



Dance on the red-brown earth

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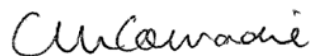
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Declaration:

I, Catharina Maria Conradie, hereby declare that the work contained in this dissertation entitled *Dance on the red-brown earth: an extract* is entirely my own work and that I have not previously submitted it, in part or in its entirety, at any university for a degree or examination. Although written against the background of real historical events, this is a work of fiction. All sources used in the reflective essay have been indicated and acknowledged by means of references.

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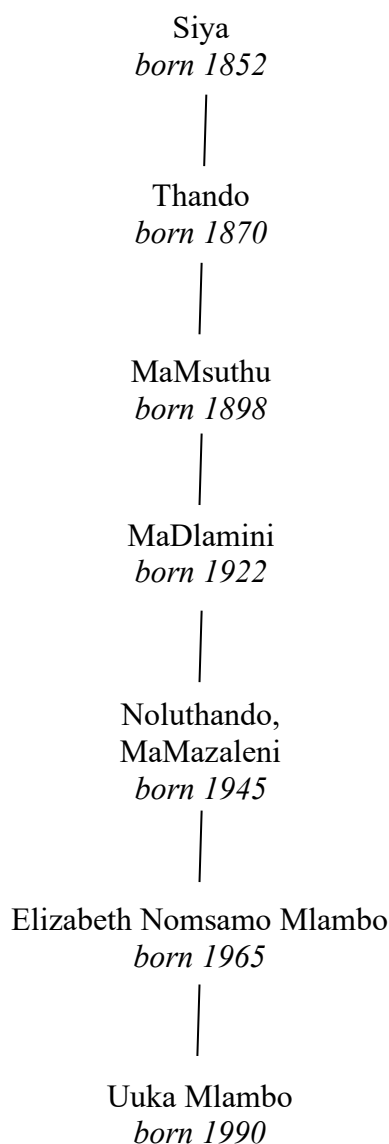
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Date: 2020.11.25

Abstract

Nandi, Java and Uuka are students at a Cape Town university, where they are enrolled in a film making course. Adela, their lecturer, will supervise their screenplay and film on a story which depicts the experience of the loss of land in South Africa. They are however also deeply involved in student protests for free university education for all. When the *#feesmustfall* protests reach a deadlock at their university and the university is temporarily closed, they decide to leave for the Eastern Cape to look for a story. There they stay with Uuka's grandparents and spend their time trying to understand the family history and the family's ownership of land, as well as the broader history of land dispossession. They do not only discover more about Uuka's ancestors and about distant history, but also about themselves. As the characters delve more deeply into the past in their search for a story for a screenplay, the margins between their own stories and the screenplay shift and merge, as do the forms of novel and screenplay.

Mlambo family



Dance on the red-brown earth: extract from a novel

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The right question in all circumstances is: who am I?
Abba Poemen, Desert Father, 340–450

Dance on the red-brown earth

The dance starts with bright sun slung through slates,
a drum, a shoulder shake, a brass band beat.
Feet start to move, to twirl, to pulse -
An unfolding parade of shadows and shades.

Shades of four legs dancing down the track,
bearing the lightness of those who danced before.
Moving and sweating, heaviness bearing down –
the joy of the beat, of the cry, of the song.

Free Nelson Mandela – his mind is still free –
Dance in your two-shaded wingtip shoes.
Dance down the mine dump, the mine shaft, the cart.
Dance in the cow shed, the kraal, on the land.

We dance, pulling skeletons, letting them shake
to the throb, to the show, the procession of lives.
Bearing our flags, we join the cortège
of bones in our beautiful red-brown dust.

A family secret

EXT. CAPE TOWN, A UNIVERSITY CAMPUS - 15 OCTOBER 2015 - DAY

‘Mina, I’m confused.’ Nandi kicks at the nettles growing over the neglected brick pathway.

She sits down on the wooden bench at the side of the old herb garden. A passing student hears her, and grins as he walks on towards the red brick building in front of them. She pulls a face at him, then turns back to Uuka and Java.

‘Can you even make this out?’ Nandi aims another kick at an overgrown rosemary bush with long extended branches. ‘How can they make a garden with all these little rows and boxes? My gogo would have had a good laugh at this!’

Uuka laughs down at her, from where he stands on the other side of the brick path.

‘You have to get inside the colonial mind. It’s like taming nature, making it your own creature. But this is not what you’re confused about?’

‘Eish no, it’s this story we need. Bad enough to write a screenplay, but how to find the story!’

Java takes out a pouch and starts to roll a cigarette.

‘We can always make it up. Imagination, you’ve got a lot of that. We all have a lot of that – remember our Christmas play?’

Nandi smiles, and swings her head so that her large yellow earrings swing in circles.

Uuka takes a step closer.

‘My family has a story. One that might...well, that might give us some ideas. Just don’t know what it is, exactly. It’s been...like a family secret, you know, we all know about it, but we don’t know exactly what it is.’

‘Uuka, think again. If your family has a secret, how can we make a bloody movie of it, even if we know what it is?’ Nandi gets up and walks up the circular path in the middle of the herb garden. ‘Shit!’ she says as she trips over a broken brick. ‘So, what’s it about anyway?’

Uuka rubs his nose.

‘Not sure. Like I said. It’s to do with...’ He rubs his nose again, turns away. ‘It’s to do with an umlungu ancestor in the family, way back. It’s probably not even true, there were no white people in the Amathole then, not where my family was.’

Nandi takes up a dramatic pose, her hand over her eyes.

‘Worse and worse! Now you want us to make a movie about a *white* Xhosa in the Amathole ...a *secret* white Xhosa in the Amathole ...when we have to write about land and who owns it!’ She swipes her book at him and Uuka ducks away. They both laugh as they pack up their packs.

‘Well,’ says Java as they walk to the student union, ‘that deals with my family stories. Lots of white blood there, and no land.’

‘Do you know that for sure?’ asks Uuka.

‘Do I know what? White blood, forty percent. Had a DNA test for my birthday.’

‘Forty per cent! Wow girl!’

‘C’mon Uuka, don’t look at me like that! I’m black, you know that!’ She holds out a slim brown hand, turns it around.

When they reach the student union music blasts from the loudspeakers. Nandi and Java move to the beat of the hip hop song. They sing along ... ‘creativity causes a revolution ...shouldn’t I be breaking the chains?...I should!...salute to my ancestors... they are assisting ... come on Uuka!’

‘But I don’t know it!’

‘You do! It’s Andy Mkosi! Come on!’

But Zanele, a student leader, is testing a microphone, and the music fades.

‘Let’s get food before they start’ suggests Java. ‘Nandi, keep this table?’

Uuka and Java queue for food and then return to the table at the edge of the large student canteen carrying a big plate of chips and burgers, with tomato sauce in plastic pockets. There are two tomato slices and Java moves them to Nandi’s side of the plate. She looks at Uuka as she does so. ‘I don’t like them and your mother feeds you well’ she smiles.

The space fills up as it becomes clear that the student meeting is about to start. Most of the students are wearing black, red, or black and green T-shirts to show their political affiliation. When the speech starts there is a lot of distortion from the speakers near the high roof and they only hear parts of Zanele’s passionate address. She starts with a chant, which everybody dances to, and then continues:

‘Dear fellow students, we are living within history. Make no mistake – generations to come will talk about this time and about the return of activism to our country. Our leaders have failed us; our political parties have gone silent about transformation; our Vice Chancellors at our universities have kept themselves blind and deaf to our suffering. Our elders have also been quiet in the face of our economic challenges...only five percent of all black students who enroll at universities complete their studies! And many of those who complete are unemployed for years. And we are tied to scholarship debts for many years while we have to use our salaries to provide for the hardship of our families. Is this right? Is this just?’

The crowd shouts: ‘No!!’ and cheers. Looking at the audience Nandi sees a sea of fists in the air and many students are pushing forward as if ready to take action.

‘We call on the president to release the long overdue report on free higher education, and on the Minister to introduce a tuition fee freeze while this is being sorted out. And our mothers who work as cleaners of the university have to be reinstated as tenured staff. We have no more patience. We insist that these demands be met, and immediately. We shall not be responsible for our actions if it does not happen!’

There is a boisterous response. Uuka gets up and Nandi and Java follow him out.

‘So it’s coming. Another day or two and it will burst.’

‘Burst?’ Nandi laughs. ‘But yes, it’s coming. We’ve tolerated things so far; no further.’ She makes a fist, still with a grin.

‘I think it will be rough, guys.’ Java frowns. ‘In res people are talking about petrol bombs. And then, the cops will come again with tear gas. Not that you are worried about that!’ She points a finger at Nandi. Now they both laugh, remembering how with the previous protests a year ago Nandi had been studying in her room when their residence was tear gassed, and had only understood what was happening when Java pulled her out and led her down the stairs to the back door, both shielding their noses and their eyes.

‘Ja, Java, it will be rough, but it’s what we are talking about.’ Nandi is serious now. ‘Our education and the land and race and our families in shacks in cities. We have to change things.’

‘Sure.’

They talk about Java’s sister Charmaine as they walk back to their rooms. She is two years younger than Java, and feels differently about the protest action. ‘All she wants is the space to complete her degree, but she has to understand that this is not only about her’ Java says.

‘But she will finish?’ says Nandi. ‘Surely she will be able to finish?’

‘She already had to drop two courses last year with the protests, so I understand that she feels nervous. And my parents are sitting on her.’ Java looks worried for a moment, then shrugs her shoulders. ‘But first the bigger picture, I think.’

Amathole

THE WRITER'S VOICE, THE PRESENT

I want to tell you about the Amathole:
the mountain where young calves were taken
by boys, hardly old enough to leave their mothers.

I want to find the words that would shape the picture
in your mind. These words are shrouded, adrift,
hard to snare.

I want to show you the steep kloofs where water rushes
down stepped sandstone gullies
into deep pools, an endless marimba dance.

Two young boys, each clad only in a kaross, deliberate at the water's edge:
The older will stay to watch the cattle,
because the lion roared in the night.

The younger will run to the imizi, to call the village men.
There will be meat and skins to be carried back
through the yellowwood forest and the vast green grassland:

One calf fell to its death over large wet boulders,
the other was bitten by a small night adder
while the boys were asleep. As he runs

I want to show you the bright flight of the Igolomi
in Kologha forest, high up in the flowering umsitshana,
where the seeping mist does not reach.

Then, let me take you to the high cave of Sandile, the warrior king,
where he held out against those who hunted him down
for the land of his people.

I want to show you the hidden beauty of Amathole,
from where the water and the blood still flow
in powerful rivers to the sea.

Let me tell you about the story of my life

EXT. CAPE TOWN, A UNIVERSITY CAMPUS - 21 OCTOBER 2015 - DAY

Uuka puts his phone on video, holds it low down. They are marching to the beat of a song.

Nobody wanna see us together

No mami no no no no

Nobody wanna see us at school!

Thina sizofunda mahala

Let me tell you about the story of my life

The marching students swing fists in the air, and the beat of the music moves them down the tar road which surrounds the university buildings. Nandi slips out from the back, and walks quietly to the yellow brick building where Adela is working in her office.

‘Sorry doc, time to go. They are coming this way.’

Adela looks up from her computer, surprised.

‘Are they? Thanks Nandi, I’ll go.’

She locks her door, briefcase under her arm, as the first students snake past her door, still dancing with knees high: *Let me tell you about the story of my life*. Adela smiles at them. As she walks out towards the outer door, a young man walks backward in front of her with a camera on her. She tries to see his face but it is hidden behind the camera. The other students keep up a beat for her as she reaches the door and leaves. There is an edge to this protest which feels different from previous student action, and Adela inhales deeply as she turns on her car to drive home from the campus.

Uuka waves to Java and also drops out of the march. He does not want to get home late. As he drives past a settlement with informal corrugated iron houses near the Cape Town airport, a woman with a toddler in her arms almost steps into his car. He swerves to the right, and a loaded taxi hoots at him. He settles into the left lane and concentrates on the traffic. He is worried, and excited, and he knows that the protest action is gaining momentum. But there will be time to think about that later. Focus now. He moves the small Japanese car into the lane which leads to the highway. Another overloaded taxi pushes past him and he falls back. When the next one accelerates past him and pushes him out of his lane, his temper snaps and he swings to the right, moving the little car into a free space ahead of the other vehicles. Careful, he reminds himself, it is not your car. Calm down.

