

In Word and Thread

Joosynne Labyns

Dear Joosynne,

You lived in Heestert, in the Land of Kortrijk. We know almost nothing about your daily life. The archives did not preserve your voice. What has survived, however, is the accusation that ultimately became your death sentence.

They called you a butter witch.

According to the stories told about you, you could prevent milk from producing butter. People believed that you could magically draw milk from a cow and milk animals from a distance with the help of the devil. In a society where a family's success depended on the yield of livestock and dairy products, such accusations carried great weight. When milk spoiled, butter would not churn, or a cow produced less than expected, people searched for an explanation. Sometimes that explanation was sought in a neighbour.

That neighbour was you.

On 1 August 1664, you were condemned and burned. People believed that fire could cleanse you of the devil and free the community from the evil they saw in you. In reality, it was not evil that was destroyed, but a human being.

Your trial belongs among the last witch persecutions in this region. While belief in witchcraft was slowly beginning to fade elsewhere in Europe, an accusation here could still end at the stake.

For your commemoration, I chose a sweater featuring black cats.

In the time in which you lived, people believed that witches and devils could take the form of a black cat. In prints and stories, alleged witches almost always appeared in the company of such an animal. The black cat became a symbol of everything people feared and did not understand.

It was not only the accused women who suffered. The cats themselves were also persecuted. They were burned, hanged, quartered, or drowned. First they were blamed for the plague, later for failed harvests, illness, and every other misfortune that befell a community. Like the women accused of witchcraft, they became victims of fear and superstition.

The cats on this sweater carry a second story as well. The two-tailed cat refers to Japanese folklore. There, a demonic cat appears that can create fireballs, use its tails as torches to start fires, and even bring the dead back to life in order to control them like puppets. In different cultures, the cat thus occupied a place between reality and imagination, between household companion and supernatural being.

Yet the cats on this sweater do not appear threatening. They creep, curl, and move freely across the knitted fabric. Their tails connect the front and back of the garment, as if refusing to be confined by the image others created of them. What was once a symbol of fear becomes here a symbol of remembrance.

Because your own words have been lost, only the stories of your accusers remain. That is why it is important to keep speaking your name. Not as a butter witch. Not as a servant of the devil.

But as Joosynne Labyns.

A woman from Heestert.

One of the many victims of a time when superstition carried greater weight than justice.

In word and thread, you live on.

Micca