

Aleid looks for sleep in the eyelidded dark and the night hours wane, sleeplessness is a fever dream, half thoughts fill her head and echo but all there is to do is listen, she turns from one to another side and the hip the wool cover goes over is far beyond her, body is gone but blood heavies her eyes, blots of dim light flow over eyelids and weave in lines, time will bring sleep, sleep hides in a way to lie.

Aleid opens eyes to a dark, the dark softens to grays. She goes under the cover and pulls legs to chest, wraps arms around shins and brings head to knees, heat and the animal smell of breath gather. She yawns, stretches from the cover, reaches arms and legs, the air is cool and body crackles, sleep will not be.

how late

Aleid turns to the wall the drawn windows are in but the dark there is even and any dim light that falls to the floor from the end of the heavy cloth is hidden by the bed here at the middle, she goes to the edge and beneath the cloth a stripe of lighter dark crosses the floor but against the thick dark around it the stripe is almost gray, she reaches from the cover across the gap between the bed and the wall, pulls the cloth from the window and the glass is dark, she lets the cloth fall

night

Aleid draws a finger along the floor up to the head of the bed, finds a leg of the bedside table and follows the leg up, she sweeps hand over the table top, fumbles into the mug and it tips but she gets a hold before a fall, sits up to elbow, lifts the mug to mouth and it is light, she tips it to sip but there is only a weak smell of honey, the mug is empty

doop you doop time doesnt boils water doesnt spring tea

Aleid pushes from elbow up to hand and sets the mug aside, swings legs over bedside and shoves off the crutch arm upright, pulls the wool cover back and hops down, the floor is cool, she goes to the windows and draws the cloth, there is the late and there is an early in the gray dark on the garden, she turns for the circuit dark in the room.

adi the rye

Aleid goes toward the foot of the bed and across the room a gray shape moves in the mirror that hangs on the far wall beside the gown she goes to put on, the shape leaves the mirror, she comes around the end of the bed and goes on, the woman the shape was steps into the mirror but the face is Postelluna's not hers and Aleid stills, mam's blue eyes are gray in the dark and stare through her but eyes under ground do not look through the earth out of mirrors

rot

Aleid comes near to the bend of metal, puts thumb and finger to either cheek, pulls the face rid of her mother, the trick is the face she for now shares not the eyes she does always, she lets go, face is thin and bags ring the eyes, sleeplessness looks like borne pain and long age

how long is it now eighteen years? nineteen?

Aleid pulls the knot from the cloth belt and shivers without cold, bites the collar of the night robe to keep it shut and draws arms from sleeves quickly, snatches the gown that hangs nearest and the bite slips, the night robe falls and she is bare to the mirror where the crooked seam she sewed shut after she took the knife twists through navel, she hurts, shudders and pulls the gown on.

twenty I was twenty its been twenty four she was what forty what four no it was winter it was snowing forty five

Aleid picks the night robe up, hangs it from the hook the gown was on and turns from the face in the mirror that is almost hers, the stripe under the window is more dark than gray, she goes toward the door.

On the stair ladder Aleid pulls the hatch to the loft down, keeps near quiet the shut of the hatch, she reaches a hand into the pocket she had Marij sew in one of the folds of cloth at the waist of the gown, feels gray blue at the touch of metal and pulls the key out, opens palm and draws finger along the line of teeth, the line is straight, pocket did not bend metal, she puts the key in the lock to the hatch and it fits like a little ago.

wont die theres enough water even if its hotter than last week

Aleid turns the key and the sound from the chew of the lock hums down her fingers, she puts the key in pocket and her other arm throws an answer to the footing that slips, she reaches for something to hold and lets go of the rye ear she got from the loft, gets a hand to the table and does not fall, goes still and tries to breathe heart beat slow, on the table the thing beneath her hand is off white, black hues fill the slots between fingers and a breath comes quick, paper, she pulls the hand, dark makes the purple hues of the blooms black but that is monkshood drawn there and she hisses in, carefully steps down.

Off the stair ladder Aleid lifts the sheet of the materia medica that her hand was on and the sheet is torn, a slit cuts words along the edge and into the nearest monkshood blossoms, another cuts the hemlock on the next, she lifts the stiff paper and the dogbane on the sheet beneath is whole, there is no way to right this and nails of her fingers dig at the palms of her fists, the plants here unsettle, each is right and is not in a strange way but there is the strange threat from each of its use, the other copy in the house does not match this, everything the old Thonis drew for Rutger goes beyond anything in that one and even if the words here are there they are not in Rutger's hand but the two of them are dead, there is no way to right this

carelessness

Rutger watches from the painting that hangs behind Aleid next to the hearth off to the side, there is no way to right this and she reaches across the desk, snatches the far cover of the book, put monkshood in wet soil like wolfsbane but

take the yield in early winter and drop the oil on an eye that hurts, a swallow will only cool a body of heat but a second should be enough to kill, the book has nothing more to tell and quickly she pulls the cover shut.

no wintersre hellebores monkshoods like wolfsbane its late summer not too far

Aleid turns toward the window at the end of the way and goes to put the key back, the dim light on the painting beside the hearth makes dark shapes of what Goessen bluntly painted without the skill to give souls to the faces there at the fore where Rutger kneels in the shadow of a nailed christ beside one apostle across from another next to the virgin mother but the dark hides the work the painting hangs for that one of the other van Akens did in the world behind where small wanderers rove the hills beneath a great walled city

jan or the old thonis had to be joend be too young rutger put it up when I was what twelve? and the wanderers jans more likely jan jan jan have him do thoniss drawings I copy rutgers hand

Beyond the hearth Aleid follows the wall to the corner the wall makes with the drawn window, puts fingers through the knot hole in the wall that the window cloth hides, takes the board out and a deep black fills the narrow gap, she steps a foot in and takes the key from pocket, goes to knee and feels out along the low shelf past other things eyes would also harm or that light would, gets the dry green feel of the felt cover of Joen's wedding ring's box and opens the lid, puts the key back in, shuts the lid and gets up, the thick dark at the far back of the gap where the shelves are empty still hides wherever the ring he gave her landed after she threw it years ago

fourteen

Aleid is still, a thud beats at her head

how does it get so long?

