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The Buried Chameleon: A Novel and Critical Reflective Essay

Cornelia Elizabeth Fick

(Student Number: 3815333)

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Supervisor: Prof. F. Fiona Moolla

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*pp 48-51 from “I was born ... why, I cannot tell.” are directly sourced from the story of Katie Jacobs in the African People’s Organisation’s newspaper *The APO* (1910) which is in the public domain and for which approval was not required.

*pp 344-345 from “a forgotten history ... alienation.” citing from my own previous unpublished work on my website based on an assignment I did online for Lydia Yuknavitch. <https://corneliafick.com/2019/10/15/about-africa/>

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The Buried Chameleon

A Novel

*During drought the Khoi tribes buried a chameleon to bring rain.
May the resurrection of the histories of the Cape bring rain.*

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Cornelia Smith Fick

Inside Front Cover

The spider sat in the middle of the web that glittered with dew drops catching the rising sun, drops like jewels in a perfect design. It waited for an insect to fly into the sticky web and provide a meal.

A stick appeared, destroying the web.

The spider started building again, slowly and methodically. First it floated the primary line and waited for it to stick to a branch next to the one on which it was sitting. When the line was attached, the spider carefully walked along the line, reinforcing it with silk from the spinnerets on its abdomen. It constructed an anchor to the ground, creating a Y shape. The design was embedded in its genes. Painstakingly the spider placed the frames and then the radials. It made concentric circles starting from the outside and laid down sticky silk in the centre. At last the work was done. It had taken many hours.

The stick reappeared; poking into the sticky white resin, obliterating the web.

The spider worked a little faster. This time the web did not have all it should; a loose thread wiggled in the breeze.

The stick appeared again, hitting at the web.

The spider scurried to safety. When it deemed it prudent to start again it made another web. After repeated destruction it worked faster and faster, forgetting the design.

Dedication

For my people: Do not be ashamed. The broken tree blames the thunder.



Egbert sat holding his head in his hands, his drawings forgotten. He hadn't slept for the past week. It'd been his first violence on a small *bundeltje* and the thought kept growing that his victim would murder him in his bed. "He's dead, for God's sake. Dead. Dead," he whispered.

Yet the spectre kept rising. In a recurring dream, amid the broken flesh a man had risen, running at him with a knife. As he woke up he heard a dull scream that he throttled in his throat. These weren't people, they were animals. Everyone knew that. So why did he feel so... he couldn't identify the emotion but it lay heavy, uncomfortable in his chest. He shoved it away from him. He couldn't embrace foolish compassion for Amberike, it was a dangerous condition.

The God of Abraham had delivered the Netherlands from the persecution of Spain and had given them a divine mission. They were the Israelites in Africa, who arrived with three duties: to build a fort, to sign treaties and to wage war.

*Shoes on my feet, I am climbing,
once again the girl born on an island,
climbing like a prayer
singing, Lordlord-lordlordlord*

"Sister Thomas on the Practice of Distance", a poem by Yvette Christiansë

Amberike from Abyssinia, eleven years old, picked up a book in the courtyard of the slave lodge. She sat down with her back against the rough stone ring of the well, which was fed by an underground stream. Water gurgled far down in its depths. In a long dress of rough

material, with long sleeves and a high neckline, she'd come to hide, but her attention was diverted by the book. She picked it up and curled her legs under her body, tugging at her frayed hem.

She scrubbed at her chest, trying to flatten the two tender lumps that had appeared. The eyes of the big men followed her everywhere. She'd caught some staring at these bumps and had tied them down with a length of material cut off from the hem of her dress. The lodge mother, Maria, was cross because it made her dress shorter and uneven, showing off her ankles.

"Child," she'd said, "you're giving me grey hair. Where am I going to get another scrap of material to make you a new dress?" They were supposed to receive material and buttons once a year, but sometimes it didn't happen. "I'll just have to wait for my material," Maria said. As matron of the lodge Maria qualified for an extra length of cotton cloth.

Amberike scratched around the band across her chest. It was itchy. Maria had forbidden her to talk to the men who lived with them, and told her to run if a white man stopped her.

"Men are dogs," she said. "Never be alone with them, and if you have a girl child, never leave your child alone with them." But Maria didn't follow her own advice. Even though Maria's male friend wrestled her until she cried, she still slept next to him every night.

Amberike waved the book to fan her face. In the opposite corner a man was being punished. Dressed in a loincloth and a ragged length of cloth around his head he was silent, hugging a pole while receiving lashes from Claas whose lips were drawn back to show his teeth. But the one being flogged didn't seem to mind. Probably because a *placaat* had been issued not to bring more Eastern slaves; so they knew their worth – prices had gone up. He knew he wouldn't be maimed or killed.

Amberike's gaze drifted. This flogging was boring. No one paid attention. Nearby someone was washing and hanging up a coarse shirt, his chest bare. Sunday afternoon was a day of rest. All of them were barefoot. Some of them looked like the master, and bare feet were the only way of separating the servant from the master. Maria had told her this when she'd asked about shoes.

She'd seen a pair of shoes on the beach when she'd accompanied Maria to search for mussels, and, after peering around to see to whom they belonged, had put a foot in one shoe. Maria had grabbed the shoes from her, apologising profusely to the fish girl who had left them to wade into the cold water of the Atlantic Ocean abutting the growing Dutch settlement at the southern tip of Africa. This was the Cape of Storms also known as the Cape of Good Hope, two contrary names that captured the experience of its people.

"It's not for us, Amberike," Maria said.

"Why not?" Amberike had wailed, looking longingly at the shoes on the feet of the owner who walked away with her basket of fish. Maria had answered with a slap.

Amberike wiggled her toes, dug out some dirt between her second and third toe. Oh, it smelled bad. She studied the book she'd picked up; it was made of soft animal skin and stained with fat. A miracle the pigs or the sheep didn't eat it. Livestock roamed about, the fat-tailed Khoi sheep plucking at the dense green grass, the pigs at the refuse. Although she was attending the lodge school, she couldn't read the strange markings on the page.

The Cook always carried the book with him so it was obvious that he could write. Unless he just made those squiggles for fun. She giggled, and flipped the pages, one, two... Someone grabbed it from behind.

"Give, naughty child." The Cook had moved from his pots further down. He wore an off-white shirt, brown vest and pants rolled to his knees, his bare feet rough and dusty. She had to concentrate not to look at the space where his big toes should be.

“I picked it up. I didn’t take it. I know it’s yours,” she said.

But the Cook had already shuffled away. She stared after his thin frame. He had a cloth tied around his head. A strange man. He had a funny walk, as if he would fall any moment. Amberike clapped her hand over her mouth. She wasn’t supposed to talk to men! Maria would be angry. But he intrigued her; they said he was a sauce saucer saucerer. Unlike the other men, he did not look at her as if she were a piece of trotter. And he fed them. She didn’t think much of his cooking, didn’t care to eat a sheep’s head with staring eyes. Once she’d accidentally bitten on an eye and it had popped in her mouth. She didn’t like food that popped. It was disgusting. And the brains, who wants to put snot in your mouth? At every slaughter, if they were lucky, the offal came to them.

She hummed a tune, and clamped her hand over her mouth again. The men and women around her sang while they worked, and sang when they were happy or sad. It was catching. However, she was inviting a beating, drawing attention like this. Maria usually broke off a branch from the market tree in front of the lodge where they sold brown people. She used the branch as a switch to discipline all the children. It was sore. Last time she, Amberike, had a bluish mark that lasted forever.

She was getting tired of all the rules: do this, do that, don’t do this, don’t do that. Nothing was good enough. When will she ever get to do what she wants?

2

Table Mountain in Cape Town is older than most mountains, the Himalayas, the Alps, the Andes. Its flat top, the result of a valley rising up to meet the sky, is 1 085 meters, with Devil’s Peak on the left and Lion’s Head on the right. The mountain has many memories. Escaping bodies have hidden in its caves.

Tethered to the earth by a cableway, its back denuded of yellow-wood trees, the black-mane Cape lion and rock hyrax extinct, the mountain's shadows conceal the endangered ghost frog, protecting this purple-flecked amphibian from doom. It glowers at the bay which carries its name.

The mountain hides its head in the clouds. White clouds amid a bright sun. It dreams about rain. Clouds swirl around its top like a table cloth about to spread. The clouds darken, threatening the bay.

Rain falls from the grey sky. Water collects in many streams which join and used to flow in four rivers and thirty-six springs towards the sea. An ancient people, the Khoina, tasted it and called it *camissa*, sweet water. They shared it in 1652 with Dutch newcomers who diverted the streams and rivers into *grachts* or canals in the middle of a street, and into a moat and well at the Castle of Good Hope built with stone from the mountain. Cemented over for reasons of hygiene by the British who came later in 1795, the rivers now run in tunnels underground, spilling fresh water into the sea.

The main river, the Camissa, used to flow past an old fir tree that stretched out its arms, not to provide shade, but simply to grow. On foreign soil, a symbol of the ancient Celts for remembrance, the freedom to grab air and light had made the tree's needle-like leaves dance. The wind sang through its branches. It worried about all that damage to its trunk. Many ropes and chains and the constant pulling had threatened to upend it.

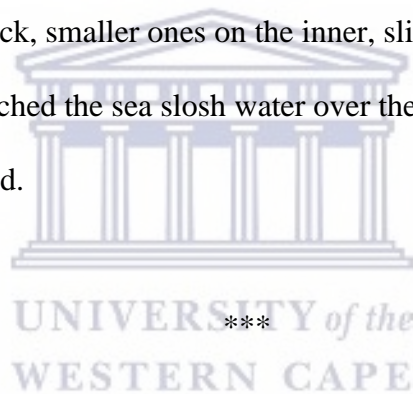
The weight of bare bodies for sale under the tree's canopy had injured its surface roots. It sent out a thick arm to moor itself to the soil. The wind pushed it, so that it leaned, flinging its growth into the space of least resistance. Curved like a feather, it stabbed the horizon, beauty in asymmetry.

Despite its valiant attempts at growing it was cut down in 1916, a woody limb placed in a glass cage in the refurbished Iziko Slave Museum in the city of Cape Town as a prop.

Only the wind could not be contained. The South-Easter howls around buildings caught between Table Mountain and the Hottentots-Holland range. It jostles grown men, whipping up sand and ghosts; it whispers about the past. It grabs at roofs, rattles closed doors and windows, sculpts trees. Called the Cape Doctor it is said to clean the air.

In a bad mood, known as the black South-Easter, its gale force winds blow black clouds over the city, causing floods. Rain and wind snap trees, and break umbrellas.

The ancient stars of the Southern Cross had witnessed ships coming into the bay. Saw them battle the strong wind, sometimes landing on the rocks. Long lines of bodies were reeled in until they were on the beach. They had been packed in chains on the lower decks of the proud ships, built especially for that purpose. Head to tail, each body on its side, bigger ones on the outer oval of the deck, smaller ones on the inner, sliding in their excrement. The stars of the Southern Cross watched the sea slosh water over the wooden vessels to cleanse them. But still the smell lingered.



Katy and Norman were confined to the house; outside had been declared unsafe. Inside they tried to contract the large scope of their normal lives into their two-bedroom abode: entertainment, companionship, sleep, work, exercise, the extra cleaning and sanitising demanded by government decree, and eating healthy while craving for a trip to their favourite restaurant or coffee shop.

Only one person could go out to procure food.

Initially they had taken turns but now Norman did most of the shopping while Katy sorted through the archival material she'd accumulated as part of her genealogy research. It gave her something to do. But lately she'd become tired, she needed a distraction. She

yawned, moving the papers around on their bed. How many more days of this could she take? She leaned back against the pillows and closed her eyes.

A big bald head nuzzled her breast. It began biting. She tried to remove her breast by pressing near the hungry little mouth to break its suction, but it latched on tighter. Milk was dripping out of the pain. “Get off me, you are hurting me.” She pummelled the air, helpless. “Mevrouw, he’s biting me.”

“He’s just an innocent child. Hold still or you will feel my wrath.” The mistress had completed her duty by bringing the baby into the world and had handed him over to Kaatje. He chewed her breast off.

Katy startled out of her nap, glad it was only a dream. She sat upright, wiping the sleep drool from the side of her face. She listened to Norman’s breathing, slow and even. He was still asleep. Even though it was mid-day they were in bed, had in fact not bothered to get up. It seemed pointless.

Her foray into history to search for the source of her daughter Amy’s genetic illness had yielded many boxes of papers. She’d discovered that one of her ancestors, Kaatje Jacobs, was unremarkable until at the age of ninety-six she became one of the few slaves in South Africa to tell her story. Kaatje had spoken to a journalist from the African People’s Organisation newspaper in 1910. But still her voice was not her own, mediated as it was through the interviewer in a different language and time.

Kaatje’s people had believed in mysteries, so when a ship came they were paralyzed by the weight of prescience. The oral history in Katy’s family that had trickled down was that Kaatje’s father had told her that her seed or origin grandmother had walked towards the raiders of her homeland, her arms held in front of her, ready to be chained. But taken away from the mighty baobab trees that lived for more than three thousand years, she soon took ill and died. She missed the spiny forest, the different types of lemurs, and the strange insects

that could only be found on Madagascar: the hissing cockroach, the moon moth and the long-neck weevil. She saw in the future there was only darkness, and like all who peer into the face of evil she began to fade. Of her eight pregnancies only her son who had accompanied her to the new land, had survived.

Katy searched for her reading glasses on the bedside table, put them on, and pulled the Bible closer. The black and white picture on a copy of the APO newspaper showed Kaatje wearing a fringed cape and a white *kapje* covering her hair. Like Katy she resembled Katy's father – Kaatje had the same dark skin and aquiline nose. She held a baby on her lap. A young boy stood next to her, wearing a lace-edged collar. For a slave, Kaatje looked so in control.

Katy wondered what her life was like. She couldn't imagine being owned by anyone. A niggling pain scratched her stomach. She was sure she was getting an ulcer. The uncertainty of the time they were living in, combined with the stress of Amy's illness, wasn't good for her health. Kaatje, after whom she had been named—each generation in her family had someone named Katie, Katherine or Cathy—had been a good wet nurse, hired out by word of mouth and advertisement. She could produce buckets of milk on a thin diet of soups.

Katy touched her own breast, elongated, empty. Kaatje had fed how many children? Yet her own children had not benefited from the bounty of her body, while the master's children had grown fat on her blood. Did she sometimes look down on them and wish her milk would cause cramps or mental retardation? When they were small they plundered her breasts, when they were grown they plundered her womb.

Sadness overwhelmed Katy. Could Kaatje's actions have affected future generations? Would they remain small and lean because she'd allowed someone else to take away her milk? Katy was of delicate build and so was her father, her brother Rohan and sister Britta.

“Wake up.” Norman stood in front of the bed. She had not noticed him leaving the bed. He had a sandwich in his hand and took a bite. “Do you want some?”

“No thank you.” Katy shook her head.

“I thought I heard you cry out. Did you have a bad dream?”

Katy looked into his grey eyes with the grey-white rim around the irises. Fourteen years older, her husband had distinctive eyes. “You don’t know what they’ve been through,” she said.

“Who are you talking about? It couldn’t have been that bad?” Soothing.

“What do you know, you don’t know anything.” A tear leaked from the corner of Katy’s eye.

“Then tell me.”

“I can’t.”

“Why not?” Norman licked the peanut butter from his fingers.

“Because we have a chance at life without the taint of the past. A chance to leave all the unpleasantness behind us.”

Norman raised one eyebrow. “My, but we are serious. Does it have anything to do with those papers you brought home?” He bit a piece of bread and chewed thoughtfully.

“You should tell me what’s in them. I’d like to know. And because it has to do with your history, you should tell others too. Otherwise how will anyone of us know?”

“It’s easy for you to talk.”

“I don’t understand. Why is it easy for me to—?”

“Because, because —” Katy couldn’t say because you’re white. They rarely spoke about race, it was awkward and her people, besides the continuation of a name, had buried their slave past. She and Norman lived in Rondebosch East, a previously white suburb of Cape Town that had become multiracial just before the advent of democracy.

“Right. We have to fix this. What can I do to help you feel better?”

Katy’s tears flowed. He was such a good man.

“Stop crying.” Norman put his arm around her shoulders. “You’re concentrating too much on the past and it’s affecting you. What does it matter where Amy’s illness came from? What matters is how we deal with it now, in the present.”

3

*I pass by these walls, the walls of Laila
And I kiss this wall and that wall
It’s not love of the houses that has taken my heart
But of the one who dwells in those houses*

*(Laila and Majnun by Nizami Ganjavi
Translated by Bruno Cassirer)*

The stench of the hold in the ship had prepared him well. He’d grown inured to the smell of bodily excretions. He sat on the wagon, aloof, listening to the conversation of the men around him.

