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NEW BOOKS AND EVENTS.
As the pilot tells us to prepare for landing, the plane begins a turn to the right and I wonder whether pilots also talk about ‘port’ and ‘starboard’. From ten thousand feet the world isn’t landscape but topography. We see a river cut tens of kilometres of green land in two, we see a coastline that’s not announced by anything like dunes or a beach; the world simply stops, as if that great expanse of farmland isn’t earthed, as if it’s been floating all this time like a sheet of coloured paper on a calm sea.

It’s a cloudless morning. We’re leaving the Baltics behind us. We’re going home. That ought to be Friesland, and that island there – barely a speck of green in the grey water – might be Schiermonnikoog. But there’s a road or a bridge running out into the sea from Groningen or Friesland. The bridge stretches so far that we can’t see the end, as if it’s not a bridge but a gangplank, a suicide bridge, designed for the sole purpose of disappearing into the water.

So this can’t be the Netherlands, but it must be Denmark, or north-western Germany. It can’t be the bridge that joins Denmark to Sweden. I don’t understand. But less than ten minutes later, when I look out of the window again, I can clearly see the blast furnaces: Tata Steel. Is the Netherlands so small? Have we already travelled from Denmark to high above North Holland?

That’s the IJ, that’s the North Sea, that’s the beach at Bloemendaal and Zandvoort. The dunes sparkle. You can see straight away of course that it’s snowed, just as you can see from the delicately glistening ice on the treetops that there’s been a frost. It gives depth, accentuating the curvature of the dunes in the otherwise flat country: short curls on a mound of Venus.

While we taxi to the gate everyone obediently stays seated, except for one man, who stands up in astonishment, iPhone in hand. He says something I don’t fully comprehend: ‘... has fallen!’

INTRODUCTION
by WEST CAMEL, EDITOR

On my first visit to the Netherlands, I had an experience of uncanny familiarity. Sitting over a selection of Dutch cheeses in a café, I thought I heard the women at the next table chatting in English. Listening harder, however, I discovered that no, I couldn’t understand what they were saying. They must be speaking Dutch. I tried tuning out a little – and, yes, the cadences, the tones, the rhythm of their sentences could have been English.

Editing this Dutch edition of The Riveter, I’ve had a similar experience. Superficially there’s something very familiar about the concerns, the ideas, the tone and the humour found in these pieces. Yet read more carefully and you’ll find the specificities of the Dutch experience. The UK and the Netherlands are both wrestling with their European identity and post-colonial inheritance, and with the challenges and opportunities presented by immigration, but as authors Karin Amatmoekrim and Rodaan Al Galidi reveal, we come at these in different ways. Both countries are still haunted by the experiences of the Second World War, but for the Netherlands, as Selma van de Perre and Marja Kingma discuss in our section on Dutch Holocaust literature, it’s not simply the fight and the suffering that people recall, but being invaded and occupied. And we both have close neighbours with whom we share a political history, a language and a culture. Yet the relationship between the Flemish and Dutch languages is very different from that between UK English and Irish English, for example, as Jonathan Reeder and his Flemish translator chums chew over in the introduction to the Flanders section of The Dutch Riveter.

In the short-story extract that opens this magazine we see Joost de Vries’s character finding it difficult to distinguish the Netherlands from its
neighbours as he flies over the land, but as the plane makes its descent, he begins to identify landmarks. In *The Dutch Riveter*, we want to present you with literary landmarks – Herman Koch, arguably Dutch literature’s best-known export; Geert Mak, probably its most famous nonfiction writer; the new Dutch star, Marieke Lucas Rijneveld; and the renowned poet Hagar Peeters. But we also want to offer you a closer look at the Dutch literary landscape, introducing you to authors you may not yet have heard of – such as Karin Amatmoekrim, Maartje Wortel, Simone Atangana Bekono and Anne-Gine Goemans – who are exploring new aspects of Dutch culture and taking fresh views on Dutch society. Rather than simply telling you how great this ‘New Dutch Writing’ is (to borrow a phrase from our Letterenfonds partners), we’re allowing you to experience the work of these exciting authors, offering you a wealth of extracts in this magazine, including some exclusives – poetry from the first Dutch winner of the International Booker Prize, Marieke Lucas Rijneveld, and a short story from Maartje Wortel.

Working on this magazine has been very different from *The Romanian Riveter*, dominated as it was by memories of the Ceaușescu regime, or *The German Riveter*, which examined the country’s writing post its reunification. In *The Dutch Riveter* the interest seems to be in how alike, and simultaneously unalike, the literature of our two countries is. Reading Geert Mak’s opening essay – in which he takes British readers by the hand and lays out the history of his country for us, readying us for the literary road the magazine offers – is to have the delight of finding something new inside something completely recognisable.

The new in the familiar is certainly what I discovered while commissioning and editing this magazine, and we at *The Riveter* have some key people to thank for these finds. Specifically we must thank the translators from Dutch and Flemish who form the major part of our contributors this time – as reviewers and feature writers as well as mediators of literature and language. We also need to thank the Nederlands Letterenfonds, the Dutch Foundation for Literature – and their New Dutch Writing campaign in the UK – who have supported the magazine, both financially and editorially.

*The Riveter* always sends its readers on a journey. This time it’s to somewhere close to home, yet we’re sure you’ll find it every bit as intriguing as our far-flung literary destinations.

West Camel
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Memories. My elder brothers cycling over the polder, struggling through the squalls, singing an old song at the tops of their voices: ‘Come hail or rain, come wind or snow or sleet / We’ll soldier on, we won’t admit defeat!’ Our teacher Hendrik Algra marching through the classroom, beating his imaginary drum and telling us about the sea beggars – those fearless fishermen and merchants who stood up to the all-powerful king of Spain, Philip II, and marked the beginning of the Dutch Republic. A bright day in May, years later: the Westerkerk carillon; seagulls; flags in red, white and blue; a gaudy, festive boat with a barrel organ floating down the canals; the sunlight glittering on the water; freedom. All this is the Netherlands – etched into my soul.

The British, the French and the Germans are each made in their own unique manner, just like the Dutch. And that’s how it has to be, because frankly, our country owes its existence to pure accident. A few major rivers flow through it, but there are no mountain ranges or any other natural boundaries. An unforeseen inheritance in the fifteenth century or a daughter of a Burgundian duke choosing a different husband would have set us on a trajectory towards a very different outcome. Our far-flung corner of Europe might have ended up as a handful of French départements, or just another state in the German Bundesrepublik, or maybe even the southernmost outpost of a Scandinavian imperium.

And all these aspects are present in the modern-day Netherlands. Visit a city like Maastricht and you might think you were in France, while to the east of the unspoken psychological border that runs through Utrecht you might still find traces of feudalism. The mentality in Friesland and Groningen is almost Scandinavian; speakers of Frisian can get by pretty well in Denmark and Norway with that ancient, musical language. But in the west, where the rivers meet the sea and the big cities lie, it is water, commerce and the wider world that set the tone. You might say this is where the ‘true’ Netherlands is found: the nation of the polder model, of compromise, tolerance, trade and open-mindedness – but you might also find the perpetual
fear of a small country in the big, wide world.

‘There’s no such thing as a “true” Dutch person,’ declared our then crown princess, now Queen Máxima – who hails from Argentina – after she’d spent a few years in the Netherlands. All hell promptly broke loose, but the outrage was revealing. Our whip-smart princess was entirely correct, and yet the truth hurt: we don’t really know who we are anymore; our country crackles with contradictions.

As a modern nation, the Netherlands is obviously diverse, and is home to a whole host of immigrant authors, as well as phenomenal travel writers, such as Lieve Joris and Jan Brokken. Yet it is also the oppressive farming backwater that produced the winner of the 2020 International Booker Prize, Marieke Lucas Rijneveld. It is a land of order – if it weren’t for our enormous collective effort from the Middle Ages onwards, we would have slipped beneath the waves long ago. Yet there is a certain sense of anarchy, too. We are, and will always be, a country of proud and headstrong citizens – a place where the aristocracy were on the back foot as early as the sixteenth century. It is also a strikingly irreligious country, having secularised with remarkable speed during the 1950s and 60s, and the churches have remained mainly empty even during the Covid-19 pandemic. And yet, deep in our hearts, we have always been Calvinists – even the Catholics amongst us – because in this country, Calvinism is above all an attitude.

Calvinism was tailor-made for the Dutch and Flemish commercial cities, as it represented a religious affirmation of the norms and values they had developed during the Middle Ages: a strong work ethic, an inclination towards thrift, and a sense of individual responsibility – to God and towards one’s fellow human beings. This is the source of the leaden morality of guilt and sin that has permeated Dutch literature in all kinds of ways.

That morality is the reason austerity and a form of civic equality became the default, and remain so to this day. The Amsterdam merchants of the seven-teenth and eighteenth centuries were the richest in Europe, but their canal-side palaces were modest in size. They left their wealth in their vaults; ostentation wasn’t, and still isn’t, the done thing.

Once, during a state visit, a French friend of mine saw President Mitterand enter a theatre, together with the Dutch queen and her consort. Mitterand strode through the entrance with all the pomp and circumstance of a French head of state, while Queen Beatrix wandered beside him, greeting members of the crowd. ‘That was the arrival of the president of a monarchy,’ said my friend, ‘together with the queen of a republic.’

Even now, we are unsure of who we are in Europe. Are we the biggest of the small states, or the smallest of the big players?
Bluntness – often mistaken for honesty – was, and remains, a virtue.

And yet there is also something tragic about the story of the Netherlands; something like the lot of the author whose debut is a runaway success but who is doomed to live in its shadow forevermore. Our history, as the Republic of the Seven United Netherlands, came into being at the end of the sixteenth century with a spectacular explosion of discovery, innovation and rapidly acquired power and wealth. Amsterdam briefly became the New York of the seventeenth century – yet the so-called Golden Age came to an equally rapid end.

Then, after the fall of Napoleon, for a short while the Netherlands and Belgium came together to form a European power once more, but that venture too imploded in 1830. After that, we established our colonial empire in Indonesia, turning our back on our wild and wayward continent and nailing our colours to the rickety mast of neutrality, until Hitler put a brutal end to our illusions in 1940. After the Second World War, we became Europeans against our will – yet our deep distrust of the continent remained.

Even now, we are unsure of who we are in Europe. Are we the biggest of the small states, or the smallest of the big players? Even now, as the fifth-largest economy in Europe and one of the top exporters in the world, we do not take our own strength seriously. The same goes for our heroes. As the essayist Gerrit Komrij once wrote, when Dutch businesspeople travel the world and ‘briefly mention, sotto voce, the names of Erasmus, Spinoza, Rembrandt or Van Gogh, they do so timidly and with embarrassment, before quickly steering the conversation back to windmills and cheese with cumin.’

Even now, we Dutch cherish our myth of impotent innocence. We love giving sermons in Brussels and beyond – our politicians can’t get enough of them – but we refuse to acknowledge that we waged near-constant war in our colonies, and that to this day our tax havens roll out the welcome mat to the scum of the earth.

And what many Dutch people fail to take seriously is Europe itself. Although we are intimately bound to Germany and the rest of Europe in economic terms, in the minds of our politicians and pundits there are dozens of roads and railways leading to London, New York and Washington, while on the eastern border, in Enschede and Oldenzaal, they see beaches and an endless ocean. They would like nothing more than to cut off Amsterdam and the rest of Holland with huge artificial lakes, like in earlier centuries – our own little island in a man-made sea.

No, there won’t be a Nexit; our businesspeople and politicians lack that inexorable instinct for self-destruction. Nonetheless, they too would dearly love to swim away from the rest of the continent; together in splendid isolation, forever small, innocent and free.

Geert Mak
Translated by Jozef van der Voort
How we feel about a country deeply affects how we feel about its literature. ‘I do love the Dutch!’ I wrote in my diary on our first family holiday to the Netherlands. I was eleven. We exchanged houses for the summer with another teacher family, leaving behind the sea and seagulls of Cornwall for the dykes and bikes of Holland. We visited Anne Frank’s House and the Rijksmuseum, bought wooden clogs and Gouda cheese, and cycled for miles to visit the windmills. Those positive childhood experiences reverberated across the decades as I learned more about Dutch history and culture, fell in love with Amsterdam (as we all do) and, as a journalist, ended up interviewing inordinate numbers of Dutch people. They made it so easy: they spoke excellent English, were friendly and approachable, and even seemed to like and understand Britain. A revelation!

These things mattered in creating the fertile soil for my appreciation of Dutch literature. The seeds were sown young – with the language, cheese, tulips, tomatoes, art and – coming from Cornwall – seagulls and shared maritime and trade links. Later as a BBC journalist, our Dutch-UK discussions turned to postcolonial guilt, problematic immigration policies and complicated relationships with Europe.

Geert Mak’s millennial masterpiece In Europe, which I read in Sam Garrett’s English translation in 2007, was life-changing for me, as have been the several times I’ve interviewed him. Although with Geert Mak and his fellow Dutch writers you can hardly call it anything as formal as an interview – they are always so reassuringly relaxed and informally dressed. I’ll even stick my neck out and claim that I have never seen a Dutch writer in a suit. Geert Mak wears his erudition lightly and with good cheer. He is witty but self-deprecating, provocative in his ideas but reasonable.
in debate, not only interested in style, narrative and innovation (all excellent qualities of Dutch literature) but also in the psychology of people and the places they inhabit. Herman Koch, Holland’s best-selling novelist, another early Dutch discovery for me, is similarly scalpel-like in his exposing of the Dutch psyche and Dutch ‘issues’. He is also very funny. Satire? Dark humour? Herman has it nailed. To be able to laugh together and argue freely is a gift among nations.

If only we British were a little more Dutch. Not only are they still In Europe but their commitment to culture and intellectual life is also enviable. Public finances are strapped everywhere, but whereas we down-grade the arts and languages, the Dutch place them on a pedestal. They respect their own literary culture so much – and know how to promote it – that, against the odds, they find ways to fund their authors and translators. You will also find an impressive long-term loyalty of translator to author, and vice versa. Alongside the extensive list of Dutch-language authors from both Belgium and the Netherlands who have graced the European Literature Network and European Literature Nights over the past ten years (and whom I’ve been fortunate enough to interview) – from Cees Nooteboom to Gerbrand Bakker, Tommy Wieringa to Toon Tellegen - you’ll also see the names of their translator-alter egos, such as Sam Garrett, David Colmer, Liz Waters and Michele Hutchison. More often than not, author and translator perform together as double-acts at UK literary events and festivals. For a purportedly self-effacing nation, the Dutch consistently raise the bar for literary performance, such an important skill in our media-digital-publicity-oriented lives.

For a purportedly self-effacing nation, the Dutch consistently raise the bar for literary performance, such an important skill in our media-digital-publicity-oriented lives.

It is the collective dedication to Dutch literature of so many of us over many years that has led to this Dutch Riveter. You’ll already know about our various UK-Dutch literary love-ins over the last decade: Go Dutch, European Literature Night, High Impact (twice!) and, currently, the superb New Dutch Writing. The first UK-Dutch festival I created in 2013 was High Impact: Literature From The Low Countries. It was wild and wonderful. I was asked to put on a literature festival to represent both Dutch speaking regions, Flanders and the Netherlands, together called the Low Countries. I was given free rein but little time, which meant running a six-day, six-city, six-author tour in the UK in deepest, darkest winter. And in January 2013 it snowed. Heavily. Trains broke down. The heating in trains broke down. There was no wifi. M&S ran out of sandwiches. But ‘crazy’ in my book equals ‘creative’ and the six
Dutch-language authors on our tour were both to perfection: Peter Terrin, Lieve Joris, Judith Vanistendael, Ramsey Nasr, Chika Unigwe and Herman Koch, with Geert Mak joining us at the end. By the time we reached The Tabernacle in London for the final packed event our numbers had swollen to embrace three British authors who had famously written about Dutch history, tulips and art in their novels: David *The Thousand Autumns of Jacob de Zoet* Mitchell, Tracey *Girl With A Pearl Earring* Chevalier and Deborah *Tulip Fever* Moggach. It was an unforgettable celebration. The affinity we felt as countries and cultures was tangible as we travelled and held public discussions – in theatres, bookshops, universities and even a cathedral – about our quirky humour, our vibrant modern literature and the upheavals and changes undergone by our small, multicultural nations.

In these lonely Covid times I look back with longing on those highly impactful exuberant encounters. *The Dutch Riveter* helps us look forward. What a gift, to be able to embrace in one volume both new work from my old ‘high impact’ familiars as well as some remarkable new Dutch writing from Marieke Lucas Rijneveld to Rodaan Al Galidi and Maartje Wortel. *The Dutch Riveter* is a declaration of love to the Dutch, to its authors and translators.

*Rosie Goldsmith*
This is a novel – an exceptional one – about death and grief, about a family living through the aftermath of the loss of a child, and not coping. As a reader you suffer the ‘discomfort’ too, but you continue reading because the writing is daring and beautiful; because this remarkable young writer is articulating, in an exquisite way, something radically profound. The Discomfort of Evening explores the dark areas of the mind and soul, and the struggles and self-destruction of three children, Obbe, Jas and Hanna, and their parents, after the drowning of the family’s oldest child, Matthies. It is a shocking and disturbing novel, but also thrilling, narrated in the first person by ten-year-old Jas, who believes she caused the death of her brother by making a childish bargain with God.

Jas is hyper-alert, highly imaginative, absorbs all she sees and hears, and is horribly slapped around by the tragic combination of being a child, suffering an inconsolable loss and belonging to a devoutly religious family. After Matthies’s death, his parents become increasingly silent, introverted and selfish in their grief, and Jas is not invited to express her feelings either; instead she describes her loss in abundant metaphors and similes of everyday life:

‘Although they said nice things about my brother, death still felt ugly and as indigestible as the lost tiger nut we found days after a birthday party behind a chair or under the TV cabinet.’

Only once is Jas asked if she misses her brother, and that is by the predatory village vet. Church attendance and belief in God should suffice, the strict Reformist community believes. But Jas’s doubt in God grows: ‘Maybe He’s on holiday, or He’s dug himself in. Whatever it is, He’s not exactly on the case.’

Jas darts from subject to subject like a butterfly, delivering energetic streams
of consciousness, dictated by the logic of her lively thoughts and language:

‘Matthies always parted his hair in the middle and put gel in his front locks. They were like two curls of butter on a dish; Mum always made those around Christmas: butter from a tub wasn’t very festive, she thought. That was for normal days and the day of Jesus’ birth wasn’t a normal day.’

The Mulders family runs a dairy farm in rural Netherlands at the turn of this millennium, although the novel’s oppressive atmosphere suggests it could be set in a distant Dutch Dark Age. The children are as familiar with animals as they are with humans, and as their grief and trauma are further suppressed, they become more animal-like in their behaviour. What might be considered natural sexual desire and experimentation in puberty becomes violent and incestuous. They know no better. The unhappy parents are themselves out of their depth. Their mother stops eating and states ‘I want to die’, so the children turn hyper-vigilant and devise rituals (killing the cockerel, for example) to keep their mother alive. They ‘feel eternally burdened, to take the weight off our parents’. Jas holds her grief in by refusing to defecate or remove her coat. If she takes it off she believes she will die. Her brother Obbe bangs his head incessantly against the wall. ‘Discomfort is good’, Jas says. ‘In discomfort we are real.’

At a certain point, of course, you think of *Lord of the Flies*, but with his cruel boys, William Golding was, in the immediate post-war, post-Holocaust period, making broader social and political observations about mankind’s potential for evil. Any great novel is greater than the sum of the words it contains, and, like *Lord of the Flies*, *Discomfort* is a great novel – in an outstanding translation (Michele Hutchison has the golden touch) – but I don’t believe that Marieke Lucas Rijneveld’s prime concern is to grandly expose society’s evil; rather it is to see how far this one family might fall, in order to see how far the writer can go. How difficult it is to write as an adult about childhood, to write without sentimentality about death and grief, to write about sex and intimate bodily functions without being pornographic or scatological. There is no artifice to this writing. It is astonishing, often funny, tender and joyfully exuberant. But there is no heavy-handed moral message; these children have been failed by their parents and their community.

Life on the farm continues. Foot-and-mouth infects the cows and they must be slaughtered. The fragile, now-feral children are therefore catapulted to confront and carry out further horrors. The violence inside Jas she describes as ‘becoming noisy’. Violence ‘grows and grows, just like sadness. Only sadness needs more space and violence just takes it’.

Recovery for Jas is seen as a journey, as escaping one day from her home and village to ‘go to the other side’. On the
fateful evening that her brother Matthies left to go skating on the lake, she had asked to go with him. He told her that she was still too young to ‘go to the other side’ – of the lake, in this case. When will she be ready? she now wonders.

Knowing that Marieke Lucas Rijneveld has lived a similar life, also lost a brother as a child and still lives on a dairy farm, underlines the authenticity and rootedness of the novel, a Dutch bestseller in 2018. It’s hard to believe it’s a debut, but easier to understand its provenance when you read Rijneveld’s poetry (we feature three poems exclusively, following this review, in advance of their publication in English). Rijneveld, whose pronouns are they/them, is an intriguing person, their unique approach to life, their wit and dazzling talent shining through every interview: ‘Farming keeps me grounded. The cows are my best friends; I like cleaning out the stables and shovelling the shit.’

In August 2020 The Discomfort of Evening became the first Dutch book to be awarded the International Booker Prize. At twenty-nine Rijneveld was also the youngest author to win the £50,000 prize, split equally with their translator, Michele Hutchison. On winning Rijneveld said: ‘I can only say that I am as proud as a cow with seven udders.’

Rijneveld has also published two anthologies of poetry and their debut collection Kalfsvlies (‘Calf’s Caul’, translated by Hutchison) will be published in English soon. The themes are so similar that I see Calf’s Caul and Discomfort as companion volumes, the images and ideas of the novel perfectly distilled in these narrative poems about childhood, religion and death:

‘my childhood when God was a father figure and my mother still lonely, that / my truth in the village was later my lack, everything I said scrubbed away with / green soap.’

After the shock of the novel (however rich and impressive it is), I feel comforted by the poetry, more deeply moved by the poet’s wisdom and the child’s trauma, perhaps because it echoes more closely Rijneveld’s own experience. It is also, frankly, less gruesome:

‘We weren’t allowed to ask questions but we were allowed to think up answers, Mum cried / a lot back then, none of us taller than a metre, and she taught us that death / had an echo that whispered deep in your eardrums’

Marieke Lucas Rijneveld’s literary journey has just begun. We have so much to look forward to. Their new novel, Mijn lieve gunsteling (‘My Dear Favourite’), has just been published in Dutch. A story of farming life, a vet and a farmer’s daughter who become obsessed with each other, and, according to the author themselves, ‘a heartbreaking yet terrifying tale of loss, forbidden love, loneliness and identity’. The themes may appear familiar to readers of Marieke Lucas Rijneveld but I reckon that this highly original writer will always surprise us.

