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# THE HISTORY

[A Novel]

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A dissertation submitted in *fulfilment* of the requirements for the award of the degree of  
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Faculty of the Humanities

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## Abstract

The action of *The History* predominantly occurs in a fictitious town on the West Coast of South Africa. The town, Soutbek, is distinctly divided into the upper and lower town and these divisions represent the division between wealth and poverty. The poor are relegated to the upper town, while the wealthy live in the lower town and have the benefit of a view of the bay.

The main characters of *The History* are Pieter Fortuin, the mayor of Soutbek and former upper town; his wife Anna Fortuin; and then to a lesser extent, Sara, a teenage runaway and Willem, a young man from the upper town. The relationships between these four characters form the bulk of the narrative.

Mayor Fortuin's great hope and aim for Soutbek is to make it famous and 'put it on the map.' In order to achieve this goal, the mayor decides to compile a history of the area with the assistance of retired history professor, Terence Pearson. The subsequent account of the Soutbek region calls into question the standard history of the early colonisation of South Africa. Pages of *The History of the Soutbek Region* are interspersed throughout the novel proper, with the consequence that interesting parallels and relationships become evident to the reader. The result is a novel which explores notions of identity, history, myth and reality, as well as the way that human beings choose to treat each other.

Much research has been put into both the pages of *The History of the Soutbek Region* and the novel proper. A bibliography can be found at the end of this text.

*For Carlo*

University of Cape Town

*And here stands man, stripped of myth, eternally  
starving, surrounded by every past there has ever been,  
digging and scrabbling for roots, even if he must dig for  
them in the most remote antiquities.*

*Nietzsche, The Birth of Tragedy*

University of Cape Town

Those sitting on the shore, the elderly mostly, did not look back. They knew well enough what was behind them; the blaze working its way through the upper town, its flames burning high so that even down on the beach the heat could be felt on their backs. They looked out at the dark waves that glowed and rolled before them. They did not speak. They looked forward only, and waited.

Others, the young, who had no memory of past fires, stood in the bushes before the shore and called out to each other, pointing and whooping. They forgot that they were watching their homes burning. They thought simply of the spectacle, feeling invigorated, excited. Around them dogs barked, running along the line of vegetation, or stood whimpering near their masters.

Others still, the mothers and fathers, walked away from the beach and the cheering young, into the low scrub of the flat lands. They searched for dry bushes or the dead branches of stunted trees and thought about the nights to follow. They knew the cold that was to come, the homelessness and the cold, and so they fanned out, some returning to the beach, hopeful of driftwood.

Further inland the river, swollen by weeks of rain, had flooded, washing away bridges as it went. Its waters now covered vineyards and farmland, the roads were all mud. For those whose homes were burning there was no hope of being reached by the fire truck which was 50 kilometres away. Even the rain, which before had been so persistent, had stopped. They could only wait until the blaze burned itself out, making do then, with what remained.

To the west the lower town lay untouched by fire, its inhabitants asleep.

It was dim outside, the sky lightening at the horizon and broadening out over the waves. Already gulls were flying low, calling. The mayor rolled over in bed and pushed his face into the pillow, his knees brushing against those of his wife. He could feel her body stiffen as he moved towards her and then the shifting of the bed as she turned from him, rising quietly, leaving the room. He did not lift his face from the pillow. He felt the warmth of his own breath on his nose and lips and went back to sleep.

When he woke again, the sky was clear and light through the curtains. He stood slowly, placing each foot carefully on the ground. In the bathroom she had left the window open and the room was cool, his bare feet cold on the tiled floor. He went to the basin and ran the water until it was warm, washing his face and lathering it with shaving cream. Then he picked up his razor and slid it along his cheek; down to his jaw line and below. There was no other noise in the house but for the sound of the razor on his face. He began again, further along his cheek, following a steady line. In the front room the phone began to ring. He stopped for a moment and listened, then putting down the razor, placed a hand on either side of the basin. He leaned heavily and sighed. Through the window came the smell of salt, of wet shrubs, and underneath, the thick smell of human filth. He cleared his throat, coughed. Disappointment and anger sat in his chest. The sound of the ringing phone infuriated him further. He was furious, furious, and the phone would not stop ringing.

For two years, together with Dr. Terence Pearson, a retired history professor, he had researched and written a book. Relating the surprising history of the founding of the town of Soutbek, it was a landmark study in terms of its contradiction of the established view of colonial history in South Africa. It proved the existence of an utopian idyll right here on the West Coast some 350 years ago. A society where coloniser and colonised lived together as equals during a period in which conflict and destruction was thought to have dominated the Dark Continent. *New Monomotapa: The History of the Soutbek Region* was to be launched that night at a venue in Cape Town to which the mayor of Cape Town, politicians and other dignitaries were invited. But, due to the resultant chaos after the fire and the still impassable roads, he and the professor were unable to attend. The disappointment he felt was

impossible to measure. He hated this god-awful town. He hated it. For decades he had anticipated a moment such as this, a single great moment, and now, because of the filth, the hopelessness, the pathetic lives of those in the upper town, with their repeated need for rescue, their continued failure at mere existence, he was being robbed of his great moment. The upper town was insufferable. He wished there was some way of getting rid of it.

When he looked up again, he saw his face, tired, grave in the mirror, and to the left the reflection of the open window, framing a small section of sea and sky. He saw grey clouds, a grey sky. It was as though the world existed in that square alone. As though there were nothing else beyond the grey. He turned and reached over, pulling the window closed.

The houses of the lower town were built on a steep sea-facing incline. Many were the holiday homes of farming families from the neighbouring area, but the hill was dominated by the homes of retired couples come to live out their days with a sea view. Behind the lower town the hill flattened into shrublands, spreading out in long plains that touched beyond the horizon. Immediately to the right of the lower town ran a dry bed where the river had split in the 1920s, choosing another route to the sea. Elephants had lived in the area once, marking the rocks of the channel with their rubbings, leaving them smooth. The upper town was separated from the lower town by the riverbed, forming on flat land which ended in cliffs over the sea. The further side of the town sloped into a small bay where fishing boats mouldered on the shore. The old fish factory, closed three years previously, stood on the far edge of the bay. Its long cement jetty, which had stretched out into the sea, now lay ruined, the uprights fallen, lying in the waves below. The furthest section was still standing, and on it remained the height of a crane, its hook hanging like a gibbet.

It had been a week since the fire and still people were living on the beach of the small bay, sleeping on newspapers and plastic bags, despite the blankets and other supplies which had been handed out. Cement-brick houses which had been built as part of a government scheme for reconstruction now lay black and broken on the rise. For the rest, the shacks were piles of burnt plastic and ash, indistinguishable from one another. Those

who had returned had salvaged what they could from the rubble, moving into the deserted homes of others, making roofs out of scorched corrugated iron, or assembling their new homes amongst the piles of the old, using what remained. But many had taken what they could to the edges of the town, their homes spreading out onto the cliffs, held together by nothing. Parts of the upper town now lay uninhabited. Left to the rummagings of dogs and rats, the heaps took on a sense of permanence in the landscape. Already complaints were coming to the mayor from the lower town: washing stolen from lines, tools and materials disappearing from garages, and worst of all, the smell of human faeces that made its way down with the breeze.

“Normal people,” he thought, “would have some pride. Normal people wouldn’t live like that.”

From the front room came the sound of his wife answering the phone and then her footsteps towards him.

“Yes?”

“It’s Hannes Fouché from Doorn Farm. He’s found a girl. He wants you to fetch her.”

The mayor wiped his face. “I’ll have my breakfast first,” he said.

It was mid morning by the time he arrived at Doorn Farm. Despite the week of sun, the yard was still full of puddles and the ground was all mire. In a corner of the yard stood piles of empty fruit crates and a small tractor with a red flag at its rear. To the right of the house two large dogs, chained to the wall, barked in his direction. He ignored them, looking down at his shoes in the mud and walked gingerly to the house. At the door Hannes greeted him, “Morning, Mr Fortuin. Some coffee?”

The mayor shook his head, said he had a lot to do. Hannes nodded and then pointed in the direction of the barn, “I found her in there early this morning. She was bloody well drinking milk straight from the cow’s teat. I couldn’t believe it. At first I thought it was a baboon. I almost shot her. I yelled at her to go, but she just sat there looking at me. I didn’t know what to do so I handed her over to the maid to see to so long. I suppose she ran away because of the fire and now can’t find her way home.”

"Alright," said the mayor. "I'll take her back and find out who she belongs to."

He made his way round to the rear of the house and found her sitting on the step biting into a piece of bread. She was maybe fifteen or sixteen and her hair was short, standing out in all directions. She was wearing a pink jersey that was too small and a floral skirt that was too big. Her feet were bare. She chewed with her mouth open and did not look at the mayor when he spoke to her, asking her name. In her open mouth her teeth were yellow and looked too small. The maid touched the girl's shoulder and told her to go with him because he was going to take care of her. She looked up at him then, and put the last piece of bread in her mouth, chewing slowly. When she had finished swallowing she got up and walked with the mayor to his car, climbing into the back seat without being told. He tried talking to her but she said nothing and after a while she was asleep.

The roads in the upper town were too narrow and muddied to drive through. He parked where the tar road tapered into dirt, locked the doors and put on the alarm. On his shoes the mud had dried and faded, cracking at the place where his toes bent. He stepped carefully onto the dirt road, but his feet sunk and the mud began to layer again. He glanced behind him to where the girl was standing at the car, looking at the burnt town. He called to her and told her to tread carefully, but her feet were already deep in the mud. They walked towards the blackened homes. His shoes were growing heavy and he felt like a fool, slipping all over the road. He stopped at the first person they came to, an old man sitting next to a pile of rubble with his dog lying nearby, and asked where Willem was. The dog raised its head off its paws and looked at the mayor and the girl and then lowered its head again. The old man remained sitting on his haunches, sifting through the pile.

"This is my family," he said, holding up an unidentifiable article. "Not one of them is alive anymore except me. Not one."

The mayor asked him again if he knew where Willem was. The man looked up from the scraps in front of him. His mouth was empty of teeth and his face was dirty. He pointed in the direction of the church. The mayor did not thank him, kept walking. The girl remained, staring at the old man as he

continued to examine the rubble. The dog came up to her, wagging its tail and sniffing at her hands. It could smell the bread on her fingers and began to lick them. After a distance the mayor turned and called to her. She followed him, the dog behind her.

The church was still standing. In later years people would speak of it as a miracle, but the truth was that the area around the church was bare of plants, worn down by the trampling of parishioners; there had been nothing along which the fire could burn its way to the building. It stood small and blackened from the smoke, the windows splintered and dirty. In the low bell tower a small shrub was blooming from a crack, its flowers grey with ash. They found Willem in the graveyard behind the church. Two fresh graves had been dug and he was starting on the third. The earth that he shovelled into heaps was orange in colour, and that colour had caked his shirt and hands and trousers.

“The fire?” The mayor asked, indicating the graves.

“One of them. The other two were old people who couldn’t take the cold.”

“You’ve taken your time about burying them.”

“Too much mud. We had to wait for it to dry a bit.”

The mayor pointed over at the girl who had strayed to the other end of the graveyard, “Anyone missing someone?”

“No.”

“But someone?”

“No. Never seen her before. We can ask around but I’m pretty sure she’s not from here.”

“Well, she can stay here until I find out more.”

Willem shook his head and gestured at the town, “Where? We don’t even have homes for ourselves.”

“But what am I supposed to do with her?”

“Take her home.”

“Do you think I want all the orphans of the world coming to my doorstep? I am already taking money out of my own pocket to help after this fucking fire!”

Willem did not look at him. His mouth opened and it seemed as though he might say something. Instead, he breathed out heavily and, raising the shovel, returned to digging up the orange dirt. The mayor stood and waited. When it became clear that nothing else would follow, he walked away, shouting at the girl to keep up. There was little else he could do.

After breakfast she washed the dishes and dried them. She waited for her husband to leave before she got dressed and then she left the house, walking down towards the beach. In the road, near the drains, were puddles of yellow mud in which the footprints of small birds could be seen. She stepped around them, careful not to disturb the patterns. Every day, carrying a watering can, wearing a dress with pockets, she went to the beach. Years before her husband had forbidden her to walk any sort of distance on the shore, ordering her to stay close to the town.

"You can't trust them," he had said. "I know them. They will rape and murder you without blinking an eye."

But with time, seeing that his threats would not keep her away from the beach, hearing her excuses about fresh air and collecting shells, he had ordered cranes and hired labourers from the upper town to haul boulders and rocks into place, forming a semi-circle of water, cut off from the sea, large enough to swim in. The area had its own beach, which was seamed in at both sides, and when the tide was low there were rock pools.

"I had this done for you, for your protection," he had said. "You are not to stray from this area."

Despite being open to the town's inhabitants there had been no opening ceremony and soon it had become known as the Mayor's Wife's Beach. To the townsfolk she was always the Mayor's Wife or Mrs. Fortuin. Not even her husband called her Anna.

For Anna the beach was a haven. When Pieter had first brought her to the town, they had lived in a small, one-bedroomed house. He had not been the mayor then and it was all he could afford with his limited income. The house was situated at the furthest end of the lower town, where the hill began to flatten out, its view of the sea blocked by a large double-storey. Anna was alone in the house much of the time. Where Pieter went or what he was doing

she did not know; only that he was making money. He left in the early mornings and returned again at night-fall. In the hours that made up his absence she spoke to no one. The people of the lower town were predominantly white and she was not sure of how to behave towards them. Uncertain of their reactions, she kept to herself, too frightened to speak to anyone. From the house she could see the upper town, and she watched as those with jobs as domestic workers and gardeners in the lower town made their way down the slope in the morning. In the evening she watched the same people return, labouring up the slope; their faces drawn, their backs bent. One woman in particular reminded Anna of her mother and she watched this woman with interest and longing. But her husband had cautioned her about these people, these people of the upper town, who were not to be trusted. He warned her never to have anything to do with them, to stay away no matter what, to scream for help if any approached her. With these instructions, Anna spent much of her time standing at windows, or in the back doorway, ducking inside if anyone came past.

It was in the kitchen doorway, which looked out over the flatlands, that Anna stood for hours each day. Some distance away, raised metres above the dry river bed, passed a railway line. The railway linked the town of Sishen, where iron-ore was mined, with the coastal town of Saldanha. From Saldanha the iron-ore was exported by ship, and the railway line had been designed for the purpose of transporting the cargo to the coast. From mine to coast, passing over more than 860 kilometres of land, the freight-trains made the journey six times each day and six times each night. Anna had heard that the freighters, when lined up end to end, made a chain of three kilometres in length. She did not find that hard to believe, for in watching the dreadful monotony of their passage, whole portions of hours were filled. She had tried counting the freighters, reaching 214 before losing track. In the night the sound of the freighters would wake her, and after they had gone by she would lie for hours, listening to her husband's breathing, waiting for the next load of ore to pass by.

After a few years, as his business increased and his position in the community grew, Pieter bought a house on a sizeable plot of land, nearer to the beach and with a clear view of the sea. The house was large, but not

large enough for his tastes, and so he ordered changes. Constant renovations and additions were contracted, with one unnecessary room after the next being built; an enclosed porch, an entertainment area, spare bathrooms, guest rooms, a second storey. There were always several builders present, hammering and grinding. They trudged through the house, leaving trails of cement and mud, knocking out walls and windows that allowed wind to blow sand and dust through the rooms. Anna began to tire of the continuous mess, the noise, the impossibility of feeling at home. She begged Pieter to stop all the construction work.

"I want a home that I can be proud of," he replied. "I want the kind of home that you and I never had."

"But the noise..."

"I am doing this for you, you know," he said.

"There are so many rooms, though. We don't need so many rooms."

"We'll use them. Don't worry. I have plans for all of them."

Seeing that he was not listening, Anna tried a different approach. She explained that she could not keep up with the cleaning. She was exhausted from the hopeless task of keeping it all clean. Pieter looked at his wife. She was very thin. Her collarbones stuck out and her wrists were barely more than slivers of bone. She had dark rings under her eyes and a pale circle around her mouth. Concerned for her health, feeling that he had been thoughtless for imagining that his wife should do the housework by herself, Pieter immediately made some phone calls. The next morning, Johanna Goliath, a woman he had hired from the upper town, came to the house. He explained to her that it was her job to keep things clean. His wife was unwell and could not be expected to do anything. Anna felt uneasy about the hiring of Johanna. She had not wanted someone to do the housework for her; she had simply wanted her husband to stop the building. The thought of company made her nervous; another body sharing those rooms and the hours of days with her. When Johanna arrived, Anna greeted her, but the woman was not interested in talking, and excused herself, saying she had work to do.

There was no routine to Johanna's day. She stalked from room to room as she wished, so that Anna was never certain where she could be without

disturbing the other woman. Sitting on a couch or a bed, she would wait for Johanna to enter the room and say, "I need to clean here now."

Fearful of the other woman, Anna removed herself to the garden. She planted seeds and seedlings, trying to fill the flowerbeds. But the workers, with their boots and loads of cement, bricks and wood, trampled the sprouting beds. Within a short time there was nothing left to grow. Coming home one evening, Pieter found her sitting on the porch steps, crying. He pulled her into the house and sat her down on a chair, "What's the matter with you? Are you hurt? Why are you making such a scene where everyone can see you?"

"My garden," she cried. "My garden... There's nothing left..."

Pieter was tired. It had been a long day of driving in a hot sun. He was not in the mood for trivialities. He felt anger rising within him, "What have you been doing outside? Didn't I talk to you about this already? I can't go out to earn money, do my job, if I have to worry about you all the time. Don't you like this house? Your things? Why are you trying to upset me?"

"My garden..."

He couldn't understand why she was crying. He lowered his voice, "Listen, what did I tell you? Those men are big, they are doing dangerous work. They can't be expected to keep their eyes open for some woman wandering around a scrap of garden. It's for your own good. You can't be there. I am keeping you safe. I'm protecting you."

But Anna continued to cry and, eventually, feeling tenderness in his hot and tired breast, he placed his hand on hers, "Look, if it means so much to you, if you want a garden so much, I will get someone to make you a garden."

"They will crush it."

He spoke quietly, "Then it will be replanted. It will be planted and replanted until it grows. You will have a garden. I promise."

Anna could not say, "It's not the garden I want." She said only "Thank you," and began preparing dinner.

Shortly thereafter Charles Cloete was hired to manage the garden. Friendlier than Johanna, he smiled when Anna greeted him. However, warned by his master not to let her outside, he did not encourage conversation. He planted what he chose and as he could, but it failed always. And Anna, from

inside the house, stood watching as he smoked with the builders, drank tea and ate sandwiches.

In the growing mansion numerous large, empty rooms, not yet decorated, led on from one another. Anna followed them through the house, taking in their unfinished cement floors and the small cracks which were beginning to appear in corners. Many of the walls were damp after the heavy rains, and she put her hand against them, feeling the patches of moisture against her skin. With her hand to the wall, Anna listened to the waves coming in to the shore below. The steady ebb and flow echoed through the cement and into her arm, so that she felt as though she were taking on the rhythm of the sea. The rhythm echoed that of the freight trains she had watched and heard before, in the old house. But now the waves drowned out their sound and only sometimes, at night, when the wind blew from the north-east, could she hear the trundling of the wheels along the tracks; minutes of the night shunting away.

Several months passed in silence. Johanna and Charles arrived in the morning and left in the late afternoon. They shared nothing with Anna and she, frightened and silent, had access to their thoughts only through snatches of overheard conversation.

"She lives here among these white people," she heard Johanna say, "and now she thinks she is better than us. I heard her father was homeless and a drunk."

"She isn't so bad," Charles replied.

"What do you mean? Have you ever seen her do anything? She sits around all day, doing nothing."

"Isn't she supposed to be sick?"

"Trust me, there's nothing wrong with her. She's lazy and rich and thinks she is better than everyone else. I'd be ashamed of myself, living like a queen while others work themselves to death for me."

Anna went to her room and didn't know what to do then. She opened the cupboards and looked at her clothes, at the shoes, the dozen bottles of perfume; gifts from her husband. Then she lay on the bed and didn't get up until her husband came home. It was then that she begged him for the fresh

air and shells. And he had given in, because he could no longer ignore the pained expression on her face.

During the weeks of rain Anna had, for the first time in years, had the house to herself. There had been a respite from the builders who could not work in the wet, and, after the fire, she had persuaded the mayor to give Johanna and Charles time off to resettle. She felt terrified by the size of the house, by the freedom to wander from room to room without worrying about disturbing anyone. Overwhelmed, afraid, the empty rooms seemed larger and emptier than before. Her footsteps echoed, and other sounds she could not place seemed to come from every room. She found herself wishing for the return of the builders, for Charles and Johanna, for the sun. But mostly she wished for something she could not put a name to. Something outside of the empty rooms of the house. When the sun eventually did return, she went down to the beach as before, her step lighter, her face warm.

Few others went to her beach. Young children splashed in the water in the summer holidays, and from time to time one of the townspeople would wander onto the sand and look around them, but for the most part she had it to herself. The mayor had planned the location carefully, situating it in front of the shop so that those four or five of the aged who sat there day in and day out could keep an eye on her.

"Here she comes," they would say, "for her fresh air and shells."

Covered with broken mussel shells, the beach was too sharp to walk on shoeless. Under her feet the shells crunched loudly and made her uneasy so that she tried to step as softly as possible. She searched among them, bending down and picking through the shards, but it was rare to find any that were still whole.

At low tide she peered among the rocks, noticing orange stone worn smooth by waves and sand. Round pockets had been carved into the face of the rocks, and they now held snails or mussels and other sea creatures. Anemones, exposed to the sun, had contracted, pulling in their arms so that the stumps of their bodies were visible. She watched them, waiting for movement which did not come.

Where the beach met the pavement there was a rectangle of cement in which a concrete bench was placed. It had been ordered by the mayor and bore a plaque with her name and the date of its placement. Around the bench she kept a garden of potted plants. The wind from the ocean and the heavy salt air left them small and unyielding, and she began to wonder whether anything she planted would ever grow. After she had watered the plants, she sat on the bench and felt the hardness of the cement under her feet, and the coolness of the bench pushing through her dress. Looking out at the small beach with its semi-circle of rocks it was as though it was no beach at all, as though the sea beyond the rocks did not exist.

If she angled her neck correctly she could see part of the cliffs where the shacks of the upper town were spreading. Just behind and below, she knew, lay the small bay where the fishing boats were kept. Most of the boats were rotten and useless, their owners having given up, but in the water she could see two fishing boats, stark and small against the cliffs and the sea. She knew that after the fire many had made homes for themselves in the abandoned rooms of the fish factory and she could hear them now, calling to each other. She was not able to see them, there was no way of seeing them, and she could not make out what they were saying, there was only the slow carrying of snatched voices on the breeze. She was craning her head, tilting an ear up, her body rising from the bench. She remembered, then, the people watching her from the shop and so she turned her head back to the semi-circle of rocks, the sun overhead, the sea grey and still, her thighs firmly in place on the bench.

Her days were mostly empty. Avoiding the house as far as was possible, Anna did not know what to do beyond going to the beach. There was nothing else she could think of. After the fire, at the mayor's request, the ladies of the town had come together and organized a daily meal of soup and bread for those from the upper town, financed by a small government fund. She had asked to join them and they had welcomed her, yet when she arrived on the first day they had smiled at her and told her not to trouble herself. For a while she had tried to help, picking up empty dishes, carrying tureens, but they had insisted she do nothing and she had been placed on a chair against the wall to watch as the other women ladled up soup and handed out bread.

The town hall was newly built, bearing commemorative inscriptions both inside and outside with the mayor's name. No mud or dirt was to enter the hall, and in order to prevent such damage they had set up the trestle tables outside the hall. From eleven o'clock the queue started forming. Men from the lower town took it in turns to patrol the queue while others stood on their porches or on the pavement, their arms crossed. Their wives chattered and laughed, feeling safe, kind. The hungry stood in groups blowing on soup and chewing bread. Some turned and walked back up the steep hill with brimming mugs and bowls, taking what they had to share with the sick and the old.

From her bench Anna could hear the hum of the queue forming. She patted her pockets for the token shells and checked her plants one last time. As she passed the porch of the shop, she paused for their queries.

"Did you get many, Mrs Fortuin?"

"No, not many."

"Never mind. Perhaps the sea will bring more tonight."

"Perhaps."

"And the plants?"

"Oh, they grow at their own pace."

When she was out of earshot they began to murmur.

"A strange one that."

"So strange."

"So quiet."

"She never says anything."

"Yes, so shy."

"And young too."

"Yes, so young still."

"Where's the boy? I never see him anymore."

"Boarding school."

"That's the trouble. She misses him. A mother needs her child with her."

"That's true."

Anna entered the kitchen and he was there, sitting at the table, his head resting between his thumb and forefinger. She had not expected him and she was startled. She moved backwards through the door, her feet already on the steps outside when he lifted his head. She did not notice the girl at the table.

"Where have you been?" the mayor asked.

She did not reply, pointing only outwards.

He got up, lifting his jacket from the back of the chair and said, "This is the girl. She will be staying here until we find her a place. Put her in the outside room. Find out if she has a name. I can't make any headway with her."

When he spoke Anna bent her head back, and when he left the room through the further door she shrank back a little, as though he might brush past her in all that distance. After he had left she entered the room again. She stood beside the table and the girl watched her from the corner of her eye. Anna looked like a stranger to the room, as though she had never been in it before. A smell of fried eggs and milk came from the countertop. She moved from where she stood and filled the kettle, made tea. They sipped their tea, Anna holding her mug in both hands. At the sink water was dripping from the tap. Eventually the girl spoke, "My name is Sara."

And Anna looked up, surprised by her voice.

She took the girl to the outside room. It was separate from the house, a remainder from the previous owner. There were spider webs in the corner, and the curtains, when she opened them, released dust into the air. She felt annoyed with Johanna for not having cleaned here, and then she felt shamed by her annoyance. She held in her arms clean bedding and an old dress. The girl carried socks and shoes. After they put the covers on the bed they stood looking at it a while, rubbing the duvet smooth with their open hands.

"You're not from here?" Anna asked.

The girl shook her head.

"Me neither. I had never even seen the sea until the day after I was married."

She showed the girl into the small bathroom and ran the bathwater for her, pointing out the soap and shampoo, placing a towel on the lid of the toilet

seat. She went back into the bedroom and sat on the bed. The girl climbed into the bath and watched the yellow mud from her feet cloud out in the water. Anna felt uncertain about what to say. It seemed foolish to try and talk, to make conversation, when this girl was naked, tired, away from what she knew. "Where are you from?" she eventually asked.

"Nowhere now."

"And before?"

"I don't remember."

The girl washed her hair, cleaned her nails. She rubbed between each of her toes and she watched the steam settling on the mirror, on the tiles, on the rim of the bath.

"But would you go back?"

"No."

In the night Sara woke to hear the wind coming in off the sea. The doors and windows rattled and curtains were sucked in and out. The crashing of the waves on the shore was loud and she could not sleep. On the cliffs the shacks leaned back in the wind. Roofs began to shudder. One shack, built too close to the edge, creaked and parted, its walls unclasping before dropping away down the cliff face. Those inside had managed to push past their falling home and stood in alarm in the dark, the sky wide and black overhead, their faces cold in the wind. In the days that followed, the individual parts of that home, the aluminium siding, the planks of wood, the tarpaulin, could be seen moving down the cliff, getting snagged on edges and in bushes, until settling in the gorge below. A gorge no person could descend, above a beach, four metres wide and pebbled, which no person had ever touched.

In the morning they ate breakfast together. The three of them sat in silence, the scraping of knives and forks the only sound in the room. Sara sat in the same chair as the day before. By now she knew the pattern of scars on the table. After the meal the mayor thanked his wife and left for his office, a small building, white, next to the town hall. He did not kiss his wife goodbye and she did not raise her head to acknowledge his departure. At the door,

turning, he looked to where she sat as though he expected a late response, but there was none. He closed the door and left.

Anna cleared the table and began washing the dishes. Suds wet the rolled-up sleeves of her cardigan. The girl remained seated at the table.

"I am going to the beach," Anna said.

The girl nodded.

"You could come? There's not much else to do."

The girl kept her eyes on the table and listened as the woman rinsed a plate. The porcelain clinked against the sink and the girl thought to herself that it was a long time since she had heard that sound.

"I would rather stay here if I can. Maybe tomorrow."

Anna put the last plate on the drying rack and passed the cloth over the sink.

"That's fine. We all want to be alone sometimes."

