Menno Wigman was born in 1966 in Beverwijk, North Holland, and is considered one of Holland’s major poets. He won many prizes for his work, including the prestigious Ida Gerhardt Poëzieprijs, awarded posthumously. He published six full-length collections, including a ‘selected poems’, De droefenis van copyrettes (‘The melancholy of copy centres’). Wigman was also an editor, essayist and prolific translator; Baudelaire and Rilke were among the poets whose work he translated into Dutch. In 2012 and 2013 he was the Poet Laureate of Amsterdam (a two-year position), during which time he wrote many commissioned poems. Wigman was also a musician and throughout his life played as a drummer in various bands. He performed his poetry widely at international festivals and his work is increasingly appearing in translation. In 2016 the British publisher Arc issued a collection of his poems, Window-cleaner Views Paintings, translated by David Colmer, and there are French and German selections of his poetry. In 2014 he began to have serious cardiac problems and he died of heart failure in February 2018.

Judith Wilkinson is a British poet and award-winning translator living in Groningen, The Netherlands. She has published many collections to date, including Toon Tellegen’s Raptors, for which she won the Popescu Prize for European Poetry in Translation in 2011. In 2013 she won the Brockway Prize, a biennial prize for the translation of Dutch poetry. Two of her own collections have been published by Shoestring Press. Among the poets whose work she has translated into Dutch are Miriam Van hee, Toon Tellegen and Hagar Peeters. Her website can be visited at www.judithwilkinson.net.
SAMPLER
Menno Wigman

The World by Evening

translated from the Dutch by

Judith Wilkinson

Shearsman Books
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Acknowledgements
Introduction

Menno Wigman’s poetry gained praise in the Netherlands from the moment it was first published. He has remained one of Holland’s most acclaimed poets, known for his intensity, his sharp and disturbing evocations of urban life, and his technical finesse. His poetry, steeped in other literary traditions but never derivative, combines classical elegance and contemporary subject matter. Wigman balances between colloquial language and more formal rhetoric, a rhetoric that consciously undercuts itself. He is both a public poet, focused on the issues of our time, and a very personal one, and he constantly and passionately questions the entanglement of these two voices. This restlessness energises his work: within a single short poem there are invariably shifts in feeling and tone, from scathing to tender, from convinced to self-mocking, from nerve-wracked to assured. Often the mood is sombre, but it is a sombreness that inspects itself. Wigman once said in an interview: ‘I don’t want melancholy that doesn’t cost anything, that is non-committal.’

Wigman was born in 1966 in Beverwijk and grew up in the village of Santpoort, a place known particularly for its psychiatric institution. At times patients could be found wandering about the local woods, something that fascinated the young Menno. His concern for the outsider probably started during his childhood. Home life felt claustrophobic to him; there was little conversation and the television was always on. When one of his half-sisters from his father’s first marriage committed suicide, it came as a great shock to him. As a teenager he began to frequent squats in Haarlem and he was a drummer in various punk bands.

Wigman attended grammar school. Encouraged by his Dutch-language teacher, he wrote and translated black romantic verses and saw himself as a somewhat desolate dandy. From the age of sixteen he published his poetry independently and began giving readings at various venues. In 1984 he published his first collection, Van zaad tot as (‘From seed to ashes’).

In that same year Wigman moved to Amsterdam to study Dutch language and literature at the Free University. He started
a one-man magazine, in which he wrote under many, often coquettish, pseudonyms. He has said that he was unhappy in his student days. The poetry of that time was different from his own and to him seemed hermetic and lacking a certain rawness. He spent much of his student life reading and translating the poets he loved.

His official debut was in 1997, when his collection *Zomers stinken alle steden* (‘In summer all cities stink’) was published by Uitgeverij Bert Bakker. It was well received by the critics and soon reprinted. His second collection, *Zwart als kaviaar* (‘Black as caviar’), was crowned with an award, as were many of his later collections. In total he published six full-length collections, including a ‘selected poems’, *De droefenis van copyrettes* (‘The melancholy of copy centres’).

Wigman was very active as a translator too. Baudelaire, Rilke, Thomas Bernhard, Else Lasker-Schüler and Gérard de Nerval are among the poets whose work he translated into Dutch. In addition he compiled a number of anthologies. He also published a collection of articles on various poets, entitled *Rood ons van de dichters* (‘Save us from poets’), and a book about his experience as poet-in-residence in psychiatric institution Den Dolder, where he put together a collection of poems written by the patients. He found himself becoming disheartened by all the suffering he witnessed there. He also worked as editor of the Dutch literary journal *Awater* for a while and as such offered advice to budding poets.