Rosie Goldsmith
THERMOMETER

If you’ve got two people and one of them does synchronised swimming and the other
doesn’t, everything goes wrong. In the end we put thermometers into each other’s
mouths to understand the meaning, words are usually linked to temperature or
how often synchronisation occurs like when we’re sitting at the kitchen table
with the ocean between us, the butter tub as a dinghy and you reach
out your hand and I respond too late. I say I’m all too familiar
with situations like this and that the sea isn’t the same level everywhere either
but nobody notices because it’s just too gradual, the same way the riverbed
never suddenly disappears beneath your feet, you having had wrong thoughts
or longed too much for the other side where the world really begins. We found
ourselves at a halfway house where they sold lukewarm coffee, cheese soufflés
and plastic globes which we couldn’t plug in anywhere, never knew how much sea
to cross or how many hours we would have on the road in which to practise
synchronicity, flexibility of thought and turns under water,
out of the question: drinking coffee without talking, just sinking and making
bubbles. I clamp your hand between my head and shoulder, tell you about
my childhood when God was a father figure and my mother still lonely, that
my truth in the village was later my lack, everything I said scrubbed away with
green soap. Thermometers broke before but never had this effect. I still
remember what my dad said on holiday when we were little and went
to the seaside, he stood at the side with his water shoes on, yelling at us
never to go deeper than our navels because they served as
an overflow like in a sink, otherwise you would drown
and your neck would become a U-bend.
THE LICE-CHECKERS

The party goes by faster if we push some of the guests to the edge like beer glasses and are either no longer able to take stock or keep things on a level to investigate what happens when you mix alcohol with melancholy, we allow the furniture to wear socks against scratches in the linoleum so that no one can find the party again until the heads on the beer consist of so much air that something heavy has to be thrown into it: someone says that melancholy is just like a mother checking for lice at school and how much we long for it: that tickling of strange fingers through your hair working their way so much more carefully than your own mother’s, as if she were looking for a reason to comb out the loss, to make you recall this later, but now with an adolescent brain instead of the childish fear of a note in your coat pocket with the message: louse found, four o’clock tomorrow behind the bike sheds, the itching not yet a deficiency, but too many heads together asking Mr Wolf the time in the hope that getting closer would be passed on. Mum, who put your well-intentioned attempts in the washing machine this school day.

There were friends who caressed the hair of unknown girls, some danced as if the itch were trying to find a way out of their limbs and someone said this made her happy, this party on this date, the shifting of the hours; lice mothers who were objects stuffed into a buttoned-up pocket never to be brought out again, too much beauty can give you a head full of worries and all those desires that were ironed out by your mother and laid on the stairs, the summer, about to burst open again, like then, tomorrow we’ll awaken with thunder in our minds.
HOLLOW ENOUGH TO HIDE AN ECHO

We weren’t allowed to ask questions but we were allowed to think up answers, Mum cried a lot back then, none of us taller than a metre, and she taught us that death had an echo that whispered deep in your eardrums, me forgetting to put my cold hands in my trouser pockets, not to make them into fists but keep them flat

the way I placed them on the glass plate of my brother’s coffin like two moist starfish, the sea suddenly above our heads, someone had pushed away the floor and failed to put it back said Grandad who turned my fears into pigeons: to tame them

I had to stroke them from head to tail and release them once a week in the pasture behind the stable, watch as they flew away but at night they’d tap their beaks on the bedroom window, in panic he called the plumber from our street because there were holes in his grandchildren, they leaked gallons of tears.

Back then, comforting was like parking, to measure is to know, and yet you often underestimate things, you keep looking for the right place, an embrace sometimes needs you to circle each other several times. On the table were tea glasses filled with jenever, strange fingers were stirring ice cubes, there was a cheerful tinkling while death still had to strike a blow the way answers take a few seconds to land in the minds of the audience, were we the audience or did we need other people’s trouser pockets to feel the warmth of a body, I grabbed a finger and opened my mouth, stir away I

thought let’s pretend we want to grab each other but we keep slipping away from each other, pulling back meant the blow didn’t strike everyone the same way, they weren’t hollow enough to hide an echo.

Next to the pastor stood the dentist, the only man in our lives who could see how we grit our teeth and understood that at night our ears turned into seashells in which we did not hear the roar of the sea but the dead brother who kept floating to the surface of our hearts.
'Travel is nonsense,' he announced. ‘The only thing you see is what’s already inside you.’
—James Salter

Apart from an older sister and a note on the kitchen table, Reza’s father left her a field. The pony he had promised her for her tenth birthday never materialised, as Reza’s mother had predicted, but now the field is hers. It is a muddy patch of earth in the middle of the polder, hemmed in on all sides by two other fields, a path and the wide, water-filled ditch, where on summery days the men from the village fish for carp and the local youth hold ditch-vaulting competitions. On other days the young people drift along in rubber dinghies, drinking lukewarm cans of beer, and swim with the muskrats before lying down on the bank to dry, side by side, with their eyes scrunched up against the sun, the drops of murky ditch water leaving brown tracks on their cheeks. A paved path runs along the edge of the fields at a right angle to the water. There are often cyclists out biking and people out walking – with their dogs or with each other, when they have something to discuss. But usually it’s quiet, usually no one’s there.

Sheep and goats are all mixed in together in Reza’s field. They’ve grazed the ground bare, but want for nothing. Reza
feeds the creatures fruit and veg from the leftovers she picks up every day from the greengrocer’s in the village. She places the crates filled with apples and raw vegetables on the back seat of her red Opel. Sometimes she takes a bite herself.

Near to where the field borders that of her neighbour there’s a small shed where the animals can shelter when it rains. Reza’s own home is an enormous metal camper she doesn’t travel around in, but merely moves to a different spot now and then. It’s usually parked as far away from the path as you can get. When you drive into the polder it looks like a spaceship landed during the night, with an alien life form lurking inside, waiting to explore Earth. The camper is designed to transport groups of people – bands on tour, travelling families – but recently Reza has been living there alone. The arrangement isn’t exactly legal, but the town council turns a blind eye because, even though her father hasn’t been back to the village in fifteen years, he used to be a well-known figure in those parts, or at least a person of influence.

‘Why, in God’s name, does someone like you live out in the middle of the polder?’ Reza’s sister asked her.

‘What do you mean, “someone like me”?’ Reza said.

‘Oh, come off it, Reza.’

‘Well, what? What do you mean?’

‘Someone who’s lonely to start with,’ her sister said.

‘I’m not lonely at all, that’s your take on it.’

Her sister broke a biscuit in half. ‘Fine, maybe lonely isn’t the right word. But you are alone.’

Reza hadn’t always been alone. She’s had had a lot of girlfriends in the past. She didn’t understand how she did it – all it took was to make eyes at a woman in the street and they’d come home with her to her field, to the camper. Some took a little longer than others, but she’d never had to make too much of an effort. Of course there were some who just wanted to see what it was like with a woman, who did it to have a story to tell, to get out of the rut, to satisfy their curiosity or to win a bet – that kind of thing. In that case, Reza would make even more of an effort to impress them, to make sure
they wouldn’t forget her. Her sister said, ‘Those women might forget about you doing your best, but I’m willing to bet they’ll never forget about this camper stuck out in the middle of this muddy Dutch landscape. I once slept with a guy who lived in an old, abandoned primary school, keeping squatters out. Five classrooms, a gymnasium, a playground with two slides and a basketball court. I can’t remember the guy’s name, but I’ll never forget the building.’

‘Yes, well, that’s you,’ said Reza. ‘That’s just the way you are, hon. It doesn’t tell you anything about other people.’

‘That’s where you’re wrong. If I’m like that, there’s bound to be loads of other people like that too.’

Reza knew her sister was right. That was precisely what had put her off living in town. Everyone seemed different, but they all turned out to be the same. It bored her. She longed for a simplicity that didn’t pretend to be anything else, that wasn’t looking for approval. Clouds, grass, sheep, goats, birds, water, mud, people walking, dogs let off the leash. She preferred seeing an ever-changing clarity over seeing a complexity that always stayed the same. She bought the camper from an old musician from Brabant and put it in her father’s field. Her father – the man who had left the family one evening, leaving a note on the kitchen counter that said I NEVER MEANT IT.

A field, a sister and a note. And Reza knew that was all she had to be getting on with. Ever since Mia had left her, more and more often she thought about leaving too. All she needed to do was get behind the steering wheel of the camper and drive off. Instead, she sat in the field and thought. Like everyone else, she could choose. To stay or to go. And in the end maybe it all boiled down to the same thing anyway.
Long, tanned legs covered with mosquito bites stretched out from under her bikini bottoms. Reza was wearing rubber boots, like she always did, whatever the season. On top she wore a tight white tank top. She was sitting in front of the camper on a garden chair, her eyes falling shut as she tried to read a book she was struggling to get through.

She was more or less woken out of her slumber by someone calling out, ‘Hello there! Miss! Miss!’ Over by the fence a woman who looked slightly familiar to Reza was waving her hands about.

Reza got up from her chair and, ashamed suddenly of her bare legs in the rubber boots, she walked over to the fence, the insides of the boots whipping against her calves.

‘Could you maybe help me?’ asked the young woman on the other side of the fence. Her cheeks were red with excitement, her hair was gathered in a messy ponytail. As Reza approached, she asked her, ‘Are those sheep yours?’

Reza nodded.

‘One of them is standing at the edge of the ditch, in the water. I thought I’d tell you – it didn’t seem like you’d noticed. Mind if I climb over the fence?’

Reza nodded. The sun burned right above her head.

‘Do you have a rope or anything?’ the woman asked.

Reza looked over at the water. How could she not have noticed the woman, or the sheep, for a whole fifteen minutes? Three sheep had drowned in the years that she’d been living here, and Reza had thought the other sheep would’ve learned something from this. She’d thought they would’ve known by now not to go too near the water, but it seemed that animals, like people, were slow learners. She should have shorn the sheep, actually, like farmers do in the spring, slowly unwrapping each sheep to reveal another, smaller animal inside. But Reza liked the way they looked in their full fleece. If a farmer didn’t pass by soon on a tractor, she knew another sheep would drown. Two women were no match for a sodden, woolly sheep.

‘Yes, I should have a rope,’ Reza said. She looked around her. The woman was still standing on the path.
‘Come and have a look.’ Reza reached over the fence and the woman’s hand slid into hers. It felt a little clammy. They smiled at each other.

‘Do you live here?’ the woman asked as they crossed the field towards the camper.

‘Sort of,’ Reza said. ‘Actually, yes, yes, I do.’ She could feel the woman making her nervous. ‘My name’s Reza, by the way.’

Mia said her name was Mia. She even mentioned her last name, maybe out of false modesty or maybe for the opposite reason, because she hoped Reza would recognise it. She was Mia Borodovic, a celebrated actress. Reza hadn’t picked up on the fact that Mia was a famous face from TV. She’d probably seen one of the films she was in, but remembering faces had never been her strong point. ‘Did you really not recognise me?’ Mia asked later on. ‘Or were you just pretending not to?’

‘I really didn’t,’ Reza said. ‘Or maybe vaguely. I didn’t know who you were, anyway.’

‘A lot of people pretend not to,’ Mia said. ‘A lot of people pretend a lot of the time.’

Reza took a tow rope from the back of her Opel. The women walked over to the ditch. The sheep was standing there with mud reaching halfway up its body. It didn’t seem overly fazed by the situation and stood in the ditch as if it had never done anything else, staring out into the distance as if intrigued by the flat horizon. The other sheep stood at the edge of the ditch and watched their herd mate. Not a sound from them either. As Reza and Mia approached, the sheep scattered for a moment before crowding together again at the water’s edge, as if they were afraid of missing something.

‘If you ask me, it’s already given up the fight,’ Reza said.

Mia didn’t reply. In any case, it was clear that she wasn’t ready to give up the fight. She stepped into the ditch fully clothed and tied the rope around the sheep’s body. In the process she slipped twice in the muddy bottom of the ditch before stepping onto the side. Ignoring her soaking wet clothes she said, ‘And now, pull!’

Two women in a field pulling on a tow rope tied to a sheep. But no matter how hard they pulled, the sheep didn’t budge. They were the only ones moving.
‘Is there anyone you could call?’ Mia asked Reza after she had let go of the rope. ‘The fire department?’

‘Maybe the sheep doesn’t want to be helped,’ Reza said. ‘Maybe it walked into the ditch on purpose.’

‘An animal committing suicide?’

‘Yeah, I read about it in a book. There are birds that kill themselves by flying into mountainsides. Whole flocks of them.’

‘I don’t think that …’

‘Yeah,’ Reza said, ‘you’re right.’ And, because she didn’t want to seem rude, she called the fire service, for Mia. The nice thing about emergency services is that someone on the other end of the line always says, ‘We’ll be right there.’

In the meantime, Reza got an idea. She gestured to Mia to follow her to the fence, to make sure the animals didn’t escape while she drove the Opel onto the property. Mia opened and shut the gate. Reza reversed the car in the direction of the sheep and attached the tow rope to the towing hook on the Opel.

‘You keep an eye out in case something goes wrong,’ she said to Mia when she got back into the car. She started the engine and put her foot on the accelerator, very carefully at first and then with ever increasing pressure. Slowly the sheep started to move. It rolled onto its side and then slid up the side of the ditch and onto dry land, ending up on its back with its four spindly legs sticking up in the air. Mia managed to roll the animal over onto its side by pressing against it with all her weight.

The sheep managed to look both exhausted and unperturbed at the same time. Just as Reza and Mia were standing next to each other, looking from the sheep to each other, with a twinkle in their eyes and the sun on their tired, contented faces, the fire truck sped into the polder, a red rectangle coming closer and looking more dangerous than helpful. The truck stopped alongside the field. Men in uniforms immediately jumped out from both sides. They acted the same way firemen do in the movies – heroically, as if they weren’t really firemen at all but were acting the part. Reza didn’t know that’s the way they did it in real life, too, but, then again, she supposed
something must have inspired them to become firemen in the first place. One by one, the six men vaulted over the fence.

‘We don’t need you anymore,’ Reza shouted to the firemen, to spare them an embarrassing situation. She pointed to the sheep on the ground next to her. Black with mud, it looked like it had been on fire.

The firemen paid no attention. They ran across the field to the water’s edge and formed a circle around the sheep. They smelled of fire.

‘What the ... ?’ said one of the firemen. ‘You got us racing out here for this? For nothing?’

One of the other men said to Reza, ‘It usually is for nothing.’

Mia said, ‘We’re sorry, but the main thing is that the sheep is still alive.’

‘Oh my god,’ said the fireman who had been angry just a minute ago. ‘That’s Mia Borodovic. I’m right, aren’t I? You’re Mia Borodovic?’

Mia nodded shyly. She blushed and Reza looked at her, at the dirty, sodden clothes clinging to her body, and wished the firemen would get back into the fire truck and disappear, uniforms and all.

‘This is our lucky day,’ the fireman said. ‘Mind if we take a picture with you?’

Mia laughed, shrugging her shoulders.

Once the men had finally left, Mia asked Reza if she had anything to drink. Reza fixed a couple of gin and tonics, with an extra dose of gin. The two women sat down in the shade of the camper. Sitting on a towel, leaning with their backs against the side of the vehicle, they had a couple of drinks. It was only after a while that Reza and Mia looked over at the sheep, which was still on its side and breathing very rapidly, but not long after, they forgot about it because Reza kissed Mia, doing her very best, better than all the other times, and pushed her to the ground, feeling the warm skin of this new woman and tasting gin and mud, and they were so drunk and turned on that they just kept kissing and were oblivious to time passing and to the people out walking along the path, and they made love on the ground in front of the camper while night fell and the sound of the insects grew louder all around them.
Reza had spotted her girlfriend on TV that Wednesday evening and had changed the channel in irritation. She couldn’t stand sharing Mia with the other people watching, seeing her body move about on the screen. She had discovered that when Mia was acting she behaved in the same way she did with her. But Reza was the only one allowed to touch and kiss Mia’s burned skin. When Mia was a child she’d been staying at her grandma’s, when the deep-fat fryer fell from the counter and burned her. Dark strips of skin ran from her navel to her breasts, as though she, like the sheep, had been wrapped in an extra layer. Mia avoided any roles that required taking off her clothes. But nakedness was never a problem when she was with Reza. ‘Intuition,’ she had said. ‘I knew it wouldn’t bother you. From the start I saw the way you looked at me.’

Reza had been lying in bed for a couple of hours, waiting for Mia to come home, and she felt her waiting once again grow into an unreasonable anger. She should go outside and drink a beer under the stars, with the Plough of Ursa Major securely above her head. She should calm herself down. Instead, she lay in the bed in the back of the camper, with the pillows propped against the rounded metal surface. It was quiet and dark and cold. Tip Marugg had once written that, when he was a boy, his bedroom was a small black square within a larger black square. When he looked through the chink under the door and saw his parents turning off the light, he was once again part of the larger whole, of the large black square. Reza wasn’t sure she had remembered his words correctly, but the thought of the large black square comforted her when she felt isolated or alone. She thought, ‘My father is somewhere too. So is my sister. And so is Mia, right now.’ But she couldn’t hold on to this thought for long. It was as if there was still a chink of light shining under the door. She thought, ‘Well here I bloody well am, lying alone in my small black square in the middle of the polder, waiting for my girlfriend to come home.’ She kicked off the covers and went to the kitchen, where she poured sunflower oil into a deep pan, waited until
the oil started bubbling and then tossed in some popcorn and covered it with a glass lid. She waited until she heard the corn popping against the lid, the hard, inedible kernels turning into popcorn, and the camper started to smell of oil. How quickly one thing could turn into another. She sprinkled the popcorn with salt, walked back to the bed and called Mia. No answer.

The digital alarm clock showed 2:08 in the morning when Reza heard a car approaching. Close to the field the motor stopped and someone got out. A little later she heard someone fumbling with the door, heard a key in the lock. For a couple of seconds she was afraid it was a burglar. There wasn’t much to take, but out here in her field she easily could be raped. She was her only protection.

It was Mia. She could tell from the sound the straps on her boots made when she kicked them off, from the light tread of her footsteps. Mia lifted the lid from the pan and took some popcorn. Someone who’s there. Someone who comes home.

But Reza still felt uneasy.

Lately Mia had been making a habit of coming back to the van in the middle of the night on ordinary weeknights – after rehearsals, or so she said. It wasn’t really something you could double-check and know for sure. ‘In the end, everything is one big rehearsal,’ Reza said. She’d tried to make like she was joking, and Mia had said, ‘You got it, sweetie. So keep on practising.’

‘Hey, you still awake?’ Mia asked when she came into the sleeping compartment.

‘What do you think? That I can sleep while you stay out all night?’ Reza jumped out of the bed and pulled her nightgown down over her bottom, shivering. She thought, ‘I shouldn’t be starting this,’ but the thought slipped away, and of course she did start it.

‘What about you?’

‘What do you mean?’

‘Did you have a good time?’

‘It was fine,’ Mia said. ‘Just a rehearsal.’

‘Let me smell your fingers then,’ Reza said, as calmly as she could.
Mia looked at her in disbelief, her pupils dilating. She was so bloody beautiful, as most actresses are, as if being pretty was an art too.

‘So come on, let me smell them!’

‘Jesus, what’s wrong with you?’ Mia asked.

‘Why can’t you just let me smell your fingers if there’s nothing wrong?’

Reza grabbed Mia’s wrist and pulled it towards her. She offered no resistance: Reza could have waved Mia’s hand about, could have tenderly kissed her palm or used it to slap herself in the face, but instead she pulled it towards her until it was just under her nose, like it was a drumstick she was about to bite into.

‘Smell them then!’ Mia shouted. ‘Smell them, for fuck’s sake. What do you think? That I’ve had my fingers in someone else? That’s something I should’ve done a long time ago, you jealous bitch. Lick them. You might taste something.’

Reza loosened her grip, let go of Mia’s wrist, and saw her sad, angry eyes. Mia said Reza made her feel sick, and Reza said forgive me, really, and that she was sorry, really, and that she wasn’t herself. But inside she knew that she was right: all the rest had been an act, all the tiptoeing around. She could have told Mia all the things that came into her head, like how she had been lying there waiting and that it wasn’t just about tonight, she could have told her how long she had been waiting already, she could have hurled hundreds of good and bad thoughts around the cabin, out loud, but the words would have bounced off the steel because Mia wouldn’t hear them. Mia knew what Reza was like too. If Mia as much as went to the bathroom alone, Reza heard herself asking ‘Where are you going?’

Mia walked out of the camper. Reza heard the door slam behind her, the door that Mia had just walked in through a minute ago. She was more or less gone, but not quite completely. To disappear from Reza’s life she still had to leave the polder.

A few minutes passed before Reza sprang into action. Bare-foot, she jumped out of the camper and ran over the field to the gate. Mia was sitting behind the wheel of her car. Reza shouted
across the field, ‘Come back, please, come back!’ She screamed across the field, ‘I love you!’ She stopped running, stood still, waited for a few seconds, looking at the bright glare of the headlights, but of course nobody got out. Mia started the engine and took off along the road that led out of the polder.

Reza could have run along the path, could have followed Mia in her red Opel. Instead she looked at the taillights and gave up. She was so unbelievably tired. She threw her head back and looked up at the inky-blue sky that first would grow blacker and blacker and later would colour again into blue, purple, pink, until the sun rose above the polder and light shone through the cracks. Reza thought of the rescued sheep and she knew it wasn’t just the sheep she had saved that first day, but herself and Mia too. Even if Mia ended up forgetting everything about her, there would always be the story about the sheep. It still hadn’t drowned.

Maartje Wortel
Translated by Sarah Welling and Margie Franzen
The main reason I went to Finland was to do something with my hands. In 1973, doing something with your hands meant something different from what it does today, in 2020. I had put an end to high school six months earlier. That’s how it’s always felt to me too, as putting an end to something: an end was put to something that had already been going on far too long. There’s a dream I have occasionally. You often hear of people who dream about having to repeat their finals. They wake up in a sweat: fortunately, they’re lying in their own room, in their own bed, it’s the middle of the night, true, but those finals really don’t have to be done all over again, they already did that half a lifetime ago. Anyone who wants to know what that dream signifies should make an appointment with their local mental health clinic, or write a letter to ‘Ask the Expert’.

My own finals dream is a very different one. In my dream, I have to go to school. Pocket diaries are opened, class schedules filled out. The bell rings. Next hour we have German with Mrs Van Aakerinden-Hagenau. Still within the dream, I break out in a cold sweat. I cycle home. And then something starts to dawn on me. The house I’m cycling to is one I haven’t lived in for ages. I’m a writer. I don’t have to go to school at all. In fact, if I go to school for a whole year, I won’t have nearly enough time to write. I’m not going to do it, I tell myself as I cycle to
I was hoping for something, there on my own, on that tractor in the woods. An accident, at the very least. An accident that would leave me gravely injured – cost me my life, in a pinch. It was a liberating feeling, a feeling I would never regain.

When I look at photos from back then, I see someone who only ever-so-vaguely has anything to do with me myself. A gangly, bit-too-skinny boy in a faded grey jacket that could, with a bit of fantasy, be called a ‘peasant blouse’. The legs of the ditto-faded jeans are tucked into nearly knee-high black rubber boots. Leaning nonchalantly against a yellow trailer with one arm, a little further in the background you can just make out the muddy back wheels of a red tractor.

The pose looks tough, but it isn’t. The boy is really too thin and gangly for that. What was he doing there, anyway, you ask yourself? Or: is he actually up to that kind of work? In later years, too, those were the questions that pursued me. After a while, even without the photographs, people (my own family members, friends) started grinning when I brought up my Finnish period. After a few quick forays (‘It was the winter of 1973, at ten at night the thermometer said it was -27°C’
‘I went there to work with my hands’ ‘I almost cut off my leg one time with that chainsaw’), I would try to change the subject. But sometimes it was too late. ‘Are you sure you really want to hear this?’ I’d ask. Yeah, yeah, come on, tell us, the listeners nodded me on. Each and every time I started in again with the boat trip straight past the Baltic ice floes, until our arrival at the iced-in port of Helsinki, knowing full well that the grinning would start sooner or later. I often felt like that uncle of mine who had worked on the Burma Railway during the war, especially when he would recount, each time anew, how, during his escape, he had cut the throats of two Japanese guards with his own hands. Between the ages of five and fifteen, I probably heard that story about thirty times, and each time I tried to combine my uncle’s pudding face with the truly evocative image of the Japanese soldiers, blood gushing from their slashed throats. I couldn’t see the grin of disbelief on my own face, but I could certainly feel it; I had to cover my mouth to hide it from the implausible uncle.

