From the Personal Papers of Adriaan Kuypers

On the day Aletta Pieters was hanged, I came to recognize the tenacity of superstition, even in an enlightened age. And on the day after Aletta Pieters was hanged, in the St Nicholas flood of 1717, I gave away the only things that mattered to me.

The first time I saw her, she was standing in the pillory of the narrow square in Delfzijl, flinging out curses in a raw voice and spitting at the village boys who were taunting her. None of the matrons glaring at her chastised the boys for their insults. Between two ivory fists, the girl's long hair blew wildly, fine as spun silk the color of nothing, of wind, so light it was, making her seem a creature of exotic plumage caught in a snare. Her eyes, unshielded by any visible eyebrows, had a reckless look. A sly, superior spark leapt from them and fell on me, a stranger shouldering a knapsack and a strapful of books. Her hands relaxed and she teased me with a wanton smile that puckered a small x-shaped scar on her cheek and pushed out her lips across the space between us. I suppose I flushed, for the mark had been laid with precision across the pure beauty of her

cheek. The rest of her, hidden by the pillory planks, I could only imagine.

"What did you do against the good people of Delfzijl that you deserve the stocks?" I asked.

"Wouldn't you like to know, now."

The boys hooted a challenge.

"There's more to life than what's in books, Student," she cried. "Come a mite closer and I'll tell ye."

Still with the scholar's close-cropped haircut, I had just fled, disenchanted, from university in Groningen.

"You'd best avert your eyes, lad, if you want it to go well with ye in this town," commanded a weighty matron. "Pack of baggage, she is."

Such virulence did not rest well in this quiet northern village on the Eems Estuary where I had, that day, come to live with my aunt, but the peculiarity of the girl's scar and her wild, colorless hair in brilliant disorder beguiled me. I stepped up to her. "No spitting," I warned.

"Closer now, don't be afraid. I'll whisper it."

When I bent to put my ear to her face, her hair blew against my cheek like the tingling of fine fresh mist, and she stretched through the pillory hole toward me and licked my ear. "Let that be an omen to ye," she cried.

The boys hooted again, and although I muttered, "Shameless wench," I conceded to myself that my callowness deserved the trick.

The next day, I found her crying on the floor of my aunt's countryhouse in a hump of gray skirt, all the defiance

drained out of her. She looked up at a small painting of a young girl about her own age sitting at a window. The flesh of Aletta Pieters's delicate throat had been scraped raw. I crouched beside her. "Is this the same fiery maid as was in the pillory yesterday?" I asked.

She ran sobbing out of the room.

"What's she doing here?" I asked my aunt.

"A year ago the minister found her on the dike road yelling curses, brought her to us filthy and raving, and said, 'The Lord setteth the solitary in families.' He insulted us into taking her. 'Do something decent for God's poor creatures for a change, for the sake of your souls,' he said. So we have to keep her as our wash girl until she's eighteen."

I did not love Aunt Rika, on account of her pretension, but I felt the delicacy of her position, wed as she was, out of love I regret to say, to a slaver, that is, an investor in ships doing Westindische trade, the Middle Passage of which everyone knew but no one acknowledged was in bodies and souls, but passion and prudence are rare sleepmates. Even so, Rika keenly wanted respectability. If she couldn't get it in the sight of God, she'd have to settle for its sham substitute in the sight of man, so while Uncle Hubert attended investors' meetings in Amsterdam, Rika spent well, and gave to the organ society and the orphanage in Groningen. She had filled her townhouse in Groningen with carved furniture and Oriental urns and paintings, and now she was starting on her countryhouse—going to auctions in Amsterdam and hiring an

Amsterdammer to paint her portrait with Uncle Hubert.

When Aletta remarked that the face of Rika in the painting was beginning to look like the ghost of the witch of Ameland Island, Rika got offended and made her sleep in the kitchen and scour the bottoms of all her cooking pans until she could see the "x" on her own face in them. In retaliation, Aletta convinced them by shaking their bed curtains at night that their house was haunted by the souls of dead Africans. One night before I arrived she walked in the fog outside their window with a sheet over her head moaning strange words and clanking pots like a ghost dragging his chains. Uncle Hubert became so terrified he fell out of bed and cracked his skull on the bed steps.

But that wasn't why she was hanged. For scaring him, she only got three days in jail and that one afternoon in the pillory. Before that, she got a beating, two weeks in jail and her cheek slit when a farmer's sluice broke and flooded his field after she murmured something incoherent while passing him in the market square. "I was only playing witches," she'd confessed to Rika. "I meant him no harm." She was pardoned because she was so young, fifteen then, though some townswomen, Aunt Rika said, wished for their sons' sakes that the extremity of the law had been brought down on her then and there.

