

Dutch Boats

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Abstract

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It began with a painting, a painting of a boat with waves that rolled off the canvas and over my body and carried me backwards in time. I washed ashore on the riverbanks of a small town in 1840s Netherlands, where one painting became the story of a young Dutchman named Willem. As he prepares for a trip across the continent, Willem reflects on his relationship with his childhood sweetheart. These memories are brought on by his interactions with the world around him, a world alive with beauty and constant, inevitable change. A tale of hesitation and heartache, “Dutch Boats” explores how reflecting on our environments can inspire both joy and suffering and how our interactions, with ourselves and with others, are affected by these moments of quiet.

Dutch Boats

I took a picture in a museum I wasn't supposed to take. The lady was quiet. She informed me very kindly of my error. I think she might have told me why too, something about the piece being on loan. The whole thing was really British when I thought about it later. But I was still embarrassed. I told my friend so, and she laughed. She said that the exchange had been the gentlest chastising to which she'd ever been witness.

I took a picture in a museum I wasn't supposed to take, and I kept it.

It's a landscape painting of a ship. Several ships really. Or maybe ships and boats. I don't know the difference. Size maybe? I feel like all ships are boats, but not all boats are ships, like ships are enormous, or retired into history, those big wooden things from *Pirates of the Caribbean*. By that definition, at least two of the boats in the painting, the two way in the background, are ships. Maybe three. It's remarkably difficult to tell actually. There's a mass in the middle ground; it's either a collage of wooden dinghies or the capsizing of a ship like the other two. I think it's most likely a combination of both.

But the boat in the foreground – and that's definitely a boat, I'd suspect a rowboat if the thing didn't have a sail – that boat draws the eye. Its bow is pointed away, toward the horizon, and you can clearly see the man hunched over beside the rudder. The wind must be high. He's got both arms wrapped around the tiller, pulling it towards himself like he's hanging on for dear life. He's trying so hard to keep the boat from being taken by the waves.

The other two are harder to make out. They're also hunched, over a bag of some kind, supplies maybe. One sits facing the stern. His body rocks with the waves. He leans forward sharply as the water jerks the craft up with it, then shifts his weight back as the wooden bench drops away from beneath him. It's an unconscious movement for him. Practiced. Like the knot he's forming in his hands now. He doesn't even know he does it.

He's struggling with the canvas bag. It's heavy and stuck between two rows of bench seats. He knows the movement of the water will toss it though, and he fights to tie it down. The wind whips his hair about; he should have had it cut. Between that and the spray, he's near blind. The man at the other end of the bag shouts something to him, but he can't hear over the crash of the waves. He shakes his head at the caller and returns to the rope slipping between his fingers. The rough callouses on his hands can't stop the wet cords from sliding out of his knots. He's come to think of himself as quite the sailor; he's seen skirmish and war, hurricane and blizzard, but today's storm took him by surprise. He and his crewmates were unprepared, and now their vessel is being claimed by the Atlantic.

The man, Willem, turns quickly, squints his eyes against the stinging of the salt. The spray blurs his vision, rain on a windowpane, but he can see clear enough that the ship is heeling dramatically to one side, waves crashing against the near-vertical surface of the deck. They hadn't even tried to take her sails down. The wind came on so suddenly, the crack of the fabric

was so loud... he thinks he can still make out the snapping of the flag as it fights to drift off and out, to be pulled along by gusts until it lands on the surface of the churning water where, like wax resting over a flame, the fabric will turn to liquid and melt into the dark below. Willem can see the other skiffs crowding around the ailing queen; his crew, his friends, seem so frail in the violent wind. They are always steady on their feet, planted like great, sea-bound trees sprung from the wooden ancestor they sail upon, but now they sway precariously as they rush to load cargo onto the much smaller crafts. Shouting. Roaring. Soaked to the bone under the weight of drenched clothes. Freezing but for the hot blood roaring in their ears. He should have known better than to be the first off; they hadn't even fully loaded before the water ripped them away.

Beyond the sinking ship, the sky is blue. Pale and sweet like nothing has ever disturbed it. Two navy ships rest on smooth waters worlds away, so small in a sky so large. They must know what's coming, the beast that's arrived to swallow the universe.

Willem turns to the west, away from blue, away from that last breath of peace, toward the incoming darkness. He's never seen night fall so fast. The clouds are rolling, leaching like ink into the blue paper of the summer day. The clouds drag a veil of rain along below them. He can see the wavering gray, maybe a minute or two away from dousing him, beating down upon the black water. He's always thought it strange how the water changes color that why. It doesn't seem like the mood of the sky should be enough to do that. It's as though the storm calls upon some shroud of Hell to infect the ocean, to remind those who rest on its surface that death is always lurking just below the waves.

A storm like this is so different at sea than it is on land. Through the glass of the windows on his house, the clouds are a deep, rich fabric rippling in the heavens, God's cloak rustling behind him as he walks across the sky. The roar of the wind is thrilling. The heart beats a little

faster as it thrashes about the roof, through the nearby trees, howling out across the fields. And among it all, the rain soothes, steady drumming in a world made unpredictable. But from a ship... no. The storm and the sea are one and the same. The horizon line vanishes in the haze of black and gray. The roiling clouds threaten to collapse onto the clashing waves where they will certainly crush any and all things laboring upon the surface. Man is made small in the vastness of these two deadly planes. The wind takes the ears, the rain the eyes, and one is made to kneel deaf and dumb at the feet of mother nature.

The sail of the sinking ship snaps erratically, beating in time with Willem's heart. The rough canvas is glowing yellow, and Willem raises his eyes to the sky directly above the shuttering vessel, watches as one of the last remaining rays of sun glances off the struggling fabric. In a matter of moments, the clouds creep across, and the doomed sail is cast into shadow, darkening like the eyes of some dying creature that knows its time has come.

He's seen it before, that look, that odd mix of desperation and acceptance, of wanting that things might be different, but knowing they cannot be. He's seen it many times, but what comes to mind now is not the violent end of thieving, charlatan sailors or the languishing of ill relatives, but a strange night many years ago, when, as a young man, he was called to a madman's parlor to witness the death of a bird.

Willem was in the parlor that night somewhat by accident, having followed a raucous crowd from the Salt and Quail tavern down the street to the dwelling of an alchemist who claimed he had the power to remove air from a man's lungs. Having been in the pub for quite some time already that day, the alchemist, a figure rather well-known for his thick accent and propensity for setting his rooms on fire, was making boisterous claims of his experiments, going so far as to tell one woman seated near him that he could "take her breath away". By that point,

his boasting had drawn quite a crowd of admirers and hecklers, and at last someone demanded the alchemist prove himself, to which the madman readily agreed.

And so half the tavern stumbled out into the dimly-lit street. It was a cool evening – neither winter nor spring, but the funny time in between – and the air was heavy with a thick mist. The cobblestones beneath their feet were slick, and several in their party slipped, laughing uproariously as they grasped at the rough brick of the tavern's outer wall. Needless to say, the crowd had thinned by the time the alchemist herded his visitors up the narrow stairway to his accommodations. If he noticed the reduced size of their party, the alchemist gave no sign, instead shuffling immediately about the room to set up his experiment.

Willem, in truth, had no real interest in the alchemist's proclamations; his attention remained instead with Betje Evertse, who, to this day, remained the most beautiful woman he'd ever laid eyes on. She was fair-skinned with delicate eyebrows and quick, dark eyes that bore a stern yet serene expression, which Willem found somewhat at odds with her witty temperament. That night, several locks of her thick curls had escaped from beneath her bonnet, coming to rest over her sloped shoulders. It was Betje who had proposed they venture to the parlor of the madman, her thin lips arching in the corners, eyes gleaming. Willem, helpless, agreed readily.

The parlor of the alchemist was dim. The man quickly lit a solitary lantern and placed it in the center of the table that dominated the small room. Outside the lone window, clouds were rushing overhead, parting on occasion to brighten the small space slightly with the shine of a large moon. The alchemist bid his guests circle round the flickering flame while he clumsily began piling his equipment before them. They looked on curiously as he assembled some bit of machinery he referred to as an "air pump," a delicate device he begged his small crowd not to touch. Instead, he vanished into the shadows of the room, emerging only moments later clutching

a small bundle to his chest. As he approached, Willem leaned over the table and watched as the alchemist's cracked hands unfurled to reveal a small bird which he quickly placed into a glass chamber atop his air pump.

Willem felt Betje brush against him then, and he looked to see her standing beside him. Despite having known her for as long as he could remember, Willem found her gaze unreadable. Only the quirking of her mouth revealed her amusement. Although she had previously defended only a passing interest in the alchemist's ramblings, Willem thought her earlier words might be contrary to what was actually a deep-seated curiosity. In an effort not to betray this knowledge, he allowed himself a slight smile, similarly indicating his own disbelief for the madman's antics.

Then Betje turned away from him. He followed her gaze across the room to where the alchemist had sent one of the tavern boys to operate his machine from a shadowy corner of the parlor. The boy was tugging on a rope strung down from the ceiling, which was pulled tight along one of the low rafters to where it attached itself to some mechanism atop the pump. The alchemist was waving his arms wildly, imploring his audience gaze upon what was now a panicked, fluttering bird within the glass chamber. They looked on as instructed, and Willem felt a cold weight settle low in his stomach. The creature's reaction grew increasingly dramatic as the boy in the corner continued to operate the machine at the bidding of the alchemist. Frozen in that position over the table, Willem stared as the bird scrambled frantically against the glass until it at last dropped to the bottom of the chamber. He was close enough to the glass that he could see the bird's tiny chest rising and falling uselessly, gasping for air that, the alchemist would later go on to claim, was no longer there. Out of energy entirely, the bird dropped its head to the side, and suddenly Willem was staring directly into the creature's eyes. They were shiny and black, flitting desperately, violently about the dim room, in search of savior who wasn't there. And then, they

settled, and Willem knew that the bird had given in, given up. Its chest deflated only twice more after that.

Stiffly, Willem straightened away from the contraption. The room had fallen completely silent but for the weeping of a child who had been brought along on this venture by a foolish father. Then, the alchemist burst into patronizing laughter, celebrating his success alone. Feeling movement at his elbow once again, Willem was jerked from his stupor and turned to Betje, still beside him. She turned her head stiffly to him, and Willem saw that her face had sharpened. The tilt of her mouth had fallen flat, and a single crease had formed on her brow.

The alchemist continued to laugh even as they left his parlor.

Back on the street, the mist was lifting, receding back into the sky and to the swift clouds above. The veiled moonlight glinted dully off the damp cobblestones, and Willem offered Betje his arm. She clung to him as they walked, unusual for her but unsurprising given the activity of the evening. It was late. The empty streets were quiet but for the echoes of distant laughter and mirth, behavior that suddenly felt alien to Willem. The sound was unnerving, and he felt certain that those laughing must have some ill intent.

As they passed a particularly noisy pub, several revelers burst out into the street, bellowing in gleeful mayhem and casting long shadows in the yellow light of the doorway. Betje leapt in surprise at the sudden chaos and slipped on the stoney road in her own hurried motion. Willem turned to her quickly, tightening his grasp on her arm as he caught her elbow. Steady on her feet once more, Betje's face lifted in the briefest of smiles, and Willem felt the dread in his gut begin to loosen. The noise of the drinkers subsided, and the street dimmed as the tavern door was shut. Her eyes were so dark then, and Willem could only stare. Another raucous crack of

laughter jolted them both from that moment, and they shared a smile again once the sounds subsided. Willem at last released Betje as they began back on their course.

Betje's family lived on a street by the riverside, and outside her door, they stopped to admire the quiet night. A chill had settled in the late evening air, and Willem shivered when Betje slipped from his arm. She smiled once more and offered a kiss on the cheek before she hurried inside. Willem stared at her closed door for a long moment before turning away and beginning down the street that led back into town.

The road by the waterfront was dirt, and his steps left a pattern of dry footprints in the damp dust. To his right, down a low, grassy slope, the river swirled and lapped at the shore. Willem's gaze followed the movement of the water. It drew him out, over the river, to the lights of town flickering across the way, and to the thickening clouds above. It was a lovely night. The clouds had slowed, thin wisps dispersing to reveal deep gray monoliths dominating the sky. The moon, now well hidden, was visible only in the light that reflected off the heavy cloud cover. The edges of each nebulous curve shone in gold-white, while the flat faces stretching heavenward glowed in dull gray. To the west, the glancing light dimmed. Rain was rolling in, not yet falling, but soon. These clouds, heavy with water, swallowed the moonlight into churning bellies and rumbled in satisfaction.

Below the heavy sky, the town lay vulnerable. Like a child who had not yet learned to fear the elements, it was stretched out on its back at the river's edge, letting the dancing patterns above lull it to sleep. Window lights blinked, watchful eyes sweet and unwary. The scattered trees around which houses were clustered rustled quietly in the breeze. The shadowed buildings were black against the dense gray sky, the proud reach of the steeple presiding in sweeping elegance. Even from across the river, Willem could hear the last of the evening's stragglers

stumbling home. Cheerful farewells, tired well-wishes. It wouldn't be long before they too succumbed beneath the watchful gaze of Selene and her white horses.

The water stirring at the edges of town was glassy flat, a rippling mirror of the marbled night sky. Its voice was quiet, hushed so as not to wake the child sleeping upon its shore. Several small boats laid anchored further upstream, sails hanging loosely from swaying masts. Willem had always had a love of ships; they held the hopes and dreams of new places, new lives. And yet, they terrified him. Reminded him how big the world was, how inconsequential he was, how mighty the gods must be. On this river though, by this town, the boats were just dreams of a fairytale world on distant, wavering shores.

