

Spoken word by Marjolijn van Heemstra, city poet Amsterdam
Palacesymposium *The Search for Extraterrestrial Life*
7 June 2023 – Royal Palace Amsterdam

Dear Martian, here we come.

It may take a while, but that's human time, nothing compared to the unwieldy years when you pass your winters.

Be warned, where satellites land now, we will soon walk emaciated but for good into your cold day.

Knowing our travelers, I don't expect a leaflet, we assume that we understand but do not need to be understood.

I think a note is in order.

To begin with, the answer to the obvious question with what longing our ships sail to the distance.

The answer is twofold.

Search and want to be found.

Curious and loneliness, both rooted in the same alienation.

Somewhere there - in that crazy void - we were before we fell into an ocean of time that shaped us from dot full of vitality to this deeply uncomfortable being that wears braces and lace-ups.

The official motivation of our upcoming visit (science, commerce) is not the true one.

A strange homesickness sticks like a bone in our throats, we want to feel connected to that whole again but when we meet you, it's a matter of recognizing what binds us: the mystery of presence in incomprehensible space.

It can take ages for a human to recognize a neighbor, let alone a relative of many years away.

And what he does not recognize, man destroys. Countless beings here on earth can testify to that.

Fast-forward a billion years you may have passed us, we burn like a barren Venus in your sky, while your descendant studies how we once lived on earth, we should consider that before we sift, turn, drill, drill and contaminate, but Thinking about the future is not our strong point - we barely peek around the corner in 24 hours, we come close to the sun, our lives are short and we burn with desire.

It is a daily struggle to look at ourselves, let alone ask ourselves how to behave in the face of a distant, unknown possibility?

Of life that ever. Of a maybe that spans millions of years?

You have to understand, we are formed in geocentric thinking.

Our bibles, myths are full of it: election.



We, we alone are the children of the sun.
We alone look back to God. Crown of creation, guardians of stars.
And then suddenly there's a herd of Martian microbes, fidgeting on Venus, who-knows-creatures in alien oceans, crushing us with the fact that we're a random encounter of the right material, that something like this is happening everywhere with varying degrees of success.

Not children of mother earth but wanderers of a solar system. Just like you.
And who knows what and where else?

Is there language for the crushing possibility that at this very moment a civilization unknown to us looks through a telescope, takes a look at the earth and thinks: there, there maybe.

We a dot of light in another's sky. That total tilt of perspective.

Can you think beyond yourself? That is where the morale of our astronauts stands or falls.
A tricky one and honestly, I have little hope for our species.
Look at me, I'm writing "you" to a Martian microbe.

I write to you and naturally think of something similar to me when no one knows what 'you' may one day grow into, what you advocate means beyond my comprehension - perhaps a collective movement, a grand collective happening in a dimension that I have in all can't see my smallness.

How do we recognize extraterrestrial life? I once asked an expert.

Her answer was: probably we don't recognize it.

We do not perceive what is too strange, there is no frame of reference to place it.

And we don't see what doesn't get a place.

But you can learn it, she said. Training an alertness to what deviates from your norm.

Making the strange step by step familiar, and the familiar strange.

Always ask yourself: why the hell? Why this? Why that way?

De-knowing what you know. Look at this world as an alien would.

And at her words I thought of all those beings, misunderstood in our presence.

The wild fish on our plate, the wisdom of root systems, the slow language of minerals that we understand only as raw materials for destructive growth.

We hardly speak the language of the landscape, our conversation with the world became a long monologue.

What will that mean for your red plains, your blue sunsets, for the highest volcano in our system?

As far as I'm concerned, there is hope in the fact that a group of peers is engaged in finding your form. Mirror eyes aims at the beginning of time. Listens and looks for the tiniest signs of life.



There is still much to discuss. The contamination issue; who will get sick from the other.
Interplanetary Solidarity.
But believe it or not, I'm standing in a palace, a typical earthly affair,
something with crowns and authority, a world far from Mars, and my speaking time is
coming to an end.

While our systems implode, we are still thinking in the distance.
Like a bunch of lost children. It's about time someone found us.
And preferably the heptapods from the movie Arrival, my favorite aliens.
Nothing but paw, spidery body, and the wonderful mission to teach us their language.
Words in which everything happens at the same time.
Whoever learns their language has a single sound for was and is and will.
Pronounces "human" as a chain; mammal and marine animal, seaweed and alga in one,
from the first pulsating cell through fins and horns to the final explosion.
But before they teach us the words, the world declares war on them.
Terrified of their otherness.
This isn't just a movie, it's a parable. This is us.
Predatory fish that moved onto the beach. Displaced so angry.
But our heart is wide and red like a watermelon.

Hold on. And warm regards.