In truth, she was hanged for smothering our baby girl.

I had come to the village of Delfzijl to study windmill design with the master millwright of the northland. I had

worn myself out squeezing some personal meaning out of Descartes, Spinoza and Erasmus and wanted instead to experience in action Descartes's principle that science could master Nature for the benefit of mankind. I wanted the making of practical things—devices to tell time, to pump faster, to see farther—not the making of arguments and treatises. And, I wanted intercourse with flesh and blood, not ink and words.

So the next time I saw Aletta crying in front of the painting, I sat beside her and studied it, trying to understand how something so beautiful could grieve her so. The tenderness of expression on the girl's face showed it was painted with intimacy and love—qualities missing, I supposed, in Aletta Pieters's life. In the painting, the girl's mouth was slightly open, glistening at the corner, as if she'd just had a thought that intrigued her, an effect that made her astoundingly real. To me, she was the embodiment of Descartes's principle, "I think, therefore I am." She was everything Aletta wasn't—peaceful, refined, and contemplative.

When Aletta finally calmed, I asked her what had made her cry.

"Papa said she had eyes like that, like pale blue moons, and hair like hers, that golden brown color, only in braids. She died when I was born."

"Why don't you braid yours? It might make you feel like her."

"I've tried a hundred times. It just slips out. Nothing

holds. It's a curse, I think." The failure made her eyes flood again.

"You have beautiful hair," I said. "Just as it is."

"People think it's false. False hair means bandits will attack soon, and so people hate me."

I turned to hide my smile. "You don't know that for a fact."

She shrugged. The rawness on the curve of her throat had not healed yet. It would be a pity if it scarred, but few there are who go through life unmarked.

"Where is your father?"

"He went to sea on a slaver and never came home."

"Who raised you?"

"Grandfather. My grandmother died young. Same as all the mothers before her. A mean neighbor put a curse on my Great-great-grandmother Elsa that no girl in her family would ever live long. She said Elsa put *pishogue* on her butter churn and so they tied Elsa's thumbs to her toes and dragged her through the canal and she drowned, so she was innocent. A stork even flew over the canal to prove it."

"There's no such thing as witches or curses, Aletta. You have no proof."

"Oh, there's witches, all right. Grandfather heard them whispering about my mother the night before I was born."

She looked up to the painting imploringly. "You think somewhere girls actually live like that—just sitting so peaceful like?"

Neither a yes nor a no would make her less forlorn.

There were no words I could give her to diminish the distance between her and the young woman in the painting.

On Sunday afternoons when I was free from the millwright's instruction, I went walking. I loved the sweep of the flat, domesticated northland that presented few obstacles to wind. Here, most of the time, wind helped man to manage the land scientifically—Descartes in action. I was always bothered, though, that my countrymen depended so completely on its constancy. What would happen if they needed to drain on windless days? There were enormities still to learn in this world.

One Sunday I walked across the peat bog between the town and the coast near where the diggers lived in mean little rows of thatched cottages built of peat blocks. Year after year they dug their slabs of black peat for fuel, and sold their own land, brick by brick, right out from under themselves. Some diggers replaced the overlying clay, mixed it with sand hauled from a beach and refuse from a town to make a soil suitable to grow buckwheat. But it was hard work and took a long time, so others just allowed the pits they had dug to fill with water, leaving straight raised pathways between them. It seemed to me that this practice was only making the land more habitable for frogs, not men. Water was seeping and sucking everywhere. Soon the peat colony would be indistinguishable from the tidal marshes along the great estuary.

I stopped to watch coots poking their beaks into the mud, a teal preening, marsh hens building their nests in the

marram grass, and became conscious of a bird call different from the throaty grunt of the coots. It was more like the honk of a wild goose. Across a large pond Aletta had crouched behind some osiers, her skirts hiked up to avoid the mud, baring her legs to her thighs. She wore no knit black stockings like other women, so her milky skin against the mud gave me a pleasurable shock. The sky was too gray to give back an inverted figure in the pond water, which I thought a shame. With her hands cupped at her mouth, she made the bird call again, urgent and wild and yearning. My soul stirred with the stirrings of her hair. I meant to walk on and enjoy my solitude, but an inner movement seized me and I circled the pond and came up behind her.

"What are you doing?" I asked.

"Get down," she whispered, and yanked my arm. "I saw a stork here the other day, and I want to see if he'll come again. They bring good luck, you know. If you can get one to eat out of your hand, you'll never go hungry."

I snickered.

"Don't laugh at something you don't know about, Student. If one nests on your roof, you'll get rich. I know. I grew up on Ameland Island."