On the Mew Way bridge Uuka turns off into Khayelitsha, and notices that Site C, the informal housing area on his right, is partly flooded with winter rain which has not yet subsided. Some shacks are very close to the standing water, and children splash in the shallows. Mew Way is now teeming with women carrying wood or water on their heads, or visiting a spaza shop to buy chicken legs and spinach to add to the supper porridge. Children are playing close to the crowded street and he now drives very carefully. In the distance Table Mountain rises above the flat landscape like a theatre backdrop.

After a while the road opens out, and he is close to Mandela Park, where the houses look upmarket. As he opens the gate to his mother’s house, he smells chicken cooking and walks a little faster.

Alone in his room, later, the day’s events return. He sends Nandi and Java a *whatsapp* to ask if they can talk, but Nandi replies: *In a meeting. Will call you*. Uuka feels restless, his body ready to move into action, full of adrenaline. If only he could go for a walk, but you don’t go out onto the streets alone at night in Khayelitsha. Not if you don’t want more adrenaline. He drums his fingers as he waits for Nandi to call, then goes to the kitchen for a

cup of tea. What to make of today's student meeting? There is a certain sense of weight to the day, something significant in the making. Not for me, while Mom is a teacher I shall be okay. But for most of the other students, living on an edge of sorts. Some not eating enough, always the lack of money. There is a rage on campus, growing to a point where it will not be contained. That's what worries me and excites me. It can change things and it can destroy things. He takes his tea to the television where his mother is watching *Isidingo*, and lets out his breath in an explosive *whhu*.

His mother looks up: 'You okay?' 'Yeah, Ma. What's happening?'

'You don't want to know,' she responds and takes a sip of her own tea. 'I don't think they should have so much sex on television. It's family time, and it gives the wrong message, you know.'

Uuka looks more closely. 'Is that Samantha and Brad? Gosh yes, that's quite hectic! I didn't even know they were into each other.'

'You know how these stories work. But it isn't good for the children who watch it.' She sighs.

Uuka smiles at her, but says nothing.

Back in his room he checks his phone again and there is a new *whatsapp*.

Nandi

Meeting with t bishop. Was great. Gave big pic. Can see t connectns. 20.04.

He calls her.

'So, you went to the meeting?'

'Yeah, like the one you came to last weekend. Bishop Mabambe was there again. He only preached, hey. Like arms waving and hands shaking, but it was good. He really wants us to pull it off. Some people started crying, they were so into it.'

'Crying? Why?'

'Because he... he ... You were there, Uuka. You know he is inspiring. Inspirational. He makes you feel your life has this purpose of swinging things now, for all other people that come after you.'

Uuka does not answer. He had been there, and was excited. Feeling part of something bigger than himself, something timeless and great and ... maybe noble. But it also worried him, the way in which the bishop succeeded in rousing the group of students to a level of intense excitement, where nobody thought whether what he said was reasonable. Uuka had a feeling that the man could almost convince the group of young people to do anything he wanted them to, and he felt he just needed to get outside the room, outside the emotions. He decided then not to go back to the evening meetings.

'Are you there?' asks Nandi.

'Yep. Did anybody talk about tomorrow?'

'Yeah. The boss will meet with us in the union. We'll take it from there.'

The principal.

Poor man, thinks Uuka. Talk about being set up for failure. We're not going to let this go.

The rhythm

INT. CAPE TOWN, A UNIVERSITY CAMPUS - 23 OCTOBER 2015 - DAY

I keep an eye on them. I am uneasy. Do they see what I see? Young energy, strong young men, strong young women. A tide, they move like a tide, magnetic forces swaying them forward, to the rhythm of a heavy dance. Do they sense the tide? Has the rhythm taken over? I am concerned. I watch from a window.

Now the tall girl in front starts the song, and the crowd takes it up after her. She wears a long flowing dress, large orange and red flowers flaming around her hips. Her arms are above her head, swinging with her shoulders and hips. Even white teeth flash in the sun as she uses the movement of her body to project the words. *My mother was a kitchen girl, my father was a garden boy; that's why I'm an activist.* She has a good voice, I think. I can see her doing this with a mike somewhere, Green Market Square, the World Cup stadium in Green Point. Thousands of feet pound the tar, thousands of arms move to the rhythm. Then I also spot Java's tiny figure in jeans and a black T-shirt in the front row. She's waving to others to follow, moving with such force. A bit like Delacroix' *Liberty leading the people*, I think. Funny how you usually cannot see who she is by just looking at her.

In the distance I see the shape of a military nyala with two soldiers seated at the top, alien creatures in their full-face masks. Helicopters circle in the grey air above, but even their sound cannot drone out the song. The singing says *we will not stop we cannot stop we are determined to hold onto this moment.*

I walk up two sets of stairs to have a view of the road the students are heading to, the road that leads to the airport. A national key point, as this is not intended to be a little skirmish, it is planned as a battle. When they reach the road, the students keep moving forward. Later I will see a photo in a newspaper of one student lying prone on the road, stopping the traffic. Drivers wave in support as they pass in the other lane.

At last the march moves out of sight, although I can still hear the rhythm of the song. I switch on my phone and wait for news. I am uneasy. The riot police force is not trained to deal with student groups, and the students are riding a wave which is cresting high.

I think of my own student years, close by in Stellenbosch, when our own wave had just broken into the realization that we were keeping privilege to ourselves, excluding those not like us. The long nights, with Mike and Vuyo and indifferent red wine, walking away from where I had been.

I look up to see a massive turquoise beam against the grey clouds of the afternoon. Through the open window I hear sirens in the distance.

Then dull shots.

Inside the ambush vehicle a man in uniform, father of a child,
reaches forward, frowns, presses a nozzle.

He aims the water beam at the frontline
It spits then blasts a blue-green torrent

the orange flowered dress fades and clings
three young girls wipe at blinded eyes
before they turn and run
falling over each other
the young man with the red shirt
bites on his tongue, tastes blood,
collapses into the zinc hut near the road
where two skinny brown children make way for him
and close the door behind him
sliding the latch into the hook
fast, fumbling.
Nobody follows.

In the street, Uuka and Nandi run towards the three storied building on the corner and fall down behind a low wall. Rubber bullets rain down around them. Nandi wipes her eyes. They are burning from the teargas that hangs in the air. She says something but Uuka cannot hear. Students are screaming, shouting instructions, yelling in anger and fear. Nearby, two young men begin hurling stones at a policeman who is running towards Nandi and Uuka. One stone hits the police officer's cheek and the flesh opens up, first white, then blossoming red. Nandi hides her face in her hands and when she looks up Uuka is being dragged away by the policeman. She runs after them: 'He did nothing!' Her voice disappears in the uproar around them. The policeman pushes Uuka into the police van and slams the door. 'Young bastards! What the fuck do they think they're doing?!' he shouts to the female soldier standing next to him. 'Marching to the airport! Who's behind this? Those bloody communists!!'

A reedy, tall man with a camera moves closer and takes a shot of the two uniformed officers standing against the police van. The male officer dashes forward to grab the camera but the cameraman outruns him and soon disappears behind a distant wall.

Nandi looks around frantically. People are milling about everywhere. She runs towards one of the organisers, but before she can reach him he is being dragged to the same vehicle Uuka is in. Aahhhh!! Then she spots Java and runs towards her. The police van is pulling away. 'They've taken Uuka!' 'Yes,' says Java, 'and Xolile as well. And others. Don't worry, we'll get them out.' Nandi clasps Java to her, and feels how she herself is shaking.

'We're doing it!' laughs Java, her knees bent, small fist in the air, her eyes shining.

Connections

INT. CAPE TOWN, A CUBAN COFFEE SHOP - 28 OCTOBER 2015 - DAY

Five days later Nandi stands in front of the mirror in her friend Liziwe's bedroom. The university has been closed down and she is staying with Liziwe. She has just come out of the shower and she looks carefully at her face. There are dark smudges under her eyes and they look swollen. There is some blue and grey eye shadow on Liziwe's table under the mirror, and she applies some to her upper lids, standing back to see the effect. She turns her head left, right, left again, pushes up her afro with both hands, then smiles at herself and gives herself a thumbs up in the mirror. Fortunately Liziwe is out – I am being so silly! What a time it has been! I have been so worried about Uuka. They could have put him in prison. Anything could have happened. And moving out of res with a few hours' notice. Thank God for Liziwe. But I cannot stay here indefinitely. And we have to finish our course work. The damn project. Is it really what I want to do? Making movies sounded so – so glamorous, but it is going to be such very hard work.

She hasn't seen Uuka since he was taken by the police officer, and she is still worried about him. She is certain he experiences things more deeply than he shows. But what does she know about him anyway?

In the taxi Nandi squeezes in between two women who are wearing similar blue Tshikiza skirts. She can feel the hard cotton against both her legs through her soft Indian skirt. After a while the gaatjie turns to her and shows her where to get off. She looks up and down the street for the Cuban coffee shop where they are meeting with Adela. The coffee shop faces the rather grim and busy street, but once you are inside the plush chairs and couches look very inviting. The other students wave at her and she is suddenly happy and relieved to see them all. She senses how her body releases the grip it has had on her all week and she smiles as she joins them and gives each of them a hug. 'Good to see you all again! Is Adela still coming? – Oh, there she is.' Adela comes in the door, casually dressed in jeans and a yellow jacket, her honey-coloured hair swinging around her face as she walks. Nandi sinks back into the corner couch.

While they are waiting for their coffee Uuka tells them about his two nights and one day in the local police cells.

'Was it at least clean?' asks Java, pulling up her nose.

'You bet. They bought us a big bucket, evil smelling disinfectant and mops, and we had to clean it ourselves. Then the floor was wet for the longest time. But it was clean.' He grins at Java.

'And how did they treat you? Were you okay?'

Uuka is silent for a moment. Then he shrugs. 'Of course, we knew we would get out. My mom paid bail, and I owe her for that, but we'll sort it out.' He looks up as the coffee arrives, sighs.

'It was impossible to sleep, and there were guys with us in the cell that are big trouble, I think, so it was so good to get out. Thanks Java, for arranging that!'

'It wasn't only me, we all tried. Pity it took so long, Uuka, really sorry! The university did not exactly help.'

'No, and you guys will have to make sure I don't have a criminal record!'

'We have a lawyer working on that,' says Java, putting up her flat hand. 'Take five!' Uuka laughs, and puts his hand against hers.

Adela smiles, then sits forward and says: ‘So good that you could all make it today, and thanks Java for finding a place where we can meet off campus. Where shall we start?’

There is silence around the table. The voice of the television anchor is suddenly loud in the corner where the television is mounted on the wall. ‘Student leaders of the #feesmustfall movement have expressed their satisfaction and excitement about the announcement of the president on 23 October, that there will be a zero increase in university fees in 2016. While the president also indicated that non-fee issues will be discussed, the student leadership said this announcement was a victory for them. The students are still discussing who they will nominate to be interviewed in our Political Podium discussion tonight, which will be broadcast at eight.’

They all turn back to the table. ‘When did you hear about the announcement, Uuka? You must have been so excited!’ asks Java.

‘They came to tell us in the cell that very night. Yes, it was quite something.’ He grins. Java looks around the table. ‘But it has to mean something that he gave that concession on the very day we had our big battle! I think it means it was worth it, successful, made them feel intimidated. Of course, not us alone, also the other universities. But still.’ She smiles triumphantly. Then she turns to Adela.

‘But to get back to your question. It’s so hard to pick up where we left off before the protest got very hot. And my whole mind is still there – with what we have to do, what we need to do to help Xolile, what meetings we should set up, how to keep up the momentum that we worked on so hard to get completely free education. I just cannot simply get into a project now, doc. You know? Projects come and go, this is something which will only happen once in our lives. And’ – she struggles to find the words – ‘and it’s important.’

‘Of course it’s important,’ says Adela.

Nandi sits forward, gestures with her hand.

‘But it’s not just that it’s important. I don’t really know how to say it, but it somehow feels connected to the land issue, to the struggle, to apartheid, to...’

She makes an expansive movement with her right hand and some of her coffee spills onto Uuka’s jean.

‘To keeping men in their place,’ says Uuka as he uses a serviette from the table to dry his pants.