Later, after Anna had left, Sara stayed in the kitchen. She enjoyed the size of the room; four walls, a high ceiling, windows and two doors. The windows were closed and no air entered the room. She felt warm and contained on all sides. From the chair she counted up the number of cupboards, drawers. She tried to measure the width and height of the room by sight. On the floor under the table were the scratch marks of chairs having been moved in and out. Under her chair, she noticed, there had been fewer scrapings. When she was sure that enough time had passed, she approached the fridge. She found a slab of cheese and bit off a chunk, she ate four tomatoes whole and drank orange juice from the bottle. In a cupboard she found biltong and in another she found a small fruitcake. It had been some time since she had been able to eat as much as she wanted. The taste of food, of all different types of food, made her mouth ache. She filled it up, kept filling, chewing and swallowing fiercely. On a shelf above the kettle she came across a tin of hot chocolate powder. She grabbed a fistful of the powder and put it in her mouth. It puffed out into her throat, making her cough, before softening on her tongue. When she looked up Willem was standing at the back door. One of his hands was on the handle and in the other he was holding a hat. Brown spittle traced the shape of her mouth, spreading as she tried to swallow. He noticed a smudge on her neck, her hand still in the tin. He

remembered the girl then as he had seen her the day before, standing among the graves. He had never seen her before that and she had meant nothing to him, among the dead. Her body had been an outline, her face invisible. Now she stood before him, with her open mouth and he could not blink. There was her brown open round mouth. Her mouth and her eyes. Her eyes and her cheeks. The room had fallen away around him and he could see only that there were about twelve steps between them. He gripped his hat and took one step forward.

“I was looking for the mayor.”

The rain came again in the late morning. In the week of sun the windowpanes had met with salt and sand carried on the breeze. The rough shapes of past raindrops were sketched on the panes, clouding the glass. Earlier the mayor had hunched at the window, peering through the stains and through the gap between the two houses behind his office. He could see the bench where his wife sat, the blur of shoulders and hair. She had been motionless, remaining so for a long time. His back had started to ache. Later, once the rain began, he had drawn the blinds. He did not want to know if she stayed.

Now he was making phone calls. For four days he had been phoning various government branches and organizations, explaining the damage done by the recent fire, the need for provisions, housing. Each time his call had been redirected. Eventually he had been told about forms to fill in. He had stayed up all night filling them in, returning them by fax before sunrise. On this morning he began by phoning those who had not returned his calls. They were out to lunch, in a meeting. Those he did speak to said much the same: “Yes, yes, we understand. We understand, but there is no money. We are already giving you as much as we can.”

He reminded them about the forms he had faxed and he was told, “Yes, we have the forms, but there is no money.”

He asked if there were other forms. “Yes,” he was told, “but there is still no money.” His situation was not unique, he was told. The people would have to make do with what they could, they said.

“It’s an emergency,” he said, “We are running out of food.”

"When you run out of food," they said, "we will send a helicopter with supplies. More than that we cannot give you."

At noon he received a phone call from his publisher, reporting on the success of the launch. A number of journalists had been present and had expressed an interest in interviewing him and the professor. A television news crew wanted to do a documentary about Soutbek. Magazines were preparing to run articles with photo spreads of the area. Remembering the burnt houses, the dirt and the chaos, the mayor's initial feeling of excitement turned to one of dismay. He could not allow the town to be seen this way. Everything would be ruined. It was impossible with the roads closed and the return of the rain, impossible, impossible to hope to repair anything in time. He was frustrated, discouraged, unable to bear the humiliation of the upper town any longer.

The phone on his desk rang. It was a reporter from the *Daily Sentinel*, asking him about the book, about what it revealed about South African history. He read his responses from notes the professor had made for him concerning misconceptions about the impossibility of peaceful co-existence, not only between black and white, but between people of indigenous tribes as well.

"Soutbek is the *omphalos*," he said, stumbling over the word, "the birth place of assimilation and integration."

"But why does it matter now?" the reporter asked, "Apartheid ended over a decade ago. Do people really care about that sort of thing anymore?"

The mayor faltered. "No," he said. "No, you do not understand the significance of this history. South Africa is not only about apartheid; it is not only about black and white. Remember we are the Rainbow Nation, a nation made up of the blood of Malay slaves, of Dutch, of French, English, of the Khoi and of the San and all the tribes of South Africa, and many nationalities beyond our own borders. Do you see," he continued, "that is what Soutbek represents. It represents the entire past of South Africa. South Africa as we know it, as a rainbow society was not born at Cape Town, it was born here."

The interviewer thanked the mayor, his voice smug, "I will send a photographer for a follow up piece once the roads are passable."

"Listen," the mayor said, "Listen, you might not think this is important, but it is."

"Of course it is," the interviewer replied and then hung up.

The mayor felt helpless. He looked at the notes in front of him, tried to remember the answers he had given. When Willem arrived he was sitting in the half-dark, listening to the rain falling.

"I see you haven't found the girl's family," Willem said. He reached for the light switch. The room smelled cold, of cement and paint. There were no pictures on the wall and the carpet was too small so that flecks of paint could be seen where the wall and floor met. The desk, large and mahogany, was in the centre, bearing a green and gold lamp, a desk calendar and a telephone. There was an armchair in front of the desk, but Willem did not sit in it. The office was new, built along with the town hall, separated from it by a narrow path and a line of daisy bushes. They could hear the chatter from the food queue, the voice of a man shouting, "Keep in line, keep in line!"

The mayor sighed. He had forgotten about the girl. Gesturing in the direction of his house he said, "She won't talk. I need to phone social services, I just haven't had a chance. And now this fucking rain again."

He looked at the closed blinds and then down at his desk. After a minute he remembered Willem, "Was there something you wanted?"

Willem told him about the shack that had fallen from the cliff the night before.

"For God's sake, can't something be done about that mess?" He was standing now and fiddling with the cords of the blinds.

"You're the mayor," Willem said.

"What do you expect me to do? This is a rural community. We have no money. I gave out blankets, we're supplying them with food. This fucking rain. No one can get here. The roads are closed. We're going to run out of food. I've made phone calls. The government says we already get a food subsidy, they have no more money for us. But how does a subsidy help us if we can't get to food to buy it? They say they'll helicopter food in if it continues, but only if it is an emergency. What is more of an emergency than this?"

"And the new hall?"

"What about it?"

"Couldn't people be housed there temporarily?"

The mayor's face showed his horror, "It's brand new for God's sake!"

"People are sleeping on the beach without roofs or walls and now the rain is back. They need cover."

"Let's just wait until this afternoon. Maybe the rain will stop."

Willem did not reply. They looked at each other.

"And afterwards?" Willem asked.

"Afterwards?"

"When the rain stops. When they can get to us. What then? There are no jobs. There's no money. Since the factory closed..."

"Listen, I do what I can. You know that. We employ as many as we can."

"The municipality employs six men. What about the rest?"

"Things will change. People are already phoning about the book."

Willem snorted, "And you think a book will change the fact that we have nothing?"

"You'll see," the mayor replied, quiet, patient. "People will come. Our town will be famous and people will come from all over just to see it."

"Because of a book?" Willem laughed. "How can a book do that?"

The mayor reached into his drawer, which held several copies of the *History*. "Here," he said, holding the book out to Willem, "Read it. Maybe then you will see."

Willem remained standing with his hands at his sides.

"Take it, take it," the mayor urged. "It's free."

Willem reached forward and took the book, and from behind him there was a knock at the door. A man, small and thin, in a grey tracksuit, entered the room.

"Ah, Terence, nice to see you. I have just been on the phone with Hilda about the launch. Willem, you know the professor?"

Willem nodded his greeting.

The professor nodded back.

"The professor and I have some things to discuss."

Willem nodded again at both men, "I'll be back at three if the rain hasn't stopped."

"Certainly."

Willem did not like the professor. It was no secret that he had been allied with the National Party, working as one of their disciples at his university. When it became common knowledge that the professor and Mayor Fortuin were locked away for hours at a time in the mayor's office, the light burning well into the night, a great mystery presented itself to the town, for though he had never said anything outright, it was widely known that the professor had not been pleased when Pieter Fortuin, a coloured man, was elected mayor of Soutbek. Thinking they could get the answers to the mystery from the mayor's wife, the inhabitants went in twos and threes to visit her. Anna, who had never had visitors before, was overwhelmed by the sudden rush of goodwill.

"Oh, we thought we'd come visit you, since you spend so much time all alone. We've noticed that your husband is so busy lately."

"Such a busy man. Always working, working."

"Yes," Anna replied, "He takes his job seriously."

"Oh, certainly, certainly."

A silence filled the room. Everyone waited, sipping their tea, looking at her expectantly. Someone asked, "When is your son coming?"

"I'm not sure. They have their holidays."

"What is his name again?"

Anna paused, "David. His name is David."

She looked at the lounge in which she never sat or received guests. She knew what was coming and she hated these women with their pencilled-on eyebrows and permed hair.

"You must look forward to seeing him, since your husband has been so busy lately."

She did not reply.

"What is it that he is doing? We see him and the professor together all the time?"

"I can't tell you that," Anna said, "I don't know."

It was not a lie.

After the visit she went to the beach. The sky was quite clear. Two young girls were playing in the waves, a ritual of sorts: the older screeching at the sight of oncoming waves before the younger one was allowed her chance to cry out. After each scream they turned and ran from the water, until, once the water was only a thin line behind them on the shore, they returned to it, arms up, a princess step over the rim, and a curtsy in the already receding water. Repeatedly, without any change, the younger followed the older. Always the smaller one, just behind, watched before she imitated. Anna was annoyed by this ritual, the religious following of the older by the younger. She wished they would stop. She disliked the way they were playing. It seemed brutal to her. It was unnatural and cruel. She wanted them off her beach.

Without exception, on Monday and Friday mornings at 9am, the professor walked down the hill to the store with a shopping list that had remained unaltered for more than fifteen years. His purchases consisted of a dozen eggs, four tins of baked beans, a 750g box of corn flakes, four litres of long life milk, six apples and a packet of wine gums. As he passed their houses, the inhabitants of the lower town stopped in their gardens or stood still at their windows to watch him. They looked specifically at his toenails; yellow horns sticking out of his leather sandals; and his bare ankles, visible below the seam of his trousers, white with scales of dry skin. There were liver spots on his hands, wrinkles on his brow, his hands, his neck and earlobes. Old age had come to him almost as a surprise, and he had reacted by choosing to neglect those things which he was no longer able to do for himself. Without family or friends there was no alternative. His neighbours gossiped that he rarely threw out his rubbish or did laundry. Those who happened to come near him spoke of his old man smell; the smell of aging armpits, of secret hollows and folds in the skin. Yet they found it reassuring, this litany of attributes of the genius, as it confirmed in their minds that what he carried in his head, his thoughts and ideas, mattered more to him than those habits of cleanliness which they themselves lived by.

As April and May passed, rumours began to spread that the mystery work of the mayor and professor was a book. No one could think what it might be about, for the professor was an expert in South African pre-colonial tribal

history and the mayor, as far as they knew, had never studied or shown any interest in studying. Guesses were made, but there could be no certainty. They watched more closely as the professor walked down the hill. They sidled up to him in the store, as though the secret could be sniffed on him, or simply discovered through the sight of him. He did not return their greetings, ignored their queries after his health and general activities. Communicating in grunts and nods, he made it clear that contact was a favour, a painful favour, bestowed unwillingly. And they admired him all the more for it.

Sickly as a child, confined to his bed much of the time, the professor had never mastered the skill of interacting with others. Barely three years old at the time of his father's death, Terence had become the sole object of his mother's attention. His father had worked for the post office for a salary that was small but tolerable for a family of three. After his death there was no money other than a pension that his mother received from the state. Poverty forced them to accept municipal housing in one of the poorer white suburbs of Cape Town. As Terence was too ill to be left alone, it was impossible for his mother to work. Without warning, at any time, Terence's heart might begin to race, colour drain from his face, and from his chest a laboured wheezing might begin. Mrs Pearson doted on her son with his scrawny legs and downy body, criss-crossed with blue veins. She protected him and nursed him, cradling his head on her bosom, loving him. With no means of changing it, Terence's life was small. There was his mother. There were his lungs. There was very little else.

In those days, despite the poverty of the neighbourhood, the properties were large, with wide open gardens. From his bed, through the window, Terence watched the children playing outside. He envied them their healthy lungs and red cheeks. His repeated attacks of breathlessness preoccupied him as he saw, increasingly, what other children were capable of. In his dreams the weakness in his lungs came to him, so that even in sleep he was unable to escape the failure of his body. Day and night the weight of his chest was a nightmare to him. He was ashamed, ashamed of himself and his failure.

Added to this, worse than anything, worse, far worse, than anything else, was the horse manure. On Fridays the steady clapping of hooves could be heard through the streets, accompanied by shrill cries of "Yyyyyysterrrrr,

iiiiirooooooon.” Dragged from suburb to suburb by a small horse, the any-old-iron cart, rusting and creaking, came by. Terence’s mother, believing in the efficacy of home remedies, followed the horse through the streets, waiting for it to defecate. This fresh, warm manure she layered onto the naked pale chest of her son, spreading it over his ribs, his nipples, before binding it tight with strips of linen.

“That will bring out the poisons, my love. That will make you feel better.”

There was no end to the smell. In his nostrils, always, the stench of horseshit, and despite his mother’s carefulness, strings of hay and grass remained behind, under the covers, in the space between his mattress and his bedstead. Mrs Pearson running home with a shopping bag full of horse manure became a common sight, so that on Friday mornings the children of the neighbourhood massed outside Terence’s bedroom window singing:

*Shit face! Shit face!*

*Come and play shit face!*

*The sun is in the sky*

*And the horse is passing by!*

With time, as he grew older and his health began to improve, the doctor took pity on the undersized boy. He advised Mrs Pearson that she might allow her son to play with other children for a short period each day. It was unnatural, he said, for a boy to remain indoors all the time. Agreeing, hoping to see her son blossom, his mother arranged for him to be included in some of the neighbourhood children’s games. But it was difficult for Terence. Smaller than he should be, always faintly smelling of horse shit, gasping quietly, he was unable to take part. He stood and watched as they played soccer, as they climbed trees; he did not know how to join in, and he understood his failure at childhood as a punishment for a crime he had no memory of committing.

However in the weeks that followed, a spate of cowboy flicks had captured the imagination of the neighbourhood boys, and Terence, an obvious and easy target, was given a role in their games. Seized and readied for hanging as an outlawed Red Indian, his captors stripped off his shirt, baring a

pale chest and weak arms. They covered him in mud and stuck a guinea fowl feather in his hair, making him whoop an Indian war cry before sliding his head into a hangman's noose. As the rope tightened around his neck, Terence looked down at the boys below. Their faces were turned towards him, each of them staring at him, and he knew that he had achieved an unnameable victory.

But soon their faces faded, and he began to gasp. He knew all too well the tightening sensation around his throat and the rush of heat into his lungs as he tried to breathe evenly. Terence had failed. He knew he had failed. His head hanging, his eyes unseeing, he heard women screaming, and later, when he woke up he was at home in bed. The scab from the rope formed a necklace around his neck, a humiliating reminder of his failure, which remained for months after his mother had banned him from playing with others.

Having left the mayor's office, swearing under his breath at the professor, Willem stood outside the town hall and looked at the incline of the hill, the steep road. It was still raining. Above him the sky was grey and behind him the sea was grey and green. The black of the street was steaming in the rain and he was beginning to feel the wet through his clothes. He was cold. He was cold and he was getting wetter, but he did not want to move. The image of the girl's face could not be removed from his mind. There was no excuse he could think of for seeing her again. He turned his eyes towards the beach, to where the form of the mayor's wife remained unchanging on her bench. He looked again back up the hill. He walked a little way until he reached a tree, and then, patting the wet pavement, sat down under it to wait. The book the mayor had given him was heavy on his lap. Willem sheltered it with his hands, careful to protect the cover as far as he could from the rain.

## I. Rumours of Gold

For the first two years after Jan van Riebeeck's arrival in 1652 as Commander of the Cape refreshment station, nothing was known of the interior further than 100 miles. Concerned more with profit than with geographical exploration, the Verenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie (VOC) did not encourage journeys into the hinterland. Van Riebeeck and his men focused their attention on building a fort and growing produce to feed the passing sailors. However, cultivation of crops was difficult, and the local inhabitants would only trade their diseased and old livestock. Van Riebeeck grew frustrated with what he described as "*een arm ende ellendich leven*" (a poor and pitiful life). As his frustration mounted, he began to look for new ways of making the refreshment station a success, in order to speed his promotion and removal from the Cape. He had heard, through travelogues, rumours and idle gossip, of the fabled land of Monomotapa which was believed to be situated somewhere to the far north of the Cape. Monomotapa supposedly boasted the river Spiritu Sancto, upon the banks of which numerous wealthy cities were located, among others, the legendary Vigiti Magna. It was from these cities that the Portuguese were rumoured to acquire much gold. Van Riebeeck requested permission from the Heeren XVII to send a small party into the interior in order to ascertain whether arable land could be found, trade with the indigenous people could be established, and most importantly, whether the fabled Monomotapa could be reached. Permission was granted and van Riebeeck went about assembling a party of volunteers for "*een tocht na Monomotapa*" (an expedition to Monomotapa). There was no shortage of willing bodies, for in those days the VOC held the promise of adventure, and many young men joined as private soldiers in order to lay claim to some of that adventure. Van Riebeeck drew a map for the men, in which he indicated that the city where the emperor of Monomotapa kept his treasure was 828 miles northeast and 322 miles west from the Cape. The map was based on information gained from accounts by Martinus Martinio, a

Spanish priest who was also a celebrated traveller and cartographer.

Unfortunately for van Riebeeck, the closest Martinio had been to Africa was when he passed the Cape by sea in 1653 on a voyage to India, without even setting foot on shore. As a result, van Riebeeck's map consisted of various cities and rivers which did not exist.

Prior to the commencement of the expedition, van Riebeeck had learnt from Eva about a wealthy and civilized people called the Namaquas, who lived in the North. Eva, a "*Caapse Hottentoo*" (Cape Hottentot), who had dwelled at the fort since a child and had been converted to Christianity and then baptized Eva, was used by members of the Compagnie as a translator in their dealings with local tribes. According to Eva, the Namaquas bartered with elephant's tusks and had "*bestiael in groote meenichte*" (livestock in great quantities). She also said that they were adorned with much gold and copper jewellery, which led van Riebeeck to believe that they had contact with the inhabitants of Monomotapa. Consequently, he instructed the expedition party to search first for the Namaquas in order to win them over with gifts. They were then to persuade them to bring their livestock to the fort for trade. Furthermore, the explorers were to find out from the Namaquas about the location of Monomotapa, and request a guide or guides from amongst them to lead the way.

Having been given their instructions, and with the promise of double pay for any travelling done further than what their provisions allowed, the party set out. This was the first of six expeditions made during the period of 1660 to 1664 in order to attempt to persuade the Namaqua into trade and to locate the mythical Monomotapa.

To the right of the Mayor's Wife's Beach stretched a long shoreline. It continued, partly straight, towards a cliff and then it turned a bend and continued on, out of sight. Anna was not certain about the bend. Perhaps it did end there after all, at that cliff and its mist. But she did not want to believe that that was the end and so she imagined the bend and the bends to follow further along the coastline. She imagined the land, coming in flat from the distant mountains, with different plants, people, animals. Her own home had been further inland. There had been mountains at the end of every view, and she found, now, this vast openness on all sides always unexpected. They had lived on a farm, her father working as a labourer, her mother helping in the kitchen of the main house. Their home had been small; a square of cement brick with a flat roof of aluminium sheets. Inside there was a kitchen in which they ate and sat, and another room in which they slept. In the long nights of the summer months when the heat was unbearable, the children would take the mattresses up onto the roof to sleep. There they lay, two to a mattress, watching the stars above them, hearing the barking of bat-eared foxes, until they fell asleep with their arms and legs spread out, careful not to touch each other in the heat. In the morning they woke to the sunrise and the bleating of sheep in the fields. They saw little of their parents who worked long hours, but on Saturday nights they would gather around their mother, watching for the staggering form of their father returning from drinking. She had taught them long ago to climb up into the thorn trees or onto the roof when they saw him coming, but from time to time one of them was caught and would be beaten along with their mother. At church on Sunday mornings, they would be among the other wives and children bearing bruises and welts, sitting in the back pews, their faces drawn, their heads down. And at home, still drunk and stinking, their father would be unconscious on the bed, sleeping away the hours meant for the Lord.

At the age of thirteen, tired of the beatings, Anna had tried to run away. She had walked for a quarter of an hour through fields and grazing sheep when she came upon a fence of barbed wire. Small wisps of sheep's wool clung to the barbs. She had looked along the length of the fence, seeing that it extended on and on in both directions. Ahead of her, past the field on the other side of the fence, she had seen another fence, and beyond that another.

And as she had looked around to the land within view, she had seen that it was all fenced in. Rows and rows of fences cut across the landscape. She had realized then that the land was all taken, that it was all owned and delineated into sections, and that she had no part of it. She had turned, and walked back to the small house on the outskirts of the farm.

Anna had known Pieter all her life. A friend of her father's, every few months he had come to visit, rousing the dust as he turned his car onto the dirt roads of the farm they lived on. The family had never known anyone who wasn't white to own a car, and they admired him and feared him a little. At the first sign of his approach in the distance, the smaller children climbed onto the roof in order to follow the progression of the cloud of dust, while others ran out to meet it. They clamoured around the car as he pulled up; some afraid to touch it, others stroking the dust from the bonnet and doors.

At that time Pieter earned money by travelling across the country for months on end, selling goods. He had a system of arrangements with warehouse men, who, for a neat price, would fill his car with as much merchandise as it could take. Loaded like that, he trekked from rural town to rural town, exchanging, selling, and dealing until his car was empty and his pockets were full. By the time he arrived at the farm he would be exhausted. He slept for long portions of each day of his visit. In the afternoons he took the children for a short drive or let them sit in his car, where they took turns behind the steering wheel.

From an early age Anna sought out his company. She followed him, asking him questions about his trips, begging for stories about the land beyond the fences and the mountains and the sheep. He indulged her, and she spent many afternoons listening to him talk. With time she found herself disquieted by his departures, restless in anticipation of his arrivals. In the months of his absence she became more and more sombre. With each of his visits it grew increasingly difficult to be near him. Her palms felt hollow, her head hurt. One afternoon they walked out into the fields together. As they walked, he touched her arm.

"Where did you get these bruises?" he asked.

Anna looked at the blue marks next to his fingers. It was clear that they had been made by a gripping hand. There was nothing she could say that

would conceal that truth. She glanced up into Pieter's eyes, her bottom lip quivering, "Please...."

He did not fail to recognize the appeal and dropped his hand to his side.

"You know," he said, walking on, "we have a lot in common. I also had an unhappy childhood."

He began telling her about the town he came from beside the sea. He told her that his father had been a fisherman in Soutbek for decades; that he had grown up knowing the smell of fish and seawater. He told her that his father had gone out fishing one morning and two days later his body had washed up on the rocks, his throat cut. There had been no official investigation into the death. That year the fish factory had raised their quota per individual fisherman and the new system had caused fighting. Fish were not as plentiful as before. Longer hours were needed on the water in order to get a decent catch. If they did not meet the quota they would not be paid, their children would not be fed. At times men had fought each other over a single fish. He told Anna that since the day he saw his father's body on the rocks beside the factory, he had known that he would never be a fisherman. He told her that he was working hard to keep it that way. He would never allow himself to be in a situation where he had his throat cut.

"I'll never be caught out like that," he said. "I'll be the one cutting throats. I will not be poor. I will not work myself to death so that my family starves while some rich man gets richer!"

Anna nodded only in reply, feeling unsettled by the vehemence of his speech.

"I have great plans," he continued, "but I am biding my time. Don't they say that everything comes to those who wait?"

"Maybe. I've never heard it, though."

Uncertain of what to say to the angry man beside her, she began walking in a different direction. He followed her, and for a time there was silence. As the minutes passed he tried to take hold of her arm again. Anna pulled away. There was something brutal about the touch of his fingers on her skin. Pieter sighed and turned from her. "Wait there," he said, bending down towards a tortoise that he had spotted walking through the scrub.

"Don't!" she called out as he lifted the tortoise, afraid of what he might do to it.

"Wait there, I said."

He bent down again and picked an orange flower that was growing nearby. Then, facing her, he put the tortoise on the ground, and placed the flower on the tortoise's back. For a minute it stayed still, its limbs evenly tucked in, but soon it began to walk towards her where the unsteady rhythm of its movements rocked the shell against her feet. She felt surprised, relieved at this small gesture and stooped to pick the flower off the tortoise's back, watching as it continued treading on. Anna laughed then, with her head back and the wind blowing her hair to the side of her face. He came forward and kissed her, as her hair whipped against his ear.

When Pieter left the next morning she had been too shy to speak to him and in the intervening months she walked around, both elated and crushed. It was at dusk several months later that the children noticed the cloud of dust approaching. She ran into the house and tried to smooth her hair in front of the mirror. In it she saw her face, small, her cracked lips, the sharp bones of her chest and shoulders. She wanted to cry. She looked at the room behind her. It was filled with mattresses, worn clothes, blankets. On the wall next to the mirror were a collection of framed photographs of the dead, their faces just visible after years of exposure to the sun. The photographs did not belong to her family; they had been there when her father and mother had moved into the house, already nailed to the wall, already somewhat bleached. There was nothing to tie Anna to these people, other than a single wall of the house. Yet there was something she understood in their expressions of self-consciousness above their high collars, their starched Sunday bests, and she could not prevent herself from envying them their clean faces, their neatly tied-back hair. The sound of his car neared. There was nothing else in the room; nothing with which she could make herself look better. She glanced at her reflection once more before climbing through the window and hiding behind the house.

Night had fallen by the time she allowed herself to enter the house again. Pieter was sitting at the kitchen table with her parents and the children. He nodded at her, not interrupting his speech.

"I've stopped travelling," he was saying. "After years of hard work I finally have enough money to put down on a house in the white part of Soutbek. They can't keep me out anymore. Things are changing and I am going to be part of that change." He paused to make sure that everyone was listening. "I have great plans," he said. "I won't be kept poor and starving. I won't allow myself to be poor."

His voice had been steadily rising, and he stood up then, motioning with both hands. His gesture took in the small room, the children, the rest of the house, the whole farm, "You don't have to live like this. There's no reason. Things are changing. Look at me! Look what I have done for myself."

Her father grunted. Both men were drunk, she could tell. The smaller children, huddled around the mother, stared at Pieter wide-eyed. Uneasily her mother reached out her hands to comfort them.

"Look at you! You live like an animal. You work like an animal; your children live like animals! You beat them like they are animals. For what? For what? For no money, for a dop once a week? What kind of life is that? How can you be satisfied to live like that?"

There was a loud crash and then her father was on his feet, the chair knocked over. He was roaring, but she could not make out any words. They; her mother, the children, herself; looked on. They made no sound. He moved towards the other man, his face livid, his chest heaving. He was drunk and he was roaring. As he roared and moved, his arms reaching out for Pieter, his mouth open, her father's body suddenly collapsed beneath him and he was on the floor. He was on the floor and clutching at the table legs, at the legs of Pieter. He could not raise himself up off the ground. There was no way of getting up. He was humiliated and drunk. On his knees, crawling and stumbling, crying as he went, he made his way to the door, and out into the night.

The farmer arrived in the morning, climbing out of his bakkie with a shotgun in one hand. In the back of the bakkie sat her father. Above his left temple was a deep gash. His face was black with blood and his shirt was torn. Blood of a brighter colour covered his clothes. His head was down. He did not raise his eyes. From the house his wife and children came forward, afraid. The farmer addressed her mother, "This son of a bitch killed one of my sheep

last night. Then he tore it apart like a fucking savage and danced around the main house spreading its innards everywhere.”

Anna’s mother clutched at the children around her. “Baas,” she said, “I’m sorry Baas. He had a dop in.”

“I don’t care how much he had to drink! He tried to set my house alight. He shouted obscene things at my wife and children.”

“Baas, I’m sorry Baas.”

“He’s a savage!”

Her mother wrung her hands in her apron. Anna looked to where her father sat and then back at the farmer. She looked around for Pieter, who she saw standing in the doorway. He had not come outside; on his face an expression of disgust. She knew that she could not appeal to him for help.

The farmer pointed at her father where he sat on the back of the bakkie, “Get down from there. I’m sick of drunken shits like you. You and your family can get the fuck off my land. You’re not welcome on this property anymore. Pack your things and fuck off. Do you understand what I am saying?” he cried out to the faces staring back at him. “I am telling you to get the fuck off my land and never come back!”

He got into the driver’s seat and rolled down his window. Then he looked back at the small group, “You have until sunset. If you aren’t gone by then, you can expect me to set the dogs on all of you.”

