In the summer of seventeen fifty-five, Grubb, then in his early twenties, attended an anatomy lesson along with around twenty other students. The lecture theatre they were in was part of the Leiden School of Anatomy, and it was styled after a classic amphitheatre in miniature, with four rows of curved wooden stalls rising up in concentric circles from the floor. Arranged throughout the stands, between the students, were various memento mori in the form of bones and skeletons, belonging to humans and other animals.

Grubb sat at the front of the class as usual, eagerly waiting for the lesson to begin. Before him, in the centre of the floor, stood the commanding presence of Master Lukas Van Haas. Van Haas was a stocky, middle aged fellow with a great bushy beard and a canvass apron over his daywear. He had a sardonic glint in his eyes as he surveyed the ranks of nervous and eager young faces. The Master wore a wide-brimmed hat, the only individual in the theatre permitted to do so, on account of his station.

A door swung open behind Van Haas and an assistant who looked like a docker wheeled in a body on a gurney. The Master rolled up his sleeves, and laved his hands and forearms in a basin, while the assistant rolled the gurney into place and removed a sheet covering the cadaver. The body was that of a muscular, bearded man with a shaved head. He had a pronounced bulge in the side of his neck, painted with florid contusions, where it had been broken by the hangman’s noose.

“Good morning class,” Van Haas boomed, not looking up from his ablutions.

“Good morning, Master Van Haas,” the class chorused in unison.

Scrubbing up completed, Van Haas strolled over to the gurney.

“Fresh from the gallows. Let’s take a moment to pray for this fellow, and give thanks for the knowledge he’ll provide us,” said the Master.

He doffed his hat and bowed his head, the students following suit. Some even murmured a prayer, while other winked and smirked at one another under the cover of bowed heads. The moment of solemnity concluded, and Van Haas became all business.

“We’ll eschew the external examination, and move straight on to the autopsy today,” he said, selecting a scalpel from the roll of surgical tools on the gurney. “We begin with the classic Y-shaped incision, like so.”

Van Haas cut into the cadaver, drawing the blade down from shoulder to base of sternum, first left, then right. It was a relatively bloodless affair, and he completed the Y with a cut from the breastbone to the pubis.

“Next we must shear through the ribs on the lateral sides of the chest cavity in order to remove the chest plate. This requires some effort, I would ask you to bear with me,” he informed the class.

As Van Haas went about his work, groups of the students murmured to one another in hushed tones, pointed and jotted down notes. The air of the lecture theatre became thick and hypnotic, with an abattoir miasma, and the crunching, tearing refrain of flesh, bone and sinew parted by bladed and toothed steel.

Grubb sat apart from the others, a textbook open before him, scratching in his journal with a reed pen. One of the other students sharing Grubb’s bench, Phillip Schuler, a nineteen year old with his brown, collar length hair tied back in a ponytail with a ribbon, as was the fashion of the time, gazed absent-mindedly along the row at Grubb. He idly tapped his lips with his own pen.

With all the ribs sawed through, Van Haas lifted the chest plate out of the corpse and put it to one side.

“Now, we have the major organs of the thoracic cavity exposed,” he announced, standing back. Then he stepped in again and took hold of the lips of the cut in the corpse’s belly, “and by parting the abdominal flaps we created, we can also view the organs situated in the lower body cavity.”

The students craned forward to see the glistening viscera exposed.

“Now, we will remove the organs in two blocks, via a series of cuts along the vertebral column, and by severing major blood vessels and the trachea,” Van Haas continued. “We begin with the heart and lungs.”

Van Haas carried out the procedure to awed silence, the students rapt now. With his cuts performed, he lifted out the slippery organs and placed them on a plate.

“Then the organs of the abdominal cavity,” he said, looking up at his enthralled audience and smiling indulgently.

After making the next series of cuts, he hauled out the pile of entrails and other abdominal organs with both arms, and piled them onto another, larger platter.