“You know, old Frans (laughter) that master never left his *jenever* still in an unlocked room again.”

Jenever. Dutch gin. The men never tired of telling alcohol stories.

“Never mind that, old friend, let me tell you this story,” Frans said.

Each one tried to outdo the other’s outrageous tale. Laughter punctured the cold night air. The Cook moved his shoulders in irritation. Every evening the men of the lodge were marshalled to collect sewerage, while the burghers and sailors visited the lodge. The wagon went around the new settlement collecting buckets full from emptied chamber pots, one under each bed. And every evening the men bonded on the wagon, telling masculine tales like they were in a tavern.

The wooden barrel next to the Cook jostled against him and overflowed onto his hand as the wheel of the wagon went over a stone in the road. He winced and instinctively spat on his hand and wiped it on the rusty metal hoop of the barrel. Three times, seven times, eleven times, an odd number to ritually cleanse him. His hand bled but still he felt impure and unclean.

He caught the sly smile of Claas, the Mardijker soldier from the place of cloves, Amboina Island, the previous head office of the Dutch East India Company before the walled city of Batavia was built on the razed capital of Jayakarta. In his late forties Claas worked as a guard in the slave lodge where he also lived. His duty was to supervise the slaves but, more importantly, he implemented the punishments meted out by the company. If a man had to be lashed, or hung upside down with a chain attached to one foot, or his bones broken on the wheel, Claas volunteered. The hangman performed the hanging but that irked Claas, because he would've liked to see his work through to completion. He was meticulous.

The Cook mumbled under his breath.

“Slave, what did you say?” Claas said.

The Cook averted his eyes to avoid confrontation. Claas had small dark eyes burning with hatred. Probably a lapsed Muslim, a *kāfir* or unbeliever, the Cook thought, and silently said a *dua* for him, to spare him from God's anger for his unbelief.

“You better watch out,” Claas snarled.

The Cook turned his head away, forcing his mind onto pleasanter thoughts. Against his will he had noticed the young girl. Her budding breasts floated into his inner eye. He banished it with violence and cursed the life he led where there was no natural outlet for his desire. This wasn't a place for a man to be a man. Better to kill all feeling than to compete with those who were entitled to love.

Yet, this girl reminded him of his home in the Makassar kingdom of Gowa in Southeast Asia, of reading the Persian poet Nizami's memorable interpretation of an ancient Arabic tale, Laila and Majnun: "Slender as a cypress tree..., her hair was dark as the colour of the night..., her eyes like a gazelle." He censured these thoughts and again rued the life he had been sold into. He worried about Amberike. This wasn't a place for a young girl. Too many men and too few women crowded under a leaky roof.

He'd watched some of his kind mimic the cruelty of their owners in their interactions with the women. He shook his head – subjugated and ill-treated men responding by hurting others. Where would it lead? He knew the schoolmaster, Egbert, was saving Amberike for himself. He could see it in the way he looked at her – waiting ... waiting for the right moment. Others could see it too if they had eyes in their heads. There would be no placating his wrath if his prize was taken. But they lived in a Dutch oven. Anything could happen.

The Cook sniffed his hand, and held it away from him. The familiar smell of human misery – blood and excretions – made his bile rise. For a moment he was back in the dark hold with human bodies squashed against his. He shook his head to get rid of the nauseating sensation. He shouldn't be working with excrement, but who cared if his cooking infected the whole slave lodge? He would have to scrub himself with sand in the river, to be pure again in the sight of God.

In this place nobody cared about his past. They were only interested in his ability to obey orders. He'd never seen such a lazy people, the men hunting, shooting, drinking and carrying on like royalty. Some of the women were fat from lounging with their feet up on a box while an emaciated child waved a branch over their heads; or from being transported on a chair through the muddy streets instead of walking to counter the effects of eating too well.

When they reached the last stop, Arrie de Boer de Grood, the *mandoor*, pushed a shovel into the Cook's hand. It scraped his wound, re-activating bleeding.

“Stop dreaming. Dig. Or do you want to run off again?”

The guards laughed. The slaves grinned surreptitiously. The Cook fell to turning the soil with alacrity. He wanted to stop his thoughts which tired him. Amberike didn't know it but she was lucky that she came as a child. She was mourning now, but soon she would forget. The memory of her birthplace and her people would fade.

Many children came. They were smaller and more of them could be stashed in small spaces – a good investment for future profit. Also, they survived better in the hold of a slave ship. Children were tougher. He wasn't so fortunate to arrive as a child.

When his village was attacked, he'd hidden his family in an abandoned house. What happened to his sister, and her son? Were they also taken or did they get away? And if they did, what were they eating now and where were they sleeping?

“Deep enough!” Arrie gave the signal to empty the barrels. The hole was filled up. Previously they had been instructed to empty the slop into the sea but the faeces kept floating on the tide, coming back ashore until the governor made a ruling against it.

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*For six hundred negroes I exchanged
ridiculously low prices on the Senegal River.
The flesh is hard, the tendons are tight,
Like iron of the best cast.*

“The Slave Ship”, a poem by Heinrich Heine (1797-1856)

They came from the eighty-year war with Spain. They came from a thirty year war with Germany, and wars with England and France.

Leaning back in his Turners chair, Egbert yawned, revealing long yellow teeth. The chair had a triangular oak seat and spindles that had been scored with chisels while rotating in

a woodturning lathe. Hands clasped behind his head, he thought about what to put in the letter to his mother.

He lifted his quill, which came from the flight feathers of a goose, and scratched his beard. As always when he was in deep thought his blue eyes rested on the painting above his desk, a copy of Christiaan van Couwenbergh's Three Young White Men and a Black Woman. In his country almost every house had a couple of paintings. The proliferation of engraving and etching artists, working on copper plates which could be used for intaglio printing on the Gutenberg press, yielded original as well as copies of existing works, making artistic prints easily accessible.

It was his best painting, a colony version of the popular brothel scenes or *bordeeltjes*. The *bordeeltje* usually depicted a young semi-naked woman, her customer(s), and her pimp – often an old woman. As most of the men had gone off to sea, in some villages there were three women to one man. A popular theme in the *bordeeltje* was the prodigal son led astray by a bad woman.

Smaller versions hung in most homes and even found their way into doll houses. Petronella, the wife of a rich merchant, had a doll house that was an exact copy of her own home, and she had miniature *bordeeltjes* in the bedroom and art room. Egbert hoped to give his future wife a doll-house after accumulating enough wealth in the East.

He admired the saturation of the woman's colour in the painting, black as night, and wondered how the artist had mixed it. The colour almost effaced her features. The light on her hair, eyes and mouth from afar gave her face an animal-like quality. The paradoxical feeling she evoked was of sweet attraction and sour aversion, love and hate.

His letter forgotten, he studied the shapelessness of the woman in the painting. Black women's bodies intrigued him. Take this one for instance; it was square, almost like a man's. And she wasn't smiling. Her mouth was agape. Probably in ecstasy, he thought. She veered

away from a naked man sitting on an unmade bed, holding her on his lap. Another man, smiling, stood in his loincloth, pointing at them while looking conspiratorially at the viewer. A third man fully dressed held up both hands, an unfathomable expression on his face.

Between them a chamber pot stood on a small three-legged stool. The latter prompted Egbert to think of his most prized possession. He kneeled, and touched the pendulous breasts and protruding buttocks of the body carved on each of the two front legs of his three-legged chair. The back post had a carved figure of a turbaned woman, giving the illusion that she was holding onto the horizontal wood supporting his back. It was a bespoke chair and he was proud of it. It had belonged to his father.

He sat down again. Drawings of torture instruments cluttered his yellow-wood desk. Like most of his countrymen, he'd left Holland to find gold in the East, but he was detained here at the Cape of Good Hope by the Verenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie or VOC. Arriving as a soldier he'd been assigned as a teacher of slave children. What a *pisvlek*. But it provided guilders for his keep, and it wasn't hard work teaching slave children. The burghers didn't care if they learned to read or not. In fact, the majority of them were against it. These savages were not in want of an education. Discipline yes, but not an education. What would they do with it?

Most days he left them to babble in their classrooms, one for boys and one for girls, situated at opposite ends of the lodge, while he worked on his inventions in a room next to the girls' school.

Some of his drawings were for torture instruments already in existence that he planned to improve. Others were brand new, based on his meticulous study of the vulnerable parts of the human body, and how to puncture it to inflict the most pain. It annoyed him that when slaves were impaled, some made jokes, talking and laughing with their friends who passed by.

Last winter Japie, a slave from Java, was sentenced because he had slapped his master. Granted his master had slapped him first; but to retaliate? What audacity. Then he had the gall to live too long – eight days. No, there needed to be an improvement to stop that kind of impudence and waste of time. That stake had probably just caressed Japie's anus. It had to be thicker, longer, about two and a half *grote palm*, to spear past the bottom organs and perforate the abdominal ones. It had to be created by a craftsman with a good eye and inserted by a master executioner.

Egbert remembered his letter, picked up the quill, dipped it in homemade ink and, using the 17th century characters of the Dutch alphabet, wrote:

My dearest Moeder,

It goes well with your son Bertie.

What next? He had no news about an impending fortune that would allow him to bring his sick mother to a warmer climate. He cursed, leaving a blank space on the parchment, and scribbled *Your loving son*, at the bottom.

Gadverdamme, he had sacrificed a comfortable life to go to the East, but he was still here. He had achieved nothing – nothing. Between his home in the Netherlands and the East he'd found himself in this place, the Cape, a halfway house and refreshment station.

Egbert sat at his desk, making notes on his inventions. He put down the quill. Chin cupped in hand, he thought about the dream he'd had the previous night. It was of a farm, bigger than those occupied by the aristocracy in his fatherland. He rode a horse from sunrise to sunset in each direction and put down a boundary. Coming from a small country where land had to be snatched from the sea by building dikes and reclaimed from the lakes by *polders* it was a pleasant dream.

Here, land was free for the taking. The only obstacle was VOC officials who gave farms to their lackeys. The acting governor, Willem Helot, who used to be a soldier and first

merchant, struggled to maintain order. He would have to bribe someone. Then he would begin marking out his space. His. He would make it a dream farm. From his veranda he wouldn't be able to see the smoke of his neighbour's cooking fire. On it he would have Khoi long-horned cattle, fat-tailed sheep, and goats. He'd produce the best cheese and butter. His farmhouse would have white lime walls, a thatched roof, a *voorkamer* and yellow-wood floors. A wife... Maybe that is what he should put in the letter. He should transcribe his dream for his mother.

"How goes it?"

Egbert jumped up, and stuck out his right hand. "Meine. What a good surprise."

Meine pumped Egbert's hand convivially. "I came into town to buy slaves and had to deliver this."

Egbert held up a bottle of home-made *konfyt* Meine had pushed into his hand. "For me?"

"The mevrouw sends it. She got her slave to run after the wagon. You've certainly made an impression." Meine laughed. "You're irresistible to the ladies. When will I have the pleasure of meeting Mrs Egbert Bol? You need to hurry. A man must marry."

"Not soon. Please, thank the mevrouw for me. Sit down and have some coffee."

Egbert moved his chair for Meine to sit on.

Meine placed his hat on the desk and inspected the chair. He whistled through his teeth. "How much do you want for this piece of art?"

"It's not for sale." Egbert poked his head around the door, shouted for coffee and sat on a bench facing Meine. "So, did you get any good slaves?"

Meine sighed. "Not really. I bought a Mosbieker."

"The ones from the coast of Africa are not bad. They are strong. Be glad it's not an Eastern slave. They're always running amok."

“Or one from West Africa who thinks he can walk home.” Meine’s big belly shook with laughter. “I wanted a strong ox with a body built for work.”

“Some from Madagascar are all right.”

“No, they are too black. One has to think about breeding.”

“That’s true. A man needs to make a good return on his property.”

Meine nodded. “I have a dam for him to breed with.”

“Good on you. Soon you’ll have a herd of slave-lings running around. Remember to put them to work early.”

“Yes. One must bend the tree while it’s still young.”

“I’d be glad to come and help you.” Egbert leaned forward eagerly. He was thinking of his future farm.

A reluctant silence followed. Meine cleared his throat, his eyes slid to the floor. “I heard that the Mosbiekers work hard.”

Egbert’s nostrils flared. He leaned back and crossed his ankles. “Don’t believe that. A slave works as hard as you make him.”

“He’ll do. I want to clear a new field and plant maize.”

“You’d do better with wheat. People always need bread.”

A thick-set slave woman appeared, and served them coffee. Meine fastened his bulging eyes on her. “How’s she?”

Egbert shrugged, “She’s alright. Have you given any thought to how to train your purchase? A friend of mine went to a lecture in London. It was on training slaves and he was very impressed.” Egbert searched on his desk, held up a pamphlet. “It seems the methods are similar to training a horse.”

“Interesting.” Meine inspected the document. “But this is English, the language of the enemy.”

“I’m translating it into Dutch.” Egbert had not thought of that before but this was a new opportunity.

“Is that so? I’ll buy a copy of your translation when you’re done.”

“Wonderful. Every good master has to control his slaves.” Egbert counted the riksdollars from the proceeds of his book. He planned to extract from Meine a higher price, for insulting him by declining his offer to help train his slaves, and because he thought the man pretentious. Egbert’s dream of going to the East still stood strong, but in the meantime he could augment his income. Studying Meine, he added, “You’ll be assisting a struggler. A man cannot live by bread alone.”

“You can say that again.” Meine slurped the last of his coffee. Quotations from the Bible pacified him. “Sorry I can’t stay long, but please, come by later. Anke does a good *rijstafel*.” He lifted his hat from the desk, coughed. “That one I saw earlier.” His hat swept toward the innards of the lodge. “Is she available?”

Egbert winked. “For that you have to come at eight.”

“I won’t be able to get away. Stay well, old friend.”

Egbert walked him to the door.

4

Katy picked Amy up, held the three-year-old against her chest, and touched Amy’s forehead. It felt cool under Katy’s hand. One of the symptoms of the pandemic was a fever. “How are you feeling today, my baby. Are you well?”

“Amy fine. Amy wants to go to school.”

“That’s not going to happen for a while.” She tickled Amy’s chin. “How about we have school right here at home? Wouldn’t that be fun? I can be your teacher.”

“Amy go to school.” Amy started crying.

“Not today, my darling.”

The sobbing became louder.

“Okay. Tell you what we’re going to do; we’ll get you ready for school.”

Katy washed and dressed Amy, thinking how to address the situation while Amy chatted excitedly about “Bobby” a new friend she’d made in pre-school. When she was ready Amy went to tug at the door handle, standing on the tips of her toes.

Katy rued the foolishness of her strategy. She’d hoped that a solution would present itself before they got to the door. She knelt next to Amy. “Listen. Nobody will be at school. Everyone is staying at home.”

“Amy school.”

“No. Amy no school. Amy stays home.”

Amy threw herself on the floor, kicking. She screamed so loud the sound went straight through Katy’s head. Katy gathered the squirming Amy off the floor. “There is no school,” she said wearily. “If there was, believe me Mummy would’ve taken you, but no-one is allowed out.”

“School.” Amy cried herself to sleep while Katy walked up and down soothing her.

The front door opened. “Hi. I’m back.”

Norman took off his green mask, undressed just inside the door and walked naked to the shower. Katy carried the sleeping Amy to the couch. She put on her own mask and gloves, and collected the discarded clothes in a clear plastic bag. She slipped the soiled clothes straight from the plastic bag into the machine, adding soap, a disinfectant, and switched on the wash. She mopped the floor with bleach.

When Norman came back from the bathroom he looked at Amy, and guessed what had happened. “She wanted to go to school, right.”

Katy sighed. “Yes. How was the supermarket?”

“I couldn’t get toilet rolls. I don’t know why but everyone had a stack in their trolley. I even saw two old biddies fighting over it.”

Katy didn’t hear his description of the altercation. Amy’s treatment had been interrupted while the hospital prepared for the deluge of new infections. The new disease had superseded all others. Meanwhile she had a sick child. Thalassaemia – that was the diagnosis the physician had given them. Amy was supposed to go for regular check-ups which had now been placed on the backburner. What if Amy was exposed to this new virus? Would she survive? The statistics and fatalities ramping up on the television news screen frightened Katy. The numbers moved into thousands. The graphs and banners flashed across her vision.

“Hey, what’s up? You didn’t hear a word I said.”

“I’m thinking about Amy. We were supposed to see the doctor yesterday but when I called they said he had cancelled all his appointments until further notice.”

“Maybe he had a scare. Everyone has to be very cautious now, including the doctors.”