Further down the road, a dirt path branched off into the water, easy access for small boats to be brought ashore in the winter. Not quite ready to head home, Willem set off toward the boat launch. The breeze was picking up, rustling his hair and rattling the tall grasses growing on the shores. At the very edge of the river, he crouched and let his fingers brush the silken surface. This time of year, it was laden with silt, so soft it felt more like the caress of a cold hand than the flowing of quiet water. He withdrew and leaned back. The evening had, at long last, fallen silent.

Willem rose slowly, joints stiff even from his brief crouch close to the ground. The boats continued to sway further downriver. He knew even then that he would find his way onto one eventually. He had no desire to leave. The peace of village life was all he'd ever wanted, but a ghostly premonition haunted him. He could feel it. Them. Three unknowable figures, hunched together just outside his line of sight, shaking their heads at him and sighing while they wove the collective tapestry of time. Change, he felt, would come with the warming of the earth. With the stretching of the days and the fading of night. He shook the velvet water from his fingers and made his way back toward town, toward home and a warm bed.



That night, Willem dreamt of a castle by the sea. The sun was setting, and the sky was light and warm. Hazy clouds slept still above smooth water rolling gently far below. The land was embraced by the swell of distant mountains, sandy and fading as the evening fell, soon to be swallowed by the deepening sky. From his place by a forest's edge, Willem surveyed a land shadowed by approaching dusk. The craggy, grassy ground before him lurched downhill toward the water, offering sustenance for a small herd of goats who, being unattended, had wandered off in every which way along the shoreline. The land itself dropped off steeply at the seaside, giving way to a small bay moored from the rest of the water by two jutting peninsulas. The headlands stretched back into the landmass in dual ridgelines, nestling the coast in a gentle valley and further sheltering the shadowy field where Willem stood.

The castle was perched on the further of the outcroppings. Constructed from pale stone, the monolith was more elaborate than the *Oude Kerk*, which had awed Willem even as a child. This structure was dominated by rounded turrets that marked the outer walls in no apparent symmetry. Those walls were interspersed with impossibly tall stained-glass windows, no doubt casting rainbows of patterned light within the elegant rooms of the fortress. A single, squared-off tower over-shadowed the entire thing from the northeast side, glowing in a halo of smoky sunlight and beckoning weary travelers to its elaborate halls. Inexplicably, somehow, Willem knew the castle was home to dangerous creatures. Whether gods or ghosts, he could not be sure, but however beautiful, it appeared forbidden and empty; no fires glowed from inside its halls, no banners waved from its pristine walls, no sound could be heard from the yards within. Some

great tragedy haunted this grand place, a tragedy sure to befall any who passed through its darkened doorways.

Unable to stare at the castle any longer, Willem looked back over the plain and was surprised to see a woman sitting quietly among the grasses where before there had only been goats. Her perch laid halfway between Willem and the great castle, too far for him to call out to and be sure that she would hear him. So, he held his tongue and watched as she stared out over the shifting surface of the ocean. She seemed lost or sad or longing maybe, some far away expression for some faraway thing. And so Willem was helpless, hopeless, wishing to give what he knew he could not.

He was a coward, he thought. A vehicle, not for himself, but for greater men, only ever acting upon the will of others. An invisible man, he would pass from this life to the next with little more than the sputter of a candle swallowing the last of its wick. He could not even bring himself to console the figure in the field, lost just as he was in this phantom country by the sea. The fervor of these revelations shook him and left him though with a new resolve. He would speak to the woman. He would help her find what she sought.

Determined now, he raised his eyes to her place in the field. It was empty. Confused, Willem looked about wildly, spotting her at last some distance inland, walking along the crest of the low inland ridge. Her pace was steady and sure, and Willem let his eyes drift forward, tracing the path she seemed to be taking. Dread curled within him as his gaze found the silent castle, a promising siren song in an empty land. Struck dumb, he stood rooted, for minutes, hours, until the woman passed through the doors of that dark place.



It was a week or so later when his master in the stone yard called him to his desk. Rain was falling steadily, and Willem shook himself like an animal when he ducked into the low shed where the stonemason kept his papers. Upon seeing his apprentice, the stonemason, a gruff man called Gerritsen who spoke only in cursory barks, stood from his desk with all the distaste of a bull being pulled from his pasture. With a grunt of disapproval, the mason indicated Willem wait in the shed before tramping past his apprentice and into the rainy stone yard. Unsurprised by the suddenness of his master's departure, Willem leaned against the doorframe and surveyed the shadowy interior of the messy room.

The building had been on the edge of ruin for as long as Willem could remember. Its wooden walls were soft with rot, and each day was marked by a few more ancient roof tiles throwing themselves to the ground. Taking up one side of the shed and resting upon a damp, slatted floor, was Gerritsen's desk, littered with shipping orders, receipts, and supply requests. Various chunks of stone, shattered remains of ruined inventory, pinned the notices to the tabletop. Willem had learned early on in his apprenticeship never to touch the desk. Don't move a sheet of paper; don't toss away one chip of stone; don't kick the leg when walking by. The mason always knew of and suspected interference, even when no one had touched a thing. Across from the desk, dominating the other side of the shed, was a dilapidated wood stove that threatened to burn down the whole structure. Beside it, stacked atop crooked shelves, the master stored his eccentricities. Old construction plans, a pile of hammers with broken handles, a coat made of patches, and the busts.

The busts had always confused Willem. They seemed so out of place among the crude blocks of the stone yard. There were two, a male and female, cut off cleanly at the neck, blank

eyes raised heavenward, faces slack in acknowledgement of their blindness. They had been there longer than Willem, and he could still remember the first time he'd seen them.

It was a wet day in early winter when his father brought Willem to the stonemason's shed inquiring about an apprenticeship. The rain was drumming on the tiled roof, and the warmth of the stove made the air cling to his skin. Willem was ten at the time, and his eyes were immediately drawn to the busts or, rather, to the statute that had, at that time, stood between them. It was meant to be a cherub, a round and naked child with a serene face looking down as though preparing to soar off into the sky; however, its wings were absent, as well as its left arm, and so the figure instead seemed to contemplate leaping to its death.

At the feet of the marble sat a boy Willem's age, this one made of flesh and bone, hunched protectively over a bound book. Curious, Willem leaned from side to side until he could see the pages. The boy was sketching. He was holding a piece of charcoal, his strokes short and smooth as he outlined a figure. After a moment, he paused and brought his stained fingers to the underside of the leather binding, staring, staring at the creature born of his own hand.

Willem was wrenched from this inspection when he heard his father speak his name. His father was entreating Gerritsen to take Willem on as an apprentice, and the mason's face was indecipherable. He gestured to Willem to walk around his desk, warning him for the first time to mind the table legs. Gerritsen then leaned back and studied him while his father reassured the mason that Willem would fill out as he grew. At last, Gerritsen nodded, gesturing to the boy across the room and irritably explaining that his own son spent his days drawing instead of learning a practical trade. The mason's son looked up at his father's words, his face as blank as the busts'. Willem stared at his feet.

The memory had always been heavy in Willem's mind. Over the years, he hardly saw his master's son, and when he did, the boy's face always remained carefully unreadable. Then, several years ago, the boy left home – for *Florence*, Willem knew now – to study under a painter. A few months later, Willem noticed the cherub no longer stood between the busts. When he asked the stonemason about it, Gerritsen just grunted, saying it had fallen and shattered. Willem learned later that the mason had thrown the pieces in the river.

The careless splashing of heavy steps in mud signaled the return of Willem's master. Gerritsen hardly seemed to notice he was indoors as he trudged past Willem, water sloughing off his leather coat like he'd brought the storm with him. He threw himself down in his chair haphazardly, rain dripping from his soaked hair onto his coat. Beneath him, a puddle was forming. Without ceremony, his master informed Willem that they would be headed on a trip to the *Italiaans* states. Gerritsen wanted to meet with new potential suppliers, and he didn't trust anyone to do it for him. Willem would be coming. It was a statement of fact, that detail, as if it had already happened. They would cross the continent to get there and, assuming a deal was struck, would return by way of sea with a fresh shipment. Stunned, Willem said nothing even as Gerritsen fell silent. The mason watched him closely, clearly waiting for some reaction, so Willem nodded. Quick and numb. The mason raised his chin and named the time – a month or so from the day – before dismissing his apprentice curtly.

Willem stood still for moment. Thrill. Anticipation. Terror. Dread. To see the countryside beyond the lowlands, the mountains, the rivers of *Frankrijk, de Duitse Bond*, and beyond. He had only ever left *Nederland* once before, and so the sudden prospect of this journey was extraordinary. The pendulum in his chest beat irregularly with fluctuating desires to see *Europa* and so too to never travel beyond the river he knew so well.

The mason barked his name with narrowed eyes. Willem nodded again and hurried back into the soggy evening. It was dark by the time he made it to his door, but never did the rain touch his skin.



He didn't know how to tell her. A part of him worried she wouldn't care, or that she would care less than he hoped. It felt cruel of him to wish her pain, but a part of him wanted her to confirm some mutual longing. But how to tell her? How to reassure her of his safe return? To express his untamable thrill and profound loss?

How to say the thing he had no words for?

He decided it would be on one of their walks, a Sunday afternoon tradition for near a decade. He tried his best to prepare the words, but he could not find them, and so he resolved to speak truly and hope she understood.

It was a lovely day. The road into the countryside had been washed out by the first, weak thaw of spring. It was hardly a road anymore. Since the Crown bought the Lucassen land, the route was rarely needed, and young spring grass had begun to creep across the worn ground. Patches of barren earth that had once delineated the path of horses' feet and wagon wheels now stood as isolated, muddied lakes in a verdant plain. The floodwaters had flattened even the deepest ruts and ridges. Now, the ground was new and soft beneath Willem's feet. In some spots, the earth was so fragile the mud rode up and over the toes of his *klompens*.

The air was cool and wet. Willem suspected the winter would return in the coming days, but for now, he walked with his coat in the crook of his arm. His wide brimmed hat had also

been removed from his person and was instead rotating slowly between his fingers. A burgeoning breeze ruffled his hair, the occasional gust buffeting him back entirely, leaving his face wet despite the fact that the rain had stopped three days prior. The trees too shuttered and snapped in the wind. Their limbs were empty but for small young buds sprouting from blood-red branches. The Lucassen's had planted them years ago by the riverside, a legacy that outlived even the family name. An infinite sky of gently graying clouds slipped by above them, dragging the wind along behind like the sweeping of an unseen veil.

The road, or what was once the road, was a calf following at the heels of its mother, the river. The ice had all melted, but it would return soon. The water, though still high, had settled back into its banks at a slow rush. Come summer, the river would be heavy with the heat, ambling around each corner and sloughing off into the North Sea, but that was still months away. Now, it churned just fast enough to be dangerous. It chirped and hummed as always, but beneath the pleasantries, Willem would swear he could hear the water whispering, plotting and threatening and conniving in its bed. In contrast, the petulant mud of the fading road sucked and spat at his steps. Willem kept his pace slow, deliberate, so as to save himself from drowning in it. As he walked, he kept several paces from the steep riverbank, still close enough though so he might watch the brown-gray water churn from the corner of his eye.

Betje was not nearly as wary as he. Several yards ahead, she stood down the bank at the edge of the river. Her skirts, already patterned in umber floral, had been steadily darkening from the hem on up, turning her to mud, water creeping, rising to wash her earthy body out to the ocean. Though perhaps she'd go willingly. Like a naiad ready to join her sisters, she'd simply turn to river and melt into the ground.

Instead, she turned back, looked to him, eyes unreadable as ever. Dark and shadowed, she watched him, saw him, flayed him and left his ribs scattered in the mud. Hard eyes that weren't looking for anything in particular, and so uncovered all he held within his chest. He was a red stag in that moment, locking eyes with the hunter in the tree line and the abyss of the shotgun barrel. Those eyes that he was sure would be the thing that killed him.

But then she looked away, released him, turned to stare upriver. The air shuttered in his lungs like he'd kept it there for far too long, and he looked down to find the mud had begun to swallow him up. Gingerly, he pulled a foot from the ravenous ground, mud squelching in protest, and he resumed his pace, skimming the surface of the washed-out farm road. Raising his head once more, he spotted Betje rushing further along the riverside with her skirts hiked up above her ankles. It was as though she'd heard the call of a summoning meant only for her, like Eurydice called back to her rightful home in sweet embrace of Death. Willem nearly choked in sudden fear, terror, that she might lose her footing and fall into the depths of the river beside her. Indeed, she did slip once or twice, her body jerking abruptly to the side, hands flying out to catch herself on the slick bank, before her sprint ended in an abrupt halt. Then, to Willem's surprise, she knelt, and he watched in dismay as she reached into the rushing water as carefree as though she were catching a child's toy boat rocking on the surface of a still pond. After a moment, she rose slowly, carefully, and brought her head down to closely inspect whatever prize she had plucked from the cold water.

He found himself moving toward her, strides edging closer to the steep riverside. His focus wavered from her swaying figure only when the clinging surface beneath his feet attempted to drag him to his knees. At last though, he arrived, muddied, to the place where she hunched over herself. She looked up as he approached and bid he take the prize from her hand.