The sharp against arm is the edge of the board and the soft at neck is the window cloth, Aleid is leaned against the wall and there on the shelf before her the almost empty jug of mandrake root wine would rid head of the thud and give sleep if she drank the last swallow, she puts a hand to the jug handle but the wine is hard enough to get that it is best left for worse hurts than the headache of a sleepless night and she does not take it, stares, slowly lets it go and steps from the gap, puts the board back in the wall, draws the cloth from the window so there is not the weird some see in windows that are always drawn and pulls the cloth so the knot hole is hidden behind, out there dark makes the Empel's yellow house gray and a mist sits on the empty bit of markt that shows between the houses, she is here.

what about some tea the bell wont ring for wait the ear the rye did I already > tea the bell wont ring what did I do with the rye

Aleid puts a hand in pocket, finds nothing and whips from the window around, goes quickly back to the stair ladder, the ear of rye is not on one of its steps, she

bends down, the floor around is empty, she stands up, comes to the desk and there it is on the far side of the book, she sits and picks it up, pushes the book before her away, sets the ear where the book was and counts the black tongues that shoot from the stem, none fell off, she takes one between fingers where it roots on the rye ovum and pins the stem, twists and the thin tongue cracks off, she pulls the other tongues the same way, crumples the rye ear and stands, takes everything in hand, puts it all in pocket and turns from the desk, goes by the hearth.

Aleid takes the stairs down until the wood overhead above the floor there at the bottom no longer hides the weak glow around the door to Joen's room that stills her feet, this is unlikely, if it is dark Joen is at work, when it is dark he does not sleep, she puts an ear to the wall that his work room is behind to listen for sound from there and feel for the hum one would send through the wood, there is the beat of her heart but nothing of Joen or his whistle, he is not there, she comes away from the wall and goes on down toward the glow, behind the door in a bed candles in a ring do not let dark reach Joen is asleep, she stands before it, he must have been drunk, over shoulder the stairs to the ground begin in the glow

but joens asleep jans alone I tell him now hell have it done in what two sheets four sides say a side a day thursday? wednesday todays early

Aleid turns from the stairs to the dark other end of the way and softly goes forward, comes near the window at the end of the way to the door Joen locks Jan behind at night and stills before it, no one is around, she whispers jan! and gives the door a soft knock that pushes it in a little

but

The bolts are drawn, the door is locked, Aleid follows a finger along the cold metal of one of the bolts until the wall gets in her way and the bolt goes on into a bolt hole, she follows the other and it is the same, if the door moved then the wall did but walls do not move so the wall did not move and the door is where it was before she knocked, she shuts her eyes and shakes head rid of what eyes saw that did not happen

dont sleep youll see things youre tired

The dark spins, Aleid reaches for the wall, the floor bends and there is air where the wall should be, she reaches farther and the wall comes toward her, she gets a hand to it and leans, the floor settles back down beneath her feet, she pushes the wall back, stands and breathes deep, the materia medica is torn but Jan will copy the torn sheets, she is here to tell him, she whispers jan! and gives the door a heavy knock that puts a line of lighter dark in the gap the door leaves where it goes in away from the wall, the door is open, she rubs her eyes, it is still the same, the bolts are drawn but the lighter dark between the wall and the door is where the door is open, the door opens

how how does it do that how oh what that that what what is that smell something dead bad what does he have in there how can he want to pick at a thing and look at and go near a thing that smells like that what and mint aley the door the door aley the book the door

The window near Aleid is drawn, the other way back toward the stairs still has no one in it and the window there is drawn too, she shivers under the stare from the dim eyes of the night bird there on the shut work room doors across from her that Joen painted to watch the bolts the night he brought Jan here from the zinnelooshuis but painted eyes see nothing and the doors other than the knocked open one are shut, no one sees things done here

and say he does he wakes up wanders out sees the door comes over sees you and says whyre you on my side Aleid well who cares you know he did it you say why do the bolts do that joen and then its him who has to answer who cares youre here or that he knows you know he did it who cares he has to say aleid it wasnt me like hah like it was jan

Aleid pushes the door open into something that stops it, the bolts stick into the air out from the door and there are narrow strips in the inner side of the wall where wood at the height of each bolt hole has been taken out to make a path to the room for each bolt to go through

what why hide you think I care jans in his room or not no you think Id tell when I know I say a word about a thing on your side all youll dos go tell things about mine same as I would joen no you know I wouldnt what is it

Aleid stoops under the bolts, pokes her head into the room and the bed Jan pulled over out from the far corner is what keeps the door from more open, the smell is hard to breathe, the black lines down the gray windows there in the dark far wall are the iron bars Joen put over the glass but something strange on the sill of one of the windows draws a cluster of dark spots threaded along dark lines through the low gray and there off to the side the head of the bed is bare of even a pillow, the bedding is a heap along the side wall too thin for Jan to be in and half the straw mat shows, he is not here

so whats to hide

There is no one to see, Aleid gets small and slips into the room, comes around the door, two narrow strips of wood are on a pillow here at the end of the bed where Jan's feet would be if the bed had him in it and she picks one up, fits it in the wall, it leaves no seam to feel, the other strip fits the same way, the bolt holes are shut, she pushes the bolts back in out of the air

lets see

Aleid shuts the door, goes toward the narrow way left between the bed and the boards in the wall Jan put up for shelves, the smell of rot grows more and curls through the mint one but still there are no flies, the low shelf Jan uses for a desk is covered in tools and brushes scattered amid shreds of leaves, the shelf

