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HEARTFRUIT

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This work has not been previously submitted in whole, or in part for the award of any degree. It is my own work. Each significant contribution to, and quotation in, this dissertation from the work, or works of other people has been attributed and has been cited and referenced.

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Abstract

This novel, *Heartfruit*, challenges the traditional farm novel as practised specifically by Afrikaans writers in South Africa and challenged by a younger generation of writers, post 1980. It therefore challenges the genre of farm novel.

The rewrite of the farm novel presupposes a critical view on social and economic relationships within a rural context and the usurping of traditional power relationships within the farming context.

This novel traces the story of a South African fruit farm and the farm's transition from a traditional white-held ownership to a new dispensation of collective ownership where traditional roles of worker and landowner are redefined.

The story explores the economic relationships and legal issues surrounding farming and the export of fruit from South Africa. Time-wise the novel stretches from the 1970's to approx the turn of the 20th century. As a historical novel it also deals with a private relationship and the public implications of this relationship within a changing political and economical space.

The novel begins with the main male protagonist, a fruit farmer traveling in Europe in search of funding and new markets, here at the end of the 1990's. The latter half of this decade has seen the opening up of trade for individual growers and agents in South Africa to access international markets, without governmental control through the old Marketing Board system.

He has an accident in the home of his estranged brother in Holland, whereby he lands up in hospital. Here he has time to reflect and consider his private history as well as his future and the fragile prospects of the new farm structure he has implemented.

In essence the novel speaks of a broader human experience of loss and guilt as well as the struggle to reach out and build relationships.

The title of the novel, *Heartfruit* is derived from the common name of the tree *Hymenocardia acida*, which is a tree indigenous to Southern Africa. The fruit of the tree is in the shape of a deeply indented heart, turning red and conspicuous when mature. In African culture, the fresh leaves are placed in the roof of a house to protect it from lightning. The root ashes and the bark are also used for various oral and stomach conditions.

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This land is not his land.

Tired of traveling, Isak longs for heat and dust and an expanse of sky.

Troubled, he checks the traffic in the mirror. He stares at the child, glued to the car window ahead, recalling his own lonely journey as a boy.

Here, there are no kestrels on telephone poles.

Here, there are no mountains overlooking broad plains.

The land is not his land, nor the people.

He feels nothing for the gentle landscape surrounding him. For the most he longs for her to be sitting here with him, gesticulating excitedly in all directions.

Dark skies clear as he pulls off the road next to lawns lined with white crosses. Cars stream past. He climbs out, stretching his body in the cold, worried that he has not heard anything from her.

Perron. Isak rolls the name over his tongue.

Perron, he thinks of home.

Geese feed off snails as he studies the map, running his finger along the road from Paris to the Dutch border. It is the name of the village that changes his mind to stay and the crosses too. He wants to know more about them, their wooden simplicity moving him inexplicably.

Stiffly, he descends the embankment towards the Fiat, taking the turn-off from the highway that leads to the main street where old men lock up for the night. Some have ribbons pinned onto their blazers and it is the first time since Rungis that he has seen men wear berets like himself.

He parks next to a dilapidated scooter under the flickering name of the hotel, cracking his knuckles in thought when a man comes out through the swinging bar doors with a clumsiness that catches his attention. Isak hesitates but two others, jovial and younger step out of the bar, cradling the jerking body onto the scooter's seat. One of them kick starts the engine while the other maneuvers the scooter off the pavement.

The taller one turns to Isak, tapping the side of his head. "Idiot," he mouths exaggeratedly and the other laughs as they shoulder their way back into the bar.

He watches the man with the lolling head drive erratically down the avenue, until the swinging doors quieten. Inside, the ceiling is low and there is a woman behind the desk with rouged cheeks.

"Excusi moi, ja ne parle pas Francais?"

"You speak Anglais?" she asks charmingly.

"Un peau." Isak measures with his fingers to show how little.

"Visa?" She offers her hand, commenting appreciatively on his younger image. "Beau homme." Her bangles tinkle as she passes it back. "Afrique du Sud...Mandela?"

"Yes, yes," he replies, grimacing impatiently. "Maak net gou," he murmurs under his breath.

"Une chamber." A flamed fingernail makes her point clear.

Together they mount the staircase, his bag between the two of them. She unhooks a key from her cleavage, chatting in broken English as he studies the number on the door.

The room is Spartan and the Madam gestures expansively. "Perron, Verdun, Somme...Is famous for bloody fighting." She pushes open the shutters and he can see

the endless fields of crosses. "Land, men killing men for land," she tries to explain the view.

Beneath the artificial ruddiness, there is skin like Ouma's.

"Merci."

"Cle." She hands over the key, while indicating the time for dinner with her fingers but he curtly dismisses the offer.

Above the bed is a crucifix with a carved Christ figure and he stays at the open window until she closes the door. The room is sided by watercolours of men fighting in trenches with haloes around their heads. Shoving off his shoes at the heel he pulls the beret off his head. *Made in China*, it reads on the inner satin. Disgusted, he kicks it under the bed.

Madam calls as she goes down the stairs and her gaiety adds to his frustration. Brochures are piled on the bedside table. Idly he flips through France. Versailles, Montmartre, the Moulin Rouge, cafés on the Champs Elysees. Tossing them to the floor, he recalls the Peripherique long before sunrise. Him caught that very morning in the swirling motion around the city. An enormous spinning wheel of vehicles that never rests. Then Rungis with its stark halls, large enough to house bomber planes, deceptive in their tattiness, displaying perfect fruit from all over the world.

Made in China, he thinks again, nothing is sacred. What is worse, the battle of the body or the mind? He knows both, the fight to survive in grass and swamps and the fight to survive in a competitive world of money. A man who has turned his back on the old order of things and yet the fight has gone out of him, long ago. Only he knows that, only he knows that this last attempt to save everything they have worked for, believed in, is like sending a cripple to the front lines, without weapons.

It is hopeless.

A gong plays in the passage of the hotel. He sits up and yawns. Out by the window in the back yard, kitchen staff feed geese through funnels. Isak closes the shutters to their cries. There is mud on his shoes. Carefully he wipes at the spots, seeing Japie in the shed, praying a blessing over him.

Their trust in him is too much to bear.

Accordion scratched out on vinyl, rises up from the dining room, while the e-mail from Danie lies untouched in his pocket. His visit to Europe is to kill two birds with one stone and the one has already been put to flight, while the second remains hidden from him.

'It would be good to see you again.'

Once again he opens the shutters for fresh air, endless crosses creating endless vistas. Disturbed, he checks the cell phone for messages from her but there is nothing. Despite his disappointment, he keeps her updated and the tone light.

“Ek is op pad om ‘n ware Fransman te word.” Clumsily, he presses the ok button, continuing with the second part. “Parys en nou uiteindelik, Perron.” *Message sent*, registers on the screen. “Buite raas die paddas so erg hulle klink soos poegies met af-exhausts, miskien van benoudgeid?” He struggles to find the question mark option, deleting his failed attempt at humour.

There are a number of voice mails from the bank and the agricultural co-op. Without listening, he deletes each one, moving over to the basin where he brushes his teeth, staring absentmindedly at the scentless rose.

France has not been a success. He has misread their enthusiasm. It is one of admiration and not of commitment.

Despondently, he sits down on the bed picking at a hair on the pillow, seductive in its solitariness, alone with his racing mind. Violently he kicks at the bedding of the too short bed.

Who has guilt? Who has guilt over Africa? Maybe the British? The memory of the concentration camps still fresh in their collective conscience, the diamond and gold desecration, their African legacy. Perhaps the Dutch's guilt about Jan van Riebeeck. And the French, he thinks in the dark, the French have had Africa, the Belgians under Leopold, too.

At last it is quiet downstairs. He studies the paintings in the dark, calling up her face before him. How he loves the way her hair falls and the way she woos him closer with her joy. He catches her doing it but it is impossible to resist. He loves them both, her and the child and yet the farm is his mistress, his lover, a prison that ensnares him. And there is no way out of this self-induced sentence. He has made the mistake to think work equates love and now that it is almost too late it is their love that he wants most, the only constant in all of the uncertainty and yet he fears he will lose it with everything else. Other fears haunt him too, his fear of losing the land, of losing Perron. So he is pulled between his two loves.

The morning spent in Paris is a lifetime away. Strolling between the fruit he saw his own, bruised and marked and he had turned away so that no one would know it was his.

What nation still had a social conscience? Who would pay for the sins of the father?

His agent amongst the pallets, jacketed like Madam, shrugging his shoulders, "Pardon monsieur Bruwer, but only the best sells at Rungis. There is no place

for beginners...Too much good fruit.” Dominique’s finely wrought face frowns up at him, the words formed voluptuously on his thin lips.

Later they sit in the diner surrounded by men smoking cigarillos, Dominique, apologetic over the baked camembert and the Bordeaux in his hand. Uncomfortable and embarrassed by this attention, Isak regrets the invitation to eat.

“Rungis is dying,” Dominique tries to soften the blow, waving his hands. “Another hall is to close down. We have lost the battle with the supermarkets.”

Dominique greying at the temples, just like him. Dominique, fourth generation on the market floor. Perhaps the last generation on the market floor. They walk back through the halls to the red and blue carton of Oupa. He bites into a pear, the wind marks and russeting forgotten as he tastes the sweetness and tartness of home

Without hope, all is lost.

Sleeping in the cramped room, he dreams of the men on the wall.

Shivering, he wakes to a moon and the clock-face down the street, searching in the dark for the briefcase with its calculator, listlessly pressing the digits over and over. The bank wants answers and he needs to give them the bigger plan, they too have little patience with a white man and a social experiment. Cartons, fruit, fuel, fertilizer and people, lots of people are coded into figures. Abruptly he switches on the light. It is the time of day that markets across Europe switch on their lights too.

And back home in the valley someone would be lighting a candle and heating water on a stove and they would be sleeping, the two of them together in his absence. Lambs would be born and the leaves would fall and the river would run full through the orchards as he struggles to find a saviour for them all.

In despair he drops the calculator with totals that won’t go away.

*

Spine to the wall, the little boy waits in the dark for the crying. It begins, rising and falling, then dissolving into a whimper. He mimics Outa's song, clicking his tongue, filling the hollow space in his head. With a cocked head he waits, wrapped in Ouma's eiderdown. There's a lull, then another, singing songs of comfort and he repeats the words, over and over again. Suddenly the song stops. He studies his feet and the shape of his sleeping brother, curled up like a frightened songololo. The shamed thumb moves in and out and the light from the stoep makes tiger stripes, light and dark, light and dark. His eiderdown is made of different material. One by one he strokes the blocks, guessing the names; calico, satin, velvet, kaffir sheeting.

On the wall is Jesus walking on water and the water looks like the wave pattern they do in their books at Sunday school, rows and rows of them, especially for Noah's ark.

Without waking the other, he climbs in, curving his body with his brother's back, mimicking the breathing of the smaller boy. The lines over his face dissolve into oneness and the words of the lullaby sink into the waves on the wall.

*

Walking down the main street of Perron, he rolls his head tentatively from side to side, feeling the old neck injury. Automatically he lifts the phone to check the screen but Aimee is silent. Bad news travels fast, he consoles himself as he enters the old church.

Perron's museum is hell displayed in glass cabinets; framed, listed and catalogued. Artificial limbs made from wood and cloth stand at attention on shelving. Against the wall a projector flashes scenes of soldiers in trenches of mud. Running, shooting, riding, falling in mud as high as horse bridles. There is no sun, no golden aura, just misery and defeat on their faces.

This is Oupa's war. Thousands of lives for a meter of soil. Trenches turned into bloodied moats, men turned into bloated bodies, embalmed in the ever-present mud.

What for? he thinks, as Europe moves to a union. If only one could see ahead.

He exits through the fire escape onto the grounds of the castle that leads to the church. Old men sit on canvas chairs along the moat fishing. He zips his jacket and hunches his shoulders from the cold as he stops to look at the tables. Live crabs and unplucked ducks lie next to each other while eels squirm in shallow baths. Again he unfolds the map showing the Autoroute de Soleil. It is a five-hour drive to the Belgium-Dutch border.

'Our house is the last in the street, on a hill, the only hill in Holland.'

The putt-putt of the scooter comes from behind. Isak points to apples and the lady lifts them off the table by their stem ends, apples with unblemished skins. He sits down on the low wall of the church biting into one, its insipid taste offering no consolation. There are millions of such apples spread over Europe.

Fruit is the beginning and the end of him.

Across the moat a girl plays the accordion. He notices her sullenness. She is the age of his daughter, her slim limbs reminding him of Sophy and the awkwardness that comes with being a father to a girl-woman.

The scooter stops. He senses the man's closeness. Without speaking Isak passes on an apple. They watch the lines in the water, listening to the thin singing.

Then he tosses the stripped core into the water and the other does the same. The two cores drift downstream until they are sucked under the bridge. With delight the man claps his hands while Isak returns to the car. Small pleasures no longer please him.

Pulling at the choke, he wonders about the cores and whether they will seed as he drives past the girl, hidden by falling hair. She is only a child. He stops the car, holding out a coin to her, which she takes with barely concealed anger, dropping it disdainfully onto the red velvet.

Wheat and mustard lands replace the fields of crosses. Stone villages and fuel stops break the monotony along the highway. Eventually the hills flatten out to beech forests and the first polders appear. He switches on the fan as a concentration of piggeries spew their stench onto the road and the sign for the village, straddling the border, comes up on the board.

It is a truck stop, a take-away town for travelers and below the road, shop windows sell women. At the end of the village is a hill and a house with a weather vane pointing south.

Two men stand on the porch, each holding a Daschund. Isak flips the indicator's arrow towards them as he slowly turns into the driveway.

His brother is of slighter build but with the same neatness as Father and a sallowness of skin he cannot remember. The other is like the house, modest in build and appearance. The dogs fly at the Fiat's wheel.

The other scolds the dogs.

“Sakkie.” His brother pulls at the door.

“Danie.” Isak struggles to release the safety belt, his eyes on the catch.

He gets out, with the dogs snapping at his heels, holding out his hand but Danie steps forward, embracing him.

“Boeta.” Danie grips him hard.

Isak withdraws, dropping his arms to his side and his brother is thinner, less muscular than he can remember.

“We’ve been waiting for you.” Danie’s eyes are like dam water.

“Business in Paris...” Isak apologises. “I underestimated the time it takes to get out of the city.”

The other with lashless eyes holds out his hand, “Gabriel.”

The dogs are picked up and carried like watermelons under the arm.

“I thought you may have changed your mind as we didn’t hear from you.”

Danie drops the dog in the entrance hall. “Welcome to one of the last vicarages in Holland.”

The house is compact and meditative in its tones. He waits awkwardly as they unlace their shoes staring at the picture on the hat stand. It is of mountains and sky. Next to it is a blackened teacup with a blue rim.

Gabriel calls the dogs and walks through to the kitchen, leaving them alone.

“I’m glad you’ve come, it would have been a terrible disappointment having you so close and then not seeing you.” Danie stands next to him and they look at the photo of sky and mountain.

“I guess my curiosity got the better of me. For a moment I thought it was Dad.”

“Appearances can be deceiving,” Danie smiles at him. “You look again more and more like Oupa.”

Isak sniffs in disagreement, wondering of which one.

“Boerekool.” Danie sniffs as well. “You must be hungry and in need of a drink... Die Boeing is lankal oor.” He peers out of the door. “Not that we would know.”

The kitchen is tiny. Danie pulls out a stool for both of them and together they perch, their shoulders touching. Isak unzips his jacket.

“Hang dit agter die deur.”

Gabriel is stirring with the one hand and drinking a beer from the other.

Danie tears at the bread on the table, the white flour sifting over his hands. “Paasbrood, peasant style.” He holds out a chunk of bread, “our version of the hot cross bun. Vat vir jou.”

Isak takes a piece. “The wine?”

“Die wêreld is vervuil met Suid-Afrikaanse wyne. Dúur, maar dit gaan meer oor die sentiment as die smaak.”

Isak sniffs at the bottle’s neck, pulling his face.

“Sweet memories van ons kinderdae.” Danie laughs at Isak’s face. “Onthou jy die bottels binne die krismisrose?” He fills the glasses. “Gesondheid, bly jy’s hier.”

They sip and Isak pushes his stool slightly back to see his brother’s face from the front. It is a face of people from the past.

“Mamma, how is she holding up?” Danie asks lightly.

Isak chews in thought, “Mamma is no longer.”

His brother holds his gaze, then drops his head to rub one of the dogs. “I often think of her.”

Isak shakes the flour off his pants. “Well, she no longer thinks of you...Or anyone else for that matter.”

The dogs lick the drippings from Gabriel's spoon off the tiles.

For a while they eat the bread and drink the wine.

"Your noses." Gabriel gestures with the spoon, feeling their discomfort.

"Nostrils like an Arab horse... Just the same and your eyes."

The dogs watch the spoon as they turn to each other.

"Tieroë met blou goeters," they reply together.

"Ouma se gesege." Danie explains to Gabriel. "En jou gesin?"

Isak flexes his fingers. "Soos rivierklippe."

"Klaar geskaaf?"

"Miskien... Ek het meer aan die rol gedink."

Gabriel sets the table with blue-rimmed plates. Slowly, he spoons the cabbage sauce over the potato, the fatty water soaking into the folds of the mash. "Stampot soos myn Oma's recept."

The sauce swims over the plate. Isak concentrates on the fatty whorls. They take hands and Danie says Dutch grace. The three of them sit in a row at the counter.

"Your congregation?"

Danie stops eating. "The Dutch are self-sufficient. God is a quaint concept to them." He dismisses the topic, playing with his fork, stabbing at the slivers of cabbage. "The farmers around here are suffering, farming is a dying profession." He looks up, pausing, "and Perron?"

Isak pulls the bottle closer, filling his glass. "We have no subsidies. Just getting poorer and poorer and no-one here or there cares a damn. Cheers."

Gabriel opens another beer, his eyes flitting from one to the other.

Isak tastes the tannin on his tongue, "The honeymoon is over, everyone believes in the new South Africa until it asks something from them."

The cell phone in his jacket starts to ring.

“Moenie sê jy’t ook een van daai goed nie?” Danie looks on in mock horror, “Suid-Afrikaanse yuppieboer.”

“Hulle steel die telefoonlyn vir die koperdraad,” he explains shortly.

“Verskoon my.” He walks back to the entrance hall.

Her voice fills the emptiness inside of him. “What does he look like... Are you glad to see him? Can Dominique help?”

“Stadig, stadig, ons eet nou, ek sal later met jou praat.”

“I can’t wait till then. I want to know now.”

Her forcefulness contrasts sharply with the coolness he feels from the men in the kitchen.

“Later, ek moet eers dink, dit in my eie kop uitsort.”

“That’s so unfair.”

“Het jy my boodskappe gekry?”

“Mmm...Sophy had a dream that you’re coming home on Thursday and now she believes it.”

“Ek kan nie terug voordat ek nie ‘n antwoord kry nie. Dit kan weke vat.”

“Let’s hope we have that luxury.”

“Het lone deurgegaan?”

She hesitates. “We stood there until they gave it to us... I refused to budge.”

There is laughter from the kitchen.

“You should have been here. It was a mistake coming alone.”

He stares at the photo, imagining their faces and her holding the phone, swaying from side to side as she speaks. The mountain and the sky captured in the

entrance hall behind her and the bare Del Toidia branches. He feels her absence intensely. All he desires is simplicity. The land without the trouble.

“Que sera sera, whatever must be must be,” she sings with little enthusiasm. “Love you,” she adds but he doesn’t reply, switching off the phone in thought.

The kitchen is warm and the dogs lie with the gammon bone between them.

“Ek gaan my tas haal, ek is nou weer hier.”

He opens the front door and the air is chilly. Without thinking he slips on Danie’s jacket, tight over the shoulders and too narrow over the chest. The dogs follow him out into the night.

Here is no wilderness and there are no stars either. The stench from the piggeries drifts over the house as he struggles to find the porch light. In the dark he guesses where the car is, all his senses sharpening to gauge the distance. The dogs keep at his heels as he steps to the right where the driveway must be but there is no driveway, just a low wall. Tripping, his knees buckle and he cannot stop it, the fall downward, head first. Down, down, down, twisting in the fall that ends with hardness so hard that his head splits open, then his shoulder, then his chest.

Then the rest of him.

Pain blackens out all thought and feeling as he lies in a pool, seeping out of his own body and nothing becomes everything.

*

He awakens from the hammering of many fists on the door, like a stampede of wildebeest over dry plains, driven on by raucous laughter and cursing.

Another night of fear.

Quick, off the mattress and up on the trunk with cold metal under cold feet. He knots his stomach, thrusting out his chin, clamping his fists stiff against his sides.

The other boys do the same. The deep sleepers are dragged off their cots. Faces are slapped hard to waken them. Then chaos as the beating on the door explodes. Door hinges pull like gum from a thorn tree as the door comes smashing down.

Dozens of eyes in the dark looking in at them.

He is third in line. The punches are rapid and powerful. Knuckles kneaded by rock and arms loaded with muscle cut into him. Bitter nausea rises from his gut. The blows continue as he tries to think of home, yet the pain shreds his mind.

The next man is on him but he daren't look down. The next boy tips forward, knees buckling on thin stilts. He hits the floor face first.

Isak shifts his eyes to the opposite wall.

Boys are crying. The aisle between the rows of beds is congested. The ou manne walk over the bodies into the night. The last one turns spitting at them. His bulky form has no face and Isak feels the spittle on his cheeks.

“Ons sien julle fokken rowe weer.”

The bungalow breathes and someone switches on the lights. He jumps off next to the boy whose nose is bleeding.

Isak wipes the hairless face with marbled eyes and shattered spectacles. “Voel jy okay?”

The boy appears not to hear, picking up the pieces. “Are they coming back?”

“Next time we'll be ready for them. I promise you.”

He looks at the boy with a thin chain around his neck. It has a red snake on the plaque. On his t-shirt is written, *Jaws* and there's a small figure swimming above the massive snout of a shark.

"We'll be ready," he reassures him again.

The boy smiles weakly.

Isak measures the damage around him. Boy's blood on the cement floor and it's only been forty-eight hours since they've been there and there is another three months to go.

"Vasbyt ouens, vasbyt," he says to them and to himself.

*

Dogs with dripping paws around his head make him aware of what has happened. Their raspy tongues licking his face, stinking of smoked meat and cabbage.

His breath disappears as air escapes from his punctured lung. Face down he lies. Bones snapped, crushed and bruised, himself frozen by calamity and cold. Whining, they keep watch as he spits out grit and chipped teeth. He tries to shout but the garage swallows the sound.

Later, much later, men in socks drag what is left of him up the hill to the house. He lies on white tiles and wonders whether the dogs will clean his mess too. His father is on the phone calling the doctor. Not for his mother because his father repeats his name, over and over. A blanket is thrown over him. He waits for them to pull it over his face and there is a great cold coming in from the door.

Men dressed like Madam pick him up, drop him on the frosted ground, then pick him up again. He can see inside his father's head. All is revealed, a longing for a

land of mountains and sky and his father thinks he will die, that he sees right behind his eyes.

There is a siren wailing and the siren is for him. Out by the door one of the men loses his grip and the stretcher tips a second time and he feels himself go down and he can do nothing to stop it.

He lies in rose bushes, their fragrance comforting. "Souvenir de Madame Leonie Vionenot," he helps them out.

"Verdomme." There's a swearing and scramble around him as they roll him back on.

He is straitjacketed by pain. "Moenie!"

No one hears him as they load him into the ambulance.

"Back, back, back!" the men shout and he wants to remind them that one can never go back, what is gone is gone but he cannot speak as they load him into the ambulance.

Under the flashing light a masked man bends over him with a syringe. And the needle is stuck in his arm.

"Moenie!" he warns them in his head but it is too late. The cold is not from outside but from within, creeping up his legs into his chest and then into his head. He sees their smiling faces with outstretched arms to take him with them and he isn't afraid anymore. "Let's go!" he calls out with relief, feeling himself die in her arms as owl wings lift him up.

*

And she is dancing. Her bare feet cracked at the heels and the child is pressed against her breast. He can see her thighs through the cotton skirt, the dimples below the buttocks as she rocks the child to a song.

The walls are black. She has painted the walls black without his consent.

He stands before her but she ignores him, dropping her chin, the room in disarray. There is paint on the table and the brushes lie hard in the sun.

Terracotta, the walls are terracotta and he will not live in such a house, with walls the colour of mud. So he paints over those dark walls while she sits on the couch watching him. Layer upon layer of white but the brown shines through the whiteness.

And they do not speak of the walls, her silence worn like a shawl that she wraps around herself, keeping him out.

“Let’s go,” he tries again but instead the cot moves beneath him.

A tiffie in green kicks open a door and the lights are green for go.

A woman mans the machine. Metal plates are pressed under his bruised flesh and photographed. They chat over his body, seductively, as he lies stripped on the trolley but for the mask over his face feeding him oxygen.

Then he is out of the green room and the tiffie whistles a tune brightly as they go into another room where he is buried in a vibrating tunnel. A voice through an intercom commands him to lie still as the winking eye looks into his brain. He wanders whether he has feet and whether he will walk again.

“Doodstil.” The voice speaks to him and his eyes twitch in answer to the irony of this and his coldness towards the caricature of a man on the scooter.

He is pulled out, unstrapped and trollied back.

The ceiling is white and the fluorescent bar needs cleaning. He is plugged into machines with pipes and nodes.

He fell. He can remember falling and twisting and not knowing where was up or where was down. That is all he can remember and their faces, when the cold came over him he saw their faces but their faces are gone.

He tries to bunch his fists but he cannot find his hands.

There is another cot next to his. His father lies asleep and this room could be a morgue if it weren't for sounds behind the screen, the farting and coughing of old men. Through the night he sees men in white and faces looming over him and they speak about him as though he is dead.

A withered hand touches his face. Isak looks up. It is an old man with an arm in a sling, who talks to him in Dutch that is impossible to understand and the clearness of his gaze makes Isak want to weep and he wonders if this is what morphine does to you, make you long for something you've never had.

Without hesitation the old man feels the hardened bandage around Isak's head, barking at the night nurse. His father sits up in the cot next to him but it is Danie, his sallow complexion is in contrast to the other's face, reddened by wind. The old man speaks agitatedly, pointing at Isak's head.

"Jou akrobatiese toertjies het ons laat skrik." Danie swings his legs off the bed, rubbing his eyes. His shirt is crumpled and there is grey stubble on his chin.

The clock on the opposite wall to the cot says it is five in the morning.

The old man turns his attention to Danie as Isak's head is unwound and the dressing replaced. Panic sets in. Will his mind fall out through the hole in his head?

"He wants to know what happened to you, where you come from and what you do for a living. In that order."

Isak can see the fear for him in Danie's eyes.

"The old man farms outside the village. He noticed your red neck and forearms as signs of your mutual calling." Danie keeps his eyes on the screen while talking. "Jy't vir ons donners groot laat skrik." He frowns, fingering Isak's wrist for his pulse.

The mask covers his mouth so he doesn't have to say anything.

All he wants to do is close his eyes and escape everything and everybody.

"Die Oom boer met varke." Danie fiddles with the needle in his dead arm.

"Onthou jy Pa se Landrasse?" Danie's voice is anxious as he rinses his hands in the basin next to the cot. "Isak?" His voice is of a boy long ago, pleading with him. "Die Oom het 'n hele album foto's van die varke saam hospital toe gebring."

The swinging cross sparkles over him.

Landras, Isak thinks, it could be my name too.

*

The pigs are in cement pens. The men look at the miserable creatures, spitting in the dust.

"Da's meer vet oppie kop as oppie lyf, die Grootbaas moet weer kyk."

The suring in Outa's hatband wilts and his nails curve over his fingertips.

But his father ignores them. The pig is caught, a nervous creature, unused to being alone, whisking its ears and peering suspiciously with small eyes.

Outa drops mielies at its snout and the pig's head drops greedily.

They play, Isak, Danie and Pettie amongst the pens, running and jumping along the cement wall when his father kneels with the point 22. They freeze obediently like statues on cue. Pettie's wiry body contorted over Danie's softness.

The gun on his father shoulder, lies level with the pig's backbone. It lifts its head. His father shoots and the bullet pierces the pig between the eyes and they carry on playing.

The pig is the weight of a full-grown man and they must help Outa and Piet lift the carcass onto the wooden door. Danie flinches while Isak keeps vigil.

His father swats the dust off his knee, placing the rifle on the wall, picking up the guitar, humming under his moustache while Outa sharpens the knife on the wetted stone. The pig stares at Isak with surprise. He closes the lids.

With one cut Outa slices through the neck. The hind legs kick. The blood drains into the basin and the dogs lick the cement. The guitar rests on his father's knee while he smokes and sings and strums.

'*Sewe snye brood.*' That is what he plays. Outa shuffles to the music around the makeshift table and there are red flecks on his shirt. Piet pours boiling water from the seepot over the carcass while Outa scrapes the hair off and Pettie sweeps.

'*Sewe snye brood,*' becomes, '*Die kat val in die modderwater.*' Isak taps with his foot as his father knocks the side of the guitar with his hand.

They've had their morning dop, Outa and Piet. Liquor on empty stomachs is something they share with his father. The men open like Namaqua daisies.

His father smiles and he looks happy here in the yard with the men singing and Isak hopes the singing won't stop.

One after the other Outa and Piet abandon the carcass and they do a dance like mating storks, dipping and diving around each other.

Without warning his father places the guitar back on the wall. He picks up the rifle. “Dis eers genoeg lawwigheid.”

Piet drops his arms and moves back to the rigid carcass. “Ja, Baas.”

They watch him walk up the hill and Outa rolls a pil. “Janneman het vanoggend weer die verkeerde kant opgestaan.” He spits on the cement.

He and Danie say nothing.

The two men share the pil, then Outa takes the knife, splitting the ribcage in two. The first to come out is the bladder. Pettie presses the urine out, passing it on to Danie to blow up, while the men remove the innards and the boys kick the bladder around.

The intestines are placed onto one side, bloodied and full of feed. The carcass is stripped of its hide and hung from a hook to be dried in the wind. The gelatinous membrane swaddles the pink flesh and Isak can't think that it was a pig before.

The head is kept to one side. The head belongs to Outa.

The intestines are hosed, inside and out and the fetid mess spills out at their feet. They throw long pieces into the ashes under the seepot, waiting for the stinking membranes to blacken. Danie gets the nersderm because he is the youngest. With quick hands they turn the pieces over, sitting on their haunches. Deftly, Pettie hooks the blistered intestines, claiming the first for himself because he is the eldest. They stuff their mouths with the burnt offal until there is nothing left.

The stench stays on their hands until evening. Even after violent scrubbing with soap and water it lingers on their hands.

**

The gun stands at the back door, alongside a row of his father's shoes.

A meerkat of a Raatjie sits polishing in the shade of the stoep, listening to Jim Reeves on the radio. The laces are washed and pegged in pairs on the line.

"Sies, julle stink." She pulls up her nose, waving them back, her dark eyes picking on them. "Gaan wassie mop van julle hanne af... Buite, nie binne nie!"

"Waar's Pa?" Isak asks her, stroking the gun's barrel.

Raatjie nods impatiently towards the mountain behind the house. "Die Baas broei daarbo." Frowning with concentration, she attacks the leather with a brush.

"En Kalbas?" Isak asks again as they wash their hands in the cement sink.

"Al die honne is saam."

They hold out their hands for her inspection. "Kyk hoe lyk julle twee, die Nooi neek vir julle en vi' my ôk." She pushes the oversized spectacles back on her nose. "Trek uit."

Obediently, the two boys strip and hand her the bundle of clothes. Isak looks up at the mountain behind the leaves of the Del Toidia.

The brush swishes vigorously back and forth. She speaks in passing as the naked boys wrestle in the sun, "Raatjie het gebak, daar's brood vi' julle binne."

They whoop and make a dash for the back door, jostling with each other to be first. On the kitchen table is bread smeared with apricot jam. The canary watches them, chewing on its seeded stick. Danie feeds it a crumb and the little bird twists its head between the bars to peck at it.

Suddenly the radio's volume is turned down.

His mother stands at the door, dressed in an overall, her dark hair swept up on the sides of her face, like the Spanish doll in Ouma's cabinet and the sinews of her neck are strained as she walks past them to the window.

"Bedonnergeid," is all she says before lighting a cigarette. She purses her lips and the smoke comes out in an even stream. "Is die volk klaar geslag?"

"Ja, Mamma." They answer in unison.

"Boeta, gaan sê vir Outa die vark se kop moet ook huis toe." She struggles with the overall's buttons, staring at him. "Trek net eers iets aan."

"Ja, Mamma."

He grabs at the pile of dirty clothes next to the radio. Raatjie swats wildly at him with the brush but he is too fast, hopping and pulling on his shorts as he runs down the hill to Outa.

The men are hosing down the cement and the door. They wear gumboots and are laughing loudly as Outa sprays the water and Piet sweeps.

"Outa, Mamma sê die kop moet huis toe."

They stop laughing.

The head lies on a tray of Ouma's with a net over it. The net is covered in flies.

"Dis Outa se kop," Piet protests.

Isak shrugs. "Mamma wil die kop hê."

Outa's eyes narrow at the boy. "Vattie kop."

He tries to lift the tray but the tray is too heavy. The men carry on cleaning, ignoring him. He tries again but he can't.

"Outa moet die kop vir Mamma bring."

They stop a second time and Piet sucks in his breath.

Outa holds the hose for a while allowing the water to run into the ditch, then he switches it off and dries his hands. Silently he picks up the tray and the flies lift briefly before settling down as he carries the tray up the hill.

“Toe, toe weg is jy,” Angrily, Piet lifts the broom.

Isak chooses to walk home through the orchards, past the office and pack shed. The office door is open. Inside is Oupa’s glass topped desk and leather couch. Under the glass are photos. Photos of his father at the boormasjien. Photos taken of Ouma and Oupa in the North on sand dunes. Photos of Oom Sakkie in Egypt in front of the pyramids. Photos of fruit trees with leaves and without. He wipes at the glass, smearing it with the fattiness still on his hands.

Then he senses that he is not alone in the room. Silver hair shows above the upright back of his father’s chair. Against the light he can see dust hanging in the air like a halo. He steps forward, reaching out to catch the floating pieces.

“Boeta.” His father swivels the chair around.

“Pappa.”

“Jy verjaar mos môre.”

“Ja, Pappa.”

His father gets up from the chair and walks to the safe. “Kom hier.”

Dutifully, Isak walks over to the safe as his father unlocks it.

His father lifts it off the green felt, a pellet gun with a barrel of polished wood.

“Dis Oom Sakkie se geweer dié.”

Isak’s reflection is warped in its curves.

“Hy’t altyd gesê my oudste moet dit kry...Môre is jy tien. Ek dink jy’s groot genoeg vir jou eie geweer.”

His father holds out the gun to him and he steps forward, reaching up to kiss his father's cheek but his father pulls back.

“Sakkie, jy's 'n grootseun. Van nou af groet ons met die hand.”

The fingers of his father's hand grip his firmly and they shake hands like men do, then he takes his gun and it is light to hold.

*

It is his birthday and it is raining. He can tell by the drumming on the roof and the light in the room. The birthday gun is in the safe behind his father's suits and the house is empty but for him and Danie.

He rolls onto his back, feeling the strawberry mark on his neck. Raatjie calls it the mark of the devil, for something he did wrong before he was born. There are no sounds from the kitchen, just the twitting of the canary as Raatjie is stacking, drying trays for the rain.

He gets up and dresses quietly so as not to waken his brother. In front of the mirror he strikes a pose. The muscles in his arms scurry like mice. Then he inspects his armpits for hairs but there are none.

In the empty kitchen the canary sits forlornly on its swing. He whistles and the bird cocks its head, the pig head of Outa on the kitchen table. He lifts the net to look, poking the flesh with his finger. Carefully he pulls back the lids, revealing the staring eyes, then covers the head quickly.

Kalbas waits at the door. He sits down and runs his hand hard over the sheepdogs back and the dog smiles with pleasure. The mountain is covered in cloud. All around the garden are cypresses planted by Ouma to keep the veldt out.

Farming is in your blood, you are baptized into it from the day you are born. That is what Oupa will say to him today.

He calls the dog and they walk through the orchards. Pickers flushed out by the rain, jest and shout at him from the tractor. Most of the men are strangers, moving from farm to farm, tumbleweeds scarcely touching the ground.

They are difficult to discipline. Their ways are different to the farm people's ways.

He turns his head away as they eat of the fruit.

In the office, Oupa sits heavily on his father's chair behind the desk while Dominee sits stiffly, like a sawn-off branch on the couch with ankles that snap like dogs against each other.

"Geluk Isak." Dominee shakes his hand. "Reën op jou verjaarsdag beteken baie seëninge."

"Reën in die somer is g'n seëning nie, Dominee." Oupa corrects him before turning his attention to Isak. "Onthou boerdery is in jou bloed, seun, van die dag dat jy gebore is."

"Ja, Oupa."

His Oupa opens one of the desk's drawers. "Wil jy met die medaljes speel?"

"Asseblief, Oupa."

Dominee pages through the bible on his lap, his suede shoes ruined by the rain while his Oupa sucks on the unlighted pipe.

Isak opens the cigar box with the medals. A number are in the shape of a star, while others are wreathed, one has a springbuck head on it.

Behind Dominee is a photo of an old man with a goatee beard shaking Oupa's hand and behind the door is a calendar with a woman in a bikini but Dominee can't see the calendar because the door is open.

The two men sit in silence. The humming noise of the grader can be heard behind the office wall and his mother's strident voice in the pack shed.

Isak unpacks the medals in rows. A row for Oupa and a row for Oom Sakkie.

His Oupa thumbs tobacco that comes out of his mother's farm shop. His Oupa still has a set of keys even though he doesn't live there anymore. "In neëntien agtien het ek en Ma van Bechuanaland teruggekeer, dis nadat ons die hele kudde aan die Runderpes verloor het."

Dominee gives up on huisbesoek. He puts the bible back into its leather bag.

Isak lifts two of the medals and makes noises like an aeroplane. He knows Oupa's stories well.

"Wat het Oom daar gemaak?" Dominee coughs politely from the smoke that Oupa blows in his direction.

"Agter die stormloop, Noorde toe," he explains. "Wou vleis aan die myne en delwers voorsien." He leans back, settling into the swivel chair. "Na die oorlog was vrugte se verkope onseker en ek het dit as 'n kans vir geldmaak gesien...deur Mammon verlei, Dominee."

Danie stands at the door with a tear stained face.

"Jou Boeta is hier binne." Oupa wags the pipe at him. "Moenie daar so verskrik staan nie en groet jy nie 'n grootmens nie?"

Danie puts his head down and runs past Dominee to Isak.

"Hoekom huil jy?" Isak asks crossly.

"Die kop." Danie picks up one of the medals. "Die kop het vir my gekyk."

“Dis dood man, die vark is dood, hy kan niks aan jou maak nie.”

Isak dives the medal out of Danie’s hand. The smaller boy bursts into tears.

“Moenie,” Oupa reprimands him, “seuns huil nie.”

“Sissie,” Isak adds.

“Willie speel nie.” Danie drops the medal and runs out.

The rain comes down on the sink roof and for a while Oupa’s voice is drowned out. He takes out a penknife and begins to clean his nails.

Dominee concentrates on the leak in the ceiling. “Wat het Oom toe gemaak?”

“Took the Union Castle to England.” He pauses. “So wan with care, we find time for frightened peace to pant and breathe short winded accents of new broils to be commenced in strands afar remote.”

His Oupa likes to speak in a grand way. It comes from having to speak English at school long ago. It helps him win arguments at the farmer’s meetings because no one is exactly sure what he is saying. Isak wants to get up but he must wait until the story of Perron is finished.

“A month there and a month back. When I docked in London I made directly for Covent Garden to AC Cohen who had sold my fruit before the war. I had just five days and in five days I sold the entire harvest up front. They remembered the blue and red brand.” He digs a faded sticker out of one of the drawers, passing it on to Dominee. “They gave me my first cheque with gold embossed guarantees on it to take home.”

“Dit was sekerlik senutergend.” Dominee hands back the paper.

“Die terugkom het langer gevat, die weer was aan die verander. Toe ek my voet op wal sit was dit die laaste dag van die kontrak.”

Isak gathers the medals, careful not to disturb the old man or his temper.

“G’n mens weet waar ek is nie, toe reël die Oubaas sommer ‘n veiling van my goed, in absentia. Hy gee Ma instruksies om die huis te ontruim en die hele vallei se boere maak hul reg om te sien hoe die Bloedsappe val.”

Dominee looks at his watch and shifts to the edge of the seat, unzipping the leather bag.

“Ek bestel ‘n taxi in die hawe met so ‘n bleeksiel van ‘n mens en ek sê vir hom net so, sit voet in die hoek, Boeta, vandag hou ek en jy nog veiling.”

Outside the sun is shining and Isak can see pieces of the mountain coming through the cloud.

“Toe ons by die werf inry, is hul besig om die laaste trekkers op te veil en ek wys vir die man om reg voor die afslaer stil te hou,” Oupa swivels round, gesturing to the exact spot. “En ek klim uit, stadig, sodat almal my goed kan sien en haal die tjek uit my boonste sak uit, stadig, sodat almal my goed kan sien en ek hou dit onder die afslaer se neus en die Oubaas s’n ook en sommer net daar is die veiling verby.” Oupa hits the desk excitedly, “toe praat ek hard dat almal my kan hoor en ek sê vir Ma net so, vrou dra in, ons bly.”

“Die een se dood is die ander se brood.” Dominee attempts to end the discussion, ready to move on to others in the wyk.

“Vandag beteken Perron se naam maar min.” His Oupa spits on the floor. “Jul Natte het alles mos kom verander.” He tears at the sticker, dropping it in the rubbish bin. “Ons boere is kamstig nou één.”

Isak holds out the box.

“Klaar gespeel?”

He nods.

“Die medaljes Oom, waar kom hul vandaan?” Dominee changes the subject inspecting one with interest.

“Jy sal nie vir hulle herken nie, jy’s mos ‘n Ossewabrandwagman.”

Dominee keeps quiet.

“Van hulle is myne...” His Oupa looks distracted, “en die ander behoort aan my oudste seun, post mortem gegee...Sy graf lê in Heliopolis, net buite Cairo.”

“Hoe is hy dood, Oom?”

His Oupa closes the cigar box lid. “Sakkie was onder ‘n Engelse offisier in die woestyn, ‘n offisier weens sy herkoms en nie sy vermoëns nie.” He takes the medal from Dominee. “Die reën is verby.”

His Oupa and Dominee walk out onto the stoep leaving him at the desk.

*

Bored, he wanders inside the shed where his mother stands on a box surrounded by women, holding a box of peaches.

“Jy vat die vrug so.” She cups the velvety fruit. “Die vel is dun, soos ‘n kind s’n. Druk jy te hard dan kneus dit.” She presses the fruit and her wedding ring cuts into the skin, the juice dripping onto her wrist. “Kneusings maak dat die vrug niks beteken nie.”

She throws the fruit over the heads into the drum.

They all turn to look and their faces are like stone.

Danie sits under the box on the cement floor drawing in chalk.

Between her brows are lines dividing her forehead in two. She scoops another fruit. “Onthou,” she taps the side of her head exasperatedly, “die vrug moet drie weke oor die groot waters reis, verstaan julle dit?”

No one answers. They all look out by the door as the lorry passes by. The men whistle but not the old man. He just stands, holding onto the railings.

His mother tries again, swiping at the loose hair falling over her face. “Wat gebeur as jy ‘n pitsweer het?” This time she doesn’t wait for a reply. “Dit sweer en kry infeksie.” She throws her head back, planting her feet wider on the box. “‘n Vrug is soos ‘n mens. Vandat jy dit pluk, begin dit stadig doodgaan.”

The women are listening now.

“As die vrug seerkry, dan vrot dit vinniger. Net veertig dae as alles goed gaan.” Her voice drops. “Baie minder as dit kneus.”

Her lips and the women’s lips are the same to Isak, postbox slits that only allow a thin letter through.

The women chorus. “Ja, Nooi.”

His mother has a name under the women. He knows because he hears it spoken about in the barrakse on weekends. Her name is Nooi Kwaiwater because she can see from afar when a peach has been babied or not. Her shouting sits behind his belly button but her singing sits in his throat.

She gets off the box and the women line the sides of the band machine. Peaches roll past, hundreds and hundreds of them. The packers’ hands fly over the fruit so fast that Isak cannot see what they do in the air. When he sees again the peach is wrapped in tissue paper.

He spits the pip as far as he can. It hops over the floor onto Danie’s drawings.

“Kom jy saam rivier toe?”

Danie nods and drops the chalk. A row of stick figures without faces.

Down at the river the water comes past, sweeping along branches and fertilizer bags from upstream. The boys walk to the edge and call out.

Petrus sits hidden in the shade of a Ceylon rose, smoking. Twelve years old and finished with school and a Meester who drinks nagmaalwyn from a thermos.

They call his name again. Petrus creeps up and shoves Isak forward.

“Moenie.” Danie tries to stop them as they wrestle and kick in the mud.

“Shurrrup, jy’s net soos ‘n meisie.” Isak dismisses him, getting off Petrus.

Sulking, Petrus retires under the bush, smaller and lighter in build from the liquor Raatjie drank. He picks up the pil and draws deeply.

“Wat speel ons?” Isak swaggers, hands on the hip.

“Kyk,” Danie points excitedly to the flock of summer swallows, “hulle’s weer hier, die son het hulle gebring.”

The birds twitter as they settle in the reeds.

“Kom ons gaan haal die geweer.” Isak throws stones into the reeds.

Petrus stops smoking. “Wat se geweer?” he asks suspiciously.

“Vir sy verjaarsdag,” Danie answers before Isak can reply, “maar Mamma sê hy mag nie skiet nie.”

“Pa sê ek is groot genoeg, so whê.” Isak sticks out his tongue.

“Waar’s die geweer?” Petrus joins Isak in throwing stones into the reeds.

“By die huis in die kluis.” Danie pipes in.

“Gaan jy dit haal of gaan jy net vertel?” Petrus challenges him.

“Dis my geweer en ek kan met hom maak net soos ek wil,” Isak retorts proudly.

“Sallie glo tot ek self sien nie.” Petrus shakes his head.

Isak ignores him, instructing Danie. “Kry die boks in die kantoor.”

Danie is still tiny enough to fit under the branches of the fruit trees. He runs as fast as he can, returning with the box of medals. On the lid is a drawing of a man with a twirled moustache and a gun slung over his shoulder.

“K...u...b...a...n.” He spells phonetically before presenting the box to Isak.

“Wag julle hier,” Isak commands as he hands them each a medal. He keeps the one with the springbuck for himself.

He takes the short cut through the pear orchard. The trees are widely spaced and they are the oldest on the farm. He likes to walk this way as it is the closest place to a forest that he knows of. Above his head, pears hang in their thousands, still hard and green like bright jewels in the sun. He pauses and scratches around in the grass until he finds the nest. Some of the eggs have broken and the nest is abandoned but for a lone egg which he pockets.

The house on the hill is empty. The key lies in his father’s drawer amongst the socks packed in rows of colour. Isak opens the cupboard and there are suits in zippered bags smelling of naphthylene. Behind the suits is the safe. His pellet gun is dwarfed by the hunting rifles. There’s a gun as tall as himself with a large telescope and silver patterns on the barrel almost the same as on Ouma’s teapot. He rests the stock on his shoulder and aims at the mirror.

“Peeow, peeow.” He pretends to shoot, finger on the trigger, stepping up to the mirror, his reflection seen through the telescope.

Carefully, he puts the rifle back, taking his own, as light as a twig. With the gun casually slung over his chest he takes his time down to the river, enjoying the leather strap and the knocking of the barrel against his thigh.

Petrus and Danie sit high up in the wild pear tree, chucking down fruit.

Numerous times he lifts the barrel, then drops it without firing.

“Boetie kannie skiet nie,” Danie sings from out of the tree.

“Basie is bang virrie Nooi, Basie is bang,” Petrus joins him.

Isak aims into the reeds and pulls the trigger. There are shrieks as the birds respond in fright. A few hover above the river, then settle down in the plumes.

“Los maar.” Petrus jumps out of the tree, openly admiring the gun.

“Help.” Danie cries from above.

“Help jousef,” the bigger boys answer as one.

They walk in single file along the edge of the river.

“Kan ek die geweer dra?” Petrus asks politely.

“Net dra.” Isak hands over the gun.

Ahead are wild ducks, disturbed by the flooding waters. The brown birds slop in the mud.

“Gee.”

Reluctantly, Petrus hands back the gun.

Isak drops on his haunches as the ducks wet their beaks. He aims, squinting with concentration. There is a large male in the group with bolder feathers and head. He shoots at it but the bird only flaps its wings. They watch as it splashes water over its body, waiting for it to fall but nothing happens. He shoots again and again at the same bird.

“Die voël se vere is te dik.” Petrus suggests.

“Shurrup.” Isak swings the gun wildly and shoots into the sky.

Petrus yawns.

“Kom staan jy voor my.” Isak calls him. “Ek wil sien of ek deur jou hemp se mou kan skiet. Lig jou arms op...so.” He demonstrates.

The other boy leans against a tree opening his arms to the side.

“Maak jou arms meer oop.”

Petrus flings them wide open. “Wragtag nou’s ek net soos Jesus.”

There’s a black cross in the telescope. He shifts the gun from side to side until the sleeve is perfectly centered. Then he pulls the trigger. The pellet makes no sound. Through the telescopes he sees Petrus falling in slow motion, his mouth wide open.

The ducks hiss. A red spot appears on his shirt at the shoulder, spreading like ink on blotting paper. Isak tries to run but his mind runs faster than his legs.

“O Heretjie, ek ga’ dood.” Petrus writhes in the mud and the ducks arch their necks.

Isak pulls at the shirt to see the mark. “Moenie by Outa gaan kla nie, hoor jy? Bly stil of ek donner jou.”

Petrus doesn’t answer. He closes his eyes, moaning.

“Ek sê, as jy op my split dan... dan maak ek jou vrek.”

“Sallie.” With a crooked arm Petrus limps through the trees to the barrakse.

“Onthou!” Isak shouts at him, picking up the birthday gun with its spattered barrel.

*

He stays at the river until the sun sets and the ducks lift off to roost in the Eucalyptus grove.

At home, the table is set for supper and the tray with the Johnny Walker jug and soda machine stands in the lounge.

The gun is wiped and put away next to the hunting rifles. The key positioned exactly right amongst the socks.

He is alone in the house.

Leisurely, he fills the bath, stripping off his clothes, standing on the bath's edge to see himself in the mirror. He aims. "Peeow peeow." He sees how Petrus falls.

Outside the dogs bark. He runs for his room, closing the shutters and climbing into bed, lying quite still.

"Sakkie?" his mother calls for him from the front door.

"Hy speel nog by die barrakse," his father suggest.

"Isak!" His mother calls down the passage. She opens the bedroom door, "is jy wakker?"

He slows down his breathing and she listens.

"Die gang is nat," she says, closing the door, walking quickly to the lounge where his father is pumping soda from the machine. "Hy slaap," is all she says.

The dogs begin to bark hysterically and there is a knock on the back door.

"Kry 'n man nooit rus vir sy siel nie?" His father goes to the door.

Isak sits up.

"Naand Baas, jammer om Baas te steur."

There's another's voice too, higher pitched and softer.

"Praat, Grootman."

He hears how the voices move into the kitchen.

"Ek het meel by die winkel gekoop Baas, ennie klong moesie sak dra, Baas.

Toe kannie klong nie die sak dra nie wan' die klong se arms was te swak, Baas."

“Hoekom was die klong te swak, Outa?”

“Baas se Basie hettie klong geskiet, hier innie arm mettie gun wattie Baas vi’ Basie present gegee het...Oorle’e Baas Sakkie se gun, Baas.”

“Vrou!” His father shouts down the passage to his mother in the lounge.

Isak sinks back in the bed, pulling the covers over his face and pulling on his pyjamas.

This time she switches on the light. “Pappa roep, hy soek jou in die kombuis, maak gou.”

He wears his flannel pajamas with red motorcars printed all over it. In the kitchen his father stands at the stove, heating brandy in a pot and Petrus sits at the table, clutching his injured arm. Outa holds his hat between his hands and there is an albino feather stuck in the strap of his veldt hat and a pained expression on his face.

“Staan nader,” his father instructs.

Both boys move closer to the stove. Danie shifts closer too.

His father unbuttons the shirt of Petrus. The shoulder is bruised and swollen around the red mark. Isak stares angrily but the other boy avoids his eyes.

“Vrou, die blades.”

His mother is busy with the pig’s head at the basin. She rinses her hands, covered in pink jelly before extracting a blade from the orange packet.

Meticulously, his father goes to work, dipping the cotton wool in warmed brandy, cleaning the wound. With the new blade he scrapes around the mark, cutting the skin open over the lodged pellet. He presses on either side of the pellet and Petrus grimaces with pain. The pellet pops out, landing on the table, a tiny piece of lead that has caused all the trouble.

“Maak die kind brood.”

The bread is meant for Petrus. Isak watches his mother smearing the slices, then Petrus, consumed with self pity, gripping the sandwich in his limp hand.

“Dankie, Baas.” Outa is satisfied with the outcome.

Petrus leaves with his grandfather and his mother calls Danie to the dining room for supper.

“Sit.”

He sits at the table. It is only the two of them with the insignificant pellet and the pig head in the basin. Kalbas lies under the table and Isak rests his feet on the dog.

“Die geweer?” His father’s nostrils flare.

“Dis in die kluis, Pa.”

His father picks up the pellet. “Jy kan kies. Of jy vat ‘n pak of ek vat die geweer, dis so eenvoudig.”

He cannot live without the gun. “Ek vat die pak, Pa.”

“Bring.”

On the back stoep is a pair of tekkies of his mother. His hand fits into it. His father takes it from him and for a moment it looks like he has changed his mind.

“Sak.”

Obediently, he drops over the chair. The red cars are pulled off his bottom, Isak clenches his teeth. At first nothing happens. The dog comes closer and licks his face.

Then the tekkie comes down and it is a thrashing like no other. The sheep dog retires under the table, whimpering.

It stops but he keeps his head down. Tears stream out of eyes. He bites on his lip, not making a sound.

Eventually, the heavy tread of the man moves out of the kitchen down the passage, past the entrance hall to the lounge.

The soda machine gushes. Silence, then piano chords softly played fill the house with notes that ripple like water.

The dog paws the boy's arm. With effort he gets up, his skin burning and broken. Hobbling to the bathroom, he climbs up on the bath's edge, turning his bottom to the mirror and the word *Bata* is written on him in reverse.

He finds his way in the dark into the bedroom. The piano becomes louder and louder like rain on a roof, on and on until it stops abruptly. The humming of the generator is cut off too as the last light is switched off.

Danie climbs out of the bed and opens the shutter. Light streams in.

"Boetie?" Danie peers over Isak, "het jy lekker verjaar?"

Isak doesn't answer.

The little boy digs something out from under his pillow, holding it out. A piece of meat, covered in cold gravy. He wolfs it down as the little boy watches with approval.

Together they lie in the brightness. Danie scratches his back with blunt fingers, while down at the river, the ducks honk, him still not knowing what the gun can do.

**

The scar has healed on his buttocks and the rain has come and the rain has gone, just as Oupa predicted.

Isak waits for his parents' door to open and the radio to be switched on. He feels the raised ridge of the letters on his skin, spelling the word. His father walks down the passage and his heart quickens but the steps don't stop.

Sounds of beans being mashed in the grinder come from the kitchen. Then measured steps down the passage. He waits but they pass by.

Danie sleeps through the seduction of the bitter smell but he follows it to where his mother lies in her single bed, tight as a ball, exhausted by the long days in the pack shed. She faces the wall and the skin under her eyes is like the pith of lemons.

Isak climbs into his father's bed. It is warm and the pillow stinks of cigarettes. His father lights up, one for him and one for her.

Without looking, she reaches out for the cigarette balanced on the saucer. Her lips tremble as she draws, lipstick trapped in the creases of her mouth.

His father pulls back the curtains, letting in the light. She shies back onto the bed and Isak can see the mountain behind the leafless Del Toidia.

The organ ends and it is the news. They speak of gold and oil in the beginning and troublemakers in the end, especially the one in the Eastern Cape, then it is the weather report and his father stubs the cigarette in the saucer. Even his mother listens with interest.

Transvaal, Free State, Natal, then the Boland and the predictions remain the same as yesterday and last Sunday and the Sunday before. No rain now or next week, or the week after. It is as though the rain of a month ago never existed.

“Sit af.” His father locks the bathroom door.

They can hear him spit phlegm in the basin. Isak rolls onto his side, watching his mother’s face, the colour of chalk on cement.

The DollyVarden is hers. On it stand wigs, blonde and red-haired, made from human hair, fitted on foamalite heads. He gets out of bed and sits on the stool with gilt legs. The mirror shows her tiny figure and the blue triangles in the corner of her eyes. Gingerly, he touches the wigs, wondering whether the women who gave the hair walked around with shaven heads, then he pulls one over his short hair, a wig with blonde tresses like Magdaleen’s.

“Isak, haal af.” His mother is frowning and the mirror skews her face and he pulls it off, arranging the wig on the faceless head.

Perhaps the hair comes from dead people, he thinks.

“Kom jy saam?” His father is dressed in his farm clothes with his moustache in a perfect line above his lip. Distracted he looks past them to the open window.

His mother’s nightie has slipped off her shoulders, revealing her breasts and she doesn’t seem to care him seeing.

The dog with the smiling face is waiting on the back stoep. Shed leaves lie still under the Del Toidia. He sits in front of the bakkie with his father, the dog on the back and they drive up to the borehole on the ridge. No clouds in the sky, just bright blue that is wide and far, meeting the top of the mountains.

Irritably, his father fiddles with the radio while old voices sing. The radio is turned off before they can complete the gesange.

So dikwels al voorheen

Het U vergewend hulp verleen

En van die skuld bevry

Hoe gou het ek nie weer u goedheid Heer vergeet nie

Die val en opstaan bring 'n diep verydeling.

In front of them is the borehole. The screeching rod is pumping up air, while the Lister machine runs on dry. They walk to the edge of the pump. His father cuts the engine. There is silence. They both listen to the dog's panting and the ringing of stone on stone as Isak tosses pebbles down the shaft.

For a long time his father stands at the hole.

Eventually, his father moves away to look over the farm.

The flash rains of summer are already forgotten, just as his Oupa had said.

Without a word the man with silver hair walks back to the Lister, disconnecting the uitgooipyp from the turbine, the metal key in his hand.

Isak lines the stones in a row, watching his father lift his arm behind his head. He throws the key into the veld.

Below the ridge a man and woman scuffle at the barrakse. She falls, her head, top heavy with curlers and the man snatches something from her hand, disappearing into the low roofed house. His father ignores the ruction, tossing the dog onto the back of the bakkie. The woman does not move, her filthy feet stick out from under the bell-bottom trousers.

They drive down to the orchards, past the barrakse, where children are pegged against fencing, waving with frightened eyes. Isak waves back.

The bark of the trees is shrivelling. They walk along one row of trees, his father in front with the dog. Turning down a side row, they head for the heart of the orchard. Here the ground is like talc. Isak bends down, printing his palm in the dust.

“Verby,” the man says to himself, “verby.”

The trees have begun to wean of the green fruit. Small pears lie in the grass.

The trees are dying. Thousands of them, for the dams are empty and the river has run itself dry and the boreholes that tap into underground lakes are waterless holes of stone.

A bundle of feathers lies ahead in the path. Isak picks it up. The bird is light and limp enough to spin up high above his head. Then it flops into the dust. A useless thing for him. His father reverses the bakkie out by the gate. He takes a chain and a heavy padlock, locking the gate that leads to the trees, then they drive back, past the barrakse to the house, to get ready for church.

The woman is murmuring on her back. Isak unwinds the window as they pass her by. She is singing a Halleluja liedjie and her head looks like an oversize lollipop.

“Jou Ma se meid,” is all his father says as he closes the window.

*

Church comes and church goes. The Dominee with the dark lenses and grey Hush Puppies thanks the Lord for their white skins. Isak sits on the front stoep with Kalbas, running his fingers over the dog’s back as he waits. From the village side, the red-winged Chevrolet of Oupa can be seen as it hovers above the road, kicking up a storm past the orchards. It is as though Oupa does not want to see what they see.

They climb out of the broad-bodied car with difficulty and they are shaped the same because they share the same surname, even before their marriage. Their faces remind Isak of upside down houses and their strongly boned hands and feet are of oxen.

Ouma opens her arms for him and he is glad for her but Oupa stiffly climbs the steps grumbling, so that David can hear in the garage, where he polishes the hub caps of the Ford, his bruised expression reflected in the aluminium rims.

His mother and father come out of the house. She wears gloves and a coat to go with the sky blue of the car, while his father's cufflinks sparkle. He and Oupa look alike, as they shake hands with their backs bent to the farm.

Isak embraces his Ouma around her hips. Her arms that take his shoulders are powerful, arms that can carry a bag of chicken dung in each hand. Oupa's feet are turning green and blue because his blood can't get there anymore and he is angry with Ouma, as though it is her fault.

"Sakkie, Ouma se lieflingskind."

She is soft and he stays in her arms until she lets go and turns to his mother.

"Sara."

"Ma." She turns her cheek to the older woman but their cheeks do not touch.

Danie hides behind his mother. Ouma takes a peppermint out of her bag, holding it out to him. Shyly, he steps forward to take it. His mother clicks her tongue for the sweet offered, the pillar-box hat, with the blue net over her eyes, hiding her disapproval.

They watch their parents climb into the shiny Ford. Their father wipes the dash with a folded hanky. Danie searches for Isak's hand because they are going away for a long time but Isak shakes it off, his brother's peppermint breath in his face.

The Ford reverses out of the garage and they wave, then the car turns with its engine facing the road and the boys run behind the car. Isak keeps an eye on the turning hubcaps.

The Ford sprays stones in their faces as it picks up speed. They stop running. Both of them don't move from under the Camphor trees until the car has disappeared on the big road that runs North.

Things change when his ouma is around. Nothing you can see, just a feeling really. He picks a bunch of leaves, crushing them in his hand, smelling-smelling as he runs up the hill with Danie following.

In the kitchen, his oupa dribbles over the table coughing, his face flushed, while his ouma sits as calm as dam water, reaching up to Raatjie. She ties a piece of raw meat over Raatjie's bruised eye.

"Die David," Ouma says quietly as she fastens the string behind Raatjie's head.

"Dis daai vrou se skuld," Oupa accuses. "Jy moet vir daai vrou sê dis die vloerpolish wat my bors so laat toetrek."

Ouma says nothing, so Oupa lifts his head, turning his attention to Raatjie. "Sê vir jou Nooi dis die polish."

"Ja, Baas." Raatjie answers with a deadpan face, her one eye looking at the floor.

Ouma holds out her arm and the boys pull. They walk with her to the room, the spare bedroom, the one of Tannie Lettie when she nursed Oupa. Obediently both sit on the bed and watch her undress. Her back is speckled with large freckles. When she untwists her bolla, lifting her arms above her head, her skin is like kneaded dough. Isak loves the way her flesh folds.

“Sal Ouma daardie liedjie van die tee sing?” Danie asks politely.

A trail of coughing leads out onto the stoep and they hear how Oupa swears at the dogs.

“Ouma kan nie meer die woorde onthou nie.” She slips on a housedress and her back is so broad she could have been a man if it weren’t for the bolla.

“*Tea for two*, Ouma.” Isak prompts her.

“Oupa wil nie hê Ouma moet meer sing nie. Oupa kla dat Ouma soos ‘n orrel klink wat nie kan wind kry nie.” She vigorously combs her grey hair, the pins and nets mixed up with Oupa’s vials and asthma pump.

“Net een keer Ouma, saggies, as’blief.” Isak closes the door. “Oupa sal nie hoor nie, hy’s buite, Ouma.”

“Hoekom nie?” She gestures to the two of them to join her on either side, at the dressing table then she takes a deep breath, pushing back her shoulders and stretching out her neck. Isak looks at her in the mirror, while Danie turns to her. At first her voice is tremulous, especially on the high notes and Isak closes his eyes imagining her on stage, young and beautiful, like on the photos, singing in the city hall.

The screen door bangs closed. Ouma stops.

“Kom ons stap buite voor dit donker raak.” She laughs gaily, “ek wil sien hoe dit met my tuin gaan.” Her eyes are on the closed door.

Either side of her they stroll out onto the front stoep. Isak enjoys burying his whole hand in the palm of hers. The sun sets over the cypresses and the garden planted by Ouma when she came back from the sand dunes of the North.

Out of the veld a wild hare appears, loping over the lawn, unafraid of the dogs. It stops at a dripping tap, pawing at the muddiness. They wait quietly for it to hop further towards the orchards.

She picks a single blossom from a dark green bush. “Gardenia Thunbergia,” holding it out for the two of them to smell, “katjiepiering.”

“Ek hou van sy naam.” Isak sniffs at the flower. “Hy ruik soos badseep.”

Ouma picks another for Danie as they walk to the rose garden. Here and there a rosebush carries a head. Ouma clicks her tongue with disapproval as she walks between the neglected bushes.

“Sakkie kyk hier.” She points to a minute creature on a rose leaf. “Dis ‘n predator, ons noem hom krokkedilletjie want hy eet die eiers van die rooispinnekop.” She scratches at the tiny creature with her nail, placing it on Isak’s palm. “Wanneer die volk die boorde spuit vir rooispinnekop dan vrek die krokkedilletjies saam.” She looks up over the orchards. “Maar dié jaar oorleef hy.”

“Is hy bly oor die droogte, Ouma?” Danie asks.

“Hoe meer krokkedilletjies, hoe minder hoef jou Pappa te spuit.” Ouma finds another and Danie opens his palm expectantly but she places it with the other and the two goggas navigate their way along Isak’s arm. “Maar nou-ja ons weet mos die mans is baas van die plaas, wie sal na ‘n ouvrou luister?”

Isak is fascinated with the way they struggle over his arm hairs. “Raatjie luister na Ouma.”

His ouma laughs, and her laugh belongs in a younger body. “Die volk in die kombuis ja.” She picks thorns off a blown rose.

The boys do the same.

“Ouma, ons het ‘n boks in Ouma se kamer gekry,” Isak stops talking and blows the goggas off his arm. “Die kamer waar Ouma nou slaap.”

Danie drops on his knees looking for the goggas.

The thorns fall onto the paving as she listens intently. “Watter soort boks, kind?”

“‘n Skoendoos, Ouma, met Tannie Lettie se naam daarop.” Danie jumps up excitedly with the predators.

“Tannie Lettie is mos lankal weg, is dit nie jul Mamma s’n nie?”

Isak shakes his head firmly. “Daar’s ‘n los plank onder die bed waarop Oupa slaap en Danie het dit gekry, toe hy van Raatjie wegkruip, toe kry hy dit onder die vloer, Ouma.”

She puts the blown rose to her nose. “Het Ouma se kinders in die boks gekyk?”

“Mmm...Net meisiekindgoed, briefies en kaartjies,” Isak’s attention is on the predators on the tip of Danie’s finger. “Niks interessants nie Ouma, blomme ook, gedroogdes soos die kleur van...’n roof.” He thinks of his buttocks.

His ouma pinches off the petals of the dark red until the orange knob is exposed.

“Ouma, hoekom is Tannie Lettie weg?” Danie places the goggas onto his rose. “Ek het van haar gehou, sy’t altyd pienk lekkertjies gegee.”

“Ouma het haar nie meer nodig gehad nie.” She kisses them each on the forehead. “Kom ons stap terug, jul Oupa wag vir ons.”

The old man stands on the stoep coughing in the shadows, resting on his cane, brooding. He is unaware of them, looking over their heads towards the mountain.

All month long men cut down pear trees with chain saws that complain like dogs do when his father played the piano. The trees are dying but no one speaks of it, for his father has gone to the North to get away from it all.

Scattered along the riverbank are heaps of trees and fruit in the dead grass.

Isak and Petrus smoke in the Eucalyptus grove near the farm gate, sprawled out on a bed of bark and the trees are tall and straight limbed, like long-legged giants. Both hear the tractor at the barrakse, off-loading sawn wood. The women's voices rise up with delight. It saves them searching the ridge daily, for there is enough wood to see them through the coming winter.

Above, summer swallows dash in between the gum trees, gathering to leave. Ahead in the road, Oupa's Chevrolet growls and moans as it brakes at the gate and over the cattle grid.

Isak clicks his tongue. "Oupa, maak net wat hy wil."

"Dis noggie Oubaas se plaas die," Petrus reminds him.

"Issie!" Isak sits up.

"Is! Jou Oupa se naam is oppie bord by die hek."

"Pa het net nog nie kans gehad om dit te verander nie, dis al."

"Jou Pa is soosie volk, hy werk virrie Oubaas."

"Twak man, my Pa is Baas."

Petrus smiles gloatingly. "Jy is maar net soos ons."

"Ek erf." Isak drops the rolled cigarette and picks up the gun lying next to him, checking the trigger, "Pa het al vir my die testament gewys, my naam is daarin geskryf." He gets up and stalks the swallows, asking impatiently. "Waar's Danie?"

“Vrywe die Oubaas se vrot voete met my Ma.” Petrus shrugs.

Isak takes out the folded diagram in his pocket, studying the drawing. The Dominee says it is godlasterlik, man playing God but his Oupa says farmers play God all the time, so it’s nothing new.

The newspaper cutting shows lines and arrows that mark the insertions made into the man’s chest. The heart is a pump, he rereads the doctor’s words.

Danie comes running down the hill with the shopping bag. “Ek het alles gekry,” he shouts excitedly, tipping the contents onto the ground. There is a bottle of chloroform, cotton wool, gauze, their mother’s nail set and needle and thread.

Isak aims and shoots. The first two birds fall to the ground unusable, the pellet penetrating their chests and killing them.

Petrus kicks at them with disgust. “Gannie werk nie.” He hunches down and lights another pil.

Danie fishes out the birds, stroking their lifeless wings, then buries them in a shallow grave under the bark.

Once again Isak swings his gun wildly, shooting into the khaki coloured foliage. A bird drops at his feet still fluttering, its eyes shining.

“Ons het hom, ons het hom!” Petrus dances jubilantly around the small bird, his smoking pil trampled underfoot while Isak feels the bird’s heartbeat.

“Chloroform,” Isak commands, passing the gun to Petrus as Danie comes running with the bottle, “en die anner voël.”

Danie hesitates, looking uncertainly at Petrus. “Kan ons nie ‘n anner voël skiet nie?”

“Daar’s nie nou tyd nie.” Isak screws the lid off the bottle.

“Ek willie gee nie.” Danie passes on the cotton wool.

“Gee.” Isak dips the cotton wool in the liquid, pressing it against the bird’s beak.

“Los hom uit.” Petrus steps forward, the gun slung over his shoulder.

“Shurru, ek’s Baas.” Isak feels how the bird relaxes in his hand, seeing how the eyes turn to glass, “en maak gou.”

Danie turns away tearfully.

“Dit is syne.” Petrus kneels next to Isak, taking out a blunt pocket knife.

There is no answer.

“Ek sê...Dit is syne...Die geel voël.”

Isak lays the bird on its back, taking the knife. “Wil jy of wil jy nie?”

Petrus nods in agreement, scratching out the pil and lighting it again, the smoke a screen before his face.

“Hou dan vas.”

At a distance Danie stands with the cage. Inside it the canary swings back and forth.

Delicately, Isak draws a line over the bird’s chest that peels open, to reveal a beating heart. “Bring,” he gestures impatiently.

Danie opens the cage door. His hand closes around the swinging bird and it trills agitatedly, pecking viciously. “Kan nie.” The small boy clutches the bird against his shirt.

“Vat dit.” Isak instructs Petrus.

Petrus sighs, gets up and walks over to Danie. “Jy’t gesê dis orraait.”

“Ek het nie geweet dit gan so wees nie...” He points to the bird. “Dis anderste as wat ek gedink het.”

“’n Man se woord is sy woord,” Petrus reminds him, reaching out for the bird.

“Moffie.” Isak taunts them both.

Danie clutches even tighter and the bird squawks louder. Petrus squeezes the small boy’s wrist until his fingers release the bird into his own.

“Dissie so bad nie, dis net ‘n voël.”

The canary’s beak is pressed into the cotton wool. The birds lie together, the swallow and the canary. Isak slices open the second chest with greater speed and confidence and with the blunted point he cuts around the heart of the first bird, loosening it from the connective tissue.

“Vat.”

Petrus cups his hands for the beating heart. The second heart is placed in his hands, leaving both chest cavities empty.

“Gee.”

Petrus tips the palpitating heart of the swallow into the canary’s chest and the canary’s into the swallow’s chest. With tweezers, Isak shifts the heart into position then begins to sew. Pinching the chest between forefinger and thumb, he sews neat stitches like the girls do in class

The boys wait. Danie embracing the cage and Petrus holding the gun. The birds lie motionless, side by side, one dull, the other brilliant.

Eventually, Petrus picks up the swallow and presses his ear against its chest, listening, then he does the same with the canary but neither responds, they hang limply in his hand. “Ek dink hulle’s dood,” he says to the others.

Isak stares at the dead birds, while Danie rocks back and forth on his heels.

*

Despondently, they sit and reconsider the operation. Petrus sprinkles tobacco along the length of the paper then rolls it up, one for him and one for Isak, while Isak checks the gun.

“Hoekom kom Koos nooit meer huis toe nie?” Isak sucks in his cheeks, drawing heavily, thinking of the 1960 Chrysler parked in front of David and Raatjie’s house. Koos was his mother’s favourite, the only brown boy to get matric.

“Weetie.”

“Hy kan mos soos die ander plase se volk maak, kom werk in sy vakansietyd, om meer geld te verdien...Of is hy ryk?”

“Watse ryk?” Petrus spits out pieces of tobacco. “Hy is mos by die huis. Wil net nie mense sien nie dis al, hy’s moeg vannie lorry ryery.”

“Willie die Baas sien nie,” Isak corrects him.

“Die Baas issie sy baas nie. Hy’s sy eie baas.”

Danie’s back is towards them. The small boy carves a stick figure from a branch with Petrus’ knife.

Isak drops his voice. “Waarvan is hy moeg? Hy ry mos nie self lorry nie, Raatjie sê hy’s net ‘n agterryer, virrie lorry se baas.”

Petrus ignores him, snapping twigs while Danie chips away at the wood.

“Is hy bang vir iets?”

“Hou op.” Petrus jumps up. “Ek loop as jy so ga’ aankarring.”

“Hy kom nie groet nie, my Ma...”

“Jou Ma se moer. Jou huis is jou huis en ons huis is ons huis.” Petrus stomps off angrily, mumbling, “hy skuld jou Ma niks nie.”

“Ma het sy skoolgeld vir sy matriek betaal...en...en jou huis behoort aan die plaas en die plaas behoort aan ons, so whê!” Isak shouts after him.

“Hy’t sy mes vergeet.” Danie holds up the knife.

“Dis ook ons s’n, was ons s’n, Pa s’n.” Isak stomps on the dead birds.

“Dis nou sy mes, Pappa het dit vir hom gegee.”

“Wat weet jy?” Isak snidely remarks. “Ek loop.” Without waiting for Danie he makes for the dam wall behind the barrakse.

Raatjie’s house is closest to the dam wall. The wall is double thick clay because of the houses below. Isak slides down into the grey bushes, the gun slung over his shoulder. From here he can see the back of her house, the orchards, office and the road to town.

Her garden has roses rescued from the rubbish bin, wrapped in newspaper and trenched in. Roses just the same as in his ouma’s garden. Raatjie’s roses are still blooming. There are sunflowers too, rising above the weeds with oversized heads and Koos, darker skinned and sharp like his mother.

Koos is making a bonfire. With quick dashes back and forth he feeds the fire. In and out he runs with boxes, dumping them into the flames and there is a grimness on his face as his head spins around looking to the road that leads to the farm.

The team are sawing the pear orchard to the ground. Behind them a white van with meshed windows drives slowly towards the office. His oupa comes shuffling out onto the stoep, slowly raising his cane, pointing towards the barrakse.

All of a sudden a figure runs from the river towards the bonfire. From the lightness of running he knows it can only be Petrus, gesturing and shouting. Koos hears him and the sight of Petrus running seems to make Koos wild as he stamps the papers and books with his gumboots.

Petrus flings the gate off its hinges, tackling Koos onto the ground and they roll over each other, while the white van comes closer.

Isak lifts his head to see better. “Oupa sal niks daarvan hou dat Koos, David se topboots so verniel nie.”

The van stops. Koos loosens himself, running to the fire, fanning it with a cardboard box. Then the van is moving again, this time to Raatjie’s house, the van of Sergeant Kloppers who loads troublemakers in the back on weekends.

The heat from the fire is so great that Koos must shield his face. He runs towards the dam, vaulting over the barbed wire fencing, dropping down into the bushes while Petrus slinks around the back of the house on all fours, Raatjie’s cat rubbing herself against his legs, meowing.

The van pulls up behind Koos’s Chrysler. The sergeant gets out, languidly lighting a cigarette as he walks around the car, peering through the windows, then he walks over to the fire. With his boot he scrapes of the burning paper closer, picking it up, before throwing it back.

Petrus disappears around the furthest side of the house and the cat sits disappointedly in the sun, staring at him in the bushes. Instinctively, he falls forward as the sergeant looks up towards the dam wall. He holds his breath, keeping flat on the rock, hearing the cackling of the fire and the melancholy chain saws.

Cautiously, he lifts his head, looking straight into Koos’ face. They are so close he smells the fear from the flared nostrils and the smoke caught in his perspiration. Koos’ eyes are dark black. Silently he mouths a word, drawing an invisible line with his finger across his throat. Isak understands.

*

They study each other. There is nothing else to do. The van door clicks open and they wait for the van to move away.

Koos stands up. He shows Isak that he must not move. All along the dam wall he runs with a bent back and thin legs in gumboots. Isak does not look around. When Koos stood up, he looked like the stick figure that Danie was carving.

He wanders down to the pear orchard that Oupa planted before the big war and it is a graveyard of stumps, rooted to the sky.

*

At last the saws are still. Then the barking of the dogs begin while his parents are away North, dogs all over the farm. First the long-tailed mongrels of the barrakse, then those at the pre-fab house of the white voorman. Finally the three on the hill. All through the night they bark until it becomes part of the night sounds, as trains come and go, a sound that you forget about over time.

The blue Ford appears one day in the driveway around noon, covered in dust. His father gets out, banging the door like teachers do at school, when they haven't had a holiday for a long time and his mother is nervous, the white gloves on her hands soiled with nicotine.

Isak and Danie run to the car and stop. Isak holds out his hand but his father just nods briefly, his eyes running over the changed landscape. His mother rubs his head and that of Danie. Her mouth is smiling, but that is all that is happy on her face and Isak wonders if they are angry because of them.

Their mother goes to lie down in the room. Ouma and Oupa are packed to leave, back to the old age home with dorpswater and municipal electricity.

Isak wants to cry as the red Chevrolet pulls out of the garage where the Ford should stand. This time he leaves Danie's hand in his.

The room of Tannie Lettie smells of mothballs and Oupa's medicine. Isak finds one of Ouma's pins on the floor with a strand of grey hair twisted around it. He drops to his knees, lifting the bedspread. The plank is still loose and the shoebox of Tannie Lettie is still there. He opens the box. It is empty, except for a handful of torn petals.

From her room, his mother shouts in a shrill voice. Down the passage, the radio is switched off.

He puts back the box and plank, pocketing Ouma's pin.

In the kitchen Raatjie lays the table, rudely dropping the place mats.

The boys wait for their father to sit, before pulling out their chairs, slyly staring at her glass eye. He sits down, wearing his city clothes and crocodile leather shoes.

The ribbed hare hops across the lawn in the midday sun, straight to the dog's water bowl on the back stoep. They watch it drink weakly before the grace is said.

The curried silt is from pig trotters, made by Ouma, for their father. The yellow jelly slips off the knife, staining the white tablecloth as Raatjie cuts it into blocks and slides it onto their plates.

Their father doesn't notice the blobs of gelatin. He gets up and places the radio next to him, reading a newspaper from the North while they eat. There's a photo of the troublemaker from the Eastern Cape on the front page and his name is easy to remember for a black man.

The Minister of Agriculture is talking-talking on the radio, when suddenly his father sweeps the radio off the table, breaking the antenna. The battery falls out and the radio stops playing.

They do not speak. With lowered heads the boys eat the silt, while the man toys with the salt and pepper cellars in the shape of windmills.

Even the evergreen cypresses are yellowing.

“Roep vir David-hulle,” he commands Isak. “Sê hulle moet die drievoet bring.”

Outside the dog with the smiling face barks and the hare hops into the undergrowth as the dog makes a chase for it. The sky is cleanly swept, a band of blue so pure. Raatjie sits on the stone wall at the wash line, skirt hitched up for the breeze to blow under, waiting for them to finish so that she can go back to the barrakse and the brew.

He runs down the hill to where the men are drinking and playing dominoes. He watches a while and they ignore him for they have no fear of him.

“Die Grootbaas roep. Hy sê julle moet die drievoet bring.”

The men curse his father loudly but it is the brew that makes them difficult and the long week past. They pack up the board game and each one takes a last slug at the communal bottle before obeying the Baas. The Baas is Baas and that is that.

On the ridge his father paces up and down. The men come stumbling up the hill towards the disused borehole, while he lights one cigarette after the other. They carry winches and chains and the spider-legged tripod is pulled by the tractor of David.

“Maak reg vir uithaal.” His father doesn't speak to anyone in particular. He turns his back on them and the borehole.

The men quieten. Even those with liquorice breaths listen, for the shadow of the man with the silver hair falls upon each one of them.

To the right, Petrus and the other boys slide down the dam wall on butter bush, their naked bodies smeared with clay. Isak stays with the men and his father at the pump.

The men are ham-fisted and struggle to mount the tripod that straddles over the borehole's opening. Eventually the winch releases the heavy chain and hook that descends into the hole.

Everything is too slow for his father. He snaps at David while grinding the stubs under his crocodile shoes.

Alongside, the boys squeal with delight as they slide faster and faster down the lubricated embankment.

As the first pipe appears at the mouth of the hole, his father steps forward.

“Stop.” His eyebrows are one. “Laat sak ‘n bietjie.”

The pipe reveals a wheel of greased bearings, enclosing the rod. David steadies the hook and himself with the winch as the other men rush forward to clamp it securely. With great care the eight foot pipe is dismounted and rolled to one side, then the process is repeated as the next section of pipe is lifted to the surface.

Isak keeps count. The butter bush gripped between their thighs looks inviting. He feigns disinterest but he notices that none of the boys have taken the slide from the very top, not even Petrus, yet he remains at the hole.

