

## FRANK GALUSZKA

*Artichokes after Harvest, 2004*  
oil on canvas, 24 x 36 in



courtesy: the artist

## SUSAN VREELAND

# The Potato Eaters

**A**dolfine de Groot set down five forks around the tin platter of steaming potatoes fresh from the coals. She had just dug them that day. Pitiful small for this time of year, she thought.

Adolfine's mother-in-law, Anna, was the last one to come to the table. "Her water just broke," Anna said.

No one so much as grunted. Not a single face changed expression in the yellow-green glow from the oil lamp.

"Bless all souls in heaven and earth and bless this food we are about to partake," Adolfine's husband, Gerrit, mumbled, and speared a potato. She hoped what she saw in his mute stare was a faltering now that the time had come.

Saartje, her youngest daughter, opened a potato and put her head down, just as she did every night, to feel the steam rise to her puffy face. "Not so close, Saartje. You'll burn yourself, remember?"

Adolfine felt the grip of the enormity of the birth about to occur. In the second room, her other daughter, Griselda, unwed, lay huge under the quilt.

"I've got everything ready," Anna said.

But the pains hadn't started yet. That wasn't good. Adolfine turned down the lamp wick. They'd need light all night and she didn't want to run out of oil. Darkness thickened around them and swallowed the corners of the room. It seemed a sacramental time, their last supper without an infant present.

Wind whistled across the fields and rattled the door. "What's that?" Saartje asked.

No one answered her. The thin crackling of crisp potato skins being pulled apart sounded loud in the quiet room.

"What is it?"

Adolfine thought if she said something, maybe Gerrit wouldn't start in. "Just the coming of a human soul," she said, and watched a spider crawling diagonally across the table. No one brushed it away.

"How does a soul come to a baby?" Saartje asked.

Adolfine knew it didn't matter what she answered. Saartje wouldn't remember. "It comes from the earth."

"Like a potato?"

Adolfine watched Gerrit push half a potato into his mouth. "In a way."

"That Vincent fellow left today," Gerrit said, still chewing. "Packed up his paints and his pictures and went to Antwerp."

“It wasn’t him,” Adolfine said.

“You don’t know that. He left because her time was close. Didn’t even say goodbye.”

“He said goodbye to me,” Karel, her father-in-law, said. “On the dike road yesterday. Since the priest forbid everyone in the parish to let him draw them, there wasn’t reason for him to stay, is what he told me.”

Possibly true, but Karel could get a thing wrong as well as Saartje. Adolfine poked at the air in front of Gerrit with her fork, once for each sentence. “It wasn’t him. She acted the same toward him after she knew as before. It wasn’t him.”

The grooves in Gerrit’s face deepened into shadows. “Then who? That good-for-nothing son of the dikemaster? What kind of a man is it do a thing like this and not own up to it? Leave another man to feed the thing. And the girl silent as a field mouse. I tell you someone in Nuenen’s going to pay.”

“Leave it be, Gerrit,” Anna said wearily, and set out the bowls for coffee.

“Pay with his own blood, I mean, if he doesn’t do right by her, and don’t you think I won’t.”

“You’ll rot your gut if you keep grinding out that poison,” Anna said. “Better to spend your time figuring how you’re going to feed it.” His mother could say things to him she couldn’t, but she felt them just the same.

Adolfine watched Anna’s hands, gnarled by years in damp soil, pouring the bowls full. She knew it was the last coffee the painter had brought them. When she had told Anna a few days earlier to make it weaker so it would last longer, Anna was cross. “I’ll make it how I always make it. I’d rather remember it dark and strong like it ought to be, instead of eking out a few more days of it so weak you can see through it.”

Adolfine wrapped her own pain-knotted hands around the bowl of coffee to warm them. There was some comfort in that. But it didn’t stop her back from aching, and it couldn’t stop her from thinking. Griselda was barely through her first year of bleeding, and Saartje maybe only two years away herself. Griselda’s fate would happen to Saartje too. After all, mud sticks on both *klompen*. Saartje was dumb enough to walk through puddles when only two steps sideways would take her around them. Even with Griselda’s misfortune clear as day, Saartje wouldn’t

understand the danger. Something was not right with her. That bulb of a head and those low, fleshy cheeks—not like a child at all. Saartje didn’t grasp the simplest things. Apparently, Griselda didn’t either.