Her mother pulled her apron over her head and began to cry. They had no place to go. They knew no one who would take them in. Her father sat on a rock in front of the house and would speak to nobody. Pieter sat in his car with the doors locked, letting no one in. He made no offer to help. Anna went into the house; began putting things into piles, folding clothes into small bundles. There was no other choice but to pack. She worked steadily at gathering their possessions. Though there was little, she was uncertain how they would carry it all. Later, looking out of the window, she saw Pieter and her father talking together with grim faces. Yet it seemed that they had made peace, for Pieter was handing her father something and they were shaking hands. She turned away to continue packing.

Towards noon Pieter came to find her, leading her outside. Under the acacia tree he took her hands and pulled her towards him.

"We are going to be married," he said. "I spoke to your father. And we are to be married, if you are willing. I will give you a home and I will look after you. There will be nothing to trouble you anymore."

Above her the sun was bright and the white thorns of the acacia tree looked sharp, bone-like. Behind her the crumbling house, the mattresses still on the roof, was silent and small. Around her all was quiet; the deep long fields, the mountains high in the sunlight. She looked at everything, and she said, "Yes."

In the late afternoon they stood outside the house. Their backs, even those of the smallest children, laden with possessions. Her father still wore the torn, bloodied shirt. Her mother's eyes were red from crying and she wiped them on her sleeves. The children looked frightened, very small. And suddenly the full weight of what was happening was upon Anna. She had not thought of this. She had not really thought of this happening. She had thought only of her own uncertainty, only of her own self. She felt frantic, sick. She turned to him, "Can't they...?"

"No," he said. "There is no room."

She began to cry, "But... can't they just...?"

"No," he said again. "No."

The bare feet of her brothers and sisters were lined up before her. She thought of them walking in the dust, on the roads, through bushes, endlessly, without destination.

"They have nowhere to go," she said.

"This is what your father chose for himself," he said. "I have my own plans. There is no place for them."

She said her goodbyes and climbed into the car. As they drove away from the small home and the farm, she tried to look back, but the dust on the road behind them was too dense for any view to remain.

"I gave your father money," he said. "They won't starve."

On the bench, Anna became aware of the rain falling on her. In the distance she could see strange fannings of orange where the rain had caused rivulets to wash soil down from the land onto the shore. Gulls rose and fell

over the waves. She gathered her watering can and shells and began walking home. In the road near the house she saw Willem, sitting with the book.

“You’re wet,” she said.

“So are you.”

She wiped her hand over the front of her dress, as though this movement would dry her.

“Come in for some tea,” she said.

The kitchen was empty, the house silent. He sat at the table while she went to the outside room and looked through the window. The girl was asleep on the bed, her legs curled to her chin, her mouth open. She returned to the kitchen and made the tea, placed biscuits on a plate. They drank in silence. At every sound he turned his head to the door, but she did not appear. After his tea he smiled and thanked her, walking home in the rain, forgetting his conversation with the mayor and the homeless still on the beach.

University of Cape Town

## II. The Quests for Monomotapa

The first expedition left the Cape on 12 November 1660 and did not return until 20 January the following year. The party consisted of 12 soldiers and 2 translators, under the leadership of Jan Danckaert. Sadly, Danckaert proved to be an inept leader. He had been chosen due to his experience in travelling through Italy, but this did not assist him in the sparse terrain of the western interior of South Africa. Very little is remarkable about this journey, other than the fact that the party came upon a river where they sighted up to 300 elephants, naming it therefore "*Oliphants reviere*" (Elephants River). They believed this river to be the Spiritu Sancto. After numerous days of travel, the explorers espied "*de vuyren van de Namaquas*" (the fires of the Namaqua), but due to lack of food they were unable to travel further and were compelled to return home. Van Riebeeck viewed the expedition as an utter failure, blaming the men for insubordination and Danckaert for poor leadership: "*de reyse weder genoehsaem vruchteloos ... uytgevaleen*" (the journey turned out to be fruitless).

However, the failure did not prevent van Riebeeck from immediately gathering a new team. Ten days after the return of the first company, the second left. Under the leadership of Corporal Pieter Cruijthoff, their mission was to establish facts and find out more about the Namaqua. This they did, recording that the Namaqua were 700 strong, with up to 7 000 livestock. The travellers feasted with them and asked the king, Akembie, to come to the fort for trading purposes. As a parting gift the men were given a goat, an animal which they had not yet seen at the Cape. They returned on 11 March 1661, and van Riebeeck greatly rewarded them for their success.

Again, ten days later a third team was sent out. This time the leader was Pieter van Meerhoff, a junior surgeon, who had been on the previous two expeditions. The party was unable to locate the Namaqua, but they did encounter a group of Grigriqua who had many copper ornaments. After enquiring about these ornaments, van Meerhoff was informed that they came

from a town a month's journey away. This was a lie on the part of the Grigriquas, but van Meerhoff was fooled, and it confirmed in his mind the presence of the mythical Vigiti Magna.

As time passed, there was no sign of the Namaqua coming to the fort to trade. Not wanting to travel during the winter, as rains would swell the rivers and make them impassable; van Riebeeck sent the next expedition into the interior on 14 November 1661. They returned 3 months later on 13 February 1662. The importance placed on this particular journey is clear from the choice of group leader, namely Pieter Everaert, the head of the militia at the Cape. Again, the party encountered the Grigriqua and was told that the Namaqua were far in the interior and could not be reached in the dry season due to lack of water. Noticing that the Oliphants River ebbed and flowed, Everaert followed it to its mouth and reported (incorrectly) that it flowed into an inland sea, rather than the Atlantic Ocean.

In 1662, van Riebeeck's long wished for relief from his position as Commander of the Cape occurred and he was succeeded by Zacharias Wagenaar. The Heeren XVII instructed Wagenaar: "*Namaquas wederom op te soecken ende voorts de groote revier Vigiti Magna ende omliggende vaste plaatsen aan te doen*" (To seek the Namaqua again and to explore further the great river Vigiti Magna and surrounding areas). Following in the footsteps of the previous commander, Wagenaar chose Pieter Cruijthoff as group leader. The fifth expedition into the interior commenced on 21 October 1662 and ended 1 February 1663. This was the first expedition to take a wagon, and they found this way of travelling difficult in the rough terrain. When the explorers met the Namaqua they were informed that they were at war with the Numaqua, and demanded assistance from the Dutch. The party declined to get involved in the war and was consequently denied further northerly passage by the Namaqua. The party tried by means of subterfuge to trick the Namaqua but they were caught out and attacked. Injured and ill, they returned home.

The final of the six expeditions was sent out nearly a year after the previous. The men were given strict instructions to fight the Namaqua if need

be, for it now became crucial to find the mythical city. They were also told to bring back as much livestock as possible for the *"Indische retourschepen aenstaande jaer"* (the ships returning from India the following year). On their journey they saw *"twee camelen"* (two camels: these are probably giraffes): *"waer door wij presumeerden dat wij niet verre van de Rivier Vigiti Magna waren, wandt ick had voordesen wel hooren seggen van de Namaquas als dat daer omtrent de rivier sulcke beesten zich onthiel"* (Whereby we presumed that we were not far from the river Vigiti Magna because I had previously heard from the Namaqua that there are such beasts in the vicinity of the river). However, their wagon was burned, their supplies stolen, and they were desperately parched. They had no choice but to return to the fort. The trip was considered a vast letdown.

This final failure ended northern exploration for a time and one official commented that *"De lant rijse naer de groote Rivier Vigiti Magna ende groote stadt Monomotapa ende verwachten negotien in gout en tanden vandaer m[e]ijne maer Chimerique Concepten zyn"* (The land journeys to the great river Vigiti Magna and the great city of Monomotapa, and the expected trade in gold and ivory from there, is a chimera in my view). It would be 18 years before a trip to the interior was made again, and in the meantime, as the improvement of the fort and cultivation of crops at the refreshment station continued, the Namaqua and Monomotapa were forgotten.

In the early evening Sara awoke. The covers were warm around her and she could feel that same warmth on her breath. She could hear the rain on the roof, the waves on the shore below. She was hungry. Her limbs, idle, stretched out under the covers. She did not want them to be touched by the cool air. For a while she yawned, and lay as she was. Eventually she rose, dressed herself, washed her face and combed her hair flat against her neck, wetting it first. There was no shelter between her room and the back door, and she had to dash across the yard in the rain. In the kitchen Anna was rolling dough. A long fat slab was positioned before her. There was flour on the table, the floor, on her face and hands. The sink held used mixing bowls, the sideboard was littered with ingredients. She rolled the dough backwards and forwards, lifting it and slapping it back down before continuing to thin it out in all directions. When she heard the girl, she looked up, pushing hair out of her face with a wrist, "The milk and eggs are already past their expiry dates. I thought I'd use them while I still can."

Sara could smell the raw dough, the warmth of the oven as it began to heat in the corner. Her stomach growled. She walked to the sink, putting her face above the mixing bowls. She ran her fingers along their rims and licked them. After she had cleared the insides of the bowls, she was uncertain of where to put her hands. She leaned against the sideboard and watched the woman's shoulders as her arms rolled the dough. When Anna turned to the cupboard, Sara reached forward and tore a strip, imperceptible, from the dough. She held it under her tongue and wished for that strip to swell. Anna showed her how to cut out the round shapes of the biscuits. She used a butter knife to trace the rim of a glass placed downwards on the dough, spacing each one carefully, so that there was no waste. They packed four trays, baking them for twenty minutes each. The kitchen was filled with the scent of baking. When the biscuits came out of the oven, the girl sat at the table, watching the steam rise from them, feeling the taste of them on the air. She sat on her hands until Anna said they were cool enough to eat. Then she ate one and put four in her pocket for when she was alone.

It was late when the mayor came home. The girl was already asleep. Anna was in the kitchen, counting biscuits into packets. He took off his wet

jacket and shook it. A brown envelope fell onto the floor. She looked at it as he bent to pick it up.

“He was here earlier. I think he was waiting for it.”

“I forgot. I’ll take it later.”

“In the rain?”

He ignored her question, pointed at the biscuits, “What’s this?”

“I thought we could distribute them. There’s not many, but we could share them out to some.”

“They need protein, fruit, vegetables. Proper food. Not cake and biscuits.”

“Why can’t they have biscuits too?”

“They can have biscuits. Let them eat all the fucking biscuits they want! And when their gums start bleeding and the children have rickets then who’s to blame? I’ll get the blame! And this fucking rain won’t mean a fucking thing to anyone because it will all be my fault. This fucking rain!”

“The helicopters will come. They said... the rain. It will stop soon.”

He sat down at the table and she brought him his dinner from the warming drawer. He ate, watching her work. After a while she said, “They don’t let me help with the soup, and I just thought...”

“The what?”

“The soup. They don’t want me there.”

He grunted and continued forking food into his mouth until he had cleared the plate. He carried it to the sink and poured himself a glass of water. Then he went to the bedroom and put on his rubber boots and rain jacket. When he returned to the kitchen she had placed a plastic bag on the table for him. It held a packet of biscuits, a few tins of food, potatoes, apples and teabags.

“It’s all we have at the moment.”

He nodded, picked up the bag and went to the door.

“Wait,” she called, running from the room.

When she came back she handed him a jersey and a pair of socks. He pulled the hood of his jacket over his head and went out into the dark and the rain.

As the mayor approached the upper town the glow of individual fires became visible. He saw the remains of charred electrical poles that rose between the plots, their wires, limp, hanging. There was nothing to be done about them until the town was reachable again, and even then, there was little hope. Most of the upper town had been without electricity for a few years. The last fire had seen to that. It was little matter anyhow, for those in the upper town did not have money. Whether they had electricity or not they would not have been able to pay for it. They would still have used fire for warmth and cooking.

From the shadows he could make out the forms of dogs. They barked at him, but came no closer. He was surprised by their numbers; thin and wet with rain. In the dwellings that he passed he could hear voices. In some, people could be heard singing, in some there was talking. In others, piles of rubble only, dark and uninhabited now, there was silence. He passed burnt gardens, broken fences of chicken wire. Where there had been flowers there was now muddied ash. He entered Willem's street, his head down in the rain. When he came to the house all was black and wet. The roof and walls were broken, lying on the ground in pieces. The plots on either side were filled with rubble too. Nothing moved in or around that mass. The rain drove into his face and he realized that he did not know where Willem was living now.

Across the road there was a shack, framed out of wooden boards and black bags. He called a greeting, and moved aside the plastic covering the door. Inside the small space were about ten people; children, women and men, an old couple. In the centre of the room, in a shallow metal drum, was a fire. They looked up at him without interest, their faces orange in the firelight. He apologized for interrupting them, asked if they knew where Willem was living now. They looked at each other and then one of them spoke, saying he had heard that Willem had moved into the Cupido place.

"Yes," the mayor said, "I know where it is. I will find it."

They did not ask for anything. Their faces, clear in the light from the fire, were empty. He reached into his pocket and brought out his wallet. It held only a few coins and a R100 note. He took out the note and wasn't sure what to do. One of the younger men stepped forward and held out his hand. The

mayor placed the note in his hand, thanking them all. They wished him well, and he withdrew, walking on.

In the years since a previous fire, the Cupido house had remained unoccupied. Maria Cupido had been a seamstress, taking in sewing from the lower town for extra income when the fish supply began to run low. She had worked in the kitchen, cutting patterns on a large pine table, sewing on an old pedal-operated machine which had belonged to her grandmother. Jacques Cupido had continued to go out in his boat most days. Though he had not been able to make the quota, he had been able to supply enough food for a meal for his family each day. Sometimes, though he had no permit, he sold a fish to someone from the lower town.

Nobody knew how the fire had started. But in the chaos that ensued, and as it made its way across the town, Maria and Jacques had become separated and dazed by the smoke. Thinking that her husband would take the youngest child, a toddler still, she rescued the sewing machine, dragging it out of the house and down the slope. She was rehearsed enough from having been raised in the upper town with its regular outbreaks of fire to know the importance of rescuing that which was most likely to put food on the table afterwards. The sewing machine was heavy, but it had wheels and she was able to move it without too much difficulty. When she reached the crowd assembled on the beach she began calling for her three other children and her husband. Some distance away she saw Jacques walking towards her, carrying a dark bundle in his arms. At the sight of the bundle she felt relieved and looked away, calling again for her children. A moment later she heard a cry. Turning, she saw her husband, closer now. His eyes were frantic; he was on his knees, weeping. He stared at her, at the sewing machine. And the dark bundle, now lying on the ground before him, was suddenly clear. There was no child. It was not a child. He had rescued his fishing nets. She reached out with her hand and steadied herself against the machine.

"I thought..." he sobbed. But he did not finish what he had begun to say.

She replied, "I thought too."

After the fire they found the child, a small purple thing, unrecognizable. He had suffocated from the smoke, in his sleep, they said. There was no pain,

they told the parents. But his eyes were open when they found him and his tongue was thick in his mouth from coughing. The Cupidos did not return to the house. With their remaining children they moved to another town, where Maria had family. The toddler was buried in the cemetery of the upper town, along with others who had died that night. There was no money for a headstone to mark his grave. Instead, his mother collected pebbles from the beach and used them to cover the small mound of earth. With time, rain and wind had smoothed the earth, scattered the stones. Plants grew in that place now, flowering in the spring. No sign of the grave remained.

Initially out of respect for the dead, the house had been avoided. But as the months passed and it became clear that the Cupidos would not return, it was ransacked. Nothing was left other than a burnt fridge, which at one point had been carried from the kitchen and then abandoned half way through the lounge. The house became the night-time haunt of teenagers who went there to smoke, drink, have sex. Children played there during the day, reading out loud the graffiti which had begun to cover the walls. Broken bottles and used condoms filled the corners. Soon the history of the house was forgotten.

In April of the following year the Lewendal girl went missing during a game of hide-and-seek. The members of the upper town came together to look for her. They combed the beach, the fish factory, the scrublands behind them. Two days later a group of teenagers, smoking dagga in the Cupido house, opened the abandoned fridge and found her body, small and stiff inside. Having decided on the fridge as a hiding place, the girl had been unable to open the door again from the inside. No one wanted to imagine her last hours in that small dark space. Her body joined that of the Cupido child in the cemetery, another unmarked grave.

After that the Cupido house was thought to be cursed. While the exact details began to be forgotten, a legend of sorts grew up around the house. Children were warned not to go there. People averted their eyes when they walked past. Even the teenagers stayed away, finding a new place to get away from their parents.

When the latest fire destroyed their home, Willem had no place to take his younger sister and sick mother. Knowing that the Cupido house still had much of its roof, and knowing that despite the desperate situation no other

family would enter it, he chose to move his own family there. While his sister sat with his mother, Willem went to the house. He swept up the broken glass, the dog shit and cigarette butts. Then he poured disinfectant on the floor and in those corners which smelled of urine. On the damaged windows he taped plastic bags and newspapers. When he entered what had been the lounge, he found the fridge, lying on its side. He opened the fridge door and sniffed. It was empty of smell. Nothing of the dead girl's breath remained inside. He closed the door again and tried to think what to do. He could not move the fridge by himself, and he knew that no one would be willing to help him. Choosing instead to disguise it, he covered the fridge in newspaper, so that beyond the rectangular shape, none of its former features were visible. Those few items which Willem had managed to rescue from the fire, he placed in the same room as the fridge, hoping that through filling a single room with all their possessions, a sense of homeliness could be produced. In a corner he placed a foam mattress which smelled of ash. Against the further wall he balanced a three-legged chair on some bricks. Fishing crates, turned upside down to function as chairs and tables, completed the furniture.

Trudie cried when her brother told her where they were going to live.

"Isn't there somewhere else? Can't we find somewhere else?"

"There is nowhere else. Ma is ill. She can't stay on the beach."

Nor could she stay among others in the large abandoned rooms of the fish factory, for the noise of voices and the proximity to the sea would distress her.

"But the ghosts," Trudie cried, "All the ghosts in that house."

Her brother replied, "There will be ghosts wherever we go."

Willem earned money digging graves when there was a need, working as a gardener from time to time or doing odd jobs for the mayor. His sister stayed at home and looked after their mother. Throughout the upper town people spoke in whispers about poor Millie Fortuin. God had sent her many trials, they said, and included her in their prayers, for it was hard, they knew, when all you had was suffering and more suffering. There were the two stillborns in a row; her husband's death from cancer; the eldest son, Paul, drowned at sea. But worse, they said, what drove her over the edge, was Simon, her second eldest.

On the day that Paul washed up on the shore, Millie Fortuin had beaten her head against the sand, knocking it over and over. Her eyes and mouth were caked in sand, muffling her cries, but still she continued. For days she had waited, knowing he was dead, waiting only for the body. And when they had come for her, leading her to the cove in which he had washed up, they tried to stop her looking, but she lifted the jacket that had been placed over his face. What she saw then was not her boy, her boy with his thin moustache and green eyes. This was a bloated face, this was skin too smooth, too pale to be his.

"I will never see him again. I will never see him again," she cried, with her head in the sand, her face buried.

Later, after he had been carried to the house and placed on the kitchen table, her cry had changed. Hysterical, numb, she called out again and again, "How will we live? How will we live?"

Standing behind his mother, ten-year old Willem watched as Simon said, "Don't worry, Ma. I will take care of you. I will find a job and I will take care of you."

By the morning Simon had begun to pack. He was going to find a job, he said. He had heard they were looking for petrol attendants at one of the big garages along the national road. He left, promising to send money as soon as he could. But the money did not come. For weeks they waited, living off the charity of others. Five months later Millie was called to the morgue in Cape Town. Borrowing money for the bus ticket, she made the six hour trip. There was little left to identify. Mandrax had shrivelled his skin, swollen his belly. A bullet wound, pink, very pink, had left a hole in his chest.

"He was involved in a gang," they told her. "He was shot by a member of a rival gang. Can you identify him? Is that your son?"

"That is Simon Fortuin, yes," she said, "but that is not my son."

It ceased then, that something which had been keeping her upright. Outside the building she could hear the terrible sound of pigeons, and beyond that there were people talking, cars moving. Buildings and streets full of people, and her child was dead. Her children, her husband, they were dead. What was this terrible noise, this noise? The streets and the people, everywhere living, alive. It had been denied her. She had been denied.

Returning home, Millie did not speak. She did not collect Trudie and Willem from her neighbour. She went straight to bed. The next day they found her, the side of her face drooping, drool coming from the corner of her mouth. Her chin and neck had swollen, her cheeks were hanging. She lay in bed and groaned and shifted her hands, trying to wring them.

From the day clinic, a volunteer came. She explained to Willem that his mother had had a stroke, that her brain and body had had a shock and might never recover. The woman showed him how to feed his mother, how to wash her and dress her. She left two adult diapers made of cloth, showing him how to bandage her pelvis into them, before fastening the points with a large safety pin.

"You must change her at least twice a day," the volunteer warned. "And you must feed her every time you eat – breakfast, lunch and supper."

But there was no money for diapers and there was no food to give her. Ten years old and desperate, Willem walked down the hill to the house of Pieter Fortuin.

When Anna heard the knock at the door she was afraid. Her husband was away and she could not be certain of her safety. She had been living in Soutbek for a short time only. Through the keyhole she saw that it was a young boy. She opened the door.

"Is Pieter Fortuin here?" the boy asked.

"No."

"When will he be back?"

"Later. I'm not sure."

The boy looked past her into the house.

"Who are you?" she asked.

"I'm his nephew."

When Pieter came home that night she placed his plate of food in front of him on the kitchen table and sat down opposite him.

"I thought your family was dead," she said.

"They are."

"Your nephew was here today."

Pieter looked up from his plate. "What did he want?"

"He said his mother is sick."

“And?”

“Only that.”

Pieter did not look at her face. He brought a lamb chop up to his mouth with both hands and began chewing the meat from the bone. When he was done, he licked all ten of his fingers and returned his gaze to the plate. A potato remained next to the bones. He picked up his fork and then put it down again. He began drumming his fingers on the table. Beside his eyes small blue veins showed up clearly on the surface of his skin as he frowned.

“What does he want from me? She’s nothing to me. My brother married her, not me. Why should I pay for his mistakes?”

“What are you going to do?” she asked.

“Nothing,” he said. “I am not going to do anything.”

But later Anna heard the door close and it was a long time before he came back. In the morning she saw that there was dirt on his shoes. She ran her fingers over the shoes; over and over, dust brittling onto the carpet. She thought of the boy, of her own brothers and sisters. Inside her something living turned over, kicking against the wall of her stomach.

The mayor entered the Cupido house and was surprised by how clean it was. He handed the packet to Willem and did not look into the dark corner where his sister-in-law and niece were asleep. He reached into his pocket and withdrew the envelope.

“I put a little extra in this month,” he said.

Willem took it. For a time the two men said nothing. Rain pattered against the plastic covering on the windows. In her sleep the old woman whimpered. A paraffin lamp stood on the makeshift table between the two men, casting shadows into slants.

“This is where you’re living now? I had some trouble finding you,” the mayor said, struggling to keep the note of aversion out of his voice.

“It’s the only place I could find.”

“I see. You understand that we can’t take you in. They are going to start building again as soon as the rain stops and we have that girl for the moment and David is coming home soon you know.”

Suddenly he felt furious. Why was he making excuses? There was no reason for him to justify his choices. He had done all he could to make sure that he had no part of this sort of life. Why should he have to look after the mistakes of others?

He pointed at the corner, angry, "I warned my brother not to marry her. I told him to get out of here. I told him to stop fishing, to leave this place. But he was a fool. He saw what happened to our father and he learnt nothing from it. I warned him. She held him here. She kept him here. She tied him to the sea and that boat so that he could never escape. And look now; this is no life. He should have listened to me, done what I did."

"What? Sell stolen goods?"

The mayor was shouting now, "At least I did something. At least I have a roof over my head and food for my wife and can send my son to school. You're living in a hole. You have no clothes, no food! This place reeks of piss. And that wad of money you're holding in your hand, that money you accept every month, you don't mind getting that, do you? You don't have any problem with taking that! Or the food I bring you!"

Willem's lip trembled, "What could he have done? The only thing he'd ever known was the sea. What did he know about farming? What did he know about the land? What did he know about anything except the sea? What could he have done?"

"What could he have done? Anything! He could have done anything! Now I sit with you and your mother hanging round my neck. This whole fucking place, all of these people, hang around my neck like a fucking deadweight. I don't want anything to do with this shithole. I got out. I made something of myself. You can all rot in your own shit and piss for all I care!"

He walked out of the house and back down the hill. He did not pause and when he reached his house he was out of breath, his tongue dry.

### III. The Found Journal of Pieter van Meerman

The six expeditions which took place between 1660 and 1664 were authorized by the Heeren XVII and were conducted under the official aegis of the Compagnie. Specific guidelines were laid out for each group of explorers, with one person from each group selected as the official journal keeper. It was his job to record the following: compass directions; the period of time taken to traverse between landmarks; areas of arable land or water-courses; animal and plant-life encountered; as much information as possible about the native peoples they came across; whether the native people would be willing to trade and have a friendly relationship with the Dutch; and finally, which tribes were at war with each other and which were allies. On the return of the expedition to the fort these journal entries were copied into the *Dagh Register* so that the information could be made use of in further expeditions.

Up until recently it was believed that the six recorded journeys were the only explorations into the interior throughout this period. However, recently, during reconstruction work done on one of the original houses in the Soutbek region of the West Coast, an old handwritten manuscript was discovered, wrapped in goatskin. It transpired that this manuscript was the journal kept by one Pieter van Meerman, the self-appointed leader of an unauthorized expedition in search of Monomotapa in 1662. Made up of a group of eight "vryburghers" (free citizens) and one "Hottentoo tolcq" (Hottentot translator), the expedition set out in secret, without the permission of the Compagnie. The *Dagh Register* at the Cape makes no mention of the disappearance of seven men, nor is there any acknowledgment of it in unofficial sources. It can only be assumed that the reason behind the disappearance of these men was unknown and unremarkable to their fellow colonisers. The recent unexpected discovery of the van Meerman text has not only shone new light on the early history of South Africa, but has also given new insight into the relationship between the colonisers and indigenous peoples of South Africa in the seventeenth century. As such, it is the record of

the unknown expedition which makes up the focus of this book; for these brave explorers, after countless adventures, discovered a treasure far greater than the fabled gold of Monomotapa. The form of this treasure will become apparent as the tale of these explorers unfolds.

The information in this study is pieced together from the records of Pieter van Meerman. Unfortunately he was an undisciplined, sporadic and untidy journal-keeper at the best of times; consequently there are several illegible entries as well as numerous gaps. Furthermore, due to the extreme age of the manuscript, it is understandable that the text is in poor condition. Damage done by damp and rodents over the years has resulted in large lacunae. However, the account which follows here is, to the best of my knowledge, true and correct.

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In the night the rain and wind increased. The crashing of waves and the fierceness of the storm raged without pause. Waves, higher than any known before, hit the cliffs and shore at angles. Water sprayed and foam was churned by the constant crashing and slamming. More than a metre deep, the foam was pushed forward by the high waves, coming partly up the roads of the lower town. Everything was white with foam. There was no more shore, no link between land and sea. There was only the water; white, against dark headlands.

The mayor, despite the cool weather, lay sweating next to his wife. They did not sleep. She lay on her side, her hand under her head. Her eyes were closed and she listened to her heart beating through her ear and against her hand. She tried to ignore the storm, her husband, the warmth coming to her from his side of the bed. He lay on his back. Sweat pooled underneath him, on his forehead, under his arms and behind his knees. There seemed to be no end to the rain. There seemed to be no other season now. There was only the rain. He felt crushed, thrown to the ground by the endlessness of it. The knowledge of what would now be expected of him was tiring, and eventually he fell asleep.

By morning there was little change. He told the townsmen to inform the people living on the beach near the factory and those whose homes would not hold against the storm that the town hall would be opened as a place of temporary shelter. He told the men to enforce the fact that there were to be no fires, toilets were to be used sanitarily, no ablutions in the bushes, and above all, it was to be understood that this was only temporary. They could not stay for good. That entire day the inhabitants of the upper town came down the hill, sodden and cold, carrying the little they still had. Below them the foam shivered and darkened where it met the land.

Two days later the front had passed. When Anna woke in the morning the sky was clear and the air was fresh. The weather forecaster promised sun for days to come and spoke of the warm summer to be expected. Anna invited Sara to go to the beach with her to see what damage had been done by the storm. They walked down the road together, pointing out to each other patches of browning foam which lay in the gutters. The sun was bright on the

water and they had to shield their eyes with their hands. The sea was still and there was only a slow breeze. Dozens of gulls dove and glided above. They seemed to fill the sky. As Anna and Sara neared the beach they saw that the cement rectangle stood empty. The pot plants were gone and the bench had been wrenched out by the force of the waves. It now sat lodged between two rocks at the far end of the wall. Gulls stood on it, calling. Portions of the barrier of rocks had been removed by the waves. Barely any remained now to separate the small beach from the rest of the shoreline.

"Let's walk along there," Sara said, pointing to the left of the beach. "That looks like a nice stretch of sand."

"Oh, I'm not allowed to."