The seventh pipe is lifted and the men warm up. His father secures the pipe himself as the men take a smoke break. David back peddles on the winch and the pipe drops without warning, trapping his father's finger in the collar.

Piet Plesier grabs the collar, wrestling with the enormous weight while David winches up to no avail. His father's ring finger is in the collar and his brow folds over his eyes. He pulls at his hand so that the sinews and veins of his neck bulge, while all the men shout themselves into soberness and run about. But his father is silent, lifting the collar with the other hand, until his finger comes out, shorter and bloody and David swoons on top of the tripod.

He strides over the ridge, the corners of his tweed jacket flapping in the wind and from behind his father's back is straight, his chin on his chest and the hand with the damaged finger is pressed into the his shirt with the embroidery.

Up on the ridge the men have found their voices as they lift the pipes furiously.

In the kitchen scullery is a pig's head. His father slices of the pig's cheek with his left hand and wraps the raw meat around the bleeding stump of a finger. They walk back the way they have come, there where the blood lies on the rocks.

The borehole is disconnected completely and the hole boarded up, until one day when it rains and the earth is filled with water.

**

He gets up to listen. The words mean nothing to him. He returns to the boy in the bed, who lies crying under Ouma's blanket. They lie under the blanket and their pupils enlarge in the dark, pupils darker than burnt wood.

“Boetie, ek is bang.”

Isak pulls his brother closer and counts the lines of the shutters that fall on the bed, lines of light and dark. He scratches Danie's back and the harsh cadence does not touch him, nor the jarring sounds that fill the spaces around them, separating them from the man and woman who belong to another world.

Pressing in his stomach is a doll with a square head. A doll with holes for eyes and a slash for a mouth and his brother hugs the stick figure of a doll while Isak rolls his eyes to see Jesus on the wall above them, walking on the water.

*

The dog, Kalbas, with the smiling face is shivering. He pricks up his ears and sits at the door whining. It is cold. He unlocks the door and they walk out, boy and dog into the garden with its graveyard trees, pointing heavenward. The dog whimpers, his tail between his legs and Isak frowns, rubbing his eyes with his fists to see better.

In the middle of the lawn is a round object, shining, the size of a small plane, balancing on insect-like legs, glowing like a firefly. It makes no sound, vibrating gently and Isak is not scared, just curious as the object spins faster and faster, ascending without a sound.

It floats towards the mountains and the moon. He follows it until it becomes a pinprick of light. The dog licks his hand. He lies down on his bed but he cannot sleep, nor the dog that will not come into the room again.

Kalbas sits on the stoep and barks at the moon and the memory of the night.

*

Dominee reads psalm 140. He prays for rain and forgiveness. He asks God's blessing upon the valley and its people, people like them.

Ouma and Oupa are tired. They climb into their bed that went and came back from Bechuanaland.

Just before midnight the first quake comes, hard and devastating. It roars like a river in flood under the earth's crust, pure energy which rocks and shakes everything and everybody.

The mountains on the southern side of the valley burst into flames as massive boulders roll into the village, igniting the veld into a hellish tinderbox.

At first Ouma and Oupa hear the rattling of windowpanes. Then their wedding portrait tips off the wall, smashing on the bed's iron frame, splintering into hundreds of slivers of glass, which pierce their skin, as frail as shattered shells.

The old age home totters from side to side. The walls buckle under the invisible streams and in the confusion they cling to each other, for there is no other to cling to.

The top storey collapses, flattening the ground floor.

Isak awakes as the christening mug of Ouma and Oupa flies off the shelf and breaks. He feels the world moving beneath him and he is frightened.

Above him his father reaches out to pick him up but the damaged hand is too weak.

“Los Pappa, ek kan stap.”

He feels for the hairpin in his pocket as he follows his father.

Outside his mother is holding Danie and the whole world is burning and turning. He looks into the sky where the moon is orange and perfectly still. The Southern Cross lies upside down, caught in the branches of the Del Toidia.

**

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The earth is wet with rain. Below the hills in the valley, thousands of men and women pinch blossoms between their fingers and the blossoms fall to the ground, spreading out underfoot.

Raatjie walks ahead, while Isak carries the box of tins, filled with water. They tramp over veldt, desecrated by drought and the fires from hell.

They pass a deserted porcupine hole. Quills litter the area around the opening.

“Sal ons iets kry? Alles is so dood.” He stands on a flat bush that disintegrates into powder. He thinks of Tannie Lettie at Ouma and Oupa’s funeral, sobbing next to the open grave.

Raatjie nips a berry off a small scraggly plant. “Proe.” Her scarf is pushed back, revealing greying hair at the temples,

The berry is sweet and sour on his tongue.

“Kyk hierso kint.” She pulls firmly at a gnarled plant, opening it up for him to see a delicate orchid hidden in the depths of the bush.

“Wat’s dit?”

“Spinnekop is sy naam.” She plucks off the stem just above the surface, placing it in one of the tins. “Hy groei nie orals nie. Die wind waai sand binne die bos...Oor jarre en jarre, dan skiet hy uit.”

“Hoekom binne die bos?”

“Die ou vaalbos beskerm hom vannie weer...Dis veilig da’binne.”

“Ek wil die bol huis-toe vat vir Ouma...Mamma se tuin.”

She shakes her head, pulling at other bushes. “Sallie werkie, dis sy plek dié. Vat hom weg, dan’s dit verby met hom.”

She passes a second orchid onto Isak. The fine petals remind him of spider legs.

“Ek gaan vir my ook pluk, na skoutyd.”

She shrugs, resting her hands on her lower back, legs wide apart. “Nee wat, kint, oor ‘n dag of dan is hul almal vrek geskroei, Basie sal moet wag tot volgende jaar.”

Isak sits down on a stone. He scratches with his nail at the grey-green moss. “Ek het gedink die vuur het alles vreggemaak.”

She rolls her lips knowingly. “Vuur maak niks aan saad nie, ma’ vannie anner soek vuur.” She walks off a little way, picking here and there until she has a posy. “Katstert, pypies, viooltjies, oumakappies, dê, vat vi’ jou.”

The flowering heads are fragile and their scent is pleasing to him. “Dankie.”

“Sit innie water.” She instructs him, her attention back to finding more of the orchids.

He will give the flowers to Magdeleen. Perhaps after the big boys have climbed off the bus, perhaps at the showgrounds.

He turns the flowers around in his hand. There were posies at the funeral of Ouma and Oupa. Flowers were thrown on the coffins, lots and lots of them. The two coffins lay next to each other, covered with flowers, roses with the French name that Ouma loved so much. Roses flown down from the North.

Tannie Lettie had to be lead away by the man with the grey shoes who drove the hearse.

“Is Koos van Raatjie gelukkig?” He draws patterns with his big toe in the ash.

She stops, frowning, “‘n Ma kennie ha’ kint se hartdinge nie.” Her mouth pulls straight like a post box.

“Koos hou nie van my nie.”

“Koos is soos Outa, hy willie gesê word nie.” She glares at him fiercely, with her new eye.

“Hy kon vir Pappa lorrie ry as hy wil.”

“Koos wil sy eie lorrie hê.”

“Volk kannie self ‘n lorrie bekostig nie.” Isak laughs at the ridiculous idea.

“Raatjie gesels nie verder nie.” She shoves the flowers into the tins. “Dis eers genoeg, die Nooi ka’ self verder soek as die Nooi wil.”

He picks up porcupine quills as they walk down towards the house. There are cracks in the plaster. Some of the windowpanes have been replaced with shatterproof glass.

*

A stack of old newspaper lies on the kitchen table. While Raatjie stuffs the newspaper between the tins, Isak stares at the familiar front-page photos of collapsed houses. There is also one of the old age home, flattened like a pancake. Oupa always wanted to be on ground floor, for safety and for his legs. Oupa made a mistake.

“Toe-toe, gee aan.” Raatjie holds out her hand.

Isak crumples the photo. “Is Koos nie besig met verkeerde dinge nie?”

“Die een se verkeerd is die ander een se reg.” She takes the tin out of the box with the posy. “Die blomme ga’ pad-af as Raatjie moet raai.”

“Issie.”

His mother comes down the passage on her stilettos.

Raatjie drops her voice, “Is! Die oumeid issie blind nie.”

“Ragel.” His mother stands at the door, her thin ankles wobbling on the pointed heels. “Sit die blomme in die kar en onthou my handskoene wat moet saam.”

“Ja, Nooi.” Her one eye drops to the ground while the other keeps on looking up.

“Sakkie, gaan jy en Danie saam? Ek hoor dis Vlaamse perde vanmiddag.”

He nods. “Ja, Mamma.”

“Danie is iewers met David in die boorde, sê hy moet gou maak dat ons kan ry. Ek kry julle by die hek.”

He takes the shortcut through the pear orchard, thinking of the black man who makes trouble and that the man has kind eyes. All around the old trees are gone but there are new trees in their place, planted closer and narrower so that the trees can begin to bear quicker.

David is irrigating the rows. The spade in his hand moves smoothly and rhythmically.

“Middag, David.”

“Middag, Kleinbaas.” David tips his hat. The spade is worn through like the teeth of an old ewe.

“Waar’s Danie?”

David smiles, pointing further down the row. “Speel innie water met die anner kinnars, Kleinbaas.”

Water floods around the base of the trees, filling the trenches dug by David. Isak splashes his way up to where Danie and the barrakse children are playing. They quieten at the sight of him.

“Mamma ry nou skou toe, jy moet kom.”

“Kan Pensie saamkom?” Danie points to a small boy slithering in the mud.

“Nee.”

He walks to the farm gate where his mother lies on the hooter. He climbs in next to Raatjie on the back seat. Danie sits in front.

The windows of the Datsun are wide open. Isak hangs out, sticking his wet tongue into the wind. In the Datsun it always feels as though they are rushing somewhere. From the back he can see the top of her face in the rear-view mirror, the lines between her eyebrows and the black roots of her blonde hair.

Wigs are too hot to wear in summer.

Every time they hit a dip in the road, their mother accelerates and the three of them hop and fall sideways. Isak can see her eyes are smiling in the mirror and her straight mouth, pretending she is doing nothing.

At the show grounds she slams on the brakes so that they all fall forward. She even laughs as Raatjie covers her glass eye protectively, then she leads the way on her high heels to the flower hall, Raatjie carrying the tinned orchids and the plastic gloves.

The hall is not a hall anymore. There is moss and pools of water with little waterfalls that come from hidden hoses.

His mother stiffens. The ropes of muscle in her neck give her away as she turns abruptly for the door. “Kom, ons gaan huis-toe.”

They all look at her enquiringly. Raatjie sighs and makes for the Datsun. Someone calls and they all turn as one. Isak has never seen this woman before, spitted and polished.

“Saartjie, ek is so bly jy’s hier. Johan het gesê jy sal handgee.” She waves vaguely at the exhibition, “gee vir my liever ‘n gholfstok as die VLV nommertjie.”

“Jy’s lankal konfyt met die kuns van uitstal.” His mother pushes her way past.
“Ek het self nog nie begin nie, so verskoon ons asseblief.”

The younger woman reaches out, brushing his mother’s hair with her fingertips. “Heel professioneel Saartjie, wie doen jou hare? Ek het jou amper nie herken nie. Net met die draaislag toe sien ek dis jy.”

“Jy weet self wat ‘n bottel kan regkry.”

“So jammer oor jou skoonouers,” the woman continues smoothly, smiling perfectly.

“Wie kan teen die noodlot baklei?” His mother’s mouth disappears.

Without greeting the woman they find their way through the hall of farmer’s wives, surrounded by buckets of protea, suikerkan and tolbos. Even large wabome have been removed and trucked in for the exhibition. They find her open space, flanked by ostentatious displays. Isak’s heart sinks for his mother. The lone orchids suddenly appear pathetic in their singularity.

With trembling hands she pulls on the gloves.

“Ons blomme is te min.” A disgruntled Raatjie surveys the scene and the abundance of flora. Buckets and buckets of arum lilies hedge them in on either side.

“Die natuur by ons lyk nie so nie,” his mother cuts back. “Gee aan.” She clutches the lighted cigarette with plastic fingers and her hair is not as blonde as the other woman’s.

Cigarette in the one hand and a tin in the other, his mother begins. The space becomes alive the way Isak knows the veldt at home. Drab bush and dun coloured sand are fetched from out of the Datsun’s boot. Some of the women walk over to look and they snigger politely but she is oblivious to the crowd, balancing on her heels in the sand. With her gloved finger she pokes holes for the orchids.

A man laughs in the hall. Isak turns to see. It is his father.

“Hoe ver is jy, vrou?”

The other woman holds his arm lightly.

His mother lifts the orchid from the tin, wrapping a piece of wet newspaper around its stem. She slips it into the hole in the sand before answering him. “Ek’s klaar.” She pats the sand around the orchid hidden inside the Renoster bush.

“Is dit al?” His father speaks more to those watching than to her. “Daai arme bol is heel weggesteek waar niemand dit kan sien nie.”

“Dié wat ken sal weet waar om te kyk.” She gets up, pulling off her gloves, “Sakkie, dis tyd vir die karperde-kompetisie, vat vir Danie saam.”

Isak has had enough of flowers.

“Jou vrou is so kreatief, ek sal nooit so kan wees nie.” The other woman swirls her hair coyly.

“Dis genoeg om mooi te wees.” His father wears his crocodile shoes. There are faint spots on the leather.

She throws her head back.

Isak can see the fillings in her mouth. “Kom.” He pulls at Danie.

They saunter into the grounds where the stalls are being erected and he wonders why his father never said hello to them.

“Mamma is mooi,” Danie says thoughtfully.

Isak thinks of Magdaleen with her perfect half-moon fingernails.

They squeeze themselves under the pavilion.

“Trekkar met twee merries, klas een.” The voice booms over their heads.

Around the athletics track, black horses tripple with high hoofs, pulling carts on spider wheels. They shine like new shoes.

“Hoekom kon Pensie nie kom nie?”

“Weetie.” Isak digs a piece of bubblegum out of his pocket. He breaks it in two and passes Danie the smaller piece, chewing loudly. “Die skou is vir boere, nie vir volk nie,” he explains. Instinctively his hand checks if the hairpin is in the other pocket.

The horses are Flemish, heavy in body with thick necks. Their tails are plaited with ribbons and there are silver buckles on their bridals. The farmers wear dark suits and hats like the State President and they snap long whips over the horses’ heads.

“Die wenner is...”

A farmer reigns in the snorting, stamping horses. He shouts out their names but the hornet whip has worked them into a frenzy, their hoofs throwing up a dust cloud over the judges and the cart.

The judges step forward unsure of their choice, when an old man runs onto the track, wearing an overall and a feather in his hatband like Outa. The boys can hear his soft words and clicking song subduing the horses. Their necks drop in submission to his strokes.

Red-faced the farmer climbs down, sweating profusely. The judges step forward again, pinning rosettes on the bridal and the farmer’s chest. Photos are taken for the farming weekly and the old man moves out of the focus of the lens.

Danie pops a large bubble that sticks to his nose. “Pensie is my maatjie.”

Isak pulls at the bubblegum, winding it around his finger. “Pensie is volk. Volk werk by die skou, hulle hou nie skou nie.” He jumps up as the old man leads the horses away and the farmer and the judges retire to the beer tent. “Kom ons gaan kyk.”

At the stables the old man is removing the bridals.

“Hoe oud is die perde?” Isak asks.

The old man tips his hat and his eyes are blue. “Vyftien jaar Kleinbaas, Outa het hulle grootgemaak.”

The horses stand quite still as he brushes their sweating flanks.

“Is dit Outa se eie perde?” Danie asks in awe of the large bodies.

“Simpel.” Isak shoots at him from under his breath.

The old man looks kindly at Danie and his eyes are as clear as sky. “Baas vanner Merwe s’n, Kleinbaas. Outa is nettie oppasser.”

“Waar slaap Outa?” Danie looks around.

The old man points to a blanket in the corner of the stable. The horses nudge his pocket. He takes out broken pieces of carrot and they nibble gently with lips pulled back.

Blankets with the Van der Merwe crest are thrown over their backs and the old man drops his hands in the water trough, washing methodically, forgetting the boys.

They lose interest and drift over the show grounds to the beer tent where a band is playing. Through the reed skerm they can see their father and he is playing the guitar. Everyone in the tent is singing along, everyone except the women behind the tables, serving potato salad and braaivleis.

Behind the fires he can see Magdaleen, her legs twisted like a koeksister around the legs of Willa from the bus and her long hair covers their faces. Isak spits out the tasteless gum. “Mamma wag vir ons.”

At the Datsun their mother stands in the shade smoking, while Raatjie sits on the back seat, waiting.

*

Someone switches on the light in the room. For a few seconds Isak readies himself for the earth to move again. His father leans against the doorpost, his thinning hair is in disarray and the buttons of his shirt are torn off. The room smells of the beer tent.

“Kyk vir my Sakkie...kyk hoe lyk ‘n dronk man...kom na Pappa toe... kom da’ Pappa vir jou wys.”

Unsteadily, he shuffles towards the bed and the boy. Holding himself up with a hand along the wall he yanks at Isak’s elbow, lifting him off the bed.

Then his father rests his whole weight on his shoulders, swivelling him around. “Stap vir Pappa.”

Isak takes a step forward, buckling under the crushing weight.

“Roep vir Danie, roep vir Mamma se favourite.”

Danie runs into the passage where their mother is crying. She holds Danie like a shield in front of her.

“Kom saam.” His father takes small steps towards the bathroom. “Binne, binne, kom binne.” Grandly his father sweeps a bow at the bathroom door. The man’s weight is unbearable for the boy.

The three of them file into the bathroom, cornered between the basin and the bath, their backs against the tiled wall. Their mother has stopped crying. Under the light her skin is covered in a web of fine red lines.

The man begins to undress, slowly and clumsily, tipping back and forth, his body white and soft, with a scar running down the middle of his stomach to his navel. The scar droops tiredly from the slack skin and his legs are thinner than Isak can remember. He opens the taps. Brown water stutters into the bath, burning his hand.

“Shit.” The man pulls back, nursing the burn.

Isak studies the man’s face. He looks like Oupa, when Tannie Lettie nursed him. Tannie Lettie would bath and dry him, then sit with him in a darkened room, feeling his pulse, while the fan blew over him.

With a splash his father slides into the bath, then sighs deeply, humming a love song.

The three of them watch him. Coquettishly he peeps at the woman with the crumpled face. “Vrou wat van ‘n afslukkertjie, net ek en jy alleen?”

Her eyes flash for a moment then drop with her voice. “Jy’t genoeg gedrink, dammitall.”

He pulls himself up, glaring at her, panting. “Vrou, hoor jy nie wat ek sê nie?”

She sweeps loose hair from her eyes, jutting out her chin. For a moment it looks as though she will defy him, then she walks out of the bathroom, down the passage to the drinks cabinet in the lounge. The two boys watch in fascination as their father sloshes from side to side, wiping himself with the soaped cloth, humming the same tune over and over.

She returns with two, neat brandies, one for him and one for her. The man in the bath tips his head back and downs it, while she sips at hers.

The mirror steams up and their reflections disappear. Isak smears his hand across the glass to see better.

“Hou op!”

Without warning the tumbler smashes into the mirror, splintering it in all directions. No one moves. Isak looks down at his feet.

Glass glistens in his leg hairs.

Raatjie sweeps the bathroom floor and her lips are puffed and her breath carries the stench of spirits.

“Maak gou, die Grootbaas is haastig.” His mother holds out a pair of two-tone shoes with fringes and studs on the soles.

Sullenly, Raatjie takes the shoes, lurching down the passage, hanging onto the broom, like a walking stick.

“Dronklap.” His mother pinches her cheeks. “Sy’s apris, teensinning vir alles wat ek sê.” With deft pats she applies the base, hiding the red veins. “Loop op dun ys as jy my vra.”

Isak waits for her to finish. “Mamma, Pappa wil weet of sy ontbyt reg is.”

“Sê vir jou Pa ek kom.” She pouts, meticulously applying the lipstick, then smiles at herself.

In the kitchen his father is seated at the table. The forgotten posy stands on the windowsill.

Isak tries to think of him naked but all he can picture is the scar on his father’s belly. Raatjie tips the glass pieces into the bin.

“Mamma kom netnou.” Isak sits down opposite him, “sy sit haar gesig eers aan.”

“Apris,” his father mutters. “Klimmeid, waar’s die eiers?”

Raatjie nods towards the porcelain hen on the dresser. There’s another canary in the cage but Danie doesn’t seem to care for it as much.

His father stands in front of the stove. “Waar’s die pan?”

Raatjie nods this time to the cupboard, as she fiddles in the soapy water. She drops a plate. It bounces before cracking in half. The studded shoes are wet. His father looks up from the pan, his one eyebrow raised as Raatjie struggles to her knees.

“Los.” His father commands her, “loop liever huis-toe, Baas Kallie wag al vir jou.”

Cursing under her breath, Raatjie abandons the blue-rimmed plate and the shoes, struggling to undo her overall. “Fokken Bruwers,” she grouses.

His father smiles, slipping the perfectly made eggs onto his plate. “Die Oumeid is lekker suur vanoggend,” he chuckles to himself.

Isak sits, expectantly.

“Wil jy gehad het?” His father is surprised, “maak vir jou, die pan is nog warm.” Then he hums the tune he likes so much, the tune from the beer tent.

“Waar’s Ragel?” His mother’s hair is pulled back in a pony-tail, the base over her cheeks blended into her hairline.

“Huis toe, ek het haar laat loop, oor sy die laaste breekgoed in sy glory stuur.”

“Wat van jou skoene?”

“Daar’s mos nie fout met jou hande nie?” His father dissects the eggs, the soft yolk, dripping from the fork. “Ek sal self vir die manne van die paartie sê, jy hoef nie te bel nie.”

“Mamma kan ek eiers kry?”

Distracted, she cracks eggs roughly, the white and yellow marbling. “Die lys is nie finaal besluit nie.”

“Ek het klaar besluit.” He wipes neatly at the yellow on his moustache.

“Dankie, Mamma.”

She is not listening, scratching the scorched pieces into the bin.

Isak wolfs down the eggs and makes for the back door, running down the avenue to the voorman's house where Oom Kalla is busy reversing the Prefect out of his garage. Raatjie sits next to him without her kopdoek. Her head looks different, covered in curlers of all colours. He chases the car to the gate. Oom Kalla accelerates at the Eucalyptus grove, leaving him coughing and covered in dust.

Resting in the fork of a tree is Danie carving a bird. "Kyk daar." He points in the direction of the canal.

Isak climbs up and sees the wisps of smoke. It reminds him of Ouma's hair caught in a brush.

"Moet ons vir Pappa sê?"

"Nee, ons kyk eers self."

With care they tip toe over the dried out bark that snaps and spits under their feet.

"Miskien is dit bandiete." Danie speaks in a loud whisper.

"Shurruup." Isak recalls the face of Koos.

The canal is obscured with thick scrub. The voeltjiekanniesitnie bush is flowering all around them, Danie sneezes.

Isak pulls him down.

The smoke thins out.

"Simpel kind...nou't jy die hele ding gebollie."

Waddling, they move closer to the edge of the canal, parting the branches to see better. Isak jumps up, shouting and waving his arms, while Danie follows suit.

Behind the reeds a frightened couple huddles on a mattress, a black man and a brown woman hiding under the torn netting of the canal. Littered around them are empty tins and on the smoking fire is a pot without handles.

“Wat maak Outa hier op ons plaas?” Isak plants his feet and crosses his arms.

The black man removes his hat. He wears trousers tied with twine and a twig of some sorts is tucked into the buttonhole of his shirt.

“Middag, Basies.” He bows his head as one in prayer.

“Wie’s jy, wat maak jy hier?”

The old man nods towards the woman. “Ek en Oumeid hettie huis nie. Baas Fransie het virrie Outa la’t weet Outa is te oud om te werk. Outa, moetie wapad vat. Baas Fransie het Outa se huis nou nodig virrie jonklong, Basie.”

The woman shakes her head slightly. She is fat and muddy coloured. Tucked in front of her dress is a small dog, a terrier of mixed blood that growls at them.

“Wat’s julle name, Outa?” Danie steps forward. He tries to stroke the dog’s head but it bares its teeth at him.

“Outa se naam is Jan Wanie, Basie en umeid se naam is Katjie, dankie Basie.” He speaks with a heavy accent.

“Hoekom bly Outa nie by Outa se kinders nie?” Danie offers a chicken bone to the dog that snatches it out of his hand.

Katjie removes the dog from her bosom, from where it barks furiously at them.

“Outa se familie is ver en Oumeid se kinners willie ‘n kaffer innie huis hê nie, Basie.”

Isak is unsure what to do. “Roep vir Pappa.”

Danie speeds off and the terrier gives chase.

“Die hond?”

“Spyker, Basie.”

He notices a wire contraption, lying next to the old man.

Jan Wanie picks it up. “Outa en Oumeid se kos is al op, Basie.”

“Het Outa al iets gevang?”

“Ta’enta’l, Basie.” He proudly lifts the lid off the pot to show a skinny carcass but the old woman’s eyes are slit. Contemptuously, she turns her back to Isak.

“Outa, mag nie jag nie. Geen volk mag by ons jag nie, nie eers ‘n slang doodmaak nie... My Pa gaan kwaad wees vir Outa.”

Jan Wanie obediently hides the crude trap under the mattress.

There is nothing further to say. Isak inspects the torn netting. It has been cut with a knife. “Outa kan bly wees my Ouma leef nie meer nie, sy’t die net opgesit om te keer dat die skilpaaie nie in die kanaal verdrink nie.”

“Issie Ounooi dood?”

“In die aardbewing, sy en die Oubaas.” He fiddles agitatedly with his hand in his pocket.

“Die Ounooi het ‘n hart virrie volk gehat...”

They all hear the purr of the Ford’s engine. Spyker barks hysterically as Katjie buries him in her bosom again. Jan Wanie cocks his head to hear and for the first time Isak can see his hunchback.

With perfectly creased trousers his father climbs out the car, checking the netting of the canal as though they are not there. They wait patiently, Isak wondering whether he will be angry with the old man but his father surveys the scene with a bemused expression.

“Middag Jan, ek het gedink jy’s al lankal onder die grond.”

Jan bows stiffly. “Middag Ba’s, Outa is jammer oor die Ounooi se dood Ba’s.”

His father shrugs it off. “Jy en die Ounooi kom ‘n lang pad...lyk vir my Baas Frans het nie meer die ou hond nodig nie?”

“Nee Ba’s, Ba’s Fransie soekie klonge.”

“Katjie jul’s mos te oud om weg te loop, dis ‘n jong mens se ding daai.”

Her face shows nothing but her voice is deflated. “Suffel keer padgevat, suffel keer gesukkel. Oumeid kannie meer nie.”

“Wie sê ek het huis?”

The old couple look up unsurely but resigned.

“Hier kan julle nie bly nie.” Their father measures the situation, the canal and the mattress, the faded clothing drying on the bushes. “Dis gevaarlik, die skema loop een van die dae, dan swem julle tweetjies groot waters toe.”

“Outa kan nog draadspan, Ba’s.”

Their father throws his hands in the air, “agge nee, Jan, die plaas begin soos ‘n ouetehuis te lyk.” He touches his silver moustache. “Hier is genoeg gryskoppe.”

Jan Wanie laughs, encouraged by their father’s good humour but not Katjie.

“Die klong se plan is die beste. Jul kan tydelik in poppenshuis intrek, daar op die bult.” His father gestures to a one-roomed clay structure. “Ek stuur David met die trekker om jul goedjies te gaan haal, want ek soek nie verstoppe waterpype nie.”

“Dankie, Ba’s.” Jan Wanie bows again, repeating his thanks over and over.

Their father walks back to the idling Ford. Isak runs after him. “Wie’s Outa, Pappa?”

On the back seat is a golfing bag and studded shoes.

“Ouma se agterryer.” His father rests his shoe on the running board of the car, wiping the dust off with a chamois, then he does it with the other. “Sy’t hom langs die

pad opgetel en Boland toe gebring.” He pauses before climbing in. “Gaan terug en sê vir Outa om van die hond ontslae te raak.”

Isak walks back to the canal to where Danie is playing with the dog, Spyker.

“Pappa sê jy moet vir Outa sê hy moet ontslae raak van die hond.”

How he wishes he had thought of the plan.

*

Coloured lights are strung through the trees. Arum lilies with droopy leaves line the windowsills of the house. Masses of trumpet-shaped heads saved from the hall, piled into his mother’s Datsun’s boot for the party.

But his mother couldn’t save the orchids. The cleaners trampled them all.

Isak watches his father instructing the men, surrounded by the lilies and he is singing the chorus with Nana Mouskouri on the hi-fi set.

The wreath that Tannie Lettie laid on Oupa’s coffin was of lilies, he thinks, everlasting lilies of plastic.

The men shift Ouma’s clawed furniture to make space for dancing and their boots leave treads all over the floor. David is at the front door making the bar counter from fruit crates while in the kitchen, Danie nibbles on fatty pieces of gammon. Isak takes a rind and it tastes of cloves.

“Uit onner my voete!” Raatjie catches them both, waving the carving knife wildly.

Together they duck for the back door.

Along the stoep’s wall are zinc baths filled with blocks of ice and bottles, Isak takes a bottle, hiding it in the hydrangea bush.

“Mamma is nie lus vir vanaand nie.” He digs out the torn paper with the list of party names, screws it up in a ball, then throws it across the lawn.

“Gaan jy vanaand Pettie toe?”

“Mamma wil hê ons moet by die paartie wees.” He spits between his feet, “en Pettie het ‘n meisie.”

The posy on the windowsill has wilted from the sun. He must remember to throw it away.

“Wie gaan die bier drink?” Danie lifts the floppy hydrangea head.

“Ek...wie anders? Ek’s nie meer ‘n kind nie.”

“Die Nooi roep,” Raatjie shouts at them.

She sits on her puff chair with the ostrich feather trim, wearing a satin gown and pom-pom slippers. Her cutexed toes stick out.

“Bad en gaan aantrek, die gaste is nou hier.”

They stand at the door staring at the back of her head covered in large curlers.

“Ja, Mamma,” they answer in unison but they don’t turn away.

Her dress hangs from the door, red and silky with flowers embroidered around the neckline.

“Mamma se rok is mooi.” Danie fingers the fabric.

“Moenie vat nie.” She swivels on the stool with her lollipop head. “Toe-toe... gaan bad en kry klaar.” Then she turns back to the mirror studying her reflection with concentration. Carefully she unwinds the large curls. “Sakkie, sê vir Ragel as sy klaar is met die vleis se sny kan sy loop, sy moet net sorg dat sy weer voor sewe inkom.”

“Ja, Mamma.” His fingers brush over the sequins.

“Maak toe die deur.”

“Ja, Mamma.”

The kitchen is deserted. Raatjie has left and so have the men. His father sits in the lounge with closed eyes, wearing his cream suit and red shirt. The music of earlier plays on and on.

In the bathroom he closes the plastic curtain around the bath, pressing against the metal head. He thinks of Petrus and the girl under the Eucalyptus trees, the curve of her breast, and her skin the colour of bark. As the water sprays hard against the curtain he sees Magdaleen, hairless legs wrapped around those of Willa on the back seat of the bus. He imagines the useless posy gripped by perfect half-moon fingernails and she smiling at him and the tightness in his hand is embarrassing so he closes the hot water and the stream of cold brings relief.

Their navy suits are matching. Danie is dirty but dressed. Isak rubs his chin but there is nothing. Stiffly, they sit opposite each other, waiting, hands in their pockets, listening to her coming down the passage.

“Hoe lyk ek?” She turns around, holding out her skirt and the sequins twinkle.

“Mamma is mooi.” Danie comments at the sight of her in red.

“Ek kry nie my hare reg nie,” she twists her head to see better, “dit wil nie reg nie, hier agter op my kop.”

“Mamma se hare is mooi.” Danie tries again.

She opens a monogrammed case, removing a slim cigarette. Her red tipped hand cups the flame from the lighter, then she tilts her head back, drawing deeply.

Motorcars come up the hill, like a shiny cavalcade of the latest models.

“Ek moet gaan.” She stubs the cigarette in case’s lid.

The guests are in the entrance. Their father greets them in his having-a-good-time voice.

“Sakkie, gaan roep vir Ragel oor so ‘n halfuur.”

“Ja, Mamma.” He wants to tell her that she looks pretty but her face is closed to him.

Down in the lounge the music’s volume has been turned up. The guests speak louder and louder, while David pours gin and tonics in frosted highballs. He wears a white cummerbund and a tailed suit that makes him look like a silent movie comedian.

The boys sit under the stairs. They can see everybody from here, men in tight suits and women with bouffed hair.

“Die Raad hou een van die dae verkiesing.” Oom Frans’ lips hardly move as he speaks to Oom Stoffel, unaware of the boys beneath the step.

“Ons sal met die manne moet praat, daar’s iets aan die broei.” Oom Stoffel waves to someone across the room.

“Die manne sal moet saamstaan om die Sappe te keer.” Oom Frans leans against the banister, “Johan vry onner ons mense.”

“En onder hul vrouens ook.”

The men laugh, their attention on the woman from the exhibition hall. Her hair is silky and her black dress cut low.

Isak’s mother spots him and the two men make way for her, Oom Frans kissing her hand. Her lipstick has shifted to the rim of her glass.

“Sakkieseun,” she lisps his name ever so slightly, “Rageltjie het nog nie gekom nie. Wees ‘n skat en gaan roep haar vir Mamma. David sê sy was by die huis toe hy daar weg is.”

“Twee mooi boereklonge,” Oom Stoffel comments and his mother smiles dreamily as Isak appears from behind the step.

“Wil jy saam?”

“Nee.” Danie’s eyes are glued on the crowd.

“Maak gou,” she touches Isak’s arm with the red nails, holding out her glass to Oom Frans.

“Hou die vyand styf teen die bors,” Oom Frans throws over his shoulder to Oom Stoffel, as he guides her up the stairs to the bar.

Outside, under fairy lights of green and red and blue, Outa and Piet Plesier share a bottle. They guard the rows of cars parked on the lawn, chatting quietly while Isak slips by unnoticed. The latest model of the Ford Capri stands out amongst the other sleek lines. Isak stops to admire its shark faced grill.

He walks under the avenue of trees. The smiling dog is just in front. They stop at David and Raatjie’s house, locked and dark. Isak walks around the place of the bonfire, just a black spot on the ground. The smiling dog sits close to him and he runs his hands through its hair. He likes the feeling of the dog’s skin under his.

The rose growing over the stoep is a rose of Ouma. He cannot pronounce its name, the roses that his father put over their grave.

“Waar die hel is sy?” He presses his nose into the petals. Petrus is with the girl. That he knows for sure.

Across the orchards a single light burns from Poppenhuis. There’s a second light coming from the voorman’s house. He drops the rose, making his way in the dark to the dimly lit stoep. Music and laughter drift with the evening breeze from the house on the hill.

The moon and stars are clouded over by a heavy sky.

The voorman’s house is locked and shuttered but from within come voices strident and high.

Isak pulls and pushes. The clip gives way and the shutter opens, revealing a brightly lit room. Petrus sits on the sofa singing falsetto, strumming the give-away guitar of his father.

Isak blinks his eyes to adjust. It is Oom Kalla in the middle of the room, sleekly brilcreamed, shuffling with bowlegs to the voice of Petrus. His arms are draped around the shoulders of Raatjie. She wears her new pink overall meant for the party. Her face is hidden in the shirt of the voorman.

Oom Kalla licks an ice cream cone. Now and again he kisses the top of her head to the beat of the music.

Isak closes the shutter. Raatjie will not be doing aandwerk. He drags his feet up the path to the house through rows and rows of new trees with spindly branches that claw at him.

The clouds part above the mountain and he can see a scattering of stars and the outline of the moon.

Ahead the house glows with light. Someone stands in the shadows of the front stoep. As he comes closer, there is not one but two and the laugh is a laugh he knows.

Smoking candles flit over black and raw silk.

**

“Isak.”

He opens his eyes to see Danie and the doctor watching over him.

“I’ve told Aimee that you’re fine, just a fall over a little wall.” Danie speaks slowly, “nothing to worry about but she insists on coming. Maybe when you are feeling better you can speak to her and reassure her that you are under good care?”

Twice he has died. He wants to laugh but all he can do is machine-breathe. The ceiling is grey as the sky outside his window, grey as the skin of Danie. There is a hole in his head. Under the bandage his skull has broken, that he remembers too. He tries to raise an arm but it lies dead under the sheet. He tries the other arm, connected to the drip but it is dumb, just like the other.

“Dis nie nodig nie, alles is onder beheer.” Someone said that. He wants to tell them that nothing is under control. That everything is on the verge of chaos. He needs to get money and fast otherwise he might as well lie here and die for good but money for what? Desperately, he tries to talk but a nurse removes the respirator, pulling the pipe out of his throat like a fish line. Panic-stricken he breathes in short spurts, eyes on the computer screen above his bed, watching his heart rate shoot above the line. Then a mask is fitted over his face. He inhales the pure oxygen, forgetting the pressing question for another.

“Leef ek?” His lips smack over each other.

No one replies.

He makes noises in the mask and Danie comes closer to hear better. “You fell at my house, in the garage.”

“Ek was besig om dood te gaan...”

But Danie cannot understand and the doctor gestures him not to speak.

Danie continues explaining as to a child. “You were travelling from Paris to Rotterdam. We were having supper when you fell into the underground garage, that’s where the dogs found you.”

“Aimee, ek moet met Aimee praat, waar’s sy?” The room spins, engulfing him in nausea.

His brother leans over him and the cross swings in and out of his vision “Rustig, rustig... You were on a business trip to see clients.”

“Wat maak ek...by jou?” he asks in his head.

Danie senses his question, pulling back. “Ek het jou genooi, wou jou graag weer sien.”

“Genoeg.” The doctor leads Danie behind the screen.

Isak can see their shadows in the folds. The answer to his question comes up in his mind. He has been entrusted to find money that will save them, otherwise all is lost. It is as though the fall is not only a fall to the ground but a fall from grace. A final fall into failure that makes him escape the responsibility he carries so heavily. It is now out of his hands. The fall has taken the burden off his shoulders.

Relieved, he closes his mind to it, drifting in a drugged haze to a time of long ago.

*

There’s a knock on the door just before sunrise. Someone large leans over his bed. They walk through the house, him tailing his father, brusque and removed. The heads of the lilies have turned brown and at the door are crates with empty bottles.

His father climbs in the bakkie and he does the same.

The smiling dog waits for the whistle but there is no whistle.

They drive fast, very fast to the hills, his father like a man with a devil inside of him, stopping on the lands behind the hills. Closed vygies wait for the sun.

His father pulls the handbrake and climbs out. Here, no one can see them.

Isak remains seated, switching on the radio to get rid of the tune in his head.

Without caution his father runs up the hill as fast as he can, up and down, over and over.

The radio can't rid him of the woman's nasal voice.

Suddenly the man sinks to his knees, pressing his arms around his chest. A fear wells up inside of Isak.

He sits in the cab, silently singing the tune over and over, not sure what to do as pain contorts his father's face.

Isak watches.

His father hits his chest. Once again he tries to run, his eyes glazed, gasping for breath.

Isak climbs out.

His father falls at his feet, face first. "Genoeg," his father murmurs, "genoeg." He lies there as the sun strikes the rock.

Isak is not sure what to do. Vygies open, changing the veld to purple.

Isak bends down.

The man is heavy. He grips him under the arms but his weight is too much. Piece by piece he drags him over the flowers. Piece by piece he lifts him onto the seat, his own chest paining, his own muscles contracting in a spasm.

His father slumps over the dashboard.

He drives flat out. Each stone, each dip in the road seems to pierce the man beside him.

She is waiting in the garage, her hair a mess.

And the doctor's new Capri is in the driveway, with open doors. The doctor pulls him out.

Isak wants to tell what has happened out there but there is no time for talking. They load his father into the sports car and the doctor spins the wheels. He can hear how the Capri's low carriage scrapes the gravel.

Her lips are drained, goose bumps all over her skin. Both stand barefoot on the stoep, she in a nightie and him in pyjamas. Above the hills they see the sun and the air is scented from the falling blossoms.

"Gaan slaap weer," she suggests.

But he ignores her, calling the dogs.

They walk along the ridge to the mogat. From here he can see far, almost as far as the town. The Capri has turned onto the main road, just a speck, just a suggestion.

He runs his hand through the smiling dog's skin.

Noises come from the house of heavy things being shifted, voices from the barrakse, then David's tractor coming along the ridge, with a trailer. A subdued Danie and Pensie sit on a heap of boxes and rubbish. David backs the trailer to the edge of the mogat and the small boys help him tip.

Isak moves closer to inspect.

There's the normal rubbish of bottles and broken glasses. Heaps of wilted lilies and a record snapped in two. He digs it out amongst the flowers. It is the record of Nana Mouskouri with the cursed tune.

*

Behind the screen the doctor moves on to old men dribbling into pee pots. From the shouts and swearing, he can make out that their bodies are being wiped down as well. No one wipes his battered body, his urine, piped into a pot.

He opens his eyes a little more. Black flowers come into focus. At the foot of his bed is a uniformed man, holding a bunch of tulips. The nurse clasps them to her chest and there are apologies made for the second fall and for the second death in the ambulance.

Flowers of condolence, flowers of apology, flowers for a funeral.

So he attempts to turn his head as she arranges them on the table but he is braced, listening as the man explains that there is no colour like black. Tulips such as these were once a rarity. Like pears he thinks, once a rarity, now a commodity.

The man leaves with a relieved look and the nurse shifts the screen aside so that he can see out of the window. The highway runs past the window and behind the stream of cars are fields with sheep, weak-legged and woolly. He would cull them all if they were his.

He searches for the abrupted story in his jumbled mind, not sure what is real. This room or the space in his head.

*

The Ford stops in the garage and his mother is at the wheel. His father gets out quietly and the new maid closes the door for him, the skin slack around his jaw. He smells of Tannie Lettie's room as he rests his hand on Isak's shoulder.

*

The windmill in the Karoo is broken and there is no one to go. Oom Kalla has gone back to Rhodesia, so Outa must go instead.

This time his father stands on the stoep and his mother waves them goodbye. His father looks past them to the hills.

This time there will be no fires along the road or stories of men and sheep.

This time Isak drives slowly. He sees his parents in the mirror, a stooped man and a woman hugging herself.

Valley opens up to valley, then vast plains to vast plains and finally mountain upon mountain gathered together on the skirt of the horizon.

The Holden knows the road to Bloedrivier as the sheep do that trek next to the road.

Men are named by this road. Between the wars, Oom Abes walked this trekpad up and down for months and years, plucking each and every fluff of wool caught in the barbs, baling and selling it, to buy his first farm in the valley.

At the gate, Outa climbs out. He picks bitou for his hatband as Isak revs the engine.

Danie and the dogs jump off the back, running ahead of Outa to the wind pump and the dry trough.

There are other men in the valley, men who have built their wealth on bandiet labour and their loyalty to those who govern.

Bleating sheep mill around the pump.

In the beginning the flock is just a flock to Isak, animals that all look the same. Only later will they get names, names that come from each ewe having her own way.

They set up camp, near the pump with the broken rod. Outa plaits a skerm of vygie and Renoster bush while the boys erect the old bell tent.

“Ons het so ‘n skerm gehat toe ek nog kint was, wa’ Ma gekook het.” The old man’s hands and the roots of the plaited bushes move in and out of each other.

Isak and Danie move closer to where the old man kindles a fire on the floor of the skerm.

“Die huis was van riet gebou, nie palmiet soos by die Grootbaas se plaas nie, “ he explains. “Hy’s pap en g’n stronk nie, ma’ vannie dikker riet. Ons kinnens het bokmis en klei gevat en getrap soos deeg en da’ binne en buite gepleister mettie hant.”

“Het Outa koud gekry?”

“Niks nie Basie, nie eers wint of reën nie. Later het Ma kartbort en stukke seil gebruik na Pa oorle’e is.”

From the skerm you can see the whole world, in all directions. Isak turns on himself, stretching out his arms and the dogs turn with him until he feels drunk and falls. He gets up and the world is still turning. There are stars in the sky even before nightfall.

Outa skewers pieces of wors and the boys hold it over the flames. The meat tastes of herbs and ash and the stars shoot and spark like a tractor’s exhaust.

“Vertel verder.” Danie’s sausage drips fat and the dogs lick the sand.

“Outa was een van sestien kinnars va’ een Ma af. Dis netjie kleintjies wa’ agter Outa gekom het wat skool toe is. Outa en Outa se broer Arrie en Outa se susters het g’n geleerdheid ‘ie.”

“Wens dit was ek,” Isak grumbles. He huddles next to the coals as the sun sets and the night wind picks up.

“Ons tent het gate.” Danie joins him at the fire, unconvinced by Outa’s enthusiasm for the protection offered by the wall.

“Vanaand wys ek vi’ die Basies hoe ons volk, sonne ‘n katel, doeksak slaap.” In the dark his cheekbones stand out and his sunken eyes disappear, changing his face.

“Ek wil huis toe.”

“Sissie.” Isak spits sausage skin into the fire where it sizzles and burns.

The ewes call for their young in the dark. A moving mass of bodies search for each other as jackals call in unison. The dogs prick their ears in response.

“Het die volk hul eie plase in Outa se tyd gehad?” Isak blows over the coals.

“Net ‘n afsnygrondjie om ons bokke vannie Baas se bokke weg te hou, Basie.”

“Was Outa se Pa ‘n boer?” Danie lifts his head off his knees with interest.

“Pa wassie witman se wagter ma’ hy’t ôk gehannel en gewannel met sy eie goed.”

Isak shakes his head disagreeably, “Pappa sal dit nooit toelaat nie, daar’s nie plek of tyd daarvoor nie.”

Something moves rapidly through the hot sand. It is a toktokkie duped by the fire to think it is the sun.

Danie picks it up and the beetle plays dead, stiffening at his touch. “Hy’s myne.” He taps the shell. “Jaffie, Jaffie word wakker.”

Isak prods it with the stick.

“Boetie, moenie!” Danie knocks the stick from Isak’s hand.

They tumble and roll around the fire. Outa begins to sing in a high voice, clicking each word softly to himself.

“Watse liedjie is dit?” Isak shoves Danie to one side.

“Wiegliedjie wa’ Outa se Ouma vi’ Outa gesing het.” The old man sings louder and louder.

“Was Outa nooit in die skool nie, soos in nooit nie?” Danie waits for the song that goes round and round to end.

“Outa het van kleins-af gewerk. Outa was tien jaar oud toe is Outa weggegee virrie witmense om bokke op te pas en van daaraf het Outa ma’ orals as bokwagter getrêvel.”

“Weggegee, soos in weggee?” Isak eyes the beetle in Danie’s hand.

Outa nods agreeably. He sits on a half drum, rhythmically tanning a piece of animal skin with his thumbs. “Was tien jaar by die witmense ingeboek, onner die kombuistafel geslaap totdat Outa ‘n groot klong geword het.” Sighing, he kicks his heels into the sand, “‘n sikspens ‘n dag en ‘n sjieling innie maand. Dit was Outa se pay. Hulle het Outa goed mishannel...Die witmense was anners daai tyd.”

“Hoe was hulle annerste, Outa?” Isak frowns. “Beter of slegter?”

“Van hulle was galbitter met alle respek gesê, maklik geslat, vir my ôk.” As an afterthought he adds, “vandag se witmense is mak.” Then he gets up from the fire, taking a spade with him to the tent.

Curious, the boys follow. Inside the tent he digs three equal-sized trenches in a row, then with the spade he scoops of the glowing coals, dropping them into the hollows, levelling them off with sand.

“Slapenstyd, kinnertjies.”

They undress, hanging their trousers on wire hooks from the tent pole. Isak notices Outa's limbs, sinewed and strong and the old scars that shine white.

Each lies in a warmed hole. The old man is closest to the flap and the boys count stars through the holes in the roof.

The beetle lies still in Danie's hand. Kalbas with the smiling face and the grey whippet lie at the dying embers.

"Nog stories," Isak begs, tracing his finger over the stars that make pictures like clouds do.

Outa snorts and spits. "Daai Nooi Visassie het in die bokkraal self bok gevang, hier by die agterbeen." He lifts his leg up for them to see. "Dan hettie Nooi self gemelk en Outa moes kop vashou en assie bok die emmer omgooi hettie Nooi opgespring en Outa plein geneek." He snaps his fingers, making pitiful noises.

Isak can see the woman in her starched kappie and laced boots, beating Outa as a little boy.

"Die Nooi het vi' Outa geslat, so kop tussen die Nooi se bene geknyp."

Danie places the rigid beetle on top of his blanket. It starts to creep over the squares of material, calico, satin, velvet, kaffir sheeting.

"Die laaste keer lê Outa onderstebo, met Outa se kop boentoe..." He pauses, "toe byt Outa 'n gat in ha' snuifie."

Isak shoots upright then flops back, overcome by mirth, while Danie giggles hysterically into the blanket until his chest closes. The torch is switched on and they searches for his asthma pump as Outa repeats the story.

"Jaffie." Danie wheezes, shaking his blanket.

Isak shines the torch all over the sand but the beetle is gone. He makes patterns of light on the tent roof, beaming the torch into the eyes of Danie and the old man.

The torchlight is so powerful it makes the stars disappear.

*

Greyness and cold wake him in the ward. It is with disappointment that he finds himself not with the old man. It is his simplicity that he craves. To lie in hot sand and study the stars, to hear stories, to live for now without a care in the world is his desire. All the complications of running a business, has been self-made. He has created the mess that he is in. And he will have to find the way out.

Behind the screen Danie is on the phone with his back turned to him so that he will not hear. But one thing that has not been damaged is his hearing. In fact he can hear better than ever before.

“Aimee.” Danie throws a furtive glance over his shoulder, making big eyes as he points to the phone, “she wants to talk to you.”

The mask is lifted briefly for him to speak.

“Isak?”

Her voice cuts deep.

“Vat weg...vat weg.” Weakly, he raises his hand.

Embarrassed, Danie puts the phone down. “Jammer.”

The line makes alpine peaks on the screen.

“Ons probeer later. Ons was te haastig.” Danie’s moustache is trimmed in a perfect line above his lip.

They both stare at the black tulips.

The Dutch were breeding black tulips while Van Riebeeck was growing vegetables for scurvy.

‘Makgemaak.’ That is what the uniformed man said about tulips. Makgemaak, is what he can remember the man saying.

He listens to his breathing, regulating the flow of air. But his heart beats its own rhythm.

*

Sheep bleat outside in unison.

Dung and dust hang over the tent and the old man is missing.

All is still but not quite. The windmill jerks and whines, pumping water into the trough.

Isak pulls on his clothes and the sand hole of Outa has the shape of a man. Something moves on Danie’s blanket, it is the missing beetle. He unhooks the barbed legs, gently placing it in his brother’s hand, stroking the squares of the blanket with the tips of his fingers.

Seated at the skerm is Outa with a new feather in his hat. The mountains are rumpled like his clothes.

All is still but for the windmill and the sheep.

They walk a little way from the camp, heads down and on the ground there are delicate scribblings.

“Haasspore.” Outa traces the spoor with his kierie.

Isak outlines it with his fingers, destroying the patterns in the sand.

“Na brêkfis vat Outa die honne, dan wys Outa vi’ Basie, hoe jaggie volk.”

At the skerm, Danie sits with an open matchbox. “Kyk, Jaffie het self teruggekom.” He holds the beetle in the box for them to see.

Outa ties string to the dogs’ collars and the boys hold them back as Outa walks ahead, sweeping his kierie from side to side.

The sand is a story of the night. Of birds and insects and animals, intersecting each other like railway tracks. To the boys they look all the same but to Outa and the dogs there are differences that make the old man pause and the dogs’ strain on their leashes.

Isak is thirsty and Danie tired of nothing but looking at the ground when Outa raises his hand to silence them. The whippet chokes with excitement. Outa’s arm stays up.

Hidden beneath the vygiebos is the rabbit. It takes a leap but the whippet is too fast, tipping it in mid air. The rabbit somersaults, landing on its back with the dog at its throat.

“Ons het hom, ons het hom!” The boys hurdle over the bushes.

Snarling, the dogs bite into the fur. Isak pulls the rabbit from under their paws, holding it high, dancing a little jig while Outa grabs the rabbit firmly by its ears, slitting its throat before throwing it into a bag. Disappointed, the dogs sniff at the bag slung over his back. There is fur around their mouths.

Unleashed they run ahead. The rocks shimmer as the day’s heat increases. Slowly they make their way towards an outcrop. Here they sit in the shade sucking oranges, while Outa sharpens the blade of the knife.

Danie removes the beetle from the box. He taps three times. The beetle responds, tap, tap, tap. He squeezes a drop of juice onto the rock and the beetle drinks.

“Wat het Outa daai tyd geëet?” Isak turns to Outa.

“Ma het ‘n skottel gehat. Sy’t bokbloed gevang en uitgekliets, vannit pap gekook, bloedpap vi’ ons kinnere.” He slides his thumb along the sharpened edge. “Dit was nou lekker eet, Basie. Amper soos rooi custard en da’ was krag innie kos. Ons kinnere hettie een siek geraak nie, al sestien van ons kinnere was gesond.”

“Kan Outa dit vir ons maak, dié bloedpap?”

Outa packs the knife away and passes the bag with the rabbit to Isak. “Dan kossit bokvang Basie. Haasbloed is bitter en ôk te dun.”

Isak carries the bag all the way back to the skerm. He can feel the weight of the rabbit against his back and it is nothing in the beginning but as he walks the rabbit hangs heavy in the bag and he shifts it from shoulder to shoulder.

They open the bag. The rabbit is thinner and smaller than when it was alive. Outa strips it of its skin, gutting its intestines. Danie walks to the tent, closing the flap but Isak helps the old man strip the skin.

Throughout the day they lie listlessly in the tent, under the drying carcass of the rabbit, watching it change colour.

And the beetle wanders over the tent’s floor, stops, then tap, tap, taps.

When evening sky and soil become one, the boys come out to find Outa roasting the meat for them. The rabbit is tough and dry, tasting of bush.

*

It is dark. The lights of the Holden catch the fence as they drive along the sheep track. Hundreds of red eyes flash behind the barbed wire. Outa has a dop in.

Isak can smell engelasem inside the cab. Outa's arm rests on the open window and he taps his hand on the cab's door, tap, tap, tap.

Danie is on the back, dangling a piece of sausage and the dogs follow the Holden with interest.

He puts his foot down hard on the accelerator and the wheels spin. Outa grabs the dashboard and the fence becomes a blur as Isak shouts, "twintig...dertig...veertig."

Only the whippet keeps up. Kalbas drops back and the sausage flies wildly.

"Twee-en-veertig!"

"O Gotta, die heining, Basie!"

Isak slams on the brakes. The Holden shifts sideways, banking into the fence as Danie and the sausage fly off the back and the whippet is on him, wolfing down the meat.

"Waar's, Jaffie?" The small boy feels his pockets.

Isak swaggers over to the dogs, laughing in amazement. "Twee-en-veertig myl!" He pats the whippet. Kalbas sits to one side.

Danie finds the matchbox. Inside is the smashed beetle. "Dis jou skuld!" Furiously he dives at Isak, punching him in the stomach.

"Issie." Isak shoves Danie away from him. The sight of the beetle is stranger than the rabbit. "Kom ons doen dit weer." He climbs in behind the wheel.

"Sallie!" Danie picks up the box. Kalbas follows him back to camp but the whippet stays with the Holden. Isak watches the small figure disappear into the darkness.

*

Danie eats breakfast off a tray, so do the old men in the ward. Isak is fed via pipes. For a moment he is nowhere, the memory of a boy disappearing into the darkness, flirts with his sanity.

“Wat sê die dokter?”

Danie lifts the corner of the mask and Isak repeats the question.

“The shoulder ligaments have torn off, so the arm is only being carried by surrounding muscle. Your ribs pierced the left lung, and the hole in your head is...what he calls, bestendig.”

“Gaan hulle opereer?”

“Maybe a steel pen can help for the shoulder but for now, no one can say. It needs to heal like the rest of you...En dit neem tyd.” Danie places the mask back over his face and he is trapped.

Nothing will ever be the same.

Frustrated, he tries to follow a man in the field outside the window with a dog.

What must be saved? He tries to lift himself up but to no avail.

The dog in the field is not a sheep dog. Isak can see by the dog's disinterest. Even the dogs here have forgotten what dogs are meant to be.

But not the dog with the smiling face, bringing the flock home for summer, lead by Outa on foot. Flock, dog and old man trekking all the way along allemansgrond, back to the farm, that he cannot forget.

All the nonsense with the dogs started with the Ford parked in the garage and the Holden bakkie with the tractors under the afdak. His father was forbidden to drive after the heart attack. The frustrations of a man encamped and confronted by his own frailty.

A bitch was on heat. A dull, neglected animal with a bloated belly and dangling teats. Her heat spread with the wind through the valley and as the nights passed, dogs headed on footpaths through fields, breaking loose from chains.

The dogs collected at the farm of Oom Frans, showing off amongst each other, growling and snapping, while the mangy bitch paraded with a mournful face. He knew the dog. It belonged to one of the workers, one of those animals that only knew beatings.

The stronger dogs got through the fence to cover her and of the weaker dogs, bored with waiting, drifted off towards the paddocks, sniffing the scent of lambs, their bleating a call to the hunt and the bitch's yelping, urging them on.

He thinks about it calmly. It is as though the fall has opened dungeons, closed up for so many years.

One of the dogs found an opening in the fence and the rest followed to where the ewes and lambs slept.

It was a cold night. The heavens were clear. He went out that night onto the back stoep to look at the stars that had lowered themselves to the earth and the hills were silent.

He did not hear them that night. Perhaps if the wind had blown towards the farm he would have picked up the frightened ewes, running back and forth, forming a laager around the lambs.

The dogs broke through, scattering the sheep this way and that and the flock stormed for the dam, empty but for a little water, just enough for them to drink, just enough for them to get caught in the cloying clay. And their hooves stuck and the lambs fell and sunk in the shallow water, just enough water to drown them.

Trapped, they were, calling out to their dying lambs as the pack of dogs thrashed in a frenzy, trampling over bodies.

One or two dogs started to bite wildly. It always went that way. Not for hunger but for madness. At the throat, the body, anywhere they could get their teeth into, until the flock lay still.

The madness passed. The dogs trotted home, each dog to his own home. Some climbed into baskets, others dropped down in the sand, exhausted, pieces of bloodied wool around their snouts.

The call came from Oom Frans at sunrise. He heard the phone, then his father opening the clothes cupboard, then the front door closing and his father walking down to the barrakse.

It was the way things happened, no one questioned it. Your neighbours expected it from you, they would have done the same. It was just another thing he expected, like all the other things it is what he knew, that is until she came and turned everything upside down.

His father cleaned them out, every dog, whether it was a puppy or an old dog whose teeth had loosened and yellowed with age. All were shot, even the forgotten dog of Katjie at Poppenshuis.

He was in bed on the back stoep when he heard the shots from the hunting rifle, the rifle with the silver filigree work.

Kalbas was in his room on the mat, sharp of mind and body when his father whistled as he came up the hill, just a single whistle and Kalbas pricked up his ears, traipsing through the open door.

There were two shots. A shot for Kalbas and a shot for the whippet, right there in the basket, under the camphor trees.

His mobile phone rings. Danie answers it. "Aimee."

He loves her name. He wishes he can tell her that, that he loves her and her name. She can look into his head. It saves him from speaking. Words are clumsy offerings for the pictures in his mind and her thoughts read his pictures perfectly.

He has had so many chances to tell, missed so many chances to tell.

Unfortunately, he has never been able to see inside her head.

**

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The phone rings, two short and one long. He gets up and opens the window for the owl. It rings again in the kitchen. The owl sits on the headboard, ears twitching, stretching its wings over the bed.

“Gaan jy vannaand jag?”

The bird hops onto Isak’s arm. Carefully, he lifts a wing, poking with his fingers to feel the wound in the soft flesh but it had healed, only a scab indicating where the wing has torn.

The generator and lights of the kitchen come on. He walks onto the stoep with the owl, listening.

“Ja, ja ek hoor...” His father rings off. “Swartskoen se moer,” is all he says as the house darkens again and the generator cuts off.

The owl takes flight over the garden. There is no moon. The Milky Way hangs as a ribbon of light in the sky over the hills, where he finds the Southern Cross and the three sisters.

The bottle of beer is still in the hydrangea bush. He fishes it out and tries to open it on the edge of the stoep. Behind him the back door opens and Danie peers out, wrapped in Ouma’s blanket.

“Boeta, wie’t nou gebel?” he whispers.

“Die swartskoene.”

“Hoekom bel hulle vir Pappa so laat?”

“Hulle hou vergadering in die middel van die nag dan drink hul mekaar se bloed as dit donkermaan is.” He bares his teeth. “Vampiere, almal van hulle.”

Danie joins him, his body still soft and hairless. “Issie. Oom Frans is ‘n swartskoen, nie ‘n vampier nie.”

Isak shrugs, hitting the lid off with a stone. “Hy dra sy swart manelpak vergaderings toe.”

“Pappa sê Dominee is een en Meneer de Jager vannie skool en almal wat by die koöperasie werk. Pappa het vir Mamma vertel.”

“Husse met lang ore.” The lid shoots off. Isak presses the foaming liquid to his mouth.

“Bietjie.”

Isak passes on the bottle.

“Is swartskoen en swartgevaar dieselle?” Danie looks puzzled.

“Nee.” Isak sees the handsome face of the black man. “Swartskoen is die Natte en swartgevaar is die Kaffers.” He takes a deep swig from the bottle.

“Wat is ons?”

“Bloedsappe. Oupa het altyd virrie ou oom op die foto in die kantoor gestem, die een met die bokbaardjie, maar hy’s lankal dood.”

“En Pappa?”

“Pappa stem nie.”

The owl returns, ignoring Isak’s outstretched hand. It lands in the Del Toidia, with a mouse in its claws. The bird pulls and picks, piece by piece, dropping the gut nonchalantly onto the grass below.

“Wil Pappa nie liever ‘n swartskoen wees nie?” Danie yawns and snuggles closer.

“Jy’s Nat, Sap of ‘n kommunist. Pappa is niks van daai nie.”

Isak parts the bushes. The mouse is alive, trembling, with the thin metal catch caught across its front paws. He lifts it up by the tail, holding it out to the owl on his arm. As the owl lifts off, it snatches viciously at the mouse, its wings closing over the boy's head, darkening the sun for a split second. He moves onto the other traps, only collecting the mice that still live, if barely, hearing the phone ringing in the kitchen, two short and one long ring, again and again and again. He pretends not to hear it as he carries the bag of mice up the hill to the house.

The phone stops ringing abruptly, in the middle of its cycle.

His mother stands in the kitchen with the telephone cord in her hand, ripped from the wall.

“Mamma?”

“Pappa soek jou,” is all she says, rolling up the cord, dropping it into the pocket of her apron.

He runs down to the office as fast as he can to where his father sits in the Holden bakkie, smoking and shouting through the open window. His father wears a tweed jacket and a tie, just like he always does when he goes to town and his moustache is trimmed in a perfect line.

“Klim.”

Isak jumps on the back, counting the markers alongside the road, sticking out his tongue into the wind, wondering when the threats will stop now that the phone is dead.

His father parks in front of the koöperasie's main door. Men stand in a small circle at the entrance with cups of tea, drinking and talking landspolitiek.

His father climbs out and Isak follows him across the parking lot to the group of men and the men pause in their conversation. Oom Frans is one. He sticks out his hand in greeting but the other men hold onto their cups, hats pulled low over their brows. His father passes the hand of Oom Frans, nodding a general greeting before walking through the revolving door.

The feed is sold at the back. Volk with strips of cloth around their heads carry the feed on their backs, out to the bakkies.

Oom Soppas shouts a number and a threat to the men. "Bloedbek, bloedbek."

The volk look too small for the large bags they carry. Oom Soppa's daughter sits with a book writing up the orders. His father teases her, laughing aloud and she flushes red behind the glass.

"Baas, Baas, die bakkie." The man loading the feed runs in, with arms waving.

Isak runs ahead of his father. The parking lot is deserted. The windscreen of the Holden is smashed. Inside on the seat lies a brick. All the tea drinkers have left.

Oom Soppas skells the man. "Vandag Hotnot, staan jy oppie witklip by my."

But its not the man's fault, Isak wants to say, not his fault at all.

*

There's a fight and the phone's cord is replaced. The calls begin again, over and over, every night disturbed by the endless two short and one long ring but Isak no longer gets up. He sleeps through them all. And his father no longer answers, as the calls are all the same, threats from men in high places.

"Johan, los dit."

"Die fabriek is vrot van sy kop af."

His mother and father smoke on the back stoep, speaking softly.

The owl cocks its head.

“Asseblief, dis nie die moeite werd nie, om jou hele boerdery op die spel te plaas en vir wat?”

“Solank daar manne is wat agter my staan.”

“Jy kan net verloor.”

Isak pulls himself up. Her silhouette is slim like that of a young girl, her feet bunioned from the peep-toe stilettos. She holds the cigarette between her thumb and forefinger the way Raatjie used to do at the washing line.

His father’s voice hardens as he walks out onto the lawn, his back to her. Then he turns to her “Die verkiesing is oor twee dae en ek hou my by my woord.”

The phone rings in the kitchen.

“Los dit,” she pleads with him.

“Ons sal voor môre moet spuit, hier kom reën aan.”

“Hulle gaan jou kruisig.” Her voice lifts.

“Genoeg!” He walks to the phone.

Isak strains to hear.

“Is ons reg vir Donderdag?”

The reply is short.

“Ek sien.”

There are no goodbyes. His father slams down the phone. The owl is restless as the back door flies open. Isak watches his mother mouth words as his father grabs Oupa’s kerie, whistling for the dogs. But there are no more dogs on the farm.

It is not long before they hear the tractor in the werf and the whirring sound of the sprayer, dispensing insecticide over the orchards. He can smell the poison right here in his room on the back stoep.

“Mamma?”

She comes to the window and there are lines dragging down from the corners of her mouth to her chin. “Jy moes al geslaap het.”

“Bruine wil jag maar Mamma moet eers van die stoep af.”

“Ek wens ek was ‘n uil.” There’s a bitterness on her breath as she sweeps her hand over his hair. Her touch is cold.

She strolls over the lawn out by the back gate into the veld and he cannot see her anymore. He waits up for her but she doesn’t return, not that way anyway.

*

His father dresses in his Sunday best. He goes to the election for the new board of directors of the koöperasie. The new boardroom is panelled in yellow wood, from trees that once grew in the mountain pass.

His father’s supporters stay away, every one of them, too busy farming to vote. His father comes home from the election with dust on the hubcaps and dust on his shoes.

“Dis verby,” is all he says, taking the kierie but this time he heads for the mountains.

His mother takes to her room for a very long time.

**

The tray lies untouched at the door. Only the tablets for her aching back have been taken and the glass of water is half empty. Isak carries the tray to the kitchen where the new maids gossip, cheeky and insolent with babelas breaths from Boxing day.

He wishes for Raatjie but she sits on her stoep under roses, thinner, dirtier, different to the Raatjie he knows.

From the orchard he can hear ladders falling and womens' voices.

The new maid stands at the bin, gobbling down the cold egg from his mother's plate.

"Ek loop."

The new maid shamelessly wipes the cold yellow egg from her lips.

Isak spots the team easily. The trees bear their first, light crop. As he approaches there's a scramble and shouting of young men.

Triumphantly, Petrus lifts the hare by its hind leg, slinging it around to the delight of the women.

"Sny sy nek, sny sy nek!" The team chant, clapping their hands.

"Los dit."

Petrus and the others stop in surprise and stare at Isak.

"Laat die haas gaan." He repeats, shaking inside.

The younger girls titter and begin to pick up of the fruit that has rolled out from the dropped bags.

Petrus narrows his eyes, throttling the hare by the throat, the penknife in his other hand.

“Daar’s vleis in Mamma se winkel te koop.”

“Vleis?” Petrus spits out the word. “Dissie vleis daai nie, dis bene virrie honne.” He taps his chest. “Aikôna.”

The old men shoot a glance at Isak then move back to the ladders and trees, leaving the boys with the hare between them.

Isak feels the flush on his face and the eyes of the young girls on them. “Die haas is nie joune om te vat nie.”

Petrus slices the air with the knife.

They eye each other.

“Los die haas...Anderste roep ek my Pa.”

Petrus looks at Isak, then the hare. He drops it. The hare lies in a bundle. Petrus kicks at it, then it lopes away.

Isak moves forward and he towers over the other boy. “Pa soek monsters.”

“Die Baas, soek monsters,” Petrus repeats to Pensie, who nervously fills a bag with fruit, passing it on to Petrus who then hands it over to Isak.

“Dankie.” His throat is closed as he takes the bag, pushing his way past the girls with gummy smiles.

There is laughter and shrieks behind him but he doesn’t look back.

On the office stoep his father curses the boys who tie the ropes over the crates. Everyone is too slow, too late, too lazy.

Isak waits in the shade of the office, paging through documents with official stamps that lie on the desk.

“Op die boereplaas, om die boeregesin waar die stryd om die behoud van die blanke beskawing in Suid-Afrika grootliks gevoer sal word en van beslissende belang

gaan wees.” He reads further, “hierin lê die boereplaas se grootste taak en hierin lê sy onmeetbare betekenis...Suid-Afrika se hoop en verantwoordelikheid.”

Bored by the formal text he studies the photos. He knows them so well that it feels like he was there with Ouma, gun in hand and the dead leopard on her lap. A young black boy stands shyly in the background, Outa Wanie from Poppenshuis and Isak wonders whether the old man misses the red dunes on the photo.

There’s a photo of Tannie Lettie standing behind his Oupa’s chair. Oupa has a blanket over his legs and Tannie Lettie’s hand rests on his shoulder. They both squint into the sun. The photos of Oom Sakkie in front of the pyramids, hands on the hips, jauntily puffing on a cigarette and Oom Sakkie in the desert, a Lawrence of Arabia.

The lorry’s hooter blares out.

Isak grabs the bag of pears, running out to the lorry with the bulldog nose.

“Toe-toe klim! Ek’t nie lus vir ‘n toustanery nie.”

Tortoise style they climb the hills, his father hunched over the wheel in thought, while he counts the white markers next to the road. He could never be like Outa Wanie. He could never leave this place. He would put up a fight, not like the old man who just climbed up onto the wagon and never looked back.

At the koöperasie gates is Oom Attie with a clipboard.

“Broederbondnes.” His father frowns, climbing out with the bag of pears.

Oom Attie’s bi-focals are tied with a piece of string around his ears and he wears grey Hush Puppies.

Inside his wendy-house are posters with fruit in various forms of decay. As they watch, he plunges a metal rod into the fruit, scribbling the pressures of each into a textbook.

“Te ryp.” He pushes his chair back, giving the verdict. “Goed vir sap maar nie vir pak, dis jammer jy’t nie al laas week gepluk nie.”

“Sestien pond is reg vir B.C.” His father’s nostrils flare.

Oom Attie smacks his lips, rocking back and forth. “Nie hierdie jaar broer, die regulasies het verander, niks meer as agtien pond is toegelaat nie.”

“Ek is nie in kennis gestel nie.”

Oom Attie feigns surprise. “Almal het skrywes ontvang, jy kan maar by die ander lede luister.”

“Ek het niks ontvang nie.”

Oom Attie yawns, tearing out the sheet before closing the book. “Dié poskantoor...” He hands over the paper.

Without a word his father takes it, deliberately shredding it, before storming out to where the forklift drivers pack the crates back onto the lorry, yellow cards stapled to the corners.

“Sap of droog, dis jou keuse!” Oom Attie shouts through the wendy-house window, throwing the pieces of paper into the wind.

As they pull away, Isak can see the hair on the top of Oom Attie’s head, combed and oiled forward over the balding spot.

The lorry shudders under the weight as they make their way out through the gate. The man on the forklift wears a cap pulled low over his eyes and his quick movements remind him of Raatjie. It is Koos.

*

His father’s hands on the wheel have pink spots from the sun. Isak

recounts the markers on the other side of the road.

They pass Oom Kalla's house. The shutters swing open and close. Running towards the lorry is Piet Plesier, Oom Kalla's replacement, eager to do the job but undermined by envy.

“Baas, hul soekie Baas by die groothuis.”

Isak stomach churns. They take the shortcut through the orchards, past the picking team who quieten at the sight of them and they walk so fast that his father doesn't even notice the men smoking in the shade.

Isak starts to run ahead.

At the front door is Raatjie in a faded pink overall. “Dissie Nooi,” she calls out to him as he runs to her.

His father elbows him out of the way. Both of them kick off their gumboots, sliding down the passage on their socks to the open door of the bedroom.

She lies curled up, a small heap of human clutching the pillow, moaning in a voice that is both unearthly and unbecoming to her.

“Vrou!” His father wrenches the pillow from her hands.

“Nee!” Her voice breaks into a wail as she claws at him for the pillow.

“Raatjie!”

His shout brings her to fall on her knees. The room smells of sickness. Isak turns his face away from her, the sight of her cracked heels sickening to him.

Raatjie and the new maids enter the room. Raatjie's face is blank while the other two are distraught with fear and guilt, begging the Nooi to speak to them, asking her forgiveness for the missing sugar, the burnt ironing, anything to stop the white woman's madness.

“Bly stil!” His father’s anger is icy and it flows through the room but his mother and the maids are not listening. “Pak die Nooi se goed.” His anger pulsates in the veins on his forehead. He sees Isak at the door. “Jy ook. Sê vir Danie om sy goed te pak, ek vat julle na Ouma toe.”

“Pappa,” Isak hesitates, “Ouma is... dood.”

“Jou Ma se Ma. Dink jy sy’t uit die hemel geval?”

His father and Raatjie try and lift her.

Isak runs to his room, slamming the door, shouting and hitting his fists against the wall. He falls onto the bed, punching as hard as he can. Ou Bruine sits on the sill, blinking before hiding its head.

The door opens ever so slightly.

“Sakkieseun?” Raatjie’s voice is gentle and makes him feel better inside.

She sits down next to him, stroking his back. “Die Nooi is siek, baie siek. Dissie kopsenuwees, kint, dis ‘n vrou se swak daai.”

“Ek wil nie gaan nie... Ek wil by jou en David bly.” Isak presses his face into the pillow so that she cannot see his tears.

“Kleinbaas moet pak, wantie Grootbaas wil ry.”

“Jy’s my Ma.” His voice is muffled and he feels like the earth is turning underneath him. He cannot breathe.

“Jy’t lankal nie meer ‘n kinneroppasser nodig nie.” Raatjie walks to the cupboard, her back turned to him. Sighing she pulls at the stuffed drawers and shirts without buttons. “Dié jonges weet niks van meidwees nie, almal wil wit wees.”

He thinks of himself lying under the table amongst the clean washing and Raatjie ironing with the smell of steamed sheets all around.

She reads his thoughts. “Kleinwees is verby.” She stops packing, glaring at him, her mood changed. “Raatjie was baie kleiner.” She indicates how small with her hands. “Toe staan Raatjie al op ‘n seepkissie in die einste kombuis van die Ounooi en wassie skottelgoed soos ‘n groot vrou.”

There is a shout from the garage.

She waves impatiently, thrusting the suitcase at him. “Toe-toe, weg is jy.”

“Gaan Raatjie nie saam nie?”

She feigns surprise. “Die Nooi se Ma ken ek van g’n kant af nie.”

In the garage is the shiny blue Ford. His mother is strapped in the passenger seat. Danie sits in the back, his suitcase on his lap with the stick doll, carved from eucalyptus wood.

The new maids weep as his father reverses. Raatjie walks up to the window. Isak sticks out his hand, she touches him lightly in passing. A last touch before they go down the hill.

Then they pass the idling lorry at the gate, full of pears but his father doesn’t even notice, taking a different road to the road they know, cutting away from the mountains to a broader valley.

“Ek’s honger.” Danie whispers and his lips are parted.

“Sit stil.” His father replies.

So they sit still, Isak’s eyes on the lollipop head of his mother, hoping the new maids will let the owl out of his cage.

All along the road, kestrels sit on telephone poles. Isak keeps count of them. A mouse scurries across the tar into the grass. At once a large yellow-billed bird swoops down. He sinks into the seat, keeping his eyes on his mother’s lolling head and the grey against her scalp.

The sun burns the plastic seats but they keep the windows shut for the dust.
His mother laughs, fiddling with the radio's knobs.

They drive and drive past burnt fields.

Eventually he sees it. A hill with two trees, the one scarred by lightning and the other bent from sea winds. His father has seen the trees too and the trees are the entrance to his new ouma's farm.

Down the hill they go to a sink-roofed house with a narrow stoep that runs all the way round. There's a wind pump and a reservoir too. No garden, no grass, just a yard filled with broken implements and rusting machinery.

His father parks the car at the broken gate. The sun boils in the basin of the hills.

A stout woman waits at the screen door. They all get out, except their mother.

The big woman doesn't move, her legs riddled with veins as thick as rope.

His father walks up to the stoep. "Dis Johan, Ma."

She walks out of the shade towards him. "Jou naam loop jou vooruit. Liewer jou van was Singer, dit sou meer van pas gewees het, Bruwer." She pats her apron, taking out a thin, dark cigarette.

Isak and Danie hold onto their cases.

"Ek's in 'n krisis, Ma." His father removes his dark glasses. "Sarie is siek..."

"En ek moet na hulle kyk." She lights the cigarette, cupping the flame, her eyes on the boys as she speaks to their father.

"As Ma kans sien." He impatiently waves them to step forward. "Lui en vreet 'n mens se kaste leeg, maar Ma kan hulle in die werk steek, dit kan hulle net goed doen."

She stares at them through the smoke, her eyes running over them, up and down, up and down.

Distracted, his father puts on his dark glasses.

She opens the screen door for them. The house stinks of stale smoke. The passage is dark and they follow her obediently. Quick as a flash something jumps though the air onto their new Ouma's shoulder. It's a monkey.

"Jaloers." She unwraps the monkey's arms, passing it onto Isak. "Hy sal moet gewoond raak."

The monkey bites Isak's hand. "Klein donner!" He drops the monkey and it cries, scrambling up her dress, complaining loudly in her ear.

Ignoring them both, their new ouma leads the way down the passage to a closed stoep, where plants and boxes compete for space.

She points to the torn boxes. "Iewers is daar beddegoed."

Obediently, they put down their cases. From here they can see the Ford going up the hill.

Isak opens a box stuffed with curtains but Danie sits sullenly on his case.

"Wat kyk jy vir my?"

Danie drops his eyes blushing as the monkey grabs the curtain from Isak and there's a tug of war.

"Pes!" Violently, Isak snatches it back as though the curtain is something he mustn't let go of.

And the monkey swings onto the light's chain, screeching at Isak.

She pulls out a broken legged divan. "Hier was lank laas kuiermense."

She lights another cigarette, exhaling through her nostrils, her eyes yellow with blue flecks. "Wie sal nou dit gedink het...Bruwertjies?"

Then she leaves them alone and he can hear her singing to the monkey, songs from the room down the passage so long ago.

The sun is high but they lie down on the divan, surrounded by cacti in coffee tins.

Isak thinks of wind through beef trees and that his father never said goodbye.

*

Their new ouma is rough as stubble lands and soft as the curd that she forces them to drink.

“Wanneer kom Pappa ons haal?”

Isak shakes his head, blowing a dandelion’s head and the seeds drift away.

“Pappa is kwaad vir Mamma.”

Way below in the yard, their new Ouma hangs from the windmill. On the hill the flock stands dead still.

Isak shifts into the shade of the trough.

“Pappa slaap nie meer by Mamma nie.”

“Mamma is siek en Pappa moet oes.”

“Pappa slaap nie meer by Mamma in die kamer nie.”

Isak takes a stick and drills a hole into the ground.

“Pappa slaap op die kantoor se bank.”

Isak snaps the stick. “Jy verbeel jou!”

“Hy slaap nie meer in sy bed nie.” Danie continues stubbornly, “sy bed ruik nie meer na hom nie.”

“Mr Know-it-all!”

In the yard their new ouma is hammering and swearing, her dress, hitched up to her jelly thighs. The monkey hangs around her neck. Isak likes the way she lights one cigarillo with the next.

“Ek wil huis toe.”

“Baby,” Isak sobs like a small child.

Danie dives on top of him but Isak rolls over, getting the better of his brother, bouncing triumphantly on his back.

“Hou op tjank, jy ontstel die ooie.” Isak presses Danie’s face into the ground.

The flock shift restlessly, this way and that.

“Hou op tjank, ek sê!”

The flock scatter up the hill, leaving a lone ewe at the trough. She paws the ground, turning on herself.

“Wat makeer haar?” Danie looks up at her bloated belly.

The ewe bleats again and again, below the hammering stops. Her dress held up over her knees, their new ouma hastily makes her way up the hill.

“Wat vang julle klonge met die skaap aan?” She bends double to catch her breath. “Ek het vir julle gesê om vannie trop weg te bly... Vannie jong ooie is dragtig.”

The ewe buckles, falling onto her flank, panting rapidly.

Awkwardly, their new ouma drops to her knees, placing her hand and ear on the animal’s belly.

Danie kneels next to the ewe, murmuring as he strokes her neck.

Cautiously, Isak touches the animal’s trembling body. He sees fear in her eyes. The same fear that he saw in his mother the day he came with his father from the hills.

His new ouma slips her hand inside the animal. “Amper tyd my dingetjie.”

Shuddering and moaning, the ewe's jaw drops and saliva dribbles from her mouth.

Fascinated, Isak watches how the narrow aperture between her hind legs, widens so wide that it looks like she will tear open. Instinctively, he closes his eyes as the lamb slithers out onto the stubble ground.

He opens his eyes. The lamb is alive, writhing in a mucous bag but there is a second, blueish and empty, hanging like a shopping bag between her legs.

“Wat se ding is dit, Ouma?” He pokes at it with the stick.

The exhausted ewe remains down, uninterested in the lamb.

“Hoe sterk is jy?”

“Ek help Pappa vrag laai, Ouma.”

“Ons moet haar 'n kans gee.” She looks down at the yard then at him. “Innie yard lê 'n hoop streepsakke.”

He runs as fast as the wind all the way down. At the back door the monkey sulks, plucking fleas. He kicks at the monkey, grabbing a hessian bag, never stopping until he holds it out to her.

She takes one side of the bag and he the other. Together they lift the ewe onto the bag. “Tel op.”

Between the two of them they carry the ewe down the hill. Danie takes the lamb. Isak's back wants to break from the weight but he thinks of his father's words on the stoep, biting his lip as he feels the bag slip through his fingers.

Shuffle-shuffle they make their way to the back door.

“Draai hom toe,” she instructs Danie. “Daar's handdoeke in Ouma se kas.”

The ewe lies in a daze of pain, while the monkey runs circles around the bag.

The kitchen sweats from the Aga. She unlocks a cupboard, taking out a bottle of wine, then she scratches in a drawer for a funnel, while he fills the bucket.

