

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.