Perplexed, he returned his hat to his head and squatted, leaning cautiously down the bank to her outstretched arms. She reached out as well and, without ceremony, dropped a wet rabbit kit into his palms. Surprised, he brought the small creature to his chest and held it close. The thing was bedraggled and cold, but its nose twitched as it too inspected him before huddling into the warmth of his fingers.

Betje called his name. Her voice was rain falling on the surface of the river as she requested he help her up the bank as well. In one hand she lifted her muddy skirts, and in the other, she gripped his warm fingers. Willem straightened, using his weight to haul her up and back so she might rejoin him out of the reach of a desperate river god. Back again on what was once the road, Betje habitually wiped her palms on her apron before holding them out to receive the kit back. Willem handed the little thing over without question, and Betje held it close to her breast, stroking the top of its head with a single finger. The rhythm must have been soothing, for the tiny creature seemed to fall asleep only moments later.

Willem looked on as Betje watched the little thing, following her gaze as it drifted to the smudged remains of the road where it disappeared beyond some distant hill. She gestured to that place where it bent up and out of sight and explained she knew of a warren there. The kit must have been washed out of the den by the rising floodwaters of a stream that fed the wider river. She was meant to return it to its mother. Willem hesitated. Though he could not see it, he knew the hour would soon be late. The day had been spring, but with night would come the winter, and the soft pooling of slick earth would freeze in uneven and inconsistent grooves ready to shatter ankles. Betje brushed off his concerns and started down the road regardless. Willem was helpless to do anything but follow.

Together, they made their way across the countryside, following the road as it strayed further from the riverbanks. The distant hill drew closer, and where the road bent up around it, Willem found the river began to fade from view. He glanced back frequently, inexplicably wary about leaving the water behind. He supposed that if night did fall, the sound of the water might be easier to follow than this road the fields were taking back. He kept turning his head, kept the sparkling, twisting, earthy surface in view as long as he could. It took only a single step, and then it was like the water wasn't even there. Just gentle green landscape, smooth and rolling lowly out to where it met the hazy gray sky.

He paused a moment, overlooking the verdant plains around him. These, the lowlands of his country. Come spring, come true spring still weeks away, the greenery would be flooded entirely. The small hills between fields would rise like fertile mountains bursting from a winter sea. The rabbits, voles, and stoats would make their way to the higher hills for a brief time, but the lowlands would hardly be quiet. The surface of the water would be speckled with rain and the landing of flitting insects. The air would warm with the sounds of small birds returning from their southern sojourn. Even in the rains of spring, their voices always emanated clearly from the thin riverside groves where they huddled in the tree branches, round and soft in the gray mornings. On the drier days, they celebrated the sun, and the water bugs were the feast that welcomed them home.

Willem found himself longing for the birds. Winters quieted even the water beneath ice, a dullness only ever broken by the incessance of gulls. He turned back to the road and resumed his step, watching Betje, as always, to where she glided along the muddy path and vanished beyond the rise of a low hill. He hurried after her. His own steps were a poor imitation of the flight that

seemed to carry her above the slick ground. He focused solely on his own feet and, so, was surprised when he traversed the hill to find he and Betje were no longer alone.

Another flooded field stretched out before them, and at its edge, a lad had stopped to water his horses. He sat upon the bare back of a black mare, holding her reins in his right hand and, in the other, the lead of a gray gelding standing next to them. They were farm animals with strong shoulders and gently sloping backs, well-fed and shaggy with the winter. Their tails had been cut above the hocks, and at their shoulders their coats had been worn thin by pulling collars and traces. The gelding was resigned to his place in the water, tail twitching impatiently as the mare dropped her head to drink from the flood below.

The boy turned atop his mare as Willem arrived to the spot where Betje had stopped. He sat loosely with all the ease of child that had been raised upon the backs of such creatures. He was slumped, legs swinging freely at the mare's sides. His trousers and vest were worn with age, but the blue of his shirt still held some of its bright fervor. His face was pale beneath his cap but for the smattering of freckles that patterned his cheekbones. He blinked slowly at them, and his gelding snorted and shook its head.

Betje waved in greeting and approached the child with an outstretched hand. He maneuvered the animals back toward the road and watched her dully. His eyes brightened though as her hands opened to reveal the kit within. He released the reins of his mare and draped the gelding's lead across her neck, freeing his hands so as to lean down and scoop the young animal from Betje's possession. She smiled at him and reached forward to run her fingers down the black horse's forehead. She brushed aside the forelock, revealing a shock of white Willem could see even from his spot further back on the road.

The boy asked about the small animal he now held, and Betje explained how she pulled it from the river and intended to return it to its mother. The lad nodded. He knew of the warren she was looking for but explained the entire thing had been washed away. Betje frowned, and Willem could tell she was unsure of what to do with the unfortunate news. The boy noticed too, and he hurriedly offered to take on the small animal, explaining he'd done so before once or twice. His thin brows were hopeful, and at Betje's delighted nod, his face split in a toothy grin. He reassured her of his care, and so Betje stepped back, smiling as the boy nestled the kit into the cavity of his breast pocket. He waved then before picking up the reins once more to guide the horses onto the muddy path. The mucky earth splashed high up onto their legs as they cantered back out into the farmland.

Willem stood with Betje as her eyes followed the rugged creatures away. The road was hardly visible in these upper fields, demarcated only by the parallel wearing of wagon wheels. The grasses, in turn, were far taller, and they swayed gently in the settling breezes. The trees, wildly grown rather than planted like the more exotic ones along the river, were short and twisted. The new growth was dense as it erupted sooner from the hardy, native branches. The clouds in the west had begun to thin, and so the sky yellowed in the evening sun. The air cooled with it. The wind brushed across the fields in hushed warning.

Turning to his companion, Willem was dismayed to see Betje's face had hardened. Despite the happy resolution for her kit, she was unsettled. At his gentle prodding, she explained she was troubled by the loss of the warren. She wished to see it, to search for the lost mother, the lost siblings, of the little creature. Willem ached. Above them, the deepening of the sunlight against the clouds was settling along his spine like the brush of a single, chilled fingertip. His refusal hardly escaped his throat. To his relief though, Betje seemed to understand, even agree.

He offered his arm, and she took it immediately, habitually, but as they turned away from the fading road, her step was reluctant. She looked back, eyes searching for the boy and his farm horses, gone off to raise the country child she'd saved from the river. On his arm, her steps slid like his had before, while he remained steadfast. They returned down the corner, back into the sight of the flooded river where the voice of the water quashed any chance of low conversation. Deflated as she was, Betje hardly seemed to have the strength to speak above a whisper.

He did not tell her that day.



Winter returned in the following days. Ice crept back out along the edges of the river, jagged and opaque. Snow fell softly in the night, dusting the shingled roofs and ruts in the road in patches of white. In the early mornings, Willem walked the unpaved lanes at the edges of town. Yellow suns rose in hazy, pink skies, melting away the bite of the cold nights, and Willem's breath joined the chimney smoke of rekindled fires. The mornings were quiet, and he thought he might find the words he needed in the silence. His departure loomed ever closer, but the words strayed further from his tongue.

After a week or so of this, he had his epiphany.

Standing upon a low bridge, Willem looked out over the shallow river harbor where the larger boats were anchored. Boats like the one by which he would return at the conclusion of his long journey. This thing he was so excited for had been casting long shadows over his days. The flush of excitement at mentions of his trip were tainted now with fear, with anxiety, and somehow, already, with regret. Willem turned from the ships, the grave reminders, and walked

the few steps across the narrow bridge to instead survey the stream it forded. Thin now, the small torrent would soon be climbing its banks with the return of the true thaw, rendering the bridge virtually useless. The silence caught up to Willem once more, and he closed his eyes. Even in these moments, he could only think of what would be. Never what was.

Frowning, Willem opened his eyes and saw, for the first time in weeks, that the stream had frozen over completely. Leaning against the low stone wall on the side of the bridge, Willem looked down upon the ice. It was paper thin and clear as glass. Below, the water pressed up against it, rippling and rushing to where it disappeared below the bridge. In the silence, he could see it. In the silence, he knew what she was to him. There was no word for it, for her, and this, he knew, was what he must tell her.

The weight slid from his shoulders, and at last, he straightened. Turning once more, he saw the sun had broken over the rooftops, boasting of its brilliance so brightly that he was left briefly blinded, yellow branded into the backs of his eyelids. For a moment, all he saw was light, and around him, he could once again hear sounds of life. When once more he could see, he found the town bustling with early risers who were walking the streets and calling to one another. The shadow of night had lifted. Emboldened, Willem set off back toward the metropolis for the stone yard. At the end of his day, he would visit her. He would tell her that he could not explain the things for which he had no words.

The road back to town had begun to thaw. The snow in the worn wheel-grooves had been pressed back into the earth, remaining only at the untrod edges of the street. Reluctant to interrupt its pristine surface, Willem kept himself in the slowly muddying road. The low bushes and bare trees branches were still dusted in silver, shivering it off only at the landing of small winter birds. Beside him, one of the little creatures launched back into the air, dipping and

bobbing up and over a nearby line of houses. Scattered clouds had begun to fill the pink-blue morning. As one made its way in front of the sun, Willem could see the shine of snow dimming before him like a wave on the shore. As the shade overtook him, he turned, watching as descended upon the road and out into the countryside. Righting himself, he found distant tree tops still shimmered beyond the reach of his town, hope unquenchable and bright.

The road was filling. Two young women, whom Willem knew only by face, were making their way carefully in his direction, words quiet so that all Willem perceived was a toneless humming. Skirts in hand, they kept to one side of the road where the snow had not yet melted, and the ground was firmer. Willem smiled and tipped his head as they passed, a wordless greeting they returned. The women were clutching the fronts of their heavy woolen shawls tightly to their chests, trying to keep the warmth close. Still, heat slipped between their fingers, stealing out into the winter air through the red of their cheeks and the fog of their breaths.

Beyond them and further up the road, a boy dashed unsteadily along the slick street. In one hand, he swung a heavy shoulder bag in great circles, catching it occasionally in the rapidly forming puddles on the ground and slinging mud through the air. A dog chased after him, leaping and snapping at the swinging bag. Willem could hear it barking.

Upon his arrival to the stone yard, Willem was surprised to see that Gerritsen had already emerged from his rickety shed. Although a hard-working man, the mason was not keen on rising early and so tended to reserve his mornings for calculations at his desk. On this day though, Willem spotted him leaned sullenly against a stack of slate sheets. As he approached, he noted the mason held his dusty glasses in one hand, indicating he was speaking. Curious, Willem quickened his step, but then the listener shifted into view, and Willem froze. Before her face could even come into view, Willem knew it was Betje. Her skirts swung unmistakably as she

swayed, impatient. She had no tolerance for the brusque mason, and Willem was, for the first time, struck by how similar the two were in character.

Then her eyes found him. Betje's eyes found him, and he knew she knew. She knew he was leaving and hadn't said a word. Willem's face grew hot and his stomach cold. What must she think of him? Her face was carefully slack, but Willem could in see the pinch of her brow, the jut of her chin, anger. Disappointment. Betrayal. Why had he done this thing?

His mouth fell open. Silent.

Betje stiffened, and she turned back to Gerritsen and nodded, gracious as ever. Then she turned, sudden and still stiff, and she left.

He watched her go.



In the coming weeks, winter wore on, lashing out violently in its death throes. The snows fell waist deep, and most of the rivers were hidden beneath papery sheets of ice. The townspeople donned their heavy coats once more, though Willem doubted they'd truly been stored away for the season.

With the return of the cold, Willem felt he'd been frozen solid. There was a stiffness in his limbs and a dullness in his chest that crept like frost and strangled his rib cage. Each night, it spread just a bit more. His dreams were murky and formless, and it took a little longer each morning for the numbness to recede from his fingertips, for heavy sleep to leave his brow. His steps were slower when he stood, his speech halting when he spoke. His hands, unfeeling, let slip

most items they held. If the mason noticed, he didn't say anything, too preoccupied with the impending trip and the tasks it demanded.

Exhausted as he was by day, Willem took to evening walks. He stayed out long after dark, circling town like a starving owl on quiet wings. Deep nights, like early mornings, were silent. The birds found rest in black trees, and the rivers were muted beneath the new ice. Winds, however gentle, were made sinister by the dark. The people returned to their homes. But Willem stayed out as long as he could, searching for an answer he knew he wouldn't find. Each night, the chill in his legs would eventually drive him back inside; each day, it was the chill in his throat that drove him back out.

A week before he was to leave, his feet carried him to the shallow skating pond hidden beyond the river harbor between some low-lying hills. The deep snow had been plowed down by the coming and going of many feet, as well-travelled perhaps as any road in the town proper. It meandered in staggering curves, drifting between small dips and rises in the land. When the sun was at his back, Willem's shadow was long in front of him, flickering in and out of the uneven footprints in the snow. He paused when he reached the final turn in the path. Beyond a crest in the land, he could hear shouting and laughter and the smooth scraping of blades on ice. The sounds were distant, despite being just around the bend. The dense wool of the snow pulled the voices into its downy layers, softening, muting, quieting the winter. All he could see was the white land glowing a thousand hues of dull orange in the late sun. Like some cloud world, the gentle rolling landscape was a white surface painted with shades and shining glares. Willem wondered briefly if this was what the birds saw as they hung in the air on gray days. Were clouds gray on top as they were below? Or did the sun shine eternally on their peaks and ridges?