“Nou moet jy kophou, kind.”

Danie comes down the passage with the lamb in a towel. They follow her outside.

“Vat die tregter.” She forces open the clenched teeth of the ewe, pressing the funnel into its mouth. “Hou dit regop,” She places his hand on the funnel while she unscrews the wine bottle’s lid.

The wine is yellow from age. It slops over his hands before disappearing down the ewe’s throat. They watch how the shivering subsides.

“Bring agtertoe.” She washes her hands in the warm water then she lifts the uterus, piece by piece, back into the ewe’s body. With every shove of her hand, the ewe groans. Both her eyes and the ewe’s eyes are closed.

“Amper verby.” Her whole arm is inside the animal. “Tregter.” She slips out her muck-covered arm to Isak for the funnel, positioning it firmly between the animal’s rump. “Gooi.”

He empties the bucket of water into the funnel and it pours into the hidden uterus.

“Dit help met die baarmoeder se afsak,” she explains to him. “Sy sal self vannie water ontslae raak.”

“Hoekom slag Ouma haar nie?” he asks.

Her eyes pause on his face. She holds out her hand to him to pull her up.

“Lewendige dier is meer werd as ‘n dooie.”

Together they drag the bag and the ewe into the shade of the stoep. The lamb is brought to the kitchen table where she feeds it with warmed milk in a dropper. The Aga's heat is unbearable and Danie's shirt is smeared with afterbirth.

She tips the bottle to her lips, downing the last of the wine.

His new ouma has eyes with triangles of blue, just like theirs.

*

The moon is out. He opens the screen door onto the stoep, where she feeds the lamb. Her toenails are ridged and her heels have deep gorges in them.

"Daar's tee," she says to him without looking up.

Isak doesn't move, watching the lamb's tongue.

"Beskuit ook."

Danie yawns behind him, sucking his thumb.

It is a sultry night and her breasts hang like the ewe's teats.

"Het Ouma 'n naam?" Danie fishes his rusk out of the tea.

She presses the lamb's tongue down with every drop. "Wat is jou Ma se naam?"

"Sarie," Isak chips in.

"Dan ken julle ook myne. Sara, Johanna, Regina." She passes the lamb onto Danie. "Ek was jou Oupa se queen en jou ma, sy prinsessie."

Isak can only see the face of his other Oupa. "Wanneer is Oupa dood, Ouma?"

"Die jaar wat jou Ma skool toe is."

The boys each take an arm and pull her up.

“Jou Oupa was ‘n softie, sag soos ‘n marshmallow.” She pats her nightgown, finding a cigarillo.

“Het Ouma foto’s van Oupa?”

“Iewers is daar kiekies innie huis...” She waves the cigarillo. “In een vannie bokse.”

Danie drops the lamb on Isak’s lap and makes a dash for the room where they sleep. It is the first time he holds the lamb. Already it is stronger, noisier, more demanding than during the afternoon, wanting to get off and walk.

Danie brings the hatbox from the stoep.

She opens the catch, tossing the photos onto the table, black and white photos with scalloped edges.

There are photos of their mother wearing white gloves and bobby socks in the same yard but there are flowers and grass in the photos.

She picks one up, holding it to the light. “Kon ‘n beauty queen gewees het met haar pikswart hare.”

“Mamma se hare is blond, Ouma,” Danie corrects her.

“Was Mamma en Pappa se troue mooi?” Isak finds one with his parents on their wedding day.

On the photo his mother is soft, her black hair piled up on her head and a huge bunch of roses in her hands. Roses like on Ouma’s coffin.

“Waar was Ouma?” Isak asks again.

She blows the smoke in a steady stream through her nostrils.

She laughs, stubbing the cigarillo in the basin. “Die kiekie het lank na die troue aangekom.”

“Dis die poskantoor se skuld, Ouma.” Isak explains.

“Hulle was haastig.”

“Wat was die haas, Ouma?”

She gathers the photos in her arms, piling them back in the box. “Almal is moeg, lammetjie ook.”

They lie on the narrow divan. Danie sleeps immediately but not Isak. Jaloers sleeps on top of the pelmet. Isak wonders about Ou Bruine. From the kitchen the lamb cries for its mother.

Clutched in Danie’s hand is the wooden doll, a piece of paper in the other. Isak pulls it out. It is a photo of his smiling mother, swinging in the long gone garden, her hair blowing in the wind.

*

He wakes from the voice of a man in the yard. His father inspects the drunken ewe that has survived the night, catching them all in bed, even their new ouma.

“Môre.” He tips his hat, wearing his city clothes with the crocodile shoes.

“Môre, Pa.” Isak stays at the screen door.

Danie runs eagerly down the steps.

His father pats the small boy’s head. “Gaan dit goed met julle twee ramme?”

Isak walks over to the man and the ewe. They grip hard and his hand grips as hard as the man’s.

“Lyk vir my jy’t lengte gekry?”

“Gaan ons huis toe, Pappa?” Danie picks up the lamb, balancing it on its feet.

“Ek het net vir Sakkie kom haal. Mamma is nog in die hospitaal.”

Ouma’s nightie sticks out from under her overall. “Môre, Bruwer.”

“Môre, Ma.” He tiptoes over the slush to the stoep. “Die klonge word bederf... Wat se tyd van die dag is dit om in pajamas rond te loop?”

“Die kinnere het laat gaan slaap.” She opens the door for him. “Koffie?”

“’n Vinnige een.” He takes out his hanky, wiping the mud off his shoes. “Ek moet vandag nog reëlings tref vir Sakkie se koshuis toe gaan.”

“Ek will ook saam.” Danie pouts.

“Ek kom jou later haal, wanneer Mamma terug is.”

Isak looks at his Ouma but she keeps her eyes on the kettle.

“Kind, gaan pak jou goed.”

In the bathroom he grimaces into the mirror, rubbing his smooth chin.

“Dis nie fêr nie,” Danie complains behind him.

Isak methodically brushes each tooth, watching his face that has something of the old man with the drooping shoulders. He wants to stay.

In the kitchen they are talking about his mother. He knows this because they speak in whispers and he catches her name. From underneath the divan he removes his suitcase, stuffing in his clothes and the photo of his mother on the swing.

Ouma and Danie are at the gate. His father has opened the boot and sits behind the wheel, listening to the radio.

Slowly he walks, one step at a time to the gate.

She reaches out for him, pulling him closer against her chest, then she pushes him away, patting her pockets. “Skryf vir Ouma.” She finds the cigarillo, lighting up.

“Ek sal, Ouma.”

“Ouma sal oor die ooi laat weet.”

He turns to Danie and nods.

Danie picks up the lamb.

He closes the boot and climbs in next to his father. They drive up the hill and he looks back as long as he can see the yard and the figures at the gate. Then they drive in silence, past the kestrels on poles, past fields and orchards, past farms with white, pillared entrances.

In the first town the school has a driveway lined with oaks. There are no boys because it is holidays and the workers sweep the grounds for acorns on the gravel.

His father appears on the steps with a woman gesticulating directions to him. She shakes his hand, disappearing behind the double doors.

The next town is like the first. Streets lined with trees and gabled buildings.

“Klim uit, miskien help dit.” His father scrutinizes him.

The foyer is lined with portraits of Springbucks and politicians.

It is bit like Dominee’s church with its high white walls and patterned ceiling.

The principal emerges from a veneered office, his hair combed perfectly into an oiled fringe over his forehead, his thick neck breaking out of the tight collar.

Confidently, he pumps his father’s hand. “Mnr Bruwer, ons het ‘n waglys van drie jaar.” The bulldog man takes them for a tour of the portraits. “Die enigste manier wat u seun ‘n kans het is as u ‘n oudleerling van die skool was en of hy kan goed rugby speel. Ons is altyd op soek na nuwe talent. U kan self sien ons kweek Bokke hier.”

“Ek het self op my dag vir die provinsie uitgedraf.” His father speaks eagerly. “Die klong het nog nie kans gehad op goeie afrigting nie, gee hom ‘n kans om homself te bewys.”

The principal sums up Isak’s length and leanness. “Goed, ons maak plek vir hom, ons soek hoeka ‘n flank vir die onder-sestien span.”

The secretary passes brochures to them through a pigeonhole, pamphlets concerning dress code and rules. The principal is a busy man so they greet him at the door.

The top one reads, 'Beginsels van Christelik-Nasionale onderwys.'

Around the corner from the school is the shop that stocks the uniforms. At the counter, the attendant wears rubber clamps to keep his sleeves out of the way.

His father gives the man the list. "Die klong kan aanpas terwyl ek weg is."

The man has a built-up shoe. Through the shop window Isak sees the Ford pass by.

The small man climbs onto a stool to measure him. "Speel jy voetbal?"

"Nie eintlik nie, Oom."

"Jy's niks daarbo sonder voetbal nie." The little man rolls his eyes. "Hoe gouer jy begin speel, hoe beter vir jou."

"Ek sal onthou, Oom."

Parcels are made up for him but the Ford has not come back. He greets the little man. At the door of the shop is a doll of a little girl with a moneybox and a leg in irons just like the shop attendant's but he has no money for the doll.

The street is never still, constant traffic like the droning of bees on the move. In the distant he sees bits of mountain like puzzle pieces, broken by the buildings.

The day passes on. Eventually, the Ford comes down the street. Without indicating, it swerves to a stop and there is hooting and braking.

His father climbs out, bowing to the irate drivers who shout at him. "Dit was gou." He views the parcels stacked on the pavement. "Kon die dwerg jou help?"

He nods. "Hoe gaan dit met Mamma, Pa?"

"Goed, goed."

They drive out of town. Vineyards are replaced with orchards and he dozes off, hungry and tired. The gravel road wakes him and he unwinds the window to feel the hot air. They turn in at the gate, driving up the hill to the house and he can smell the camphor as the leaves brush the sides of the Ford.

The stoep is unswept and the kitchen sink is piled with dishes. On the back stoep his room is locked. The owl's cage hangs from the Del Toidia and the owl sits behind the closed door.

Isak opens the door, whistling gently. Suspiciously, the owl hisses at him.

“Bruine, dis ek.”

The owl hops forward.

“Dis ek.” Isak holds out his arm and the owl grips his sleeve. “Jy moet weg.” He nudges the bird.

“Jy moet gaan.” Isak loosens the one claw and he feels something loosening inside of him. The bird pecks lightly. “Gaan nou.”

The owl spreads its wings, lifting off, circling the garden and Isak.

“Shoo, shoo, weg is jy.” Isak claps his hands loudly.

The beautiful bird glides above the cypress trees towards the mountain. Its wings catch the last light of day, dissolving into the brown and purples of the rock face.

**

Is there something like cold love, a dead love that carries no life? This is his mother's legacy to him, to love from a distance, a love that asks nothing.

Bells ring until nurses relent to the old men's wishes of flickering light and sound that triggers nausea and remembrances in Isak.

The screen shows men running after a ball and the old men cheer, heartedly.

Instead, he studies the still heads of the tulips, and the empty field across the car park.

Other bells ring throughout the building.

Bells used to regulate and control him, the depth of their sound, speaking of their purpose. Bells triggered great noise or silence, peace or panic. Bells called one to church, to study, to eat, to jump, bearers of good tidings and bearers of bad news.

But now it has come to this. The bell above his cot is his saving grace.

Weakly, he spits out pieces of blood and grit, listening to the bells down the passage.

School bells were the worst.

She lay there in her hospital bed and she let him go. She never fought for him, or loved him enough to say no, so wrapped up was she in her own pain. It made him harden to her a little more; harden to a thing called love.

*

Boys are everywhere. Shoving and pushing, snatching and grabbing his space, in bedrooms and bathrooms, passages and dining halls, every place you flee to.

He stands, pressed against the wall as the bigger boys jostle in front of the board and he is bored and angry. His name is listed under the C team, without his consent. He doesn't want to play or to be here. He wants to go home, back to the owl and the veldt behind the house.

"Isak Bruwer." The boys spit out his name and they titter like finches in the reeds.

"Boerejood," someone says in the group and he struggles to see the speaker as the boys disperse, anticipating the bell.

Bare feet he walks to the practice fields where hundreds of boys are kitted out in togs, passing the ball swiftly or kicking at the posts. He sits down on the pavilion, watching their antics, his own togs untouched.

The coach is an insipid looking man with premature balding. The man is also his hostel father who cannot stop smiling. Like a clown, he blows on the whistle and the boys respond, jogging into line, jumping up and down on the spot.

"Bruwer, die fluitjie is ook vir jou."

Thick-lipped he joins the row.

"Ons sit jou op flank," the smiling clown continues.

All eyes are on his feet. The boys nudge and comment from behind as they take position on the field. The whistle calls for a scrum. Grudgingly he hooks in with the boy next to him and they dig their heels in and he feels them push, the B team with all their force directed at him. So he pushes back and anger wells up in the pit of his stomach, then into his head and every muscle of his body and this anger gives him new strength to push even harder until he feels the other boys weaken, the other flank

of B team. It gives him a thrill, so he drops down lower and the other begins to bend, to relent, to fall and he shoves his right knee into the other boy's gut and the scrum collapses with B team's flank in agony, rolling on the grass and the other boys stand back, with a new look in their eyes.

He wants to speak, so they wait. He is not one for words so they walk away from him.

Alone and miserable he crawls under the pavilion, waiting for the dark, imagining horses parading around and around the track and the cracking whip over their heads. From here he can see mountain and stars coming out. Comforted, he takes the hairpin from his pocket, bending it back and forth until it snaps. The pieces lie in his hand. Two thin pieces of nothing. Scratching in the dirt he makes a hole, burying the broken pin before he crawls out onto the field. The street lamps burn and the street is quiet. Unobtrusively, he climbs up the side of the building into the dormitory.

All the lights are off. His mattress and bedding have been stripped from his cot. Moths circle the street lamp opposite the window. There is a hissing in the room. He sits down, head in his hands.

“Gee my goed terug anderste donner ek die hele lot van julle.” He speaks softly.

The hissing stops.

“Gee my goed.” He stands up and moves over to the first cot, snatching the foot under the bedding, twisting it backwards.

Sheets and pillows fly through the air. The hissing starts up again but with less enthusiasm as he lies down, hungry and alone.

His name is listed the next day under the B team. This time there is less shoving in front of the board.

The game is played on the following Saturday and the pavilion is packed. His new togs pinch his toes as he drops down to scrum. The sweat and farting trigger his anger and his opponent bends like cooked spaghetti. On his shirt and face are stud marks from Isak's boots. There is a roar from the pavilion and the boys are cheering, cheering for him.

They carry him off the field and his name is listed under the A team and the boys give way to him as he walks to the board. The boy whose position he takes stands next to him. There is a gasp from all the boys as the boy has played this position since primary school and his father's name is on the tablets in the school foyer.

Boys slap his back, shake his hand but he couldn't care less, not for the position or for the boy, his thoughts are of an owl and an open valley.

*

"Moet ek haar weer probeer?" Danie holds the phone.

Isak shakes his head, struggling to talk into the mask. "Mamma beteken niks nie."

Danie bends down and Isak can smell toothpaste.

He wanted to ask her what he had done to deserve being sent away but now it is too late. Her mind has gone, and it doesn't matter any more, he has overcome her.

"Ek praat van Aimee." Danie speaks as though to a child.

The nurse replaces the drip, her eyes on the soccer match. She taps the side of her head, rolling her eyes in explanation to Danie.

“Idioot.” Isak thinks of the two men helping the other on a motorbike. He has become that man.

“Aimee,” Danie tries again, “jou vrou, Isak. Ek praat van jou vrou, nie van Mamma nie.”

He knows. It is Aimee that has remade him in her image or is it in the image of his original being?

But it is the other name he wants to know now before he forgets it again. “Die man se naam...?” Isak frowns. “Die een in die koshuis. Wat was sy naam?”

“Wie heb je het over?” The nurse asks.

“Vossie. Vossie, nou onthou ek.” His mind hasn’t gone completely to the dogs. He sees Vossie clearly. He hasn’t thought of Vossie for years.

Knocking on the door, then opening it, he sees the balding man on the couch and the woman with the soft body. Two little girls bounce up and down on his stomach, their hair spraying over their faces and the woman with her washed face, lying curved in his arm. That was a shock. Before he could leave, they sensed his discomfort, getting off the couch, giggling like children and she came to the door where he stood. He felt very old. She touched his arm, leading him into the room and his arm burnt under her touch, she, a woman he did not know, had touched him.

The man bathed the children. He watched, sitting stiffly on the edge of the bath. The children were so free, splashing water over the balding man, messing water without fear on the floor. He could not forget that. And so it became an obsession with him to watch. He thought of any excuse to come down and knock. And the children would later come to be swung by him, or ride on his back or sit on his shoulders, to be thrown in the air. It made him feel good. The same way he felt when

they, the man and woman kissed in the kitchen as she passed to the stove or his hand on her lower back when she stood at the sink.

It was the first time he saw touching for the pleasure of touching.

*

The Ford is parked in the street below his window. He leans out and all he can see are her hands on the wheel and smoke drifting out of the window. Other boys run past him, glad to be going home but he drags his feet down the stairs to the door.

She gets out of the car and he has not seen her in months and her hair is the colour of raw silk, the way his father likes a woman.

“Mamma.”

She turns her cheek but their faces do not touch, for her cheek is rouged and her lips wet with red. She wears dark glasses and she dabs her mascara behind the black lenses.

“Gaan dit goed met jou?”

“Ek is bly Mamma is gesond.”

“Pappa het die Ford gegee. Hy sê, Johan Bruwer se vrou kan nooit in ‘n Datsun ry nie.”

“Is Mamma orraait om te ry?”

“Jy kan buite die dorp die wiel vat.”

She drives shakily.

“Is Danie okay, Mamma?”

“Hy’t weer begin met bed natmaak...Pappa sê dis om aandag te trek oor ek so lank weg was.”

Cars queue up behind the crawling Ford until they reach the fork in the road just outside the town, where she pulls off, adjusting her hair in the mirror.

“Ek hoor jy speel voetbal vir die eerste span. Pappa vertel almal jy’s die volgende Springbokkaptein.”

He shrugs his shoulders, watching the impatient drivers pass.

“Dis jammer Oupa kan nie vir jou sien speel nie.”

He gets out and walks around the car to the driver’s side, wondering which Oupa she is speaking of.

All the way he wants to ask of his new Ouma and the photos in the hatbox and the girl on the swing but she falls asleep next to him, her head slipping onto his shoulder and her hair on his arm disturbs him greatly.

From far he recognises it. He nudges her. “Mamma, ek wil uitklim.”

She moans, waking and her lips part. When she smiles at him it is not a smile for a boy.

“Mamma.”

She nods and the dullness returns to her face.

“Ons is by die hek, Mamma. Pappa wil nie hê ek moet die Ford bestuur nie. Mamma, moet die laaste stuk self ry.”

He waits for the Ford to go past, then he walks to the bridge where the owl clutches onto the railings, its brown head cocked and its yellow eyes on his hand. Isak whistles through his teeth. The owl hops closer. For a second time he whistles but it rises up, momentarily, dragging its wings, then flying over him towards the Eucalyptus grove.

It hoots in the grove. He walks under the gums, tearing off bits of bark from their trunks, looking for the big bird amongst the browning leaves but the bird shuns

his calls. Standing in the grove he smells the earth and trees and the dust on the wind. The owl calls from the river, then from the bridge, then from the hills.

Harvest time is over. Solitary pears hang here and there in the orchard that leads to the house. Isak finds one, ripe and yellow and sweet. The air is thick with the rotting of fruit in the grass.

He walks around to the back of the house, peering through the window. Danie is kneeling on the mat next to the bed and the Jesus picture still hangs on the wall.

He taps the glass.

“Boetie.” Danie runs to the window, pushing it open and throwing himself onto Isak, hugging him long and hard. There are tears in his eyes. Isak’s throat itches, so he pushes the smaller boy from him.

“Boetie, ek wil by Boetie kom bly.” Danie’s eyes are watery.

“Kan nie. Ek’s innie hoërskool en jy’s nog te klein vir koshuis.”

“Ek’s ook in die koshuis, innie week.” His face is screwed up and there is a flutter of some sorts in his one eye. “Mamma vat my Maandae en haal my Vrydae want sy moet petrol spaar.”

“Dan is jy mos fine.”

“Ek wil by Boetie wees, die groot seuns is lelik. Claasen...”

“Mamma, sal dit nie oorleef nie.”

“Asseblief.”

But he shrugs off the little boy, his heart saddened by the owl.

*

Danie's face is close to his, so close he can see the broken veins in the whites of his eyes.

“Hoekom staar jy so vir my?”

“Jou oog knip nie meer nie.” Isak speaks into the mask.

Danie lifts it and Isak repeats his words.

“Ek is nie meer ‘n kind nie.” Danie withdraws from him, shifting his gaze elsewhere. “The doctor is speaking of a fortnight before you can go home.”

Isak shakes his head vigorously.

“Jy kan nie ‘n vrug ryp druk nie, so jy sal net moet rustig raak en wag totdat jy reg is.” He straightens the sheet, rearranging Isak's limp arm, “Ek doen langsaan besoek, probeer slaap.”

Acid rain beats on the windowpanes. The sheep have collected in a miserable bundle. On the highway, cars switch on their lights and the artificial heat in the ward makes him long for crisp cold air.

In two weeks the last pears will be ready for packing. In two weeks he needs to find a sponsor for them all, a saviour from his hospital bed.

It cannot be done.

Seasons run to their own rhythm and one runs alongside. To run one's own course comes at a price, to run another's comes at a price too, it is one of the few meaningful lessons learnt at school.

In the beginning he followed like a sheep but to follow carries its own price.

Him, no different to the lambs caught in clay.

*

The wooden cross on the wall is stained brown. Dominee is cloaked in the black and the shutters are closed for the heat.

“Isak, wanneer het jy die Here as jou saligmaker aangeneem?”

“Ek kan nie sê nie, Dominee.” Jesus has been on the wall as long as he can remember.

“Jy besef ek sal jou nie in die kerk kan voorstel totdat jy met sekerheid vir my kan sê dat jy die Here op daardie dag en datum as jou Verlosser aangeneem het nie.”

The clock on the wall has Latin numerals.

“Ek is jammer, Dominee maar ek kan dit nie sê nie.”

“Dan wag ons totdat jy kan onthou.”

He is left alone. For hours in the office, waiting for Godly inspiration and the hands of the clock move from one numeral to the next and he counts the knots in the wood of the cross.

The dominee returns, the same dominee that prays in gratitude for the congregation’s white skins. “Jy is kaptein van die eerste span,” he speaks in his Sunday sermon voice, “‘n voorbeeld vir seuns op alle terreine.”

Isak thinks of the light on the lawn. “Die aand van die dertiende September 1969, Dominee.”

The date is written down. Dominee nods approvingly at the little resistance he presents. He is not the worst case that the dominee has had to deal with. There are those few who refuse to recall anything.

*

In thought he strolls to the café, past the crippled doll at the door of the clothes shop, waving at the man with the short leg through the display window. He phones to the farm from the tickey box.

“Pa, dis Sakkie.”

“Wat maak die weer daar?”

Isak turns to look down the road. “Die akkerbome stoot, Pa.”

“Dis te vroeg,” his father’s voice turns sour, “die volgende gemors is op pad.”

He says nothing in reply.

“Jou brief het gekom, jy’s na Kimberley toe geroep.”

“Wat staan op die brief, Pa?”

His father scans the letter. “Jy moet die sesde Januarie klim... in die middel van oestyd.”

He hears the exasperation in his father’s laboured breath.

“Jy moet maar die ding vat en klaarkry... Ek is nou gatvol verby met die volk en hulle nonsens en Oom At-hulle by die koöperasie. My lus vir boer is so te sê op.”

“Ek maak einde November klaar, Pa.”

“Wat help dit? Net soos jy begin kop kry is jy weer weg... donnerse Natte, ek wonder wat maak hul seuns?”

There’s a hammering on the booth.

They both hear the click of a receiver being put down.

“Oom Frans kan net nie ‘n oproep laat verbygaan nie.” His father chuckles triumphantly on the other side.

“Pa, die ander seuns wil bel, stuur groete by die huis, ook vir Raatjie.”

“Die oumeid gaan dit nie maak nie soos sy nou te kere gaan.”

“Ons praat weer, Pa.”

Boys are congregating on the pavement. Most have received calls from home. Bloem, Oudtshoorn, Simonstown are mentioned and there is an excitement and bravado amongst them.

It is only the German boy from South-West with a German passport that has received nothing. He watches them with lazy amusement.

“Jy’s sekerlik spyt.” Isak sympathises.

“Just the opposite my dear friend, I can’t tell you how sorry I feel for all of you, thank God I’m out of the country by December.”

Isak hides his irritation. Good riddance, go back to Germany, he thinks as he enters the outfitter’s shop.

The small man dresses a mannequin doll in the window, bare and genderless but for the breasts without nipples. He dresses her in a school shirt, pulling the buttons across her chest. The doll wears a wig and her legs are smooth.

“Waarheen is jy oppad?” The small man pulls a skirt over her hips.

“Kimberley, Oom.”

“Destyds wou ek aansluit maar die Weermag wou nie vir my gehad het nie.”

“Wanneer is dit, Oom?”

“Nege-en-dertig, maar die polio het my ongeskik gemaak.” He pins the skirt of the doll tighter over her buttocks. “Vandag is ek nie spyt nie.”

“Het Oom nie uit gevoel nie?”

“Daai tyd ja, maar watter verskil maak dit nou?” He points to the doll. “Skuif haar vorentoe seun, nader aan die glas.”

Isak picks up the mannequin and she is light and hard, just a plastic doll.

“Party van ons manne is buite gebreklik en ander weer binne.” The short man admires the doll. “Ek vat liever wat ek gekry het.”

“Sien vir Oom.” Isak feels uncomfortable talking about such things.

“Kyk mooi na jouself, seun.”

“Sal so maak, Oom.”

They shake hands.

“Ek hou die koerante dop.”

Isak smiles graciously

Back at the hostel, Rabinowitz is waiting in his room. Surprised, he sees the letter in his hand with the emblem on the front.

“So jy’t ook een gekry?” For a moment he thought Jews would be exempt.

The other boy unfolds the letter.

“Ek het besluit ek maak dit klaar dan kan ek verder studeer.” Isak continues.

Rabinowitz holds the letter as though it is a snake. “Why are you doing this, you didn’t vote them into power?”

Isak sits down, the euphoria at the café diminishing under the other boy’s criticism.

“We can stand against this stupidity.”

“My oupa en sy broers, my pa en my oom het almal in die oorlog geveg. Kan jy dink aan die gemors as die Geallieerdes die tweede oorlog sou verloor het? Dan was julle Jode geskiedenis...History.” Isak looks out of the window.

“Sam Njoma is not Hitler.” Rabinowitz cuts back. “What about Botha as a candidate for evil?” Rabinowitz jumps up, pacing the room. “The war is stirring up bad things.”

“Ons verdedig almal, wit swart en bruin teen hulle.”

Rabinowitz stops pacing, glaring angrily through his spectacles.

“Die kommuniste wil die Weste oorheers.”

Rabinowitz rolls his eyes. "Somehow when it suited the West, Stalin wasn't too evil to do business with."

Isak feels confused.

"The so-called enemy is often closer to home than what you think."

"Wat gaan jy maak?"

Rabinowitz folds the paper, then tears it in two, "I'm afraid I will have to object to my call up." He drops the paper in the bin. "I was hoping that you, more than the others would see reason but I guess I'm on my own in this."

Awkwardly, Isak gets up and shakes Rabinowitz's hand. There is no cleverer boy in the school, possibly in the country. He hopes Rabinowitz will change his mind. He opens the windows and watches the other boy walk up the hill to his parent's home.

To sit in jail for a year. Not to be able to move, to run and feel the sun on your skin, not to play rugby, that would be more than what he could deal with.

He fishes out the torn paper, joining the two. Kimberly, it reads. They would both be going to Kimberly but not any more.

*

The queue at the co-op's gates stretches down the road. It is oppressively hot. Farmers and their sons chat in the shade of the stacked crates.

"Almal se hero." Oom Frans swaggers over, slapping Isak on the back.

"Welgedaan met Cravenweck."

"Dankie Oom, ek is net bly ek is klaar met skool."

His name is engraved on the tablets but he will not miss the school, only the man and his wife and the two little girls.

“Hoe lyk die oes van jou Pa?”

“Laat ryp het van die perskes gevang maar anderste goed, Oom... Ons was gelukkig.”

Oom Frans peers through the slats of the crates, “Nie heeltemal so gelukkig nie, ’n bietjie misvormheid en aan die klein kant sou ek sê.”

He keeps quiet.

“So, wat is ons volgende Springbok se planne?”

“Ek gaan eers my diensplig afhandel, Oom.”

“Mooi so.” Oom Frans moves away towards the older men, smoking on the curb.

“En Willa, Oom, wat maak hy?”

“O die arme seun het asma, al van kleintyd af.” Oom Frans stops, tapping his chest. “Sal ongelukkig nie kan Weermag toe nie. Hy werk al op een van Oom se Karooplase.”

The queue moves forward and all the farmers climb in and shift their lorries towards the gate.

At the gate is Oom At, manning the hut. Pensie lifts his cap to the forklift driver. There is familiarity in his profile.

Isak hands over the bag of samples. “Oom, wie’s die ou op die TCM?”

Oom At checks the driver through the tiny window, dropping his voice.

“Koos, Koos Baadjies, sy ma werk mos by julle.” He closes the door. “Moeilike Hotnot daai, ons probeer hom uitwerk maar dit lol. Uitstekend in sy werk, diploma en al in die Kaap gekry maar sy houding...” Oom At raises his eyebrows.

The fruit samples have problems. Isak tries to understand the method of analysis but it remains a mystery to him. The pack-out will be lower than his father has predicted. The percentage of wind-marks is higher while the sugars are lower. He does not look forward to handing over the results.

Back at the lorry, Koos drives like a maniac on the forklift, yet his control over the machine is superb. Pensie hangs out of the window talking to Koos who displays total disinterest in him. They sit in the rocking cab until all the crates are removed. Briefly Koos lifts his head and Isak feels his eyes on him, dark and angry.

With a load full of empty crates they head out of town.

“Kom Koos nog plaas toe?”

“Nee, Kleinbaas.”

“Waar bly hy?”

“Weetie, Kleinbaas.”

“Is jy dors?”

“Ja dankie, Kleinbaas.”

Other side of the railway line is the general store with a pool table for the lorry drivers as they wait for their fish and chips. Isak leaves the engine idling, while he runs into the store. She sits behind the counter on a stool, her face bloated and blotched.

“Magdaleen?”

With careless eyes she looks up from the celebrity pages of the weekly.

“Isak?” Nervously, Magdaleen runs her hands over her hair, bleached to lifelessness.

“Ek het jou nie herken nie, jy’t so, verander.”

“Waar bly jy nou?” he asks politely, disappointed that there is nothing of the fantasy before him and she sees it in his eyes, the disappointment.

“Ek en Willa is getroud, hy’s voorman op sy pa se plaas, Remhoogte.” She struggles to get off the chair and her waist is broad and the skin pinched around her mouth. “Ek bly innie dorp deur die week en gaan huis toe oor naweke.” Openly she admires him. “Mamma sê jy’s die volgende Springbokkaptein.”

“Nee wat.” He keeps his hands in his pockets. “Dit vat meer as Cravenweek om dit te wees.”

“Ek het nooit gedink jy sal my onthou nie.”

She smiles but there is nothing of the stirrings of old. Were her teeth always so stained?

“Kan ek twee cokes kry en ‘n pakkie salt en vinegar, ek’s nogal haastig.”

She passes the ice-cold bottles to him and the half-moons on her nails are the same as always.

“Dankie.” He places the rand note on the counter. “Hou die kleingeld.”

Clumsily, she steps forward and there are dark hairs covering her calves. He ducks for the door.

“Ek hoor jy gaan Kimberley toe, skiet die Kaffers vrek!” She shouts out at him.

They pass dams on either side of the road. Waters so calm that the mountain lies reflected, back to front in the blue as he and Pensie drink their cokes. He feels embarrassed. Embarrassed that he could ever have thought of giving her flowers as he studies the clay walls that keep the waters back. In these walls, moles dig unseen tunnels. One never knows when the walls will break.

*

The strike at the co-op begins a fortnight before Christmas, in front of the police office with placards and nervously shouted slogans. The handful of strikers seem unaware that thousands of livelihoods depend on fruit.

Koos heads up the strike. His name is on everyone's lips. The most hated man in the white valley, the most respected on the other side of town. The Sappe and the Natte hold meetings together to manage the crisis. The last time they stood together was with the earthquake.

Whites in the valley take the place of the workers. Teachers and doctors, housewives and retired dominees offer their services free of charge to save the community.

Isak gets nightshift and the TCM of Koos. It is in immaculate condition. During the day the strikers picket along the fence, throwing stones at the oncoming lorries and the cars carrying white women to pack but at night the strikers go home, tired and hungry to their families. There is dissent amongst the strikers, violence in the township and the whites hope that the workers will break, but they don't.

One man never goes home. He keeps an eye on Isak and the forklift during the night but Isak is too tired to notice, picking fruit all day and stacking crates in cold-rooms all night.

He works alone. The shift gets long and the diesel vapours intensify to toxic levels. He fumbles with the controls, shaking his head, then yawning as he struggles to stack, crate upon crate. Great sleepiness enfolds him. His eyes close as the forklift drifts over the cold room floor, breathing in the deadly gasses, for there is no one to check on him. Slower and slower his heart beats and the colour of his lips drain away, turning blue, then purple as if bruised. He slumps over the controls.

Someone stands in the shadows. The engine falters and the night becomes quiet. The man in the dark hesitates, then vaults over the fence, pulling Isak off the machine, dragging him into the fresh air. He disappears into the darkness and all the while Isak is aware of the man but he is like one in a coma, unable to speak. What he can recall later is his dark eyes and they are eyes he has looked in before.

The strike becomes ugly. The entrance to the co-op is barricaded. No one can get in or out. The directors have to relent to the demands of the strikers as a number of them need to leave for their holidays at the sea and so the newly established union has victory. There are shop floor stewards like on the mines and Koos is the leader and the police go for training afterwards to be prepared, just in case it should ever happen again. The strike is resolved the day before Christmas, so that everyone in the valley can go shopping.

*

The bell rings above his cot.

“Jy’t die knoppie gedruk, is daar fout?” Danie checks the monitor but the green line runs its normal ups and downs.

“Daar kom groot kak.”

“Ekskuus?” His brother lifts the side of the mask. “Watse moeilikheid?”

Isak shakes his head, confused, not sure whether the mess has already happened or is about to.

**

“Ek’s op pad Kimberley toe.” He sits down on the step next to her. Her feet are dirty, yet delicate and finely shaped. There are no cracks in her heels.

“Waar’s jy oppad, kint?”

“Kimberley. Ek moet ‘n jaar diensplig doen.”

“Sakkie is ‘n goeie seun, Raatjie het Sakkie mooi grootgemaak.” She pats his hand approvingly. “Party dae wonner Raatjie oor Koos en Pettie. Pettie wil net dans en diskomme toe en Koos?” She throws her hands up in the air. “Moeilikheid by die witmense maak.” She looks at him and there are white veils over her eyes, “maar jy kint, jy het goed uitgedraai.”

Unstaked roses bloom here in her garden, tall as trees they twist and grow over the stoep. He picks one, pulling off the dark petals.

“Gaan die Grootbaas vi’ Raatjie se kint vat?”

“Nee, ek ry trein, tot binne in die Groot Gat.”

She laughs, slapping him on the back, “Raatjie gee iets virrie lang pad.” She carries a loaf of bread, wrapped in newspaper. “Virrie groot honger by die Groot Gat.” She laughs again, “dit sal lank hou dié brood, dis ingesmeer.”

“Dankie, ek eet dit alleen op.”

“Eet kon jy altyd, kint.”

“Kan nog,” he corrects her. “Ek moet aanskuif en die ander gaan groet.”

He gets up to leave, bending down to shake her hand but she pulls him closer, holding on to him. Patiently, he allows her to embrace him, making sure she doesn’t squash the bread under his arm.

There are tears on her face. He waves, picking another rose at the gate, sticking it into his shirt's buttonhole.

“Bly soos jy is, kint.”

He nods, heading for the orchards, then stops. “Hoekom is Raatjie se hakke nie gekraak nie?”

She looks down surprised, inspecting her heels. “Raatjie werk hom met ‘n growwe klippie, kint.”

He nods again, rolling up his pants, walking in the freely flowing water between the trees.

David and Petrus rest on their spades, smoking.

“Ek kom groet.”

David tips his hat. “Goed gaan Basie, veilige reis.”

“Totsiens, Baas.” Petrus keeps his hands on the spade.

“Watse mense gaan Basie veg?” David enquires curiously.

“Terroriste, David. Kubane, Swapo, Kommuniste.”

“Baas sal eers met die gun moet oefen.” Petrus retorts.

“Ons kry mos opleiding,” Isak throws over his shoulder as he walks away. Dis nie vir speel nie dis vir real, he thinks to himself.

*

The troepie train is running late. They sit in the car at the station, listening to the radio. The train is late because Ikey students are lying across the tracks in the Cape Town and the MP's have to forcefully remove them.

His mother is chain smoking, lighting one cigarette with the next. “Kom ons klim uit, my senuwees is gedaan.” Without waiting she throws the door open, her cheeks flushed and there is ash on her dress.

The two of them follow her up the steps to the deserted platform, Isak carrying the duffel bag and the wrapped bread. The station master smiles at the sight of her thin ankles and blond hair, even though the Jackie Onassis dark glasses conceal half her face.

“Wanneer verwag u die trein?” She gesticulates wildly in the direction of the tracks.

“Watter een, Mevrouw?”

“Tumbuktu s`n onnosel.” Exasperatedly, she stamps on the half-smoked cigarette.

The stationmaster is confused.

“Die troepietrein, Oom, die Kimberley trein.”

Danie starts mouthing words behind the man’s back. “Hoe ry die trein, hoe ry die trein, Kimberley se trein,” pumping his arms comically like a locomotive, then he stops, aware of their disapproval, his arms hanging clumsily.

“Die trein is vertraag seun. Daar’s moeilikheid by die Kaapse stasie. Vannie hippies lê op die spoor.”

She marches down the platform. Sitting on the bench is Janneman and his mother.

Isak studies the tracks trying to imagine Rabinowitz lying there with long hair.

“Gaan Janneman ook Kimberley toe, Babsie?” His mother sits down, blocking the sign, *whites only*. She lights up.

The flat-footed woman pretends not to hear the other on her stilettos, blowing smoke over their faces.

“Ja, Tannie.” Janneman smiles broadly at the three of them. “Ek’s ‘n offisier by die kamp, ek sal na Tannie se kind kyk.”

Relieved, she turns to Isak. “Janneman gaan ‘n oog oor jou hou.”

“Ek kan na myself kyk, Mamma.” Irritably he counts the screws holding the sleepers together.

The picking team would be taking their mid-morning break. His father would be in the office, behind the desk, his white hair thinning on the crown, his hands on the glass, scorched from the soldering torch.

He walked down the hill. His father sat in the swivel chair at the window looking out towards the mountain.

“Ek is op pad, Pa.”

“Sit so ‘n bietjie.” His father pointed to the other chair. “Jou Ma is altyd laat.”

Both listened to the machine behind the wall and the voice of the packers.

“Ek moes lankal met jou gepraat het. Miskien is dit te laat maar ek het ‘n plig teenoor jou en ek wil dit gestand doen.” He shifted his chair back from the desk. “Jy speel goeie voetbal en jou kanse is goed om vir die Weermag ook te speel.” His father’s nostrils flared. “Daar gaan meisies wees, na wedstryde.”

These were not the words he had hoped to hear.

His father leant over the table, winking at him. The sight of the wink made him look away over his father’s head to the wall and Smuts shaking his Oupa’s hand.

“Sorg dat jy ‘n kondoom by jou het. Wanneer dit nodig is, is dit wragtag nodig.”

“Dankie vir die advies, Pa.”

His mother hooted outside.

“Mamma wag vir my.” He stretched across the table. They shook hands, his father squeezing his fingers weakly.

He feels the oncoming train’s vibrations. So does his mother. She grabs his wrist.

“Ek moet groet Mamma, die oom sê die trein stop omtrent nie.”

Her expression is the same as the day in the hospital. He moves to the edge of the platform but she holds on. Janneman takes him by the other elbow and they position themselves.

As the train pulls into the station the MP’s jump off. “Klim!” they order him.

Isak tilts his head towards her. She kisses his cheek, over and over, her mouth wet on his skin until he must push her away from him.

He nods at Danie.

“Vasbyt.” Danie holds out a plastic covered album.

Janneman is already on the train and the stationmaster blows the whistle. He takes the album. Boys hang out from the windows, reliving their goodbyes. The compartment is a chaotic mess of cake tins and rucksacks. The boys at the window retreat respectfully, allowing his mother one last look at him.

The window frames her. She is still lovely in a gaunt type of way. In the corner stands the stationmaster admiring her with the whistle in his mouth and behind her are mountains, like a backdrop for an opera.

“Isak.” She rushes forward to the train but the stationmaster and Danie restrain her and he pulls back, both relieved and ashamed.

*

The boys are as distant to him as the wide expanse of the great Karoo. Janneman, chats about rugby and his clichéd remarks require no concentration. Isak's mind floats with the winds over the exposed plains, back to Ouma and sheep grazing on the hill and a wind pump that does not turn.

Boys with bleached hair and shells strung around their necks are constantly on the move. In and out of the compartment their visplakkies slap gaily on the floor.

Forty years before his father had left by train for the North. Five years later he came back a changed man. Changed within and without. It was of trains and men and of war that he had hoped to hear.

Suddenly the train shudders to a halt in the middle of nowhere. He tenses as the boys hang out, catcalling to each other down the length of the train. Without warning another train rushes by and the boys fall back, laughing as hot air is sucked into the compartment. The passing train snaps and clicks like hundreds of dancers feverishly smacking their castanets.

Once the train is gone, the Karoo comes back in view. Wedge-headed Dorpers mow the grass down, heads stuck through the fence. The train lurches into action. He unfolds the newspaper wrapped around the bread, reading snatches off the oiled paper.

Die Eerste Minister het ten sterkste ontken dat Suid-Afrikaanse soldate hulself in Angola bevind.

He breaks off a piece of bread.

Janneman takes it without missing beat, regaling the new boys with the horrors of basics. Isak offers the English boys too but the aniseed smell puts them off.

He bites into the feathery texture, chewing deliberately, thinking of Oom Sakkie in the desert, killed by the man he admired most.

The boys start wrestling, so he makes for the top bunk, with his head towards the open window.

He opens the album from Danie.

It is filled with photos from Ouma's hatbox. The titles are written in a childish hand. He thinks of their visit to Ouma and his mother, sick in hospital. The album was made a long time ago.

There are photos of his mother before they knew her, gloved in the garden and on the swing. Also photos of his other Oupa with the hanging shoulders, posing solemnly in front of a train. His favourite is the one of his mother on her wedding day and the roses in her hand have been painted in and her lips too with red paint.

The night comes slowly and the jousting continues late into the night. Now and again he can see a light of a farmhouse, far away, or the lamp of a skaapwagter from his skerm in the veldt.

As the new day begins, the boys drift off to sleep and along the track the earth turns from yellow to red.

Isak senses their journey is coming to an end. A grey fog hangs over the veldt. Coal fires burning from statte surrounding the city.

Janneman awakes. The night has changed him. He discards his civvies and dresses in an officer's uniform while Isak watches. A uniform with brass buttons that subtly transforms the expression on Jannman's face.

The train slows down as it reaches the outskirts of Kimberley. The sleeping boys are roughly awakened and there is a mad scramble for clothes, bags and the toilet at the end of the carriage.

Kimberley station lies ahead. The train begins to brake. The boys stick their heads out to see imposing men in berets with shining boots lining the platform.

The jesting subdues as the brakes screech to a standstill. Doors are thrown open and Janneman and the other officers herd them onto the platform, shouting. "Soentoe, soentoe!" They wave their batons menacingly towards open trucks lined up at the entrance.

Other trains pull in with boys from other provinces and there is confusion.

Some boys have mislaid their belongings but there is no time to look so they join the row, shuffling like old men with gout.

Above their heads someone shouts, "Bruwer, dra my fokken tas!"

All heads turn as one. It is Janneman.

Without thinking or looking, Isak shouts back. "Dra jou eie fokken tas!"

The men with batons pause in their stride and look at him with interest. They nod ever so slightly to each other but he doesn't care. No one moves until the officers begin to shout again. "Soentoe, soentoe."

"Now you're in the shit, big time," a red-headed boy whispers next to him.

His punishment will come, not now but later.

*

"Vasbyt ouens, vasbyt."

His punishment has come. It is everyone's punishment. From their first night of basics, there are raids that leave the bungalow and the boys in pieces.

Enough is enough, he thinks. The bloodied face of Jaws tells him, enough is enough. A Boerejood with an Afrikaans father and a Jewish mother.

Isak waves his hands for quiet.

Shaven headed rowe tighten the knot over their knuckles, the weighted pillowslips, swinging gently from side to side. In the dark he can make out Butler's red hair, keeping watch at the window while he and Jaws lead the attack at the barricaded door.

Exaggerated laughter and scuffling outside, warn them of the return of the ou manne, newly arrived from Angola.

Jaws clutches his pick. The two Hillbrow boys swing their handles in a practiced arc above their heads, their arms tattooed with flowers and girls' names.

Isak nods to the boys at the door. They tip the cots and rest their weight behind the frames.

Someone kicks the door but it resists. The laughter stops, replaced by swearing and mumbled discussion.

The boys lift their pick handles, whispering.

Then a storm of kicking erupts but the door holds and the boys press down harder and Isak can see the door will not withstand the battering.

They can hear men sneaking around the bungalow.

Isak takes position. Butler starts to swing the electric iron in the pillowslip for momentum. As the glass panes shatter he is ready for them. Ou manne pour in through the window, falling at the feet of the window guards. Butler is the first to strike.

Isak shouts to the boys at the door and they move back as one. The door collapses, sending dozens of men sprawling across the floor.

Butler, crouched on the sill, hits such blows that the men fall back, out of the frame. Some give up without a fight. The sight of the boy and his red eyebrows is enough to convince them to leave this for another night.

Those inside, grope across the polished floor, struggling to get up. It is the liquor and the boy's aggression triggered by fear, which gives them strength and boldness they didn't know they had.

In the chaos Isak recognises Janneman, crawling on all fours to the door.

"Janneman," he shouts. "Waar die fok gaan jy?"

The crawling Janneman turns over, belly side up, like a stricken beetle, his hands over his face in defence.

Without hesitating, Isak slams the pick handle across his chest. Janneman rolls over, blood spurting from his mouth.

The ou manne limp out. Others get dragged out until the bungalow is empty.

Someone switches on the light.

Ecstatic boys whoop and embrace, leaping from one bed to the next, exhausted and stunned by their success.

"Zak, Zak, Zak," they chant, lifting Isak onto their shoulders.

Butler wails like a bagpipe as they carry Isak over the glass and the bloodied floor.

"Ons sal moet skoonmaak." He climbs off and the boys calm down. Brooms and mops are fetched and the boys begin to sweep.

Isak walks out. The ou manne won't be bothering them that night again but he knows they will come again. These are men that have killed and their hunger to hurt is greater than theirs.

But tonight has cancelled whatever he owes to anyone.

Inside the boys are still bullish from their victory, recounting each blow and fall. In thought he rubs glass off his legs.

*

Weeks of foul food go by. As the corporal says grace, he fiddles in the varkpan in front of him, filled with goulash made from offal. The corporal opens his eyes and Isak takes a deep breath, shovelling the food into his mouth, joined by other boys, burping and farting as they finish their food in five minutes flat.

A siren blows and they shoot up. Back onto the parade ground they march where their corporal waits with a man wearing a purple beret.

“Vir inspeksie, hou geweer!”

“Flying Meatball,” Butler informs him, jutting his chin out.

“What’s that?” he whispers back as the corporal does inspection.

“Bats,” Butler replies through clenched teeth as the corporal moves in closer.

“Aantree...val in...aandag!”

“Die Valskermbataljon soek manne met karakter.” The man in the purple beret begins to speak. “Manne wat nie net fisies sterk is nie maar ook geestelik en van uitstaande gesondheid, intelligent en met leierskapskwaliteite. As jy dink jy voldoen aan die kriteria, sien ons jou môre by die sportgronde.”

Jaws prods Isak, while Butler snorts.

“Staan en rus!”

They saunter back to the bungalow.

The inside of the bungalow is immaculate. Isak sits down on the floor next to his perfectly made bed. He picks up two dicky pans and continues hitting a neat fold into the corner of the blanket.

“Biting is better.” Butler perches on the sill.

“Ironing is quicker,” Jaws chips in from under his bed, lying on the cool cement.

Isak uses the pans, ignoring their advice.

Butler lights a half-smoked cigarette. “So, we’ve had the entire road show of the Defence force.” He ticks his fingers off. “Pantsers, Geniekorps, Tiffies and now the Flying Meatballs.”

“Have you decided Zak?” Jaws asks.

“What do you want to do?”

“I asked first.”

“The guys say you get better food in Bloem.”

“Stop that!” Butler kicks at the dicky’s in Isak’s hands.

Isak carries on smacking the pans along the edge of the bed, “I can play for Free-State, if I’m in Bloem.”

“Oh, for the green and gold,” Butler remarks. “One day I can say I knew the great Zak Bruwer, God’s gift to rugby.”

“Shurrrup.” Isak kicks out at Butler. “What about you?”

Before Jaws can answer Butler dramatically clutches his heart, singing loudly, “I’ll take the low road and you’ll take the high road and you’ll be in shit long before me...” He sticks his finger up his nostril, “I don’t give a damn who gets South-West, one goddamn heap of sand.”

“You’re fighting for your country.”

“The Kaffirs give me enough grief in the Eastern Cape, without having to play cops and robbers with some foreign munts.”

“You?” Isak peers under the bed.

Jaws flexes his fingers. “I don’t know. I want to be a doctor, that’s what I believe in...” He lifts himself up on his elbows. “The best way of getting through this is to stick to you, so I’ll give the prelims a go tomorrow.”

“G2K1, a Bat?” Butler slaps his thigh, roaring with laughter. “Let’s all play, follow the leader.” He slides off the sill and kneels before Isak. “O Allah, am I worthy to follow in your footsteps?”

“Shurruup!” Isak jumps up and pins Butler to the ground.

“Forgive me, forgive me,” Butler pleads in high-pitched voice.

Isak rolls off, shoving him hard into the floor before releasing him.

“Ag shit man, that was sore.” Butler sits up, rubbing his neck. “Don’t you have a sense a humour or something?”

Isak turns his back on him. There are parts of him that frighten him. Pushing yourself to the limit, having power over others, not feeling any fear. There are things inside of him that thrives on this shit and it shames him, not knowing where it comes from.

He unfolds his mother’s letter.

Stellenbosch en Tukkies het albei ‘n beurs aan jou aangebeid vir volgende jaar. Ook plek in die koshuis. Pa sê jy moet Stellenbosch toe, oor die afrigting en ek sê ook so, want Stellenbosch is nie so ver van die huis af nie.”

*

Silently they put on their smogs. Outside the bungalow, officers are betting over a bottle of brandy how many rows they will get off the course before lunch. The boys follow the conversation.

“Afkakkamp number two coming up, any takers?” Butler interrupts their thoughts, twirling and flouncing around.

Jaws takes off the necklace with the snake while Isak, folds his letters away amongst his clothes.

Bloemfontein is dull. As they drive from the station all he can see is a flat, dusty place, without mountains and Janneman and the corporal sulking in the back of the truck. It is their second attempt at Tempe.

Here they are all equal.

A siren goes off. They jog onto the deserted parade ground, surrounded by brown buildings and high fencing. To one side, poles as thick as Butler’s chest lie stacked on one another.

A sergeant appears from the mess and the screaming begins.

“Jou Ma het die kind weggegooi en die nageboorte grootgemaak.” The sergeant pulls at Butler’s chest, “en dis jy.” He strolls over to a pastorie boy called Dirk, spitting on his boots. “En jou Pa het die kollekte gevat en vir julle etterkoppe drive-in toe gevat.”

The senior men come out from the canteen and laugh with the sergeant.

Isak bites his lip and holds his breath. The sergeant draws two lines in the dust with his boot. He picks up a pole, to demonstrate and the rest follow. Isak balances it on his shoulder, measuring the distance that they must run. At first it feels fine but there is no end to it, back and forth between the lines, over and over again. His head burns in the sun and the pole cuts into his flesh through the smog’s fabric.

The swearing never stops and the swearing means the running must not stop. The two lines stretch further and further away from each other. Isak feeds off his anger and it is anger that makes him move from one line to the other. Someone cries out behind him and a pole falls to the ground. The falling pole triggers a skittle reaction as others fall with their poles, while the rest of them keep running past those who have failed.

Then a whistle is blown. Some still stagger forward, unbelieving. One or two collapse right there on their knees, vomiting in the dust, while others pass out.

No one cares.

In the mess hardly any of them eat. The only men with appetites are the officers, exchanging money and laughs.

Isak glances at Butler's burnt neck and shaking body. Jaws sits in front of him and there is dried blood on his smog. Across the table are two boys with old men's faces and their eyes dart around the room as they gulp down their food.

"Wie's julle?" Isak is fascinated by their appetite and apparent disregard for the recent torture.

"Meintjies," the tougher looking one says. His nose is broken and he sucks loudly at food caught between his teeth, "en dis Lovett."

"Waar's jul vandaan?"

"Hillbrow," Lovett answers with thin lips. "Meintjies is my ma van so size af." He shows a little height off the floor. "Ons survive saam-saam oppie streets."

Isak nods in admiration.

The siren calls them back onto the parade ground. Of the hundred and twenty, ten boys have already left.

The poles have been removed and in their place are blocks of cement. Marbles, is what the sergeant calls them. Square and rough they weigh approximately twenty kilograms. The cement marbles have nothing of the charm of coloured glass.

The sergeant has a name, Staf Sakkie. He draws a new line with his boot, further back than the morning's line.

He smiles at them. "Troep, dieselfde as vanoggend."

"Nee!" A boy with broad shoulders protests, stamping his boots like a child. "Nee!"

No one moves.

"Moer uit!" Staf Sakkie calls him forward, flipping a yellow card at him.

The boy takes the card, walking past them defiantly.

"Nog iemand?"

Isak bends down and gets a grip on the block. "Donners," he mutters. No one will make it on their own. He checks for Butler and Jaws in the group, shifting closer to them.

The whistle blows. They stagger under the weight. Most of them drag themselves across the course. Isak moves in between Jaws and Butler.

"Breathe easily. Try and breathe deeply... Take your time, just take it slow and easy," Isak encourages them. "In and out... Just keep going."

Their legs move together, one leg, then the other, Isak paces his stride with that of Jaws. He seems unaware of Isak's voice.

They stumble to the line and back and the voices of the officers are like screeching birds in the reeds.

Jaws gasps and buckles. Isak drops his marble onto his knees and lifts the marble of Jaws before it reaches the ground.

“Vasbyt Boeta, vasbyt, ons is amper klaar met die fokken donners.”

The eyes of the boy are holes and the hands that must work for him one day take hold of the block of stone and they move, Isak’s thigh pressing against his, to the lines in the dust.

The sun is stuck in the sky, then the whistle blows and the sun moves to the horizon. Jubilant officers add up the twenty boys that will go back where they came from.

Staf Sakkie fetches the bottle of brandy and screws its lid off, downing the liquor with a great thirst as the boys crawl back to the bungalows.

The canteen is busy that night. So are the bungalows of the new recruits. Boys cry out deliriously, cramping on their narrow cots and the nightly raids of Kimberley have some nostalgia for Isak, here in this God-forsaken place.

*

He lies under the open window, exhausted. His body belongs to someone else. If he lifts his head slightly he can see the lights of Bloemfontein. Thousands of people sleeping, eating, making love, while the insomniacs peep anxiously through lace curtains at the reassuring lights of Tempe.

“Zombies.” Jaws speaks softly in the dark.

“Them or us?” Isak lies on his side.

Somewhere in the bungalow a boy has a nightmare.

“They want to break us down to nothing,” Jaws continues, “for what?” What do they want to achieve by destroying us?”

“Build us up again, I guess.”

“But to what, what are they going to make of us?”

“Soldiers, that’s why we are here.”

“Shurrup you guys, the rest of us want to sleep.” Butler sends a boot flying through the air. It is the first time he has spoken since the morning.

Isak closes his eyes. Red-headed lilies would be pushing through dry earth.

“You saved me today,” Jaws whispers, “again.”

“Ag, it’s no big deal,” Isak answers.

“Ek verlang na ‘n gat van ‘n Kimberley,” Dirk comments dryly next to him.

Isak longs for another place of rock and trees and a river that flows in flood through orchards.

Her letters speak of such things, unintentionally. He sees Petrus in his boots digging canals at the mention of his name. Raatjie on her stoep, rubbing her heels with a stone, as his mother gossips of her drunkenness. When she speaks of rain, he can see the clouds hung low. When she writes of parties, it is David in his cumber band at the bar and a couple embracing in the dark. Danie’s name recalls a small boy in an Eucalyptus tree peering out over the farm. And his father, he sees his father, even though she avoids his name, sitting in the office, at the desk with the glass top, brooding.

He wonders where all of this is heading.

**

Troepies jog up the hill. Up and up towards the pakkersgebou. Tomorrow is their final trial but for now they are lower than dogs.

They run fast and hard, carrying their beds on their backs as punishment and they drop their eyes obediently to the ground as the white women who pack the parachutes file out of the building, waving and calling out in high voices.

You don't ask what for, you don't protest, you just keep your mouth shut and do it, the running and the not looking.

Officers are putting up a boxing ring on the parade ground as they run past with their beds. Tonight the ou manne will have fun, one last time with them. Isak hates them with a coolness, more powerful than his old hot headed self.

Back in the bungalow, Dirk rubs Butler's back with Deep Heat and the calloused hands of Jaws, presses the cramping calves of Isak.

"Tomorrow, if I make it, dan drink ek my poepdronk," Butler comments to Dirk.

"Aandag! Staan op troep!"

All the boys jump to attention, including Butler in his nakedness.

"Alle troepies word op die paradedgrond verwag, soos in nou, dadelik."

They march out onto the parade grounds where the officers are waiting, sitting on fold up chairs, drinks in the hand. There is sakkie-sakkie music playing from the canteen's radio. Some officers shuffle playfully in the dust.

The troepies line up.

Staf Sakkie eyeballs each one of them, then he stops in front of Meintjies and Lovett and they all know what's coming. Meintjies the professional boxer and Lovett the professional pimp. Some of the officers giggle.

The sergeant yanks them out of the line and they stumble into the ring.

“Fight ‘till your buddy is down. Refusal to do so means a yellow card!” The sergeant roars over their heads. “Verstaan?”

Meintjies and Lovett nod. Boxing gloves are strapped on their hands and Isak can see the gloves fit better on Meintjies than Lovett.

The ring is a thick mat covered in green plastic. The heads of the searchlights have been swivelled around to light up the lone ring. In the ring, the buddies circle each other stripped to the waist, their identical tattoos, a symbol of brotherhood. Lovett is quick and nervous, sparring playfully, full of bravado, teasing Meintjies. Their faces have dark shadows. Meintjies comes forward, reluctantly and the Rowe keep quiet, while the Oumanne bay for blood.

Lovett taps Meintjies on the chest with his right and Meintjies responds viciously with a hooker, catching the soft face of Lovett on the jaw. His buddy's head wips to the side and Meintjies backs off, his face grey and the Oumanne jump and hit their fists into the air as they shout for their favourite, Meintjies.

Jaws stares at the lights, but Isak keeps his attention on the two wiry figures, stalking each other on the mat. Meintjies moves in for the attack but Lovett keeps on side-stepping, crouching behind his gloves and the shouts increase. Lovett feebly tries a right at the chest of Meintjies but he slips, falling onto his knees and the Oumanne rise as one shouting for the kill and Meintjies hesitates, looking wildly into the crowd, even on the street you don't hit a man that's down. Lovett lifts his head and looks up

and it is a look of shock and betrayal. Meintjies pulls out a punch, with all his force. It knocks Lovett onto his back and he lies there, sprawled out on the green, lights out.

Isak turns to Jaws but his eyes are closed.

*

“Troepies, staan en rus!”

Meintjies is forgotten by the crowd. Lovett too. Isak steps forward and helps Meintjies lift Lovett onto his back. He watches them head for the bungalow.

Hitting your buddy is like hitting your wife.

Jaws has drifted off into the dark. Isak finds him leaning against the fence, lighting up. They stand for a long while, just looking out over Bloemfontein. Jaws, attempting to smoke one of Butler’s Van Rijns. The searchlights cut this way and that and they hear the Oumanne celebrating their victory in the canteen.

“Have you never seen boxing before?”

“Ja, bullies on the playground,” Jaws puffs effeminately, “and Gerrie Coetzee on TV.” He coughs, handing the cigarette back to Isak. “That’s about it.”

“No thanks, I stopped at thirteen.”

Jaws smiles wistfully. “And I’ve never touched one until now.”

“My dad started when he went to war, just seventeen. He had to keep watch in the desert. The older guys told him it was good for his nerves.”

“Does he ever talk about it, the war?” Jaws tries the cigarette for a second time.

“No, never. His brother died in Egypt and won some medals in the process.”

Isak conjures up Oom Sakkie at the pyramids. “My father landed up in Italy at the end

of the war, that's about what I know. He likes to sing in Italian, or used to when I was a kid."

"My father was too young but my granddad fought." Jaws stamps the cigarette under his boot. "I've never been whipped in my life, can you believe that?"

"Mommy's boy," Isak teases, thinking of Danie.

"Perhaps," Jaws concedes. "It might all be so much easier, if I had been whipped in some way."

Isak thinks of his father with his mother's tekkie. "Tomorrow is our big day."

"Are you ready for the target shooting?"

"Ja, I think so, why?" He enjoys the shooting.

"Well the cardboard men we shoot at are going to be real men if we pass tomorrow." Jaws steps closer to Isak and there is a twitch in his eye. "Have you thought about that?"

"Ja, of course." But it has never really crossed his mind.

"Me too." Jaws presses his hand against Isak's chest, taking hold of his shirt. "The difference is we will be shooting at people like ourselves, skin and bone and blood, like Lovett."

*

"Jy was mos op Tempe?"

Danie is lying down on his cot. He sits up. "Waar's jy nou?" He lifts the mask for Isak to speak.

"Tempe, buite Bloem. Die keer wat ek my wings gekry het, het jy en Pa en Mamma opgeroep, om te kom kyk."

“O-ja, wat ‘n ramp.” Danie sits down again in thought. “Ons het buite die dorp in ‘n motel gebly, waar die beddens en TV aan die muur vasgeketting was.”

A woman briskly walks into the ward with a trolley full of equipment.

“Jou fisio.” Danie withdraws as she parks the trolley next to Isak.

She removes the mask and for a moment he cannot breathe. She cranks the bed up into a sitting position. He lies quite still, each crank painful to him, then she holds a plastic container at his lips, gesturing for him to blow into a pipe. He blows as hard as he can but she shakes her head impatiently, demonstrating with an exaggerated blowing action what she expects from him. He cannot do it, the blowing.

“Probeer,” Danie encourages from the side.

He wants to blow. Can’t they see that? Fed up, he tries again but the attempt is too feeble for her approval.

“Die af rib het jou long seergemaak,” Danie sympathises.

The woman chats with Danie while packing away her equipment. She removes the oxygen mask as well.

Isak panics. “Sê vir haar ek kan nie alleen asemhaal nie.” He thinks of black Bass, hooked with gasping mouths.

“Jy moet van die masjiene af. Hoe gouer hoe beter. Jou long moet leer om weer van self te werk.”

Isak practices breathing on his own, concentrating on his memories. “Jy’t nooit weer daarna geskryf nie.”

“Ag, ek was kwaad oor baie goed.”

Across the ward, the old man with the off-shoulder presses the knobs on the TV’s remote, jumping from one channel to the next.

“Vra vir hom om dit af te sit, dit maak my naar.”

Danie gets up with a phlegmatic cough and Isak wonders whether the lack of sun causes him to be so bleak in the face. The noise stops abruptly and the screen blanks out.

“Dankie.”

Danie coughs phlegm into his hanky. “Jammer.” He lies down as well.

“You said you were angry.” Isak reminds him. “Die Tempe-stuk.”

“I guess I couldn’t understand what you were fighting for.” Danie settles down, crossing his feet at the ankles.

Isak breathes in and out deliberately. “How could a goeie Afrikaner boere-seun of sixteen have such an underdeveloped conscience?”

“Koos. The things he would say made me think.”

“When did you see him?” He speaks slowly, afraid he will run out of breath.

“At Raatjie’s house on week-ends when Pa was at the golf club and Mamma, was passed out in the bedroom.”

“Wat het jy daar gemaak?”

“Visiting, what else?” Danie rolls onto his side, “I went to the barrakse because I was alone. Koos was printing pamphlets on this little machine and his spelling wasn’t too good, so I helped him.”

“Koos is mayor.”

“I know, he stayed here last year...”

“Then you know everything.” Isak breathes rapidly. All of a sudden, snatches of why he is here dart in and out of his thoughts. “You know about the gemors we’re in.”

“He spoke more of Mamma,” Danie carries on quickly.

“Mamma?” Isak can’t figure that one out.

“Koos sits between a rock and a hard place. For the whites he is too radical and for his own people he has opted out, given up the struggle and joined the fat cats.”

Koos’ struggle is Isak’s struggle.

The two brothers lie and ponder on this.

Isak thinks of the phone calls in the night but he doesn’t say anything more about it. “Why did you ask me to come?”

Danie does not reply as though he has not heard the question, then he sighs, speaking very quietly as though to himself. “Every day I close the door on the greyness and miserableness of the street where I live and I look straight into the mountain and the sky of the farm and I think of you all.”

“Why did you go?” Isak’s throat is dry. “Could it have been so bad for you? Others have suffered more and stayed.”

*

“Who knows?” Danie sighs. “Who knows why you do what you do? Doesn’t one run from pain?” he asks himself. You cut yourself off from people and places, like an amputated limb but it’s as though the limb is still there, you can feel it, pulsating, the pins and needles of dead flesh.”

Isak nods as he watches his brother, always the eloquent one with words. He thought they felt the same way, saw things the same way, his way.

*

Tempe is one of those experiences for him. Then, he had never really thought about thought why he was doing this. It all seemed so clear then. All for his rugby career, he could justify it all through his own selfishness. Or did it have more to do with escaping the alternative? And there were high moments which were thrilling and lows as well that confused him, but which he neatly wiped out of his mind until now.

The Aapkas. Him wearing a harness, standing on the platform high above everyone's heads, the heads of men with berets and clipboards and him jumping, falling, then dangling like a fly at the end of a fishing rod.

Or the part when you looked out, stepped out, that very first second before and after falling, terrifying and yet exhilarating, when nothing or no one can hold you back. Better than a maul, better than a kiss.

Off-weekends spent at bars in flaking hotels on the edge of town, drinking and playing snooker, jolly boys, singing Bat songs so loudly that the locals would get up and walk out and them wanting trouble, big trouble. All you wanted to do was beat up the bastards with their long hair and soft bodies.

The kick you got from breaking off the legs of a chair and kicking them in their guts as they lay groaning and them, boys just having fun.

Here in the ward he can see the eyes of the older men pressed against the bar counter. Only now he realises that they were men that knew war too, a long time back and it was pity in their eyes that he could never quite place, pity not for those on the floor but for them.

And the Pantzer boys behind the fence, hiding from them. Boys just like him but you had both superiority and contempt grilled into you and so you thought nothing of pulling them apart, just for the lark, to see them fold at your feet and to despise

them even more afterwards on the parade ground, their moffies' heads covered in paper bags, for fear, condemning you.

It all made you harder and harder. That is what they wanted from you and it suited him.

Playing rugby for the Free State was a highlight. Playing with men and the girls served afterwards. Somehow he never was into them, the girls. Women were weak and he had no time to waste on weakness. They made him play with men even though he was still a boy and the trouble with his neck began but he was made to feel a man, so he ignored the signs, flattered that men would want him, his need for approval blinding him to the recurring pain in his neck. In the end his body was too soft, too weak for both men and the game. They should have let him play other boys instead.

The worst was seeing Rabinowitz. Being confronted by Rabinowitz, firstly at a distance. Turning shamefully away at the sight of him, handcuffed in brown overalls with unlaced boots of which the leather tongues hung loose like a tired dog and Rabinowitz dressed like the black men who kept the camp clean.

Then he spat and mocked him with the rest as the line of objectors came past with their heads held low and their drooping shoulders, a disgrace to men and their fatherland and Rabinowitz looked at him and there was pity in Rabinowitz' eyes, not for himself but for Isak.

He shouted curses at their white faces like clotted porridge and he looked at their bound feet and was glad that he was not as big a fool as this boy, who he thought was so clever and he was glad that he had not listened to him, for such solitary imprisonment would have killed his soul.

But now? Who sat with the disease of the soul? Whose feet were bound?

Isak tries to think of what came next but his mind is dull and so are his memories. There are gaps, like in an album from which the photos have fallen out.

*

He walks into the house for his Seven-Day pass and the first thing he notices is the grainy photo on the wall. A black and white poster enlarged from a cheap camera of a toy soldier under an opened parachute.

“Ek het dit van jou by Tempe afgeneem.” She steps forward and touches the photograph. “Ek het nie geweet watter een gaan jy wees nie, toe neem ek almal af wat spring.”

“Hoe weet Mamma, dié een is ek?”

She measures him with her eyes. “Jou lengte, maar ook jou skouers, die manier wat hulle so skuins loop...”

“Soos Oupa s’n?”

“Daar’s ‘n verrassing vir jou buite.”

“Waarvoor?” He is surprised.

“Jou verjaarsdag...jy gaan nie hier wees nie.” Her eyes fill with tears.

“Ek is nou hier Mamma, vir sewe dae.”

“Wat is sewe dae?” She throws her hands up in the air.

He walks out onto the stoep. Seven days of this, he thinks.

The veldt has invaded the garden. She has openly abandoned the rose garden of Ouma. Renoster bush grow where Ouma’s roses used to stand.

“Dit wag onder in die werf.” She speaks behind him.

Together they drive down in silence and he notices that the Camphor trees have grown, making the avenue darker than ever before.

Excitedly she leads him, tugging at his shirt, to behind the shed. There is a new stable that he has not seen before. A horse looks out, beautiful and polished as boots. He strokes the animal's neck and it shivers at his touch.

“Hou jy van haar?”

He nods, pressing his face against the horse.

“Ek wou haar solank ry maar Pappa sê dis belaglik vir ‘n ou vrou wat nie eers ‘n kar op die pad kan hou nie.”

“Het Mamma seergekry?”

She shrugs. “Meer geskrik as enige iets anders. Ek het nie besef die ligte is rooi nie anderste sou ek gestop het.” She rubs the horse's nose and it delicately nibbles at her hand. “Hou jy van jou present?”

“Sy's mooi Mamma, ek het dit nooit verwag nie.”

“Jou Pa kies altyd, toe besluit ek, ek kies dié keer.”

“Wanneer klim jy op?” His father joins them. “Niemand kan bo bly nie, nie eers Petrus nie en jou Ma, ruiters in swart. Vader behoed ons as sy probeer, ek moes net keer, anderste was sy op.” He flicks mud off his shoes. “Daar waar jou Ma vandaan kom neek dit nader aan donkie se kant toe as volbloed s'n.” Then he walks back to the men coming in on the tractors.

Isak opens the stable door. Moving his hands quietly over the horse's flank it reverses into the corner of the stable, stamping its hooves.

“Staan stil, Sakkie.”

Isak stands back, allowing the horse to turn on himself.

“Kyk haar in die oë,” his mother instructs him from the door. “Praat saggies met haar, sy hou daarvan.”

He does what she says and the horse quietens.

“Nou kan jy die stang insit.” She pats the horses back. “Die perd was my idee.” The horse turns to her voice. “Ek wou as kind nog altyd my eie perd gehad het.” She slips the reins over the mare’s head with experienced hands. “Napoleon sou ek hom genoem het.”

Isak throws the saddle over the horses back and tightens the girth belt.

“Dankie, Mamma.”

He stares at her, so small and pinched up on the other side. “Wil Mamma nie ‘n ent saamry nie?”

Her eyes widen. “Saam met jou?”

“Ja, net so ‘n entjie. Ek sal Mamma by die hek laat afklim.”

She shakes her head. “Nee, ek sal afval.”

“Ons stap stadig, niks meer as ‘n drafstappie nie, Mamma.”

“Nee, die volk sal lag en jou Pa...Nee.” She leads the horse out, holding the reins.

Irritably, he mounts and her face is tight and closed.

His weight makes the horse rear and she lets go. Without warning the mare bolts down the hill. He reins her in, pressing his inner thighs against her body, sitting deeper in the saddle. She slows down as they cut across the orchards to the lower hills, where the veld’s bushes are flowering. He smells aniseed in the air.

When he looks back for his mother, all he can see are leaves.

The mare labours under his weight as they climb towards the plateau. From here he can view the entire valley. Below, a tiny figure stands at the stable. He

dismounts, tying the reins to a tree. In thought he bends down to scratch amongst the bushes. The dried out remains are still there. He pinches the thin stem between his fingers, tugging at the roots and lifting the plant with bulb and all. Its beauty has faded and yet its fragile petals recall the tins. Carefully he slips the plant into his pocket.

Cutting the farm in two is the river, clogged with Ceylon roses and reeds. Its course is lined by flowering fruit trees, a colourful trail through the dull veldt.

As the horse feeds off the low grass, Isak begins to climb over the rocks, moss under his hands. He pulls himself up, higher and higher. Above his head, baboons hear him coming and they bark out a warning.

There is no end to him. Faster and faster he climbs and the rock begins to change to a sheer face, smooth as a slab of granite in a cemetery. Determinedly he hooks his fingers into the shallow crevices, pulling his body weight up, balancing his boots on a narrow ledge. His cheek is flush with the rock and he likes the thrill of just hanging from his fingers.

Tiptoeing, he moves along the ledge until he finds a place where the rock widens. It is a far drop to where the horse waits. Fresh baboon droppings lie scattered over older droppings. He kicks at the heaps, clearing a space for himself.

The village of the valley has shrunk to a pinprick. Smoke hangs over the sprawling township on the outskirts. He squats and rests, perspiration running down his neck.

Up here the wind howls over the rock. Up here he is quite alone.

Soon he will be nineteen years old, old enough to fight but not old enough to decide his own fate.

The sun revolves around the mountain. He wipes out the creases in the letter, thinking of Jaws and Butler and Dirk. He reads the letter, it is short and to the point. He will have to find a way with them both.

A shadow passes over him.

Silhouetted against the sky, the black eagle is frozen in flight, waiting and watching.

Nearby on the same ledge sits the elephant shrew. The eagle glides by, hovering like a dark rain cloud over both of them. It passes so closely that Isak feels the force of air under its wings.

The twitching creature is out of his reach, crouching in vain.

Expected but with such speed and daring the bird strikes, a blur of blackness so close to Isak that its claws sinking into the flesh are frighteningly sharp and in focus. The shrew screams and its screams echo against the mountain, over and over, the final remainder of what it was.

Silence settles over the mountain, sun, sky and the swirling clouds that could bring rain and relief or hail and devastation.

He stuffs the letter into his pocket, sliding easily down the rock, back to the horse. This time he doesn't mount but leads the mare by the reins.

In the yard, the men are receiving their evening dop from his father. They queue in front of the shop as the women and children carry the groceries home. His eyes run over them.

"Dankie Baas, naand Baas," each one says as they receive their drink. Even Petrus is in the row, with his hat pulled low over his brow, his eyes hidden from Isak. He downs the wine and passes on the enamel mug but he doesn't say anything, just turns and walks away with hunched shoulders

The sun drops behind the hills. Some of the men touch their hats as Isak passes with the horse and he greets them in return with a slight flick of his chin.

An old man is mucking out the stable. He doesn't look up but carries on sweeping as Isak unsaddles the horse.

“Naand.”

“Naand, Baas.” The old man looks up briefly and his eyes are blue and it is the old man for the show grounds but he doesn't recognise Isak at all, just carries on sweeping.

“Ek ken vir Outa. Outa het na Oom Frans se Vlaamse perde gekyk.”

“Ja, Baas.” The old man stops.

“Hoekom is Outa daar weg?”

“Stry by die Baas gekry, Baas.” The old man takes the horse from Isak.

“Maar Outa bly mos al jare by hom.”

“My Pa is daar gebore Baas, ek ôk, Baas.” The old man sighs but does not explain any further and there is none of the liveliness that Isak can remember in him.

“Dankie.” Isak feels uncomfortable but the old man appears oblivious to this, brushing the mare down. He takes out the orchid still attached to its bulb. “Sal Outa dit vir Ragel gee? Sê vir haar dis van Baas Sakkie af.”

Roughly, the old man pockets the bulb, then carries on brushing.

From the avenue that leads to the house he can see there are no lights burning but he finds his way easily to the kitchen, taking a beer from the fridge. Leisurely he walks down to the lounge to where the new television stands in the place of the hi-fi. He switches it on. Test patterns run across the screen.

“Was dit lekker?”

His eyes adjust to where she sits, smoking, with a drink in hand.

“Wil Mamma so in die donker sit?” He flops down in a chair in front of the screen.

“Ek hou daarvan. Ek dink meer helder in die donker.” She holds out her empty glass to him. “Ry sy sag?”

“Baie.” He takes her glass and fills it from the tray. “Sy’s ‘n great perd, jammer my tyd is so min met haar.”

“Ek moes maar saam.”

“Waarna toe, Mamma?”

“Saamgery het.”

Isak opens his beer and drinks thirstily. He can see her eyes when she draws on the cigarette. The curve of her neck and shoulders highlighted against the window has changed. He leans forward. “Daar’s iets wat ek met Ma hulle moet gesels, voor ek weer gaan.”

“Die plaas is joune.” She lights the next cigarette.

“Dis nie oor die plaas nie, Mamma, dis oor die Weermag. Hulle wil hê ek moet aanbly, Staande Mag toe en by die Reccies aansluit.”

Her head falls back. “Wat van jou voetbal en Stellenbosch? Die beurs is al klaar aan jou toegeken.”

“Ek speel al klaar vir die Weermag en Vrystaat. Ek’s ‘n goeie soldaat, Mamma... Ek hou daarvan.”

“Hulle sal jou doodmaak.” She can hardly speak. “Ons sal jou nooit weer sien nie.”

“Ek weet wat ek doen, Mamma, dis regtig nie so erg nie.”

“Jy’s te jonk, jy weet nie waarvan jy praat nie.” There’s stubbornness in her voice.

They hear Danie come in and make straight for the shower. The hot water pipe in the roof shudders and moans.

“Pa was in die oorlog en Oupa ook.”

“Ek sal dit nie toelaat nie” His mother sits upright, speaking with her hands. “Jy weet nie wat oorlog aan ‘n mens doen nie.” She grabs his arm and her touch is distasteful to him. “Maak my eers dood voor dit gebeur.”

He pushes her away.

“Besef jy nie dit sal my einde wees nie?” She covers her face with her hands.

“Oh come on, Mamma!” Exasperatedly, he tugs at the bottle’s label with his nails, tearing the paper in strips, “ontspan net, asseblief.”

“En dit?” His father switches on the lights of the lounge. “Hou julle twee konferensie?” Without waiting for a reply he sits down stiffly next to Isak, ignoring her tears. “Sit harder, die nuus is nou op.”

Isak turns up the volume and South-West Africa features as the main news. The death of a hoofman is covered in detail and his death is attributed to Swapo and he can’t wait to get his hands on the buggers.

“Oor ‘n week is ek daar.” He points to the images of emaciated cattle and huts.

“Lyk nie te onaardig nie.” His father’s attention shifts to the drinks tray.

“Boeta skink vir my ‘n double met ys.”

Isak measures the tots carefully. “Pa, ek het ‘n brief wat Pa hulle moet teken as ek gaan aanbly.”

“Hoe nou?” His father is watching the weather report.

“Ek kan by die Reccies vir volgende jaar aansluit, Pa.”

“Nee, ek teken niks nie, dié storie van jou moet nou klaarkry.”

“Asseblief, Pa.”

His father turns off the television and frowns.

“Danie kan in my plek boer.”

“Danie? Dis nou die laaste mens wat ek sal laat boer. Voor jy jou kan kry, sit Petrus by my lessenaar en op my stoel.”

Isak sits down, staring at the dark screen. “Verkoop die plek dan, Pa.”

His mother gasps. His father slowly puts down his drink. His mouth is contorted. With anger he slaps Isak through the face. His mother gasps again. Isak doesn't move. They look at each other. For a moment he wants to throttle this man until there is no more breath in him but instead he gets up and walks out of the lounge, out of the house.

The hot water pipe is quiet. Danie has eventually stopped showering, an elusive, white-faced stranger to him.

Concertina music plays in the barrakse with much laughter. There is a circle of cloud around the moon.

Will the old man remember to give the bulb to Raatjie and why couldn't he give it himself? It is as though the barrakse has become a place that grown men don't go to easily. And somehow he doesn't want to see her...or Petrus.

*

Confused, he looks around the darkening ward. What was he to his mother all those years? Representing hope over experience is perhaps the best explanation that he can find.

The rain leaves dirty streaks on the ward's panes. Never did he think rain could ever be distasteful to him but so much has changed in him, that nothing surprises him anymore.

He wants to see Aimee. So unrecognisable is he to himself that he needs to see her to see himself reflected.

She is change and confusion and yet she is the known, safe place. She is uncontainable and yet she is rock. She is giving and she is taking, never satisfied, like an explorer of dark caverns she probes and pushes into the hidden chambers of his heart, opening him up to the light, to feelings and memories that he thought he no longer had.

She is all the seasons in one.

For the first time since he has fallen he can fashion her in his mind. The Aimee he can follow his fingers over, along the bridge of her nose and down her neck and shoulder to the base of her spine. If she could climb into his cot and hold him, cheek against his cheek and stroke his hair and breathe in his neck, then for a moment he would let her come but he cannot let her come and he does not know how he will stop her.

There is hardly any place left to hide from her.

Somewhere inside of him he wants to be her saviour, the hero for the people and for the farm, but this is a lie, an expectation which he cannot live up to. He can blame the fall if he wishes for the impending, inevitable failure but the failure was birthed before the fall and he knows this, even if it is only him who knows this.

Still it is such a macho thing to do, to want to save.

And he always seems to land up in this dilemma, creating expectations that he cannot meet, taking responsibility in places and for people that he is not capable of.

He will have to speak to her on the phone tonight. It has to be done, not now, but later. And he is afraid that she will voice his fear. He is afraid she will show him up as the charlatan he has always been.

