

# New Poems

by Jean Janzen  
Fresno, California

Jean Janzen is a Mennonite poet from Fresno, California, whose work has received growing acclaim in recent years and who deserves to be better known among Canadian-Mennonite readers. She emerged on the scene in 1984 with *Words for the Silence*, which contained some evocative and nostalgic poems about the Mennonites of Russia and their migration to America in the twenties. Her next appearance was in *Three Mennonite Poets* (1986), where she shared space with Mennonite poets Jorifumi Jaguchi and David Waltner-Toews. Most recently some of her poems were included in *Piecework: 19 Fresno Poets* (1987).

Jean Janzen was born in Saskatchewan during the Depression, the seventh child in a family of eight. Growing up in Minnesota and Kansas, she later graduated from Fresno Pacific College and received her Masters degree in Creative Writing from California State University. Jean and her husband Louis, a pediatrician, live in Fresno and worship at the College Community Mennonite Brethren Church in Clovis, California. They have two sons, two daughters and a grandson.

As these new poems demonstrate, Jean Jansen is a poet of free-ranging but disciplined imagination who possesses a secure poetic technique and subtle modes of expression. She is a Christian artist whose work breathes a deep faith and spiritual acceptance while exploring with great intensity and sensitivity the moral, ethical and existential themes that we need to grapple with in these troubled times. (A.R.)

## 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 doubled 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 opening the water’s glistening petals,  
opening a secret passage in the deep  
and watery place.

### Reclaiming the Land

1

Not even Kansas is as flat as this place,  
our eyes interrupted only by the distant  
dykes where a sailboat is a speck  
floating above the land. Land and sea,  
elemental, separated as in God’s third  
day. Order out of chaos. And great emptiness.  
Twelfth Century, Hadewijch the Mystic, gathers  
the young sisters around her, pleads  
with them to cherish their emptiness,

to be tender toward their human longings.  
They stand in a huddle in the marshy field.  
The tree is upside-down, she says, eyes  
searching, hats and skirts flapping. Inside  
that burning.

## 2

These are my people near the breaking  
rage of the North Sea, and inland  
by the quiet avenues  
of water — Menno Simon's escape routes  
and his arteries of faith. What footings  
here for the descendents.  
what moorings for the heavy cargo  
of ourselves? The light stays long  
in the Dutch summer. Green promises  
more green even as I sleep. This land,  
reclaimed, opens and fills — country manors,  
barns, ships that sailed away and returned  
heavy-leaden, captains that demanded  
blood, and these people with my name  
refusing, cutting the ropes, letting it go.

## 3

“Mennoniten? Sie spielen nicht,  
Sie trinken nicht, Sie lachen nicht,”  
say our friends from across the Ems.  
Separation from the world? The words  
shift like global waters, mirror  
the fickle sky.

The land lies uneasily  
beside the ocean's strength.  
Winds strain at the locked gears  
of windmills. One sweeps and dries  
the damp fields, another  
carries floods in its arms.  
Which wind? Which true one  
for the turning?

## 4

In his “View of Haarlem”  
Ruisdael's sky dominates  
the land. Great thunderheads

rise over the far dykes, faces  
of beauty and danger over  
the fields of grain, the red  
slanted roofs, the dark clusters  
of elms and chestnuts.  
What we want is hidden,  
something elemental that stirs  
in the color or in the canvas  
itself. Something under  
those long stretches of white  
linen drying in that shaft  
of sunlight.

### Three Windmills

1

Inside this windmill  
all is clack and thump,  
a great stomping of small red seeds  
for a trickle of oil. The vanes  
turn and turn: light and shadow,  
light and shadow, straining and creaking  
as they try to lift me from this land.

2

The ones on the midwestern plains  
clapped their metal through  
those nights without borders,  
like the plains themselves,  
these mountains a rumor, these rivers  
invisible. Only dust and wind  
as the windmill clanged on, its song  
a monotone about insatiable thirst.

3

The vanes turn and turn  
perhaps to start something new.  
Rilke writes, patience is everything,  
the German *geduld*, like a duck  
too fat to fly. Endurance,  
the grind of gears. Or was it  
*gelassenheit* with its upward draft?  
A floating resignation, arms cutting  
deeply into the empty spaces.