Resuming his trek, Willem rounded the corner and was met by the village's well-loved skating pond. It was a relatively small body, fed by ground water alone. In times of high flood, the pond would roll over its low banks and pour into the countryside. The torrent often took the very path Willem had followed to this place, seeking and finding that same flat route. When it would reach the cobblestones of the harborside street, the new stream would turn and cascade down the slope and into the river proper. For months after, those portions of the riverside would remain bare, earth and seeds carried into the harbor with the sudden rush of dark water.

In the past weeks of sudden cold though, the pond had frozen over entirely. The ice had gone from a varying and chalky white to a deep evening-blue as more and more water froze beneath it. The invitation to skate once more was irresistible, and those living nearby had begun to flock back. The rivers were far too thawed; the pond a final refuge.

Willem had no intention of joining the skaters. Instead, he made his way to the far edge of the water where visitors had erected several low benches and a fire pit. That day, the area was empty. A few logs remained in the round stone hearth, abandoned but still glowing. Willem settled himself beside it with a welcome sigh. His breath was wet and crystalized in the air in front of him. He tugged his hat lower over his ears before sticking his mitten-clad hands in his armpits. His chin and mouth he tucked into the layers of his scarf.

There were far more skaters that day than he had originally estimated. The last thrill of winter, he supposed. The majority were slow-moving young lovers, making use of the cold as an excuse to cling tightly to one another. They were joined by several married couples as well and handful of lone, older men whose easy motions indicated many years of experience. At the far edge of the pond, a group of boys was rough-housing playfully. Their shouts skittered across the ice as they spun to and from each other, abrupt movements leading to frequent crashes into

passersby, at one point even causing a young woman to fall. By then, one of the older men had begun to yell at them, and Willem was unable to suppress a smile. His own childhood was colored by similar incidents, and for a moment, he missed the simplicity.

More than anything though, he missed Betje. He hadn't sought her out after she left the stone yard that day. He couldn't be sure what she thought of his silence, but he didn't need to know because he had seen how she felt. Her face, disappointed and angry, waited for him every time he closed his eyes, every time he blinked. An incessant reminder that he'd hurt her. So he wouldn't see her. He wouldn't make it worse. He would go to the *Italiaans* states, and upon his return he would have the words, the new words he needed to explain. To try again.

In the distance, the sky was darkening. The orange was dulling with rich browns and frosty grays as the sun lowered and more distant households began building up their fires for the night. Faint clouds were drifting in, brushing in front of the sun and giving Willem a glimpse of its perfect, round disk. From this spot, he could see the line of windmills that dotted the countryside. The blades rotated slowly, gently, like the opening and closing wings of a resting butterfly. They had a hypnotic quality, and Willem felt the motion luring him into some sort of waking dream. He closed his eyes instead and listened. The blades cutting the ice, the shuttering of the lone tree by the side of the pond, the steady, breathy beat of the windmills back toward town. And laughter. Voices. Rising from the pond like smoke and music.

He and Betje had come here as children, as adults. Their voices had been part of the evening chorus, laughter and breath on the ice. So many times, he had wanted to hold her hand but was too afraid to ask. Then, she would drift from his side like a ship loosed from an anchor and dance away. Her dresses always sailed out, wings fluttering, and there were times he thought

her flight across the ice might carry her into the sky. But the pond was small, and at the end of each outing, she'd always find her way back to his side.

Willem opened his eyes again. The world was glowing. The pale sun was dusty now on the clouds, the snow. The colors shifted and danced like the earth had sunk beneath the surface of a primordial sea and was waiting to be reborn. For a moment, Willem thought he might be drowning, but when he gasped aloud, his lungs flooded with air, and he could breathe. The air was bitter with cold and soot, and Willem started coughing. He curled over himself, shaking with the heaving of his chest until his lungs were able to expel the irritant. Sitting up again, he blinked away the tears in his eyes to see that many of the skaters were now at the far edge of the pond, seated and removing the blades from their feet. The end of day was summoning them home to firelight.

Beside Willem, the glowing logs of the fire pit had gone black. The sun was dipping below the horizon, and the chill was settling in Willem's still body. His joints seemed to have fused, and when he stretched his arms, his wrists and elbows cracked, the sound like ice splitting and shattering in the spring. Some base instinct though drove him to move, to stand, to stretch and break and shake loose the ice from his blood and bones. He thought he heard pieces fall and crunch beneath his steps as he began to follow the herd home, leaving behind a quiet pond and an empty evening.



They left before dawn.

The mason had purchased a pair of sturdy geldings for the first part of the journey. Not quite plow animals, though certainly descended from them, the horses were heavy-footed and docile, making no complaint as Willem and the mason guided them into the muddy street.

In that final week before their departure, the air had warmed considerably. The deep snow sank into the velvet earth, and when the spongy ground could hold no more, the remaining melt waters sought out the shallow dips of land only made visible when they were filled in spring. The rivers too had finally surged above their banks, overtaking roads and docks and bridges. The countryside had become a muddy sea, better to float upon than wander through. In town, the populous had emerged from their sheltered dens to find they now resided on islands. On housetops and dryer hillsides, they basked in the gray sun, layers falling from their shoulders like melting sheets of ice. Laughter and splashing footsteps skittered over the surface of the water, free now of the snows, and ricocheted down the streets. The air was heavy and wet. Willem watched the activity from his doorway, the shadowy light only just falling across his face. Several times, a particularly loud call startled him back into the dim comfort of his burrow. Springtime could be like that, he'd always thought. Longed for, of course, but shocking. Too much all at once after waking from hibernation.

Taking their leave of town though, Willem was grateful for the break in the weather. The early morning air, though cool, was energizing. The streets were clear for the first time in months, leaving the damp paving stones to glint dully in the few slats of pale light that managed to find the gaps between rooftop overhangs. The horses' feet clacked rhythmically on the cobbled roads, set to music by the calls of small birds. Their rocking steps were soothing, the swaying motion steady and unhurried. No slick ice or snow-covered inconsistencies threatened to break the strides of the hardy animals.

As they made their way to the riverside, the village began to stir once more. Tradesmen and sailors were boarding their vessels, which floated gleefully on the dun ripples of the dense river. Wet wood clattered against shingles as shutters were thrown open. The scent of peat smoke was faint in the still air. It was a pattern to which Willem had been witness daily with the warming of the week, but from his perch that day, it was different. His previous morning wanderings had been purposeless, driven by a need to escape from and drown in the reality he'd set upon himself. He'd been wallowing, wanting, watching, but never seeking. Yesterday, Betje held the world in her hands. Today, it waited for him in *Carrara*.

The night before had stormed, and Willem spent most of it on the floor of Gerritsen's rickety shed. He and the mason worked long after midnight preparing supplies and paperwork, simple but consuming tasks that proved a welcome distraction. Outside the sodden structure, rain fell hard and fast, spattering in the open doorway and dripping steadily from leaks in the roof. After hours of listening to the drumming of water, Willem asked his cantankerous master about their itinerary, to which Gerritsen responded with his typical terseness; they'd arrive in *Den Haag* the morning of their second day. There, the mason planned on meeting his own former master, a merchant who'd since expanded his business into other areas of trade. Gerritsen's former master was willing to buy their horses and get them a transport to *Rotterdam* where they'd arrive by evening. The day after that, they'd board a steamship bound for *Zwitserland* where they'd be crossing the *Alpen* on foot. Upon arriving in the *Italiaans* states, the pace would slow. They would meet with suppliers in *Milaan*, *Turijn*, and *Genua*, before arriving in the port of *Carrara*. They'd return by sea in the summertime.

Following the road out of town, Willem could hardly imagine what this quiet country lane would be like by the time he returned. The water would be lower, of course, and rich blue-

black. The currents would be gentle, and the mud of the melt-water would have been washed out into the deltas. Ducks and geese and other fowl would bob upon the river, feathers shiny in the summer sun. Old men would perch at the banks like watchful frogs, clustered and croaking in crooked groups. In their gnarled hands, they'd clutch fishing rods older than themselves, certainly the most valuable things they owned. The roads would be dried out, full of couples dodging loose dogs and chickens. The air would be heavy with warmth. There would be sounds of children screeching by the riverside, splashing in the shallows, earning bellows from the disturbed fishermen.

This morning, the riverside belonged to Willem. He'd found himself drifting further and further behind the mason. To his left, the river churned. The banks had been swallowed entirely, and the water lapped eagerly at the edge of the muddy path. The rapids were clogged with broken branches and loose grasses. Around a narrow bend in the river, this debris had clustered along a series of large tree roots, collecting in jagged masses until the rushing water pulled them loose. Across the river, a row of houses stood marooned on a forming shoal, the narrow path on that bank having been completely washed out. The windows were still dim, sleeping inhabitants surely unaware that they'd become stranded in the night. Beyond the dark cottages, a low grove of trees was completely flooded. Their bare branches stretched crudely from the developing swamp, alien and desperate like the arms of the sinners caught in the Flood. Calling out and praying, they reached for the God they'd abandoned even as rained His vengeance down upon their drowning heads.

On Willem's bank, the land was better suited to fare the melt. Some road builders, or perhaps frustrated residents, had dug a deep trench to Willem's right, offering floodwaters another avenue of travel and leaving the dirt road a bit more intact. This channel, which would

surely be dried out when Willem returned, shared none of the river's urgency and swirled gently alongside the murky lane. Beyond it, the countryside spread wide before them. The land dipped and swayed gently, short winter grass dominating the draining hills. In the distance, the highlands rose in deep gray-green like the smudge of a watercolor shadow. Above them, the clouds were dark with the storm they'd endured through the night. Left behind was a smattering of dissolving cloud cover, gray-gold with the rising sun and giving way to a dull, blue morning sky. Willem hoped that meant the sun would shine through as they travelled on as his sudden invigoration made him long for the warmth of spring at his back.



Around midday, the muddy town lane met up with the much wider coast road into *Den Haag*. It was an unremarkable crossroads, a mere meeting of mucky ruts on a low hill. The coast road followed along the top of a high ridge that dropped off steeply to the edge of the North Sea. Every year, the road itself would creep further and further inland, away from the ever-collapsing cliffside. It was a gradual process, one that might go unnoticed entirely except for the permanent, fresh wagon tracks of crushed grass at the road's far side. In this way, the road devoured the countryside, an infestation of watery locusts that were eating the earth itself. Willem's grandfather, an old *norse* man, claimed *Nederland* had been cursed by a sea god during the reign of the Vikings. The water, the old man swore, unsatisfied until it swallowed the entire country, would rip and tear at the shore long after everyone he knew was gone. As a child, the sea scared Willem for just that reason; as an adult though, he couldn't help but think it was people eating the land. People with wagons and wheels chewing the land to road because they feared the sea.

At the meeting of the two roads, Gerritsen turned his horse south and continued along the way, unknowing or uncaring of the change in scenery. Willem, however, stopped his gelding at the crest of the hill, steps from where the muddy path slid down over the edge of the land. Before him stretched the mudflats, the fingertips of the sea. Their sly growth was always the first indicator of the land next to be sunk. During high tides, the flats formed slow and shallow lakes, lapping at the fresh shores and drowning the tall, salt grasses. At the current moment, the tide was low though, water giving way to a vast and vacuous mud plain. The surface was a pale shine dotted with driftwood and drying sea weeds, which gathered in sprawling heaps at the very edges of where the water had been only hours before.

The flats were firmer, Willem knew, than the mud of the road currently sucking at his horse's cannon bones. As a child, in the long summer sun, he would spend days at a time on the flats with his father and brother. Barefoot and with their trouser legs rolled up to their knees, they would sway slowly over the surface of the mud, looking for the gentle bursting of tiny bubbles in the muck. Upon finding a series of pinholes left by the popping, Willem would fall to his knees and dig until he found the hardy muscle that had made them. The mollusk would then join the others he'd been keeping in the water-filled pail resting in the crook of his elbow. When he stood again, his knees and legs would be covered in a thin layer of the slimy earth. Looking down at his feet, he would watch the impression of his knees in the mud fill with murky water. The filling of this shallow basin would wash in tiny whirlpools of sand and dirt, spinning faster and faster as the imprint pulled in more muck. Within moments, it would be as though the mud had never been displaced by his kneeling in the first place. The hand-dug holes, however, never filled with enough mud to entirely disappear; at least, not on their own. The rising waters of high tide always brought with them enough of the sea floor to completely erase the empty clam graves.

He'd always wanted to take Betje clamming, but she'd never had the interest. Though they'd visited the coast together before, those excursions had culminated in walks on the beach itself. She told him that she loved the sound of the waves too much to spend the entirety of these daytrips on the quiet mud. The roar of the ocean was clean and pure, leaving only salt to stick on their skin when they left. Just as they gobbled the land though, the flats were known to swallow clammers whole. With the rising of the tide, Willem would find himself washing the mud from his forearms and calves, picking grit from his hair and his nails. What the sea cleaned, the flats stained, Betje claimed. Though he disagreed, it was an argument Willem never cared enough to have; and so, when they passed the flats on their way to sandier shores, he would simply stare out over the wet plains for as long as they were in sight, watching and rocking to the motion of the swaying clammers in search of air bubbles in the muck.