‘Oh, I’m so sorry! Okay, I’ll calm down. But you know what I mean.’ Nandi looks at Uuka, and he nods. He frowns, makes an effort to bring his thoughts back to the present discussion.

‘Yes, I do know. It does feel as if something which was frozen for a long time is coming alive again. What we heard about, learnt about, a kind of ...’ he breaks off ‘...a kind of determination which people had in the apartheid days, and which we thought we would not need. And yes,’ he says as Java sits forward to speak, ‘it feels as if there is a possible connection to the big struggle of the past. Sorry Java, you wanted to say?’

‘That’s just it! There is a connection, and that’s what our script should be about!’

‘Say more?’ invites Adela.

‘C’mon guys, help me!’

‘Yes,’ says Uuka, ‘if the land had not been taken, we, our families, would not have been without money, we would have gone to good schools, we would have had good schools to go to, gone to university without these endless debts and struggles for food and tuition fees, had good jobs, been the captains of industry, or what do they call it?’

He grins at them, embarrassed at his own vehemence.

Nandi puts her cup down, claps her hands.

‘We’ve got it! We need a script that brings that exact line into a story about people’s lives!’

‘It does really sound very good,’ says Adela. They are all smiling. ‘The three of you will also be a good team as you have done projects together in the past. And you have complementary skills. Have you thought about who would do what?’

Java breathes deeply. ‘I want to help with the analysis, with understanding why and how things happened. You are both good at that too, but it is what feeds my soul’ she says with a shy look. ‘You know that you are both better than me with writing. I can offer ideas, but I think the two of you should put the script together.’

‘Well maybe,’ says Uuka, ‘but let’s not get into that yet. I think we should work as a team and see who is good at what as we do it. We have - how long Doc? A few months?’ Adela looks at her phone and says: ‘We don’t quite know what will happen at the university. I assume we shall open at the usual time, so you have time now to work on it. I would need a completed script by the end of March next year, I would say. We can then all edit it before you put the film together. I should have the completed project by the end of the first semester.’

‘So,’ says Uuka suddenly, ‘Nandi and Java are without accommodation, and I want to get away. Why don’t we go and stay with my grandmother in the Amathole and – I don’t know, see where it takes us? See if we can find a story that helps us to do this?’

Nandi’s stomach gives a little lurch. What is this excitement about? It would be a great way to do the project. It will just be great, full stop.

As they get ready to pay and go, Java looks at Uuka, smiles at him. Here comes trouble, he thinks.

‘Goodbye then, mister jailed revolutionary.’

‘Confess, Java, you’re jealous.’

She grins. ‘Maybe a bit. Why do the men always have to get the prime spots?’

‘Next time I’ll stand aside and ask them to offer you a lift.’

As they walk out Uuka is aware that they have not finished the conversation.

The Ostrich Feather

INT. BACKPACKERS, KNYSNA - 2 NOVEMBER 2015 - NIGHT

On their way to the Eastern Cape they plan to sleep over in a backpacker hostel near Knysna. They are using Mrs. Mlambo's car, and Uuka is the only licenced driver. Because of the long distance they therefore decided to break the journey. As they drove down the Houhoek pass towards Botriver, they all feel a sense of freedom in leaving Cape Town behind, with the stresses of the past weeks. Java has decided to join them, as the locus of the fee struggle moved to the northern universities, and Cape Town students are now focused on finishing the academic year.

At dusk they arrive, having driven along the coast for the last hour. The backpacker is situated in the foothills near Knysna and overlooks the blue water of the lake. Nandi imagines herself a guest to a wealthy nineteenth century white family in their ostrich palace. She bows to Java, her hand gently imitating the ostrich plume movement on her hat. Java lets out a snort, makes a curtsy, and says: 'Can I help you madam? You'll have to be quick, I have to return to the slave quarters before dark.'

'Oh do you?' She looks at Java with a question in her eyes. Java was named, she knows, for an ancestor who was brought from Java as a slave. Nandi is not certain whether she can risk a joke on the subject.

Java does indeed look upset, as if she is about to say more, but then she turns to the reception desk and asks: 'Can I get a beer here?'

Nandi glances at Uuka. Did I say something? He lifts his shoulders and his eyebrows – don't know.

Later they sit out in the garden with their beer.

Java sighs, then says: 'It is really lovely here. After all that tension back home.'

After a while she continues. 'But I want to tell you what this reminds me of.'

Java sips the beer and thinks how to start. The deep shame, the burning rage. Just forget it. But the harder she tries the bigger it gets, the more does she feel like attacking and destroying something, somebody. She hits the wooden table with her fist and the glasses rattle. The others remain silent, uncertain. She takes another sip.

A beautiful early summer evening, without wind, without clouds, celebrating her graduation with Leah, her mother, who never goes out like this, not to a restaurant, to just enjoy herself. Also a beautiful old house, where they have a glass of wine in the garden and then a meal in the restaurant. Laughing together about ordinary things, making a connection to each other. After a while Leah goes to the toilet, comes back.

'Then this white man with a white tie comes and says he wants to search my mother's handbag. He didn't say it like that, search, but it is what he said. She looked like he had hit her. I said: why? He then said that another lady – lady! – had taken off her expensive watch in the washroom and it was gone. I could not keep quiet, I said: then why search my mother's handbag when she has lost her watch? Why not search hers? He apologized, but he went right ahead and searched my mother's bag and mine as well. We paid and left, called an Uber and went home in silence. Doesn't it just piss you off that if you are black, you are wrong? In the wrong. In their bloody privileged little world. There was a roomful of people in that restaurant, but guess who got searched. In front of everybody, with no reason. This happens to all of us, being shown that black is bad, but my mother looked so vulnerable...'

Java hisses, gets up and walks to the hydrangea bed near the gate, comes back.

Nandi reaches out a hand. 'I'm sorry Java, what a horrible experience.'

Uuka lifts his glass in a toast. 'Maybe just hang onto that anger, Java, you might still find it very useful.'

Java barks a laugh, and takes up her beer to toast, her eyes meeting Uuka's, her face relaxing.

The farmhouse

EXT. FORT BEAUFORT DISTRICT - 3 NOVEMBER 2015 - DAY

Their route through the Eastern Cape has ended in a yellow dirt road which leads to a small rural village. Uuka drives past a cluster of zinc-and-wood shacks, then past a few small brick houses, and stops at a big, busy shop where a Coca-Cola sign says *Umthengisi Jikelele*. He tells them the shop belongs to his great uncle, Babanathi, who lives with them.

A few minibus taxis are parked across the road, while a row of women wait in the shade of a pepper tree with their shopping in Checkers bags. They all wear colourful headdresses.

'See, there is Cleopatra,' says Java. They look at a beautiful young woman with a bright emerald coloured shaped around her head like a turban. She stands tall, regal among the other tired-looking women.

A few minutes later Uuka comes out of the shop with a small brown paper bag and a smile. Further down the road they leave the village and pass a half circle of round huts made from red-brown clay soil. He drives carefully down a long-rutted track towards the farmhouse which stands at the end of the lane and parks under the ancient-looking oak tree next to the kitchen door.

It is a large South African farmhouse, one that Java recognizes from visits to aunts on Boland farms where they meet you at the gate and lead you to workers' cottages, out of sight of the main house. A thin greyhound rushes to the car, sniffs at the wheels. Probably mixed with another large breed. The last light of the day picks up the colours of the high green grass and the other old oak which grows near a small stream.

The house is a surprise. The first impression is of faded beauty, an older woman with the bones of her younger face still visible under sagging skin. The front of the house looks older, built with yellow river stones cemented together. The brick wall on the other side, facing the last sun, was painted a strong canary yellow, a good few years ago. Deep blue window frames and doors make the house seem more modern than it could be.

A woman wearing a large blue apron appears in the door. 'Uuka! Unjani wena? Uhambe ngokukhuselekileyo?'

'Yes, Gogo, we travelled well.'

Nandi touches the yellow stone wall as they walk in. Cold. How cold will this house be in winter with snow on the mountains! They walk through the living room, where MaMazaleni, Uuka's grandmother, warns them not to step on the boxes filled with day-old chickens, chirping in high baby tones, and they pass through to the bedroom Nandi and Java will share. Mamazaleni chases the ginger cat as it puts its nose into the chicken box, and she closes the living room door behind them. The smell of pap and meat and spice hangs in the air, and of old firewood, ash. Nandi feels an unexpected nostalgia for a place she does not remember.

As soon as they have unpacked, they bring their gifts to the kitchen where MaMazaleni is getting supper ready on the iron stove. They have brought a lot of groceries, things that you cannot find in the small local village shops, unless you go all the way to iBhofolo, Fort Beaufort. Nandi and Java also insisted on giving something special, and Uuka then remembered that his grandmother's radio no longer worked.

'Haibo!' she exclaims when she sees the new radio. 'And batteries too!' Her face lights up. She is quite beautiful, thinks Nandi. Even though she is really old.

MaMazaleni says something in Xhosa, and Uuka laughs and translates for Java. 'It is very good to have batteries, as the electricity here is like a man - it is good when he is there, but you never know when that will be.'

After supper Uuka helps his grandmother with the dishes, and they talk about the family. Uuka's grandfather and Babanathi have gone away on business, and are expected back any day. Nandi and Java stack the clean plates and cutlery in an old wooden cupboard, moving the green fabric curtain aside every time they add another dish.

In bed, Uuka cannot sleep, despite the tiredness of the long journey. He sleeps in the little room off his grandmother's bedroom, his room as a child. When he was smaller he spent long periods here in the village while his mother was studying. A memory surfaces of him lying in bed, like this, and hearing the sounds from the bedroom next door when his grandfather was here. Wondering what the regular knocking sound was, listening anxiously to hear whether they were awake to see to whatever trouble there might be. Then hearing them talk, later, and catching his own name. 'Why are you worried about him?' His grandfather's response: 'He is not like the other boys. He is not in front when they are stick fighting. He first stands there, looking on.'

Uuka turns his face into the pillow, cringes into a foetal position, gives a small groan. Shame, is what he feels. He knows the feeling now, did not know it then. Not strong enough, too careful, wrong, wrong, wrong. Not good enough for his grandfather. Maybe his father left because he had not been good enough. Not man enough. Even though he has now proven that he is a man, has had his initiation. But even then he somehow failed, did not do as well as the others. When he got infected in the very sensitive wound his grandfather eventually fetched him from the initiation school in the mountain – only because his grandmother had held an axe over his head. Family may not interfere, especially women may not do or say anything. But Gogo did insist, Bawu Damani told him on the way to the hospital. He came here to the village to recover, and lay in this same bed for two weeks, slowly reviving, slowly clawing back. Ashen when he saw his face in the mirror, thin and gaunt. Shame. Mortification. When he wanted them to say: well done, Uuka, so well done!

The next morning the sun is up when he wakes, and he goes to the window. So what was that about last night? You're a strange person, he tells himself. When Java knocks on the door to hear if he wants to come for a run with her and Nandi, he smiles at his image in the mirror and puts on his running shoes.

As the two young women run ahead of him, Uuka thinks: two attractive girls, here, now, how unexpectedly great! Both have nice legs, both good friends. Do I want more than one woman? Do I even really want one woman – a commitment which will take away my freedom? No, I think not! But to touch those lovely legs would be a joy. He grins and joins them at a gate that needs to be opened and closed.

The other side of time

EXT. THE OLD HOUSE - 4 NOVEMBER 2015 - DAY

After breakfast Uuka takes his grandmother to the nearby village. Nandi and Java unpack the rest of their things while the dog, Khaya, runs excitedly from bag to bag in their room. 'It's our snacks,' laughs Java. 'That biltong you brought! Do zip it up in a bag he cannot get into!'

'Eish! Let's hurry and take him out.' Nandi rubs the dog's head.

Outside, Khaya first sniffs around the back door, then leads them to a narrow gap in a thorny hedge to the right of the farmhouse. They are talking about the new SMSes they got from Cape Town that morning – students on campus are confined to their residences, preparing for exams. The protests have been called off following the president's announcement of zero fee increases. When they get to the gap in the hedge, Khaya squeezes through and barks invitingly.

'She wants us to come! Shall we go?'