In 2012 Wigman was appointed as Poet Laureate of Amsterdam, a two-year position, during which time he wrote many commissioned poems, several of which are included in this selection.

He gave readings at numerous festivals, including Lowlands, Crossing Border and Poetry International. In addition, he continued to perform as a drummer in various bands, the last one being ‘The Uncool.’ Poet-artist Frank Starik has commented that Wigman wrote ‘with a drum set in his head.’

He regularly took part in a scheme originated by Frank Starik and organized by the municipality of Amsterdam, whereby poets
commemorate the funerals of those who die unmourned and alone, such as the homeless or elderly. Wigman felt that this humanistic gesture gave rise to a whole new poetic genre, unique in the world. Some of these poignant funerary poems have been included in this book.

Wigman was a slow but disciplined worker, always revising and deleting, and thoroughly researching his poems. There were periods when he locked himself away for four to five days at a time, working fiendishly and barely sleeping. He always preferred to write in the evenings and at night. A few times a year he shared a rented apartment in Berlin; the place was quiet and had no TV or internet, making it ideal for working for hours at a stretch.

In 2013 he developed a life-threatening heart condition and was unable to write for a while. In his last collection, Slordig met geluk (‘Squandering happiness’), he takes stock of his life, drawing on his experience of being hospitalised.

Wigman’s poetry doesn’t fit neatly into any Dutch literary context. Unlike most of his contemporaries, he adheres to fairly strict verse forms. The early twentieth-century Dutch poet J.C. Bloem inspired Wigman, but Bloem’s urban sonnets are tidier and tamer than Wigman’s poems. There are nods at Vasalis in his work, but Vasalis’s romanticism is quieter and less unsettling than his. What Wigman shares with some of his contemporaries is a colloquial tone and a certain boldness and immediacy. But perhaps most of all, his work has an affinity with the late 19th century French poètes maudits. He was influenced by the decadent poets of the fin de siècle; Baudelaire, with his preoccupation with darkness, his rejection of the sentimental and his ironic anti-climaxes, was his great example. Both in his fascination for the anonymous figures inhabiting the subterranean spheres of big cities, and in the structure of some of his poems, Wigman is reminiscent of Baudelaire. ‘Pitying the Reader,’ for example, echoes the mood of Baudelaire’s ‘Le goût du néant’ (‘The taste for nothingness’), although there is less posturing and, arguably, a more deeply felt despair in ‘Pitying the Reader.’ Wigman was also influenced by some of the German poets whose work he translated. He admired Else Lasker-Schüler, for instance, for her
wholeheartedness and her willingness to embrace big words like ‘soul.’ He once commented: ‘her poems are full of storms.’ In his own poem ‘Love,’ the words ‘Oh you!’ are a direct quote from one of her poems.

Wigman frequently commented on his work in interviews. He felt that we are living in an end-time, an unprecedentedly fast but not very fulfilling time. Many of his poems focus on our consumer culture, on pleasure and its consequences and on the passing of youth. ‘Europe has become a department store, something that disgusts and fascinates me. You can’t detach yourself from the current culture.’ A claustrophobic fear of boredom runs right through 19th century French poetry, and in his own poems Wigman often looks back on nights of pleasure, which he felt were in part a way of warding off boredom. ‘When you’ve emptied the glass to the dregs, what’s left?’ He aspired to writing poems that ‘cut into the heart of the reader like a stiletto’ and he believed that ‘the best poetry is both universal and subversive. I like my poems to have something harsh about them, something recalcitrant.’

For Wigman, writing meant delving deep into darkness, but without being destroyed: ‘I like to balance on the edge, something I both fear and choose. Out of a sense of abandonment I signal in Morse code to those who are reading the work in isolation. There’s a kind of contact.’

In terms of technique, he valued strict metres, but he always made sure there are small flaws. Many of his poems approximate the sonnet form; the closest Wigman comes is in the poems that start with a five-line stanza, followed by a four-line, a three-line and a two-line stanza. He called these his ‘count-down poems.’

A great deal has been written about Wigman’s poetry. Poet Ingmar Heytze, who praises Wigman’s ‘heart-felt lyricism’, calls him ‘the finest poet of his generation’, likening him to ‘a courageous front officer, armed to the teeth, subverting old barricades.’

Poet and critic Marc Hurkmans comments on how the poems balance between Welschmerz and joie de vivre. ‘Wigman sings about decay and disillusion and there is always an undertone
of darkness, but the poet never lapses into maudlin prattle about doom.’