Even now, Willem half expected to see clammers out on the flats, but the mud was empty. Too cold to harvest, he supposed. Instead, the dull land shone unmarred under the clearing sky. Beyond the flats, there was a strip of land that had not yet taken by high tide. Over the years, it had been steadily shrinking, held together now by only a few stubborn trees. Through their bare branches, the glinting surface of the sea flashed slowly. Even on this quiet morning, its shifting served as an ever-present reminder of its inevitable encroachment. The clouds were looming mountains above the seascape, drifting in tall, white herds against the blue curtain of the sky. Their motion was slow but steady, and they cast shadows on the flats that trailed behind them like footprints being filled with mud.

The mason bellowed Willem's name across the lonely road, and Willem nudged his horse along the path once more. Behind him, the flats shrank slowly below the ridge, leaving only Willem's longing for summer days and mollusk suppers.



Willem and his master rode late into the evening. Gerritsen knew an innkeeper outside *Den Haag* and hoped they might earn a lower rate for lodging. They travelled long past sundown until the lights of the inn came into view. It was a surprisingly large building, long and ramshackle, with a lean-to barn against one side. A single gas lamp lit the yard out front, though some light spilled out from windows of the brighter interior. In one fluid motion, the mason dismounted and crossed to the door of the inn, calling for Willem to water the horses before coming in. As the door opened, the sounds of raucous voices filled the yard. Then it slammed a moment later, muffling the lecherous shouts once more.

Willem sat still on his horse for a moment, taking in the cool night. The air was wet with rain and sea. The dark itself was quiet, and above him, the moon was blurry with cloud cover. He watched the slow shadows pass across its stony face before the impatient shifting of his horse led him to swing himself up out of the saddle stiffly. He landed with a grunt on numb feet, sending crippling shocks up his ankles and shins. He gasped in pain and clung to his horse's side until the feeling passed, and he was left brittle with exhaustion. Wearily, he grasped the reins of his master's horse and led both animals into the musty barn.

When at last he entered the inn, Willem recoiled at the scent of unwashed bodies, urine, and bitter ale. After hours of smelling only salt and brine, the odor of civilization was startling. The entryway was a tight corridor beside the base of a rickety staircase, lit with a series of low oil lamps. The voices came from down the narrow hall which Willem reluctantly followed into a cramped and decrepit parlor. Like the rest of the building, the room was small and rundown. The

slatted floor was more mud than wood, and the walls, which at one point might have been whitewashed, were gray with oily soot. Leaning against said walls were arrays of empty and splintered casks, piled in ways that suggested they'd simply been tossed there. Similarly, a series of shelves hung at odd angles around the room, as though they'd seen a few too many drunken brawls. The only one still functional had been nailed close to the ceiling and held a clock stuck on ten minutes to three. The dim chamber was lit primarily by a small fireplace which, on the best of days, might've only illuminated half the space. At the moment, it served only as a glowing backdrop for the twisted figures dominating the room.

To one side, a group of men were seated on mismatching stools and intact barrels before the fireplace. Willem immediately spotted the mason there, leaning heavily to one side as he grinned drunkenly at a bearded man in a soldier's slouch hat. Behind them, another four travelers laughed at a compatriot across the room who was busy accosting a tavern girl. Despite having managed to open his trousers, the villain was too inebriated to stand and, as a result, was now subject to wrath of the young maid. The girl had her hand buried in the drunk's hair and was prying him from her skirts. The man yelped and wailed as the girl yanked the hair from his scalp. When at last she was able to remove the parasite from her person, she sent a sharp kick to the side of his perch, and he spilled onto the floor while she disappeared into the kitchen. The onlookers howled as the drunk struggled to sit up, their voices doubling as the man vomited violently onto the ground. At his feet, his full mug sat upright and undisturbed.

Willem had attended his fair share of seedy establishments, though perhaps none so vulgar as this. At home, he'd frequented a tavern called the Salt and Quail, which was where, on that fateful night weeks ago, he and Betje had been so taken by the ramblings of a drunk alchemist. That place was more welcoming than this inn for sure, and Willem could count on one

hand the number of times he'd seen Betje harassed by drunks. The first time it had happened, he'd been stunned speechless. Barely fifteen at the time, he and Betje had only just started spending their evenings at pubs around town when the blacksmith from down the road leaned over Betje and grabbed her breast. To this day, Willem was ashamed that all he'd managed to do was stare, his surprise only interrupted by the shrieks of both Betje and her assailant. She'd leapt to her feet with a screech of fury, swinging her elbow out wildly and hitting the blacksmith in the eye. The man had fallen back clutching his face, only to be swarmed by the proprietor and a group of his angry customers. The blacksmith had then been dragged down the street and tossed into a manure pile by the riverside.

Such punitive action would clearly not be taken against the man writhing on floor of this traveler's inn. Disgusted, Willem stomped to the intoxicated mason, who unsteadily held out a key to the rooms he'd gotten them for the night. Taking it, Willem left the loud room swiftly, retracing his steps back to the crooked staircase he'd seen in the front entry. He located their rooms on the second floor swiftly and dropped himself into one of the narrow beds. Undoing his boots, he threw his feet up onto the bare mattress and bunched his salt-damp coat into a moderately comfortable lump which he then laid back upon. He stared at the ceiling blankly. The room held a damp chill, and he could hear rats scrambling up and down the walls behind his head. His eyes burned suddenly, and so he shut them. Below, the chaos of the parlor raged. The floorboards of the hall outside groaned with every passing pair of footsteps. On the roof above, rain had begun to patter on the shingles, reverberating down into the rooms like the impatient tapping of nature's fingers. None of the sounds were particularly foreign, but in this darkness, in this place, they were monstrous. Willem rolled over onto his side, clutching his head in both

hands. He didn't want to hear, didn't want to be here. Something ached in his chest, expanding, hollow and heavy. And for the first time all day, he wished he were home.



That night, he dreamt of a castle again.

In his dream, he found himself standing on a hill overlooking a gentle valley. The green fields were bordered by a dense and lively forest which climbed three magnificent, rolling hills to the south. The first two hills were clear cut on their tops, smooth and bright like the upturned heads of balding men. The third though, the largest and furthest away, was rocky and gray; its sloping sides cut jaggedly into the horizon, dropping off on one side in a sudden cliff. A series of white, wispy clouds were emerging from behind this formation, pale and shady in the dawn sky. They roiled and spun like slow-moving smoke, giving that highest peak the appearance of a smoldering volcano. The sun, emerging from a network of hills in the east, cast a golden pallor over the vibrant green of the landscape.

The hill on which Willem found himself was long and gently-sloped, rolling down before him until it met the steep but shallow edge of a smooth lake. The water was still and clear as a mirror, the reflection of the hills and clouds and sky interrupted only by the remains of a crumbling castle. Willem could tell it had once been beautiful; it was of a classic medieval structure, with four turrets walled together by a central keep. The stone blocks of its construction were pale gray in color, stained now by the rising sun so that it resembled golden fields of ripe wheat. The windows, dark and empty of glass panes, stood out sharply against the gilded stone walls in high, delicate arches. A few great vines still clung to the sides of fortress, spreading

leafy covering across the cold surface. Against one tower, a twiggy willow was sprouting spring growth. Of the towers, this was the only one that still had its elegantly spired roof. The rest, along with the top of the keep, stretched upwards as open-air installations, stone walls ending in uneven peaks of stone blocks. It was a sad sight, the face of a tragic and bitter loss. It seemed that God, in deciding to punish some vainglorious ruler who once reigned from this place, had dragged the castle down into itself so its ruler might need only look up to see the face of the only King who mattered.

The keep had been long abandoned, but the water, the mirror lake, seemed to be a new element. The plant growth on the walls was green and thriving despite the roots surely drowning below. The stone walls were unmarred by water staining. The edge of the lake was beachless, grassy ground simply continuing, unbroken, below the surface. For a moment, Willem wondered if, in this place, time was moving backward. If this castle, sculpted painstakingly by the hands of serfs, had been planted and was now growing from the lake; emerging as a crumbling relic of a forgotten age, arriving at its maturation as a fully-formed and functioning fortress, and upon its death, disassembling itself block by block into organized stacks ready to be hauled away. Perhaps. Perhaps it was just an old castle, flooded.

There were others too. Spectators and onlookers to this lost place. At the edge before Willem, a shepherd leaned on his crook, a small flock of sheep bedded at his feet like loyal wolfhounds. Beside him, a rider in a beaver felt cavalier hat speaking from atop a black stallion. The shepherd looked up at his companion and responded, and both horse and rider turned their heads to listen. On the far shore of the lake, a small herd of cattle grazed while a couple walked arm in arm. He knew immediately the woman was Betje. The tilt of her head, the pinch in her

shoulders; her back was to him, and she was quite far away, but he knew it was her. Willem didn't recognize her companion.

He opened his mouth to call to her but stopped himself. What would he say? Would she even hear him? Doubtless, the only attention he'd attract would be that of the shepherd and rider standing between himself and the water's edge.

There was a crashing then, and a splash. Willem's attention was drawn back to the castle, from which a large stone block had just slipped from one of the open-air towers. The structure seemed to be shaking. Humming. Whistling. Vibrating. Sending ripples out across the still surface of the lake. Then, another block pried itself from the wall of the keep, colliding magnificently with the water below. Drops of liquid gold sprayed into the air, falling in a fine, jewel-like mist back to the mirror surface. As Willem watched, one block after another removed themselves from the castle and tumbled into the lake until, all at once, the entire thing fell, collapsing as a cascade of pale stone into the water. A fountain erupted in its place, heavy drops raining down from a gilded thunder cloud. The smooth lake shuttered violently, ripples forming waves that lapped at the grassy edges of the fields. And then it stilled. Ripples smoothed and the fountain withdrew, leaving behind the surface of mirror that had never seen a castle.



Willem and the mason left before sunrise the next day. Given his level of intoxication the night prior, Gerritsen was surprisingly well-rested by the time he roused his apprentice. Willem, on the other hand, was somewhat worse for wear. The ride yesterday had been long, his sleep fitful, and his muscles had turned wooden sometime in the night. Still, he sat up, laced his

boots once more, and followed his master down the stairs and out into the yard. They readied the horses wordlessly, then mounted from a carriage stone in the yard. Willem's groin and lower back protested at the movement, even as he settled back into the saddle. He'd always considered himself a decent rider, but never before had he spent this long on horseback.

The dawn was gray and foggy, and Willem fought to keep himself awake as he and the mason made their way down the coast road once more. For all the aching in his body, the rocking of his gelding had a lulling effect, and he quickly found himself nodding off. Finding the animal unbothered by his lack of attention, Willem cautiously leaned over the horse's neck and rested his upper body there. Its dense muscles were warm against his chest, so soothing that he hardly noticed the brittle scratching of the horse's coarse hair against his face.

He closed his eyes. Turning his head to the side and freeing his nose from the dusty scent of horse, the air was thick with salt and the fishy rot of low tide. The scent was not entirely unpleasant. When he'd been clamming with his family as a boy, they'd often spent several nights by the sea beneath a thin canvas tent they'd borrowed from a neighbor. He'd wake up to that smell every morning. To the sound of gulls crying for the sun and the wind blowing through long grasses. To pale light seeping through the thin fabric above him. He slept well those nights, just as he slept well on his horse.

Though he didn't sleep. Not really. Resting against the gelding's neck, he was conscious of the fact that he was sleeping but not asleep. He could feel the damp of the heavy fog on his face and, as the road drew closer once more to ocean, he could hear the distant crashing of waves on the sand. The sound faded in and out as their path drifted to and from the shoreline. Waves upon waves. He was floating, it seemed. Swaying with pale wings on pulsing gusts. Below, far below, the sea was white and gray, dragging and beating itself upon the beach. Reaching.

Reaching. Stretching and grasping at the land. Dragging the sand it caught out to the center of the sea where the waves brought all their treasure. Willem wondered if it was the waves then that formed islands, new lands. The earth it swallowed might be taken from this countryside, but on what far shores might it then appear? The ocean had never been infinite; its greatest power was simply seeming to be so.

Willem's horse, for all its sure-footedness, was no match for the deepening mud of the road into *Den Haag* and slipped, lurching forward and down before it caught itself in a wide, bracing stance. Willem, limp on the horse's back and at the mercy of its near-fall, slid over the pommel of the saddle onto the horse's neck. It was only the creature's quick reflexes that saved him from tumbling over its head and into the muddy road. Instead, he was able to slide awkwardly back into the proper position as the gelding righted itself and continued on unperturbed. Shifting from side to side, Willem sat back, straightening and stretching his spine, blinking wearily. He felt oddly refreshed and was relieved to see the occasional squat cottage on the roadside, signaling they were already at the edge of the city.

Willem had travelled to *Den Haag* semi-annually growing up, accompanying his mother on visits to her sister. His aunt, a kind but serious woman by his recollection, had died of a fever when he was nineteen, effectively ending these infrequent trips to the city. Willem recalled finding the bustle of *Den Haag* to be utterly overwhelming. The city itself was not unlike his own town, just much larger, a factor that seemed to make all the difference. The unpleasant scents of his own home were brief, swept into the countryside and dispersed by the wind. The smell of *Den Haag* hung permanently there. Perhaps it was the smoke blanketing the place or the sludge always washing up along the shores; something, something trapped the smell. Willem felt sure that this something also trapped the temperatures. The summers, during which Willem had

most often visited, had been unbearably hot in *Den Haag*; and in the handful of winter trips he'd made, the cold had been especially bitter.