Are you sure you really want to hear this? Besides courtesy, my question had everything to do with the implausibility of my stay in Finland. With the photos that did indeed show me posing beside a trailer pulled by a red tractor, but didn’t show me ripping down snow-covered roads through the Finnish forest at the wheel of that same tractor. Yes, actually ripping. Always too fast, especially on the curves. I was nineteen. Not so very long before, things had happened that had upset my life completely, to say nothing of knocking the bottom out of it. I was hoping for something, there on my own, on that tractor in the woods. An accident, at the very least. An accident that would leave me gravely injured – cost me my life, in a pinch. It was a liberating feeling, a feeling I would never regain. There was no danger, or more rightly: the danger was there, but it was a friend – perhaps even the best friend I had, back in 1973.

Herman Koch
Translated by Sam Garrett
In his international bestseller and first novel in English translation, *The Dinner* (2012), Herman Koch meticulously exposed the hypocrisies at the heart of middle-class society; in *The Ditch*, his fourth and latest novel in English, he turns his analytical gaze onto personal relationships, and the famed Dutch reputation for tolerance.

Koch has a way of unsettling the reader with the sheer simplicity of a narrative of everyday occurrences; as in *The Dinner*, in *The Ditch* in particular, he underpins the credibility of his characters and the events in their lives with anecdotes involving real people. Here François Hollande and Barack Obama, for example, appear in ‘real-life’ situations with Robert Walter, the book’s protagonist and narrator, and the story takes on a new, utterly believable dimension.

‘François Hollande winked at me. He had turned his head to follow the tall blonde girl with the serving tray … in that moment, it was not the French president on a state visit to Amsterdam who was winking at me, but … the enamoured president … who slipped out at night … to pay a secret visit to his lover.’

Robert Walter is the mayor of Amsterdam, a man of the world and especially the political world, a public figure with practised skills that are key to his job. He can spot boredom a mile off, manipulate meetings, say what people want him to say, deal with foreign dignitaries without a second thought. And, with his world-weary arrogance, he knows it: ‘It’s tiring to be the obvious pivot in almost every group. The motor behind every conversation … it’s just my day-to-day reality.’

He has a beautiful wife, Sylvia, whom he adores, and a lovely daughter, Diana. He does not though use their real names when discussing them: in ‘Sylvia’s’ case, because she is from an unnamed country far to the south of Holland, about which the Dutch have ‘preconceived notions, both favourable and unfavourable’. The Dutch, he points out, are full of such prejudices, about Belgians, French, Germans, never mind that unnamed country. As for ‘Diana’, as the mayor’s daughter, she is entitled to her privacy.

But then, out of nowhere, this confident, well-adjusted family man is thrown totally off balance by a light touch on the elbow at a New Year’s party: not his elbow, but Sylvia’s, and not by him, but by one of his aldermen, an unappealing provincial by the name of van Hoogstraaten, who is telling
her an apparently amusing story. Suddenly, Walter is overcome with suspicion: van Hoogstraaten and his wife are having an affair ...

It seems implausible – that touch is the only evidence, but it’s enough to turn Walter into a domestic secret agent:

‘I went undercover in my own home. From behind my newspaper I kept a close watch on my wife ... From the tiniest shifts in my wife’s behaviour, I was trying to deduce whether my worst fears were based in the truth.’

Are Sylvia’s openness and good humour the real thing, or just ‘a five-star performance’? Koch’s exposition of Walter’s descent into raging doubt and fear is as good as it gets. His insecurity was clearly always there, the self-assurance just a front, his time as mayor, we discover, plagued by a lack of any real progress.

Into all this, Koch injects some penetrating reflections on racial and social differences and stereotypes; profound thoughts on fascism and democracy, on what he calls the new ‘eco-fascism’, and on how charismatic leaders rarely win power through popular choice: ‘Wherever people are given an opportunity for public comment, you get ugliness. Not just ugly buildings, but ugly, nondescript politicians.’ This is gripping stuff, every bit as compelling as the vicious circle of Walter’s conjugal suspicions. But then, other narrative strands come into play: his parents’ impending deaths, his relationship with his best friend, in which he was somehow always second best, and an event in his past that could turn into a public scandal. These are the real problems Walter faces, for which his wife’s presumed affair is a convenient psychological displacement activity.

Sadly, as the story progresses, Herman Koch doesn’t manage to meld these various strands into a convincing whole: they just don’t hang together. The analytical insight he brings to Robert Walter’s jealousy is dissipated in the final third of the book. The old prejudices about Sylvia’s unnamed country are laid bare, but in the end, the resolution of the story, in which the significance of the ‘ditch’ becomes clear, doesn’t work for me: it is a dying fall, a whimper, which left me wondering: why?

Max Easterman
‘The writer’s job,’ Nabokov once wrote, ‘is to get the main character up in a tree, and then once they are up there, to throw rocks at them.’ As someone who believes that all literature worth its salt has something edgy about it, that explanation has always delighted me.

Dutch literature at its finest has that edginess too. At its best it is the domain of unbridled rock-throwing, of ribaldry, of gut-wrenching tragedy, black humour and in-your-face social critique. Often peppered with qualifications that would make the hair stand up on the back of any sensitive reader’s neck.

It is, in short, alive. Which is probably why I’m fond of it – and with me are its growing readership abroad.

One titillating aspect of being a literary translator from the Dutch is that so few people speak and read it – only an estimated twenty-five million worldwide: the combined populations of the city of São Paulo and Los Angeles County. Which makes it all the more rewarding and cosy, as though you were a member of some secret club of lost boys and girls. As though it were a kind of deep-op code, and you are the Enigma Machine.

But why on earth would any serious person spend the greater part of their productive life cracking the end-to-end encryption of something spoken by no more than one-third of one percent of the world’s population? Is it purely masochism? No ... or at least, not purely. Are there other rewards then? Intangible ones in this case, for, God knows, no serious person – what am I saying? – no one in their right mind would enter this profession for the money.

To answer that, I don’t even have to rack my brain to find the moment when first I was forced into translating Dutch literature. For yes, I was forced. Even forty years later, the memory of that moment and the place it happened is as clear as the proverbial bell.

It was in the draughty upstairs kitchen of the squat my girlfriend and I occupied in the early 1980s, where I accidentally came across a special, twenty-page Christmas insert with stapled binding from a local Dutch...
paper; it contained a story called ‘A Day in the Life of David Windvaantje’ (a windvaantje, by the way, is a weathervane, spinning madly in every fair and foul wind that blows).

Someone had taken that insert out of the newspaper and folded it flat, face down, to use as a shelf liner; there were coffee stains – and something else that looked like peppery, red sambal hot sauce – on the cover, which bore a drawing of a man who looked exactly the way I felt at the time: mad-scientist hairdo, a seedy-looking angel on his shoulder and a string of hearts bubbling up from his left ear. The real surprise, though, was inside: the story follows a deeply neurotic librarian who makes a terrible, terrible mistake, then ends up fleeing accountability on a day-long bike ride around The Hague, fraught with perils imaginary and real.

The story was by Maarten Biesheuvel. Sadly, Maarten died in early 2020, having – against all odds – reached the age of seventy-nine, but from the moment I finished that Christmas special he became a fixture atop my literary Olympus. The dilemma, of course, was that now my friends back home absolutely had to read this. Yet, how could they? There was only one solution, and that was to translate the damn thing myself.

Later I discovered other memorable stories by Biesheuvel, and then Jan Wolkers’ autobiographical Terug naar Oegstgeest and Gerard Reve’s De avonden and Frans Kellendonk’s Mystiek lichaam and Tommy Wieringa’s Joe Speedboot. All just crying out to be translated. A great story, I learned, is a loaded gun pointed at the translator’s sense of fair play. For who was I – now that I had the key to break the code and unlock the trove – to keep these jewels all to myself?

Some of them I did end up translating, yes indeed. Others may come my way someday, and yet more will hopefully be discovered and handed over to new readers by a new generation of Dutch–English translators: serious people all, I’m sure. The poor devils.

Sam Garrett
In developing and commissioning The Dutch Riveter, we as an editorial team have worked closely with the Dutch Foundation for Literature’s New Dutch Writing (NDW) campaign. Several of the authors, and many of the translators, featured in the campaign appear in this magazine, offering our readers a selection of work we believe represents the best of contemporary literature in the Netherlands. This literature is characterised by a renewed scrutiny of the Netherlands’ colonial past and its current treatment of immigrants, by the lives of LGBTQ people, by questions of freedom and religion, and by new views on the traditions of Dutch rural life. It also reveals a generation who seem already to be experts in their craft, as the pieces we feature in this magazine demonstrate. Economic prose, crisp dialogue, perfect blends of wit and sadness, beautiful characterisation and a lightness of touch are all evident in the work of these writers, suggesting a mature literary culture in which raw talent is husbanded and refined.

The new wave of Dutch writers is accompanied by a new generation of translators, many of them contributing translations, reviews and features to this magazine. NDW has put these translators at the centre of its efforts to bring the work of the new generation of Dutch authors to UK readers. In the following piece we hear from the campaign’s translator in residence, Alice Tetley-Paul, about her experience and NDW’s work in the UK.

—The Dutch Riveter Editors
As the NDW campaign’s translator in residence, my role has encompassed translation, training sessions, book launches and projects with schools and universities – both online and face to face. In spring 2020, as the UK was preparing for lockdown, I worked alongside my mentor, the translator Jonathan Reeder, to provide guidance to students from three UK universities as they translated an extract from Fikry El Azzouzi’s *The Reward*. Before lockdown, I was also able to meet students at UCL in London to discuss their translations and any issues they might have. Although we were not able to gather in Sheffield as planned to discuss the final translations, a digital symposium was organised so we could still meet up virtually to round off the project, with Fikry in Belgium, Jonathan in the Netherlands and the rest of us in our respective locations across the UK. The project was a resounding success, and being involved as a professional translator felt extra special to me as that very same project had been my first real-world translation experience back when I was a student.

As it became clear that Covid-19 wasn’t going away in a hurry, the migration to online events and workshops became par for the course. I appeared (via Zoom) at an event at the Dutch Centre to launch my co-translation (with Anna Asbury) of *My Name is Selma*, the memoir of Selma van de Perre, who joined the Dutch Resistance during the Second World War and used an alias to survive the war and Ravensbrück concentration camp. (You can read an extract from the book in our translation in this magazine.)

I also took part in two online events to promote the VERZET series of Dutch chapbooks, having translated one of the books: *Bergje* by Bregje Hofstede. I spoke alongside other authors and translators at the launch, in collaboration with the National Centre for Writing in Norwich, as well as at an event for Sheffield’s Off the Shelf Festival. The VERZET series, which was featured on BBC Radio 4’s Open Book, was published by New Dutch Writing in partnership with Strangers Press to showcase eight of the best new Dutch writers in translation. The NDW campaign will continue to promote and pitch these authors and their translators in 2021 (you can read work by some of them in this magazine). The inclusion of translators at events such as these has helped increase awareness of the role of the translator, and what’s more, there’s been huge interest in NDW’s translation workshops: it has run seven workshops since May 2020.

Of course, the International Booker Prize win for Marieke Lucas
Rijneveld and Michele Hutchison for *The Discomfort of Evening*, and the international success of Rutger Bregman’s bestseller *Humankind*, translated by Elizabeth Manton and Erica Moore, have helped draw attention to the NDW campaign and to Dutch literature in general, as has the campaign’s prominent online presence.

As for the continuation of my residency into 2021, I will be back in schools (either virtually or physically), building on training received earlier in 2020 through the Creative Translation Ambassadors project with the British Centre for Literary Translation and National Centre for Writing in Norwich and the Translation Exchange in Oxford. I will also be undertaking short residencies in London, Sheffield and Newcastle, where I will be working with university students and delivering translation workshops in schools.

I will also continue to be involved with the campaign’s social-media presence, so do make sure you are following the Dutch Foundation for Literature on Facebook and Twitter and keep an eye out for #newdutchwriting and the latest news and updates from the campaign.

I would like to thank Rachel Toogood and Martin Colthorpe from Modern Culture, as well as the Dutch Foundation for Literature, for this opportunity, and my mentor Jonathan Reeder for his time, support and guidance.

*Alice Tetley-Paul*
In May 1976 my aunt and I were world news. I was six years old and had shoulder-length red ringlets, but you couldn’t see the colour in the photographs. ‘Holy Sister and Her Little Angel’ was the headline in a newspaper in Texas. A Brazilian Catholic magazine wrote about an apparition of the Blessed Virgin Mary before the gates of hell. In this case, hell was an abortion clinic in our village of Heemstede. We had no idea that we were going to become famous without anyone knowing our names. We had not performed some feat or survived a disaster. I happened to be at my grandma’s house because she was looking after me for a few hours, and my aunt, Sister Trientje, also happened to be visiting. After coffee, my grandma looked at her watch and announced that she was going to demonstrate in the village. ‘Some red women,’ she said, her jaws clenched so that her thin lips disappeared, ‘have occupied that gruesome, baby-murdering factory so that they can stop it being closed down.’

I was ashamed of the colour of my hair and had nightmare visions of shrieking red witches with babies skewered on knives. Thanks to my grandma, I knew exactly what an aborted foetus looked like at ten, twelve and fourteen weeks. There were leaflets all over her house with biblical admonitions and pictures of tiny, underdeveloped bodies that had been torn apart, which she handed out to pregnant women at the door of abortion clinics. Grandma had given me a foetus doll for my sixth birthday with a card that said, in her neat handwriting: ‘Psalm 139:13. For you created my inner parts, you wove me in my mother’s womb! Happy birthday.’ That same evening, my mother threw the doll in the bin. ‘Don’t forget,’ she said, ‘she’s your step-grandma. Your real grandma was normal.’

Fifteen minutes later, we were standing outside the gates of the abortion clinic on Herenweg in Heemstede. What I remember was the relaxed atmosphere. It was like the village fair.
My step-grandma stood up, put on her long brown coat and pushed a stack of leaflets into our hands. She inspected her short perm in the mirror in the hallway, while Aunt Trientje made the broken foetuses disappear into the infinite pockets of her long black habit. On the way there, my step-grandma spat her bile about the murder of innocent children and about atonement. She marched a metre ahead of us.

‘Remember the mop, my dear,’ said Aunt Trientje, putting a protective arm around me. Aunt Trientje had taught me how to mop. The exercise went as follows. I had to find a quiet spot and close my eyes. Then I grabbed a big mop and a bucket of water and I scrubbed my head until it was empty. After that, I’d mop down through my throat and towards my heart and the rest of my body, giving everything a big old clean-up. She’d explained that I was mopping away all the filth and the nastiness from outside, so that I could be clean and fresh inside again. Aunt Trientje used to give herself a mopping at least twice a day, on top of all the psalms she sang all day long, as if they were nursery rhymes. I didn’t know anyone who was as pure as my aunt Trientje.

Fifteen minutes later, we were standing outside the gates of the abortion clinic on Herenweg in Heemstede. What I remember was the relaxed atmosphere. It was like the village fair. Music, cheerful voices, a chip stand on the pavement. In the front garden of Grandma’s satanic murder factory, women, children and a few men were sitting on the grass. They were eating sandwiches, singing battle songs and laughing together. No one had red hair, except for me, and no one was walking around with knives that had bleeding foetuses skewered on them. The only one who looked angry was my step-grandma, who went to stand with a group of like-minded people. A scrawny man in a black habit and wearing a pair of dark sunglasses was speaking into a microphone about ‘the sixth commandment of the law of our Lord: Thou shalt not kill,’ but no one was listening.

My aunt asked if I wanted some chips, and we went to join the queue. In front of us were two young women holding
signs that said ‘Knitting needles? Never again!’ My aunt loved knitting, and I couldn’t imagine that anyone could ever have anything against knitting needles. When the women went to pay, they only had a twenty-five-guilder note, and the chip man didn’t have any change. Aunt Trientje said that she’d get them, and she paid for four portions. They gave her a really strange look; it was the first time I’d felt ashamed of her ankle-length habit and black veil. It wasn’t until years later that I realised quite how extraordinary her gesture had been.

The sun was shining, and my aunt wanted to eat in the shade of the trees in the front garden. We walked onto the grounds of the abortion clinic, and I couldn’t fail to notice that all eyes were on her again. With a fearless and friendly smile, she walked past the mini-skirted women, feeding chips to a handful of pigeons and pointing out to me their beautiful grey colour and clever little eyes. When we’d finished our cones of chips, she crumpled the wrappers into a ball and conjured a huge white handkerchief from her habit, which she used to wipe my face. Then Grandma suddenly appeared in front of us and started preaching, with raised finger and lipless mouth. ‘You have entered the camp of the baby murderers! They have blood on their hands!’ She was pointing at the house behind us. They were Nazi doctors, bringing about a second Holocaust, while we munched away on our chips and mayonnaise. I was so scared of my grandma’s wolfish jaws that I grabbed Aunt Trientje’s hand, which was clutching the cotton handkerchief. And it was precisely then that the photograph was taken that briefly made us world famous. This was what people saw: a furious middle-aged woman wagging her finger at a serenely smiling nun who was holding on to a frightened little girl and a white flag of surrender, with five doves of peace at her feet. On the building behind us was a banner: LEGALISE ABORTION.

Anne-Gine Goemans
Translated by Laura Watkinson
Eric Lie is a seventy-one-year-old taekwondo grandmaster living in Paramaribo, Suriname. He is the most highly decorated martial artist in his country and is considered a living legend by many. As a passionate hunter of wildlife and women alike, Mr Lie fathered many children. One of them is writer Karin Amatmoekrim. In her memoir Unless the Father Amatmoekrim tries to discover the man behind the myth, hoping in the end to find her father.

I was eleven years old when my mother told me that my father’s name was Eric Lie and that he lived in Paramaribo. It had not so much been a notification, as it had been pure magic. My mother had closed her eyes as she unfolded the story, her hands plucking at the air, reaping from her memory the description of a man I had never heard of before. She unveiled a new truth – that the father I knew was not my blood, and that my true father was living in Suriname, and that my old father, suddenly proved to be my stepfather, a common sailor on an ocean liner, but in reality a man who fully dedicated his days to drinking, a reality that was at the time inseparable from our own lives, and that my true, my real father was a famous sportsman in my native country. It was the day that the police had come to our house and forced my father, excuse me, my stepfather, to leave. My mother and I had cleaned up the mess his drunk visit had left behind and we went to bed, together, me joining her on the large king-sized mattress, under the blanket, which was welcoming and heavy on our bodies. She lay on her side, her face towards mine. Her eyes were closed, but I could tell she wasn’t asleep because she was gently shaking her legs, a habit she had when she went to bed a soft and soothing motion that calmed us, her children, and

She closed her eyes again and started talking, and while she told me the story her hands moved, her slim brown fingers, which I admired so much, gently touching the blanket, waving through the air.
herself. In a documentary on the nature channel I once saw how an elephant mother softly cradled her child with her trunk. The smooth voiceover told me the mother did so to appease the child and that the rhythm of the lulling movement she made kept pace with the rhythm of her heartbeat. I thought about that, and about how my mother just lay there silently, and about how she seemed even younger than before. She was only twenty-eight at the time, but to children their parents always seem old, no matter what their actual age.

At that moment she opened her eyes and looked straight at me with a gaze I had not seen before. ‘Your father,’ she said. Then she stopped. I turned on my back, and I waited as she silently searched for the words. I looked at the ceiling, which was divided in two by a straight line of light that came in through a gap in the curtains. I listened to her breathing, soft and steady, and couldn’t hear anything out of the ordinary. She kept shaking her legs softly, comfortingy. Nothing indicated that she was nervous about what she was about to tell me. And yet I felt something was about to happen. Something great.

‘Your father,’ she said again. ‘Didn’t you ever wonder why you look so different from him?’

I shook my head without considering the question. I wanted her to get on with it, I needed her to skip steps, to hear what it was that was keeping us awake in that dark bed, under those heavy blankets. She studied my face, and I waited impatiently, careful not to say or do anything that could delay the revelation.

Then she said, ‘He is the father of your brother and your sister, but not yours.’

I held my breath for a short time. Then I let it escape through my nose.

‘Karin?’ my mother asked.

‘Yes,’ I answered, and my voice sounded normal, there was no emotion in it. I had laid my hand flat on my stomach in an attempt to feel if anything had happened, if anything in the depth of me had been changed by my mother’s words. There was nothing.
'Yes,' I said again, and I turned my head to the side so I could look her in the eye.

'Do you want to know who your real father is?'

I nodded. She closed her eyes again and started talking, and while she told me the story her hands moved, her slim brown fingers, which I admired so much, gently touching the blanket, waving through the air. I wondered what it was she was looking for. Was it something she could hold on to, or was she conducting her words, the story? Did she charm the elements, moulding a whole new father, a father just for me? And she spoke of a famous sportsman, a grand master in the arts of taekwondo, a word I had never heard before. And she spoke of his love for her, and of how much she loved him, once.

I thought about my stepfather the sailor. The giant that came and went as he pleased, who laughed because he drank, until he drank so much that it made him cry, big, old, salty sailor tears across a crude, white face that I never recognised as not my own, for the love of a child is loyal, does not ask questions. Drink, laugh, drink, cry, cry, scream, break things, make them fall apart.

My mother asked me how I felt.

'I feel fine,' I answered. I laid my hand on my stomach again, tried to feel something. Somewhere deep down, but distinct, existent, there was a sense of relief.

'Is there anything you would like to know?' my mother asked.

'Not really,' I answered. I was tired and longed to see the end of this day. 'Or maybe I do. Yes. I do have one question.'

'What is it?'

'What’s his name?'

She paused for a moment, it was as if she had to gather something, I don’t know, courage maybe, and finally she said, ‘Eric Lie. That’s his name.’
Anil Ramdas (1958–2012) was a Dutch-Surinamese writer of Hindustani descent. He migrated to Amsterdam at the age of nineteen, becoming one of the most respected commentators and essayists in the Netherlands. In his work – appearing on television as well as writing for the intellectual magazine *De Groene Amsterdammer* and the newspaper *NRC Handelsblad* – he showed himself to be a keen thinker on culture and identity. He committed suicide on his fifty-fourth birthday in 2012. His short life can be read as the restless journey of a writer in search of an all-encompassing answer to questions about civilisation and identity. Even though he had always admired western civilisation for its ability to be self-critical, he detected a paradigm shift in 2012 that he could not agree with: ‘During the Rushdie affair a class of intellectuals arose who no longer knew what to do and therefore became very vulnerable to the concept of western superiority.’

Ramdas’s views on multicultural societies were seen more and more, and by a growing section of the intellectual elite, as ‘politically correct complaining’ that was long past its sell-by date. Today, we are seeing how the shifts in the public debate that Ramdas had been identifying since the early nineties have led to an even more hardened political climate and to increased criticism of multicultural societies.

After his death, it was said that the Netherlands, ‘the country that he had loved, and that had rewarded him for that love, now turned its back to him’¹. It was suggested that at a certain point he had fallen ‘outside the spirit of the times’. In an in memoriam in *De Groene Amsterdammer*, the editor-in-chief, Xandra Schutte, said that Ramdas ‘was stranded in reality’.

It is this ‘reality’ to which Schutte refers that I am particularly curious
about. What constitutes this specific reality? What about it made Ramdas shift from hope to despair? Some have said it was a matter of failed ambition combined with alcoholism. However, I’m interested in a different reality from the one depicted by Ramdas’s contemporaries. A reality that is more nuanced and more difficult to measure. A reality, more specifically, that to an extent is shaped by the fact that Ramdas was one of very few people of colour in a predominantly white environment – something that seems to be characteristic of the Netherlands.

When the Black Lives Matters activist Patrisse Cullors visited the Netherlands in 2016, she stated in an interview that she was glad not to be living in Holland because ‘Black people here [in the Netherlands] cannot easily escape whiteness’. It’s an issue that Dutch scholars such as Gloria Wekker and Philomena Essed have been researching for a long time. It might be interesting to extend that research and find out how texts like Ramdas’s, which are specifically critical of the Dutch, are read and interpreted in a nation that is undergoing a profound political transformation and that has always been uneasy about racial issues – that has even shown an unwillingness to consider race as a matter of any real significance².