The jumbled stories of his life confront him. He tries to find the next instalment, and it is like some tacky soapy, with him as the second rate star. Yet the past brings some relief from the present and what he can't even think of.

**

University of Cape Town

The Samels lumber forward, away from Grootfontein. A convoy of open trucks with loose canvas hoods to keep off the sun. The trucks cross the invisible red line, a line drawn firmly in the minds of men in a desert of blinding heat.

Isak pulls his bush hat over his forehead, squinting to see the phantom water that resonates over the sand. The semblance of water induces a constant thirst in him, a thirst that never seems to go away. Here on the road to Ondangwa, home is a mirage.

Now and again he imagines a clump of trees or an eland in the shade. Mountains appear and dissolve in the distance and the black shape in the sky that follows the convoy.

Behind in the dust lies Grootfontein with its railroad that ends in the nothingness of the desert and before them lies Ondangwa with who knows what.

Something moves on the horizon. Sluggishly, Butler points to the specks and there is a pounding rhythm to whatever it is.

“Perde, wille perde,” Dirk says next to him.

The horses are running in their direction without regard for the road or the convoy. They storm forward, forcing the Samels to slow down, crossing the road with fury. Their bodies are thin, sinewy and scarred from fencing. Their wildness driving them wherever they wish to go. Not even barbed wire can contain them.

“Mooi,” Isak says more to himself than to the others, thinking of his own horse and veldt that smells of aniseed. The sight of the fleeing horses invokes sadness. He will call the mare Josephine. If he gets a chance to write he will tell her that is the name he has chosen.

The driver hammers on the cab door. Isak gets up and hangs out the back of the truck. Ondangwa is without stone, just white sand and palm trees and the hellish heat on his brain. Then he sees the nets, massive nets in the sky surrounding the camp. Nets for catching birds he assumes. Only later does he hear that they are for catching missiles that may come in the night.

“Afkakkamp nommer drie.” Butler surveys the camp with a resigned look.

*

He reaches out for the glass with water but his arm does not respond. Concentrating on the muscles in his arm he tries a second time. Overwhelming thirst makes him panic. Slowly his arm lifts off the bed, shaking uncontrollably. Biting his lip he moves his fingers towards the glass but his fingers refuse to bend and take hold.

“Kan ik je helpen?” A nurse grips the glass for him and the water rocks and spills and he sees it all in slow motion, the wasted water dripping over the man’s hand.

“Moenie.”

The nurse smiles in response holding the straw for him, gesturing that he must drink. Obediently he opens his lips, sipping of the cool water that tastes of metal.

“Nog?”

He nods and the glass is filled, then held under his chin and he drinks like a child does from a beaker for the first time, sipping cautiously until he is bloated and exhausted from pursing his lips. There is blood on the straw.

She does a routine check of the heart monitor and the screen, fiddling with the dial that regulates the morphine through the drip. “Wees rustig.” The nurse pats the bedding and he can feel the morphine flowing into his mind.

*

He lies in the cot at the opening of the tent, playing solitaire.

One week of standby, one week in the bush, one week of rest and then the cycle repeats itself, the routine of alertness behind the electrified fence. His stick is on standby. Two weeks of volleyball and cards is not what he expected.

Jaws polishes his rifle for the umpteenth time, and they all wear their brown vests and Santa Marias, even though the dress code for standby is half-dress.

Butler is busy with the poesboekies left by the previous company. He tries to make out the naked women’s nipples under the imposed stars. Now and again he snaps his fist around a fly, gleefully crushing it.

They are ten boys in the tent, bored out of their minds.

Isak looks out over the raked sand of the runway, where the Impalas and Mirages are lined up and the small, corrugated iron shack where all the action takes place. He tosses the jack of diamonds onto the queen of clubs for the hundredth time that day.

“Where’s the closest woman?” Butler asks.

“Weet nie, stel ook nie belang nie,” Isak answers him while sweeping the cards off the bed, rolling onto his back.

“We might as well find out because this Mickey Mouse war is never going to happen.” Butler slaps the magazine onto the floor.

“Oshikati is the place if you are looking for white women, otherwise the Kooka shops are a good place if you want to go local.”

Butler wips up, staring at Jaws with disbelief. “How the hell do you know?”

Jaws spits on the rifle’s barrel, polishing some more before answering. “While you are beating up the cooks, I happen to be listening to what the Oumanne are saying.”

Butler collapses on his cot, groaning. “How much longer of this? If my old man must find out I’m doing shitall, while he is working his arse off...”

A siren goes off above the tents, a distressful call that churns Isak’s stomach.

“My God this is it.” Butler is white in the face.

There’s a frantic scramble for clothes and equipment. Twenty minutes is what they have. It takes twenty minutes to prepare a helicopter.

Isak dresses quickly, waiting outside the tent for the boy who leads the second stick. Together they jog over to the ops room, the small building he has been eyeing for weeks. Inside the low roofed shack, their commander ignores them, busy with the maps against the wall. Urgent voices come over the radio equipment. The briefing is short but intense. A landmine has destroyed a vehicle and boys have been killed. Isak concentrates on remembering the details of compass readings, position and emergency manoeuvres. For now the ambush is a technical exercise.

On the runway are two Pumas and an Alouette gunship. The boys smile at the sight of the helicopters, showing thumbs-up signs to each other as they climb in.

“This is it.” Isak repeats the words of Butler as he sits down next to Jaws at the open door. The mortars he carries on his body weigh him down. He is compromised on speed and agility and it is this very mobility that is needed to survive. He knows he is a human bomb.

Around him everyone is busy with routine checks, folding the butts of the rifles down except the four at the door whose rifles point outward.

The Pumas rise up like lazy birds towards the North-West. With interest the stick look out over the endless bushveld. The trees get denser as the helicopter makes its way North. When he looks back, the water tower of Ondangwa has disappeared.

The shadow of the Alouette falls over the Puma. Isak looks up against the belly of the gunship that protectively covers them and he is glad for it.

Then the helicopters drop down, skimming the trees and the pilot is talking to ground control, confirming the place of contact.

The smiles are gone in the helicopter as all of them listen to the voices. Isak spots the shona ahead, encircled by a sandy beach, the expanses of savannah stretching far and wide. His eyes scan the trees as they descend with crab-like clumsiness. He lifts the rifle and Jaws does the same.

For a brief moment it is a small boy with wide-open arms and a white shirt before him. He sees him dark-skinned and of medium height in his sights but this time he wears mustard coloured khaki and he is as much surprised to see them as Isak is to see him. Isak can see the surprise in his eyes, so close are they to each other and the boy in mustard rests the RPG7 on his shoulder, aiming at them.

Isak centres the black cross over the boy's chest, carefully. Then he releases the trigger and there is some sort of sound from the rifle but he is not so much aware of the sound, for the rotors of the helicopter drown out all sound, it is more a sensation of something being released but he is totally aware of the boy in the trees. Through the telescope he sees how the boy falls in the grass. Then suddenly others appear from the trees, dozens of them and the front man has his hands up in the air. Isak has not

taken his eye off the sights. For a second time in seconds, another appears in focus, the man with raised arms and the boys in the helicopter are shouting.

“Skiet hom, skiet hom!”

He drops the rifle. “Nee.”

Before they can argue with each other the undergrowth is alive with men. The Puma touches down and the sticks pour out of the helicopter, fanning out into a straight line with the second stick joining them. Isak is aware of shots being fired from the Alouette in the sky.

He is on the one edge of the line. The captain in the middle shouts instructions to both sticks on either side of him as they advance towards the trees and tall grass where at least fifty men are shooting back at them.

The Alouette withdraws and the Pumas have left as well. There is no more security from the skies over them. He drops onto his knee, setting up the mortar as the line replies with a barrage of fire. Swiftly, he loads the projectile, releasing it without waiting to see where it lands. He loads the second projectile that lands behind the insurgents, cutting off their escape. The stick’s line moves into the thicket and the insurgents drop down, crawling backwards into the exploding shells.

Their bodies lie in the grass. The last five make a run for it but the boys shoot them down from the back and it is the fists of Meintjies punching Lovett that flash through his mind.

The contact is over, quickly. Minutes have hardly passed.

The captain gives orders that all bodies are to be searched. Wary of hand grenades the boys roll them over with their boots.

Isak can hear birds squawking in the branches above his head. He walks to the tree. The boy in mustard lies there on his back. The camo clothing ripped open over

his chest and Isak can see a part of his lung and his heart. And the lung is black from smoking but the heart is red and moist and bloody and yet nothing will get it going again. He scratches in the pockets, avoiding the boy's shot eyes that stare at him.

There is a letter written in Portuguese and a small black and white photo of a girl with curly hair and light complexion. The smudged page ends with a heart and crosses and the girl's name, Maria. He folds the letter neatly putting it back in the pocket but the photo he keeps with him. Quickly he closes the eyelids before rolling the body over and for the first time he can look at the dead boy with his finger still caught around the trigger.

Excitable birds dart in and out of the trees. He swings the rifle to shoot but drops it as quickly, surprised.

Only now he is aware of the ambushed stick, sitting next to the blown up vehicle. Some of the boys are crying and Jaws is administering drips and they look like sotte in the hostel, gone from home for the first time. There are others, dead with torn off limbs, their skin burnt off to pinkness.

One prisoner has been taken. The tall boy with the raised hands and he does not look at the bodies of his comrades but defiantly at Isak. A madness overtakes the victors. Boys cut off ears and string them onto dog chains, while others strip the bodies of jewellery and weapons. Butler is alone, hunched over the radio, fiddling with dials and knobs. Isak waits under the tree, his heart racing.

The pillaging is cut short by the captain's call for quiet. With sign language he instructs Isak to guard the prisoner, pressing his wrists together to make his point clear. Isak and Butler will guard the Ovambo boy for the night.

They regroup and follow the captain away from the shona. Lovett and Meintjies each have a bizarre necklace of ears around their necks. The boys with light

injuries are helped along and he feels bad that he immediately sees them as a liability. Shamefully, he turns his thoughts to the prisoner in front of him.

To one side is the abandoned Ratel, hacked open as though by a blunt tin opener, the burning diesel a smoking message to the bush.

The afternoon drags onto nightfall, last light as they call it, the most dangerous time of day after dawn. They will spend their first night in the Angolan bush. The boys go about setting up a temporary base, while the remnants of the shattered stick look on in a daze.

Isak and Butler lie at twelve o' clock and the other buddies dig in at their nominated hours of the clock. All eyes are on ground level looking in to the circle where the Ovambo boy sits, fastened to a tree, his wrists and ankles bound with rope.

The hornbills honk on and on, broadcasting their presence to both man and animal. No one speaks a word.

He sees the five boys fall, again and again. The red spots on their shirts spreading like ink on blotting paper.

All light withdraws from the forest and there is no comfort from a fire. No flames to warm your insides, no fire to keep the dark out. Both he and Butler chew on dog biscuits.

He takes out the photo but he cannot see anything so he imagines her face, dark eyes and a broad brow with a widow's peak just like his own. He constructs the rest of her and she is soft and round and there are fine hairs on her arms. And he tries to imagine her smiling.

The moment he takes his attention off her the contact vividly replays itself. The heavily injured that are taken out by the returning choppers and the boy on the stretcher. The boy with a face covered in acne and his leg, missing from just above the

knee and his other foot mangled and all Isak could think of is that he will never play rugby again.

Finally, it is the boy in mustard with the RPG7 that appears. Every time it is him or the boy. Both of them knew it. The boy with the tieroë, just like him.

The prisoner feigns sleep but he watches Isak's every move, bright as an owl and he does not sleep, listening and alert to every cry and call of the bush.

From out of his trench Isak observes him through the infra-red binoculars for Butler is of little help, lying motionless beside him, eyes wide open with his rifle across his chest.

*

Dawn creeps up on them. The early light tempered by millions of leaves. Isak flexes his feet, touching the strawberry mark on his neck, while Butler snores gently, his body shaking in sleep. The Ovambo boy is still awake, his skin the colour of clay. The captain moves around the circle gesturing them to get up but there's a lethargy that keeps them down.

Butler sits up, avoiding him, eating hungrily from a tin of baked beans. Across the circle Isak watches Jaws consume his daily ration of water in seconds. His own thirst is unbearable but he refrains from gulping, measuring the water carefully in a dixy. Sip and wait, sip and wait.

The captain designates two buddies as reconnaissance. They walk ahead by fifty paces and the stick joins them to make a scorpion, the bounded prisoner between Dirk and Jaws.

Outward looking they move amongst the trees, avoiding the tracks of cattle and vehicles, a labyrinth of sand, flies and heat, all day long. The captain draws a halo over his head and the front two boys begin to walk a circle in the sand, then he holds up his hands, marking off the count of six with his fingers and the two boys stop at six o'clock while the others religiously follow, taking their place, back to back in the midday heat, a time to rest your body but not your mind.

They sit under the Mopane trees with *black is beautiful* on their faces.

The rooibok has been there all the while, waiting for the heat to pass, for them to pass. Isak only notices it by the flick of its ear. What else is out there that he hasn't noticed?

They get up and move out and the rest of the day maintains the same hypnotic aura. Reading signs and warnings in broken twigs, the bush sounds, the movement of leaves and grass.

The only change that takes place is who walks ahead. Now it is Isak and Butler's turn. The mortars' weight is great and cumbersome amongst the trees, Butler struggles with his radio's weight. Tempe and its marbles now a playground for boys.

The trees thin out as they approach another shona. Butler signals the compass reading and grid reference to the ops room so far away and the ops room to the pilot coming in.

The scorpion fans out along the edge of the shona, rifles pointing towards the bush. Exposed in the short grass is the captain and Butler hunched over the radio, bringing in the helicopter and the prisoner stands tall, looking up at the sky.

They hear it coming in before they can see it, just like the boy in mustard must have heard them coming before he saw them.

The helicopter is for the prisoner, not for them. Its noise is deafening after a day of silence. Sand kicks viciously into their backs but it takes less than a minute to load the Ovambo boy.

The smell of paraffin lingers. The boy without a name will be taken to some small village where men wait for him that will make him talk. Isak has heard the talk of the hole in the ground, covered with a corrugated iron sheet. Out in the sun the interrogation will begin as the heat climbs and the boy will cry out, then speak and tell them the story they want to hear.

The scorpion of boys recedes into the bush. The second night faces them and no word is spoken. For most there is nothing to say.

*

As in a dream they walk on and on, deeper and deeper into the bush, mesmerized by birds and the heat trapped under the trees.

The Ovambo boy has split, so they must continue. Butler swears over and over, cursing the Ovambo boy who is free of this.

Three days they walk and watch. Without warning, the blackened men of thirty-two battalion step out of the undergrowth for their rendezvous and if it weren't for the setting it could be happening anywhere.

In front of them the men stand, confidently jeering at them so easily caught off guard. Renegades and old terrorists brought in and reconditioned for South Africa's cause, by the hole in the ground and the corrugated sheet in the sun. Without a word they form a long tail that twists far behind the pathfinders, clearing their way to the Swapo base. At night they join to create a circle of safety. In this they are one.

The renegades smell of dung and old fires. Curious, Isak follows their movements. Peeing against a tree like a dog, farting as the captain signals to them, fearless men with no place called home but in this. You can tell they don't give a damn by their swagger, the shrunken ears around their throats, the freeness with each other in their affections, driven by the thrill of the chase and money.

Four days of high alert pass by. Long days spent scanning the bush as they move North. The anticipation of a contact itches at them and then it happens suddenly, not the contact but the discovery of the Ovambo boy's split as the scorpion's tail lashes out to the side. The men of thirty-two battalion are caught unaware.

On the tail end, Isak and Butler pick up the innocent mounds of earth, hidden in the grass, while the rest of the group walk over it, eyes on the bush and not at their feet. With a whiplash the two of them send the scorpion running in all directions.

The base lies in the middle of a clearing, camouflaged by soil and grass. Hastily they regroup. An avalanche of smoke grenades pour into the rifle openings of the base. Nothing moves, just smoke puffing out of the bunkers. Isak and Butler cock their rifles.

Hornbills lift off in a flurry.

Still nothing moves. The base is deserted perhaps for an hour before them getting there. They drop down into the bunkers. Food litters the floor of the masterly disguised base.

Like rabbits they scurry through the endless warren of tunnels. Stacks of badly printed pamphlets block the passages. Clumsily drawn hammer and sickle signs on the cover and slogans in Portuguese. Isak stuffs one into his pocket, ready for attack but the base is an anti-climax for the men of thirty-two and a relief for the boys.

Some of the men of thirty-two casually eat the food off the floor, then they part ways as quickly as their coming together. As the men melt into the bush, Isak thinks it's better to be with them, where death is a game.

The stick forlornly watches them go. Thirty-two were some sort of guard, some sort of protection against the unknown.

It is their tenth night out. A fortnight is the longest you stay out in the bush. That is what they were taught at Tempe.

They set up base not far from the hide-out, tension in every limb, exhaustion etched on their faces, unsure of what last light will bring. Maybe the deserters will return with the sun behind them.

Alongside him Butler with his bulldog manner trenches in for the night. The monastic silence between them doesn't bother Isak. He enjoys speaking with his eyes and hands but not Butler. The prolonged speaking embargo aggravates his aggression.

To the left of the circle is Jaws digging determinedly, his once impeccably kept hands are covered in muck. And the night is agonisingly slow. Every two hours the shift changes but no one sleeps.

For Isak the closeness of Butler brings calmness. Allowing his breath to follow that of Butler reminds him of boys with spines curved like taut bows. He takes out the crude drawing, careful not to elbow Butler, studying it through the binoculars, How did they know they were coming? Men like moles hiding in narrow passages, longing perhaps for a farm, a kraal, a girl? He takes out the photo and studies the face and it is a face that has seen things, the heaviness of her gaze tells him that. Would she have been told of the mustard boy's death?

Perhaps the hornbill's cry or the small boy at dawn, herding the cattle, too young to fight yet sharp as an arrow, was their warning. Even the men of thirty-two

had lost their touch in the bush, the skill to tread on twigs and leaves, the art of leaving no footprint, understanding the little boy for what he was. Missing the vital signs for survival.

And whose will to live was the biggest and who was the least afraid of dying?
And why did thirty-two not see the mounds?

So many questions in his head without answers and so much time to think, more time than he has ever had. Here in the bush it is as though one's thoughts are clearer, less tainted and influenced by others.

He longs for the farm. Veldt and mountain with a sky deeper than blue, recalling the burning pamphlets of Koos under the dam wall and the clouds, puffed like pillows over his head.

Throughout the night a thirst gnaws at him. Day after day the clouds have come and gone. Their rations are running out and the old soldiers who know this place have gone North, men who might have been able to find water in the sand.

Butler's jerks and whimpers don't disturb Isak anymore. Quietly he cuts open a tin of peas in the dark, drinking the thickish water.

*

Here in the hospital cot is nothing but you.

He longs for what was. He longs for a time when he saw everything in black and white. It made it so much easier to live with yourself.

He thinks about the boys in the bush. They really were only boys, children, fighting other children and hardened men with a cause. What did he say to Petrus that time?

Dis nie vir speel nie, dis vir real. Isak snorts at his own stupidity.

Even now, thirty years later, the sense of disappointment is still acute, to be airlifted or not to be airlifted.

The faces of the young men around him that day in the bush are fuzzy but their disappointment is still real to him. Some of them started to cry, unashamedly. Boys who had beaten up old men in bars were crying to go home. He was embarrassed for their sake, so he had walked away as they dropped down and cried. But he didn't cry. There was nothing calling him home, not even the thought of Magdaleen could excite him anymore, that fantasy had been destroyed forever.

If he could speak to them today, would they remember their tears, retell the story the way it was? Or would they have buried it as a bad dream in the dungeon of their subconscious like he had done? Perhaps they would cling to it as the only time when they really felt alive?

Some would laugh like Butler. Remembering the card games and the booze-ups. Butler, shooting stock thieves and still on the rampage in the thin white corridor of farms in the Eastern Cape.

The bad dreams of Butler in youth have become his nightmares.

The boy in mustard camo will not go away, not even in this morphine numbness here in a foreign country. The boy travels with him, always.

He has learnt to cry about the boy and for the boy. The boy with eyes like himself, green and yellow-flecked.

Allowing himself to be disappointed with himself is something tougher. That it is okay to feel pissed off like now. That it is okay for him to be pissed off with himself, for falling. That it is okay that others will be pissed off with him for his failure to save.

If only he could go home. To a loser's reception doesn't matter anymore. Home has become more than the farm. It is the greater sum of people. It is the magic that surrounds him when he is there. A belonging. Connected with earth and sky. Home is only something he is beginning to comprehend.

Out of the rain a burst of sunlight fills the ward with brightness. The old men clap their hands in childlike delight. Even a good thing like sun can become a demon when you get too much of it, he thinks despondently.

What happened after the men of thirty-two left them? The memories are sketchy. After the first few days everything becomes indistinguishable, one day just like the next.

Thirst and hunger become the overriding memory of that time. Meintjies and Lovett dragging behind, their water ration finished. He was aware of their dehydration but ignored it like the rest of the stick. But their lagging made the scorpion vulnerable to attack and it felt like his responsibility, why he cannot explain, but he felt moved to do it to ensure his own survival perhaps?

He wanted to say something as they drank greedily. Tiny drops of water falling wastefully. Watching the water sink so fast was hard. His water so carefully rationed over the weeks, now gone in seconds. Sharing it was the hardest thing he had ever done.

They headed down South, if he recalls correctly. Not quite so alert, not quite so sharp, their minds distracted.

By chance they stumbled on them, huddled together and Janneman was one of them, clawing at him like a man possessed. To the one side was the body in the bag, covered with flies.

How quickly you change from an animate object to a bagged body. The difference being how quickly your finger is on the trigger, how clearly you see in the dark.

Janneman and them had water, enough for all of them. It took all his self-control to stand back and let the others drink until they were full. Their weakness made him feel stronger. It gave him a sense of power controlling the urge to push and shove and take.

In this he had changed. Now he was fighting for every drop, every cent, every chance to survive, shamelessly...a hardened man, torn apart.

Around him were the injured boys. He will never forget their faces, boy's faces disfigured by shrapnel, looking up at him with trusting eyes as a dog to his master.

Butler and the captain were on the radio and Jaws and Dirk handed out drips, like smarties at a children's party while the rest encircled the injured.

Janneman would not let him go. It must have looked funny if it was anywhere else.

Janneman of all people crawling behind him.

Helicopters came and went again, but not for them. The casevac was for the worst injured. Those who could walk, stayed behind.

Their captain went along to report back to base, deserting them, without any of them realising it but he did, he knew they were being abandoned.

How forlorn they were as the helicopters lifted off. Their swollen tongues stuck to the roofs of their mouths. Butler as ever, furiously encoding their position to the ops room.

But there was no reply. It is as though the world had forgotten of them.

*

“Ek wil met haar praat.” He rolls his neck so that he can see Danie with closed eyes on the other cot.

“Met Aimee?” Danie makes sure.

“Gee.” His eyes run over the cell phone on the bedside cupboard and the tulips that droop further and further forward. It must be the artificial heat of the central heating that makes them waste so quickly.

Danie types in the number, holding the phone to his ear as it begins to ring.

“Hello, it’s Aimee speaking.”

He hesitates.

“Isak, is that you?”

“Aims...I’m sorry.”

“How high was that wall and how far did you fall?”

There’s no point in lying to her, she will catch him out down the line. “A small wall but a far fall, about five meters, I think.”

Now she is quiet. He can see her picturing the fall, living herself into it.

“Donner dis ver,” is all she says.

“I’m fine, you don’t have to come, I’ll be out here, soon.”

“If I must come, I’ll come. Petrus can run the show, his anyway doing it most of the time.”

“Nee, nee. Danie slaap hier by my in die hospitaal. Ek’s fine, belowe.”

“Lieg jy of praat jy die waarheid?”

He is tired. “Ek’s by die huis voor jy ‘n vlug kan reël.” He changes the topic.

“Hoe’s die weer?”

“Droog, nog niks geval nie. Het jy iets gebreek?”

“’n Rib of twee, my skouer is af en daar’s ‘n gat in my kop, maar niks het uitgeval nie. Hoe ver staan die pakkery?”

“Ag...” Now it’s her turn to be caught on the back foot. “They picked up gnats in the stem ends of the late peaches. The last batch was turned down at inspection. Petrus says they come from the wheat fields.”

“Hoe gaan jy nou maak?” His voice is on edge.

“Ontspan, die vrouens blaas nou die goeters uit, een vir een voor hulle dit pak maar dit gaan stadig.”

He struggles to see the farm, to remember what each one is busy with.

“Maak seker dat Petrus die Forelle se drukke dophou.”

“Al klaar gedoen.” The finality in her voice makes him leave questioning her further.

“Is Sophs daar?”

“Ja, sy spring op en af hier langs my en jou Ma...”

He hears the exasperation in her voice and he doesn’t want to hear any more.

“Ek kan nie nou verder praat nie, die dokter wag vir my.”

“Petrus says you must think of a solution while you’re lying there, you always do and Koba has composed a poem for you. We’ll fax it through to Danie and ...”

“’n Boer maak ‘n plan,” he replies.

He hears his daughter shouting into the phone. “We love you, Daddy.”

“Dankie... Ek mis julle.”

“Vasbyt.” Aimee encourages from the other side.

Danie takes the phone away from his ear. He can hear the two of them shouting, love you, over and over.

He wants her to come. He wants her to hold him. He wants to kiss her lips but the bank will not sanction the money for a ticket and this disappointment he cannot, will not, bring on her or himself.

The farm lurches from one crisis to the next, most of the time unforeseen and unpredictable. He knows she is trying her best but her best isn't good enough to get them through the season and he doesn't have the heart to tell her, that it's just a matter of time.

*

The Pumas come as the sun is going down. They hide amongst the Mopane trees as the three helicopters crouch on the sand of the shona like roaring lions. All of them run, even the weak ones run and he holds back and Butler holds back with him because they are buddies.

There's a mad scramble at the doors. Jaws and Dirk step back. Two of the Pumas lift off. Isak can see the smiling faces from down under. They make a run for the third but it stays put.

“Out, out!” The pilot shouts.

Nobody moves.

Isak climbs out. The helicopter doesn't budge.

“Out!” The pilot shouts again.

Reluctantly, Butler, Jaws and Dirk join him. Janneman hangs limply in the door with wild eyes and a torn leg. He turns his head away.

Lazily, the helicopter lifts, swaying dangerously.

The four of them are mesmerised by the Puma, following it until it is a speck and the roaring has faded.

The sky over the shona is deepening into the colours of wet earth. The sun is so intense and beautiful that they pause and watch it sink behind the horizon.

On the edge of the shona they dig in, a little way from the previous nights base, all four of them in one trench, alone in the vastness of the bush. Alone in a country where they don't belong.

They cannot speak. They choose not to speak.

Far above their heads, green lights move in the night sky. Planes flying across the continent to Europe or even to Luanda. Intermittently they appear, some to the right and some to the left, back and forth, unaware of them. People will be sitting in these planes strapped in, watching a movie, enjoying an iced drink, licking salt off their fingers from peanuts.

Here below in the bush, elephants crash, trampling and stripping off bark. All four listen to the lumbering creatures passing closely by and their tread sounds so close that they hold their breath, feeling the earth tremble beneath them. To be killed by an elephant has never crossed their minds.

Hungry they toss around. Butler licks his cracked lips and all Isak can concentrate on, is the water falling from the mouth of Meintjies into the sand.

Throughout the night drums beat out messages, drums so far away but as frightening as the closeness of the elephants.

And dawn is delayed. Then they hear it at first light. Butler leaps up running towards the open grass, shooting off a red flare into the sky before any of the others can stop him. Now the whole bush knows of them.

The lone Puma is skittish and an easy target for RPG7s. Timing is now of the essence. Running low, rifles ready, the four of them board.

Up, up and away they escape the green cage. Butler shouts above the engines and his voice is croaky and thin, slapping them on the back. All of them smile.

The pilot smiles at them too, giving them the thumbs up, their stony faces have haunted him through the night.

“Waarheen is ons op pad?” Isak shouts.

“Net suid van die grens,” he shouts back.

“Nie Ondangwa nie?”

“What’s he saying?” Butler shouts into Isak’s ear.

“Not Ondangwa, somewhere else.”

This unexpected change of plan sobers Butler. He relays the message to the other two.

“What does this mean?” Jaws mouths to Butler.

“Ons is nog nie klaar nie,” Dirk answers dryly.

“Shit man! Shit!” Butler smashes his fist into wall of the cabin.

“How much more of this? What about a week of rest and a week of standby?”

Jaws throws up his hands in despair.

“Oorlog het geen reëls nie,” Dirk comments without expression.

“Waar’s die plek?” Isak asks the pilot, trying to read their destination from the control panel of the cockpit.

“’n Basiskamp.” Is all he gets in return.

They fly south. The terrain beneath begins to evolve with greater stretches of dull sand and low scrub, less trees and more open spaces, then the river. From the helicopter door they see the river, a snaking band of swarthy water. In all directions are sparse kraals of cleaned poles and putty coloured ant heaps. Ovamboland is home to the captured boy.

The base camp is small and immaculately swept, surrounded by a wall of sandbags and lookout towers. Ratels are lined up against the fence and inside the camp are rows of tents, while in the center is the mobile kitchen and storerooms. To the south of the camp are two structures.

Isak points and the pilot answers, "81mm mortierstellings."

Some distance from the camp are a few poles and nets draped between trees.

"Wie bly daar?"

The pilot nods to them in the helicopter.

"Hoekom buite die kamp?"

He shrugs, his attention on their descent.

They land to the western side of the base and there is no one to greet them.

One by one they climb out. Isak salutes the pilot and he raises his hand in acknowledgement.

This time they don't wait for the helicopter to leave. Butler has already begun to walk along the fence, his radio slung cockily over his shoulder. It is strange to be in a place where there is so little protection. Isak feels exposed.

Boys lie listlessly in the sand, while the injured are under the shade nets in makeshift cots.

"Wat die fok gaan hier aan?" Isak kicks at an empty bully beef can.

"Maggie daar in nie," someone bored answers from under the nets.

“Wie sê?” He kicks viciously at another tin.

One of the boys point to a boy of the injured stick. “Siebrits het gaan vra.”

“Hoekom?”

Siebrits gets up, dusting himself off. A lank boy with a moustache and a weak jaw. He holds out his hand. “Luitenant Siebrits,” he introduces himself. “Ons het ‘n sleg naam by Infanterie, hulle’s bang ons vat oor, mors die plek op.”

Isak takes an instant dislike to Siebrits but he doesn’t argue. In rank the other boy is higher than himself.

Jaws’s eyes run over the wounded. The shrapnel wounds are beginning to fester. Some of the boys have a fever and even Janneman’s leg has begun to swell.

“We need to get them out.”

“Dis nie net hulle wat hier moet uit nie.” Dirk sums up the rest.

“What the hell now?” Butler sits hunched on top of his radio.

“Get on that radio.” Isak looks over to the camp. The towers are manned. They are under constant surveillance by the Infantry.

So the next stage of survival begins.

Days pass. Butler furiously sends message after message. Jaws collects syringes and drips through the fence, even the Dominee speaks to him behind the wall of sandbags. As hunger and boredom eat at them, Isak plans the demise of those inside the camp. Power lies with watching.

More days pass and no one responds from Ondangwa. It is as though they have never existed. At night the boys with fever, shiver from their infections while the others cry from the nightmares of the bush. Isak feels sorry for all of them, the bush has left no mark on him. Instead he feels stronger, more alive, his mind sharper than ever before.

Infantry forgets about them. He can see this in their slackness with the routine watch.

He strolls over to Butler twiddling knobs. "Dis nou die tyd."

Butler nods. "When?"

"Last light."

The word goes around under the trees and for the first time there are a few smiles. Anxiously, they sit around listening to Isak and Butler's plan.

Eventually last light comes.

Butler and Benjie, a big boy under Siebrits, storm the sandbags. The scab is ripped off their frustrations and all the terror and anger and fear of the past weeks boil to the surface. Infantry have no defence against this.

Isak calmly listens to the chaos in the camp, while Siebrits deliberately ignores the raid.

In the tree, reporting on the progress is Jaws. He bursts out laughing and it is a sound that they've forgotten. Isak and the boys on the cots look up into the tree with interest.

"What's so funny?"

"Dominee has locked himself up in the storeroom."

"Butler's doing a good job in there."

"I wonder what's for supper?" Jaws climbs down. "A Black Label wouldn't be bad for a start."

A cloud of dust rises above the camp.

"Someone will have to sweep tomorrow," Isak comments.

*

Suddenly the fight is over. Boys come running towards them, triumphantly, loaded with cases of beer and tinned food. It all looks very comical to Isak, like a spaghetti western. He laughs and Jaws joins him and they laugh until the tears run down their cheeks and the boys on the cots begin to laugh as well.

“Ons het die fok uit hulle geslaan!” Dirk waves a beer above his head and the sound of Dirk swearing sends both Isak and Jaws into fresh spasms of laughter.

The injured are the first to get the beers. Butler pulls at the cardboard boxes, tearing them open, spilling the tins all over the camp, fruit and vegetables and beef. He drinks two beers simultaneously and the others copy him, while Isak sips slowly, getting his breath back.

Dehydrated bodies and beer are an intoxicating combination. They get drunk very quickly. Some trip over poles and lie there, unable to move, while others pass out next to the fire, their hands in the ash. A few cramp and vomit, right there amongst the others, unused to food and drink.

Isak is light headed, yet sure on his feet. He steps around the bodies. There is a tin still unopened, of peaches in thick syrup.

The moon is large, golden and so bright he can read the label. It says, *product of South Africa canned in the Western Cape*.

Methodically, he cuts the tin open, placing it between his knees, throwing the jagged metal lid behind him like a discus. He dips his finger into the tin, licking the cloying syrup. Carefully, he lifts the half-moon peach and he sees how her hair falls over her face, squashing the orange flesh with her ringed hand.

The fruit is warm and sweet and soft. He chews thoughtfully, with the taste of almonds in his mouth.

*

Squatting amongst empty cans, Butler gets the injured boys out, by persistence. Flooding the airwaves with requests, blocking the system for any other communication, until someone, somewhere notices.

The Puma comes on the first day of the summer rains, landing as pregnant drops skip off the sand. Rains that have gone long past their expected date arrive without warning.

Isak follows a flock of goats that stand on their hind legs, pulling at dry branches to feed higher.

At the kraal there are no men, only women and children and goats.

He gets down on his knee, steadying the rifle.

The sky is turbulent. Drops fall faster. She comes running out in a faded floral dress and the noses of the tackies are missing, while her kopdoek is skew, like Raatjie's when she has a dop in. She hugs herself, falling onto her knees, unaware of Isak, then she cups her hands above her, laughing with delight as the drops fall faster and harder and her laugh is that of younger person. With difficulty she gets up. As in a trance, the old woman spins faster and faster and her enjoyment of the rain is captivating to him as she topples over, her upturned face smiling blissfully.

The clouds give birth. Goodness pours down. Lightning and thunder rip the sky open.

Head down, Isak makes a dash for their campsite. Briefly he sees the young girl behind the poled fence with a baby on her back, stirring a drum, unaware of the storm. Her head is uncovered, her face blank.

The helicopter waits like a bedraggled bird as the injured boys are loaded. Isak can see the leg of Janneman will have to go. They shake hands. The rest of them line up and salute those leaving. The helicopter waits for the weather to clear then it takes off, shakily. No one looks up. Jaws has gone too, without saying goodbye.

So the cycle of hunger begins all over again and no one seems to care what happens.

Isak takes his rifle and heads back to the goats with Butler, his footprints already washed away by rivulets. The goats have not moved but the old woman is missing.

Once again he kneels and cocks the rifle. One creature seems to have weathered the drought better than the others. A cocky animal that watches him inquisitively. The bullet is straight, precisely where he wants it, between the eyes, splitting the brain in two. It falls to one side with little fuss, the shot scattering the rest of the flock.

“Poor Ballas.” Butler has a soft spot for small stock.

Together they lift the carcass and it is lighter than he expected, big framed and carrying little meat.

“Bad choice.” Butler pokes the animal’s ribs.

Isak throws it over his shoulders, passing the rifle to Butler. He looks up to see if the girl is still there but it is the old woman on the other side of the kraal wall and her eyes are alive with hatred.

Back at the camp, the boys sit dejectedly on the wet sand. Isak splices the goat in two and it is a messy affair and the stench of the guts is far stronger than what he can remember. He burns the intestines in the fire, while Dirk and Benji braai the

animal on the spit but the Cape boys can't stomach the meat without salt. The beer is finished so they sit lost in thought.

The girl at the drum was making beer, Isak knows. It was the same stuff they made at the barrakse on weekends.

*

They stink of burnt goat and fat, lying under a rumbling sky.

"Casspirs by candlelight." Butler burps nonchalantly.

Isak listens more intently. Beneath the rumbling of far-off thunder, engines growl in the dark.

The noise is ominously magnified here in the open. More men will be coming to the base camp and more men means less resources.

"Time to get out." Butler reads Isak's thoughts.

The Koevoet convoy pulls up. The undersize lights of the Casspirs cast a ghostly shine. The soldiers are relaxed, wearing camo clothing, their boots laced up to their calves with Russian army caps pulled low over bored expressions. Most of them slouch on top of the slit-eyed monster of a machine, legs swinging side to side.

The Bat boys get up to see better, while the infantry boys snap them in their flashlights, keeping the newcomers at bay.

Water is what they want. They have been bold enough to travel at night. While the guards nervously fill the jerry cans at the gate the Koevoet men stretch their legs, taking a smoke break.

A man stands on top of the front Casspir, shouting orders, his sharp angled face demonised by the yellow light.

Isak comes closer to inspect. There are five Casspirs. The camp lights sweep over the vehicles, revealing mutilated bodies tied to the mudguards, bodies dusty as straw dolls.

He walks into the veldt, hunching down. The excited voices of the boys mingle with the bragging replies of the Koevoet men.

They are hunting a group of PLAN insurgents, helped by the locals. He recognises voices from his stick, high and hysterical. Some of the boys run back to fetch their gear.

He vomits up fat and pieces of grey meat.

“They want us to go along.” Butler’s boots are in front of him. “Some hectic macho called Claasen calls the shots with them.”

“I’m not going.”

“Just checking, wanted to make sure, that’s all.” Butler kicks sand over the mess. “Meintjies and Lovett are leaving and some of the others, I think.” He drops down. “Can’t blame the chaps though, leaving.”

Isak nods.

“Are you okay?”

He nods again.

“Siebrits is in charge of us I guess.”

Isak keeps quiet, listening to the shouts of men ready for the hunt.

“The rest of us can’t stand his guts man, trying to Lord it, while he is shit scared himself.” He peers closely at Isak. “You’ve got to pull yourself together man, take control.”

“Ek’s fine.”

“You’re the toughest of the lot, the guys respect you Boertjie, there’s no one else who can get us out of this shithole but you.”

The Casspirs trundle in the direction of the kraal. Isak hears the engines idling, men’s voices, then a shot, then the wail of a woman.

“Are you listening?” Butler waves his hand in front of Isak’s face.

“Ja, I’m listening.”

“You’ve got to think of a plan, man.”

“I think they’ve shot the old woman.”

Butler frowns. “Your old lady?”

Isak gets up. “The old woman at the kraal, they’ve killed her.”

“Why would they want to kill an old woman?” Butler looks in the direction of the kraal.

“They’ve been hiding men in the kraal all this time we’ve been here.”

“Why didn’t you say something?” Butler is surprised.

“I only realised it now, the beer she was making was for them.”

“For Gods sake.” Butler yanks at Isak’s shirt. “Pull yourself together, man.”

“Maybe it was her son, the old woman’s...” Isak pushes Butler away from him. The Casspirs engines linger in the distance. “How many are we?”

Butler is rattled. “I don’t know...maybe forty.”

“Tomorrow we shower in camp.”

Butler smiles with relief, slapping Isak on the back. “Your stench is making me naar. That Ballas deo just doesn’t do it for you, Boertjie.”

The night is quiet. The camp’s lights sweep over them as they walk back to the trees and the thinned out stick.

Butler announces in an upbeat voice. “Tomorrow we move in.”

Benjie's hulking form appears out of the dark. "What shit are you saying again?"

"It's time we give the infantry guys a taste of what its like to be outside the camp with the enemy as their buddy." Isak steps forward. "Tomorrow we take the showers."

"Who's in?" Butler shouts gleefully.

Siebrits raises his hand to protest.

"With first light we take the camp, lock, stock and barrel," Isak continues.

"Amen," Dirk supports the idea. "Ek wil persoonlik die Dominee doop."

The boys cheer and Siebrits drops his hand.

*

First light is just before four. Benjie whistles softly and the boys tighten the belts wrapped around their fists.

Vapours rise from the hot sand. The guards in the towers are restless, their concentration before the change of the shift is at its lowest.

The remnant of the stick leopard crawls towards the sand bags. There are faint glimmerings in the east and the guards expect nothing more of the night. Isak and Butler slip under the barbed wire and the rest follow. The guard's eye is on the horizon and the smoking kraal. He doesn't see the snake of dirty men sliding over the swept sand.

Quickly they position themselves at the head and tail of the tents. The guards finish the shift, thinking of sleep.

Isak calls like a hornbill and the boys crouch down.

Then they storm all at once, tipping boys off cots and letting loose with their belts.

Benjie takes on a tent by himself, pulling out the main tent pole, smothering the boys inside on their cots with his weight. Butler has the kitchen under siege, while the others beat the daylights out of the infantry boys all the way out of camp, locking the gate behind them. Dirk has cornered the dominee in the showers, dunking him thoroughly, then dropping him over the fence.

In the showers a dozen naked boys slip and fall beneath Isak's belt, while Benjie and the the boys mop up the last of infantry hiding amongst the tents, herding them out of the camp with their kit.

Forty boys stand amazed at their victory. Broken tents and gear lie all around them. Outside the camp, two hundred boys, dazed and bruised, stare at them through the fencing.

They are left alone. Isak stretches out under the shower. The water is warm, softening the filth all over his body, dissolving the fattiness of goat's meat caught in his beard. He lifts his chin to the meagre stream, enjoying the pattering of water on his skin.

Boys lie on the deserted cots, while others raid the storeroom.

"Boss, someone wants to see you, on the double." Benjie taps Isak on the shoulder. "If I'm you I'd move it."

Leisurely, Isak picks up a dropped towel of infantry, wrapping it around his hips before coming out of the makeshift shower house.

A dapper man, precisely dressed in full regalia waits for him at the broken door, an older man with a firm mouth and a perfectly trimmed moustache.

His insignia show the rankings of a commander. Isak salutes smartly, snapping his heels together.

“Welkom by Eenhana, Korporaal Bruwer.” He makes a gesture over the remains of the camp. “Ek sien jy het jou heel tuisgemaak, Korporaal, jammer net jy het nie eers kom vra nie.”

“Luitenant Siebrits het toestemming gevra, Kommandant, maar is...”

“Niemand het by my kom toestemming vra nie,” he cuts Isak short. “Ek het aangeneem julle wil soos cowboys daarbuite lewe, Korporaal.”

“Ons het sake in eie hande geneem, Kommandant.”

“Bronne is skaars hierbo, Korporaal Bruwer, kos, water, diesel, drank.” He raises his one eyebrow. “Dink in watse gemors sou die Weermag wees as elke Jan Rap en sy maat sake in eie hande neem?”

“Ek is jammer, Kommandant.” Isak drops his eyes.

“Wie is eintlik in beheer van julle, Korporaal?”

“Luitenant Siebrits, Kommandant.”

“Môre kom daar ‘n helikopter van Ondangwa af. Luitenenant Siebrits kan saam terugvlieg om reëlins vir julle uitklaring te tref.” The Commander surveys the mess made by the Bat boys. “Ek verwag dat die res van julle die Infanteriemanne sal bystaan om hul toerusting vir oormôre se vertrek reg te kry, asook die netheid van die terrein.”

“Ja, Kommandant.” Isak salutes a second time.

The Commander turns to walk, then he stops. “Laat weet vir my op ‘n ordelike wyse wat julle behoeftes is, Korporaal.”

“Ja, Kommandant.” He snaps his ankles a third time.

Benjie and the rest hear the devastating news with him. They pack up and march out of the camp, heads held high as the infantry boys catcall and mock them for their short lived reign of terror.

Back at their filthy campsite, Benjie kicks into the grey porridge of ash under the goat's carcass, then he picks up an empty diesel drum, throwing it at the direction of the camp. "Shit, shit, shit!" He swings around unexpectedly, grabbing Siebrits by the throat, throttling him hard.

Siebrits's legs go limp before Isak and Butler can move in and free him.

"Fuck off ... You kaffir lover!" Benji knocks Isak to the ground, his knees on his chest. Isak can feel how his head flops from side to side as Benjie punches him in the jaw but he doesn't fight back, just closes his eyes.

Butler jumps on Benjie's back like a rodeo rider, pulling at his arms. A white-faced Siebrits is attacked by his own stick even while Dirk tries to resuscitate him.

Along the fence, infantry follow the brawl under the trees, shaking their heads and spitting in the sand.

The fight goes out of Benjie, like a burst tyre, skidding wildly off the road, causing havoc, then falling to pieces. The fight goes out of the other boys as well.

Suddenly it is only the generator inside the camp and the hammering of tent pegs into the ground.

Benjie lies with his full weight on top of Isak, his arms twisted behind his back by Butler. There are tears of the big boy on Isak's cheek as they lie pancaked on top of each other. Butler releases Benjie's arms. The big boy loosens himself, getting up with downcast eyes, yanking Isak to his feet.

"Keep the little prig away from me, just keep him away."

Boredom and uncertainty will make them destroy each other. Siebrits is incapable of talking, the imprints of Benjie's hands still on his neck.

Rain clouds move in from the north, thick and fleecy like merinos, yet there is no relief.

"Butler, fetch the rat packs from the kitchen and behave yourself." Isak talks quietly. "Dirk vat ons plek en maak dit skoon, gaan vra mooi asseblief 'n besem daarbinne." He looks over to the camp. "The rest of you guys can come with me to tidy up the tents and you, Benjie," he eyes the diesel drum, "get some homebrew going. Use the raisins from the rat packs. If the PB's can make beer from bugger all, so can we."

The entire day is spent restoring order, inside and outside the camp. Benjie's drum keeps him busy. Discarded pineapple skins from the rubbish dump at the back of the camp are mixed in the drum with sugar, raisins and water, then put in the sun to ferment. The big boy begins to whistle a Bat tune as he stirs his brew.

Dirk's team have set up tents under the trees and they all watch Benjie, hypnotised by the stirring.

Butler lies in a hammock, mimicking the dialling tone of a phone. He lifts an imaginary receiver to his ear and the rest shift their attention to him.

"Hi Mom, can you hear me? It's your darling boy, Mom, you know the one that disappeared off the face of the earth? Well I'm back Mom, Andrew Warren Butler, your youngest." He pretends to listen. "It's me, promise, alive and kicking in some asshole of a joint, I'll be back for Christmas." He pauses again. "Ooh my favourites, banana caramel and sticky chocolate pud, yummy."

Dirk jumps up, snatching the imaginary phone from Butler's hand. "Ma, dis Dirkie, nie daai rooinek Butler nie. Ma ken hom nie. Ek is mos Ma se seun, nie hy

nie.” Dirk turns his back to Butler. “Sê vir Elsie sy moet skaapkop bak, ek is oor ‘n week daar Ma, dis nie meer lank nie, Ma...”

Furiously, Butler bumps Dirk, grabbing the phone. “He’s talking a load of crap Mom, I’m sorry I swore Mom but these rock spiders are really getting to me, Mom...”

Dirk wrestles with Butler for the phone. Butler falls out of the hammock and they roll over the sand, Butler’s hands sweeping the ground, his voice high pitched. “Where’s the fucking phone, dough ball, you let the fucking phone fall!”

Benjie drops the stick, pulling at Butler’s dog chain. “There’s no fucking phone, you idiot, your’re going nuts, there’s no fucking phone!”

**

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“Ek’s honger.”

“Jy’t geslaap toe vat hulle jou aandete weer weg.” Danie helps him sit upright.

“Waarvoor is jy lus, ek sal gaan kyk wat in die kombuis aangaan.”

“Ingelegde perskes.”

Danie stops straightening the bed. “Wanneer laas het ek dit geëet?”

“Oppie grens in ses-en-sewentig.” Isak remembers his last time.

“Ek dink ek was by Ouma in die outhuis, net voor die aardbewing. Ons het dit uit die bakkies met die blou randjies geëet.”

“As ek my oë toemaak dan skiet die derms van die verlede op in my kop en ek kan dit nie stop nie,” Isak groans. “Dit maak my op.”

“It must be the combination of the morphine and shock.” Danie coughs behind the screen.

“Why do you cough so much?”

“Ek sukkel om van die laaste van die brongitis ontslae te raak.”

“Is dit nie TB nie? Jy’s maer en jou kleur is nie goed nie.”

“Ja, Mamma.” Danie throws the hanky into the bin, “TB is ‘n Afrika-kwaal. Jy kry dit nie in Holland nie, Mamma.”

“Global village,” Isak reminds him. “Vandag kry almal alles, Boeta.”

“Ek gaan soek vir jou perskes.”

“In stroop.”

“Ja, Ma, in stroop.” Danie rolls his eyes.

He is fed up, not with Danie but himself. That he went on so long with it. Is it the way one is brought up that makes you blind to reason to see the shit for what it is? Or is it your own agenda born from selfishness?

“Hulle het net pere, in suikervrystroop, vir diabete.”

“Gee maar.”

Danie takes the spoon and chops the pear into pieces. “Hoe smaak dit?”

“Sleg.”

“Nog?”

“Los maar.” The pears make him lose his appetite. He looks at Danie. The weaknesses of childhood have become his strength. “Hoekom wil jy nie terug nie?”

“Dis ’n besluit wat ek geneem het.”

“Besluite kan omgekeer word, kyk vir Mandela...Daar’s ook baie ander.”

Danie covers the pears with a paper towel.

“Why’re you so...rigid?” Isak feels his agitation rising.

“I don’t really know.” Danie sits down on Isak’s cot, watching the soccer match. “Maybe it’s a bit like riding a horse, if you fall off and don’t get back up immediately, its something you just can’t bring yourself to do later, even though your rational mind tells you it’s okay.” He keeps his eyes on the screen.

“What could have hurt you so badly?” Isak shakes his head impatiently.

“Los die gesels.” Danie’s voice is terse.

“Ek wil weet.” Isak insists.

“Kom Aimee?” Danie deflects the question.

“Nee.”

“Is daar fout?”

Isak ignores the question.

Danie rinses his hands, his back turned to Isak. “Dink jy nooit aan die tyd wat jy weg is army toe nie.” He turns to look at Isak and his eyes are heavy. “Hoe voel jy daaroor?”

“Goor, kwaad, opgevreet deur skuldgevoelens, niks anderste as die meeste wit middeljarige ouens nie.”

Danie catches the heart monitor peaking dramatically on the screen. “Kom ons praat later oor die dinge, jy moet rus.”

“My brein moet rus.”

“Dit ook.”

Unsuccessfully, Isak tries to draw up a list of things that Aimee must check. There is no help for them from the neighbouring farmers. Not even now as he lies here. He knows that Perron is being discussed and watched, not only on the co-ops stoep but in boardrooms and on golf courses. If their experiment works, it will have far reaching consequences for all in agriculture. Many hope that the experiment will stay exactly just that, an experiment.

*

The leaves of the trees shine from the rain. Siebrits has left for Ondangwa. Isak and Butler line-up the scorpions.

“Nou!” Dirk shouts.

Isak prompts his scorpion with a stick. Warily, the two creatures circle each other. Butler nudges his from the back and the deathly tail whips up aggressively while the boys shout.

“My geld is op Savage.” Dirk eyes the smaller scorpion of Isak.

Isak snaps his fingers in the air and his scorpion responds in the same manner, stalking the other.

Butler pushes his scorpion onto Isak’s and there is a vicious slashing of pincers and stings. Both boys fall back, horrified yet charmed by the creatures.

“Go for the kill!” Butler shouts excitedly as his scorpion mounts that of Isak.

But the other scorpion is smaller, more agile, bending its sting into the back of the other. They hear the death strike, watch how the larger scorpion’s strength fades.

The boys become quieter. The smaller scorpion tosses the dead scorpion off its back.

“Loser!” Butler kicks the dead scorpion to one side.

“Vat ‘n ander een,” Isak suggests, carefully placing the winner in a tin.

Butler grabs his rifle. “Let’s go Ballas bashing.”

The scrub has changed overnight from the rains. There’s a freshly dug mound under a lone tree, where the goats, nervously nibble of the new leaves on the lower branches. Isak and Butler fan out on either side of the flock. Butler waves his arms and the goats choose the old path back to the kraal.

Isak waits for them.

The front goat is the smartest, stalling at the sight of Isak. It careers sideways, while the second freezes, giving him time to aim and shoot.

Behind the goat is the girl from the kraal. Her skin is waxed like freshly laid dung floors and her expression is one of open resentment.

“I’m sorry.” He gets up, pointing to the goat. “I’ll pay for it.” But he has no money, nothing to give her to make up for her loss.

She points to his rifle.

“No, its not mine, I can’t give it to you, I’m sorry, so very sorry.” He wants to ask her about the old lady but he doesn’t know how to, so he acts out the rain falling and the old lady dancing and he pretends to fall on the sand like she did. “The old lady, is she all right?” He walks slowly with a bent back, using the rifle like a walking stick.

She does not appear to understand, bending down to pick up the dead goat, then she points to the bullet mark on the goat’s head and the mound under the tree. As she walks away he sees bruises on her back.

Butler shouts his name and he hears the Puma coming overhead and the girl is forgotten as they run back to camp.

Boys embrace and whoop in delight. Benjie tips the drum of brew into the sand and they load their gear in double time. It is with relief that they look down on the camp and the solitary kraal of stripped poles. From the air Isak can see the kraal has been burnt but he turns his thoughts to Ondangwa. Ondangwa is home for now. The Pumas fly south-easterly, over a landscape of increasing desolation. Not a sighting of a tree or a man or an animal.

Singing breaks out to a loud cheer at the sighting of Ondangwa’s water tower.

Three months later and none of them are boys anymore.

The tarmac is busy but there is no return celebration for them. There are new recruits in the tents. Siebrits steps out of the ops room with buttons and boots shining.

“Die kamp is vol.”

Isak listens with hooded eyes.

“Ek het pertinente instruksies ontvang dat julle onder geen omstandighede kontak met enige ander soldaat op die terrein mag maak nie.” There is grumbling but Siebrits continues, “bly weg van die storte en kombuis af, totdat julle verdere

instruksies ontvang het. Ek, Offisier Smit en van Rensburg moet vanaand op Oshikati terugrapporteer. Julle bly net hier op die aanloopbaan tot verdere kennisgewing.” He turns to Isak. “Korporaal Bruwer en Butler sal my plek volstaan, tot dan.”

“Naf, naf, naf,” Butler imitates Siebrits.

They dump their belongings right there in a heap. Without further discussion they erect a canvas for shade between the diesel pumps and settle down. Dirk hauls out the cards and the endless rummy game begins while Butler and Benjie catch flies, pulling off their wings, watching the insects crawl and burn on the tar.

A Landrover drives out of the camp with Siebrits at the wheel on his way to the debriefing and white women waiting in pre-fab houses under dust-covered fans. The noon heat distorts everything, warping the flat landscape. Planes hover above the tarmac.

A tiny spot in the sky becomes a plane. Isak blinks and squints under the canvas. The plane becomes larger and larger, a DC130 Hercules, heavy bellied, with propellers churning lands and they all feel the vibrations in the tar. The engines are cut but the propellers continue spinning. No one moves. The card games go on and the dominoes smack the board.

Isak sits up with interest.

The tail end of the plane opens like the mouth of a crocodile, its lower jaw ramping onto the runway. The flight sergeant exits through the gaping hole as provisions and sealed drums are off-loaded.

Isak strolls over to the plane, peering into the empty cavern while the flight sergeant signs off papers for the disimbursed cargo. Isak counts the boys under the canvas.

He salutes the flight sergeant, accompanying him along the plane's fuselage.

“Waarheen is Sersant op pad?”

“Terug Waterkloof toe.” The sergeant checks the screws, heading for the cockpit.

Isak follows him at a respectful distance. The pilot is filling in the logbook and flight plan, the pips on his shoulders show an even higher ranking and he salutes with more enthusiasm.

Both the pilot and co-pilot look up.

“Middag Kolonel, Korporaal Bruwer van Valskermbataljon. Het Kolonel plek vir veertig manne terug Waterkloof toe?”

The clean-shaven colonel stops writing, measuring the young man before him. On the tarmac the group under the canvas have got up in anticipation.

“Ook ons kit, Kolonel.”

The colonel hesitates, viewing the miserable group of boys that have moved in closer. “Dis reg, Korporaal, julle kan maar klim. Maak net gou want ek moet voor donker op Waterkloof wees.”

Isak salutes again, and without thinking leans over to the cockpit window, giving a shrill whistle. The pilots share a smile and carry on with their flight preparations.

There's a frenetic scramble around the pile of gear. The ops room guys come out to look as the group make a dash for the plane. As they run past, Isak stops to report and the men step back into the shade.

“Ons gaan Waterkloof toe, met die Flossie. Sê vir Luitenant Siebrits, Korporaal Bruwer het die besluit geneem.”

There are murmurs of indecision but he snaps his heels and salutes, charging

for the plane. Benjie and Butler strap the gear securely in the hull while the flight sergeant draws up a detailed inventory of their belongings. Upbeat boys file on board with their rifles and hastily assembled webbing. The plane starts to taxi past palm trees and white sand. Isak settles down, facing Butler. He takes a last look at Ondangwa and the nets in the sky.

If they could just get back to Ondangwa everything would be fine, that's the mistake he had made. Ondangwa had kept him going. Making Ondangwa home in his mind. He wouldn't make the same mistake with Waterkloof.

The Hercules turns at the end of the runway, struggling to lift its nose as it picks up speed. Then the entire fuselage shudders as the wheels lift off. The deafening throbbing of the engines puts an end to all discussion. They head south for Grootfontein with its zinc buildings and endless parking lots of camouflaged vehicles, then the plane changes direction, down towards Upington.

Isak stands in the doorway of the cockpit. The colonel banks the plane gently to the left, dropping lower than the flight plan for him to see the mighty river, lying like a shed skin stretched out over the breadth of the desert. Dramatically the river collapses, creating thundering waterfalls. Spray spits up against the cockpit window as they fly through a rainbowed haze.

Further along are terraced grape plantations watered by canals, patches of intense green that disturb the calm hues of stone, sand and kokerbome. Dry yards packed with raisins lie open to the sun. With shock he realises the seasons have not waited for him.

He walks back into the merriness and the endless rummy game.

Eventually, it is Pretoria that lies below. The Jacaranda trees have long shed their flowers but the streets are still purple. The Voortrekker monument sits like an

oversized anthill on the koppie and Waterkloof lies ahead with its hangars as far as the eye can see.

The city looks hard and dirty to Isak.

They enter from the western side of the base. Butler jumps up, punching an imaginary opponent while the others stay glued to the portholes.

The Hercules lands perfectly on all wheels and there is an uproar in the plane.

“Kry julle gear en wag vir my, ek’s nou terug.” Isak makes his way out onto the runway. The air stinks of petrol.

The ops room is decked with paper streamers and a tacky, plastic Christmas tree. Fairy lights flash on and off. Christmas cards with reindeers in the snow are strung across the room. Isak salutes and waits for the chatting men to notice him.

“Korporaal Bruwer,” he announces his arrival.

“Ja, Korporaal en waar val jy uit?”

“Ek vra toestemming dat Hammanskraal vir ons vervoer reël, daar’s veertig van ons, Kaptein.”

“Onmoontlik,” the older man behind the desk answers, waving him away but it’s late on a Friday afternoon and it will soon be Christmas.

“Ons maak so, Korporaal,” says another, winking at him.

Isak salutes. “So far so good.” He thinks smugly of Siebrits in Oshikati.

*

“Ai tog.”

“Kry jy seer?” Danie plumps the pillows behind his back. “Of wil jy lê?”

“Weer lê.”

“Asseblief.”

“Asseblief.” Isak sighs loudly. “Oorlog maak die kind in jou dood maar dit maak nie noodwendig ‘n man van jou nie.”

“Dis nie net oorlog wat so maak nie.” Danie cranks the bed flat, then he switches on the reading light, pulling up a chair close to the cot. There are black rings under his eyes and the growth on his chin makes him look older, not quite as sophisticated as the first time Isak saw him in the street. “Dink jy?”

Isak nods briefly. He can feel his brother moving from him.

“Ek wil van jou weet.” Isak reminds him. “Wil weet hoekom jy weg is sonder om enige iemand te sê, nie eers ‘n nota nie.”

Danie raps the tip of his finger on the cupboard next to the cot. “I guess it began with you going to hostel. There was no one to protect me anymore.”

Isak stares at the ceiling. Not another one, he thinks, ready to defend himself.

“So I spent more and more time at the barrakse.”

“Why?”

Danie feigns laughter. “What was there to keep me at the house?”

“True.” Isak concedes.

“Mamma was feeding off her pain, the only thing she knew and held onto.”

“Miskien het sy rede gehad.” Isak sees his mother, dancing on the lawn under a night sky.

“Everyone’s a victim in some or other way.” Danie speaks sharply, a tightness around his mouth.

“Suid-Afrikaners het ‘n goeie dosis daarvan, die blaming mentality, bedoel ek,” Isak concedes.

“It takes guts to move on.” Danie gets up, changing the angle of the reading light away from their faces. “Mamma was more of a martyr.”

Isak thinks of Aimee. His mother could play the game either way it suited her, the victim and the victimiser.

“David was a good man,” Danie continues. “Only Koos resented my visits.”

“Koos is ‘n ander kat,” Isak agrees.

“To find out that someone hates you, not you but what you stand for is quite a shock at thirteen.”

“Ja, well it’s quite understandable. Die boer se kind...So what did you do?”

Danie raises his one eyebrow. “Fish.”

The night staff interrupt them with loud jokey voices, flipping through charts and adjusting dials that feed him, roughly rebandaging his head and the hole while ignoring them both.

“The doctor is coming,” they toss over their shoulder as they move onto the old men where the laughter and joking becomes louder.

Danie waits politely for the women to be out of hearing. “Just after Mamma got back from hospital, Pettie and I were fishing for bass with Pa’s reels and rods. It was late afternoon and the wind had gone to lie down.”

Isak slowly twists his head so that he can see Danie’s face.

“The fish had just come up to feed, when I saw Pettie throw his rod down and disappear into the reeds. Koos was lying watching us, for quite some time I suppose, but I didn’t let it bother me, it was our dam, our fish, our land. In a way I saw it as mine, even if it wasn’t, the farm I mean.”

“Ja, ek verstaan daai gevoel.”

“Pettie called, telling me to make a run for it but I knew Pa’s stuff had to go back, so I stayed behind to tidy up while he made a dash for the barrakse.”

“Was hy bang vir sy eie broer?”

“They were different, as brothers are...I was busy winding up the line, when the geese lifted up from their nests amongst the reeds.”

“En?”

“Nothing much.” Danie gives a small laugh. “He took the rod from me and snapped it, then he ripped the reel off and threw it into the dam. I guess the worst was what he did with the fish. He peed all over them, slowly, deliberately.”

“Hoekom het jy nie gesê nie?”

“Probably the look in his eyes.”

Isak remembers that look. “Die pamflette?”

“Later that year, when Raatjie nursed me.” Danie gets up, moving over to the basin, watching the water run.

“Jy was mos nie siek nie.”

“Sick?” Danie speaks sharply. “How would you know, you were hardly ever there.”

“Watse siek?”

“Siek, seer, stukkend,” Danie waves his hand angrily. “Wat maak dit nou saak?” He closes the taps, looking past the screen to the highway.

“Als okay?” The doctor stands at the cot’s end.

“Prima,” Danie replies, smiling.

The doctor moves his hands over Isak’s chest, then over his shoulder. He studies the chart and the monitor.

“He wants to leave as soon as possible.” Danie reminds him.

“Impossible.” The doctor confirms his position, gesturing Danie to join him behind the screen.

“Ek sal hier uit,” Isak speaks out to them.

*

Hammanskraal is sympathetic to their plight. The commander plays rugby and recognises Isak, so they get vehicles, as many as they need for the night. Some of the boys head for brothels in Hillbrow while others entertain the thought of grilled meat.

As they drive into the heart of the city, Isak finds it funny not seeing any black people on the streets, just white families, window-shopping under lights shaped like bells and holly.

Jauntily the five of them walk abreast, shoving the oncoming pedestrians off the pavement and they don't even notice.

Butler shoulders the door of the steak house. It has dropped wagon wheels above the tables and polished Afrikaner horns against the walls.

They order their drinks then sit down together around an oval table with red plastic mats and wooden handled knives with serrated teeth. Jaws is thin and pale, less boisterous than the others. Absentmindedly he scratches red wax into soft balls. Isak can see that his fingers are scarred.

The waitress is pimpled and braced. Her body brushes against Isak's arm. When she takes his order her breath is heavily minted. Butler wants to eat the waitress, not from the menu, his eyes drool over her plumpness.

The T-bones are slopped over wooden platters with meat juices running over the table and Sonja Heroldt sings 'Daantjie' over the speakers. Dirk calls a halt to the

drinking and they all hold hands as he says grace. Isak peeps to see Butler squeezing the under-age waitress.

They drink and drink. Benji downs one beer after the other and they laugh and laugh.

The waitress sidles up to Isak, her bosom on eye level. She holds out a tray with expensive wine.

“Ons het nie bestel nie,” he corrects her, enjoying the view.

She points to a sprightly smiling man in the furthest corner, wearing a cap that Isak immediately recognises.

“Shit, kyk wie’s daar.” And he points as well.

They all stare openly.

“My God, it can’t be.” Butler leans forward and whispers his name so loudly so that even the man with the cap hears in the corner.

Benjie giggles like a girl and they all take a good look at him.

They drink of the wine and as one bottle is emptied so the next arrives and with each they wave gaily to the general, who cordially waves back, enjoying their appreciation.

Later the steak house is empty. Isak and Dirk lie over the bones on the wooden platters while Benjie and Butler ride their chairs, hammering on the table and it is only Jaws who sits upright, nursing his glass, swirling the wine to the beat of their fists.

Unnoticed, the general passes their table, pausing to pat Isak lightly on the back. The rest shoot to attention attempting a seated salute.

“Julle is die manne van Ondangwa wat die Flossie gekaap het?”

“Ja, Generaal.” Isak pulls out a chair for him.

Clumsily, Butler pushes a glass in front of him, filling it with the last of the wine.

“Ek weet van julle. Ook die kontak met ‘n groep FAPLA soldate en PLAN terroriste. Vyftig van die vyand dood, en julle sonder verlies, indrukwekkend. Ek wens julle geluk.” He raises his glass to them.

Overawed, they join in. They are heroes. The general has confirmed it. Isak hears the words from his mouth but it has little meaning. It was so easy, so quick, killing them.

“’n Mens kry nie ‘n dooie weer aan die lewe nie.” Someone said that once to him. Instinctively, he feels in his pocket for the photo but its gone with his browns to the wash.

Butler has his arm around the general and they are singing Bat songs while the general’s bodyguards stand and wait at the door. They forget what the badge on his cap stands for and the golden braids and pips on his shoulders.

Dirk proposes a toast to the general. Rocking side to side they drink on him and Isak is too drunk to ask why they were forgotten for so long, if they are heroes, besides he likes the dimple in the general’s face.

Pêllie, pêllie, that’s what they are with the general. He orders Irish coffees for all of them, the bodyguards included. The waitress is on Butler’s lap, her hands under his shirt with her eyes on Isak across the table. Her eyes make him grab the wagon wheel above the table and he pulls himself up, one after the other, after the other. The others keep count with their drumming and her skin isn’t so bad after all when he looks down at her.

At twelve the lights go out. Behind the beaded curtain that leads to the kitchen, with his finger on the switch, is the manager. Singing, they saunter out onto the

deserted streets where a black limousine of a car with tinted windows waits. Without asking, Butler climbs in with the general, both of them off key, while the rest follow in the Landrover.

Pretoria is empty, except for the Christmas lights that flash on and off.

The black car stops in front of a fancy apartment and Isak stops right behind. What he notices is the Flokati mat in the entrance hall.

The general has a large collection of LP records. Butler spins, *The best of Springbok Radio* on the turntable and the two of them dance, Butler and the General, langarm into the kitchen and back again. As they waltz past a pot plant, Butler plucks a pointesettia, throwing back his head, the red flower's stem clenched between his teeth. The general drinks brandy from a vase that does the rounds in the room, like the nagmaalsbeker.

Isak and Jaws lie on the long-haired mat, watching the dancing as the bodyguards get drunker and drunker. There's a box of cigars on the coffee table. Isak opens the wooden box. Each cigar is beautifully wrapped and sealed.

He takes out two, passing one onto Jaws, spelling, "c...u...b...a...n."

With his penknife Isak cuts off the cigar's tip and Jaws does the same. There's a lighter in the shape of a lion on the table and they suck as hard as they can while holding the cigars against the flame that comes out of the lion's mouth.

"Goed vir die longe," Isak comments as Jaws struggles to get his going.

In the kitchen, raiding the fridge of the general are Dirk and Benjie.

The record is finished. Jaws chooses the next one and it is Nana Mouskouri. Tearfully the general stops dancing. His head falls forward onto Butler's chin, then he slowly slides down Butler's chest. The general is drunk, very drunk. Butler tries his best to keep both of them going, rocking back and forth on his heels.

“Dans nog ‘n bietjie,” Isak encourages him.

He speeds up the turntable and Nana Mouskouri sings like an accelerated chipmunk. Butler responds by twirling the general, faster and faster until both of them collapse into a chair. The bodyguards lie, scattered like cushions over the floor and the room spins in Isak’s head.

At last the record is over. Relaxed, they smoke their cigars, Dirk crawls from the kitchen, curling up on the hairy mat while Benjie lies prostrate on the kitchen floor, the fridge door still open.

The cigar smoke is intoxicating. It clears Isak’s mind. “How was it?”

“How was what?” Jaws has his back to the stereo.

“The trip with Janneman?”

“There’s not much to say.”

“Why do you say that?”

“Being a hero comes at a price.”

“How come?”

“Janneman’s leg didn’t make it.” Jaws grimaces. “Here comes the candle to take you to bed, here comes the chopper to chop off your leg, chop, chop, the last one’s leg is off.” He hits the coffee table, hard with the side of his hand.

“Dis jammer.”

“Casualty of war, unfortunately.” Jaws stubs the cigar in the pot plant. “In the long run, none of us are up to this, not even you, hero boy.”

Isak sits up abruptly, discarding the rest of the cigar. Butler moans and farts.

“Its time to go.” Isak shakily pulls at Butler, while Jaws ignores him, deftly swapping the beret on Butler’s head with the general’s cap full of badges.

“Suits him, nogal.” Jaws admires Butler.

Isak jabs Benjie in the ribs. "Wake up soldier. Help me get Dirk out of here."

Benjie snorts, shooting up, wide-awake. "Where's the bloody ters."

"It's time to go," Isak repeats. "Hammanskraal?"

Benjie lopes through the lounge, dragging Dirk by his heels. Jaws leads Butler, who gropes like a blind man, the general's cap, low over his eyes.

Outside in the black limousine the driver sleeps. They abandon the Landrover and all five of them get in.

"Hammanskraal." Isak taps the shoulder of the driver.

Butler admires himself in the driver's mirror, egged on by Jaws.

The sun is coming up. At the gate, the guards salute, letting them through without question. The driver drops them off in front of the mess where lights still burn in some of the bungalows.

"Offisiere." Isak peeps through the window.

Butler staggers over. Benjie kicks at the door. Someone opens it cautiously and sees the cap.

"Moer uit!" Benjie shouts. "Aandag!"

Twenty officers jump to attention and salute. Butler marches into the bungalow, kicking at trowsers and punching men randomly in the stomach, while Benjie walks behind him, rigid as a rod. They get to the end of the bungalow and no one has moved, then they walk back again, punching who-ever they feel like. Benjie slams the door shut.

Jaws giggles and they all laugh, except for Isak. Dirk lies asleep on the ground. The big boy sags to his knees, tilts over slowly, collapsing under the flagpole. With bravado, Butler spins the general's cap through the air, then he yawns, heading off in the direction of their bungalow.

Under the flagpole are Isak and Jaws. They watch the sun come up.

“Why are we in Angola?”

“Huh?” Isak frowns.

“What are we doing in Angola, I thought we were fighting for us?”

“Jeez, how must I know?” Isak shrugs. “I guess those guys are helping the
terrs.”

“We killed FAPLA guys. The one you shot from the helicopter had
Portuguese blood in him.”

“Look, I don’t have a clue. I do what I’m told. And I’m not going to wait to
ask questions while someone else is planning to wipe us out.”

“Somehow you don’t do what you are told to do when it suits you.”

“Just back off.” Isak turns viciously on Jaws.

They don’t speak. Isak gets up, throwing Dirk over his shoulders.

“Here’s something for you, a memento of our time together.” Jaws holds out
his hand. It is the photo of the girl. “You left it in the wash, so I took it out for you.”

“Thanks.” Casually, he takes the photo. Jode, he thinks, dink te veel, as he
carries Dirk to the bungalow.

*

Danie pushes the screen to one side, his expression one of immaculate self-
control. “He will speak to the airline.”

Frustrated, Isak wiggles his toes but he cannot lift his legs. Where did Danie
learn this perfectly controlled demeanour?

The nurses have their hands full with one of the old men. There is groaning and a nauseating smell. The ward smells of aging flesh.

Danie lies down on his cot.

Isak never much thought about Danie when they were young. He was just there, going along, making up part of the background of his, Isak's life. He thought his anger was Danie's anger, his fear, Danie's fear, his dreams that of his brother.

"Did something happen to you?" he asks for the first time, really wanting to know, wanting to understand who is this man.

"Like what?" Danie stalls.

"Hoe moet ek weet? Jy sê self ek het nie 'n clue wat in daai tyd aangegaan het nie."

Danie takes a sip of water through a straw. "Ek is ook koshuis toe, danksy die oliekrisis en Mamma." He offers the straw to Isak who also takes a sip of water. "Ek het die doop net-net oorleef, toe kry ek 'n meester, 'n matriek outjie uit die stad uit."

"Claasen?"

"Ja, Claasen." Surprised, Danie lifts his head. "I had to look after Claasen in every way." Danie hesitates. "We never spoke of him...How do you remember his name?"

"Weet nie...In die nag het ek van hom gedroom maar dit was op 'n ander plek as skool." Isak frowns. He can see Claasen but it was on a Casspir at night. "Jy was mos sy sot."

"Sot. Dis 'n goeie woord, dit beteken mos dwaas." Danie gives a small smile.

"Claasen had been sent to the platteland to reform." Danie rolls back onto his cot, looking intently at the ceiling. "He had to look after the PT teacher, Santa...And I had to look after him."

“Soos wat?” Isak recalls Vossie bathing the little girls and how he looked at them, Vossie and his wife when they thought he was not looking, embracing in the passage as he read the children stories. She was dead now, remembering the lonely man who was grieving, even though she had died more than a decade ago. They had a drink together and he could say thank-you to the man for showing him something that he wanted, needed, even if he didn’t know then what it was or how to make it happen. Vossie had tears in his eyes as they greeted each other. The girls were big and they still spoke with fondness of the boy who read to them and he was surprised and pleased that they remembered him too.

“Soos wat?” he repeats, afraid he has missed something.

“Sodomise would describe it best.” Danie turns his dispassionate face to the lights on the highway.

Isak tries to sit up but the pain in his chest is too great and the pain is not from the broken ribs. “Ek verstaan nie.” His head drops back on the pillow and as he does it he sees his mother’s head dropping back, with him at the hospital door, greeting her from a distance.

“Elke aand...Dis waar die bednatmaakstorie begin het, nie oor Mamma se ellendes nie, maar oor my eie.” Danie’s voice is detached, as though he is speaking of another.

“Here, help ons.” Isak sees the little boy praying through the bedroom window. He wants to cry out, ek’s jammer, bitter jammer, but it is too late.

“Don’t be sorry,” Danie anticipates his reaction, replying with forced gaiety. “He was getting it from Santa and I’ve long ago put it behind me. Claasen was messed up in his own way, just like me, just like all of us.”

“Weet Mamma?”

“No.” Danie crosses his ankles, settling down with arms folded behind his head. “There are things parents can’t deal with, ever.”

So much makes sense to Isak. The washing and washing of Danie. “En Koos?”

“Koos took pity on the white boy.” Danie gives a wry smile. “He understood violence, seeing he’d given...and received it.”

“Shit.”

“Somewhere between the printing and the bad spelling, we both realised this was our shared inheritance just in different guises.” Danie lifts his fist, “Viva die ou Suid-Afrika.”

“So you became friends.”

“A truce would describe it better. Our needs were being mutually satisfied.” Danie speaks in a detached way. “My helping took the sting out of it for him. I don’t think Koos could hate quite the same after that...Neither could I.”

“Claasen.” Isak shakes his head in disbelief, thinking of the shots in the dark and the wail of the old woman.

“Ja, he was killed somewhere in Angola during the late seventies.” Danie swings his legs off the bed. “A sad piece of work.” His voice is artificially light as he checks the drip on Isak’s arm. “Ek gaan gou ‘n draai by die huis maak. Ek’s vroegoggend weer hier.”

“Ek’s okay.”

“Ja...” Danie isn’t convinced. “Net-net, danksy jou vrou.” He gives his shoulder a pat, before switching off the light. “Vasbyt, Boeta.” He waves brightly at the door.

Wasted all of them, Isak thinks, wanting to stop him, wanting to ask more.

They walk to their respective planes that will take them home, sans their gear that has become part of their lives for ninety days. Benjie and Dirk have already left by train, the general's cap collected by bodyguards with foul hangovers. Butler in his beret, embraces Isak, then climbs the steps, saluting to Isak and Jaws from the top. They salute back.

The Dakota takes them to Cape Town. The two of them sit apart. Jaws has lost interest in Isak, he can sense it by the way the other boy turns his back to him but it doesn't bother him much.

Seeing the Karoo from the air is very different to passing through it. From above it is more of a nothingness, flat and scrubbed, its subtle detail of colour and texture lost. Rather it becomes an encroaching wasteland, with brown fingers that tug at green fields.

The pilot gives them a view of Cape Town bay and mountain. Before the descent he circles over the sea, flying over the small island where Isak's parents used to go by boat to dance, when he was small, when they still danced together.

The Dakota taxis onto the Youngsfield landing strip but there is no emotion in either of them. They sit quietly, waiting for the plane to park in front of the hangar.

"This is it." Isak picks up his bag.

Without a word Jaws walks straight to the door. His parents are there on the runway to meet him, both short and stocky and his mother wears platform shoes with bright blue eye shadow. She kisses him all over. Her bangles tinkle all the way up her arm. Jaws's father kisses him too, repeatedly and they lead him away, arms intertwined into his.

“Té.” Isak pulls a face.

The telephone booth is nearby. Isak thinks of his ouma. He gives the number to the operator. The line peeps. As she picks up, he replaces the receiver, her gravelly voice in his ear. He pauses, angry with himself for not being able to speak, then he dials again. The operator puts him through and the familiar two short and one long ring, rings repeatedly.

Eventually, Oom Frans picks up. “Hoe lyk die weer innie Kaap, seun?”

“Winderig en warm, Oom.”

“ Soek jy jou ouers?”

“Ja, Oom.”

“ Jou Pa is weg met jou Ma hospitaal toe, daar’s niemand by die huis nie.”

He walks out of Youngsfield with his Ouma’s voice in his head, out onto the highway, where cars with families hoot and wave at him under the bridge, smiling faces ever thankful to him.

*

The veldt is dry and dusty. From far a pillar of black smoke rises. Caught in the canal is a tortoise with a shell of patterned stars. He frees it from the netting, placing it amongst the flowering rosemary. The tortoise turns back to the canal. This time he places it deeper in the undergrowth but it circles on itself, heading determinedly for the canal.

Irritated, he carries on, watching the smoke rise and spread its head like a mushroom over the farm.

From the nearby orchards he can hear laughter and the sound of an idling tractor, then more playful shouts that change to heaving and panting. Without investigating, he takes the longer route to the werf.

The pears are right for picking. Hard and green, they fit perfectly in his hand. He snaps a stem and the pear drops down. The starches are too high and the sugars still too low but its freshness washes the dust off his tongue. He cuts across the Eucalyptus grove to the werf where his mother's Datsun is parked. In the coolness of the office she sits on Oupa's leather couch, her shrunken thighs exposed.

"Mamma."

She sits quite still. "Jy lewe."

"Ja, Mamma, ek lewe." He bends down and his lips brush her cheek.

Her cheeks are wet. Sighing, she tramples the cigarette under her heel, curling her legs underneath her. "David is dood," she announces flatly, staring out towards the mountain.

Isak sits down beside her and she leans over to him, clutching his arm, burying her head in his neck. Together they sit like this for a long time.

Isak counts his breath before asking, "Mamma, wat sê Mamma van David?"

"Jy lewe."

"Van David, Mamma." He shifts back from her, twisting her to look at him and her eyes are puffed and vague.

"David is dood," she repeats.

"Is Mamma seker?"

"Hy was depressed. Ek het nie geweet bruin mense kry depressie nie." Her nails dig into his flesh.

"Ek ook nie."

“Pa het hom van die waterlei weggevat.” Her pupils are enlarged. “Hy’t binne sy huis doodgebrand.”

“En Raatjie?”

His mother snorts with derision. “Die Oumeid partie by Koos oppie dorp.” She comes closer to him sniffing. “Jy’t peer geëet.”

“Innie boord.”

She smiles beautifully and they both stare out by the window.

“Jy lewe.”

“Ja, Mamma.” He looks out by the door. “Waar’s Pa en Danie?”

“Dorp toe met die lyk.”

“Weet Pettie daarvan?”

She claps her hand over her mouth. “Ek’t vergeet...”

Isak walks to the door. “Ek stap gou na hom toe.”

“Praat mooi met hom...Sy pa is dood.”

“Waarvan praat Mamma nou?” Without waiting for a reply he retraces his steps to the orchard. Cool water flows in the furrows between the trees and guinea fowl drink in the shade. The smoke from David’s house spreads.

Her breath is sour and her touch is of a woman not of a mother. She has everything she needs, and yet none of this seems to make her happy and he can’t understand it, thinking of the old woman dancing in the sand.

Somewhere in the orchard the tractor moves again. Isak follows the sound down the rows until he sees Petrus with the grass cutter, mowing the long grass.

Behind him a pouting girl rakes the grass into heaps.

Isak comes alongside the tractor.