Critic Guus Middag describes Wigman as a poet who looks back, who starts writing when an experience has passed. ‘His poetry is carefully reasoned and crystal clear, with a youthful energy that is immediately tempered. The same themes keep recurring: time and again, spleen wrestles with an ideal and the speaker’s grand illusions are undercut by reality. The setting is always concrete, for Wigman keeps his feet on the ground.’

Commenting on his last collection, *Slordig met geluk* (‘Squandering happiness’), poet Maria Barnas writes: ‘Wigman expresses a nihilistic view of life in an exuberant manner. His sentences have a kind of dragging structure, but always get there in the end. Love is what gave him back his writing after a long period of illness.’

Increasingly, Wigman’s poetry is appearing in translation. Full-length collections of his work have been published in France and Germany. In 2016 David Colmer’s translations of Wigman’s poetry, *Window-cleaner Sees Paintings*, were published by Arc. I hope my selection will help build on Wigman’s growing reputation in the English-speaking world.

My choices were personal ones: I chose poems that I found powerful and I tried to reflect something of the range of Wigman’s work in this collection. I admire his ability to look deep and to confront himself without becoming gratuitously confessional; the poems pulse with temperament, but vehement outbursts run up against lucid analysis and self-scrutiny, making for an unusual interplay of emotion and reflection. In the poems where he explores the events and features of our time, such as ‘Burger King’ or the haunting ‘Grey Zone,’ he bears witness passionately, a passion contained in tightly argued and often heavily ironic poems. I have also chosen poems in which he puts himself in other people’s shoes with great empathy, such as ‘Window-cleaner Sees Paintings’, or the commissioned funeral poems, that explore the lives of solitary or homeless people. In addition I have translated many of his love poems, such as the beautiful ‘Promesse de bonheur’.
I worked on the translations intermittently for several years. Wigman gave me a great deal of freedom in translating the poems. I was grateful for his feedback, which made me puzzle over and revise specific passages. I tried to preserve the musicality of the originals, as well as their structure and (half) rhymes as much as possible.

In one of the translations, ‘Promesse de bonheur,’ I followed David Colmer’s translation in one of the lines, namely: ‘It is a love that must.’ It seemed the perfect find, and none of the alternatives I considered had that same inevitability.

Wigman once said that he saw poetry as ‘a kind of amulet that you can wear to protect yourself against possible disaster.’ After a long period of illness, he began to write again. Of his subsequent collection, Slordig met geluk, he said: ‘I am beginning to shed some of the black romanticism of my earlier poems. I’m not done yet, and my most recent book feels like the work of a person who has survived himself.’

On 1 February 2018, just a week after Shearsman had accepted this collection of translations for publication, Wigman died of heart failure at the age of 51. His Dutch publisher, Prometheus, wrote in an ‘In Memoriam’: ‘We mourn the loss of one of our greatest poets. Menno Wigman was one of the few writers who won over both his fellow poets and a wider reading public. His death is a blow to Dutch poetry.’

Judith Wilkinson
'S ZOMERS STINKEN ALLE STEDEN

1997
ALL CITIES STINK IN SUMMER

1997
Jeunesse dorée

Ik zag de grootste geesten van mijn generatie bloeden voor een opstand die niet kwam. Ik zag ze dromen tussen boekomslagen en ontwaken in de hel van tweeëntwintig steden, heilloos als het uitgehakte hart van Rotterdam.

Ik zag ze zweren bij een nieuwe dronkenschap en dansen op de bodem van de nacht. Ik zag ze huilen om de ossen in de trams en bidden tussen twee maal honderd watt.

Ik zag ze lijden aan een ongevraagd talent en spreken met gejaagde stem: – was alles al gezegd, nog niet door hen.

Ze waren laat. Aan geen belofte werd voldaan. De steden blonken zwart als kaviaar.
Jeunesse dorée

I saw the greatest minds of my generation
bleed for an uprising that didn't come.
I saw them dream between the covers of their books
and wake up in the hell of twenty-two towns,
ill-fated as the torn-out heart of Rotterdam.

I saw them swear by a new-found drunkenness
and dance on the bedrock of the night.
I saw them weep over the blind herds in the trams
and pray under cold, unwholesome light.

I saw them suffer from an unsolicited talent.
I heard them speak in agitated tones—
if it had all been said, then not by them.

They were too late. Their promise unfulfilled.
The cities shimmered, black as caviar.
Vondelpark

Hoeveel avonden zaten we niet aan het water, rookten te veel, vergaten in ons hoofd te staren en laveerden traag terug naar bed, onverzadigd als het zomerbloed van die verdoofde nachten, lamzalig van genot en nieuwe sprookjes machtig?

De stad was toen een blonde kroeg, een toren van extase, en midden in het park bestal de zon de tijd de dag, we wisten niet meer wie we waren.