I wonder if it’s true what Cullors said; is it more difficult to escape the dominant gaze and views of the white man in the Netherlands? And if so, what does that mean for the way a black writer like Ramdas unfolds his world to the white public?

Those who read Ramdas’s essays today are struck by the topicality of his words. In his Socrates Foundation lecture of 1997 he wrote: ‘In the past five centuries, it has always been the whites who went into the world. Now the coloured people come to the white world, and few can get used to it. The nervousness of a community like this can silently turn into panic, tension and fear’³.

In his work, Ramdas drew attention to this fear and panic in Dutch society. His own anxiety, however, was kept private. It is the goal of the biographer to unveil the inner world of one’s subject – yet that goal is nearly impossible in the writing of Anil Ramdas’s biography. The challenge in this particular case is to see how the journeys of postcolonial Dutch writers such as Anil Ramdas, develop from an optimistic, humanist and hopeful start, to anxiety and, in the end, to despair. Writing such a biography is ultimately an attempt to depict reality in the way that Ramdas himself would have expected, from any form of literature: to show the world in all its complexity and in all its painful and impossible nuances.

Karin Amatmoekrim

Karin Amatmoekrim is working on PhD research on the life and work of Anil Ramdas. Her thesis is due to be published in 2021.

(1) https://digitaleeditie.nrc.nl/digitaleeditie/NH/2012/1/20120218__/1_28/index.html#page29
(3) http://www.stichtingsocrates.nl/lezingen/1997.htm
Zandvoort had something going for it, especially when it rained. One drizzly Sunday a two-man band was singing Spanish songs in the little music pavilion on Raadhuisplein accompanied by a loud electronic drum machine. Thirty folding chairs had been set up in front of it, but no one was sitting on them. The few onlookers, all German tourists, concealed themselves among the stalls selling fish and confectionary. Zandvoort was a tourist resort, and in sunny tourist resorts you heard ‘playa’ music. Background music could do a lot, but not everything. It could not dispel the cold and greyness. Two cops were directing traffic away from Raadhuisplein, and even cyclists were ordered to dismount – here illusions were upheld with brute force.

Zandvoort itself had something artificial about it, just like Disney World, and Badal sometimes got the feeling he was surrounded by extras, all of whom simply pretended to actually live here. Even the tourists seemed to be playing their own walk-on roles for a fee.

That one time, he had been tempted to go back home. To prove to them he was sober. As he was trying to make up his mind on the platform in front of the ticket machine, he heard a dull thud behind him. A strapping lad with a thick pair of glasses and adolescent stubble lay sprawled on the ground. The two boys he was with looked at him, and then at their surroundings, as if they didn’t really belong together, or as if they were looking for help but didn’t see anyone who could.

Diagonally across from him were a couple in their thirties who spoke English – he white, she black. Of late, he had developed the tendency of noticing black people. Up until now he had only come across one black person in Zandvoort – in a wheelchair. A handicapped black; if they were all extras, this was a real gem. And now here was this beautiful black woman, with the English man who did not react to the boy
Racism was allowed nowadays; anyone could be a racist, even the whites, whom he had always thought never harboured such base feelings, since they were above all that.

lying on the ground. He did not notice that the black woman had also ignored him. Whites were supposed to help whites. Badal reluctantly walked over to the boy on the ground and asked him, first in bad German and then in English, whether something was wrong. He had taken his cell phone out of his jacket by the time the boy put his thick glasses back on the bridge of his nose and said: ‘No, no, everything’s okay, everything is okay.’

‘Are you sure?’ Badal asked.

‘Yes, yes, sure.’

Badal walked back to the ticket machine and surveyed the entire scene. It wasn’t until the boy scrambled to his feet and began wobbling his way up the stone flight of stairs to the station’s exit that the Englishman intervened. ‘I wouldn’t do that if I were you,’ he said in German. The boy slumped down on the first step.

‘Have either of you got anything sweet on you?’ he asked his two friends, who were still in a daze. No, nothing sweet.

‘Go upstairs and score me something from the vending machine, chocolate or an ice cream, it doesn’t matter what.’

The Englishman walked back to his girlfriend and said: ‘Those half-baked kids come from Germany to smoke their brains out and fall flat on their arses.’

Smoke dope, thought Badal. If he gave up drinking, he could always smoke dope, couldn’t he? The very thought made him think twice about buying a ticket and he walked back up the stairs. Badal, you haven’t recovered by a long shot.

The Zandvoort station hall looked as though no work had been done on it since the Second World War. Tiles with chipped corners, a small kiosk to the right, the word ‘Wet’ taped to green doors on scraps of paper.

Had he only wanted to go home to prove he was sober? What he really wanted was to cook in his own kitchen, like he used to. Long ago. When he brought home thick ribs of meat, cut them into blocks the size of the palm of a hand, and then braised them at high heat. In the meantime he would dice
a large onion and three or four cloves of garlic, if his wife was not at home. She claimed it upset her stomach when he used too much garlic, but if she hadn’t seen how many diced cloves he had tossed into the pan, she didn’t notice a thing. His secret was the mustard that he added before pouring the boiling water over the meat and simmering it for two hours: two heaped tablespoons of the hottest mustard he could find. That was four times the amount the recipe called for, but his son was crazy about his stewed meat. He could look through the window of his study and see him eat. Fathers love watching their children eat. It offers the kind of gratification no other moment can provide. Not even when you yourself eat, nor when you see strangers eating. That was the way evolution had arranged it, for a parent to be pleased at feeding its offspring.

He walked into an Italian restaurant right across from the Holland Casino. It was empty. There was a Turkish man behind the bar, who also doubled as cook and waiter. The radio was on, tuned to a station giving the football results, but the volume didn’t appear to have anything to do with his love of football. He was deaf. It was when he said in a loud voice ‘Excuse me, sir’ to the Turk standing right behind the bar, that he noticed it, because he just kept on drying glasses with a tea towel, without responding. Racist, was the first thought that popped into his head. Racism was allowed nowadays; anyone could be a racist, even the whites, whom he had always thought never harboured such base feelings, since they were above all that. They were no longer allowed to harbour them, because of their historic guilt over colonialism and slavery. A decade or two ago, racism was a disgraceful attitude for whites to assume. For blacks, for Surinamers, it was quite common. Hindus were supposed to be racist towards black Surinamers and vice versa. Of all racists, Turks were the worst, he thought. Atatürk might well have turned out just as bad as Hitler, were it not for that one redeeming feature of his: a weakness for wine. People who die of cirrhosis of the liver can’t be all that bad.

But racism had nothing to do with this Turk, it was deafness.

Anil Ramdas
Translated by Scott Rollins
From Badal. Anil Ramdas (c) 2011. Published by De Bezige Bij, Amsterdam.
I became addicted to *lekkerbekjes*, batter-fried fish, and this also gave me something to do outside the ASC. The fish stall was run by a man, a younger guy, and two girls.

One day I was standing in line and the girl in the stall called out: ‘Who’s next?’ What a question! We were standing in line and naturally the person in front was next.

‘Me,’ I shouted from the back, as a joke, but a few annoyed faces turned to me, as though I’d meant it seriously.

‘Sorry, mister, you’ve only just got here,’ the girl snapped. I left the line. Her surly attitude was enough to put me off *lekkerbekjes* for good.

As I walked off, another girl struck up a conversation with me. She had seen what had happened.

‘We Dutch have no sense of humour, you know,’ she said, walking with me across the market. ‘Where are you from?’

‘From the asylum seekers’ centre,’ I said.

‘I meant which country.’

‘My country is one huge ASC, home to millions of asylum seekers.’

Her name was Maddalena. She was twenty-five, pretty, and seemed to be the most easy-going girl in the world, because within five minutes she repeated the word ‘okay’ at least five times, which is one okay per minute. The person who shared his life with her would hear so many okays that he could skate on
them, swim in them, sleep on them, and wake up in them. She talked and I nodded, pretending to listen, but thinking of that one golden okay that would lead me to her body, which was no doubt far tastier than a lekkerbekje. She smiled as though she were watching a play she’d read beforehand and knew it would only get better. Then she pointed to a window on the third floor of an apartment building.

‘That’s where I live,’ she said. I asked if I could drink tea at her place.

‘Okay,’ she said. ‘How about tonight at eight o’clock?’

As I walked back to the ASC I thought how I mustn’t sell myself short and think that an asylum seeker couldn’t hook up with a Dutch woman on the outside. Maddalena was beautiful and friendly, and she always said okay. And I would drink tea in her apartment at eight o’clock that evening.

No one at the ASC believed that a chance meeting could lead to an invitation to a Dutch woman’s home. Walid claimed that she was either a hash addict, a whore, or just plain crazy. At six o’clock I took a long shower, shaved my face and armpits, and trimmed my pubic hair. I brushed my teeth at least six times and went from room to room looking for an iron. From one person I borrowed a gold chain, from another, a silver ring. Toby, a perfume thief, offered me two kinds, one of which I sprayed all over my body and the other onto my clothes, and I searched high and low until I found dress shoes my size. For the first and the last time, I went to reception not as an asylum seeker, but as someone who had a date.

‘Aspirin?’ asked Rik, the receptionist.

‘Condoms, please. Do I look like someone with a headache?’

‘How should I know? You always ask for aspirin.’

‘From now on, no more aspirin, only condoms.’

‘Who’s the lucky girl?’

‘A Hollander,’ I answered proudly.

‘Really?’ he said. ‘Then you might want to stock up on aspirin after all.’

‘Not necessary,’ I said, and off I went to my date with the three condoms distributed over various pockets.
so that one would always be within reach when things got exciting.

I rang her bell at twenty past seven.

‘Who’s there?’

‘Samir.’

‘I thought we said eight o’clock,’ she replied brusquely. ‘Hang on.’

I stood there. A man with a dog walked by, and I told him I had a date at eight o’clock, but that I was a little early. A woman peered at me from a window across the street, and I called to her that I had a date at eight o’clock, but was too early. Another neighbour asked the first one what that asylum seeker was doing down there, and she told her I had an appointment at eight. Gosh, I thought, make a date with a Dutch girl and you get to meet the entire neighborhood. At eight o’clock sharp the door opened and many pairs of eyes followed me inside.

I walked up the stairs and Maddalena offered me a cold hand. Not a single okay passed over her lips. She made tea.

‘I wanted to call you to reschedule,’ she said, ‘but I didn’t have your number.’

‘That’s okay,’ I said. Instead of listening to her okays I started saying okay myself.

‘I’ll leave as soon as we’ve had our tea, if that’s okay. Or should I go now?’

‘No, no, drink your tea first.’ She bit her nails and snapped at a little white dog in a basket who wasn’t doing anything wrong. She tried to turn off the TV with the remote control, but it was already off, and when it went on she swore and switched it off again. If the dog and the television were having such a hard time of it, imagine the trouble I’d be in if the tea took too long, so I drank it in quick little sips, even though it burned my mouth. I said ‘okay’ after ‘okay’ until the tea was finished and I was relieved to be back outside. I had a headache, and the forty-minute wait and the twenty minutes in her apartment had worn me out. I hadn’t an ounce of energy left, and barely made it back to reception. I took the three condoms out of my various pockets and laid them on the counter.

Without a word, Rik took them back and slid me two aspirins.

Rodaan Al Galidi
Translated by Jonathan Reeder
Rodaan Al Galidi’s new novel – based on his own experiences of seeking asylum in the Netherlands – is one of those stories that grabs your attention with its clever cover and captivates you within seconds of turning to the first page.

With its engaging, humorous style, Al Galidi’s story of his nine-year wait in a Dutch asylum centre after emigrating from Iraq – told through the eyes of his protagonist, Samir – could read like a fictional account invented purely for entertainment. But bubbling beneath the surface is the harsh brutality of the asylum system and the enormous sacrifices and struggles suffered every day by those who are desperately in need of help. The story is not recounted in a linear way – instead, Al Galidi jumps back and forth in time, perhaps mirroring the confusion he feels and his struggle to come to terms with the injustice and absurdity of his situation. The characters that pop up along the way are brought to life expertly in Jonathan Reeder’s translation, transporting the reader to Iraq, the Netherlands and beyond.

‘So the Dutch people who passed us that day became irritated, because we rode [our bicycles] very slowly, and if Abdulwahid had soaked his tyres in white paint, the line he left behind would resemble a cardio-gram. Sometimes they would shout, “Hey, watch out!” or just give us dirty looks, although they could just as well have had a little chuckle about the Yemeni man trying to become a Hollander.’

Al Galidi deftly depicts the marked cultural differences between the many countries visited by his protagonist on his asylum seeker’s journey, not to mention the impenetrable bureaucratic systems of the western world. For readers like me, from this world, this is an eye-opening and essential story and one that I can only recommend.

Alyson Coombes
Where to start with Dutch crime fiction? It’s a very rich and wide-ranging field – although largely unknown to English-speaking readers. Thankfully, recent translations are remedying that unfortunate situation – but not quickly enough. While writing a variety of books on crime fiction from around the world – most recently, Crime Fiction: A Reader’s Guide – I found myself drawn repeatedly to crime writing from the Netherlands, which has a peculiar character all its own. But again I ask: where to start? It might, perhaps, be with a writer admired by no less than the formidable Patricia Highsmith. The unconventional Maarten ’t Hart’s novels have sold in their hundreds of thousands in his native Holland, where he has gained something of a reputation as a cross-dresser, often appearing on chat shows dressed as his female alter ego ‘Martha’. His unusual interest in rats led him to assist the equally eccentric director Werner Herzog in his remake of Nosferatu, which featured ’t Hart’s favourite verminous animals.

Also well-known to fans of translated crime is A.C. Baantjer, a former Amsterdam policeman who has written over seventy novels. His Inspector DeKok books are still highly popular, and were the basis for a long-running TV series. In 2003, Baantjer received the medal of honour from the GNM, the Dutch crime writers’ association.

The formidable Saskia Noort has long been the best-selling grande dame of crime fiction in the Netherlands (published in English by Bitter Lemon Press). She was awarded the Master Prize in 2013 for transforming the Dutch thriller market. Also notable are the psychological thrillers of Esther Verhoef, once a writer on animal life, subsequently the female half of thriller team ‘Escober’. Simone van der Vlugt is also prolific and enormously successful. She won the Crimezone Thriller award in 2009 for Blauw water (‘Blue Water’), and in 2010 her book Op klaarlichte dag (‘In Broad Daylight’) won both the Crimezone Thriller Award and the NS Publieksprijs.
Whenever I’m talking Dutch crime fiction, my principal contact and source of information is the amiable Charles den Tex, who published his first thriller in 1995 and who has won the prestigious Golden Noose multiple times: in 2002 for Schijn van kans (‘Chance in Hell’), in 2006 for De macht van meneer Miller (‘The Power of Mr Miller’) and two years later for CEL (‘Cell’). His novel De vriend (‘The Friend’) won the 2012 Crimezone Thriller award, and in 2013 he bagged another prize, the Gouden Vleermuis (‘Golden Bat’) for his body of work. Den Tex is perhaps best known for his Bellicher trilogy (The Power of Mr Miller, Cell and Password). The Power of Mr Miller and Cell were filmed as a ten-part television series. In the last six years, he has published three thrillers: De erfgenaam (‘The Heir’), Bot and Verloren vrouw (‘Lost Woman’). But den Tex is not ploughing the current crime fiction furrow alone. In recent years, female authors have tightened their grip on the genre. In addition to Saskia Noort, Simone van der Vlugt and Esther Verhoef, Loes den Hollander, Linda Jansma, Samantha Stroombergen and Linda van Rijn are outselling many of their male counterparts, while Donald Nolet, Max van Olden and Erik Betten are talented newcomers who have each won the annual Debut Crime Fiction Award in the Netherlands.

The verdict? Crime fiction in the Netherlands is in rude health. But when will more of these authors be made available to English-speaking readers?

Barry Forshaw
I WANT TO GO ON LIVING EVEN AFTER MY DEATH: DUTCH HOLOCAUST WRITING
BY MARJA KINGMA

The title of this piece refers to a passage in the most famous wartime diary ever published: that of the young Dutch Jew Anne Frank.

Despite her early death at the age of fifteen in the concentration camp Bergen-Belsen, Anne Frank most definitely lives on. Her diary was first published in Amsterdam in 1947 and has been translated into more than seventy languages. At the British Library we hold a first edition, as well as scholarly editions and translations into fourteen of those seventy languages, including Burmese, Esperanto, Maori, Welsh and Yiddish. The book is now one of UNESCO’s world heritage publications.

Another famous Dutch Holocaust diary is Etty Hillesum’s Het verstoorde leven, which translates as ‘An Interrupted Life’. Etty worked for the Jewish Council, travelling to and from the Westerbork detention and transit camp, until her internment and deportation to Auschwitz, where she was murdered in November 1943. For part of her life she lived in Deventer, the town I grew up in. My old school was renamed for her, and the old synagogue is now the Etty Hillesum Centre, which works towards a better understanding between religions and cultures. Etty stands out for her deeply spiritual ideas, which centre around her refusal to hate and to avoid her inevitable death. Her ideas are still the subject of research, as shown in the many titles about her held by the British Library, in Dutch, Italian and English.

Another fascinating read, which unsurprisingly won the Costa Book of the Year award in 2018, is The Cut Out Girl by Bart van Es. It tells the story of
Lien de Jong, a Jewish girl who went into hiding with foster families during the war and thus escaped deportation. Her parents and most of her other relatives were not so lucky. The book is also the story of the half-Dutch, half-English author’s search for Lien and for his own family history. Bart van Es found Lien still living in Amsterdam. They have since become good friends.

With numbers dwindling, many survivors feel an urgent need to tell their story, often as a warning against contemporary hatred of ‘the other’. As Dutch Holocaust survivor Selma van de Perre says: ‘We must show tolerance towards each other.’ 2019 saw the publication of van de Perre’s Mijn naam is Selma, published in the English translation in 2020 as My Name is Selma. It is special partly because it was written so long after the event: Selma is now ninety-eight and survived the only women’s camp, Ravensbrück.

The book’s title is significant because Selma survived the war by adopting a different, non-Jewish name, Marga. Not only that, but she managed to hide her Jewish identity from the Nazis and those around her throughout the war. She was arrested not because she was Jewish but for her work in the resistance. In the camp barracks Selma often tried to keep herself awake, fearing that she might say her name out loud in her sleep.

For many years Selma, who lives in Britain, did not want to write about her wartime experiences. But when she realised that many people here were not aware of the fate of the majority of the Dutch Jewish population during the war, she joined a survivors’ group, ‘The Women from Ravensbrück’, with whom she went back to Ravensbrück year after year. She also started visiting schools in this country to tell children her story. Eventually she began to write, first in English, but as plans for publication became firmer, she had the manuscript translated into Dutch. The published English translation is taken from the Dutch edition.

The Dutch books included here are all very different, but what they have in common is the desire to bear witness to what happened to the Jewish people when the world seemed to be looking the other way. These accounts are also a testament to human ingenuity, to resilience, to courage and to the part that sheer luck played in these women’s stories. And as Anne Frank hoped, we hope also that their stories will live on – forever.

Marja Kingma

Marja Kingma is curator for Germanic studies at the British Library, and specialises in Dutch history, culture and literature.

“ ‘I want to go on living even after my death!’ Anne Frank and her Diary. British Library European studies blog: http://bit.ly/2EuRSt201504
Although I was twenty, my family still saw me as a child. Since Clara and I were so much younger than Louis, David and our cousins, we were always seen as little girls, and when our parents and brothers went to family events, the two of us stayed home and waited for them to return from the party with cakes. So it didn’t occur to my father – nor me, in fact – that I might be in danger when I went out. Only on my way home, when I saw boys and girls being loaded into trucks, did I realise how risky it was. I covered my Star of David and fled homewards, my heart in my mouth, praying the Germans wouldn’t catch sight of me.

Uncle Arie and Aunt Sara had been trying for some time to travel to Switzerland with their son Maurits, who was already married. After my warning they made another attempt. Maurits’ father-in-law was a wealthy diamond merchant, so their family had a large sum of money to pay anyone who could help them cross the border. They waited in a café for their smuggler as instructed, but instead of being brought to safety they were arrested by the German police. The man to whom they’d paid so much money had betrayed them.

I assume that informers didn’t know then of the deadly consequences of their betrayal – they were just greedy. In addition to the money from the Jews they’d offered to help, they would have also received a reward of seven guilders for each Jew they turned in. That was a lot of money in those days – as much as a week’s welfare payments – and the temptation for some was simply too great.

For Jewish people it was impossible to know who you could trust, but Uncle Arie and his family were so desperate that they’d taken the risk. After their arrest the German police sent them home, but a couple of weeks later they were
captured during the systematic round-up of Jews. Their eldest son, David, who was studying medicine, had gone into hiding in a fellow student’s house in Hilversum. He should have been safe. But one evening he decided to go home to fetch some books. That very evening the family was arrested by the Sicherheitsdienst – the Nazi intelligence and security service – and transported to Auschwitz. David too. We never saw any of them again.

Whether people lived or died often depended on a coincidental split-second decision. My father had also talked about fleeing to Switzerland, but after what happened to Uncle Arie and his family, he no longer had the courage. And at that point we didn’t know what happened to the people who were transported to Eastern Europe. We still thought they were going to work camps.

Meanwhile, the Allies were dropping bombs. One landed close to our house – fortunately, it destroyed only the window. Despite the danger, we welcomed the bombs. After all, we knew that the Allied forces were fighting to destroy the Nazis and we lived in the naive hope that the war would soon be over. But it only came closer.

Selma van de Perre
Translated by Anna Asbury and Alice Tetley-Paul
Seventy-five years ago, on a cold winter’s day – 27 January, 1945 – in Poland, the Dutch doctor and trainee psychiatrist Eddy de Wind saw Russian troops in white camouflage suits stroll up the road ‘as if no Germans existed’ and enter Auschwitz concentration camp. Soon after, he and other newly liberated prisoners were taking turns to dance on a large portrait of Hitler they had dragged out of an office. ‘I don’t remember what I felt,’ de Wind wrote later. ‘Rather than a fine way of venting my hatred, I probably found it ridiculous ... I don’t think any of us were capable of experiencing real emotions at that stage, not sorrow, not hate, not longing.’

He’d spent more than sixteen months in the camp, with his wife, Friedel, who had been forced out of Auschwitz at gunpoint a week earlier during the murderous evacuations that would come to be known as the Death Marches. De Wind did his best to cling to hope, but everything he saw and heard made her survival seem less likely, and he had no news of her until he finally made it back to the Netherlands on 24 July 1945, ‘the day of the miracle’, when a Red Cross worker told him that ‘a Mrs de Wind from Auschwitz’ was in a nearby hospital. Before being reunited with Friedel, de Wind had stayed in Auschwitz for another three months at the request of the Russian medical detachment, helping to treat the survivors by ‘performing all kinds of difficult medical procedures, carrying out amputations and small operations that were essentially far beyond [his] capabilities’. It was in this period that he wrote Last Stop Auschwitz – in the evenings, sitting on his bunk in the former Polish barrack, after long days working in the hospital – driven by the one emotion he was sure of, his pressing need to let other people know what he had seen and suffered.

‘If I record it now,’ he wrote, ‘and everyone finds out about it, it will never be able to happen again.’

De Wind’s account of his experiences in Auschwitz, taken more or less directly from his notebook and first published in the Netherlands in 1946, occupies a middle ground between memoir and historical document: written after the fact, but on location and soon after the events it describes, sometimes just weeks later. Trying to identify what exactly makes the book so compelling, novelist Heather Morris wrote, ‘In all other accounts and testimonies given
many years after the suffering, there was at times a disconnect between memory and history ... In *Last Stop Auschwitz*, written when it was, there is no separation of these two, they waltz perfectly in step.'