Petrus pulls on the hand brake, disengaging the gear. He acknowledges Isak, though his mouth is grim.

“David is dood.”

Petrus looks up at the smoke, then at Isak. His eyes flame with anger. “Wie se skuld?”

“Hy was alleen, dit was ‘n ongeluk.”

Petrus jumps off the tractor. “Hoe weet jy, jy was nie hier nie.”

“Die Nooi het vir my vertel, die jerry can het omgeval en hy’t ‘n dop in gehad...Ek’s jammer.”

“Jy lieg man!” Petrus steps forward, fuming.

Isak grabs his shirt.

But Petrus pulls away, the shirt tearing in Isak’s hand. “Los my uit!”

“David het depressie gehad!” Isak shouts back at him.

“Depressie?” Petrus laughs bitterly. “Volk kry nie depressie nie, Baas. Dis ‘n witmens se siekte daai, vra virrie Nooi.”

Isak shivers with rage, throwing the pieces of shirt onto the raked grass.

Petrus spits on the ground, running towards the burning house, the ripped shirt hanging from his shoulder.

The girl has stopped raking. Frightened, she moves back.

“Vee,” he orders her, getting onto the tractor.

Obediently she sweeps, tears running down her cheeks.

From the barrakse he can hear wailing of women and his hands tremble on the wheel. The chopping action of the mower’s rotor is strangely comforting as he trundles up and down the rows.

*

The grass is cut. Inside the deserted pack shed, crinkle paper steamers drift down from the ceiling. All the packers have gone home, leaving tables full of peaches. Only the overhead conveyer belt rattles round and round, carrying brown-faced cartons.

He picks a peach from the uitgooi bin, bruised and marked. There's a cut on the flesh made by a bird's beak. The flesh burns hot in his mouth.

**

University of Cape Town

Both watch the smoke pall. Danie has grown as tall as him.

They stand a distance apart and Isak notices the drooping shoulders of his brother. Up on the hill, their parents are having their evening shot and the wind brings the whiff of rotting fruit from the moggat.

“As Pa, David nie weggevat het van waterlei, het dit nooit gebeur nie.” Danie speaks accusingly and there is a flutter in his eye.

“Pa het David probeer red.”

“Te laat,” Danie answers angrily.

For a moment there is an uncomfortable silence. Isak sees Raatjie alone on the stoep of the burnt house. He walks ahead, aware of his uniform and short hair, the heavy boots on his feet that make him tower over the children who run in fright at the sight of him. Here and there someone nods but for most, their eyes are lowered.

Sitting on a salvaged stool, swinging her bare feet freely is, Raatjie. Above her is the skeleton of the rosebush, burnt to its roots.

Hawkish faces watch him from the other side of the fence and the greetings are for Danie.

“Hulle glo dis Pa se skuld,” Danie explains.

“Pa het self gebrand, wat verwag hulle?” Isak slams the broken gate. “Ragel, dis Sakkie.”

Her face is closed. “My kint,” she greets him with little enthusiasm, pressing her head on his chest and he holds her. “Dankie, dat Sakkie spesiaal vir Sakkie se ou kinnermeid gekom het.”

“Ek is bly ek is hier.” He feels too bad to tell her that his presence has nothing to do with her.

Petrus comes out of the smouldering house, his hands streaked with black. He leans against the wall rolling a cigarette.

The house is hot and smoking. Isak walks under the collapsed ceiling, over burnt linoleum. Standing in the middle of the kitchen is the notorious jerry can, like a sacrificial urn.

He peers through the blackened window. The rest of the workers elbow each other along the fence, discussing the remains, while the children run up and down with wire cars, shouting excitedly.

The bedroom is sparsely furnished. On the wall hangs a picture of Jesus, walking on the water, its glass frame cracked by the heat. The feathers of the pillow have burnt out on the stained mattress, its copper coils exposed. Isak kneels in the ash. Tied to the metal frame is a parcel in oilcloth. Inside are David’s marriage certificate and the christening seals of his children. The begrafnisboekie’s initial entries are in shillings, religiously entered in each month and marked by shaky crosses. There’s also money, rolled up tightly, not much but enough to please.

Under the bed are charred papers. The shape of a crudely drawn sickle catches his eye. He pulls at the paper but it disintegrates in his hand.

“Kry jy iets?” Danie’s eyes dart around the room. He holds a sooty teacup with a blue rim. “Laaste een van Ouma,” he explains.

Isak wraps the oilcloth around the book and money. “Net dit.”

*

The cornflakes are soft and sweet. Isak chews each spoonful, until they are a dry paste in his mouth.

“Ons sal ‘n kis moet koop.” His mother speaks agitatedly. “Hulle het nie geld nie en Raatjie se winkelboek is ver oortrokke.”

“Koos kan dit koop. Hy’s mos ‘n unie man, vol geld.” His father looks over his head. “Waar’s brékfis?”

“Net die eiers moet gebak kom,” she turns to the stove, “hy’s sonder werk. Danie sê hy’s al laas maand gefire.”

“Shame.” His father cuts the toast in perfect quarters. “Hy moes geweet het toe hy hierdie perd opsaal.”

His mother cracks the eggs on the side of the pan, releasing the yolks and opaque jelly into the melted lard. She turns her back to them while his father whistles a tune.

“Is jy nou klaar met PW en sy makkers?”

“Daar’s nog kampe, Pa.”

His father raises his singed eyebrow then turns to her. “Hoe laat ry jy vir jou hare?”

“Na nege.” Her hair falls over her face. She wears a nylon housedress.

“Tel my nuwe stokke op, ek wil voor die Classic oefen.”

The eggs are lifted onto the platter. Some are sunny side up and others sunny side down, just the way his father likes them.

“Waar’s die meide?”

“Gaan eet.” She places two eggs on his plate with the bacon.

“Wag hulle nie meer dat ons klaar eet nie?”

“Hulle breek die eiers se gele en brand die spek sodat ek dit vir hulle moet gee om te eet.” She fills the hot pan with water. “As ons klaar is, is hulle ook klaar.”

His father picks up the windmill cellars. “Kom jy môre met die manne speel?”

Isak strips the bacon off the rind. “Ek wil David se begrafnis bywoon, Pa.”

“Suit yourself.”

His mother stands at the washup, forking the last of the eggs off the platter.

“Wil Mamma nie sit nie?”

Guiltily, she wipes the yellow from the corners of her mouth. “Ek’s klaar geëet.”

“Jou Ma is op diet,” his father explains. “Sy weet goed ek kannie ‘n vet vrou verdra nie.”

She needs a smoke. Isak can see by the way she pats her apron’s pockets. She sidles to the bin, fishing out a half-smoked stub, lighting up just outside the door.

“Hoekom rook Mamma by die deur?” he asks her.

“Jou Pa het opgehou...” She blows the smoke towards the back stoep.

“Rook walg my,” his father answers, without looking up.

His mother taps her chest knowingly behind his father’s back.

“Kan ons nie die goedkoopste een kry nie?” She tries again.

“Koop soveel as jy wil.” He gets up to leave.

“David se kis,” she reminds him.

“Hy’s gebrand, daar’s niks van sy gesig oor nie.” His father smears the bread with the messed yolk on the plate. “Dis ‘n mors van geld om ‘n kis te koop. Ek raai aan hul laat hom veras, die job is amper klaar gedoen.”

“Die volk glo nie in verassing nie...” Her voice fades. “Raatjie sal dit nooit toelaat nie, hulle is Nuwe Apostels.”

His father's mouth tightens. "As jy so sterk voel, hoekom skenk jy nie joune nie?"

She ignores this comment from him, stacking the plates at the washup. Isak understands nothing of this.

*

Funerals begin on Saturday afternoons after picking. The tractor shed is cleared and the lug boxes packed out for seats. The first dusty bakkies arrive just after four, with thin-necked drivers and solemn faced women and children squashed on the back. Isak waits in the shade of the office stoep. Outa sits at the shed door with a surring in his hatband, greeting the sporadic stream of mourners.

People sweat under the sink roof. Isak is head and shoulders taller than the rest. Behind him is a woman wearing white court shoes and dark brown tights. She hauls out a pendulous breast for the child on her hip and he thinks of the girl at the kraal.

"Baas Sakkie." Outa takes both of his hands.

"Outa lyk goed."

"Die Grootbaas mishannel Outa goed."

Isak smiles at the incongruity, gently pulling his hand from the old man's. The sagging suit was once his Oupa's. He makes his way through the erratically packed boxes to the back of the shed and the animated conversations die down as he passes. Older men rise from their seats, avoiding his gaze, their hats on the floor, while the younger ones simply look on with blank faces.

The coffin is raised on a draped table. A wreath of plastic lilies lies on top of it. Around it, the gospel band plugs in the speakers and the guitar nags and complains under the tuning. Cords bounce off the congregated bodies.

His father has left to play in the tournament with his new clubs and his mother has hidden herself in the bedroom.

The singer is a young girl with a sad voice who yodels into the mike, then steps back, embarrassed at the sound of her own voice. She is pregnant and all eyes are on her swellings.

The mourners forget about Isak. Children run past him, their hair plaited in intricate patterns.

Then the entire band strikes the first chords. The volume is too loud but the mourners seem oblivious to the badly distorted sound.

At the door is the preacher with a bible and crocodile leather shoes that are too big for him. Koos and Petrus walk in. Raatjie wears a dress of red and the sequined flowers around the neck wink and shine below the sombreness of her expression.

That dress has only known sadness, he thinks.

The family follow the preacher to the front row. The mourners rise as one. Children are shooed off the reserved seats. Raatjie and her entourage wait patiently for the seats to be cleared as the band plays on.

Danie sits with them.

Isak moves to the window for fresh air. The mourners are singing, led by the preacher and the pregnant girl. She never looks straight ahead, always sideways to the open door as though she is longing to be outside and far away from here.

The song is cyclical. Around and around it goes, the same few words with the same tune. New songs get strung along with the first song. Isak feels light headed from the endless incantation.

Then it all stops. The preacher is illiterate, so he calls on Koos to read. The suring in Outa's hatband wilts.

Koos reads fast and eloquently. "Die dag van die Here het nou gekom, dit is 'n wrede dag. 'n Dag van gramskap en gloeinde toorn, 'n dag waarop die land verwoes en sy sondaars uitgeroei sal word..."

The preacher reaches out for the bible. It is not what he has been instructed to read but Koos ignores the flapping hands.

"Wie gevang word, sal doodgesteek word, wie ingehaal word, sal om die lewe gebring word, hul huise geplunder word en hulle vrouens verkrag word." Koos reads faster and faster, shouting out the words and the mourners are restless and embarrassed, twisting their necks slyly to watch Isak's reaction.

"Net woestyn diere sal daar gaan lê. Die huise sal vol uile wees, die volstruise sal daar bly en die veldgode sal daar rondans, hiënas sal in paleise huil, jakkalse in die huise waar feesgevier is. Die stad se ondergang is hier, sy dae is getel." Koos closes the bible. There is a brilliance on his face as he glares at Isak.

Apologetically, the preacher snatches the bible from his hands but this time Koos doesn't care. The preacher praises the goodness of the Bruwer family but it is the words of Koos that stays with him.

Outa is called forward. He drops his chin and begins to pray. The preacher holds the mike at the old man's lips. It is a prayer for David. A David, Isak has never known. Women amen the prayer as Outa is led to his seat. Even the babies and small children sense the sadness in the shed. The mourners file out, showing their last

respects at the coffin, breaking out into sobs as they view David for the last time. Out of duty Isak joins the end of the queue. At the coffin, Danie cries softly. A coffin of dark, lacquered wood with handles of gold and a lining of red velvet. The remains of David's face lies in a sea of polystyrene balls.

A mummy from the pyramids, is what Isak thinks when he sees the burnt skin, tightly stretched and discoloured.

Men of straw, tied to the wheels of Casspirs.

Hot bodies push him and the light-headedness returns. Out of the shed, densely packed cloud pile up and an icy wind blows. Mourners climb back onto the bakkies and lorries, heading for the brown people's graveyard at the kliprug, shallow graves raided by marauding dogs at night.

Danie is a pallbearer with Koos and Petrus. The coffin is lifted onto the back of a bakkie. Isak has had enough of funerals. No one asks him whether he is coming so he walks around the back of the barrakse along the dam wall.

His room is humid. He lies down, watching the mountain succumb to the cloud. It darkens, he switches on the bedroom light, paging through the bible at his bedside as the first heavy drops fall. He continues paging through the Old Testament, back and forth as the drops become a downpour, hammering on the sink roof.

Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy. There's a flash of lightning. The old lady had danced, unafraid. He counts the seconds between the lightning and the thunder.

Isaiah.

His mother is at the door, her coiffured hair dishevelled and her mascara streaked beneath her eyes.

"Gaan jy nie begrafplaas toe nie?" Her speech is slurred.

"Ek was by die diens, dit was eers genoeg."

“Hoe het die kis gelyk?”

“Blink.” He shrugs.

She smiles contentedly. “Jy sê die kis was mooi?”

“Heel grênd met goue handvatsels.” He takes his eyes off the page.

Her eyes sparkle. “Ek gaan vir my ‘n drankie gooi, wat van ‘n biertjie?”

“Ek’s fine vir eers.”

“Moenie vir jou Pa van die kis vertel nie, dis ons geheim.”

“Sal nie.”

Isaiah, chapter thirteen. Isak recognises the words of Koos. The rain is deafening. He reads the chapter slowly, then the next.

“Die verdrukker se einde het gekom, die lyding wat hy veroorsaak het is op ‘n end. Die Here het die heerskappy van die goddeloses verbreek, ‘n mag van die oorheersers. Die verdrukker het in sy gramskap, volke getref met straf wat nie opgehou het nie, hy het in sy toorn nasies vertrap, hulle sonder medelye agtervolg.

Lightning and thunder are one as the lightning strikes the roof. The sound of falling rain changes to the sound of falling stone.

He jumps up and runs outside where the iced rain as large as thumbnails fall all around him. In minutes the lawn is covered in hailstones and stripped leaves.

The storm passes overhead. The clouds clear and the sun shines. Isak traipses around the house to view the orchards. Pears lie everywhere. His mother is on the front lawn, bare footed, a glass of wine in her hand. She bends down and picks up a hailstone, dropping it into the glass, where it floats and melts and disappears.

**

Are we blind to those closest to us, he wonders, or are we so close that we don't see them anymore, can't see clearly for the closeness? There is a knowingness that we share and yet there are spaces as wide as oceans between us. Unseen currents that separate us, further and further from each other. How many times had Danie not shared a cot with him in that time of Claasen, clinging to him in the dark and it was just another he had thought using him for their selfish purposes.

Maybe in the end it does take words to know another's truth.

With Aimee, truth needs to be spoken and lived and proven, over and over. It is tiring, living with her. What he gives is not enough. She wants him, not things, not distractions or toys but him and that's the hardest part of all. He has tried to outwit her, divert her attention away, but he is a loser at his own game.

Isak sighs, riding the numbness induced by the morphine, thinking back to Ouma and Oupa. He hasn't thought about them at all in a long while. He pictures their broad faces and bodies as he remembers them in his first memory, sitting on the back seat of the Chevrolet eating a cookie, wearing a bow tie for their Sunday drive and the oppressive heat in the car while they drove up the mountain pass and his Ouma crying.

No words spoken, just her crying.

He saw it all in the mirror and he was so small it didn't bother him. Women cried a lot, women were unhappy a lot, women were never satisfied, even at three he knew it. He loved Ouma. Perhaps she was crying about Tannie Lettie and the humiliation of having Oupa's lover right in her house down the passage from her. It was sensing her sadness and that Oupa had a part to play in it that made him afraid of

the old man. It was also the way you were brought up, to fear your father and grandfather. His own daughter knows nothing of this fear.

He is cut out to be a different type of man and that is his dilemma.

The nurse has forgotten to pull the screen around his bed. Aware of rain on the windows he rocks between sleep and wakefulness. Motorbikes gear up on the highway, opening throttle over old men snoring.

It would be so good to be on a bike in the rain.

*

The Gold Wing is clumsy and unstable on the gravel. He manoeuvres the bike away from the loose stones that collect on both sides and the ridge in the middle of the road. Once it hits the tar, he opens the engine to its limit, lying flat on the handlebars, him and the white line only with a dust wind in his face.

He stops at the café on the edge of town, parking with the front wheel inside the tickey box booth. He dials the number for Hammanskraal and the colonel's lisp secretary answers, then the colonel himself. Indiscipline, youthful, spirited are words the colonel uses to reprimand him, their mutual scrumming for Free State, forgotten.

There is graffiti in the booth. The letters, *ANC* are scratched into the bakelite of the phone. Children congregate at the booth's broken door, fascinated with the bike, running their hands over the metallic blue of the mudguard.

He dials a second number.

“Siebrits hier.”

“Bruwer.”

“Jou klein donner...”

Isak holds the phone from his ear as the expletives come thick and fast, then he presses the receiver to his ear. “Ek het in belang van die manne opgetree.”

The children are thin. Some have small heads with slit eyes.

“Jy’t gedros.”

“Ons het net vinniger by die huis gekom as jy.”

One child climbs onto the passenger seat while Siebrits fumes on the line.

Isak remembers what he wants to say. “Janneman stuur groete.”

Siebrits stops talking.

“O ja, die generaal sal die saak verder vat. Geseënde Kersfees, Luitenant.”

He laughs out loud as he puts the phone down with Siebrits still on the line.

The children step back in awe.

Slowly, he drives down the main road of the village, lined with Eucalyptus trees. The same lights of Pretoria are strung across the road. Rows of lorries, loaded with farm workers are parked in the shade. Hundreds of workers mingle on the pavement, while drunks lie slouched against buildings. There’s a festive feel to the village. He spots a white face, here and there. Their way of walking and expression is one of gritty determination to get home, he supposes.

Janneman lives in the co-op grounds. He frees the bike down the incline. The house is modest, made from pre-fab panels. The curtains are drawn and the windmill on the post box is still. He walks up the slasto pathway to the front door, welcomed by the smell of boiling bones.

A face appears fleetingly behind the lace. He rings again. The door is unlocked. She fills the space, big and blowsy, bunches of plastic grapes dangle from her ears.

“Middag, Tannie.”

Middag.” She sums him up under pencilled eyebrows. “Jy’s Bruwer se klong.”

“Ja, Tannie.”

The door remains half closed.

“Is Janneman by die huis, Tannie?”

She shouts into the house. “Slaap Boeta? Hier’s kuiergaste.”

An older woman shuffles down the passage and peers at him suspiciously. “Ja, hy’s wakker.”

The door is opened. The women lead the way down a gold and brown-leafed carpet to where Janneman lies. It is a small room. Janneman lies on a crumpled sheet, the raw stump of his leg exposed.

“Sit.” Janneman’s mother points to a chair covered in plastic.

Uncomfortably he sits down on the only chair in the room while the women stand at the foot of the bed.

“Hoe gaan dit?” Isak leans forward.

“Dit gaan goed met hom,” his mother answers and Janneman nods in agreement.

“Geluk.” Isak admires the medal hanging above the bed. “Die ouens is trots op jou.”

Janneman’s eyes are watery. Embarrassed Isak stares at the print on the opposite wall. It is of a single rose lying on a step. Behind the lace curtain is an old bandiet digging in the garden.

“Hoe voel die been?”

“Hy voel hom nog tot by sy tone,” his mother replies distracted by the gardener. She storms out of the room.

They hear the back door open and watch her through the lace. She looms over the man, shouting and wagging her finger.

Isak sees Janneman's pleading eyes under the shade cloth and the oozing leg.

"Wat nou?" Isak points to the leg.

"Die Weermag laat maak 'n nuwe been vir my."

"Hulle betaal vir alles," the granny interrupts.

"Wat van jou voetbal? Jy was goed."

"Wat help dit ek sit met twee bene en die Kaffers regeer die land?"

*

He wants to pass by but at the last moment he turns the bike in at the gate of the farm where Tamarisk trees flower.

He knocks on the screen door. Eventually someone comes and it is Magdaleen but she is not alone.

"Wie se kind is dit?" he speaks to her through the screen.

"Myne."

Shocked, he views the plump baby on her hip.

Magdaleen narrows her eyes. "Ek is getroud, onthou." She opens the screen door.

The baby gets hold of his shirt, tugging him closer, gently he releases the fingers. The baby looks like Oom Frans. The brown flecks on her face have faded but there are dark bruises under her eyes.

"Ek's besig met badtyd," she informs him listlessly.

"Wat maak jy hier, wat van Willa?"

“Hy oes.” Her eyes are evasive as she shifts the baby on her hip. “Help maar vir Ma en Pa vir seisoenstyd.”

Unsure, he waits for her to invite him in.

“Soek jy iets?” she asks him.

“Wou by jou Ma kom hoor hoe dit met jou gaan.”

“Kyk self.” She looks down at her changed body. The roundness of her cheeks are gone. The new angularity gives her a more grown up look. She sighs, “kom binne.”

There are old photographs behind curved glass. They walk through a series of interleading rooms.

He sits down on the bed as she undresses the baby. He cannot see her face as she cradles the baby in the nook of her arm, kneeling at the plastic bath. The baby with its elongated head, splashes and gurgles with delight.

The rounded bones of her spine show through her nylon dress, the strap of her bra, broad and white cuts her back in two.

She lifts the slippery baby out of the water and the baby howls. Isak laughs.

She stops drying the child. “Om ‘n kind te hê is glad nie snaaks nie.”

He gets up off the bed, moving over to the dressing table. A pile of paperbacks with voluptuous couples on the covers, are stacked next to baby things.

The baby has stopped crying, vigorously sucking her thumb.

“Sy’s honger,” Magdaleen announces.

“Wat eet sy?”

“Sy eet nie, sy drink aan my soos die meide se kinders.”

“Moet ek waai?”

“Maak soos jy lus kry.” She settles down on the bed.

Isak sits on the windowsill so that he can see better. Magdaleen unbuttons her dress down to the bottom of her breastbone, flipping open the cup of the bra, revealing her engorged breast and enlarged nipple. He keeps on looking as the baby sucks forcefully. His eyes wander along the shell shape of her ear, down her neck with raised veins, into the hollow of her bones of her shoulders.

“Is jy gelukkig?”

She looks at him with a steady gaze. “Jy trou, for better or for worse. Partykeer tip dit meer na die worse se kant toe.”

“Kyk Willa mooi na jou?”

She sticks her finger into the baby’s mouth, sighing. “Jy vang goed aan om van ander goed weg te kom dan kom jy agter jy’t uit die water innie vuur gespring.”

“Trou is nie perdekoop nie,” Isak agrees.

The baby latches onto the other breast and he loves the way her little hand strokes the soft skin of Magdaleen.

“Hoe is dit?”

“Wat?” She deliberately misunderstands him.

“Willa en getroud wees, die baba.”

“Ek kla nie.” Her eyes flash defiantly.

For a while he listens to the gentle baby sounds, his eyes on her skin. “Hoe kan jy dit toelaat?”

She shrugs, “Hy kan dit nie help nie.”

He doesn’t understand it. Why don’t people just leave when they are unhappy, it would be better for all. He gets up to go, the marks on her arms and breasts disturb him.

*

He can recall the dark room and the fan above the bed, with Oupa under the layers of blankets and how they had to tiptoe down the passage. No one was allowed to play the piano then, not even his father. Ouma nursed Oupa after Oom Sakkie's death in the desert but that was before he was born. The second time Oupa was nursed was when they took Perron's blue and red brand away, for unity's sake, then it was Tannie Lettie's turn and he can remember it well. How she would ask him to help her push Oupa out into the sun behind the cypresses. He was proud to do it, a little boy pushing the chair up the hill, a decoy, only there to give their rendezvous some sort of respectability. Oupa stroking her arm never seemed strange as he waited for them under the bloubos, sucking handfuls of pink sweets.

His mind flits back to the market in Paris.

Fifty years later, Perron's blue and red brand is stacked up in the narrow aisles of Rungis and they must start all over.

The name Perron has come back to France. It has a nice touch to it. His oupa would be proud. He changed the farm's name from Uitkoms to Perron, after he came back from Bechuanaland.

Isak hopes that he will not have to come home and admit defeat.

*

He parks the Gold Wing in the garage. "Spuit af," he instructs Outa as he jogs down the hill to the picking.

On the one side of the tractor are the reeds, river and Ceylons roses, while on the other side are the pear orchards and the picking team. Danie's head is down, reading a book while shifting the tractor little bit by little and the men are on tall ladders while the women move under the trees, removing the lower fruit.

Sitting in the shade is a group of small children, swaddled in blankets. Some of the babies lie on their backs with bottles full of red Kool-Aid, while the bored toddlers nibble on the green fruit.

Isak takes a picking bag. He tramps over damaged fruit and begins to pick. The crop is light.

“Watse ring grote gebruik ons nou?” Petrus consults with Danie.

“Twee-en-vyftig millimeter.” Danie passes a bag full of metal rings to him.

“Ons moet 'n groter ring gebruik,” he shouts to the team. “Die Baas willie boord skoonmaak.”

Some of the men get off their ladders. Some light up and the women murmur at the sight of Isak.

Petrus gives Isak a ring. “Baas moet by die vrouespan inval daar's nie genoeg trappe nie.” He calls a woman. “Koba, die Kleinbaas pluk onner jou.”

She is tall and strong, wearing a broad brimmed hat. “Ons anties se luck is in, daar's 'n ram onner die ooie.”

The other women giggle and gossip under the leaves. The girl who sang at David's funeral stands to one side.

Ignoring the jesting, he enjoys the repetitiveness of the work, pressing the ring over the bottom end of the pear. If it hooks, he deftly snaps the stem back, laying the fruit carefully on its side in the canvas bag. When the ring slips over the neck, he

leaves the pear to hang and so he does this to each fruit, working his way around the tree.

The heat increases and the talk diminishes.

The mobile radio is slung over Petrus' shoulder. Every half an hour or so, Isak's father calls and everyone listens.

“Amper 'n vol vrag, Baas. Die sapgoed is twee kratte en daar's baie merke oppie wange, Baas.”

Isak notices the crates are far from full but he carries on picking, pretending not to listen. His father barks out instructions over the radio.

“Die Baas sê julle moet ophou stront praat en pluk.”

The children move along with the tractor. A fuzzy haired girl leads the play. Fractious babies are strapped on their mother's backs.

Isak rests his bag on the crate, unclipping the bottom, allowing the pears to roll out into the crate. The pregnant girl flattens the fruit with her hands, throwing the marked pears into the juice crate at the back of the trailer. Every time she bends down, her stomach presses against the wood.

“Wie's die Pa?” he asks politely.

With a pained expression she points to Petrus.

“Wat's jou naam?”

“Sussie, Baas.” She stares into the crate.

“Jy't mooi gesing.”

A fleeting smile passes over her face.

A siren goes off. The bags are dropped, the tractor switched off and the babies unstrapped. The men gather around the domino board where the two contestants slap

the wooden blocks with great enthusiasm. Petrus laughs the loudest, hands on his hips.

Isak joins Danie in the shade of the tractor. "Wat lees jy?"

"Sol Plaatje."

"Nog nooit van hom gehoor nie." Isak drinks from the water can. "Waaroor gaan dit?"

"Meestal swart geskiedenis maar dis ook 'n liefdesverhaal."

He pulls a face.

The women sit under the trees, feeding the children salted fish and chunks of bread.

He breaks off a leaf, holding it to the sun. "Rooispinnepkop." He passes the leaf on to Danie.

Danie scratches at the mite on the back of the leaf. "Daar's 'n verbod op die gebruik van die spuitgoed wat die goggas vrekmaak, maar Pa hou aan spuit."

"Wat verwag die mense, dat jy jou hele oes in sy glorie moet laat gaan?"

Danie looks up from his book. "Hulle sê toetse bewys die gif gaan lê in 'n mens se bloed, ook in die grond, dit gaan nooit weg nie."

"Daar is mos iets wat rooispinnepkop eet." Isak takes another leaf, "dis so 'n groen goggatjie."

"Krokkedilletjies," Danie reminds him. "Ouma en haar Gardenia Thunbergia."

"Ja," Isak remembers. "Ek soek hulle maar ek kry nie."

"Die gif maak hulle ook dood."

A second siren goes off and he abandons his search.

The team buckles down. The men take turns to slip away for a smoke until the train of crates are full. Danie drives off with the loaded trailer to the werf where his father paces the stoep.

Everyone relaxes.

*

“Onthou jy die kind?” he asks out of the blue.

Danie yawns.

“Koba se meisiekind.”

Closing his book, Danie shudders. “Ek kry nog nagmerries daaroor.”

There was a scream, not from a woman but a child. He won't ever forget the horror on Danie's face as the tractor jolted to a halt. It was the fuzzy haired child of Koba. Isak saw her first, under the wheel with the weight of a thousands pears pressing down on her. Something triggered inside of him, the same trigger as in the bush. He fell flat, rolling onto his back next to the child and her face was like that of an ensnared animal. He gripped the wheel, pushing with all his strength against the weight of the crates, the blood in his head, throbbing.

And the screaming from the women was unabated. As Koba recognised her child she ripped wildly at her clothes and the child next to him thrashed vainly at the sound of her mother's voice. Then the head fell to one side and he wanted her to live, more than he had ever wanted anyone else to live. He was aware that Petrus and the other men were trying to shift the trailer with their combined weight but it didn't budge.

It was as though his brain was smashing open. With every bit of strength he regripped the wheel, shouting, “nou...nou!” And they pulled together, for the first time in years.

From somewhere he got the strength, pushing upward and the wheel lifted a little and Petrus dragged the child out. Without asking, he snatched the child, taking the short cut through the river to the office, the damaged child limp in his arms.

His father was on the stoep with a thundering face, until he saw the child.

Without further explanation, they climbed into the bakkie, his father behind the wheel and they drove like madmen, out by the farm gate, throwing up dust and stones over the trees.

“Die kind haal nie asem nie.” He placed his hand on her tiny crushed chest.

His father glanced down at the child, slamming on brakes, swerving the bakkie off the road. “Vat jy die wiel.”

He shifted behind the wheel, thinking of purple vygies opening to the sun as his father walked around. He placed the child on his father’s lap.

“Ry.”

From the corner of his eye he could see his father pressing his stumped finger over the heart, then lifting the cherub lips to his own and blowing. Briefly he lifted his foot off the pedal, staring at the silver haired man.

“Ry!” his father repeated sternly.

Fingers tapped on the chest of the child. Five gentle breaths given into the deflated lungs, all the way into the village, then down side streets, through stop streets, to the gates of the hospital.

“Hou stil by die wit kant.”

The bakkie slid to a stop in front of the Outpatients entrance with its blue-headed Christmas roses. His father kicked the door open and ran up the paved ramp, through the doors marked, *Whites only*.

It was the first time since the day in the hills and the last time that he saw his father run.

**

University of Cape Town

He presses the pedal hard and the engine of the Jeep responds, smoke pouring out from the exhaust. The road is straight, with hardly any other vehicles. He drives on the white line, playing chicken with the oncoming traffic until he hits the outskirts of the town.

Trellised vines replace fallow fields. He takes a wrong turn, going up a one-way street full of longhaired students, who jeer and smack the side of the Jeep. At the bottom of the street is the hostel, a plain building with rows of small windows.

He parks the Jeep next to other cars showing similar wear and tear. For a while he sits in the cab, licking the chocolate cake's icing off the seat, watching a group of students welcome parents on the steps of the hostel. Their hair is greasy and their beards matted. Balancing the cake in one hand and his kit in the other he makes his way to them.

"Boetie-vannie-Border," one sneers at his short hair.

He walks past into the courtyard, full of students with clipboards and badges reading, *verwelkomingskomitee*. Isak ignores them, finding his name and room number on the board.

The room is on the second floor. A boy sits on the bed, stocky and blond, with short back and sides. "Dowling, Ladysmith, Cape." He juts out his hand.

"Bruwer."

"That looks good."

Isak looks down at the sagging cake, then up again at the broad face of Dowling. "Help yourself."

Dowling pulls out a ruler from a drawer and cuts the cake in slices, offering Isak the first.

“Not for me, I’ve had.”

Embarrassed, Dowling eats in silence.

“I’m going for a walk.” Isak feels awkward. “Do you want to come along?”

“No thanks, I’ll just take a kip. They say the doop is pretty bad, so I’ll save my energy for later.”

Isak walks out onto the open passageway. From here he has a view of the rest of the hostel. All the doors of the rooms are open and the courtyard bustles with parents meeting the hostel father.

He finds his way to the kitchen entrance at the back of the hostel where it is much quieter. A Dalmatian lies at the kitchen door, emaciated and forlorn. The dog is in the kitchen staff’s way as they clear the dining room for the night, shooing and prodding him in the ribs but the dog lies, head on its forepaws.

Isak strokes its ears and the spotted dog seems to be quite at home. “Wie se hond is dit?” he asks one of the women mopping.

“Hy’t nie naam nie,” she swirls the mop around the dog. “Hulle het hom die einde van laas jaar hier vergiet, nou lê en wag hy vi’ sy Baas ma’ sy Baas gannie weer kom nie, hy’s afgeleer.”

Isak whistles. The dog pricks up its ears. “Oubaas se honne, kom na Oubaas toe.” Isak waits a while, then calls again.

Lethargically, the dog gets up.

“Agge nee Kollie, hoekom is jy so maer?” Playfully he reproaches the dog, rubbing the flaking skin. Isak politely waits for the woman to complete her mopping.

“Verskoon tog.”

She stops and looks at him suspiciously.

“Is daar iets wat die hond kan eet?”

Without replying she stamps the mop in the bucket, opening the doors of a fridge as big as his hostel room.

“Hierso vat dit, niemand ga’ dit mis nie.”

It is a bowl of cooked mince. Isak takes the bowl, placing it at the dog’s paws but the dog makes no attempt to eat.

“Nee a, beggars can’t be choosers.” Isak sticks his hand in the mince and offers the dog a ball of it on his outstretched hand.

The dog eats. Isak makes another ball and he eats that as well until the bowl is empty. The streetlights come on and the voices in the courtyard have diminished.

“Kom.” Isak whistles. “Ons moet gou maak.” The dog feebly wags its tail.

The two of them slip up the stairs to his room, Isak pulling the dog by its collar.

Dowling lies on the bed, ankles crossed, staring at the ceiling. “And this?”

“Sorry, but we’ve got an extra roomie.”

“Great stuff,” Dowling enthuses, jumping off his bed. “I anyway miss my dogs.” He rubs the dog’s back. “Shame man, he is just skin and bone.”

Isak takes out a towel, folding it double and placing it between the beds.

“Lê, Kolle.” He points to the towel.

The dog lies down.

“How do you know his name?”

“I don’t.”

The dog has a miserable look on its face.

“Obviously an Afrikaans speaking dog then,” Dowling chats, happy to have something in common.

“I think he will listen to Chinese at this stage,” Isak replies.

During the night there is a banging of doors and loud whoops from the courtyard. He wakens, disorientated, on the alert, his heart pumping. The alarm clock shows four am, his time to do watch. Dowling sleeps but the dog is awake, watching him. He must get used to the sound of traffic in the night, brakes screeching and police sirens.

It is cooler out on the balcony. Kollo follows him, licking his bare feet and it is good to feel a dog’s skin, to have a friend, no matter how haggard.

Isak fetches the last piece of chocolate cake, breaking it in two. They share the cake and he allows the dog to lick his face and the last traces of sweetness off his fingers and the next day cannot all be bad, he thinks to himself.

*

He hides the dog in the room with cornflakes and toast stolen from breakfast to see him through the day as they are marched up and down town, the girl’s hostel being their last stop of the day.

With lightness he holds the girl’s hand as they walk in pairs, crocodile style, past the university’s neoclassical buildings. The girl next to him is plump and eager, her sweaty palms a distraction to his thoughts, her mixture of must and floral spray forcing him to lift his head and breathe deeply.

Ahead in the road he notices a lone car with a missing number plate. The occupants are black, two of his age and an older man with greying hair.

“Wat’s jou naam?” his partner plucks up courage to ask.

The car with its rusted chassis idles in the street and Isak tries to memorise their faces.

“Wat is jou naam?” she tries again.

“Pieter.”

She waits expectantly for him to ask hers but he doesn’t.

The younger one winds down the window as the rest of the crocodile walk gaily by. Isak steps out on the road, releasing the hand of the nameless girl.

“What do you want?” he asks brusquely.

Unblinking, the black boy looks straight at him, holding out a torn piece of paper.

“Coetzenburg?” Isak looks around in the car. “Why do you want to go to Coetzenburg?”

“Paint, Baas.” The boy demonstrates with exaggerated strokes and the older man laughs.

“Drive back and turn right, then go over a bridge and you’ll see it.”

“Thanks, Baas.” The boy continues smiling.

The pairs continue to stroll on, making small talk and the doopkomitee led by Schoeman shout at him to get back in line while the girl stands lost on the pavement. He stands in the street, checking on the car until it turns the corner, sauntering on with hands in the pocket while the girl totters on her wedge heeled sandals, trying to catch up.

The town is abuzz with students. The boys wear short-sleeved shirts of purple and green with garish ties, smoking and swearing, while the girls are watered down

versions of Farah Fawcett Majors, flicking their styled curls over the straps of their sundresses.

The movie house is old, draped in red brocade. A matinee is showing a re-run of *The Poseidon Adventure* and they fill the theatre with its gilt columns and collapsed seats.

The nameless girl is humiliated. She sniffs with self-pity in the dark, while others use the dark to grope. Isak closes his eyes at the sight of the doomed ship, trying to picture the men in the car. Now and again he opens his eyes, catching glimpses of tidal waves and frantic women in evening gowns, thrashing in water, with perfectly made-up faces. The theme song plays and the credits rolls down the screen. Some pairs have hit it off, while other pairs have swapped. A few like him sit with folded arms.

“Watse roomys wil jy hê?” he asks on instruction.

“Rum and raisin.” She pouts with watery eyes.

The ice cream wafer is wrapped. He tears it open, pushing the head of the wafer forward. A group of girls have collected around the nameless one, clucking sympathetically, their eyes flashing at him as they hug her.

“Hierso.” He hands the ice cream to her.

Grudgingly, she accepts, her eyes blinking desperately but he has moved away.

The crocodile is formed again under Schoeman’s orders. He waits until the last moment before joining up with her. Briskly they walk back as the girls have a curfew. At the entrance they kiss their partners and the nameless girl knowing what to expect, climbs the steps, without greeting him.

All the way back to their hostel the mocking begins. He is mocked about her ugliness, her fat ankles, the too tight top, none of which he had noticed.

Kolle greets him joyfully. He throws a ball for the dog and it retrieves it. Music blares from transistor radios. Down in the courtyard the second years are singing the theme song from the movie, louder and louder. He carries his mattress out onto the balcony. The dog and him lie down together.

*

A week of playing games comes to an end, cold showers and silly concerts. He counts the weeks before rugby trials begin as they pass the fields where he will play.

Thousands of first year students enter the graduation hall. There is scaffolding against the outside of the building. Isak recognises the boy scraping off paint.

Inside there's a festive atmosphere. He sees some of his old school friends but they are strangers to him. The girls look all the same.

The rector is tanned from his holiday at the sea and his hair is cleverly combed, disguising his baldness. His speech is long. Isak dozes under the words, the cream of the country's youth, the new intellectual elite who must take the country forward. He studies the panels of the ceiling in an attempt to stay awake. Along the length of the hall are windows open for the heat. In one of them is the face of the black boy, listening intently to the rector. He is not the only one who has noticed him. Of the students begin to point and whisper. Someone on stage sees him too and waves behind the rector's head at the boy on the scaffolding, then he disappears from the window and calmness descends.

A tall, soft-spoken man takes the microphone and begins to recite the list of distinguished alumnus, men and women who have shaped the face of the country. Theology and politics feature highly and Isak remembers the book of Noah that he must still read.

At last the ceremony is over. Students file out past the empty scaffolding. On the lawn are trestle tables with trays of sliced watermelon. The university staff, cluster in small groups, their gowns flapping in the berg wind.

It is stifling hot. Students lounge on the grass, under the trees, eating the sticky chunks of fruit, playfully spitting pips at each other. Isak climbs into a tree. The mountains feel so close, the crags sharply defined. A bird floats like a rag above the peaks on winds that don't reach them.

Boys smear the green skins over each other and the girls screech predictably, running off and watching from a distance. Isak jumps down and picks a slice off the table. Some brave girls in short skirts with muscular calves try to fight back. Isak spins the slice through the air. It hits a girl on the back with force and she turns in shock, bursting into tears.

“Stop! Stop!”

The game comes to an end before it has even started. Hostel leaders call for order and the welcome is officially over.

He strolls back with Dowling to the hostel past his austere faculty building. On the corner of the building is an old man with a cart, selling fruit. He wears a fez and he is laughing with a girl.

She wears a wide checked skirt that billows and her hair is in a ponytail and he notices that when she laughs she touches the old man's arm. He slows down but Schoeman is shouting at them from the hostel gates.

As they enter the courtyard a thunder flash goes off from the top storey. The courtyard is full of second and third year students with cricket bats and rubber cudgels. Isak immediately turns but the gates are locked behind him.

Without a word, Isak and Dowling spread out, counting the possible exits but the armed students move in menacingly, their faces all screwed up and the first years retreat, backs against the wall.

A pale faced student with spectacles storms down on Isak. “Wie’s ek, wie’s ek jou stuk stront!” he screams, wielding a cricket bat over his head.

Isak shifts his feet apart, ducking as the bat misses his face by inches.

“Is jy doof, jou fokken rekkie, ek vra wie’s ek, wat’s my naam en wie die hel is jy?”

The bat smacks him on the cheek. Without thinking he knocks it out of the shorter boy’s hand, plucking at his shirt, lifting him off the ground, shaking him like a rat. Chaos breaks loose as Dowling and the others attack.

Half a dozen boys are on Isak’s back. He gets punched in the face. He drops the boy like a rotten fruit, the spectacles breaking under the stomping feet, his arm twisted in a vice grip.

The shortsighted boy is shivering, his eyes fearful and glazed. He spits in Isak’s face, while the older students cheer him on.

The mass of seniors herd them into a darkened room. They get stamped in like cattle until there is no space to move. Paper bags are forced over their heads and their wrists are tied with string. The door is closed and locked.

For a while no one speaks.

Dowling calls softly, his voice muffled by the bag, “Bruwer?”

“Ja, I’m here.”

“Are you okay?”

“Ja.”

Fruit and sweat swelter in his nostrils, then a sickening overpowering smell drifts over their heads.

“Watse stink is dit?” someone asks.

Paper bags rustle but the sweet smell is not easy to define.

“Incense,” Dowling suggests. “Sandalwood.”

“How do you know?” Isak asks curiously.

“I’m Catholic.”

There is a murmuring amongst the boys.

“Die Pous is die groot anti-Chris,” a voice calls out.

“The Pope is saving Poland from Communism, more that what the bloody Afrikaner church is doing for this country,” Dowling flashes back.

“Kafferkerk,” another retorts.

Who said that?” Dowling is in a rage.

The boys struggle to free themselves from the string.

“Cool it ouens, cool it!” Isak shouts hoarsely.

They stand shoulder to shoulder. Isak feels nauseous and claustrophobic.

Tannie Lettie’s box with the letters under the bed smelt like this.

**

Aimee would be dressing his mother, seated on the fluffy chair with curlers in her hair. She would speak to the portraits on the dressing table, reprimanding him for not answering.

He feels his chest tighten.

“Lees vir my.”

Danie puts on the light, reading randomly. “Young men are fitter to invent than to judge, fitter for execution than for counsel and fitter for new projects than for settled business...the errors of young men are their ruin of business but the errors of aged men amount to this, that more might have been done or sooner...” His eyes flit over the paragraph. “Men of age object too much, consult too long, adventure too little, repent too soon and seldom drive business home to the full period but content themselves with a mediocrity of success.”

“Afrikaners need new rituals,” Isak remarks more to himself than to Danie.

“Not only Afrikaners.” Danie comments without lifting his eyes from the page.

“Think about doop at varsity,” Isak reflects. “Karakterbou, vernedering wat die man in jou uitbring, om die groep te versterk.”

“Gedink dis al lank verby.”

“Dit lê te diep, wette sal dit nie stop nie.”

“Afrikaners is lief vir die bekende,” Danie adds without paying much attention to his brother’s conversation.

“You know we were the first group that had seen action in Angola that went to varsity?”

Sighing, Danie puts the book to one side. "No."

"I don't think they were quite prepared for us, the doopkomitee, lighties straight from home."

"Ssssh." Danie places his finger on his mouth as the old men complain.

"Rustig jongen."

*

The main switch is turned off. Blindfolded they are lead to the cellar. The blindfolds are removed and what he sees reminds him of the Klu Klux Klan with their black pointed hoods and capes.

There is an open space between them and the table where the five druids are seated. A voice, high pitched and comical if it were not for the surroundings, speaks from under one of the hoods, explaining the seriousness of the court and the procedures which leads to sentence.

He struggles to follow the squeaky voice, reading the circle of faces of the others, strained and in fearful anticipation. A bottle is sent around filled with an oily brown mixture. Isak takes a slug, letting the sickening thickness of linseed drool out of the corners of his mouth.

The door opens behind them. A naked body is pushed into the clearing, clutching his groin, his long hair in greasy ropes while his buttocks shine in the candlelight. Wildly he looks around the room.

Then the trial begins. A bucket of water is thrown over the cringing body and his sins are listed, the cuckolded boyfriend reliving the scene of betrayal and they all listen, voyeurs to the crime.

Sentence is proclaimed. The sinner pleads. The blindfolds are put on.

“How much more of this are we going to take?” Dowling whispers in his ear as they climb the stairs.

Singing breaks out in the courtyard, the theme song of the movie.

“Let them go ahead, just when they think we are beaten, we take them on, when they least expect it.”

Dowling glances over his shoulder at the scapegoat of the group, Ferreira.

“Maybe we should do it sooner than later.”

“Next year it’s our turn to donner the skoongesiggies.”

“Not you, Bruwer, you’re a softie, ask Kollé.”

*

They wait until the first snow is predicted. They wait until Schoeman and the rest think the job is done.

Ten boys push the Jeep into the courtyard, so that no one wakes. An icy wind blows, lifting leaves and they pull the balaclavas tightly over their faces, a sock clenched over the right hand.

Ten seniors are targeted, Schoeman and the worst of his cronies. The boys who took the greatest delight in the doop.

Isak climbs up the guttering to the top storey and an open sash window. Hooking his foot on the frame, he pulls his body up, flush against the wall. Inside the room Schoeman lies prostrate on his bed, snoring. Positioned outside other windows are Dowling and the rest of the ten. Isak motions to them with his hands to stay calm as Dowling shows off, doing press ups on the narrow sill.

Schoeman mumbles in his sleep as Isak lifts the frame. Stealthily he slips into the room, allowing his eyes time to adjust. The room is in a state of disorder, pin up girls discreetly displayed behind the door.

He moves in, sizing up the sleeping Schoeman, pulling the sock off his hand. Light from the street makes stripes over Schoeman and for a moment Isak forgets why he is here. Then he grabs the boy's head, stuffing the sock into his mouth, falling on top of him, locking his arm around his throat and throttling him.

There is a struggle. Isak tightens his grip.

Schoeman spits the sock out. "Die Baas het nie geld nie."

"Baas, Baas? Wie die hel is ek?" Isak speaks in a high pitched voice.

The other begins to cough uncontrollably. "Moenie my dood maak nie, Heretjie asseblief."

Isak shoves him down the steps with a bag over his head. Schoeman trips and scuffs his knees badly all the way down to where the others wait at the Jeep with their targets, stripped naked and tied up.

Isak gives the thumbs up as he gets behind the wheel. The naked boys are thrown onto the back as the Jeep is pushed out into the deserted street. There's a mad rush to jump on as the engine kicks to life, back firing pistol shots through town. They head out to the mountains.

The town disappears beneath low cloud as they climb the mountain pass. A hare sits in the road, blinded by the Jeep's lights. Isak swerves, without warning and the kidnapped boys shout out in fear to the glee of the others. At the top of the mountain, a gravel road peels off into a forest of pines and fynbos. Here it is isolated and silent. He pulls the balaclava over his face and the others do the same.

“Af, af.” The boys lead them down different paths into the bush. Isak spins Schoeman until he is drunk in the head before letting him go. The boy staggers and falls. Speaking with his hands, Isak calls the others back to the clearing.

They break off branches, while Dowling unloads the beers and the ten boys crawl around, calling out but no one answers them. Instead the ten drink the beer and watch the fire, eating sausage off sticks.

More sausage and more beers are consumed. Eventually, some of the crawling boys find their way to the fire.

“Sê net wat jy wil hê, sê net.” Schoeman’s arms and legs bleed.

Isak drops down on his knees next to him, hissing, “Die Boeties vannie Border sê...fokof.”

Schoeman cocks his head. “Bruwer, is dit jy? Heretjie, sê net dis jy.”

Isak signals to Dowling and the engine of the jeep is switched on.

“Moenie vir ons hier los nie!” Schoeman desperately screams, toppling forward.

Isak stands over him seeing Ferreira dangling in the air above their heads. “Dis vir Ferreira.” He kicks the boy hard in the ribs.

Schoeman rolls over, knees pulled up from pain.

“Laaï hulle,” Isak instructs. Roughly, he cuts the red band around the other’s wrists.

The gang watch him but they don’t move.

“Dis eers genoeg.” Isak rips the bag off Schoeman.

“Chicken,” one of them challenges him.

“Die game is oor,” Isak cuts him off.

Schoeman is crying with relief, hanging onto Isak’s ankles.

“What more do you want?” He looks down at Schoeman, seeing another boy’s face.

Dowling unties the wrists of a boy. Reluctantly, the rest of the gang follow.

The wind has stopped blowing and the air is unnaturally warm. Flakes feather down, melting on their skin.

*

Isak glances at Danie lying in the cot next to him with lips slightly parted. He searches for the boy in sleep but there is nothing. He conjures up Claasen on the Casspir as a youth but there is nothing.

The night switches on the ward’s light with a brash greeting, pulling the screen back.

Danie checks the time, then he swings his legs effortlessly off the bed. “Vandag moet jy op.” Danie wipes Isak’s face with the hot facecloth, then he cranks the bed into a sitting position, before she can get to him. “Hul’s bang vir bloedklonte in die bene,” he explains the presence of an armchair.

“Ek kan nie.”

“Probeer net.”

“Ek wil nie.” Isak watches the nurse turn the morphine up one last time.

She indicates to Danie where to hold, then they lift him.

“Off your deathbed, brother.” Danie grips firmly.

Isak feels the soothing drug in his veins that makes the pain bearable. He is helpless, incapable, not only in body but in mind. They slide him into the chair. Spontaneously his muscles shake as the morphine is cut off. His heart races, his hands

tremble, while his mind jumbles back and forth. Exhausted, he views his calves covered in stockings.

“Try and flex you feet every hour.”

Isak focuses on Danie’s breathing.

“Do you need anything?”

“Sit die TV aan,” he manages to say.

“What channel?” Danie picks up the remote.

He doesn’t answer as the pain in his chest returns with vengeance.

Swirling patterns appear on the screen. Low temperatures are predicted for large parts of Europe. From the footage, Isak can work out the projected damage in millions to the continent’s apple and pear production. It sparks a glimmer of hope in him. Perhaps the prices will lift, the demand will increase for Southern hemisphere fruit.

“Die een se dood is die ander se brood.” His throat is dry and there is overwhelming panic in him.

Danie watches the screen. “Die Franse boere het Parys weer op hol. Hulle blok die strate met hul trekkers, gooi varkmis op die sypaadjies.”

“Hulle het ten minste meer guts as ons.”

“Invoere maak hulle dood.”

Isak grimaces with pain. “Na sestig persent subsidie, kan hulle dit nog nie maak nie.”

“Hoe oorleef julle?”

“Ons oorleef nie. Rentekoerse, inflasie, ’n onvriendelike landboudepartement, uitvoersubsidies wat weggeval het, nuwe arbeidswetgewing, kunsmis wat aan die

dollar gekoppel is, verskeping...Should I go on?" He flexes one stockinged foot then the other. "O ja, en 'n Europese mark wat totaal versadig is."

"Genoeg om jou polse te sny." Danie's face is impassive.

"België se uitskotappels is meer as die hele Suid-Afrikaanse produksie van appels, dit beteken." He runs out of breath, "they don't need us or our fruit."

Talking is not such a good idea. Explaining tends to rub him up the wrong way. To keep his mind off the increasing pain that permeates his entire body, his present troubles fill his thoughts. For a moment the morphine had lulled him into thinking that the problems would, like moles, burrow down and disappear.

*

The hardest thing to do is to draw a line.

He tries hard to think of other things that will distract him from this. His stillborn rugby career is one thing he spends little time agonising over, even though then it felt it would be better to be dead than not to play the game. Fighting about a ball was what gave life meaning, without it there was no reason for him to stay at university. He had the line drawn for him and he had chafed against it, going back over and over again to test his neck, his Achilles heel. On the other hand it was the excuse he was looking for to leave the likes of Schoeman behind. Boys who played God on campus, marionettes of men in public office while the so called liberals tentatively challenged the national truths, too scared to make a stand, for fear of lost futures. And he knew of boys dying while this charade was taking place. Boys in elephant grass while the intellectual elite shifted tokens over a board and other boys were dying in the streets of townships for the right to learn in the language of their

choice and the man in the Eastern Cape, his death leaving the Minister... What were his words then... cold?

He had to go. He thought the farm was his salvation.

Isak drifts in and out of sleep with children running in the streets of Soweto, boys on stretchers next to landmines and himself on a stretcher falling into roses. Aimee's smiling face, her arms reaching out to him returns again and again. And he dreams of the two of them in a lorry, loaded with ripe apricots on the back, driving down a road that leads to a river. She climbs out walking up a hill, watching him walk through a labyrinth alongside the river, trying to cross over as the lorry floats on a wooden pont to the other side.

He dreams of fields. Fields of flowers and fields of green. Walking onto the green field, facing a man from the sport pages of the Sunday newspaper, wearing the green and gold. Along the chalked lines are older men in purple blazers with gold braid, resting on canes or sitting on pegged chairs watching them drop into the scrum. Him, flanked by school opponents who press down with him.

And he digs in with his heels, feeling the greater force of the famous front ranker, testing his own strength. But the man in green and gold pushes back harder.

Anger makes him strain to give more and the expectation of the inevitable release but it does not come as expected.

As a beer bottle's lid snaps off, there's a crack and snap in his neck, then total dissipation of power flowing out of his entire body, like a flash flood that passes by.

Living yet lifeless, he lies on the turf with older men around him, concern on their faces. And the big man whose face he has only seen from far lifts him gently with the very strength that has done him injury. They carry him on a stretcher,

whispering kind words and he mistakes their gentleness for weakness. Mistakes it for guilt.

The stretcher and him are loaded in the back of the ambulance.

David's coffin is loaded on the back of the bakkie.

Janneman is loaded in the helicopter.

A neck brace is placed over his head. He reminds them of the dog and the dog climbs into the ambulance as well, then the siren is switched on. His fingers hook and fall from the dog as they drive fast, past walking, talking students with not a care in the world.

Words spoken with promise in change rooms, next to fields fade. Dreams of green and gold that keep his nights sane, fade.

In the white room nothing matters anymore than to push and shove and bully others to the ground. But later much later he joins the old men to watch others play and he sees it for what it is, an escape from the softness that threatens to take him.

**

They dawdle, Isak, Dowling and Kollé. Their place is at the back of the lecture hall, nearest to the exit. It is packed with sons of farmers and a string of girls in the front row, daughters of farmers who have with no sons.

Portraits of past professors and ministers of agriculture reign on the walls, thick jowled men with bi-focals.

Isak yanks at his tie, kicking his feet out noisily while Kollé sits quietly under the desk. Dowling takes out his pad and textbook.

The sun shines over the podium where the profusely haired professor smacks the microphone. A girl in a tent dress fiddles with the plug and his voice booms over the speakers. The class settles down as their names are read out in alphabetical order.

“Hond Bruwer?”

The class laughs and everyone looks at Isak who lifts the paw of the dog as acknowledgement and the class laughs again.

“Isak Bruwer?”

Isak flicks his wrist.

The professor lifts his eyebrows. “Ek is bly dat die klas met jou teenwoordigheid geëer is, Mnr Bruwer. Ek het begin dink dat jy ons vir groener weivelde gelos het.”

Isak checks out the chalked scribble on the blackboard. Landbou Ekonomie 1. “Boring, boring, boring,” he murmurs to himself.

“Ons gaan verder om die agtergrond van die huidige bemarkingswetgewing en beleid rondom landbou in Suid-Afrika te skets.”

Isak takes a pen, digging a hole in the wood of the desk. The hole has progressed well over the past few months

“Wat is dus die hoofmerk van die bemarkingswet?” The professor asks. No one answers as he anticipates. “Om,” he makes sure everyone is listening, “stabiliteit in die pryse van landbouprodukte te bevorder en tweedens om by wyse van rasionalisasie, die gaping tussen die produsenteprys en die verbruikersprys te vernou.”

All heads are down making notes as fast as he speaks. Isak scratches with his pen in the hole, the nib collecting fine dust.

Isak drums his knuckles.

“Dus beheer, orde en struktuur was die onderliggende motief agter die inisiatiewe. Boere boer en kundiges bemark en skep nuwe markte; ’n wenresep wat nou meer as dertig jaar beoefen word.”

The girl in the tent dress sticks up her hand. “Professor, dit beteken dat almal moet saamstaan, anderste werk die stelsel nie.”

The professor gives the girl a broad smile and she blushes. “Presies! Eendrag maak mag. Groepsbelange oorskry individuele belang. Dit is onmoontlik dat ’n enkele boer met dieselfde mate van sukses, die hele ketting van gebeure kan bestuur.” He looks to the back of the hall. “Die geheim? Skoenmaker, hou jou by jou lees.”

Isak drills through the wood.

“Met die vyandige houding van die res van die wêreld teenoor die Republiek, sal ons makro ekonomie geweldig daaronder ly as daar van dié beleid afgewyk word. Ons is besig met ’n ander soort oorlog as die boere in die veertigs maar die noodssaklikheid van eenheid is niks minder belangrik nie, dit kan ek nie genoeg beklemtoon nie.”

Isak leans back to listen. The elephant grass will be taller than their heads. The tubed lighting of the hall flickers.

“Die doelwit van die regering is om blanke boerdery gesinne op die ground te hou en om hul boerderye uit te brei na kommersiële eenhede toe. Die wanbalans van blanke gesinne tot kleurling en Bantu gesinne bly kommerwekkend op die platteland.”

“It’s tough being a white man in Africa,” Dowling chips in under his breath.

“I’m off,” Isak replies.

“I’ll take notes for you,” Dowling offers.

“See you later.”

As Isak and Kollo slip out by the back exit, he catches the professor’s words. “Elkeen van julle is ‘n sryder van die saak en die saak is wit Suid-Afrika... Dis die boer op die plaas wat ‘n kernfaktor in ons sosiale struktuur gaan bly.”

*

He walks down the deserted street with Kollo at his side. It is only those with babbelas that sit in the hostel’s courtyard, nursing their headaches. There’s a note on the door, *bel jou ma*. He tears it off, throwing it over the edge of the balcony.

His side of the room is immaculate, clothes colour-coded in precise stacks. Carefully, he extracts a towel and shorts without disturbing the neatness.

“Kom, Honne.” Kollo follows him down to the Jeep.

The battery is flat but the babbelas boys have recovered enough to push start the jeep into the road. The engine falters and farts over pedestrians who cough and cover their faces for the fumes. Then he sees the girl through the smoke. He slams on brakes at the sight of her.

She turns at the commotion, smiling at the sight of the spotted dog. Cars hoot agitatedly behind him and he accelerates, her amused face imprinted on the windscreen.

The road is downhill all the way to the coast. Homesteads are hidden by avenues of oaks, while up against the fencing are children and sickly dogs, running past old women chewing tobacco.

Along the coast the beaches are empty. The take-away shops have visplakkies and postcards displayed. A few, weather-beaten grannies walk their dogs on the promenade. The cliff road hangs over the blue sea. Isak drives as close as he can to the edge. Way below fishermen sit like Comorants on outcrops of rock, waiting for the currents to bring the fish closer.

His beach is a narrow strip, flanked by mountains and black boulders at the water's edge. They park under the Milkwood trees. Kollo leaps through the open window, lifting his leg over old demarcations and roots protected by alien undergrowth. Together they walk the path, Kollo a little ahead, onto a beach that is only surf and sand.

Kollo finds a spot in the undergrowth, while Isak studies the waves for currents. The tide pushes up. Seagulls tip toe along the watermark and the wind shifts sand to new places.

He breathes in the sea air, watching where the foam breaks, markers for unseen gullies. Then he undresses, folding his clothes neatly.

Leisurely, he jogs along, feet in the foam and the seagulls give way, lifting off and settling a little further on. The beach ends abruptly with a high boulder wall. Kollo waits patiently as he looks for footholds in the hollows of the black rock, his hands slipping over the slimy sea lettuce.

Doggedly, he tries again and again, dragging himself over the unforgiving rock. Tantalizing glimpses of the other side fuel his determination. Sweating and breathing hard, he slides up on top from where he has a fish's eye view of the coastline.

Seagulls swoop effortlessly over to the other side.

The wall he has climbed is deceptive. Not a single mass but a conglomeration of different rock, shaped into fantastical forms by the constant struggle of the sea. In the middle is an unforeseen chasm, wide and deep, cutting the rock in two. To get to the other side he has no choice but to cross it. He stands on the edge, measuring the fall.

The hidden beach is beautiful. Nests of baby seagulls cover the gentle dunes, their squawks and cries alluring to him.

Again he measures the width of the chasm that seems to expand before him. Crouching low he keeps his eyes on rock, then he leaps, everything a blur. For a second he does not know whether he will make it, hanging suspended between the two, then it is hardness under his feet. Exhilarated he shouts, punching his fist in the air.

On the other side he is alone. With long strides he runs through the water, following the curves around the cliffs. He picks up his legs, increasing his speed, pushing the water out of his way, harder and harder, faster and faster. Gulls shriek in the dizzy madness.

He falls, skimming over the sand, face down.

For a very long time he lies like this, unmoving as the gulls bouree around him. There is a heaviness in him that will not lift. Like a baby he crawls along, struggling to carry his own weight, limbs shaking from the effort. He tips to one side,

curling up in a ball, clutching his legs close to his chest, rocking himself in the wet sand.

Shadows pass over him. He hears the sound of a beast gnashing its teeth and the sound comes from within.

Coldness seeps over him. He sits up, noticing the sun has moved.

The gulls' nests are in the dunes, hundreds and hundreds of them. There is a deafening response as he wanders amongst the fragile eggs. Whitened bones of birds lie in the sand. He picks up a skull, exquisitely light, knotted fish line twisted around the bones. He tries to untangle the mess but gives up, dropping it, remembering the dog.

The rock is easier to climb, the chasm less daunting. Kollo is still where he left him. Isak turns to look at the beach behind him. He will come again, the heaviness has become a little less heavy and the darkness of his thoughts a little less dark.

“Huis toe.” He muses over his own use of the word.

*

She is walking away from him, her ponytail curled up and pinned on the back of her head but he recognises the uprightness of her back under the gingham.

This time he pulls the Jeep alongside her and gets out.

She sees the spotted dog at the open window and she stops as well to rub his head.

“Ek’s op pad om ‘n draai met die hond te stap, wil jy saam?”

Kolle places his paws on the window, licking her hand.

Surprised, her eyes run boldly over him, summing him up. “Yes,” is all she says.

“We can walk with him along the river, then I’ll drop you at your res afterwards...If you want.”

“Fine.” She juts her chin out, opening the door of the Jeep before he can.

Kolle sits between them, panting and he is aware of her fingers playing with the dog’s ear, talking animatedly to the dog. In the mirror he can see the skin of her neck, velvet but alive with transparent hairs that lead his eyes down to her shoulders.

They walk the dog. He cannot speak to her about anything. He has no idea what to say to a girl wearing Jacaranda seed earrings, so they walk the dog. Now and again he calls Kolle to heel just for the sake of something to say. His head spins and there is a tingling all over him, like you get when you ride the swings at the show grounds.

Kolle runs down to the river and they follow.

“Where do you come from?” she asks, throwing a stick into the water.

“Perron. My dad farms with fruit.”

Kolle splashes mud all over her and she laughs, dropping to her haunches, her neck curved like a cat.

“And you?” he asks standing to one side.

“Eastern Cape, but now suburbia.” She draws with her finger in the clay soil.

“Are you going to farm?”

Isak is taken aback. “Ja, I love the farm.”

“Yes, I’m sure of that but do you want to farm, like work there the rest of your life?” Her eyes are green and gold.

“Of course, its my inheritance. That’s why I’m doing Landbou.” For him the two are the same. “And you?”

“Well, what I was supposed to do was domestic science because I love cooking and my father knows the professor...He taught her maths at school,” she explains the connection, “but that doesn’t necessarily mean I only want to cook so I changed to Art.” She is drawing a face. “Cooking comes naturally to me, you don’t have to study something that comes naturally, it just happens along the way. That’s why I’m doing art. I struggle with it,” she explains, wiping out the lines in the clay.

“Was your Dad angry, for changing?”

“Of course.”

Kolle brings her the stick and she hugs his wet body. “Jy’s ougat!”

“So, what happened?”

“Oh, he didn’t speak to me for months, literally months.” She rolls her eyes, “but he got over it, especially when I didn’t transform overnight into some... bohemian rhapsody.” She giggles as the dog tries to sit on her lap, pushing her over.

“Kolle, nee, af!” He pulls at the dog’s collar, reprimanding Kolle to sit and stay. “Sorry.” The sight of her lying down increases the sensation.

“He was only having fun.” She gets up, dusting her clothes off. “Do you have brothers and sisters?”

“A younger brother, very studious and serious, he’ll probably become a tokkelok.”

“I’ve an older brother,” she answers without being asked, “but he’s planning to leave the country.”

“Have they offered him a job?”

“No. His drossing the country.”

“How come?”

“He did the biggest part of his military service in Soweto last year, they had to shoot at kids...” She pulls a face. “So he’s jumping the camps and the country, he refuses to shoot fellow South Africans,” she finishes blithely.

Isak frowns with disapproval. “Won’t he be stopped at emigration?”

“I don’t think so, he is off for a holiday, just never planning to coming back.” She looks at him with a steady gaze.

It is cold at the river. She crosses her arms.

“I could never leave the country, abandon the farm, it would be impossible to do.”

She shrugs. “Its different when you own land, my brother doesn’t have that, it’s somehow easier to leave. For him, land is distant, it’s not something he is connected to.” She shivers noticeably.

Isak pulls of his jersey and offers it to her.

“Thanks.” She snuggles into it. “He hates the Nats but he can’t see them ever not being in power, for another hundred years at least.” She buries her hands in the sleeves, “so he believes its better to get out now than wait for a second Beirut.”

“We’re going to win the war,” he responds. “We have the best trained army in Africa.”

“Win what war?” she asks innocently. “South-West or South Africa?”

“Both.”

“We shouldn’t be using our army against our own people and...” She takes a deep breath, “we shouldn’t be in South-West or Angola in the first place.” Her eyes dart over him.

“This is a national issue, not a party issue,” Isak reminds her. “We’re protecting the country and all its citizens.”

“Bull!” She laughs out loud. “Citizens or people? It’s not the same thing, not now anyway and I don’t need you to look after me, thank you very much, I can look after myself.”

Her quick anger makes her even more beautiful for him. He wonders how on earth they got into politics, without even knowing her name.

“Sorry, what’s your name?”

“Aimee, spelt the French way... Very la-di-da you know to have a European name,” and she purrs like a cat. “But I know yours.” Her eyes sparkle, “Isak Bruwer.”

“How come?”

“The janitor at Landbou told me,” she says with a straight face but her eyes laugh at him.

At a loss for words he keeps his eyes on Kolle.

“Res closes in five minutes.” She makes for the Jeep. “Us first year ladies need to be protected against the big bad wolf.”

Kolle has run off, digging holes after river otters. Isak gives a sharp whistle and the dog comes bounding towards them.

“What nonsense having to be kept indoors, to protect ourselves against ourselves, so medieval don’t you think?”

Thumping cars drive past them. Some of the drivers hang out and try to make a grab at Aimee. She jumps in the Jeep, laughing. Coldness seeps over him. Her carefreeness and apparent disregard for uncalled-for attention is off-putting. Kolle jumps on the back and they drive to her hostel. At the gates he greets her formally without affection, for him she is just another girl.

“Thanks for the lift.” She hops out but there is less confidence in her now, a new unsureness. “See you,” she adds in an attempt to regain the openness they had, sensing his withdrawal but not knowing where it has come from or why.

*

Winter rains pour down the following weeks before the mid-year break. Dowling dresses for class. He has stopped asking whether Isak will be joining him. Diligently, he places precisely written notes on Isak’s side of the room, unread notes that fade in the sun.

“See you later.” Dowling thoughtfully switches off the light. “I’ll tell Prof that you’re sick again, got the flu...If he still believes it.”

“Thanks.”

Dowling closes the door. In the stillness of the room Isak and Kolle listen to the rain. Traffic in the street quietens down and voices in the passageway move on. The two of them sleep. The dog dreams, its eyes flickering with distress, while Isak floats in and out of consciousness, the girl’s bare skin as soft as rose petals, the hollows of her shoulders, shifting dunes under the wind, her neck arching like a bridge that he crosses over and over.

The skies clear and the greyness of light lifts. Isak sits up feeling refreshed. He touches the back of his neck, the unseen injury tugging at his spine. The brown envelope is in the drawer. He pages through the report, scanning the medical jargon to the last line that is of interest to him. He rereads the report but there is no ambiguity about the diagnosis. Carelessly, he tosses it on top of the pile of notes.

“Lets go,” he calls to the dog, bundling his wetsuit into a tog bag.

They drive under a vault of branches. It is cold in the cab, their breath misting up the windscreen. Isak wipes a clear spot but she is not on the street.

The sky is raked with cloud. They drive up the pass to the turnoff. Isak manoeuvres the Jeep through the thick scrub, as far as he can go, past the clearing with its burnt-out fire surrounded by alien trees that rise above the fynbos with origami heads.

Everywhere it drips. He can hear the roar of water.

Kolle takes a flying leap into the bushes, while Isak strips down. He zips the wetsuit closed, carrying the tube above his head as he forces his way to the river.

They sit on a rock, right at the water's edge, watching the passing surge.

The girl is beautiful in a wild way.

"Kolle, wag," he commands the dog. "Bly." He pats the place where the dog must remain.

The tube is held against his chest. He takes a deep breath, throwing himself off the rock into the storming water. Briefly, he is off the tube, then back on again, his full weight pressing down as the tube tumbles along.

Water, land and sky revolve around him. Full frontal waves of brown water explode in his lungs. Gasping for breath he twists his head sideways but the river has no patience, only the urge to go down and spit the debris out.

Unexpectedly, the river hits boulders that force the water through a narrow channel, flipping him off the tube. He claws his way onto a rock, watching the tube bob away. There is no time to think. He hardens his body, arms rigid underneath, fists clenched, head down and he goes with the water, like a torn off branch and the water takes hold of him. Unlike the tube he offers no resistance.

He and the river are one. He feels the changing flow, the release and steady loss of power, of letting go. Now and again he manages to lift his head, just long enough to keep him going.

Then the rush is suddenly over. The river flattens out, broadening its course. Ahead is the cycling bridge. Students stop to watch. He dives down as he approaches the bridge, pushing up for air on the other side.

A second bridge gives him the chance he has been waiting for. His hands grip the masonry, while his body is pulled forward with the water. Isak hangs on with his last strength.

*

He jogs back to the hostel, along the route that he and Aimee walked, not looking up at the rugby fields. The sight of a man in a wetsuit running through the streets elicits shouts of sarcasm from passing students.

She sits on the steps of the hostel, her hair plaited and rolled over her head. Kollo sits next to her.

“Where you’ve been?” she asks crossly, not waiting for him to explain. “I got him on campus, terribly distracted, so I brought him here.” She digs out his jersey from an enormous canvas bag. “I’ve brought your jersey back as you’ll probably need it.”

Isak takes the jersey from her. “Stout hond, hoekom luister jy nie?”

She gets up and she is eye level with him. “He loves you.” Then she notices his outfit. “What were you doing?”

“Niks nie.” He is angry with her.

“You were in the river,” she accuses him. “Someone in class said they saw this guy coming down with the river.”

He shrugs.

“Isn’t that very dangerous?”

“Dis niks nie.”

Students returning from classes slap him on the back, openly admiring her.

“I must go.” Her grey skirt blows against her legs.

“Ek gaan huis toe die naweek, wil jy saam?”

“That would be nice.”

“Ek tel jou Vrydagmiddag op by die koshuis.”

She slings the bag over her shoulder, greeting the dog and her socks accentuate the slimness of her ankles.

Schoeman stops to watch her leave.

“Kom.” Isak calls the dog that wants to follow her. He heads for the showers. Dowling can help him fetch the Jeep. He struggles to get the wetsuit off, all his muscles fatigued. Dozing on the wooden bench he waits for the water to heat up. He picks up the jersey, pressing it into his face. It smells of veldt and herbs and wet earth.

*

She sits on her suitcase in the foyer wearing men’s jeans that must have been her brother’s. Around her neck is a camera and her hair is free. He reaches out for the suitcase.

“It’s okay, I can carry it myself.”

He follows her outside, unsure of what to do next, aware of the eyes on them as she huffs and swings the case onto the back of the Jeep, then she kisses Kollo and without prompting climbs up into the cab.

“Ek’s reg,” she announces, waving out by the window to a sea of faces above.

The Jeep splutters as he turns the key. To his relief it takes and they drive out of the town, without another word.

They drive on, his eyes on the road and his thoughts to himself. She studies the landscape of barren lands and renoster bush, lifting her camera against the glass, she too keeping quiet. Stark fruit trees tell her they are approaching his home. Recklessly, he accelerates on the gravel road but she discreetly holds onto the door handle, keeping her head turned from him. An owl sits on the bridge. Isak brakes at the farm gate, creeping up until the bakkie is opposite the bird.

He unwinds his window. “Bruine.” He whistles softly.

The bird cocks its head, noticing Kollo on the back.

“Bruine.”

The owl hops from side to side. Isak stretches out his arm. The owl swivels its head nervously, then hops onto his sleeve.

There is a loud click. The owl hears it as well, lifting off to the Eucalyptus grove. His angry face makes her drop the camera.

“I’m sorry.”

Furious with her, he doesn’t bother to reply. He is not used to explaining and the effort it requires. They drive up the hill, the camera on her lap. The grass has been cut and the stoep swept, even the front door knocker shines. He leads the way into the house, her suitcase and his bag tucked under his arms.

“Mamma?” he calls down the passage.

There are arum lilies in a vase on the windowsill.

“Sakkie.” Her hair is meticulously crafted, her wrists heavy with gold.

“Mamma.” He gives his cheek. “Dis Aimee.”

His mother studies the girl in veldskoene. “Welcome.”

“Thank you, its nice to be here.” Her tone is demur.

Isak puts the bags down. “Ek sien die volk is nog in die werf, ek gaan gou af.”

Aimee stares at the door then at the other woman, the two of them caught in the passage.

“Can I offer you a drink?” His mother walks into the lounge where a tray has been set with glasses and ice and a silver claw to pick at them.

Aimee politely remains standing, overawed by the room’s opulence. “No thank you, a glass of water will do.”

“Please take a seat, it appears you have been working?” She looks at Aimee’s shoes. Her words are perfectly modulated.

“Just my art.” Aimee sits down on a monstrous chair with ball and claw feet, counting the gilded mirrors.

The older lady pours water from a jug. The sedateness of her movements make her appear older than she is. Then she pours wines from a decanter, sitting opposite Aimee with ringed fingers.

“A cigarette?” she offers, lighting up and her nails are perfectly manicured.

Aimee tucks her hands with stubby nails under her jersey. “No thank you, I don’t smoke.”

“No vices?” Isak’s mother smiles, “no obvious ones, anyway.” She sips the wine, balancing the cigarette in the other hand. “Your parents, are they farmers as well?”

“No, my father teaches and my mother is an estate agent.”

“What a pity, I personally don’t believe a woman should work.” His mother lets out a snake of smoke from her glossed lips.

“At least she has a life.” Aimee realises her mistake but the other keeps her composure.

“So where do you live?”

“In the northern suburbs.”

“Isn’t that a bit...industrial?” The older woman tops her glass up.

Aimee studies her in the mirrors from all angles.

“Voortrekker is just fine.” She defends the place where she lives, wondering why Isak has left her to this.

“Our shops are so backward here in the platteland.” Isak’s mother sighs, taking a deep draw on the cigarette, which seems at odds with her sophistication. “If you want anything worthwhile you need to drive to the Golden Acre or Cavendish, at least there you can still get imported goods.”

Aimee nods. “Would you please excuse me.” Without waiting for a reply she escapes from the oppressive heat of the room.

Outside on the stoep it is bitingly cold. There are orchards in front of the house. She walks down the tractor path, alternating between walking and running, crossing her arms to keep the wind at bay. The trees appear dead. Silver bark that makes a filigree fence on either side of her, down to the bridge where the owl sat.

A tractor with an open trailer is on the road. Men in overalls and women with covered heads sit on the back. A few children dive into the mothers’ skirts. The men and women drop their eyes immediately as she catches up with them. She smiles but it is only a young girl clinging to a small baby who smiles back. The tractor hick-ups

into lower gear, the sullen faces bump along to the barrakse. Aimee carries onto the bridge. All around her are grey hills and mountains of ash.

The owl calls from the grove. Aimee steps between the putty skinned trunks, peeling away like dried out scabs. She looks up into the leaves but the owl is hidden, even though his call is clear.

She whistles like Isak, calling his name.

A dark shape glides low, resting on a branch just a little way from her. Aimee holds her breath, then she whistles a second time. The owl responds by flying to a closer branch. For a long time he preens himself, keeping an eye on her from under his wing. She steps forward. The dried bark snaps under her feet and the owl sweeps over her towards the mountains.

Disappointed, she finds her way back to the house with its blazing lights. A man stands in the shadows of the stoep.

“Waar was jy? My Ma sê jy’t net verdwyn.”

“I went looking for the owl.” Her hands are icy, her nose red from the wind.

He takes off his windbreaker. “Trek aan.”

“This is becoming a bad habit.” She zips the jacket closed.

“Did you see the owl?”

“Yes. I think he saw me before I saw him...He isn’t wild at all, just verskrik.”

“No he isn’t. His just not used to people anymore, that’s all.”

Isak pushes open the front door and they can hear the television playing, cowboy music and gunshots from out of the lounge.

**

Nurses pull at him, talking over him and about him. He allows them to touch him, to do what they must do.

Words are swords that cut the heart in two.

Even she could not convince him to stay with words. The farm was the only constant in all the uncertainty of his life. It spoke of times long before and he wanted to return to it. Not so much the farm but to return to the place of memories. Smoking a pil under the trees, or catching mice for the owl, or lying in the clean washing, listening to Raatjie singing with Jim Reeves.

To do this would be his salvation.

He remembers running up the stairs to where she was painting, a man with an angelic face, the canvas wrapped in barbed wire.

“Ek’s op pad.” He stood at the door, eager to get going.

“Jy maak ’n fout, dié kans kry jy nie weer nie.” She tried a last time to convince him, dabbing paint on the man’s face.

“Ek mors my tyd hier, ek kan meer by my Pa leer.”

Aimee turned to him, her eyes large. “Ek is hier.”

“Ek kom kuier.”

“Jy maak ’n fout,” she repeated, turning away back to the painting.

“Ek moet ry, voor Kampusbeheer my vang.”

She walked to the door with him, her eyes lowered. He climbed into the Jeep with the dog beside him, so sure that this was the right thing to do. And she didn’t wave as he drove off. Not even her forlorn figure in the mirror could bring him back to this place that he associated with emptiness.

So he packed his things, thinking that to leave a place is the solution, to run is the way out but whatever you are running from runs with you. He wants to tell that to Danie.

“What in farming has made you so cynical?” Danie asks but he is interrupted by the cell phone ringing in the drawer. He presses the wrong button, increasing Isak’s agitation. Then it rings again.

“Gee,” Isak demands crossly. The drip needle hurts as he crooks his arm for the phone.

“Isak?” It is Aimee and there is shortness in her voice. The bank is looking for you.” Her voice drops. “They phone daily but I’ve told them you’ve had an accident and are not available.”

“Wat nog?” He is aware of Danie’s eyes on him.

“They want to know when you will be back.”

“Ek beplan om voor die naweek te vlieg.”

“Dis Paasnaweek Isak, jy gaan sukkel om ‘n vlug te kry and anyway, when you’re back you’re back.”

“Hoe loop dinge?”

She takes a deep breath and her voice is on edge. “Everyone’s trying.”

“I’ve got an idea for the muggies.”

“Tell.”

“The nozzles that they use on cows when milking? We can use them to suck the muggies from the stem ends.”

She considers this before answering. “You genius, you should fall more often.”

“Jy’s die ster.”

“Ja, ja,” she brushes him off, “Twinkle twinkle little star. Just come home in one piece, if that is not asking too much.” He can hear her picking herself up again. There’s more prayers going up to heaven for you than for the Pope himself.”

It is a strange thought, prayers for him.

She will need blessings. They will all need blessings and more to see them through. The muggies are the least of their problems.

*

There is lichen under their feet. He studies the shapes of the grey leaves. Small things grow in significance through her camera lens. A child in a torn dress, a tree split open by lightning, a rusted tin in the grass. He is entranced. Swallows in the sky and blossoms that fall like confetti from the peach trees onto her hair and shoulders and hands.

He breathes her in.

From the barrakse thumping music plays base to drunken squeals and screaming. She listens with interest, making her way towards the raucousness.

“Kom ons stap so om.” He gestures in the opposite direction

But she carries on walking towards the motley group of houses. Children run and hide. Sussie claps her hand over her mouth, disappearing into a house with grimy walls, embarrassed by her naked head and feet. In the centre a group of men crouch over a board of dominoes.

Aimee focuses the lens on them. The men petrify, boozy smiles frozen on their faces until she drops the camera.

“The people of Idas Valley are incredibly bad tempered.”

“Maybe you were intruding.”

“I meant no harm.” She waves at the children that dash behind the house.

“Their homes are quaint. I thought it would be seen as a compliment, being photographed and all.”

They follow the footpath up to the dam wall.

“Maybe they felt on display, like animals in the zoo, next time ask before you do it.”

“I’ve never thought of it that way.”

There are two houses against the dam. The one roofless, its walls pitch black, while peppercorn trees with festive berries, hide the other. An old man sits on an oil drum, plaiting leather under a fig tree. She waves gaily. He tips his hat.

Veldt herbs are planted in canned fruit tins, while runner beans and sweet peas compete along the fence.

Aimee picks a posy. Excitedly, she holds the fragrant flowers for Isak to smell.