They both have to bend low and they carefully worm themselves through the gap. On the other side Kaya is already running down the narrow, overgrown track that leads along the river to a small rise and the ruin of an old house. It was built on a foundation of river stones, and has crumbling, thick walls which look as if they might have been made from a mixture of clay and straw. The wind stirs the few dry, cracked reeds that protrude from the broken rafters. As they walk closer, a musty smell emerges from the ruin, and they notice that the dirt floor is covered in dung. Something scatters away unseen.

Nandi feels as if she has stepped through a dream curtain. She blinks and glances at Java, who looks excited, and is carefully walking into the ruin. Nandi closes her eyes for a moment. I have a strange feeling, she thinks. As if there are people here, on the other side of this dream I'm having, people who are important. People I don't know but who I'll keep coming back to. Weird, scary.

She breathes in deeply. Time and the other side of time. They know we are here. They have not left, I can feel their laughter and their pain in the silence.

Nandi clutches her arms to her body and follows Java into the old house. There are open glassless windows with wooden shutters which close from the inside. One of the shutters is broken and somebody has stacked a large river stone in the gap. Java stands in the door of a small room, which could have been a bathroom or a pantry. She has picked up a cracked wooden bowl.

'There are others, too, here on the floor. And little mounds of clay. See, here on the bottom, here, underneath, there are letters. Scratched into the wood.'

'Let me see?' Nandi takes the large bowl, and Java dusts down her hands on her jeans.

'What does it say? Holla? Halla? Can you make sense of it?'

'Wait,' says Java, coming close, fingering the letters. 'It might be two t's, Hotta or Hatta? We'll have to ask MaMazaleni. Let's leave the bowl here, anyway – I'm sure they left it here for a purpose.'

'What purpose? But okay, let's leave it. The place feels spooky anyway. What's happened to Khaya?'

The dog seems to have gone off on its own. After whistling for a while they go back to the farmhouse.

'So, it's eerie, isn't it?' asks Nandi.

Java glances at her. 'I don't do mystery,' she responds with her usual grin. 'It's an old house with broken bowls somebody left there.'

‘Yeah, it is, but – how shall I explain it? I – no, let me put it this way. In our culture we know that our ancestors live along with us, that they protect us if we respect them.’

‘And you thought they were here? Come, Nandi, they would not after all be your ancestors, they’d be Uuka’s. And it’s too tricky to know that you respect them properly, so better not to go there. And I was in the house too, you know, it is just an old house.’

They crawl back through the gap.

‘You don’t understand,’ says Nandi.

‘You bet, I’m a hard-nosed Marxist. Most things can be explained by people’s material interests.’

‘Oh Java! Hey Uuka, we found a lost house,’ she calls out to Uuka who is walking towards them.

Supper at the Aga stove

EXT. THE FARMHOUSE - 5 NOVEMBER 2015 - NIGHT

The next day is rainy and cold, with low grey clouds being blown by strong winds. Bawu Damani and MaMazaleni's brother, Babanathi, had come back from their business trip the previous afternoon, and decided to spend the day indoors. The three young people have promised to cook supper, and are in the kitchen with their laptops open at different recipes. Uuka has had to endure a lot of teasing about wearing an apron and working in the kitchen with the women, but is taking the bantering in his stride. He is baking a banana and pineapple loaf for desert, carefully following the instructions on the webpage. Nandi has been preparing a chicken casserole in a big iron pot, adding vegetables as the afternoon stretches into evening. She also stirs a pot of pap, the staple maize dish. Java is working at the side, making a dish of curried beans and rice with spices she brought along. By dusk MaMazaleni, Bawu Damani and Babanathi have all pulled up chairs to be closer to the warmth, and to the smells surrounding the stove. Every now and then they move their chairs back to leave the young people enough work room, but then they inch closer again without noticing.

Uuka moves back to the table to pour Bawu Damani and Babanathi more vodka and Sprite from the bottles they had brought home. MaMazaleni is only drinking Sprite. Uuka also pours the soft drink for Nandi and Java, but then goes into the scullery to add something else from a small flask. Nandi, who can see him behind the backs of the older people, gasps as she bites back a laugh, and when everybody looks at her she explains that she suffers from sinusitis.

The older people want to know everything about Nandi's family and ancestry and do not believe her when she says she hardly knows who her grandparents were. Her clan name, Khuluza, is not familiar to them, although they talk extensively about people they do know who might be related to that clan. Nandi translates for Java from time to time, but otherwise does not really respond. She feels ashamed that she does not know her ancestry, does not know her father.

An image shoots into her mind, disappears again. She turns away from the conversation to recapture it. A small photo, a man with a charming smile. A cigarette hanging from one hand, dressed in a double breasted suit with two rows of neat buttons, a neat dark tie. A large, old fashioned car and an unknown older woman in the background. Was that him? Was it taken in Cape Town or sent to them from Johannesburg? More like Igoli, the city of gold. Where he went down the mine shafts by day and dressed up over weekends. Living dangerously by day and by night. Other women in other photos, this one sent to her mother because of the older woman in the background, a last small connection to a previous, unregretted life.

To move the discussion in another direction, Uuka says that Nandi and Java went to the old house the previous day. There is a short, awkward silence, and the two older men glance at each other. Then Bawu Damani says: 'It's in a dilapidated state. There's nothing there, really.'

Babanathi takes a sip of his drink, and clears his throat. 'Yes, nothing there. But it is an interesting place, it has a history.' Nandi and Java book look at him with interest, and he clears his throat again. He looks at Bawu Damani and then continues:

'This house' – he points with his finger – 'this house is where our parents lived, mine and MaMazaleni's. Our mother inherited it from her mother, MaDlamini. It is a house which has been owned by women.'

'But Bawu Damani, why is it so different from the other houses in the area? It looks like a white man's house,' asks Uuka.

‘It was a white man’s house, an English man’s house, but that man went to fight in the big war the English fought against the Boers, and he never came back. So our family, which was living in the old house you saw today, came to live here.’ He takes out a pipe, puts it away again.

‘Nobody ever saw that Englishman again. They waited for about three years after the war was over, then they moved here.’

‘And what happened to the old house?’ asks Uuka.

‘Well, people lived there for a short time, then moved off.’ He laughs. ‘They said it was haunted.’

‘Haunted?’ asks Nandi.

Babanathi laughs again. ‘Just stories. There are no ghosts there, or anywhere else.’

‘But the people there had a difficult history,’ says MaMazaleni, who has sat quietly next to the wall, the ginger cat on her lap.

She trails her hand through the cat’s fur, feels the coarser brown skin of the calf which was killed to create peace for the people of that house. Hiding behind her mother, she had watched the knife slicing across its throat before it fell to the red-brown soil. She remembers the women dancing around the fire, singing and stomping for a very long time. After a while her mother came, picked her up, and tied her onto her back with a towel, where she shook every time her mother’s feet stomped the ground. On her tongue the sour *Umqombothi* which her mother put in her mouth to taste when she cried.

‘So what happened there, Gogo?’ Uuka pushes the fruit loaf into the oven and sits down next to her.

She closes her eyes. ‘It is just that the mother of that house was taken away when the baby was very small.’ She opens her eyes again. ‘A very long time ago.’ She sits thinking, then says: ‘The grandmother of my grandmother. MaDlamini told us about it, Babanathi. But it is so long ago, nobody can remember it anymore.’

‘Yes,’ Babanathi responds, ‘but can you remember, Hatta was still alive when the family moved here, to this big house. She died here in this house, our Makhulu Hatta.’

‘It’s very confusing,’ protests Uuka.

‘It’s very strange,’ says Nandi at the same time.

‘It happened,’ says Babanathi. ‘There were abamhlope from shipwrecks who stayed here and married our ancestors. But still, the people did not like it and most people who did marry white people moved their homesteads away. It was mostly white men who married our women. So, Hatta was different.’

‘Would that old house then be from the time of your grandmother’s grandmother?’ asks Uuka.

‘Yes, your grandmother’s grandmother’s grandmother.’ They move to the table as Nandi and Java start to dish for the men.

Hatta

EXT. THE OLD HOUSE - 18 DECEMBER 1834 - DAY

She sits in the sand near the house, a thin brown dog next to her.

‘Come, Voetsek, come, sit down. It is tea time. Are you tired? Here ...’ she shoves some sand into a small wooden bowl. ‘Here is some very nice bread. Just out of the oven. Come on, Voetsek, you like bread!’

The dog sniffs, then turns away and settles on the warm sand with its head against her thigh. Hatta takes a small cup and brings it to her lips. But she does not drink. She knows it is pretend coffee. Voetsek also knows, she thinks and sighs. She pulls the kappie forward over her eyes. Mamma gets very cross when she burns in the sun. Today Mamma is cross anyway. She comes out with Sara, her older sister, to put the bread into the bakoond, the outside oven within the big anthheap, and keeps saying *he should not have done it. They should not have done it.* Do men have no minds, can they not see what is right in front of their eyes? We are living here, out of reach of everybody. Who will help us if they come....?

When she notices Hatta under the thorn tree she stops talking suddenly, and wipes her eyes with her fingers. She looks sad. Hatta gets up and runs to her, putting her hand in her mother’s. The woman bends down, holding the child’s face between both her hands.

‘Is my child happy?’ There is tenderness in her face, in her hands. ‘Are you playing with Voetsek?’

Hatta nods, and starts to tell the story of Voetsek and the bread in the cup.

‘Sara, put the bread in, but careful, it’s very hot,’ says the mother. She walks back to the tree with her youngest daughter and drinks a cup of pretend coffee before going inside.

Hatta looks into Voetsek’s calm yellow eyes. The even flow of her life seems different today. Her mother and her sister looked different, unhappy, worried. On other days she can hear them laughing and teasing as they work in the house. She hides her face in Voetsek’s neck. She does not like the feel of the day. I am scared, she thinks.

Later she hears the horses, and then Hannes, her father, and her two bigger brothers dismount and rub the horses down. Usually there is a man to help them, but he is not here today. She runs to the kitchen door. When they see her, the conversation stops and there is an awkward silence.

‘Mamma, what is it?’

‘Nothing, lieferd, come, let’s wipe your face and hands.’ Her mother looks meaningfully at her husband, and he turns back to the horses.

MaMazaleni

INT/EXT. THE FARMHOUSE - 6 NOVEMBER 2015 - DAY

I look at these young people and think – maybe my mind got stuck at that age. My body is still firm, but very different from that time – now released into a bigger mould. And I have lived for these long years, that cannot disappear. But in me is this young woman, just the same as Nandi, and as that unusual, beautiful girl Java, wanting to run and to start new things. They look at me without seeing that. They see what I saw in my Makhulu, somebody nearer to the end, cut off from the pulse of life.

MaMazaleni finishes her ablutions in the zinc tub in her bedroom, gets dressed and collects the chicken feed, the delight of her early morning routine. The big cock with the dark red comb runs towards her, and pecks impatiently at her foot. She pushes him away while she feeds the smaller hens, but he keeps thrusting his way back in.

‘Yes, you are the man, but you can wait. I will come to you. You are the one man that must wait for me,’ she laughs at him. He struts and nods as if he agrees, but she knows that he does not.

Maybe this house was the thing that made me different, so that I am not like my cousins and my friends in the valley. Maybe when we moved into the house of the white family we became a little like them.

She thinks about the white women she knows, and then shakes her head. I am not like them either. I am just an odd egg that came out differently.

When the young Noluthando was born her family had already been living in the farmhouse for half a century, and they had small successful projects on the farm – the chickens, other poultry, some sheep, and lots of cattle that they milked. Their grandfather carted the large metal milk cans off to Mister Grossmut’s shop in the village in a small horse buggy, and they also made *amasi* and butter. When she was small, Tante Linde and Onkel Hans were living with them, she didn’t know why. But Babanathi, who had been inquisitive since he first opened his eyes, their mother said, told her later how it had happened. They were an uncle and aunt of the Mister Grossmut who owned the village shop during the big war, and their home in Germany had been shot apart by English fighter planes. There was no food or shelter for them where they lived, and their son had also been killed in the war, so they came to Fort Beaufort and lived in a room in the farmhouse, for which Mister Grossmut paid the family a small amount. That was also why, when apartheid came soon after the war and Mister Grossmut was paid for his shop by the Nationalist government, he asked their father, Bawu Magwala, if he wanted to take over the shop. When Mister Grossmut left for the seaside a few years later the two old people went along, and the children never saw them again.