"Why?"

"My husband says ... Well, he said not to walk alone."

"We'll walk together. You won't be alone."

"I suppose."

Anna followed Sara as she picked her way across the small beach which was now littered with rocks from the barrier. They passed easily across the old border and immediately the air felt cooler, fresher, coming in off the open sea. Sand was flat and even underfoot. Pebbles, rubbed smooth by sand and waves, were scattered on the shore. As they walked they picked up these pebbles, showing them to each other, making piles of them and pocketing the best ones. Along the waterline were plants they did not recognise, complete with roots and leaves; rolling in the waves and lying washed up on the sand. Sara waded into the water and beckoned for Anna to follow, who hesitated before lifting up her dress and stepping into the waves.

"It's freezing!" she cried, laughing.

Small waves shifted sand between her toes. Above her the sun burned onto her nose and cheeks, and below her, under the water, her legs were numb with cold. The two women splashed in the waves; crawling out later to lie on the warm sand. With the cliffs beside her, the cold ebbing from her feet, her pockets heavy with stones, Anna felt content.

"Can we walk to the bend?" she asked. "I've always wanted to know what's beyond it."

"Of course."

It did not take as long as she had imagined to reach the white cliff that marked the bend. As they came round, she saw what she had always suspected; that there were other bends, on and on, but more than that, in the distance, across the water, too far to be certain, there was another shore. She pictured herself walking along the length of the sand, following the coast, until she came to that further shore. From there Soutbek would not be visible. It would not exist.

"Look here," Sara called to her.

Behind them, in the pale cliff face, was a cave. Its floor was piled high with smoothed stones and they stumbled over them, finding it difficult to walk. Further in they saw that the cave still held much of the foam that the waves had churned up during the storm. They could not see how deep the cave was, and were unable to explore further.

"I think someone must have lived here once," Sara said, pointing out soot marks on the walls and ceiling of the cave.

"It couldn't have been very pleasant."

Out of the corner of her eye Anna saw a green shape. She turned towards it and realised that it was one of her flowerpots. There was a crack along its side, and it was spotless; no sign of the dark soil it had held remained. She picked it up and walked to the mouth of the cave where Sara was sitting looking at the water.

"It's not what I expected," Sara said.

"What? The sea?"

"I thought it was supposed to be blue."

"It's the river that makes it so brown. The mouth is a few kilometres further up the coast and it is probably very full from all the rain."

"And there are no palm trees. I thought there were supposed to be palm trees. That's what it looks like in magazines: blue sea, yellow sand, warm sun."

"I suppose it is that way in some places, but not here. It's never been that way here. I have never seen a blue sea."

"If I'd known that I wouldn't have come."

"Why did you come?"

Sara remained silent, scratching at the sand between her toes. Gulls stood idly at the waterline.

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#### IV. The Establishment of van Meerman's Expedition Team

Word began to spread among the soldiers and *vryburghers* stationed at the Cape about the teams of men sent out in search of the legendary gold of Monomotapa. Excitement grew with the setting out and subsequent return of each expedition. Curiosity about the gold infected everyone, so that rumours were rife among the colonisers. Some said that the gold had already been found, but that the Compagnie was keeping it secret, not wanting to share their newly acquired wealth. Some said that the members of Everaert's expedition had located the gold and had decided not to report it to the Compagnie. Suspicions arose when they returned with one less man than they had set out with. The official report recorded Pieter Roman as having been killed during an encounter with a wild animal, but it was believed that the party of explorers had murdered him when he threatened to expose their treachery to the Compagnie. It is unsurprising that such gossip existed, for life at the Cape was not easy. The Compagnie's private soldiers laboured doggedly to build a fort that kept collapsing and found it difficult to cultivate crops that were constantly being destroyed by the wind and rain. Furthermore, many of the private soldiers were not Dutch. From as far afield as Bavaria, Portugal, France, Prussia and countless other countries, men came to join up, with the promise of adventure and wealth. However, the reality was far from what they had been led to believe, with the result that the foreign soldiers began to view the Dutch as underhanded and untrustworthy.

For the *vryburghers* life was even less agreeable. In a letter dated 30 October 1655 van Riebeeck had been given permission by the Heeren XVII to release a few men from their duties ("*in vrijdom te stellen*") and these men were granted land which they could farm. The idea was that the company could buy their produce from them at fixed prices and that the work could be done "*veel oncostelijker*" (much cheaper). This would allow the refreshment station to become more self-sufficient. By 1658 the bulk of the *vryburghers* had entered into *boerderij* (farming) on allocated land, but there were among them

also *traankokers* (whale oil distillers), *klerenmakers* (tailors), *knechte* (servants), *wiltschutten* (hunters) and a *geneesheer* (doctor).

The Compagnie supported the *vryburgher* farmers to the extent that it gave them land and replaced or repaired their ploughs for three years without cost. For the rest they were left to fend for themselves in a working environment that was harsh. Not only did the wind and rain destroy crops, but their livestock was frequently stolen by local tribes. Struggling with keeping their farms going, the *vryburghers* approached van Riebeeck in 1657 and requested permission to go on a trading mission, "*sonder Compagnies dienaers*" (without company officials) to see if "*sij van de inwoonders niet beter als met ons te samen eenich meer bestiael souden cunnen opdoen*" (without the company, we can't get more animals from the local inhabitants). However, they returned eight days later, having had slim success. After this the Heeren XVII advised that the focus of the *vryburghers* was to provide food for the sailors, not to go wandering about the interior.

By 1661 van Riebeeck was forced to admit that the situation at the Cape was so dire that "*op verre na uijt den landtbouw van haer coren tot spijsse niet connen warden gevoet*" (the farming of corn and the making of bread would not feed all of the settlers). In order to feed the growing population, rice had to be imported. The more *vryburghers*, the more rice was needed. In a letter, from the Heeren XVII, dated 23 August of that year, van Riebeeck was instructed to keep the number of free citizens as small as possible. As time progressed the *vryburghers* became notorious for their laziness and boorish qualities. Some among them, in order to get as much profit as they could out of their sheep, had been slaughtering them and selling them privately to individuals from ships lying in the bay. This meant that the Compagnie could not obtain enough meat to refresh the ships' supplies. The amount the Compagnie paid out to the *vryburghers* for sheep was fixed at 2 stivers a pound. With private sales the farmers could get double, even triple that. There were those among the *vryburghers*, too, who were selling bread at a price exceeding three stivers a pound, although the set price of one braspennigh had been established.

Van Riebeeck sent out a warning: "*twelcq een schandelijcke woecker ende gansch schadelijcke uytuyperije is, die in een wel gestelde regeringe niet magh geleden, maer ten eersten moet geweert ende g'extirpeert worden*" (This malpractice amounts to shameful usury and exceedingly harmful extortion, which cannot be tolerated in a well-ordered government, but must immediately be checked and rooted out).

After this warning, word spread among the free citizens that their land would be taken from them and they would be forced to return to military service. Military service meant hard manual labour under the Commander, strict discipline, and worse, the restriction of tight alcohol rations in order to prevent debauchery among the soldiers. Pieter van Meerman was amongst those of the *vryburghers* who knew that his days of freedom were numbered. Van Meerman had had a promising university career back in Den Hague. However, drawn by a desire for adventure and riches, he had joined the VOC as a private soldier, and was one of the first to arrive at the Cape and serve under Commander van Riebeeck. It was van Meerman who was the chief instigator of the private selling of slaughtered sheep and cattle to the anchored ships. While there was no proof of his involvement, it was only a matter of time, he knew, before he was caught out or betrayed.

It happened that late one night in early February of 1662 there came a knock on the door of his homestead. Van Meerman's farm was some distance from the fort, situated in the area known today as Rondebosch. He was surprised by the knock and took care to arm himself well before answering. When he opened the door, by the light of a tallow candle, he was taken aback to find a young soldier, Jacques Fournier, a French man whom he had befriended when he was still serving at the fort. Fournier was covered in blood and clutching at a sword wound on his right shoulder. He was in a state of great agitation and begged van Meerman to let him come inside. Van Meerman ushered him in and tried to give the young man some brandy to steady his nerves, but Fournier refused, shaking his head vehemently. Eventually he calmed down enough to explain to van Meerman the events of

the evening which had led to this point. He and two other soldiers, Jan Brouwer and Lourens Boom, had managed to barter some gin from a sailor aboard the *Malacca* which was currently anchored in the bay. They had begun to partake of it that evening, and within hardly any time at all had emptied the flask. Jan Brouwer became increasingly loud and violent; shouting insults and curses at the top of his lungs about "*Jan Compagnie*" (soldier's slang for the VOC). When the two other men tried to subdue him, lest they get caught out and whipped for their misdemeanour, Brouwer drew his sword and began attacking them. Fournier, drunk himself, did his best to prevent the fighting, but in the fray he took a strike to the shoulder. This infuriated him to such an extent that he began swinging his sword like a madman. He told van Meerman that he could not remember what happened then, only that when he came to Brouwer and Boom were lying dead, and he was bloodied from head to foot. Naturally such behaviour was unacceptable in the eyes of the Compagnie, and if he were caught Fournier would face certain execution. He begged van Meerman to hide him until he was able to slip away somehow.

For a number of years van Meerman had been unhappy with his lot at the Cape. The promise of wealth and adventure made by the VOC had not been fulfilled; instead his days consisted of attempting to cultivate crops in sandy soil and keep sick livestock alive. The tales of the "*goutrijcke stadt Monomotapa*" (gold-rich city Monomotapa), and the success of the official explorers had re-ignited his lust for adventure. When Jacques Fournier came to him in his desperate state it seemed the perfect opportunity to embark on an expedition of their own. Fournier readily consented to the proposal. Knowing that the success of the journey would depend on numbers, van Meerman decided to recruit volunteer "*lantreysers*" (explorers) beyond himself and Fournier. There were others amongst the *vryburghers* whom he knew would be lured by promises of gold and "*de geheimen van Afrika*" (the secrets of Africa). With little difficulty he persuaded four other men to join the expedition. These were Wolfgang Heller (a *wiltschutten*), Hendrik de Jong and Barent Specx (*boer*) and Jão Perreira (*traankoker*). From his own "*knechte*"

(servants) van Meerman recruited two men, namely Geraard van Hoesem and Isaac Rootkop. The seven men were careful to bide their time. They gathered provisions and loitered at the fort in order to collect as much information as they could about the earlier expeditions. The most challenging part of their preparations was finding a Hottentot who would be willing to accompany them as a "*tolcq*". It was certain that the journey could not commence without the aid of a translator, as communication with native peoples would be impossible. However, all of the translators at the Cape were in the employ of Jan Compagnie. With time, though the details are unclear, van Meerman found one of the "*watermannen*" (water men) or "*strandlopers*" (beach walkers) who was willing to join the expedition. This man's original name has been lost over time, for to the explorers he was known only as Adam. His reason for joining the expedition is uncertain, but van Meerman suggests that Adam was fond of Dutch delicacies such as "*brandewijn*" (brandy) and "*taback*" (tobacco). Perhaps he was bribed with the guarantee of having as much of these as he wished. Of his part in the expedition there is very little recorded, and we can only imagine what this man must have gone through, travelling with the band of mutineers.

Within two weeks of the return to the fort of the expedition under Everaert, the party of unofficial explorers had gathered all they needed for their journey. Van Meerman carried with him two quires of white paper and six lead pencils stolen from the fort. With these he kept his journal. For trade purposes they took with them several pounds of tobacco, a dozen clay pipes, three small looking glasses, copper wire, and many beads (also stolen from the fort). The group made certain that it was well-armed. They carried with them five pistols and six cutlasses, as well as 80 pounds of lead and 30 pounds of gunpowder and two bundles of fuses. The provisions they accumulated for the trip are listed below:

60 lbs of biscuit

30 lbs of salted pork

4 quarts of brandy in pewter flasks

4 quarts of Spanish wine in pewter flasks

20 lbs. salt

1 small bag pepper

2 loot mace

2 loot cloves

2 loot nutmeg

¼ pound of cinnamon

3 lbs. of sugar

They also took twelve fish hooks, numerous fishing lines, two kettles and two copper pots.

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Sara came from nothing she could put a name to. Waterless, unnatural, her home had been red heat on dust. There was nothing by which she could identify the place other than dust and heat; no distinguishing feature besides the sky, which was larger, somehow, than elsewhere. Bordered by an unsteady horizon, the sky settled on everything; hills and plains alike. Below it, the earth lay motionless. Only in the sand did creatures move, careful of the heat. Night brought with it nothing that was lush or fresh. Bitterly cold, it bit out, destroying what the day had not, while the moon in its slow progression watched the hopeless plains; bleached, unmoving, dead.

Out of this place Sara had grown. It was not from her father, distant, nameless, whom she had never met, nor from her mother, a shamed woman, that Sara had formed. The sand itself had raised Sara, while her mother remained in bed each day with the windows closed, curtains drawn. The disgrace of an illegitimate child, of loving a coloured man, of being put in a car by her father and sent away, had never left Sara's mother. Each day a careful pattern of living was followed. As she awoke, feeling the heat of the day rising all around her, Sara's mother avoided hearing the still warmth outside. She ignored the red heat on dust, and swallowed down the thirst in her throat with water that tasted of solid earth, of salt and stone and thickness. It was the only water they had, and it never quenched.

Growing up in this way, where the arrangement of life was marked only by sleep and despair, Sara found the days relentless. So little came out of each one, as though dried out, they could offer nothing more. As time passed she grew restless, unsatisfied. Playing with pebbles, capturing beetles and lizards, no longer held any interest for Sara. She began searching through their small home, hoping to find anything of interest. Boxes came to them from time to time, with clothes, food, books, other miscellaneous items; brought by a church elder, sent by her grandmother. It was from these boxes that Sara made up her wardrobe and supplied the kitchen. It was from these boxes too that she had her first encounter with the sea.

Pages of magazines, decades old, had been used to wrap a cup, glass milk jug, a teapot. As Sara removed the covering on these items, she saw that the pages bore not only words, but pictures too: women in outdated outfits, children modelling hand-knitted cardigans. The back of one of the pages

showed a long stretch of yellow sand with a bright blue sky over it. Between those two colours, wedged in neatly, horizontally, lay the sea. Palm trees grew in the yellow sand, their fronds reaching towards a sun. A sun that did not parch and destroy. Sara had read about the sea. She had known of its existence, but she had never seen it, not in pictures, not in life. The rhythm of waves, the steady flow and flow and flow of water, was something she could not imagine. She had read also about seashells carrying with them always the sound of the sea, and she tried to replicate that phenomenon by putting the hollowed out shells of land snails in the bath for days, before lifting them up to her ear; silent, unyielding.

Leaving the cave and the bend behind, Anna and Sara began to walk back along the shore towards the town. They did not talk anymore, but smiled at each other from time to time. It was getting late and they were warm, tired. They wanted to fall asleep, climb into bed with sand on their feet, and sleep. In the distance they saw a human shape moving along the shore; someone old, they thought, from the shuffling steps. Nearing, they saw that it was an old man, bending down and looking through the washed up plants. At intervals he placed items in a yellow plastic shopping bag which he held in his left hand. The two women greeted him as they passed, and Sara asked what he was doing.

“Shopping,” he replied. “This is where I come to get my food.”

“What do you mean?” Anna asked.

He held out the shopping bag for them to see. Inside were tomatoes, onions and squashes he had picked up, “When the river floods, it strips the low-lying farms and all of this is carried to me by the water.”

“But,” Anna cried, “This can’t be all you eat? You can’t only live on washed up vegetables, can you?”

The old man laughed, “No, not always.”

He looked around, as though making sure that no one would hear what he was about to say, and beckoned the women closer. “Look here,” he said, reaching into the pocket of his shirt, and bringing out an old, dirty handkerchief. “Today I found a treasure.”

He unwrapped the handkerchief and revealed a small round green object.

“What is it?” Anna whispered.

“A guava! It’s not ripe yet, but I am going to hold it in my pocket and keep it warm until it is ripe enough to eat!”

He wrapped the small fruit up again and returned it to his pocket, patting it with pride. “I’ve never found one before. It’s my lucky day.”

That night, lying in bed, Anna envied the old man his small treasure. She had never nurtured anything.

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## V. The Unknown Expedition Sets Out

On 26 February 1662, in the dead of night, their provisions loaded on the backs of two pack-oxen, the expedition set out under the leadership of Van Meerman in search of the "*coninghrijck*" (kingdom) of Monomotapa. They struck out northwards across the sandy plains, the cattle moaning and struggling in the dark. By dawn they had reached the "*Tijger Berg*" (Tiger Mountain) and were tiring, but since they could not be certain that the Compagnie would not send out soldiers in pursuit of them, they continued onwards. By nightfall their progress was limited as a consequence of exhaustion, and they decided to make camp on the banks of a small swampy river they had reached. However, that night the mosquitoes made so much noise and attacked the men so relentlessly, that by morning little sleep had been had and their skins were covered in bites. On 28 February they came to a place that they recognized from descriptions, a kopje named Riebeeck's Casteel by an earlier expedition. They travelled east over the Casteel and shortly thereafter lost sight of "*Tafel Berg*" (Table Mountain). Finally they were able to feel secure that no search party had been sent out in pursuit of them.

The streams they encountered contained predominantly brackish water and the weather was oppressively hot. Dysentery, caused by the salty water, was rife among the men. This was aggravated by the heat, which made travelling during the afternoon unbearable. Jão Perreira suffered the most. Crippled by dysentery, he kept falling behind. Towards late afternoon on 1 March, it was brought to Van Meerman's attention that Perreira was missing. Wolfgang Heller and Isaac Rootkop were sent to look for him, while the rest of the men built a fire to guide him, for it was already getting late. All through the night there was no sign of the men, and the cackling of "*wolven*" (wolves i.e. hyenas) was chillingly close. The next morning Heller and Rootkop emerged through the scrub, carrying Perreira between them, after having spent a terrifying night in the dark. On that day the explorers managed only an hour's journeying, for Perreira was too ill to walk and had to be carried.

Realizing that it would be in the best interests of everyone if they let Perreira recover, Van Meerman ordered the men to make camp for the next few days. During this time the men saw many "*vogelstruysen*" (ostriches) and "*paarden*" (zebras). Heller shot a hartebeest, parts of which the men roasted over the fire. Slowly, with rest and care, Perreira began to improve.

In the days that the men were camped in this area, Hendrik De Jong kept to himself. He shied away from company and did not join the conversations of the other men around the fire. On the last night of their stay at that particular camp, the explorers had heard the roaring of lions and had even seen the glinting of eyes in the firelight. In the dead of night, despite his proximity to the fire, De Jong was dragged from his sleeping mat by a lion. Though De Jong made no sound, Van Meerman had been wakened by the beast's panting and growling. He jumped up, calling out and waving. The lion dropped the man and fled. De Jong lay where he was, unmoving. When Van Meerman reached him, he saw that De Jong was alive, his eyes were open and he was expressionless. Van Meerman helped him up and led him back to the fire. The composure of the man amazed him, and he asked how it was that he had made no call for help. At this query De Jong began to sob, whispering at intervals that he wished to die. Van Meerman was astounded at this revelation, and poured the man a double ration of brandy, sitting with him until he calmed down. After some time De Jong had regained enough self-control to explain his behaviour. Fitjie, the girl he had loved ever since he was a young boy, had married him and agreed to come and live at the Cape with him. Though life was difficult, for two years they had lived happily together. When she fell pregnant in the winter of 1661, she was incredibly ill. One evening, a few months later, he came home from the lands to find her moaning on the floor, with blood pouring from between her legs. There were no neighbours within shouting distance and he did not wish to leave her alone for the two hours it would take to go to the fort and return with a doctor. With no knowledge of what his wife was going through, De Jong tried to nurse her as best he could. Yet, the following morning she was dead, and

the baby, its legs sticking out from her body, was dead too, smothered in the birth canal. He blamed himself for bringing her to this place which was "*eenzaam en naar*" (lonely and terrible). She had been good and kind and beautiful and had deserved a better life than the one he had brought her to. He hated himself for what had happened to her and he wanted to die. There was nothing for him to live for. He had only agreed to come on the expedition because he had hoped that it would be the death of him. He confessed to Van Meerman that when the lion had grabbed him he had felt that finally he would be at peace, but the other man's interference had robbed him of that release. It seems that eventually De Jong fell asleep. No more mention is made of this incident throughout the journal, and it can only be assumed that Van Meerman kept the information to himself.

In the days that followed, it began to rain and travel became difficult. When they got to the Bergh River it was so swollen that the men wasted a full day in floating their possessions across. They camped on the opposite bank of this "*claere revier*" (clear river) and ate fish in abundance. To the west they spotted a large herd of hartebeest. Van Meerman and Adam went in pursuit of the herd in the hopes of catching one for their dinner. As they were passing a mound of rocks, Adam suddenly called out, "*Bijteman, bijteman!*" (A biter, a biter!). Looking up, Van Meerman saw a lion which was making straight for him. He had little time to react, but fortunately he kept his wits and managed to aim well with his pistol, hitting the lion in its chest. Adam thought it might have been the same lion that had dragged De Jong from his bed and that it had probably been hunting them for days. Van Meerman took the time to cut off the furry tip of the lion's tail, to keep as a souvenir and show to the other men.

Strengthened by the fresh food and rest, the men continued their journey after a few days. Van Meerman's success with the lion had renewed their morale and they began talking about themselves as "*couragieuse manne*" (courageous men). Restored to their original focus of the quest for gold, the men sang as they travelled:

*Ik zi het ingewandder hoge Bergen zoeken,  
Op hoop van puyk Metaal. Den Hottentoo verbaast,  
Di sidderd ende lild, ja sgynd de Tyd te vloekken,  
Om dat ons Donder-bus tot lof van Holland raast.  
Men trekt te Landwaards in doorsnuff'lend alle hoekken,  
Men vind een beter Aard' van Mensgen, stel u sgrap,  
Man-moedig Neer-lands volk, gy vind door lang te soekken,  
Gy hebt u 's Heeren wensg, dat's puyk van Koopmansgap.*

(I see the settler searching the high mountains,  
In the hope of precious metal. The Hottentot is amazed,  
He shakes and trembles, powerlessly cursing Time,  
Because our guns fire for the glory of Holland.  
In exploring the interior, search all corners  
Find a better type of person, prepare yourself,  
Courageous Dutch nation, you will find that through long searching  
You have God's wish; that of an excellent and prosperous expedition.)

The days of heat that followed the storms meant that the flooding river began to recede. Bridges and roads became visible again, and with time teams of workers had begun to clear the mud and debris. Where bridges had been washed away, repair work became a priority, and farm roads across private land were opened, allowing people to reach those places which had been inaccessible.

Soon delivery trucks came to Soutbek. Heavy with fresh eggs and milk, bread, meat, fruit and vegetables, their wheels trembled in the drying mud. In the shop the shelves and fridges were restocked; cupboards in homes stood full. The mayor ordered large amounts of fresh food on his own account, which he presented to the ladies who ran the soup kitchen to distribute as they saw fit. Each day now soup and bread was accompanied by two fruit. The members of the upper town ate them sitting on pavements, standing in the street. They wiped their hands on their clothes and threw pips and cores into gutters, where gulls fought for the remains. In their homes, behind their doors and walls, residents of the lower town tore into apples and peaches, tomatoes and cucumbers they had bought with their own money. They ate without plates, without knives or forks, enjoying only the feel of something fresh in their hands, of juice running down their chins. Their hunger was not the same as those from the upper town; only the knowledge that they had been deprived, that they might have suffered had they been poor, drove them to such behaviour. Yet amongst themselves they spoke with disgust about the manners of the upper towners, shaking their heads, clicking their tongues.

Small donations were sent by charity organizations from neighbouring towns. Downpours and flooding had wrecked their own rural communities; there was little left to share. From the wealthy metropole of Cape Town nothing came, despite appeals. Similar storms had ravaged the Cape Flats, and it was beyond their already stretched resources to consider a distant town of a thousand inhabitants, when hundreds of thousands were suffering in the sandy plains of the Flats. Nothing could be spared.

As though a reminder of an untroubled life, flowers came after the rain. Over-run, the scrublands lengthened, a band of colours; pink, orange, blue; stretching out of sight. Unsure of how to behave or dress, people came out of their houses. In the days of rain they had longed for heat, and now they found

themselves uncertain. Only fragments remained in their memories of what heat was, of sun and the outdoors. They dressed in cardigans and jackets, wore scarves and vests, sweating under their weight, unwilling to take them off. Men and women alike ventured out into the flatlands. They picked flowers for their kitchen tables and night stands. Acclimatizing to the weather, they spoke more, laughed more, and from the town hall people erupted. Laden with bundles of clothes they had washed in the bathroom sinks, women came out into the streets, hanging their clothing on bushes and fences, or made their way down to the Mayor's Wife's Beach where they draped shirts and dresses over rocks. The women stood in groups near their laundry, heads wrapped in scarves. They spoke loudly, about the fire and storm, their homes, their children. What would become of them? They asked each other, reciting their complaints one by one. They shook their heads, made the sign of the cross, and said they would remember each other in their prayers. But in their hearts there was no room for pity for others. For each woman her own family, her own people were all-consuming.

In the lives of the mayor and professor, an ardour for fame overtook all other concerns. Across the country *The History of Soutbek* was becoming increasingly popular. Reviews and articles featured in newspapers; at least three PhD students chose to include the work in their theses; reviews began to appear in literary journals and several university history departments placed the book on their students' recommended reading list. With the growing popularity came a demand for the authors. Both the mayor and professor were invited for interviews on television and to speak at symposiums and conferences. Night after night the two men sat together to prepare. The professor rehearsed the mayor in those questions which he anticipated. But the mayor could retain nothing. He listened and wrote down and repeated, but the answers would not remain in his head. In public Terence fielded the bulk of the questions, protecting as far as he could, and under the gaze of so many, that old and foul-smelling man became erudite and witty. Where the mayor could speak only of Soutbek, of the wonder of the town, Terence spoke of history, and brought people face to face with their ancestors. In the *History* they saw a past they could be proud of.

Fame was not a wholly new experience for the professor. He had come to it early in his university career, and had, with some difficulty, faced its eventual end. The years he had spent in bed, weak and ill, had left Terence unwilling to accept weakness of any sort in his later life. He was self-possessed and confident, seeing the map of his future before him. He made no allowance for failure and chose a route which would guarantee success. He understood that in the country there existed a need which had to be met, and he knew that he could be the one to fulfil that function. Extensive funding as well as a successful career were assured him if the outcome of his postgraduate research would confirm certain ideas held by the leading political party in the country. The nature of the research, with its conclusion already worked out for him, did not upset him; for it held within it a guarantee of success.

During the years which he worked on his research, Terence retreated further into himself. He read more and more about the tribes which the early settlers at the Cape had encountered. Records showed how the tribes were constantly fighting and cheating each other. The result of his research was inevitable: a fierce defence of the actions of the South African government's institution of Apartheid. History, he argued, proved that it was necessary to keep different peoples apart. It was evident that there could be no peaceful co-existence, not among tribes, and not among settlers and tribes. In conclusion, Terence argued that, in fact, for Apartheid to be most successful, it would need to be carried further, with peoples from each individual tribe being located in respective areas or camps across the country, with no interaction allowed between respective tribes.

For a number of years Terence was the leading academic voice in justifying Apartheid. His findings were published throughout the country. He travelled and lectured, gaining a large following. But with time, as both worldwide and national disapproval mounted, Terence found it increasingly difficult to have his papers published in journals, or to be taken seriously in academic circles. Students walked out of his lectures, his house was attacked with rotten eggs and fruit. He found dog shit in his pigeon hole and graffiti on his office door. Barely teaching, publishing nothing, his government funding revoked, Terence was told that there was no longer room for his kind of

thinking at the university. It was then that he retired, and moved to Soutbek, removing himself from his failure.

The professor did not disdain the person he had become. He felt no remorse for his actions. He believed that what he had done was fair and just. He had rendered a service and had been paid for that service. He had moulded the past into a suitable present, giving people historical proof of what they believed anyway. But instead of the reward he believed he deserved, he had been despised and humiliated. And it was for that reason that when the mayor approached him with a suggestion of collaborating on the *History*, that the professor agreed without pausing to consider.

With the passing months the homes on the hill began to be repaired, and a few of the families moved back to the upper town. Gardens were started again, with flowerbeds delineated by broken gutters and worn tyres, decorated with seashells. In various streets old men brought chairs and radios outside, turning the volume up, so that hymns from the gospel station filled the air. Children played in the dust of the streets, running barefoot, bare-chested. The smell of the sea was strong, and from the north-west came the scent of plants and the sound of bleating lambs. In the evenings the sun set later and later, forming red and gold patterns on the sea. The inhabitants stood outside their shacks and watched, hungry for something more than a sunset. After dark some ate in secret, ashamed of what they had and their unwillingness to share. Later when the town was dim and invisible, everyone asleep, the only sound was the creaking of tin roofs, shrinking in the cool air blown in from the sea.

