Written in Blood
Spierenburg, Pieter

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As the prelude suggests, this book is about love and violent death. The man who wrote that letter of hope and fear would spill his blood in vain. Eventually, his name would become known throughout the entire city of Amsterdam and far beyond. It had been eight and a half years since the previous murder that every Amsterdamer had talked about. Twice, within a decade, Amsterdam had been a witness to killing for love: two cases of lethal passion in an age of Enlightenment. These murders are the subject of this book.

The dossiers of these crimes, first assembled by the city court and now enlarged upon by historical research, are voluminous. They form the basis for the two tales presented here. Obviously, a nonfictional murder story cannot be told as a “whodunit.” Instead, this book’s narrative elaborates on the personality of the protagonists, the events of their lives, and why they became killers; all against the background of an age of reason and sentimentality. A brief overview of the two cases follows.

The narrative beginning in chapter 2 revolves around Nathaniel Donker, born in Indonesia and sent to the Netherlands in his youth. A rich orphan at twenty, he meets Cecilia, a working-class widow, and they join in an illegal marriage contested by his older brother. They roam around and live for several years as fugitives just across the border, but finally they settle down with their two children on a country estate. Then, Dora enters the picture, a younger woman of German descent who completely enchants Nathaniel. He runs away with her to Amsterdam and, as Cecilia pursues them, they make plans to murder her. In December 1766 they lure her into their “house at the water” and strangle her. Despite some difficulties, they manage to dump the victim’s corpse in the moat outside the city wall and think they are safe. A week later, however, the discovery of a truncated female body is the talk of the town. The court
arrests Nathaniel, while Dora remains in hiding. But, after a month, someone betrays her. In a long trial, Nathaniel finally confesses, which leads to his execution. Dora, however, withstands the third degree of torture and survives in Amsterdam’s prison for women.

The main protagonist in the tale beginning in chapter 6, J. B. F. Van Gogh, is approaching forty at the time of the crime. He has unsuccessfully pursued the careers of actor, surgeon, and hack writer. In January 1775, while visiting a brothel, he meets Annie, twenty-four, and falls in love with her at first sight. She agrees to marry him but secretly continues to work as a prostitute and to see her former lover and pimp. For six months, the engagement is on and off, with many quarrels, tears, and reconciliations. The tension escalates when a hostile hack writer publishes two pamphlets mocking the affair. At the end of June, Van Gogh writes a letter with his own blood, hoping to persuade his beloved to marry him after all. He recites it to her in the presence of the neighbors, but to no avail. Her rejection induces him to commit suicide, but at the last moment he turns his knife and stabs her in the heart. His trial, with successive appeals, goes on for years, while several writers publish accounts about him and his deeds. Some consider him a freethinker, including the prosecutor, who despises sentimentalism and depicts the defendant’s deed as an ordinary crime of revenge. In the end, the public executioner decapitates Van Gogh on Amsterdam’s main square in April 1778.

Microhistories often deal with only one case, but there are good reasons why this book focuses on two. In many ways, they complement each other. First, they represent the two prototypes of killing for love: eliminating a rival and turning against a lover who ends the affair. They also differ with respect to the social milieu, the character of the main actors, and the strategy used to get them convicted. Finally, the public impact of these two cases was different: a collective shuddering over an atrocious crime and great astonishment about the murderer’s high standing in the first case and a lively interest in the persons of the killer and the victim in the second. But why should history writing be concerned with sensational crimes at all?

Emerging as a separate field in the 1970s, the history of crime had an ambitious program. Crime was a window to social relations. Court records revealed hidden secrets about common people’s existence, the antagonism between the rich and the poor, and the position of various minorities—in short, the whole web of social relationships. Moreover, crime reflected economic conditions. Did the number of thefts and robberies rise in years of dearth or recession? Did the pattern of crime change with industrializa-
tion? Solid statistical work formed the basis for answering such questions. A key word was “serial research,” a term indicating that the properties of the series itself constituted the object of investigation: annual fluctuations in the number of offenses, the ratio of theft to violence, the average age of offenders, the percentage of women prosecuted, sentencing patterns. The scholars who devised this program frowned upon the study of separate, exemplary cases. To focus on one sensational crime surely was anathema.