More than anything though, it was the residents of the city that set it apart from Willem's home. The density of the population made sense to him, but why that density seemed to alter their kindness did not. Faces in the street were cold and focused, looking past and over, but never seeming to see. In attempting to ask for directions, he'd been ignored, shoved, and once, spat on. The steps of those people were rushed and careless, like the steps of horses, crushing all but stones beneath their feet. As a child, Willem and his brother often flanked their mother on both sides as they walked, so as to prevent passersby from stepping on her heavy traveling skirts. Willem had felt cowardly in the city, childish, afraid to move about alone. The roads were always booming with shouting and lewd cackling, by day and night. Curled on the hard mattress he'd shared with his brother, Willem had wondered how anyone could sleep with all the racket in the streets below.

It was the most distinct argument Willem had ever had with Betje, the quality of people living in cities. In describing one of these visits, he had named *Den Haag*'s residents uncivilized, to which Betje protested. She believed one could not critique a behavior they didn't understand which, she claimed, was exactly what Willem was doing. She pointed out the presence of pickpockets and thieves living there, robbing their victims not just of their valuables, but also their sense of safety. Disease, she believed, ran rampant in these dense places, taking the health and loved ones of the city's residents. She also cited the importance of money for urban citizens, the thing she always thought was the source of true evil. She was sure these had turned sour the hearts of those in *Den Haag*, and beneath it all, they were good people. Willem, still a boy at the time of this debate, was defensive and insulted. He told her she was foolish, that she hadn't been

there so she didn't know. She, in turn, called him spiteful and arrogant, and they proceeded to go a week without speaking. In the end though, Betje was right. Willem's aunt was dead within the year, and he had to watch as his mother's face permanently took on that same set scowl he'd seen on so many residents of *Den Haag*. It was life that made people hard, not the city. He'd intended for a long time to apologize to Betje but could never determine how best to broach the topic. So, they never discussed it again, not even when Betje travelled to *Den Haag* herself for the first time. And now he'd left without saying goodbye or telling her he was wrong.

Indeed, Willem was determined to see the city as Betje did this time. Although they would be in *Den Haag* only briefly, for in truth they were really only passing through, this journey would be taking Willem and his master through a number of foreign cities, some in which they might spend considerable time. So, alongside some uncertain anticipation, Willem felt the unmistakable spark of curiosity. As they came up on *Den Haag* now, nausea was climbing Willem's throat. He swallowed thickly. Excitement and dread felt so similar.

Willem and the mason were approaching along one of the wider canals. The water was high, wavering at the very top edge of its banks. It was gray and dark and rippling against the short mud slope that separated it from the road. The road itself drew away from the canal, this wider bank allowing for the mooring of small rowboats and dinghies high up on the mud. The horses' feet suddenly started clacking, and their pace increased as the soggy road turned to hard cobblestones. With the change in pavement, the road also rose slightly in elevation. Sitting now several lengths above the canal, the street became steadily lined on the left side with rows of houses and shops, all dark and quiet in the early morning light.

The road ahead turned with the canal, and as they approached the bend, the city center came into view. The sunrise, like the hours preceding it, was gray. The yellow at the horizon line

was shadowy, like the sky of a renaissance painting doused by years of dust. The smattering of small clouds, which hung immobile above the city, were smoky mustard in color. Their outlines became increasingly vague as they disappeared onto the horizon, fading into the gray of a distant hill. *Den Haag* was a monochrome mass below, the towers and pointed rooves of the *Binnenhof* the only distinctive shape among the dark sea of buildings. From countless chimneys, smoke curled into a thick haze above the city.

As they drew closer to *Den Haag* proper, the sky brightened, and the smoke thickened. The residences along the canal began to wake. Shutters opened, dogs were released into gardens, wizened old women emerged to sit by their doors and watch. All so familiar. A small bridge emerged over the water, and Willem followed the mason across.

The city seemed smaller than Willem last recalled. Whether the youth of his last visit had summoned ideas of grandeur or the years that had since passed had built the place into a sprawling maze in his mind, Willem couldn't say, but *Den Haag* no longer felt vast or untamable. The streets seemed narrower, shorter. Looking down one block, he could see halfway across the city. This was no labyrinth. It was ramshackle, built on impulse without forethought. The mason knew the way though, and soon they were joined by crowds of early risers wearing exhaustion, not cruelty, upon their faces. Even the beggars and miscreants lurking in alleys and overhangs were more of a sad sight than a threatening one. Betje was right of course. This was not the worst of humanity on display. This was just humanity.

Willem followed Gerritsen across the city to the residence of the mason's former master. By all accounts, merchants were known to be wealthy businessmen, so Willem was surprised when they arrived at an enormous stone yard. He supposed this surprise was foolish; his master received most of his own shipments from this merchant, so of course he'd still be closely

affiliated with this branch of his business. Suddenly on edge, Willem urged his horse up beside his master's, and they approached a haphazard shack tacked onto the side of a storehouse. A man close to Willem's age approached them, taking the mason's reins as Gerritsen abruptly swung to the ground. Willem was quick to follow.

Gerritsen took only a moment to describe the purpose of their visit before the young man summoned a boy to come take their horses. He explained that Willem and the mason were expected and ushered them toward the precarious building before them. They were guided into a dingy hallway and told to wait while the man disappeared further into the dusky structure. Willem shifted his weight, nervous in the shadowy hovel. Unlike the inn where they'd slept the night prior, this residence was far too quiet, like a home built for people but inhabited by ghosts. Willem glanced at his master who seemed entirely unperturbed by the strange stillness of the place. Together, they waited, silent like the building, until the man returned and directed them to a door at the end of the hall. Willem's master headed down the corridor immediately, leaving his apprentice to scramble behind. Gerritsen knocked firmly on the appointed door and waited until a raspy voice indicated they could enter.

The room inside was some sort of study. Musty and dark like the hall that had brought them here, it was tight. On the right, a fire snapped hungrily from a hearth, robust but somehow failing to warm the space. To left, across from the struggling fire, was a small, square table, pushed up against a wall with a window situated at an odd height. Though it let in a good deal of the morning sun, the window itself was too high from the ground to see out of. Too high, Willem supposed, to see into either.

The merchant and his wife were seated together at the table. The woman, though facing Willem and his master, made no sign that she saw them. Though she had a worn shawl thrown

over her shoulders, the woman was wearing an elegant, high-collared dress, deep green in color with ornate, auburn lacework on the cuffs and neckline. From her ears hung dangling silver earrings, and upon her head was a lush velvet cap. Despite the luxurious quality of her adornments, she hardly seemed a woman who'd had the genteel life these clothes implied. Her face, square and wrinkled, was dotted with spots from exposure to the sun. A faint scarring on her cheeks was indicative of frostbite, which Willem recognized as matching those marks on his father's face. Her hands, gnarled with age, were calloused and crooked from long, hard labor.

With his back to the fireplace, the merchant, stared blankly at the wall before him. Like his wife, he made no move to acknowledge his visitors. Sitting hunched in his chair, the merchant wore a navy-blue doublet and a matching cap. The velvety material was heavy and opulent, with sleeves that buttoned tightly at the wrists. Draped around him was a dark, linen cape, which folded at his shoulders and draped down both his chest and back. Around his neck, the merchant wore a stoat scarf of a shining gold-brown. His features, already well-defined, were accentuated by a dramatic roman nose and a neat, white beard. Also like his wife, Willem could see his hands were deeply calloused, and by the angle of some of his fingers, he'd had bones broken as well.

Willem's eyes quickly skated over the strange occupants of the room and landed instead on the contents of the table. Upon it rested a toppled stack of money orders and two large canvas bags filled to the brim with coin. The merchant's wife was weighing two small piles of these coins on a set of scales. She looked to her husband as she did so, frowning deeply as he continued to stare straight ahead. In his hands, he held a third canvas bag, this one empty, which he squeezed rhythmically.

For a brief moment, husband and wife remained intensely focused on their actions, until the mason finally cleared his throat. The merchant, pulled from his reverie, straightened and turned to Willem and his master with a wide and black-toothed smile. The merchant greeted them heartily though he remained seated, offering a warm hand for both to approach and shake as Gerritsen introduced his apprentice. The mason restated their intended journey, requesting both payment for the horses and passage to *Rotterdam* as discussed in previous correspondence. The merchant readily agreed, asking questions about the quality of the animals and explaining he'd send for a coach to take Willem and his master to the next city.

Willem remained quiet throughout the interchange, focused instead on the copious amounts of money moving back and forth across the table. At one point, the merchant's wife caught his staring; her eyes narrowed, frown deepening, and Willem looked down at his feet quickly. The merchant remained oblivious to this interaction, calling loudly for the man who'd brought them to order the coach. Willem flinched at the man's bellow, causing both Gerritsen and the merchant to laugh. The merchant turned to Willem and inquired about his work back home. Willem hardly had time to answer before the merchant proclaimed a young man such as himself must thrilled for the journey ahead.

The comment gave Willem pause. The simplest response was to accept the statement, to agree that, indeed, he was excited for the great things that awaited him on this trip across the continent. And he surely was anticipating it. He'd be seeing mountains for the first time, traveling by sea and riverboat, exploring the remains of the Romans across their cities. But he would miss his home, miss his town, his river, his country. Miss his family and friends. Miss Betje. A part of him worried that no one, none of it, would be there when he came back. And a part of him worried he would be the one to never return.

The mason noticed immediately the uncertainty on his apprentice's face and leapt in to draw the merchant's attention from the long, quiet response he'd received. For the rest of their visit, Willem stood silent while his master and the merchant spoke. The merchant's wife continued to weigh coins, though Willem could feel her hard gaze brush over him from time to time. Within the hour, the merchant's man returned and informed the party of the arrival of the summoned coach. The men bid each other farewell before Gerritsen hurried from the room. Willem, however, snuck a final glance over his shoulder. The merchant had returned to his sightless stare at the wall while his wife kept her eyes fixed on the coins.

Upon returning to the yard, Willem and his master quickly boarded the stagecoach. The ride to *Rotterdam* was long, and the mason spent much of this time chastising Willem for his hesitant response to the merchant, a reaction he called ungrateful to both himself and their host.



The coach delivered Willem and his master to a lavish inn, which, they learned upon their entrance, had already been paid for by the merchant. Gerritsen then inquired about the location of the riverboats to which the innkeeper responded with detailed directions to a place located just across the canal. So, Willem and the mason exited the inn and made their way across the river.

For all Willem's misgivings regarding *Den Haag*, none of those opinions, good or bad, compared to *Rotterdam*. The city was enormous. Sprawled across a series of canals, the city was the hub of trade for the entire region of the country, a status it reflected in its architecture and citizens. The extravagance of the dress alone made the merchant's opulent clothing seem cheap. Crossing a small bridge, Willem found himself stopping every few yards so that he might take in

the blue of the canal and the steeped skyline. Some part of him knew this awe was influenced the pleasantness of the weather. The sky had cleared but for a few masses of white fog that might one day be clouds somewhere. The sun burned through them, casting the city in a veiled, white light, and Willem had to squint against its reflection off the tall buildings around them. The air was warm on his neck though, and his skin hummed as it drank in the heat. Willem could hardly stop himself from slowing his steps to turn his face to the sky. Closing his eyes, the world fell away, and it was just him and the sunlight, at least until the movements of other pedestrians brushing past him returned his feet to solid ground. This behavior and the lagging pace it caused earned him another series of reprimands from the mason, who was quickly losing patience with his wayward apprentice.

Despite Willem's distraction, Gerritsen quickly located the place where the riverboat tickets were sold. Willem waited outside and sat on the low stone wall of a nearby bridge. The sun still warm on his face, Willem tilted his head back once more to enjoy the light. This time, he remained in the heart of the city though. Around him, he could hear *Rotterdam* pulsing. Carts rattled loudly on the cobblestones, and the bustling streets were full of voices. Below, the canal was washing against its stony walls as boats slipped along the water way. Beneath the usual scents of standing water and animal dung, Will thought he could smell baking bread and fresh flowers, the breath of the city.

This peace was interrupted by the unmistakable roar of his master. Turning to the building offering passage by riverboat, Willem watched as the mason stormed by. He scrambled quickly to follow. He caught up with Gerritsen halfway across the bridge where, between strings of obscenities, he learned the mason had found the riverboat tickets to be nearly three times what they had anticipated. Following his master back to their room at the inn, Willem sat on his bed as

Gerritsen tore through his belongings to count what money he'd brought. For the next hour, the mason crashed around the room, attempting to find a solution and, finding none, cursing the price of the boat.

Eager to escape the mason's wrath, Willem waited for the first quiet moment to excuse himself. The mason hardly seemed to notice him leave. Entering the street and starting to walk, Willem feared, briefly, that he might become lost in the enormity of this city. After a moment though, he reminded himself that the inn sat right along the canal so, as long as he kept the canal in sight, he had no chance of losing his way. With a newfound confidence, Willem strode along the water's edge, passing groups of shouting children, sailors staggering and laughing raucously, groups of young women with heads bent close together. The world had emerged from winter to enjoy the warmth of the evening.

It was a scene that brought Willem a surprising amount of peace, and he continued on comfortably until he came upon a large harbor overlooking the rest of the city across the canal. Carefully, stepped onto the stone wall of the canal's edge and sat. Settling in, he looked down into the water below him. If he pointed his foot, the toe of his travelling boots would just brush the surface. Swinging his legs then in slow circles, he created shallow whirlpools in the gently-bobbing canal. Childishly pleased with this result, he flicked his toes up, sending a small spray of drops across the water. Looking up as he did so, he spotted a handful of old women watching him closely from their benches on the opposite bank. He felt his face grow abruptly hot and, abashed, he looked back down at the water. As the surface settled from his disturbance, tiny fish appeared. Squinting, Willem leaned forward and watched them. They moved erratically, like the drunk sailors Willem had passed on the way here, though they did so with a fragile and controlled agility that no man, intoxicated or otherwise, could ever mimic. Their random

movements, quick – slow – then quick again, caused their silvery scales to flash in the setting sun. The light bouncing from their sides stung his eyes, but Willem couldn't bring himself to look away.