Katy’s eyes flashed. “What about the other illnesses? People didn’t stop having other ailments!”

Norman shrugged. “The president is addressing the nation tonight. We’ll hear what he has to say.” Norman moved toward the kitchen. “I’ll make some soup.”

Katy was lost in her thoughts. A few weeks ago she’d tried to establish that Amy really had this debilitating disease which presented with anaemia, jaundice, an enlarged spleen, and brittle bones. She had taken Amy for a second opinion, and planned to go for a third. She couldn’t just accept the diagnosis of the first specialist.

When Amy had gone for her routine pre-school vaccinations, the sisters at the clinic had said that she was underweight. Amy had a poor appetite and became tired easily. The nurses at the clinic had insisted that she should consult a doctor. Katy had gone from one

general practitioner to the next, who referred them to numerous specialists. The last one had done blood tests and said Amy's symptoms were consistent with thalassemia.

Katy couldn't accept such a dire outcome. Eventually they had ended up with a haematologist.

Katy sat in Dr Sloan's waiting room, nibbling on her thumb nail. Amy was exploring the dog-eared magazines stacked on a small table: how to do a breast examination, information on skin disorders and a glossy travel magazine, *Diversions*. Dr Sloan appeared from behind the counter where the receptionist sat. Short, thickset, he peered at her over owl glasses.

"Mrs Marais?"

"Yes..." Katy took Amy's hand and followed him to his consulting room.

"Please sit down I'll be with you in a minute." Dr Sloan closed the door. The receptionist had explained that he had three examination rooms and was alternating between them. Katy studied the framed certificates on the wall. She couldn't make out what it was for but hoped that one said he was an expert in Amy's illness. Dr Green, their house doctor, had referred her.

"No, don't," she said to Amy who was re-stacking the papers on a corner of the desk according to her own design.

Dr Sloan reappeared and sat down; she noticed the crocodile logo on his red jersey. Didn't doctors wear white coats anymore?

"What can I do for you today?"

Katy launched into Amy's medical history, starting from the chart at the clinic that showed she was not growing as well as she should; the visits to numerous general practitioners, and the referral to a specialist physician.

Dr Sloan asked many questions which she tried to answer as best she could. He put his fingertips against one another in a thoughtful gesture. He had clean hands, dry hands —a doctor's hands.

“Let's see what's going on.” He stood and indicated to follow him.

Katy placed Amy on the examination table and undressed her. She held Amy while Dr Sloan prodded her tummy and put his stethoscope, warmed on his Lacoste jersey, on her chest. Amy grabbed at it.

“Don't worry,” he crooned. “I won't hurt you.” He tickled her neck. Amy giggled. “Her spleen is slightly enlarged but that is of no concern right now. We'll have to do some blood tests, a blood count and a special haemoglobin test, but I think it is a firm diagnosis. I agree with the physician that she has thalassaemia.”

He put Amy's dress over her head. Katy stepped forward to help.

“Where's your husband?”

“He's at work.” Katy didn't want to explain about Norman's unemployment.

“The two of you should come in for genetic counselling. Sometimes this sickness comes from one parent, but I think this time it may not be from one but from both parents.”

“Both?” Katy gasped. The previous specialist had said it was only from one side and she'd assumed it was from her family because they had inherited the most diverse genes one could imagine. Dr Sloan explained, frequently getting her ensnared in medical terms. Katy had to interrupt to untangle them.

As soon as she reached home Katy searched for Norman. She found him on the bed in the spare room watching a program on lions and wildebeest. The television was mounted on the top shelf of the built-in cupboard.

“What did the doctor say?” He lifted himself up on his elbows, day-old stubble still on his chin.

Katy put Amy on the bed. She crawled to her father. He scooped her up and held her. Katy perched on the bottom edge of the bed, nervous. She related her visit to the doctor.

“He said that it comes from both parents,” she concluded.

Norman frowned. “He said that? That’s impossible. Does he know what he’s talking about?”

Katy knew at that moment that Norman also thought the disease came from her side of the family. “I think so.”

“Fok.” Norman swung his legs onto the floor, and disappeared into the bathroom. Amy, puzzled, stared after him, her bottom lip quivering.

“I can see you are a lost cause today,” Norman had re-entered the room. “The soup’s ready. If you’re looking for me I’ll be wiping down the groceries with antiseptic soap. Do we still have some left?”

Katy focussed her attention on him, nodded.

“After that I’ll be in my vegetable garden. Snow will fall upwards before I neglect it.”

“I don’t know if you can work in the garden,” Katy said. “My mother says where they live, a man was working in the garden when the police came past in their patrol car and shot him with rubber bullets.”

Norman frowned.

“But maybe the rules are different in the sub-economic areas of the Cape Flats,” she added.

“What rubbish, they can’t do that.”

“The police and the soldiers are about. Everyone says they’ve seen them. Be careful, they are monitoring all communities.”

“I don’t believe that story about the rubber bullets,” Norman said, his frown deepening, “it’s too far-fetched.”

“At least look out for them. If you see a patrol car...”

Norman saluted, grinning. “Yes ma’am. If I see them I’ll run in and hide under the bed.”

It was a rare moment of levity. Since they were confined to the house Katy found that they didn’t have their previous ease of communication. When Amy was with them, they laughed and talked to her, but when they were alone an awkward weight had settled, heavy and immovable.

Katy had fallen into an abnormal daily ritual, her new routine. She got up in the morning, brushed her teeth, washed her face, and sat at her desk to work. She was creating schedules for the start of a new academic year that had shuddered to a halt. She researched an article she planned to submit when everything returned to normal, although she didn’t know when that would be.

Still wearing her pyjamas and bunny slippers, she cleaned every surface thoroughly with Amy’s “help” which consisted of turning every task into a game. At night she had a bath and changed into clean pyjamas. She couldn’t remember when she’d dressed or gone outside.

Katy and Norman were waiting for the president’s address. They were sitting in the lounge in front of the television. The silence between them stretched long.

“He’s late,” Norman said. “How can he be late when he knows the whole nation is waiting? This government is incompetent.”

Katy picked up the remote and increased the volume. President Cyril Ramaphosa had appeared. “We reiterate that the most effective way to prevent infection is through basic changes in individual behaviour and hygiene. Wash hands frequently with hand sanitisers or

soap and water for at least twenty seconds. Cover your nose and mouth when coughing and sneezing with tissue or flexed elbow. Avoid close contact with anyone with cold or flu-like symptoms. Everyone must do everything within their means to avoid contact with other people.”

Katy blanched at the tally, over 340 000 confirmed cases world-wide and in South Africa the number of confirmed cases had increased from 61 to 402. The disease had been brought in by those travelling to and from Europe.

There would be a lockdown for twenty-one days. Shops and businesses would close, there would be shelters for the homeless, water tanks, and the army would be deployed.

“See, I told you,” Katy said.

“That wasn’t a bad speech,” Norman said. “But what are we going to do? Locked up in our homes with no cigarettes and alcohol?”

“We should just keep busy, I think.”

“That’s easy for you to say, you have your teaching and your research. What am I supposed to do? I like the outdoors. I want to go fishing and have a beer.”

Katy had started reading literature on pandemics of the past. Several media had come up with a list, and she came upon Boccaccio’s *The Decameron* where characters isolated in an ancient plague, the Black Death, told stories to pass the time. That gave her an idea.

“We could tell stories about our past, about our families, about growing up.”

“Mm.” Norman was thoughtful for a moment. “We have to keep our sanity. Maybe you would like to go first?”

“Now?”

“It’s a good time. Unless you have something else planned?”

“Only Amy’s school hour but we can catch up later.”

“By the way where is Amy?”

“She’s colouring in a frog. She loves colouring so it will keep her busy for a while.”

Katy paused for a moment. “When I started my research I spoke to our neighbour Mr De Bruin.”

“That’s the old man on this side?” Norman asked, pointing to the neighbour on their right.

“Yes, he has traced his ancestors back for four hundred years.”

Katy could tell by the expression on Norman’s face that he was impressed. She continued. “That’s unusual, especially in our community.”

Katy related her story:

Mr De Bruin lived alone. He invited her in and offered a cup of tea when she started chatting to him over the wild jasmine hedge about family histories. As she entered, she saw dust had settled on every surface in his house. In a corner books and papers were stacked on the floor. Fish moths were scurrying about.

Katy sat gingerly on the dusty couch, dreading the tea. Mr De Bruin disappeared into the kitchen and came back with a tray. On it was a pristine cloth, two clean cups and a bowl of sugar. Mr De Bruin smoothed his hand over the dust on the coffee table to make room for the tray.

“It’s so nice to have guests. One gets tired of living alone.”

Katy regretted just waving across the hedge whenever she saw him. It had not occurred to her that he was lonely. Mr De Bruin poured the tea then settled on the couch. He took a delicate sip, his pinkie sticking out.

“What did you want to know, my dear?”

Katy explained her quest.

Mr De Bruin beamed. “Yes, everyone should know their past. Then you know who you are.” He sipped again, silver hairs protruding from his nose. “Have you heard of Krotoa?”

“I can’t say that I have,” Katy laughed self-consciously.

“Don’t worry, my dear, lots of people haven’t. Krotoa was a young Khoi woman who was a translator in Jan van Riebeeck’s house. She also looked after his children. From the Goringhaicona clan, she took over her uncle Autshumao’s task of translation after he was imprisoned on Robben Island. She married a Danish surgeon, Peter Havgard—the first mixed-marriage at the Cape. She is one of my ancestors. She is also the ancestor of many Afrikaners.”

“That’s interesting.”

“Yes, it is, my dear. We share a lot with the Afrikaner. Did you know that the original ‘Afrikander’ was a mix of Khoi and white? Our history has been forgotten, but I believe the knowledge of slavery is locked in deep among the brown people. It is there in our idioms, traditions, stories and songs that have been passed from generation to generation. It just needs to be excavated. Take my family, for instance. There is this saying in our family that if someone wants to kill you, you take him with you. That’s a strange thing to say wouldn’t you agree? Where did it come from? I have given it a great deal of thought and it could only have come from my slave ancestors from the East. They were a troublesome lot.” Mr De Bruin chuckled.

He finished his tea and offered Katy another cup. She declined, hoping he wouldn’t be offended.

“It must be great to know so many of your ancestors,” Katy said.

“It is, it is. I’ve spent a lifetime getting to know them.”

“If I may ask, how did you go about discovering your past?”

“I started with my grandparents and worked back from there.” He told Katy exactly how he had built up his family tree and concluded with, “It took many years but it was worth it.”

Katy looked covertly at her watch, one hour had passed. She remembered the bobotie in the oven.

“I’m sorry I...”

Mr De Bruin rose. “You have to leave? That’s alright, my dear. Thanks for visiting an old man.”

Katy got up and extended her hand. Mr De Bruin bowed over her hand.

“If you run into a brick wall in your research, just give me a call. I’ll be more than happy to help.”

“Thank you.” Katy walked to the front door. Mr De Bruin hastened to open it.

“Have you ever visited the Slave Lodge?”

“I’ve lived in Cape Town all my life but I haven’t been there yet.”

“You should go. There is no reason to be ashamed of having slaves as ancestors. Most brown people talk about their Dutch, German and French grandfathers, their Scandinavian ones, but not about their brown and black grandmothers because they were the slaves who came from East Africa, Madagascar, Mozambique, Angola, India, and South East Asia.”

Katy thanked Mr De Bruin for the tea. She could see that he was reluctant to let her go.

“What’s your family name?”

“Jacobs.”

“Jacobs, Jacobs you say,” Mr De Bruin thought for a while then smiled and rubbed his hands in glee. “Then you’re in for a treat. You’re so lucky; one of your ancestors told her story!”

“Where... when?” Katy whispered.

“It’s in the archives. Somewhere. I read about it once, but I can’t remember.” Mr De Bruin frowned in concentration.

Katy was overwhelmed. “I’ll search for it. Thanks.” She thought of the bobotie. “I really have to go now.”

After the first part of her story Katy said to Norman: “Talking about bobotie it’s almost lunch time. We can take a break and continue later?”

“Sure.” Norman followed her to the kitchen. He watched, leaning against the dresser with his arms across his chest, as she set the table and warmed leftover spaghetti bolognese from the previous night. Amy kept getting in the way. She had been released from colouring.

They sat across each other at the table. Amy was confined to her high chair. She relished slurping up the spaghetti. “Look Mummy, look.”

“I see, my angel,” Katy said.

“It feels strange to have lunch in my pyjamas,” Norman said.

“Tell me about it,” Katy said. She studied her pink bunny slippers; they were in need of a wash. “I don’t know how I’m going to survive this.”

After lunch Katy continued with the second part. Norman listened intently.

The Slave Lodge was in Long Street, a busy street. Her taxi stopped amid impatient hooting while she jumped out. She entered the wooden doors. From the bright sun into the darker interior her eyes had to adjust to the light. She felt a clenching in her stomach. She placed her hand on it to quell the strange feeling.

“Hi. Do I know you?” A strange man with high cheek bones was staring at her.

“I don’t think so,” she said.

He smiled. “I’m sure I’ve seen you before, maybe around the UCT campus?”

“Maybe.” She was displeased at the interruption.

“This is very interesting,” he waved his hand to encompass the museum. “But they left out the smallpox.”

“Are you the guide?” she asked.

His smile stalled. “No. I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have accosted you like this. I’m Dean. I shouldn’t have... it’s just I’m obsessed with history.”

Katy nodded and walked off.

[She hurried through the part where she met Dean. Norman’s eyes narrowed.]

In the foyer she stood in front of the Woutersen vase, a silver trophy that was presented to Pieter Woutersen in 1826 for opposing British legislation to improve the living conditions of slaves. It featured a fat man holding an anchor with a leaf over his genitals, and two cannons on either side of a round shield.

Her eye fell on the wall opposite the entrance. There was a mural of Green Market Square by Johannes Rach, the date, 1762. Fascinated, Katy studied it as well as an oil painting of Long Street in 1845 by WHFL Longschmidt. In the centre of the painting stood an Indian woman wearing earrings and a hair ornament. Dressed in a long skirt, a long-sleeved blouse, flat white shoes, and a shawl crossed in front of her chest, she had a stole over her left arm. Next to her was a barefoot man with a wide-brimmed hat and waistcoat. He carried two buckets, his trouser legs and shirt-sleeves rolled up. To the side an Eastern man with a reddish headscarf, a long white shirt and long pants.

In front of the painting was an exhibition of the Cape Minstrels, a group of brown men who celebrated Tweede Nuwe Jaar on 2 January every year with street parades to commemorate the emancipation of the slaves. Also known as the Coons they had ghoema drums, top hats, waist coats, shirts and bow ties. Katy had seen their marches, heard their singing and music, but after her conversation with Mr De Bruin and this exhibition their performance had a new significance.

Through a corridor she came to a dark room filled with rows of wooden benches. Apprehensive, she stood near the door. The air-conditioner blew cold. On the television a documentary of slavery ran on a repeat loop —people in chains, people standing in shallow water while a narrator told their tale. Katy thought she was alone until she heard movement and realized she had disturbed an old white man with a young black woman at his knees. The eerie light from the television flickered on the woman's shadowy figure melting into the darkness.

She saw the broken tombstone of Jan van Riebeeck and his wife Maria de la Quellerie in the courtyard next to the well.

In a large room, a glass display case. In the next, a reproduction of the inside of a slave ship, the Meermin. She fingered the thick rope and was overcome by a deep ache that grew into a searing fire which seemed to go through her body to reach far back to the bodies of her ancestors. This ache was replaced by a mixture of sadness and dread which became her companion as she inspected each exhibit. It escorted her home.

At home Katy wanted to talk about the Slave Lodge, but Norman seemed distant. She had assumed that he was probably worried about Amy's illness.

Silence followed the end of Katy's story. Uneasy, not knowing what Norman thought about Dean or her comments about the Slave Lodge, Katy rubbed her left thumb nail with her right thumb, in a circle, over and over.

Norman said, "There should be rules about how we tell the stories. First, there should be no interruptions."

"That's a good idea."

He added, "Questions should be asked only at the end."

"A third rule should be honesty and respect. Honesty in the telling and respect in the reception of the tale."

She pondered if he harboured unspoken thoughts and ideas about her people now that Amy's disease had entered their lives. "What did you think—" Katy swallowed the rest of the sentence. She was going to ask for a response to her story, especially the last part, but was reluctant.

5

*Heitse Eibib. Green insect
you sit on the curtain calm.
Long body. Triangular head
wiggling.
Your eyes follow me.*

The Ghost Whisperer was allergic to pepper and addicted to truth. Being thus afflicted one would think that he would be garrulous, telling many stories, but alas, he had lost his voice. For one sin or another he'd had his head on a pike as a deterrent to others. Being separated from his muscular body, of which he was proud (it attracted the ladies), he had no option but to remain quiet, thinking, analysing.