### **Lines and Strings**

(for my Grandfather, Peter Wiebe, 1856–1904)

As you carved a violin  
in the Ukrainian night,  
Tchaikovsky up north tangled  
with the “Pathetique,” all those lines  
and strings pulling him on.  
And something drew you  
to the tension of catgut  
over wood, those scraps  
you shaped and glued  
in the lamplight, even  
as the wheat, sown too late,  
withered under the moon.  
Something — no grand finale  
after four movements —  
but a single melody that etched  
its way into the children’s  
drowsy heads as they spread  
blankets on the dirt floor.  
Bloodline and starline  
are what you gave me,  
one line continuous, the other  
breaking off between constellations,  
leaving empty spaces in the map’s  
black sky. Cold places  
where sometimes you appear,  
tall and boney, scraping your bow  
on the bridge. And then  
we dance, you and I, tethered,  
stepping among the stars.

### **Plain Wedding**

To imagine my grandparents  
on their wedding day flying  
over the Russian village  
with cow and moon. But Chagall’s donkey  
drops them with a thump.  
None of that frivolity,

the fathers said. Black dress  
for the bride, like penance  
over the apple-breasts.  
Hair tightly bound.

What could have lifted them  
above the somber wedding sermon  
and congregation was song,  
that sturdy vine which creeps  
and thrusts into the barest room.  
Rich loosened voices in four parts  
lifting the four corners of paradise  
with its lavender skies, its white wings,  
its throng of flowers. "Grosser Gott,  
Wir Loben Dich." The harmonies  
gradually unwrap pure whiteness,  
of canvas, of bride. Not to be  
blemished, but with touch  
upon touch, to be filled.

### Double Rail

Winter 1933 and one more mouth  
to feed. Seven at home and his schoolroom  
full during freeze and thaw. I wonder  
what he wanted then as he crossed  
the darkening yard where after lessons  
he skated with the growing boys. I wonder  
what he thought when he entered the warm  
kitchen where my mother waited, her apron clean,  
dark hair smooth, skin smelling of bread.  
What to give a woman when she asks?

Refuge? A thousand year of peace?  
Only after the Rapture, he tells my brothers  
at the supper table. Premillennialism,  
he called it. (And the young child  
listens and fears, for who can abide  
the day of His coming?)  
His borad, immaculate hands butter  
the bread, the talk is steady. What difference,  
the train stopping at Karkhoff with the Reds  
streaming out, or the S.S. blowing bridges  
in the spring? Sons. Brothers. Nothing  
to stop the flow. A train for escape?  
*Zug*, we called it in German,

as it dragged through the prairie, sighing  
into the station with its load.

\*\*\*

The congregation stares up at him  
in the pulpit. Behind him the words  
carved on the wall: *Heaven and earth*  
*shall pass away*, as the corn wells  
and the lake thickens with fish. In the pews  
all of us listening for the Word that speaks  
to our feasts and droughts, to the sludgy  
bottom of the lake and the silence after harvest.

This life is a journey to another world,  
a different glory, he sang out as he stood  
shaving at the mirror. He rode the trains  
with a carefree spirit, at country crossings  
inched the car forward toward the thundering freight  
as we gasped and begged. But also, he knew  
the shadowy places, the times when life was stopped  
and crowded, when he confided, *sometimes I*  
*hardly know who I am*. That great distance  
and my mother kissing him, so that at the end  
he wasn't sure to which home he wanted to go.

### Eating Stones

(for my aunts who died in the Ukrainian famine in the 1930s)

Hunger with its open face,  
its open mouth. Simple  
as a life-line. I love  
the old man's story —  
the miracle in the Ukraine —  
how that loaf of bread slid off  
the military wagon into the snow  
and saved his whole family.  
Survival and escape from  
the unspeakable desert.

One loaf.

When the tramp sat on my  
childhood backsteps, hunger  
seemed to rub its rags  
against the edges of adventure.  
The small dramas of

the Depression, my mother  
exclaiming and clapping  
her hands as we opened  
the huge round of government  
cheese. All of us unaware,  
the mute murders so far away.

I want  
history to veer in their behalf,  
not that wilderness of stones  
with its refusals. Susie  
and Marie, orphaned, young, and  
beautiful, emaciated on  
the pitiful bedding, their mouths  
bloody with the effort. I want  
for them the transformation  
into loaves. And then, those  
other necessities we live by:  
a hand on their foreheads,  
someone calling them by name.