above holds only sheets of drawing and a quick whistle of air comes from beyond the head of the bed through some seam in the outer wall Thonis Goessen will need to stop before any water leaks, she goes to the tips of toes and the top shelf is full of stacks of the glass jars that hold the bits of dead things Jan keeps, she settles to feet and on the desk beside the handle of a knife a quick gleam comes off the nail of a thing like a finger only coal black, there are four others like it and the five lay at the end of five bone white lines in the shape a hand makes, her gut twists, she turns quickly, swallows bitter gall, swallows again but none of this has ever been hidden and she shakes her head, goes on toward the window where the dark spots in the gray are early buds, the thing is a plant and another whistle comes through the wall from down low but this near the air is cold, the bed is that way for the heat and she takes a stem between fingers, bends near and the smell of mint burns, she peels a bud open and a thin oil wets her fingers, the inner hue of the bud that the dark makes gray is a lighter purple than on the monkshood drawn in the materia medica, she lets the stem go, dries her fingers on her gown and stands up

well all right why there arent flies whered he get it though whod even give it to him joen doesnt care enough and Id know if he took a cutting this big from mine but out of joen whos he even oh and kat whos he even see? marij? toon and jan goessen? oh aleid silly silly someone in the zinnelooshuis one of them grows it! a garden in the zinnelooshuis that that is a strange thought pennyroyals not something joen would hide

A large copper pot takes up the corner that the head of the bed does not, half carved bits of wood and a few jugs of paint lay there around it but that is all, across the room on the other side of the windows the bedside table is pulled out as far from the corner it belongs in as the bottom shelf that gets in the way lets it be and a gray line goes through the dark there in the narrow gap of floor the table leaves between, somewhere along the board at the bottom of the wall there is a spot that the light for the gray line comes through and Aleid goes to knees, follows the cool of the air to the wall where two boards meet in a seam made uneven by a shallow strip cut into the far edge of the near board but none of the other seams are the same way and there was nothing here like this when this was her room, it had to be made

whatre they hiding

Aleid gets fingers into the shallow strip along the seam, pulls and the near end of the far board comes out away from the wall until the little table is in the way, dark fills the opening the board left and something Joen needs hidden is in it, she lies to the floor to find it but there is no wall behind what shows through, the dark arm there is an oak branch and the gray line beneath it is the top of the stone wall, the garden, it is the garden, that is the garden and quickly she pushes the board shut

why? why? why lock jan in then let him out? why hide?

It is wrong here, Aleid stands, the way things are is not right, the smell of rot

and mint is the air, it warps the room but there is nowhere else in here to hide things, there is the door, she is quick.

something he does?

Out in the dark way the air does not rot and Aleid pulls the door behind her shut, draws the bolts to hide the other mark she made, the still sound the city makes in its sleep hangs and the glow still leaks from the edges of Joen's door, heaviness weighs on her eyelids and the stairs down are over there but Jan does not know to copy yet, she turns to the work room doors.

its here or hes down stairs up stairs Id know whyd the bolts be that way if he went through the hole

Aleid goes forward and the night bird carved into the doors watches from the top of a misshapen tree, swarms of small eyes fill crooks in the twisted branches and slowly she turns the handle of one of the doors, pushes it open and there is a thinner dark, light comes from the nook on the far side of the room beyond the hearth and no one is at any of the half painted boards that stand about, the dark way out here is empty, she steps into the work room, slowly shuts the door.

The j Aleid begins to say she cuts off before it sounds what Jan might take as a warning to hide whatever he does for Joen that Joen would keep hidden and will not do or watch but wants done enough to let Jan out alone even while he sleeps, strewn things cover the floor and even beneath the nearest of the half painted boards there is a stack of books but something like a clear path follows the long table along the cold hearth it is up against toward the nook set in the far end of the room, she watches the floor and goes forward, steps around a jug of paint and something hits her head, she swallows the groan the hurt makes and gets a hold of the hanging thing, stills it without sound, a candle in a metal holder, another hangs farther along, she goes on beside the bits of carved wood and sheets of drawing that crowd over all of the table but the middle where everything is heaped back in a ring around a sheet, she steps around a chair at the middle and words fill the sheet in stead of drawing like the others, Oirschot : Straten : Aarle : Beerze is written across the top in a large hand that is easy to read by the light from the nook here half the way there and her breathe catches, the Ten Roedeken deed should not be here but up stairs like everything that is only hers, marriage did not make den Meervenne into van Aken and Jeronimus van Aken owns nothing of the Ten Roedeken house, why would he take the deed now when he has not even been there since Goyart brought him to winter with the family again a bit before they fought, he has been unwelcome since Goyart's death years ago left her the house but nothing has happened to make him care about that now, she reaches for the sheet

wait take it hell know you were here ask about it later oh joen I was looking through the records for something of geyrtrudes earlier and I didnt see the ten roedeken deed do you know where it is that way he doesnt know

Aleid leaves the sheet and goes on, dips beneath the other candle at the end

of the table and muttered sounds come now but too low to bear meaning, the nook is behind a painted board she turns toward and there in the middle a great pelican hovers over a fire under a dark sky, she comes around

A shape wrapped in a cloak takes up a chair at the back of the nook and the yellow glow across the wall Aleid came by shifts around shadows thrown from the fingers that play at the lit end of the candle set beside whatever the hooded shape bows toward but not even the slightest bit of Joen would idly twitch the way those fingers do so the shape is Jan, she crosses to the outer wall and if he mutters words they are not in dutch but it is a book he has on the desk, his other hand is on the open sheet and slowly moves across the top, so Joen has him draw, she begins into the nook beside the rows of boards leaned against the drawn windows but the hand on the sheet holds no pen and she halts, if he does not draw he must read

how he cant anymore even if he still did though joend never let him out to do something he could himself so why? not for him to try learning how again not when he wont joen wouldnt care enough he could read locked in the room too

jan! Aleid says and the sound a throat between hands makes when the thumbs begin to choke leaves the cloaked shape, legs shoot from folds on the chair down to the ground, the hood of the cloak falls, Jan turns and the candlelight wrenches, he leaps up, the candle rolls on the desk, the chair leans to fall, she points, he does not move, stares empty fear at her, she reaches for the chair herself too late