My amusement at the simple certainties of her universe inflamed the little "x" on her cheek. She let down her skirts, tugged her sea-colored shawl around her, her proud breast rising and falling in pique, and walked off a ways, her pretty pout pushing out her lips. "You've ruined it now, you noisy boy."

"Then come with me for a walk."

She didn't move so I went on by myself, disappointed. Soon I saw a white bird wading on long black legs. "Aletta," I called. "Here's a stork."

She came crashing through the marsh grass splashing us both with muddy water. "Oh, that's only an old spoonbill. No black wing feathers. No red legs." She followed me now along the thread of pathway near the diggers' colony.

The deckhouse of a sailing barge protruded above the dike of the Damsterdiep on its way to deliver peat to Groningen. "What's going to happen when they dig up so much peat that their own houses sink into the bog?" I asked.

"Move somewhere else."

"You don't get the point. There has to be a better way."

"Meantime, they've got to live." She pulled out some osiers right in front of someone's cottage and used them to whisk the air free of insects as we walked. She was close enough now that I smelled her blown hair salted with sea wrack.

We followed the Damsterdiep under the elms. She fascinated me with dark stories her grandfather told her, about shipwrecks and sailors and women cursed to sail with them forever, never putting foot on land, but tied to bowsprits when the ships came into ports. Her great-great-grandfather, she claimed, was the lighthouseman, Varick, of the Ameland light across the Waddenzee. He got rich, she said, by sending out false signals so trading ships would

run aground in the shallows and he'd collect their goods in a skiff or wade out at low tide and pick them up. She told it without shame, and with what I took to be an admiration for his cleverness. She told how sailors' wives made a healing froth by soaping the skull of a person who died violently, mixing it with two spoonsful of human blood, a little lard, linseed oil and some Java cinnamon. She showed me a nutshell she wore on a string filled with spiders' heads to ward off fevers. I saw only the smooth skin on which the nutshell rested. When she cautioned me to place my shoes upside down at night like she did to frighten away witches, I laughed, which made her eyes narrow and reveal a darker spirit. Although it all struck me as quaint and engaging, I could see that the poor girl was haunted by a hundred demons.

At the drawbridge over the Damsterdiep I stopped to study the mechanism. Bridges, windmills, locks and dikes had fascinated me since boyhood, and I marveled out loud how they all worked together in a system of integrated parts.

"It doesn't matter how they work," she said. "When the waterwolf wants to come up over those dikes, he's going to, and no pile of mud and seaweed is going to stop him."

I was undaunted. We crossed the Damsterdiep, and at the Farmsum mill, with the miller's permission, I showed her how drainage mills worked. In the province of Groningen they were mostly screw mills, lifting water on

an enormous, sheathed Archimedean screw placed at an angle below water level in a deep ditch. She had never been inside a windmill before and so she stood astonished and kept her arms crossed over her chest, afraid to touch anything. When she grasped how the movement of the sails turned each connected part of the mechanism, it gave me a surprising, indescribable happiness.

In explaining it, I realized that the wind shaft wheel had sixty-eight teeth, and the connecting gear post had thirty-four staves at the top wallower as well as at the bottom crown wheel, and the connecting gear at the head of the Archimedean screw had thirty-four also. That meant that for every turn of the sails, the screw turned twice. If its head was made to have only seventeen staves, I reasoned, wouldn't that mean that the ratio would be one turn to four, and the land could be drained twice as fast? Or with half the windpower? And if the spiral blade on the screw could be wider, that would increase the uptake of water on each turn.

"Not so fast," the miller said. "You've got to consider what wind power 'twould take to lift more water."

We talked at length while Aletta went off following a duck and her ducklings in the drainage ditch. As a result we got caught in the rain coming home. Rain bubbled up in puddles on the bricks of the square, and where the bubbles broke, Aletta would not step across them even though she wore *klompen*. It would profane the breath of God to be released up her skirts, she said, her eyes widening in a gravity I found enchanting.

When we came home together, wet to the skin, Rika took me aside. "You'd best mind yourself with that girl, Adriaan. Not a speck of sense. She'd walk over one night's ice on a dare. You get mixed up with her and you'll be finding another aunt to house you. If Hubert were here, he'd say the same."

Church towers, windmill caps, dike roads all afforded views of the flat expanse around Delfzijl. Nothing was hidden, and that made everybody's business everybody else's, which was, I realized, just the way they liked it. Rika even kept her curtains open as a display of virtue. The only place Aletta and I could be together unseen was just under the rafters in the church tower, a circumstance that propelled us into an earlier intimacy than what we would have known had we been permitted to walk together Sunday afternoons under the wide sky. Using the church as a refuge was her idea. Since the bell was rung from below, we wouldn't be discovered, and the church was never locked, she said. I liked her contempt for conventional piety, yet she had a personal code as rigid as any Calvinist's.