“We can examine these organs at a later point in the postmortem,” Van Haas explained, “but for now we’ll move on to the head.”

Grubb looked up from his textbooks and journal for the first time since the postmortem commenced, and said, “Master Van Haas?”.

“Yes Grubb, what is it?” said Van Haas, looking up from the empty shell of a human on his autopsy table.

“Master Van Haas, where do you suppose the life force resides within the body?” Grubb blurted excitedly. “What, in your opinion, is the physical location of the soul?”

“Not this nonsense again, Grubb,” growled Van Haas. “Where would you have it?”

“Well, according to Descartes, the pineal...”

“Pineal! Pineal! More learning and less metaphysics, Grubb,” Van Haas blasted, cutting Grubb off in his prime. “Pray don’t waste my time or the time of the other attendees while you’re here. If you interrupt me with such inanities again, I’ll have you ejected from my lesson. Now shut up and pay attention.”

The other students sniggered into their sleeves and pointed at the crestfallen Grubb after his dressing down, but Phillip looked upon him with pity and sympathy. Grubb said no more and retreated into brooding over his text while the lesson concluded. At the end, Van Haas and his assistant wheeled the cadaver and its contents out through the doors at the back, while the students all filed from the theatre.

Grubb discretely hung around after the others left, then gathered up his textbooks and instead of following the students, he made his way to the doors through which Van Haas had gone. He hesitantly pushed the door open on a corridor and saw Van Haas and the assistant emerge from a room, chatting together. They didn’t see Grubb, and turned a corner at the head of the corridor, where they disappeared from view.

Grubb stealthily darted down the corridor and into the room they came from. There on the gurney lay the autopsy subject, along with the trays of its internal organs. Grubb spied the brain in a steel bowl and put down his textbooks. He cautiously approached.

Grubb stood before the brain, admiring it. He was blind to all else as his hands trembled over the gelatinous hemispheres. He was just about to delve his fingers into it, when Van Haas’s stern voice shattered the moment, “Grubb! What do you think you’re playing at?”

He whirled around, guilt written all over his face.

“Master Van Haas, I...”

“What were going to do to that brain?” Van Haas demanded.

“Nothing, I, that is to say. I just wanted a small part for my own studies.”

Van Haas took a menacing step towards him, “What studies?”

“Just into pineal glands, you see, I want to conduct my own research,” Grubb babbled. “I know you don’t like my questions, so... It’s such a small thing. May I take it?”

Van Haas rolled his eyes and sighed, having heard enough, “You’re a quack Grubb. Worse, I suspect you might be some sort of lunatic. Get out, I don’t want to see you in my lecture theatre again.”

Grubb bowed stiffly, retrieved his books with as much dignity as he could muster under the circumstances, and left the college forever.

Students chatted outside the anatomy school, enjoying the sunshine as Grubb emerged. He moved amongst them as a downcast shadow, avoiding eye contact, with his books gathered under his gangling arm. One of the students noticed the miserable spectre in their midst and cuffed Grubb on the back of the head as he passed, causing in him to almost drop his books.

The student then rounded on him, backed up by several others, “Really Grubb, you’re such a freak. Why don’t you drop this mysterious alchemist act and join the rest of us in the real world?”

Grubb stared intensely at the boy, horrified and baffled by the intrusion.

His tormentor pressed on regardless, “I mean what is this rubbish you have here? On the Difference Between Spirit and Soul? Treatise of Man? Don’t you have any actual anatomical texts? You’re a joke Grubb.”

Phillip, the boy who had looked upon Grubb with concern rather than loathing was chatting to another student nearby, and the commotion caught his attention. He bade his companion excuse him, and strode across to the group.

“Leave him alone,” he ordered the ringleader. “You’re supposed to be adults. Be on your way before I report you to the Headmaster.”

Their fun spoiled by Phillip arriving on the scene, the bullies sloped off, hooting and making derisory gestures.