No one believed he existed. In the noisy world of new buildings, horses, carts, auctioneers, screams and mud in the few streets of the Cape of Good Hope, the populace could be forgiven for not hearing a whisper telling them that what they were doing was recorded by a huge brain in a shrinking head. The lack of an audience to speak to dried up his words. He was waiting for someone to come along and moisten his phantom tongue.

6

*Afar in the Desert I love to ride,
With the silent Bush-boy alone by my side:*

40

*When the sorrows of life the soul o'ercast,
And, sick of the Present, I cling to the Past*

"Afar in the Desert", a poem by Thomas Pringle

The Southeaster howled around the building. It screeched and sobbed. The roof shook and lifted, exposing the nails like teeth in a giant mouth. A gust kept lifting the roof further and further until it was in danger of falling off. Two male slaves, drenched to the bone, were standing on the roof, one trying to knock nails in with a hammer, while the other weighed it down with boulders handed to him by a third. Amberike watched and she was afraid. She'd never seen such an angry wind. Rain pelted down on her where she stood outside the closed door. A big boulder leaned on the door to keep it shut, but still it rattled.

"Ife, where are you? I need you now." She listened, half expecting an answer. Ife was her sister's name, but she was also known as Gilda, her slave name. Gilda... guilder. The refrain comforted Amberike somewhat. Her sister would chase her now if she called her that, making fun of her slave name.

Amberike decided to wait until the rain softened. What had happened to Ife? Would the Cook do a magic trick and call her back? She planned to ask him. The sisters had never been apart, even when they were taken by dhow from Abyssinia. After a cramped journey they'd arrived in Aden and had gone on to Zanzibar. The smaller children's legs were lame from crouching, and they had to be carried off the boat with much shouting and slapping by the tired crew.

They were assembled in a damp dark place where lime peeled from the walls. The raw slaves, who were called raw because they had never been slaves before, were put through training by men in white dresses. Their training consisted of a beating to learn to obey.

Amberike inspected the skies. This rain wouldn't let up. She'd have to go soon before it was too dark. Her thoughts returned to the past. Some of the girls and women were herded into a different room, she and Ife among them. Her name was Afia then, because she was

born on a Friday. A man with a high-pitched voice had inspected them, not leaving an inch of their bodies unaffected by his gaze. Ife was three years older. After they were thoroughly scrubbed and burnished with oil, her body fluff was removed.

They were dressed in colourful clothes, short tops which showed their midriffs, and pantaloons. Jewellery decorated their hands, noses, ears and feet. Amberike touched the small holes on her earlobes and on the right side of her nose. They were closing. Paraded in front of old men they were destined for Arabia but had ended up here, in the Cape of Good Hope.

It was such a beautiful name, the Cape of Good Hope. She rolled it on her tongue. The first time she'd heard it she thought they were heading for a good life. Now look at this wind.

Amberike walked holding onto the wall of her second mother's house. Mevrouw Anke was her mother in the community, the one who taught her how to walk and how to speak and how to have good manners. But she loved her lodge mother more, even though Maria was fierce.

She came here twice a week and was on her way back to the lodge after ironing and cleaning. It was getting dark, a stream had flooded, and the tentacles of icy water froze her feet. She stumbled into the storm holding a tattered scarf above her head. Rain and wind snapped a tree in front of her; a sudden gust took her scarf. Without a coat, she trembled, cold and afraid of this violent land. She missed the hot rainy season and cool dry season of her homeland where colder weather was a feature of the mountains of the highlands.

She missed her real mother and her brother. Her father had left when she was three but Enati had managed. Enati grew red bananas. How she missed a spicy beef or lamb stew with vegetables on *injera*. Food here was so bland.

The wind blew her towards the lodge. Ahead she saw the familiar market tree. The wind shrieked through its branches. An old rope dangled from its stem. Amberike reached the gate of the slave lodge, it was closed. She banged on it. "Open! Open!"

The guard wasn't there. A tall silhouette wrapped in a blanket approached the gate. Arrie said something but the wind whipped away his words. He opened the gate and she ran into the dank building, and sank onto the floor, shivering violently. She put her arms around her body to stop her teeth chattering.

"Oh there you are," Maria said, "I expected you back earlier."

"I couldn't leave."

Maria clicked her tongue. "That woman, couldn't she see the rain coming?" She dived Amberike with her apron. "Next time..." Helpless, Maria hung her head. "Come. You also don't listen." She dragged Amberike by the arm, displacing her anger onto an easier target. She pulled off the wet dress roughly, rubbed Amberike's body, massaged her feet with candle wax, placed her in front of the fire and covered her with a blanket.

"A gift from the *mandoor*. You are beyond silly but you have an admirer."

Amberike cried because she was cold and at the unfairness of Maria's anger. What was she supposed to do when there was such a huge pile of ironing? Leave and get into trouble? She missed Ife today more than ever.

They'd gone to fetch water and were on their way back when someone shouted the dreaded word. SLAVERS. A huge man had blocked their way. He wore a curved dagger and an evil grin. "Run!" Ife had said with the authority of a big sister, kneeling to meet the man. Amberike, or Afia as she was then, had found her legs unable to move. Not without her sister. She'd joined Ife, both of them kneeling on the path. Cackling loudly the man had snapped iron bracelets onto their wrists. The memory caused sadness to overwhelm her. Her body shook.

"My name is Afia," she whispered. No one called her by that name and she was also starting to forget that it was her name.

She said it louder, tears streaming down her face. She slid down onto the cold floor, struggled up, tried to pray, coherence lost as she clasped her hands tightly together to bring strength. Words fell from her mouth onto the floor. Loss wasn't easy. Her whole body clawed against it.

*The Virgin now to Bed do's goe:
Take care oh Youth, she rise not soe;
She pants and trembles at her doom
And fears and wishes thou wou'dst come.*

*"Amboyna, or The Cruelties of the Dutch to the English Merchants" (1673),
a Tragedy by John Dryden*

The Cook saw Amberike come in from the storm. He noticed her distress, and Maria's concern. He had been waiting to see if she was safe. From afar he watched over her daily. He knew that showing any interest in her would imperil them both. She was crying when he shuffled closer. "Did you eat?"

"No." She turned her tear-stained face towards him.

"I'll bring something," he said gently.

He came back with a bowl of soup and bread and watched her eat hungrily.

She finished and handed him the bowl. "Thank you. May I ask you something?"

He grunted.

"People say you are a sorcerer. Could you please do a magic trick and tell me where my sister is?"

"Don't listen to gossip," he said sternly.

"I don't listen to gossip. It's difficult not to hear what people say. Unless you put your hands over your ears and sing every time someone opens their mouth. And that is childish."

Amberike dropped her blanket and ran away. She slammed into Claas and bounced back, her eyes wide with fear.

With his gaze on the Cook, who had followed her, Claas said, “Stupid girl, she needs some brains knocked into her.”

Amberike stepped back, her arms raised to shield her face. The Cook stood quietly, holding the bowl.

Most of the slaves were impressed by Claas’ stories; they spoke of freedom, of making a choice. Some of the slaves hated him but Claas didn’t care. His work was better than toiling like a dog, he said. Even the settlers feared them, these dark-skinned soldiers from Amboina with a penchant for blood. Claas had worked as a seaman, and bragged that he had fought in the Amboina massacre.

The Dutch had executed a group of men to oust the English from the spice trade. Claas had assisted in the torture to extract confessions. As far as he was concerned it was a squabble between strangers for his land. His hilly island had been usurped by the Portuguese years ago and was no longer his home. He refused to dwell on it. What was the use?

The Cook had heard in one of Claas’ storytelling sessions that after the massacre, they’d impaled the head of the English captain on a pole and displayed it in public, catapulting the reputation of the Dutch as being the most cruel of colonisers. The men loved this part of the story – the gruesome beheading of the English captain. It pleased them to know that they were not the only ones to have their bodies broken at the hands of the Dutch.

“What are you looking at? Off with you,” Claas said to Amberike.

She sprinted, her long plait swinging on her back.

Claas watched her, and winked at the Cook with a leering smile. “Our girl is growing up.”

The Cook made a fist.

Claas laughed raucously and dusted off his shoulders. He wore a uniform, not the coarse cotton cloth prescribed for slaves. He had a long shirt made of linen, trousers and a waistcoat. He had shoes. He ate better, the leftovers of the officers, not offal and black bread bulked with sand.

“Not very talkative, are we? Slave, you probably think you are too good for people like me. That’s why you write in your book the whole day.” Claas snatched the book tied with a string to the Cook’s trousers, breaking the string.

He perused a page. “Tell me, what funny writing is this?”

“It’s the Makassar alphabet,” the Cook said evenly.

Claas tossed the book on the floor, and turned on his heel. He walked towards the asylum near the hospital. The Cook picked up the book and followed, retrieving another bowl of soup from a ledge. He pinched his nose at the anticipated smell when Claas opened the door of the wild-eyed inmate. On seeing Claas the man started jabbering in a strange language, pulling at his hair. He cowered in a corner. Claas swung his whip.

“Come here.”

The man hurried to kneel in front of Claas.

“Who’s your family?”

“You’re my family,” the man stammered.

Claas touched the whip-handle to the man’s shoulders. “That’s right, my esteemed ruler.” He laughed again. “Who are you talking to?”

“You’re my master.”

Claas grinned.

“You’re my family, my brother, sir.”

“And what else?”

Claas tapped the whip on the man's shoulder. He started shivering. After a while he said, crying. "You have my life in your hands."

"Sir."

Claas brought the whip down on the man's back again and again, then put his hand into his side pocket to rub salt into the wounds.

"You're blubbering now, but you've probably done this to hundreds of slaves under your command. That's your people's punishment, isn't it? And that's probably why you lost your mind. You are weak. Weak among your own people and weak among people like me. Next time I'm bringing molten lead."

The man screamed. Claas choked him to keep him quiet. His secret pleasure was to torture the residents of the asylum in a section of the lodge – men who had been discarded by their kin. In his spare time he volunteered in the hospital.

Claas noticed the Cook standing with a bowl of soup. "Slave, are you following me?" He brandished his whip.

"I'm just doing my job," the Cook put the bowl down on the floor for the sick one to eat and left.

7

*On 1 December 1838,
when the slaves were set free,
it rained for three days.*

Katy had become obsessed with Kaatje. After reading her story Katy tried to imagine Kaatje's life. It helped her to forget her own problems: Norman's increasing frustration with unemployment and their conversations about money.

She took out the copy of the APO newspaper she'd found in the archives from her Bible and re-read Kaatje Jacob's interview of 1910. The APO had been the first newspaper started by prominent brown citizens at the Cape to uplift their community by addressing the curse of alcoholism which had resulted from wine for wages. Most farmers gave a daily quota of wine as part of remuneration. The newspaper had also tackled prostitution, gambling, homeless children, and the lack of schools and housing.

As Katy read, she could hear Kaatje's voice as if Kaatje spoke to her alone: "I was born on Mr Mostert's farm, near Kalabas kraal. I don't know the exact day, but I was between nineteen and twenty years when we were freed. My father was a Malagasy, and my mother a Cape woman. I began to work when still very young.

When my baas, through old age, was unable to continue farming, he distributed most of his chattels among his sons, whom he had set up as farmers in the neighbourhood.

I and some cattle and horses were given to baas Kootje; my mother and some more cattle were presented to another son in Frenchhoek. From that day I never saw my mother, nor do I know what became of her.

Though I did not know how long it would take to perform the journey to Frenchhoek, I often desired to see my mother. The baas, however, always refused my request. I think he was afraid that I would not return."

'How did your new baas treat you?' The interviewer asked. Baas, the pet name for a 1620s Dutch ship captain.

He thrashed me only once, when I allowed the young horses to run away. The work was more arduous than on the old farm, for the land had never been cultivated, and was overgrown with innumerable big bushes. For the first year, I had to take my pick and shovel and fall in regularly with the men at sunrise to clear the land. In the evening I assisted in the kitchen. At other times of the year I herded cattle. This job I hated most of all, not only

because it was monotonous and I dreaded somewhat to be alone so far from home, but because I had to don men's clothes.

I always tried to avoid meeting strangers for fear of being discovered as a girl in men's clothing. By lighting a stumpy clay pipe, which I purposely kept when accosted by strangers, and by pulling my slouch hat well over my eyes, I managed for a number of years to pass as a boy.

One day I was identified. A Mr Van Niekerk, a frequent visitor to the farm, happened to pass the grazing grounds on his way to Cape Town. He approached me and warned me not to let the cattle stray into his fields, unless I wanted a good *sjambokking*. As usual I had taken the precaution to light my pipe and to draw my hat somewhat carelessly over my eyes.

Mr Van Niekerk had acquired a reputation far and wide among the slaves for the ease and naturalness with which he cursed and swore at anything or anybody on the slightest provocation. That morning, he was apparently in a bad temper, for he swore at me as I had never heard him swear before. While at the height of his paroxysm he suddenly stopped, stared hard at me for a few seconds, burst in a loud laugh and exclaimed, 'My God, it's Grietje of Mr Mostert'.

I felt ashamed to think that I had been discovered, and from that day I hated herding cattle more and more.

'What time did you have for recreation?' the reporter asked.

Well, I was often allowed to go to dance parties; but we had to be home before two in the morning. I had a husband though we were not legally married. My first child died in infancy. I was a healthy woman, and as my missus was in rather delicate health, I became foster mother to her firstborn son and heir.

During this time I was well looked after, and became one of the family; that is, I was made to sleep on the floor of the dining-room near the bedroom door to be at hand when the

young baas wanted another drink (of milk). One evening we were ordered to appear next morning in our best clothes and await further instructions. During the day we marched into the dining-room, and without any previous warning we were told by a magistrate that in four years we would be free.

My father replied that four years was a long time, and he did not think he would live so long. The magistrate said he would communicate with Ou Nooi – Queen Victoria – with a view to obtaining a reduction in the terms of the apprenticeship. At a later date he again visited the farm, and told us that a reduction of one year had been granted.

Nevertheless, my old father died in slavery, and so did not live to enjoy the God-given freedom which is the right of every human being. During our apprenticeship my husband – who visited me twice or thrice weekly of an evening – and I began to build castles in the air. He would work for me, and we would get a little hut of our own, where we could dwell together and be happy. My baas and missus, though somewhat irritated at the news of our prospective liberation, were on the whole kind, and I was not overjoyed at the idea of leaving them. So, on the 1st December 1838, while performing my usual duties, I was startled by an angry voice demanding to know whether I was going with the speaker.

On turning round I recognised my husband in a violent passion. His baas was cruel, and *sjambokked* his slaves as often as he fed them. He (the owner) was mad with rage on the day of our emancipation. Early in the morning he armed himself with a gun, mounted a horse, and drove every ex-slave off his farm. At the boundary he warned them that the first one that was found trespassing on his land would be shot down. A soaking rain had fallen from daybreak, so that when Jacob reached me he was drenched to the skin. No wonder he addressed me in an unusually harsh tone on this day of joy and humiliation and prayer.

My master offered to take Jacob and me into his service at f1 10s and 10s a month respectively, and food and house. Jacob at first appeared determined to leave the district

where he had suffered so much. My missus wept at the idea of my leaving her. ‘No; you must stay!’ she cried. ‘Think of my son, whom you have suckled and nursed, and who has now grown so fond of you. What will become of him? No; you must stay; you cannot go!’ Finally, my husband gave way, and we remained at the farm for three or four years. Shortly after our liberation, my husband and I went to Durbanville to be baptised and married.

The Rev. Beck, who performed the ceremonies, was kept busy from morning to night, as there were hundreds of ex-slaves gathered together for the same purpose.

I had often asked my master to allow me to be baptised, but he would never consent – why, I cannot tell.”

Katy wept.

They sold their children yet Kaatje, when given a choice, opted to remain a slave. Katy wrestled with the question, what was it like to be a slave? The answer came to her slowly. You’re too busy surviving... to think was too painful... a piece of you was missing... you looked and looked for it ...in their eyes... searched for the recognition that you were human... that which had been taken away from you... but couldn’t find it... they were machines... grinding everything in their path... you feared and hated them at the same time... hated yourself...

Amberike leaned against the well. She found the murmur of running water in its depths soothing. From here she could see the blue of the sky, and the birds. That’s where freedom is, she thought, not in this ugly building where narrow slits in the wall formed barred windows and the damp gave many of them chest problems, especially in winter, when the

cellar flooded and their bedding remained wet. She coughed and put her hand on her chest to breathe easier.