A powerful crack tears silence from the house, Jan mews, backs away from the fallen chair until against the wall, the candle! Aleid hisses but Jan only shakes his head, mumbles no again and again, she comes around the chair, reaches across the desk, rights the candle before fire spreads

There is no sound but Jan's no, Aleid turns to the book, puts a finger to the open sheet and shuts the book on the finger, lifts the cover and the first sheet reads summa theologica II but no volume is numbered, she opens to the finger and the bit of latin non erit lex sed legis corruptio written at the top of the sheet makes it the volume on law Goyart kept in the dining room to talk over with Joen at dinners years ago that Joen said mustve been lost when she had asked him to give it back after the Eindhoven burning a few winters ago, she turns to Jan, his chin is nearly to chest but still he mumbles no and she steps toward him, hisses stop! and puts a hand over his mouth, he looks up and the hair that hangs before his face falls away from the eye like scar the bore left in his forehead, his eyes shine, he quiets, she pulls the hand away and brings the tip of a finger to her lips, taps his ear and whispers may be he didnt hear, points through the wall Jan stands against toward the door to Joen's room that glows beyond the stairs behind the wall and she listens, it is quiet, all is still, Joen did not hear and the breath she held she sighs out, she steps away but Jan's eyes follow her and he shakes his head, she stills and listens again, in the quiet now a soft scratch comes in and out that might be nothing or the wind through a tree but might also be steps in slippers, the shut of a door sounds, the scratches

come louder

Jan goes to the desk quickly, gets the book, comes and pushes it at her, “dont tell dont tell him tell him anything say its yours dont say” he begs, shudders and that is more than he has spoken since Joen brought him from the zinnelooshuis, he whispers to the floor “anything Ill anything”

doesnt joen doesnt know? later later Aleid whispers and takes the book, puts it under arm and tears well in Jan’s eyes, she whispers pick up the chair bring me the candle do something hed have you do, he nods, nods and begins about, she steps from the nook around the board, follows the long table to its middle, waits before the Ten Roedeken deed and Jan brings the candle, offers it out, the scratches are near but not yet at the door, he tries to smile and offers again, she whispers be in the garden after everythings dark tonight jan, his eyes fall, he nods, she takes a candle from the table, lights it from the one he holds and whispers go, puts it back, he moves off, she turns to the doors, one opens

Joen is in the opening and he yawns over a shoulder, bats the ball at the end of his droopy nightcap away from his face, lifts the candle he holds and leans out, peeks around the open door and begins to slowly look over the room, good morning joen if we woke you Im sorry she says when his eyes happen into her but the look goes on and nothing shifts in his face.

“sweet jan would you please light the candles” Joen says, turns and walks toward her, his eyes watch her, she steps back but still he draws near and she is no farther away, he comes to the long table and points to the chair between them to make her answer, the room is one of his and she should not be here, she nods. “I thought it was a burglary” he says and sits, rubs an eye and turns away, taps the deed, “is this a burglary aleid?”

joen Im in my house taking back something I own its mine not yours if its a burglary it isnt me its you whod know Aleid yells almost, her grip of the book hurts, she shakes in feeling, takes a slow breath and over by the doors Jan lights the last candle, her grip is no looser, she says so why dont you tell me joen is it a burglary tell me why is it here

“This?” Joen taps the deed, looks from the sheet up to her throat, the lips of his face bend into the shape lips take when a face smiles but the face is slack and the eyes are flat

Aleid says yes that

Joen stamps the floor and his head shoots toward her, he barks laughter, stares at her, she is another step back and behind Joen Jan moans, hurt breaks across his face and he stoops toward the floor, his wrist is in a hand Joen threw blindly back and Joen twists, says “we do not stare jan Ive told you before” and stares at her “would you please get to work or Ill put you back” he lets Jan go, says “brothers” and shakes his head but keeps the look at her, folds hands on the table, “where were we right” he puts a hand to cheek and opens eyes wide, squeals “whats a burglary joen?” drops the play fear and narrows his eyes, “whys it

here?" he says and looks to his fingers, "I wanted to read it." he picks at a nail "go cry to the schepenbank tell them your husband took a copy of a deed hes on down some stairs" turns the finger side to side, "may be theyll care what you think" the lips peel off his teeth, he taps his tongue, wipes the finger on thumb, slowly he says "why are you here"

I couldnt sleep and geyrtrude wrote a bit ago to ask if I still had the old den moest deed so I went and looked through the records

"I do it too" Joen nods "much better than sheep" he scoops a hand through the air to egg her back on

Aleid points to the sheet and says it wasnt there

"no!"

I thought it might be here

Joen claps "and here it was aleid what luck!"

my thought joen what luck so why am I here you were up stairs thats why so why were you there why take it whyd you need to read it

"Oh aleid dont think too much lets say the same as you I couldnt sleep" Joen laughs, stares at her but points behind his back, over her shoulder in the corner across from the nook near the drawn windows Jan stands before an almost empty board and Joen says "and hes here to help you find it?" Jan quickly turns around, looks to her and opens his mouth, looks away and shuts it, turns his back.

he asked me would I let him out he had work to do I said if hed help Aleid says and shrugs

Joen turns from her to the table, plays at a corner of the deed "he couldnt sleep either?"

how would I know

"he heard you"

Aleid shrugs

Joen knits fingers, "so nobody but me could sleep how strange" he says, brings fingers to lips in a steeple and his hands leave the table, Aleid snatches the deed, puts it in the book beside the hard cover and starts around him for the door but something wraps her shin above the other ankle, pulls at her next step and holds it in mid air, she reels, the foot lands, the bind is tight and hurts, it is his hand, he is leaned out from the chair, the grip tightens and he says sweetly "would you please put the deed back up stairs dear?"