“The flowers are for you.” She presents him with the posy. “All together, they remind me of you.”

“’n Deurmekaarspul,” he suggests.

“Complex would describe it better,” she counters him.

Further along the dam wall, wild geese nest at the water’s edge, honking agitatedly. The geese fly back and forth over the water in an attempt to ward them off.

Aimee tries to capture the geese with her camera. “I don’t think they want us here.”

“They’ll get used to us, if we stay long enough.”

Willows grow in baked clay. They sit in the shade of tendrils, curled like the locks of a girl.

Isak picks up a stone, spinning it over the surface. It bounces on and off to the other side. The geese call out in warning. Aimee picks up a stone and throws but hers plops in the mud right at their feet.

“Like this.” He leans over, placing the flat pebble in her hand, pulling her arm back with his, then pushing it forward.

The pebble shoots forward, hopping merrily a few times before sinking. She claps her hands. They try again and he can feel her arm give to his, the pebble responding with extra force and she counts the increased skips with delight.

They lie back, arms crossed over their eyes for the sun. He can smell veldt and herbs and newly rained earth on his skin. Ants march over her dark hair, clinging to the strands like mountaineers. The geese quieten and the music from the barrakse is a lone mouth organ, coming from Outa’s house. Gentle winds play with the green wands above their heads.

Her eyes are closed and her mouth relaxed. So he closes his eyes too and shifts his arm closer to hers, waiting awhile, then like creeping ants he feels the tips of her fingers touch his wrist, his arm tingling with surprise. She slides her palm down onto his, her fingers filling the spaces between his fingers and they do not move, the sensation so sweet that he is mindless.

*

They ride bare back. He holds the reins around her waist and the curves of her body fit in the hollows of his and they ride up to the plateau where the orchids grow.

It is not the time for the veldt to flower but hidden in the grass are the stones, weathered tools of people who have lived in the valley. He finds one easily, passing it onto her.

“If only stones could speak.” She turns the stone over, running her fingers along the bevelled edge.

Isak cups his hands to drink from the stream.

“Where does the water come from?”

“High up.” He rinses his face.

“How does it get here?”

Moments like this he only wants to listen to the water and the wind over the hills and to look at her.

“It finds its way through rock and sand over years, hundreds, thousands maybe.”

The clouds are whipped up. He sees the profile of a woman lying on her back.

“Then the water is older than South Africa.” She kicks off her shoes, lifting her skirt to wade in the stream. With wet feet she squats next to him where he lies watching the sky. She picks up the stone again, digging a hole in the ground.

“The stone remains but not the person,” she muses. “I wonder what will be left of us?”

“Ek weet nie wie ‘n honderd jaar gelede hier geboer het nie, om nie eers van ‘n duisend jaar te praat nie.”

“We really are nothing in the end; the stone is more than us.”

“We might be gone but we leave our mark.”

“Like?” She scratches in the grass, looking for more stones.

“This place.” He points to the hills. “The renoster bush has taken over the grasses from overgrazing by farmers over the past hundred odd years; it will take the same time, if not longer to restore it.”

“But someone must start.”

“Ja, but how do I know that there aren’t other things that I’m going to do that others will have to rectify... Luckily they won’t be able to blame me because they won’t even know my name.”

“That’s true,” she concedes, “but there are things that one can do that others will be glad for, even if they don’t know who you are.” She packs a pyramid of stones. “I guess it not only counts for the land but it’s also the same with people.” Her pyramid falls down and she begins to rebuild it. “Are you scared?”

“Vir wat?”

“Me going back to varsity.”

“Hoekom sal ek?”

“Why do you reply with a question?”

“Ek dink ons moet vas uitgaan,” he announces flatly.

“What does that mean?”

“Jy is my meisie.”

“Does that mean I can’t go out with anyone else, ever?”

“As jy my meisie is, is jy my meisie.”

She knocks the tower over. “I don’t know if I can do that, not going anywhere when you’re not there.”

“Ek stel in niemand anderste belang nie.” He sits up, crossing his arms.

“Its not that, its just... I like people and men happen to be people too.”

“Jy moet besluit wat jy wil hê.” He thinks of Schoeman.

“You’re asking too much.”

Isak calls the horse. He helps her mount, her bare leg in his face as she pulls herself up, clutching the stone. Sullenly they ride, her back stiff from stubbornness.

He brushes the horse down while she watches from the corner of the stall.

“Where’s the old man who cleaned here?”

“Die een met die blou oë?”

“He was so gentle.”

“Hy’t van my Pa se tools gesteel, ek dink hy’s opgesluit.”

“Shame. He could have been my grandfather.”

“When you catch someone stealing it’s never their first time.”

She gets up to rub the horse. “If you want me to be your girl, you’ll have to accept my going out with others.”

“I have to go again.” He hoses water into the trough, ignoring her statement.

“To a camp?”

“Ja, the papers came this week, they’re planning something after the raining season, all the guys have been called up.” He holds the hose to his mouth and drinks.

“Some soldier is being kept in Southern Angola.”

“South-African troops aren’t supposed to be in Angola.”

“Well they are there, to destroy insurgent bases and follow up on attacks started by SWAPO, who shouldn’t be there either.”

She washes her hands and feet under the hosepipe. “I don’t think you should be fighting.”

“Who else must do it?”

“Let them sort out their own mess, we’ve got enough issues of our own.”

“It’s all one and the same. South Africa is on the Commies shopping list.”

“Why must a farmer on the edge of the Karoo defend another country’s population or rather government? No that’s wrong,” she stops herself. “Why must you protect a country from people who are of that country?”

“Who is SWAPO anyway? A bunch of Ovambos with a bad attitude who want the whole of South-West on a plate. They should join the Alliance, then we can all go home.”

“Is it worth dying for?”

“What is worth living for?”

*

Danie’s question remains unanswered. His cynicism is born from deception. Nothing is the way it seems to be.

His ribs are checked and his head rewrapped. The nurse holds his hanging arm as the protruding bone in his shoulder is rotated. Travel insurance is such a small thing, yet now it is his saving grace. He must learn to listen to her more often, trust her intuition and common sense, not steam roll over her simply because his mind is already made up.

The doctor greets him. Danie is gesturing with his hands, in trying to explain the situation to her. She doesn’t give up easily but nor does he.

Letaba fills his thoughts. Hundreds and hundreds of paratroopers dropped from the night sky, human darts drifting towards thorn trees in preparation for Cassinga, to take the road from Pereira d’Eca to Vila Artur de Paiva. One is so taken

up by the moment that you don't question the why, what it is all about he ponders, grimacing in pain, even now, it is the first time he can reflect on his present struggle.

A luta continua. His battle continues. The bank is closing in on him. The net is being drawn tighter as the account moves further and further away. From the local manager with bitten off nails to the offices in Adderley Street, then to the men in Jo'burg, who know nothing of farming and fickle seasons. Men who don't want to know.

**

University of Cape Town

She has gone back, leaving him with an anxious spirit, whether she is his girl or not, he cannot say. He yawns, kick starting the scrambler in the dark, driving in the lowest gear through the potato plants. The earth is wet and musty. He stops the scrambler, listening to the patter of the sprinklers and the Lister engine at the gate, counting the hours from the last shift, shifts that run through the night and he is alone in this, these nightly shifts that teach him to sleep lightly.

The moon grows and so do the potatoes. This would have been David's work. He could have learnt from David. He scoops a handful of soil, switching on the torch over the moist heap. There are worms, fat white ones. Isak picks one, holding it up for inspection; it wriggles, then curls up, playing dead.

“Jou blêddie klein terroris.” Isak squashes it between his fingers.

The worm lives off the roots of plants. There are millions of them hiding under the lush leaves.

The arc of the torch picks up a fox feeding in the rows as a giant moth hovers at the front end of the torch, grotesquely magnified over the potato field. He switches the light off and the moth is reduced to a speck of grey.

He is tired, so very tired. He counts the days until the train leaves for the North, wondering who will care for the plants in his absence and if he will come back and care for them again.

Petrus comes up in his mind. If he can jippo the work he will. In the team Isak is invisible, a nobody, a boereseun with no power. so they hide nothing from him, not even their disregard for the work or for his father.

He shares the mundaneness of the work with them. For him it is an escape from thinking, an escape from responsibility and it is a dangerous place to be. One's mind does not stay empty.

A car staggers down the gravel road. Its engine stalls then screeches as it is revved too high. Isak stands on the pillion, watching the car until it disappears over the hill. It is just after midnight, time for the next shift. The second hand of the watch aligns with the twelve. He disconnects one copper pipe from the rest of the system, keeping the scrambler's engine running, then he lifts it to his shoulder, running to the next row, dropping it and running back to fetch the next, disconnecting and connecting. The watch reads ten past, breaking the previous night's record.

The soothing pattering begins again. He opens the scrambler's throttle, wheeling towards the gravel road. The tracks of the car show a drunken route all the way to the farm's entrance. The anchor pole is down. Isak slows down just long enough to sum up the damage, then cuts through the pear orchard to the house.

The car's lights burn and the driver's door is open. In the garage, the boot of the Datsun stands wide open too. He ramps onto the stoep. Suitcases stand at the door. Isak cuts the engine. Inside is an uncanny silence.

"Moenie." His mother's voice is hardly audible.

Isak fumbles for the pliers in the toolbox, strapped to the bike. He runs down to the end of the passage, trying the handle but the door is locked.

"Johan, asseblief." She is crying softly.

"Koggelooi."

Something heavy falls and his mother gives a shriek of fear. Things get knocked over, then there is a long silence. He bends down, placing his ear to the keyhole.

His mother has stopped crying. “Pa se dinge.”

“Hy’t Ma lank voor haar tyd doodgemaak,” his father interrupts her. “Haar openlik verneder, voor almal, ook voor die volk.”

“Ek weet dit maak seer.” She speaks calmly.

“Hy’t my gehaat.” His father’s voice is bitter. “Niks was ooit goed genoeg nie.”

Isak rests his back against the door.

He hears her hesitate. “Dis wat jy aan my doen...Maak my binne dood.”

His father shouts. “Moet alles altyd om jou draai, alle pyn, alle hel, alle swaarkry? Jy’s nie die enigste een wat al seergekry het nie,” he retorts sarcastically, “jy leer nog wat die woord beteken.”

“Ek kan nie,” she tries weakly.

“Geen vrou loop weg van Johan Bruwer nie.”

The explosion is deafening from the single gunshot. Isak jumps up, throwing his whole weight against the door. It bursts open and he skids over the carpet as his father holds the rifle in his hand.

“Klop as jy wil inkom,” his father politely corrects him.

His mother is bundled in the corner of the room. She wears her going out clothes and make-up. The Dolly Varden lies on its side.

Above his father’s head is a hole torn through the ceiling board.

“Ek moet nou loop.” His father salutes the two of them, clicking his heels as he leaves the room.

The front door slams closed. They sit on the rose carpet as his father reverses wildly down the hill.

“Dankie Here Danie was in die koshuis vannaand.” His mother takes out a compact from her handbag, flipping open the small mirror to wipe her smudged mascara with a tissue. “Dankie Here hy was nie hier om dit te sien nie.”

Isak stares at the hole in the ceiling, estimating the height the bullet would have reached.

*

The hole in the ceiling is fixed, fixed before the maids come in so they will not talk. Isak fixes it with a piece of cardboard cut from a shoebox, the letters, Finesse glued over the hole, then he paints over it, disguising the hole and the lettering.

“Bly by my, ek is bang,” his mother implores him, with her Valium soaked eyes and her hair, permed bigger than a film star.

“Ek moet na Aimee toe, Mamma.”

“En wat van my?”

“Danie is mos hier die naweek.”

She shakes her head. “Danie is ‘n wit hotnot.”

“Ek wil Aimee groet, voor ek moet klim, Mamma.”

Sulking, she walks out of the room and he feels bad but he must go, the anxiety eating away at him. It is a far drive to her and the day is already shorter than he had hoped. At the front door are the forgotten suitcases. He reverses out of the garage, the scrambler’s shocks, hard and tight beneath him. The vibrations of the road ripple through his hands. Dead gnats caught in the slipstream of the bike, stain the visor as he lies, flat over the bike, pushing the throttle wide open.

Unsure feelings nag at him. Faces of other men flash before him, Schoeman swaggering past her, even Dowling.

No one can be trusted, not even her.

At first the road is empty. He flattens himself a hairbreadth above the tar, through the mountain pass, claiming the road as his own. Baboons, delay their departure, picking insects off the white line, fascinated by Isak and the machine that flips sideways, just missing them. In his side mirror he can see how they languidly twist their heads to watch him.

He gears down as he hits the Saturday morning traffic and his apprehension climbs at the sight of students. A cyclist cuts in front of him, while another tries to touch the bike with a beer dumpy in his hand. The parking in the street of the hostel is full so he rides his bike up the stairs. Girls screech from the foyer, then flirt with him under thickened eyelashes.

“Isak.”

He looks up at a girl, fashioned with hot curlers. She leans out of a window.

“Sy’s op pad.”

A host of curious girls discuss him and the bike. Some clutch gowns at the throat, while others blow-dry their hair.

He nods curtly and waits in the foyer to get away. Thirsty, he pours water from the jug on the table, messing drops on the wood.

“Dis okay, jy kan maar los, die bediende sal skoonmaak.” A girl speaks to him from behind a glass partition. “Teken Aimee solank uit, ons het haar al laat roep.”

He wipes the drops with his hanky before filling in her name in the exercise book, horrified at everyone’s familiarity with something he finds so private.

“Isak.” Her voice is dull and her hair is caught in pigtails. She wears a cotton sundress with the oversize bag.

Unsurely he steps forward trying to read her face. “Kan ek vir jou die sak dra.”

“No thanks.”

“Ek het jou klaar uitgeteken.”

They stand awkwardly apart.

“Then I suppose we must go.” She sighs, turning to the girl and her voice is warm. “As iemand my soek is ek die hele dag uit.”

On the steps she looks up and down the street. “Where’s the jeep?”

“Verkoop.”

“And Kollé?” She frowns.

“Two’s company.” He shrugs. “Here’s your helmet.”

She openly disapproves, tugging the helmet over her pigtails. “Where’s yours?”

Isak ties the strap under her chin. “The one you’re wearing.”

“Why must I ride with one and you not?”

“Jou kop is sagter,” Isak explains, helping her onto the back of the scrambler. There’s no seat for a passenger.

She pouts. “Where are you taking me?”

“Dis ‘n nice dag, ons ry beach toe.”

She sighs again, clenching her bag.

“Hold on like this.” He demonstrates to her how she must place her hands around his waist. “And your feet, here on the exhaust... When I lean to one side, you’ve got to lean with me.”

“Yes, yes.” She has had enough of the lesson.

The throaty roar of the bike has the same girls rushing to the windows. Aimee lets go to wave. Out on the road she holds lightly, her hands on his hips and he is aware of her peeping over his shoulder.

He screws his eyes for the sun as Aimee holds tighter, shifting closer, her arms now around his waist, her body flush with his, a greater thrill than the bike beneath him. He banks the bike into the corners of the descent and she leans sideways with him, unafraid, then he banks the bike to the other side and her body's weight is one with his. He can sense her enjoyment of the ride.

They pass the beaches and vendors and the fishermen petrified on the rocks to the beach below the cliffs, deserted and windswept with only gulls left behind.

It is sheltered and still under the Milkwoods, the trunks, hunched and warded by sand and wind.

Aimee pulls off the helmet, her pigtails comically skew. She runs her hands over the mulched leaves. "I want to sit here under the trees."

"Kom ons swem eers."

She digs in her bag. "I don't have my costume here, only a towel."

"Swem dan in jou onderklere, ons is alleen."

"Why not?" She tugs at the elastics in her hair.

Her sundress has buttons all the way down the back. She struggles on her own, then comes to him giving him her back. The buttons are small and finicky, his fingers slow and unpractised. The top button is below her dimple at the base of her neck. One by one he undoes the buttons and one by one the bones and curves of her back are revealed as the white cloth falls away. Her skin is the colour and texture of wedged clay. Each time his fingers touch her by chance, jolts of electricity flow along his hands into his head, then down into his gut.

The dress is unbuttoned, resting on the sloping dunes of her shoulders. She does not move. He slips the straps off, letting the dress fall onto the dead leaves and she is quite bare. Ever so lightly he slides his finger down her spine, stopping in the hollow above her buttocks.

“Dankie.” She steps out of the dress, stuffing it into her bag, wrapping the small towel around her. “Gaan jy nie swem nie?”

He doesn’t answer, undressing with deliberate care until he only wears his underpants. She raises an eyebrow. He hesitates, then pulls them off.

“Last one in the water is a mampara.” She drops the towel and runs.

He chases after her but she is quicker under the trees, only catching up with her at the water’s edge. They both dive into the small waves.

She surfaces, laughing and shouting, “ek was eerste, ek was eerste.”

Isak dives under the water and grabs her ankle, pulling her under, she twists under the water grabbing at his foot and they tug and pull until a wave dumps them both hard on the sand.

She rolls over, gasping, “jou bogger.”

He lies on his back, salt water up his nose and the gulls shriek all around them.

“Pasop of hul pik jou op ‘n pynlike plek.” She jumps up in mock horror, splashing in the shallow water.

He joins her and they float on their backs, over the swells, closing their eyes. Isak treads water and a thousand drops glimmer over her skin.

“Kom ons gaan uit, ek kry koud.” He catches a wave onto the beach, while she dreamily paddles after him.

“I love swimming,” she affirms, humming and dancing, leaping and twirling her wet hair around her head. “It makes me feel alive.” Drunk she plonks herself

down. “Ek het myself nou warm gedans.”

“Jy’s goed.”

“Dit en swem maak my gelukkig, ongeag my bui.”

“Geluk tel nie by nie.”

“To be happy is everything for me.”

“Geluk bestaan nie.”

“What do you feel now? Aren’t you feeling some sort of euphoria?”

“Wat se ding?” He pretends ignorance. “Ek voel goed maar geluk?”

“I thought all people need to be happy.”

“But not all people want to be happy.” Discreetly he crosses his legs, “and when do you know this is happiness?”

“It’s a state of bliss, it’s a feeling that you want to catch, hold onto because it’s so good for you.”

“Happiness is wasted effort.”

“What are you living for, what makes your life bearable if you can’t be happy?” She is upset with him.

“You can’t want something that you have no experience of, that you’re not even sure exists.”

“Why do you want to be with me then, what difference does it make?”

“Everything is clearer, less confused,” he chooses his words, “more intense.”

“Well that’s a start.” Her voice is hopeful.

“I can’t laugh and dance like you, it’s not in me, whatever makes me ‘happy’ lies somewhere else.”

“Jy’s...” She searches for the right word to describe him. “Nors. Most of the time I’m not sure whether you like me or not.”

“Ons dra nie almal ons harte op ons moue nie.”

“Then how am I supposed to know?”

“Jy moet leer om te kyk.”

She peers into his eyes. “I can’t see anything.”

“Jy moet uit die son uit, jy gaan brand.”

“Ja, Mamma.” Childishly she sucks her thumb, “Kyk hoe rooi is Mamma se arms en nek.”

“All the better to eat you, my dear.” Playfully he grabs at her but she is up and away to the trees.

The stillness of the trees becomes part of him. Both dress, backs turned to each other. He hears her exasperation with the buttons but he doesn’t offer to help, waiting for her to ask but she doesn’t ask either.

Aimee sits down on the leaves, tucking her knees in. “So what’s wrong?”

“With what?”

“With you.”

“Nothing.”

“Your spirit is so heavy it drags me down.”

“Ek’s jammer...Dis ek.”

“Like now...I feel flat and just now I was happy.”

He shrugs, “then your happiness doesn’t count much.” As they dressed he had had a sense of peace that was new to him, but now this has gone too. “Ek is nie goed vir jou nie.”

“I’ll decide what’s good for me.”

He stands rigid, his hands fisted. “Ek kan jou nie gelukkig maak nie.”

“You feel so old to me,” she explains. “Why?”

“I don’t know.” But he does. He sits down opposite her and he can see she is sad and angry and confused with him but he cannot tell her about boys dying in grass and drums in the night and him killing a boy. She will detest and hate him forever. He tries to change the topic. “Yesterday I came into the office and my father was sitting with the bank manager having tea. They play golf together, have the same handicap.” He can’t think why he is telling her this but he carries on in an attempt to divert her thoughts. “He shook my hand and said something in this line, ‘jy moet trots wees op jou seun’ and my father kept a straight face, looked at me, not at the other guy and gave this really loud sigh and said, ‘nee wat, hulle’s meer ‘n teleurstelling as ‘n trots’.”

She reaches out for his hand. “Bastard.”

“Maybe his right.”

“Bastard,” she repeats under her breath. “It’s only true if you believe it.”

“I must spray the potatoes at around three tonight.” He looks at his watch. “Ek wou vanaand by jou wees, dis al waaroor ek die hele week dink.”

“Jy kan net na middernag ry, dan is jy nog betyds.”

“Waar bly ons tot daardie tyd toe?”

“Hier.” Aimee throws her hands up towards the trees.

“Jy’s nie bang nie?”

“Jy’s by my.” She looks around. “Is jy bang?”

“Ek is minder bang vir donker as vir lig.”

She places her hand on his chest, undoing the top button of his shirt, slipping her hand over his chest. She can feel his heart beating. He opens his arm and she snuggles closer, nestling her head in his neck and they sit listening to the waves. She concentrates on his breathing.

“Jy’s nie bang om by my te wees nie?”

“Should I?”

He winds her wet hair around his finger and he hates himself for what he has done.

A lone bird with metallic purple feathers forages amongst the trees, unaware of them, its long bill pecking at insects, moving ungainly on its short legs.

“Wat maak die voël hier op sy eie?” she asks.

Isak places his finger on her lips.

“What type of bird is it?”

“A Hadeeda, from your part of the world,” he whispers.

The bird twists its head, inspecting them.

“As a small boy I can’t remember them, they’ve only moved in recently.”

“Why would birds change their ways?”

“To survive.” Isak suggests. “Food, nesting, mating, a combination of reasons.

But this one is a loner.”

“How come?”

“They normally function in groups.”

“Strange that a bird would go against its own instincts?”

The Hadeeda moves further into the scrub.

They lie back, his fingers caught in her hair. As he sleeps the tightness around his mouth dissolves. Gently, she extracts her hand, exploring the bones of his face and the red mark on his neck and he does not flinch under her touch. Skilfully, she undoes the rest of his shirt, the skin, white and muscled with fine hairs trailing down to his navel. She places her head on his chest and closes her eyes.

They wake to a rising moon. It is dark and damp. The wind has stopped blowing and she shakes her arm, deadened by sleep.

“Ek’s honger.”

Isak stretches out smiling at her. “My Ma het saamgestuur.”

He gets up, buttoning his shirt. In the toolbox is a Tupperware container with raw sausage and vetkoeke.

Aimee grabs one, licking the jam off her fingers.

“Ek het fynhout nodig om die vuur aan die gang te kry.” He snaps off dry branches.

Aimee reaches up into the trees bending a branch back and forth that won’t break.

“Los, dis nathout, soek liewer onder.”

She sticks her hands into the leaves, pulling out a bunch of fine twigs.

“Gooi hulle daar.” He points to a sandy spot. “Ons wil nie die bos aan die brand steek nie.”

“We don’t have matches.”

“Ek sal ‘n plan maak,” he appeases her. “Ek gaan net bo die pad soek.”

Alone, the shadows and spaces becomes ominous. Creatures move in the undergrowth and the canopy of leaves that kept them cool now closes down on her. She picks up a branch, holding it like a weapon, her eyes large with fright. Suddenly a monstrous shape appears and she lifts the branch to strike.

“Ontspan, dis ek.” On his back is a massive trunk. “’n Hele boom het omgeval, dis ’n indringer so ons kan hom brand, eintlik doen ons natuurbewaring ’n guns.” He drops the enormous log at her feet.

“I hate the dark.” She sits down, still holding the branch.

“In die donker is jy vry.”

“Since small I’ve been scared.” She shudders. “When the bedroom light was put out I saw snakes, hundreds of them, writhing around my bed.”

“In die donker het almal ’n gelyke kans.” Isak digs out an old lighter from the toolbox, pressing a lighted twig under the pile of wood. The fire takes. He keeps the big log to one side, fashioning a grid from an off-cut piece of wire.

“What are you thinking?”

“Niks nie.”

Her face glows as the flames soar. “I’m going to miss you.”

“Hulle praat van twee, drie maande.”

“Who will take your place on the farm?”

“Enigeen kan doen wat ek doen.”

“But not as good as you.”

Isak divides the sausage into bite lengths, placing them in a row on the grid. He flattens the coals with a wattle branch and she enjoys watching his deftness, his ability to do things well, the way his arms and wrists move.

“Vat die ander vetkoek vir jou,” he offers.

“Ek vat net ’n stukkie.” She tears off a chunk and passes the rest to him. “This is better than fighting.”

“I like fighting, life would be boring without it.” He stabs the sausage with a stick. “Vat vir jou.”

Meat juices run down her chin as she holds out her stick. "More please, sir."

They eat everything off the grid. Isak rolls the trunk on to the embers.

"Stap saam, ek wil my hande was."

Holding hands they find their way through the trees.

"Fireflies." She claps with delight.

Light points skip in and out of the trees. For a second there is radiance on her as the firefly hovers above, before dashing off at high speed.

The beach is silvery. Phosphorous, like the beading on an evening dress glitters on the waves. It reminds him of his mother, dancing alone and Raatjie in the same red dress, mourning alone.

As they walk along, their footprints fill up with water and her white dress clings to her ankles.

The moon is amber. She moves towards him, close, so very close that he can feel her breasts through the thin cloth and her hair smells of fire and sea. He cups her face, tilting her chin upward and her eyes are the colour of leaves. His lips barely touch hers.

The log bursts into flames, shooting sparks high, higher than the stars.

*

He is on the bike, intoxicated by a girl with pigtails and a transparent summer's dress. He travels along the lines of her body, cat eyes winking, reminding him of the road.

Recklessly he leans into the returning corners, the day's heat trapped in the tar.

Harder and faster he drives, the bike's beam opening a strip of light, which he pursues with abandonment and he tastes her.

The road is embanked by rock. The bike swerves vertically and Isak wakes to the now, forcing the machine sideways, back to the road.

He is wide-awake and late.

Ahead is the last mountain pass before the village. His watch shows fifteen minutes to three so he flattens himself out, chin on the handlebars, knowing the treachery of the winding road.

Past Lover's Corner with its Yellowwood trees and wagon cuttings. He brakes briefly to negotiate the curve. A white car is parked beneath the overhang as he flashes past, then flat out through the village to the open lands that he loves. The skies are still night skies and he revels in the power that carries him through the darkness.

There is a light burning on the front stoep. He can see it from far. As he gets to the bottom of the hill he cuts the engine, pushing the bike to the house. He stops to rest, breaking off a handful of camphor leaves, crushing them in his hand to release the pungent fragrance.

The garden is peaceful. On the back stoep, Kollo's basket is empty. He feels his way through the kitchen but the room lights up as he reaches out for the switch, his mother's hand under his. The generator sluggishly responds.

She covers her eyes, her unbelted gown curling back, revealing her wasted body. He looks past her.

“Ek is jammer as ek Mamma wakker gemaak het.”

“Waar is julle, wat maak julle?” She steps forward shakily. “Ek was bang.”

“Waar is Pa?”

“Weg.” She throws her arms wildly, clutching a bottle that messes on the floor. “Jou Pa’s weg, Danie’s weg, Honnie’s weg.”

“Waar’s die hond, Mamma?” Firmly he removes the bottle. “Waar’s my hond?”

“Oom Frans. Hy was by Oom Frans.” She cries and laughs. “Innie bobbejaanhok...” Then she retches.

He forces her head over the wash-up where she vomits, waiting for her to finish, wiping her face as she heaves nothing but red water. “Kan Mamma vir my sê, waar is Kollie?”

“Ek’s jammer, Sakkie.” She sags down onto his feet, “Hy’t eers geskiet en toe gebel...Ek kon hom nie keer nie.”

Isak stares at her, her tears wasted on him. He picks up the basket. She calls from inside but he is walking through the garden, past the Del Toidia into the veldt behind the house. Up towards the plateau, faster and faster, anger beating like a drum, his own breath chasing him towards the mountain. It is the time when night meets day. Roughly he tears off branches from scarred trees. Then he flicks the lighter and the blue flame wavers and he lets the flame take the leaves that immediately smoulder and burn. Purposefully, he drops the basket into the flames.

Around him the mountains mirror the changing light. Far down in the valley a car comes along the gravel road and it is his father’s new, white car. And the basket burns until it is an ashen remnant of a dog he once had.

**

A luta continuava, Isak repeats.

He can't recall the camp much but he remembers the journey there, the trees in the ravine rising out of the mist, Encephalartos Transvaalensis. Living fossils with spined leaves that bowed down to them as they drove through the kloof and then the sight of tea plantations, so different to fruit orchards, manicured like a golf course.

And the hills were dotted with people nipping the buds with the sweet scent of fermenting tea. It was beautiful to see. After that came the Bosveld in all its thorned diversity and the savannah could have been the shonas of Angola. The camp was on a river and there were tall Monkey trees everywhere with podded branches and hippos feeding off the reeds. It could have been a safari if it weren't for the browns and the gear that everyone wore.

If he thinks back, it was a relief to be away from the farm and his father. The camp was some sort of holiday for him. The back and forth shuttling to Hoedspruit, the night time jumping was better than what waited at home. The day and night grind, seven days a week for a man who would never give his approval, ever. Anything was better than that. And he wanted it, the acknowledgement. Now it didn't matter, he needed no one's sanction but then he was young and unsure and eager to show that he was a man and he needed a man to say it. Shamefully, the war gave that to him.

Isak bites his lip for the pain. He can feel the morphine withdrawing and it makes him edgy.

Wars come and go. Life moves on, memories of war die with the old. Only the soil can speak and remember, whether it is here in Holland with Jews being shot along the canals or children dying in Africa's grasslands, the earth is stained with blood.

The whole operation of that time is a dream to him. Benjie and Butler blowing their last cash at the bar, shouting valiantly, if you must go, then go with a blast...Angola unfolding beneath the C130, its belly bouncing off the trees, him watching the green light as the throttle pulls back and the loadmaster giving the thumbs up and how silly but he can remember saying to himself, ready, roll, action as though this was just another dress rehearsal.

The thrill of jumping is over. He will never have it again but the thrill is still there in his mind, he can bring it back by thinking about it.

That morning they jumped rapidly and low, creating a webbed necklace of green, yellow cards in the pocket, drifting down to the town, thin and drawn out like the neck of an old woman. And it became an operation of errors as swiftness and surprise turned to agonizing delay and the town wrestled and writhed under the bombardment, a slow death, as trenches were grenaded and cleared, street-to-street.

It was all a dream even then while it was happening until the end, then it was a nightmare.

The officer's name he can't recall but the row of prisoners' faces he can. Each one of them, because they were brave and mocking. Then the order. No one challenged it, they just did it, shot them openly and he will never forget the grins and mockery etched into their faces as they fell forward.

Butler's face he will never forget either, the shock and disbelief. The firing squad jolted them all. Suddenly everyone wanted to get out as though they were contaminated.

They ran, sidestepping bodies and debris, when he saw the child, barely a toddler, taking small steps along the road to Artur de Paiva. Without thinking he scooped her up as Butler covered him and they made a dash for the Pumas.

There was no victory for him, only a terrible sense of loss and he couldn't understand why, the town had been taken, he was alive. Only now he can see it for what it was worth, that they had all lost something that day, that there were no winners, only losers.

And the child sat on his lap as the others looked at him with disapproval and hate at her, the child, sorrowful and speechless. Later that night, when they were all smashed, he heard that Benjie was missing.

What became of the child? She would be twenty-one. He must take trouble to find out when he gets back, to speak to her, to say he is sorry for that day, for that war. Was it Magdaleen with her baby that had made him pick her up? Perhaps it was for a small boy on a bed of light and dark lines that made him stop and not run by.

*

The train bringing them home slices the Karoo open like a can of bully beef. Plains, beaten to bony ridges taper off to smoky mountains. He is hungry for dust and sheep dung.

The train rocks, cradling him on the top bunk, precariously poised on its thin tracks as the troopies run from one side to the other, playing their version of Russian roulette. He ignores the shouting, sticking his head out by the window, the curved desolation speaking of her.

He watches out for the landmark, the board saying Bloedrivier. It wips by, unnoticed by the others and the abandoned skerm of Outa, a skeleton of plaited branches.

The train rolls like a ship at sea.

Jaws has gone home, long ago, straight after the interrogation. Jaws the Judas of the camp. Where does one's loyalties lie, with those who fight at your side and cover your back or with your heart? Isak contemplates this. Cassinga, to capture a man who was not there, to rescue another who shouldn't have been there and a child on a dirt highway, walking to nowhere.

But to doubt is to die or to be degraded.

MP's shout and wave their batons in the corridors to restore order. His station is up next, a small town with main road, lined with fish and chip outlets and a general store where the merchandise is faded from the sun and no sales. A town that is more of a truck stop with an oversized church at the end of the street.

The rocking evens out. Isak lifts his bag, kicking cans away. Below his bunk are two buddies seeking comfort. He opens the door of the carriage, breathing deeply. The locomotive slows down and the wheels grind over the sleepers.

Excitement overwhelms him.

It is the end of summer, dust and dung rise off the tracks as the locomotive pulls into the once brooky-laced station.

The girl gets up, walking boldly towards the train, ignoring the heckling. He jumps off without goodbyes, walking towards her but at a slower pace, masking his urgency. He sees her green eyes, the narrowness of her waist and the way her hair lifts off her shoulders and he halts, looking freely and there is nothing but her.

No train, no station, no war.

She lifts her arms and her mouth opens in laughter, washing, cleansing, restoring him. Her hands are locked behind his neck, pulling his face to hers and her skin shouts, drowning out the hooting of men and machine.

The station is empty. The train is gone and for a moment he has no doubt.

“They’re expecting you tomorrow.”

“Dan bly ons net hier.”

“There’s a hotel in the main road.”

“Hoe het jy hier gekom?”

“Met jou bike.” She leads the way out of the station.

Her skirt swoons around her legs like a lover. He thinks of Schoeman.

“Ry jy,” he suggests, strapping his bag to his back.

“Hou my so vas,” she instructs him, “en moenie jou voete op die exhaust sit nie, dit brand.”

Confidently, she kick starts the bike, frowning with concentration as the engine responds and he likes sitting behind her, with his hands on her waist.

The hotel is patiently shedding its grandeur. A double storied building with a rickety veranda and an off sales bar with saloon doors. Early morning bar flies guard the entrance as they stop in front of the double doors. A cat lies on the counter. There are limp leafed pot plants and dirty ashtrays to welcome them and cutlery crashing in the kitchen.

Isak rests his hand in the small of her back.

She tinkles the bell, looking up at the pressed ceilings. “Dis mooi.”

A blowze of a woman opens the kitchen door, eyeing Isak. “Brekfis is eers oor ‘n uur.”

“Ons is klaar geëet, ons soek ‘n kamer...Met ‘n dubbelbed.”

The woman sidles behind the counter, shoving off the cat, flipping through the pages of her guest book. From underneath she fingers a lighted cigarette, tipping the pale ash into the pot plant.

“Ons het net enkelkamers, reps bly die meeste by ons.” She sums up Aimee, her eyes veiled with envy, then she turns to Isak. “Daar’s die honeymoon suite.”

“Ons vat dit.” He slaps the green notes that burn a hole in his pocket onto the counter. “Los die kos, ons soek net ‘n kamer.”

“U naam, Meneer?” Her hand with the chipped nails is poised over the paper.

“Bruwer, Meneer en Mevrou.”

Instinctively, she glances at Aimee’s hand. “Lekker om getroud te wees nè en nog so verlief.” She unhooks the key from the board. “Kamer sewe, bo, reg in die hoek.”

The two of them walk stiffly up the stairs, aware of her eyes on them.

“Enige bagasie, Meneer?”

“Nee dankie, ons sal self regkom.”

They pose on the landing. The cigarette smoking in her hand is the only life in the foyer.

The room is north facing, draped in dusty pink. There is a crown of lace and rouged satin above the bed, tied back with bows. The stained wallpaper suffocates him. Roses cover the walls.

“Maak oop die venster dat ons kan lug kry.”

Aimee tugs the curtaining to one side, forcing open the sash window. Sounds from the street burst in and bright light that turns the room to the pinkness of burnt skin.

He holds onto the door handle, disorientated by the brightness and her silhouette. Dust from the open window drifts over her. He reaches out to touch.

Then she drops the curtain that lifts in the breeze, her eyes dark as waterholes in the grass. Sun falls across the room, carrying the promise of herbs and wet earth.

*

“Daar wys ‘n rolprent in die kerksaal vanaand.” The woman holds the cat, scratching its ear.

They walk down the main road, filled with dust and farm workers. The usher wears a blue uniform with gold braided epaulets on the shoulders. He seats them on school chairs in the back row, the screen, a white sheet hung from the stage. Aimee eats handfuls of popcorn, waiting for the film to begin, Casablanca, black and white candyfloss.

Isak sits back disinterested as the lights are switched off and the children clap their hands. The man with the projector is right behind them.

The film is slow moving and an excuse to show close-ups of the heroine. He drifts in and out of sleep, only catching an embrace here and there. Aimee’s eyes shine as the lovers draw closer. In the background is a plane, the propellers turning and it is the plane that catches his eyes. Struggling to get out, he knocks her popcorn over to the floor. Without stopping to help, he tramps on a child’s foot and there is a painful squeal as the child begins to cry, which gets the entire hall up in arms. The usher switches on the torch, showing him the door onto the street.

People become bodies and bodies become bones and bones become the hunt for hyenas in the night.

He sits on the pavement, feet in the gutter, head in his hands and the propellers churn in his mind.

At the door of the hall a man digs in the rubbish bin. Isak grinds the coins in his pocket, waiting, but the man leaves him alone, folding pieces of cardboard and

tying them with string. He carries a smallish rucksack and a rolled up blanket on his back.

The doors fly open behind them and Aimee storms out, her eyes blazing. Isak gets up but she walks right past towards the hotel.

*

He takes the bike and she sits on the back, the whole way to the farm. He wears silence like a coat. The quieter he becomes the angrier she is with him.

It is with relief that he sees his father in the lands as they come along the gravel road. “Ek klim sommer hier af, jy kan die bike vat.” He hands her the bike. “Sien jou later.”

She rides on without answering him.

Rock veins run under the surface of the clay soil to where his father stands resting on a cane.

“Jy’s terug.” His father shakes his hand. “Alles goed afgeloop?”

“Dankie, Pa.”

Together they survey the wide unplanted field.

“Dié stuk grond beteken niks nie.”

“Kan ons nie van die klipbank ontslae raak nie, Pa?”

“Ek soek nie onnodige werk nie.” His father pokes the ground with the cane.

“Klip is klip en grond is grond, ons is nie quarrymense nie.”

“Plofstof sal die klip oopbreek,” he suggests.

“Dis ‘n kak idee.” His father spits phlegm into his hanky. “Wat sê hulle van jou, hoe ver trek jy al?”

“Eers oor tien jaar, Pa.”

“Fokken Natte.” His father shakes his head angrily.

His father’s breath is laboured as they make their way to the bakkie.

The two of them climb in without another word on the rocky field, driving along the orchards to where the team is pruning the old pear orchard, with its wide set rows. Piles of branches lie between the rows.

“Lyk vir my die volk verstaan net stukwerk,” his father comments.

Isak bites on his lip. He can see the shoddy work, the new wood lying with the old.

“Volk het nie die dissipline vir ‘n dagloon nie, al my jare van boer wys dit.”

The old frustrations rise up in him, his powerlessness in this all, so he keeps quiet, imagining how he will blow up the rock and plant new trees, apricot trees covered in orange fruit.

They can hear the hydraulic pruner, sucking and cutting.

“Ons manier van werk moet verander, Pa.”

“Rome is nie in een jaar gebou nie,” is his father’s closing comment.

Isak gets out, highly agitated.

“Het jou Ma al vir jou gehad?”

He doesn’t answer, slamming the door of the bakkie.

“Terwyl jy hier is, sê vir Petrus dat niemand val uit voor die laaste ry nie klaar is nie.”

His father drives off. Isak smashes his fist into a tree, then he picks up a sawn branch of bearing wood, now worthless, throwing it back on the pile. If this goes on there will be nothing left for him to inherit.

He finds the team and there are no greetings. Suspiciously, they look at him from the ladders.

Petrus is behind the pruning machine.

“Die Grootbaas sê niemand val uit voor die laaste ry nie klaar is nie.”

“Julle moet klaar opneuk voor julle loop.” Without acknowledging him, Petrus shouts down the row.

Isak turns his back on the team and the disfigured trees, fuming. Is this what he has come home to?

*

He is going home. The doctor has spoken behind the screen. Prickles of excitement are tempered with doubt as he considers the extent of injuries.

What lies ahead of him?

It is better to be in the fight than in the waiting of it. But this is a fight of words and cunning not brute strength and bravery. This is a fight of diplomacy and charm, not heavy-handedness and force.

His whole life has prepared him for a battle that requires action, man on man encounters, but this battle is one of patience.

He is poorly equipped.

The old way of doing things, unity at all cost was simpler than the new way, each man to his own.

Why was it amongst men that your greatest enemy was those closest to you? Men taking delight in another's downfall? Inadequacy so deeply ingrained that only another's failure could make you find some self worth?

All he wanted to be was master of his own destiny. He swore allegiance to that but it was a fallacy. There is no such thing as freedom. He thought by stepping out he would find it. But years of entrusting others with one's livelihood, one landed up gullible and naïve, at the mercy of beaurocrats who told you they knew more.

They did know more.

Beaurocrats that lead the farming volk to the Promised Land for fifty years, Men like him finding themselves in the wilderness. Men like them recreated into marketing fundis of a new dispensation.

A letting loose of laws is a letting loose of men that have been in for life. Isak weighs up the price paid for years of believing others.

That is how it is with him.

There is little accountability. People forget quickly what other people say and do. For him it is not so easy.

His head, aches, his chest and his shoulder. Suddenly the flight home appears long and daunting.

Debt is the ultimate bondage twinned with guilt.

If only he and Danie could go back again, know what they know now. If only he could be who is now, then.

Debt has brought him here. Guilt drives him like a carted horse.

*

“Dood is dood.” Outa taps the door.

Isak tries to get the Holden going but it is stuck. The engine revs and the wheels spin, kicking up sand. He switches off the engine and the lights.

“Hoe’s Outa se Pa dood?”

They sit in the cab, his eyes adjusting until he can make out the sheep.

“Doodgetoor, Basie.”

“Wat’s dit?” Isak puts his feet up on the dashboard.

“Pa is deur toorgoed geskiet, deur afgunstigheid oppie plaas. Iemand het Pa mettie Paljas getoor, Basie.”

Isak pulls a face.

The old man tries to explain. “Die Doring rivier ga’ verby pa se huis, toe hardloop Pa binne die rivier. Da’ was ‘n ou Damara kaffer, uit Upington se wêreld, dis hy wat toe keer met sy eie Paljas da’ Pa nie verdrink nie.”

Isak watches Danie’s bent shadow in the tent.

“Hulle skiet toe weer vi’ Pa, ma’ die keer hartloop hy die rante uit. Pa was so sterk hy kon ysterpenne met een hand uittrek. Niemand kon hom keer nie toe gooi die ou kaffer die dolosse en hy bring vi’ Pa uit die berg uit, so mak soos ‘n lam.” Outa continues in singing voice. “Die ongeluk hettie da’ gestop nie. Hulle skiet vi’ Pa met ‘n witwurm, met ‘n swart kop, hier onner die vel.” He lifts his shirt to show the place on his back. “Die wurm het Pa doodgevreet, al langs die ruggraat, onnerlangs die vel.”

Isak feels nauseous, closing his eyes, imagining the big worm. “Watse ding is ‘n Paljas, Outa?”

“Stompies, Basie.” Outa patiently explains. “Enige stompie wat innie grond groei. Soos da’ by die Grootbaas se huis. Daai rooibloom mettie pienk sap wat innie herfs kop uitsteek? Dié grawe jy uit dan gooi Basie ‘n wit klippie of ‘n swart knopie innie gat. So betaal Basie vir Basie se goed.”

“Hoe weet Outa watter stompie om te kies?”

“Basie maak hom eers droog dan gooi Basie die bene offie dolosse om te sien watter stompie Basie moet gebruik, dan maak Basie die een wat teenie een ga’ werk. Vat vet en vrywe dit tussenie hanne en Basie sê die een se naam en van wattie Paljas moet intrek. Of Basie ma’k ‘n pil vannie stompie en dan blaas Basie die rookie na dié een se huis toe.”

Worried, Isak touches the birthmark on his neck. “Hoe keer ek dat iemand Paljas na my toe stuur?”

The old man laughs. “Da’s net een een ding wattie Paljas weghou, Basie. Basie moenie in him glo nie.”

“Ek glo nie in Paljas nie.” He drops his feet, switching on the lights. “Kan ons more ‘n bok vang?”

“Kos vroeg opstaan. Die bokke wei lank voorie son sy kop lig.”

They get out of the Holden, abandoning it for now. Isak can see the torch inside the tent, distorting the shadow of Danie against the canvas.

*

It is chilly. They push the Holden out of the sand trap. Danie is on the back, holding on to the dogs. Outa, hangs out by the window, following the steenbuck’s spoor.

On the outcrop, stands the fawn, the colour of morning light, its ears alert, nervously watching them.

“La’t die windhond af.” Outa instructs Danie.

The whippet has sighted the doe as well. It runs a wide circle and the doe bounds away.

Outa points forward.

Isak feels the rush in his head.

Outa leans out, shouting to Danie as the Holden accelerates.

Danie grimaces, clutching the dog.

Faster and faster. Isak concentrates on avoiding dongas and keeping to the track.

“Dié kant toe!”

Isak yanks the wheel sharply and the doe hesitates, uncertain to which way to go. They drive parallel with her as she leaps gracefully alongside the bakkie.

Outa smacks the roof of the cab. Kalbas takes a flying leap, hitting the ground hard, running low.

“Links, nou, stop!” Outa shouts.

Isak brings the Holden to a sudden halt, blocking the way of the doe.

She freezes with fear. Her nostrils pump vapour into the grey light. The whippet and sheepdog are head on head as they smack into her with full force, throwing her to the ground.

She flounders on her side. The dogs are on top of her.

Outa takes his kerie. They stand over her. Isak pulls off the whippet. With practiced accuracy the kerie’s head crushes the doe’s skull.

Three blows, then she is quite still.

For a while they do nothing, just calm the dogs. Isak runs his fingers hard over the sheepdog’s head, while Outa lifts the carcass over his shoulders. The boys are silent but the old man hums all the way back to camp.

Outa slits the throat. The blood rushes out into a bowl, red as a packet of Kool-Aid.

Isak and Danie watch as the old man cooks the blood porridge. It thickens like custard.

Outa pours it out into enamel bowls.

Isak eats of it, spoonful after spoonful. He can see the doe's eyes wide and beautiful, reflected in the shininess of the spoon.

Danie sits with the bowl in front of him.

The rest of the doe is given to the dogs, thin bones with little meat.

**

University of Cape Town

The bakkie stops next to the road and her legs are straddled over the gearbox, the swelling of her stomach uncomfortably positioned between the two men. His father light up's the forbidden cigarette, resting against the bonnet as ants cross the road.

“Wil jy uitklim?” Isak asks her politely.

She turns her head to the window, where a lone peppercorn tree grows. He gets out without asking again. She has so little to say to him. His empty spaces have become hers.

“Kom kyk hierso.” His father gestures to her through the spattered windscreen.

Aimee obediently climbs out, standing next to the older man as he points to the column of ants.

“Reën binne die volgende week,” his father patiently explains to her.

Isak kicks at the wheel to test the pressure.

Aimee climbs on the running board of the bakkie to see better. The world is ironed flat, except for the earthen helmets built by ants.

The cigarette is finished so they get back in the cab.

They drive on in silence. Her changing body both fascinates and repulses Isak. The board of Bloedrivier is just on the other side of the railway track. Excitedly she leans across him and there is something of a pregnant Magdaleen in the markings on her face and the roundness of her cheeks. He unlocks the gate. The Bitou bush flowers as far as he can see while the sheep mill around the wind pump, bleating

miserably. Outa sits at the entrance to the skerm, a piece of animal skin in his hands. He ignores them under the plastic sheeting, bones strewn over the floor.

Aimee shakes his hand, enjoying the way the white feather trills in his hat and how the sinews in his arms raise the skin. He holds her hand, patting it gently.

The two men nod in greeting, walking straight to the crippled wind pump, while Aimee kneels in the shade next to him.

He holds out the skin for her to touch, pummelling it with his fists. “So sag soos murg.”

The skin is soft and warm from his hands and the sun.

“Ek het iets vir Oupa saamgebring.” She fetches a basket from the back of the bakkie, proudly displaying it so that he can see the contents. “Dis my eerste probeerslag.”

Wrapped in a tea towel are fried cakes of liver. She takes one out and offers it to him, while popping another in her own mouth.

“Ek moes alleen die skaap opsag terwyl Oupa weg is.” Aimee demonstrates to him the action of pushing the carcass through the band machine. “Toe kry ek die lewer.” She shudders at the thought of the shiny, purple organ. “Die Nooi se bediendes het vir my gewys hoe om lewer in netvet te maak. Dis omtrent slawewerk,” she complains.

The old man chews the cake with his gums, listening to her. Isak climbs up the wind pump to the damaged head. The old man’s eyes are slits of hardness as he spits pieces of liver onto the ground. “Die Base het Outa al laat vrekwerk, allie jare, daar’s nie uitkoms vir Outa nie.”

Stunned, she pulls back, staring at the strangeness in his face. He reaches out for the enamel mug, sipping the cold, black coffee with shaking lips.

He offers her the mug as though nothing has been said.

She is shocked by the bitterness in his voice, declining the offered mug. “Ek sal met die Baas praat.” She passes a second cake to him but he shakes his head. “Oupa moet rus, Oupa is te oud om te werk.” She hopes to restore his sweetness. Yet she senses that sympathetic words are not enough, she herself tired of not having anyone to turn to. The pregnancy and the embarrassment that grows inside of her, grows a world between them, this child conceived in a room of roses.

Isak hangs from the pump’s head, tightening a bolt, while his father shouts instructions from beneath, surrounded by sheep. She is angry with herself that she can’t keep her eyes off him.

In an effort to forget him hanging there, she tries to reassure the old man. “Kleinbasie is lief vir Oupa, Oupa is soos sy eie familie.”

He replies sharply. “Outa is erge’ as ‘n hont mishannel.”

“Dit is nie waar nie,” she protests, “ek is lief vir Oupa.”

The old man stops kneading the skin with its sparse hairs. “Ma’ Nooientjie willie va’ Outa se beker drink nie.”

The scathing attack silences her. There is truth in it. She walks away from him.

Men, Aimee thinks, fed up with the whole lot of them. She has never shared a brown man’s drink before.

Ashamed with herself, she wanders off to an outcrop.

The veldt is sparse like rabbit skin. She lifts her jersey exposing her stomach to the winter sun, the stretchmarks shining along the protruding navel. Her stomach dips and dives and there is a sudden pain, in her thighs, that buckles her legs as the child presses down, wanting its way.

Just like the wedding, grown-ups having their way with her, the dress, slightly gathered around the waist to hide it all.

“Vir die kind se onthalwe,” the dressmaker said.

The hasty wedding date, the simple ceremony, the cut of the dress, even its off-white colour tells the tale.

“It never happens to bad girls, they’re too clever,” were her mother’s first words. So she was a stupid girl, a stupid, good girl.

“Bly liewer weg van die kerk, ten minste vir die begin, anderste kom jy onder kerklike tug.” Were his mother’s first words to her.

She wore cream. A plain shift of a dress for the minister had requested discretion. And she had picked of the flowers from Outa’s garden under the fig tree, sweet peas and tissue flowers, flowering herbs and roses with big heads, tied with string. She was glad for the day. It had rained softly, making the path to the church wet and muddy and she had stood in the rain, lifting her veil to feel the drops on her face, before walking down the aisle to him, with his face so closed. When he turned to speak the words to her, there was something in his eyes she had never seen. A gentle kindness that opened him up to her, giving her a glimpse of a man she wanted.

They went back to the room with the rosed wallpaper. It felt different this time.

Someone had scattered rose petals over the sheets. She opened the curtains, allowing the light into the pink room, feeling uncomfortable and shy.

He sat on the bed like a weary traveller, wiping the petals to the floor.

The light fell on him.

There were veils over his eyes.

So she was a sinner, more than the others, the cuckolders in the front row flaunting their virginal ties.

Lethargically, she brushes the grit off her hands, thinking of light over rose wallpaper.

Around her are minute cacti, camouflaged amongst the rocks, flowering delicate orange buds the size of her nail. She picks one, licking at its nectar clear and sticky, then picking another, waiting for the nectar to collect on her tongue. There are hundreds of such flowers.

On the furthest side of the camp the windmill pumps into action, its metal blades turning in the breeze as the rod moves up and down into the earth, spitting a thin stream of brown water into the crib.

A pile of discarded flowers lie at Aimee's feet.

From behind Isak and his father are the same in their gestures and manner of talking as they discuss the pump's head. It is only the cane in the older man's hand and his silver hair that makes him appear older.

She has conflicting feelings about Isak. When he walks towards her she is torn between running and embracing him or standing back, coldly waiting for him to greet her. It doesn't come naturally to her to play this game of coldness, it tires her out, makes her unhappy that she cannot be who she is. And he is unaware of her dilemma, so wrapped up is he in himself.

At the skerm, Outa unpacks his rations.

She strolls over, her mouth thick with sweetness. "Ek is dors."

The old man carries on unpacking out of the fertiliser bag, ignoring her, tearing open a packet of Kool- Aid, tipping the red concentrate onto his palm, dipping his tongue in the redness.

“Ek is dors,” she repeats.

His tongue flicks in and out of the red like an injured snake. Without a word he flings the dregs of the coffee onto the coals and hands her the mug. Aimee positions it under the pipe that trickles water into the crib, deliberately sipping. She can feel the old man’s eyes on her.

“Daar’s mos bekers in the bakkie,” Isak confronts her, the veins in his hands like blue baling rope.

“Ek’s klaar.”

“Maak soos jy lus kry.” He grimaces and his face shines from perspiration, “Onthou, daar’s wyksbyeenkoms vanaand.”

The sheep drink contentedly as she dips the mug under the salty water a second time. His mother must have decided the time is right for her.

At the skerm she drinks, then hands back the mug.

Outa hooks it on a nail. He presents a small cap made from fur with uneven stitching.

It is soft and tiny enough to fit a doll’s head. “Al klaar gemaak?” She squeezes her fist in the cap.

Isak makes a bonfire of burning renoster bush. The old man rolls a ball of tobacco, stuffing it inside his cheek with hands that remind her of tortoise legs.

“Topdeck,” he murmurs in thought, watching Isak.

Isak’s father loops the sausage on the metal grid and the meat smells of coriander and cloves. The smoke hangs like a pillar of salt over their heads.

Aimee hides the fur cap in her basket. Topdeck is what she would like to be.

*

She opens the bible and so do all the others. Some find the passage quickly while others less pious page in ever increasing shame.

Neighbours from farms all over the valley sit in a cramped circle in the voorkamer. To her they all look weather beaten and old, except for the young woman with peroxidized hair in the corner under the fringed lamp and her mother-in-law, whose laugh tinkles off the vase on the coffee table as a man with a nose, chartered like an atlas squeezes her arm.

Aimee glances over the passage, skimming the text as the Ouderling, on his riempies chair, spreads out the page, smiling at her with stained teeth. Isak stands behind her, his buckle brushing the back of her head as she tries to concentrate.

“Romeine dertien?” The ouderling’s manner changes as he speaks to the wyk.

Aimee nods encouragingly.

“Bladsy 1081 in die Ou Vertaling.” He turns to a woman with oxen proportions, “Sal Tannie dit vir ons voorlees?”

There are fourteen verses. She reads them with trouble, stumbling and back-tracking. Isak breathes over her as he follows the passage on her lap. All turn the page obediently. His breath is of burnt wood.

The Ouderling peers through spectacles, the bible at a slight distance, tipped to the light. “Die hoofstuk roep ons na gehoorsaamheid, wil iemand die lysie probeer?”

Aimee runs over the list, government, magistrates, taxes and laws of the land. She hesitates, watching the others contemplating the text. Her father-in-law is watching her. She smiles shyly, while only his moustache twitches in recognition.

A man with a bulbous nose tries in a faltering fashion. “Gehoorsaamhied teenoor die regering, die landdros, die howe, die wette van die land en die betaling

van jou belasting.” He pauses to allow the men to guffaw at the last one. “Dan die wet van die liefde, daardie skuld is nooit afbetaal nie.”

The laughing dies down and there is seriousness.

“Wil iemand iets verder bydra?”

The older women are restless as the smell of chicken pie and venison wafts in from the kitchen.

Aimee lifts her hand tentatively.

The Ouderling’s eyes are colder than his smile. All the attention shifts to her.

“Die hoofstuk praat van die wette, wat met God se regverdigheid en liefde ooreenstem.” She looks up for support but there is none. “Wat dan van wette wat deurmense daargestel is asof dit van God afkom...Staan dié wette bo dit?” She drops her eyes, unsure.

The room is quiet. Isak’s hands are either side of her but she is not sure what he is thinking. The girl under the lamp stares past her.

The Ouderling coughs. “Ons land se wette is heeltemal in lyn met God se plan vir sy volk.” With crude hands he expands his point. “Miskien is dit nie die geval in ’n land soos Rusland nie,” he adds generously.

Aimee listens politely, feeling the stultified atmosphere. Suddenly it is a room of strangers.

An oldish lady excuses herself to the kitchen. One or two others follow her. Aimee waits for the circle to settle down.

She begins to read. “Pay all your debts, except the debt of love for others, never finish paying that. For if you love them you will be obeying all God’s laws, fulfilling all his requirements. If you love your neighbour as much as you love yourself, you will not want to harm or cheat or kill him or steal from him...It is the

only law you need.” Aimee twists to see Isak but his eyes are on the page where she has read so she turns back to the lowered face of the ouderling.

He glances at his watch.

The old lady at the kitchen door looks towards the stove. “So vyf minute dan is die pies reg.”

The child rolls over inside her and her heart beats faster. “The laws of the land must reflect this.” She taps the page with her fingers.

The Ouderling replies, slower than before, as one does with a child. “Ek dink jy fouteer om die Woord so los en wyd te interpreteer.”

“Ek stem saam met die kind.” Her father-in-law speaks but only she hears.

There is general discontent at her presumptuousness. Aimee bites her lip.

The Ouderling takes charge of the meeting, calling for prayer. “Ons sê dankie aan almal wat gekom het. Kom ons bid klaar dat ons met die ete kan wegtrek.”

They pray for rain and for blessings, they pray for people she has never met in hospitals and old age homes. They pray for the boys on the border and they pray for Oom Frans, murdered by a blue-eyed bandiet.

“Amen.”

Bibles get packed away and a forced jolliness spreads through the room as the men move out onto the stoep for a smoke. Her mother-in-law is the only woman who joins them, while the rest head for the kitchen and the bathroom, discussing the gory details of the murder. Aimee and the girl under the lamp remain seated.

She is strong and energetic, with blond hair thrown over her one shoulder. Her hands resting on her knee are calloused. The blunt nails of her long fingers have perfect half moons.

Aimee smiles weakly at her. Isak withdraws to the opposite side of the room.

“Ek sien jy’s swanger.” Magdaleen speaks to her. “Is jy bang?”

“Bietjie,” Aimee confesses. She feels the animosity of the others as they walk past, avoiding her gaze.

“Die eerste ses maande is hel in sy ergste graad.” Magdaleen crosses her legs like a man.

Men drift inside, brandy and cokes planted in their hands.

“Jy moet onthou om jou borste voor die tyd son te gee, dit help baie,” she says to Aimee. “Hulle suig jou dat die bloed loop.”

Horrified at the thought of bleeding nipples, Aimee looks down at her breasts.

“Onthou, moenie die pyn probeer keer nie.” Magdaleen accepts a neat brandy from the ouderling. They knock their glasses, amicably.

Aimee has no idea of what she is talking about.

Magdaleen downs the drink then turns her attention to Aimee. “Pyn soos jy nog nooit beleef het nie, pyn wat jou binnegoed uitspoeg.”

Isak’s father rests on his cane at the door. He nods a greeting to both of them.

“Hy’s baie gaaf.” Magdaleen responds to the gesture.

Talking breaks out spontaneously, overflowing onto the tables as the women walk clockwise, dishing up for their husbands. Chairs are rearranged so that the men can sit at the table, while the women move into the voorkamer, balancing their plates on napkins, discreetly spread over their knees. Isak’s mother joins the men at the table.

At the table is risqué laughter. Her mother-in-law bends towards Oom Willie. He lights her cigarette and their heads touch briefly.

Aimee sits alone in the circle of chairs. He could have said something, stood by her, she thinks, watching Isak chatting to Magdaleen under the lamp about lucern and sheep and things she is not part of.

Her father-in-law beckons to her. Chivalrously he offers his seat and plate and she gets up, grateful for the attention. She finds herself tucked between the Ouderling and the Oom with the perfectly straight path through his hair.

Her father-in-law greets everyone jovially. “Dankie vir die lekker aand almal, ek is op pad.”

There’s nudging and winking around the table. Her mother-in-law takes a deep drag, tipping the ash casually on the floor, her eyes on him as he walks out.

“Do you stay nice here?” The Ouderling speaks haltingly.

“Dis baie anderste, ek is gewoon aan die stad.” She stares at the plated food soaked in gravy.

“But farm life are better than town life?”

“Vir die wittes, ja.”

The Ouderling puts his arm protectively around the back of her chair. Oom Willie wags his finger knowingly from across the table.

“You must not worry so much about the Hotnots. It was not good for the kid.” He pats her stomach repeatedly, turning to her mother-in-law. “Mooi dingetjie wat Boeta nader gebring het, Sara.”

“Ja, sy is mooi,” her mother-in-law concedes coolly, holding out her glass to be filled by Oom Willie.

“Dit moet wonderlik wees om die dogter wat jy verloor het, terug te kry.” The oom with the divided head speaks warmly.

Her mother-in-law sips, viewing Aimee up front. “Jy kan nooit een met ‘n ander vervang nie.”

The conversation lulls as the table’s glasses are refilled. Women in stretch tracksuits carry the dirty plates to the kitchen.

Oom Willie tries to revive the conversation. “Sara, gaan julle weer ‘n bietjie Weskus toe vir die vakansie?”

The man with the divided head comes in eagerly. “Kyk, dis mos bederf om ‘n groot seun in die huis te hê wat die boerdery kan vasvat en ‘n skoondogter wat die meide kan opcheck.”

Her mother-in-law leans over the table, patting the man’s hand. “So kry sy die werk wat ek al die jare haat.” Then her head falls back as she laughs knowingly.

Aimee wets her lips with water.

“Wat se werk?” The Ouderling’s stained teeth are near her ear and his breath stinks of brandy.

“Winkel, dop, slag, saag, lone, posuithaal, ecetera, ecetera.” Her mother-in-law exhales through her nostrils. “Ek is klaar met dit.”

“Arme kind.” The Ouderling makes clucking noises of sympathy over her.

Aimee pushes him away. “Ek hoef nie.” She says to him, looking across the table at the other woman, perfectly composed. Did he come from her? Was she in him?

It is difficult to speak back, difficult to disagree. Is this how an orphan feels when fostered? This is her family, her new family, for now and forever.

Oom Willie sits up but her mother-in-law carries on smoking. Only the staccato puffs of smoke show her agitation.

Something in Aimee's face makes the other woman carry on.

“Jy het nie ‘n keuse nie, my liefie, dit werk so op plase, almal het hul plek.”

I'll find my own place, not fill another's, Aimee thinks to herself, frowning at her.

“Jy ken jou gawe skoonpa maar sleg.” Her laugh is forced. “Dis jou werk, vroumenswerk. Verwag jy Sakkie moet dit doen? Plaaslewe is nie dorpslewe nie. Hy het sy manier en klaar. Of jy's deel daarvan of jy's uit,” she continues.

Things can change, Aimee wants to say, feeling nauseous, her stomach in a knot.

Her mother-in-law stubs the cigarette. “Sy's baie jonk,” she speaks to the table, “rou...Het ons nie almal dit op 'n tyd gedink nie?” Dismissing Aimee, she digs in her handbag for her car keys. “Sy sal bykom, sooner or later.” These are her final words on the matter. Ignoring Aimee she looks over her head. “Waar's my seun, sê hy moet saam met sy Ma kar toe stap.”

The Ouderling whistles, calling Isak's name.

Isak sits quietly, unnoticed on the windowsill of the voorkamer, listening.

The Ouderling drops his hand guiltily from Aimee's shoulder.

“Sakkie stap met jou Ma, ek wil ry.” She offers her cheek to Oom Willie and the other men.

Isak takes her arm and they walk out.

She had not said anything back and she had lost. The other had read her mind, knew what she was thinking.

She had wanted Isak to fight for her tonight.

Turning to the man with the divided head, she can see the car's lights through the window. “Was daar nog 'n kind Oom, het Sakkie 'n suster gehad?”

“Ja, ‘n meisiekind. Die kind is dood gebore.”

Where was her father-in law?

The two men look over her head at each other.

“Aimee is jy klaar?” Isak waits at the front door.

“Ek kom.” She greets with a handshake. The Ouderling pulls her closer, kissing her full on the mouth.

Isak turns away without waiting for her. She waves to the women washing up in the kitchen. Magdaleen is missing under the lamp. The Ouderling struggles to get out of his chair to accompany her.

“Oom hoef nie saam te stap nie, ek’s mos ‘n bevryde vrou.” She presses him down firmly, hastily making for the door. Outside she is more aware of the scurrilous nature of their talk. She carries her uneaten supper on the paper plate.

*

Isak sits behind the wheel of the bakkie, reversing before she has even closed the door.

“Wat’s fout?” she asks as they take the short cut along the river.

“Niks nie.”

“Hoekom jaag jy so?”

“Ek ry soos ek lus kry.”

“Die hele aand was jy nooit by my nie.”

“Jy’s mos opgesels met die manne of hoe?” He spins the wheel violently to avoid the dongas.

“What are you talking about?”

“Druk jou lyf bo-op die Oom en skinner van my Ma of kan jy nie onthou nie?”

“Ek het net gevra...”

Isak slams on the brakes and Aimee shoots forward against the dashboard.

“Hou jou mond! Dis ‘n afgunstige spul mense, hulle gun ons familie niks nie.

Die hele lot se name is netjies in die Engelse koerant gelys as Broeders...Of het jy nie gesien nie?” His eyes are blazing and his knuckles are white on the wheel. “Tweedens hou jou stryery met my Ma vir ‘n ander tyd. Dis mos nie ‘n openbare boksgeveg nie, waarom dink jy lag daai spul nou...Waaroor!”

“She started it, she wants to treat me like her personal maid...”

“Moenie!” he shouts at her.

Frightened, Aimee covers her ears.

“Moenie my forseer om tussen jou en my Ma te kies nie.”

She pulls her legs up and the paper parcel bursts open on her lap, gravy running down her thighs onto the cab’s floor.

Isak shifts the bakkie into first gear. There is a porcupine in the road, a full-grown adult, crouching in the lights. Suddenly its quills flare in a display of aggression and attack, then it scurries down the road, leading them all the way up the hill to the house, where it disappears amongst the cypresses. Isak’s mother’s Datsun is parked in the garage but his father’s car is missing.

Tearfully, she asks with concern. “Waar’s jou Pa?”

Isak switches the engine off, thinking of a white car parked under the Yellow wood tree in the pass. They sit in the darkness and stillness, under the swaying branches of the camphor trees, she crying all alone.

**

The prefab house of Oom Kalla the voorman is neglected. Abandoned cats from long ago press their exposed ribs against her legs with limp tails in the air.

But Aimee is blind to the flaking paint of the shutters, the dead grass and the shattered panes. This is her house. Patiently she scrapes the black paint off the wooden beams, brushing the toxic stripper, then waiting for the paint to bubble and run, quickly scraping off the gooey mess before it drips and burns her skin. Shakily she balances on a drum, wearing over-size rubber gloves and a butcher's apron.

The weight of her stomach pulls her forward as she strains to maintain her balance, recurring pain running down her legs. She sits down on the drum, hugging her body happy to be alone, the fumes of the paint remover, pleasant and intoxicating.

If she could just teach him to smile it would help a lot. It is as though his heart is a cave filled with murky water that no one can see into, not even she herself. His heaviness dampens her spirit, but it's this very brokenness that makes him desirable.

"Hoe gaan dit met die kind?" Her father-in-law stands at the door, one hand resting on the cane.

She likes his face, the highness of his forehead and the silver hair, untamed like an old lion.

"Goed dankie, dit vat net baie van die goeters." She lifts the pot to show him. "Wat is dit weer?"

"Paint stripper." He helps her walking down the passage, looking up at the beams. "Wanneer kry ek 'n naam?" His nostrils flair with amusement. "Jy kan maar kies as Pa te erg is, noem my sommer Johan, Jan, Ouballie enige iets, solank ek net 'n naam kry."

“Ek kan nie.” Aimee blushes.

“Wat gaan dit wees, Aimee?”

“Johan is better than Jan...Or Pa.”

“Dan is ek Johan, verstaan ons mekaar?”

“Ja...Johan.”

“Not so bad after all.” His eyes are provocative. “Ek ry waterskema toe, bo in die berg, wil jy saamry, Aimee?”

“Dit klink lekker, Johan.”

Her father-in-law snaps the mobile radio off his belt. “Sakkie, Sakkie, kom in.” The radio crackles and she can hardly hear Isak’s voice. “Die kind ry saam skema toe. Sê vir jou Ma ons is nie middagete by die huis nie, sy moet vir ons kos bêre.”

On the back of the bakkie are pipes and a toolbox like Isak’s but just bigger. As he opens the door for her she realises that this is the first time she has ever been alone with him.

The road is new to her, a steep climb that takes them swiftly out of the valley. It rises above bush and orchards and they float above the valley as the mountains become sharper and larger, like a sculpture being carved before their eyes. As they travel he points out beacons to her, the canal hidden in the reeds next to the road, the wild geese feeding off grain lands and he tells her the names of rock and peak and each type of soil. At the top of the pass, they turn off onto a narrow track, which meanders through fynbos. The valley is out of sight and each crevice in the rock drips with water, hundreds of them making a symphonic crescendo. Aimee unwinds the window to listen to the sounds of baboon and water, the air crisp from the frost still lying on the tips of branches.

She looks at the older man, liking him, despite all she knows, despite all she sees him do. It is hard to hate someone who has only been good to you.

The dam is built between the mountain and a steep cliff that drops to the valley below. She closes the window.

“Hier, vat my baadjie.” He stops the bakkie, pulling off his jacket before she can protest. “Trek aan. Ons stap verder.” A pair of men’s gumboots is passed onto her. “Die grond is nat en modderig.”

Together they walk over the sheets of frost, him anchoring them with the cane and she holds onto his arm so that she will not slip. Water cascades over the dam wall. Glimpses of rainbows appear in the spray. They are higher than any other place she can see, equal to the clouds.

“Wil jy verder saamstap?” he points downwards to where a massive pipe lies on metal supports, running flush with the mountain’s face. “Ek moet met die pyplyn langs.”

She nods.

“Gee hand.” He holds out his hand with the pink skin and she takes it gingerly, his fingers closing around hers. “Kom.” He drops his cane into a bush.

Crablike, they shift along the broad back of the pipe. The water rushes with wild abandon and she realises the danger of it, tightening her grip as they measure one step at a time. The leaking joint releases a fountain that shoots up into the sky and they watch the wasted water tumbling over the sides of the pipe.

“Sit en rus.” He lets go of her hand.

Aimee holds onto the pipe with both hands, sliding her legs out, one by one. Below her the incline is so sheer that she cannot see the ground and her head spins with the thrill of it. He moves closer to the joint, inspecting the cracked bitumen that

seals the pipes. Then without warning he slides down the side of the pipe as well and she is lame with fear that he will fall, closing her eyes, breathing in and out as Magdaleen advised. With great effort he climbs back onto the pipe, struggling badly and she watches, unable to help, holding out her hand for just in case but he uses his own strength to get back on and they sit next to each other, she giving him time to recover.

“Die kans is goed ek trek jou saam af met my,” he manages to say in jest at the sight of her open hand. He looks old and exhausted, his hands trembling from the effort.

She regrets her past anger against him. “Ag, nooit nie,” she teases back, “ek is mos rond en gesond, `n anker. Niemand trek my so gou af nie.”

“Ek sal die skema moet toedraai. Daar sal op die pyp gewerk moet word, voor die volgende reën.”

Comfortably, they sit and look over the far off valley, cusped by mountains.

“Kan jy die huis sien?” he asks her, thin vapour expelled from his mouth.

“My huis?”

“Enige huis.”

She searches for landmarks that will help her. “Die boorde lyk niks meer as krydstrepe nie... daar is die pakstoor se dak en jou huis en daar’s myne,” she calls out excitedly. “Daardie wit kolletjie is my huis.” She claps her hands and he smiles at her. “Kan jy die pyplyn van my huis-af sien?” She asks.

“Ja, as jy weet waar om te kyk.” He indicates to the rock behind them

“Daardie skeur in die berg...Trek nou `n reguit lyn soentoe, dan kan jy presies uitwerk waar ons nou sit.”

Aimee memorises the grey scar in the rock.

“Kom ons gaan terug, daar’s koffie in die bakkie en jou man slag my af as hy weet waar jy jouself nou begewe.” He tucks one foot under, then the other, pushing himself up before letting go of the pipe. Aimee copies him, taking his hand. They shuffle along the pipe to the dam wall. The entire mountain reflected in detail on the smooth surface. She slides off the pipe gumboots first, picking up his cane, passing it onto him. At her feet is a modest plant with needle sharp leaves and dark red flowers that hang at the end of drooping stems.

He pokes at it with his cane, lifting the flower’s head for her to see.

“Skaamrosie, dis ‘n seldsame protea wat net teen die berg in sanderige grond groei.” With trouble he picks one for her. “Pluk vir jou om huis toe te vat, hul blom vir so ‘n kort rukkie.”

While he pours the coffee she picks a bouquet of the mountain roses. They drink coffee studying their reflections in the clear water. She twists the stems in her hands.

“Is jy gelukkig by ons?” He looks at her in the water.

Aimee thinks of Isak and the unfairness of it all, her inability to fight him where he is strong. “Nee, ek dink nie so nie.”

“Geluk is nooit daar waar jy dink hy moet wees nie.”

“Waar is dit dan?”

“In jou eie kop. Maar wie soek dit daar?”

She contemplates this. “Ken jy geluk?”

Astonished he turns to her, then he drops his eyes. “Lank gelede maar of dit geluk was weet ek ook nie meer nie.”

“Will you tell me?”

He looks her up and down. Waterfalls of melting snow embrace her from all sides. “Hoe oud is jy nou?”

“Twintig.”

“Nog ‘n kind.” His eyes fall back on her watery image. “Ek was omtrent so oud soos jy, miskien ‘n jaar ouer.” He pushes two stones closer to each other, before sitting down.

Aimee sits down on the cold stone. She spins a pebble over the water and it ripples and bounces to her delight, then she picks up another and for a while it looks like she had forgotten him as she throws stones over the water.

“You throw well. Who taught you?” He carries his weight on the cane.

“Isak.” She smiles proudly.

“I never taught him.”

“When were you maybe-the-last-time happy?” she reminds him.

“At the end of the war. It was a messy time, planes dropping pamphlets, telling us that the Fascist forces had been overcome, singing the merits of Stalin, the Allies new friend but for us on the ground...” He stamps the cane. “It was another story. Our war wasn’t over yet. Hiding in the hills and mountains were pockets of German troops and they were broken but not beaten.”

“Where was this?”

“Northern Italy.”

They both sip their coffee and Aimee cuddles in the jacket smelling of cloves. He pauses to recollect and his eyes have changed to dark grey.

“Die donners was goed opgelei, beter as ons. The most magnificent force to be reckoned with. We had to claw our way through each God forsaken hovel and village,

one by one, our snipers against theirs.” He stops abruptly. “Jy’s sekerlik al op vir oorlogstories.”

“Isak never speaks of it.”

“Drink jou koffie, jou lippe is al blou van die koue.” He unscrews the thermos, filling her mug.

He moves like Isak, not rushed in any way. There is great confidence in his delayed gestures. He must have been a good-looking man. She imagines the silver hair black, the pink blotched skin, smooth. He would have been Isak.

He fills his mug as well. “Cheers.” He taps her mug. “Kom ons hoop alles loop goed met jou bevalling.”

They drink and listen to the baboons calling.

“Our battalion was spread out,” he picks up on the story, “over too wide an area, our fire power was diluted when we hit an unexpected spot of resistance, a few hundred miles north of Rome, heavy artillery in the mountains.” He struggles to remember the name of the pass then shrugs it off. “So I deserted my brigade, like all the rest and fled into the hills, bangjan liever as dooiejan.”

“You were only a boy.”

“Not a hero like your husband.”

She is puzzled by this comment of his.

“I ran through fields of poppies, thousands and thousands of these red flowers growing along the hilltops. That night a berg wind blew from the front.” He looks at her calmly and they are very close so close she can count the burst veins in the whites of his eyes. “I got to a village, daar iewers in die berge, more of a communal farm with stone buildings dating back from the Roman times and I sat at this well in the

middle of a square and I was hungry, in fact starving like a stray dog.” He mimics to her how he ate, stuffing imaginary food into his mouth. “Manjiare, manjiare.”

She laughs loudly. It is good to laugh again. It is good to laugh with a man.

His eyes twinkle and below the moustache she can see something of a smile.

“The family living there had food if nothing else and lots of it, hidden from the Germans in the cellars below the houses and they allowed me to eat until I was kaput.”

Aimee tries to imagine this immaculate man gorging himself, “Who lived there?”

“A patriarch, a wonderful old man, his wife and an assortment of husbandless women with hordes of children,”

“The women must have been glad to see you.”

“The old man was the gladdest because I was young and strong and knew a bit about farming. It was still harvest time when I got there, so I could do most of the heavy work for him and pay for my board and lodging in that way.”

“Were the women pretty?”

“There was one.” He studies her openly, “younger than you but with the same dark hair and animation, only she had violet eyes.”

Aimee looks at her reflection, which is foreign and distant to her.

“Ek was lief vir haar.”

Aimee tosses a rose onto the water and it drifts slowly away from her. “How long were you together?”

“Three months and a few days. Then Armistice came and we had to go home.” The wind begins to blow as he speaks and he reads the time. “Ons sal moet aanstaltes maak huis se kant toe.” He takes her mug. “Hier lê baie werk.”

Aimee wants to know more about the girl with the violet eyes. “Did you see her again, did you go back?”

“Vir?”

“The girl with the violet eyes.”

He pulls himself up against the cane, taking the basket. “Sy’t Suid-Afrika toe gekom as ‘n model vir die Wolraad, jare later.”

“Op soek na jou.” Aimee’s heart quickens. “Het julle ontmoet?”

He stops in his tracks with an impatient look, his bushy eyebrows obscuring the lids of his eyes.

She has asked too much.

There is something frightening in his disapproval, wilder, darker than in Isak.

The weather turns bad as they take the descent. The return is faster, brisker and the valley of mist and cloud becomes orchard and lands and buildings. She sees red poppies and pomegranates splitting open, petals on slate and a crow on the telephone line, waiting.

*

The baby grows and Aimee slows down. Every day she stands on the stoep measuring the crevice in the rock, exposing her breasts to the sun as instructed by Magdaleen. Her breasts are veined and heavy in her hands and she feels less and less like Aimee.

Sitting down she thinks about the two of them. Where it all began and it began in blackness, in the total absence of light in a room with rose wallpaper. They have so little in common but for interlocking curves and hollows and bones. It is only in

nakedness that they can be honest with each other, that she can see something of who he is.

It is as difficult as catching light in your hand.

Bevrugting, she says the words out loud, tucking her breasts back in the mamma-size bra. It is the same as an apple core, thrown into a river that floats, sinks then washes up on a strange shore, lying in wet earth unseen as it breaks open and gives birth to new life. Whether it is loved or not, watered or left to die, the seed will have its way.

This new life in Aimee is stronger, more determined than the sum of her. Much as she contemplates this she cannot understand this power. The process and functionality of it all yes but that not her mind or body can stop the seed drawing nourishment from her bones and blood, landscaping her body to its needs, that she cannot fathom. It is the first time she isn't in control.

For now she is the baby's maidservant, subjected whether by default or choice to bring it to fruition.

All of her is at its call... And this is only the beginning.

Sighing, she picks up the cat, walking towards the gate. No book can really tell how it will be or what to do exactly, no diagram, no tannie's gory explanation can really prepare her.

She waits for birds to fly overhead, hearing their wings beating together.

The room in the Karoo hotel was beautiful. No one can take that away from her. The two of them had been reckless, without restraint, without caution and who can think of caution and planning things when you don't even know if tomorrow you'll be alive?

She looks down the gravel road for his bakkie, just in case but he is busy, hardly ever there to talk to her. She must deal with it, all on her own, the nausea, the tenderness and pain, the stretchmarks and varicose veins. Fear.

Each morning she gets up and stands in front of the mirror, prodding herself all over, noticing the shift of her hips and her jawbone that has broadened. Sideways her backside repeats the curves of her stomach and she has become something primal, and distasteful if it were not for the thought of the baby.

At the cattle grid she sits down again, tired, dropping stones through the slats. She has a lot of time to consider all these things. It's not only her body that is changing but her mind and being as well and that is more difficult to tell, for him to grasp that she is no longer the girl on the motorbike.

Baby. It's just another word under b in the dictionary until it happens. A word, a sound, a thought, a dream becomes flesh. It keeps her busy all day this word. For him it is something happening out there.

At night, the word kicks and shoves and rolls and sleeps and breathes and feeds from their shared cord and it is this that scares her. Then she grabs his hand in the dark so that he can feel and know like she knows, what this rippling under the skin means.

Aimee hugs the cat hard. She is scared, so very scared of the pain. All she wants is to be babied, to make her fear his as well but it doesn't happen.

*

It comes when she is alone. Starting in the back, a dull sort of pain, which is more uncomfortable than sore. Then it goes away. Aimee shrugs it off, sitting down in

the middle of the kitchen floor with a mat, fixing the fringe, concentrating on the neatness of her stitches.

She counts the days until her date and it comforts her to know it is still a while.

Then the pain returns as a band around her lower back, like a belt, tightened too much. She drops the needle, doubling up on the floor, lying in a heap, holding her breath, waiting and frightened.