Maria said it was no accident that the lodge was between the Groote Kerk and the Company Gardens; they had to obey the God of the first and be whipped to work in the other. The foundations of the church had been laid and the garden cultivated at the same time. The lodge had two entrances, one to the Groote Kerk and one to the Gardens where the Cook sometimes tended the vegetables, hiding a cabbage or two for their pot. But they were not allowed inside the church during a service; that was only for the masters. Their duty was to take care of the graves between the church and the lodge, and to buff the floors.

She would've liked to talk to the Cook about these things but since he was so abrupt with her, she was avoiding him. She didn't listen to gossip. Everybody talked about everybody else. It was difficult not to hear what people said.

"Good afternoon."

Think of the wrongdoer and he appears. Go, away, go, away, she chanted in her head. If she opened her eyes he would be gone, and she would not have to speak to him.

"I greeted you."

He was still there.

"Why are you closing your eyes?"

Now she had to say something. She opened her eyes, and licked her lips. "I'm not..."

He waited for her to continue but she was gawking at his feet. He moved them irritably. "What?"

She shouldn't stare but those scars where a big toe should be were like a magnet to her eyes. She cleared her throat. "I'm not talking to you."

The Cook inhaled sharply. A deep frown appeared between his black eyes. If he thought she was afraid, he was mistaken. Her second mother with the white face was more

intimidating. Why, when she got into a mood ... Amberike flounced away. That ought to teach him a lesson.

She stopped. Her fast pace had brought on a bout of coughing. She was still recovering from her night out in the cold.

“You’re walking too fast,” the Cook said, coming closer. “That was a daft thing to do.”

She turned and stuck out her tongue. Unexpectedly he laughed. She frowned, blushing.

“How’s your chest?” he said.

“Better.” She was not about to be friendly to people who laughed at her. Coughing ceaselessly she leaned forward, putting her hands on her knees.

The Cook left and came back with water in a pewter mug. He held it to her lips. “You shouldn’t walk home in a storm.”

Amberike swallowed a few sips. “I didn’t have a choice!”

The Cook pushed the mug into her hand. “Why so angry? I should take you to Maria’s friend.”

“No, please.” Amberike held up her hand.

A lung problem, Maria’s male friend had diagnosed. He stood looking at Amberike thoughtfully. “I have to bleed her.” He was trying to emulate the ship’s doctor. Fortunately Maria had intervened, “She only needs some herbs.”

Maria had asked the Cook, and he’d brought his medicine clay pot. He gave her some turmeric in milk. When that didn’t help, on the advice of his Khoi friend, he prepared the leaf juice of the Khoi fig for her to gargle and mixed leaf juice and honey to drink. Her body was healing slowly. They were waiting for her to be strong enough to work.

“No need to fret,” the Cook said. “Maria’s friend has been sold.”

“Oh no, Maria will be sad.” Amberike had noticed his absence but was afraid to ask. Why didn’t anybody tell her anything? Poor Maria. She had sympathy for Maria but was grateful to escape the friend’s ministrations. Slaves were not allowed to marry and he was Maria’s second friend since Amberike arrived.

“Thank you,” she said, “for the water.”

The Cook studied her, his expression inscrutable. “It was nothing.”

Amberike walked away. The matriarch of the lodge, an old slave who couldn’t work anymore, came towards her. Half-blind Catrijn sewed clothes from coarse material, shuffling in the dark by instinct if there wasn’t a candle or oil lamp to spare. People said that she had worked hard and had managed to earn enough to manumit five of her children.

“Hello, my child, how are you?”

“I’m fine thanks, Mother.”

Women lost their children and children lost their mothers. So each alone, they acted like a family together. Some came, some went but always a new arrival fitted into an empty space. It all depended on who did the buying and selling. Maria said there was a shopping list. On it was the item, girls 11–13 years, so Amberike had to be vigilant against being sold.

There was also a story among the older slaves about two sisters, Cornelia and Lisbet, who were nine and ten years old. The burghers had complained because they’d been given to Jan Van Riebeeck by a French captain and the burghers wanted to share in the gift. The commander ruled that the girls could be hired out. Maybe that is what happened to Ife? Was she gifted and then lent to the burghers?

The Cook, while making a fire, recalled how agitated he was the first time he saw Amberike. He remembered thinking, what was a harem girl doing here? He would've recognised her as a harem girl anywhere with the small hole in her nose where a jewel should be.

She had looked familiar. Then he remembered a fellow slave pointing her out to him, saying that she was dumb, that she couldn't speak. That proved to be untrue but she was as pretty as they said she was. But to play with his precious book, what was she thinking? He'd acquired it from a piece cut off from a lamb skin he was preparing for a VOC soldier, and made his own ink.

He usually hid his book among the vegetables in his make-shift kitchen. The pigs probably carried it away and dropped it where Amberike found it. He had to be more careful. Once, when someone nosy discovered it, he'd said it was for cooking – slaves were known to eat anything.

He placed a big pot over the wood fire, added water and the cleaned *beeste pote*. The smell of raw meat gone slightly off, hit his nostrils. He chose a wrinkled cabbage, peeled off the outer layers, chopped it and added it to the mix. A song from his new homeland came into his head, a song dedicated to *beeste pote*. Incarcerated men always found a way to familiarise their surroundings, to make it more palatable.

“You should use less wood. The trees are becoming smaller. They are chopping down all the big ones.” The *mandoor* Arrie was standing at his elbow. Born at the Cape he loved the wild flowers, the trees, the animals – every living thing.

The Cook turned towards him. “Why don't you tell them?”

Arrie moved his big shoulders. “They won't listen. Do you need any supplies?”

“Fresh ones? I need fresh meat and vegetables.”

“I'll see what I can do.”

Arrie could only provide what the masters saw fit to give him, but he liked to pretend he had power he didn't have. Arrie looked into the pot.

“What are you cooking today?”

“Beef stew.”

“That sounds good.” With a big body to fill, Arrie appreciated the Cook's efforts the most.

“What happened to your brother? The one that they said fomented the uprising on Baas Meine's farm? I overheard someone talking about him earlier today.”

Arrie turned away. “I'd rather not talk about it.”

The Cook regarded Arrie with compassion. For all his bluster he was a good sort. He said gently, “they killed him, didn't they?”

Arrie stomped about in agitation then lashed out with his fist, catching the Cook on his arm. “I said, no more talking.”

The Cook rubbed his arm. “I'm not the enemy. But here's one approaching.”

Egbert came towards them.

Arrie took off his hat and held it in front of his chest. “Master Egbert, what can I do for you, Seur?”

“I need someone to sweep the school room. Why hasn't it been swept? This place is like a pig pen.” Egbert kicked debris out of his way.

“Yes, Seur. I'll do it right away, Seur.” Arrie walked backwards bowing all the time. He tripped and fell over a branch.

Egbert laughed. “Idiot.” He turned towards the Cook, expecting him to share in his mirth, but met a cool stare. Egbert returned to his classroom.

The Cook watched Egbert's departure without amusement. The severe longing for his motherland sometimes pressed on him. It started as a crack in his heart and spread, getting

bigger and bigger. That was the first stage. After that the panic set in, his mouth dry, his breath racing, the impulse to run uncontrollable, unbearable. A malady of slavery, it had come upon him after his arrival in the Cape of Good Hope. He'd never had it before.

The last time he'd given in to this force that raced like a quagga through his brain, he'd gone to the mountain. The quagga was an animal new to him in this land. He'd encountered it on hunts with different masters. Its fat made the best candles.

He'd heard that there were caves deep enough to hide a slave on the mountain, but he had been caught by a return expedition searching for the Khoi tribes who had moved inland to hide their livestock from the hunger of the ships and the growing colony.

He had rested briefly on a rock near the mountain when the sound of hooves stirred the morning. "A *droster!*" voices shouted in unison. When he jumped up and scampered into the bush, one of the soldiers came after him. Although tired, he tried to sprint as fast as he could, dodging from side to side, to elude the horse that had been trained to run down a man.

He'd thrown himself sideways at the last minute, but still the horse caught him on his shoulder, mowing him down. The impact made him roll head over heels over the rough terrain. A silver tree broke his fall. Desperate, he'd grabbed at a branch, trying to get up. A blow to his head flattened him. He'd moved in and out of consciousness, still holding onto the sapling which had been uprooted, one of its branches held tight in his hand. The silver tree was rumoured to grow only if it could see the mountain. This one would not grow again.

Afterwards they'd chopped off his big toes. He had severe cramps in his feet from walking on his heels. When he massaged his feet he disturbed the abrasions that the manacles had cut deep into his ankles. Learning to walk again took six months, with old rags stuffed into festering wounds. He fingered the scars of his missing toes. Who'd have known that a big toe was so important for walking? He would always walk with a shuffle.

And this new name for a new life, Scipio – they gave their pets classical names. Some of the slaves were named after the months of the year, Januarie, Februarie, March, April, May, Augustus and so on, or after their physical characteristics, like Hanna de Dikkop, who had a large head sitting on a thin neck. Everyone, thankfully, just called him the Cook. As an educated man who studied in Egypt, he could see the rationale behind what the Dutch did – the logic of it all. But it was better not to see. Ignorance was a form of protection.

He'd watched some of his kind plead to be recognised as humans worthy of compassion. It was there in the bent back when serving the master, the unctuous voice. If they were agreeable enough, if they worked hard enough, on a good day the master would realise that so and so was a human being after all and free them.

Arrie de Boer de Grood was one of them. Big and harmless, he bowed to every master. What the miserable bastard didn't understand was that no amount of pleading could convince a mind, cultivated to see a dark skin as inferior, to set him free – surely a housebroken animal could not fend for itself?

The owners mistook this for loyalty. Every settler wanted a loyal slave who would sacrifice his life for him. The Cook laughed cynically. That was not for him. He was prepared to die for his freedom.

Who said it? The Ghost Whisperer searched around him. He'd heard a voice. It came again: was that his voice? He'd not heard it in a long time.

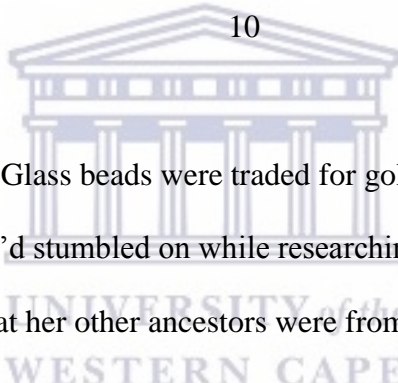
He longed to rest, but when he was invited by the Great One to speak at the gate of heaven or hell he couldn't answer. One needed a head to house a mouth, and a mouth to

house a tongue. And where's that head you might ask. Well, last he heard (his ears having gone with it) his head was stuck on a pole in the town square.

Do not rise up against your master. Do not burn things. But if you told him not to do something, he always did it. Call him stubborn, call him contrary, call him Daikoku, for that was his name. It meant god of the kitchen. No one could match his culinary skills.

One of his other slave names was Donkey but he didn't have to use that anymore because he was free. They'd ruined his body – broken on the wheel, drawn and quartered – but they couldn't reach his spirit. He was free to roam to the top of Table Mountain and to the graves underneath the soil. He could dance with the Northwester. He sneezed with pleasure.

10

The logo of the University of the Western Cape, featuring a classical building with columns and a pediment, with the text 'UNIVERSITY of the WESTERN CAPE' overlaid.

Blue beads. Dutch blue. Glass beads were traded for gold and ivory in Southern Africa. Katy read the article she'd stumbled on while researching genetic diseases from Southeast Asia. She believed that her other ancestors were from there, because thalassemia was common in that area. With thalassemia the red blood cells were fewer, smaller or deformed, which affected the protein carrying oxygen in the blood.

Katy heard Norman at the door. She lifted her head and put a smile on her face when he entered the study.

“How's the research going?”

“Fine.” She switched off the computer, and walked towards their bedroom. Norman followed. She sat on the bed, and patted the place beside her. Norman was obviously bored and maybe she could entice him. It would relieve the sameness of their existence.

“What, now? During the day?”

“That never stopped us before.”

“I don’t know; I haven’t showered.” With that he sprinted to the bathroom.

Presently she heard the shower come on. But she had lost her nerve. Should she join him in the shower? Would she be welcome?

That evening Katy woke to a strange sound coming through the baby monitor next to her bed. Her heart skipped a beat. It was Amy wheezing.

“Norman!” she shouted as she jumped up and raced to Amy’s bedside.

“Mummy,” Amy cried, her voice changing into a rasping whisper on the last syllable.

Katy placed her hand on Amy’s forehead to feel if she had a fever. “Is your chest sore?”

Amy nodded; she was pale, weak and short of breath. Norman appeared. He looked into Katy’s eyes, dark with worry.

“Do you think she contracted —” Katy couldn’t finish the sentence.

“No. We’re careful. We wear masks and we sanitise our hands. I’ll call an ambulance.” His voice was hoarse.

Norman paced up and down. “Where are they, I called them five minutes ago. They should’ve been here already.”

“I’m sure they’ll be here soon.” Katy, wearing a coat over her pyjamas, sat on a chair near the front door cradling Amy. Every now and then she wiped Amy’s forehead.

“I called them ten minutes ago.” Norman’s jaw was working as he bit on his teeth. “I need a cigarette. I hate being forced to give it up during this damn lockdown.”

Katy’s eye fell on her bunny slippers. “Norman, could you please fetch my shoes.”

Norman brought two left shoes, black canvas house shoes, one pair for inside and one pair for outside work. “It’s fifteen, twenty minutes. What the hell is going on? The whole country is going to the dogs.”

“My going-out shoes are in the cupboard,” Katy said gently.

Half an hour later they heard the sirens approaching. The ambulance's flickering red light had drawn a crowd. Gathered on the pavement at a safe distance, wearing masks, they stood silent, watching. In spite of the restrictions strangers had come to their suburb looking for work or food. The invaders scattered as the police and army drove in. Amy was wheeled out on a stretcher. Katy accompanied her into the back of the van.

"I'll follow the ambulance in my car," Norman said.

When the ambulance reached the hospital Amy was wheeled into the emergency unit. Katy realised that she had forgotten her mask. Amy would probably be safe because she had an oxygen mask over her mouth and nose, that is, if it was sterile. Katy fervently hoped it was. She asked an approaching nurse for a mask and followed Amy's trolley into a cubicle.

Soon a doctor arrived with a clipboard. He wore a mask, disposable hat and gown, and protective boots over his shoes. Only his eyes showed. He asked many questions to establish if they had been exposed to big crowds or relatives and friends who tested positive to the virus. He examined Amy and wrote down orders on a prescription pad. The nurse on duty put up an intravenous line. She obtained throat swabs from Katy and Amy to send to the laboratory. The test came back negative. Katy was relieved. Amy had not acquired the deadly infection but what about the thalassaemia, was it worse? The doctor didn't seem to think so.

For two hours Katy sat in a chair next to Amy's cot in the emergency room, anxiously looking at the blood in the intravenous tube snaking down from the blood bag. Amy was receiving an infusion of healthy red blood cells. A green oxygen mask covered Amy's lower face. She had anaemia, the doctor said.

When she was stable, Amy was admitted to the children's ward.

"She's over the worst." Katy texted Norman. He had called earlier to say that they wouldn't allow him inside the hospital as part of the Covid protocol; he was waiting in his

car. Katy yawned, and looked at her watch, it was two o'clock. "I'm not leaving her. You can go home," she texted.

"Are you sure?" Norman replied.

"Yes. Then at least one of us can rest. I'll call if anything happens."

"She'll be fine, I promise." Norman sent kisses and two praying emojis.

Katy settled in to wait. Every time Amy woke, Katy smoothed her hair and held her hand.

When the reddish light of dawn glowed Katy rubbed her eyes to get rid of the sand in them. Norman texted: "What about the hospital bill?"

"Taken care of," Katy replied.

The clerk at reception had given her forms to fill in. She calculated that if she moved the large sum of the budget section on her credit card to the straight section, she would just be able to pay for emergency care. If she fell short she could deplete her savings. Otherwise Amy would have to be moved from the private clinic to a government hospital, and she didn't trust their hygiene protocol. Government hospitals had a bad reputation. She prayed that Amy would not stay long and catapult them into debt.

The next day, with the resilience of the young, Amy had improved. After two days she was discharged.

Amy recovered well after her stay in the hospital. She didn't develop a fever; she didn't develop cold or flu symptoms. In fact, she was in high spirits because the hospital had provided a new experience to talk about. She babbled on about the doctors, the nurses, even the cleaner.

After her failed attempt at intimacy Katy avoided Norman – as much as one can avoid someone living in the same house. She took to having long baths, and spent hours reading, doing her hair and putting on make-up, which she wore around the house and washed off at night.