In the village Noluthando felt that she was always seen as the child who had grown up with white people in her house, the child who brought her friends strange cookies at Christmas time and who sang those songs with the strange words. Not just white people, but people who were not Amabhulu or English; other white people from over the sea.

There was of course also the old story of their family and its past, of the strange white woman who set them apart from the rest of the village. Maybe that is where it really started, being different.

The clay pot

INT. TRAVELING - FORT BEAUFORT - 6 NOVEMBER 2015 - DAY

They are taking MaMazaleni to the big Shoprite in iBofolo, Fort Beaufort, named for Lord Beaufort, the father of Governor Sir Charles Somerset, and the grandfather of Lieutenant General Henry Somerset, commander in the land wars. Their clan name, awarded in different wars in older times on a faraway island.

Nandi and Java sit in the back of the car, each holding a box of chirping chickens that must go to the cooperative. Nandi is careful, as Java had her finger bitten when she tried to stroke one of the chicks.

‘What will you do while we are at the museum, Gogo?’ asks Uuka.

‘You can drop me at the market, as we said. I must take the chickens to the Co-op and then I have a meeting with the other women farmers. We have a village committee and we keep an eye over our local politics,’ she says with a mischievous look. She turns to the back of the car, now with a serious expression.

‘It’s hard work, these meetings. Most of the women do not believe that they may hold a view of their own. People still think it is the work of men to have political views, and two of the women could not come to the last meeting as their husbands do not like it when they talk about politics. But, if the women do nothing, things do not get done.’ She loosens the seat belt and turns more to see them better. ‘The school feeding does not run, as the teachers who have to plan it allow the money to disappear if we don’t ask where the school meals are. The clinics do not run properly, as the staff come to work as they please. So the women now check everything.’

‘But is that not for government to do?’ asks Nandi. ‘Surely, they get paid to do it?’

‘It is, but when nobody walks one step behind them it does not happen. It is bad, but that is how it is. We have been resisting so many governments here that we do not know how to work for the people, only how to work against the government.’

‘Is this work not dangerous for you, Makhulu?’ asks Uuka.

‘Well, people will not do anything to me. And if they do, they know I will just come back.’

‘But, why ...why does Bawu Damani ... I mean...’

‘You mean why does he allow me to speak and act?’ She smiles ruefully. ‘It has not always been easy. But our family has some respect in the area, some stature. Also, my brother has always lived with us. And, we have rubbed each other over the years, I think. He is a good man, Bawu Damani.’

They sense that she was about to say more, but decided not to. Nandi smiles at Java.

‘We told Java that it is different here for women.’ She sobers. ‘But, in Cape Town it is also bad. The violence. Perhaps even worse, as the families are living here in the rural areas, I mean the extended families, and they do not interfere to protect the women in town. My friend Liziwe was almost killed last year by her boyfriend. No reason, just drink.’ She sighs. ‘But she is seeing him again. I told her to just stop it, but it’s her life, what can I do?’

When they drop MaMazaleni off at the co-op, a woman walks towards her with a cane, her leg in plaster. MaMazaleni sighs.

‘So, he did hit her. After all we said now.’

They drive on to the museum, where MaMazaleni told them she had left some of the family heirlooms that had been in the house. Uuka shows them a traditional round clay house in the garden area and Java is excited about the smell of the dry dung floor.

‘It’s exactly how my grandmother’s cottage on the farm smelled, it must have also had a misvloer! But how does one sleep here, with no air and a fire inside?’

‘Don’t know, we never lived in one of those,’ Uuka responds.

Inside the museum they wander around the rooms. After a while they start walking faster. Nandi complains that there are too many things of the same kind – drawings of soldiers in this uniform, that uniform; kitchen implements from that time, clothes stitched by hand, the fabrics worn thin.

Maybe we can do a few shots here for our film, says Java. She smiles, poses in front of a kitchen scene. ‘Anybody for English tea? How about *you*, madam? All the way from China, no, I mean India. A special blend for you, to uphold standards here in the African wilds.’

Uuka holds up his phone: ‘do that again, please. Just put down your smart bag, and tie your hair back, like this, that’s it. Right, here we go, 3, 2, 1.’ When she starts talking to Nandi, Uuka moves down the room, filming a few more objects. Nandi stands in the corner, observing them.

On their way out Nandi puts her head into a small room at the top of the stairs, and calls the others. The room is full of wooden pots, like those they found in the old house, but in better condition. There are also some clay pots.

The pots are very different to the cracked wooden pots they saw in the old house. They are all painted in bright colours, and some have painted geometrical decorations. There is one clay pot that seems to pull them all into its radius, and they lean over the table where it is exhibited. It is a traditional Xhosa clay pot, which women bake in an open fire, but unlike the other pots it has been decorated with well-drawn figures. They walk around the table to follow the images. There is a big tree, with branches that spread both left and right, and with colourful birds in the branches.

‘Look, here is the Loerie! The Igolomi,’ says Uuka. ‘Just taking off, so you can see the bright green feathers coming out under the sparkling blue ones. Just like they do. If you are lucky enough to see them. And a blue starling! And these small birds with all the colours you can imagine. The artist must have wanted to show the brightest birds of the Eastern Cape.’

‘But look here, Uuka. A snake under the tree. It’s a miracle the birds are sitting there so quietly!’ says Java. ‘But also with these deep colours.’ She looks intrigued.

They walk to the back of the table, and now there is the figure of a naked young black boy with scalloped wings and an assegai in his hand, an expression of glee on his face. The last two figures between the boy and the other side of the tree are two children, one with long flowing hair and one with short curly hair, running away with a backwards glance to the boy. The background is covered with natural objects, plants and flowers, and two guinea fowl are running ahead of the children, towards the tree.

Nandi lets out a long breath. ‘It’s...it’s entrancing! So beautifully done! Like the windows of a church!’

‘Ahh, yes, that’s it.’ Uuka slaps his thigh. ‘It’s the Adam and Eve story, don’t you think? What a gorgeous young angel! But he does look naughty – what do you think has he done?’

‘Maybe he is just glad to escape from heaven for a while. Or he enjoyed chasing them from paradise.’ Java walks to another table and calls them. ‘Here is a plaque,’ she says, pointing to the wall.

The plaque is in English, Afrikaans and isiXhosa.

These pots were made by Hester Smit, called Hatta, a woman who lived near Fort Beaufort in the 19th century. Her whole family was killed in a cattle raid when she was about five years old, and she was subsequently raised by a Xhosa family. Hatta made traditional Xhosa clay pots, but also added the very unusual decorations which can be seen here. The Reverent Abraham Grobler, who met her when she was elderly, was instrumental in

preserving the artwork. It was recently restored by Elise van Rensburg, and donated to the Fort Beaufort Museum.

Java picks up one of the wooden bowls and turns it upside down.

‘Hatta, it says, like the bowls in the old house.’ Nandi gapes. ‘What!’

The attendant appears in the door.

‘Please don’t touch the exhibits!’

‘Sorry, I just wanted to check something. Do you know where these came from?’

‘No, I am just responsible to see that they are not damaged,’ says the woman sternly.

‘I am sorry, we won’t touch them again,’ promises Java.

As the young attendant leaves, they look at each other. ‘This must be important’ says Uuka, ‘but I have no idea how.’

When they get back Uuka googles Hester Smit and Hatta Smit, but none of the hits have anything to do with the Hatta they are looking for.

Supper around the fire

EXT. THE FARMHOUSE - 6 NOVEMBER 2015 - NIGHT

Tonight the weather is good and Uuka makes a fire outside where they can sit and watch the stars. Over supper around the fire the young people tell the others more about the pots and bowls in the museum exhibition, and Babanathi agrees that it is incredible that nobody had told them that these things were right there. They now speak in English for Java's sake, lapsing into Xhosa from time to time. They look at the photos of the decorated pots on Uuka's laptop, and MaMazeleni marvels at how beautiful they are. Nandi and Uuka fetched the two cracked bowls from the old house earlier, and they compare the shape of the old pots with the photos.

'I don't understand how Hatta's pots got into the old house. Did she live there?' asks Uuka, as he examines the name at the bottom of the bowl.

Now it is quiet, and then MaMazeleni says slowly: 'Yes, she did, they lived in the old house and when our family started to care for her they moved from their homestead to the old house.'

'But why, Gogo? They must have had their own lives where they lived? Could they not have taken her there?'

'It was not like that,' Babanathi answers. 'They probably did take her there for a time, but the times were very bad then.' He sighs. 'It is almost impossible to tell you how bad it was.' He rubs his eyes. 'There was a story about a stolen axe at that time, which caused a war, but it was not about the axe, it was about the land, you understand?' He looks at them in turn. 'Only the good, fruitful land they wanted. So Maqoma fought back, fought a bit, then drew back into the mountains. Came and went. Hit and run. At that time some men came here, cattle had been taken, cattle were taken back. It happened all the time. But this time the men who came killed the whole family and took their cattle and sheep. Some of which might have been their own, but who knows?'

MaMazeleni adds softly: 'But they did not kill Hatta. Nomsa had taken her to her husband's homestead, we don't know why. When they came back they found – what they found. People then, other people, did not think it was a good thing to look after a white child. So it was better for them to live here, more on their own. That is what we were told. But it is very long ago, and people might remember it differently from how it was. Because that was a very confused time.'

'And what about the Hatta of the museum? Do the people in Ibofelo know that this Hatta lived here?'

MaMazeleni laughs. 'No, how would they know? In any case, what people in Ibofelo? The people we know in Ibofelo do not go to museums.'

Everybody laughs out loud at the idea of the people in Ibofelo going to a museum.

'Except for Babanathi,' smiles Nandi.

'How would you feel if we told this story in our film?' asks Uuka.

There is a short silence, then Babanathi says: 'We shall discuss that.'

Uuka turns the radio louder and takes Java's hand, swings her around on the cement slab to the rhythm of a song. The older people sit back and talk in Xhosa.

It is dark moon, and the stars are very bright. More stars than Nandi has ever seen. She sits on her own, and watches Uuka and Java as they move to the fast music. She looks away again. Is she jealous, does she feel out of it? Possibly. They have been a threesome for a long time, friends in spite of many differences. Nandi picks up one of Hatta's wooden bowls, and

follows the curve of the bowl with her fingers. The wood is rough and she feels a splint entering her skin.

She closes her eyes. I am intrigued by this woman. I am moving into her skin, she is moving into mine, it's her bowl in my hands. Maker of images. Maker of meanings. I want to know her more deeply, I want to see everything she has made and left behind. Not what I had in mind, Uuka's white great-great grandmother, but here she is. Nandi holds out an inviting hand, then smiles her embarrassment in the dark and bends her head over the bowl.

'Come and dance with us!' Uuka pulls her up and she puts the bowl back on the chair.

Babanathi at Sandile's cave

EXT. SANDILE'S CAVE - 8 NOVEMBER 2015 - DAY

Let me show you the places where it happened, where we were struck on the head, a poisonous, dangerous cobra. That was how they cleared the land, made it ready for their people, who took it and sold it again and again, and became rich. But the cobra is wily. It sailed under a bush to recover, and it came back. Many times. Let me show you.

This here was Sandile's cave. It is where he hid in the last war from the English and their allies, the Boers, the Mfengo and the Mthembu. Yes, the tribe of Mandela always fought the amaGcaleka and the amaRharhabe, except on one or two rare occasions. I am taking you to this cave to show you the place, because you cannot understand what happened if you do not first see the place.

See, here from this height in the Amathola Mountains, you can see to the far horizon. This last war started again with a match that was thrown into dry bush. There was a small fight between men of the Gcaleka and the Mfengu at a wedding, and that small fight became a big one. But the land was dry, and it needed no more than that to start the war.

So, do not look at the green fields below, see rather the yellow grass of the time of Sandile. That is what I want to show you here. In all nine of these wars for this land, ranging over a hundred years, the land itself was the main weapon. Maqoma and Sandile took their warriors into the mountains, the Amathole and the Mthontsi, the Waterkloof, and these towering places were impregnable fortifications, which were *never* taken in battle. Although the amaJohnies tried for long years at a time. How were they then taken? They were taken by destroying and burning the land, the food, the huts and kraals, the cattle, so that the women and children could not eat, and the warriors could not eat. The English soldiers got their provisions from the sea. You can only fight that for so long.