Aleid clenches, throat is narrow, Joen's eyes are soft and the nails of his fingers dig into shin, she grinds words she does not say between teeth.

“would you please be a dear and put the deed back up stairs?” Joen says and wet comes up beneath one of the nails

let go

Joen leans head to a side and smiles, says “aleid.” and the wet trickles down shin, Aleid steps toward him

let go

“dear would you please bring” Joen says but Aleid brings a hand to his neck and lightly folds the thumb over while his eyes grow, she smiles and leans her head to a side, he looks away and breathes out, his grip loosens, softly he says “what I want from you Ill take dont think I care aleid” to the floor, looks back up at her and lets go.

mm Aleid says and turns, goes, steps through the door, turns and shifts the book to the crook of the other arm, takes the door handle and says thank you for the help jan

“oh aleid I wanted to ask” says Joen before there is time for her to shut the door, “since youre here you know” he offers a palm to the room “lets make a gift to the geefhuis nows the perfect time heer heezackers told me the storesre so low right now theyll be turning away hungry mouths soon it doesnt even need to be more than a couple mud either five or sixd be fine aleid oh but then it is only rye though isnt it and youre here too well lets say seven since youre here”

since Im here Aleid says and the words come out chewed, too much of the house might burn if one of Joen’s candles were to tip and roll under the bed while he slept, there are better ways, Joen and Jan watch her, she shows teeth the way Joen does and says oh Im so glad you asked joen its good I was here wasnt it but seven mud? we better listen to heer heezacker hed only ask for a couple if he asked everyone and everyonell give some and they wont have that much room well listen to heezacker and give two

“Oh aleid come now!” Joen says and stands up, comes toward her “how can you be so tight you work so hard to keep each and every single belly in the city full!” a black pit opens in her gut and swallows heat “you wouldnt want”

dont play joen you wouldnt

“wouldnt want empty bellies? heavens no!” Joen says and stands before her in the open door “think of it aleid” he stoops and pushes belly out, “empty because of you?” he pouts and gives the round belly a slap, this is fun for him, he shakes his head, pulls his belly in and stands back up “oh aleid no, I wouldnt want that” he says and in the candlelight his eyes are yellow, he smiles, “what I want is for you to say seven”

“how wonderful aleid how wonderful!” Joen says and steps forward, gets too near and Aleid starts back but he reaches, puts a hand to the arm she has around the book and takes her other hand in his, there is nowhere to go, he has her, he

stares at her and his eyes glitter, he smiles, strokes her arm and her hair rises, "Ill have heer heezacker ready it" he says and smiles, brings her hand to lips and she goes stiff, he kisses the bare ring finger where his wedding ring should be and her blood pounds, she rips hand back "and you my dear I will see at the service." he says and turns, goes into the work room, she is ways to harm, wrath, hand is a fist, she grinds teeth and starts forward to break things

The door shuts and Aleid steps back so her nose is not hit, beats a fist on the door, laughter comes from the other side, she leans against a wall and shuts her eyes, the scratches of steps move away, go quiet.

Aleid scrubs her hand on her gown and goes to the stairs, whispers aleid be a dear put the deed up stairs hell take it, clenches the book to chest and goes down.

Aleid steps from the last stair to the floor and a toe of hers feels a shoe among the scatter in the corner here to the side of the main door, out is somewhere to go but the spot to hide the deed in is not there and it is within the house somewhere beneath the up stairs, she is still, does not have where to go.

where cant he get

Aleid stands straight and looks, turns and it is dim but there is an opening across the way where the dinner room doors are not shut, she goes through, reaches across the table past the seat at the foot she now has and sets the book down by the seat beside it that was hers before, goes back and shuts the doors, she comes around the end of the table to the other side and pulls out the chair to her old seat, sits to wait for thought.

where cant he get

The room is dark and empty, this is not a dinner and Postelluna does not whisper where cant he get into the fingers she would pick raw from her seat at the foot, the family is gone and the years when they were not are far, Aleid taps the velvet arm of Geyrtrude's chair and says why tiel ger why not here, the half sad look her sister would smile at her in answer floats in the dark, her finger draws back from the chair arm and she turns away.

how are they all gone ger

It is still, time is gone, Aleid falls in the black yawn of the hearth across the table on the other side of the room until the wood overhead sounds under the weight of footsteps in the work room, above the hearth the swan feathers that ring the van Arkel coat of arms shed a dim glow on the gold m of the shield and down into its black key hole, finger wanders a crack in the leather cover of the book.

may be if rutger aleid no if rutger joen wouldnt be here but rutger isnt and its not what if its where cant joen get where wouldnt he look aley and thats not

here. tea.

Aleid stood and she pushes the chair in, lifts the cover from the book and the deed is still before the title sheet, she shuts the cover and takes the book up, goes along the side of the table away from the foot, pushes open the kitchen door.

A web of dim light flows on the glass face of the dish cupboard in the far corner and in the room Aleid shuts the door, follows the wall the dinner room is behind toward its other corner, sets the book where there is an empty spot on the cutting table that takes up the middle of the room. Near the side wall she opens the low hatch to the cooking fire and comes down low, the fire is old, she blows over the coals and the gray ash shivers, the coals wake, she feeds in a log from the stack in the corner, shuts the hatch.