In 1980, when seeking republication, de Wind turned down an offer from a leading Dutch publisher who saw a rewrite as a prerequisite, choosing instead a smaller house that aimed for as faithful a reproduction of the original as possible. De Wind knew this approach could expose him to ‘criticism for the style and immature political statements’ but preferred ‘the greater guarantee of authenticity’.

Forty years later, as his English translator, I bore this in mind and did my best to translate the book de Wind wrote rather than the polished version he rejected. The rawness and immediacy go hand in hand with the authenticity he demanded. Some of his transitions are abrupt, the pacing can be uneven, there may be some repetition and confusion as figures appear and disappear in the narrative, but none of this matters. What matters is his personal account of the Nazis’ crimes and the ordeal of the men and women who survived or, much more often, perished; his surprisingly early insights into the psychological and political processes at work; and the urgency with which he describes the killing machine he was caught up in.

I wanted it to be good English, of course, but English that felt as much like the Dutch as possible.

An important exception was the spelling of names, which de Wind often approximated or wrote down phonetically, presumably because he had only heard them and had never seen them written down. It’s hardly surprising that a small publisher in war-ravaged Amsterdam had few resources for fact checking and, in the immediate post-war period, when the Nuremberg trials had only just begun and knowledge of the camps was still relatively limited, it would have been extremely difficult to obtain information that is now just a few clicks away. It was only natural, then, to correct ‘Glauberg’ to ‘Clauberg’, ‘Klausen’ to ‘Clausen’, and ‘Döring’ to ‘Dering.’ A benefit of the book coming out in 2020 more or less simultaneously in some twenty languages around the world was being able to consult with the German, Polish, Hungarian and other translators in a lively Google group.

Translation is never easy and with such an important subject, getting it right is even more important. When de Wind described kapos and soldiers armed with *stokken*, for instance, the Dutch word could mean many things: ‘sticks’, ‘canes’, ‘branches’ or ‘bars’. By chance, I happened to go to Poland while translating the book and was able to visit Auschwitz, where I saw
drawings and photos of German soldiers brandishing both walking sticks and cudgels made from sturdy branches. In another room I saw prisoners’ uniforms in a display case and took photos of the wooden shoes and sandals mentioned in the book, glad to clarify the distinction between them. In both instances I ended up using the most literal translation, but that too is part of a translator’s task: putting in time and effort to make sure that the most obvious choice is actually correct. Proof once again of Dutch poet Adriaan Morriën’s old adage that a translator is someone who looks up words they already know in the dictionary.

David Colmer

This article was previously published by TIME magazine, online.

Last Stop Auschwitz by Eddy de Wind
Translated by David Colmer (Black Swan, 2021)
The sea begins somewhere else each day. I head for the surf in a straight line. The waves of the retreating tide have whipped up the sand. My feet sink into it. I wade through knee-deep water and feel the cold sea seep in through the holes in the knees and elbows of my wetsuit. Beyond the island of bladderwrack, I make my first crawl strokes.

In the sea, one writes without chair legs, footstool and desk. There is no slow work, no more staring out of the window or eating apples. As an underwater writer you have to discard everything, be submissive, strap on lead blocks; otherwise, you will float back up to the surface and all the newly written words will ebb away.

The forest that I swim through is powerful. The algae seem to be driven by a mysterious current, they calmly wave back and forth. While snorkelling in the bay I lose all sense of scale. I have never seen a landscape so slowly and completely in motion. Loose fronds float past below and above me. Many are almost transparent, but none of them look lifeless. Jagged leaf edges, torn-off stems, broken-away hold-fast, only out of the water does the seaweed surrender to the test of time and shrink away. Decay is nowhere to be seen under water.

To my left and right I can see in the corner of my eye how algae each have their own substrate and territory. I try to concentrate on the different stages of development and investigate various clusters for their shape and size. I look around as I hold on, slowly flippering, one hand clutching on to a rock. The sea here is so clear that the sun projects the...
rippling surface onto the bottom. Everything is moving: the water, the rays of light, the seabed, the seaweed and the creatures. Two young dabs shoot away, the red tentacles of the mottled anemones waft back and forth, and a small school of needlefish hide when my other hand creates a shadow. On the algae I see other algae. I run my fingers over a kelp leaf with a delicate brocade of Obelia geniculata attached to it. I do not pick it, even though I can barely resist doing so. Millions of zoospores and gametes around me are already on their way to creating a new generation. All these travelling particles that carry life within them and will settle on the seabed or some other surface have a strange effect on me. Will they settle on me too? Is the water making me permeable? In all this interconnectedness, you might see an example of an ideal world in which species are tolerant and offer each other holdfast in the current in order to survive. Pure symbiosis.

*Miek Zwamborn*  
*Translated by Michele Hutchison*
Sometimes you’ve read so many learned texts that all that learning gets jammed in your head like a cupboard in the bend in the stairs. Civil-society organisations try to get it moving again by forcing an extra advisory report or two into the cracks in your brain, but the whole thing is stuck solid. Only a cat – the smallest subject of literature – can slip through the only gap left, between the stairs and the cupboard, between the frontal lobe and the writing.

The cat is happy to take advantage of this precarious situation. More than that, she feels it is her right that everything is about her. Spoiled as she is, she is convinced that everything happens just as she wants it to. Doors that open by themselves, the boiled fish that drops from the sky and lands precisely on her plate.

Outside in the garden, she has just jabbed her mighty paw into the air and plucked a blackbird out of nothing. After toying with it for a bit, she has brought it indoors and now she is surprised. The surprise is not intellectual, but biological. She didn’t actually know that this is what she wanted. She waves a lazy paw in the direction of the bird, which is screeching in silence.

For the bird, this is no small matter. The cat has half torn his right wing from his body, his head is at a strange angle and he finds it impossible to turn it back again. In a final surge of passionate denial, he has thrown himself against the walls of the hall, red streaks of blood are flowing down the white wallpaper, vomit and spit are smeared across the cellar door. He can see it vaguely...
through his yellow-ringed eye and doesn’t understand it. Or rather – ‘understand’ is a big word for a bird – he didn’t know that this was possible. He is doing this for the first time, this dying, and because of the unbearable pain, he has come to a halt halfway through the process.

In the hall, at the bottom of the stairs, stands a tired man. ‘Long nose / silly clothes / no paws / useless claws.’ An American cat once described him in these words, in a translation by the poet Paul Gallico, and it’s a pretty accurate characterisation. He is standing there, completely useless and ineffective. A strange still life in the hall; between the silent screeching, the blood, the fur and the waving paw, the man’s motionlessness is the strangest of all.

Outside the world is beautiful. Summer is coming to an end; the trees are full and ripe, with a hint of autumn and the scent of black pepper, stables and vanilla. Water birds bob up and down on the moat around the castle. The hallucinatory light-green carpet of duckweed is adorned with white down, which looks divine, but is probably the remains of a young duck. Caught by one of the birds of prey that you see hovering above the landscape and scouring the ground with their sharp eyes. The animals they hunt are slower than usual this year. It may be a disease, say the farmers.

The man thinks. That is, after all, what he does. Even though he has visions of himself as an active being. He sometimes thinks of buying a gun and putting it in the boot of his car, in case he runs into a wild boar one night on a deserted forest track and, for the sake of decency, has to put the beast out of its misery. The romantic idea of himself as a saviour runs through his head. A saviour with a gun. If he had a gun now, he would shoot the bird.

Meanwhile, the cat has become very satisfied with herself. With good reason, as she has nature on her side. And not only that. Art and culture are behind her, too. People worship her, artists praise her in odes. Poets say that cats love their neighbours as much as God. This piety is based on the fact that cats play with their prey and so give it a chance to escape. Sometimes, the prey takes that chance, and succeeds – ‘one
mouse in seven escapes’. The cat lies smugly in the hall and playfully takes a swipe at the dying bird; when the man moves, she takes it as encouragement.

The bird screeches, but still no sound comes. He flaps his wings wildly, but is unable to fly. His head gasps for breath on his broken neck; he has forgotten how only a few moments ago he was sitting on top of the roof and singing so sweetly. The still life in the hall explodes; the soundless screeching of the bird reverberates throughout the house, the blood flows wildly down the walls. The harmless man comes closer; he thinks of his gun and the white down on the bright-green moat. Until he no longer thinks and does what he has to do: seeing that death will not come, he becomes death himself.

Maxim Februari
Translated by Andy Brown
NEW DUTCH POETRY – WHAT A DISCOVERY!
by ANNA BLASIAK

Let me start with a disclaimer – I’m no expert on Dutch verse. But I do read a lot of poetry, with a special focus on, and passion for, poetry in translation. Delving into Dutch poetry in English translation has been a real journey of discovery.

What is astounding for me is how much Dutch poetry is translated into English. As a poet and translator myself I know oh-so well that this is quite a rare situation for poetry written in any other language, especially a ‘small’ one. Dutch poetry in translation is therefore a shining beacon, an example that others should definitely follow. As we all know, English-language publication is more often than not a question of funding. Therefore thanks should be directed at the Dutch Foundation for Literature, which – not coincidentally – made this Dutch Riveter possible too.

There is a thriving poetry scene in the Netherlands, due in large part to a robust, well-developed infrastructure of literary magazines, publishing houses specialising in poetry, and bookstores putting poetry in the limelight (e.g. Amsterdam’s Perdu). There are spoken-word and poetry events everywhere in the Netherlands, from festivals (in Rotterdam, Arnhem, Nijmegen, Groningen and The Hague) to open-mic poetry cafés. There are various poetry-writing courses and a truly amazing number of poetry prizes and awards (e.g. the VSB Poetry Prize, the P.C. Hooft, the SNS-Lux Poetry Prize, the Literary Prize of the province of Gelderland, and more). Pretty much every regional or local library hosts its own poetry prize. Poems are everywhere, including on the walls of trains or in the underground, on pavements.

Contemporary Dutch poetry’s finger is very much on the global pulse: migration and refugees, climate change, sex and gender, sexual abuse, racism, identity – it’s all there.
and on building façades. And, let’s say it again, there is Dutch funding for poetry and poets through various schemes, such as grants, educational projects and residencies. Since 2000, the Netherlands has also had its own poet laureate, and celebrates the National Day of Poetry every January and, in April, the Week of Poetry. It’s wonderful to see a country that takes such pleasure in poetry, and a country where poetry is popular.

In my reading and selection for *The Dutch Riveter*, I decided to focus on contemporary poetry and poets, partly because I wanted to take a close look at what is happening in Dutch literature now – and it turns out that a lot is happening. Contemporary Dutch poetry’s finger is very much on the global pulse: migration and refugees, climate change, sex and gender, sexual abuse, racism, identity – it’s all there. As Alfred Schaffer, a great poet himself, wrote in his introduction to *New Dutch Poets*, it’s about creating ‘poetry that isn’t just about form and style, about language and craft, but that is also relevant and tackles all sorts of urgent issues’. He also wrote: ‘Dutch poetry is in a state of constant flux, but with the emergence of so many new young poets it now seems to be heading in a truly new direction, one that reflects the challenges, obsessions and fascinations of this complex twenty-first century.’

What a great introduction his words are to my selection of poets for *The Dutch Riveter*.

Anna Blasiak
PITYING THE READER FROM THE WORLD BY EVENING
BY MENNO WIGMAN
TRANSLATED BY JUDITH WILKINSON (SHEARSMAN BOOKS, 2020)

A book? From cover to cover? I lack the strength.
Even poetry – just thinking about it –
exhausts me now. I’ve overdosed on poems,
stare blindly at the pages of my books.
For many months I’ve had a reader’s block,

I’ve grown allergic to the alphabet.

And this poem that refuses to be a poem,
flat on its back and dying for some light,
for god’s sake, what do I want with it?
Admit it to yourself, your lines won’t run,
your mind a thing too delicate for words.

and you pitied the reader in the end.

Tuesday. A city eyeing itself. Not doing a thing,
not wanting to. Death of a boyhood dream.
Ambition, desire, all burnt out, done in.
Something to do with hubris, meagre fame
and a divine trauma I refuse to name.

Menno Wigman
Translated by Judith Wilkinson
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REVELATION IN H&M FROM WINDOW-CLEANER SEES PAINTINGS
BY MENNO WIGMAN
TRANSLATED BY DAVID COLMER (ARC PUBLICATIONS, 2016)

She came to buy herself a brand-new face.
It seemed too dear. A frock would have to do.
That got her in
a fitting room where she became psychotic.
Was it the light? Her skin? That ghostly face?
Like death had just molested her or worse, 
that’s how she felt, her lungs wrung dry of air.  
And thinking of death, 
she numbly hung the frock back on the rack.  
The registers gobbled money. Nothing broke.

Then in a flash of darkness they appeared, 
the centuries before her birth, she grew 
so light and calm, 
as calm as Barbie hair. Weila, weiala, 
walla. She still had eyes. So she left.

Menno Wigman  
Translated by David Colmer  
By permission of Arc Publications.

**POEMS FROM BIGGER THAN THE FACTS**  
**BY JAN BAEKE**  
**TRANSLATED BY ANTOINETTE FAWCETT** (ARC PUBLICATIONS, 2020)

**ONLY THE BEGINNING COUNTS (2)**

In the bar in the square everything is cut back 
to far-off and nearby.

You come from here.  
I left a month ago.

The barman is glued to the radio  
deaf to our thirst, listening to messages for the resistance.

Your nails scrape away all the sticky stuff.  
I see the patterns, the awkward prayers, look  
straight ahead, right through the windows  
and see the square visited by ever stranger shadows.

I see how dear to me  
you could be.  
You bend your head.  
The bar bends in towards you, all its glasses dying.
SUMMER’S WAY (8)

Shave your head. Shave your neck. Get rid of a beard, hair by hair. Stick photos across the vista. Cover the eye that wants to make bricks from a ruin, instructions from bricks. Avoid seeing a chapel behind dark-green cypresses.

Go back, go forwards. Leave the hotel without being seen. Don’t breathe before the square has been crossed. Restrain yourself from remembering a name. Don’t place an order, don’t give in, don’t go down like the sun but cry out like an avalanche, be silent like glass. Think and don’t think about thinking and avoid that thought and get lost in that thought and write that thought down and tear it up and succumb to it, turn your head away, rise up, walk off.

See hair growing. One o’clock, two o’clock, three o’clock, every hour of the clock, count every minute in your sleep, count till you sleep, till the fire dies down, heaven burns, the fire lasts till morning, till they laugh, how the laughter feasts on others obsessed by the same laughing.

How that requires a similar afternoon or a few days, the last few months, other possibilities. If questioned wish to understand the question, catch fire, complete a sentence. This one. Another one. Stop.

Jan Baeke
Translated by Antoinette Fawcett
By permission of Arc Publications
AND YET IT BEGINS (1)

There was someone someone was spread into the black sun like starlings made of dust where she in the tingling, buckling, in balloons that gracefully touched a person was born of her own poison and her holes burned the seething.

She cased darkness that fell into itself, fell and at the same time existed, glare, profusion, hysteria around the edges also those things without blood, the people their thoughts hornlike until they broke meaning and played dead in their bodies to make her beginning a beginning.

PUTTING ON MY SPECIES (4)

I mastered living immediately and predicted what would happen next. When love came not even in the guise of a young angel I forgot my dot and caught fire, yellow a fuchsia heart.

Then I forgot about forgetting, naked as a single rose.

Sasja Janssen
Translated by Michele Hutchison

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Who made the young me sweat in bed
with visions from the psychiatric ward
girls who’ve grown obsessed with the man
and the touch of the man, and the touch of the woman
that makes them realise they want to be a man

I fear the man and want to eat him up
but I am also scared that he has eaten me up
that I was born in the man’s stomach
or ribcage or in a toe
and escaping from his body
has made me lose mine
I want to eat the man up the way I eat Facebook
and installation art
and have for years now eaten up
enormous amounts of light
shining on my face

I hoped to be able to eat the man up
to protect my sisters
but I feel what’s left of the man gnawing at my insides
searching for a way out through my womb
my navel, my open mouth

Every inch of my body
of my thinking brain
is split into two camps
I am a single moustache hair
fallen onto the chin after an attempt at union
and the attempt at union has failed
only my silhouette seems right
I will wash down the drain of the shower or I will crumble
I will drown or suffocate in the woollen jumper
removed to facilitate copulation
meanwhile I search for electricity pylons
to hang out my shrunken body
charge it, fuse it together
because my body is more than just one body

I require a state of being that will make me superfluous and all-powerful
I want to build a corridor that leads nowhere
and lock all of my bodies up in it
so they won’t harm themselves or each other
so they will be present as a single whole
without context to confirm it
billions of cancer cells that have established themselves in my father
established themselves in my mother
billions of cancer cells that have established themselves in me
waiting for the right moment
silent in a waiting room

All my poems are quiet and still
my poems have been smeared on the side of the bed
my poems are not poems
I am a puddle of blood seeping through a carpet
that tries to turn systems into words
the systems asked, ‘What can you do, now you know?’
and I was quiet, deciding to go on holiday

**FRICITION (III)**

I wrote a poem about myself
I wrote five versions of myself that were male
broken, disembodied and confused
I wrote myself into the hell of being an artist and left me there to rot
I wrote beyond myself and came up with a lot of empty words:

That the moment of ignition makes or breaks all memories
that context mustn’t be added, but has to arise by itself
that I put my father’s urn in the fuse box when he slapped my wrist
for my dubious breasts and strange way of carrying myself
that I only exist as a projection of the brain of a white Western male:
I borrow money from a white Western male
I buy toilet paper for a white Western male
I am the white Western male’s thought experiment

I am lying drunk on a floor and he asks who I am
and I am a version of Kunta Kinte forced into a mould
I feel no bond with my given name

I lie on the floor drunk and see patterns on the ceiling
the boy on the floor next to me is a child I want to acquaint
with my darkest thoughts
to destroy him
to educate him
I am an apelike jazz musician’s doll
I am Sylvana, Louwiya, an enormous bum people pay money to stare at
I can present myself in hundreds of forms

I am a cool afterthought, a drum kit, I am a religious fanatic
with yellow eyeballs and a hoarse-screamed mouth, I am a court jester:
I put on a dress, I put on a flesh-coloured dress and I am
one hundred and fifty pounds of flesh without a name
language or country of origin
a nail-chewing, collapsing, bleeding anonymous entity
without a concrete goal
all energy and no purpose
I do have a good report:
well done, well brought up

I am a virus that eats itself due to a lack of matter to feed on
I am the most flesh-coloured dress you can wear
a daring choice
and oiled on a snow-white beach
standing among those hundreds of versions of myself
I ask, ‘Are we already on holiday?’
I get no reply

Simone Atangana Bekono
Translated by David Colmer
By permission of Emma Press
my skin my cast iron skin my equator skin my cast iron equator skin my skin my scarring skin my grey scarring skin my grey skin my asylum seeker skin my skin my colourblind skin my smoke skin my colour smoke skin is burning my burning skin my cursed skin my cursed skin is burning my skin my prayer skin my prayer marshmallow skin my cloud marshmallow skin my burning cloud skin my skin my marshmallow skin is burning my skin my unreeled skin bare my bare unreeled skin my capitulate skin my skin my blues skin my limpid skin my limpid blues skin my skin my blues is burning skin & my skin is a home my rust skin my skin rusts my rust skin is burning oxidises

my skin oxidises my neutral skin my black neutral skin my pinched off black neutral skin is burning my picked skin my dry skin my dry skin is burning my matured skin my matured skin is laundered skin my laundered skin is skin my becoming skin my malleable becoming skin my language skin is malleable my skin is burning my miracle skin my annotation skin my annotation miracle skin my mirror skin my splinter skin my mirror splinter skin my magic conjuring skin my #blackboymagic skin my black skin is conjuring skin and boys are burning
MEER LEGS
BY MAARTJE SMITS
TRANSLATED BY VIVIEN D. GLASS

I would möchté be
a frauship’s shallow schouwdek
a bitsy bitchy lust objection

with dikke thighs
dikes off all men deck
deilig thighs bulk carriers that
tar all, tenderly tegen affection
halten

ik want thighs that faul
behouwen and dare to be seen
zie you siegst
minne Seekontainer legs
siegst minne peal d’orange
cellulite royal ’t squirts
lukewarm tea dregs in my lazy rolling dans lui
weil go on and choose to you weinst
past my solid soaked legs

Maartje Smits
Translated by Vivien D. Glass

POEMS FROM THE FOLLOWING SCAN WILL LAST FIVE MINUTES
BY LIEKE MARSMAN
TRANSLATED BY SOPHIE COLLINS (LIVERPOOL UNIVERSITY PRESS, 2019)

Before you sink away
into the morphinesweet unreality of the everyday
we would like to say something
about those spasms and fasciculations of yours
as well as that bump on your back

For years you have no doubt
been googling every freckle. Just recently
you were at the doctor’s with a patch
of dry skin on your leg
Diagnosis: too much shower gel
But on hearing the word chondrosarcoma
you went home and immediately unplugged your router
Do you know where your priorities lie?

Do you know what life has to offer
or did those endless therapy sessions
and that eight-week mindfulness course
simply teach you how to tolerate suffering
that every signal in your body
can be temporarily expelled
to the rhythm of some breathing exercise?

\textit{Let the pain be}
\textit{To be free is to be free of need}

Wrong
To be free is to need some fresh air
and to be able to get up and go outside

Don’t say we didn’t warn you

\textbf{EVAPORATE, CONDENSATE}

These are strange times, unstable times.
Seasons change, but never turn into holidays.

You coexist with other bodies
that piss, dribble, rant, shit. All the while
a choir in a minor key softly screaming,

Your body is sick, but you will heal, this will fade.
You’ll lie in the grass, stiller, thinner,
receive visitors looking fashionably underweight.
Cancer has no calendar, so be patient.

Evaporate, condensate. Even disasters are composites of events, not products of fate.
You just have to distill, then ablate:
You will heal. This will fade.
This morning while I wasn’t yet awake
and not asleep either, doom crept in
on cloven socks, nestled invisibly
against me and spoke my name, a whisper—
not wanting to wake me.

Without opening my eyes I saw him
look at me, though his eyes too were shut.
He stroked the pillow, he mistook it for my lips
and it kissed him back the way I would have kissed.
We embraced in the assumption of each other.

In my grandmother’s village
the women came to fruition once a year
developed new shoots bore fruit
there was blossoming round the clock
bloodiness from the dead, the miscarried
the misshapen and the ordinary viable ones.

In the village a front mentality
reigned;
the women were soldiers
pitted against the dominant majority
of the dissenters
approaching from all sides.

Armed with pregnancy
they obeyed submissively
but when the viable foetuses
had matured and grown up  
and had left the battle field  
it wasn’t the emperor who was checkmated  
but the mother who had no heaven  
to rely on, nor a life  
to look back on.

Just as the father’s leather belt  
and the teacher’s ruler  
beat the hand of the disobedient  
so the church bell beat out its calling  
to the medieval rhythm of sowing  
and mowing and harvesting  
whereupon the pastor would arrive at the door  
to inspect the armour of pregnancy  
and every year he’d check the belly’s curvature  
of the pregnancy-armed front soldier and serf  
my grandmother was.

The toll of a bell  
is like a blow to the face  
of the man who listens to the tolling  
and bends until he’s on his knees  
in the corn in the field  
that wouldn’t grow otherwise.
Hagar Peeters is one the most celebrated poets in the Netherlands. She started as a performer in youth clubs, an experience that came in handy later when Peeters was invited to perform at numerous international poetry festivals. It might also be why her early poems often have the ring and rhythm of songs, and might explain the presence of comical elements in her work.

She published her first collection, *Genoeg gedicht over de liefde vandaag* (‘Enough about Love for Today’) in 1999, at the age of twenty-seven. The book received immediate recognition, and she went on to publish a further five books and a pamphlet, and has also written for several major Dutch newspapers. In 2015 she published her first novel, *Malva*, which won the Flemish Fintro prize and was translated into English in 2018.