Phillip turned to Grubb, “I apologise for those oafs. They still think they’re in kindergarten.”

Grubb composed himself and thanked Phillip for his intervention. The social niceties observed, he loped off with his long gait without further ado, and Phillip hurried to catch up.

“Henrik, isn’t it? Henrik Grubb?” Phillip pressed, drawing alongside.

Grubb grunted his assent, not looking at Phillip.

“How do you do, I’m Phillip Schuler.”

“Pleased to meet you,” Grubb replied, but he continued walking, saying no more, and refusing to meet Phillip’s eye.

Phillip chuckled at this, amused rather than put off, “They’re right about one thing, you’re not much of a one for earthly discourse.”

Grubb stopped walking and finally looked at Phillip, slightly confused and irritated.

“What?” he said.

“Small talk, human interaction,” said Phillip with a smile. “Never mind, I get it, you’re a man who stands alone in the world. But you’re an interesting fellow, Grubb, and I for one would like to hear more about your theories.”

Grubb was incredulous, “You would?”

Phillip locked his slender arm through the crook of Grubb’s elbow, “Walk with me,” he said, brooking no dissent.

They strolled together along the canal-side.

“I find all that death provokes a desire to just enjoy the air and the sunshine,” Phillip mused. “One needs to experience some sensation to be reminded one is alive. Wouldn’t you agree?”

Grubb did not agree at all, but attempted to be non-committal in the interests of politeness.

“Perhaps,” Grubb said after a moment.

They passed a coffee house, where a serving girl leaned over a table to place a pot of coffee before a gentleman, who stole a look down her blouse as she did so.

Phillip noticed the faux-pas and nudged Grubb, “What did you think of that? Damn impressive prow wouldn’t you say?”

Grubb looked, then quickly averted his gaze.

“I wouldn’t know about that,” he said after another pause.

Phillip was amused, “Hmm, that fellow certainly seems to think so. I’ll wager she gets more than the tip.”

Grubb was exasperated by such talk and disengaged his arm from Phillip’s.

“I’m not really interested in such things,” he admitted.

“Fair enough, fair enough,” Phillip conceded. “So what is your thing Henrik? What does interest you?”

Grubb stopped walking and faced Phillip, “What do you mean?” he said.

“I don’t know, tell me a bit about yourself,” said Phillip. “I’m new here too and don’t really fit in yet either. So I suppose we could both do with a friend. Everyone needs friends don’t they? Look, tell you what, I’ll go first.”

Grubb shrugged and they meandered on their way once more.

“By all means. Don’t let me stop you,” said Grubb.

“Very well, my father is a book seller from Amsterdam, and my mother, also from Amsterdam, is the daughter of a banker. My older brother is the heir apparent to the business, so for my part, I’ve been sent out into the world to learn a respectable profession. Surgeon was the consensus, when we discussed it shortly after my eighteenth birthday. Oh look, let’s sit.”

Phillip steered Grubb to a free bench overlooking the canal, and they sat down.

“So, you were saying?” said Grubb.

“No, no, dear fellow. It’s your turn now, I’ve said my piece,” Phillip said.

“As you wish,” said Grubb. “I was raised in a convent near Utrecht. My mother was a nun.”

“That’s... not ordinary,” Phillip interrupted.

Grubb shot him an impatient look, and Phillip raised his palms in a placating gesture, shaking his head slightly.

“As I was saying,” Grubb continued, “my mother was a nun. She wasn’t permitted to have much contact with me, on account of her obvious sin. I was largely raised by other nuns at the convent, who impressed upon me the importance of the eternal and immortal soul.”

With a faraway look in his eyes, Grubb gazed at a swan cruising past.

“I see,” said Phillip to encourage Grubb.

“It was all catechism though,” said Grubb, taking the cue, “there was precious little intellectual rigour to the learning. However, it made me consider the relationship between the spirit and the flesh. I carried out experiments: rats, birds, cats, whatever I could trap. I’d weigh them on scales, before and after death.”