Aleid steps around the table toward the window that the dish cupboard is beside and where her shadow is it cuts out the light the fire throws on the glass, down here the dark oak branch out there is a thicker arm and the top of the garden wall meets a softer gray night sky, she takes an empty jug from among the others on the floor beneath the sill, goes on toward the water urn and above there in the window the blue boards of the Ghijssele's house bend in the glass without color, she takes the stone lid of the urn by the rope handle and drags the heavy thing to the top of the barrel at the side, reaches the jug through the opening but there is no push from water and nothing is there, she reaches further but gets nothing until she has shoulder to the rim of the urn and the jug flat to the bottom, the water is low, her hand is dry, the jug is not even half full and she sets it on the barrel, bends and puts a hand to the floor but the wood around the urn is dry, there is no leak

how there was a tun for the stems and caps yesterday no Saturdays yesterday
aley the boil was Friday yesterday Marij brought water up for them for the week
she must've forgotten to fill it aley aley aley Marij!

Aleid quickly stands up

have Marij hide it he'd never think of there he'd never think to look he'd never
think I would

Aleid drags the lid back over the urn, leaves the jug and goes for the book.

At the bottom of the house Aleid looks back up through the thick dark toward the gray behind the door shut at the top of the narrow stairs, here beneath the ground the earth around the walls keeps out all light and makes the flow of the rivers from a low sound into a thing to feel. She steps into the way that goes along beside the stairs and moves the book to the crook of her other arm, reaches for the far wall to follow through the dark and gets fingers to the wood, goes down the way, the wall cuts back in at the door to Geyrtrude's room that Geyrtrude has not been through since years ago when she came for awhile after

the first husband died while Paulus was still little and Aleid goes on, the beam of wood between Geytrude's room and Goyart's comes out before the wall cuts back at his door but it is not his anymore now that it is Marij's, she puts an ear to the wood

wynandus thats his name

marij are you awake? Aleid whispers, the girl does not answer and Aleid in stead of a knock pushes the door open far enough to fit through, slips into the room, leans against the door that softly shuts. There is nothing at all and it is a deep black but from the far corner where the bed is there comes an uneven breath, there is a rustle and the heavy sound of wood that gets hit, quickly she whispers marij it isnt its me its only aleid

"aleid?" Marij says with a slow tongue "oh mevrouw, mevrouw what are you oh no oh no did I is it late?" Aleid shakes her head in the dark but before there is time to speak Marij says "a candle a candle let me light a candle" and there is another rustle.

softer marij its too loud speak softly. its early it isnt late.

"early? then I didnt over oh" says Marij and from the bed there comes a slap, she whispers "sorry sorry mevrouw Im sorry its very very soft well be" taps play along wood and Marij whispers "there" a strike to flint scratches and throws a spark that does not catch, a dark comes back that falsely gleams, there is another scratch and light fills the room.

Aleid takes a seat on the stool by the foot of the bed, sets the book on the little table beside the door that Goyart wrote on.

In the bed Marij yawns and rubs an eye, pushes away to sit back against the wall, draws legs in to chest and pulls the blanket along, tucks a lock of hair behind her ear and says "good morning mevrouw"

it isnt morning yet

"oh." says Marij, she looks away, fingers come to her lips "then"

does joen ever Aleid says but Marij's head whips back and something stops Aleid's throat, the girl's eyes are very wide, there is the floor, Aleid swallows, slowly says marij when hes here what else does he do? and beside the girl the shadows on the wall that the bed is against twitch in the candlelight.

"mevrouw? what? what do you mean? he, mevrouw he doesnt mevrouw mevrouw dont" says Marij and the words break, her mouth shuts, opens, shuts again

marij no no I dont care about that dont cry it isnt that Im not here to no marij dont cry marij Im not angry with you Im not asking about that Im only asking to see if he wouldnt look for oh marij dont cry dont cry marij dont cry Aleid says but Marij sobs and Aleid goes to her to be near, pulls the blanket up and around the girl's shoulders, sits on the edge of the bed and Marij's head falls on the arms across her knees, Aleid pulls the girl to her and holds tight

“mevrouw I didnt I I didnt I didnt want” Marij sobs into her knees, her body shakes and she leans into Aleid “I didnt mevrouw I didnt I didnt want him to”

all right marij all right all right its all right its all right to cry marij its all right its all right marij I wont tell anyone its all right Aleid says and the girl peeks up from the arms that are across her knees, Aleid nods down, says no one marij not anybody all right?

“mevrouw I didnt mevrouw I swear I didnt want for this to happen I swear I dont I swear” says Marij and she sobs, the girl’s head drops down on her arms again.

Aleid holds Marij and Marij sobs, time goes and it is this way, without daylight down here Aleid has nothing to tell her how much time there is before she needs to either leave or let the girl’s fit make her late but it should be early still and she holds the girl tight, time goes and it is the same, she does not leave, time goes, she shifts back and pulls away to leave but the sobs that shake the girl begin to slow, dry

“mevrouw its evil Im”

Aleid raps the nail of a finger to Marij’s head and says oh quiet it isnt true dont say it, she pulls the girl to her and says bad? evil? look at me marij look? see me? evil? no you are not all right did you do this no it isnt you whos wrong marij its him he is all right

“mevrouw I I dont I, its, its still, I still, mevrouw I dont know”

I know marij but marij I do believe me marij I know he used to Aleid says until she does not, turns away toward the door and shivers, shrinks back, lets Marij’s hand go but the girl takes the hold.

“mevrouw?”

Marij presses her hand, lets go.

“Im sorry mevrouw”

Aleid points to the book on the writing table and says marij I dont want joen to find that

Marij sits up and looks past the end of the bed, looks back.

would he ever look here?

“he, no. he doesnt” Marij says and wipes her eyes

could you hide it for awhile?

Marij hops to the floor, takes the book from the table and gives a sly look back, says “but where oh where?” but leaves no time for an answer and goes to the wall of shelves across from the bed, drops to knees and pulls a blanket from the middle of a stack on the bottom shelf, hides the book in its folds

he wont find it?

