

As you know, a head is a deal heavier than it looks. That is one reason you do not want to drop it anywhere near your feet. Another is that it takes a long age to push it back into shape if it should fall on its sides or on the back. The face matters less but the sides and the back take an age to put right and he almost always could tell if you had gone and dropped it while he was out.

He was out when they came so sudden to the door and I stumbled and let the thing fall but held on at the last and spared it and my toes and set it on the sill of the street side window, where there was light to see by. At their end of the shop the man blocked light from the door and the woman who walked before him moved under a dull cloud. She stopped three steps in and spoke to her man without a look at him or me, or anywhere but at her hands in finger gloves held at her stomach, pressing the dark stuff against her. She said:

‘Melt. Ask after the master.’

The man Melt moved from the door, and light followed him into the shop. He looked at the blank faces on the shelf, then at me, his expression the same for me as for the wood and wax, yet under his eyes I felt my shoulders drop and a stillness settle in me, I recall it as that sudden and thorough, the effect of his looking. Though she had not spoken to me I answered her that my master was at the barracks for a fitting as he taught me to say, and so of course he straight ways made me a liar by arriving on the threshold in his bare feet with his shoes and stockings in one hand and haarder fish in the other and him shouting: ‘Trijn! Onions!’

We were in the front room of the shop on Low Street. It is a baker’s now, and its street is cobbled, but then it was all sand and stones around us.

I moved to meet him and he spun where he was, handing the fish to me as he came around with a lift of his brows, then stepping into his shoes and ending bowed over the lady’s hand to give to her a press of his lips and a share of fish reek, by which I knew he had bought them (and those not lately from the sea) and not caught them as he was likely to boast.

With him engaging her I was free to look and saw a packed party, not tall, with hair, where it showed beyond her cap, that jinked and swept over her forehead in matching lines, a regular series that did not move independent of her head and being fair but not clean wore the several colours of an oyster. A sweet jasmine pomade compounded this. Still, she rode low in the water, her silk and the silver of her reticule saying she was heavy with goods. I saw that he saw this too, had likely marked it on the instant he stepped into the shop.

‘Crispin le Voir, my lady.’

She made no answer but lifted her chin and I noticed that her nostrils tended to the vertical to give her a greedy aspect. She twitched her head at her man and Le Voir turned so that only I could see the face he pulled. The tall man held the door for me and I passed close by his body with its arm

stretched wide. Outside, he did not linger near the shop but walked off towards the square with not a word and I was left with a boy guarding the cart and with the sound of her lofty speech and Le Voir's answers, though I could not hear the words. He was using his best voice on a country woman, the voice he kept for castle men.

On the street a gust lifted my skirts and sent the boy into a crouch as he took shelter next to the cart. The brown mare closed her eyes against the sand. She snorted and shifted in the traces, lifting now this hoof, now that in irritation. In this season the wind was all but ceaseless. I think I would not have minded a lashing gale but this hissing, snatching on and off noise that bit at the corners of the house and made every window bump without rhythm in its frame ... 'It is illogical to attribute wicked intent to the displacement of vapours,' Le Voir would say when I muttered about it, though when a day broke still and warm I saw his mood was lifted same as mine.

At last Le Voir showed her out and the tall man came and handed her into the cart, though I had not seen his return. For a moment I hoped Le Voir would see her off with one of his company bows: a leg stuck out in front, one arm straight up at the back and a deep bend of the waist – a bow that made me laugh; but he only dropped his chin to his chest in the manner of one affirming an arrangement. I burned to know her business. Measuring for a wig would have taken longer and messed her own hair, so it was not that. As she settled and shifted her back side in the cart she gave me a direct look, taking my measure, and for a plunging moment I thought she might have asked after me; I was not in play, but you ever feel you may be again if once you were.

They left. A pair of boys chased the cart until it turned the corner and gained the paved road.