The cobra had to emerge from the height to drink, to survive, and it was taken. It lost its kingdom, its freedom to sail out on a morning and raise its crowned head to the early sun.

Working around the kitchen table

INT. THE FARMHOUSE KITCHEN - 9 NOVEMBER 2015 - DAY

Uuka, Nandi and Java are sitting around the kitchen table after breakfast, the sun pouring through the back door and their laptops open, making notes for the script. Babanathi and MaMazaleni have agreed that the family story should be told, after so many years of silence. After some discussion Nandi reads out what she has written.

EXT. SANDILE'S CAVE - NOVEMBER 2015 - EARLY MORNING

EXTREME LONG SHOT. The camera pans the scene from Sandile's Cave, down into the long valley below, showing the surrounding mountains and large stretches of grassland as the first light of day begins to spread. Birdsong is heard. The camera pivots to show the cave itself, zooms in on animal life to be seen. In the background, fade in the soundtrack of 'Meet me at the river' sung by Miriam Makeba, softly, then more sound. Then the camera pans scenes in the high mountains of the Amathole, again zooming in on the landscape, animal and plant life.

A female voice reads:

'Land in our country means many things. It is the beauty of our landscapes; wild mountain spaces, open veld in every direction. It is our heritage, the soil which holds the graves and the bones of our ancestors, our grandfathers and grandmothers. It will hold our own bones when we live the next life. It is our future, the possibility to grow subsistence and prosperity in the place we inhabit. Land is also the rage about our past, an open wound; the rage about the violence which separated and still separates us from our places. The blood which darkened the red-brown soil, seeping away into its deeper layers.

The land holds the stories of those who lived here, with passion, with sorrow, with joy. These stories live on in the homes and ruins, the kraals, the open spaces which held them at different times.

We want to invite you to experience with us some of these lives, which still form the shadows of our everyday existence.'

Then CLOSEUP of the painted pot, the camera slowly zooming in on the figures, DOLLY IN for all angles.

There is silence when she finishes. She looks around – 'Is it too much?' 'I think it's good,' says Uuka cautiously. 'But let's see how the rest of the script develops. We might tweak it again. What do you think, Java?'

Java hesitates. 'I also like it, but it is heavier than what I would have written. Good idea to let it stew a bit. Babanathi?'

'Yes, I agree. I like it though, Nandi.'

Uuka has now taken out the big camera they brought along, and Nandi and Java have prepared questions to put to Babanathi.

Babanathi has started to speak and Uuka stops him, gets the camera ready, and then asks him to start again. 'Now I will show you how our family became involved in the war. There is much blood in this story, and I am sorry about that. I would rather have told you a story without violent death, but if I tell this story, I cannot avoid it. Maybe you, who are the future, will do better.'

Java sits forward, her hair forming a large brown halo and a frown of concentration on her face. She asks in a slightly stilted way: 'Babanathi, could you please tell us how exactly your family became involved in the land wars? The land wars in this area?'

Babanathi smiles at her, and puts down his pipe.

'Our family became involved when Lonwabo joined Maqoma in the years following the arrival of the people from the sea, the settlers. You can consider him our founding father, in the story you are trying to unravel. He took Nomsa as a wife, a beautiful and a good woman; our founding mother, if you wish. First she lost two babies, but then she had a strong son, Siyabonga, who was born the year before his father went to war, fighting with Maqoma.'

This war of Maqoma was not a serious war, at first – he needed cattle and he raided Bawana's homestead on the Koonap River. But he had forgotten that Bawana had friends among the abamhlope, and before he knew it the Boere were burning his Great Place. One of the men killed in the battle was Lonwabe. He never saw his son grow into the man he became. Siyabonga.'

There is a long silence.

Nandi then takes up the questioning: 'Did Siyabonga also grow up to be a soldier?' Uuka moves around the table to get better light onto Babanathi's face.

Babanathi shrugs his shoulders. 'All men were soldiers at that time. But he only became a soldier much later, in later wars. When he was a baby, his mother, Nomsa, had gone into deep mourning after the death of her husband. She was living at the homestead of the brother of Lonwabo, and he wanted to take her as his third wife, but she knew he was cruel, also towards women, and she left the place and went to Fort Beaufort with the baby. Her life was hard now, and the white people in the town thought the Xhosa had brought their troubles on themselves. But yes, both Lonwabo and Siyabonga fought under Maqoma, the greatest general in the wars.'

It is Java's turn again. 'But how could people just come and take the land when there were people on the land already?'

Babanathi snorts somewhat grimly. 'That is a very good question. And not so easy to answer. Many of the white people who came here for land from the Netherlands or England were not rich, otherwise they would have stayed in England or in Cape Town where it was safer. They needed land, and they moved into stretches that seemed open. But they did not understand that we did not buy and sell land. And what some of them did – it is a very long story.'

The nagmaal weekend

INT. FORT BEAUFORT - 17 APRIL 1830 - DAY AND NIGHT

The day is just dawning and Helena extinguishes the lamp. She has been baking for the last few days, sometimes with the baby tied on her back like the Xhosa women do. The canisters are filled with soetkoekies and rusks. Hannes and Kobus, his Khoi servant, slaughtered an extra lamb, and the raw meat is covered with an old wet cotton sheet. As she packs away the last of the food under the wagon tent she notices her cracked hands, and sighs. The dominie's wife has such nice soft hands. But the feeling of excitement remains – five days of seeing other farmers, other women. Of going to the trading store to buy necessities, and maybe some extra things she had not even thought of.

As she goes to the kitchen door to pick up the crying baby, Helena notices the first sunlight on the high rocky peak behind the farmhouse. She stops for a moment, despite the crying child. I love this place. Lonesome and dangerous, but I love it.

While she waits for Hannes to chain the doors for the five days they will be away, she talks to Johannes on her lap. He gurgles back, and she hides her face in his clothes, her hair tickling his face, which leads to more giggling. He is a sturdy baby and she closes her eyes for a moment: dear God, protect him in this wild land. So many things can happen.

Hannes and Kobus make sure that they get a staanplek for the wagon under a large shady tree next to the small mission church where the services will be held. Kobus promises to keep an eye and to start a fire while Hannes goes to the hardware shelf in the trading store and Helena walks across the open veld to the cottage of Kato Brink, her sister. The Brinks have been here for longer than Hannes and Helena, and they have a dorpshuis, a cottage in the village for church celebrations. This is where Helena and baby Johannes lived with Kato the previous year, when the men were on commando in the Kat River area after Maqoma had raided cattle.

Helena walks in the open front door and calls: 'It's me! Are you here?'

Kato comes through the middle door and opens her arms. 'The two people I have been waiting to see! How is my little sister and how is my big boy?' She is a big woman, with an attractive, open face, now lit up with a smile.

'Not fair,' laughs Helena. 'It seems as if I shall always be the little one!' She holds out the baby to her sister, and follows her to the kitchen, where she can smell fresh coffee. Kato holds Johannes with one strong and capable arm, while she pours the coffee with the other. Helena takes pleasure in the small cottage with its wooden floors and glass windows. Kato also gets attractive fabrics from the trading store and even sometimes from the traveling hawkers who offer their wares on the back of the buggy they travel and sleep in. The blue and white cotton she used for the curtains in the kitchen and the voorkamer look beautiful to Helena in comparison to her house with dung floors, wooden shutters and earthy colours.

But I am happy there. One day, maybe.

They do not linger over coffee as they have to rush to be ready for the preparation service in the church – the first of the long list of services held during a Communion weekend, when farmers come from great distances to celebrate Communion together.

Later, the men stand around the fires and try the witblits they had been experimenting with. The meat has been cut up and will be cooked on the open fire, and the women have made *pap*, and cooked some greens from their gardens.

When the women are all seated in a circle on riempiesbankies while they wait for the fires to form coals, Helena asks Kato: 'Who is that woman with the baby on her back?'

‘Oh, that’s Nomsa. She arrived here a few weeks ago and I give her little jobs when I can. Her husband was killed in the raids at Kat River, she says, and she does not want to live with his family.’

‘Oh no. And her family?’

‘All killed in one of the previous wars, she says.’

‘And she has a baby?’

‘Ja, a little older than Johannes.’

Helena looks at Nomsa again. She looks thin and haggard, and also, like Helena, has a child to feed. With a shock Helena realises that the woman probably lost her husband in the same raid Hannes took part in. And he came back to her, while this woman has had the experience she had so feared herself.

The next morning Helena walks over to Nomsa where she is working and addresses her in isiXhosa. ‘You are doing some work for my sister?’

Nomsa looks up. Her eyes are drooping and her skin looks dry and sallow. The baby on her back whimpers, and she takes him down. Helena is shocked – the child looks too thin too.

‘Yes, I do.’ She holds herself proudly, looks over Helena’s head into the middle distance. ‘But she is only here in iBofolo when she comes to church, not often.’

‘And otherwise, who do you work for?’

‘Otherwise I do not work.’ Nomsa pulls herself up again, stands tall.

Helena wonders how to approach this. She has seen the pride, and does not want to make the woman feel insulted by her offer.

‘My husband I and have talked. We live half a day by ox wagon from here, on the Kat River and against that mountain over there. On a farm, where we have cattle, sheep, vegetables. I need a woman to help me there. We can pay you a small amount but you will get all your food from us.’

She stops, she is talking too fast. The woman has not moved. She looks as if she is in a trance.

Helena feels she did not do this right, and she starts to move away. Nomsa reaches out and touches her arm. ‘No, do not go. I will go with you. When you came I knew that I will go with you.’

Helena seeks the woman’s eyes, but she is not really present. Perhaps this is how she is.

‘Thank you, that is good,’ Helena says. ‘This is our wagon, you can stay here if you want to. Kobus will show you where things are.’

Helena feels uncertain when she turns back to Kato. ‘I really want to help her, she seems lost in a dark and strange place. But I am not easy about this. If she knows that Hannes and Kobus fought in the commando that killed her husband, will it be safe to have her at home?’ Kato pulls up her shoulders. ‘I don’t think she will be difficult,’ she says. ‘That’s not how I see her.’

I shall see how it goes, Helena decides. I shall say nothing of this to Hannes, because if he knows what I know Nomsa will travel no further with us than the low-water ford on the other side of town. I shall just see how it goes. She does not look angry, she looks dull, frozen. I cannot just walk away from her. Let’s see how it goes. I shall watch her closely and if it doesn’t work we’ll bring her back.

Nomsa

INT. THE OLD HOUSE - MAY 1830 - DAY

Helena and Hannes had a brief argument about where Nomsa and the baby would sleep. Kobus had put up a reed shelter for himself near the river, and Hannes thought he could put up a second hut for Nomsa. Helena would not hear of it.

‘She is a woman from a different background, a different race, and there would be nobody to protect her if he wanted to take advantage of her.’

What she really felt was that Nomsa was still in shock after her husband’s death, and who knows what else at her brother-in-law’s homestead, and that she needed to be looked after for a while. But she would not say that to Hannes. He was not keen for the African woman to sleep in their house, and only the insistence in Helena’s eyes made him give way.

‘Well, let her sleep in the kitchen then, but just for a while.’ He smiled. ‘I might as well be kept awake by two babies as by one.’

Helena put her hand behind his head and kissed his cheek. ‘Thank you.’

Nomsa finds the work easy and after a few days she starts to pick up a rhythm. She milks the cows, helps with the cleaning, the vegetable garden and fetching water and fire wood. She watches when Helena bakes and Helena encourages her to bake her own bread. Nomsa also teaches Helena her own ways of cooking pap and vegetables.

As Siyabonga improves and gains weight, Nomsa can feel her own body easing into new life. She still keeps herself apart, and is especially wary of the two men. A woman on her own is unprotected, everybody knows that, and there would be no consequences for either Hannes or Kobus if they wanted her body. But nothing happens, and she gradually comes to hope that means that it will not happen. She also has a sense that Helena is aware of her, where she is and what she is doing, what she is feeling.

One morning as the bread has gone into the outside oven Helena says: ‘Now we can have a rest. Won’t you sit with me and drink some coffee?’

Nomsa looks at Helena’s face to be sure she has not misunderstood her, and then nods her head.

Like the first time they spoke next to the wagon in iBofolo, they are awkward with each other. Nomsa looks less angular to Helena, more filled out.

‘I want to know, Nomsa, how you are. We are sharing a house, but we live together like strangers.’