It comes back and every time it comes, the pain is stronger and longer. A pain no one could prepare her for. Like cutting her finger on a rusted tin, over and over in slow motion, transferred to her guts. She throws herself against the wall, sobbing, pleading with him to come home. Then she crawls and crouches, screeching like a pig under the blade and there is no one to help her but the cats that lick her face.

In between the pain she tries rocking back and forth on her heels and there is no time to breathe like Magdaleen said because she is moaning so much. Overwhelmed by each contraction, she descends into blackness and with each she can feel the child bear down, wanting out.

The pain will kill them both. She tries to shift her thoughts to the child inside of her, both of them going through the same thing, for the first time. They are companions, fighting this one together.

Somewhere in all of this, his shadow falls over her in the passage and from his face she can see he has no clue what to do or what she is going through. And she hates him with such a hate that she would kill him if she could.

“Probeer stadiger asemhaal.” Isak kneels next to her in his golfing clothes.

Aimee pushes him away with force, laughing and screaming at him at the same time.

“Moet ons gaan?” he asks helplessly, looking around. “Waar’s jou tas?”

Her hair is loose and she looks like a mad woman to him and he thinks of his mother, clawing at the pillow, shouting like this.

He picks her up, running to the bakkie, terrified the child will make its appearance, while Aimee shouts curses at him and to see her in such pain is a terrible thing, worse than all the pain he has ever gone through.

He parks at Outpatients, running up the steps, with her in his arms under the sign, *Whites only*.

Theatre sisters in their green smocks shine lights inside of her measuring her dilation, chatting with him about his father and the little girl of Koba and he cannot listen, their no-care attitude driving him further into distraction. Can they not see she is dying?

Hour after hour she dilates wider and wider. Een vinger, twee vingers, drie vingers. Distraught, Isak paces the room, kissing her head each time she cries out, and he is crying, openly for her suffering, it is too much bear, to stand on the sidelines and watch.

And Aimee pleads with him to end the agony but he can’t, there is nothing that he can do, nothing.

Then she feels the most excruciating pressure ever. Her back arches like a cat and she hears the doctor saying calmly. “Haal diep asem.” And she doesn’t miss the irony of this.

“Druk,” he orders like a coach.

She has never done this before but she pushes with very sinew, every muscle and organ to the limits of her limit, feeling the blood burst in her head and the child’s

head shows a little after all that effort and when she sees Isak's face she know, it's now or never, pushing so hard she would push a scrum over, single-handedly.

The head comes out, black matted hair and her thighs tear open as the rest of the child shoots out, smooth and naked, exploding from within, out of the darkness into the light.

Exquisite ecstasy washes over her, the pain immediately forgotten forever as the blue baby is passed to her, latching on with anger. And both of them burst into tears, crying and laughing at this perfect person, Sophy.

**

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It is another day of loneliness for her under the vine. Bored cats claw wood and she stands, feet apart, looking out to the mountains, rocking the baby, stuck on her hip.

Swallows fly away from her.

Stretched gospel music comes from the barrakse. Sheep eat purple flowers in the lucern camp.

Days are long and they are all the same.

Resentfully, she unbuttons her blouse. The baby latches on greedily, sucking her dry.

There is even less of her.

She sits again as the child drinks and drinks.

The swallows return, swarming to the river and the reeds.

One day is so long for her, what about a lifetime of this?

Her breast subsides. She forces the baby to let go, who cries with frustration. Aimee presents her with the other breast. There is satisfaction. The little hand relaxes.

Her heart is caught in flight.

She places the sleeping child in the crib.

Sleeping gives her moments and yet there is nothing to do with them surrounded by stone and bush.

The cats perk up their ears. And old man crosses the river. Aimee shades her eyes to see better. He is bent like a shepherd's staff. The cap of fur, so small to her then would drown this little thing of a person.

The baby lies so still. She moves her hand over the little one's face to see if she is breathing.

There is nothing.

Her heart beats quicker. She pinches the soft cheek of the child. The baby's lips tremble.

This will drive her to exhaustion.

The old man unlocks the gate of the lucern camp. She watches how he walks amongst the flowers.

The sheep keep their heads down.

Without another thought she opens the broken gate. The cats follow her along the path to the lucern fields.

Yellow surings grow out of the gravel.

Aimee leans over the fence. The breeze blows over. She looks back to the house. Already she feels better.

Outa hooks at a random ewe, shaking his head. He snorts with disgust, flicking the mucous off the back of his hand. Parasites crawl and wriggle over the rump of the sheep.

She picks up one of the cats, rocking it in her arms.

Slowly he makes his way to the gate and she can see that he is angry, angry with Isak for never being there.

She waits for him to lock the gate. A baby cries from the house. She drops the cat and runs.

A bakkie is parked at the house. She runs onto the stoep where Isak rocks the screaming child under the flowering vine.

“Waar was jy?” he shouts at her above the baby's furious wailing.

Aimee snatches Sophy from his arms but he snatches her back and the cats are under their feet, meowing and rubbing as they tussle with the child. Isak kicks out, his boot sending the cat slithering across the floor. It hits the stoep wall hard, blood pouring out of its eye. She grabs the child with all her force, running down the passage, slamming and locking the doors behind her, to the bathroom, where she slumps on the floor crying, the baby hyperventilating, her little face blue and her eyes rolling over. Aimee hugs Sophy, giving her breast as a pacifier and the baby takes the nipple, sobbing pitifully between sucks.

Frightened, she presses her ear to the keyhole but the house is deathly still so she comforts the baby, watching the light change.

There is a knock on the door but she ignores it, then soft tapping of fingertips.

“Aimee maak oop.” His voice is cold and aloof. “Maak oop.”

“Sallie.” She gets up shivering, speaking through the door. “Jy’s nooit hier nie...En die paar keer wat jy hier is hou jy jou Baas oor my.”

“Maak nou die deur oop.”

She shakes her head. “I never see you, all day long. I’m here, just me and the baby with no one to talk to, just me and the baby.”

“Die plaas is baie erger as ‘n baba.”

Aimee pulls a face in disagreement. “Hoe sal jy weet?”

“My Pa is nooit meer in die werk nie, iemand moet al die punte bymekaar hou, anderste val die hele spul uitmekaaruit.” He takes a deep breath, keeping his voice level, on the other side. “You can’t have your cake and eat it.”

“What cake!” Annoyed, she walks away to the window, looking out on the mountains. “I have nothing of nothing...And the farm...It’s your lover.”

“Jy’t geen idee waarom dit gaan nie, waarmee ek besig is nie.”

“And you?” She raises her voice, then drops it as the baby pulls her face to cry again.

“Is jy nou klaar?” He fiddles with the doorknob. “Maak oop anderste maak ek dit self oop.”

Tearfully she opens the door, his face unreadable.

“Waar’s die kat?”

“Dood.”

Fresh tears pour out of her eyes. “Hoekom?”

“Sy oog was uit, hy sou dit nie maak nie.” He widens the door, taking the baby from her, calmly kissing Sophy on the cheek. “Ek moes haar vankant maak.”

He sees the thought in her eyes.

“Waar was jy?” he asks a second time.

“By die skaap. Ek was ‘n paar minute weg, ek wou uitkom dis al.”

“Kry iets vir jou hande om te doen.” He switches on the bathroom light.

“Raaijic kom môre, ek het klaar gereël.”

“Ek soek nie ‘n kinderoppasser nie,” she stubbornly reminds him.

“Laat haar ten minste die spinnerakke afwas.” He reaches up and wipes dust off the light bulb.

*

Raaijic knocks on the back door.

Aimee pulls out a chair for her and they sit opposite each other with Sophy on Aimee’s lap. Raaijic’s hands are folded in hers.

She listens intently, peering through spectacles at Sophy and she wears layers of brightly flowered clothing.

“Ek kom saam met die huis van Baas Kalla se tyd af.”

“Ek sal self met die baba werk.”

“’n Kinnermeid is ‘n goeie ding.”

The telephone rings and Aimee puts the baby on the floor.

Sophy crawls towards the back stoep with Raatjie’s eyes on her but she doesn’t move. Aimee drops the phone, picking up the wriggling baby, placing her next to the table but it is not a minute before the baby heads down the passage.

“Dis reg, ‘n honderd dag-oue kuikens.” She reads the name off the page of the magazine, watching Sophy disappear around the corner.

Raatjie sits with crossed ankles as Aimee clamps the mouthpiece.

The older woman gets off the chair, flattening her skirt, before following Sophy. She throws the baby onto her back, binding her with a towel that she knots under her breasts.

Aimee keeps on talking, so Raatjie hands Sophy a rattle, picking up discarded clothing and the pile of dirty babygrows and bibs. As she moves about she does a little dance, shuffling her feet, singing a song and the rattle shakes rhythmically.

The conversation is over. Aimee runs down the passage holding out her arms.

Raatjie unknots the towel, taking the baby off her back but the small face screws up with displeasure.

“Sy’s gelukkig.”

Aimee hesitates, afraid to give the child to another but Sophy’s disgruntled look encourages her to put her back, where she gurgles as the song begins again.

She looks at her child with the other and there is an enormous sense of loss.

“Gan ma’, juffrou.”

They stand in her bedroom. Self-consciously she opens her cupboard.

Raatjie views her from the back. She pulls out an overall.

“Wat eet die kleinding?”

“Haar naam is Sophy.”

“Dis ‘n kombuismeid se naam daai.”

“Dis ook die naam van...” she wants to say queens but it sounds inappropriate.

“Sy drink aan my,” Aimee explains as she digs out her old school lace ups.

Raatjie spits to one side. “Ons bruinkinders eet pap en brood met die gumse vannat hul die têt vat.”

Aimee nods, embarrassed.

At the front door the remaining cat whisks his tail, purring as she rubs him but he does not follow her.

*

A group of young men herd the flock out of the lucern camp. To their amusement a young ewe bolts out of the cordon. They give chase, bringing her back with cajoling and whistles. Aimee stands at a distance from them. She recognises Outa and Petrus and the absence of Sophy makes her feel exposed. Aware of their underhand stares she tugs at the bib of the overall, digging her hands in her pockets, taking a deep breath as she follows them to the pens where the sheep will be dipped and doused.

No one makes eye contact with her. It is as though she is invisible.

“Môre,” she announces boldly to the group.

Some nod back, while others look away. Petrus smiles at her and without thinking she smiles back, triggering sniggers from the younger boys.

The sheep run past. Outa drops beans into a tin three at a time, while the men channel the rams that mount each other in mock mating rituals to one side and the ewes to another. She climbs onto the pen's fence, trying to tally the sheep as they rush by. The old man passes the tin to Petrus, who throws the beans out onto the sand, counting them one by one and she counts along.

“Vyfhonderd-en-tien, Pa.”

“Daar's twee kort, tel weer.”

Aimee recounts as well.

“Vyfhonderd-en-twaalf, Pa.” Petrus gets off his knees.

“Dis reg.” Aimee confirms.

Petrus with his sinewy arms and narrow hips at looks at her with interest, then turns to the other men. “Kom, kom ons hettie aldag nie.”

Strapped on his back is a tank with a pipe leading to a metal cylinder, shaped like a gun, his finger resting on the trigger.

“Bring uit!” Outa shouts over the bleating.

The rest of the men corner the sheep, gripping them between their thighs, waddling closer. Each ewe's head is tipped back and the jaw pulled open, the gun's barrel stuck down into the throat as Petrus releases the trigger, allowing the milky yellow fluid to flush down.

A cloud of dust hangs over the pen from the stamping hooves. Five ewes in a row are chased through the dip bath with a loud commotion, the yellow liquid, trickling out of their snouts. Eventually all the ewes are done, soaked and scraggly on

the other side. It is only the dozen or so rams that remain, the tank on Petrus' back is almost empty.

She hesitates. "Mag ek?"

All of the men look at her. It is as though they have not understood her.

She asks again, pointing to the tank on the back of Petrus.

He unstraps it, passing it onto his grandfather. The old man lifts it onto her shoulders. It is the weight of a baby. Petrus steps back, dropping onto his haunches, rolling a pil, while the other men hang over the fencing.

"Nooi, moenie bang wees nie, 'n skaap is 'n geduldige dier." Petrus speaks to her, drawing on the lighted paper.

Outa places the gun in her hand. "Pettie, bring een nader."

Petrus takes another draw before pinching the burning end of the pil and pocketing it, then he circles a ram, darting from side to side, forcing the animal against the poles of the pen. He grabs the ram in a vice grip dragging it to Aimee, where he mounts the animal, pulling its jaw wide open for her.

Tentatively, she sticks the gun between the row of yellow teeth that grin grotesquely back at her.

"Dieper," Petrus instructs her.

She avoids his eyes, concentrating on the large pink tongue that is in the way. She presses the trigger and the dosing spills out over her hand.

"Probeer weer, Nooientjie," Outa instructs her.

Petrus regrips the ram and Aimee steps forward.

He places his hand over hers, holding the gun in the right position, "Druk nou."

The dose flows down the ram's throat. Petrus releases it, smacking it on its rump towards the dipping tank. He brings the other rams to her until there is one left.

"Nooientjie kom goed reg," Outa congratulates her.

"Ek wil self probeer."

The last animal snorts and stampedes from corner to corner.

"Ek wil die laaste skaap self vang. Petrus hoef nie verder vir my te help nie."

"Nooientjie wil self uitvang?" Outa confirms with her.

"Probeer." She loosens the straps of the tank, handing it back to Outa. Petrus relights the pil with an amused look on his face.

"Saggies ma' seker, Nooientjie." The old man talks to the ram across the pen, his arms widespread and his head dropped into his shoulders. "Die klonge werk te rof." Then he whistles under his breath, shifting his weight from one foot to the other, closing in on the animal. Aimee copies him from behind.

The ram stands still, pawing the dust nervously as Outa steps aside, winking at her to move in.

"Arms wyt oop, dan vinnig, ommie nek. Nooientjie vang hom met Nooientjie se sterkste arm en hou sy kop reguit, dan druk Nooientjie, Nooientjie se lyf so styf teen syne."

It is her and the ram. For now there is nothing else but the two of them in the pen. Step by step she creeps closer, taking her time, clicking her tongue and there is joking behind her and the smell of burning tobacco.

The ram reverses into the poles, ready to bolt. She plants her feet wide in the dust, arms thrown open as though to embrace the animal that charges straight at her. Instinctively she makes way, then changes her mind, grabbing him around the neck

with all her strength, just as she has seen Petrus do. Aimee tightens her arm, digging her heels into the ground until they come to a standstill.

Triumphantly, she tips the ram's head back while it huffs angrily. "Kalmeeer, kalmeeer," she speaks soothingly. "Wat nou?" she calls out to Outa.

"Baasvanger," he murmurs with a broad smile.

With her arm locked around the ram's chin, she opens the jaw with the other hand. Outa passes the gun to her, holding the tank while she presses the trigger and the animal swallows noisily. Only then she lets him go, patting his rump as he makes a run.

Outa walks out of the pen, ordering the younger boys to take the flock to the hills.

With shock, she realises it is noon. There are large blisters on the middle of her palms and her watch is stained. "Ek moet gaan."

The men sit in the shade of the bloubos, eating their lunch.

As she begins to run for the house, Petrus speaks from the shade.

Aimee stops and looks back.

"Die Nooi hettie plaasmaniere nie."

She stammers, her cheeks colouring.

"Die Nooi issie 'n nooi nie." He gesticulates, searching for the words.

The other men smile and their smiles are spoilt for her by the gap in their teeth.

She tugs at her bib, embarrassed by the stickiness in her bra, running as fast as she can down the path to her house.

*

She follows the hands of the clock on the stove.

It is late and Isak has not come home yet. She switches on the black and white television and the man with not a hair out of place is reading the news, intimately to her.

Reagan, Thatcher, PW Botha, their skins, shades of grey on the screen, all having their moment on various podiums. Then there are nameless masses, scenes of black solidarity moving through the streets to Parliament.

Her father-in-law is also not at home as the lights of the Mercedes have not come over the bridge.

Stones are thrown on highways, from bridges. Cars with shattered glass and blood on the dashboard are shown. The Springbucks run onto the field, playing a rebel side, here for the money and not for the glory and the Springbucks play with all their heart to show sanctions don't hurt.

A skeleton of a city is shown. Ripped concrete, exposing steel that dangles like intestines and views of women, clutching shopping bags as they stumble over the debris. Beirut in all its complexity as other women bathe on the beach, plump women in bikinis, licking ice creams under striped umbrellas.

There's a knock at the door. She switches off the television, petrified.

"Wie's daar?" she asks afraid.

"Magdaleen. Ek het jou melk gebring. Jy't vergeet om dit te kom afhaal."

Aimee unlocks the door, taking the silver milk can and she is glad to see her.

"Ek wil 'n skaapkursus loop," she blurts out what she has wanted to say to him all day long.

“Solank dit net nie geld kos nie,” Magdaleen warns her. “Niemand spandeer geld op vrouens nie, vra vir my.”

Aimee looks at her glumly. The excitement of the morning has stayed with her all day. Magdaleen is the first one to share it with.

“Onthou net, boere soek nie ‘n vrou om vir hulle rond te shunt nie, boerdery is hul baby,” Magdaleen cautions her. She kisses Aimee on the cheek.

Aimee wants to argue with her but Magdaleen is already out on the stoep.

She pulls a wry face. Magdaleen’s fragrance reminds her of someone.

The bakkie turns into the big road and the lights are eerie in the dust. As she closes the door a second set of faint lights appear behind the first.

Spookligte, she thinks.

The food is dried out in the oven, a fancy type of pancake that she has made, especially for him. Aimee cuts through the rubbery dough, taking a bite but it is tasteless. Holding the dish above the bin, she calls the cat instead. Wary of her he keeps his distance. She drops onto her knee, offering a piece but it turns its head away.

“Is jy klaar geëet?” Isak stands at the door she forgot to lock.

“Nee, ek is net besig om dit weg to gooi.”

He tries to stop her as she forks the first lot into the bin. “Moenie dit doen nie.”

She swings the Pyrex dish, smacking him against the chest, so that he falters, losing his balance.

“Don’t touch me, don’t you dare touch me,” she spits out over him.

He gets up off the floor. For a moment Aimee hangs in the balance. She grabs the fork, holding it threateningly, her eyes wild and frightened. He walks past her, back into the night.

Blindly, he finds his way to the river. It is overgrown with reeds. He will kill her, so easily.

He thought of killing her before he could stop the thought.

The riverbed is dry. Violently he pushes and tramples the reeds to the ground, breaking their tough stems. Birds squeak as they fall out of nests.

Gliding silently towards him is the owl. He stops in anticipation, holding out his arm, calling its name but it passes by, engaged in the hunt.

Behind the hills there is a brightening and the aura intensifies as a slip of moon grows out of the earth. He can see the house of his parents blazing and his own house, dark but for the stoep light.

His hands bleed from snapping the reeds. The moon rises like a searchlight over the river. He keeps on walking until he cannot go further. A storm water pipe blocks his way.

Down at the bottom of the riverbed a car drives over the cattle grid. For a very long time he stands considering the Ceylon roses, then he unlaces his boots, pulling off his socks, retracing his tracks. Out of the river he takes the path, past the lucern fields. The front door is open and the cursed dish lies on the floor. The cat licks the last of the filling, eyes glinting. He shakes the sand off his feet, listening. Softly, he pads through the house in search of her.

The baby is fractious in the cot. Isak takes her little hand in his. With the other he strokes her back, tinier than the span of his fingers.

On the mat is a lifeless figure, curled up into a tiny ball, unrecognisable.

To see better he pushes the curtains back, and her hair is spread out over the knotted wood, her face buried in her arms. Ever so gently he traces her, along her cheek, the shell of ear, the curve of her back, his finger glides.

She doesn't respond but her breathing deepens under his touch and he knows she is sleeping.

He leaves her there, going out onto the back stoep, sitting under the vine, struggling with the raging war within him. He cannot live without her but he is afraid to live with her too and what she can do with his heart, her never-ending dissatisfaction with him, her pushing him open like a dam scraper.

Restless, he goes out by the gate, up to the stable on the hill where the horse waits, unriden for so many months. She whinnies at the sight of him. He leads her out into the early morning, frisky and excited, as he slips on the bridle. The horse knows its way, trotting, then cantering and finally a furious gallop, higher and higher to where the trees grow and the water seeps out of the ground.

*

Aimee awakens on the mat and it is still dark in the room. She lies there exhausted, listening for him but the house is empty but for her and the baby.

I won't give up, she thinks. He will have to stop trying to push her away because she has decided that she is not giving up on him.

She rolls on her back, studying the flames in the wooden beams. She wants him to believe. To believe in love and trust and happiness. He gnaws like a rat at her spirit, sometimes she beats him but mostly she doesn't.

It's exhausting to love someone, she decides. Hard work, every day, you have to keep at it. And he has learnt his ways of protection from the womb and that's a hard one to beat.

He has learnt it from his mother. Living in pain for so long that she has become blind to it, just coping and carrying on until numbness is normal. And she will die, never knowing what there is in the freedom of being loved.

Some people seemed to be doomed to a bottomless pit of destruction.

Aimee gets up and stands at the cot, watching the baby.

Everyone here on the farm is doomed. White and brown, brown and white, top deck, they are all the same.

She lives in a community cut up and thrown to the wind. Where drunken women lie next to the road, their dresses pulled above their navels, legs wide open, while children sit under bloubosse naked and crying. Then there are the other women that clip open crocodile leather bags, flipping lids off bottles with tablets, while their children cry too in decorated rooms where everything matches.

It is a place where fathers' rape daughters behind dam walls and where daughters stay quiet and bear the child, where mothers and daughters feed off the same seed.

It is a place where sweet-faced grandfathers touch little children and promise not to tell.

It is a place where men roam free, no matter if they are Baas or Klaas and where women, no matter the weight of their golden bracelets are caged birds with clipped wings be the cage gilt or tin.

It is a place where roles are cast in stone, where power and money and status are enmeshed in your birthright and you are nothing without it, land and lots of it.

It is a community who calls on God for rain while the earth calls out in despair, used and abused, force-fed and butchered, raped and left for dead. Yet this very community cries out for rain, while the poor in barrakse call out for mercy.

Everywhere are green orchards but the orchards are a desert. Hills covered in bush but a memory of grasslands, where the fine balance of life has been irrevocably broken.

It is a majestic place, she concedes, where one stands in awe at its length and breadth. It is a valley of mountains and streams but its people are blind to its beauty and the beast inside of them.

What amazes her is that those who have much, complain much, wanting more and those who have nothing, know nothing, don't know even how to think of something called more.

Aimee frowns, closing her eyes again. It is all so confusing to her, must she stay or must she go. She has made a choice and she hates going back on choices.

She lives here, because of him. She chooses to make it her home, this place of shame because of him. To choose to stay means to give a little, to be patient a little, to listen and love a little.

If she stays then that's the only way.

People are like fruit trees in the winter. Bare branches and fallen leaves, their fruit picked and gone.

But there are seasons filled with sun and water and earth.

She wraps her arms around herself, crooning and swaying as if she is holding the baby.

**

“Dit sal nie werk nie, vroumense is te afgunstig op mekaar... Try maar.” His father’s words from more than a year ago, still stick in her head.

The shop next door is busy. Men get their evening dop from Isak, while the women pack their flour and soutvis in fertiliser bags. Children giggle at her, chewing on toffees and chips.

She stands in the shed with its sink walls and leaking roof. There are no windows and it has an earthen floor, yet she is glad for it. She waits with Sophy on the hip, humming a Raatjie tune.

Women’s voices, loud and teasing, gather outside. They will not come in of their own accord, so she moves to the door and the sight of her kills all conversation.

“Kom binne,” she invites them in. “Kom,” she calls to the children as well. “Dié wat meer van ‘n crèche wil weet.”

The women move in a tight group, suspicious and sullen, their babies drinking from bottles and some from the breast as they collect at the door of the shed.

Her heart beats rapidly as she waits. A few shove and elbow their way to the back.

“Dit sal nie lank vat nie.” She smiles at the children, making big eyes for them.

A girl in the front pops bubblegum as she speaks, which distracts the women from listening to her. Outside is a second group of women who want nothing to do with this. Aimee is conscious of her long hair, the sounds coming out of her mouth, so foreign and alienating.

“Wil die Pappas nie kom nie?”

No one answers.

“Kyk Baas Ben innie stoor, Nooi.” A cheeky little girl helps her out, she has forgotten about the Friday night television in the tractor shed.

“In seisoentyd gaan ons die stoor as ‘n crèche gebruik.” She talks slower, “‘n crèche is ‘n plek waar jy jou kind veilig vir die dag kan los.” Expecting a show of gratitude of some sorts, Aimee pauses but there is none, just blank faces. They have not understood a word she has said.

“Die plaas gaan iemand aanstel om na die kinders te kyk.”

This elicits strong negative reaction. She shifts Sophy to the other hip, talking louder, sharing her trump card. “Die plaas betaal die persoon se dagloon, elke Ma moet haar eie kinders se kos en klere vir die dag saamstuur.”

There is no response. No indication of whether this is a good or a bad thing.

“Van die nuwe seisoen af sal die kinders glad nie in die boord toegelaat word nie.” Her voice fades as she sees the growing resentment, hearing the grumbling and whispering of women whom she cannot see. “Dit is nie veilig in die boord nie, kinders kry seer. Is daar enige vrae?”

An uncomfortable silence follows. Aimee recognises Sussie in the group.

“Sussie, wil jy iets vra?”

Sussie shrinks under the attention.

“Julle kan regtig vir my vra.”

One of the babies cries and she has lost them.

“Dankie, ons is klaar.”

Relieved, the women make for the door, already more animated, her presence a barrier to them. Who would have thought it to be so difficult. Tears prick her eyes.

She had hoped that they would be happy, so glad. Was this not for their own and their children's good? Couldn't they see she was doing it for them?

Dusk is at the door and she hears Isak saying good night. She waits for him to lock up the shop, then his measured stride to the shed where she stands alone with Sophy.

“Ek het geen kwaad aan hulle gedoen nie.” Tears roll down her cheeks. Isak passes her a hanky, then carries on swinging the squealing baby.

He is quite matter-of-fact about her failure. “Hulle sien 'n mooi wit vrou wat alles in die lewe het, vir nou kan hulle nie verby dit kyk nie en die crèche...” He laughs knowingly. “Dit klink te veel soos 'n marteling wat die witmense vir hulle uitgedink het, om hulle by te kom.”

“Hulle moet vir my as 'n mens sien.”

Isak puts Sophy on the soft soil where she takes shaky steps, falling over between them. “Sien jy mense soos jy of sien jy volk?”

Aimee walks behind Sophy ready to catch her, if she falls again. She sees hurting people everywhere. “Mense,” she answers.

“Sien hulle dan so.”

Aimee imagines Outa under the fig tree. How does Isak see him?

“Ons moet toesluit. Die oom wat die referendum reël kom na ons toe.”

Isak lifts Sophy onto his shoulders, while Aimee locks the shed.

A sunset like an Indian sari is swept over the sky, folding and falling behind the mountains. They walk along the pear orchard, old trees planted in wide rows, trees from another time.

“There's no trust.” Isak stops at one of the trees to inspect. “Not just with you, I see it with the men too. We've played as children, worked and lived together but

there is resentment and bitterness beneath the surface.” He breaks off a twig for Sophy to play with. “Without trust there really is no future.” The last months have brought despondency over him.

The toddler hits him gaily on the head as they walk further.

“Ons land gaan in sy moer in en ons kan niks maak nie,” he says.

Aimee stops in the middle of the path, picking a suring, sucking out its acidic juice. “I can’t live like this.”

Isak frowns at her.

“I can’t live in this community.” She picks another suring, sucking harder. “It will kill me, this constant guilt of being white, of being privileged, of always being grouped with the likes of him.”

“Wat dan? Blaas die dorp se stasie op, raak vryheidsvegters, gaan sit in die tronk?” His face is grim. What did it bring Rabinowitz?

“We can’t change the country but maybe, here on the farm we can do things, differently?”

“Soos?”

“Symbolic things that make a break with the past.”

“Kunstenaars werk met simboliek, nie boere nie.”

“Like the dop. We should stop it, make it clear it’s something of the past, that we don’t agree with it.”

“Half the men will walk out, if you do that, Aimee.”

“Maybe,” she concedes, unsure of herself.

Isak snaps off a dead branch. “You forget my father is in charge. While he owns the land he will do with it what pleases him, with the people too.” He spins the

branch into the reeds. “Party dae wonder ek of ons nie sommer Agentinië toe moet trek en die hele lot vergeet nie.”

“That’s running away. You have responsibilities.”

“Responsibilities?” Isak glares at her, “I have none, zero.”

“One day soon. Your parents and the farm, it is your future, you’ve always said it to me and the people like Oupa and Raatjie, they are almost family.”

“Ek voel niks vir hulle nie.”

“That’s a lie. Why did you pay to have Raatjie’s cataracts removed and for her new spectacles?”

“Dat sy kan beter sien waar om te werk, soos die stof bo op die yskas.”

“Asseblief.”

Sophy tugs at Isak’s hair. They carry on down the path, each with their own thoughts. Oom Willie, the National party’s secretary, waits for them under the vine. Their house is the voting station and the booth is the waskamer on the back stoep

Isak slows down. “Ek gaan vyftig wees en nog my Pa se handlanger wees...Ek wonder of daar ooit ‘n tyd sal wees waar ek die grond kan boer soos ek hom wil boer.” He thinks of rock veins exploding.

“Be patient.”

The windows of their house are tinged with orange but the mountains have already turned to grey.

“Maybe one day everyone can share the land.” Aimee flings her arms open.

“Wat ‘n belaglike gedagte.” Isak flares his nostrils seeing a boy with red on his shoulder, falling.

The oom on the stoep wears a rosette of royal blue.

Aimee looks at the sky above his head. It is the same sky for everyone.

*

Her cramped kitchen is taken over by tannies of the wyk, with basins full of sosaties and koeksisters. On her new lawn the men of the wyk have set up a lapa of reeds cut from the river, all to raise money for the new kitchen of the church. Most of them wear National Party rosettes saying, *stem ja*. The local branch has made too few for the demand.

The tannies set out the cups under embroidered nets, gossiping and rolling cutlery in paper serviettes, while the men nurse the fire, drinking to vang gees, for this historic occasion.

Aimee carries a tray to an oldish couple. Magdaleen's parents, primly greet her. Rosetted voters come in drips and drabs to make their cross on the ballot form, either a yes for the tricameral parliament or a no.

Oom Willie, tied and suited sweeps the tray from her, passing her his brandy on the rocks. He presents the tea with a flourish.

"Môre, môre, wat van 'n koppie tee, sommer op die huis?"

The old man replies but the Tannie ignores the friendly overture. Aimee sees how her mouth wrinkles with displeasure.

"Waaroor moet ek en die tante nou stem?" There is uncertainty with the Oom.

Aimee listens how oom Willie reduces her dilemma to a choice of opening or closing a door.

The old man turns to the tannie for support but she pours her tea out on the lawn.

“Vir die Kaffers,” the tannie sums up his speech, passing him the empty teacup.

“Ons moet ja stem?” The oom makes sure. “Nou ja, laat ons dan maar stem.”

The oom takes the tannie’s hand.

Aimee likes her with her crocheted jersey and stokies. Oom Willie leads them to the booth, giving the thumbs up sign to the men at the fire.

Sophy sits on the kitchen sill with her feet in the soapy water, watching Aimee wash the cups.

“Is sy al gedoop?” A tannie asks, vigorously drying glasses.

“Lankal, Tannie.”

“Jy’t sekerlik by jou eie mense in die Kaap laat doop,” she continues.

The chatting around the table stops. Their eyes are on the buttered rolls and fatty knives.

“Nee, Tannie, ons het op die dorp laat doop, dit was makliker.”

The tannie holds the glass up to the light, blowing on it then polishing some dull spot on the rim. “Snaaks dat ek dit nie kan onthou nie.”

The others slow down their buttering of the buns.

“Ons het in die Sendingkerk laat doop, Tannie.” Aimee reaches out for Sophy, catching her as the little girl throws herself into her arms. “Go and see where Raatjie is.”

All eyes watch the little girl crawl down the passage.

“Soos Tannie kan sien sy’t nie peperkorrels daarvan gekry nie.”

Sheepishly, the other women look away, buttering faster.

Her steps are controlled but she is shaking with anger. Through the bedroom window she can see Raatjie picking berries off bushes. Her kinneroppasser. She never

wanted one but here was Raatjie in her life, better at everything about motherhood. Better for Sophy to have her than not to have her.

But her taking offence is difficult to comprehend, whether it be their judgment or their subtle rejection of who she is. Ashamed, she confronts her own need for their approval. It has greater value than she will admit. Or it is the unfairness of it all, this straitjacketed path she must walk to be part of this community?

Raatjie slings Sophy onto her hip.

Dismayed, she recognises her own succumbing to the ways of this place.

“Waar’s juffrou Wonderwerk?” her father-in-law calls down the passage.

“Ek bring haar,” she calls back, opening the window. “Raatjie, die Grootbaas wil vir Sophy sien.”

“Baas, Baas,” the little girl calls from the veldt and she holds a handful of red berries.

Her father-in-law rests on his cane at the end of the passage.

“Die kind lyk kwaad?” He notices her strict expression. “Het van die Natte jou ontstel?”

“Van die tannies in die kombuis.”

“Vet, lelik en jaloers, moenie jou aan hulle steur nie, wees jy net soos jy is.”

It is the closest thing to a compliment she has received from him.

“Raatjie bring haar nou.”

“Het jy die kursus geniet?”

She forgets her agitation. “Ek was die enigste vrou tussen die vyftig mans.”

He laughs with her and this is a scarce thing in itself, his breathing laboured, a blueness around his lips. She thinks of the dam in the mountain. The two of them reflected in the water.

“Ek sal nooit weer met dieselfde oë na ‘n skaap kyk nie...Dankie.”

“Daar’s ‘n veiling volgende week in die Rûens. Sakkie sit vas en die snoei is agter. Wil jy nie saamry en jou nuwe kennis kom toets nie?”

“Ek sou graag.”

“Dan maak ons so.”

Sophy comes tottering along, calling, “Baas, Baas, Baas.” She holds out the red berries to the older man. He bends down, with effort, taking a berry between his fingers.

The little girl watches as he eats it. She passes him another one.

He pulls himself up. The little girl holds onto his leg as they inch their way back down the passage to the braaivleis fires.

Aimee takes a deep breath, entering the kitchen unnoticed. There is a new topic of discussion, the wonders of microwave ovens. She carries the tea outside, weak and milkless, just the way he likes it.

Sophy messes red all over his shirt. He listens unobtrusively, to the men’s political debates that flip and spin over their heads like a frisbee.

To say yes, would mean saying no to millions. To say no, would show dissent but what kind of dissent?

Magdaleen’s bakkie pulls up at the lapa, three sheepdogs on the back. Aimee waits for her to climb out. She wears gumboots and a man’s hat for the sun.

She greets the brandy drinkers as one, kissing Sophy on the hand, where she sits on her grandfather’s lap. She appears distracted, her eyes glancing briefly over the women in the kitchen. “Daar’s ‘n rooikat onder die trop en ek moet nog iemand kry wat voor vanaand ‘n yster kan stel. Waar stem ek?”

Aimee points obediently to the room on the back stoep.

It is not only Aimee that watches Magdaleen. Her father-in-law's eyes are on her too as she enters the booth.

She pours a second cup of tea, taking it out to the fire.

Magdaleen joins them, joking crudely with the men. Aimee holds out the cup to her.

“Hoe gaan dit met die boerdery, Lena?” Her father-in-law asks her as she drinks thirstily.

She wipes wisps of hair from her strong face. “Daar's 'n mannetjieskat in ons lande en ek sal voor vanaand 'n slagyster iewers in die hande moet kry.”

“As ek reg onthou, het ons 'n oue iewers, jy kan dit netnou kom haal.”

She smiles appreciatively. “Dis baie gaaf, Oom maar ek het nog nooit een self opgestel nie en Pa is te oud, of liewer te swak.”

“Ek bring dit later af. Ek is nie nou soos wyle Oom Jakkalsvanger nie maar tussen die twee van ons sal ons 'n plan kan maak.”

She smiles broadly. There is something familiar in her smile that is off-putting to Aimee. The way she smiled at Isak under the fringed lamp.

“Ek en die kind ry volgende week veiling toe, as jy nog 'n ooi soek kan jy saamry, daar's plek vir nog een.”

“Wat 'n fees, ek kom nooit uit nie...Dankie, dit sal lekker wees.”

All of a sudden Aimee feels terribly young and out of place, something has changed between them.

Magdaleen pecks her on the cheek. “Dankie vir die tee, ek stuur die geld saam met jou skoonpa.”

A spate of bakkies, stop at her gate. Farmers from other districts have heard of the lapa. She takes the sleeping child from her father-in-law. His shirt is smeared with red berries.

“Ons het nie kans gekry om oor jou kursus te praat nie,” he apologises.

“Daar’s baie tyd daarvoor.” She avoids his eyes.

“As ons volgende week veiling toe ry, dan kan jy vir my en Magdaleen daarvan vertel.”

Her enthusiasm to retell is diminishing. “Ek sal sien oor die veiling, miskien is die crèche al aan die gang.”

“Dis jou besluit.” With difficulty he gets up from the chair.

She feels angry and sad.

He nods a greeting to all before driving off and he is gone, without voting. As she takes the cups, she makes a mental note to tell him that she will go along, after all.

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Isak comes across the lawn from the orchards, saw in his hand and she likes the sight of him walking towards her. As he comes closer, she frowns a little, for just in case but his eyes are not clouded over and she relaxes a little.

“Hier gaan dit lekker.” He surveys the fire and farmers, hooting and back-slapping. “Hulle ruik ‘n wen in die wind.”

“I haven’t voted yet, I’m confused,” she explains her dilemma to him.

“Maybe a yes is then the best.”

“No, not a yes.” She shakes her head adamantly. “And not a no either.”

“It’s quite easy then.”

“What do you mean?”

“Spoil your vote, krap hom, skeur hom, trap op hom. Spoilt votes are counted separately.”

“I like that.” Her eyes gleam.

“That should give your message.” He almost smiles. “And you’re right.” He looks up over her head. “Waar’s die tannie met die hoepels deur haar ore?”

“In die waskamer.”

They join the queue on the stoep, sharing subversive looks,

“Whose first?” Isak nudges her forward.

“Brains before beauty.”

He takes his ballot paper from the tannie. The door is ajar and she can see him making his mark. It feels like an eternity that he is inside, the scratching of his pen so loud that she worriedly watches the tannie’s face. Eventually he comes out with a smirk on his face, the paper neatly folded in half and he poises the paper over the box before dropping it.

Aimee takes her paper, shielding it from any view off the stoep. There are two blocks marked yes and no. Such power lies in this small paper. A simple mark made by thousands of pens, shaping the country and the lives of millions, for better or for worse. For a moment the paper intimidates her. It feels wrong to spoil it. As though she is disrespectful of having such power. But it is this very power, which she wants to scorn, her right to vote.

With the black bic pen she draws a face of a child over the printed block.

Around the face she draws the rough outline of the African continent with the words below, *Cry, my beloved country*.

“Is jy klaar?” The tannie asks at the door.

She folds the paper, dropping it in the box her face shining. Isak pulls her closer, hugging her.

His father drives past. Aimee waves but he doesn't seem to notice her or the hive of activity. Isak sees the disappointment on her face.

“Ek stap oor.” He moves away from her to the bragging men and their predictions of victory, leaving her to herself.

She picks up the sleeping Sophy, closing the door of her bedroom. Aimee rests with the child in her arm, thinking. Later she hears the tannies in the kitchen packing up. Only then does she get up.

The evening is cold and dry. The sky's clearness is a sign of frost. Those warming themselves at the fire, keep their eyes on the coals and the drink in their glasses.

Isak stands on the edge, listening to their talk of politics, fruit and women.

The white Mercedes comes down the hill and it his mother coming to vote. Oom Willie opens the door for her. She climbs out regally, wearing fur.

“Slaap Sophy?” She asks joining him at the fire, her jewels burning in the light of the flames.

“Aimee sit haar innie bed.”

“Was jou Pa al hier?” She looks around. “Hy't gesê hy gaan nog vanaand kom stem.”

“Hy's al lankal verby, golfklub se kant toe.”

“Miskien stem hy nie eers nie, hy't geen belang by die politiek nie.”

“Ook nie die plaas nie, Mamma.”

“Hy wag totdat hy voel nou is die regte tyd vir oorgee.”

“Is daar iets soos die regte tyd, Mamma? Ek het nie meer tyd nie, ek kan nie langer wag totdat hy reg is darvoor nie.”

“Sakkie, jy kan mos nie verwag dat hy alles, one shot vir jou sal oorgee nie, dit sal ‘n ramp wees.”

“Dis anyway op pad om ‘n ramp te word, Mamma. Pa het nie ‘n clue wat in die boorde aangaan nie, wat die mense aanvang nie.”

“Dis jou erfenis, Sakkie, uiteindelik sal dit jou kant toe kom, wees net geduldig. All good things come to those who wait.”

“Partykeer is dit nodig om dinge aan te help. Ek weet nie of ek die geduld daarvoor het nie, die wag.”

“Die plaas is in jou bloed, ‘n mens loop nie sommer weg van iets wat joune is nie. ongeag die verdriet.”

Isak pours a glass of wine for her.

“Cheers, op die plaas en op jou.” She lifts the glass to her lips and they are the colour of ox blood.

“Mamma lyk mooi vanaand.”

“Iets het met my vandag gebeur wat my half onkant gevang het.” She takes a sip. “Ek het die pos in die yskas gesit en ek kan glad nie onthou dat ek so gemaak het nie.”

“Hoe lank gebruik Mamma die pille?”

“Hoe oud is jy? Amper dertig jaar.” She answers him.

“Gaan sien vir ‘n dokter dat hy Mamma ‘n slag goed ondersoek.”

Aimee comes out of the house carrying both cats. Oom Willie blocks her on the stoep. Isak and his mother can see it is a heated discussion.

“Sy verander jou, jy besef dit.”

“Dit gaan ‘n leeftyd vat om vir my te verander, Mamma.”

“Ek’s ernstig, Sakkie, sy maak dinge in jou wakker...Ek hoop dis alles goed.”

“Ek wil dit so hê, Mamma.”

“Solank jy net Baas van jou eie huishouding bly.”

“Glo Mamma regtig wat Mamma nou sê?”

A record is playing Bob Dylan. Aimee dances on the stoep with the cats. Oom Willie gives up on her, returning to the fire, shaking his head.

“Jy’s reg, kyk hoe lyk ek van Baasskap.”

“Wil Mamma vir die uitslae bly?”

She swallows the rest of the wine. “Ek gaan nie stem nie. My een stemmtjie tel ook maar niks nie. Stap saam motor toe.”

“Sal Mamma alright wees?”

She rests her hand on his arm. “Ek het al meer nagte alleen as saam met jou Pa geslaap.”

In the lights of the dashboard she looks like Ouma, her hands older than her face.

“Nag, Ma.”

“Nag, kind.” From the gate he can watch her drive all the way up the hill, the car’s lights shining through the leaves.

The voting booth closes at ten. Another hour or two of waiting must pass before the sealed box can be opened. Most of the revellers leave as the brandy bottles empty and the coals turn to ash. Later it is Oom Willie and the tannie with the earrings that remain.

Isak and Aimee sit on the stoep under the vine. Oom Willie is passed out on the couch while the tannie watches the umpteenth rerun of National Velvet.

“Is jy reg vir Karoo toe gaan?”

“Why?”

“Die skeersel moet geklas kom, wat anders?”

“What are you saying?”

“Jy’s deur.” He holds out his hand to shake hers, formally.

She claps, delighted.

The tannie is absorbed in her movie, the disturbance on the stoep of no consequence to her.

She savours the moment, his lack of enthusiasm a slight irritation to her. She wants to tell the older man, make up to him for her childishness.

“Daar kom weer ‘n kamp, oor ‘n maand.”

“Moet jy gaan?” Her eyes widen, the news tempering her excitement.

“Kannie anderste nie. Jou Ouma moet omtrent doodgaan voor hulle dit eers oorweeg.”

“Sê jy’s klaar met hulle.”

“Laat ek dit liever agter die rug kry.”

“Ek dink jy maak ‘n fout.” Her excitement is gone. Brief moments of happiness simply show her the depth of their struggle.

Oom Willie wakes up totally disorientated, clutching his head and swatting at the ribbons over his face as though they were flies. “Hoe laat is dit?”

“Nog net ‘n halfuur om te gaan,” the tannie replies without taking her eyes off the screen.”

“Te dinges met die halfuur.”

The tannie sighs, switching of the television as Oom Willie brings the box to the kitchen table.

“Maak koffie, kind. Sterk.” He orders Aimee.

Aimee gets up, disappointed with Isak. He can say no so easily to her but with others he is the obedient child.

The tannie cuts the taped lid, tipping the ballot papers onto the table. She makes three piles, throwing them back into the box, mixing them with her hands.

“Net een wat nee stem.” Oom Willie studies the shaky cross. “Net soos ek gedink het, tannie Hanta, die ou suurpruim, moeder van die Boeremag,” he grouses, tossing her ballot paper back into the box, “en twee bedorwe stemme.” For the first one he shakes his head in disgust but for the second he holds it up to see better. “Dis fraai, wie teken so mooi?” He reads the words slowly. “Cry my beloved country...Dit kan net ‘n rooinek wees.” He dismisses it, patting his rosette. “Van krag tot krag...Ek groet julle jong mense.”

Oom Willie and the tannie load the voting booth and the newly taped box, to be taken into the village, to ensure no tampering.

“Onthou van môre se werkery op die pyplyn.” Oom Willie’s bakkie pulls away, wheels spinning, as though time is of the essence.

“Reg so, Oom,” Isak shouts into the dust.

“Jou Pa het vergeet om te stem.”

“Miskien verkies hy om nie te stem nie, dis ook ‘n soort stem.”

“Ek stem nie weer nie, nie voor die hele land se mense kan stem nie.”

“Nie in jou leeftyd nie, Aimee.” He pulls her closer.

She resists but he pulls harder, kissing her in the neck. His lips on her skin break her anger.

“Wat het jy op jou papiertjie geskryf dat die Oom so voor vies was?”

“Fok julle Natte.”

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Aimee reaches in the dark but Isak has already left for the pipeline in the mountain, so she tucks her arms around the pillows, feeling his heat. Then she stretches out her feet to where his feet usually lie and it is warm there too.

This is her favourite time of the day, when she alone but not alone, when she can think and think about things, seesawing between dreams and consciousness. Sophy sleeps while she rocks herself in this delicious state of in-between.

The gravelly purr of a diesel's engine comes closer to the gate. It stops and she waits for him to unlock. The steps on the stoep are quicker and lighter, then an urgent knocking, someone else calling her name.

She sits up, wide-awake, wrapping a shawl around her, before going to the door and it is a woman calling her.

"Ek kom." Frowning she gropes her way down the passage trying to identify the voice. "Wie's daar?"

"Aimee maak oop, dis Magdaleen."

The kitchen's clock shows twenty minutes to five, Aimee switches on the stoep light.

Under the weak light, Magdaleen stands shivering with cold. Her face is pale and drawn and she is dressed or rather undressed, her feet bare, wearing a man's jacket that just covers what needs to be covered.

"Is daar fout?"

Magdaleen nods. "Is Sakkie nog hier?"

"Hy's klaar weg, berg toe."

“Dankie Here, jy moet vir my help. Iets verskrikliks het gebeur.”

“Waarvan praat jy? Wil jy nie inkom nie?”

“Hy’s dood, morsdood. Ek weet nie wat gebeur het nie maar toe ek hom kry is hy dood.”

“Wie is dood?” Aimee’s heart tightens. “Jou Pa, jou broer?”

“Johan, Johan is dood.”

“Johan?”

“Johan Bruwer, Aimee, watsé ander Johan ken jy?”

Aimee stares at her with disbelief. Her cheap hair and prematurely aged skin, the torn nails clinging to the jacket that smells of cloves. Was it the shaded light that made her so beautiful that first time?

“Ry net saam, asseblief, ek sal vir jou verder in die bakkie sê.”

Aimee panics. “Wat van Sophy, ek kan nie haar alleen los nie.”

“Aimee, hy lê dood voor my deur.” Magdaleen ignores the shock on her face.

“Ons moet gou maak, jy sal nou-nou weer by die huis wees.”

“Moet ek so gaan?”

“Daar’s nie tyd vir aantrek nie, kom.”

Aimee closes the door, apprehensively as Magdaleen reverses the bakkie, waiting impatiently for her to lock, then pulling away violently as she climbs in.

“Wat maak hy voor jou deur?”

“Hy’t gisteraand die slagyster kom stel.” Magdaleen drives fast.

“Dit was vroegaand, jy moes hom gegroet of iets?”

“Hy het nie gery nie.”

Both of them keep their eyes on the road. Magdaleen swings out for a crowd of Guinea fowl on the middle ridge.

“Wat jy dink is reg. Hy’t by my geslaap, wat maak dit nou saak?” She changes to a stronger gear as Aimee stares at her, trying to grasp this.

“Hy was te oud,” Aimee protests, “hy’t swaar asemgehaal...Kon hy nog...”

Magdaleen cuts her short. “Hy sit dood agter die bakkie se stuur, voor my deur en ek wil hom daar wegkry, voor iemand dit agterkom.”

“Hoekom bel jy nie die ambulans nie, kry ‘n dokter?”

“Hoe oud is jy?” Magdaleen snorts cynically, “dink net...”

They slow down at the crossing to her farm. She switches off the lights as they pass her parent’s house.

“Jy moet die bakkie ry tot by die steilte, dan dit daar los. Dit moet lyk asof hy ‘n hartaanval op pad huis toe gekry het.”

“Hoe kom ek by die huis?”

“Ek ry agter en tel jou op.”

“Ek het nog nooit ‘n dooie mens gesien nie.”

“Dis niks anderste as ‘n dooie dier nie.”

Aimee sits in tumult, looking at the bakkie in front of Magdaleen’s house and she can see a figure slumped over the wheel. “Nee.”

“Ek vra jou, asseblief.”

“Ek skuld jou niks nie. Vat my huis toe, nou, dadelik.” Her green eyes flash dangerously. “Nou!”

Magdaleen reverses, a white ring around her lips.

Aimee can hardly speak her throat is so constricted.

“Hy was oud en ek alleen.” Magdaleen pleads with her.

Aimee shuts her ears with her hands, blocking out Magdalen's voice. There is frost as far as her eye can see. It is too late to tell him about her Springbokkop, too late to ask him more about the woman with the violet eyes.

Would he still be wearing the shirt stained with red?

It is too late. Too late to tell that she loved him, if just a little, the old man with the silver hair.

**

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There is a voice on the line, singing a strident lullaby. The masked face of Danie appears from behind the screen. He moves the phone away from him. A name is cried out. It is not one of theirs. The voice dies in his hand.

The two brothers contemplate their mother, a stranger to both of them. Who really knew her?

The foreignness of her voice on the phone, wild and uncontrolled, disconcerts Isak. Torn between anger and pity, he struggles to love her, honouring his duty as son but his duty is no more than for another. Raatjie is his mother. With her there will always be comfort and safety.

If love is doing the right thing towards another, then he loves her.

In the beginning he thought marriage gave licence to possess, a once-off pact, put away until death do us part.

What foolishness.

And his mother? Did she stay because of the gun?

Pity wells up in him for her. Yet her very touch still burns like poison ivy, even now in illness.

How he loved her voice. A voice that slipped through keyholes into his ear. A voice that sang for him songs of gentleness. Her love caught in her voice.

He would sit at the closed door. Frightened of the dark, filled with crawling creeping things. Then he would sing in his head with her, the lullabies and the words had wings, flying down the passage into his mind, scaring the badness away.

Then the singing stopped. Then he knew it was dead, the love.

So he was drawn to Aimee, the antithesis of her, yet in no way was he prepared, for his father's ways were the only way he knew with a woman. You demeaned them and kept them where you could control them, or you flattered them to give you what you wanted.

And then there was Vossie's way. But that would come later, much later.

He could not rein her in like his father reined in his mother and he didn't know how else to manage her. She was unmanageable.

It only dawned on him later that he was not the antithesis of his father. It only dawned on him later that Aimee was not the antithesis of his mother, that the two of them were as fallible as any other man and woman. That relationships had nothing to do with control but all to do with wilful submission and this was not a place he would go to, ever. But never is a word one must not use lightly.

He had to learn what love is, a fragile orchid, to be burnt by the sun.

Perhaps there is another season with love, perhaps there is not.

His mother's life speaks of this as does his own.

Isak's thoughts are interrupted for supper. This time he is lifted up and seated on the chair. This time there is no upping of the morphine. Every bruise and ache in his body magnified by the withdrawing drugs. Unable to speak, he sips soup from Danie's hand.

Open the windows for fresh air, he wants to scream.

Danie shifts the trolley to the ward's door. "Hulle voorspel sneeu. Ek loop 'n draai buite, ek's nou weer by jou."

Falling back in the chair, he envies the ease with which Danie moves. He is totally drained by the effort to eat.

When did the end begin? The weather, a constant reminder that there are forces bigger than oneself at play. And one could blame the hail and the frost and the clouds that brought no rain but hail alone cannot seal your fate.

His father's faults were so clear to him, both as a man and a farmer. Isak could list them, classify them, prioritise them and he did just that, biding his time as he worked with the team, digging canals where no one saw him, shifting pipes in the dark while others slept. It was his father's way with him.

Then it happened, by default and not design. He got his way and it was perhaps no different to the way he dealt with his marriage, making the mistake of thinking it gave him *carte blanche*, *die reg om te maak en te breek soos hy lus kry*.

In this too, he was no different.

It disturbs him to realise that he is more of, rather than less, of him.

Others make you who you are.

It takes a lifetime to become who you want to be.

If it were so simple to blame his crisis on the weather, the banks, the markets, the currency, he would do it. But here, alone in a hospital ward in Holland he cannot fool himself any longer. Things don't work out for a myriad of reasons. Stripped from the frenetic pace of the last months he must firstly confront himself.

*

They stand at the grave with impassive faces. There are roses on the coffin. His mother stands between the two of them, in a red dress with a neckline of flowers.

Magdaleen steps forward, her knees buckling on the artificial grass as she throws a handful of petals, dark red ones, the colour of a dried out scab and his mother says nothing, does nothing, only the sinews in her neck tauten like the ropes that lower the coffin.

She grabs his wrist and her lips, as thin as the opening of a post box, hardly move. "Vat vir my huis toe, nou, dadelik."

And the three of them turn away from the sight of Magdaleen sobbing and the sounds of Raatjie's singing. It could have been Oupa's funeral, it could have been David's.

They drive in silence up the hill, under the camphor trees. Reaching out through the open window, he strips some of the leaves as they go past, rubbing them in the palm of his hand, wondering whether Danie knows and whether they will ever see him again.

He helps her out of the car. The old man in the cravat waits for them in the lounge while his mother pours herself a drink in the dark. None of them have cried, only Aimee, dressed in black. He dismisses her tears for she cries over life and she cries over death. But has she cried over the man, his father?

"Die plaas se dinge lyk nie te goed nie." The old man calmly holds a piece of paper, the balance sheet of their lives.

His mother pours another drink from the Johnny Walker bottle. She downs the clear liquid. With a flutter of her eyes she excuses herself, sweeping her hand along the passage wall to keep herself upright.

The room is hers. The room with the feathered stool.

She flings open the doors of the naphthylene smelling cupboard. The suits are wreathed in plastic bags and the leather belts are flaccid tongues, hanging in a row.

Defiantly, she pushes the suits aside, like one does with curtains when you let light into a room. The guns are strapped to the wall. She remembers his caress. How his hands floated over the long neck of the barrel.

Seductively, she reaches out, letting her fingers run over the silver, then she steps back unsteadily and the suits fall into place. She locks the cupboard. The key lies in her palm. At the window she looks out over the garden towards the mountain, then she throws it as far as she can into the scrub. Tired, she lies down on the bed in the red dress, staring at the ceiling and the flames in the wood.

She will go to her she decides. She will go and find out, once and for all.

In the lounge, Isak and Aimee sit on the opposite sides of the room, listening. Her face is one of sadness and loss.

The old man draws the curtains open to read. There is a halo of dust around him as he stands at the window, reading the final will and testament of his father.

It is a testimony of failures. A piece of paper that sums up his lot in stark figures. Is this all that is left of one?

Aimee sits up straight. Isak looks out to the mountain. All his fears for the farm have been confirmed by this man and the sheet in his hand.

The Del Toidia's branches block out the view.

“Jou Pa was moeg.” The old man takes off his spectacles. “Moeg vir boerdery maar ook moeg vir die lewe. As hy kon gekies het.” He shrugs.

“Dis 'n donker gat van skuld.” Isak gets up, crossing his arms with great agitation.

The old man refrains from answering.

“Is there anything like the perfect time?” Aimee breaks the uncomfortableness, turning to the old man.

“As ek jou kan raad gee, Isak, jou vrou is jou beste bate.”

Isak ignores them both, paging through Perron’s history; Oupa’s journey across the sea, the pre-war sales of fruit, the difficult years of coddling moth and drought. Holidays and new cars are also recorded. He sees how they climb into the Ford, his mother’s dress the colour of a summer sky and her gloves, stained on their return. Their lives encrypted in figures.

Aimee walks over to him, glancing down at the columns and tables that mean nothing to her. She presses his shoulder, then sits down again, this time with less eagerness, while the old man, used to such occasions, lights up his pipe.

Isak tosses the file onto the coffee table. It is a sobering exercise, overwhelming in its gravity. The responsibility that comes with it, catches him by surprise. From now on he is the one people will turn to.

“Dankie.” He dismisses the old man. His thoughts run. Where does one start?

The old man packs the files away. Pausing at the door, he gives his final remark. “Boerdery is besigheid.”

“Boerdery is bankkrotsky,” Isak retorts, without looking up.

They sit in silence. Both listen to the plaintive calling of the Hadedas as they fly over the house and the old man’s car as it drives down the avenue of trees with dust on the wheel hubs.

They sit with the red and black carpet between them and the damning sheet of paper still lying on the coffee table.

Aimee begins to cry quietly, her legs curled up underneath her, her face buried in her hands.

He is not moved by her tears. It would be better if she cried for the living than for the dead. Isak thinks bitterly of the empty inheritance that is his, like the puffed up

clouds overhead, just a handful of nothingness. There is no time to lose, no time to waste on mourning, there are banks and co ops and creditors waiting, respectfully for this day to pass but tomorrow will be different, he will have to persuade them, that this place is worth saving.

“Ek stap.”

She straightens her bowed neck. “Wil jy nie daaroor praat nie?”

“Nee,” he cuts her short. Frowning he takes the walking stick with its smooth head that stands at the door. For a moment he is not sure where to go.

“Ek sal jou help,” she offers, wiping the tears from her face.

He acknowledges this impatiently, looking up to the mountain and the blackened rock in the midday heat. Instead, he turns away, taking the shortcut through the orchard, down to the werf. It is as though every broken spitter head, every torn off branch, every carelessly dropped pear adds to his sense of failure.

The werf is empty. Everyone has gone home. He climbs the pack-shed steps. For a long while he surveys the scene, thinking of a man with silver-grey hair and a gun lying on green. He recalls the sadness of that handshake, his father gripping his hand, dividing them for always.

He takes his place behind the glass-topped desk covered in photos of people who have brought him to this place.

In thought he pulls open the top drawer. The cigar box is still there with moth eaten ribbons and dulled medals. There are none for his father. There never were and he never asked why. His own medals lie somewhere, forgotten, useless.

Jan Smuts hangs on the wall above Oupa’s leather couch and the office still smells of sulphur.

Swivelling the chair around he views the werf and the hills and the mountain, and the washed sky, afraid and unsure of how to get out of this quandary.

Everything is still the same and yet everything has changed.

She comes down the hill, running, her skirt caught between her legs and her hair is all mussed up. What does she know about farming he thinks with increasing despondency?

He is alone.

“Ek het gedink.” She interrupts him, falling down onto the couch, gesturing to the window. “Ons kan die mense se huise regmaak, soos die badkamers en krag,” her hands create frantic circles, “dat hulle kan sien dis ‘n nuwe begin en manier van boer.”

He stares at her.

She waits expectantly with an open face.

“Is dit al waaroor jy kan dink?” He speaks softly.

Aimee looks puzzled and hurt.

He catches his breath. “Verstaan jy niks wat nou net gesê is nie?”

“Van?” she asks and he can see how she pulls back against the leather.

“Daar is niks nie.” He shouts it out to her. He shouts it out to himself.

His own words make him feel nauseous. All the anger and disappointment of the afternoon comes straight into his throat.

“But you have the land,” Aimee fights back. “You have all of this!” She points out by the window.

“If you don’t have money you might as well have nothing!”

“You’ve got the chance,” she chips back, pressing her face right under his.

“It’s more than most people get in life.”

Her eyes are green with black slits like that of a cat.

Furious, he turns the chair, so that his back is towards her. Must she always have the last word?

Both of them fume. Isak can hardly keep himself from insulting her. Already she is trying to shape him. Yet he cannot do this on his own. He needs her, if only to listen, to confirm, to reassure. He turns back towards her but she is sulking at his attack, her bottom lip stubbornly protruded, defiantly avoiding his gaze.

“Aimee.”

She lifts her chin and studies Jan Smuts from the bottom.

“Aimee.”

She crosses her arms and legs, sighing loudly.

Her words sting him. Has she any conception of the enormity of the task on hand?

“Ja, ek luister.” Her curiosity gets the better of her.

“Ons kan praat oor die volk.”

“Mense,” she corrects him.

“Ons kan later oor die mense praat maar sonder die bank...Is dit nag.”

She rolls her eyes. “Die bank ken julle, vanaf jou Oupa se tyd.”

“Ja...” He concedes.

“If I were them I would give you the money you need.”

He raises his eyebrow.

“You love this place,” she searches for the right word, “passionately.”

He watches her sit down, resigned, for a moment, seeing the softness move over her face. Her eyes are all the while on him, then she gets up from the couch,

walking around the desk. He hugs his chest but she pushes his arms to the side, climbing onto his lap.

It's what he needs. He needs to be held.

*

Isak shifts back and forth in the chair, trying to find a position that will give him some relief from the increasing sensation of pain. Danie walks into the ward. It could have been his father, with the slightly stooped back, the polished crocodile leather shoes, the tweed jacket, loose over the shoulders.

“Hier's iets van die plaas af.” Danie tosses a piece of paper onto his lap.

He cannot focus on the words. There's a knot in his stomach. It tightens at the reaffirming of their belief in him. “Hulle verwag te veel van my.”

Danie's hands are like ice as he picks up the paper, reading it aloud.

“Hulle dink ek is Moses wat hulle uit die woestyn gaan lei...Maar ek kan nie.”

He flexes his feet, one by one, concentrating on breathing lightly, to avoid the pain in his chest, to avoid the pain in his head. Danie rereads the poem and Isak tries to cut out his brother's voice by counting the number of times he has moved his feet.

Danie hands Koba's poem back to him. It lies on his lap, a reminder of why he has come.

The night nurse takes him in a brutal grip, lifting him single handedly back onto the cot. He can sense there is less patience with him than earlier. He clenches his fists, as she arranges him under the sheet.

Danie switches off the lights and pulls the screen around the cot.

Who is Danie anyway, he wonders in the dark. “Ons praat net oor my,” he confesses, aware that he knows so little of this man.

“My storie is vir ‘n ander dag,” Danie replies neutrally.

Uncharted waters, Isak thinks. Both of them drowning in uncharted waters. When you are sinking, you need to find new ways out. You take risks. Some are good but most are bad.

• You try and be brave, with your back against the wall.

The poem of Koba is special to him, even if he will not admit it to Danie. There are victories on smaller stages that will last longer than the battles he took on broader fronts. Koba is one of them.

*

He sits up with an aching head, reflecting on the precious day’s events. The gilt handled coffin, the French roses in his mother’s hands, like those on her wedding day and Magdaleen, helped from the grave, his own cold heart towards the dead man and the red dress with flowers around the neckline.

She reaches out to him in her sleep, pulling him closer, murmuring sweetness. He lies back in her arms. It is her earthiness of skin and smell that draws him back, a temporary escape from old orchards and bank overdrafts.

Guinea fowl scuffling amongst the cypresses wake him. He stretches out, flexing his feet, feeling the strawberry mark on his neck. Then he follows the shutter’s lines of light and dark over her body, wondering where he will get hold of Danie to pay him what is his due.

There is only one way forward and that is to do more, faster. To replace the old trees, to build dams and cold rooms, to gear up in every way.

He considers her way, dismissing it quickly. So many things demand his attention, so many things demand money. And yet people must be considered in all of this. People must make this all happen. Perhaps there is merit in what she says after all, he concedes, looking down at her.

In the kitchen he counts the mugs, spooning coffee and sugar generously into each, stirring in the boiling water, wondering what he is to say. He carries the tray out to the shed where the men huddle in groups, with hats pulled low for the cold wind. He gestures but no one steps forward. Awkwardly he hands out the mugs. The men take off their hats, then disappear around the corner of the shed with their coffee and he can hear their animated banter.

On the other side of the river, the flock graze on the stony hills and the mountains are chiselled like the teeth of a wild cat and he struggles with the words in his head. Nervously, he climbs the steps of the pack shed, waiting for them.

They appear as a group, with the empty mugs, keeping their distance from him. Petrus is missing.

“Staan nader,” he calls them closer and they shuffle reluctantly towards him. “Vandag is ‘n nuwe begin vir ons almal.” His voice is strained. “Alles gaan verander. My manier is ‘n ander manier.” He senses their distrust. “Dié wat kans sien, kan môre kom. Dié wat nie kans sien nie, kan môre loop.”

Of the men mumble under their breath.

He dismisses them. Unsurely they look at him, then slowly walk back to the barrakse with shaking heads.

What will change and how it will change, he cannot say.

*

Isak is gone the whole day, dynamiting a field of rock. Now and then she hears the blasts and shouts in the air. The birds in the river rise up as a black stain against the blue sky, squawking in fright and the children at the barrakse begin to cry with every unexpected blast that echoes against the mountain.

She sits under the vine with its feathery catkins that drift over the stoep, sweeping the fine powder off the empty pad on her lap. There is a tightness around her mouth, a narrowing of her eyes as she tries to draw. She cannot draw faces anymore. Sophy crawls to the edge of the stoep. Aimee jumps up to fetch her. The little girl, bored with the things around her.

Aimee too has lost interest in the human quirks of nose and lips and eyes. Instead she copies the outline of the mountain with its open wound, marking the place, remembering the pipeline and the water storming over the dam wall, while the two of them sat at the water's edge with their reflections.

What would he have thought of the rock beds being blown to pieces?

The mountain's heavy, brutal shapes fascinate her as the afternoon light shifts. She presses the charcoal hard, smearing her hand over the sheet, giving the mountain mass and weight and form. And it is the largeness of her gestures and the strength of her hand that comforts her. She misses the older man. He had time for her.

Where do women fit into this place called farm, she wonders listening to the children's crying coming from the barrakse. She places a piece of charcoal in Sophy's small hand. The baby mimics her actions by making stripes on the cement, sucking the charcoal, smudging her face with the blackness.

The crying continues. With small steps they walk all the way to Oupa's house under the fig tree, where the old man is seated on a drum, swatting at small children with a tiny wip.

The children scatter at the sight of her. Sighing, she picks a ripe fig, carefully stripping it of its skin, then tearing its ruby pitted flesh in half for her and Sophy. The fruit is sweet and sticky on her tongue.

“Voorvye.” The old man watches her eat.

She drops the skins at her feet and picks another. Oupa's garden is the way she remembers it with sweet peas and roses, growing in rusted tins amongst weeds and herbs from the veldt.

“Waar's die Mamas?” she asks him, peering into the house. The photo of Oupa and Isak is on the kitchen dresser. From the ceiling hangs a yellow ribbon, impregnated with dead flies.

“Innie Karoo, Nooi.”

“Weet Kleinbaas van dié werkery?”

Oupa shrugs, picking up a shoe that needs repairing.

Another blast sends the children shrieking with fear into the house. From the barrakse she can see the rising column of dust from the blast. It is as though a madness has overcome him.

“Basie wil appelkoos plant,” Oupa informs her, watching the dust cloud. “Te veel klip en te min grond.”

Aimee nods. “Ek weet.” But she hardly knows anything.

She sits down on another drum under the tree, picking up a piece of tanned skin in thought. The old man sits in silence with the broken shoe gripped between his thighs, pushing the curved needle back and forth, back and forth into the gaping sole.

“Hier kom hulle, hier kom hulle,” the children shout excitedly.

Coming up the road are the women. Wearily they bend down to pick up some of the younger children, while the bigger ones are shooed off.

In front is a woman, tall and broad with a crocheted sun hat and grey veldskoene on her feet. She walks up to Oupa under the tree, greeting and picking a fig, while shouting at the children to go home.

From the shade, Aimee watches Koba’s mouth full of ripe fig. She hesitates then points to the children. “Is dié uitwerkery nodig?”

Deliberately, Koba picks another fig, spitting out the skin before answering. “Die sente van seisoenstyd hou nie, Nooi.”

“Julle kan met die skaapskeerdery kom help, ek sal met die Kleinbaas praat.”

Koba calls out to Sussie, snapping twigs for firewood.

“Die Nooi vra of ons anties volgende week met die skeer sal wil hand bysit?”

“Sal julle kom?” Aimee looks from Koba to Sussie.

“Dis manswerk.” Sussie speaks through a thick lip.

“Dis werk.” Aimee counters her, “en geld.”

Women come closer and they stand like a wall in front of her. Another blast catches them unawares. Some scream and swear, while others laugh.

Aimee tries again. “Gaan ons probeer?”

“Ons kennie die werk nie.” Sussie chips in, with a plump, child on her hip, that presses his head noisily under her shirt.

“Ek ook nie, dis my eerste keer.” Aimee dislikes the girl.

Sussie’s eyes are cold and hard, looking past Aimee to no-where, as she clutches and pumps her breast like a tomato sauce bottle.

“Daar’s nie fout nie.” Koba smiles, purple fig stuck to her teeth.

Aimee smiles back at her, then she throws Sophy onto her hip, aware that they are watching her walk home. The wind has picked up, carrying the red dust over the farm, like a desert storm. Behind it is the bloated sun, more orange than ever. She keeps her head down, hand covering the little girl's eyes. The cats wait at the broken gate for her and her drawings lie scattered over the stoep, covered in dust and catkins. But she doesn't care, she cannot wait to tell him what she has done.

*

The wind lies down like a tired dog. Mosquitoes from the river hang as an invisible gauze curtain under the vine where she sits waiting for him. It gets dark and the stars come out. The stoep light burns on the hill. His mother, poised and in control, sits with her lap dog and the remote, drinking gins and tonics in the lounge, while the television plays on and on until the test pattern comes upon the screen.

Aimee hears the bakkie over the cattle grid but she stays seated, almost nonchalant as though she doesn't care whether he comes home or not.

He is covered in dust and smelling of Guy Fawkes as he bends down to touch her cheeks with his lips.

He asks her how she is in passing, walking inside, switching on the lights and the television.

She doesn't answer. He doesn't ask again, stretching himself out in front of the news. Her heart pumps, faster, and her temples ache, all her eagerness to tell, dissipating into the night. Not even her practised coldness draws his attention.

Pretending to be busy in the kitchen, she is aware of him falling asleep. She slams the fridge door, switching off the lights.

He wakes up disorientated and grumpy, rubbing his eyes “Wat maak jy?” He sits up “Hoe laat is dit?”

But she carries on washing the same glass in the basin, over and over.

“Het jy al geëet?” he asks but she just shakes her head. “Het jy myne gehou?” he tries again.

She gestures to the oven with a dripping hand.

He kicks off his boots at the heel, then gets up and goes down the passage to the bathroom. Aimee carries the dried out food to the table and sits, smacking mosquitoes with her serviette. The geyser shudders in the roof as he opens the hot water of the shower and as he washes she wishes she had never come to this place, never met him, never had a child with him. How do you walk out when there is a child she wonders to herself? How do you walk out anyway? Do you just take your handbag and go?

She snatches the pretty pink candles out of their silver wedding present holders, throwing them out by the back door, where they fall and snap, shedding pink wax.

He stands in the passage watching, hair wet and the towel wrapped around his hips. She lowers her eyes not to be tempted to let this anger go.

“Is daar fout?” He frowns.

She shakes her head.

“Ek weet nie,” his eyes on her eyes, “ek vra maar net.”

Her back is very straight as she smashes the mosquito’s long delicate legs into the tablecloth.

“Is jy haastig om te eet?” He asks again.

Aimee turns deliberately towards him, her eyes running over his chest and shoulders and neck and mouth. “Nee, glad nie, hoekom sou ek?”

He nods and turns to the room.

If only he was ugly, she thinks. If only he was ugly, it would make hating him easier.

Isak joins her at the table and they hold hands to say grace. His hand is warm and inviting and she keeps her eyes open to look at him.

“Jy’s kwaad vir my,” he says quietly.

“Ja, ek is.”

“Waaroor?” he asks as she dishes up for him.

She pushes her plate to one side.

“Gaan jy nie eet nie?”

“Het nie lus nie.”

“Dan eet ek ook nie.” Upset, he pushes his plate away too and they stare at each other.

She can see how tired he is, his eyes deeply sunken in their sockets, the burn marks on his cheeks and neck. There is premature greying along his forehead and he sits slumped in the chair, arms resting on the table, trying to keep himself awake.

She shakes her head.

“Asseblief, sê net,” he asks heavily, wanting to get it over and done with.

“I might as well be a widow like your mother. Perhaps the two of us should live together.”

He sits up straighter, pushing the chair away from the table.

“If I was dead would you notice?”

“Jy weet mos hoe ek oor jou voel,” he reminds her in a flat voice.

“Whatever,” she dismisses it. “Your good intentions mean nothing to me.”

“Wat soek jy van my, wat wil jy nog hê?” he asks irritably, his voice climbing, tired of being criticised by her.

“I want you.”

Isak gets up from the table and walks out onto the stoep. He listens to the Lister pump running at the borehole on the ridge, thinking of his father who always seemed to know what to do.

There is nothing he can say to her.

*

He places the broken candles back in the silver holders, then he lights them. The yellow light falls on her, casting shadows around the room. He bends down as he passes, kissing her in the hollow of her neck. She reaches out to him, pulling his head down to hers.

*

The tractor shed is cleaned out and the fruit crates are lined up against the one wall for the wool clip.

Nervously, Aimee stands at the trestle tables, packing out the wool pieces in a neat row. The women are lined on the other side, wearing butcher’s aprons and dubious expressions. She glances over to Isak, speaking to the shearers. Strong men wrapped in blankets with trimmed beards and conical hats.

No one touches the wool.

“Dit stink.” Sussie grumbles and some of the others agree at the sight of dung caught in the wool.

“Ag dis niks nie, jy trek dit af en gooi dit een kant toe.” She yanks at the hardened dung, scratching the last pieces with her nails, then throwing it into the crate. Most of the women grimace at the sight of this. Aimee takes another piece, fleecing the wool vigorously, tossing the hardened dung pieces to one side and the cleaned wool to the other.

“Die olie in die wol is goed vir jou vel. By die einde van die week gaan ons die mooiste hande hê.” Without thinking she rubs her hands over her face to make the point, “en ons gesigte.” She looks down at her stained hands and filthy fingernails, pretending to admire them.

One of the younger girls laughs and picks up a piece, cautiously picking off the dung.

“Nou-ja,” Koba rolls up her sleeves, stepping closer to the table, “ek soek so ‘n mooi gesiggie soos die Nooi s’n.” She begins to pull and tear at the wool with gusto.

The others follow, reluctantly.

Aimee continues to fleece the wool, while watching the heated discussion through the open door. The shearers around the fire are masked in the heavy light of morning and the swirling smoke. Their tall regal backs are turned to her. She can sense disgruntledness in their gesticulations and in the way that their hats bob. Also from the silhouette of their bodies under the blankets, while Jackson translates what Isak is saying about them, the women.

She walks out, past the men sharpening their shears on wet stones. They drop their eyes when they see her.

Isak looks down at her with a closed expression. “Jou gesig is vuil.”

She lifts the point of the apron and wipes her face. Jackson comes back to Isak, a stocky man with powerful arms. Ignoring her, he sucks on his pipe and the rest of the shearers move in behind him, griping in Sotho.

“Die witvrou het haar Springbokkop, net soos ‘n man.” Isak explains again.

Jackson translates this to the men, then he points to the women at the tables “Hoekom net vroumense?”

“Vroumense kan net so goed stukkiesklas as mansmense.”

“Aikôna, Baas Isaac.” Jackson shakes his head.

“As hulle agter raak dan stop ek die werk, ek belowe.”

Jackson looks at Aimee for the first time. She likes his broad brow and clear gaze on her. She smiles at him.

Something changes in the corners of his eyes that only she can see.

*

The first sheep are brought in with great noise and excitement. The men with sharpened shears, tip the ewes onto their rumps and the women look on with admiration and gasps as the shears fly like their hands do over peaches and tissue paper. Then the sheep are slapped and let free as the first fleece lie on the floor.

A young man with copper bangles tinkling around his wrists, scoops it up, in one smooth motion, tossing it through the air towards her. It floats down, perfectly spread out like a tablecloth.

Another moves in but Aimee steps ahead, plucking and pulling at the fleece, working her way around the table, aware of his smoky breath on the back of her neck. The shearers heckle and cat call in delight at the young man's displeasure.

She points with certainty to a crate and together they lift and toss the fleece, yet as she turns, the next one floats over her head like a prayer shroud.

Isak is outside in the kraal with the men and she wishes he would look at her, see what she is doing but he is speaking over the radio attached to his hip.

At the tables the women work their way through the piles of wool pieces. There is no time for her to check as the fleeces come in.

Then there is a sudden break as the shorn sheep are let out of the kraal.

Sussie swears loudly, untying her apron, dropping it to the floor, walking out without a backward glance.

Aimee leans over the table, flexing her trembling hands, trying to get her breath back.

The young men saunter out to smoke and the shearers sit down on the earthen floor, sweeping the shears with deft movements over the wetted stones.

Aimee walks out after them. Isak is gone. Oupa sits on the wall of the pig's pen with a suring in his hatband, counting the incoming sheep. He cocks his head at her and she waves at him but her heart is aching with heaviness.

**

Across the barren hills, ewes call for their lambs as the rain pours down from the low-lying cloud. The clouds press down on her. Shivering she begins to run, this way and that, between the bush calling and shouting hoarsely like one does for a missing child.

Oupa struggles, his staff slipping in the muddy rivers that course down the side of the hill. And she doesn't know which way to turn. They lie, dead in the mud, their ungainly legs rigid under their soaked bodies.

She bends down, lifting the lamb's head, so small that it fits in the palm of her hand. It stares at her with marbled eyes. Gripping the hind legs she struggles on, the lamb hanging like a rag doll.

The veldt is littered with dead lambs. She gathers them in either hand. Their weight pulls her down as she wanders between the frantic flock.

Live lambs bleat pitifully from behind bush and rock. Reaching out to touch, Oupa calls out to her.

"Nee, nee," he repeats, waving his staff at her.

Distressed as the lamb, she watches how it stumbles towards her. "Ek kan nie," she pleads with him, standing her ground.

But Oupa waves his arms and the lamb turns away, bleating pathetically.

Together they gather some of the dead bodies, but most are left behind.

She closes her eyes, sickened by the sight.

"Te laat gedek, Nooi," Oupa explains, pointing with his staff to the North.

"Die eerste winterreëns is hier."

Skies clear as Isak views the hundreds and hundreds of drying trays stacked on each other. Sulphur hangs in the air, puffing out of a hole in the chamber, while the men unpack the trays, laying them in precise rows on the wet grass.

She is coming down the hill, gum-booted and sodden, carrying something in both hands. The seed earrings with the painted cats spin on their silver threads.

“Isak.” She starts jogging at the sight of him and he can see what she is carrying. “Kyk, Isak.” She lifts up her hands and her eyes are wild.

From each hand hangs a bunch of dead lambs, their legs too long for their ribbed bodies.

“Die arme ooie is deurmekaar van die reën en die lammers dwaal in die modder.” She drops the lambs to the ground. “Ek kon hulle nie almal dra nie.”

He moves them into a pile with the side of his boot. “Ek sal Oupa vra om te kom help.”

“Die arme goed lê orals rond, net waar jy kyk,” she continues, shaking from cold. “Oupa was al klaar daar. Hy sê jy’t te laat gedek,” she accuses him through chattering teeth. “Jy moes baie vroeër laat dek het.”

“Wil jy dit nog ‘n keer sê?”

She shakes her head.

He takes off his jacket. “Trek dit aan.”

Obediently, she takes his jacket.

They walk, with her lagging behind to the office where she collapses on the couch, covering her face with hands that smell of their dampness and death.

“Will the rest die?” she asks through closed hands.

“Nie sommer nie.” He looks out at the voluptuous clouds shifting away from the mountain. “Die son is uit. Voor vannaand sal hulle mekaar weer kry.”

Aimee lies completely still. Death is new to her, to see it here before you. She thinks of his father in the bakkie, slumped over the wheel, she more scared of seeing him dead, than angry with Magdaleen. Has he seen a dead man, she wonders? Has he seen a man lying at his feet like she has seen the lamb with all its life gone?

“Het jy al ‘n dooie mens gesien?” she asks.

He swivels the chair back to the window.

“Het jy al?” She sits up.

Isak thinks of David lying amongst polystyrene balls, the boy in the bush, the men tied to the wheels of the Casspirs.

“‘n Paar,” he answers with his back to her, dreading what she still might ask.

High winds tug and move the clouds into fantastic shapes and the sun flits in and out of the office as he waits for her to ask but she doesn’t.

“Dit moet baie soos ‘n lam wees,” she replies.

He doesn’t answer her. She has awakened images of men and boys running low, amongst elephant grass and burnt skin, off boys’ faces and legs and arms and empty chests, blown away by mortars.

“The flock must go.”

They sit opposite each other. He waits for her outburst but she just looks at him in a way he cannot fathom what is in her mind.

“I’ve sold the flock,” he repeats, “and Bloedriver too.”

Outside the forklift stacks crates under the veranda of the packing shed. There’s a screeching of tyres as the cage hits the side of the stoep. Isak glances out by the door then at his watch.

“Do what you must do.” She shrugs her shoulders. “Sometimes it’s better to let things go.”

*

At the door is a man with sharp features and an abrupt manner.

“Aimee, dis Koos, Raatjie se oudste seun. Hy doen die vurkhyseropleiding.”

Koos steps forward, noticing her reddened cheeks and watery eyes.

Lethargically she gets off the couch, holding out her hand and he shakes it formally in return.

She hardly notices him, her thoughts out on the hills.

The two men walk out towards the idling forklift, their heads bent over the engine.