She reviewed the recent past, before lockdown, and concluded that the unease between them had a long history. One incident in particular occupied her thoughts, Norman combing his hair in front of the mirror on the inside of the door of his wardrobe.

He'd just showered. He still had a full head of hair, straight, brown, greying at his temples. Schooled by her people's preoccupation with straight hair that was the first thing Katy noticed when they met, Norman's beautiful hair.

There were four things to look for in a marriage partner, her mother had advised: hair and complexion being the most important. If he was overweight, that was fine but he had to have a slim nose and thin lips.

Katy had fidgeted with the blanket, watching him. It was a Thursday evening and she was reading in bed. Usually Norman would also read but now he was going out.

"Don't come back too late," she'd said, careful to keep her tone light. She didn't want it to be an accusation.

"Hmm." Norman turned his head sideways, and combed the back of his hair.

"Remember our appointment. We have to see Dr Sloan at eight."

"I know."

Katy wanted to add "don't drink too much" but thought it unwise. "Have fun," she said to Norman's retreating back.

Katy swallowed the lump in her throat. Normally he would kiss her before going out the door. She returned to her book, but the words swam into a conglomerated mess that did

not make sense at all. To relax from her research interest in West African diasporic literature she voraciously read romance novels. She put the book down and went to the bathroom.

She ran a bath, adding Epsom salts to soothe her. She lay in the foamy water, her head resting on the one side, while her toes didn't quite reach the other side. Ruing her short frame she thought of luxurious pictures of film stars so tall they could actually poke a seductive knee above the foam. Like a movie reel she reviewed her life. When did Norman become so distant, and what was her contribution to that alienation?

After a long bath she could concentrate on the romance set in the Scottish Highlands, getting lost in the description of the heroine riding on a horse with a Scottish laird, whose thighs were the size of tree trunks. She read until the early hours of the morning, waiting for Norman to return. She switched off the light when Norman tiptoed in, his shoes in his hand, reeking of alcohol. He bumped against the side of the bed and swore under his breath. He listened to hear if he had woken her, and then fell into bed. Soon he was snoring. Katy turned away from the brandy haze in front of her face, put the pillow over her head and tried to sleep.

When the alarm went off Norman jumped up. "What ... where..." He fixed bleary eyes on Katy and fell back onto his pillow. "What time is it?" he slurred.

"Six-thirty-five. We have to hurry. The traffic is really bad this time of the morning."

Norman groaned. "Can't we cancel?"

"Dr Sloan made an effort to arrange for the genetic counsellor to see us. The least we can do is turn up. Anyway, if we don't go now we may have to wait for weeks. Months even." Katy put the arm on Norman's side under her head to restrain it. The urge to hit him was very strong.

"Okay. Okay." Norman sounded defeated. "You go on then. I'll wash after you."

When she came back into the room, Norman was snoring. She shook him none too gently. “Time to get up.”

Norman sat up, his legs over the side of the bed. He put his head in his hands. “I can’t do it.”

“What?!”

“I can’t go and listen to someone telling me how it’s my fault that my child is sick. I just can’t. It grabs on a man, on his...” He searched for the correct word.

Pride, conscience, ego, Katy filled in, biting her tongue.

“You know what I mean?” He looked at Katy pleadingly.

“No, I don’t. Maybe if you didn’t go out, if you didn’t drink, we wouldn’t be having this conversation.”

“Ah, give a man a break. Why do you have to be like that?”

“Like what?” By now Katy had forgotten all her good intentions to be calm.

“So difficult.”

“Well, excuse me for wanting to do the best for our child.”

“There you go again,” Norman said. “You never—”

“Never what?” Katy’s voice had risen.

“You’re waking Amy.” Norman pulled the blanket over his head.

Katy pondered what to do. Pull the blanket off him and insist he should go? Wait until he snores and pour cold water over him? She was angry enough to do both. She forced herself to leave the room, rubbing her forehead, a pounding headache had landed.

She peeped into Amy’s bedroom. Amy was still asleep. Katy kissed her fingers and placed them on Amy’s hair spread out on the pillow.

At Dr Sloan’s office he eyed her quizzically. “Where’s your husband? I thought I made it clear—”

“He’s indisposed.”

“I see.” Dr Sloan studied the yellow file in front of him. “The counsellor will join us shortly. She’s a specialist in blood diseases.”

The receptionist ushered in a tall woman. “Dr Singh.”

Dr Sloan got up and held out his hand. “Glad you could come.”

Dr Singh turned to Katy and smiled, “You must be Mrs Marais? I read your file.”

Dr Sloan left the room. The counsellor re-arranged the two upholstered chairs in front of the desk so that they faced each other.

“Normally I work from my office but...” Her long hair fell over her face. She pushed it back. “Dr Sloan is a friend.”

When they were seated Dr Singh rifled through the file. She looked up, her dark eyes on Katy. “Did you have counselling before the blood tests?”

Katy shook her head. “No.”

“You should’ve had counselling in order to give informed consent. But never mind, we’ll take it from here.” She produced a diagram with bi-coloured figures, black and white. She pointed to the man and woman, tracing the line that separated the two colours inside their bodies. “As you know each parent contributes half their genes to their offspring. In your case both of you contributed the thalassaemia trait. When that happens a quarter of the children will be unaffected, half will have the minor trait and a quarter will have the thalassaemia major trait — that is what Amy has. Did you ever have a miscarriage?”

“I had four miscarriages.” There was tightness in her voice as Katy remembered her gut-wrenching disappointment at losing those babies. And how happy she was when Amy was born.

“That is common in this disease. Do you know the genetic history of your ancestors? I’m interested in the last three generations. Did anyone in your family have the disease?”

Katy felt validated in researching her past but realised she didn't have the answer to Dr Singh's question.

"I honestly don't know."

The counsellor explained how having a child with thalassaemia would affect their life, the chances of it recurring if she had more children. What to watch out for. When to seek medical treatment. Which foods to avoid. And how to inform other members of their family. Katy was exhausted after the meeting.

On the way home the spectre of the deformed creature she'd delivered during her last pregnancy before Amy haunted her, a discoloured, bruised, swollen thing. Did she do that to her baby? She stopped on the side of the road and cried.

When she reached home, Amy was having her afternoon nap. Norman watered her roses. Penance. She walked past him towards the front door. He followed leaving a drizzle of water to settle around the base of her precious Nelson Mandela rose which had been introduced in 2018 to celebrate the centenary of Mandela's birth. A tall plant, it had an abundance of orange-red blooms. She retraced her steps and turned off the tap, flushed with anger. He was killing her rose. Norman stood chastened, not knowing what to do.

"I'm sorry." He pushed a hand through his thick mane.

"That's alright," she said. "You just carry on as if Amy's illness isn't real and drink yourself into an early grave."

Norman was deflated. "I realise that I have not pulled my weight recently." He held out his hand. "Liefie, can we please start again?"

Katy hesitated then walked into the house.

Norman burst into the room. “Why didn’t you tell me about the hospital bill?”

Norman waved an envelope angrily. “I found it in the mailbox. It’s a wonder it didn’t get lost because I haven’t seen the mail man for ages.”

Barefoot, Katy stood in front of the built-in cupboard looking for her pyjamas. “I took care of it.”

“This is a statement from the hospital. We still owe R14 000. Fok, are they charging five-star hotel rates?”

Katy put a clean pair of pyjamas on the bed. “I didn’t think—”

“Yes, you didn’t think. Since I’ve been laid off you treat me like a good-for-nothing. Do you think I’m not man enough to pay my daughter’s medical bills?”

“I didn’t mean—”

“Save it, I don’t want to hear another word out of you. And wash that war paint off your face.” Norman stomped out.

Katy put on her pyjamas, washed the make-up off and crawled into bed. He would make his own supper.

Katy slept, and when she woke up it was dark. She looked at her watch, ten minutes past one. Norman was not in the bed. She reviewed their fight last night and concluded that she was innocent. She only wanted to help and he was too pig-headed to see it.

Her stomach rumbled. She ventured to the kitchen in search of food. Norman was sleeping on the couch, his long legs hanging over the side. She watched him through the prism of her anger and felt sure that he was cheating. An incident came to mind.

A year ago she had come home early and found Amy bouncing on her bed.

“What are you doing?! Where’s Anna? You know it’ll make you tired. Come here, Mummy will help you get off the bed.”

“No.” Amy giggled, collapsing in the middle of the bed. Katy reached out to her.

“No, no,” Amy wailed, kicking her legs.

Katy grabbed hold of her legs and pulled Amy towards her. Amy started crying.

“Daddy lets me jump on the bed.”

“By the way, where is your father?”

“He said play here. Stop troubling Anna.” Amy pushed out her bottom lip.

Leaving Amy sulking on the carpet in the passage, Katy went to the kitchen. She had instructed her helper not to give Amy any sugar because it made her hyperactive, and that could lead to breaking a bone. Why, if she disobeyed such an important instruction, then...

Katy gritted her teeth. As she reached the kitchen door Norman came out.

“Hi. Is Anna here? I’m looking for her.”

“How would I know? I just came for a glass of water.”

“I’m just asking—”

He brushed past her. That’s odd, Katy thought. He usually avoided any communication with the help – that was her duty. Not having a job was changing him; it was changing them. They seemed to be at loggerheads for no reason. And to leave Amy alone on the bed like that. What if she had fallen and bumped her head?

But he adores Amy, she corrected her thoughts. He probably just had another unsuccessful interview. She pushed open the door, Anna wasn’t there.

“Anna! Where are you? I’d like to talk to you.”

Anna pushed a sullen face around the open backdoor. “I’m here, Madam.”

“I told you, my name is—” Katy had asked Anna to call her by her first name but Anna stubbornly resisted. “Did you give Amy chocolates or a fizzy drink or anything else that is sweet?”

“No, Madam.”

“Oh, I thought...” Katy was at a loss for words; she couldn’t very well accuse Anna without any proof. “Never mind.” She turned to go out when a red handkerchief caught her eye. She bent to pick it up off the white tiles but Anna snatched it from under her nose.

“The baas gave it to me to wash.” Although asked to use their first names, she insisted on using “baas”.

Katy remembered Anna had disappeared into the backyard.

In the kitchen she cut the bread, *boerebrood* which Norman loved to buy, and made a cheese sandwich. She made tea and sat down at the kitchen table wondering if Norman had anything to eat. A brief stab of guilt. She banished it with the thought that he was a grown man; and there was nothing wrong with his hands.

Sated, she carried her cup to the bedroom. Walking past the lounge she stopped to observe Norman. He looked vulnerable in sleep, his eyelids were fluttering. He wouldn’t cheat. He was such a sweetheart. It was just the stress of being unemployed that was making him a bit edgy. Tenderness welled up, she went to the bedroom, fetched a blanket, and covered him.

Egbert was dining at Meine’s house on Verkeerdevallei, a farm in the Liesbeeck valley. The two men were dressed in long coats and Egbert had a silk scarf knotted loosely at the throat. Anke, Meine’s wife, wore a sombre black dress with pearl earrings, strings of pearls in her hair, and on her wrist and neck. Her curly brown hair with two paths on either side was piled at the back of her head. A brooch decorated her fichu. She had a pinkie ring, a

big nose and a permanent frown. Her daughter, Gerda was in a blue gown. The table had a white damask table cloth.

Amberike and Mankbeen, one of the farm hands, hovered in the background. Anke, as Amberike's community mother, could summon her at any time.

They ate the first course of vegetables in butter, followed by fish, chicken in a currant sauce, and a mutton roast.

"A wonderful meal," Egbert said. "How well you have trained your cook."

"I try," Anke said modestly.

"I miss eating well. My daily fare consists of cheese and bread."

"That's scandalous, *meijnheer*," Anke said. "The company should feed its respected teacher better."

"The company isn't the problem, it's me. I don't want to dine with the type they collect from all the corners of Europe. Robbers and scallywags. All you have to do is be able to handle a musket," Egbert said.

"They are too stingy," Meine said, digging into a shin bone with a marrow spoon. "They lay about in Amsterdam, these *Here XVII*, and all they care about is profit."

Three bones sat on a plate in front of him, next to two pasties. The bones had been immersed in salt water for twenty-four hours, and cooked for fifteen minutes. Egbert had declined this delicacy.

"The recipe for the pasties comes from *De Verstandige Kok*," Anke said. Her uncle was related to one of the seventeen high-born men and Meine delighted in criticising them.

"Ah, the cookbook published in 1669." Egbert responded, flushed with enjoyment of the amply supplied wine at the table. "How I miss home cooking."

"You should come more often," Anke said.

“Don’t tempt me.” Egbert inspected Gerda’s spotty face; wished she were prettier. Her name meant robust as a spear, but she was pale and sickly.

Meine intercepted the look. “Gerda is fourteen next year.” A marriageable age.

The girl blushed and threw a beseeching glance at her mother, who was compelled to speak. “There’s plenty of time.”

“Not really. You don’t want her to be an old maid of twenty,” Meine said. He turned to Egbert, “The other two went to live with Anke’s mother. Such a bother these girls are. A man needs a son.”

Anke secretly patted her swollen stomach. “The Lord decides. Do not ask the Lord for that which he chooses not to give.”

“We’re ready for dessert,” Meine said.

“Mankbeen.” Anke summoned the server, and whispered to him. He and Amberike disappeared into the kitchen and returned with preserves, cheese, nuts and sweet pastries.

Anke spread her arms, proud to preside over such a meal. “Gentlemen, your dessert.”

Egbert ogled the cheese, a home-made Gouda. He couldn’t live without cheese. It cheered his spirit and he became cranky when separated from it. He cut a piece, smelled it and devoured it.

“Good cheese, ma’am,” he said. “It reminds me of patria.” A fond name for Holland.

“Thank you. I added some cumin.”

“I can taste it. Some put cloves in the cheese.”

“Spices are too expensive,” Meine interrupted. Most of the spices they loved had to be shipped from South East Asia where the Dutch had taken over the spice trade.

“Lovely cheese,” Egbert said, cutting another piece. His eye fell on Amberike and he studied her unobtrusively.

“If we had more servants I could make enough to sell.” Anke fixed Meine’s profile with a malevolent stare which dissolved when he turned towards her. Egbert noticed.

Meine indicated to bring his long pipe. Amberike fetched the brass box from the side table.

Egbert jumped up, “Allow me to help you, meijnheer.” He prepared the pipe and lit it.

Meine smoked while Amberike held the tip so that it wouldn’t tilt.

“I have business in town,” Meine said; he turned to Egbert, “care to come along?”

“Yes, of course. Thanks.” *Gadverdamme*, what’s this, thought Egbert. He didn’t have a horse. The company was in the process of replenishing their stable by importing horses from Batavia. Meine had sent a slave to collect Egbert in a wagon, and now he was asking if Egbert needed transport back. The spleen of this man – Meine was fond of needling him.

A strange singing filled the *voorkamer*. It was mournful and ebbed and flowed.

“What’s that?” Egbert turned sideways in his chair. Amberike had disappeared.

“The workers are singing their prayers again.” Meine had told Egbert earlier that he suspected that his workers were dallying with the Mohametan faith. He didn’t want them to indulge in the Mohametan religion. It made the slaves proud and rebellious.

“You must nip it now. If you give them your small finger they will take the whole hand,” Anke said, tossing her head angrily.

“This farm is run like a tight ship.” Meine went out and came back out of breath. He was a short man with auburn hair, bow legs in white stockings, grey knee-length breeches and a waistcoat with straining buttons.

“That’ll teach them.” He had removed his jacket; sweat dripped from his forehead, and made unsightly stains under his arms. Anke looked at him in distaste, and dabbed delicately with a lacy cloth at her nose.

Egbert recalled Meine saying that on a Sunday morning, when he had been drinking the previous night, he rose well before dawn. Then he tackled the slave bell which had been salvaged from a slave ship. He rang it with authority. When the slaves were standing under the oak tree outside the kitchen, shivering in the early morning cold, he would try to save their heathen souls.

Following Abraham's ordinance he taught them the Bible, the King James Version printed unofficially in Holland and exported illegally to England in wine vats or casks of butter. Meine had acquired the Bible from a family member, a rope maker, who had moved there. He taught a modified version of Christianity which emphasised obedience, prevalent at the time, and wished he could obtain a copy of the Slave Bible.

From the great book Meine had memorised a clutch of verses which were appropriate for slaves: Ephesians 6:5: Servants be obedient to them that are your masters according to the flesh with fear and trembling in singleness of your heart as unto Christ. Colossians 3:22: Servants obey in all things your masters according to the flesh; not with eye-service, as men pleasers, but in singleness of heart, fearing God. Titus 2:9: Exhort servants to be obedient unto their own masters and to please them well in all things not answering again. 1 Peter 2:18: Servants be subject to your masters with all fear, not only to the good and gentle but also to the froward.