They both sit quietly for a long time, their eyes on the two children on the floor. Since he has been getting solid food as well as his mother’s milk Siyabonga has been visibly flourishing and has started to walk. He has to be constantly watched, and both women have developed a habit of looking where he is. At the moment he and Johannes are both pulling at opposite ends of a towel.

There are sudden tears in Nomsa’s eyes, which she brushes away. ‘You are very good to me,’ she says softly. ‘I am good and Siyabonga is good.’ Helena puts her hand on Nomsa’s knee, her own eyes shining. ‘I am very glad. It is also very good for me that you are here.’

The new water tank

INT. THE FARMHOUSE - 11 NOVEMBER 2015 - DAY

Bawu Damani has decided that they need a water tank for the farm. Although the house was built about thirty meters from a branch of the Kat River which runs through the property, they need purified water for the house. They rely on municipal water for most of their needs, except for the irrigation of the vegetables and mealies. This service has become increasingly unreliable, and they often have to fetch and then boil river water for their household. Babanathi is funding half of the tank, and Bawu Damani and MaMazeleni are paying for the other half. Her contribution comes from the chicken money. Bawu Damani, Babanathi and Uuka will install the tank, and have asked two cousins, younger men who live in the village when they are not at university, to help with lifting and carrying. The cement, the tank and the piping have already been delivered, and Sam and Thabo have arrived.

When Nandi and Java bring tea and bread, the cement layer has been laid, and Bawu Damani is measuring where the piping should be fitted. The conversation stops suddenly when they appear, but Nandi had heard them talking about the circumcision school nearby which has been closed due to a number of deaths of young men. Uuka introduces them to Sam and Thabo before they go back to the kitchen to help prepare the big lunch which will be served later.

‘Just like you said,’ says Java with lifted eyebrows. ‘The men do the hard work and the women cook the food.’

Lunch is eaten at a long wooden table under the oak tree. Khaya runs up and down and yelps for food until Uuka takes him away with a bag of bones.

Thabo is studying at Fort Hare University, not far from where they are. He turns to Bawu Damani: ‘It is strange, Bawu Damani, that you have a whole farm here. I have asked about land here, for when I have a government job, but they told me the chief still allocates the farming land, and it does not become one’s own.’

‘This land belongs to Babanathi,’ he replies. ‘We share the work and the income, but he registered it in his name.’

Everybody looks up.

Babanathi puts down his food to explain. ‘I registered it in MaMazeleni’s name, as it came to us from the mothers in our family. But because the amaBhulu in the administration office did not accept that, I also put down my name. When I took over the shop from the Germans in the sixties, the office gave me a chance to register the property.’

‘Why?’ asks Uuka.

Babanathi shakes his head. ‘Who knows? With the Bantu Administration nobody knew why they did things. They must have thought that it would somehow be in their interest. But it was good for us, because that was the time of the removals, the Betterment, and we were never removed. Because of the registration.’

‘The betterment?’

‘Another grand scheme. Better for them, not for us.’

‘And which mothers?’ asks Sam. ‘We do not know the history,’ he tells Uuka. Uuka raises his shoulders to show that he does not know it either.

‘Our grandmother looked after us when we were small,’ says Babanathi. ‘Those were the years after the world war, and we were poor. Our mother worked in East London, and MaMsuthu, our grandmother, looked after us here, in this house. That was how we grew up, me and MaMazeleni. Things were very different; we worked hard, growing mealies. But they

made sure we went to school in the village, and we did that every day for many years.’ He takes a breath, smiles. ‘The teachers were very different in those years. We were quite scared of them – they walked with a cane and you did your bit or you got it! But they also taught us so well. There was a teacher from the mission at our school, Mister Brown, but white as a lily. He taught us history. That man changed my life. In his classes history was no longer boring, it was alive with people and with drama.’

‘So that was MaMsuthu,’ says Uuka when Babanathi leans back with a smile. ‘And her mother?’

Babanathi and MaMazeleni exchange a glance. ‘That was Thando,’ she says. ‘I have a photo somewhere. One of those old ones where the people sit dressed in English clothes without smiling or blinking.’

While MaMazeleni goes inside to look for the photo, Thabo responds to the questions of his great uncles. He is keen to get land in the valley, there is so much water. No, he will not live here, he will have a job in a city, working for government, possibly even in another country in a diplomatic mission. They all look up with interest, and Sam teases: ‘He is very well connected, he is active in the political structures. One day he will be the minister of foreign affairs.’

Babanathi laughs too. ‘I hope you will look after your old relatives when you are rich and famous,’ he says. Thabo looks pleased, and embarrassed.

MaMazeleni comes back with the photo. ‘I’d forgotten I had this,’ she says, and puts it on the table.

Really? thinks Uuka.

‘But,’ says Thabo, ‘isn’t she a white woman?’ ‘No,’ says Sam, ‘you can see she is black, but she looks very light. But then many people in our family are light of skin. Not everybody, like my father, but some. Like MaMazeleni, also like Uuka, see here! But look at the clothes! She looks like the pictures of those first students at Fort Hare, Thabo, with those long skirts and the funny hats. And the dress that is tight up to the neck.’

Uuka takes a photo of the photo, but says nothing. Was this maybe Hatta’s daughter? Nandi catches his eye. Her big eyes look troubled, and he realizes for the first time how beautiful they are. He deliberately does not look away and she is the first to drop her eyes. But both of them know that something is happening between them, that their search for Hatta and the substance of her life is also present between them.

Babanathi

INT. THE FARMHOUSE - 11 NOVEMBER 2015 - NIGHT

These young people interest me. What a wonderful time to be young, now. When Noluthando and I were young, life was bad. Or at least, not easy. Apartheid was just beginning, and we could not think about careers. What a good word. *Careers*. We had to make a living; I had to make a living. And it turned out well, but have I really had a fulfilling life? Maybe I have. Noluthando and I were always close, and her children have brought me joy. Could I have had a better life? What a strange question to ask oneself. For everything I would have been able to add to my life, something might have been lost.

So how could that other Babanathi have lived? If I had been young now, I would have gone to university like they do, and I would have studied like they do. Political studies, history, making films and writing books. And would I then have read like I have read? Or would I have had one voice only?

The young women when I was young were also different from Java and Nandi, were they not? I did not know many young women who were interested in things like they are. Interested in me, yes, in my money, in the life I could offer them, but not interested in the world like I am interested in the world. Who was there in those years who could maybe have been close to me in this way for a lifetime? Well yes, Mercy was a beautiful woman and had a voice like an angel. But she was not interested in me. Grace was a good woman, but she would have bored me. Better that I went from one to the other like I did, and always came back here.

I hope these youngsters will manage to pull this thing together. The land and what it means. I could have built a life around that, maybe. That would have been something to get up for in the morning. Maybe as a land lawyer, who took one case at a time and took it through the courts until it worked. Or a historian of the land. Just reading everything and pulling it into a tool to use for the future. Or a film maker, like Uuka will be, showing the grandeur of the land, and how everything starts there.

Good that they are here. It gives me a second chance to look at what I want to do, to be.

Nandi

INT. THE FARMHOUSE - 14 NOVEMBER 2015 - NIGHT

We went back to the museum today. I wanted to see the clay pot with the figures again, and Java and Uuka wanted to try to figure out the different wars. I'll leave that to them, it just depresses me.

I looked at the faces on the pot today and I think they are real people, I mean that she used real faces of people she knew. They are too...too specific, too individual, to just be images. I don't know how one draws, but surely one uses a model. And maybe, then, the girl with the long hair is she herself? Or maybe she used somebody she knew as a model. Her expression is so sad...

The loss of paradise. And that cheeky, sturdy young angel with his umkhonto, his spear. His large, flat feet solidly on the earth, for an angel, not prepared to let them back into the garden. The deep colours around the tree, and the dull grey on the back of the pot, where they flee.

This loss is in my bones. It is Gogo getting sicker and sicker and wasting away. It is everybody I cannot connect with. It is the empty space between me and Uuka, when I know we could be sitting under that tree. It is everything I cannot dare because I might not succeed.

Maybe I am no longer rooted in other people, in my people, safe in who I am, because of the white people's story about a paradise which was lost.

I shall just pick up my stick and walk right back in. Stand aside, Buti, I am on my way to the flowering tree which houses the beautiful birds. How about you drop that spear and we play? You do look like fun.

Glossary

Abamhlope: white people
Amabhulu or Boere: Afrikaans or Dutch farmers
Amajohnies: the Xhosa name for British soldiers in the 19th century land wars
Amathole: calves
Amazi: sour milk
Biltong: spiced and dried raw meat
Doek: a scarf folded around the head
Gaatjie: taxi assistant in Cape Town
Gogo: grandmother
Igolomi: Knysna Loerie
Imizi: homestead, collection of huts
Kappie: cotton bonnet
Kaross: cloak made of pieces of animal skin
Mina: me
Misvloer: floor polished with cow dung
Nagmaal: Holy Communion
Pap: porridge made of corn or mealies
Riempiesbank: wooden bench with a seat of leather strips
Thina sizofunda mahala: we will study for free
Tshikiza: skirts made from printed dyed cotton, initially from Europe but now part of Xhosa traditional wear
Uhambe ngokukhuselekileyo? Have you traveled safely?
Umqombothi: traditional beer
Umlungu: white person
Umsitshana: Cape Chestnut tree
Unjani wena? How are you?
Uuka: arise, rise up
Voorkamer: drawing room, lounge
Witblits: peach brandy, usually home-made

Credits

The song Mna Nawe by Andy Mkosi. <https://10and5.com/2015/12/17/15-south-african-musical-acts-to-come-out-of-2015/>

Dance on the red-brown earth:

The poem was inspired by the film 'More sweetly play the dance' by William Kentridge
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SiVsIWwvcg>

It was originally published in *McGregor Poetry Festival 2018 Anthology*, 2019. Cape Town: African Sun Press.

Free Nelson Mandela – his mind is still free - This line comes from the song *Free Nelson Mandela* written by Jerry Dammers in 1984.

'Nobody wanna see us together', sung by Yamkela Gola and Wits Students:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mFmRA2U5-pQ>

Reflective essay on writing an extract from a novel

As I slowly progressed with my creative writing assignment, I made an important discovery: writing was a process which absorbed me completely and which I found deeply fulfilling. I had once before tried to write a novel, but at that time I had a very detailed idea of the plot, as well as of the “meaning” of the novel, and it just did not work out. With the guidance I received during the Creative Writing coursework and from my supervisor, I went about it in a different way. Although I had planned major parts of the plot in advance, I mostly left its unfolding open to be created by the characters. Once they came alive and the story started to move forward almost of itself, I felt as if this was a novel I was reading and trying to keep up with. Some of the characters appeared in my dreams, and the writing was then more than a conscious process. Nevertheless, there was a large amount of conscious planning and deliberation involved, and in this reflective essay I want to consider the ways in which conscious preparation and intuitive unfolding worked together in my writing.

Plot and themes

The central theme of the story is that individual and collective identity is shaped by personal experience, against the background of large-scale historical events, and that these experiences can go against preconceived social assumptions. “Black” and “white” are therefore real identities in the novel, but the main characters move in and out of these identities with a measure of fluidity which comes from their life experiences.

The plot so far deals with three university students, Nandi, Uuka and Java, who are enrolled in a film course. They receive an assignment to make a film that deals with land in South Africa, just at the time when the protests at their university increase in intensity and the university is closed down. Their lecturer and supervisor for this project, Adela, approves of their idea to go to the Eastern Cape during the period that the university will be closed, to try to find out whether Uuka’s family history might offer a story which they could use for their assignment. MaMazaleni, Uuka’s grandmother, as well as his great uncle, Babanathi, turn out to know more than they have told Uuka before, and the young people also discover some artefacts in the village museum in Fort Beaufort which reveal aspects of this history. By means of flashbacks the story reveals aspects of the home life of Hatta’s family, both before and after her birth, and this includes an allusion to the killing of the whole family, except for Hatta, during a cattle raid. The students are also told by MaMazaleni that later when she was a young married woman Hatta was taken away from her baby, Siya – a very traumatic experience for the whole family.