Drunks became a common sight in the upper town. Few fishing boats had survived the final storm, and the men, their days empty, their hearts sore, sought solace where it could be found. They sat on the sloop, watching the sea with resentment, wondering how they would provide for their families. Their skins felt dry on the land. They walked in the dust of the roads, staring in dismay at the imprint of their shoes behind them. They watched the waves and felt hollow, depressed. Their children were eating soup and bread once a day. What could they do? At night they stared at fly blown photographs of parents and grandparents which they had rescued from the fire. They knew no

other life. There was for them only the sea. Outside their homes, their fishing nets were strung between posts to serve as washing lines.

Days slipped by, and more and more a wish to return to life as it had been came to those of both the upper and lower town. Impatience filled the air. In the lower town the inhabitants were tiring of the noise, the litter. They had come here to retire; they had come for peace and quiet. Could the soup kitchen not be moved? they asked. Could the people not get on with it and make new homes and get out of the town hall? The mayor heard their complaints. He was doing his best, he said. He would see what he could do, but it wasn't easy. They didn't care: there was no space for the upper towners in the lower town. Those from the upper town, in turn, felt discouraged by their growing dependence on the lower town. They needed its soup kitchen, the protection of the town hall. They wanted to leave, but where else could they go where there would be roofs over their heads, running water, free electricity? It was impossible.

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## VI. The Disintegration of the Expedition

On the afternoon of 15 March the men had just began to unload the oxen in order to make camp for the night when they sighted a "*rhenoster*" (rhinoceros) coming towards them. They knew of the fearsome tempers of these creatures and, fearing for the safety of their oxen, the men rushed towards it, armed with guns. Their confrontational tactics did not work, for the animal continued coming forward. Heller and Fournier took aim, and though their shots were true, the bullets could not pierce the thick skin of the *rhenoster*. As the animal continued stampeding towards them, in the mad rush of shouting and firing and running, De Jong was tossed into the air by the *rhenoster's* horn, before being trampled under its feet. Running forward, Heller, the *wiltschutten*, managed to shoot the beast in the eye, at which point it sank to the ground. The men then attacked it with their cutlasses, piercing its thick skin until it lay dead. Though De Jong was still breathing after his ordeal, his injuries were grave. He died in the night and was buried the next morning. It seems unusual that in the light of his conversation with De Jong on the night he was dragged from his bed by the lion that van Meerman simply recorded the episode leading to his death, without making any further comments. In any event, the group was depleted by one, and though this meant more provisions were available to each man, their troubles soon increased.

As water sources became scarcer, so was there "*schraelheijt der weijde*" (lack of grazing) for the oxen. On the morning of 22 March one of the oxen refused to get up. It was exhausted, had an infected hoof, and was not getting enough food. The men had no other choice but to kill it. They spent half a day digging a grave in which to bury the dead beast as they did not want to attract more lions to their trail. When they packed up their belongings each man's already heavy load was doubled. In the days that followed there was much dissent among the men. They were unhappy about the extra loads, increased by the deaths of both ox and man. Progress was dreadfully slow

and the men were exhausted after every step. Geraard van Hoesem and Barent Specx were the loudest of the complainers. Specx was notorious as far as his native Holland for his boorish behaviour. He had joined the VOC only as a means of avoiding the law, for he was wanted for various misdemeanours in the homeland. At the Cape he was known to have stolen livestock and crops from other *vryburghers*, using the war with the Khoikhoi as an easy way of laying the blame elsewhere. Van Hoesem, angered by a hostile environment, spurred on by Specx during the journey, became rebellious and offensive. Uncouth and filthy men both, they complained at full volume not only about the heavy loads, but about the lack of water, van Meerman's leadership and the compass direction the group was taking. They wanted to travel towards the east, while the rest wanted to continue as they were in a north-north-westerly direction. After several days of belligerence, Specx and van Hoesem said they could no longer agree to stay with the party and would be setting out on their own. Van Meerman agreed to this with great relief, and willingly shared out to them their portion of the supplies. The two mutineers took their leave towards the east. Of these men nothing was ever seen or heard again, either in van Meerman's journal or in other records.

It is after this episode that the journal begins to cease recording dates. Based on descriptions of weather, stars and plants it is at times possible to estimate the season, but no exact dates can be pinpointed.

It is also after the leave-taking of Specx and van Hoesem that the party's luck began to change. Van Meerman does not record many of the details of the events of the next few days, but it appears that somehow they met a handful of Grigriqua who bartered them a bag of honey for tobacco. These men, when questioned about the Spiritu Sancto, replied that they knew of a great river and they would take them there. It was not too long before they came to a large river. The men were amazed by the presence of up to 150 elephants on the opposite bank. Remembering what had happened to poor De Jong with the rhinoceros, the men kept their distance, opting to remain on the south bank until the elephants moved on, despite the bemused urgings of the

Grigriqua. This was certainly the Oliphants River reported by the previous expeditions. The company was quite exhausted and it seems to have taken them a further two days to get to the Grigriqua kraal. During that time they did not see a trace of water anywhere and van Meerman commented about the "*grootte armoede*" (great poverty) of the land.

From information pilfered from the fort before their departure, the men had found that it was towards the Namaqua that they should travel since it was believed that this tribe was in amicable trade with the cities of Monomotapa. Van Meerman and his men were pleased to find that the Grigriqua were allies of the Namaqua. That evening the party of travellers had a feast held in their honour. They shared out some of their depleting supply of alcohol and handed out pipes with tobacco, walking around the circle of people seated around the fire, showing them how to suck on the clay pipes. It took some time before they could get any of the Grigriqua to agree to take them to the Namaqua for by this stage they were drunk and raucous, unused as they were to alcohol. But, the following morning they set out, and it appears not to have been too many days later that the Grigriqua called out, "Namaqua!"

Encouraged by the *History*, tourists began to appear in small numbers in the streets of Soutbek. Middle-aged couples on bird-watching safaris at the nearby estuary, or carloads of students with their own ideas of the past, came to see what history looked like. Without exception they appeared disappointed, cheated. The upper town horrified them with its shacks and dirt, and the clean superiority of the lower town disgusted them. Was this the utopia that the *History* had been speaking of?

From his office the mayor watched the reactions of the tourists, and realised with dismay that it was not enough simply to have written a book. Physical changes to Soutbek were required in order to achieve his goal of making the town into a tourist attraction. After all, what did the town have to offer? There was no coffee shop, no restaurant, no information centre. Nor were there any hostels or camping sites. If he wanted people to come, he would need to organize places for them to stay. And tours; he needed guides who could take people on walks or game drives around the area, pointing out those landmarks which were of interest.

"That's what I need," he thought, "That's what people want. That's what will bring them in their hundreds."

With so much on his mind, the mayor neglected his other responsibilities. He forgot about Johanna and Charles, who had not returned to work, but whose wages continued to be paid. They were still trying to reform their homes and lives in the upper town. Johanna and her family were living in one of the large packing floors of the fish factory, sharing with seventeen other families. From the damp walls and cold floors, Johanna developed a cough. Lying at night with her children around her, she tried to stifle it. The dreadful odour of fish long since packaged, frozen and eaten made breathing difficult. Splutters escaped from her mouth, causing the children to stir, their neighbours to sigh. There were too many bodies in that space. Sleep was difficult when others were crying, whispering, having sex. Johanna's husband sat outside, till late, smoking, before crawling in next to her, and holding her quivering chest against his.

Charles, too, had found a place to live in the abandoned factory. It had at one time been a utility room and now he shared it with his father, his wife, his son and daughter-in-law, and their three children. Of the five adults,

Charles was the only one with an income. He was 61 and he felt like an old man. The dampness of the factory had swollen his joints until he could hardly move his fingers, or bend his knees. His father chewed buchu and rubbed it onto Charles's joints, but no relief came.

The continued presence in his home of Sara was ignored by the mayor. Each day he reminded himself to phone social services, but each day he forgot, and the yellow reminder note beside his office telephone began to fade in the sun. He was busy, too busy, to sit for hours trying to organize such things. But maybe, because these days he saw in his wife's face softer lines, a warmth around her mouth and eyes that he had not seen before, maybe he ignored the note with purpose.

The mayor forgot also about the additions to his house, leaving rooms unfinished. He had other, more pressing projects in mind for the builders, which he was hoping to begin soon.

Anna, taking advantage of the absence of the builders, aware of her husband's preoccupation, began working in the garden again. With Sara's help she shifted bricks and sand as necessary; planted seeds and seedlings in neat patches. Weeding alongside each other one day, Sara asked, "What is the book about?"

"The book? You mean the history book?"

"Yes."

"I'm not sure; I haven't read it."

"Why not?"

"I can't."

"You can't read?"

"I can read words, short sentences. Enough, but not a whole book."

"Doesn't your husband mind?"

"He doesn't need me to read."

"And he hasn't told you what the book is about or read parts of it to you?"

"He doesn't have time to do that. He did tell me about it. Well, he told me that it was the history of this area and it would bring money to the town."

Sara looked at the woman next to her with her tiny, dull life. Dirt under her nails, a walk on the beach, baking biscuits; there was so little.

"Why don't we read it?" she said. "I will help you. We'll do it together."

Anna glanced up, about to speak, when from far away in the still afternoon came a strange sound that neither of them immediately recognized. Dropping their trowels, they ran up the hill towards the flatland and the tar road. In the distance they saw a van with a red flashing light. It was not moving very fast, and as it neared, the siren getting louder, they realised that it was an ambulance. At the dirt road to the upper town it turned, its shape vanishing amongst the burnt houses.

“What could it be for?” Anna asked.

“Not for anything good, I’m sure.”

In the evening Willem interrupted their dinner. The mayor did not invite him to join them, simply gestured with his fork that he should say what he had come to say. Willem explained that the ambulance had come for a five year old girl. The girl had been feverish for days and the previous night she had begun vomiting and complaining of a stiff neck. Realizing that something serious was wrong, her father had run to the public phone outside the shop in the lower town to call the state-run hospital in Genot. Their ambulance was out, they said. It would come when it could. Which it did, nearly seven hours later, by which time the little girl had already died. The mayor stood up, throwing his fork onto the table.

“That’s all I need,” he said, leaving the room.

Anna had not ever been to the upper town. Her husband would not allow it. But the story of the little girl’s death brought to her mind her own family, with their bare feet and laden backs. She had no way of knowing what had happened to her brothers and sisters and felt certain that she would not recognize them if she were ever to meet them again. The deaths, she knew, of some of them were probable, and she wondered where they had been buried, and how. In her dreams the corpses of her young siblings walked past her, unrecognised, unrecognising.

When the day arrived for the funeral of the little girl, Anna felt no fear of her husband. The aching memory of her family drove her up the hill and through to the dirt roads of the upper town. The sound of hymns guided her towards the church with its low bell tower, and the cemetery beside. Anna did

not enter the church where the mourners were, nor did she pass through the gate of the cemetery. Instead, she remained as she was, standing on the side of the road, watching as the mourners eventually left the church for the graveside. They did not wear black, for many of them had only the clothes on their backs. But the few who still had them wore hats, and the drawn faces were all clean, as were the hands and nails of those who picked up fistfuls of dirt and sprinkled them onto the lowered coffin. It was a long time before the last of the mourners had left. Only Willem remained, filling in the grave alone. Anna walked to him and held her hands in front of her.

“What can be done?” she asked him.

“There’s no need,” he replied. “Your husband has already paid for all of it.”

Anna had not been speaking of money, but at the mention of her husband, she forgot what she was saying and looked around, “He’s not here, is he?”

“No. No, but he paid for it.”

“All of it?”

“A proper casket, an actual headstone, engraved. They will deliver it next week Friday.”

“I didn’t know,” she said, uncertain.

“He gave money for the tea afterwards too.”

She watched Willem fill the grave, and continued by the graveside for some time after he had finished and gone home. It was getting dark by the time she returned to the lower town. Pieter was sitting in the dark lounge, watching the news. The light of the television reflected off his face and she saw in it something of what she had known before, before she had left her home and family with him.

“Where have you been?” he asked.

“I went for a walk.”

“You know what I said about walking. It’s dangerous.”

“Sorry.”

That night, Anna allowed her feet to brush against his in her sleep.

In the evenings, after dinner, when the mayor was away or in his office with the professor, Anna and Sara brought out the *History*. Sitting close together at the kitchen table, with the book open before them, they began to read. They went slowly, sentence by sentence, stopping at the end of each paragraph to read it again and make sure that they understood what was being said. When they came to the Dutch words they laughed at their attempts to pronounce them and were grateful for the included translations. On the fourth evening Willem stopped by. As he entered the room both women looked up, their faces guilty, flushed.

"Oh, it's you," Anna smiled when she saw him. "Sara is helping me with my reading." She held up the book for him to see.

Willem had tried reading some of the *History* himself, but the big words had intimidated him and he had given up after a page or two. He believed that, despite what the mayor said, a book could not change things at Soutbek. Few in the upper town read well enough to read a whole book, for Soutbek had only a primary school, and there was no transport to the nearest high school two towns away. A book that no one could read, Willem knew, would change nothing. But seeing Sara, and encouraged by the possibility of spending time with her, he asked if he could join them.

"I have my own copy of the book. It wouldn't get too cramped by trying to share."

"Of course. Of course you must join us!"

In love with Sara, wanting only to impress her, Willem went home that night to read by candle light, practicing sections of the book in advance, searching for words that he could stumble over, so that she would turn her head towards him, help him along, whispering "good, good."

For Anna, not only the reading of the *History*, but the *History* itself became a pleasure. She was amazed by what she read about the explorers, the animals, their adventures.

"This is wonderful," she kept saying to Sara and Willem. And to her husband she said, "This is wonderful" each time she was near him, though he did not hear her, for she never said it out loud. Within her a growing admiration for her husband began to form. His kindness to the family whose

little girl had died, his kindness to Willem, the wonderful history he had recorded; it all added up to someone extraordinary.

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## VII. The Namaqua

Van Meerman's record of his time spent with the Namaqua is not always credible. There are numerous anomalies in the text; various customs or behaviours which are better understood as van Meerman's own interpretations rather than actual facts. But it is certain that he took the time to try and find out as much as he could about the Namaqua, and it is many of these investigations into their life and culture which are found recorded in this portion of his journal. There is evidence that van Meerman attempted to learn some of the Namaqua language, which he, disparagingly, recorded as follows after his initial encounter with them: "*hun sprake gaet geduurigh met klokken, als de kalkoensche hanen, klappende, of klatzende over het ander woort op hun mont*" (Their speech is filled with constant clicks, like turkeys cackling over each successive word in their mouth). Yet, despite this critical view of the language and documenting that he found it tended towards the monosyllabic, van Meerman struggled to learn anything beyond a few single words and phrases. He understood the usefulness of learning their language so that he could communicate without a translator, but years in the service of the VOC had instilled within him their policy, whereby native peoples were expected to learn Dutch, not the other way round. In fact, a fellow soldier, George Frederick Wreede, had compiled the first Hottentot-Dutch dictionary which had been brought to the Heeren XVII. They had congratulated Wreede on his work, but had rejected it, on the basis that it was not in accord with their policy.

Van Meerman indicates that after encountering the Namaqua scouts, the expedition was led to their kraal by men well armed with bows, arrows and assegais. They also bore shields so large that a man could hide behind one. The Namaqua kraal took the form of a large circle which was enclosed in a great fence of thorn bushes. In the fence were two gateways, one facing north, one south. Within the fence there were about 65 huts belonging to the "*Haus*" (tribe). Each kraal was host to a number of patrilineal sibs, meaning

groups of people who are related in the male line. One of those sibs claims seniority and it is within that sib that the chieftainship is inherited along the male line. The following is the order of the sibs in the kraal as recorded by van Meerman: in the western portion of the kraal, facing east stood the huts belonging to the chief's sib. To the left of the chief's sib, facing east, came in order the *!Oa Gaon*, the *//Naigaman*, the *!Gurusin*, the */Gari Karin*, the *!Neise-ein*. To the right of the chief's sib came the *Goamun*, the *//Khau Tanasen*, the */Gari Gein*, and the *!Ga ei Tanasen*, which met the *!Neise-ein* in the east of the kraal. Outside the kraal there were three huts which were occupied by men who had no cattle. They acted as messengers for the chief between himself and other tribes. The open space at the centre of the kraal was used for herding the cattle into at night. Calves and lambs were kept in separate kraals, but the cattle or sheep would simply sleep in front of their owner's hut. The contents of each hut were sparse. It consisted on the whole of *"/garu-ti"* (sleep mats), *"/hoe-ti"* (milk vessels), cooking utensils and ostrich eggs. Van Meerman was most impressed by the sight of their *karosses* (shawls of animal skin) for those Khoikhoi who lived around the Cape fort wore their skins uncured. He took it as a sign of the Namaqua's civilization.

When the explorers were led into the kraal, they were brought before chief Akembie. Van Meerman had warned the men to keep an eye out for *"costelycheyt"* (riches) like gold, copper and pearls. This they had no difficulty in doing, for the people were all richly adorned with many beads and other ornamentation of copper and iron. Chains with copper discs suspended from them were wound some fifteen or sixteen times around their necks. On their arms were rings of copper and ivory. And flat pieces of ivory hung over their genitalia. Their legs were adorned with plaited thongs studded with copper beads. Some even had their hair threaded with beads.

The explorers were advised to address the chief as *"gou-aob"* (fat man) or *"!khu-aob"* (rich man). These were customary terms for rulers and were used interchangeably, since a rich man could afford to be fat and to anoint himself with *"goub"* (animal fat). *Akembie* was seated on a chair studded with

copper beads, draped in skins also studded with copper beads. They were astonished to find that upon his head there was a "*roo mutsen*" (red cap) of the Compagnie's soldier's uniform. Other of the leading men who stood near the chief also "*die roode mutsen hadden*" (had the red caps). *Akembie* greeted the men and asked them their business. Van Meerman explained that they were simply travellers who were exploring the land. He said that their intentions were friendly and asked Adam to teach *Akembie* the phrase "*onse vrindt*" (our friend). On hearing that, *Akembie* welcomed them to the kraal and asked if they had brought more gifts, for the last white men had given them many, including the red caps they now wore. Van Meerman replied that they had many gifts, but no red caps, for they were not part of the other white men's company. They were on their own and not tied to the fort at the Cape. Upon hearing this information, *Akembie* began to frown and stroke his red cap. Van Meerman asked his men to begin unpacking their gifts of tobacco, beads and brandy before the chief, but *Akembie* continued to look displeased. Eventually van Meerman remembered that Fournier still had the orange sash from his soldier's uniform and asked him to present that to the chief. Immediately *Akembie* looked better pleased. He draped the sash across him and invited the visitors to stay with them as long as they wished.

The explorers were given two huts in which they could stay and were invited to a feast to be held in their honour that night. The men gratefully accepted, but explained that *Perreira* would have to be excused as he was not well. Plagued with dysentery, he had been ill for days. *Akembie* nodded wisely and said that it happened from drinking brackish water that the blood entered the stool. He sent one of the medicine men of the tribe to care for *Perreira*. He was given wild figs for the dysentery and buchu was used to cleanse and heal a festering blister he had developed on his heel.

That evening a fanfare was blown. About 150 of the Namaqua men formed a circle, with each man holding a hollowed reed, some of which were long, some were short, others were thick, others were thin. In the middle of the circle one man stood holding a staff and singing, while the others blew on

their reeds, dancing in a circle. The women danced around the outside of the circle. They feasted on honeybeer, grasshoppers, fruit, buttermilk, mutton and beef. This went on for some six hours until the travellers could barely keep their eyes open, and were forced to retire.

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The salary of a mayor of a small town was negligible, but Pieter, a shrewd businessman with a taste for wealth, had not abandoned those acquaintances with whom he had had dealings in the past. He kept a hand in selling stolen merchandise, investing the profits wisely by buying properties in Soutbek and Genot, as well as purchasing numerous stocks and shares in successful corporations. Once he realised that the town required serious adjustments before it could become the tourist destination he had hoped for, the mayor phoned his financial adviser with instructions. Within a few days the bulk of his stock and properties had been sold, and he began to undertake those steps required for correcting the town.

"I have business in Genot tomorrow," the mayor told his wife. "You can shop while I'm busy, and then we can meet David at the bus depot."

"David?"

"He's coming home for the holidays. Did you forget?"

Anna had not imagined his return from school would be so soon. The thought of the boy terrified her. She felt it wrong, entirely wrong that he should suddenly be returning.

"Sara..." she said.

"She will have to stay behind. There won't be enough space in the car, what with the shopping and David's luggage.

But what she had meant was, "Sara is enough. I don't want the boy."

In the two days before their marriage, after he had removed her from her family, Pieter had kept his distance. He did not touch her in any way, paying for separate rooms where they spent the nights. But when she climbed into the car after the small civil ceremony, wearing her new dress and shoes, he had laid his hand on her thigh. Except for changing gears, he did not move his hand from that spot. It looked over-sized on her small thigh, its knuckles dark and hairy. She could feel the clammy warmth it left on her skin and she tried to crawl out from under it, pushing her neck into the seatbelt.

He smiled at her and told her about the house he had bought. It was small, he said, but bigger than anything she would be used to. It had a kitchen, a lounge, a bedroom and an inside bathroom. It had a front garden, and at the back, a washing line. They drove through the afternoon and it was

dark by the time they arrived at Soutbek. She could not make out the sea. Before them was only the dark of the road lit up by the car's headlights, and shadowy expanses on all sides, which might have been anything at all.

Inside the house he had led her to the bedroom. He placed her small bag in the corner and told her she looked tired, she should get into bed, he would be back soon. She undressed and climbed under the covers. She did not know which part of the house he had gone to, she could not hear him and she was almost asleep by the time he returned through the door. He was naked and silhouetted by the passage light. She had not noticed his girth before and it surprised her. He stepped forward, and in her eyes, with that belly and chest, the swirls of his nipples, the dark trembling of his penis, he was a stranger. She could recognize no part of him. When that great alien whole climbed into bed with her, filling the space beside and above her, groping at her breasts, its flesh against hers, its tongue on her face, she wanted to disappear. His body pushed against hers, trying to get in, and then a voice, clear, very clear, saying there was a problem. He lifted the covers, and taking each thigh, pushed her legs wide apart. Then he leaned his head between her legs and spat into and over her before raising himself above her and pushing against her again. This time the resistance was torn, and afterwards when she went to the bathroom she found blood on her thighs.

By intervals his body became less alien, the daily intercourse less painful. But still she felt that what she had known before, what she had believed, had been false. Since the day she had left the farm, there was in him nothing she could recognize. There was no part of him that she knew or that she wanted to know. She learned to remove herself from the events of intimacy, and, when with time, she became aware of low moanings in her throat, the wrapping of her legs around his form as he thrust, or the trailing of her fingers on his back, she felt betrayed by herself. She felt separated from her body and unable to understand it. She hated herself. She hated her body, her legs, her breasts. Every part of her made her feel resentful and deceived. Eventually that feeling of hatred culminated in the final treacherous act of her body; her monthly period vanished and soon she came to understand that she was pregnant. She thought of the being inside her as a strange amphibian creature with webbed limbs and a lipless mouth. It terrified her, revolted her.

She thought about throwing herself down a flight of stairs, of stabbing her belly. There were no stairs; she feared the knife. She was trapped by this thing that kicked her and nauseated her. She was filled with dread. When it was finally born, covered in blood and mucous, it was as though she were being handed her own internal organs in a blanket. She had turned away and refused to look at the child for days afterwards.

Driving to Genot with her husband, Anna watched as they passed along flat land covered in low scrub; sweeps of farmland, with grazing sheep, no houses in sight. The road ran straight ahead of them, continuing on and on, so that it felt to Anna as though the clouds came no closer, the distance remained distant. But then the grazing land gave way to vineyards, packed neatly along the course of the river. Farm labourers walked through the rows, picking bunches from the knotted vines. Along the river, beyond the vineyards, trees grew, heavy with the nests of weaver birds. On the other side of the river, clear of the trees, the same could be seen, more vines, more workers picking grapes.

"A few months ago this was all flooded," her husband said, pointing. "They say the vines have never looked so good. It must be all the silt."

"Is this the river where the explorers saw the elephants?" she asked.

He looked at her in surprise, "Yes. A whole horde of them."

"150 of them I think it was."

"Something like that."

Anna smiled. A herd of elephants was unimaginable among those vines. Nearing the town, the ruins of old farm houses could be seen, and further away, new houses, large and white. The road dipped so that suddenly before them, above them, were vast grey uprights, high up, metres and metres high, supporting the train tracks over the river.

"Are those the same tracks that run past Soutbek?" she asked.

"The same."

"But they're so high!"

"They put them high up because of when the river floods."

"But so high?"

"It was built in the 1920s. There was a lot more water back then."

The streets of Genot were wide and flat. Everything; roads, buildings, shop fronts; was rigidly square-edged and even. As her husband drove through the main road, Anna looked out at the busy town. It was Saturday morning and many farm labourers with their wives and children stood or sat outside the liquor store and budget supermarket. She remembered her own trips into town as a child. Though the town had been smaller than Genot, she was able to recognise the clean morning expressions of faces washed with soap and water over a hand basin, the swaggers of people wearing their town clothes. Beyond that she recognised, too, the hard lines and slow walk of people tired after a week's labour. Women and children stood on corners and in the shade with grocery bags. The walk back to their respective farms, she knew, would be long and heavy. Already there were drunks in the streets, both men and women. They shouted and staggered, repeating their behaviour from previous weeks. Anna thought of the signs of the *Plaaswag* she had seen on the way to Genot. A yellow and red triangle with a silhouette of a farmer wielding a shot gun; warnings to labourers and others that the crops were guarded, the houses of farmers protected.

Though she recognised her old life in those of the farm workers, she did not envy them. She grieved for her mother and siblings, but there was in her no feeling for her father, or for the small home she had left. All around her was evidence of what she had escaped. Beside her, the mayor changed gears, his hand jerking on the lever, eyes fixed on the road. Where her usual reaction would have been to flinch away, Anna shifted instead, so that her leg might be nearer to the lever. The distance was imperceptible, the movement unseen, and yet it signified a change in Anna. For, though she did not wish him to touch her, her growing realisation that there was something remarkable about her husband left her with a feeling that the possibility of being touched by him was not as horrible as before.

The mayor stopped outside a small shopping centre. Farmer's wives, fat and loud, sat in the coffee shop, while opposite, outside the Agrimark, the men stood at their bakkies talking. Anna got out of the car and the mayor placed several notes in her hand, "I'll be back to fetch you at three."

Like the streets, the aisles of the grocery store were wide. The same fat women pushed laden trolleys and gossiped at the tellers. Unsure of how to

spend her time; needing nothing, wanting nothing; Anna bought a few toiletry items for Sara, food for Willem and his family. Afterwards she walked through the centre, passing slowly from shop to shop, waiting. At the window display of a small jewellery store, Anna paused, seeing a pair of silver cufflinks, inlaid with ivory. She entered the shop and asked if she could see them.

"They are antique. Probably around 1890," the sales assistant told her.

"They're beautiful."

"Made in England, but the ivory is from an African elephant. That's before ivory was illegal to trade in."

It was impossible to know whether the ivory came from one of the elephants that had lived in the region before, for herds of them had been hunted and killed across the continent of Africa. But in her own mind, Anna allowed herself to believe that what she held in her hand had once been part of an elephant from the Oliphants river. Those same elephants she had tried to imagine walking through the vineyards along the way.

When the mayor returned for Anna, he placed her shopping bags in the boot of the car. The cufflinks, wrapped in a small box, remained in her handbag. He drove to the bus depot on the outskirts of town and parked. Then, while they waited for David's bus to arrive, he got out of the car to make a phone call. Anna remained seated, watching, only half-listening to his voice, insistent, "Steve, you owe me. I know you can help me with this."

Feeling the weight of the handbag on her lap, Anna felt nervous about the gift. She could not be certain how he might react. Perhaps it would anger him, though there was no reason why it should. But she could not be sure. She watched him continue to pace, talking quietly now. Maybe she would leave it on his bedside table, or on his desk, then she wouldn't have to hand it to him in person. He need never know the gift came from her. While considering this, a movement on the grassy verge next to the car caught her eye. She turned her head and looked out of the side window. The movement had come from a bird, a black bird with a white breast, seated on a stone. She tried to recall whether it was a crow or a raven that had the white breast. She could never remember which was which. Anna noticed that something hung from the bird's beak, and she smiled, thinking it a worm.

"The desk," she decided. "I can slip into his office before he goes to work and leave it on the desk."

