“Ego enim quasi obdormivi”:
Salvation and Blessed Sleep in
Philip Galle’s Death of the Virgin
after Pieter Bruegel’

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Engraved in 1574 at the behest of Abraham Ortelius, Philip Galle’s Death of the Virgin depicts in unprecedented detail the final moments of the Virgin’s life, as they appear in Pieter Bruegel’s grisaille of ca. 1564, itself owned by Ortelius (fig. 1). The print’s elegant inscription, presumably composed by Ortelius, avers that he had ‘caused it to be made for himself and his friends’, among whom the print would have circulated something like an album amicorum, its exchange marking ties of amity between donor and recipient. Indeed the Death of the Virgin is contemporary with the celebrated Album amicorum initiated by Ortelius around 1573. Just as that volume contains entries in memory of Bruegel and Galle, so the image, the inscription’s final laudatory quatrain states, is a picta tabella produced by an artifici manu. The terms picta (painted, delineated) and tabella (panel, picture) ascribe the ‘skilled hand’ to both Bruegel and Galle, while the further meaning of tabella (votive or memorial tablet) suggests that the Death of the Virgin functions not only as an epitome of painter and engraver, but also as an epitaph of the recently deceased Bruegel.

The bulk of the inscription characterizes the print as an exemplum of skills cited too in Ortelius’s eulogy of Bruegel in the Album amicorum. In the eulogy Ortelius compares Bruegel both to Apelles, who painted what could not be painted, and to Timanthes, in whose works more was discerned than was painted. So, too, the print’s inscription commends Bruegel in a brilliant series of paradoxa derived from the Gospel of John 16:20. Bruegel has portrayed the indiscernible, describing compound passions that reconcile irreducible antitheses: the Virgin’s great joy and sweetness of heart (pectus gaudia quanta, quid dulce magis) at the thought of rejoining her son, and her sorrow (quae tibi maestitia) at the prospect of leaving his devoted followers; the delight and distress of the Virgin’s companions (quam maestus quoque, quam laetus...grec), pleased to see her departing to glory (quid magis his gratum), but also saddened by that imminent departure (aeque triste... factie quam caruisse tua). Bruegel’s ability to fold opposites into each other, embodied in figures whose faces and poses he imbues with happy sorrow (maestitiae laetos habitus, vulgusque proborum), certifies his claim to surpassing artifice (artifici manu).

In Ortelius’s formulation this conjunction of joy and sorrow marks the piety of the Virgin’s devotees (proborum), and it is Bruegel’s signal