EULOGY
23 November 2026



Eulogy by
Hasna El Maroudi

Dear audience, dear Babs, Poet of the Fatherlands,

In 2026, it feels almost like a cliché to say anything about displacement as the child of migrant workers – previously referred to as guest workers, and, in more privileged circumstances, as expats. About neither feeling at home in the Netherlands, nor in Morocco, about the search for my own identity. A cliché because it is a story that has been told among people like us for decades. After all, clichés exist through relentless repetition, don't they?

My father came to the Netherlands back in the early 1970s. Surely, by now, enough time should have passed? It is difficult to explain why my eleven-year-old daughter, the child of a white Dutch person and this Moroccan, still regularly finds herself wondering: where do I belong? For how many generations can – or may – displacement continue to resonate? Surely, enough is enough by now, isn't it?

And yet, for years, I searched for a place I could call home, a space where I could be myself, without having to answer questions like these: *where do you really come from?* – without conditions attached to my identity – *why do you have dual nationality?* – a place where I could finally breathe.

Lo and behold, I found it in the poem *Go Back to Your Own Country* by Babs Gons.
[Now I am about to do something quite challenging: reciting the final stanza of one of Babs' works, something she, I'm sure, can do infinitely better than I can.

"Know your own land
Always right behind your eyes
Folded beneath your heart
Between thumb and forefinger
Never be a stranger
For all of this is your own land"[1]

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[1] *During the laudation, a recording was played in which Babs Gons herself recites this stanza.*

Every time I read this poem, I find myself moved to tears all over again. Because that is what poetry – good poetry – does: it touches you, right to the very core of your being.

Through this poem, Babs taught me that I can find my way home through language. That language belongs to us, too. That we are entitled to claim the space that exists, and that, in doing so, we create space for others.

At a time when language is increasingly under pressure – reading proficiency among young people in the Netherlands has been declining for years, and freedom of expression can no longer be taken for granted internationally, as the experience of British writer Sally Rooney also illustrates, to give just two examples – Babs uses her work to claim space for the stories that are so often the first to be threatened with erasure: stories about women who are unsafe in society, about non-white Dutch people who, against their will, have to fight their way into a society that should already be theirs. She asks questions that are sometimes difficult to answer. *We are fond of wondering who we might have been, but who will we be tomorrow?* How do we, as a society, treat one another? And how do you find the words to describe the horrors unfolding in Gaza? Babs does this, nonetheless.

[Pause]

Today, we honour you, dear, wonderful Babs Gons. Your work inspires so many people to do it anyway. To find the courage, when life gets difficult, when our spirits sink and we wonder whether it is still worth fighting the battle with the neighbour, the employer, my mother or that irritating uncle, to pull ourselves up by our own bootstraps and then – encouraged by you – tell ourselves, insist to ourselves: do it anyway. We owe it to those who came before us, to ourselves and to those who will come after us. We owe it to society. OUR society.

You have taught us to keep showing up, to keep speaking out and to keep believing that change is possible, even – perhaps especially – when we cannot yet see it.

To quote you (once again): “Somewhere, you know that this is the only way to live in peace with yourself and the world.”

[Pause]

I once introduced you on a major stage as *Poet Laureate of the Fatherlands* – a slip of the tongue that was so fitting that I would like to bestow that title upon you for all eternity. Because you understand, better than anyone, that the Netherlands is not made up of just one story; that the Fatherland can contain multiple identities, and that a person can carry more than one Fatherland within them.

What I find so remarkable about your work is the way you interrogate social issues without losing sight of the human being – something that happens all too rarely and all too quickly these days. In fact, you put the human being at the centre, because you know that behind every social issue there is a real person, flesh and blood.
You also dare to make the personal political, and the political personal. And the words you choose to do so are refined and subtle: soft bubbles that dance on your tongue, yet explode with astonishing force once they reach you. You challenge the cognitive dimensions of language, inviting readers to listen more attentively to the stories of

society. Our society.

You once wrote: ‘Vote with yourself in mind as someone's favourite ancestor.’ It is an instruction that is as simple as it is powerful, and one that everyone in this country could take to heart. It is a message you also embody in your own work. Because there is one thing I know for certain: thanks to your contribution to this country, you are already someone's favourite ancestor. You have broadened the horizons of the Netherlands. You have shown this country that our stories, too, are an inseparable part of its story. That this country – your country, my country, our country – is not made up of just one group, one narrative.

Babs Gons, thank you for reminding us that we always carry our country with us.
Thank you for making space for the stories that enrich our Fatherlands.
And above all, thank you for never giving up on doing it anyway.

Congratulations on receiving the Johannes Vermeer Award.

Hasna El Maroudi
2026