

LOUISA HOWEROW

GERANIUMS

“It smelled like geraniums when you crush them in your hands.”

—British human rights activist Helen Bamber describing the Bergen-Belsen concentration camp, where she served as an aid volunteer in 1945

Their red is everywhere—
in pots, bouquets, the still life
of Van Gogh. I bend my face
into the flower that once promised
to heal wounds, banish cholera
and evil spirits. A shop girl advises
I try a vial of its soothing oil
as a mood-lifter, restorer.
There was a time I yearned to fill
my window boxes to overflowing,
reminiscent of a hidden street
in Amsterdam, where red blooms
broke up grey, held onto summer,
except now I can't but see a fist,
crushed petals, palms opening
to the smell of death.