How do you let something precious just go, she asks herself as she compares Isak’s physicality to Koos’ sinewiness.

It is as though the flock is deeper in her heart than his. The ewes have a special bearing and character, different to other flocks. She can see it in the way they lamb, their patience and forbearing bred over generations from being brought up on hills and open stubble lands. And Bloedrivier? Once the land is gone from you, it is gone.

Saddened, she sits down at the desk, running her fingers over the glass and the faded faces of those before them.

Does everything on a farm eventually become a means to an end?

*

“Stap saam,” he invites her.

Silently, she follows him along the path next to the river, past the flowering Ceylon roses and plumed fluitjiesriet, keeping a little distance between them.

Her eyes are on the clouds and his are on the plastic pipeline, laid down between the pear trees.

He stops at a tree, fixing broken spitter heads with a handful from his pocket.

“Miskien moet ek weer gaan kyk,” she suggests.

“Was al daar, hulle’s fine.” He carries on screwing heads along the pipe.

“Ek wou saam.”

Isak keeps on walking, back bent under the branches. “Dit onstel jou net.” His thoughts have moved on from the flock.

Offended, she walks on towards their house, kicking at stones, ripping at the reed’s feathers. Small birds jabber in their nests and up in the Eucalyptus grove is the owl. She calls to him but the owl ignores her, its eyes on the river. Aimee picks up a smooth stone, spinning it over the flooding waters. It hops and bounces before hitting the other side. She picks up another, hesitates, then throws into the trees but the owl simply turns its head away from her.

“Ek het gedink.” Isak is behind her.

She wips around guiltily, hoping he will say what she wants him to say.

“Ons moet die kans vat om self die droëvrugte te pak en te bemark, ongeag wat die wet sê.”

Disappointed, she picks up another stone. “Ek wil nie hier wees nie.”

Quizzically he looks at her.

“As hulle die skaap kom haal, wil ek nie by wees nie.”

He nods, taking the stone from her hand, spinning it upstream against the flowing brown water. The bigger stone hops and leaps, then sinks as the pull of the stream is too strong for it.

“Wanneer kom hulle haal?” she asks.

“Volgende week.” He touches her hand but she withdraws it. “Die vrouens kan vannou af in die droëstoor werk.”

She shrugs, burying her hands in to the pockets of his jacket.

He whistles to the owl. The big bird cocks its head, raises its wings and lifts off, flying low over the river.

“Dis ‘n kriminele oortreding, as hulle jou vang.”

“Waarvoor?” She sees the abandoned lambs on the hills.

“As jy self pak en verkoop.”

“Oh,” is her only response to this, her disappointment rising.

The owl disappears into the reeds.

“Het jy al ‘n man doodgemaak?” she asks calmly.

Isak keeps his eyes on the reeds. “Ja.”

“Net een of meer?”

“Meer,” he answers bluntly.

She nods, crossing her arms across her chest. “Ek het dit geweet.”

*

She walks out to the hills where the waters flow from deep lakes within the earth. Sophy hangs on her back and the cats trail behind her.

From far she sees the fenced trailer of the lorry, swinging in a swirl of dust. She walks faster and more determinedly towards the plateau.

The mountain comes closer, bigger, harsher, rougher in its chasm and cliffs than the mountain she knows from her house.

Panting from the little girl's weight she rests against the stocky trunk of a waboom. The cats lie down under the flowering head with their snaking tails.

The lorry pulls in next to the lucern fields. Petrus and the men are there, herding the flock into the pens. Oupa is there too. She can see him with his crooked staff and hat, counting sheep with a tin of beans.

Aimee bites on her lip. Is this to be her life, a series of frustrations and of unmet expectations? Is she the only one who struggles to let go? Has Oupa lived such a life, that the sale of the flock is just another loss?

Sophy climbs off her back, picking up tiny insects and leaves. The cats get up.

From here on the plateau everything down there in the werf looks small and insignificant.

Above the winds is an eagle pinned to the sun.

She follows the scene at the pens, removed from it all. Even the sight of the lambs cannot waken her.

It goes quickly. The trailer is full. The lorry hoots as it goes over the cattle grid, this time slower with less dust. Then they are gone. There is nothing in the pens and the hills are empty.

She looks down at her hands, the cuts and creases in her palms. Her lifeline slices her hands in two, boned like a cleaned fish.

She is spent.

If she could stay right here, away from all that lies below her.

She would stay forever.

*

The shed has whitened walls and washed floors. The wool classing tables are lined up on one side of the sink shed, with a row of serious faced women in butcher's aprons, painstakingly sifting through heaps of peaches with gloved hands.

Puzzled, she sits with the government documents on her lap, trying to make sense of all the jargon, lists and lists of technical specifications that hold no interest for her.

Cursing him in her mind, she measures the halved fruit with a ruler, aware of the women's eyes on her. While she consults the manual, they turn and twist the fruit around as one inspects a counterfeit note, waiting for her to decide.

Why couldn't they just have stuck to sheep, it would have been better for all, she moans inwardly. She walks out onto the werf but he is not there, then to the empty office, sitting down heavily on the swivel chair, scattering fruit across the glass. It all looks very much the same to her.

"Die opleiding se rekening." Koos stands at the door with an envelope.

Exasperated, she takes it from him but he doesn't leave, looking at the desk with interest.

"Ons weet nie hoe nie en niemand kan ons ook wys nie want dit is..." She stops, wary of telling him.

"Teen die wet?"

*

The curtains are drawn back to allow the moonlight in through the shutters. The lights are off when he comes in from the blasted lands. He carries a rifle with filigree work on the barrel, holding it lightly like a man who knows a gun and her heart quickens.

“Erfgoed,” he explains in the semi darkness, opening the cupboard.

“Gaan jy dit hou?”

“Miskien.” He sits on the edge of the bed, shoving off his boots. “Miskien nie.” He falls back onto the bed.

They lie together, awake, both of them aware of the other. With soft fingers she finds his hand and they lie like this for a long time.

“Gaan jy vir my sê?” she asks quietly.

“Ek moet nog besluit, dit kom van Oupa af.”

“Nie dit nie.”

“Wat wil jy weet.”

“Alles.”

“Moet dit vanaand?”

She frees her hand, stroking his face, down his neck, over the strawberry mark, brushing his chest with her fingertips to his navel. He pulls her closer, frightened of what she will think of him once she knows all of who he is.

“Ek het jou lief,” she whispers, surprised at her own words, pressing her lips into the shell of his ear.

Grateful, but not believing he drops his head onto her breast.

She lifts his face so that he can see her, glaring at him. “Jy maak my mal.” Then she drops back, angrily. “Drive me to despair.”

He feels her mouth moving under his touch.

Aimee sighs deeply. "But it's okay. It's still better with you than without."

He kisses her, gently, sadly, glad for her.

What does he tell of child soldiers, the Swapo boys and them?

He listens to her breathing, her heart beat under his cheek and it reminds him of a time he lay under a table in crisp washing, warmed by the sun, the most perfect place to be in the whole wide world.

Her breathing lengthens and as she sleeps he puts words to pictures in his head that he will share with her. Not now but soon. It must be done so that he can let go of this thing, which grips him, weighs him down, day after day.

There are things he has done which can never be undone. All he can do is to try and make up for it in some small way. And yet he blunders through it all, he can see from the pained expression on her face. It is as though he doesn't know how.

And it was hard for him to let the sheep go, not only for her but for the memories of Bloedrivier with Outa and Danie on the back of the Holden bakkie. It is as though Danie fades from his life, piece by piece. There is less and less to remind him of his brother. Brothers separated by more than oceans and continents.

He gets up, without disturbing her, opening the cupboard where the rifle stands. Sophy sleeps in the room next door and he pauses at her big bed, ashamed that she is so little in his thoughts. She is curled up like a songololo, sucking her thumb.

What he does, he does for them. He consoles himself with his thought.

Out on the stoep, leaves of red drift to the ground. He cuts through the orchard to the river that is still in flood, parting the reeds open to the muddy bank. The silver work on the rifle, sparkles and dances in the moonlight.

Without another thought he tosses it into the river, watching it sink in the strong pull of the stream.

**

University of Cape Town

The Parade grounds are deserted. Chip packets cling to fencing and the stalls are empty like on a Sunday afternoon after the drunks have gone home.

Seagulls circle and scavenge the rubbish bins and she tastes salt in the air.

They walk abreast, alone on the pavement, she clutching the fruit samples to her chest, passing shops with closed doors where anxious staff hide, behind rails of clothing.

The flag of the Republic hangs limp from the pole over the city hall. Isak is uneasy, not knowing where all the people have gone.

There are no cars at the robot intersection. No hawkers with fruit.

He hurries her on.

The noon gun goes off.

Seagulls flutter off the bins then settle again.

Isak hears it first, the drumming of thousands of feet. He checks the road behind them but there is nothing. Ahead, running towards them are hundreds and hundreds of people, perhaps thousands, all running in their direction.

He grabs Aimee, pressing her against the stone blocks of the city hall. The crowd storms passed them, heads down, silent but for their feet on the tar, a stampede of young and old towards the station.

Behind them in the street is a screen of smoke. In the smoke are Casspirs with masked soldiers, spraying the air with gas.

Shocked, Isak looks over the heads to the Casspirs. It feels bizarre seeing them amongst concrete and shops and crowds. It could have been the start to a marathon if it weren't for them. He shouts out but he has no voice.

The samples fall from her hands. Packets split open and fruit lies strewn over the pavement. She drops to her knees, crawling amongst the oncoming legs snatching at the fruit from under their feet. Old men and women side step around her but the young leapfrog over her back.

The Casspirs roll forward. Soldiers casually eject tear gas over their heads and he knows that they are mere boys.

The anger of Koos, the anger of the girl with the goat, some of the anger of these people running by, ordinary people just as they are with nothing, not even a stone in their hands becomes his anger.

It is a revelation.

Above the smoke, Table Mountain rises up. The smoke is so thick that you can't see the cable car, even though it is a clear autumn day.

Everyone is coughing, covering their mouths against the noxious gas. The two of them as well. He hammers on a shop door but the lot inside are frightened, withdrawing from the window at the sight of him. He looks them in the eye, yet they turn away, telling him to go.

The Casspirs pass. Together they grope their way through the thick smoke up the road to where the samples fell. Aimee picks up the flattened pieces.

She lifts her middle finger. "Varke!" Shouting at the boys in the Casspirs.

One of them turns to look. His face is pig-like from the mask. He aims at them. Gas puffs towards her.

He considers following them, pulling the cowards out and onto the road, beating their baby faces into the tar. Horrified with himself he turns his back on the scene. Violence comes too easily. It is a hard thing to break.

His eyes stream with tears, so do hers.

The stampede is over as quickly as it began. He takes her around the waist, leading her away from the road and the boys and the mess.

He doesn't know tear gas. It's not a combat thing. This is the first time he has had to deal with it.

"Ek haat hulle, ek haat hulle!" She shouts out with frustration, carrying the left over fruit like a baby.

Will he ever be able to tell her of himself, he wonders as they enter the peaceful atrium of the supermarket's offices with its fountains and delicious monsters growing to the roof.

*

They sit in a low-ceilinged conference room without windows. His hands tremble slightly on his lap, deeply perturbed at his own wrought state of mind.

Smoke grenades he knows. Green smoke brings in the choppers, red smoke means danger. Grenades thrown into bunkers. Grenades blowing up bunkers, that he knows.

She sits next to him, scratching grit out of the fruit with her nail and she is talking again and again of the boys and the gas and the people running by but he cannot concentrate on any of it. It is as though a mirror has been held up to him in the street.

Aimee stops abruptly, her eyes trying to plumb his thoughts, but he blocks her out, blocks out the room, blocks out the reason why he is there.

It appears all so meaningless to him.

A young woman holds out her hand to greet. He misses her name as she tears open packets, spreading the fruit before them on the table and he sees how Aimee falls to her knees, disappearing under the crowd's feet and his own helplessness in it all.

"We source all our products from the current agent of the Board." She turns her attention to Aimee, who packs out the few salvaged fruit, her voice extra upbeat in an attempt to soften Isak's aloofness.

The young woman holds a peach to the light turning and twisting it as though it's a counterfeit note. With picky fingers she compares the fruit from the packets with the fruit of Perron. He is on the point of leaving the room, walking out into the street. Walking away from it all.

The fighting never stops.

The fighting is in the streets, and the fighting is in boardrooms. The fighting is with guns and the fighting is with fruit, with each other and with yourself, you can't get away from it.

The young woman excuses herself, taking some of the damaged fruit.

Vexed, Aimee snaps her fingers in front of his face, her eyes sparking and there is a line between her eyebrows and her mouth is thin like the slit of a post box. Despite his confusion, he enjoys this sight of her, all hot and bothered, the swollen veins running down her neck into the dimple of her collar bones.

"Ag, los dit." She waves her hands dramatically at his seeming detachment.

Briefly, his mood lightens at her vigorousness.

The young woman returns with a man, suave and smoothly shaven and his voice is as polished as his perfect dentures. The man greets Isak in passing but he has

been briefed in the passage and so his attention is with Aimee. Jovial and interested, he leans forward over the table towards her.

A man too old to understand the street.

Galled, Isak takes a bite of the packeted fruit, pulls a face and spits it out into his hand. The man and woman watch him.

“Can we get some of this?” The man asks.

Isak nods. “Ons kan ‘n plan maak.”

“We have in stock,” Aimee confirms quickly.

The man gives her a smile, drumming his knuckles, thinking aloud and the drumming and the talking increases Isak’s bad mood.

“What are the legal implications for us?” The man asks the woman, keeping his gaze on Aimee.

“Both parties will be charged with the contravention of the Marketing Act,” she shrugs, sympathetically, “but in practice, Doug, who knows what they will do, it’s not a common occurrence, the contravention that is.”

“Packing facilities, volume, twelve month availability, delivery to our depot?” The man throws the question to Isak.

“Sê net, dan maak ons so.” Isak bites back.

“You’re not afraid to take on the Board?”

“Nee.” He tosses the word at the other.

Doug weighs him up before answering.

“Well, neither am I.”

*

They watch the red arrow and the descending numbers. In the lift, people discuss the march and the tear gas, while the two of them listen.

In the foyer, they walk through a commotion as the tear gas has infiltrated the building's air conditioning. She wants to dance with excitement in the very street she has cried but his sombreness descends over her. They walk, one behind the other, down the pavement to the bakkie, the only vehicle parked at the Parade.

He knows he has this effect on her but he can't stop himself from doing it, turning cold towards her. Another's eyes on her does this to him.

They sit on the seat with the gearbox between them. Seagulls have messed on the windscreen. Someone has snapped off the wipers.

"Dis ek daai," he says without turning to her.

"Dit was jy," she corrects him.

But she doesn't understand what he is saying.

*

Women smoke behind the toilets. They wear uniforms with *Perron* embroidered on the pocket.

It is cold in the office. Above the couch are photos of children at the crèche and women on top of Table Mountain.

Both hear the car coming over the cattle grid. Relieved, she goes to the door but he carries on adding up the figures, hearing her enthusiastic greeting. He can't quite place it but it is as though she takes greater delight in others, keen to escape the gloom, which comes with him.

Did he and Raatjie not foxtrot in the lounge to Jim Reeves records while his parents danced on Robben Island? Did he not laugh in the Eucalyptus grove with Petrus and Danie? Or was he always so? He thinks of a word to describe himself; so glum?

Without rushing he takes his time out onto the stoep.

The women have taken their places behind the tables, grading and packing but their attention is with her and the man at the car as she embraces Doug. Composed, he joins them. Doug slaps him on the back while Aimee pulls him towards the shed, her animation switched on.

“Can you keep up?” Doug jokes over his shoulder.

“She does the sprints and I do the marathon,” Isak replies with barely contained sarcasm, following them inside.

The shed smells of disinfectant and fruit. Isak watches the expressions of the women as Aimee introduces Koba to Doug.

The light shines on her. Inevitably his own and others contributions are sidelined by her articulate energy. Is she aware of this or is it something that happens in her, around her without much thought?

Dried fruit is more than one sees, he thinks, picking up a perfectly halved pear. It has to be cut and sulphured, packed and unpacked, opened and closed as they sun and rain plays games, night and day, for weeks and weeks, before it can lie here on tables with her prettily explaining it all.

Yet it is this lightness of her that he is attracted to, this very thing that overshadows his own heaviness of being.

She swings her legs under the table. He is aware of Doug looking.

Suddenly there is a new tenseness in Doug's speech. "We've been formally requested to remove your product from our shelves, if not legal action will be taken against us as a supermarket group."

Aimee stops swinging.

"Your product is eating into a high value part of the Board's market. I think they are afraid this might create a precedent for other farmers like yourselves."

The women sing hallelujah liedjies.

"They underestimated you," Doug concedes beneath the singing. "What you are busy with has far reaching implications for the national agricultural scheme."

Isak weighs up their slender chances. So much to fight against, it is as though you cannot hide from it, the fight. "Wat gaan julle maak?" he asks tersely.

Doug's face is grim. "We'll take your side. I just think you need to know that you guys are next in line."

Aimee turns to Isak, frightened. "What do we do?"

He ignores her, turning to Doug.

She drops her eyes, crossing her arms and feet, listening to the men debate.

*

Doug greets them at the car, regretful that he has brought them the news.

Aimee shakes his hand and so does Isak.

The dry yard's lawns have been mowed and swept. The crèche children have learnt a new song. Raatjie has baked for the tea they would have under the vine, all for Doug's visit. Disappointed, she goes into the office, lying down on the couch with her feet up, closing her eyes. Is this just another thing they must let go of, she and the

women? They seem to move from one crisis to the next. Is it something they bring upon themselves or is this the way it is on a farm, a constant struggle.

She begins to understand the old man's tiredness, his escape into the arms of another woman.

"Ek stap 'n draai," he tells her, taking the walking stick behind the door. "Wil jy saam?"

"No," she snaps back, upset. She can never follow her heart with him, always doing the opposite of what she wants to do. And she is angry with him. Not for making this mess happen but for the way he put her down, in front of Doug. With Doug she feels valued, with Isak it is never enough.

He walks up the hill under the camphor trees, pausing to listen to the women singing in the shed.

The singing stills his fear. He hums the tune under his breath, thinking of what is to come. What horrors had he seen? Can a man ever be the same after war? Can he ever live without fear? Can he ever live without guilt?

His father running up and down the hills, the paljas in his heart.

They sing songs from a darkened room. He sings along in his head. It clears his thoughts.

It is not only for himself that he wants to save Perron.

*

A police van pulls into the werf. Sergeant Kloppers, with a broad back and thick neck, climbs out, stretching, in the winter sun. He lights a cigarette, looking curiously around him. It is a long time since he has been here.

“Soek jy iemand?” Isak climbs off his bicycle.

“Bruwer.” The sergeant grips Isak’s hand firmly. “Kan ons binne praat?”

Isak parks his bicycle under the office window, knowing what is to come.

In the office his mother sits regally on the couch, black stockinged and permed, combing the hair of the little dog. The lap dog barks at the sergeant while his mother’s jewelled hands run over it.

Isak introduces the sergeant. “Sersant, my ma, Sara Bruwer.”

“Mevrou.” Courteously, the sergeant removes his cap, while his mother keeps on combing. “U sal my nie onthou nie maar ek was betrokke by u man se doodsondersoek.”

Idly, she lets her eyes run up and down the sergeant, her grey hair swept back, and knotted in her neck. Without a word she rises, carrying the dog like a handbag, the jersey’s label caught in her cleavage.

Isak gestures for him to take a seat. For quite some time they sit, the sergeant on the edge of the couch, twisting his neck to look at the photos under the glass. Isak is easy with the silence.

Eventually, the big man asks. “Hoe lyk die vrugte?”

“Goed.”

“Dis mooi.” The sergeant cracks his knuckles. “En die pryse?”

“Dis te gou om te sê.”

The sergeant acknowledges this, shifting his weight for side to side. “Jou Pa was ’n netjiese boer, jou Oupa ook.”

Isak nods, while the other turns the cap with the polished insignia in his hands.

Sighing, the sergeant continues in a monotonous tone. “Ek kom al ’n lang pad met jou Pa en Oupa. Tot nou toe was daar nie moeilikheid tussen ons nie.”

Isak leans back in the swivel chair, noticing that Smuts is off the wall behind the sergeant's head. "Ek's bly," he answers, wondering what has happened to Smuts.

The sergeant unfolds a sheet of paper. Interested Isak tries to read the document from upside down.

"Dis in verband met die wet..." The sergeant stumbles over his words.

"Wet nommer 59 van die Nasionale Bemarkingswet van Suid-Afrika."

"Dan weet jy." Relieved, the other hands over the paper to Isak.

Isak scans the summons. It has been addressed to him in person, addressed from the High Court of Cape Town. His amusement at the other's bumbling ways is replaced with concern.

The fight is no longer just an idea.

"Wat nou?" he asks, stalling for time.

"Jy moet saam."

"Wie's nou staatsaanklaer?"

The sergeant struggles to recall the man's name. "'n Swarte, met die naam van Mopane."

So this is how it happens, Isak thinks. The way it must have been with Rabinowitz. You're busy minding your own business and then it happens, without fanfare or a cavalcade of cars, just a middle-aged policemen doing his job, whether it be right or wrong is not his concern. And there are no bullets shot, or fanciful escapes. You get the paper, you get into the van, you get locked up and then... Will this man handcuff him like Rabinowitz, can it be?

"Ek gaan nie vir jou force nie," the other answers his thoughts.

"Ek teken niks voordat ek nie met Mopane gepraat het nie."

“Dan maak ons so.” The sergeant wants no fight with him, them belonging to the same church and everything. He puts on his cap. “Ek ry agter jou aan.”

Isak walks out. The women of the pack shed stand with the men.

He gets into his bakkie and the sergeant drives behind him, past the crèche where the children run along the fence waving at him, over the cattle grid and past his house, with the cats sunning under the vine stripped of its autumn leaves.

How will she deal with it, now that it has come?

*

The magistrate’s offices are closed but he makes his way down the passages until he gets Mopane written on the door. He knocks.

“Come in.”

“Mr Mopane?”

“Correct. And you are?”

“Bruwer from Perron, regarding the dried fruit case.”

“Sit.” The other points to a chair. “Speak, I’m listening.”

His bravado is gone. For a moment he is lost in where to begin. He wants to speak of his oupa and father’s battles with the red and blue brand. He wants to tell of his own disillusionment with the state. Discovering the price paid for obedience, for fighting a war to uphold the Nationalists in power. He wants to tell Mr Mopane that he distrusts everything and everyone associated with power in the country. He wants to tell that in some way he wants to recompense for the foolishness of youth.

All he can say is, “I will fight them.”

**

Miserable, he lies on the cot, his first night without morphine.

The night staff takes temperatures and blood pressure readings. Propped up, they undo the bandage around his head, the cloth, crusted with blood. The night nurse drops it in the bin and it looks like the shed skin of a snake. Roughly she dabs the open wound with disinfectant and they do not close his head up again. While his chart is filled, he lifts his hand for the first time, exploring the hole. He has lost a piece of his scalp. Hair will not grow there again.

Tomorrow he flies home and he is increasingly worried that he will not have the strength for it.

She will have to nurse him as she nurses his mother.

Aimee can immerse herself in another's world but it is also her biggest weakness, the expectation that he will behave in this fashion towards her.

She loves him with abundance. He loves her as best as he can.

*

Fluted reeds hang as wind chimes under the vine, piping melancholy notes into the breeze.

The front door opens onto walls of brown, terracotta, the colour of the dynamited lands in which the apricot trees grow. She stands on a drum with a brush and the little one has a smaller brush, painting brown stripes onto sheets of newspaper spread out on the wooden floor.

The sun shines into the room. Through her dress, he can see the outline of her legs and hips.

He hates the colour brown, brown like the clay walls of kraals.

She jumps off the drum, scooping Sophy onto the hip, her eyes anxiously searching his face. "Jou Ma sê jy's weg in 'n van."

"Dis glad nie so erg nie." Irritated, he takes the little girl, swinging her above his head. She appears bigger and older than the morning. "Net 'n dagvaardiging," he explains the visit, looking at the walls.

She leads the way out into the garden. "Ek's jammer," she apologises, "toe ek terugkom was jy al weg."

The winter rays slide along her arms to the tips of her fingers, as she washes her hands under the outside tap yet the brown walls stand between them. He feels an outsider to this place. Home is where she and the child live.

"Met jou Ma is 'n mens is nie altyd meer seker wat om te glo nie." She comes to stand in front of him.

"Ag, it's just a summons to appear in court, that's all." He plays down the seriousness of it.

Rabinowitz would have gone straight to the cells. Koos too.

She claps her hands over her mouth, sitting down on the edge of the stoep, with bare feet, her legs apart. "Vertel," she impels him.

He finds explaining tiresome. He has spoken more today than in a long time, saying things he has only thought of in the past. "Die plaas se geskiedenis... My eie."

"Wat nog?" She wants details, every word spoken.

"Die hele aanloop tot dié affêre en," he sits down next to her, "van jou en die vrouens en al die veranderings wat aan die gang is hier."

Pleased, she hugs her legs. “Wat nog?”

She picks at the afternoon like a carcass until the bones are clean. But there is good in telling, in saying things aloud.

He is glad that this thing has happened. It is bit like coming out of the closet for him, making a clear stand on who he is and what he believes in. Keeping quiet is the same as standing for a cause. The army has taught him that.

She slips her arm around his waist and it feels good to have her so close. He slips his hand between her thighs, forgetting the walls for now.

“What did Mr Mopane say, what did he decide?”

Isak sees the man in the office “It’s scrapped, off the roll.”

She considers this, not sure exactly what it means but she knows it is a victory, if be it a small one. “Good.” She likes this man that can see past the farmer, the language, the system.

“It’s only the beginning.” He notices her relax. “It will only delay the process, they’re not finished with us yet.”

She grants him this, but to her it shows there is sympathy even if from unexpected quarters. The shift of power has begun and she is glad for it. At least it is something to hold onto in all the uncertainty.

He throws Sophy onto his shoulders and they amble along the lucern fields and sheep pens, towards the river, hand in hand, leaving the day’s events behind them on the stoep. She kisses him. There is a different smell to him, sharper, more acidic, like an animal.

*

Aimee pulls at the twig caught in the car's wiper. It is a mantis, not a twig turned as dark as it can to match the rubber. It stays in her hand, frozen in prayer as she carries it to the Gardenia bush covered in fragrant flowers.

Sophy strokes the stick-like insect with its bulging eyes before she places it on a leaf. Satisfied, she watches how it claws to the satiny finish. The little girl claps her hands in delight. Cautiously, the mantis revolves its eyes.

There is a noise, a flutter and the sound of wind.

Before she can stop it the bird snatches the mantis in its beak, flying over their heads.

Sophy screams. The bird drops the insect. It falls though the air, its belly bursting open, releasing hundreds and hundreds of small eggs onto the gravel.

Aimee kneels on the stones. The bird waits in the bush.

With care she carries the tiny thing, lifting it up to the leaf. Fast as a flash the bird is on her, grabbing it out of her upheld hands.

The mantis is gone. Gone into the throat of the bird. The brown bird with its golden breast, hops cheekily from branch to branch and the red flowers fall to the ground.

Isak watches her comforting Sophy under the tree where the owl hung in the cage. The mountain behind them is the colour of its wings. He thinks of the day that rock and feather became one.

“Wat's dit?” She points to his hands.

“Die balju was hier. Dis die saak teen my.”

Mortified, she stares at the pack of papers, thicker than a bible. But she doesn't move. The eggs of the mantis lie at her feet.

*

Isak longs for the morning. He cannot sleep. He cannot speak. The cot next to his is empty. Was there ever one beside him? Why did he ask him to come?

He tries to regulate his breathing with the snoring in the ward but the deathly silences that follow each crescendo adds to his own anxiety as he mulls over the past.

"Hulle kan nie kop toe vat daai ding dat 'n witman teen sy eie nasie staan nie." Koba watches him closely from under the sun hat, her feet planted widely at the open door.

He nods, the document with its accusations before him.

"Sê as ons moet help."

When she is gone, he opens the newspaper to the small article. The months of struggle spent with lawyers, in and out of advocates' rooms on the top of high buildings, threats in the night are all captured in one succinct line. The case continues.

The uncertainty of the outcome taunts him as he walks out to the shed where the Gold Wing still stands. Turning the ignition on and off, he rocks the big bike until it responds feebly under him. Then he drives out of the farm and the bike smoothes itself out onto the gravel as he lies forward, enjoying the wind, his mind full of the road.

Straight into town as fast as the bike can go all along the middle line, hoping someone will pull him off. But there is no one.

He slows down in front of the café at the railway line. The extractor on the roof stinks of fish. He parks the bike next to Oom Willie's bakkie. Inside they are speaking of him, Oom Willie and the gold-chained Portugees.

He stays seated on the bike listening, undecided in what to do.

"Wit Hotnot," says the Portugees of him.

He hears how Oom Willie agrees. There are other voices too, Magdaleen's from behind the till.

He walks into the dark space. They stop speaking. Oom Willie holds out his hand but he ignores it, taking a coke from the fridge, tossing the coins on to the table without waiting for the change.

It is Magdeleen's face that stays with him as he gets back on the bike. He sees how she falls on the artificial grass and he wonders how he ever could have wanted her.

*

He will never forget the outcome.

The office of Doug had views over the mountain and the harbour. A man in a harness, hung on the outside, cleaning the windows. Aimee sat next to him. He could feel her leg against his, the plumpness of her cheeks gone. Her dark hair swept up on her head. And there were ropes in her neck. And he thought her very beautiful, wanting to kiss and touch her right there in Doug's office as they waited for the call.

He drew closer to her the more she was contained.

He loved her most when she was free.

There were people in the passage and at the door, crowding around the office.

The man in the harness pressed against the glass, giving him a thumbs-up. He hoped that this was a sign of what was to come.

The phone rang. Doug let it ring and ring. The crowd at the door pushed into the office to hear.

Doug picked up the phone. Aimee took his hand. They both watched his placid face for a clue. He said goodbye, then he looked straight at them.

“They’ve withdrawn with cost.”

She turned to embrace him but he got up to shake Doug’s hand and they held each other’s gaze respectfully. For the rest the room went wild. It was a victory for the mostly white-people. Everyone felt they had won a battle of some sorts.

She wanted to phone to the farm but he stopped her. He wanted to tell them himself, face to face.

*

Humiliated, he watches his limp penis while the night staff, fluff the pillows and shake out his bedding.

A few drops of urine leak out. The nurse checks the pan, then they heave him off onto the chair, while he shivers uncontrollably from the effort. A hot cloth is swiped over his face and arms and legs. The room turns as he swallows the vomit in his throat.

The nurse opens his clenched mouth like an ewe does with a dosage, just wide enough for her to force the brush in. The toothpaste stings his mouth. He strains forward, tongue and mouth dumb. The paste dribbles out, messing over his chest.

His head totters. The red button on the black leash is placed in his lap.

Tomorrow he flies home.

*

He is amongst tall trees in the darkness, sensing someone behind him. Anticipating the knife, he swings around violently but it is Aimee next to him, reaching out in her sleep. Isak switches on the bedside lamp. It is just after twelve. A car stops at the gate and he is out, down the passage, crouching in the dark, listening to the foot steps on the stoep.

He throws open the door, flattening himself against the wall.

The cat walks in.

Koos, caught by surprise, stands under the light, sharp as a blade. Isak steps back and Koos follows the cat into the entrance hall of terracotta walls and uncomfortable silence.

Isak leads the way out onto the back stoep. He lights the paraffin lamp on the table. They stand a distance from each other, watching the cat swipe at moths drawn to the flame.

Both of them keep quiet, waiting for the other.

Koos rests his open hands on his thighs, jiggling his right leg, his dark eyes searching the darkness of the garden, while Isak enjoys the night with no moon.

He passes a letter onto Isak. In the weak light he can see it's from the bank.

"Hulle wil my nail." Koos leans forward making a stabbing motion towards his back.

"Jy's trouble."

"Jy ook." Koos retorts sharply. "Maar hulle tyd is getel."

"Wie se tyd?" Isak thinks of the bank.

"Die Boere."

Isak frowns.

"Ek hou boek van dié se ingatmaniere. Soos wie slaan wie, wie hang wie op."

Koos explains, "en daar's ander goed ook."

Isak doesn't ask what. He rereads the letter. A month's payment is overdue on a house. It is the same bank as his.

"David se kis." Koos carries on speaking as though he, Isak, has asked what things. "Jou Ma het betaal."

Isak folds the letter, handing it back.

"Die eerste keer wat ek by julle kom oplei het, het sy kos stoor toe gestuur op 'n blommetjiesbord met 'n mes en vurk in 'n wit lap togedraai."

Aimee stands at the door, listening, bleary-eyed and bare footed. She tries to sit on Isak's lap but he pushes her away so she sits down on the edge of the stoep, swinging her legs. His mother surprises him.

"Ek het 'n blikbord verwag." Koos gives a harsh laugh. "Oupa Wanie en Katjie..." he stops, a moment in thought. "Dis waaroor die ander lys gaan."

Aimee knocks her ankles loudly against each other.

"Moenie." Isak scowls at her.

From the stoep he can see the lights burning at poppenhuis. He remembers the bleached washing draped over bushes. The old man in the canal holding the trap made of wire and the old woman, bad tempered with the dog buried in her bosom. And Danie. It was Danie who suggested poppenhuis as their home.

“Hoe gaan dit in die stoor?” Koos asks Aimee.

“So-so.” She stops swinging her ankles. “Koba wil nie meer werk nie.”

“Ek het dit lankal sien kom,” Isak joins in.

Aimee wips round. She looks hard at him but he keeps his eyes on the lights of Poppenhuis.

“Het sy rede gegee?” Koos feels the tension between them.

The cat jumps off the table onto Isak’s lap. He rubs its ears and the cat stretches out, purring.

Aimee walks inside to the kitchen. She opens the taps and begins to wash the rinsed glasses. “Jaloesie.”

“Dis `n ding daai.” Koos sympathises, speaking to her through the open door. His voice is different with Aimee.

“Oor naweke word sy deur die ander anties uitgeskel oor die ekstra geld wat sy verdien...Ag sommer alles...en Sussie is die voorbok.”

“Koos hasn’t come to discuss this.” Isak coolly informs her.

“Oh sorry.” She straightens out her back, crossing her wets hands.

Embarrassed, she moves out of their sight. “Please, please carry on.”

“Wat van die Boere?”

Koos keeps Isak’s gaze. They both think of the time behind the dam wall.

“The ANC will be unbanned.”

“Yes.” Isak cautiously agrees.

“There will be an election and the ANC will win.” Koos watches his reaction

“What will happen to us?” Aimee is back at the door.

Isak drops the cat onto the ground, lowering his eyes. “Farming will never be the same.”

“That’s good.” Aimee replies innocently.

“Why did you come tonight?” Isak reminds Koos.

“I need to pay cash on the arrears...”

But Isak cuts him short. “How much?”

“Two grand.” Koos narrows his eyes.

“I’ll see that you get it tomorrow.”

“Thanks.” Koos gets up to shake his hand.

For Isak, it is the least he can do for Raatjie.

“I’ll pay you back as soon as I can.” Koos grips his hand and his eyes are other eyes than those of years ago.

Isak leads the way to the front door.

“When I’m mayor of this town one day, I’ll remember you guys,” Koos jokes at the door.

Aimee laughs with him. She reaches out and her cheek touches his.

Isak walks with him to the dilapidated car, wondering on which list his name appears.

*

Fed up, she waits at the door, turning on him. “Kry jy lekker om vir my so to sien suffer?”

Feigning ignorance, he walks right past her to the fridge.

She follows him. He drinks from the milk bottle, then he burps, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand. Furiously, she snatches the bottle, pouring the rest of the milk into the basin.

“Jy sien hoe ek sukkel en jy maak niks nie.” She drops the bottle into the bin.

“You`ve got to take the punch girl, it comes with the territory.” Isak strolls out and sits down in a deck chair, whistling to the cat. The paraffin lamp`s glass has burnt black. All he can see of her is the whites of her eyes. “Jy kan nie net wil shine vang nie.”

“What?” Her pupils enlarge.

She stands in front of him. He picks up the cat again, making fun talk with it.

She lifts his chin so that he must look at her. “What,” she repeats firmly.

“Jy hou van pronk en die limelight steel.” He keeps his composure.

Shocked, Aimee steps back. “Is that what you think of me?”

“Kalmee.” He cautions her.

“Ek sal nie!” She shouts it out.

Isak leans over to close the back door so that Sophy won`t wake but she kicks the door open before he can.

“Waarvan praat jy?” She demands though tears.

“Jy hou van aandag, Miss Huggy Buggy of everything male.”

Aimee closes her ears.

“Oh Doug, oh Willie, oh Koos.” He copies the tone of her voice. “`n Soentjie hier en `n soentjie daar.” He smacks his lips exaggeratedly against the face of the cat.

Horrified, Aimee watches him. “Don`t you like me?” she asks quietly.

“Like?” He says this loudly. Months and months of pent up feelings surface. It is as though he can’t stop himself. “Like? No, I don’t think I particularly like you.”

“My God.” She drops to her knees, moaning. “Why did you marry me, why?”

The cat jumps off his lap and sits next to her.

“Ek kan nie self sê nie.” Perturbed, he walks out onto the lawn. “I want you and I wish I didn’t.”

“What is it then that you dislike so much?” She stumbles towards him.

He lets his eyes run over, from her wild face, down her neck, to her hips, her ankles, her bare feet. “You’re so free with your feelings and I want it for myself...Only for me.”

Her eyes are black holes.

“For me.” He repeats.

She takes his arm but he shakes her off, walking out by the gate.

“Please Isak.” She runs after him.

He turns viciously. “Can you understand that? I don’t want to share you with anyone else.” He towers over her crumpled face “Jy ken nie mans nie.”

“I want you, Isak.” Her hands implore him.

He hates crying, despising her for it. “Ek hou hulle dop, die aasvoëls. Sien hoe hulle tonge uithang vir jou. Geen respek vir dit van ‘n ander man nie.” He spits it out.

Overwhelmed by his bitterness she drops her hands and moves away. It is a side of him she has never seen. His anger towards her is frightening and saddening. Who and what she is, is the biggest bane of his life.

Heartbroken, she wanders into the lucern field, thinking of her sheep and the excitement she felt and the sense of self that it gave her. She cannot change to keep him happy.

“Jy moet liever weg van my af.” Isak speaks softly, hating his weakness for her. “Ek is nie goed vir jou nie.” But it is she that is not good for him.

“Ek is nie ‘n wegloper nie,” is all she can get out.

*

Isak sighs heavily, the red knob still in his hand. He has fallen asleep in the lazy boy chair.

How she has hurt him. How he has hurt her. It pains him to think of it. How long it took him to realise that what he feared the most was what she could do to him.

What he has seen his father do to his mother.

Yet sexual deceit is not the only way to hurt another. To withdraw affection and love as he has done is a subtler, more powerful tool of domination.

And it was a trigger in him that went off automatically every time another man was near her, an instinct of high alert. He would try and conquer it on his own but he failed over and over. It was only when they stood on the edge, that he could see he was losing her through his fear. Not to another but to herself. Only then could he be brave enough and let it go, the fear of being hurt by her and make peace with the understanding that she was with him out of choice.

That she chose to love him and that in itself was enough.

She stood in the foyer of the cinema, waiting for him to pay the tickets. He saw how the man moved in on her and her reaching out to kiss him, full on the mouth. How the man held her shoulders, pulling her closer to him and the coldness came over him and the man’s eyes were wary as he came to stand behind her.

“Isak, can you remember Schoeman from varsity?”

He shook Schoeman's hand, keeping quiet.

She turned with exaggerated enthusiasm back to the bastard. "Wat 'n wonderlike verrassing om vir jou weer te sien, jy moet vir ons kom kuier."

He ignored them both, studying the posters on the wall as they chatted about varsity and he couldn't believe she could be so dumb as not to see the man was a jerk, a weakling still wanting her.

She came to stand with him in the queue but he made out as though she was just another woman, that he felt nothing for her. He tested himself as she touched his arm and it could have been the accidental touching of another.

As he hated her, it crossed his mind that Schoeman could have slept with her, that the child could be his and he hated them both but mostly her for her stupidity and neediness to be liked by every man she met.

**

University of Cape Town

From the dam wall he hears the shouts of women. Below, diggers uproot pear trees, chains ripping into their trunks, tossing the old wood in between the rows.

Isak pauses, doubting his decision, remembering the swallows in those trees and the pellet gun and rolled cigarettes in their shade.

All things must eventually go.

The digger turns the trees upside down. Long ago the digger dug up trees, dead from the drought. These trees still live.

He feels a longing for that time, to enjoy the digger like a small boy.

Ahead at the dam, Petrus sits on his haunches, gumboots in the slush, rolling a pil with deft fingers. The other men stand at the water's edge.

“Die sif is verstop, Baas.” One of them warily steps forward.

Isak wades in, poking a stick under the water, feeling for the metal sieve that covers the large pipe that brings water from out of the mountain.

Above their heads the wild geese fly to nests hidden in the reeds. Petrus tosses the burning pil into the water. He joins the group of men, kicking his boot's nose into the mud.

“Wie't laaste op die pyp gewerk?” Isak asks Pensie who frowns in trying to recall the man.

Isak nods to his breast pocket. Reluctantly Pensie undoes the button, taking out a battered notebook with some loose tobacco. Of the men peer over Pensie's shoulder.

Petrus spins stones that tap dance across the water.

Pensie meticulously rubs the tobacco off his fingers. Licking his thumb, he pages through the book with painful slowness.

Isak can barely watch this. Instead he follows the digger's path through the orchard, until Pensie shifts from one foot to the other.

“Wie was dit?” He struggles to hide his irritation.

Pensie shoots a look at Petrus. “Kan nie onthou nie, Baas.”

“Wie se naam staan daar geskrywe?”

Pensie looks guiltily at Petrus.

“Dan is dit mos Pettie se verantwoordelikheid.”

“As die Baas so sê.”

“Sorg dat die sief skoon kom.” Isak keeps his attention on Pensie.

Unsurely, Pensie turns to Petrus but he has already thrown his jacket onto the ground, undoing a belt that once belonged to Isak's father. He drops his trousers, showing his nakedness and the other men giggle, watching Isak's face.

“Dis gevaarlik, Baas.” Petrus stands naked but for the gumboots.

“Jy moes daaraan gedink het toe die dam leeg was.”

Petrus shrugs then strolls into the water. He turns onto his back, floating, with his boots sticking out. He makes no attempt to clean the sieve.

The men watch Isak. He kicks off his boots. The stones are sharp under his bare feet.

Petrus begins to move away from the sieve, kicking and thrashing his arms as a child does.

Isak dives into the water.

Pensie whoops a warning.

He thinks of her and the cat with its bleeding eyes, turning around under the water towards the sieve, fighting against the beating anger in his head. Down he drops to the murky bottom of the dam, shoving and struggling with the sieve, this way and that, unable to release it. Heart pounding he surfaces, then he goes down again, this time his mind more on the sieve than on Petrus.

He rips it off the face of the pipe.

Gasping for breath he slings it hard over their astonished faces. The thin metal plate falls. The sieve is covered in green slime.

He walks out, stepping into his upright gumboots. “Sorg dat die sif skoon kom,” he repeats, not looking back.

“Ja, Baas.” Petrus answers from the water. “Was op pad om die sif skoon te maak, Baas, maar toe spring die Baas my voor.”

Her softness has gone to his head.

*

She puts it on. His jersey that covers her knees and wrists. Then she lies down on the bed, tucking her feet under the ribbing and she lies there, hungry for him.

Silently, she wishes that there was a staircase to the stars that she could climb and that the small dark spot on the moon’s cheek was hers. Like a boat rocked by waves she rolls, cosseted in the woollen cables, waiting.

Her heart is cast out to sea.

She remembers the phosphorous on the beach and the flames that shot holes into the black sky.

In her mind they make love. She clasped like a belt around his hips and his kisses are tender and his words are kind.

Every time she looks at him it hurts. Every time she waits for him to smile it hurts. It feels like there is grit in her eyes, all the time.

And she gives and gives. Yet giving is not enough to get.

And she tries and tries. Yet trying to make him happy is not enough to make either of them happy.

What is there to do?

*

She drives the Datsun down the Karoo road. His shadow is on her. Sophy sits on the back seat. Aimee watches the little girl's face in the mirror, who solemnly watches her. The mountains draw back. There is a big sky and an open valley of nothing.

She stops the car just off the road under a stunted peppercorn tree at the spot where he smoked. They climb out. She lifts Sophy so that she can see the anthills. Was there ever happiness between them?

Ants crawl on their feet. Frantic little creatures that never stop running. Both of them jump into the car, crazily shaking their feet out by the door. Ants fly through the air.

Sophy laughs but she wants to cry for them.

Blinking, she picks some of the red berries, rubbing off the papery skins. Together they lick their tongues across the peppercorns. Their eyes burn and water from the hotness.

She straps the little girl in the seat next to hers, who chatters and sings to someone who isn't there. Aimee puts on her dark glasses and they drive further. She is angry with him for dying. If he had lived the flock would still be there.

Next to the fencing are sheep with black heads and a moving mirage on the road that brings a lone bakkie with a dragging exhaust pipe. They see the snaking trail all along the way.

Sophy shakes her finger accusingly at the invisible boy. The tone of her voice is hers. The words of punishment are hers. Aimee stares at the little girl's mouth pulled in an angry line. Briefly, she looks at her face in the mirror, seeing herself.

They drive in silence.

The gate is locked at Bloedrivier. Another's name is painted on the board.

"Kom." Aimee hitches her skirt over the barbed wire but Sophy is small enough to slip through the wires.

The single track to the skerm is overgrown and the paddled head of the windmill lies on the ground.

She stands in front of the skerm. Only the twisted branches remain. Rusted tins lie in the bushes, her thoughts, windswept from all memories.

Taking her daughter's hand, they begin to walk with no idea of where they are walking too.

If they could walk into the blue she would. If she could dissolve into the mirage she would.

Ahead of them lies an outcrop of rock.

"Kom ons rus so 'n bietjie." She wipes her hands across the rock and the little girl sits down, obediently, watching her mother's eyes behind the glasses.

Growing amongst the rock are vygies with orange flowers. She looks out over the plains, thinking of what she will do, and where she will go.

Emptiness calms her.

To the right of the rock is the klipspringer. She turns to Sophy. The little girl's hands are full of limp vygies.

She places her finger on her lips and they keep still, hardly breathing as the fine footed buck, jumps from rock to rock, closer and closer to them.

“Mama.”

The buck twitches, then it leaps past them, so close that Aimee can see the lashes on its eyes.

Sophy drops the vygies in fright.

Aimee remembers petals on slate and a room with rosed walls.

“Kom.” She helps Sophy climb down and they pick up the vygies, one by one.

She misses the old man. With him she could speak.

*

No one responds to his hand on the red knob. He cannot sleep in this place anymore. He must go home to Aimee and Sophy...and his mother. There is something bittersweet in her withdrawal into the twilight world.

A love in war is clearer, more intense, darker than any other.

The kitchen was empty and her glamorous room a mess. He and the dog stood at the unmade bed with half smoked stubs on the floor. Then the dog ran out onto the back lawn, past the Del Toidia to the shed where it pawed at the door. A light burnt behind the curtain.

“Mamma,” he called.

The dog went in first. The shed was like some time warp taking him back thirty years. She was sitting on the floor with the lap dog, wrapped in the crocheted blanket of Ouma. The gloves on her hands were sepia at the fingertips and beneath the crocheted squares, he recognised the dress with its beautiful sequined flowers around the neckline.

“Mamma.”

“Johan, ek wag vir jou.” There was life in her voice that made him think of Aimee. Flirtatiously, she held out her gloved hand to him. “Kom sit by my.”

“Mamma dié rok van Raatjie?” He knelt next to her.

“Gesteel.” She curled up, hiding the dress. “Die oumeid het my rok gesteel.” Then her face fell loose along her jaw as she tucked her legs under her skirt, scarred with cigarette burns. “Sy’t ook my kinnere gesteel. Die paljas oor hul harte gestuur.”

He couldn’t argue with her. It was so. Distraught, he got up. At the back was a wedge-shaped box with gilt handles.

“En dit Mamma?”

But she didn’t hear him, scratching amongst the piles of paper and clothes, pulling out a pair of peep toe stilettos with diamante bows, forcing her swollen feet into them.

“Dans met my.” She lifted her arms.

“Mamma weet ek hou nie van dans nie.”

“Asseblief, Johan.”

It was the least he could do. He pulled her up, off the mat. They danced stiffly, badly around the room, she oblivious to his clumsy feet and sadness.

“Genoeg.” She pushed him away, sagging into a brooding heap. Coyly, she patted her breasts for a hidden cigarette, cupping her hand around the flame. The ash lengthened, tottered, then fell over the dress.

She smoked serenely. He picked up a letter on blue airmail paper, then another. All the words were written in Italian, dated from the forties, running to long after his birth, posted from a place called Laterina.

“Was Mamma in Laterina?” He read the curved name at the bottom of the pages, “agter Angelina aan?”

“Heidi, Heidi...” His mother sang prettily.

He held the letter in front of her. She touched the paper with the burning tip. It smouldered in his hand.

She laughed. “Ek is mooier, baie mooier, Johan. Jy’s verkeerd, haar oë is gekneus, nie viooltjies nie.” She lay down on her side crooning and the little dog lay beside her. “Net ‘n bietjie liefde Johan, net ‘n bietjie liefde.”

“Dis okay, Mamma.” He reached out, patting her head. And he said it, just once. “Ek is lief vir Mamma.”

“Dankie, Johan.” She smiled at him and her agitation disappeared

He watched over her as she slept, covering her face with his hands, kneeling amongst the letters, mourning for what he knew and what he didn’t.

She had loved his father. His father had loved another.

The nurses arrive, ending his reminiscence. Today there is no sympathy. He clutches the drip stand like a drunkard.

With tiny steps he drags his feet over the polished tiles towards the window. He rests in the middle of the floor, then he shuffles forward again, counting the lines of grout, two steps for each tile. Shaking and sweating he takes hold of the windowsill

with one hand, the other still dumb. He cannot conceive how he will live with this crippling. The nurse shifts the lazy boy over to the window. He collapses onto the seat.

He wants to remember her as the sunshine girl on the swing.

**

University of Cape Town

Isak sits upright, tense. She is a sleeping pieta under the sheets. To the east is a soft glow, so soft that he mistakes it for a new day.

She is slipping away from him and he cannot stop it. Like water, like rain, he cannot hold her for much longer.

Without a sound he moves out of the house, finding his way up the track to the horse. The sky is the shade of bisque ware.

The horse has not forgotten him. They canter along walls of stone and wild pear trees, making their way up to the plateau. He remembers the first time with the horse and the withered orchid hidden in bush. He thought he was a man.

The mare whinnies, as they get closer. Isak sniffs the air like a dog, the creeping heat invading the lower hills.

In front is the mountain. Behind is the valley, where the summer has spent itself. So dry that any fire can run unfettered.

There have been other fires. The night when the world rocked beneath him and he saw the moon caught in the tree. Or the smoke that hung over the valley, seen from his father's shoulders. Men of Oom Willie trapped in a cage of flames, stricken like jackal in a trap. Their ash coloured bodies now a dream, carried by weeping men fighting fires on lands they would never own.

Other fires haunt him. Fires that flushed out women and children from kraals under a clear sky. And there was David's fire.

He calculates the wind's velocity and direction. It is a slow burn, held back by thick scrub. The mountain will burn, he decides, turning the snorting horse away.

Isak knocks on the door, under the scalloped gable. Broken plaster and thatch lie on the steps of the house of the deceased Oom Frans. A farm passed from generation to generation. Called a blessing by his family, called a curse by those who work there.

Tannie Katrien appears, heavy jowled and suspicious. Behind her, Rottweilers with studded collars bark viciously.

“Dit brand op Tannie en Willa se buiteveld.”

Her eyes widen.

“Sê net vir Willa, Tannie.”

She withdraws into the house. He hears exaggerated coughing coming from the room on the stoep.

So he gallops from farm to farm, all the way back to Perron. The last farm is neglected. Pigs feed in orchards of overgrown weeds. The road leads past worker's homes. Skeletons of exposed beams lead to a yard littered with broken crates.

A sweatiness hangs over the place. The sun is soft as yolk.

And the flames climb higher.

Oom Willie stands on the stoep. “Dis jong Bruwer,” he acknowledges but he doesn't move. Isak catches sight of a dark skinned woman in the window.

“Dit brand, Oom. Dis op pad na Oom toe, van die berggrond af.”

Oom Willie sees the glow but there is a remoteness in him. “Sê vir die volk as jy verby ry, hulle moet opskud.”

Isak turns the horse cantering down the lane, shouting out to the derelict houses. “Vuur, vuur; maak reg manne.”

The men turn their faces reluctantly from the jerry can to the fire.

*

On the werf the men wait around the idling tractors for him. Petrus has a radio slung across his chest. He passes one to Isak. The water carts are hitched and he is pleased.

The horse bolts into the orchards.

Wordlessly, the convoy of tractors trundles up the hill. Isak catches a ride on an old tractor of his Oupa. From here he talks to Petrus and Pensie, confirming the fire's dimensions. And he thinks of all the farms strung along the road, it is as though time has stood still.

At the foot of the mountain, farmers and workers gather in separate groups. The farmers make a tight knot around their fire, sipping brandy laced coffee from flasks while the workers have their own fire, sucking on rolled cigarettes, their eyes covered by the bent brims of their hats.

Isak says nothing. He senses hostility mixed with anticipation in the men behind the bakkie laager. So he walks past them, picking up a plakker off the pile, an oversized rubber swatter. Some of the workers that know him come closer, while Petrus and the other tractor drivers continue up the mountain, their carts messing water as they jolt along the stony track.

A few workers pick up plakkers while most wait and see. Isak moves towards the fire. A few follow, hesitantly and the farmers turn as one to watch as he makes his way over the smouldering veldt, the colour of and Angus' hide. He lifts the swatter above his head then he brings it down hard, beating the flames into smokiness.

*

The sun hardens. A smoky haze rolls out from the lower hills. She stands on the stoep of the office, knowing he is there somewhere.

She sits down at the desk, looking for clues in the faces of those under the glass. Then she scratches in the dustbin, pulling out an old newspaper for something to do.

On the front page is a gloved boxer with a flaccid face and no expression, his pose, stilted in the style of photographs from the fifties. While the old man's face is openly lined and marked, smiling from his forehead to his chin. His hands are raised triumphantly above his head

The first photo is black and white, the second in colour. It is the same man separated by years.

Aimee studies the photos. She much prefers the old man.

From the swivel chair at the window, she can see the fire.

It will come here too, she thinks. It would be sad to lose this place.

She calls the dog with the smiling face and they walk past the Eucalyptus bush to the crèche. Sophy hangs upside down in a tree. Children run to the gate calling her name. She bends down to embrace them. Tiny fingers like marching ants stroke her hair.

“Mamma wil die vuur gaan kyk, kom jy saam?”

Sophy shakes her head.

So she and the dog walk further. It is not so much for the fire but for him that she wants to go closer.

The dog leads the way. The fire is higher up than what she imagined.

What will the old man do? Will he take and give away, she wonders.

She stops at the place where the water comes from out of the earth, now a trickle of mud.

Aimee picks up a stone, running her fingers along the bevelled edge. The weathered rock fits snugly in the palm of her hand. Her fingers curve around it. She sits down, hitting the sharp edge against a flat rock.

The stone in her hand chips a groove into the other rock.

There is no-where to go but here. There is no one else to turn to but him. She clings to the little hope left in her.

“Maybe you have to hold onto small victories,” she says aloud to herself.

*

Isak can hear the swatting behind him as others join, deeper and deeper into the heat. Burning bush scorches their hands and faces. The swatters swing rhythmically over their heads. And the swiping stills the flames, signalling the fire's temporary death.

Oom Willie and the rest retire to their cabs, keeping an eye on things, listening to the news, leading up to the election and the run on canned good. As the day gets hotter, new groups from far-off farms arrive, upbeat and eager. Workers stumble out to rest. Isak and his team don't come out, not him nor the men on the tractors.

Berg winds chop and change. Rubber swatters melt. The fire shoots out tongues of flame which screech like shot birds. And the mountain begins to burn.

Farmers' braai on charcoaled trees, discussing the madness of risking one's life and the day passes.

*

The night is a canvas of flames. Bystanders on the safety of the plateau enjoy the fiery display, dancing to music on stretched cassettes.

Aimee stands apart, holding Sophy's hand. With lacquered faces and dark hair over their shoulders, they watch.

Somewhere in this inferno is Isak.

The fickle winds play games with the fire and she is angry, so angry with him that she hates him for never thinking of her or the child but just himself and his own guilt and the price it seems to her he wants to pay. To be burnt. A dread fills her for this single mindedness. He tempts the gods with his life. It is as though his life is a thing to be thrown away. Not even their love for him can give it meaning.

She snorts at the sight of Oom Willie feeding the crowd with his stories.

Murmuring to herself, she walks along the edge of the burnt out veldt, searching for him in the darkness. Why does he punish her so? Why does he feel responsible for everything?

*

Isak's voice comes over clearly. The dance music is switched off.

“Die manne moet uit.” His voice is strong, yet flat.

Aimee steps into the crowd with Sophy. It is as though he has a death wish.

“Bring die bakkies en kom haal die manne. Maak gou. Die wind is besig om te draai.”

Suddenly it is everyone’s fire. Bystanders retreat to their cars. Willa directs the traffic down the mountain pass while Oom Willie and the other farmers drive in a sober convoy towards the flames.

Out of the dark, soot faced men appear, flopping down on the back of the bakkies, their swatters in shreds.

The convoy continues up.

Isak checks that the last men are on, before climbing in next to Oom Willie. Something flickers in the mountain, a light within the growing furnace. Isak calls over the radio as Oom Willie reverses but there is no reply.

“Oom, vat my op, daar’s nog ‘n man daarbo.”

Oom Willie brakes, staring at the raw skin on Isak’s cheeks, the frazzled hair and the macabre streaks all over his face. Then he looks to where Isak is pointing.

“Nie ‘n moer se kans nie. Ek ry nou voor almal verbrand.”

Isak takes hold of the steering wheel. “Ek sê Oom moet opper ry.”

The other bakkies have turned and left.

“Ek ry nie vir ‘n Hotnot nie.” Oom Willie revs the engine, knocking Isak’s hands off the wheel.

“Oom, maak soos Oom goeddink.” Isak watches the small light moving further and further away. He climbs out, kicking the door.

The bakkie turns, its brake lights winking on and off. He is tired, very tired. He hears how the exhaust of Oom Willie’s bakkie hits the rock and the shouts of the men on the back.

Then he begins to run over the coals, through the dense webbing of branches. Her voice calls him over the radio and her voice makes him run faster, lighter with more energy towards the tractor lights that move cheerily away from him, unaware of the fire that rushes to catch it.

“Isak, kan jy my hoor? Kom uit asseblief...Ek smeek jou, asseblief.”

The soles of his boots give way. He is torn between her voice and the man on the tractor.

“Jy hoef nie elke keer die hero te wees nie. Asseblief Isak, vir my en Sophy.”

The radio’s strap wips off his belt. He hears her pleas get softer and softer.

Ahead is the red tractor of Oupa, scraping a firebreak through the fynbos. He shouts but the engine and the scraper’s teeth on the rock drown him out. So he runs faster, shouting louder along the cleaned path of the tractor.

“Klim af, klim af!” He runs alongside the tractor.

With a last effort he vaults onto the driver’s platform, grabbing at the wheel, jerking it violently to the left, away from the flames.

Petrus is caught completely off guard, snatching the wheel back from Isak. The tractor careers down the mountain, slinging them from side to side, over boulders and unseen dongas. The two of them tussle for control of the wheel as the flames soar.

Isak is stronger but Petrus is more agile, the fire forgotten as the tractor tips drunkenly over but they hang on, determined and wild, punching and shoving, the fury in them as uncontrollable as the flames.

“Kyk agter...Kyk agter!” Isak croaks, lifting his hands off the wheel, twisting Petrus’ face to see.

With horror Petrus views the oncoming wave of fire. In a flash he grabs the wheel, straddling the slumped Isak.

There is no road, no way out.

“Daaikant toe.” Isak lifts his head, eyes sunken, pointing forwards.

Obediently, Petrus follows his hand and the fire moves in closer.

“Hier af.” Isak gestures with his burnt hand.

With agonising slowness the tractor struggles in the dark. They can see the lights of the vehicles way below.

“Dié kant, ja ja.”

The tractor stalls. They feel the heat as the curtain of flames sweeps faster and faster.

“Af.” Petrus commands Isak.

The abandoned tractor’s lights cut out with the engine as they jump off. The fire springs forward for the kill. Isak lingers.

“Isak!” Petrus pulls him away as the flames encircle them, tackling him to the ground. The red tractor explodes. The stink of diesel is sucked up by the fire.

They run and fall, towards the lights. Her voice over Petrus’ radio, calling their names.

He sees their faces in the dark, their outstretched arms. And there is no other place he wants to be.

*

The fire burns. He opens his arms. She steps forward, Sophy too. He holds them both. Aimee looks up at him. Their life together lies in her eyes and there is both life and death in them. For him, it is like the very first time he saw her, bright and gloriously alive.

**

University of Cape Town

Elegantly, the doctor rotates his ankles, demonstrating what he must do. The stockings are to keep clots away, for the flight of tomorrow.

Sitting at the dirty window he has time to think things over. Was it only for the common good that he wanted them to be part of Perron? Was it only to secure a future for all? Or were there deeper, darker motives? His drive for financial survival, leading him to explore all avenues, pushing the boundaries of the way things were done. Was this just another one?

If he had money and lots of it. No overdraft, no loans, no interest to pay back, would he have cared so much, needed them so much? Would he have been so generous... Were they not a life boat to a drowning man?

And how will he ever truly know?

Perhaps the only answer to these questions is, if he could choose, he would do it again, all over, just the same way.

If adversity had to take him to a place where he had to learn to let go, then he is glad for it.

Losing teaches one to live.

*

A film of mist coats the orchards. Oupa waits for him under the fig tree, shrunken and frail. There's rosemary in his hatband and his hands are clawed over the crook like a cat.

Isak opens the door, helping the old man swing his stiff legs under the dashboard of the bakkie.

He drives slowly, seeing his parents in the mirror, a stooped man and a woman hugging herself. There's a smiling dog on the back. Only Danie is missing.

They drive past the new apricot trees that stand in broken rock. Past empty hills with purple vygies, along the gravel road. Oupa points and nods in the direction of the trekpad and they speak of men long gone.

Valley opens to valley and plain upon plain.

Pulling off the road under the lone peppercorn tree, Oupa waits patiently while Isak climbs out to wee. Fascinated, he watches the ants scramble around the pool of urine that sinks into the sand.

Across the road are desecrated anthills.

They drive further. The old man reminds him of winter and allemansgrond and the trek with the flock and his father.

Bloedrivier lies ahead. The lock is rusted but the key still fits. He unwinds the chain, pushing open the gate. Oupa gets out too, tapping the earth with his crook, clicking his tongue at the sight of the returning bitou.

Isak takes Oupa's elbow. Slowly, they walk towards the skerm. The old man says nothing, just sweeping his stick over the markings of birds in the dust. Sighing, he rests on an overturned drum. The cold wind cuts through the branches of the skerm. The pump is still.

The dog runs all along the fence, sniffing at bits and pieces of old wool ensnared in the barbed wire.

Isak walks the unused track towards the sun.

On top of the outcrop of rock are buck droppings.

Bloedpap. He thinks of blood custard eaten with a spoon under a sky of sequins strung out like those on the dress of his mother.

He picks an orange flower, holding it in the palm of his hand, admiring its exquisite symmetry and colour. It is a flower like her.

There is a tightness in his chest, a sadness of what can never be. He can only keep on trying with her, with them, with himself.

Carefully, he presses the stem of the flower through his buttonhole.

The sun is on top of him. He feels its heat through the wind.

On the way back he collects thin branches from dried out scrub.

Oupa rubs a piece of leather in his hands, singing a song with clicks and words that he has forgotten.

He bends down again in thought.

A hare jumps out. Whelping with excitement the dog is after it.

Isak whistles and shouts for it to stop but the dog is young and full of the hunt, chasing low and fast.

The bundle of wood scatters as he runs behind the dog, leaping over rocks and bush but it is too late. The dog has the hare by the throat.

Growling, the dog keeps him from coming closer. He turns away, looking down at his trembling hands, the orange flower fallen from his buttonhole.

*

He and the old man sit at the fire, drinking coffee. Fat drips from sausage stuck on sticks.

They do not speak but the wide, open spaces do.

Isak looks across to the old man. He sees him holding the share certificate he cannot read and the silent shed. No shouts or cheers, just this old man kissing the paper.

Behind him Koos wears a chain and the Minister drives off in his black car filled with bodyguards.

*

You press on and on, then suddenly you look around and things have changed in their very fabric and you wonder how it all happened and you can't put your finger on it, explain it to any one else, the change is just there to be believed.

In offices over Europe he has tried to explain in words their story. A story of a fractious land. But the men are bored. They know nothing of what he is speaking and he is not good with words so they patronise him in his quest to save a farm, a way of life. He had hoped colonial guilt would move these men to atonement money. But it is not to be. Not all men are slaves of guilt.

The burden of ownership came quickly to them all as it had to him.

*

The dancing and celebrations are finished. They stand in the same shed without the crinkle paper streamers and certificates of ownership.

Worried faces confront him.

They all understand his words. "Die fasiliteit by die bank is gevries."

Unsure of what is to come, some of the men openly show their dissatisfaction.

“Dié wat wil loop met ma’ loop.” Koba lifts her hand in the air. “Dis my plaas. Dié wat wil bly, steek hande op.”

Oupa raises himself off the seat at the door, balancing on the crook, the albino feather quivering in the hatband. He lifts the staff with its swan neck to the ceiling.

Aimee and Raatjie raise their hands. Petrus looks around the room, hands in his pockets, then he throws his arms wide open with an enigmatic smile on his face.

Isak remembers the blood, blotted on his shoulder.

A small group follows but Sussie keeps her arms crossed, spitting on the floor. Koba shouts angrily, marching up and down in front of the men. “Die paartie’s verby en nou’s julle skaars?”

Hands go up, some raise both hands, surrendering.

They all understand what he has said. No over-pay, no bonus, perhaps no pay at all.

It is a sobering experience for him and for them.

Sussie walks out of the forest of upraised arms, Pensie too. There are others. It is too painful to look who.

Isak stands under the carton rail with the red and blue brand.

Grimness replaces the fragile euphoria he had shared with them. Dancing with Raatjie that night, he had felt light in the way Aimee felt light, the burden of his past, lifted momentarily.

He speaks of sacrifices to them but he is really speaking to himself.

You make choices to get away from choices, then those very choices become your shackle.

The men walk out. Someone switches on the packing line. The women begin to pack. Some hum quietly, wrapping fruit in tissue paper and the carton rail rattles along. Women begin to sing, louder and louder, louder than the machines.

Aimee comes up to him. He takes her hand, kissing it, without thinking, here before everyone.

Better to be shackled to love than not at all.

*

Thick glass hides the freckled teller with cauliflower ears. He studies the cheque of Perron as the queue builds up between the corded ropes. Isak takes a deep breath, his calmness belying his rage. He would swat the boy to one side if he could, take the money and run.

The boy turns the cheque around, holding it to the light as some counterfeit money. The crowded bank watch him.

“Kan Perron vandag hulle lonetjek kry?” He calls out to the bank manager behind a door that is slightly ajar.

Conversation in the queue dies down. All wait to hear the reply. Isak reads the advertisement above the boy’s head, promising that this bank is for you.

“Jo`burg het nog nie laat weet nie, jy sal moet wag.” He announces efficiently, looking past Isak to the next customer.

He does not acknowledge the dismissal but turns to go, before the boy has finished. The eyes of those in the queue drop to the slips of paper in their hands. With forced affability he greets them, pausing until they look him in the eye, then he

elbows his way onto the street, where the unemployed lounge around in filthy overalls.

Jy. This is what the schoolboy called him. Jy sal moet wag.

Hardened by this weekly ritual, he looks at the downcast men. They have given up. Humiliated by the boy, there is no other recourse but to go back in.

What comes first he wonders, knowing nothing of liquidation. Would the bank move on Perron without telling him? If the men in Johannesburg could see what he could see would they not listen to his plea?

Tomorrow night two hundred people must be paid, shareholders or not, people need to live, he thinks as he walks to the bakkie. It would have been easier if they were a sea of faces.

An old man with tattoos and eyes as blue as sky speaks to him, rubbing his stomach, pitifully.

Isak digs for his keys. He unlocks the door, frowning at the sight of the old man in his eighties, perhaps older. Such a face he had seen in dreams. “Jy’t iemand vermoor.”

The old man shrugs.

“Jy’t Oom Frans vermoor, dis mos...”

“Amperste twintig jaa’ gelede.” The old man helps him out.

Isak sits in the cab with an open door, biding his time. He remembers his gentleness with the horses. Could he have really killed a man? Then he thinks of himself and the boy in the grass with his chest blown away and the girl in his pocket.

He leans over to unlock the passenger door. “Klim in.”

With surprising agility the old man jumps on the back of the bakkie.

Isak knocks on the back window.

“Nog nooit lanksaan ‘n witmens gesit nie, Baas.”

Isak wants to tell him that he is nobody’s Baas but he leaves it, listening to the radio, studying the old man’s face, seemingly happy and content. On the surface he is just another old man, living off the grace of others. His troubles are over for now, greeting passers-by with a wave and a laugh.

Isak wishes that it was him.

*

The old man has eyes like summer days. He works in the ringed garden of the ouetehuis, next to Oupa and Raatjie, planting tomatoes and his favourites, sunflowers, rows and rows of them that stand tall, following the sun, their heavy heads snapping off, scattering yellow petals and seed over the farm.

Farming is like throwing the dice.

The clouds gather and climb. White columns with puffed heads that pass over the sun and high winds that draw the columns ever closer to their lands.

They pray. The women at the pack shed door, the picking teams in the orchards, looking up between the rows. On the dry yard, men run to close up as it darkens over their heads. The two of them sit at the office window, praying that the clouds will pass over to farmers, less righteous, less good than themselves. But the clouds don’t.

The high winds drop down into the orchards, slashing at leaves and branches.

They sit on the couch of Oupa, waiting. The telephone lines go dead.

There is thunder over the mountain and the rumbling moves in, closer to the farm. Lightning strikes the roof. The lights fail. The packing line grinds to a halt.

Aimee closes her eyes, clenched fists against his thigh. The smiling dog runs into the office, hiding under the desk.

Thunder and lightning are back to back, striking the same chord.

They listen for the sound.

Her presence is not enough to stop the first stones falling, just a stone here and there with the rain. Then it becomes a drumming and finally a raging cacophony of ice.

“That’s it,” he says.

Verby, she thinks, walking to the window, her eyes bright and wild.

It lasts for an eternity but it is over, before it even begins.

He joins her at the window. They hold hands, the yard transformed into a strand of ice pebbles all the way as far as he can see. Isak walks out onto the stoep. It stretches though the orchards to the ouetehuis where the old man picks up the heads of sunflowers, beaten to the ground.

Together they take the short cut through the orchard of gashed pears and ripped off branches.

His mother is on the lawn, picking up hailstones.

*

They get out of the hired car in the underground parking lot. A guard escorts them to the lifts where they are frisked, tagged and allowed through. On the next level another guard verifies their identity behind a bullet proof booth.

The metal detector sounds the alarm as Petrus walks through. He digs in his pocket, tossing an old penknife with a blunt blade into the basket.

Another barks at them.

Stricken, Koba stares into the lens, the photo clipped to her jacket, reflecting her fear. Identified and displayed, they are allowed through the lobby of grand proportions. Elaborate chandeliers hang from gilded ceilings and the lobby is clad in marble. Isak reads the words, engraved into the floor, latin words for wealth.

A lift of glass and copper transports them up to the top of the building. So this is the bank Isak thinks as the numbers of the floors run by. These are the men who control their lives. He wonders if any of them grew up on a farm.

The doors open onto rich carpeting of royal blue. Large paintings that look like nothing welcome them.

A young woman in stilettos ushers them wordlessly into a conference room with windows all around. She places a thick file at the top of the table. Isak thinks of the last supper.

All three of them move to the window.

Johannesburg lies below, buried in smog. Afar are mine dumps and the Hillbrow tower, piercing the dirty air.

Someone coughs.

They all turn. The man is short, stocky, exuding brilliant certainty.

He points to the table and they sit. He does not look at them. Without introduction he speaks, looking straight past Isak.

“This meeting you have called for Mr,” he looks down at the name on the file, “Bruwer is something I loathe. In fact I avoid all contact with the high risk clients of the bank.” He opens the file, reading something pinned on the stack of papers. “What is it that you want from me?”

Isak's mouth is dry, he weighs his words as he takes out his file but the man stops him.

“Nothing you do Mr Bruwer is going to make any difference. Your file has been presented to the board of this bank and the answer is no. Your business will not get another sent from this institution and that is final.” The man looks at his watch, then at Petrus and Koba. “Financial discipline is what we want from our clients, not sentiment.”

He gets up to leave.

“Het ons vir niks gekom nie?” Koba turns to Isak.

The man pauses at the door. “Precisely. I did tell Mr Bruwer on the phone it was a waste of time but he wouldn't listen.”

They are left alone in the conference room. The secretary gestures, leading them back to the lift. Isak looks down at his watch. The meeting did not last five minutes.

“Kry 'n mens nie eers 'n koppie tee in die grênd plek nie?” Koba asks.

Petrus keeps quiet, knowing what the meeting means.

The lift's doors open. The copper walls reflect their distorted images. He did not get the chance to speak. If he could have only have had the chance to speak, he would have told them they were making a mistake.

*

It is sleeting outside. He shuffles back to the cot, clinging to the stand midway. A brusque hand leads him the last few meters of the floor, tipping him onto the sheet.

The Minister of Agriculture wore a Hawaiian shirt and his bodyguards, suits with dark glasses. The certificates of ownership lay on the table, issued and signed by him. The band kept a thin tune going as Koos spoke, fiddling with the microphone's cord. It was David's funeral that came to his mind.

Who would have thought the Bruwers and Baadjies family would farm as brothers?

Or was this an act of irresponsibility, he so burdened with responsibility.

He reaches out for his phone but there are no messages. Not from investors or banks. Not from her.

**

University of Cape Town

Restless, he snaps like a twig, woken by summer rains on the roof. It is his birthday. Fork-tailed swallows arrive overnight from far off places.

Like his grandfather he will have to go. Find someone who believes in dreams, who believes in Perron. Holding on to this thought, he extracts himself from Aimee. His daughter, lovely as a willow, sings to his mother in the room down the passage.

Her illness invades the house.

Isak takes the walking stick, whistling for the dog.

More and more, he needs to get away.

The rain is over. He hears the tractors start up.

In the office it is creditors who pick up on the scent of their distress. So he walks towards the farm gate under trees weaning fruit that lies, damaged in wet grass.

Oupa sits in a wheelchair under the vine of the ouetehuis with its walls of terracotta, shelling peas. On the stoep are potted tins. The cat that-doesn't-want-to leave, suns itself on the stoep, flicking its tail at the sight of the dog.

He sits down in the deck chair next to the old man.

The shadows on the mountain show the season and the time of day.

Isak thinks, rubs the strawberry mark on his neck, thinking of Paljas. He takes of the pods at the old man's feet, tearing them open. The peas lie like green pearls and they taste of morning.

Oupa struggles to extract the peas with his arthritic hands.

“Paljas werk nie daar waar 'n mens hom nie glo nie.” Isak confirms this aloud to himself.

But the old man, keeping his eyes on the bowl, clucks in disagreement.

Sceptically, Isak listens half-heartedly to his words of caution, his own thoughts, in other countries with other men.

He remembers his father's curses falling on ground, dry as talc, the dead shrike and the dying trees.

The old man offers his help to break the curses.

Dismissing the offer, Isak drops the peas in the bowl, the names of the men in his head. He nods a greeting.

The old man points to a tin with a fig shoot and a single leaf bud. "Vir die verjaarsdag." He takes a mouth organ from his pocket.

Isak waits patiently on the steps while the old man plays for him, shakily and with little breath, *Die kat val innie modderwater*.

He taps his foot to the dragged-out tune, his mind in other countries.

*

She clears the damp earth with her fingers, scrunching the clods in her hands, sprinkling the brown earth back into the hole. Then she scoops the shoot from the tin with its spidery roots, keeping it upright with one hand while she stamps the soil around it. She dribbles water over the unfurled leaf.

His mother sits in the garden, plucking at rose petals that fall into her lap, petals the colour of blood. And Sophy plays the piano, running her fingers up and down the notes that it sounds like a river in flood.

Aimee gets off her knees. It will be a time before she can pick of its figs. Perhaps it will not be her but another.

He has gone to men with money.

His mother laughs, tossing handfuls of petals over herself.

*

March lilies flower red amongst the rocks. She cuts them with a knife. Their pink stems bleed over her hands as she passes them on to his mother.

The older woman drags her feet next to her as they walk towards the hills, her skin pleated like a skirt.

North winds sweep up dust and leaves.

Oupa and Raatjie and the old man with eyes so blue sit on the stoep of the ouetehuis.

She waves at them and they wave back as one.

His mother laughs, swaying from side to side.

The cat follows them as they make their way up the hill to the graveyard.

She pushes open the gate. The cat jumps onto the wall. His mother leans on her, breathing hard and her eyes are vacant lands.

Together they circle the graves. Ouma and Oupa buried on top of each other and his father's grave marked with a slender stone, the writing on the older graves, weathered to mere scratching.

His mother kneels next to his father's grave. Magdaleen's wreath of lilies caught in a bush.

Aimee looks across the farm. The sky is convoluted like a wrung cloth.

The older woman lays the red-headed flowers on the grave.

The grass on the hills bows before the wind.

Aimee says a prayer for the living and for the dead.

Then the older woman lifts her hand towards Aimee. Shaking her head, she taps her finger with the other hand. “Hy was lief vir jou.” She speaks clearly. Her words are words she has chosen. With clumsy fingers she pulls off her wedding ring, holding it out to Aimee. “Vir jou.”

Aimee kneels down next to her. The older woman takes her hand in hers. She slips the wedding band onto her ring finger and the two rings, different in colour, lie seamlessly next to each other.

*

She pushes open the shutters. It is a clear day. She can see the mountain and she thinks of him, gone to strangers, gone to Danie.

She listens to the call of birds in the moulting Del Toidia, surprised to find his absence turns her inward.

And where will they go, what will become of them all, if he returns with hands, empty as a dam at the end of summer?

She takes the walking stick on the back stoep, through the veldt behind the house, up to the plateau of Proteas.

The cat that doesn't want to leave the house with terracotta walls, sits in the grass.

Aimee stops at this unexpected meeting, the cat's gaze, fixated on something she cannot see.

The cat strikes out with its paw, then the other, rising up on its hind legs. The head of the cobra appears above the grass, absolutely still, its tongue sensing them both, waiting for the cat to come closer.

Aimee lifts the stick.

So fast that not even her eye can follow, the cobra spits. The cat falls back. She shouts out, throwing the stick but the snake drops down, slithering away.

Like a mad man the cat runs haphazardly, meowing and clawing at its own head with her running after it.

Frightened, she tries to catch it but the cat won't be caught, so she stands and watches the terrible sight of the dying cat.

It whimpers, crawling into a ball.

Aimee sits down in the grass, stroking its trembling head. She can feel the poison working as she picks up the limp body, rocking it in her arms, the cat that doesn't want to leave.

*

The phone on his chest rings for a long time. Disturbed by his thoughts, he lets it die. Then it starts again. With closed eyes he feels for the green button, laying the phone on the pillow, near to his ear.

“Isak?”

He hears the tension. “Wat's fout?” Alert, he opens his eyes.

She is silent, then she sighs. “Die bank was hier vandag.”

“Om wat te maak?” Fear flushes through him.

“Hulle bates op te skryf.”

He doesn't answer.

“Hulle het sonder waarskuwing hier aangekom.”

He waits for her to continue, anger welling up in him that wants to split open his forehead.

“It’s over, Isak.”

Verby, he thinks.

“Ek’s jammer.” Her voice is flat. “Ek moes jou sê.” She keeps quiet on the other side. “We tried, you and I,” she encourages him.

But he doesn’t want that, he wants to smash the windows. And yet she is there, waiting for him.

“Ek is lief vir jou.” For a moment he thinks she has put down.

“I love you,” she replies graciously and he can hear how the corners of her mouth lift.

They speak of the weather and how the trees have been stripped of their leaves. They speak of wind and clouds and the river run dry.

They do not speak of it again.

Nothing has changed and yet everything has.

He presses the red button.

He will tell Danie, that it is too late, too late for him to return home.

*

They have made their move. What happens now, what happens to him? His name signed on every bank document, every account. Is he to be held accountable?

You sign because you are willing to take the risk.

Risk becomes your choices.

Your choices become you.

*

Tired of traveling, Isak longs for heat and dust and an expanse of sky.

Troubled, he stares out by the window onto highways and fields of sickening green.

He wants to lift up like an eagle and ride the winds to lands that are no longer his to have.

He knows every tree in every orchard. The composition of the soil and the way swallows fly before they leave. He knows the ripeness of a peach simply by touch and smell and the time of day from the shadows in the mountains.

Soon he will be landless.

It has never been his. He made the fundamental mistake of believing it was his, to have and to hold until death be parted.

You can never own land.

You can love it, long for it, shape and care for it, desecrate it, but nothing more than this.

It is for you to serve the land so that its abundance can share with you. It is for you to leave it a better place than what you have received it and this asks wisdom. But who can be the judge of that?

His fate is cut and dried.

Petrus and Koba, tasting the bitter fruit of stewardship are swept along with him and it saddens him deeply. This is not the way he wanted it. This is not the way he had hoped for.

For him it is all over but for their sake he will try and battle on as they have tried to do with him. He will fight their fight and there will be no reward, for his time has come.

A new life lies ahead.

To be wrenched from the land is as a baby is wrenched from its mother's breast.

It is more painful than broken bones.

Not to walk in veldt and read the moodiness of the mountain.

Not to brush your hand over the paths of birds in the dust.

It is hardly comprehensible to him.

But there is she and the child. And they will take the road that leads over the cattle grid with the late evening sun in their eyes as the day withdraws over the cooling earth. And they will take a road that leads then through the valley to places he has only been to in dreams.

For the people of this place, perhaps their time has come, perhaps it has not. Only time will tell if this will birth and grow but as he has found out for himself, time never tells until time tells.

*

Isak lies back, closing his eyes with exhaustion.

The land is not his land. Nothing lasts forever.

Only love is as strong as death.

He thinks of her as the lights of the ward are switched on.

**

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