Nu is het donker. Nog één kus en ons bed zinkt naar de bodem van de nacht – zo dankbaar, zo onvatbaar snel.
Vondel Park

How many evenings didn’t we sit
  by the waterside, smoking too much,
forgetting to stare into our heads,
  before staggering slowly back to bed,
insatiable as the summer blood
  of those dazed nights,
sluggish from pleasure and
  rich in new fairy tales?

The city was a blond pub at the time,
  a tower of rapture,
and in the middle of the park the sun
  stole the day from time
and we lost track of who we were.

Now it’s dark. One more kiss
  and our bed sinks to the bottom
of the night – so gratefully,
  so strangely fast.
Onder het asfalt

De hitte kreunde als een hond
en door het hoge venster plensde
zonlicht op mijn Grote Bosatlas.
Ik kende Appelscha en India,
Amerika, New York en Wolvega
en bij die rode stip stond Stork.
De wereld, leerden wij, was rond,
en loodrecht onder onze klas
in de beschutting van de dag
lag Nieuw-Zeeland, was het nacht.

Die middag kwam ik bij een zebra-pad
waar ik de barsten in het asfalt las.
Daaronder is het donker, dacht ik,
en zag twee vissers turen bij een lamp.
De maan bescheen een open kluis.
Een plunderaar begroef zijn buit.
Ergens dreef een bleke slager
in zijn bloed de winkel uit.

Wat wist ik van de streken van de nacht
wanneer je zonder geld of vrienden zat?
Ik keek weer op en wist niet beter
of de zon bestond alleen voor mij,
geboren in een onverwoestbaar dorp
in de oneindigheid van mei.
Beneath the Asphalt

The heat was moaning like a dog
    and through the tall window sunlight
splashed down on my atlas of the world.
    I knew Appelscha and India,
America, New York and Wolvega
    and that red dot was Stork.
The world, we learned, was round,
    and deep beneath our classroom,
far down, under the lee of day,
    New Zealand lay, and night.

That afternoon, at a crossing,
    I noticed cracks in the road.
I thought: beneath the asphalt lies the dark
    and saw two fishermen peering by a lamp.
The moon shone on an open safe.
    A plunderer was burying his loot.
Somewhere a pale butcher floated
    out of his shop in his own blood.

What did I know about the tricks of night,
    when you were penniless and without friends.
I looked up at the sky – for all I knew
    the sun existed just for me,
born in a village time could not destroy,
    in the infinity of May.
Stil maar, wacht maar

Wat een geluk dat Holland niet bestaat.

Alleen een tenger land van mist en klei,
alleen miljoenen doden zonder steen,
alleen het ultimatum van de zee.

En wat een troost dat er geen morgen is,
der er nooit sprake was van sneeuw en hagel,
zon en voorjaarswind – helemaal niks.

Alleen het ultimatum van het licht.

Tot zover het weerbericht.
You’ll See, All Things Will Be Made New

How fortunate that Holland doesn’t exist.

Only a slender land of mist and clay,
only the millions of dead without a grave,
only the ultimatum of the sea.

And what a comfort that there’s no tomorrow,
that there was never any snow or hail
or sun or a spring breeze – nothing at all.

Only the ultimatum of the light.

That was your forecast for today. Sit tight.
Tot zichzelf

Alleen mijn nagels en mijn haren, dat is alles. En wat dan nog?
Ik groeide op, vermaalde brood, ontviel drie vaders en leed niet langer aan de ijle lengte van momenten. Zo werd ik groot, zonder de vrijheid na te bootsen, zonder mijn dromen aan te lengen.

Ik groeide op en hield het kort, nog steeds de jongen aan het raam die peinst of alles wat bestaat verdient dat het ten gronde gaat. Nu, mijn haren zijn de hoop ontgroeid, mijn nagels splijten van verwijt en wat rest is stilte, omsingeld door rumoer van alledag.

Ik ken de waarde van de dood, niet de prijs, – het gewicht van een woord, niet dat alles met de vlakte als ook dit, mijn haren, mijn nagels, mijn ik.
To Himself

Only my nails and my hair, that's all. And so what? I was young, chewed bread, dodged three fathers and no longer suffered from the fleeting length of moments. That's how I grew up: I didn't mimic freedom, I didn't doctor my dreams.

I grew up and I kept things brief, always the boy at the window who wonders whether everything that lives deserves to be destroyed. Today my hair’s outgrown my hopes, my nails keep splitting from reproach and what remains is silence, hemmed in by the din of every day.

I know the value of death, but not the price, the weight of a word, but not that everything will be erased, even this poem and my hair, my nails, myself.