And as for herself, how could she say otherwise and not be a hypocrite? She looked at Gerrit’s sunken cheeks and a sadness came over her. He wasn’t always this way. When had the meanness of life taken root there in the grooves of his face?

“Whoever it was is still around here,” Gerrit said. “Either she’ll own up to who it was when that baby comes, or I’ll take a rag to it before it even cries. Plenty of babies born dead these days. Snuff the life out before she has a chance to see it breathe.”

Every night the same thing till she was numb from hearing it. Not that he was shamed because everyone in Nuenen knew. Oh no. He had no shame. It was because there would be another mouth to feed. Adolfine peeled the skin off the one remaining potato, put the thin flakes of the peel on her tongue, and mashed the potato in hot water to make a broth for Griselda. Anna took it in to her in the other room.

Adolfine put on her shawl and went outside. She tried to feel a soul approaching. There should be sacredness in that. They were being sent a charge. That meant her family was in God’s thoughts, at least. She ought to feel the closeness of the Father. All she felt was Saartje grabbing her skirt in a tight fist.

Across the flat potato fields, the outline of Widow Bresken’s squat cottage, three poplar trees, and Willem and Camilla de Neff’s windmill barely made a mark on the desolation. It would be dark soon, and the darkness would wrap itself around the earth. Other babies would be born tonight too. Every night of every year someone somewhere was born into wretchedness and misery. Where was the god in that? She felt small and forgotten.

How could she stop Gerrit if he really set his mind to it? The baby, that is. He was no stranger to bloody business. In better days, she’d watched him bleed a pig for half a day while it squealed just to get a few *stuivers* more for bloodless meat. If only she could pray. If only God happened to be listening. How could God know everyone’s thoughts? Did He know Griselda’s fear? Gerrit’s fear? His anger? Saartje’s silly notions? Saartje, with a mind like a

bumblebee. What kind of god would make such a child? Or such a man?

Which was best, life or death for that baby? She knew she was supposed to answer “life” and fight her husband for that child. All that she’d listened to in the parish church had told her to be grateful for life even with all its misery. She looked up at the deepening purple-gray sky. She could not deny that there might be a kind of relief in eternal darkness.

She drew her shawl around her more tightly. It was natural to want something finer for her daughters. A house with a stove in each room. A softer man than their father. An escape from the dampness, the bending, the deadening repetition of life. She remembered that when she was carrying Griselda, just a few weeks before she was born, she told Gerrit of her dream that a good man would see Griselda digging in the fields from the deck of a fine old spritsail barge floating through the canal, and would take her away to his house in Dordrecht or even Rotterdam where she would have curtains and fine bed linen and cheese from Gouda. Might as well ask God to give her a city of gold, Gerrit had said. Now, all she wanted was for Griselda to survive.

She felt Saartje tug at her skirt. “How can a soul come from the earth?” Saartje asked.

Adolfine tried to rub out the pain in her lower back. “The earth gives us up, for a time, for the blink of an eye, really. And we wander, like blind birds pecking at the earth, until the Father in heaven takes us to His bosom.”

“And then what?” Saartje yanked on her skirt again. “Then what?”

“Then our souls become stars.”

In the quiet night, she heard Griselda moan and Anna croon to her. The sound was not like a labor pain yet. It was the piles, most likely. She’d had them too with her firstborn. She turned back to the house and found Karel doddering in the doorway.

“You let your son do harm to that poor babe and you’ll go to hell for it,” she muttered.

Inside, she carved a raw potato into a narrow shape a little wider than her middle finger. With the paring knife she rounded the edges smooth and made a point at one end, narrow but not sharp. She tried to put into it all the tenderness she felt for Griselda, and when she heard her

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cry again about the maddening piles, she went into the other room and said, “Here, *lieffe*, this will give you some relief.” She lifted the quilt, turned Griselda onto her side, away from her, and slowly slid the potato in.