The serial program no longer holds sway. Although much work in the history of crime and criminal justice continues to be based on extensive data sets, few scholars belittle the study of exemplary cases. In part, this change of orientation is due to a decline of confidence in quantification. It also owes a great deal to the modern interest in questions of representation. For example, if a historian’s subject is crime literature, the notorious cases obviously predominate. A third important factor in the change of orientation, next to lesser confidence in quantification and interest in representation, is the increasing interest in cultural themes, such as the concept of honor. Historians now recognize that the in-depth study of one or a few trial or police dossiers can deepen our insight into the culture and social relations of the society in which they were compiled. Examples are the small dramas investigated by the papal court in sixteenth-century Rome or the much-publicized but unsolved murder of Mary Rogers in nineteenth-century New York. And yet, as serious historians, we may feel uncomfortable when confronted with severed body parts found in a canal or letters written with blood. Is there a justification for focusing on these two sensational cases? Can we analyze them, look beyond their mere sensation, and use them as a source of information about the world that witnessed them?

The justification is based on a simple argument: the brutal or unexpected murders of the past are not only sensational to today’s consumers of popular historiography, they equally fascinated the contemporaries who heard or read about them first-hand. That fact makes these crimes legitimate objects of scholarly research. Contemporaries were eager to learn everything about the offenders, the victims, and any relevant circumstances, so their interest mirrors their perceptions of the world. Apparently, the fascinated public recognized a familiar element in the life stories of notorious murderers. They morally condemned the crime, no doubt, but somehow they could imagine themselves in the killer’s shoes. However twisted, they showed a degree of empathy. If fatal attraction fascinated Amsterdammers in the 1760s and 1770s, this was because many could imagine what it felt like. A revolution in love, discussed in the
opening chapter, was taking place at this time. As extraordinary as they were, the two cases dealt with here reflected the cultural mood of the age.

But this book goes beyond the analysis of mere sensation. It also takes up the program of microhistory, first laid out by authors such as Carlo Ginzburg and Natalie Davis. These historians have shown that a detailed study of an individual case can reveal hidden secrets about the larger society. What do abstract notions like gender roles or popular versus elite culture come down to when applied to real people who lived in the past? In *The Return of Martin Guerre*, for example, Davis carefully assesses the room for maneuvering available to Bertrande, the female protagonist, within the cultural and social constraints she encountered. She lived with a man who was not her husband, but she had to maintain that she had never known that he was an impostor. Otherwise, she would have lost her chaste reputation and become an outcast.

The concept of “room for maneuvering” forms a bridge, moreover, between microhistory and the epistemological work of the famous German sociologist Norbert Elias. One of Elias’s main goals was to do away with discussing the behavior of historical actors in terms of dichotomies such as structure versus agency or voluntarism versus determinism. As he put it, society is just the name we give to the network of individuals who constitute it. Social processes, and specific social situations within them, result from the interactions of millions of men and women, but simultaneously these processes and situations become relatively autonomous from the wishes and efforts of individual men and women. The network, which we all form together, in its turn constrains us and limits our options. People can make choices, but at a certain risk. A French aristocrat at Louis XIV’s court, for example, might choose to retire and forget about the rules of etiquette. However, if he did so, he put his social existence at stake, risking the loss of everything that gave life meaning according to his world view. It is understandable, therefore, that only a few nobles chose to avoid the court.

Similarly, a jack-of-all-trades in eighteenth-century Amsterdam, fancying a prostitute, might choose to marry her, but with serious consequences for his honor in the eyes of others, who would treat him accordingly. And a married man in love with another woman might prefer her permanent company over keeping her as a courtesan, but at the cost of becoming a fugitive libertine, condemned and shunned by respectable people. Thus, the exceptional choices made by a few individuals make it understandable why the majority opted for more predictable life courses.

In sum, social circumstances leave individual persons with a limited set of options. Many people, in the past as well as today, act simply as we
expect them to act in their situation. The protagonists of our story sometimes acted differently. The voluminous dossiers about these murder cases allow us to ascertain the options open to a few men and women who lived some 250 years ago and to understand what the consequences were of taking the one road or the other. The method is a dual one: we must carefully assess the motives and thoughts of the principal actors during the main phases of their lives, and we have to perfect this assessment by confronting it with the best knowledge we have of Dutch society and its culture in the eighteenth century.