

I LENS (1696/1668-1670)

And since my thoughts were occupied mostly with the crystalline body that is the eye, I removed it from the eye and placed it before the magnifying glass. And I was greatly pleased to see through the magnifying glass, and at the same time through the crystalline body, not only the houses upside down, but I also saw people walking in the street, however small they appeared, all going with their feet upwards; nay, what is more, I could see the color of their clothes. From this sight the extreme perfection of this small crystalline body also became evident to me.

Antoni van Leeuwenhoek



WE BUILD AS WE SEE
1696

"I never imagined there was so much difference between men's eyes," my father exclaimed as he pulled the sheet of paper from the engraver's hand. "Come, come, Maria. Come and look."

I closed the linen cabinet, turned and put the last of the fresh linen in Grietje's arms.

"You better hurry," she said. "Before he gets carried off. Tell him for me, Mejuffrouw, I've had enough. I'll not go hunting those fleas again. He promised he'd give them up."

"But he did—a month ago."

"So he said, but look at that poor boy." She nodded her head toward the open door of my father's study. "It's his blood those fleas are after now, not each other."

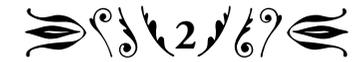
"Maria!"

"Save him, Mejuffrouw." Grietje, mounting the stairs, leaned over the stack of clean linen for a last glimpse of the young engraver. "I'd like to taste him first myself." She winked at me, but I pretended not to notice.

Grietje, at twenty, was well on her way to the spinhuis, the house of corrections for women. She was worse than the Predikant Petrus Grebius, for she took delight in what he abhorred, but they both saw lechery everywhere they looked. It floated like a mote of dust on their own eyes.

"Would you just look, Maria," my father said as soon as I entered the room. His thick white finger hammered the paper. Poor Gerrit sat with his hands between his legs. His cheeks were veined like a ripe apple, his full pouting lips were wet. His hair fell over his far cheek, shielding him from my father's eyes.

"Would you come and look at this, Maria," my father repeated.



A WORLD OF DIFFERENCE
1668-1670

The day Regnier de Graaf brought Johannes Vermeer a lens for the small hole in his window shutter, set a piece of greased paper on the easel, and had Johannes take his place on his stool, the first man they saw take shape upon the paper was my father, stretching his neck, twisting his head like a turtle. On the sunny market square, my father stood apart, as if he were surrounded by an invisible moat. He opened his mouth, clapped it three times, clamped it shut. Even outside, I doubt I would have heard his voice, but within the Mechelen it was impossible. In the darkened room, accompanied by loud jesting, the clatter of crockery, the thud of wooden platters, clang of pewter, I saw my father silently jaw the sunny air.

"Here, try it here," the young doctor said, pulling the easel back from the window. "Your picture will be clearer."

Fearlessly wading the bright moat around my father, a young child approached, wavering in over-large shoes. My father's arm climbed, his hand twisted in the air like a drifting piece of paper, but it never touched the boy's hair, never cupped his head as he had done daily with my brother Philips.

"I've heard in Paris they have special chairs fitted with shades and a lens." De Graaf shifted the easel again until all that remained was a mottle of faded color. Even in the dim room, I could see his flushed cheeks. "It is possible also to fit a box with a lens and mirror, right the image and spread it out upon a sheet of glass like a drawing on a table."

Johannes, yawning, was pushing back the shutters.

"I'll show you," De Graaf said. He pulled out a sheet of paper, a stick of chalk from his pocket.

Johannes cupped his hand to one side of the shutter, prodded the lens out with his finger. He glanced down at the doctor's bowed head, listened to