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“Bless all souls in heaven and earth and bless this food we are about to partake,” Father said.

Saartje opened her potato, bent down, and steam came up to meet her. It was prickly and warm. Potatoes are brown on the outside, Saartje thought. Dirt is brown. Coffee is brown. Our clothes are brown. That’s the color of things. Brown and dirty green. The walls are dirty green. The table too. A spider walked up the leg of the table. It was brown. Spiders can walk like that, on the ceiling too, but people can’t.

How can water break? It can only dribble. Or fall out. Dribble fall dribble fall dribble. Like coffee falling into the little bowls. A high sound at first, then low like wash water falling back into the canal. She played there with Griselda. There or the sand hill. Griselda made a little barge of sticks for her to float. That was a long time ago. Water can’t break. She could tell them that, but she wouldn’t. She was the nonsense child, Mother always said. She told Mother lots of things. She told her fairies put eggs in the hen house. She told her she heard a bird singing Hail Mary. Mother only said, nonsense, child.

“How does a soul come to a baby?” she asked.

“It comes from the earth.”

“Like a potato?”

She waited and waited for Mother to answer.

# Did potatoes have souls? Open a potato, steam comes out. Was that a soul coming out?

“In a way.”

Did potatoes have souls? Open a potato, steam comes out. Was that a soul coming out? Steam. Can’t catch steam. Father stabbed another potato and lifted it on his fork. What did that do to its soul? Father had long fingers and big knuckles and his thumb was bigger at the end. Big hairy spider hand.

The spots on potatoes are called “eyes.” They should be called “dimples” because they go in. Potatoes aren’t blind. They have eyes. What do they see in their time in the brown earth? In the earth before their borning time. A secret time before they go into their bodies on top of the earth. Can they see other souls waiting down there?

She saw a secret once she shouldn’t have. From the miller’s wagon. She put her eyes close up to the space between boards. She could look out but no one could see her. She should have been playing in the sand hill or floating her stick barge or helping the miller’s wife wash clothes in the canal, but she came back and saw and saw and saw.

Afterward the miller pulled the weeds out of Griselda’s hair and smoothed the tangles.

Griselda slapped her and shook her by the shoulder all the way home. “You breathe one word of what you saw, and I’ll cut your tongue out, you hear?” Cut your tongue out tongue out tongue. Griselda’s lip wiggled in a mean way and rolled back from her teeth. A long time ago.

All this night Griselda screamed and fell asleep screamed and fell asleep. Grandpa Karel piled peat on the fire and went out. “Can’t stand to hear her,” he said. Grandmother gave Griselda two raw potatoes to hold. Big ones. One for each hand. Saved them for this, she said.

Saartje was sleepy but she wanted to stay awake. She wrapped up in a blanket in the corner. No one paid any attention to her. She could see the bottoms of Griselda’s feet. Griselda screamed. Her feet pointed up and the quilt slipped off. A time ago they slept together back to back in the cabinet bed. They’d bend their knees and lie feet to feet. A time ago.

Scream breathe scream breathe scream. Grandmother put a raw potato in Griselda’s mouth and told her to bite down hard. Mother bent her legs and told her to push.

It looked like it hurt awful.

The baby was coming out now. “Push,” Mother said. “Push.” Grandmother had her hands on it. It looked like the rabbit Grandpa Karel caught and skinned. Red and wet, but in some places kind of white and oozy. Not many things that red. The windmill had a red door but not that red. There was a patch of red in the clover behind the windmill after Griselda got up.

She would stay away from the miller’s red door even if mother made her go fetch the flour. She would never go to that mill with Griselda again. She would never go behind the windmill in that clover patch. Never hide in his wagon. Never roll on the ground with him or play wrestling games. Never grunt and twist and say “Willem, oh Willem.” She would never ever say that word. Then she’d be safe and this would never happen to her.