Elevation in a land so flat was a heady feeling, one that nudged aside caution and gravity and worship. Above the narrow strip of the village we felt like stowaways on a ship bound for some pleasure isle that the good people of Delfzijl feared even dreaming about lest the mere thought would sweep them into hell. With her I was in another world, drawn into her being. It became impossible to read in the evenings. The sound of her girlish voice moved me

now as surely as the silent voices of sages had months earlier, and her smell of blacksoap and sweat sent me into tremors of excitement.

Under the holy rafters she met my shy, formal advances step for step, accompanied by grateful, urging noises, until one spring afternoon in the dark church, a flood threatened to crash over me. I drew apart and she laughed in a way that made me feel childish. I gave a little tug to the drawstring on her chemise and discovered, by accident, that she carried a lucky bean between her breasts. I leaned her backwards and kissed the two pink ovals of warm flesh where the bean had pressed. Beneath the layers of gray skirts she wore, she arched up to meet me, pressing, urgent, beyond all bearing. Her thighs opened, and I was lost to any Heaven but Aletta. Aletta. *Aletta.*

Afterward, I expected her eyes to have a misty distance, searching to see if she needed to feel ashamed. Instead, she straightened her clothing, and said, "Well, so it's done then."

"What's done?"

"You mean to marry me."

Her simplemindedness knocked all breath out of me. I didn't say anything, yea or nay. I didn't have to. Her faith in the bean assured her of whatever she wanted to think. The morning I was to show the millwright my drawings of a better mill design, I found it in my breeches pocket. It was the same bean for sure, with speckles, an enormous sacrifice. I was about to throw it away when some tenderness

made me put it back in my pocket. It seemed a sort of proffered pledge.

One night not long afterward at Rika's house, Aletta heard a loud scraping sound and then a crash. She tore through the rooms looking for the reason, and when she found the painting of the girl having fallen off the wall, she screamed and backed away, her breast heaving, and her hands pulling at her hair. Aunt Rika, Uncle, everyone was roused, and Rika made her drink hot milk to calm her. I showed her that the broken cord on the back of the painting had come untwined, but still she would not be consoled. "You watch. Something terrible is going to happen." Nothing quieted her until I folded her in my arms, which told Rika rather more than I'd intended.

The next morning, Rika followed me outdoors as I left for the millwright's. "There's nothing of the Holy Spirit in her, Adriaan."

"You're wrong, Rika. There's nothing but spirit. With such demons chasing her, it's by God's grace alone that she even has faith enough to take a breath." I turned and left, that spirit potent over me as an act of nature.

Our plan for the birth had been to wade at low tide across the Waddenzee to Ameland Island where she had some rights of inheritance. No one lived in the big house except her deaf old grandfather and his housekeeper. We could stay there until we decided what to do, but it was late November and a gale brought driving rain and we couldn't

cross or even get a herring boat to take us there, and so she made it look like she'd run away, but I knew where she was.

Secretly, a little at a time, she had brought up to the church tower dry straw, a blanket, water, bread, candles and an old basketful of clean rags. Every day as we waited for her time to come, I brought her a crock of ale from the tavern and food that I stole from Aunt Rika's kitchen. She asked for buttered bread and ewe's milk cheese to swallow right after the birth, and, to wrap up with the child, she wanted a cabbage leaf in case of a boy and a clump of rosemary in case of a girl. Out of fear to set her raging, I complied. By then, I'd do anything she told me to.

I even watched when she poured molten wax into a bowl of water. When the drops hardened, she laid them in a row to study their shapes. Her face twisted into a torture of grooves and she swept them up in her fist.

"Well? What's it mean?" I asked, ashamed at my own curiosity about what was only folklore.

"Can't tell you. It'll make it true if I tell you."

It infuriated me that she wouldn't say. I had lost hold of reason, of all that I'd believed to be true.

She refused a midwife even though I pleaded with her. She said midwives in Delfzijl were all under oath to report any illegitimate births to the town council, who might take the child, so I had to do it myself. When it was time, she signaled me by hanging out her shawl from the stone grating up under the eaves and I made some excuse to the

millwright and came across the square in the rain. I found her gripping the rafter above her head. "Now don't you pass out dead cold at what you see," she said. She told me what to do and I did it. Once she had said she'd never been made love to by a man before me, yet she had an exact knowledge of birthing, and she wasn't the least bit afraid, which made me wonder, just before the baby came, if it really was her first.