Even though her poems are often intimate and personal, Peeters refuses to call them autobiographical. She often uses exaggeration – to focus her audience’s attention and as an analytical tool. Sometimes she creates powerful tensions, even discordancies, by combining and contrasting simple, everyday language with a more formal tone.

There is urgency and immediacy in these poems, but also more reflective moments. The *Manhattan Review* critic Rick Larios compared Peeters to Wisława Szymborska – in the way that both poets are playful and serious at the same time, and mix ambiguity with empathy. Peeters has also been compared to other contemporary Dutch poets, such as Alfred Schaffer and Jan Baeke (whose poetry appears in this *Riveter*).

This collection, Peeters’ first in English and published by Shoestring Press, draws from her various books, which explains the strong stylistic, linguistic and thematic differences between its five distinct parts. We owe a lot to translator Judith Wilkinson for bringing this poet into English and for her finely tuned translations. As she explains in her introduction, this is her personal selection of Peeters’ work.

The first set of poems comes from Peeters’ first collection. They combine lyricism and comical elements, and they are tender and imaginative at the same time. I really enjoyed the directness of some of them, the boldness in the way she discusses big emotions – love, desire and relationships.

The second set comes from the book *Koffers zeelucht* (*A Suitcase Full of Sea Air*). This set’s focus is family growing up, loneliness, longing and,
memories – all of which are captured with great perceptiveness and irony.

The poems in the third set are inspired by the biblical story of Hagar (coincidentally – or not – the author’s namesake), and were originally published in the volume Loper van licht (‘Runner of Light’). The ideas explored here include exile and gender, and there is a feminist tone to the poems, especially the last one, ‘Hagar’s Ambitions’.

Part four comes from Wasdom (‘Fruition’) and contains some of Peeters’ very early poems, as well as some more recent work, although we are not told which ones were written when. The final part of the book comes from Gedichten voor Wich (‘Poems for Wich’), a commission dedicated to the set designer Harry Wich.

Even though Peeters found her voice quite early, she continues to explore new directions in her writing, and this English selection shows this variety very well. I hope that more of her work will be translated into English in the future. Because I definitely want to hear again from a poet who can produce lines like these:

‘Always in search of a navel string, since the first one no longer exists, I balance on the flimsy thread between glances, until the moment when I you and you I once more.’

Anna Blasiak
Extract from *TAXI!*
by Aimee de Jongh (Conundrum Press, 2019)

Doesn’t feel like summer, does it?

Non! But it’s nice, after all that heat here in Paris.

Yes, and I prefer cold weather anyway.

Where are you from?

Wait! Let me guess... Greece!

Wrong!
I’M FROM HOLLAND...

PAYS-BAS!

AH! CRUJIF!

HONK

ATTENTION!

THAT WAS CLOSE. I HATE THOSE CYCLISTS...
THEY ONLY CAUSE ACCIDENTS. THEY DON'T BELONG ON THE ROAD. IF YOU ASK ME.

YOU THINK SO?

SORRY, THERE'S TOO MUCH TRAFFIC HERE. I'M TAKING A DIFFERENT ROUTE.

OVB!
I thought you were Greek, because you don't look like a Dutch girl. You don't have blonde hair... you're not very tall...

Ah, yes, my family's from Indonesia.

Really? Have you been there?

Yeah! Last year I went there for the first time.

What about you?

You don't look very "French" either...

I am, I was born here.
FLEMISH: DUTCH’S ‘HUG BUDDY’
BY JONATHAN REEDER

Of the Dutch>English literary translators based in the Low Countries, many (if not most) of us are based in the Netherlands. I am American, live in Amsterdam and translate from both Dutch and Flemish. We thrive on Holland’s rich cultural life and its world-class literature. But we also love much about Belgium – the food, the pubs, the retro streetcars, the way the Flemish use the language – and most Dutch translators jump at the chance to translate a Flemish-Belgian author. What’s the draw? Is there something essentially unique about Flemish writing, or is it just the attraction of an exotic neighbour?

When we translators get together to talk about Belgium, we usually do it op café - in the pub. So, for this special Dutch Riveter chat, I invited two colleagues with similar experience translating Flemish writers, to share their thoughts at our socially distanced ‘Zoom Bar’.

JR (‘Bolleke’, amber De Koninck beer, in a goblet-shaped glass): All the Flemish books I’ve done till now are set in Belgium, mostly in Flanders itself, while many Dutch authors seem more likely to cast an eye abroad. So when I’m offered a Flemish book I’ve come to expect the themes, style, setting and language to feel more ‘regional’ than Dutch ones.

PV (Westmalle Tripel): My experience has been less black-and-white than yours, but you could say that Belgians have a more diverse cultural palette to work with.

CM (red wine from the Ardennes): It seems that in Belgium there’s an openness to engaging with localised writing and less standard language.

JR: I’ve seen more films and television in local Flemish dialects than Dutch ones. There was even a TV series set in Belgian Limburg that was subtitled in Dutch, so that the rest of Flanders could understand it. Can’t imagine that in Holland.

PV: There’s also the Dutch tendency to set stories in a middle-class or educated environment ...

JR: ... hip young urbanites doing things on their laptops and mobile phones ...
PV: ... whereas in Belgium it’s often working class, set in small provincial towns.

JR: Or ragtag city neighbourhoods.

CM: Sometimes I think there’s a sort of ‘Netflying’ happening in literature, especially among young writers. When you standardise the style and setting, you also limit the kind of people you can write about. The Flemish like to tell stories about things happening closer to home. The local element is what makes translated literature so interesting. And look at the books from the Netherlands that have done well in translation and have won big international prizes: intimate, local settings.

JR: How about their use of the Dutch language? Are we attracted to it because it’s really special, or just because it’s colourful and kind of sexy?

CM: There’s certainly a different approach to the language in Holland. In Belgium, the Flemish have really assimilated a certain Frenchness into their way of writing. Dutch can be more staccato but I definitely get that French rolling, lyrical feel in Flemish. Even their sentence structure has a definite French influence.

PV: You could say the same for Flemish poetry. What I like about Flemish literature is its tendency to work more with colloquial patterns of speech. It’s lively.

JR: It can be beautifully baroque and exuberant, although sometimes it’s exhausting to read. There’s a lot to be said for the down-to-earth Dutch style, especially from a translator’s point of view.

Speaking of the French influence, I do love how the Flemish have appropriated so many French words, either literally, like ‘facteur’ for ‘postman’ or ‘bricolage’ for ‘DIY’, or bastardised, like ‘goesting’ from ‘goût’; ‘nonkel’ – ‘uncle’, from the French ‘oncle’; or one of my favourites, the expletive ‘nondeju!’; from the French ‘nom de dieu’.

CM: Nondeju, love it!

PV: There’s a lot that makes Belgium an interesting place to write about. Take the cultural and social tensions between the Flemish and the Walloons. Belgium’s also got a more volatile history, what with all the devastation and upheaval in the First World War, which brought about a lot of changes, including in their literature. The Netherlands is a stable, regulated, peace-loving place, and it shows in their writing.

JR: So guess what the 2020 Words of the Year in Belgium and the Netherlands were? It kind of says it all. Both, not surprisingly, have to do with Covid. Here in the Netherlands, the winner was ‘anderhalvemetersamenleving’, meaning (roughly) ‘socially distanced society’, whereas the Belgian winner was ‘knuffelcontact’, literally ‘cuddle contact’: Belgian regulations allow every Belgian one ‘hug buddy’, ie, someone from outside your home you’re allowed to hug.

CM: Santé to that!

PV: Proost!

JR: Op uw bakkes!
THE CONVERT by STEFAN HERTMANS
TRANSLATED BY DAVID MCKAY (HARVILL SECKER, 2019)
REVIEWED BY WEST CAMEL

In this intriguing and at times devastating book, Hertmans pulls a clever trick: he offers his readers both a traditional historical novel, and an account of his writing of that novel. The effect is to vivify his heroine in a way that a conventional historical work might struggle to, but also to illuminate his own life and his readers’ lives: like all great books, The Convert makes us look at the world around us in a new way.

Based on two scraps of evidence found in the hoard of manuscripts known as the Cairo Genizah, The Convert tells the tale of Hamoutal, a Norman knight’s daughter, born ‘Vigdis’ in eleventh-century Rouen. After falling in love and eloping with a Jewish scholar, her story becomes entwined in the turmoil created across Europe and the Mediterranean by the first Crusades.

Many an historical novel begins in such a way: a writer uses a small fragment of a true story and from it creates a fiction. But Hertmans does more than that. He follows Hamoutal’s life not just in his imagination and through research, but physically – travelling the roads his fictional heroine, and possibly the real woman, has taken. He drives the route of the couple’s escape from Rouen to Narbonne – the home town of Hamoutal’s husband. He sails the route he believes she must have taken as she searched for her kidnapped children, from Marseilles to Palermo, from there to Alexandria, then by river to Cairo – the site of medieval Fustat.

But it is in the village of Monieux where Hertmans feels closest to his heroine. It is where he lives and where he writes the book. It is where his research takes on the form of amateur archaeology – there’s even a photograph in the book of the ancient Jewish ceremonial bath he uncovers on the outskirts of the village. And it is the location of the eleventh-century pogrom, perpetrated by crusaders, in which David, Hamoutal’s husband, is slaughtered, the synagogue burned down and her children kidnapped. This incident, while small in comparison to these seismic shifts the Crusades created across Europe, feels immediate and tangible. In the eleventh century, this remote village had a thriving Jewish community – one of many such communities in towns and villages across Europe. But now grass and tumbled rocks cover the area where the synagogue and cemetery stood.

There are still survivors of the Holocaust, of the death camps, alive to tell their tales. But how can any writer tell the stories of the persecution and slaughter of the Jews across
Europe nearly a millennium ago in as moving away as those real-life accounts? They can’t, but Hertmans seems to have managed a way to approach that chill of reality we feel when we hear those personal autobiographies. By presenting his physical and imaginative journey alongside Hamoutal’s, observing the hypermarkets and car parks where the farms and castles once lay, the allotment filled with potatoes where the Monieux synagogue once stood, he reminds us that these events happened right here, under our feet. Creating a fictional life for Hamoutal is an act of the imagination, but it is also an act of empathy. Wandering the streets of Marseille, Hertmans observes:

‘I feel a slight, strange euphoria; the present seems exotic today. I am so immersed in Hamoutal’s age that I feel as if a time machine has carried me into her distant future, where I have no right to be.’

We are all living in Hamoutal’s future. Her story occurred, perhaps not in exactly the way Hertmans tells it, but something close to it. A Norman noblewoman, with a Frisian mother and a Viking father, living in France, married to a Sephardic Jew, a convert to the Jewish faith and with Jewish children, Hamoutal’s life could seem very far from the lives we live today. But Hertmans manages to bring us close to her, and very close to the atrocities that form our continent’s history.

West Camel
I see my bedroom in full sunlight for the first time. Everything is as I remember it, yet everything has changed. Lifeless. Cold. As if no one ever grew up here, as if no one ever laughed or cried. As though everything had to be forgotten. I lie in bed and listen to the silence I have so longed for these past few years. But now I yearn mostly for the noises that make life normal. The everyday sounds I used to wake up to. The ones that made this house my home. Mama’s footsteps. The clatter of glasses, cups, and plates. The sound of warmth. It’s not something you can describe, but you’ll surely hear it when it’s gone.

I would have prevented the sun from coming up, if I could. It shines stubbornly into my bedroom and reminds me that I belong to the living. But I can’t make myself get up. I’m wearing jogging pants, socks, and a sweater; it’s a sizzling early September morning, and yet it feels ice cold in here. I want to get out of bed, but what then? What’s my next step? Life has never been so not-cut-and-dried. As long as I stay in bed, I can cling to the thought that I don’t owe life anything. That I don’t owe anyone anything.

Through the closed window I hear the small park up the street come to life. The grassy field allows the neighbourhood children to dream, just like we used to dream there. Life was simple then, the ball just had to cross the white line. No more and definitely no less. Out on that field, we all believed we could conquer the world. That we could be something. Nothing, not even sunset, could keep us from getting closer to our dreams. We would keep on playing, keep on kicking the ball over the white line. No thirst, hunger, pain, or doubt could
come between our feet, the ball, and the net. It was there on
the grass, surrounded by oak trees and dandelions, that
I learned to fight for something. For myself. For my dream.
But I’ve forgotten how. The white line used to be your goal.
But that line’s gone now. I have no idea which way I have to go.
No idea at all.

A child has just one wish before she falls to sleep: to grow
up. Now I would give anything to revert to my youth, because
only there can you really start with a clean slate. When I got
out, they told me I was getting a second chance, and that
I should make the most of it. I wonder if it’s really a second
chance, or if they’re just asking me to retrace the rocky path
of my first chance. Rocks that, every one of them, cut deep
into my flesh.

Finally, I’ve managed. I’m out of bed. I stretch and give
a long, deep sigh. From this perspective, too, it’s a fact: nothing
has changed, and yet everything is different.

My wardrobe in the corner still looks just as puny as the last
time I took my clothes out of it. I’d like nothing more right now
than to shatter the two mirrored doors. I used to stare at
myself in these mirrors during my years of self-searching,
exploring who I would become, but now I don’t even dare
look. If I saw anything in myself back then, I certainly won’t
see it today. I close my eyes and take two steps forward while
I grope for the handles. I jerk the doors open and sniff the
musty smell of a wardrobe that’s been shut for too long.
I open my eyes. It’s not just my old clothes lying in there, it’s
much more. Every pair of pants, every skirt and every T-shirt
comes with a memory, and every memory comes with regret.
Smells, colours, and sounds come tumbling out. I hadn’t
expected this. I close my eyes again, quickly close the ward-
robe doors and take a few steps to one side. My jeans and
favourite sweater are still hanging on the hooks. I feel around
in the jeans pockets and come across a few reminders of my
old life. A piece of chewing gum, some small change, a cinema
ticket. The ticket stub is illegible now, but I know exactly what
it says. Which movie it was. Time can blur an event, but it can’t
erase it entirely. The memory lies dormant, waiting for someone to dig deep enough to find it. I hold the ticket stub. My stomach knots up. I still remember. Summer evening. Hand in hand. Popcorn and laughter. Cuddles and tender words. Jokes and Cokes. Movie and making out. Strolling and a talking, so many talks, for hours on end. About us. Children. Names. If we had a boy, he could choose the name. ‘Samir,’ he says. I remember how happy he was when he talked about our children who still had to be made and born. I knew then: he’ll be a dream father. I push that memory away and wonder if I’ll ever see him again. I wonder if I still want to.

Ish Ait Hamou
Translated by Jonathan Reeder

EXTRACT FROM *NACHTOUDERS (‘NIGHT PARENTS’)*
BY SASKIA DE COSTER
TRANSLATED BY MIKE WILKINSON (DASMAG, 2019)

NOTEBOOK

The history of how Karl and Saskia got to know each other is an all-or-nothing tale, a history that has become snowed under even though they’ve only known each other for four years. It seems to be an eternity ago that Saskia was accused of drug smuggling, as a form of welcome to Winnipeg – a small city in the icy, thirty-below-zero heart of Canada, a place nobody would go in winter except to help shift Winnipeg’s exceptionally pure cocaine through to the rest of North America. Or to write. At the invitation of an arts centre, Saskia travelled to the snowy-white molehill. She was going to stay at an artist’s house there. Juli let her go, of course; Juli always lets her go when she’s got to write. She’s always been in holy awe of it. Unlike the customs officers at the airport. With rubber gloves they probed for anal evidence of her alleged author status. Finally released at three in the
morning, she hobbled into the arrivals hall and her old, overfull suitcase picked that moment to burst at the seams and scatter the contents over the cold tiles – knickers, tampons, ripped-open packets of instant sachets of tomato soup with cheesy croutons for emergencies. Crawling around like an insect, she collected her belongings together. She looked up and saw some dickhead grinning down at her. One of those lesbian-hating homos who are too pretty to lend a helping hand, a step worse than the macho guys who spontaneously offer instructions when you’re parking. The kind of prideful jerk who thinks he’s a cut above the rest of the world. Said dickhead made no move to help, leaving her to fume instead. And what she hadn’t even dared contemplate turned out to be true: the dickhead was the artist whose house she’d be staying in for a month.

Karl was a dickhead. Afterwards, he explained that her hackles were raised so aggressively, her body language screaming ‘leave me alone’ so loudly that he didn’t even dare to help.

All or nothing. He could do it. Her hard shell of ice broke immediately thanks to the man who, without a word, draped a woollen blanket over her shoulders and gave her a cup of ginger tea. Because she herself was numb but too tired to sleep, he gave her a tour of his strange Gothic house at four in the morning. He’d made a lot of changes to it himself. Twenty stuffed and mounted deer heads stared at her; preparation for an installation in the Whitney. He told her about the sect that had lived here, fundamentalists who believed they could exclude all negative external influences and kept their children imprisoned here. Under the wooden floor in the living room, Karl had found a drawing. Big painted letters on it said, ‘We will be a happy family forever’. In the bright colours of this gaudy and cheerful slogan, he saw a cry for help from children who were locked up to keep them pure. He would use it in one of his works. In one room you could still see how children’s fingers had scratched the wallpaper off and how they had filled in the patterns with stick drawings.

The blond, muscular man with a trimmed beard, toned body, blue eyes and not much of a chin was ever so hospitable,
an artist without a mobile phone, a food snob without a food blog, an eager beaver who made his own filo pastry, who tried out all his best ingredients and recipes on her (all organic and local and wholesome), who offered her pricey shampoo made from melted fats mixed with lavender he had plucked himself, who didn’t have a single plastic bag in his home (let alone that horror of horrors, aluminium foil) and who was able to keep her amused at all times with his inexhaustible knowledge, sarcasm and hugs. He took her to his studio, where installations rose up that were as lavish as Paul McCarth’s and that looked her straight in the eye with intense ferocity.

Karl had taken Saskia on board so quickly that it seemed as if they had known each other for years. He confided everything to her: his recent relationship breakup, lots of screwing around, his exaggerated suspicion of his friends at times, his love for his mother and his isolated youth on a hippie island. That childhood was a bit weird, he said; he could build wooden houses at the age of ten but had never seen candyfloss.

‘I was a freak.’

‘I was the freak on the other side of the hedge.’

Oh yes, they were both well crazy. Or conversely, maybe they were the only ones sane enough to see the madness.

Karl told her what a culture shock it had been when he arrived in the city. An islander who was totally maladjusted. In his perception, the big city was a cacophonous laboratory full of tubes and structures, where they were trying to bring a single monster to life with exhaust fumes and radio frequencies, a monster that was perhaps made up of thousands of swarming people. He could hear every penny drop in the cash registers and felt as if the noise coming at him from all sides of the metro would make him explode. He only knew the din of nature, which penetrates deep inside you through your pores rather than screeching into your ears.

They met at a moment when both their lives were totally overpowered by love. He had just broken up with his film-
director boyfriend and was still wiping his nose on handkerchiefs that had the latter’s name embroidered on them. She had just discovered the shining, euphoric depth of a rock-solid love that was only improving the longer it lasted.

Over endless cups of tea (with added unsolicited whisky and a lump of butter), Saskia talked about Juli and her boundless energy, about their friends and their radio careers and musical ambitions and training in psychology and their urban allotments, about the deal she had made with Juli seven years ago that had turned out so well. Saskia would like to spend her whole life writing and Juli wanted children sooner or later. They would respect each other’s wishes. It had been one-way traffic so far. Juli let Saskia roam the world, collecting stories. Juli had no trouble with that.

For nights on end, Karl and Saskia told each other their multifaceted stories of love and loss. That was where they forged their bond, where they spoke scornfully about their families. Karl told hilarious anecdotes about his eldest brother, the hippie who still lived on the island of Portes and whose wife had had a vision of the place where all her chakras would achieve perfection. That transpired to be the most deserted and spookiest spot on the island, deep in the woods. So that’s where they’d now built a nice, cosy house. Mad as hatters, those two. Karl also told her about the loneliness on the island. How he could tell that Saskia understood something of it. And about how they, with their new and delicate bond, should protect each other’s loneliness. There are areas where everyone is alone, and you need to respect that in each other. Areas where you say, that’s mine and mine alone, and you’ll steer clear of it if you respect me. Saskia thought it was wonderful. She’s got her own cellar full of dark secrets, with her shame keeping the lid on it tightly closed.

Saskia de Coster
Translated by Mike Wilkinson
How does a young man in wartime Antwerp avoid being shipped off to work in Nazi Germany? Wilfried Wils finds a convenient solution: join the local police – even if that means handing over to the Nazi occupiers other men seeking to avoid forced labour. For Wilfried is above all a survivor. The occupation calls for compromises of conscience, and this young fellow – whose lack of grit lends a bitter irony to the title ‘Will’ – bends with the times.

The novel opens in today’s Antwerp, as an aged Wilfried wanders through the snowy city. Musing, he slips back through a fold in time to the winter of 1941, when two Nazi gendarmes command him and his friend and fellow constable, Lode, to round up a Jewish family. They obey, but Lode protests and resists. Wilfried, though disgusted by the gendarmes’ cruelty, reports the incident only in order to pre-empt a possible complaint against the two constables. This is the first of many scenes in which he slides further and further into collaboration with the occupiers.

The narrative weaves back and forth in time between the present day and the early 1940s, when events that set their stamp on the rest of Wilfried’s life take place. There are also flashbacks to his late teens, when his father packs him off for extra French lessons to a viciously anti-Semitic character he calls ‘Meanbeard’, as well as passages about a tragedy that occurs in Wilfried’s seventies. Wilfried appears to be telling his story to a teenage great-grandson, though one he scarcely knows. The reasons for his broken family emerge little by little in the course of the novel.

In 1942: Het jaar van de stilte (‘1942: The Year of Silence’), historian Herman Van Goethem chronicles the wartime persecution and deportation of the Jews of Antwerp in painful detail, day by day. Jeroen Olyslaegers does something comparable in his gripping novel, bringing the past vividly to life and showing how it continues to affect the present. Indeed, his protagonist argues that the evils of history never end; it is a ‘stream of filth, bastardry that never stops, not really’. The recent use by a British newspaper of the epithet ‘enemies of the people’ (a term used by ‘respectable’ middle-class anti-Semites in Will) bears out the continuity of a current of thought that is anti-democratic and opposed to the rule of law.
In *Will*, Olyslaegers paints a convincing portrait of a man who is not evil, not even bad; in fact, he is sometimes almost likeable. It is precisely that which makes the novel so disturbing. The same man who writes poetry and comments sardonically on the ills of society can also violently attack a member of the Resistance in order to save his own skin. Wilfried Wils is Everyman. Though he speaks a robust Flemish (brilliantly conveyed in David Colmer’s translation), he might be of any nationality under occupation.

*Fiona Graham*
THE BLESSED RITA by TOMMY WIERINGA
translated by SAM GARRETT (SCRIBE PUBLICATIONS, 2020)
reviewed by JONATHAN LEVI

The Golden Age of Dutch art hung Ruisdael windmills and Rembrandt granaries in the gallery of our international imagination. These were picturesque images of tranquility that dotted a cloudy plain, where sea and land mixed in infinite flatness. After countless losses to the French, the English and the Germans, the flatness remains, covering over the rotted corpses of soldiers and shells from 350 years of battles. Those who could have long ago fled the farms for the pleasures of Amsterdam or the wealth of the reborn Berlin. But some of the Dutch, like hares hardwired to eke out their lives in a single field, remain, even when the grain has been harvested and they are nakedly open, easy prey for hungry crows.