On the verge the bird continued tugging, and she turned to look at it again. "Crow," she thought, mouthing the word, and at that same moment realised that it was not a worm hanging from the bird's beak. It was not a worm at all. It was flesh. Nor was it a stone on which the crow was perched. It was a head. The head of a dog. There was no other part of the dog's body, simply the head, its tongue hanging out, its neck ragged. The bird sat on that head, pulling strings of flesh from its neck.

Anna turned her face away and looked into her lap, pressing her hands together over the handbag. She could hear her husband's voice, the sound of buses moving and she could not remove that image from her mind. What was it doing there? Why was the head of a dog lying on the side of the road? She heard her husband open the door.

"He's here."

Anna thought she might faint. She let herself climb out of the car, careful to avoid looking at the verge. She walked around the car and glanced up. From where she stood she could see the boy, young. Was he that young? And yet he was older, clearly older, and her insides shifted at the sight of that dark mass of hair, his round face, neat clothes, his arm reached up in a wave. In her mind there was only the dog's head, its ragged neck. She felt unsteady on her feet and clutched at her husband's arm with both of hers and he, startled by this movement, her touch, showed it with a warm glow on his face. The private knowledge that his wife's hands, small, very small, were in the lee of his arm, made him blush. She was light, so light, and he felt that he was carrying her across the street, lifting her over the pavement and gutter.

When they came to the boy, his face smiling, she did not let go of her husband's arm as she bent down to greet him. Reaching her closed mouth towards the boy's cheek, her own against his, her nose leaning towards his neck, she felt ill. There was a smell of travel, of heat about him. He was raw and rotting. She saw before her the neck of the dog. Rotten flesh. Rotten flesh standing before her, talking. She felt ill. She turned away from him and held onto her husband.

They drove back as they had come. The boy talked about school, his friends, rugby and cricket. In the front seat Anna thought about the fact that for the nights to come her son's breath would be in the same house as her again. It would travel up the passage, through rooms and rooms, until it came to her; a fist down her throat, squeezing.

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### VIII. Life among the Namaqua

In the days that followed, the explorers began to feel stronger and well-fed. As guests to the kraal, they did no work, and so they spent their days sitting in the sun outside their huts, watching the activity in the kraal. They slept much of the time, for they were still tired from their journey, and the luxury of having nothing to do soon encouraged laziness. It became common practice that some of the senior men of the tribe would come and join the men outside their huts to partake in tobacco and brandy. The explorers had not forgotten their search for the wealthy Monomotapa, and so they continuously asked the Namaqua elders the origin of their "ʒei" (copper) and "/urib" (iron). These questions the Namaqua pretended not to understand or answered evasively. Van Meerman and his men determined that it would take some time to win the tribe's complete trust.

A week after their arrival at the kraal, van Meerman caught a Namaqua man in his hut, trying to steal the last of their Spanish wine. Furious, he took the man to the chief, who reprimanded the man soundly and told van Meerman, "*Khoikhoi tamab, Sab ke*" (He is no Khoikhoi, he is Sa). This is as much as saying, "He is no gentleman (Khoikhoi meaning men of men), he is of low extraction or a rascal." *Akembie* said that he had had much trouble with this man, named *!Gurjbee*, for he did not wish to do any work and was insubordinate. However, not wanting to cause trouble, van Meerman requested that the man not be punished, and that he be given another chance. *Akembie* agreed to this, saying that van Meerman had the makings of a great chief, for the worst thing a chief could be was "*gei-//are*" (greatly left-handed or stingy).

After this, *!Gurjbee* became devoted to van Meerman. He followed the Dutch man wherever he went, and began sitting at the edge of the circle of elders which formed around van Meerman each day. With time it appears that the two men became friends, and van Meerman found *!Gurjbee* to be a bright and entertaining man. *!Gurjbee* was soon able to converse in broken

Dutch, and explained to van Meerman that he was looked down upon by his fellow tribesmen because he had no cattle. The Dutchman replied that he understood well what *!Gurjbee's* situation was, for he himself had come from a place where he was looked down upon for having little.

The two men sat together most days, talking and waiting for the women to bring them food. Mostly the women brought "*χurina*" which is the collective word for roots, berries, honey and bulbs collected in the veld. Van Meerman developed a taste for the "*!naras*" fruit, a type of melon the size of a newborn baby's head. The custom was to eat the flesh raw and then keep the seeds to be eaten in the dry season. He ate these seeds by the handful, claiming that they tasted much like almonds. Steadily, van Meerman and his men could feel their stomachs expanding and their bodies filling out.

Among the women who brought the travellers food everyday was a girl named *!Urisis*. Van Meerman was utterly spellbound by this girl with her nut-brown skin, round breasts and dark eyes which she lowered every time she came before him. He began concocting errands she could run for him, merely to spend some time in the happy anticipation of her company. He would ask her to take gifts of tobacco and beads to the chief and she would always reply, "*Goreb !na ta ni tani*" (I will carry it in the palm of my hand). His agitation whenever *!Urisis* came to his hut was evident, and the old Namaqua men would laugh at him, for they knew the signs of love, which were the same in all men no matter what their colour. Van Meerman asked *!Gurjbee* about the girl and was told that she was the daughter of *Akembie's* son, *!Urisib*, who had died in a battle with the Numaqua a number of years before. The old men, sitting nearby, teased van Meerman and asked him why he was so curious about this girl, and he replied that there was no reason. "*Heitse!*" they warned him, "She may have a body like a cow's body now (that is, have a beautiful, fine, fat body), but look out because a woman cannot be quiet for as long as it takes sweet milk to turn sour! And once you're married, *Heitse!*, you get scolded all day long. You can't even put your hand in the food pot without getting shouted at!"

It seems that after some time, at van Meerman's request, *!Gurjbee* approached *Akembie* and asked what van Meerman should do in order to be granted *!Urisis's* hand in marriage. *Akembie's* reply was that she was "*Gei khoits oase*" (a great man's daughter) and therefore she could not be married to a man who owned no cattle other than a single pack ox which was barely alive. No, he could not let it happen. Van Meerman was devastated by the news and began to brood.

Devoted to the Dutchman and seeing that both van Meerman and *!Urisis* were "*//ā//ōs*" (dying of love), *!Gurjbee* went to the girl's uncle, *Xam/hab*, and begged for his assistance. *Xam/hab* agreed to supply van Meerman with "*disi go-ma-i*" (ten cattle), as well as with the meat for the wedding feast. *Akembie* was not very pleased at this turn of events, complaining, "*!Goahe tamata ha*" (I am not counted, meaning, I am unfairly treated). He accused *Xam/hab* of trying to make him, *Akembie*, look like an ungenerous chief, when all he was doing was protecting the traditions of his tribe and caring for the future of his granddaughter. After much arguing and deliberation it was decided that *Akembie* and *Xam/hab* would each give van Meerman ten head of cattle, on condition that the cattle were to be kept with their own herds.

When van Meerman heard what *Xam/hab* had done for him with the help of *!Gurjbee* he was overjoyed and shared out the last of his tobacco with the two men. His fellow explorers were less pleased, however, and Jacques Fournier took him aside to remind him of the real aim of their mission. Yes, they understood lust, but to actually marry this "*vuil prinsesje*" (dirty princess) was another thing altogether. Embarrassed by what love had done to him, van Meerman explained to Fournier that the marriage was simply a ploy for getting into the good books of *Akembie* and finding out the location of their copper and other treasures. Fournier, Rootkop, Ferreira and Heller were disgruntled, but agreed to trust their leader. Adam, on the other hand, had grown tired of life among the Namaqua and missed his own people. After the brandy and tobacco ran out he decided to return to the Cape. Without a word, he left one night.

In preparation for the wedding many cows and ewes were slaughtered. The explorers were informed that tradition held that no other livestock could be killed in that time as this would mean the couple would have an unhappy life together. Van Meerman and the others had to participate in ceremonies along with young Namaqua men. The fattest cow was found and then chased around the kraal as the young men beat it with sticks and stones, encouraged by the shouts of others. *!Gunbee* explained to van Meerman that tradition states that the cow should become so tired that she will stand still trembling with fear and allow herself to be touched. However this cow was a spirited one and she continued to kick and fight with the men. At this a great cry rose up among the people. Van Meerman asked what was wrong and *!Gunbee* explained that the cow's continued fighting signified the continued fighting of husband and wife. To this another man added that it would be particularly bad for van Meerman for he had heard that *!Urisis'* mother had eaten leopard meat when she was pregnant, which meant that her daughter would bear that creature's violent characteristics. Van Meerman shrugged his shoulders and smiled, but *!Urisis* looked away, her eyes downcast.

*!Gunbee* told van Meerman to look closely at the heads of the goats in the days leading up to the feast, for if they rattled their heads and wagged their ears then it was believed that it would rain, which was crucial for the newly married woman. She must run in the rain and let it cover her whole body so that she will be fertile. No such shaking occurred and so the rain makers were called. They sprinkled their urine into a burning fire and cut their finger nails and also threw them into the fire. After that they caught a bird known as "*†gā//goeb*" and burned the bird to ashes.

Van Meerman recorded that he was taught a song which he was expected to sing to his bride at the wedding feast. It went like this:

*"Ti xamse !*

*!Gaibista !aote ?*

*Gomasa ke /ausi //gain !omsai !*

*Natere !*

*!Gabe-/khatere !*

*Ti xamse !*

*Gei khoits oase !"*

(My lioness!

Are you afraid that I will bewitch you?

You milk the cow with a fleshy hand (that is, with a soft hand)

Bite me! (that is, kiss me!)

Pour for me (milk)!

My lioness!

Great man's daughter!)

These were amongst the last of the happy days that the explorers spent with the Namaqua.

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Returning home after fetching David in Genot, Anna found Willem and Sara sitting in the kitchen. The *History* was before them, unopened.

"We were waiting for you before we started," Sara said.

"Started what?" the mayor asked, coming in with David.

"We're reading your book," Willem replied.

The mayor grunted, "Well you can't now. David is here."

Willem felt his mouth stiffen. Beside him Sara breathed out. He raised his eyes, meeting Anna's; Anna who had turned away from the boy standing between herself and her husband; Anna who had her hand on the back of a chair, and stood still, unhearing. The mayor waited, silent, until Willem finally rose, removing his jacket from the seat of the chair beside him. Deliberately slow, deliberately mute, he reached each arm into a sleeve and walked towards the back door.

"Make sure you get a good night's sleep. I have work for you tomorrow."

"Yes," Willem answered, brushing past the boy.

But Willem did not go home or to bed after leaving. He remained outside the mayor's house, watching the shadow movements behind the curtains; slow actions of people making dinner, eating, getting ready for bed. In the silence every sound was bare and distinct; the turning of a tap, the rush of water into a basin, cupboards opening and closing. He waited for the lights to be switched off, for the house to become still. Then he walked to the door of the outside room and tapped softly. From inside came Sara's voice, "Who is it?"

"Me, Willem."

She opened the door, wearing a nightgown. Her hair was wet and he could see the slope of her bare neck and shoulders. Water dripped from her hair.

"Can I come in?"

"It's late."

Willem felt foolish. He had never been in love before and he was uncertain of how to behave. He only knew that she was a splinter. She was a splinter inside him. For the hours of each day he felt as though sharp hot slivers had been inserted into every part of him. It was a pain he had no way of

preventing. He walked like an old man, limping, slowly, his limbs burning, his chest weak.

"I thought we could talk," he said, putting his hands in his pockets.

"I'm going to sleep soon."

"Just for a while, please," he said. "Please."

Sara stepped aside and he walked in, turning in the doorway to where she stood, still holding the door. He could smell the heaviness of damp hair, and the sharpness of toothpaste about her. His entry through the door, her body close by, signalled an unnameable victory to him. He bent his head to her neck, kissing it. She did not move. His nose was cold against her warm skin. That cold travelled up her neck, over her cheek, and into her mouth. Bringing his lips up to hers, his hands gripped her waist, pulling her towards him.

It was not his body she thought of as he touched her. Nor was her body her own. She kissed Willem as she had seen others kiss, moved as others had moved. When Willem grabbed her legs, kissed her feet, her calves, the backs of her knees, she was remote, far from herself. And later, opening her eyes, it was with surprise that she saw him next to her on the bed. The soft stubble on his face, the freckles lining his cheek bones and forehead, were unfamiliar to her. Only when he spoke, his voice low and fond, did she recognise him.

"Can I help you clean up?" he asked. "There is usually a bit of blood after the first time."

Sara allowed him to strip the bed and lead her into the bathroom, where they stood together, naked. He carefully wiped her thighs, dabbed between her legs. Then he washed the sheet in the bath, scrubbing the patch of blood with his knuckles.

Later when he went home, Sara lay on the bare mattress, feeling the warm patch their bodies had left.

In the morning Willem knocked at the door to the mayor's office. Mist was coming in from the sea. The cliffs and beach were invisible in the thick air. On walls and roofs throughout the town, drops of condensation were forming, so that everything felt damp and heavy.

"Come in" the mayor called. He was in a good mood. Steps towards the re-modelling of the town were underway, waiting only for confirmation.

To Willem he said, "You may have noticed that we're getting a lot of tourists now. It's our job to beautify the town and make a good impression. I am organizing some exciting changes to the town, but I thought we could start in the meantime with a few coats of paint."

He led Willem to a store room at the back of the town hall. Inside were hundreds of tins of paint.

"Where did you get so many?" Willem asked.

"An old friend gave me a special deal."

"Stolen?"

"I didn't say that."

"What do you want me to paint?"

Wishing for a neat, united town, the mayor's intention was to paint all of the key buildings in Soutbek so that they resembled one another.

He pointed through the doorway of the storeroom, "You can start with the town hall and then move onto the benches and fences. Then you can move onto my house, and we can see from there."

"You want me to paint the town hall?" Willem asked.

"Yes. The town hall should be done first."

"But it was painted six months ago. I painted it myself."

"And now you are going to paint it again," the mayor replied, walking away.

After laying down plastic sheets around the base of the south wall of the building, Willem fetched a tin of paint and some rollers. Using an old screwdriver he prised the lid off. The paint inside was thin and grey. According to the label it should have been sea green in colour, but inside there was only a dull watery substance. He took a stick and stirred the paint, thinking the colour and bulk had sunk to the bottom. But the paint remained the same consistency throughout. Colour and texture unaltered, he poured the paint into the tray. It was pale, almost clear. The roller did not immediately pick up the colour, and so he tried again. When he swiped the roller across the white wall, a faint stroke of grey remained behind. He stood back and waited, seeing the grey paling further as it dried. After a few minutes, licking his finger first, he

stepped forward and ran it across the streak of paint. It came away easily; the wall white as before underneath.

Willem fetched the mayor from his office, "You can see it's too thin. It's like watercolour. As soon as the mist comes in tomorrow morning it will wash off."

"Don't be stupid. I have 1000 litres of the stuff. You have to use it. Keep painting. Just do layers."

"I'll need ten layers to make an impression and even then it will wash away."

"I don't care. Just paint the fucking thing."

This Willem did; each day revisiting the same wall, painting and repainting, only to return the next day to find that he had to begin again.

David, coming home at the end of the school year, expecting things to continue as they had been, was distressed by how much the town had altered in the intervening months. He was confused by the presence of Willem sitting beside his mother in his father's kitchen; Willem whom he had at all times been taught to despise. Nor could he understand the absence of Johanna who had always made his bed, tidied his room, washed his clothes. In her place there was a strange girl living in the outside room; cleaning nothing, yet eating at their table, sitting on their furniture, wearing his mother's dresses. She opened their fridges and cupboards, taking what she wanted, and left the dishes, unwashed, in the sink. Having grown up without any affection from his mother, without ever having been put to her breast, without ever having been given anything that he didn't cry for first, David resented the presence of this girl. For his mother spoke to her with a tenderness he had never known, and she touched the shoulders and cheeks of the girl, laughing with her, saying her name. In his mother's behaviour towards the girl there was nothing of the aversion he had always received. David went to bed angry and afraid.

The following morning, David walked down to the beach, bored and annoyed by the two women rolling dough in the kitchen.

He found his mother's beach destroyed. Plastic cups, foil sacks from box-wine, paper plates, and more, littered the sand. The pot plants were gone, his mother's bench hung between two rocks, metres out to sea. All around,

the stone wall had been destroyed and youths from the upper town leaned against the ruined perimeter, smoking. They called to him, thick-accented, words he did not understand, and he looked away, down at the dirty sand and shells, brown with urine. Nearby lay a pile of faeces, fly-blown, human. David turned and walked away, ignoring the calls behind him.

The beach, he fumed to himself, was his mother's. The beach had been made for *her*. It belonged to *her*! And therefore it belonged to him too. Those people had no right to be there. No right at all. Who had given them permission to ruin everything?

As David walked through the lower town, seething silently, he became aware of how much had in fact been ruined. Women from the upper town stood talking to each other on pavements and in the road; a group of children stood begging outside the store; and more children, dozens, were running through the streets. He wondered how his father could allow such devastation to occur. His father had taught him determination, taught him to take what he wanted and never wait to receive. David admired his father. There was nothing in his father that he could not respect. Yet, why had he allowed this to happen? Why was Willem in their house, why was a homeless girl eating at their table, and why were the poor living in the lower town?

He went to his father's office and sat down in the arm chair, frowning, "I don't like it here anymore, Dad. Why are all those people here? Why are they on Mama's beach?"

"I know, Davey. I know. But they have to be there for the moment. They have nowhere else to go right now."

But David, who had never learnt to feel pity for the poor, who had always been taught that poverty was a choice, replied, "I hate them, Dad. I hate them. They stink and they're dirty. Can't you make them go away? It's our town, not theirs. It belongs to us."

"Don't worry" the mayor replied, coming round the desk and placing his hand on his son's head. "I'm working on it. Soon you won't have to see them anymore."

"When?"

"Soon."

David left his father's office, pleased and trusting. He went to the town hall where he knew Willem would be busy painting. He took up a position, leaning against a tree, shaded from the sun, and watched. He observed with satisfaction the other man painting and painting, pausing every few moments to swat away the flies that landed on his face to drink the sweat that formed there.

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## IX. The Search for Gold Continues

In the weeks that followed the wedding, van Meerman became increasingly interested in certain aspects of the Namaqua way of life; particularly those aspects of Namaqua culture which concerned the Namaqua's relationship with snakes. When a hunting party returned to the kraal, carrying a man who had been bitten by a snake on his foot, van Meerman watched as they bound the man's leg tightly at two places under the knee in order to prevent the poison spreading. They then cut the foot and covered it with fresh cow dung that was still warm. After that one of the Namaqua men bent down and sucked the blood from where they had cut him, spitting it out onto the ground. Van Meerman was amazed at the swiftness of the man's recovery and the lack of pain he experienced.

Shortly thereafter van Meerman was privy to another incident involving a snake. A young girl ran screaming through the kraal explaining that she had seen "*!Ganin-!gub*" while she was milking the cows. The "*!Ganin-!gub*" is a type of snake that the Namaqua believe to possess genitals with which it attempts to impregnate girls. The full tribe was compelled to stay up for the entire night, singing and dancing, in order to drive away the fiend.

After these two experiences, van Meerman let it be known throughout the kraal that he would offer beads and tobacco for large snakes if they were brought to him alive. He was not wholly certain what he would do with them once he had obtained them, but his curiosity was piqued, and he was growing bored of being idle all day. The following morning a young man came to him and opened his kaross, showing two yellow cobras coiled around his arms. Van Meerman brushed tobacco oil onto their mouths and noses and they fainted, whereupon he placed them in a jar for later inspection.

That evening one of the cobras escaped from its jar. Van Meerman immediately grasped his pistol and shot at the beast as it was making straight for him. He shot the snake in its neck and in her agony she flung herself a distance of more than thirty yards across the centre of the kraal. It was after

this event that van Meerman began to notice that he was treated differently. People would say “!gai-aob ke, !gai-aob ke” (He is a sorcerer, he is a sorcerer) when he walked past, and avoided his eyes.

Alienated and uncertain, van Meerman began to grow anxious, for the Namaqua had begun to talk about migrating north for greener grazing land, before the winter rains trapped them and prevented their passage. His fellow explorers also grew uneasy. They were no nearer to finding Monomotapa and had no wish to follow the Namaqua herds aimlessly. In addition, the situation at the kraal was becoming tense, for the novelty of the visitors had worn off. Their idleness was annoying the Namaqua, who complained that the “!luri-au” (white man) was “/hobe” (lazy).

As tempers began to rise a terrible event happened which confirmed the fate of the explorers. Again the incident involved a snake. Isaac Rootkop had gone to bathe in a nearby stream. The Namaqua believed that in each fountain lives a snake called †Gābeb (the one who lives in a hole) and if the snake leaves the fountain or dies, the fountain will dry up. It so happened that on the day when Rootkop arrived at the stream, he found it to be dry. As he approached the dry bed, he disturbed a cobra, which reared at him, ready to attack. In order to protect himself, Rootkop picked up a stone and brought it down on the cobra's head. At that same moment several women appeared, come to fill their water jugs. When they saw what he had done they ran back to the kraal to tell Akembie that one of the white men had killed †Gābeb and that there was now no more water.

As a consequence of his actions, despite explanations, Rootkop was banished from the kraal. Knowing that the other members of his party would go where Rootkop went, and realising that his own relationship with the Namaqua was disintegrating, van Meerman was in turmoil. Could he drag his new wife away from her family? He remembered the story of Hendrik de Jong's wife who had died in labour, and he felt ill. That night, sitting outside his hut, smoking with !Gunbee, van Meerman was told a tale which interested

him greatly. !*Gunbee* pointed at a cluster of stars and related their story, which van Meerman later recorded:

*The /Khunuseti (we know these as the Pleiades) said to their husband, "Go and shoot those three Zebras for us; but if you fail, don't dare to come home."*

*The husband went out with only one arrow, and when he shot, he missed. He sat where he was because his arrow had missed. On the other side stood the Lion and watched the Zebras, and therefore the man could not go and pick up his arrow to shoot again. Because his wives had cursed him he could not return home and therefore he sat in the cold night shivering and suffering from thirst and hunger.*

From scribblings in the margins of his journal at this time, it appears that !*Gunbee's* tale resonated with van Meerman. Though faded and torn, one can make out the following on the left-hand edge of the forty-third page of the manuscript:

*Paarden (zebras) = Monomotapa*

*Man (husband) = ik (me)*

Consequently, one can construe that van Meerman interpreted this piece of Namaqua star-lore as a personal allegory, whereby the failure to shoot the Zebras echoed his failure at reaching Monomotapa, and that his future with the Namaqua would be like sitting out in the cold. It is this tale therefore, we the authors believe, which finally decided van Meerman in favour of leaving the Namaqua camp. The following morning he approached *Akembie* and struck a bargain. He agreed that in return for the information he had requested regarding the origin of their treasure he and his men would depart, leaving behind the generously bestowed wedding present of cattle. Eager to rid himself of the explorers, *Akembie* fabricated a position for the precious metals in the area near the big river where the elephants were.

While the rest of his party readied their belongings, van Meerman (as he is at pains to point out in his journal) encouraged !*Urisis* to remain with her family. But his wife was with child, as well as deeply in love, and therefore

chose to leave the kraal and all her family behind, becoming the soul woman in the band of white explorers. She was, however, not the only Namaqua to join the explorers, for *!Gurbee* too had elected to leave the tribe where he had no standing, and chose to join the white man, where there was a position waiting to be filled, that of *tolcq*.

*Akembie* was furious at the news that two of his people were leaving. "*!Goahe tamata ha, !Goahe tamata ha*" (I am not counted, I am not counted) he shouted over and over. Those were the last words the party heard as they left the Namaqua and travelled back towards the Oliphants River.

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Willem no longer read with Sara and Anna in the evenings. Since David's return the mayor was home more regularly, and he had made it clear that Willem was not welcome. Instead Willem continued reading the *History* on his own; often sitting up until midnight before walking down the hill to Sara. Though he enjoyed the quiet luxury of lying in a proper bed, of sleeping next to the woman he loved, he was careful always to return to the upper town before dawn, undetected. It would be foolish to encourage the wrath of the mayor.

With Willem the hours of the night spent in reading the *History* began to resonate in interesting ways. The Compagnie's six failed expeditions in search of Monomotapa underlined for him the absolute futility of his own work; painting day after day the same wall, without getting any closer to completion. Increasingly, the past intrigued Willem. Having read the *History* three times, he longed to have more to read, but the town had no library, and few people owned books. There was, in fact, only one person he could think of who might have any literature that he would be interested in.

He did not trust the professor. A person so removed from the company of others seemed unnatural, unsettling. Nor had Willem forgotten what he had heard about the professor's National Party affiliations and pro-apartheid research. But no other options were available, and so he chose to approach the man.

The professor's garden was overgrown, his windows filthy. There was no response when Willem knocked at the door. He waited and knocked again. Through the glass of the door he could see a shadow move into the hallway. He knocked again. The shadow came forward; spoke without opening the door, "I don't want a gardener."

"No, that's not why I came sir."

"I don't have any money."

"No, it's not that either. You see, I read the book. The book you wrote with the mayor."

"What about it?" the professor asked, opening the door a little, and peering out at Willem.

"I was wondering, are there others? I mean, have you written others? It says so on the inside cover."

"If it says so why are you wasting my time asking?" the professor snapped, taking a step backwards.

Willem flushed. Though he had planned his words carefully in advance he had forgotten them all, "Please, you see, I was wondering, I know it's a lot to ask. I know that. But I was wondering if maybe I could read some of them."

"You can do whatever the hell you want, I don't care!" the professor cried, closing the door.

"Wait!" Willem shouted. "Please! Please wait! I meant could I borrow them? Can I borrow your books? I want to read them. I want to learn from them."

The professor opened the door again, ushering Willem through a dark corridor. A dreadful odour filled the house from rotting apple cores and brimming ashtrays. Books covered the couches, tables and chairs; some with scribbled notes in the margins. The professor looked through a stack of books on an armchair and chose a red hardcover.

"You can borrow one at a time," he said. "You won't get another one until I get the first one back. Do you hear me? In the same condition. No candle wax, no pen marks."

"Yes, sir. Of course."

He took the book and thanked the professor.

Walking back towards the upper town, Willem read the title on the spine: *An Overview of the Native Tribes of South Africa before 1652 by Prof. Terence Pearson*. It was dated 1974 and contained no pictures other than a few maps. That evening Willem began to read the professor's book. Hours later, lying next to Sara, he finished it. He returned it in the morning, borrowing another one. When he finished that one, he exchanged it too. So it progressed, until Willem had read all of the books written by the professor, and began borrowing texts by other authors. As Willem read more and more about the history of South Africa, patterns began to emerge which he both recognised and loathed. Every book seemed to say the same. Every book showed that history had nothing to do with dates or people. History was about mastery. The tribes fought amongst each other, each tribe trying to rule the other; then respective groups of Europeans came and tried to subdue the natives, all the while fighting amongst themselves for possession of the Cape.

Willem saw that history was about the strong ruling the weak, and nothing else.

The futility of painting the same wall day in and day out became amplified. What was the purpose of his painting? he wondered. To beautify a town that his ancestors supposedly had had a hand in founding? To improve a part of a town in which he was unwelcome? For twenty years Willem had lived on the outskirts of Soutbek, accepting the fact that he was poor and his uncle was rich. But since reading about Pieter Van Meerman and his fellow explorers, with their wish for independent wealth, for a life without working themselves to death for a master, he had begun to resent his uncle. The foolishness of painting over and over what did not need to be painted, the humiliation of being watched in that repetitive act by a boy, a boy he loathed, enraged him.

"I won't do it anymore!" he told himself. "I won't paint that wall one more time!" But they were only words. He could not afford to put any meaning behind them.

After receiving confirmation of his plan, the mayor called a meeting for all inhabitants of the upper town. With the town hall still occupied by squatting families, they assembled instead on the Mayor's Wife's Beach. The mayor stood on the porch of the store, his wife and son on either side of him. Anna wore a new dress, make-up and jewellery for the occasion. Feeling proud, certain she waited for the crowd to settle.

For David, too, the anticipation of what was to come was immense. He had heard his father's speeches before and looked up to this man whose voice could carry across hundreds of people and be heard over the sound of the waves. The power of that voice, of what it held, of what it offered people, was tremendous to him. He looked out at the faces that were turned up towards his father. They were the faces of hardship, of homelessness and despair; as though beaten and left for dead. Even in the children's faces there remained nothing smooth or clear; hollowed out, they were expressionless. He had seen vagrants, smelled them in the town where he went to boarding school and also in Genot. He had seen that they were all the same, the faces of the neglected; there was no means of distinguishing one from the next;

each shared with the others the same texture, the same shrivelled appearance. Here, before him, the thronging bodies on the beach had been reduced to a single mass of bones and flesh. That mass took on the shape of a large body with a single face, a face with a wide open mouth; above a body with two hands outstretched, wanting.