In the part of the novel that will still be written, the reader will be shown how Hatta’s aunt and uncle, the Brinks, decided to join Piet Retief’s move to the northern part of the country in 1836, and settled in the area later known as the Transvaal. Many years later they hear from a hunter who returned from the Eastern Cape that the Smit family had been killed, except for Hatta. The hunter also reports that Hatta has married Siyabonga, the son of Nomsa, her foster mother, and that they have a son, Siya. The Brinks are shocked and send their eldest son, Freek, to fetch Hatta. She is deeply unhappy during these years with the Brinks, and eventually finds a way to return to her husband and child. By then their lives have however developed into new directions, and she finds it hard to fit in again. At this time she finds refuge in her art.

The main focus of the narrative will however be on the present story, where Java, Uuka and Nandi have to deal with more student politics, and also learn more about the land issue as

they work on the film script. Their own relationships, their exploration of the land wars and of how these influenced Uuka's family, and the current tensions in the country will shape their film making skills and the work they eventually produce. The screenplay for the film will be developed, and the film makers will start to actually produce the film.

I anticipate that the novel will reach an integrating moment as the real-life situation, the family history and the screenplay on the land and the people come together.

The novel had a long gestation period and during this time I did extensive research on the historical background. Noël Mostert's *Frontiers* (1992) was an excellent introduction to Eastern Cape history, full of interesting tales, although quite long-winded. I was fortunate that John Laband's outstanding book *The Land Wars* (2020) was published early this year, in time for me to read it from cover to cover and to pitch my story into its timeline. I also benefitted immensely from Mphuthumi Ntabeni's novel *The broken river tent* (2018), where the main character is "shadow-walked" by the spirit of Maqoma, the Xhosa warrior chief during the time of my story. I have to mention that I have been a qualitative social researcher for most of my academic life, and have had the privilege of conducting numerous rich interviews with Xhosa speaking women in which they shared their own experiences with me, a reflection which they often told me also enriched them.

After I had planned the initial outline of the plot against the historical dates, I started to write. At that time I had just read *Doctor Thorne* by Anthony Trollope (1858/1952), and was struck by a sentence in the introduction, where Trollope is quoted to have written: "No novel is anything, for purposes of comedy or tragedy, unless the reader can sympathize with the characters" (Skilton in Trollope, Oxford University Press, 1952:xvi). Although this is a 19th century statement, in my own reading it is certainly true, and I then decided to make the three main protagonists, the young film makers, the key focus of the story. I therefore tried to write in such a way that the reader's focus would keep returning to them, and that the historical material would emerge through their eyes and interpretation. (This was also the point at which Adela moved into the background.)

In planning the following short chapter, I often had to think back on the overall design, and then usually followed my intuition on where the story should go next. As soon as I felt that the focus was moving away from the three main characters, I would move the story back into the present and into their perspective.

Characterisation

The aspect of writing that possibly interests me most is the development of the different characters. This is possibly also the facet about which I learnt most in writing the story. After I had written the first few thousand words it struck me that all the characters were a little similar, and that I needed to find a way to differentiate between their personalities. For this I used a personality typology called the Enneagram, which gave me some ideas for typical character traits for the main characters. To fill in the detail on these personalities, I associate the characters with people I know who have similar traits. I have therefore not based any of the main characters on a person I know, but borrow real-life actions and characteristics from different people. As the first section of the novel, which is now being submitted, had to deal with familiarising the reader with the plot, context and characters, I look forward to being able to explore character development more deeply in the writing which will follow

In the section of the novel I have written so far, Uuka for instance displays a lack of self-confidence, which could be related to the fact that he grew up without a father figure, and in a culture that rates overt masculinity highly. I hope that his future development will reveal a growing sense of quiet competence, confidence and self-reliance, which will increase as his creativity finds expression and direction. This is also expressed in the meaning of his name in Xhosa: “the one who will rise.”

As mentioned above, I had initially planned to give Adela, the lecturer, a more central role in the story, but the narrative did not go that way. I intend, however, to bring her back into the action when the students return to Cape Town, and are confronted with identity and race based politics in the student arena. Although Adela has gone through a personal transformation, she does represent Afrikaans culture and to some extent oppression, and there will probably be some confrontation and frank discussion in this group on the issue of race and privilege in South Africa.

Together with detailed characterisation I attempted to give the main characters a specific and individual voice. Java is assertive wherever she is; Uuka is relaxed at home but quietly respectful in his grandparents’ home, and Nandi is outgoing when among friends but otherwise cautious, and has a rich inner life.

The issue of writing about black African characters as a white South African has to be discussed. In an in-depth exploration of this topic, Meg Vandermerwe interviewed three other prominent South African authors who have given voice to characters not of their own race group. Marlene van Niekerk stated the conviction that a writer can imagine any kind of character or voice, and can express that voice. Antjie Krog was also convinced that a writer could do so, but with the *pro viso* that she had to recognise that she would never be able to enter and understand that world fully (Vandermerwe, 2018). Both Zukiswa Wanner and Vandermerwe herself agree that it is difficult but should be attempted, if we want to challenge and change the artificiality of these inflexible social categories (Ibid). The difficulty for a white South African writer is the way in which “white” can be associated with usurped power in everyday South African interactions, as Java experienced in the story, and that the action of giving voice to a whole range of black South African characters, as I am doing, can be seen as “cultural appropriation” and as an act of white power and privilege. I see no other way but to introduce this theme into the novel, possibly in the interactions between Adela and her students, but also in other settings, and to somehow bring these discussions into the open. I would also want to do so with great humility, and with the full understanding that I am bound to misunderstand many things as a writer from a different culture. This dilemma exists not only in terms of writing race, but also other social dynamics such as gender and culture. This kind of writing certainly challenges what Edward Said (1978) termed “the ‘forbidden’ other” in his essay *Orientalism*. On the other hand, South African social interactions are a part of my inherent knowledge and of my formation as a person – something I understand, to some extent, from a lifetime of experience. The “forbidden other” is therefore not intimately known to me, but neither is it unknown. I know well enough what I don’t know to understand that I have to approach the work with the deepest possible respect. I have also often thought that, in spite of having read hundreds of novels that are set in Britain, I could no more create a British character than walk on my hands. I simply do not understand the complexity of ways in which class manifests in that society, while I do, to some extent, have an understanding of how it happens in my own.

I have asked some of my Xhosa friends to read the final story for feedback on this particular aspect. I do not want to receive this feedback before the whole story has been written, as a strong internal sensor could be the end of the spontaneous flow of the narrative. I would however take their feedback into account in writing a final draft of the story.

Form

I decided in advance to write the novel in short chapters, as Anthony Doerr did in *All the light we cannot see* (2014). I also intended to write some chapters quite visually, almost as visual scenes. In this I was inspired by the writing of Virginia Woolf in *Mrs Dalloway* (1925/1964), Arundhati Roy in *The god of small things* (1997), and also of Michael Ondaatje, in for example *The English Patient* (1992).

When Professor Vandermerwe had read the first draft she suggested that I merge the margin between the novel about a screenplay and the screenplay itself, an idea which I liked. After some experimentation I decided to have ordinary chapter headings, and then to have a “scene heading” as done in a screenplay as a sub-heading. This, I hoped, would have the advantage of informing the reader about the setting of the chapter while the sub-headings would suggest filmic scenes. I also read about screenwriting and *montage*, and attempted to use the short, visual chapters to place the story in context, to convey essential information briefly, to move the pace, and to introduce key images which I could return to later. In addition I made use of filmic strategies and tools such as zooming in on detail in a scene, zooming out into long shots, picking up on visual images which are not necessary for the scene but which create a context, and tracking, by moving with a character as he or she experiences something important, such as the protest march and the chaotic movement of people when things started to go wrong.

I read about how Virginia Woolf and James Joyce shaped the form of the novel in the 20th century by reflecting on cinematic writing, (<https://www.bl.uk/20th-century-literature/articles/cinema-and-modernism>) and want to use the completed work as a conscious experiment in merging the boundary between novel and screenplay. Strangely, in this unusual year of 2020, I left numerous novels I had started to read unfinished. I also watched more films than I normally do. This led me to reflect on what it is that creates “readability”, and how the best elements of reading a book and watching a film could be combined in a novel that works hard on keeping the reader absorbed and involved.

I chose three main settings for the chapters, although there are also many other less important ones. The university campus in Cape Town, the Farmhouse near Fort Beaufort, and the Old House, which can only be accessed by slipping through a narrow gap in a thorny hedge near the Farmhouse, are the three main settings of the story so far. I anticipate that there will be a house in 19th century rural Transvaal that will be added in the next section of the story.

The once broken and now restored painted pot which Hatta left behind is a central visual image, and also a major component of the form of the story. It carries the symbolism of a paradise lost, of brokenness which had to be glued together again, and of constant loss. There will probably be other similar visual images for the next part of the story, but I will have to see how they emerge.

Style

Form and style are closely connected, but I shall discuss the use of style separately. My main writing so far has been academic writing as a social scientist, and there have been both

dangers and advantages associated with this. The danger is mostly related to what my supervisor has called “talking heads,” and I have had to think very deeply about how I can convey historical facts or any other information without confronting a reader with a range of often boring facts and/or descriptions. This has in fact probably been another of the most important learnings associated with this mentored writing process. Through the supervision process I learnt that I needed to plan what I wanted to convey, and then step back and look at the material from a different, personal, intuitive and even emotional vantage point before creating the form and style which would express the material best.

I think in writing the rest of the story, and also in other writing afterwards, I would most vitally have to internalise the voice of my mentor regarding this aspect of creative writing – that the narrative is the vehicle and the focus and the purpose of the writing. This is also the advice given to writers by John Gardner (1983/1999) in a book which was recommended to me many years ago, and which I read early in 2020, *On becoming a novelist*. Gardner writes:

If the writer understands that stories are first and foremost stories, and that the best of stories set off a vivid and continuous dream, he can hardly help becoming interested in technique, since it is mainly bad technique that breaks the continuousness and checks the growth of the fictional dream (Gardner, 1999:45).

Gardner continues to explain potential forms of “bad technique” such as making characters do things they would not have done; “laying on the symbolism”, or “breaking in on the action to preach” (Gardner, 1999:45). From my reflection on why I had left many novels unread after a few pages this year, I came to the conclusion that Gardner was right – when I read, I need to be absorbed in the story, and can then tolerate a few mistakes on the part of the writer.

I have always enjoyed books with good dialogue, and have developed this in my own writing style. I think dialogue brings an immediacy and again a visual encounter with characters which is very hard to achieve without using their own words, at least for a less experienced writer.

In my proposal I expressed the intention to write this novel by using different stylistic forms, such as prose, poetry and *fusion fiction*, in Bernardine Evaristo’s terminology. I attempted all of these, but in discussion with my supervisor became more aware than I had been before that the flow of the story should show where and how forms other than prose could be included. I have kept the poems and the fusion fiction, but made a very conscious effort to do so in a way which strengthened the story line and the flow of the narrative, rather than to detract from it. I moved the title poem from being part of the text to the title page, kept the poem on the Amathole, as this prepares the reader for a journey to a quite different place, and deleted another poem which did not work. I used fusion fiction on pp. 9 and 10 where the students are unexpectedly confronted with tear gas from a military vehicle and run off in search of shelter. I intended the broken lines to express the extreme confusion of the sudden attack and the scattering movement of people in all directions. The lines draw to a close as a young man enters a protective space and the children inside the shack slide the latch of the door into the hook.

I think that the way in which the course work was structured was really good for me. At first we were taught a poetry course, with its emphasis on the selection of every word to be the right word and in the right place, in order to say what one wants it to. This included the

elimination of all unnecessary words, a really important training. In my academic writing I have also learnt this lesson over time, and that is probably the biggest advantage for me of having done a reasonable amount of academic writing – I have learnt to say the essential things first and not to elaborate too far beyond what is necessary. I still have to work on this skill, saying what I want to say in a minimalist way without leaving out essential content or emotional impact, but I am learning.

I should maybe also say that because my home language is Afrikaans, I am aware that there is sometimes an Afrikaans “accent” in my writing, for better or for worse. Sometimes, when the characters are Afrikaans, I use it deliberately. At other times it slips in.

Finishing the project

The project has not yet been completed, and I need to return to it with new energy in order to finish a complete novel. I am looking forward to helpful feedback that will assist with the last phase of the writing.

I am deeply grateful for this course in Creative Writing, and for the doors it has opened to do something which I have wanted to do for a very long time.

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