Paul Krüzen is just such an animal. The hero of Tommy Wieringa’s haunting new novel The Blessed Rita is a fifty-something Everyman. Abandoned by his mother at a tender age, Paul has nevertheless remained in Mariënveen, the hamlet where he was born. In a former mill, Paul cooks potatoes drowned in gravy and tends to his ailing father. Out back is a barn where he runs a mail-order business specialising in Nazi uniforms and other war memorabilia. The windmill of his ancestors is gone. The landscape is pockmarked now by the Happytaria, Shu’s Dynasty, Club Pacha, and Paul’s school chum Hedwig’s dusty grocery store, long past its sell-by date. The burghers and peasants of yore have been replaced by Polish security-alarm salesmen, small-time Russian hoods, Thai hookers, and unreliable electricity. ‘Out here,’ Paul says, ‘we’re at the end of the wire.’

And yet, every time Paul raises his head above his station and ventures out of his field, to buy decommissioned war pistols and musty uniforms, or to dally with Asian girls on sex holidays with Hedwig, he returns to Mariënveen in a panic of homesickness. The Blessed Rita is ‘the lamentation of the stay behind’, as Paul clearly sees himself, one of the many around him who ‘were doing their best to bring their desires into line with their possibilities’.
Tommy Wieringa is the prize-winning author of many novels, shortlisted in 2020 for the International Booker Prize. Depressing as Paul’s flatland life may sound, The Blessed Rita is often as funny a novel as any Carl Hiaasen and as lyrical as any Cormac McCarthy, those American masters of other endless vistas. But there is also something very much Wieringa’s own in the way he teases out Paul’s descent into the heart of his own darkness. Centuries after Rembrandt and Vermeer, the Dutch East India Company and the Boer trekkers, the Dutch may be finding it harder to reclaim their identity within a changing Europe than to reclaim arable land from the sea. The new Dutch masters may be writers instead of painters who, like Wieringa, haunt us with portraits of people trying to keep breathing even as the waters rise around them.

Jonathan Levi

**SLEEPLESS NIGHT** by **MARGRIET DE MOOR**
translated by **DAVID DOHERTY** (NEW VESSEL PRESS, 2019)
reviewed by **EMMA RAULT**

It’s the dead of night, the dead of winter. Unable to sleep, a young widow bakes a cake while her lover sleeps upstairs, and finds her thoughts returning to her late husband. Just fourteen months into a seemingly cloudless marriage, he went into their greenhouse one evening and shot himself. Why did he take his own life? In a voice by turns mournful and matter-of-fact, the narrator recalls their courtship, their brief life together and her increasingly obsessive attempts to make sense of his absence.

In this slim volume, Margriet de Moor fashions a taut, finely wrought story that crackles with tension, shifting abruptly between the domestic and the macabre. She has a poet’s knack for sticking the landing, setting traps that lure readers into the next sentence, the next chapter, only to find the ground giving way beneath them. Early on, the protagonist casually mentions her husband’s height ‘which – as I came to learn – was six feet four and half’. In the next chapter we find out she learned this upon seeing his coffin.

Though the story is set in the seventies and eighties, it sometimes feels like it belongs to an earlier time, or outside of time altogether. More than once I was reminded of Virginia Woolf. Lucia, the narrator’s sister-in-law wouldn’t be out of place in To the Lighthouse: ‘She smoked cigarillos ... strode around in her riding breeches and an olive-brown Shetland wool sweater.’ But de Moor also shares
Woolf’s profound understanding of interiority, the complex mix of emotions, memories and urges that make up her character’s consciousness.

David Doherty’s English rendition of de Moor’s prose is nothing short of stunning. There is – at the risk of sounding a bit bonkers – an almost synaesthetic pleasure in reading phrases like ‘boyhood hideaway’ (those y’s, those h’s, the mirroring b’s and d’s), ‘the calm scrape of skates’, ‘a woman with a tangle of damp curls and a knot of anger in her belly’. There’s an inevitability about the translation – every sentence so perfectly balanced it’s hard to imagine any other possibility – that’s the hallmark of there being not just one but two great artists at work. To de Moor’s rich symbolism and poignant objective correlatives, Doherty adds his own echoes and reverberations. Consider this deft repetition of the word ‘passing’, which – in addition to evoking death – suggests someone pacing back and forth, back and forth:

‘Walking the floor of the darkened living room calms me... I sleepwalk over the bands of oak, which I would swear have grown warmer with the passing of the years and the friction of my footsteps. And there is no doubt that the effect I achieve bears more than a passing resemblance to the workings of dreams. The sense of melting into things hidden or shoved aside.’

The result is a book that is utterly captivating, brilliantly alive in every line – a quick and piercing read that will stay with you for a long time to come.

Emma Rault

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**CRAVING by ESTHER GERRITSEN**
**Translated by MICHELE HUTCHISON (WORLD EDITIONS, 2015)**
**Reviewed by DAVID HEBBLETHWAITE**

Esther Gerritsen is a celebrated Dutch author and playwright. She’s also building a reputation as a screenwriter, with scripts including the 2019 film **Instinct** and the new TV series **Red Light**. Michele Hutchison’s translation of Gerritsen’s novel **Craving** was also one of the first titles published by World Editions (along with Gerritsen’s equally unsettling novel **Roxy**), and as an introduction to this author’s work and a statement of intent by its publisher, **Craving** is quite something.

We meet Elisabeth as she runs into her daughter Coco, whom she hasn’t seen for some time. Elisabeth has always found it difficult to talk to Coco, but now she feels compelled to tell her daughter that she is dying from cancer. We then switch to Coco’s viewpoint, and it seems her main
reaction to the news is that she's looking forward to being able to tell her partner:

‘things like that excite him. It’ll keep him occupied for a while. She won’t die that fast. Perhaps while that happens, they’ll be able to salvage something.’

It appears clear where Coco’s priorities lie.

*Craving* is a chronicle of the relationship between mother and daughter and, as the book’s opening demonstrates, it’s a fraught relationship. As a young child, Coco was destructive around the house, and as Elisabeth didn’t know how to deal with her she would end up locking Coco in her room. As time went on, Elisabeth struggled to relate to her daughter emotionally. In her turn, Coco had her own struggles with addiction. Now, faced with the news of her mother’s cancer, Coco decides to move in with Elisabeth to care for her – and the old frictions re-emerge.

Something that’s striking about *Craving* is its obliqueness: the reader has to piece together a good deal of the subtext, and it is in this area where Hutchison’s translation really shines. The dialogue feels naturalistic: conversations proceed haltingly or with characters talking past each other. Some of this may seem inconsequential, but the dialogue carries emotional weight, especially as Elisabeth’s condition starts to take its toll. For example, here she finds her ex-husband waiting for her at home:

‘[...] what are you doing here?’
‘Coco made a roster – you remember, don’t you?’
‘Again?’
‘It’s still the same roster.’
‘But you’re here again.’
‘Does that bother you?’
‘I like it.’

There’s so much beneath the surface of this exchange: a complex personal history and the present-day impact of illness. Yet Gerritsen’s prose – in Hutchison’s translation – carries it so lightly.

To read *Craving* is to be taken through the changing emotional lives of two compelling characters. It’s an affecting and challenging journey, and Gerritsen is an assured guide.

*David Hebblethwaite*
On the Bright Side: The New Secret Diary of Hendrik Groen, 85 Years Old by Hendrik Groen
Translated by Hester Velmans (Penguin, 2018)
Reviewed by Scott Eblen-Jarrett

At a time when being stuck indoors, unable to go out, has become the new norm and the spectre of illness (and indeed death) hangs over us constantly, it seems fitting to review a book told from the perspective of one of our most vulnerable sectors of society, the elderly.

On the Bright Side is the story of a resident of a care home for the elderly in Amsterdam. His year-long diary is about his life, ailments and emotions, as well as the anarchical antics of the Old-But-Not-Dead Club, an eight-strong group of ‘inmates’ who organise excursions and day trips to escape the banality of life inside the care home. Whether sampling Ethiopian cuisine for the first time, going to a jazz club in the centre of Amsterdam, or simply enjoying a night of cards and brandy, the club’s roster of events and outings contrasts with the limitations of care-home life and old age. There’s a lot of fun, anarchy and hilarity. The care home itself also provides plenty of action, however, with discussions of food, love, sex, politics, current affairs and multiculturalism, as well as the ‘inmates’ criticism of how the home is run. The life of the elderly residents is revealed to be a microcosm of the outside world – a life filled with its own trials and tribulations but one that is more similar to younger people’s lives than we might like to think.

Despite its generally light-hearted insights into the life of pensioners, the book does not shy away from difficult topics; dementia, physical decay and death (and its aftermath) are dealt with throughout. While these subjects are the bases for the most poignant moments in the book, particularly for the protagonist Hendrik Groen himself, they are discussed rather casually, and even humorously. They are also the very reasons why Groen decides to take life by the horns at the age of eighty-five, and it is this contrast that gives his story its unique perspective.

As a translator from Dutch myself, I paid special attention to Hester Velmans’ translation: it is good and firmly places the book in the Netherlands. However, one small point: while the use of descriptive translations for Dutch concepts (especially foodstuffs) is useful for the reader, it is inconsistent in places and at times feels a little out of place, given that the novel takes the form of a personal diary.

Hendrik Groen’s diary gives us a charming, emotional and funny insight into an often-forgotten part of society, and shows young people like me that the elderly, in spite of their physical limitations, can still have
agency, interests, and above all humour. Although conceived as a sequel to his very successful debut, *The Secret Diary of Hendrik Groen, 83¼, Years Old* this follow-up can be read as a stand-alone text, and it is easy to see why it has gained international appeal, despite its Dutch setting. Hendrik Groen (the pseudonym and adopted persona of author Peter de Smet) demonstrates that you can still value life and living even when you’re older and even when you’re in a care home. You can still live with gusto, laughter and your eyes fixed on the bright side, even when your circumstances may be less than ideal.

*Scott Emblen-Jarrett*

**JOSEPHINA: EEN NAAM ALS EEN PIANO**  
(‘JOSEPHINA: A NAME LIKE A PIANO’) BY JAAP ROBBEN  
WITH ILLUSTRATIONS BY MEREL EYCKERMAN (DE GEUS, 2010)  
REVIEWED BY JOHANNA MCCALMONT

Poet, playwright, novelist and children’s author Jaap Robben is popular with readers of all ages. He began writing for children and has won several awards: the White Raven for the middle-grade picture book *De Zuurtjes* (‘The Sourpusses’), followed by a Vlag en Wimpel honorable mention in 2013 for his poetry collection *Als iemand ooit mijn botjes vindt* (‘Should Anyone Find My Little Bones’), and a place on the Boekenpauw shortlist in 2019 for the picture book *Suzie gaat tekenen* (‘Suzie Draws’) – all of them illustrated by Benjamin Leroy. While his novels for adults – *Birk* (‘You Have Me To Love’, 2014) and *Zomervacht* (‘Summer Brother’, out 2021) – have both been translated into English by David Doherty, Robben’s entertaining, yet sensitive, work for children has yet to make it into English.

Josephina Florence is the grandmother brought to life by Jaap Robben’s sweet young narrator in the story for children, *Josephina: Een naam als een piano* (‘Josephina: A Name Like a Piano’), a book showcased at the 2020 Dutch KidLit Week, the annual spotlight for YA and children’s literature in the Netherlands.

‘Most grandmas weren’t always a grandma. Before that, they were a mum, a lady, and before that a little girl, a child, a baby, and before that, they were too tiny to see. Not much bigger than nothing at all.’

Grandmas are so old that some of them were even around before the dinosaurs! This young boy knows his grandma wasn’t always a grandma, because he has seen a picture – a photo of a baby in a garden, in black and white, and not a dinosaur in sight. That
little baby grew up, became a girl who could float in the sea, a lady who played the piano and married his grandfather, after dreaming of him long before they met. She became a mum, and – later – finally became his grandma.

Merel Eyckerman’s beautiful illustrations show the blond-haired little boy looking in on his grandmother’s life as she grows up and ages. He peeps over the edge of her pram, or listens at her feet, cuddling his dinosaur, as she plays the piano for his grandfather when they first meet. The young Josephina is drawn in black and white, contrasting with the soft pastel colours used around her to illustrate the little boy’s own imagination and precious moments with his ageing grandma.

But the young boy’s grandma forgets things sometimes; she calls a lamp a vase, or the biscuit tin a ‘what-do-you-call-it’. So her grandson helps her find the right words, receiving an extra biscuit as a reward. Josephina sits in her kitchen, dreaming about her childhood, remembering school friends, and wakes up thinking she’s a little girl in a playground. She weeps from time to time, and one day even forgets who the little boy is. She tells him she’ll live in the garden in the painting on her wall one day. Grandmas don’t have a ‘later’, the boy is told, but he doesn’t believe that. His grandma will live in a garden, with a piano, and hopefully his grandpa too.

Josephina is a poignant story about old age, memory loss, and eventually the passing of a grandparent. It is narrated from the innocent – and at times humorous – perspective of a young boy who is curious about his grandma’s life and enjoys spending time with her, looking at old photos, or simply watching her as she nods off. The love between the grandma and grandson is tender and warm. Robben’s language expresses a child’s view of the world. It is simple yet unusual, poetic yet direct, gently combining a childlike sense of innocent amazement with that of his grandma’s gradual bewilderment. Combined with Eyckerman’s enchanting illustrations, Josephina is a heartwarming picture book that offers an opportunity to explore what is often a difficult theme in a sensitive way.

Johanna McCalmont
Jelmer Mommers’ book starts with two aims: 1) to explain the principal parts of the climate emergency, and 2) to offer a less depressing perspective on how we can resolve it. This is ambitious, but Mommers does, mostly, manage it.

He tackles the issue from several angles, starting with the historical explanation for how humanity has treated nature in general, and the planet in particular. It is interesting to note here that Mommers, and/or his translators, consistently use ‘man’ or ‘mankind’ instead of gender-neutral options. We could, of course, take this literally and conclude that we can blame men and not women for both the conceptual and practical problems behind the climate emergency – which, in historical terms, would be an accurate assumption.

Another question the book asks is about the current state of research regarding climate change – how reliable is it, and how have governments and industries responded to it? Mommers also reflects on what we can do about the emergency. What happens if we do nothing? Are there any options that do not leave us with horrifying despair and depression? (Yes.)

This last question is a key concern for Mommers, and he is able to find reasonable grounds for his reply, which are spread throughout the text. Depending on what you knew, or thought you knew, before you picked it up, you finish the book with a better understanding of some key questions, such as ‘what actually are fossil fuels and why we should absolutely not use them for energy’, as well as a good grasp of what strategies can be used to fight climate change. This in itself is enough for me to want to buy copies for all my friends and family.

One final point worth highlighting is that Mommers makes an effort to examine the obstacles that prevent us switching to more environmentally sustainable habits rather than simply blaming evil corporations. In addition to the scientific problems – how can we make plastic sustainably from plants rather than from gas or petroleum? for example – there are problems of implementation, such as those raised by the gilets jaunes in France last year. Mommers considers in a serious way how such obstacles might be overcome, and suggests several promising ways to do this, which are based on currently active plans advocated by various environmental groups.

How Are We Going To Explain This? is an informative, readable guide to the climate crisis for laypeople, and ultimately is much less depressing than such a book could be.
In the exact middle of Penguin’s impressive first collection of Dutch short stories is Cees Nooteboom’s ‘Paula’. Indulging in unashamed nostalgia, the narrator recalls the glamorous woman whose presence held together a motley group of his card-playing friends.

These characters, their backgrounds and their concerns seem to reflect, if not exactly, then in spirit, the wide range of themes and threads running through this entire anthology: friendship; love; ‘renounced nobility’; the ‘real war’ – which was ‘still quite recent’; the polder – the Netherlands’ reclaimed land – on which ‘one can project any image one likes’; the dead, who ‘contrive’ to make you remember them.

So, do these subjects and preoccupations, dealt with across the thirty-six stories, reflect, in turn, those of the Netherlands – the country of today, and of the last century?

A South African friend of mine, who spent fifteen years living in Amsterdam, once offered me a subtle insight into the thinking of the Dutch – if there is such a thing. When I remarked that the handsome houses in such districts as the Jordaan had no blinds or curtains in their windows, despite giving directly onto the pavement, he told me – pointedly – that you’re not supposed to look in. Privacy relies on the manners of the passerby. Perhaps, then, if a social history of the Netherlands offers a view of the public lives of the Dutch, a collection of fiction, such as this, invites the reader to glance through those windows and gaze on the private activities of the houses’ inhabitants.

This dynamic is very clearly displayed in the way many stories in the anthology deal with the Dutch encounter with South-East Asia. In ‘The Southern Continent’ (published in Dutch in 1991) P.F. Thomése reimagines the lives of the explorer Jacob Roggeveen (the first European to land on Easter Island) and his family, for whom ‘voyages of discovery [were] the crowning glory of creation’. Whereas Jacob sets out to discover the real Terra Australis, it is the imaginings of his invalid brother, Jan, which are most revealing. From his sickbed Jan builds a picture of the Southern Continent based on questionable scientific assumptions, optimism and a peculiarly European impulse to classify and exploit. The result is a book of which he is ‘extremely proud’ and which his father pays to have printed. Thomése details, dammingly, that ‘the edition had a run of three copies, one for each member of the Roggeveen family’. For me the famous public achievements of the
Dutch East India Company are brought low by this tiny, private insight. A peek through the window reveals the reality of the colonial adventure.

Harry Mulisch’s 1995 story, ‘What Happened to Sergeant Massuro?’ demonstrates a similar concern, but in a much more immediate and shocking way. It describes how the eponymous sergeant, on patrol in the jungle of New Guinea, develops a surreal disease, which seems to involve him gradually turning to stone. The first symptoms appear as the troop plays a game – significantly called ‘land grab’ – just after one of their number abuses a girl from a local tribe. In the chaos that builds around the ever more solid and inflexible Massuro, a fellow soldier attacks him, and in that moment, the narrator has ‘a fantastic vision’ of European history; of popes, kings and cathedrals.

The doctor tasked with the post-mortem of Massuro’s stone body suggests the cause of the disease is ‘atrocities’, or rather ‘remorse’ for atrocities. ‘Science knows nothing about the area where mind and body communicate, nothing!’ he insists. For me, the implication is that fiction does know about such intimate, private exchanges.

Published in 1952, just after the Dutch relinquished power in South-East Asia, A. Alberts’ ‘Green’ takes us even closer to the colonial period, to the ‘heart of darkness’ (this story reeks of Conrad’s novel), and to an even more intimate and personal place. An agent is tasked with monitoring a patch of forest, his predecessor having ‘[drunk] himself to death’. Quickly obsessed with finding the edge of the seemingly never-ending vegetation, the narrator, who is suffocated by the ‘green’, is made uneasy by his relationship with ‘Peartree’ – the only other European in the vicinity – and is dismayed by the local people, who are clearly thwarting his efforts to gain some kind of European-style control of the wilderness. All of this is obliquely described, however. Given greater importance are the act of walking, the light hung outside the agent’s hut, his pointless procrastination about meeting with Peartree – all everyday, personal details that speak volumes about Europeans’ experience of the places and people that the colonial undertaking forces them to face.

The Dutch engagement with the landscape of the Netherlands – much of it man-made – offers another angle on this tension between surface description and interiority. This is most marked in Maarten ’t Hart’s story, ‘Castle Muider’. A writer is engaged to interview an elderly muskrat catcher about his work. An alien species, the muskrat’s tunnels can cause severe damage to the delicate environment of the polder. But there is no obvious symbolism here. The writer resists any attempt to make out of the rat catcher’s tales ‘ideas… syntheses… summaries’. He is intent instead on pure observation, on ‘a unique, always one-off receptivity to
one-off sensory impressions'. Yet, this story is a fiction – an insight into the psychic, not just a record of the evidence of the senses. The story ends as the old rat catcher allows a similarly aged muskrat to go free, happy that ‘the world can’t be such a bad place ... if that fellow is still able to find a place to rest his head for the night’. Twenty pages of beautifully rendered nature writing, and we arrive where almost all these stories place us – outside the window, peering in.

Nowhere is this invited intimacy more evident than in what, for me, is far and away the stand-out story of this entire anthology: Helga Ruebsamen’s ‘Olive’. Olive is a charming, sensational courtesan, who takes the narrator under her wing, mischievously naming her ‘Oliver’ – a reference to both her boyish appearance, and her subordinate role. For years they live a life of debauchery – sometimes homeless, always drunk; always carefree. Until, suddenly, Olive becomes sick, and the romantic veneer of their existence falls away. Olive’s ‘proud face was the pointy, shrunken skull of a witch’; her hands ‘looked like the yellow horny claws of a dead wild duck’. For a fleeting instant, Oliver says, ‘I was able to take off my blinkers and see ourselves and everything more clearly’. Yet more is to come. The story ends with an abrupt, brutal blow that turns Olive and Oliver’s decades-long romantic existence into a horrid case of manipulation and emotional abuse.

What makes ‘Olive’ so visceral is Oliver’s open, honest narration; she spares neither the reader nor herself. This makes Ruebsamen’s story more shocking, even, than the obvious candidates for that label in the collection: Manon Uphoff’s ‘Poop’ for example, in which two chance acquaintances eat dog faeces. Or Jan Wolkers’ ‘Feathered Friends’, in which a man murders his wife and feeds her dismembered body to the seagulls on his roof. More than these, ‘Olive’ pulls aside the veil, offering the reader the real rawness of human experience – something all the stories in this anthology do, to varying degrees.

If, therefore, this collection indicates anything essentially Dutch, then perhaps it is what Joost Zwagerman describes in his introduction: ‘Dutch writers frequently explore the vague borderland between delusion and reality.’ But, whereas Zwagerman says these writers often sketch ‘the disturbing process of delusion eating away at those borders and ultimately conquering the entire territory’, for me, the delusion – those grand facades you see when wandering the canals of the Jordaan district – falls away when you are granted permission to observe the reality of authentic, Dutch lives.

West Camel

This review was first published on eurolitnetwork.com in 2017.
Wings by Toon Tellegen (Querido, Amsterdam, 2016)
Translated by Fiona Graham

This short story was first published in Dutch in the collection De trein naar Pavlovsk en Oostvoorne (‘The Train to Pavlovsk and Oostvoorne’) by Toon Tellegen (Querido, 2016). It is appearing in English for the first time in The Dutch Riveter.

My grandfather was old. He had a bushy white beard and smelled of tobacco. He walked with a stick, was always dressed in black, and dropped bits of food when he ate.

But he could fly.

On a shelf in a cupboard was a cardboard box. Inside was a neatly folded pair of wings.

Sometimes, when I was sitting on Grandfather’s lap, he’d say: ‘Shall we fly around, then?’

I always said yes.

No one but Grandfather, Grandmother and I knew there were wings in that box. And I was never allowed to say a word about them to my mother. ‘I’m sure she wouldn’t approve of flying,’ said Grandfather. ‘Walking’s more her style. Brisk walking.’

Grandmother would take the box out of the cupboard and fasten the wings to Grandfather’s back. When she’d finished, I would stand on his knees and clamber onto his shoulders.

‘How did you get these wings?’ I asked one day.

‘From my grandfather,’ he said, ‘and he got them from his grandfather, who got them from his grandfather, and so on, all the way back to the beginning of time. They’re very old wings. Eternal wings, if you like.’

‘How did you learn to fly with them?’ I asked.

‘Up there,’ said Grandfather, pointing at the ceiling. Where a lamp was hanging, there had once, long ago, been a hook: he had hung from that and learned to fly. The same
way people learned to swim, suspended like a fish on a line in
the swimming baths.

‘Was it hard?’ I asked.

‘No,’ said Grandfather. ‘If you want to fly, you can always
learn how.’

Grandmother opened the window. ‘Take care, won’t you?’
she said. And off we went.

‘Where shall we go?’ Grandfather asked.

‘Mmm... to the steppes...’ I said.

‘All right,’ said Grandfather.

So we flew to the steppes.

We saw a vast plain, crossed now and then by a glittering
river like a meandering thread far beneath us. And every
thousand kilometres or so we’d spot Cossacks on tiny horses,
veiled in clouds of dust.