The mayor cleared his throat in preparation. He was excited. He had had an idea of dignity and that idea was about to be fulfilled. He would eliminate the reminders of his early life – degradation, humiliation; that misery which had followed him wherever he went, touching all he owned, all he did. It would no longer exist. He cleared his throat again and raised his hand for silence.

“Thank you to everyone for coming today. I know these past few months have been difficult and I want to thank you for handling the situation so well. I wish that there was more I could have done, but these things take time. There is always so much red tape! However, I have not forgotten you or your situation: I have been making demands on your behalf and finally the time has come when your faith in me and your patience will be rewarded. Things are about to change for you. I have made arrangements for improving your lives. Within the next few months each family from the upper town will receive a new home made from proper bricks and cement. The houses will come with electricity and running water and a bathroom. You will no longer have to sleep on the sand. Your children will have roofs over their heads.”

On the beach a wave of chatter rose. Some began to cheer. Others were speechless, hugging their children to them, their family. They whispered to each other and words could not come to them fast enough. The noise of the crowd stirred nearby seagulls, which flew up over their heads, across the houses of the lower town and past the cliffs of the upper town. Questions began to be called out.

“When? When will the houses be built?”

“How much will it cost?”

“How big will they be?”

The mayor motioned again for silence, “You must not worry. It will cost you nothing. You will not be expected to pay for anything other than the water and electricity you use once you have moved in. Now, please, please,” he called

as other questions came from the crowd. "Please be patient. This is simply a preliminary meeting to inform you of what the future holds for you. In the next week I and my associates will meet personally with each family and discuss their individual needs."

He lowered his arms and bowed to the crowd. Then taking his wife and son by the hand, he went home. After the mayor's speech, the inhabitants of the upper town stood in clusters, talking.

"But will they pull down our houses?" one of them asked another. "My grandfather built our house. My father was born in it. I was born in it. My children were born in it."

"Yes," replied another, "and where are you living now? In the town hall. What's the good of having a pile of rubbish if it can't protect your family from the wind and rain?"

Others nodded at this wisdom, murmuring assent.

"A house built by a stranger is better than a brick laid by your grandfather," they said.

Soon however, the same people began to recall the housing promised to them by the Reconstruction and Development Programme a decade or more before. Despite the allocation it had been more than three years before building had begun.

"Three years?" the younger inhabitants gasped.

"Oh yes," the older replied, listing in unison the reasons they had been given for the delay: shortage of water, theft of materials, problems with sewage disposal, and mostly, shortage of funds. In the end only 80 houses had been built, most of which had been destroyed by a fire shortly afterwards.

"We know, you see," the older said, "not to hold our breaths. Perhaps the houses will come, or perhaps not, but autumn is hard on our heels. You will find us frozen to death on the packing floors of the fish factory before a single brick is laid."

At this the crowd stood silent. Almost as one they looked out at the grey sea behind them, the dull sky above. They felt no words inside them. They felt only a sharp recognition of what it was to have days and months pass without pause, without any pause; recognition of what it was to be led towards hope and then denied. The broken margins of the Mayor's Wife's

beach formed a border around the silent crowd. They could see nothing of the upper town from where they stood. Removed as they were from it, at this distance so small, they found themselves unable to imagine it as anything other than what it was. They could not picture it in any previous condition nor could they imagine what it might look like if...

A child began to cry, and at that sound the mothers on the beach returned to themselves, saw their family members around them beginning to shiver in the cooling air. Calling their children, they turned back towards the hill, walking unsteadily along the dirt path which ran through the dry riverbed, returning to the upper town and to what homes they had.

Yet within a few days a difference in the upper towners was already noticeable. A difference in the way they walked, in the words they chose when speaking to each other, to their masters and mistresses in the lower town. They walked more upright, spoke more clearly. Something akin to pride had been returned to them, for they bore now a hope of shelter, and, though the word was not common to them, they felt themselves moving towards civilization. They would be people again. They would be respectable.

Along the coastline the weather remained warm. Here and there midges began to appear, until within a week clouds of them hovered in doorways and near trees. They flew around people's eyes and mouths, looking for moisture to settle on. The threat of autumn was forgotten as the inhabitants of Soutbek walked with waving arms and squinting eyes, their lips tightly shut against the insects.

Willem remained on the beach after everyone else had left to spread the news amongst those who had not attended the meeting. He had heard the mayor's announcement with neither joy nor grief. There was something inevitable about the news, as though all of his life had been moving in the direction of this obligation. Once the houses came, he knew, they would all, each member of the upper town, be beholden to the mayor, beholden without relief. They would be shackled to lifetime after lifetime of painting walls, of planting gardens that would not grow, of cleaning ever increasing numbers of unused rooms. He could not accept the house, he decided. He could not

accept it. And yet, his mother sat all day in a rank corner, pissing onto newspapers, while his sister sat beside her, growing old and ugly.

From the sea a mist began to roll in. It shifted across the small bay, covering the streets and houses. The town quivered, vanishing swiftly, but through the mist he could still make out the south-facing wall of the town hall. Where everything else was shaded by fog, the wall stood out, as though all things dark had formed a rim around it. Willem understood, then, the sum of his past and future, yet he could not believe that it could amount to so little. He had always believed that something good would return to him, that something more would come to him.

With the mist the air had turned cold, and Willem, suddenly shivering, turned up the collar of his work-jacket, put his hands into his pockets. A lone seagull returned from the cliffs and perched itself on a rock nearby, silent, eyes closed against the cool air. The promised houses returned to Willem's thoughts. How could he refuse something so necessary? How could he deny his mother and sister the right to shelter and warmth and safety? There was no refusing it, he knew. There was no rejecting such an offer; for even without the house he was indebted to the mayor. Even without the house he would spend the rest of his life working off the debt of his family's poverty.

It lay then – the answer to a life of obligation – it lay in one thing only: the presence of Sara. Sara, whom Willem loved. He would bring her to live with him, and it would be her face that framed his days.

On the Sunday afternoon following the mayor's announcement, Willem led Sara through the upper town towards the plot on which his father's house had stood. Despite the lapse of time and the green shrubs which had grown over the rubble, there remained still a smell of cinders, a smell of things not quite gone. Solemnly, Willem showed her the litter of glass and charred brick, "We will live here. I will tell the mayor that our house must be built right on this spot."

He pointed to the left and right, at other patches of rubble, mentioning those who had lived there before; people who would return, who would be their neighbours. People she knew neither by face nor by name.

"They will help us," he said, "and we will help them. That is how it works here."

Sara smiled in reply, innocent of the fact that the we of whom Willem spoke included herself.

Walking through the streets of the upper town with Willem, Sara recognised nothing from her first visit. In the intervening months shrubs and small orange flowers had grown, and the streets were less empty, the smell less acrid. It was not until they approached the church and the cemetery that Sara remembered anything clearly. The same well-trodden earth remained; the same dusty plant grew from the low bell tower. In the cemetery, too, nothing seemed altered. Only the three graves of those buried on the day she arrived were different now; indistinguishable from the rest.

"This is where we buried my father," Willem said, pointing at a grave towards the centre of the cemetery. A pile of soil, covered by a fishing net placed over a wooden frame, marked the position of the body. In places the net was broken and the same green and orange weeds Sara had seen throughout the town grew up through these holes. At the head of the grave stood the upright from a wooden cross; bleached grey, rotting, broken. No crosspiece remained, and so there was no name, no dates to show his life and death.

For Willem's brother, Paul, there was no marker at all. In fact, Willem was able only to point vaguely towards a spot, overrun with weeds.

"We had no money, then," Willem said, as though in apology.

They walked a little way, treading carefully so as not to step on the mounds which might have been graves. Pausing, Willem reached over and took her hand.

"This is where I saw you for the first time," he said.

"Yes," she said, and his hand in hers was cold, the hand of a corpse.

When Willem had first come to Sara, knocking at the door late at night, she was not surprised. Though sheltered as a child, she had learnt enough of the relations between men and women from her mother and the migrant workers who had come to their house from time to time in search of food and shelter. Seeing Willem standing before her, his eyes downcast, his cheeks

pale, Sara had recalled those homeless men who stood on the doorstep, pointing at their tired feet, their empty bellies, the lowering sun. And just as pity had prevented Sara from sending them away, it was pity that made her open the door to Willem.

They came from the north mostly, the migrants, from the gold mines. Their stories were all the same: the mines were closing. Nothing remained to dig for. There were no more jobs. The land had been used up. So they had come south, having heard that a vast tract of cultivated land followed a large river, a river which led towards the sea. No one starved in the South they said, because there was so much; farmers gave away fruit, the sea was full of fish and other things to eat. Any man could live there and have enough to feed even the largest family. In the South there was plenty. They spoke of the sea as though they had been away for a long time and were now returning, as though they had known it themselves; but their knowledge was formed entirely from rumour and gossip. They did not know it at all.

Sara brought out her picture of the sea and asked, "Is this what it looks like?"

"Yes," they replied, their voices trembling, their eyes bright at the first sight of their futures. "That is the sea. That is where we will live."

And she, having no reason to disbelieve them, began to feel that she too knew the sea.

After dinner, Sara would make up a bed for the travellers on the floor; a sleeping bag, a pillow, an extra blanket if it was cold. But more often than not she found the bedding untouched the following morning, and understood what the rhythmic creaking from her mother's room had meant. She did not blame her mother for this. She understood very well. For Sara too was coming to terms with solitude and with her own changing body. She too wished for the warmth of someone next to her, for the touch of a hand on her skin. It was, therefore, not only pity that made Sara open the door to Willem when he came to her. It was something else as well. Something she could not put a name to, yet something that she felt deeply nevertheless.

Standing in the cemetery beside the graves, Sara pointed up towards the sky which was turning pink and orange.

"Look," she said, "Isn't it amazing? To look at all of this and know that your father and brother would have seen the same thing, and even before that, 350 years ago, your ancestors would have shared this view."

"There were people here long before that," Willem answered.

"I know, but this is different. We're talking about you being descended from adventurers and pioneers. Doesn't that make you feel proud?"

"No," he replied, angry. "We're not the children of pioneers. We're the children of slaves."

"What do you mean?"

Willem gestured, taking in the landscape, "The people in this area have always had someone telling them what to do. First by tribal warring, they were bullied into this corner. Then the explorers came and took this land from them and made them take care of them, and then, more people came and took the land from them. There is always someone that is stronger."

Sara shook her head, "But that's not what happened. It wasn't like that."

"How do you know? Were you here?"

"No, of course not, but the *History* says..."

Willem interrupted, moving away from her, "History says that for centuries humans have been trying to rule other humans. That's all the history you need to know. There is nothing else."

He had begun to walk away, his hands in his pockets, his gaze on the ground. She saw him then as she had on the first day. Dirty, frowning, a pair of hands burying the dead. On that day she had been confused, disoriented. She had been walking for weeks, through rain and cold, eating what she could find. When they had come upon her in the barn she had felt only relief, and later, when the mayor came to fetch her, she was tired, too tired to think of anything other than the promise of being taken care of.

He had brought her to the upper town, a burnt and broken place; black, lifeless. Beyond the blistered land she saw a mass of brown water, rough and churning. This was not the sea. This was not the sea she had been led to believe in. This was no place at all. It was nothing.

The mayor had led her to the cemetery, and she had seen the form of a young man digging holes for the dead. Her own life, her own empty past,

came to her, and she saw that though she had fled from emptiness, she had come to something lifeless and destroyed. Since then, that moment when Willem had laid down his spade and looked across at where she stood, she had seen that he bore the face of the dead. Not her own dead, for she had none, but the dead of those around them. When, months later, he had come to her, it was with the dead that she had slept, not him, and she had known then that she could never love him.

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## X. The Founding of Soutbek

The party set off in search of the river where months previously they had witnessed the horde of elephants. Due to *!Urisis'* pregnancy they travelled slowly, but their progress was steady. Van Meerman noticed that sometimes they would pass areas where stones and branches had been stacked. At these *!Urisis* and *!Gurḡbee* would always pause and make a few additions to the piles. Asked the reason for this behaviour, *!Urisis* explained that the piles represented the graves of their ancestors or were cairns to the Namaqua god, *Tsui-//goab*, who often manifested himself in the form of a praying mantis. By laying down stones or branches she was honouring them. Fournier and Rootkop scoffed at her, asking what could a god, who was nothing but an insect do? She told them that they misunderstood, but said no more.

A few days later the travellers found themselves without water, and with no clear idea of where they were. Van Meerman was certain that they should have reached the river two days previously. Anxiety was rife among the men, for they were frail without water and feared the hyenas which preyed on the weak. *!Gurḡbee* tried to calm the men, explaining "*Tsui-//goab gum ni huidaο*" (*Tsui-//goab* will help us). But van Meerman, frustrated and exhausted, began to lose faith in *!Gurḡbee*. In a fury he turned to the man and shouted, "I don't want to hear about your god again! I am sick of all these rituals, all this time wasted on an insect! You will never speak of him again!"

Yet, the next day *!Gurḡbee* led the party, which had begun to lose hope, to the river of the elephants. After they had drunk their fill, *!Gurḡbee* turned to van Meerman and said, "*Ti /hūtse //arits ke ko !gamte-ḡgao hā, ḡaveb ke Tsūi//goaba ko ḡkhātsi, tsī //ēib ko nesiri hui !kheisa mū-!ants ko //nai*" (Yesterday you could almost have killed me but *Tsui-//goab* refused to let you do so. Have you now convinced yourself that he has helped us?). Van Meerman did not record his reply.

In fact, very little of this portion of the journal is extant. The worst of the damage has occurred to these final pages, so that in some places two or three sheets at a time are unreadable. It seems that it took the travellers some time before they reached the mouth of the Oliphants River, and arrived here at this spot, where the river dried up in the 1920s, and where we now find the town of Soutbek.

Originally the intention was to make camp only for a few days in order to rest, before continuing in the direction *Akembie* had advised them to take. Unfortunately, the very next day storm clouds came in over the cliffs and the sea, and by afternoon the party were experiencing their first West Coast storm. Heavy rains, fierce winds and giant waves raged all around them. They huddled in their portable huts, rarely able to make forages into the surrounding region in order to gather what food they could find. Taking what was immediately visible, they lived on mussels and succulents for days.

After leaving the Namaqua kraal, *!Gurbee* and *!Urisis* had shown the men how to make "*matjieshuisen*" (mat-houses). These were semi-permanent structures comprised of a dome-shaped framework of saplings bound together with plant fibre. *!Urisis* had laboured long and hard to make enough sedge mats with which to cover each of the *matjieshuisen*. While these structures had been adequate shelter in the interior, they proved utterly useless in the violent coastal weather. Usually moisture would cause the sedge to expand and thus to become waterproof, but the rain that fell destroyed the mats completely. Within a few days no shelter remained to them. Concerned for his wife, and realising that they could not survive under such conditions, van Meerman began to search for other shelter. By great fortune he discovered a cave in the cliff-face along the shoreline of the bay. It was dry and offered protection from the cold. The party moved in immediately.

Evidently during this period the explorers' search for the gold was neglected, their primary focus became their own survival. It was a dreadful time. Freezing cold, little nourishment led to the members of the party falling

into despair one by one. Squabbles broke out among the men and one night Heller attacked *!Gunbee*, saying that the "*vuile Hottentoo*" (dirty Hottentot) had purposely led them there to die.

Believing themselves to be waiting only for death, the party continued weakening each day. However, part way through the winter, what van Meerman describes as a "*mirakel*" (miracle) occurred. A band of Strandlopers (their specific tribal name is not recorded) came to the cave. It was a regular dwelling place of theirs and they were surprised to find inside it five white men, one Namaqua male and a pregnant woman. At first they reacted with hostility, for among the tribes of South Africa it had for centuries been understood that each band had a territory of its own, marked by a specific watering hole. To hunt or live within that territory without permission was to incite war. But before any harm could be done, *!Urisis* stepped forward and spoke to the band of Strandlopers, explaining their situation. They had only to look at the heavily pregnant women and the bedraggled men to change from hostile to sympathetic. They agreed to make peace with the interlopers and to share the cave with them.

It was thanks to the intervention of the Strandlopers that the explorers did not die during that first winter; for the Strandlopers showed them how to gather food, pointing out which roots and berries were edible, and where the best water was to be found. */Khunibeb*, the chief of the small tribe, apologised to van Meerman through the *tolcq !Gunbee* about being so protective over their land. He explained that in their culture the territory of each tribal band was handed down from father to son. This meant that each band developed a strong bond with the landscape, a bond which was reinforced by stories relating to particular features within that landscape. */Khunibeb* explained further that the small tribe of which he was chief had only been living in the area for five generations, as they had been ousted from their previous territory by a rival tribe. The loss of their territory had been difficult to come to terms with and they were only just beginning to form a strong bond with their new landscape. */Khunibeb* leaned forward and told van Meerman, "Do

you see? For our people to lose their land means to lose everything." The chief's words obviously touched van Meerman, for in the manuscript they are underlined twice. And in a later entry he observes, "*Wij beginnen ook nu deel van het land te worden*" (We, too, are becoming part of the land).

As her pregnancy progressed, van Meerman records that *!Urisis* became increasingly concerned about having her baby away from her family and their traditions. But the old women of */Khunibeb's* tribe, sensing her fears, stepped in and cared for her. Though their rituals were different to those she had learnt from her own people, they seemed to comfort the girl. And when finally, the pains of labour came to her, she let the old women send van Meerman out of the hut in order to make a small fire which he was to keep going throughout the birth process. No pots were to be put on the fire, nor was anything allowed to be cooked or roasted on it. The old women warned that both mother and child would go blind if this practice was neglected. Van Meerman records that only once the newborn's screams were heard was he allowed to enter the cave again. There he watched as the umbilical cord was cut with a knife and the bleeding staunches with a plaster of mud. The baby was not allowed to be washed with water, and was only cursorily wiped with some grass, before being wrapped in a kaross and placed in *!Urisis'* arms. They named their newborn son Pieter *!Urisib-geiste van Meerman*.

By the time spring came, both Perreira and Rootkop had met women of their own from the Strandloper band and were happily in love. Flowers began blooming in the veld all around the area. The mass blossoming, the abundance of colour and the quiet beauty of the area, as well as new-found romance, made the explorers forget about their expedition and the gold. Soon Perreira's wife was pregnant, and the men began building houses of stone on the hill so that there would be permanent shelter to protect them in both summer and winter.

Together, the Strandloper men and van Meerman's troupe constructed low stone barriers in the intertidal zones of the rocky bay. Waves swept fish in, and the fish, unable to escape, were easily caught. To this day the remains

of these stone walls are visible at low tide in the bays of Soutbek. In fact, many of the original stones were used in the building of the fish factory in the late 1960s. The factory still stands and on any day one can see a number of colourful boats on the water. It is a comfort to know that though centuries have passed, the inhabitants of Soutbek are still as reliant on fishing as their forefathers were.

It is after these events that van Meerman's journal tapers off. Life beside the sea with his son, wife and others seems to have taken up the bulk of his energy, with little time to spare for keeping a journal. Other than some minor entries about catching fish and the growth of his son, nothing further is reported. However, it is evident that the diverse group lived peacefully amongst the Strandloper band. Many children were born, and many friendships were made. Life at the mouth of the river was idyllic.

From the official records of the Compagnie we can determine that van Meerman and his small tribe did their best not to be detected, for when the Compagnie sent the ship *Bruijdegom* in August of 1667 to determine "off de Oliphantsreviers aldaer niet in zee ujtloopt" (whether the Oliphants river flows into the sea there), they found only the river, which they established was too shallow for transport. They saw no signs of human life and reported back to the Commander that the West Coast was too violent and dangerous for habitation. In 1669 another ship, *Grundel*, was sent to explore the West Coast. Their report confirmed that that area of the continent was "dood" (dead) and economically utterly unrewarding. It was many years before any further exploration of this area was carried out.

The result of the Compagnie's neglect of the West Coast meant that van Meerman and his tribe of followers were able to establish for themselves a town based on communal living, sharing and acceptance. Therefore, while their expedition had begun as a quest for gold, for van Meerman and his party of explorers there was in the end no great wealth, no rich city of gold, but what they found was worth more than any treasure could ever be.

For Anna the absence of any affection for her husband had waned in the weeks since first reading the *History*. She had begun to see that her husband was good, a god even, with all that he did for the town. In the night she rolled towards the warmth of his body, allowing his face to come near hers, breathing in his exhalations. She paid more attention to what she wore, to how she greeted him when he returned home.

Lying in bed next to Pieter as he read, she was thinking of her family, of how she might now be able to search for them, bring them to Soutbek, have a house built for them in the upper town. Surely he would allow that? Surely there was space for them now?

"It's so wonderful what you are doing," she said.

"I told you," he said, softly, placing his papers on the bedside table and leaning towards her, so that the bones of her shoulders pushed against his arm. She was so small, so thin. He wanted to fill in the fragile parts of her so that she would be complete and strong. "I told you I would take care of you and give you a better life."

"I know," she replied, resting her head against him. "But this isn't for me. This you are giving to Willem and Johanna and Charles and all of them."

"And for you," he said, kissing her cheeks, her brow. He felt that he understood his wife at last. She had been unable to love the invisible things about him; it was only now, now that he was famous and successful that she could care for him. Before that he had not been enough. He tilted her chin towards his mouth and brought his lips to hers. Both had forgotten what it was to be kissed. For Anna every place he kissed, every place he touched, felt as though it belonged to two people; the mother and wife she had been for more than a decade, and yet also that of a seventeen year old girl. This time there was nothing loathsome or fearful about it. His hands on her body were gentle. She could feel herself crawling into those hands, guiding them. In their lovemaking there was nothing like pain or degradation. He became for her something sacred, and for him, the free entry into her body, the ready access to what he had yearned for, was as much as to return to their first kiss beside the tortoise in the field, and to begin again. The mayor was in love with his wife, and he was loved back.

Afterwards she lay with her head on his chest, with her hand on the rise and fall of his belly. Afraid that if they stopped touching, if she moved away or got up, if he let go, that it would all come to an end, he kept his arms around her. Light from the passage lay on the open cupboard door, lighting the bottles of lotion, pots of cream, perfumes and clothes.

Beside her Pieter spoke, "I was right wasn't I? Good things come to those who wait."

"Yes, you were right."

"And once they're gone you will see all the good that will come of it."

"Once who is gone?"

"The upper towners, of course. You don't think I am going to let them stay do you?"

Anna sat up, her cheek cooling where it had moved away from his skin. "What are you saying?" she said. "What about the houses? You promised them houses."

"Yes, and they will get them. A spot has been selected, about ten kilometres down the coast. They'll still be by the sea. Nothing will change for them. It will be better actually."

She rose from the bed, naked. Her nightgown lay on the floor on his side of the bed. She picked up her pillow and held it in front of her body, trying to think, trying to understand what he was saying. "How?" she asked. "How will it be better? These are their homes."

"Homes? They don't even have homes. I am giving them homes."

She could feel a knot beginning to form around her throat, "But this is where they live."

"And what way of life is it? I am helping them."

He leaned his head back on the pillow, reaching his hand out to her, "Come, lie down again. Don't worry about this."

But Anna did not see his hand, or hear his words. She was thinking about her family; their bare feet and laden backs. The dust of the car on them, as she and he drove away. How had she imagined she might find them again? How had she believed that he would let them come to live here?

She walked around to the side of the bed and reached down to pick up her nightdress, all the while holding the pillow in front of her, "What you are doing is wrong. You cannot remove people from their homes."

"I don't see what the problem is. I'm rescuing them," he replied.

"And the *History*?"

"What about it?"

"The history of this area is the history of these people. It's not the history of retired farmers and professors."

"You forget that I am from the upper town. It's my history too. I want to make something of this town and that can't happen if it stays like this. It means moving some people to better conditions, it means making changes."

She was begging now. She was standing in front of him naked and begging. Something of what she had learned to love had to exist inside him. Something had to be there. Surely he couldn't be this. He couldn't be just this. She pleaded, "All that time you spent compiling and researching. I thought you believed in the past of Soutbek. I thought you believed in its lessons about everyone living together. You wrote it down; the *History* ..."

The mayor threw the blanket from the bed and shouted, "The *History*, the *History*! Shut up about the fucking *History*! The *History* is a lie!"

"What?"

"A lie. I made it up. Every single part of it was made up by me and Terence."

Anna stared at him from across the bed, "I don't understand."

"It doesn't exist," he roared. "There is no history. I am the *History*."

He watched the woman moving slowly away from him, watched as she turned from him and walked towards the cupboard. He could see her back, her narrow thighs. There was so little to her, as though she had been cut from cardboard. She was as flat and unimpressive as paper.

"What are you doing?" he asked as she began to dress.

Her bottom lip trembled, and all through her body that trembling spread. She spoke with difficulty, hearing her voice falter at first.

"I don't want ... I don't want to be here anymore."

Not waiting for a reply, not even looking at him, Anna ran from the room, escaping through the empty passages of the house. In the dark she

could see nothing, walls and empty space looked the same. She moved as though blind, feeling her way by memory. From the bedroom sounds came of her husband dressing, and she knew he would come after her. She knew he would follow her and that she had to get out of the house before he could find her. She had not realised that she was screaming, until suddenly her hand fell on something warm, something alive, and she stopped.

“Ma?” it said, “What’s wrong?”

Anna felt the warm circle of flesh in her hand; it was the child, the boy. Underneath her fingers she could feel his rotting skin. It was monstrous, monstrous. Her own skin had begun to burn too in all those places where she had been touched. Between her legs it felt as though a flaming torch had been thrust into her. It was hideous, inhuman. She had been invaded. She heard the voice of her husband in the dark, and pushed the child from her, running outside.

Anna awoke in the late morning, feeling nothing. She had slept enough, she was not cold, not hungry. Opening her eyes, seeing her surroundings, the night before returned to her. She recalled the fence she had hidden behind, listening, listening for the sound of her husband, and the feeling of panic that had begun to spread through her body till her limbs were trembling, her mouth clenched tight. Where could she go? There was nowhere, nobody. She had nothing. It was to Sara that she had gone eventually, creeping in the early dawn like a criminal, a fugitive.

“I don’t know where to go,” Anna said as Sara opened the door. “I don’t know where to go,” she repeated, and in that moment her body appeared to shrink; her shoulders raising to her ears, her arms clutching at each other, her voice frantic, “I have nowhere to go.”

Before her Sara saw the body of a child. She put her arms around the thin form, trying to usher her indoors, but Anna was immovable. She remained standing on the step, repeating the same words, the same gestures of panic. Bringing her a glass of water from the bathroom, Sara watched as Anna twisted her head, spitting out the water that had touched her lips.

“Nothing of his,” she whispered. “I’ve left him. I want nothing of his.”

Only then did Sara understand. She drew the trembling body against hers, frightened by its smallness, by the threat of the coming dawn. The mayor, she knew, would not let this pass. He would come to look for his wife, he would take her back. Without money, friendless, Sara could not think of what to do. Where could they escape to without transport, without someone to help them? There was one person alone who Sara could think of. Only one person who she knew would take them in. With no other option available, Sara had little choice but to turn to Willem, and by making that choice Sara understood that she was cementing her life.

It was to the upper town, then, that she had led Anna. Willem opened the door, and, without questions, allowed the two women to lie down on his rough bedding and go to sleep.

It was there where Anna lay when she woke. The room, she saw, was bare. The windows were covered. Beneath her the floor was hard and she became aware of the smell of cold ash, of stale urine. Full of hate, repulsed, Anna could feel the liquid of the mayor lying inside her. She sat upright and covered her face, but the details of the previous night were before her eyes in slow detail; his hands on her, her tongue in his mouth. She sat as she was, groaning quietly; unaware of Sara stirring beside her, of the whispered conversation between Willem and his sister in the corner. Anna would have liked to have been brave, but she wept instead. She wept for herself; for the pit that her husband had put her into; for the tables, chairs, beds and clothes and all the other items which numbered among his possessions and with which he had ornamented the house. She could forget nothing about him. Not his eyes, his hair, the lines of his face, nor the man he had pretended to be.

Willem and Sara did not question why she had left him; it was obvious enough in their minds. Sara comforted her with murmurings and strokings and Willem brought food to her which she refused to eat.

Only Trudie was ungenerous.

"What do you think he will do when he finds out she is here?" she asked her brother. "He will stop the money and then what will we do?"

"I can't just leave them to live outside."

"Let them go to the town hall then. Let them eat at the soup kitchen. How can we feed two extra people?"

Beside Anna, Sara turned her head away, pretending not to hear.

It was noon before Anna spoke. She began without announcement, saying quietly, unhurriedly all that had passed between herself and the mayor. She explained the lie of the *History*, the plan to remove the upper town. She spoke the words as though they were meaningless, as though she had rehearsed them too regularly in advance. Her features unmoving, her hands in her lap, she spoke without hearing herself.

"It's not enough for him," Willem said when she had finished, "to go away from the upper town; he wants to take us away from here too."