After several minutes, the fish moved further up the canal, and Willem looked back up at the city. He was surprised to see a large wooden warship was being towed into the harbor. Its body was white-washed and its wooden trim stained a deep auburn that glowed gently as the vessel was brought to port. The deck of the ship rose above most of the buildings alongside the canal and seemed to overlook all of *Rotterdam*, giving the already elegant craft an aura of divinity. The bowsprit jutted heavenward from a deeply arched forepeak, stretching gracefully like the neck of a swan. The three masts were reaching too, their stowed sails turning them into tall, stripped pines, dignified and stubborn even in the most unlikely circumstances. The bow of the ship met the water in two symmetrical arcs. The water broke before it like great sheets of ice, and the wakes churned out behind it in sprays of foam.

This relic was being towed by the most modern of nautical vessels. The small tugboat was low to the water, its small wakes crushed by the bow of the ship it pulled. Dark in color, it chugged along steadily, making its way across the canal at an astonishing speed for a boat of its size. For all its humility, the tugboat was steam-powered, and its smokestack blew puffs of black soot into the empty masts of the warship.

Beyond the two, the sun was setting in a blaze of smoky orange. As it had been that morning, the sky was hazy with clouds, though more so now. They were wispy, but numerous, veiling the sun so that Willem could almost look right at it without feeling a burn in the back of his eyes. Pale pink and angelic, larger clouds loomed in the distance. Their rounded tops were set dramatically against the deepening blue of the sky, these tallest formations casting purple

shadows down across the faces of the rest of the cloud body below. Busy with the bustle of the city, the canal could not capture shapes and instead reflected only the colors of the evening. Orange and smoky red were interrupted by the east-facing shadows of each little wave. The colors wavered like paint that wouldn't mix, streaking across the surface of the watery canvas in distinct and rippling rows. At the breast of the great warship, the water deepened to a blue-gray, breaking across the bow in great splashes of sparkling white.

Steady as ever, the tugboat pulled the great ship past Willem's spot on the shore. With the closer vantage, he could tell that the old vessel had seen better days. The frames of many of its gunports were rotted through, and splintered holes in its sides marked where cannon balls had flown through its wood. Saddened, he watched anxiously as the ship was anchored, the tugboat releasing its catch with a cough of black smoke. Tearing his eyes away, Willem found that small crowds had gathered on both sides of the canal to watch the ship come in. As it came to a rest, the watchers stood still, like they were unsure what to do next. In the few minutes it had been there, the massive warship had gained a new army of protective onlookers.

Relieved that he was not alone in his awe, Willem stood slowly, turning once more to face the sun. It had truly set now, the horizon throwing out only a few remaining glances of warm light. Willem sighed, knowing it was time to return. By now, the mason's fury surely would have abated, allowing the man the chance to develop a new plan. Willem walked back along the canal hastily. With the sun gone, darkness fell quickly, and he once more feared he might not be able to find the inn. Much to his relief though, he recognized the building quickly and entered to find, once again, his master deep in the local ale. Unperturbed, he climbed the stairs to their rooms and readied himself for a sleep that would be dreamless.

The next morning, Willem read the local paper over breakfast, the headline of which told of the return of the great warship to *Rotterdam*. After years of service, the craft was to be retired, broken up over the coming weeks and its remains repurposed. In the harbor the previous evening, Willem had been witness to the last journey of the ship called the *Betje*.

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Setting Sail on Dutch Boats

A Reflection on a Thesis

My thesis work has been baffling. From its conception, this piece has gone against my instincts. I've never been a fan of historical fiction, yet here I am writing about the nineteenth century; similarly, I have no interest in writing love stories, yet "Dutch Boats" has had its heart set on becoming one. These narrative directions were concepts present in the work from the outset, and I was initially apprehensive to write at length in these unfamiliar areas. Despite my hesitation, I could not shake my loyalty to this piece. "Dutch Boats" was the underdog of my half-started projects, but I love an underdog, so I set myself to see this project through.

Time Tells Tall Tales

In asking myself why I was compelled to write "Dutch Boats," I first have to ask myself why I bother writing at all. That question seems easy. It's cathartic. I enjoy it. It helps me escape. I know I'm not alone in this; to some degree, I see this instinct as a symbol of my humanity. I

have always believed that human beings are driven to innovate mostly for the sake of communication. Language and text, the printing press, libraries, morse code, telephones, radio, the internet. A social species, we have survived because of this ability – this need, really – to communicate. And so, writing and preservation go hand-in-hand. Much of our species' social history is based on a written record which is easy to accept as truth, even though at this point we all know that "history" is written by the winners. But I don't write history; I don't even write nonfiction. So, what *am* I doing?

I think science-fiction author Ursula Le Guin put it best when she claimed narrative is "language used to connect events in time" ("Some Thoughts on Narrative" 38). Stories are a link, the movement from one thing to the next, the documentation of cause and effect, all inexorably intertwined with time. But narrative, Le Guin goes on to assert, "does not seek to triumph over or escape from time [but] asserts, affirms, participates in directional time, time experienced, time as meaningful" ("Some Thoughts on Narrative" 39). The narratives of nonfictions are fixed within the global timeline (histories providing past insight, philosophies and commentaries often looking toward the future), while fictions exist on a parallel but hypothetical timeline. According to Le Guin though, the movement of narrative in time is indicative of, native to, and reminiscent of the present moment at the time of its telling. In digesting the journey conveyed through narrative, the audience is reminded of their own narrative in time. As any creature seeking to survive does, we exist in the "now" (indeed, when will it never not be "now"), and it is in the "now" that we are easily lost. Especially in a world as digitally dependent as ours is "now," the passage of time quickly becomes irrelevant. Narrative, by contrast, is grounding. Even in attempting to escape our own reality, narrative reminds the audience that their journeys through time are important, are relevant, are real.

Something I realized after the completion of my first few drafts was that “Dutch Boats” was reflecting my own desire to return to slower times. I won’t say simpler, because eras past have all been characterized by social, political, and economic struggles more threatening than what we see currently. That being said, the development of communicative technologies has brought with it an increase in pace. Every exchange is more rapid, each moment more loaded as conversations that may once have taken weeks now only take minutes. As a result, change happens more quickly, and admittedly, sometimes I long for the boredom that must accompany moments of quiet. Theodor Adorno draws a more poignant conclusion in his defense of the cultural undercurrents of lyric poetry. He argues that the “detachment [of a lyric poem] from naked existence becomes the measure of the world's falsity and meanness. Protesting against these conditions, the poem proclaims the dream of a world in which things would be different” (Adorno 58). Although he speaks to poetry specifically, I find his principle applies to “Dutch Boats” as well. The gradual procession of my narrative speaks to a tranquility of a life focused solely on the day to day while simultaneously overlooking the inevitable struggles that would accompany this kind of life. In focusing on the peace this narrative does have, it also rejects the volume and speed that characterize our own daily lives. Of course, the ability to do this comes from a place of privilege, of not needing to live very day for survival. However, even this awareness cannot override the desire for the “uncomplication” that comes with this struggle.

Through the Looking Glass

“Dutch Boats” is inspired by a series of unrelated paintings, dating roughly from the early 1600s to the late 1800s, all of which are housed in London’s National Gallery. Initially, the piece began as a description of one such painting called “Dutch Boats in a Gale.” This process

was a typical one for me as description tends to be my go-to practice for generating ideas. This is a strategy I first developed in my senior year of high school after reading Erin Morgenstern's *The Night Circus*, which had been recommended to me by my advisor. What fascinated me about *The Night Circus* was its immersion strategy; on the first page, Morgenstern drops her reader into a second-person, present narrative of predominantly tangible description which she then continuously intersperses throughout the novel. This was a style I began to replicate on my own, slowly learning to recreate a similar immersion effect.

I had an advantage with "Dutch Boats in a Gale" because I had a physical image work from, an element I believe aided in my success with this initial painting. Even as the piece became tangible though, I found that describing a scene could only do so much; despite my love for projecting my writing into a particular moment, I was struggling to move beyond this immersion. It seemed that all I was doing was dropping my reader into the scene of the painting and leaving them there. While there was nothing wrong with this, it didn't have the strength or the body to become something greater (and it certainly needed to if it was to become my thesis). I needed direction, a path I could push "Dutch Boats" down until it gained enough steam to drive itself. Narrative seemed the natural solution.

Suddenly stuck, I turned my focus to the allure of the painting, to the things that drew me to it in the first place. Sure, I could put myself in the scene, but what else did I see? The answer was people. Although my fascination with landscape paintings is a result of the environments they are able to create, these paintings frequently contain numerous and vague figures for whom the painting is not scene, but a reality. So, I returned to "Dutch Boats in a Gale" and focused in on a singular sailor caught up in a rowboat during the storm. What situation could have possibly brought him to this place in time? So began the narrative. I answered my own questions; I gave

him a life outside the painting, and, eventually, I gave him a name. Willem. The creation of his identity allowed the piece to embrace the structure of a story (as opposed to a mere description), the form I was looking to produce.

Following the Yellow Brick Road

I created a route for myself by selecting a series of paintings from the archives of London's National Gallery. Scrolling through their digital database, I selected every piece that jumped out of me. Immediately, I set to citing them, a process through which I noticed an emerging pattern. The paintings I selected were of the early Baroque, Romantic, and Realistic styles. Though several featured human subjects, most were landscapes and, in particular, landscapes of the northern and western European country sides. These patterns created a way forward, establishing both a geographical location and a location in time that allowed me to narrow in on a setting, the Netherlands, between 1830 and 1850.

Initially, I had no difficulty moving "Dutch Boats" forward, but then again, I have always found that beginning a narrative is far easier than continuing one. I tend to let my writing control the progress of the piece, maintaining a minimum idea of what direction I want the project to take. While I think this has produced some of my best work, it occasionally leaves me trapped with no idea of where to go next. However, the selection of artwork I'd collected gave me a solution. With this piece, I would write until I felt unsure of where I should take the narrative next. Then, I would open my file of paintings and scroll until something caught my eye. This was an indiscriminate process. I chose whatever attracted me in the moment and simply made it work. The results have been really exciting! My expectations for the plot and the characters have changed in ways I never could have anticipated and occurred so frequently throughout the

development of “Dutch Boats” that I have gained a flexibility in my practice that I hope to use in future projects.

True to the Source

From the outset of this project, I decided to avoid reading about the paintings themselves. I knew I wanted the stories they inspired to be my own. The only major deviation occurred with *An Experiment on a Bird in the Air Pump* (which first appears on page 5). As fascinated as I was by this piece, I couldn't quite decipher what I was seeing; the imagery was so historically specific that I couldn't identify the events taking place. I decided to read a description so I could better understand the image and more effectively utilize its “story.”

In terms of staying true to the paintings that were less specific in their imagery, the patterns mentioned earlier helped narrow my creative focus. Although I would come to rely on this to create “Dutch Boats,” the practice had its own challenges. Variation in century, season, and lifestyle meant that, on occasion, the painting I'd settle on wouldn't make sense in context. For example, I struggled with how I could include *Landscape with Psyche outside the Palace of Cupid* (appearing on page 9) because the content of this painting is so intangible, mythical even. In this situation, I chose to create a dream sequence so I could move into an unreality and accurately reflect the painting. In doing so, I was given the opportunity to further explore the personality of my protagonist, Willem, which allowed me to further flesh out his character and his experience of the world.

As the piece got longer and the setting became more precise, I also encountered physical and geographical inaccuracies. The more I wrote, the less flexibility I had, especially as a plot was forming. This became most evident to me as I wrote about *River Scene* (first appearing on

page 44). I used this painting to describe Willem's experience riding into The Hague. However, as I learned more about the Dutch countryside, I realized it was unlikely that this painting resembled The Hague because the city doesn't have wide riverbanks like those depicted in the painting. This inaccuracy stumped me for a while. However, in reflecting on my work as an independent creative piece, I realized that my use of the artwork did not have to be identical to what I wrote. In gaining this permission, I realized I could use the paintings more loosely than I originally believed.

Finding "*Nederland*"

My brother (who I would call an armchair historian, though he would probably argue that such a title is too prestigious) once told me that while the countries of the world have always been at war with each other, the Netherlands has always been at war with the sea. This was a conversation I kept returning to as I was writing "Dutch Boats," probably because it represented the entirety of my knowledge about the country. I have never been to the Netherlands, and whatever I may have learned about the place in history classes has long since fled my memory. So, as I began to work on "Dutch Boats," I realized that my knowledge gaps needed filling.

My research habits were sporadic though and focused mostly on using accurate language, reflecting geographical layout, and matching the technology with my chosen time frame. I was surprised to find a lot of these elements tied in with one another. For example, much of my research went into figuring out Willem's journey to Italy. I had to determine whether the cities on Google maps were there two hundred years ago and if their names had changed. Where was Willem likely to have stopped and what would he have known these places as? Similarly, Willem's method of travel would greatly affect his experience and the time it would take to

complete his journey. Trains weren't widely used until later in the 19th century while steamboats, fairly new to carrying passengers, could take Willem as far as Basel, Switzerland. While the narrative was flexible, I wanted to remain loyal to the art by grounding the story in reality, an element that required such research.

