

FRANK GALUSZKA

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



courtesy: the artist

SUSAN VREELAND

The Potato Eaters

Adolfine 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."