

In Word and Thread

A letter to
Martha Van Wetteren



MICCA

Dear Martha,

You were about thirty eight years old when they sentenced you to death. Widow of Adriaan Van Moerbeke, born in Landegem, living in Belsele. And you were pregnant.

That did not save you.

It only gave you a little more time.

On 24 July 1684, the court of Sinaai and Belsele pronounced its sentence. You were to die at the stake. But the child you were carrying had done nothing wrong. And so they had to wait. Not out of compassion for you, but because the child first had to be born.

I try to imagine what those months must have been like for you. Knowing that your child was growing inside you, while knowing that its birth would bring you closer to your death. Every day brought the child closer to life and you closer to the end.

We do not know what you thought during that time. We do not know whether you rested your hand on your belly and spoke to your child. We do not know whether you feared the birth, or what would come afterwards. We do not even know how much you still allowed yourself to hope.

I do not want to fill that silence in history with words that were never yours.

What we do know is what others said about you.

People came forward with stories. You were said to have made predictions. You were said to have cured sheep suffering from pox and made grain grow better. A stolen cow was supposedly recovered through your intervention. Jan van Paddebrouck declared that you had promised to teach him witchcraft if he married you. Isabelle Aerents said that you had helped her find a wealthy husband and had predicted his early death.

It was even said that you had learned witchcraft from Albert Geerinckx of Sint Pauwels, in whose household you were believed to have worked before your marriage.

Those are the words that survived.

Not yours.

Perhaps that is one of the cruellest things about so many of these old trials. The voices of the accusers remained on paper. Their suspicions, their fears and their stories were written down. Far less remains of the woman they were speaking about.

Because of this, we know strange little things about you. That people believed you could heal animals. That they thought you could predict the future. That they saw meaning in what you said and did. Even a consecrated host that, according to one surviving account, you hid in a fold of your skirt to give to a sick goat could be used against you.

But we know almost nothing about the people who loved you.

We do not know how you laughed. We do not know what your hands looked like. We do not know which words you used when you were angry or afraid. We do not know what you liked to eat, which place you called home, or how you pronounced the name of the child you carried.

And yet you were more than the record that remained of you.

You were a woman from Landegem who came to live in Belsele. You had been married. You had lost your husband. You were pregnant when others decided that you were no longer allowed to live.

Your child was born.

And after that, there was no more reprieve for you.

In October 1684, the sentence was carried out. The sources do not even agree entirely on the precise day. Most give 23 October, while a local historical source gives 28 October. As though, after all these centuries, even that one final day cannot quite be given back to you.

You were burned alive.

You were about thirty eight.

Today you are often described as the last person in the County of Flanders to be executed at the stake for witchcraft. As though you were the full stop at the end of a history.

But to me, you are not a full stop.

When I connected a design to you, it became a cape. I had already designed it before I truly knew your story. A simple shape, knitted in one long movement. From one front panel, across the shoulders and back, to the other. Six shades of wool, from pale beige and grey to almost black. Ridge after ridge, the shape grows and slowly closes around a body.

Only when your name became part of it did I understand what that shape could mean to me.

A cape protects.

From cold. From wind. From rain. You wrap it around your shoulders and pull it closer when you need shelter.

The shelter you were never given.

Perhaps that is why, when I think of your story, I keep returning to that child. To one body within another. To you, who, while no one was willing to protect you any longer, were still the shelter for someone else.

The law that sentenced you to death waited until you no longer had to be that shelter.

Then the fire could come.

I cannot change what happened to you in 1684. I cannot take you out of that prison. I cannot undo the sentence. I cannot place your child back into your arms, nor can I tell you what became of that small life.

I can only make something that closes around a body.

Something warm.

Something that protects.

And give it your name.

Martha.

Not the witch of Belsele.

Not the last witch burned in Flanders.

Martha Van Wetteren.

A woman who lived.

And who had a name.

Mieke