The potato rolled out of Griselda’s hand onto the floor. Something slid out of her into the big bowl. It made a wet floppy sound. Plop lop op.

The baby jerked in Grandmother’s hands. Maybe that was its soul coming to it. That rabbit jerked too, just before Grandpa pulled a knife across its throat. One minute it was alive and moving and looking around, and the next it wasn’t. Wasn’t. Grandpa skinned the rabbit like peeling off its coat and it was all red and slimy underneath too.

Potatoes have skins too but they’re white underneath and soft and steamy. Warm and wet feeling but not really wet. Drywet. Maybe that’s soul. Drywet soul.

Mother wiped her knife and cut something quick. As easy as cutting a tongue out. Father took the baby from Grandmother. His big hands on the baby. The baby all wet and shiny. “Gerrit!” Mother said.

“Tell me now or you won’t see this baby again,” Father said. Griselda was shaking her head. Mother took the po-

tato out of her mouth. “His name,” Father said. He held the baby high over her stomach. It dripped. Griselda shook her head.

“With all your threats, is it any wonder she is silent?” Mother said.

Father turned and Mother grabbed for the baby. Father swung his arm backwards and knocked her down and her elbow tipped over the bowl and the wet floppy thing fell out of the bowl onto her. Father took the baby out of the house.

“Father! Don’t!” Griselda screamed a scream that went forever. Grandmother held her down.

Saartje ran out after him and could see in the light from the doorway. He laid the baby on the pile of peat blocks.

“Willem. Willem,” Saartje said. She didn’t want Griselda to hear her. Griselda’s teeth showed that day like a mean dog. Griselda was still screaming for her father to stop. “Willem,” Saartje said louder. He didn’t hear her.

He put a rag over the baby’s face. His hand spread itself out over it from ear to ear and pressed. Big ugly bumpy spider hand. The baby’s wet rabbit legs wiggled and jerked and then stopped.

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A necessary act, he told himself. A solution right at his fingertips. A sacrifice. He grabbed the thing from Anna and her face turned ugly. The thing was slippery in his hands. Skinny as a rat. Mightn’t live anyway. Adolfine snarled. Griselda howled like a bitch in heat. The cussedness of women harder to live with than conscience.

Get it outside. Through the rag the face moved under his hand. Press harder, he told his hand. He didn’t breathe. The thing didn’t breathe. The life went out of it under his hand. Like a surrender. Good and done. His hands wet and sticky. He turned away from it.

In the doorway, Saartje. Her eyes big as moons. His heart didn’t beat but his hands wiped each other with the cloth. He took a step toward her and reached for his shovel leaning against the house. She dropped her blanket and ran off stumbling into the darkness. Let her go. Stupid thing. At least *she’d* forget soon enough.

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Saartje stumbled across potato mounds and twisted her

ankle in her *klompen*. Running, splashing through mud puddles. Mud puddles, blood puddles. Red mud like on the baby. The rabbit. The windmill door. Her side aching. Running, running until she saw, darker than the dark, the big stiff arms of the windmill reaching for her. For her. But they wouldn’t catch her. Running another way. Up the sand hill to the dike road. In the dark. Blind bird running until she couldn’t run any more. Falling onto the dirt. Letting herself go. Down, onto the dirt. Her chest hurting.

Back across the fields, sparks whirling out of the chimney into the darkness. Waiting. Waiting until one bright one went up and up and it became a star.

**Susan Vreeland** has published six art-related novels, four of which have been *New York Times* Bestsellers. Her two most recent novels are *Clara and Mr. Tiffany* and *Luncheon of the Boating Party*. *Girl in Hyacinth Blue* was a Book Sense Book of the Year finalist and *Forward Magazine’s* Best Novel of the Year, and *Clara and Mr. Tiffany* was shortlisted for the Lannon Literary Award for fiction. She lives in San Diego where she taught high school English for thirty years. Her short fiction has appeared in numerous literary magazines including *The Missouri Review*, *Ploughshares*, *New England Review*, *Confrontation* and others. Her work has been translated into twenty-five languages.