Phillip did his best to conceal his horror at Grubb’s admission, and gamely pressed on with the conversation, “How old were you when you were doing this?”

“Oh, around nine, ten I’d say. As you can imagine, it proved crude and ineffective.”

“Yes, I’m sure,” said Phillip, the corner of his mouth twitching down in mild alarm.

“I had no access to proper instruments. I did however discover a library at the convent, and was permitted to browse there by the sister in charge of it,” Grubb went on to less disturbing revelations. “I don’t suppose they even realised the treasures they had in that musty collection. I studied Galen, Plato, Aristotle, and of course Descartes. True philosophers and seekers of knowledge, not mere butchers of flesh like Van Haas.”

“That would explain a great deal,” Phillip concluded.

Grubb’s guard dropped and he became passionate, “I learned from these masters that the human pineal gland is the cradle of the soul. I’m convinced that study of this organ will lead me to the creation of the Elixir of Life. The Philosophers’ Stone, Phillip!”

“And how do you mean to do that? It’s evaded alchemists throughout the ages,” Phillip pointed out.

“That is the question. I must get my hands on a human pineal gland to test my theories,” said Grubb, animated and engaged at last.

“That sounds rather easier said than done,” Phillip replied doubtfully.

“Not if I complete my studies and become an anatomist. Except that oaf Van Haas has thrown me out of his class,” said Grubb with feeling. “But I have so many theories right now. I’d do anything to get my hands on one.”

Phillip laughed to lighten the mood.

“Can’t really think of any legal means by which you might achieve that,” he stated the obvious.

Grubb’s fervour subsided, and he was once more his guarded self, “Indeed, merely an idle fancy I entertain. I must of course go through the proper channels.”

“Relieved to hear it,” said Phillip, and he meant it. “So what happened next, at the convent?”

“Well, I naturally couldn’t remain in such an environment,” Grubb said airily. “I was maturing as a young man, and so the nuns grew increasingly uncomfortable in my presence. There was a, shall we say, concomitant increase in the severity of their punishments.”

“How awful,” Phillip gasped. “What did they do to you?”

“The usual sort of thing I suppose. Beatings, isolation, enforced fasting, cold baths. I existed on a plane above their petty torments and humiliations. I had work to do, but I was never going to achieve it in that barren matriarchy.”

Grubb related these events as a dispassionate observer rather than one who had lived them.

“And what did you do?” Phillip pressed.

“As luck would have it, my father had me released from them,” said Grubb, looking at his shoes. “I suspect they would have turned me out in any case. When I came of age, he made a generous donation to the convent for my care. He continues to pay a modest stipend for my studies and upkeep.”

“So who is he?” asked Phillip. It was the obvious next question.

“I haven’t the faintest idea,” said Grubb, meeting Phillip’s eyes. “It is a condition of the stipend that I never take steps to discover his identity. I deal with a lawyer.”

“Aren’t you curious?” Phillip wanted to know.

“No, why would I be?” said Grubb emotionlessly. “It doesn’t matter. As long as the rent and my tuition are paid, what would I care?”

“But surely most people would want to know where they come from?” Phillip said, as though it were the most obvious thing in the world.

“Most people are fools,” Grubb replied matter-of-factly. “I’m concerned with where we are going, not where I have been. And speaking of where I am going, I must bid you good day Phillip. I have enjoyed our talk, but I must return to my studies.”

“Indeed. Thank you, my dear Henrik,” said Phillip, and shot him an appraising look. “Your company is uniquely stimulating. I pray we can do this again, and soon.”

Grubb rose from the bench, and favoured Phillip with a slight, curt bow before he stalked off.

Phillip sat shaking his head slightly as he watched Grubb depart. A look somewhere between wonder and bewilderment writ upon his fine features.