Something like vengeance had begun to fill his stomach, his throat. He could feel himself growing in fury. He put his hand out, touching Anna's shoulder, "You mustn't worry, Anna, I will sort this out."

So it was Willem who walked down the hill to the payphone, and it was Willem who dialled the numbers and spoke to reporters at three different newspapers. And it was he, too, who returned to Anna as she lay on the bedding, silent, still.

"It will be fine now Anna. I am going to take care of you. You and Sara."

The boy, David, had been pushed against a wall, had cut his forehead on the edge of the hall table when his mother had fled. The mayor, coming down the passage, still dressing, saw the boy and the blood, and picking him up, chose to leave his wife for the moment. She had nowhere to go and he expected she would go to a neighbour, have a cry and come back in the morning. He would not humiliate himself by going after her, knocking at every house. In the meantime he bound the boy's head, trying to staunch the flow of tears.

But the boy was offended. To have been shoved by his own mother, to be made to bleed by her, a woman he had only ever wished to love. It was she who had let Willem and the girl into the house. It was she who was to blame for the state of the town. The boy begged his father to allow him to return to school, to spend the final week of his holidays away from the town he hated and the mother he hated. The mayor did not resist. He had seen the

way Anna had looked at the child, nauseated. She had worn the same expression at the birth, carrying it with her throughout the remaining years.

In the morning he packed the boy's bags, not bothering to fold clothes, simply picking them up off the floor and putting them in bags. They drove to Genot in silence and he drove home again in silence. It was a long straight road between himself and Soutbek and he felt that he should see the town any minute, but it was always at the last possible moment that the rooftops appeared, always smaller than expected.

It was dark when he pulled into the driveway, and dark in the house too. He walked from room to room switching on the lights, following what he believed was the smell of her. But she was in none of the rooms. He went into the bathroom and saw her things, and in her cupboard her clothes. The mayor began to be afraid. Why had she not come back yet? He began to think over what had passed between them. Her words – he had not listened – what had she said?

He went to the door of the outside room. It was unlocked, the bed unmade. The girl was gone too. He sat down on the bed; it was cool, the sheets smelling of sleep and bodies. He pressed his face into the pillow. It was not the smell of Anna but it was human. He fell asleep that way.

In the morning he rose, not bothering to change his clothes or see his face in the mirror. She would return today, he knew, for what could two girls with no money do?

He walked down to his office, humming quietly. She would be back home by the time he returned. She would have tidied the kitchen and made the beds. He would forgive her. All would be well. He turned towards his office, noticing the wall of the town hall. It was white again. It had not been painted for a few days. He tutted irritably. Where was that idiot Willem? He had become annoying, unreliable recently. Always hanging around the girl. Always coming to speak to his wife.

The mayor paused, abruptly, feeling a fool, a giant fool, realizing where his wife and the girl had gone.

"That stupid boy!" he muttered to himself, and then louder, "That stupid fucking boy!"

He would go up the hill. He would bring her back. He would tell Willem what he thought of him. He would spit in his face, withdraw all future monetary assistance. He would show that little shit that he could not be taken advantage of. He was the mayor for fuck's sake. He was the goddamn fucking mayor! He was fuming, livid, and he was terrified.

Turning towards the upper town, rehearsing under his breath what he would say and do, the mayor saw two ladies from the Woman's Committee standing across the road staring at him and whispering.

He blushed and waved at them from where he stood, calling "Nice morning, isn't it?"

They nodded slightly and walked away.

"It can wait," he thought, watching the women, calming down. "It can wait till later. I will go later." For the third time that morning he changed direction, treading heavily towards the shop at the bottom of the steep hill.

The porch was empty, but from inside the mayor could hear the sound of many voices. As he stepped over the threshold, the rush of voices fell silent, and before him the bodies moved aside, clearing a path for him. No one returned his greeting, and though all eyes were on him as he moved towards the counter, no person made eye contact with him.

The mayor moved uneasily. Did they know about Anna? Was that what it was?

In front of the counter, beside the dusty packets of biltong, he saw the newspaper rack. "I will buy a paper," he thought, "and then leave. Just buy a paper and leave. Let them gossip if they will."

Reaching out for the paper – it was the last one, he saw – the headline caught his eye: *Forced Removals and Fake History*.

He read no further, registering hastily the newspapers in the hands of the assembled people, understanding their fierce looks. Not waiting for his change, saying nothing, the mayor rushed from the store, feeling the gap closing in again behind him, the noise recommencing, rising like a wave.

It was only once he reached his office that the mayor allowed himself to lay the paper out on the desk in front of him. He skimmed through swiftly, horrified by the phrases he read.

*"Allegedly promised homes ... ten kilometres away from the town...out of sight."*

*"Professor Terence Pearson, affiliated with pro-apartheid propaganda..."*

*"Mayor of Soutbek, Pieter Fortuin, one time fisherman..."*

Fisherman? Where had they gotten that from? He had never been a fisherman.

*"Professor Hugh Priestly of ... and Dr. Harold Adonis... experts in the field, concur that there exist certain incongruities in dates and information... 'It could not be other than a fake,' Dr. Adonis testifies."*

The mayor groaned when he came to the final paragraph, which explained that despite the reporter's best efforts Mayor Fortuin was unreachable, and Professor Pearson had not deigned to comment when, contacted.

Having read the article, having seen what was said of himself, of his vision for Soutbek, the mayor felt at first only stunned. How had this happened? He had been so very careful. All moments, each step, had been carefully planned, all signs of artificiality had been avoided. How was it that this had happened? Neither his wife, nor the possibility of her betrayal entered his mind. She was incapable, he knew, of such treachery. Instead he viewed the blame as lying in the failure of his collaborator. He picked up the phone, feeling a rising sense of fury as he dialled, so that when eventually he heard the voice of the professor answering, he shouted, "What is this? They phone you and you say nothing to me about it. You don't warn me. I have to find out in front of the whole town from a newspaper!"

"I thought it was a hoax," the professor replied, quietly, too composed.

"A hoax?"

"It has happened to me a lot in my professional career. It is what happens."

"But they're saying it's a fake. How can they know that? You fucked up! It's your fault! They're saying it's full of dates that don't make sense. You're a Professor of History! I thought history was all about dates! How could you get them wrong?"

"I didn't get them wrong. Not the real ones."

"You're a fucking idiot!" the mayor shouted, slamming the phone down.

By the afternoon several reporters had phoned the mayor in his office. He side-stepped all questions, commenting on nothing, speaking without commitment, until finally he tired and unplugged the phone at the wall. Outside he could hear the buzz of the soup queue forming. He put his head in his hands, placing his elbows on his desk, dragging his palms over his cheeks. So much noise. Always so much noise from them. The hungry, the homeless; they sat on his shoulders, they hung round his neck. They gave him no peace. When would he be rid of them?

As he sat brooding, he noticed that the sun was already far along its course. It was late afternoon. It was too late for the queue to be forming. What was causing that noise then? Getting up, he left his office, walked round the side of the town hall and saw that indeed there was no queue. Instead, inhabitants of both the upper town and lower town stood in large groups, talking. Reporters moved amongst them, herding them in front of film crews and microphones.

Those from the lower town were reticent, unwilling to reply to the questions posed. They were pushed out of the way by the upper towners, who shouted out that the allegations against the mayor were false.

"We watched him grow up," they said.

"We knew his father."

"We played with him as children."

They called him a good man. They spoke of him with admiration and respect, listing all that he had done for them.

"He wouldn't do anything bad like that. He is one of us."

"He wouldn't make us move away. He knows what Soutbek means to us."

When they saw the mayor appear from behind the town hall the members of the upper town began to cheer. The reporters turned from them, running towards the mayor, calling out questions, blocking his way.

"What do you have to say about the accusation that your history of Soutbek is false?"

The mayor pushed through the mass, grimly, "Soutbek is a wonderful town with a marvellous history. You can't fake that."

"What about the manuscript? Where is that?"

"Will you make the manuscript available in order to prove your book's authenticity?"

"It is in a private collection" the mayor replied. "It is not for me to say."

"Is it true that you are forcing people to move away from Soutbek?"

The mayor had reached his house. He turned on the doorstep and shielded his eyes from the sun, "I have no idea what you are talking about. I love Soutbek and its people. I grew up here."

He reached into his pocket and brought out his keys, turning his back on further questions, trying to unlock the door without any signs of haste.

Within days further information was leaked to the press by anonymous individuals. Names of the bribed officials in the alleged removal scheme were released; their photos filling the newspapers, the evening news. Across the country the media fuelled an irate outcry. Citizens were outraged. Had there not been enough of this sort of thing in the past? Forced removals; doctored histories? In the wake of the uproar, pending investigation, the officials were suspended and the promised houses, so urgently fought for by the mayor, were rescinded; the documentation taken into custody, null and voided.

In the upper town the inhabitants assembled around the one or two television sets which were still in the possession of a few. They stared, abashed, at footage of their destroyed homes, their shacks, hearing the interspersed voice-overs of their words of faith in the mayor. Artistically, the segment was powerful, with its careful use of juxtaposition to enhance the tragic irony of the situation. Yet for those watching on scratchy screens in the upper town, aesthetics meant very little. They understood only that they had been made fools of. That they had been turned into characters of pitiful misfortune. The mayor had cheated them. They had been cheated. Disillusioned, having been promised something, having formed ideas in their minds of their futures, of their homes, they saw that yet again they were to be denied the dignity of achievement.

"This is your fault," Trudie told her bother.

“How?”

“It was you who went to the papers. It was you who made this happen. What gives you the right to choose for everyone? What gives you the right to take houses away from us? We don’t care about the past. It’s only *now* that we care about.”

“What was I supposed to do? Let him get away with it, let him put us behind a corner, out of sight?”

“You should have let us have houses. You should have forgotten about the stupid *History*.”

The mayor sat in the dark with the curtains drawn, watching the news, his face coming back to him, swollen, livid, through the screen. He felt deceived, humiliated by what had come to pass. Each morning he had woken knowing that greatness lay ahead of him; that things had been promised to him, by himself, by his own efforts and design. Now he found that everything he had made for himself, all those things which had, for him, formed the basis of his life, did not exist. The ability to arrange all things, to bide his time and plan, had come to nothing. There was no substance to what he had done. Nothing had been achieved. Through all his years of preparing, he had succeeded in nothing. The lack of initiative, the hollow lives, the poverty of the upper towners was insufferable, but now he saw that he was as despicable, more even, more despicable, than anyone from the upper town.

On the morning of the fourth day, the mayor walked out to a sky, grey, cloudless. He stood in front of his house, his chin stiff, and spoke to the waiting reporters.

“There is no manuscript,” he said. “Pieter van Meerman never existed. I made him up. I made up the entire thing. I lied about the houses too. I wanted the upper town gone. I promised them houses so that I could get rid of them.”

It was what they had already known. In fact, many had already written their articles, waiting only for those very words to slot in place before sending them back to their editors. Those words, they knew, would, within a few hours, line lampposts throughout the country. The reporters were pleased at their success and, having nothing more to do, began packing up their belongings,

so that by evening none remained; their presence only evident by the litter of polystyrene coffee mugs and cigarette ends which lay outside the mayor's house.

University of Cape Town

### Afterword: Soutbek Today

Present day Soutbek is a far cry from the small settlement established here in the mid 1660s. Yet, that same spirit of generosity and enthusiasm which united such a diverse array of people in the common goal of a better life is in no way absent in the Soutbek of today. Visitors to the town often remark on its "old world charm" and "quiet beauty," as well as the kindness of the locals. Renowned for its local delicacies, the people in this area live a quiet life, spent mostly in the long-standing industries of fishing and *bokkom*-making. Come to Soutbek on any day of the week and you will be warmly welcomed by the local fishermen and their families. They will gladly take visitors out on their colourful boats, showing them around the rocky coastline, and allow them to be privy to that self-sufficiency, that independent spirit of the inhabitants which was instilled 350 years ago. The local fishermen still make their nets by hand and it is a truly unique sight to see them sitting on their front door steps, mending or producing these. With the correct permit (available from the local Post Office) the independence of the Soutbekers can be replicated by any tourists interested in collecting crayfish or mussels, or even in doing some fishing of their own.

But far from simply remaining quaint and unprogressive, this coastal town has become a favoured holiday destination for national and international tourists alike. Famed for its solitude, Soutbek boasts a wonderful stretch of peaceful coastline, on which one can idle, admire the breathtaking view, whale-watch or simply relax. A protected beach with a tidal pool also makes Soutbek an ideal family destination. Mothers can let their children swim and play without need for concern. For the more active visitor, Soutbek offers a variety of activities such as surfing, horse riding, hiking and 4x4 trails. It is also the favourite destination of birdwatchers, since the nearby estuary serves as an important habitat for migratory birds, and has recently been registered as an IBA (Important Breeding Area). In addition, Soutbek attracts botanists and nature lovers from across the globe, due to the famed riot of

colours which erupts each spring in the form of a carpet of flowers that spreads for kilometres. The full beauty of these flowers is best witnessed between the hours of 11:00 and 15:00, the hottest hours of the day, when the blooms turn to face the sun.

No trip to South Africa can be considered complete without first stopping at Soutbek, nor do South Africans any longer have an excuse for not visiting. With its wonderful reputation for professional service and its ability to make everyone feel at home, Soutbek is able to entice even the most exacting tourist. But above all, the mild winters and temperate summers, as well as the peaceful atmosphere, beautiful scenery and a truly rich history, combine to make Soutbek the ideal holiday destination. A destination which, I am sure Pieter van Meerman would agree, is worth traversing the world to reach.

Pieter Fortuin

Terence Pearson

On the West Coast, winter returned sooner than the previous year. The dry earth of the plains muddied, the grass turned green. In the lower town those who could, had begun to leave. It was not the embarrassment of being associated with Soutbek that drove them away. Rather, it was the continued presence of the homeless in the town hall, the continued stench of litter and human waste. Though they had not been privy to the mayor's plan to resettle the upper towners, they now felt robbed by the lost benefits it would have brought them. A town that was not their town was no town at all. Houses went on the market or stood empty, their windows crusted over with salt and dust, their gardens overgrown.

Still, despite the emptying town and the lapse of time, the disgrace of his failure kept Pieter indoors. Initially, after his confession, letters had come for him: from his publishers who were suing him, from his lawyer notifying him that he was being investigated for fraud, bribery and corruption, and from the town council, informing him that under the circumstances he would be relieved of his position as Mayor of Soutbek. After that he had heard nothing from outside; not from inhabitants of the town, not from further afield.

He stopped washing, stopped dressing. He ate what there was, scrounging in the cupboards for what food still remained. He lived off stale bread; tomato and onion mix eaten straight from the tin; peanut butter. In the freezer he found meat which he placed in the microwave for a few minutes, eating it pink, half-raw. At night he slept in any of the many rooms of his house, dragging a sleeping bag and pillow behind him; afraid to sleep in an individual room for two nights running. Sleep punished him. There was nothing easy about it; no rest, no calm. Each night he lay somewhere between sleep and wakefulness, feeling his eyes burning, his skin crawling on his body. Half-dreaming, half-awake he would see the wet form of his father coming towards him holding out a freshly caught fish.

"It is too small," he would try to tell his father. "You have to throw it back."

But his father would not leave, would continue towards him, the red flap of his slit throat opening and closing like a gill, until Pieter covered his head with the sleeping bag, gnashing his teeth, begging.

The routine nightmare, the horror of sleeplessness, caused Pieter to turn to alcohol. He opened the doors of his liquor cabinet and steadily went through its contents, hoping to go blind with drunkenness, hoping to sleep. But, too soon the alcohol was gone. It was weeks since he had been outside, weeks since he had spoken to anyone. Drunk, stinking, he made his way outdoors, blinking violently in the dim mid-morning light. It was raining slightly, and cold, but Pieter noticed neither, stumbling down the hill towards the shop, stopping part way in order to check into which pocket he had put his credit card.

He did not pay attention to where he stood. He did not observe the line of glaring faces, did not hear the shouts coming from the soup queue outside the town hall. Only when they began pelting him with hunks of bread and cups of soup did he look up, drawing his arms up to protect his face from the hot liquid. From the queue, from further up the hill, from the town hall, they ran at him. He was confused, stumbling, unable to turn away. They slapped him, kicked him, pushed him to the ground; all the while shouting and cursing. He called out for help, crying out the names of the men who stood guard. But the men were motionless, saying nothing, their arms crossed, their faces blank. He began to cry, snot and spit pouring from him, his body grating on the tar. They kicked and kicked, while he held his arms up in front of his body as though he wasn't there, as though he didn't exist.

As the lower town steadily emptied itself of inhabitants, jobs for the upper towners became scarce. With only the small government subsidies that each family received for every child under fifteen, there was not enough to live on. Children ran in the streets, hungry, naked. Dogs, too thin to move, lay in the road, panting. The people of the upper town were reduced to frameworks only; to bones and skin. They went to church, they prayed. Their bodies tired, hurting, they kneeled before God, begging for forgiveness for their sins, asking for relief. They spoke of mercy, of salvation, but in their hearts they no longer believed in such things. Leaving the church, they looked up at the large sky coming in black and cold. Around them the wind was strong. They found themselves turning, holding down their hats, their dresses, turning in the wind underneath a black sky; boats on the sea.

Taking advantage of the destitution of the upper towners, a farmer arrived one morning in a large truck. He went from shelter to shelter, explaining that he had a week's work for anyone who was willing. He owned a citrus farm on the banks of the Oliphants River, and would pay R60 a day for naartjie pickers, payment at the end of the week. A generous amount, he was careful to observe, for unskilled labourers.

Anna and Sara, who had become inseparable, heard the offer with gratitude. For weeks they had lived on the charity of Willem and his sister, unable to offer anything in return. It was only this which made them uneasy, for otherwise a strange sort of calm and contentment had entered their lives. At night they slept together, holding each other close for warmth, and during the day they walked through the flatlands and along the shore for miles, searching for firewood to bring home. Each recognized in the other something of the goodness of her own self, and though the women said little to one another, each knew she was loved and would not be abandoned.

When the opportunity arose for them to do some work, to make some money to feed those who had so kindly taken them in, they readily accepted and were amongst the first to climb up on the back of the truck. At the naartjie orchard the farmer gave them a canvas bag apiece, which they were to wear slung over a shoulder. To some he gave stepladders with which to reach the top branches. Anna and Sara walked together through the rows, filling their bags, enjoying the cool air, laughing at their steaming breaths. For six days this routine became their lives. For six days they were fetched before dawn, watching from the back of the truck the world around them slowly unfold, become clear, as the sun rose; and then in the evening, on the return journey, watching the same objects disappear into night.

On the evening of the sixth day, the farmer waited for everyone to climb out of the truck and made them form a line. Into each waiting hand he placed two R50 notes. Seeing the amount, Sara, who was at the start of the line, stepped forward, "But where is the rest?"

"What was that, *meisie*?"

"You said R60 a day. That's R360. You still owe us R260 each."

The farmer smiled, "Listen *meisie*, you've obviously never done this sort of work before, so let me tell you - I had to meet my expenses. You don't think I'm going to drive all this way twice a day for nothing. That R260 of yours covers your transport every day."

Sara opened her mouth, ready to say more, but Anna took her by the elbow, "Come," she said, "We need the money." And Sara, grim, walked with her to the Cupido house, ashamed as she handed the two crumpled notes to Trudie.

Soon the heavy storms came. The river flooded, roads were blocked off. In the upper town they turned to foraging. They stripped the rock pools of mussels and small crabs. They gathered root tubers, winter berries, insects, lizards, the odd mongoose. Some even ate gulls. They no longer recognized themselves by their own faces in the mirror, seeing, instead, their wretchedness in the faces of each other; so that each man and woman became an echo of the next, the original impossible to locate. They squatted in the rubble of their homes, holding in their hands crumbled bricks made by their parents and grandparents. They touched the earth wherever possible; mud and dust and dirt. It was theirs and they carried it with them under their nails, on their skins.

In having the history of Soutbek turned into a lie, to the outside world truth and fiction had now become indistinguishable and the past was a fable, the identities of the inhabitants a mere myth. Robbed of their selves, their ancestors, they were nothing to anyone anymore. In the passing months as hunger and dejection increased, it was as though they had become completely invisible to others. Outside of Soutbek, they no longer existed.

On the packing floors of the fish factory, bodies lay asleep, exhausted. The night was cold; wind blew in from all sides. Somewhere someone was coughing, elsewhere a child whimpered. Out of the dark mass of sleeping forms, a body rose, walking stiffly, unnaturally, as though entirely made of bone. It limped through the sleepers, careful not to wake anyone. Exiting the factory floor, it walked out to the land, littered and foul beside the jetty. There, in the moonlight, the shape came out of the shadow and the face was clear: young, tired, hardly yet a man. The tide was low and he waded awkwardly out

towards the far end of the jetty which still stood. At the upright, he pulled himself stiffly up the ragged sides, resting on the shit-covered concrete at the top, leaning against the crane which still remained. He sat and looked out at the sea; dark, still, endless before him. Behind him the land was quiet, expanding out and out.

The following morning they saw his body, hanging from the crane, a noose made from shoelaces. The tide was in and it was hours before anyone could get to him to take him down.

The mayor did not recognize Anna when he arrived at the Cupido house, drunk, foul, unable to stand. She was small, too thin, her face lined and drawn.

"Sit down," she said. "I'll get you some water."

"Some food. I need food," he replied.

"There is none."

"Nothing?"

"Nothing."

"Water then."

She knelt down beside him, holding a cup to his lips, and he drank loudly. He put his hand up, tried to touch her arm, but she moved away, wrinkling her nose at the stench of him. After the beating at the soup kitchen, he had not left the house during the day. Only at night did he go outside, scrabbling through the rubbish bins of those few remaining inhabitants of the lower town. He was sick; he had broken ribs, a broken nose. He lived on bread crusts and chicken bones.

"I didn't want this," he said.

Anna said nothing.

"I wanted to feel proud," he belched quietly, wiping his mouth with his sleeve. Anna held the chipped cup to his lips again.

"I wanted something I could be proud of," he continued. "Something for my son to be proud of."

"Are you proud now?" she began to ask, but his head had already tipped back, and he lay where he was, breathing deeply, slowly.

He woke to the sound of hymns being sung. He was cold, lying on a concrete floor, drenched in his own urine. He got up unsteadily, coughing up phlegm and clutching at his aching ribs. Outside the singing continued, and he left the house, following the sound. Near the church he stopped, seeing a large crowd in the graveyard. It was a funeral, for the suicide. There had been no objections in the congregation to burying the boy in the cemetery. They knew what had killed him, they knew that that same thing existed inside each of their own bodies.

Six men had dug the grave, taking hours, as the wet soil kept caving in. Into this crumbling pit they lowered the body. There was no coffin, only a sheet to hold the corpse, lowered down by means of two ropes held by four men.

From where he stood, he looked out at the shacks around him, at the people assembled around the grave. Beyond the cemetery, in the distance, the cargo train was moving in an endless line towards the further coast. When the last of the carriages was out of sight, he turned, walking away from the upper town, away from the hill, the beach, away from Soutbek and his house, with its many rooms, empty.

## Afterword and Acknowledgments

While the events, characters and many of the places in this novel are fictional, much of the inspiration for this work was drawn from several trips to the West Coast towns of Strandfontein and Doringbaai between February 2008 and January 2009.

Originally, deeply concerned with the question of appropriating voices for my own ends, I struggled to write anything substantial. Wishing to remain as neutral, as removed as possible, I did not name my characters, nor did I use quotation marks to indicate direct speech so as to avoid being accused of putting words into the mouths of others. This overly cautious approach resulted in an unreadable, as well as unwritable, story. Consequently, though initially it pained me to do so, I took the advice of my supervisor, Damon Galgut, which was simply this: "All writing is appropriation." This observation, of course, is true, whether referring to male authors writing female characters, adults writing children, humans writing animals, and so forth. And, simple though the advice may be, it is that which, I believe, has made the difference; for without it, I would have a novel with no emotional resonance whatsoever.

At all times I have been careful to remember that though this is a work of fiction, it is a tale nonetheless which represents a sore reality, and I have tried my utmost to relate it in a sympathetic and sensitive manner. However, if this is not evident, then the failure is all mine, and I apologise sincerely.

There are a number of people I would like to thank for their kindness to me during the year spent in the writing of this novel.

Firstly, I would like to thank the National Arts Council for making it possible through financial assistance for me to write uninterruptedly for six months, thus producing the first draft of *The History*.

To my parents, Keith and Esmarie Jennings, I owe more than I can say. For their continuous support I thank them; for clothing me, feeding me, *putting up with my moods*, giving me advice which I sometimes took, more often didn't and then later regretted not taking, for being willing always to drop anything and help me because I need to know *right now* how long the Sishen-Saldanha railway is or what a *nice-sounding* Portuguese surname would be. In short, I must thank them for everything. I hope the end result will please them and make them proud. (I must also single out my mother who assisted in some of the Dutch translations with great patience!)

Carla Potgieter I want to thank for first introducing me to Strandfontein and Doringbaai, and to her parents, Johan and Linnea Potgieter, for generously opening their holiday home to me, allowing me to visit Strandfontein several times, without the worry of the cost of accommodation. I will never forget the seven days Carlo and I spent alone in their holiday home in July of 2008. It was freezing cold, and we had only one pair of gloves between the two of us. Bundled up in bed, dressed in all of our clothes in an attempt to get warm, we each wore a single glove, using the bare hand to turn the pages of books, or, in my case, to write; all the while knowing that the roads were flooded, that we were trapped, and that we had run out of sweets!

Megan Witbooi of “Die Hawe”, Doringbaai’s community centre, I want to thank for taking the time to show me around and introduce me to a number of the admirable people working to make Doringbaai a self-sufficient community. From Megan I learned about the soup kitchen and the dreadful statistics of how many of the inhabitants survive solely on that meal each day, as well as the fact that recently a farmer had hired some of the inhabitants of the town, paying them at the end of the week between R60 and R90 each, claiming petrol costs. She also told me of the unnecessary death of a young boy from meningitis due to the fact that it took seven hours before the ambulance arrived, as it was busy elsewhere. It is from Megan, too, that I heard the deeply tragic news of the suicide of Percivil Jacques Don, a fifteen year old boy. Visiting the cemetery later that day, I discovered that Percivil had hanged himself on 17 July 2008 – one day after my previous visit had ended.

I am touched by the generosity of the learners of Voortrekker High and Fish Hoek Senior High Schools who so kindly donated bags and bags of toys, school supplies and clothing to the Doringbaai Community Centre. Here again I must thank my parents who used all of their influence to inspire their learners to give to those less fortunate than themselves.

Damon Galgut, my supervisor, though I didn’t trouble him too much (for which I am sure he is grateful!), I must thank in particular for his early questioning of the original time period of this novel; had he not done this I would have a rather pretty, but somewhat irrelevant novel on my hands . It has been a great comfort to me to be able to communicate with an author of Damon’s calibre. He has patiently put up with my numerous anxieties, encouraged me, listened to me and above all, he has never lied to me about the lot of the writer. To write *is* to appropriate. To write *is* to

alienate some one or other reader (or readers). These are lessons I will carry with me always; invaluable to any author.

Furthermore, I would like to thank the following: Carrol Clarkson, who supervised my previous Masters Degree (in English literature), and from whom I have learnt so much, not only about literary criticism, but about writing too, as well as about life, about being all that one can and should be; Tannie Babs Conradie for supplying details about naartjie picking; Carlo Germeshuys Snr and Sandra Germeshuys for putting up with me over numerous weekends as I wandered around their house with wild hair, pyjama-clad, looking for the right word to complete a sentence, while simultaneously eating them out of house and home and stealing the affections of their cat; Jean Keiser for alcohol, food and lively company; Lesley Marx for always being available with a ready shoulder for me to cry on; Fedde van den Bosch for translations of the more difficult, archaic Dutch I came across from time to time, and with which my mother was unable to assist me; Pieter van Eeden - a wellspring of information regarding the Strandfontein area; Retha Werner for being most obliging during a desperate late night phone call regarding symptoms of meningitis – information I had to have *right then and there* and then failed to use.

Most of all I must thank the wonderful Carlo Germeshuys Jnr, who was beside me through every moment of the process of writing *The History*; from my very first experience of Strandfontein, walking along the beach, freezing cold, peering desperately through the mist, right up to the moment I completed the final editing. It was to Carlo that I would turn daily, hourly at times, to discuss my problems, my moments of genius, my desire to kill off all the characters in an unexpected alien attack. And it was, without fail, Carlo who listened to me, encouraged me, and, most importantly, understood me and what my hope was with this book. He read the same pages over and over and over, even when I had changed only a single comma, without complaint and with glowing praise. No part of this novel would be possible without him, and each page is a testament to his love and his extraordinary faith in me.

Karen Jennings

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