‘Look,’ said Grandfather, ‘a castle!’

There, below us and at some distance, was a castle. We
swooped down towards it.

There were soldiers in gleaming blue uniforms, with
rapiers and muskets and glinting halberds. Grandfather poin-
ted at them.

‘Aha!’ he said. ‘I see what’s going on. They’ve captured
a princess. Hold on tight, now!’

Keeping out of range of their bullets, we darted in
through a garret window.

When he was flying, my grandfather could do anything.
He would smash the glass in the thickest windows to
smithereens, and iron doors were nothing to him.

If a princess happened to have turned into a frog, Grand-
father would magically turn her back into a princess. And if
she was guarded by a fire-spitting dragon, Grandfather would
spit right back and put the dragon’s flames out. Or he’d chop
off a few of its heads, just like that.

Sometimes there’d be a sleeping princess. Then Grandfather
would waken her with a kiss. I remember the startled expressions
of all the princesses we freed. Some of them had been lying
asleep for a hundred years, and they would have slept for
a hundred more if my grandfather hadn’t made an appearance.
At other times we soared above armies advancing on each other in battle array. We witnessed the Battle of the Golden Spurs, the Battle of Marathon and the Battle of the Field of Blackbirds.

On one occasion Grandfather and I were invited up to Mount Olympus, where we sat between Zeus and Hermes. It was all very convivial. Zeus was amazed at everything my grandfather came out with.

‘I see,’ he said. ‘Now that I didn’t know.’

‘I thought you knew everything,’ said Grandfather.

‘But not that,’ said Zeus.

We were served cakes made of ambrosia and large glasses of nectar.

And so we flew hither and thither, into the past and into the future, to Katwijk and to Turkmenistan – wherever I wanted to go.

‘When I die the wings will be yours,’ Grandfather yelled into the wind, as we saw Troy beneath us and the ships of the Greeks, who were supposedly setting sail, and the gigantic horse standing before the city gates.

‘All right,’ I replied.

At the end of the journey we flew back to Russia. Then Grandfather flew lower so that we could see the villages and the forests, and we skimmed over the roofs of St Petersburg, over the street where he was born.

‘Close your eyes, we’re coming in to land!’ he cried over his shoulder, and then we landed.

When I opened my eyes again a few moments later, we were having our tea at the table in my grandparents’ house in the Haagweg, in Leiden.

We flew around like that many times. The last time, I think, was when I was seven.

Grandfather died when I was thirteen. I heard the news when I came home from school.

‘It’s always unexpected, no matter when it happens,’ my mother said to someone who was offering their condolences.

He was buried in a small churchyard on the outskirts of Leiden.
That box, I thought, as I followed my mother over a gravel path beneath rustling trees. That box ... I wanted that box. But how could I ask for it? My mother wasn’t supposed to know it even existed. And Grandmother was very pale and tiny, and she was avoiding everyone’s eyes, not saying a word.

It was only months later, when I was alone in the room with her, that I tentatively tried to broach the subject. ‘Those wings ... er ... you know the ones I mean ...’

‘Oh, Lev and his wings ... ’ she said, and she looked past me and out of the window, shrugging. She said nothing more, and I asked nothing more.

Grandmother lived for a long time after that.

Only after she died did I dare go in search of that box. It was up in the attic. ‘Wings’ was written on it. In Russian, German and Dutch. Below that, someone had written the name of my mother’s brother, killed on the Burma Railway. The box contained dusty old notebooks full of scribbles, a few exercise books filled with writing in Russian and Dutch, and a great many loose sheets of paper with indecipherable poems. But no wings.

I brushed the dust off the box with my sleeve and took it away. I put it in a drawer in my cabinet. Next to another box, one that was all but empty still, on which I, too, wrote ‘Wings’.

Toon Tellegen
Translated by Fiona Graham
ISH AIT HAMOU is known to the general public as a dancer and choreographer. He made his literary debut in 2014. He has also written and directed a short film. He was awarded the Prijz van de Gelijkheid – the Equality Award – in 2016.

RODAAN AL GALIDI is an Iraqi-Dutch poet and writer. His novel De autist en de postduif (‘The Autist and the Carrier Pigeon’) won the European Union Prize for Literature in 2011 – the same year he failed his Dutch citizenship course. His novel Two Blankets, Three Sheets was a bestseller in the Netherlands, and the English translation was listed by the Guardian as one of the best books of 2020.

KARIN AMATMOEKRI is a Surinamese-Dutch writer with Indonesian, Chinese, African and Native American ancestry. She is the author of six novels, a memoir and numerous essays and short stories. Her work explores cosmopolitanism and notions of home and identity.

ANNA ASBURY is a literary translator of Dutch into English. Her translations include The Eschatos Betrayal by Robin E. Flennok and the graphic novel Rembrandt by Typex.

SIMONE ATANGANA BEKONO graduated from Creative Writing Artez with her first poetry collection how the first sparks became visible, which went on to win the Poliziedebuurtbordprijs Aan Zee in 2018 for the best Dutch-language poetry debut and is published in English by Emma Press in 2021. She also writes prose, and published her debut novel Confrontaties in September 2020.

JAN BAEKE is a Dutch poet, translator, editor and curator, with nine poetry collections to his name. His latest collection, Seizoensoordel (‘Seasonal Gossip’), was awarded the Jan Campert Prize 2017. Bigger than the Facts appeared with Arc in 2020, translated by Antoinette Fawcett. Baeke is currently the festival programmer for Poetry International in Rotterdam.

ALICE BANKS is a copy editor and literary translator from French and Spanish based in Ciudad Real, Spain. After graduating with a French degree from Bangor University, Alice went on to study for an MA in Literary Translation at the University of East Anglia. She currently volunteers for both the European Literature Network and Asymptote Journal.

ANNA BLASIJK is a writer, poet and translator between English and Polish. She is a co-translator (with Marta Dzidurosz) of Renia’s Diary by Renia Spiegel. Her bilingual poetry book, Café by Wren’s St James-in-the-Fields, Lunchtime, as well as a book-length interview Lil: Lil Stern-Pohlmann in conversation with Anna Blasiak are both out with Holland House Books.

DEAN BOWEN is a poet, performer and psychonaut. He works at Perdu, an Amsterdam-based literary platform focused on poetry and experiment. He won the first Van Dale SPOKEN Award and his debut collection Bokman was nominated for the C. Buddingh Prize.

ANDY BROWN is a translator specialising in Dutch. His many translations include Maxim Februari’s The Making of a Man: Notes on Transsexuality. He lives in the Netherlands.

WEST CAMEL is a writer, reviewer and editor. He edited Dalkey Archive’s Best European Fiction 2015, and is currently working for new press Orenda Books. His debut novel, Attend, is out now. He is the Editor of The Riveter magazine and of #RivetingReviews for the European Literature Network.

SOPHIE COLLINS is an Edinburgh-based poet, editor and translator, who grew up in Bergen. Her first full poetry collection Who is Mary Sue? was a PBS Spring 2018 Choice and won the Michael Murphy Memorial Prize in 2019. Her translation of Lieke Marsman’s The Following Scan Will Last Five Minutes was published by Liverpool University Press in 2019.

DAVID COLMER is an Australian translator, writer and editor who lives in Amsterdam. He has translated more than sixty book-length works of Dutch-language literature and has won a host of international prizes for his work.

ALYSON COOMBES is a translator and editor. Her co-translation of Eichmann’s Executioner by Astrid Dehe and Achim Engstler was published in 2017 by The New Press. She has previously worked with New Books in German and the European Literature Network, and is currently training to become a languages teacher.

SASKIA DE COSTER is a prolific novelist whose work has been translated into some ten languages. Her family chronicle We and Me became a bestseller on its release in 2013 and was nominated for several Dutch-language book awards. In 2016, it became the first of her novels to be translated into English. Her most recent novel Nachtwouders (‘Night Parents’), an ode to love and non-biological parenthood, was published in 2019.

DAVID DOHERTY’s translations include novels by Peter Terrin, Marente de Moor, Jaap Robben, Margriet de Moor and Hanneke Hendrix. He has also translated the work of leading Dutch sports writers Hugo Borst and Wilfried de Jong. He is based in Amsterdam.

MAX EASTERMAN is a journalist – he spent thirty-five years as a BBC broadcaster; he was a university lecturer in journalism; is a translator, media trainer with ‘Sounds Right’, jazz musician and reviewer.

SCOTT EMBLENT-JARRETT graduated from UCL in 2015 in Dutch and Spanish. He held a residency at the Translators House in Amsterdam, translating the work of Radna Fabias. His first full-length translation work, Jules Deelder’s poetry collection Transeuropaw, was published in 2019.

MEREL EYCKERMAN is an illustrator and archaeological illustrator, whose work has been translated into several languages. She has illustrated picture books, poetry and books for early readers, while her work as an archaeological illustrator regularly takes her to Egypt, among other destinations.

ROSIE EYRE is an MA graduate and early-career literary translator from French and Spanish, winner of the National Centre for Writing’s Emerging Translator Mentorship 2020-21 for Swiss French. Currently working under the mentorship of Sarah Ardizzone, she has recently joined ELN’s Riveting team.
ANTOINETTE FAWCETT is a translator from Dutch. After a career teaching English and world literature in the UK and several other countries, she returned to university to study for an MA and then a PhD in literary translation. Bird Cottage by Eva Meijer was her first full-length translation.

MAXIM FEBRUARI is a writer, philosopher and columnist. He is the author of the novels Klont and The Book Club, as well as several columns and essay collections. The Making of a Man: Notes on Transsexuality was published in English translation in 2015, and was subsequently translated into Spanish and Turkish. In 2020, he received the P.C. Hooft lifetime achievement award and C.C.S. Crane Prize for his complete works.

BARRY FORSHAW’s books include Crime Fiction: A Reader’s Guide, the Keating Award-winning Brit Noir, and Nordic Noir. Other work includes Death in a Cold Climate, Sex and Film and the British Crime Writing: An Encyclopedia (also a Keating Award winner). He edits Crime Time (www.crimeetime.co.uk).

MARGIE FRANZEN is a translator from Dutch, German and Spanish, based in Madison, Wisconsin. She translates almost anything (auto)biographical – from literary essays to medical documentation. When not writing, she dreams up ways of getting more translated literature off the pipelines and into the hands of readers. More on her work can be found at www.margiefranzen.org.

SAM GARRETT is a prolific translator of Dutch literature, the only translator to have twice won the British Society of Authors’ Vondel Prize for Dutch-English translation. In 2012, his translation of The Dinner by Herman Koch spent two months on the New York Times bestseller list and became the most popular Dutch novel ever translated into English.

ESTHER GERRITSEN is one of the Netherlands best-known authors. In 2005, she was awarded the Dif/BGN prize for her second novel Normale dagen (‘Ordinary Days’), while Superduif (‘Superpigeon’), Craving and Roxy were all shortlisted for the prestigious Libris Literature Prize. In 2014, she was awarded the Frans Kellendonk prize for her body of work.

VIVIEN D. GLASS is a literary translator from Dutch and German. She holds a Bachelor’s degree from the ITU University of Applied Sciences for Translation and Interpreting, and her published translations include works of fiction, nonfiction, poetry and children’s verse.

ANNE-GINE GOEMANS made her debut in 2008 with the novel Ziekzoekers (‘Unfurrowed Ground’), which won the Anton Wachterprijs for best debut. Her second novel Glijvlucht (‘Gliding Flight’) was awarded the Dioraphte Youth Literature Prize in 2012. Her latest novel is Holy Trientje (‘Holy Trinity’), published in 2019.

ROGIE GOLDSMITH is Director and founder of the European Literature Network and Editor-in-Chief of The Riveter. She was a BBC broadcaster for twenty years and is today an arts journalist and presenter. She was Chair of the Judges for the EBRD Literature Prize from 2018-2020.

FIONA GRAHAM is a literary translator from Dutch, Swedish, German, Spanish and French. Her published translations include Elisabeth Asbrink’s 1947: When Now Begins, which was longlisted for the Warwick Women in Translation award and the JQ Wingate literary award.

HENDRIK GROEN is the pseudonymous author of the international bestseller The Secret Diary of Hendrik Groen, 83 ¼ Years Old. Following its publication in 2014, the book was an enormous success and it won the NS Public Prize 2016. The sequel, On the Bright Side, was published in English in 2018. The third book in the series, Two Old Men and a Baby, is set for release by Grand Central Publishing in 2021.

DAVID HEBBLETHWAITE is a book blogger and reviewer. He has written about translated fiction for Shiny New Books, Strange Horizons, Words Without Borders, and We Love This Book. He blogs at David’s Book World (www.davidsbookworld.com).

STEFAN HERTMANS is the prizewinning Flemish-Belgian author of many literary works, including poetry, novels, essays, plays and short stories. His first novel to be translated into English, War and Turpentine, was longlisted for the Man Booker International Prize, and was chosen as a book of the year in The Times, Sunday Times and the Economist. His latest book available in English is The Convert, which was published in 2019.

MICHELE HUTCHISON is a literary translator from Dutch and French. In 2020, she won the Vondel Translation Prize for her translation of Sander Kollaard’s Stage Four, and the International Booker Prize together with author Marieke Lucas Rijneveld for The Discomfort of Evening. She is also co-author of The Happiest Kids in the World: Bringing up Children the Dutch Way.

SASJA JANSEN is a poet, novelist and short-story writer. Her debut novel De kamerling (‘The Eunuch’) was published by Querido in 2001, and was followed by Teresa zegt (‘Teresa Says’) in 2005. Since 2006, she has focused mainly on poetry. In 2020, Putting on My Species became her first poetry collection to be published in English translation.


JOREN JOSHUA is a Rotterdam-based illustrator, whose witty and absurd illustrations depict everyday life in a humorous way. His drawings are imbued with both a playful quality and a certain complexity that encourages deeper research. Strongly influenced by graffiti and printing techniques, Joren has developed a graphic but dynamic personal style which he has successfully applied to a wide variety of projects for many years.

MARJA KINGMA is curator for Germanic studies at the British Library, with over thirty years’ experience as a qualified librarian in libraries in the Netherlands and London. Her interests cover a wide spectrum within the arts and humanities, with an emphasis on the Netherlands and Belgium and in particular the relationship between the Low Countries and the UK.

HERMAN KOCH is an internationally bestselling author. His 2009 novel, The Dinner, was translated into forty-two languages and was followed by bestsellers such as Summer House with Swimming Pool, Dear Mr M. and The Ditch. His latest Dutch-language novel is Finse dagen (‘Finnish Days’), published in 2020.

JONATHAN LEVI is a reviewer, academic and author of the novels Septimania and A Guide for the Perplexed. A founding editor of Granta, he currently lives and teaches in Rome.

GEERT MAK is a leading Dutch journalist and one of the Netherlands’ most popular writers of nonfiction. His books have been translated into over twenty languages and he has won international critical acclaim and numerous awards, including the Leipziger Buchpreis and the Prins Bernhard Prize. His 2004 nonfiction book In Europe is considered a masterpiece.
LIEKE MARSMAN, an Amsterdam-based poet and author, is one of the leading new voices in Dutch literature. After winning a cluster of prizes for her 2010 poetry debut, Wat ik mijzelf graag voorhou (‘Things I Tell Myself’), she has since published two further poetry collections and a novel. Her latest poetry collection, The Following Scan Will Last Five Minutes, was released in English translation in 2019, and her novel Het tegenovergestelde van een mens (‘The Opposite of a Person’, 2017) is currently being translated into English for Daunt Books.

JOHANNA MCCALMONT is a freelance translator and interpreter from Northern Ireland. She works from French, German, Dutch, and Italian into English. Her translations have previously appeared in the journal No Man’s Land and she is a regular contributor to the WorldKidLit blog.

DAVID MCKAY is an award-winning literary translator who lives in The Hague. His recent translations include The Convert by Stefan Hertmans, and the classic political novel Max Havelaar, a joint translation with Ina Rilke that was shortlisted for the 2020 Oxford-Weidenfeld Prize.

JELMER MOMMERS reports on climate change for De Correspondent. He has previously worked as a researcher and online editor at De Groene Amsterdammer, De Gids, and the investigative journalism platform Investico.

MARGRIET DE MOOR is a classical singer turned novelist whose work has been translated into more than twenty languages. In 1992, she won the AKO Literature Prize for her first novel, Eerst grijs dan wit dan blauw, which was published in English as First Grey, Then White, Then Blue. Her latest novel to be translated into English, Sleepless Night, was named as one of Library Journal’s Best Books of 2019.

HAGAR PEETERS is an award-winning poet and previous nominee for Dutch Poet Laureate. Over the past two decades she has published multiple Dutch-language volumes of poetry, including City of Sandcastles which appeared in English translation in 2018. Her debut novel Malva was awarded the Golden Book Owl 2016 and has been translated into six languages, including English.

SELMA VAN DE PERRE was a member of the Dutch resistance ‘TD Group’ during the Second World War. She worked for the BBC in England and as a foreign correspondent for a Dutch TV station. In 1983, she received the Dutch Resistance Commemoration Cross.

ANIL RAMDAS was a writer, journalist, public figure and media commentator. Surinamese by birth, he spent most of his life in the Netherlands. He was a correspondent in India for NRC Handelsblad for several years. In 1994, he was awarded the E. du Perron Prize for his collective body of work. His only novel, the autobiographical Badal, was published in 2011.


JONATHAN REEDER has a dual career as a performing musician and literary translator. He has translated several Dutch-language operas into ‘singing libretti’ and provides the English surtitles for all DNO productions. His translations of Conny Braam’s The Cocaine Salesman and Peter Buwalda’s Bonito Avenue were both longlisted for the International IMPAC Dublin Literary Award.

MARIJE LUCAS RIJNEVELD has emerged in recent years as one of the most exciting new talents in Dutch literature. After winning the 2015 C. Buddingh’ Prize for their debut poetry collection, Kalfsvlies (‘Calf’s Caul’), in 2018 they published their debut novel The Discomfort of Evening. The English translation saw Rijneveld and translator Michele Hutchison jointly awarded the International Booker Prize in August 2020. Rijneveld’s latest novel, Mijn lieve gunsteling / My Dear Favourite, was published in Dutch in November 2020.

JAAP ROBBEN has published several books of poems and stories for both children and adults. His widely acclaimed debut novel Birk, published in the UK and the US as You Have Me to Love, won several prizes and was voted Best Book of 2014 by Dutch booksellers. It has since been translated into four languages. His latest novel, Summer Brother, will be published in the UK in 2021.

SCOTT ROLLINS has been a cultural entrepreneur in music, literature and film for over forty years. Born in the US and based in the Netherlands since 1972, he has published three books of his own poetry and one spoken word album. His translations of Dutch poetry, fiction and nonfiction have been published in the US, UK and Canada, and he is particularly interested in literature from the Dutch Caribbean (Suriname and the former Netherlands Antilles).

JENNIFER SARHA is a researcher of obscure European history by night and a wrangler of research funding applications by day. In her remaining free time she is attempting to learn all the languages in the world.

MAAjtE SMITS’s highly innovative first poetry collection Als je een meisje bent (‘If You Are a Girl’) was published in 2015, followed two years later by Hoe ik een bos begon in mijn badkamer (‘How I Started a Forest in my Bathroom’). The way in which Smits lets her poems break free from the Dutch by peppering them with German, English and French words is becoming something of a trademark for her.

TOON TELLEGEN is a prolific poet, playwright and children’s writer. Over the last fifty years, he has won numerous prizes for his children’s books and his poetry, and much of his work has been translated into English and several other languages. A Wish, a book of prose poetry translated by David Colmer, is his latest work available in English.

ALICE TETLEY-PAUL is currently the translator in residence for New Dutch Writing. In September 2020, she also published her co-translation of Selma van de Perre’s My Name Is Selma, alongside co-translator Anna Asbury.

HESTER VELMANS is an award-winning translator of contemporary Dutch and French literature, including the internationally bestselling Hendrik Groen series. She is also the author of the popular children’s books Isobel of the Whales and Jessaloup’s Song.

JOZEF VAN DER VOORT is an award-winning literary and academic translator working from German and Dutch. He completed his MA in Translation Studies at the University of Sheffield, and has since been nominated for several international translation prizes. His translation of Maartje Wortel’s Something Has To Happen is now out with Strangers Press.

JOOST DE VRIES is an editor and literary critic at De Groene Amsterdammer. In 2010, he published his debut novel, Clausewitz, and in 2013 was awarded the prestigious Charlotte Köhler Stipendium. His second novel, The Republic, for which he won the 2014 Golden Book Owl, was published in English translation in 2019. His debut short story collection, Rustig aan, tijger (‘Easy, Tiger’), was released in 2020.
LAURA VROOMEN has translated multiple fiction and nonfiction books for publishers in the US, UK and Australia. She has also translated excerpts for Dutch and Flemish publishers wanting to sell foreign rights, as well as books and excerpts for self-publishing Dutch/Flemish authors.

LIZ WATERS studied philosophy and theology at the University of Manchester, and worked at a literary agency in Amsterdam before becoming a full-time translator of literary fiction and nonfiction. She has translated writers including Linda Polman, Fik Meijer, Paul Scheffer and Lieve Joris.

LAURA WATKINSON founded the Dutch chapter of the Society of Children’s Book Writers and Illustrators. Her translated works include classics by Tonke Dragt, as well as works by Peter Terrin and Cees Nooteboom.

SARAH WELLING is a web editor and literary translator, who grew up in Eindhoven and previously worked as a bookseller and teacher. Her published translations include Wytske Versteeg’s prize-winning psychological thriller The Boy, as well as pieces for the Dutch literary magazines Das Mag and 2.3.74. She also creates illustrations and other combinations of words and pictures.

TOMMY WIERINGA is the author of several internationally bestselling novels. His fiction has been longlisted for the Booker International Prize, shortlisted for the International IMPAC Dublin Literary Award and the Oxford-Weidenfeld Prize, and has won the Dutch Libris Literature Prize. His acclaimed 2017 novel, The Blessed Rita, is his latest work available in English.

MENNO WIGMAN was a Dutch poet, anthologist and translator, who became one of the most celebrated poets in the Netherlands. During his lifetime he published five poetry collections, compiled several anthologies and translated a large number of European poets, including Baudelaire, Rilke and Laske-Schüler. In 2013, he won the Atwater Poetry Prize for the collection My Name is Legion, and was posthumously awarded the Ida Gerhardt Poëzieprijs in 2018.

JUDITH WILKINSON is a British poet and translator living in the Netherlands. She has won many awards, including the Popescu Prize for European poetry in translation (for Toon Tellegen’s Raptors) and the Brockway Prize. She has also translated Miriam Van hee, Hagar Peeters and Menno Wigman.

MIKE WILKINSON is a British translator and editor who has been a resident in the Netherlands for over thirty years. As well as a linguist, he is a keen musician and has been in a number of blues and rock bands. He also writes novels under the pseudonym Nicholas Clare.

MAARTJE WORTEL is the author of several novels and short-story collections, the latest of which, Er moet iets gebeuren, was nominated for the Fintro Literature Prize and the ECI Literature Prize. She is also a journalist and writes columns for NRC Next and Trouw.

JOOST ZWAGERMAN was a novelist, poet, essayist and editor of several anthologies, including The Penguin Book of Dutch Short Stories (published posthumously in 2016). After starting his writing career with bestselling novels such as Gimmick! (1988) and False Light (1991), in later years he concentrated on essays – notably on pop culture and visual arts – and poetry. He took his own life in 2015.

MIEK ZWAMBORN is an artist, novelist and poet. She lives and works on the Isle of Mull, in the Hebrides, where she runs a project working to explore the natural environment – and particularly its bountiful seaweeds – with scientists, designers and artists. This interest is reflected in her latest work, The Seaweed Collector’s Handbook, which was published in English translation in 2020.
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