Marij speaks laughter softly, says “anywhere but in bed hell never know” and puts the blanket where she took it from, smiles back, the stack is like it was, she turns around on knees, the look on her face falls, she puts a hand to the floor, comes near “mevrouw what happened”

nothing Aleid says and she stands, goes toward the door

“your leg mevrouw theres blood let me”

its nothing Aleid hisses over shoulder and steps from the room into the way, Marij follows

“let me clean it”

marij its nothing not now

Marij gets near, bends down

not now Aleid says and she pulls Marij upright

“but mevrouw”

marij so loud.

“but”

marij later all right for now lets get a bit of sleep Aleid says and turns the girl around, softly pushes her back into the room.

“but”

later marij right now I need to not be here well talk later all right?

Slowly Marij nods

thank you for the book marij

The door shuts and there is only dark, Marij’s steps move away, Aleid reaches for the wood to follow back down the way but does not leave.

and what if she gets no if she doesnt want to keep it she wouldnt need me shed know someone else what if she doesnt? or she does and asks and they even help even then whoever that is now they know and they tell about it ever even once and it spreads thats all its done and worse for her than anything else no aleid you already know you have to aleid sixteen aley a child

Aleid takes the handle of the door but lets it go, softly knocks. Marij’s steps come back, the door opens and Marij holds the candle, “mevrouw?”

marij if Aleid says, the rings in the wood floor draw lines down the way, she puts hand to navel, the girl’s loose night gown hides her belly, marij if you need help Ill I could I know someone who Aleid whispers, the light from the candle reaches the stairs, Aleid whispers marij Ill help tell me, quickly leaves.

Aleid goes from the dark house out into the garden behind and she pulls the door shut, gray mist dims the sky and clings to the steps she takes down to the garden paths, her feet sink in thick moss at the bottom and she sits on the last step. Next to house the oak twists up and the leaves of the tree scatter a black full of holes that gray sky fills, in the corner to the side of the tree the lean to for the garden things sits against the house and the flat roof of it is not far beneath the sill of Jan's window

he climbs he climbs down then he climbs back > he climbs down then climbs back

In the dim light the bars down the glass are gray lines and the pennyroyal on the other side of the window is hidden, toward the gate away from the house the bear's foot stands too high for any plant behind to show other than the nearer willow. It is cold where the backs of legs meet the step, she pulls the length of the gown in so the hem comes above shin and the dry blood there makes a line that goes from a bit above ankle down to the top of foot, dew shimmers in the moss at her feet and she scrapes the line off until there is only the cut, she picks flakes from the nail of the finger.

Time is slow, the rivers cradle sound away, mold curls through the green smell that floats from the bed of hyacinths here by the garden path, a few of the blooms droop on stems but more sprinkle the dirt, it is so wet and hot this year that little thrives but the rye, Aleid puts a hand in pocket, finds the black tongues beside the ear and the garden key, turns over shoulder and the gray above the garden wall lightens near the spot where the hidden sun will soon rise so walk slow then itll be up

Aleid stands, follows the garden path away from the house and fallen oak leaves crackle, past the bear's foot yellow bursts from the sint Jan's wort and the sweetness of the daphne across the path is overtaken by the sharp mint of the pennyroyal in the next bed, she comes out from beneath the reach of the oak and the empty feel of air swells into the open gray above, there is quiet, she stands before the bed of pennyroyals and reaches, takes the back of a finger and carefully pushes the outer stems away from the ones at middle she never cuts, comes down to the plant and the smell of mint fills her eyes but there are no stumps, slowly she lets the stems she pushed away go back, she pulls her hand and comes upright, wipes the finger dry

so whered he get it

Aleid goes on along the path and the wind blows a murmur from the far willow on the other side of the garden across the well here at the middle into the near one on this side that floats above ground on a white bark stripped trunk, after the wet heat of the last weeks ashen blooms cover the belladonna before her as if now were late summer not early and beyond the well she turns away down the path toward the gate, purple buds spot the nightshade that climbs along

the back wall, she pulls vines from the gate handle, opens the wood gate and the low sound of the waterway gets the hum of its own echo, the air is cool on the little bridge and though the top windows of den Salvatoer are not drawn like the Ghijssele's or the Empel's everything in her loft is far enough from the glass that all there is to see from the ground is roof, she shuts the gate, here beyond the wall the sun is a dim glow in the low clouds

well wont be early now but adi now will she oh no oh yes before the bell goes even shell be there chewing fingers staring when I show up its her daughter aleid what should she do dont be so hard

Aleid reaches into pocket and feels the number of black tongues, takes the key she got and locks the garden away, drops the key in pocket. Mist floats on the still water and she crosses the bridge, steps through the gap between the low brick hedges that wall this side of the waterway and she breathes in

not a whiff even they come in much laterll need to have marij buy tea

The linden grove Aleid walks through has yet to get even a bloom and the high whine of metal to whetstone comes from somewhere behind the low back house the Barbiers live in that the path comes by, thin smoke rises from the chimney into the gray, Iken is in the open kitchen window, she wipes her forehead and looks up, sees Aleid and smiles, waves a hand white with flour and leans her head to a side to ask, Aleid shakes hers no but smiles back, Iken nods, turns again to the dough she rolls and Aleid walks on.

At the edge of the house Aleid peeks out around the side and down by the far end of the wall Everit bends over a scythe but his back is turned to her, she goes on along the path and watches over shoulder but he does not turn her way, trees come between, the rye field before her sways. She goes through the gate, turns down the lane and the stalks beside her come above shoulder, the crop is near ripe and the black tongues grew thick in the gold ears this year but Everit will mow the field next week or in at most two

tonight lets come tonight ask iken if ikenll keep everit busy again then before jan tonight we come back and get enough ikenll help > ask iken if ikenll keep everit busy again then we can come back before jan tonight and get enough ikenll help

Aleid is near the end of the field and pulls the crumpled rye ear from pocket, reaches over the wood hedge that follows the edge of the field beside the lane, lets the rye fall, the field ends and the marshland stretches off through the low mist into the gray shape of the city wall.