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The knecht took charge of the line; he held in his hand the lanyard of polished leather pieces that I had handled in Calcoen's room. Each person that came forward was made to show his right arm with the sleeve loosed and pushed up as far as the shoulder. While the knecht was employed with so arranging the shirt he told each one's name to Calcoen and guessed his age and had from him his birth place if that were known. These the master of Vogelzang wrote in columns ready ruled on the page, I would see when it came to my turn. The knecht next took the wrist of the person and held it so that the arm was in Calcoen's view, and it must be kept thus while the knecht held discs against the skin to find a match, one for the outer side of the forearm and one for the inside arm higher up, that being hid from the sun in the usual course and paler. He would try several discs until Calcoen judged the correct one had been come upon then, at a grunt from Calcoen, the knecht read off the numeral cut into the leather, only he gave the numbers as 'vee one' or 'one ex' as they came, for he was truly ignorant. These Calcoen noted under columns headed with little drawn pictures — a sun for the fore arm, a sickle moon for the upper.

We were some thirty in the line and the going slow. We preferred it to work we told each other, though uneasily, for there never was new plan from a master that did not cost us in some way.

I was in the line behind Verde Sussan, who balked at the knecht's pulling her chemise to expose the swinging purse of flesh on her arm, but allowed herself only a hissed curse. Then it was my turn. I moved with haste to pull back my sleeve to give him no reason to lay a hand on me but he made to fuss with the cloth, rolling it back with care and with every turn pressing his plump knuckles into my breast. He groaned in his throat, looking into my eyes the while, until I lowered mine in shame. When they were done with me he made to roll the sleeve down my arm but I pulled away and stumbled against Calcoen's table. I could hear the knecht snigger behind me as I ran to escape his sight, around the back of the workshop. There I turned my face to the wall, my arms held tight across my bosom, pressing into myself to remove the memory of his fist at my breast. I thought, I will find a stone and bite down on it and with my splintered teeth I will shred the skin from his face, and I rolled the curse in my mouth to get every taste of it, the more because that was the closest it would get to being.

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The girls, from what I could see of their faces, were at the brink of crying though with no thought to disobey their father. De Buys noticed their distress; he recited absently as he adjusted his belt and broke wind: 'The daughter of my people is become cruel, like the ostriches in the wilderness. Leviticus, four, verse three.'

He stood, took each by the shoulder and steered her after Le Voir to the eastern court yard. This was a sun trap sheltering a lemon tree, one bearing pomegranates and a trellis with a rose. The young mistress's window looked onto it; had she chosen, she could have watched her new hair begin the passage to her head from theirs.

The elder girl sat at one end of a stone bench. I handed Le Voir a length of twine that had been run through soft tallow and he draped this on his shoulder at the ready. De Buys said, 'Rachel' and she untied the ribbon on her bonnet and lifted it from her head, releasing an abundance of coppery hair. Le Voir dug his hands into the crown of it, spreading it in the slanting morning light. He separated a bunch about the thickness of a candle and tied it off, then had the big shears from my hand and cut above the cord. He handed the hank to me where I stood out of the girl's sight. It reached from my hand to below my elbow and was heavy as oiled silk. The harvest from Rachel was three lengths, and three from Hannah. We had brought no mirror and for certain there was no such at their home but each girl saw her own head in the other's and then the tears spilled.

With a thickened voice De Buys told Le Voir: 'You have that which you wanted. You and I will conclude our business by and by. We will have a moment here.'

He positioned himself behind the girls where they sat on the bench. As I left the court yard with the hair laid in orderly fashion in a cloth, I turned to look at the family. He had a hand on the pale nape of each daughter. All three had closed their eyes and the father was praying aloud for a blessing on their bowed, clipped heads.

Le Voir bade me take the hair to the back bed room before Calcoen or one of the household women should see it. As I passed through the hall one of the song birds made a peep; the other looked to be moulting but I did not stop to see. I held my breath as I crossed Madam's room but she was asleep or in a pretence of sleep and did not stir. The young mistress was awake and watched from her bed as I placed the bundle on the seat at the window. I had thought she might be interested in it but she turned away as though from some disgusting thing.