He replaced the word servants with slaves of course. However, he never told the Exodus story; that was forbidden. It would give them dangerous ideas about freedom. Afterwards he would take a deep breath, study the blank faces of his audience and end with "That is the word of God."

Meine neglected to mention the verses that recommended good treatment of slaves, or that emancipated slaves should be supplied with some of the wealth that they helped to create. Egbert recited a verse silently. "Thou shalt furnish him liberally out of thy flock, and

out of thy floor, and out of thy winepress; out of that wherewith the Lord thy God hath blessed thee shalt thou give unto him.”

“How’re your inventions coming along?” Anke cut short Egbert’s thoughts. He smiled; he knew that women admired his attractive bloneness.

“I’m on the verge of a new discovery. And I’m busy with a translation.”

“How interesting,” Anke leaned forward eagerly.

Egbert checked to see if Gerda was impressed too but she had her sullen face turned to her plate. How did she expect to attract a husband? When a man spoke, a woman should listen.

He revelled in Anke’s attention. “Making instruments is a science, like the discovery of blood circulation by William Harvey or Copernicus’ heliocentric model.”

“Hel... helio... what’s that?” Anke glanced nervously at Meine. She was behaving badly.

“It’s a mouthful isn’t it? It’s the idea that the earth rotates around the sun and not the other way around. It sure gave the ole Catholic Church a headache,” Egbert laughed. Generally he thought that women were stupid but now and then he was prepared to indulge the little ladies, toss them a bone.

“I’m not surprised.” Anke was flattered at being treated as an equal.

Egbert nodded. “We’ve made great strides in gaining knowledge: laws of motion, astronomy, and mathematics. There are so many books.” His enthusiasm overflowed, “I want to build a gentleman’s library.”

“Of course you should. If I... we... can help...” Anke said, fluttering her eyelashes.

“Women only know how to supervise the house slaves,” Meine interjected, sour that his wife was entranced by Egbert. Egbert needed a wife, anon.

“Cooking is also a science,” Egbert defended, “You mix certain ingredients in exactly the right amounts and you get a good result.”

“Oh,” Anke said deflated. “You may leave the table,” she commanded her daughter in a stern voice. “And mind your manners; be sure to greet meijnheer before you go.”

Gerda, got up, curtsied and left.

“Good manners are so important, don’t you think?” Anke tried to re-establish her rapport with Egbert.

“Of course.” Egbert was mellow with a full stomach and wine in his blood. He studied Meine. What an ugly man, rat-like, somehow. He didn’t like Meine but he could be useful. And his wife was ravenous for attention.

Anke left the gentlemen to their after-dinner brandy.

“Now I can go to the slave lodge,” Meine whispered and spat into the spittoon in the corner.

Egbert admired the art work on the porcelain spittoon. Two muscular dark brown bodies in white loin cloths tended a green field, while a man dressed in a red coat sat in a light brown chair smoking his pipe. Finely drawn, the well-developed calves of the slaves caught Egbert’s eye. Above it on the wall was a copy of an oil painting Egbert recognised, Vermeer’s *Girl with a Pearl Earring*.

“I’m sorry my friend, what did you say?”

“We can go to the slave lodge,” Meine said in a low voice watching the door.

“You rascal.” Egbert slapped Meine on the back and followed him to the four-wheel cart pulled by two magnificent horses. “Your wife. What will she say?”

“She doesn’t know,” Meine chuckled. “And even if she does, a man is a man.”

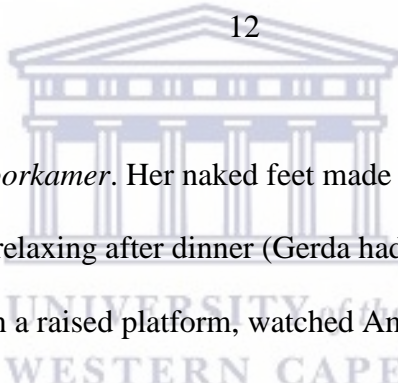
At the lodge they sat on the cart among the throng of men waiting. The burgers waited patiently, their horses tethered to posts. The sailors pulled at their clothes impatiently.

Egbert nodded in satisfaction. There were many light-skinned children in the lodge school. Their fathers planted the seed and the seed grew into the labour force. All was right with the world. He jumped off the cart to ensure that Amberike had been locked up to protect her from the attentions of these rough men.

When he came back Meine was sweating profusely. “What’s the time?” He searched in his pocket for the guilders he had set aside for entertainment.

“Relax. Just a few more minutes to eight,” Egbert laughed, looking at his pocket watch. He counted the heads to see how much money the VOC would collect. Twenty men, a tidy sum. Egbert pitied the men who had to wait while he didn’t have to.

12

The logo of the University of the Western Cape, featuring a classical building with columns and a pediment, with the text 'UNIVERSITY of the WESTERN CAPE' overlaid.

Amberike entered the *voorkamer*. Her naked feet made a dull sound on the wooden floor. Meine and his wife were relaxing after dinner (Gerda had gone to her room.) Anke, with her slip-on shoes resting on a raised platform, watched Amberike as she put the silver tray on the round wooden table. The two porcelain cups clinked against each other. They were from the East, Amberike had overheard Mevrouw saying. Amberike wondered how far away “the East” was.

They also had what Mevrouw called a tulip vase. Standing in the middle of the table the vase was decorated in blue and white and had five spouts to put flowers in. Was it also from the East? Amberike would’ve liked to ask but, like with the cups, she would have to wait until someone mentioned it.

“Coffee, Mevrouw?”

“Of course.” A frown coloured Anke’s unusually pale cheeks, bleached from always wearing a *kapje*.

Intensely aware of her brown fingers on the delicate cup Amberike inspected her hands. They had broadened with work, and were not like Anke's slim white palms and fingers. Envyng those soft hands Amberike poured the coffee and handed it to Anke who liked her coffee black and bitter.

“Did you grind the coffee beans well?”

“Yes, Mevrouw. Just like Mevrouw taught me.”

“Did you strain it? I detest spitting out coffee grounds.”

“I strained it twice, Mevrouw.”

“Seur?” Amberike glanced at Meine who shook his head; he had a glass half-filled with brown liquid.

“You may go now,” Anke said. She was in the third month of her pregnancy. Half-moons of sweat grew bigger under her armpits despite the padding she'd stuffed inside to absorb it.

The efforts of a naked boy stirring the air with an ostrich feather were not enough to lift the humidity. He was dozing in the heat, his eyes closing. Before Amberike could wake him, Anke slapped him with her shoe to renewed vigour.

“Clean the vase. It's dusty,” she said to Amberike.

Her frown accompanied Amberike's retreat to the kitchen. Tension settled in Amberike's neck and shoulders on behalf of the naked boy. Although she was only a few years older he looked up to her as a mother, a role she had learned to play to many children since her arrival. The boy's rough treatment prompted her to focus on her own predicament. Lately she had come to realise the precariousness of her life at the Cape.

She heard her name. Anke was saying something about her. From the kitchen Amberike strained to listen to the conversation. She moved closer to the door, pretending to clean something off the floor.

“She’s so lazy, and this child that tags along with her is lazy too.” Anke aimed another swipe at the boy’s bare bottom.

Amberike winced at the sound. She peeped through the open door. The boy had widened his eyes and was swishing the feather energetically with both hands.

“What would they do without us to feed and clothe them? Probably just curl up and die.” Meine scratched under his armpit.

Anke nodded, her lip twisting. “She works the whole day and you can’t see what she’s doing.”

“All they need is a good drubbing. Then they’ll work.” Meine laughed. “You can’t treat them like real people. You just can’t.”

“They are all heathens.”

“I miss the good old days. For running away, theft or rebellion the punishment: nose and ears cut off, Achilles tendon cut, leg cut off, hanging on a meat hook through the ribs, torture of the body with burning tongs, burnt alive or rolling through the streets in a spiked barrel.” He laughed.

Anke joined him, tittering for a good while.

“You can’t catch a pig,” Amberike silently mouthed the words, referring to Meine’s bendy legs. “And your unwashed body smells.”

“Don’t worry, things will come right.” Meine patted Anke’s podgy hand. “As for Amberike, my plan is already working. But you and the children must do your part.”

Amberike drew back. What plan? She recovered to resume her surveillance.

“She mustn’t attach to anyone. We must break them in their minds. That Egbert thinks he knows about training slaves but nothing beats experience.”

“Yes, my husband.” Anke nodded her head vigorously, her *kapje* bobbing. She placed a protective hand on her growing baby. “Amberike has to know her place. The inheritance of the next generation has to be secured.”

Amberike swallowed the cough rising in her throat. It was time to retreat before it gave away her presence. She was getting tired of the cough, of barking like an old dog as Maria said. Back in the kitchen she thumped her chest, bidding it to go away. At least she could walk further now without being accosted by the need to cough. She tried to guess what treatment Enati would’ve offered.

That brought her to the reality of her life at the Cape. What would become of her? What did Meine mean when he said that she should not attach to anyone? Her family wasn’t here? A foreboding of trouble ahead took hold of her. The feeling was so uncomfortable that she immediately banished it from her body.

She was washing the tulip vase that Mevrouw said was precious, sticking her fingers into each one of the spouts to get rid of the dust that had accumulated at the bottom. She peered down each spout; there was still dust deep down where her fingers couldn’t reach. She looked around the kitchen for an implement long enough to reach the bottom of the spouts. Her eye fell on the poker next to the range. Fitting the cloth over the end of the poker she twirled it around the first spout. Clean. She repeated the procedure on the other spouts. The last spout came off in her hand.

Shocked Amberike tried to fit the spout back into its place. It fitted perfectly except it didn’t stay. Amberike stared at the white line of the crack separating the two parts, wishing it away. Mevrouw would have her hide. She sniffed.

Just then Anke walked in. Amberike turned, spout in hand.

“You broke my vase from Holland!” Anke took off her shoe and hit Amberike on her head.

“I’m sorry, Mevrouw. While I was cleaning it just came off.” Amberike stepped away; the blows weren’t painful, not as much as Maria’s switch, but it was humiliating.

Anke followed, limping as she walked on the tips of her uncovered toes while wielding the shoe. Amberike put up her arms to shield her head. She saw Anke’s toes splayed out on the floor. Inexplicably she had the urge to laugh, but she knew that would escalate the punishment, so she wailed fearfully until Anke was out of breath.

Later, in the hut at the back of the main house, Amberike spanked the five-year-old boy’s bottom.

“The mevrouw says you were lazy today. Why did you let the feather go so slow? I saw you. You were sleeping.”

“I tried, Mama. I really tried.” The boy was one of the orphans in the lodge. They arrived seeking a substitute mother and latched on to any female, young or old.

“That’s not good enough. You have to be obedient. You have to listen and do what they say.”

She beat him till he had blue marks on his legs. It was the only way she knew to protect him, to ensure his survival, as Maria and the other women had done for her.

Katy redoubled her efforts to trace her ancestors. Although Norman didn’t understand why she had to find the source of the disease, she knew it would ease her guilt.

Before lockdown she’d hired a researcher in the Cape archives. After a month the researcher had come across the name Amberike from Abyssinia. Further investigation confirmed Amberike as a new addition to Katy’s family tree, which had grown off the A4 paper onto an A2 sheet.

Katy had progressed on her lineage but not on untying the knot that would provide the definitive answer to the source of Amy's illness. Amberike was from the Horn of Africa and the disease occurred in North Africa, the Mediterranean, and Southeast Asia. The trail had stopped in a dead-end. She would probably have to retrace her steps. Nonetheless she loved the name Amberike. It was exotic and beautiful. If she had another girl she would shorten it and modernise it to the English name Amber.

Although they grew up with Afrikaans, she and Norman had decided to raise Amy as English, a growing trend among brown people. English was perceived as an international language and was also a form of resistance since the apartheid government had declared Afrikaans the official language and tried to enforce it on black children resulting in the 1976 youth uprising.

But English was difficult for a people with their language roots embedded in history. While walking in the street once Katy had overheard a woman shout from a window. "The chicken is in the organ." Organ instead of oven. This and other stumbling inaccuracies and mispronunciations had Katy vow that theirs would be proper English that Amy could be proud of.

To her surprise Katy was disappointed at discovering another slave ancestor after Kaatje. She'd hoped for a different addition to her blood-line, maybe a Mediterranean adventurer, or a princess or a religious leader. Then again her family history hinted that she may have more slave blood. A great aunt had apparently told the story of a *sleg boerevrou* who ill-treated an obscure grandmother. As soon as the grandmother's father left, and he left regularly because he was a travelling salesman – a Hollander – the woman, his second wife, would lock the grandmother's long hair into a chest. She would pull and pull, crying to be free, until she became bald.

Katy woke to see the morning light slanting into their bedroom. Just before the lockdown they'd received a letter from the teachers' government medical scheme informing them that they had lost their medical aid. The scheme had paid all Amy's medical bills. Now she had to acquire a new medical aid through the university, and the administration office was closed.

Although Katy would only contribute half of the monthly payments, it would reduce her salary. She worried about living expenses and that the new medical aid would put restrictions on Amy's health care.

To divert her anxiety she thought of Norman's story of the previous night which he had narrated with his usual attention to detail.

As in the plague novel she'd read (Boccaccio) they'd agreed to tell each other stories to while away the time. So far she'd observed that her stories were historical and Norman told stories about the present. She was absorbed by the past where she found injustice, and he was concerned with the present where he found injustice.

That was certainly true of the story he'd told:

He had been called to the new principal's office. Mr Sherman was young and ambitious.

"There's been a complaint from one of the parents," Mr Sherman said.

Norman waited for him to continue.

"After discussions, the School Governing Body and I have decided, we've decided that it's better if you, if we, if you offer to resign."

"Excuse me?" Norman's heart raced, his mouth dry. Some of his colleagues had already taken early retirement. Teaching had become extremely stressful under the new

government that abolished corporal punishment and had legislated compulsory integration. Rather than change their ways, some of his friends had opted to leave. He, on the other hand, needed to be busy.

Mr Sherman had gazed at something behind Norman's head. "You're near retirement age and—"

"What about my experience?" Norman was only 57.

"Please understand, it's not personal. It's just that older people are stuck in the past. It's time to make way for the new generation."

A new generation indeed, Norman smarted from the insult. Instead of walking out and slamming the door he should've said something to educate that young nincompoop. He wasn't what Mr Sherman obviously thought he was. He had married Katy. Katy recalled her unease whenever he said that.

Afterwards he'd gone to a bar. He swivelled his chair towards his neighbour. "I love my wife and I like the new South Africa," he said.

Next to him on a bar stool sat a black man in his forties. Norman took a photograph from his breast pocket. "Look here. Isn't she beautiful?" It was his badge to show solidarity.

The black man moved his chair to glance at the woman holding a red-haired baby. "A yellow bone."

"What did you say?" Norman reacted, adrenaline coursing through his body.

The black man laughed. "Hey cool it, my man. I mean no disrespect. That's what we call them." He sucked on his cigar. "Yes, in the townships everyone wants a yellow bone."

"Isn't that derogatory?" Norman's protective instincts took over. "That is my wife you're talking about. And women like her. What's wrong with you people?" The stress of being retrenched, indignation and five beers, sent his blood pressure soaring. Here was a man sitting in his expensive suit and making remarks about his beloved Katy.

“You people? What do you mean by you people? I told you I wasn’t disrespecting your wife. I was only making a comment about the township.” The black man fixed his red eyes on Norman and pointed. “You mustn’t come and ‘you people me’, you hear? I don’t take that from anybody.”

“Who are you pointing at?”

“You! You, mlungu, white man.” He stabbed his finger on Norman’s chest.

Norman slapped his hand away. “Don’t touch me.”

“Cut it out.” The barman had called the bouncer who stood in front of them.

The barman watched from behind the counter, polishing a glass with a small towel.

He waved the glass at the bouncer. “Get them outta here!”

The bouncer stepped between them, obscuring Norman’s view of his opponent.

Norman lunged around with his fist, connecting with flesh. He wanted to injure the fool who had said bad things about Katy.

The man danced into view, holding his fists like a boxer. He delivered a perfect upper cut to Norman’s jaw. Norman staggered back, dazed, with the knowledge that he was outclassed. He charged like an enraged pit-bull. Wasn’t it enough he had to teach a new history curriculum that humiliated some of the young people? He had to watch these young people squirm at hearing that their ancestors were not as illustrious as their parents and grandparents had told them. All he had done was to make it slightly more palatable, and someone had reported him.

