

“Singing at the Fire”

(A poem cycle based on engravings by
Jan Luyken, seventeenth century)

Sarah Klassen, Winnipeg, Manitoba

Live burial

They offer you reprieve:
the mercy of a six-month breathing space
a rare chance to recant.
But you Anneken ask for the earth
to lie in. How long

have you been dreaming darkness
this cool unbroken silence
a small room of your own?
I find you too adamant, Anneken.
Incomprehensible.

Aren't you afraid
when the earth closes its cold damp
arms around you, cradles you
clogging your nostrils, clamping
its weight on your warm limbs

you'll want to stretch an arm out
carve with a work-worn hand a space
in the black roof above you
large enough for the sun
to break through one more time?

Or do you really believe

your song, a silver bell
will rise
glide through the stubborn sod
immortal
and irresistible

a melodious witness
an echo
a sharp mercurial flame
searing with its razor edge
the whole penitent earth?

Anneken van den Hove
Bruxelles, 1592

Witness

Levina's execution was postponed
because of pregnancy. Her
husband, a humble shoemaker,
martyred months ago, six
children orphaned by her death.

David condemned to burn,
his sister Tanneken drowned,
his brother beheaded.

Levina and David (strangers in life)
fused in fierce heat
of unrestrained faith. An audacious fellowship
immune to fire, a bond
immoderate as young love.

The executioner in mercy strangles both
before burning their bodies. He's etched
forcing a sharp-pronged fork
into David's chain-bound
charred breast.

Glowing coals cast light
on the robed priest, illuminate
the wooden cross he holds
high and safe from the heat. He's never seen
so clearly such defiance
such deliberate dying. Uncompromising

words he might have meant to speak
(about obedience
fidelity)
die
cold in his throat.

David van der Leyen
Levina Ghyselins
Gent, 1554

Hands

Hands bind you to the narrow wood
ladder you believe leads to heaven.
Men's hands. They lift you, swing you
up and over until the tongues of flame touch
your trembling skin, hair, your ankles
lashed to a rung in the ladder. Hands
that wove fine linen,
smoothed a child's sleep-tumbled hair,
bound at the wrists with rope, as if in prayer.
Your eyes wide as disbelief, your mouth
crammed with gunpowder to keep you mute,
blow you sky high.

Men gathered and lit the wood for the fire
that in a forest clearing would be friendly
a place to warm cold hands, cook meat
a place to sing in harmony with friends.

Flames throw warmth and light
on your face.
They flicker and dance.

Your bound hands cast fantastic shadows.

Mothers wives
daughters of wood-gatherers
fire-lighters magistrates
the tireless executioner
bend over safe home fires
kneading bread
brushing tears from a child's cheek
smoothing a rumpled shawl. They fold
their work-worn hands in prayer
for father son
beloved husband
priest.

(Perhaps even for you
Anneken: I want to believe
women's hands are clasped
knees bent and trembling.
Tongue and appalled heart
pleading for you)

Anneken Hendriks, Amsterdam, 1571

Heresy

In prison Jan,
old clothes peddler, hungry and thirsty,
is questioned about the sacrament: he believes
you eat bread no matter where
and crumbs will scatter
at your feet, grow stale, be eaten by birds.

Wine is wine poured from a cup. The blood
is not what you drink. It
comes from wounds in a gouged body, stains
the lacerated skin, the ground and the guilty
hands red.

(Antwerp, 1551)

Legend I

On the horizon a small blaze
toward which the horse plods
patiently. An ordinary man marked for death
leans out of the wooden cart
to pick field flowers
in front of the wooden wheel. Imagine

a man holding a blood-red poppy
and a white wilting daisy
while his limbs burn.

The executioner heaps wood with zeal on the pyre,
prods, maneuvers the corpse with a crude lance.

No fire on earth savage enough to sear
the white and red petals, or consume
wholly the devout body.

Leonhard Kaiser
Scharding, 1527 (Schaerding)

Legend II

These are the things you won't see
ever again: that dark, starred tent, the way
the wind twirls the town hall's weather cock.
Trees.
The elegant church steeple. Look how it lifts
its pinnacle against the outraged sky.

The last crude pillars you will cling to
touched by tongues of fire
at your feet. Believers swear

those black twin stakes turned green
overnight: charred wood restored, bark brilliant,
branches alive with light-flecked whispering
leaves
the two of you will never see.

Ursula and Maria van Beckum
Deventer, 1544

Street scene

Anneken offers her body, blood, breath
a warm sacrifice, her beautiful young son
Isaiah to anyone who'll take him home.

A decent baker holds out
his snow-white arms. His wife protests
six children are more than enough

in these hard times. Anneken composes her last
testament: leaves her son wisdom
to be his mother, fear of God for a father

and the overflowing cup
of her suffering. She leaves the baker a full sack
of money. The boy grew up to be a brewer, became

mayor of Rotterdam. Never claimed his mother's faith.
They tried to drown it with her body
which had borne and fed

Isaiah. See how the rope binds her
to the jailer's wrist, the fibers twisted,
rough as justice. Shoved from arm to arm,
look
how that innocent child
smiles.

Anneken Jans
Rotterdam 1539

A suspended life

Did you wait for the sun's first rays through lace
at the window, scan the ink-black sky
for clues? A pin-point of grace?
For beauty?

Were you stern or joyful, Ursula,
did you delight in daisies,
rain tapping on roofs, the warm
smell of the earth

afterwards? Wedged between cold walls
everything shrinks. Goes grey.
Steel thumb screws tighten flesh to bone.
You're left suspended by those slender wrists.

Luyken engraved you hanging there, gagged mouth,
afflicted eyes averted,
the flogging caught mid-air, the horrible wheel,
the tableau callous in the background. Overhead

stars hurtling at breakneck speed
spawn a billion sparks
that bravely occupy the darkness. The indifferent
universe is violently expanding.

Ursula of Essen
Maastricht, 1570