

Jean Janzen

Flowers of Amsterdam

For the sake of the Gospel,
the book says. 1549. Pieter, Johann
and Barbara are tied to the stake.
Their bodies flare out in a triple bloom,
still flare out in the mind, the recalcitrant
flesh still acrid. And Catherine drowns
in the canal, her skirts billowing out
over her tied legs like a lily.

Now vast markets of flowers, a harbor
where once a shipload of grain
was exchanged for a single tulip bulb.
City of night when the streets open
their black laps for the painted blooms,
when music rides the blue and swollen veins,
washed and languid houses that double
in the watery streets.

City of choices. Which fire, which perfume,
and at what price? Catherine cries out
over the water. Each one must choose,
she calls into our bright throats,
each one for himself. And how
do you choose when a whirlpool sucks you in,
into the purple corridors of the iris,
the cool swarm of apple orchards?
„Careful of the feast’s tomorrow,“ Van Gogh
writes near the end, after the yellow skies.
„For my own work I am risking my life,
and my mind is half-gone ... But what do you want?“

What do you want? The one way to live,
the one unequivocal rose in this life
of mirrors, in this city of water where
the day is now nearly gone and the floodgates
already open. The dark elms dip their hair
into the rising tide and the laden boats
drift with the current. But here and there
one moves against it, one figure in a boat,
the twin oars quietly open the water's
glistening petals, opening a secret passage
in the deep and watery place.