I felt weak with the magnitude of what was before me—the blood, the smell—and what I was holding in my hands—quivering life. "A fine, healthy boy," I managed to say. Aletta only moaned. I cleaned him up, set him in the basket and had my hands out ready for what she said would slide out next, when she screamed again, the sound muffled by pounding rain. She gave a mighty heave and out came another head. Shaking, I supported it in the palm of my hand.

Twins were the worst kind of omen, Aletta said afterward, and this one, her little lip was split like a cat's or a hare's. "The mark of the Evil One's claw on her surely."

"That's nothing of the kind," I said, with less firmness than I had intended.

I had no choice but to make her as comfortable as possible and go back to Rika's.

The next day, when I brought her midday supper, Aletta said the girl couldn't suck without the milk coming out her nose. "She'll live a short life taunted by jeers and she'll turn mean and wild and then die of loneliness. Better

dead already. Better send the poor thing to her Maker before she gets used to life."

"Aletta, don't you be thinking such a thing."

I was afraid to leave her, but I had to go home to avoid suspicion. "You lay one hand against that child and you'll endanger your immortal soul." I gave her a hard look and told her not to move from that spot until I came tomorrow. I lay awake all night listening to thunder crack the world.

Hard, driving rain beat on the roof of the millhouse where I worked the next morning on a windmill model, carving a drainage screw with a small gear head and wider blades. I prayed the rain would continue and drown out any babies' cries that villagers might hear. With more food for her and some milk, I slipped in the side door of the church, tasting the rank odor of mildew, and climbed the wooden stairs in an agony of dread.

The boy was at her breast, her hand behind his little skull. The basket was empty.

"Where's the girl?"

Aletta, with bitten, swollen lip, fixed on me a fierce glare. "You breathe one word of this, Adriaan, and they'll stretch a rope around my neck surely."

"My God, Aletta."

"What do you know, Student, about a mother's rights?"

"What about a father's?"

"You didn't read the wax drops, Adriaan. I had no choice."

"Tell me where she is, Aletta."

She turned her face away. I looked at her hands and saw dirt under her fingernails. Mud had smeared her skirt, her elbow and her cheek.

"Tell me where."

Her stony coldness was more convincing of the cataclysm than the dirt. Argument was as futile now as blame in Eden. I could not bear to look at her. She had cast away her soul.

Even in this, nature worked against her: She didn't dig deep enough and rain washed away the loose dirt. The next day townswomen discovered the poor sodden babe in the mud. That sent the aldermen straight to Rika, and my honest aunt told them Aletta had run off. It wasn't long before they would find her, I knew. In the righteous town of Delfzijl, iniquity was as unable to be hidden as a windmill on a mudflat. "Look in the mills. Look in the barns. Look in the church. She's bound to be somewhere," Aunt Rika told Alderman Coornhert, and then she gave me a look of righteous defiance.

A few hours later, Aletta burst through the doorway shrieking, "Adriaan! Mistress! Don't let them take me." Fighting the aldermen who seized her, she cried out to me, "Don't let them foam my scalp. Don't let them, Adriaan. I'm warning you." She leveled at me a look that paralyzed me, but no one seemed to notice me, and whatever I said was lost amidst her arms flailing against their chests and her hair whipping their faces. They had who they wanted.

I stood dumb and helpless before the door a long time after they left.

"You only think you love her now, Adriaan," Rika said softly. "There will come a time, though you can't imagine it now, when you will not be able to remember her face."

I looked at Rika with her braid wound smugly on the top of her head, not a hair disordered. "You don't know what you're talking about."

I had two beautiful days with the baby in the bell tower. Several times a day and throughout the rainy night, I soaked a corner of Aletta's shawl with ewe's milk I got from the millwright's boy and let the baby suckle it the way I'd seen a farmer do with an orphaned lamb, with his little finger in the lamb's mouth. I did the same, though I didn't know how to hold him properly. I tried to remember how Aletta did. When he was satisfied, his wiggly arms flew open, and his blue eyes closed to slits. It fairly split me with joy when his tiny dimpled fist with fingernails like flakes of candle wax performed his first miracle: He grasped my index finger.

By the third morning the babe seemed listless. Gnawing hunger had set in. While I fed him again, the truth I had resisted became clear: I would have to give him to someone who could mother him. I wrapped him in clean rags, settled him warmly in the basket hidden in the bell tower and left to search for someone. It occurred to me as I walked that Descartes had a child by his maidservant in

Amsterdam. But Descartes got to raise his child as his own. No house in Delfzijl had a small wooden placard covered with red cloth hanging under the eaves announcing a new baby in the family, but what did it matter? If he were suspected to be Aletta's baby, no one would take him.

At the next feeding, I found a way to dribble milk down my finger into the baby's mouth and I think he got more that way, but time was short.

