With standing room only, the bus sped down the freeway on a bright warm morning. Once we turned onto the bollenstreek, long ribbons of intense blue, mauve, and white stretched to the near horizon. At the same time, the colours seemed to invade inside and pour over us. Fields of yellow daffodils blared spring’s final triumph over the particularly long winter. Every head on the bus turned and gazed. And then suddenly, quite spontaneously, everyone sighed together, “Aaahhhhhhh.” A breath song of collective awe.

We were headed to Keukenhof Gardens, near the Dutch town of Lisse, famous for its variety of bulb flowers, especially tulips. I was feeling particularly triumphant because I had two Dutch people in tow. My husband had finally run out of excuses and decided to appease his American wife. Along with us was a friend who had actually lived near the gardens for the past 35 years and had never visited them before.

It seemed that every time I mentioned this beautifully landscaped garden to the Dutch, they would smile uncomfortably as if to say, “Oh, that place full of tourist buses where you have to pay to see tulips. No thanks.” No matter how hard I tried to convince them of the wonder and unique beauty of viewing seven million bulbs in bloom, the Dutch just looked at me like someone to be pitied.

Even our friend had justified her visit to the park to her three children by saying there was “an American lady who wanted to go.” But not ten minutes after our arrival, she and my husband were overcome with the fragrance of hyacinths, the morning light flickering through cherry blossoms, the sound of water flowing over carefully placed stones, and the old oaks whose gnarled trunks resembled elephant feet.

People of all nations and faiths were visibly touched by the richness around them. Languages softly floated up and whirled around us blending with the scent of blossoms. Cameras clicked. A young French couple snapped photos of their two toddlers sitting in a tulip field who looked like
tender butterflies. Young women dressed in silky hijabs stood for their photos next to potted black tulips aptly named “Queen of the Night.” Japanese women, afraid of tanning, hid under open umbrellas held by gloved hands. A fleet of elderly in wheelchairs posed by the fountain, its sound rushing, swishing, gurgling beyond us.

“If only the world could just plant tulips,” I thought. Even as thousands of visitors poured in throughout the day, a stillness remained. The natural beauty of scent, colour, sound and sunlight seemed to quiet the restless minds and chatter of people. In some ways, it felt like paradise, as we all mingled past flowers that we knew, like ourselves, were fleeting in time, transitory in nature.

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