A Picture Speaks a Thousand Words

...or, more precisely, one thousand one hundred and seventy-three, if you average it out. Roughly three pages per painting.

This was a major divergence from my initial idea for this piece, which was to base it all on that first painting; I thought I might write about one individual until I ran out of things to say and then jump to the next figure in the painting and write about them. Two things stopped me from continuing with this strategy. First of all, I didn't want to write solely about men. To be sure, most, if not all, of the figures in "Dutch Boats in a Gale" are men, and while women would surely appear in their life stories, I felt I wouldn't be able to feature any female characters as I was able to do by writing about Willem's relationship with Betje. She may not be the protagonist, but I value the role she is able to play throughout the piece. My other motivation for sticking with the single protagonist was my own interest and compassion for Willem. I found myself identifying with his perceived muteness and his struggle with social interaction. As a result, I developed a loyalty to him from which I was ultimately unable to disentangle myself.

As I prepared to describe each piece, I first injected Willem into the painting. Sometimes he embodied an already present figure. Most of the time though, the image was a reflection of his own experience; the paintings showed me what Willem was seeing. From there, I immersed myself in each scene. If this was where Willem was, what was he hearing? Smelling? The classic

five senses. If the setting didn't logically make sense with the narrative, why was he seeing this? Was it a dream? Or maybe a memory? If so, what did those dreams and memories tell me about him, and how could I convey that?

Person and Place, Perhaps the Same Thing

Given the similarities in time periods and geographic locations among the paintings I chose to guide my writing, the setting of "Dutch Boats" was key to its development. I found that the shifting landscapes about which I was writing were the sources of Willem himself. In the broadest sense, this is evident in the scene based on "Dutch Boats in a Gale," the piece of writing which led to Willem's very invention. However, these sources occurred on a more minute level as well. The fast moving water of the painting "The Petit Bras of the Seine at Argenteuil" (which first appears in the scene on page 16 of my creative thesis) both causes and emphasizes Willem's anxieties. Much like his fear, he can always hear the water whispering in his ear, threatening to overwhelm and drown him. Similarly, Willem's affection for the mudflats (a scene beginning on page 34) reinforces his belief that predictability and repetition are indicators of stability. Willem is so hesitant with Betje because he knows nothing bad will happen so long as nothing changes, which he decides outweighs the benefits of any risky declarations of affection.

Such parallels between character and setting are hardly novel though. Cormac McCarthy's protagonist, who so frequently describes his willingness to kill his own son as an as evidence of his mercy, would likely a villain in any piece other than the post-apocalyptic setting of *The Road*. Tom Crick's big move to the city would not be so shocking should he have been raised somewhere other than the stagnant Fens in Graham Swift's *Waterland*. This is a pattern that stretches further back as well. Shakespeare's *Macbeth* presents a title character who is

plagued by his decision to usurp his king; influenced by the supernatural, Macbeth's actions haunt him, an effect enhanced by the play's Scottish backdrop that would have been considered wild and mystical to its contemporary audiences. Settings mold their characters as much as the author does, manipulating the audience's acceptance for a character's choices. In my own work, the parallels between Willem and his environment are meant to deepen the audience's understanding of and support for his decisions, despite how much they might consciously wish otherwise.

Not Quite Romeo, Not Quite Juliet

When I began "Dutch Boats," I could hardly have imagined the piece would evolve into a love story. I plan on it being more of tragedy of course, and as soon as I realized where this narrative was headed, I decided I wanted to avoid the classic romantic tale; neither Willem nor Betje will kill themselves, nor will they live happily ever after. My goal for this piece is to have it be a story where the love just doesn't work out, where life gets in the way and the characters must simply move on.

Key to this goal was creating a couple that felt unique, as all couples are, and, in that way, realistic. Willem was written to be head-over-heels for Betje, but it was important to me that Willem was respectful rather than jealous or possessive. It may sound idealistic, but I prefer to interpret these traits as someone genuinely in love; Willem respects Betje because she is a person, and his lack of jealousy has less to do with her and more to do with his own fear of being honest with her. Betje was more difficult to write simply because the reader is never in her head. Betje is built on Willem's interpretation of her, and as a result, the reality of her experience is dependent on how the reader (or Willem) perceives her actions. What the reader is meant to take

away though is her strong-will and the expectations she holds for Willem. Though never addressed, I aimed to convey her own feelings for him through her disappointment and anger regarding his silence.

Their interactions, though few and far between, are meant to foreshadow the impossibility of their relationship. Willem's struggle to understand Betje parallels the differences in their personalities and goals. Their arguments and split interests reflect conflicting perspectives. This is meant to be most clear through their inability to communicate with one another. As I continue my work with this piece, these are elements I will maintain throughout Willem's thoughts and memories.

The Writing on the Wall

One of the most difficult choices I faced with this piece was the decision to write without dialogue. "Dutch Boats" is written in the past tense with interactions retold to the reader through Willem only. The reader is therefore forced to rely on Willem for information; given his frequent silence though, his fear of or frustration with other people, I am hoping the reader will question the nature of Willem's world. That being said, the absence of dialogue is used primarily to parallel Willem's struggles to communicate. The stonemason, Gerritsen, is a difficult man to begin with, and the reader is not supposed to believe this line of work was ever truly of interest to Willem. Whether his silence stems from a lack of confidence or a fear of the stonemason is not meant to be clear, but it does mirror the lack of control he experiences in his day to day. However, Willem's failures to express himself are most evident in his relationship with Betje. These failures occur both before and after he learns of his imminent departure and are reinforced when he neglects to seek her out. The cause of this muteness is rooted in his inability to find the

right words. What his fear is exactly remains unclear, but it is enough to risk his relationship with Betje for the sake of staying silent.

In combination, Willem's narration as well as the helplessness he experiences are intended to further distance Willem from Betje. Betje is characterized by strong opinions and a subtly dominant personality. Willem is her opposite; he fears excitement just as much as he anticipates it. He stewes in his generally negative opinions about other people but projects an agreeable, servile personality. Their greatest similarity is their stubbornness, a trait underlined by their continued, mutual silence.

Treason of an Artist

I was seventeen when I first read what has been the most influential text of my literary life, Ursula Le Guin's "The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas." Over the years, I have found more and more meaning buried within this piece, but it seems almost preordained that the quotation that first snared my attention at seventeen is the same one to which I keep returning as I review my thesis. With an ease that seems both wise and naive, Le Guin's narrator professes "the treason of the artist [to be] a refusal to admit the banality of evil and the terrible boredom of pain" ("The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas" 330). This is certainly a conception of which I have been guilty; even now, I don't know that I totally agree. There is a degree of beauty in suffering when we suffer on behalf of another because it remains one of the few universal hardships. The Good and the Evil alike mourn the loss of their loved ones. Both saints and sinners know the heartache of a severed friendship, of a broken love. Whatever crime or penance brings us joy, the true remnant of love is the pain it leaves behind. This is why our stories, our art, return to pain over and over, not for what it is, but for what it means.

It is this suffering I see in Willem. Callous though it might sound, Willem's despair for Betje is what makes him real to me, his writer. Willem is my storyteller because I see myself in him. I know his silence, his insecurity, his distrust and self-sabotage. His fear is my fear, his despair, my despair. Willem is imperfect, as are we all, but he is not irredeemable. The good I see in him outweighs his sins, and so I embrace him for all his flaws. They say our greatest critics are ourselves, so, in finding forgiveness for Willem, I subliminally find forgiveness for myself. The characteristics I see in him are not exclusive to myself either. My hope with this character was to create a figure to whom my audience could also relate. The compassion he allows me to feel for myself is one I want to share with an audience, even if it is pain that makes this sympathy possible. These are the connections that drive storytelling. Our characters suffer because it is to that suffering that we relate; it is in that suffering that we make them human, and it is in that humanity, we offer our characters the kindness we cannot grant ourselves.

Redeeming My Treason

As unifying as it can be, the glorification of suffering in our art and in our texts remains flawed. In condemning this behavior, Le Guin's narrator in "Omelas" makes a poignant statement; in legitimizing only our shared pain, we, as a species, also devalue our shared happiness, encouraging this idea that joy is "something rather stupid" ("The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas" 330). This idea, however, is one that our art forms also contradict, evident in every written or performance narrative that is said to have a "happy ending." This is a discrepancy even more apparent in visual artforms. For all the paintings that depict the suffering to which we all relate, there exist just as many that display images of joy. Just as one may find "Dutch Boats in a Gale" evocative or stirring, one might experience a similar reaction from

“Skating in Holland” (the painting that inspired the scene beginning on page 26). Over and over, artists and creators return to happiness one way or another because joy offers something pain cannot. While pain is based in loss, happiness stems from hope made real. In narratives, when we are witness to a happy ending, we see a dream come true for both our characters and ourselves. Joy in these works is indicative of discovered possibilities which audiences thereby reflect onto themselves – if it can happen to the character, then it can happen to me too. Even if the thought is fleeting, the emotion it creates is lasting. Hope, it would seem, is a hard thing to kill.

That said, the happiness I find in “Dutch Boats” stems from the paintings. In those that are light-hearted or happy by nature, I find joy in the emotions I share with Willem. When I imagine myself in the settings of these pieces, the awe, the wonder I feel belongs too to Willem. In realizing I share these feelings with him, I am able to reflect my positive associations – my affection for him – onto myself; this is an act that brings me happiness. As for the paintings with darker subject matter, I find joy in their beauty. For example, although “Dutch Boats in a Gale” depicts the capsizing of a ship, I am awed by elegant detail of the storming sky and the churning sea. The layering of the colors creates a depth and realism that puts me in the moment, on a boat rocking on the waves. The ability of this painting to transport me is where I find that joy, and in mimicking that process, I hope to share it with my audience by detailing my immersion. Our collective reliance on suffering to bind us together might just be the greatest flaw of our species. Perhaps it’s time we all shared more of our joy instead.

Face in the Mirror

Willem is hardly the first character who has caught my attention with their willingness to watch the world go by. In my senior year of high school (which I’m now seeing was a

foundational year in my literary career), I found myself quite taken with Kazuo Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go*. Initially, I interpreted this fascination as an excitement for finding an acclaimed piece of speculative fiction (genre fiction, I'd dare to say), but as I reflect, I've realized it is Ishiguro's narrator to whom I'm drawn. Kathy's thoughts and behaviors remind me of my own at points when I've believed I was trapped in my own life. As a seventeen-year-old, I felt (as many seventeen-year-olds do) like I lacked agency; like Kathy, life was something was happening *to* me, and I had no say in where it took me next. Although sometimes I have worried that my identification with Kathy is a sign of my own personality flaws, I have realized that her experience is more telling of a greater human condition. Ishiguro uses the drama of Kathy's circumstance to amplify and reflect the lack of control a reader (such as my seventeen-year-old self) may feel as a result of immutable events or prospects.

I see now that it is with a similar stasis that I created Willem. The nature of this "stuckness" is more closely tied to his intrinsic motives; as opposed to life or fate forcing him into a situation, his struggle is self-inflicted. He feels trapped in his circumstance because he fails to initiate change. This characterization is the kind of thing that makes you want to grab Willem by the shoulders and beg him to do something, *anything*, to affect the course of his life. But as I've said, the line between myself and Willem is thin, maybe nonexistent – a fact for which I must apologize to Ursula Le Guin as she asserts a necessity for distance between a writer and her character – and so I understand his deference ("The Writer and the Character" 237). His inability to act is not, in fact, an inability, but rather a culmination of his fears and anxieties influencing his decisions, and in granting him that allowance, I am capable of extending that same compassion to myself and to the people around me. It is characters such as Kathy and Willem who reveal that we, as individuals, are not inherently flawed. Our struggles are often mutual, but

in thinking said struggles are indeed personal failings, we remain unwilling to share with others our internal conflict. By contrast, the nature of a text's character is to share their inner mind, to reveal what is otherwise hidden from the wider world. As we identify with them, we begin to see that our own experiences are universal, realizations that lead audiences to be more compassionate to themselves and to each other.

The Destination of "Dutch Boats"

At this point, I cannot say for sure whether or not "Dutch Boats" is complete. On one hand, I feel its current conclusion is sufficient. It ends ambiguously and ensures the audience remains engaged in Willem's thoughts. That said, I had always imagined this piece coming full circle, returning to "Dutch Boats in a Gale" after Willem's return from Italy. The natural option would be to continue to use paintings to guide the writing, to tell Willem's story with image and word alike and to deeply engage my audience in nineteenth-century Europe. The other option I have considered was to break his journey into distinct arcs (leaving home, the journey, his time in Italy, and his return) but to advance the time period of the setting in each arc (leaving home – 1840s, the journey – 1940s, his time in Italy – 2020s, and his return – 1840s again). The motivation for this would be to keep the writing fresh and maintain the audience's attention. However, I suspect in doing so I might lose the peaceful aesthetic the original paintings encapsulated and simultaneously bewilder my audience. At this point, the decision remains to be seen, but regardless of what I decide, "Dutch Boats" will always begin and end with a ship on the water. In many ways, our characters are ships on a sea we call narrative. Whether the surface is smooth or stormy, these great vessels sail on to their next port, the conclusion of their journey, bearing countless passengers, characters and audiences alike, along the way.

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