In a chilly mist, I crossed the slippery Damsterdiep Bridge to Farmsum. Along the way the men of the Water Boards of Delfzijl and Farmsum were measuring seepages and stamping on the ground, and farmers were building cofferdams in suspect places. There were no new birth placards in Farmsum. I returned to feed the baby and then went inland under a steady drizzle along the shores of the Damsterdiep, to Solwerd, crossing fields spongy with eight days of rain. There, farmers were building earthen animal ramps and hoisting stores on block and tackles from gable beams into upper rooms and barn lofts. No birth placards in Solwerd either. I would have gone all the way to Appingedam but Rika would have asked me where I was if I weren't home for supper. I fed the babe again and came home soaked. Since Uncle Hubert was in Amsterdam, Rika asked me to haul her ornate mahogany spice chest upstairs. Even with all forty-eight drawers taken out, I could barely manage it myself, and fell into bed exhausted.

I wrestled through the night in wakeful darkness. Aletta Pieters was to hang at noon the next day. If I went to

watch, I would live with the horror the rest of my life. If I didn't, I would be forsaking her. Better memory than betrayal, I decided.

A noon hanging was sure to attract a crowd, so if I went and joked with the village lads in front of the Raadhuis, no one would suspect, but when the church tower struck eleven and rain began again, I entered the square and found it empty. If I were the only watcher, that would declare me the father for sure. But that wasn't the reason I kept walking. I just couldn't bear so close a view. In an act of supreme cowardice, I crossed the square and climbed the church tower. From the window grating in the bell tower I could see the Raadhuis where they'd raised the gallows. Maybe she'd look up here.

The deadened thump of rain on roof tiles grew to a roar that I hoped might drown out the noon chime. At the half-chime, puddles had joined to become great pools, and men headed out across the peat bogs with their carts loaded with huge willow mats and boards, slabs of turf and sacks of sand, shovels and stakes and lanterns on poles. Flood was on everyone's mind, so no one came to see Aletta Pieters hang. The only townspeople left were the presiding aldermen and the sheriff, women trying to get their cows upstairs, girls carrying bedclothes and stores of food and peat into attics, and small boys securing skiffs by long ropes to roof beams.

When the cart rolled up, she was strapped to a post, her arms bound to her sides. She had no hair at all! Bitter anger

exploded in my throat. Someone had shaved her. Preparation for frothing, she'd think. It was probably only the jailer's wife wanting her hair for its strange color to weave it into belt buckles. Anyone who tried to would be cursed in the attempt. Aletta's silky hair would never hold.

Awkwardly, I held the babe face out in front of me. His first view of the world out the window would be to see his mother hang. How much he had to learn. I draped a corner of Aletta's shawl out the window to tell her we were watching, and prayed she would see it. I think she stood up straighter on the cart just then and stretched her neck longer, as though Rika herself were watching her. The shame of dying, of being sent to die, was nowhere in her posture. She scanned the skies. I hoped, in all that grayness, she might see a stork. Or a bubble bursting that might tell her God was breathing all around her. Her dripping gray dress clung to her and showed the small, beautiful mound of her stomach. I swallowed back the closest thing I knew to love.

Rain pelted the bricks in the square, smacked against the windows and ran down in sheets. No doubt all those windows along the square had gawking faces in them cursing the rain for obscuring the view. Alderman Coornhert strode back and forth like a general under the stepped eaves of the Raadhuis behind a fringe of water. Get on with it, man! Petty arm of provincial justice. Can't offend anyone by enacting its judgments too soon, or too late, or not at all. Order. Order must be had. Though the water-soaked earth be removed and though the mountains

be cast into the sea, order must be had. They would hang her punctually at noon, making her wait that last miserable half-hour in bone-chilling rain, her head shaved. The defenselessness of her quivering, swollen lip should have shamed them into some kind of mercy, even that of a sooner death than noon.

Close behind me in the tower the great bell sounded. The baby jerked in my arms. I held him tighter. Then again, the bell resounded in my chest on its slow, pompous way to twelve peals.

Would Aletta have appreciated the totality of effect—the air gray with rain, and the gibbet and the plain stone Raadhuis behind just a darker gray—if she had been watching this from a different perspective? Would she have noticed rain pouring off the ends of her fingers, elongating them into liquid gray roots like witches' hands?

I'd look at her hands, only her hands, even though I couldn't see where the fingers stopped and the rain began. Rain poured off them until that sudden unmistakable jolt, which I did see, will always see, when her feet kicked wildly, kept kicking, her *klompen* flying off, and in my mind's eye, her hands flung the water away, and in another moment rain poured off her hands and her still feet smoothly again in slender silver ropes.