The matins bells begin to ring out from over behind the grove but the buildings the lane goes between to reach Tolbrugstraat are not far and Aleid goes no more quickly, back over shoulder the sun is the same glow of low clouds above the field, she steps around a puddle, there where the lane meets street a bright gown that already went by goes by again but now the other way, the woman turns toward Aleid, turns around, goes back the way she came

adi adi adi

Aleid comes between the buildings and before her a man leads a mule away toward markt down the street, she steps from the lane and turns the way the gown last went to Adriana who is steps away, there is no one behind her who is near enough to see and Aleid turns to the other way that is the same, now is the time, she puts hand in pocket, says oh! adriana! and gathers the black tongues in a hollow fist, reaches to clasp Adriana's hands

"good morning aleidis" Adriana says but leaves her hands and comes near, the rose water she wears covers the animal smell from the mule and she puts arms around Aleid, Aleid now does the same and Adriana holds tightly, mumbles "I didnt wait aley I know Im sorry"

its all right but adi now Aleid whispers, steps back, says adriana good morning! and takes Adriana's hand, turns the palm of it up and sets her loose fist on top, puts Adriana's other over the fist she opens, smiles, brings her hands back

"thank"

thank goodness it isnt sunny I know adriana I know the weather this year if it isnt hot its rainy back and forth thats all it does and these clouds? rain dont you know it says Aleid and Adriana looks around at herself but her gown has no pockets, Aleid taps Adriana's shoulder and says well better that than hot, smiles and tugs the neck of her own gown, Adriana's mouth opens, shuts, she brings the hand Aleid turned upward to her own neck

lets! Aleid says and takes Adriana by the arm, brings her around and leads the way up the street

"how do you take"

adriana stop Aleid hisses, says I need you to wait I need you to trust me, farther up the street two in brown robes walk toward them and the sound of hoofs comes nearer from behind, they walk on.

A horse comes by, the cart it draws comes behind, dust follows the cart toward the wall.

The monks slow and step aside to let them by, "mevrouw, vrouw van aken" says the old one and "vrouwen" the other says, both say "good morning" and bow heads, the older's name is lost but he is one of the ones from sint anthonis's who once or twice came by den Salvatoer years ago to care for the wound to skull Jan got before he left the zinnelooshuis, she smiles and nods, goes by.

No one comes down the street before it ends at the wall, those behind are far away, Aleid asks how far along is she?

Adriana's hand plays at neck and beyond her here past the buildings that line the street the field Everit works way out there in the green marshland is more white than gold

adriana Aleid says

Adriana turns slowly

lisken adi Aleid says and the end of the street is near, she turns to follow the wall and leads Adriana along, says adi how far along is lisken?

“she didnt even tell me aley”

adi Aleid says and she finds Adriana’s hand, presses, down beyond the bank gleams shift over the flow of water that goes beside the path, a shaft of light comes through the clouds now.

“she didnt even tell me aleid”

adi

“her mother”

adi shes afraid Aleid says and Adriana stills, Aleid gets held back, Adriana’s eyes are down.

adi says Aleid and she steps nearer to Adriana, says adi shes afraid it wasnt to hurt you and the grip Adriana has of her hand tightens

Adriana looks up and her eyes are hard, “youre her?”

wouldnt

“youre her?”

I

“No.” Adriana says, starts forward and lets the grip go, “you dont know aleid.”

Aleid lingers, softly says but I do and whispers and adi I couldnt tell her either no one knew, begins to follow, beside Adriana she says she should have told you adi Im sorry

Something moves farther along down on the bank, someone

“liskens three months” Adriana says, she shakes her head “I shouldntve gotten angry aley Im sorry.”

A groan of hurt comes from the bank where a bundle of rags stands, bends back, stabs a wrapped arm up and a coal black thing pokes from the sleeve, head droops behind shoulders, the noise grows to a howl and the hood of the cloak falls from a bearded face, the man screams, crumples and goes silent, the man drags to knees, crawls to the edge of the bank and drives the arm into the water

three monthsss still early she wont need as much Aleid says, goes around behind Adriana over to the edge of the path and nearer to the bank the man hobbles up, says give her three fourths what I gave you have her take it with food

Adriana shakes her head, mumbles something the man yells over and he falls forward but gets a hand to the ground beneath, stumbles up to the path

adi?

“she doesnt eat” Adriana mumbles, the man staggers toward them and Adriana nods over to the side of the path he is not on

adi then she shouldnt have more than

“aleid” Adriana says and she takes her arm

adi listen dont give her any more than half or says Aleid sharply until Adriana begins to pull her away, Aleid shakes Adriana off and goes on, Adriana stills

The man stumbles forward but catches self enough to slow the fall and there is a smell of rot, he sinks to knees before Aleid, his eyes waver slowly around, he shudders, begs “help” and raises an arm, pulls the ragged sleeve from a coal black hand, “help” he sobs

let me look Aleid says and bends near, the man wrenches forward and throws the other hand for her wrist but she steps out of reach, he falls across the ground

“aleid” Adriana calls

The man pushes up to an arm and looks at Aleid but now his eyes are sharp, he slowly reaches out the hand that rots, says “woman” in a flat way that leaves the meaning of the word out of the deep sound, points at her and says the same strange way “woman there is a fire” his face twists, he sits upright and chokes on laughter.

“aleid” Adriana says

The man sags, his eyes waver, “it wont go out” he mumbles and lets the black hand fall, Adriana gets her by the arm and pulls

go to sint anthoniss

“cut it off” he sobs

sint anthoniss Aleid says softly and Adriana pulls her along, Aleid comes by and says theyll help, he claws the air, Aleid goes on.