My soul shuddered.

I turned my back to the window and bowed my head over the babe until the echo of the twelfth chime had died. "Father, give Thy benediction, give Thy peace before we

part," I whispered, my breath moving the baby's feathery hair. "Peace which passeth understanding, on our waiting spirits send."

Behind closed eyes I saw again the jolt, the flung water, her feet, wild then still.

Anyone standing close enough to be wet by the flung water, she might have said, ought to expect some bad luck having to do with water, the least of which might be burning one's mouth to shreds with hot tea, the greatest, drowning in the flood that was sure to come. The curse of the flung water, she'd call it.

Quick peals of alarm followed. I nestled the babe in the basket, left him in the tower and stumbled down the narrow stairs hardly able to see, to join the few remaining townsmen running across the peat bogs. Blown rain needled my face and I slipped and fell. All along the Damsterdiep, windmills had stopped with their vanes in the alarm position.

Wind-whipped peaks sloshed over the sea dike in places. Gray, impersonal death was licking at the continent. The waterwolf of Aletta's nightmares was baring white fangs that dripped their foam over the embankment. I joined the lines of men working to raise the crown of the dike with planks. Between each plank, I shoveled clay like a madman.

Late in the afternoon, to the north, where no one was working, the sea folded over the dike and gushed across the lower peat bogs, filling in the pits. We climbed the dike slope to work above waterline until a skipper in the estuary

steered his scow broadside into the breach and we could secure it with ropes and pack the gaps with seaweed, reed mats and slabs of turf. Then the sea broke through another place. Loss swept over me, and for a moment I couldn't get my breath. Probably all along the coast, the sea was winning.

We mended the new gap with the side of the nearest barn torn down, secured it with ropes to dike cleats, and tamped clay against it. In quickly fading light, I could see the patched place bowing. All night in glassy blackness we lay with our heels dug into the upper incline of the dike and braced it shoulder to shoulder, our arms linked in a numb chain and our backs pressed up against the slanted dike wall. The wolf on the other side sprayed icy seawater on my sweating face, and my arms burned. I closed my eyes against the pain and imagined Aletta walking a sinuous path to avoid bubbles in puddles. Rain fell down the back of my neck and rain was falling on the church tower and the Raadhuis and the gallows and Aletta's unprotected head. Inland I could see a row of watch fires stretching far to the north. I counted them, and later counted them again, and when there were fewer, I knew the sea had broken in somewhere else. The land would be covered. Thunder and wicked lightning bore wave after wave of shock and disbelief and anger until all shock and anger and disbelief were washed out of me and there was only shivering loss. And the babe in the tower hungry and crying through the night.

Eventually we could feel and hear that the tide had

turned. Whatever water would come had come already. Slowly, shapes began to emerge, the rain thinned to a silver mist, and there was a kind of horrific beauty in the muted dawn. Stepping away from the incline, I stood like a crucifix, unable to lower my arms. In milky gray light, I turned and saw that the fleshy forearm I'd been gripping all night was Alderman Coornhert's.

"You're a fine lad," he said. "Far better'n the likes of her."

Rage hissed through me. Who else had known?

I jostled a place in the first punt back to Delfzijl. Peat bogs and farms were all under water. Bare trees were only bushes of twigs now. Families of peat diggers waited on soggy thatched roofs or shared tree branches with chickens. A miller's family huddled on the cap of the mill. Big, gentle Groningen draft horses swam mutely, aimlessly, without understanding. I envied, for a moment, the simple griefs of animals.

Without the straight lines of canals and ditches outlining farmers' plots, there was less of a human mark upon the land. The town was shortened, diminutive. In Delfzijl, water flooded the just and the unjust. Only the lower rooms of houses were under water. And the church floor. The babe was safe in the tower, I knew. We floated through the square between the Raadhuis and the church, the water as flat as a pewter plate, upon which an enormous rat rode a wooden door. An omen, Aletta would have said. But the gibbet and Aletta Pieters had been washed away.

Aunt and Uncle's house was scaled down, humbled by the water at window level on the lower floor. From the punt, I climbed through a half-submerged window and found Rika, wet from the waist down, on the stairway, in one arm a Ceylon urn, in the other the painting of the girl, each one acquired by sending a soul to hell on earth in the Americas. No human being tied me to Rika's house decorated by oppression, or to this town of quick and simple justice. Redemption earned through the begrudged boarding of an orphan was too easy. I needed to return to more difficult ideas.

"You look like—"

"I have to leave, Aunt."

"Yes, you do. I'm surprised you stayed to help."

"You know?"

"Missing girl. Missing food. Nephew out all hours. Sits in an empty church like some Catholic. I expected you to leave when they—at noon yesterday."

"You knew she was in the church, and you sent them there!"

"To save you from her."

"Save me?"

"You're free," she stammered shamefully.

How could I explain to one who thought like that?

"Rika, I need money."

"Money?" She set the urn on a step and gave me a puzzled look. "Half the countryside under water and you're worried about money?"

"There was a second child."

She inhaled a loud, exaggerated breath and made me wait for her answer. "If I give you something, will you promise to take the child away?"

"You think I'd leave him to the good people of Delfzijl?"

"Take this." She held forward the painting. "Sell it in Amsterdam. I'll give you the dealer's paper. It was her favorite, despite her tears." Her chin quivered. "I can't enjoy it any more."

"My mill drawings?"

"I saved them too. Upstairs."

"Give them to the Water Board."

Through waist-high water I followed her upstairs and took the painting, the paper, another blanket, my books and knapsack, a cheese quarter Rika handed me, loaded Uncle Hubert's skiff and pushed off. Rika stood at the upper window as if on a houseboat, or an ark. "Remember, Rika," I said, "when the Lord repented for having made man, He brought the flood."

I climbed into the church loft, changed the baby's rags, fed him, wrapped him in Aletta's shawl and blanket and laid him in the stern of Uncle's skiff so I could see him, propped the painting and my knapsack next to him and covered the whole with another blanket like a tent. Exhausted, I pulled away from the town of Delfzijl and its muddy truths.

At first, swirling water mastered me, and the current of

the Damsterdiep carried me backwards until I learned to recognize it rippling the surface, and navigated near farmhouses to avoid it. My arms cramped and I had to let go of the oars from time to time, and my ears ached from cold air blown across them.

Inland, toward Solwerd, the waters calmed, and the rhythmic motion of the boat cradled the babe to sleep. Wind drove an opening in the clouds, and the sun cast a silver glare over the water. Past Solwerd, watery desolation spread out in a dreadful, false calm. When the land was drained, the fields would be covered with sea sand, and the soil would be salted for years. All my pride at science mastering nature was swept away. Time was sporting with man. My faster pump mill was years too late, and Aletta and I were years too early.

"Far better than the likes of her" wasn't true. I hadn't fought off any demons. I had just drifted with her currents, while she. . . . Never did she succumb to the cowardice of self-pity. I had fancied love a casual adjunct and not the central turning shaft making all parts move. I had not stood astonished before the power of its turning. All I'd learned at university to be firm and eternal was floating unanchored, and, as a result, God seemed much less scrutable on the long row back.

Appingedam was under water too. I reached it by midafternoon. People were out in skiffs rescuing animals and goods before the early dark. Past it, in the hamlet of Oling, two young children leaning out a red-shuttered

upper window waved to me and called out, "St Nicholas! St Nicholas," laughing.

"Have you any milk?" I called.

They only giggled. I asked again, and they disappeared below the sill. Above the water, I could see that the door, arched over by a leafless vine, was painted with a rustic scene the way country people do farther south. In a few moments a woman came to the window and lowered down a wooden bucket with an earthenware jar of milk inside. I picked it out, thanked her and rowed on out of view behind a barn and tied up to a tree. I soaked my sleeve in the milk and dripped it into the baby's mouth.

I regretted that I didn't know any lullabies. All those motherly sounds one makes for babies—I knew none of them, and all I could think of was the doxology.

"Praise God from whom all blessings flow," I softly sang, letting the milk flow into his mouth and smiling at him.

"Praise Him, all creatures here below."

The woman had asked no questions before she brought the milk to the window. A knot swelled in my throat. Those were happy children in the window. Here was the place.

"Praise Him above, ye Heavenly Host."

This first time would be the last time I'd sing to my little son. My voice cracked in a thin whistle.

"Praise Father, Son, and Holy Ghost."

At dusk, a man rowed a skiff toward the house, tied it

to the gable, handed a flapping chicken through the window, and then climbed through himself. I dug into my knapsack for a pencil stub and on the back of the art dealer's document, I wrote, "Sell the painting. Feed the child," and wrapped my son, the paper and the cabbage leaf in the blanket. Lulled to a sitting sleep by exhaustion and the lap of water against the hull, I woke in darkness and placed our beautiful son in the man's skiff, sheltering him with the painting and the blanket, and took to my oars.

Pulling away, I heard the boat nudging the house in timid little wave surges, as if knocking politely, like a blessing, and I knew that I would row all the way back to Groningen, if need be, until I could feel solid ground under me once more.

And for this return, I wonder, would it be blasphemy to thank God?

Adriaan Kuypers, College of Science and Philosophy, Groningen University, St Nicholas Eve, December 5, 1747. Rain all day.