It was probably Katy’s father, he said. That bitter Bessie had objected to him marrying his daughter. Not knowing how to respond to Norman’s groundless accusation Katy had leaned forward and said: “And then what happened?”

Clinically, the boxer delivered blows to Norman’s stomach and ribs. Dragging his breath in and out despite the pain Norman put him in a head-lock, but he broke free and

kicked at Norman's upper thigh. Norman jumped back, slipped, fell, and heard the sound of bone breaking.

"I'm sorry. Are you hurt?" The black man extended a hand to help Norman up. He slapped it away. He took out his cell phone to call Katy but it just rang.

"Do you remember? I called you but you didn't answer?" Norman had fastened his grey eyes on Katy. She nodded.

He continued, "The ambulance is on its way," the barman said, giving Norman his meanest repertoire of dirty looks.

At the hospital Norman waited on a wheelchair, trying to forget the dull ache in his lower leg. Finally, he was ushered into a cubicle. The female doctor was young enough to be his daughter.

"Listen," he said. "I have to go home as soon as possible. My wife will be worried."

The doctor gave him a quizzical glance and carried on with her examination. Hours later he hobbled out on crutches.

Katy waited at reception. "They couldn't tell me where you were," she'd said to Norman, hugging him, and almost causing him to lose his balance.

"Calm down. Let's go home," he'd said.

Katy had heard this story before and she knew that Norman found it hurtful to be dismissed. She hoped that he would find work. That would help him to embark on a path of healing. She pulled the blanket to her shoulders. The morning sun had reached their bed. Dust particles danced in its stream.

Norman stirred next to her and rolled onto his back. He looked at the digital clock on the bedside table next to Katy. She pretended to be asleep. Six o'clock. He woke up at the same time every morning. He had been used to getting up at that hour to prepare for the day's

lessons at George High School in Camps Bay. It had been his work address for twelve years, now the clock had been moved to her bedside table and was set to wake her at seven.

He rolled to the other side, taking the blankets with him. Occasionally he still complained of a dull ache in his lower leg.

Katy stirred, tugging at a sheet. “Are you alright?”

There was a time she would’ve complained. But after losing his job he’d acquired the status of one who needed nurturing.

“Yes,” he mumbled into the pillow. “You go back to sleep, love.”

Katy wanted to snuggle up against him. She wanted Norman to put his arm around her. Her nearness, she knew, would soothe him. She radiated warmth and comfort. Instead she curled into a foetal position. He had withdrawn from their intimacy.

He softly recited a lesson from memory. “On the slopes of the Twelve Apostles Mountain where lions, antelope and leopards used to roam, Camps Bay was the last refuge of the Khoi and San tribes.” He turned to Katy and uttered the longest sigh. “At this stage I’m prepared to forego a higher salary at a private high school to teach at a government primary school.”

“Something will come up,” Katy said. It was an automatic response she’d come to doubt. All the schools were closed.

“The kids at a primary school will probably also be rude and feel entitled. No one teaches their children manners anymore. Teaching history to adolescents was a challenge, but I don’t think I’ll be able to cope with smaller snot-nosed empty heads. Yet a man has to work. That’s what Oupa Kallie always said. A man has to work.”

Cynically, he spoke about his optimism that, with his experience, he would find employment easily. Wherever he went they regarded him as if he had just stepped off Noah’s ark. “Every time I use your money I sink deeper into despair.”

Katy knew his depressed mood had increased. He probably couldn't tell her about it because she would increase her care and attention. And he was sick of it.

"We can use some of your pension money," she said in a small voice. "I thought we shouldn't because—"

"Because I would find a job!" he interrupted bitterly.

The bedroom door opened. Amy, clutching her brown teddy, made for the bed. Norman moved and intercepted Amy at the foot of the bed.

"Don't bother Mummy." He carried her back to the nursery. Amy put her arms around his neck.

"Mik," she said.

"Daddy will give you milk."



14

*The helmsman strokes the fiddle,
The cook who plays the flute,
A ship's boy strikes the drum,
The doctor blows the trumpet.*

*A hundred negroes, men and women,
you cheer and hop and circle
like mad; with every jump the
irons clink rhythmically.*

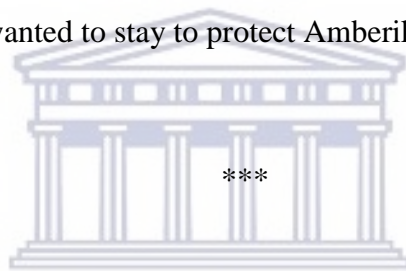
"Das Sklavenschiff" ("The Slave Ship"), a poem by Heinrich Heine

The Cook sat with his back against the rough wall of the well. The courtyard spun; he closed his eyes to stop the dizzy spell. Sweat dripped from his forehead, his legs shook. He pressed his back into the wall, trying to emulate it, to become its stillness, but it was no use. His head whipped from side to side, his breath ragged, eyes searching, which way, which way should he run. Run! He pulled his legs up under his body, reared up, then sank back

against the wall again, scraping the rough paving with his heels. He pulled at his sleek black hair, hit with his right hand on his thigh. He had to go. Now. But he couldn't. What about Amberike?

Soon they would go to collect sewage again. And while they were away sailors, soldiers and settlers came to visit the women in the lodge for an hour. The gate keeper let them in at eight and rang a bell at nine when it was time to leave. They arranged their payment with the VOC.

He forced himself to breathe, slowly, calmly. The reflected heat of the sun on the wall embraced him. Little by little the warmth relaxed his tense muscles until he became drowsy. Not today. He would not give in to the overwhelming urge to run, which had overcome him so many times in the past. He wanted to stay to protect Amberike.



The next morning the Cook, Frans, and a few other slaves were on Meine's farm to help with the harvest. The latter had planted a new crop of wheat. Anke's uncle in the VOC provided many privileges; one of them was permission to use the slaves from the lodge.

The Cook's body worked, but his mind was elsewhere. Yesterday when he hung around near the kitchen door to greet Amberike she'd not even looked in his direction. He was still smarting from the rebuff. Why it should affect him thus he didn't know. She was just a girl. But he'd come to care about her.

When he came out of the barn he'd seen Amberike at the washing line. Against his judgement he'd walked up to her. "Good afternoon, Mevrouw." He couldn't resist the sarcasm; she was acquiring the highborn mannerisms of her second mother, Anke.

"Good day to you, Meijnheer," she'd said, mimicking Anke.

He had not expected such an answer from a young girl and was out of a response. His interactions with women in general were a source of discomfort. Normally he just kept away from them. He didn't know how to talk to them, but he'd persevered.

“Why did you not acknowledge me this morning?”

“It's not you.”

“Really? As I remember it, it was me standing in front of you.”

“I can't allow anyone to come near me,” Amberike had said.

He wanted to know why.

“I don't know, but Baas Meine won't allow it.”

“He has a wife.”

“That's not what I mean.”

His heart jumped at the thought that it could mean the one with power had first choice among the slave women, which happened too often. He couldn't tolerate the idea of Amberike with that brute and now he was more forceful than he'd aimed to be.

“What do you mean then? Are you giving me the merry dance?”

“You don't understand.” She'd hurried away.

The Cook was left scratching his head. At least she'd spoken to him. He was in unfamiliar territory. He had not expected to meet anyone who would awaken his desire to protect after losing his family. Usually he had a brace around his heart.

During his journey to the Cape he had been cooped up with slaves who were in a deep depression. They stared ahead of them with dull eyes and couldn't be roused to interest in the maggot-ridden food. He had therefore dined well. Then they were removed from the hold and forced on deck. He saw the crew with instruments. The music was quite jolly but he and his fellow slaves were indifferent to dancing. The whip set them aright.

He still did not feel like dancing, that was not in his nature, but there was lightness in his being at the prospect of this girl in his life. He also wanted to improve his appearance, to become the respectable man he'd been in his homeland. Who would've thought that a hat could become important to him, or shoes? These were the markers of respectability here. The Cook longed for these items to improve his status so Amberike would look up to him.

He'd discovered that she was learning high Dutch and had contemplated becoming fluent in Dutch like Egbert, but rejected the idea. He didn't care for the language spoken by the masters. He preferred kitchen Dutch, the growing language of the ordinary people at the Cape, and the language of Sheikh Yusuf of Makassar who wrote it in Arabic script to teach their faith.

He shifted his skull cloth to a better position and wished for new clothes not made of the cheap sail cloth deemed appropriate for slaves. He saw himself in knee-length breeches with a matching coat; a white shirt with a stiff collar. Stockings; and shoes, not just any shoes, but ones with silver buckles and real leather, and a tall hat. He imagined Amberike in a silk dress with lots of lace, which was forbidden for slave women. They would be such a handsome pair. She reminded him of taking walks with his sister and nephew, of having a family.

Immediately he suppressed these thoughts. Caring was not for him; he had to get it out of his system, fast. However, his thoughts wandered back into the previous groove.

Allah – may He be praised and exalted – might be displeased if he regarded her as more than a child. But like the Prophet with Ayesha, he was prepared to wait for her to grow up. He would protect her, comfort her and shower her with reverent love. Didn't He preach of love? Not the Christian kind, about love thy neighbour as practiced here at the Cape which excluded those of a darker hue. The Prophet Mohammed – peace be upon him – welcomed everybody.

The Cook's inherent fairness forced him to acknowledge, however, that Believers also practiced slavery; that it was in the Qur'an. There was an ancient slave route, the Silk Road, linking Europe and the East to East Africa, where slaves were traded. He could argue that they treated their slaves better, but slavery could never be justified. Slavery could never be considered to be humane.

It occurred to him that he and Amberike could not be betrothed. Most slaves were not baptised and she had to be baptised in order to marry. He cursed her decision to be a Christian; it was probably Maria's influence. Couldn't she see that there was no comfort for their suffering in that religion at the Cape of Good Hope? Islam, a growing religion, provided community, and survival against the cruellest master. Christianity didn't, or couldn't because it was complicit. He would have to convert her, but he didn't want to. A woman who saw you as her religious instructor may not also see you further along in time as a prospective husband.

Meine's cat-o'-nine-tails found him. "Stop day-dreaming. Or are you praying? You Mohametans mustn't think that I don't know you pray while you work."

"I'm not praying."

"I'm not praying, Seur. Where are your manners?"

Slaves were not allowed to use the familiar 'you' resulting in elaborate constructions such as 'master Egbert said that Seur should bring a gift when Seur comes to visit Seur's sister and Seur's sister's baby, Seur.' The Cook thought it was ridiculous.

"So what are you doing?" Meine continued. "What does a slave have to think about? Concentrate on your work!"

Another lash bit into the Cook's back, bringing tears to his eyes. Usually he was tolerant of any master's cruelty but something had shifted in his mind when he started

thinking of himself as a suitor, as a man. Then it became intolerable. He grabbed the lash and Meine fell from his small horse.

“You’ll pay for this,” Meine spluttered, wiping dirt from his face.

There was hidden mirth from the other eight slaves. Although Meine couldn’t see it he knew it was there and he flogged the nearest ones.

“Tonight you will sleep hungry. You will know who your master is. Without me to feed you, you will starve. And a good thing it will be too, you miserable sacks of pig shit.”

15

The Ghost Whisperer thought he knew too much. Knowledge had coagulated in his stomach. It was a heavy, balled chain. Without a corporeal body to anchor him, he roamed in and outside of his life frame.

He’d acquired familiarity with the Cape’s history since Jan van Riebeeck arrived, and before that, when the Khoina had traded with passing ships. It had given him a bird’s-eye-view. However, truth was the most difficult thing to pin down.

He scratched a phantom itch on his left leg. Throughout his short life-span he had not stopped to consider many things, for example, the dark side of being human was accepted as part of reality in his native religion, Buddhism, yet here it was considered to be outside the person, an evil.

He, Daikoku, the harbinger of fortune, originally from Batavia, cut and quartered, was suffering. He’d lost his black hat and golden mallet.

He experienced phantom pains in his stomach. Suppressing memory... Who should take responsibility for him losing his head? Where was that head? What was it observing? His dark deeds?

The need to be blind had been total. In the act of destroying human beings in his rebellion he had become an “other,” bred from violence, and forced to separate and pigeonhole two selves, the gentle one to his mother and half-brother Arrie de Boer de Grood, and the face of aggression to his enemies. Did he ever forget which was which?

16

Egbert was reading a page of his translation from English to Dutch when he saw Amberike walk past. He stood to have a better view. She was petite with skin the colour of honey, matching the beads around her ankles, wrists and neck. Her eyes were sombre and she had a slight frown, serious for one so young. Her long hair, loosened from its customary plait, swung over her face. She walked leaning forward, walking as if in a dream. Her lopsided skirt swished from side to side.

Egbert stepped into her path. She made a startled noise, and looked up, her eyes searching his face. Their eyes met. Immediately she lowered hers.

“Look where you’re going,” he scolded.

She hung her head, her whole body dejected.

“The next time there will be serious consequences.”

Nervous, she touched her birthmark, a small black mark in the middle of her forehead in the shape of a main sail. He’d heard gossip among his people that it was the mark of Cain. The seriousness in such a vulnerable body stirred something deep, lost within him.

“You have to learn to be more careful.”

He turned his wrist. The riding crop puffed flour from her apron. She jumped back, stifling a small scream. He knew that she’d just assisted Maria in the kitchen of the purser

where the latter sometimes worked. Concerned that she was in the gaze of another settler he vowed to put a stop to it.

He motioned for her to come closer. She came, holding her hands behind her back. He reached into his pocket and handed her the sugared fruit he had saved from his dinner. He observed her tawny eyes. There was no discernable expression. He was glad she wasn't green-eyed and light-skinned. It was a custom to breed that kind of slave for their looks; the mix of a white man and an Indian or South East Asian girl fetched a high price.

Meine had told him of a German man who had started sleeping with his children and grandchildren to improve the strain. He thought he could maybe also breed slaves in the future but for now he was content just to look at Amberike – to feast his eyes on her beauty. She had a high forehead, narrow nose and perfectly formed lips.

Egbert measured her delicate shoulders with a trained eye. Unexpectedly the seed of a yearning to protect her struck at the bottom of his heart. He coughed to get rid of it, to hide it, and leaned forward.

“What’s your name, kitten?”

Voice soft, he'd used the tone and language of his mother when she spoke to him as a child. He pushed his freckled hand through his hair in exasperation. *Gadverdamme*. What was wrong with him? There was something in her that touched his empathy, encrusted as it was with rust. Must be the pork he'd had for dinner, he thought, it was making him soft. Flabby.

She hesitated. “Amberike.” Her voice was so soft he could hardly hear it.

“That is such a beautiful name.”

Egbert uttered a hoarse laugh then said, “A beautiful name for a beautiful girl.” He shook his head. An idiot, that's what he was. He knocked on his head with his fist.

She shrank back, her hand reaching up to her mouth. Admiring her slim wrist and small hand he longed to fold his hand over hers. He moved his whole body to get rid of this foolishness. His eyes were trained to search out only two parts of a woman's body and now they refused to obey. Instead they were caught in two yellowish-brown pools of innocence.

She shouldn't be looking at him like that, so direct, it was disrespectful. Summoning his authority he stared at her to put her in her place, but ended up admiring her long neck, his gaze unable to go down to her budding breasts.

He knocked on his head again. This was a disaster. He was a man with a future and she was, well, she was a slave. But... he was confused. The thought that she didn't trust him caused his heart to contract in sorrow.

"I come from a great people. In just a hundred years we've grown from nothing to the world's greatest seafaring nation."

She frowned, uncomprehending. He realised that he was trying to impress her about how important he was, how eligible. His voice hardened.

"I suspect you won't understand. No, you wouldn't."

Silence.

"But I'll show you. One day I'll take you home with me."

He kicked a loose rock, hurting his toe. She gasped. Her fear had increased. It scorched his stomach that she should perceive him as a threat. He would rather chop off his little finger than hurt her. He groaned. This bout of indigestion was worse than usual. He felt decidedly ill.

"Would you like a doll house?" he asked, hoping it would soften her trepidation.

"Every girl needs a doll house. I can give you a big one. As big as this," his hand was level above his head.

A flicker in her eyes spurred him on, “And it will have furniture, real furniture, a bed, a table, paintings, curtains of the finest silk.”

But he’d misread the look in her eyes. She was probably surprised that he thought she would be excited by a doll house. Had he not noticed she was a child of slavery?

Someone sneezed.

“Meijnheer?” Ambrike threw glances over her shoulder, looking for Maria, whom he had banished to work in the gardens till nightfall.

“You may go now.”

He watched her walk away, putting one little foot in front of the other languidly, which effected a slight swaying of the hips. Did she do that deliberately? He didn’t think so. Some women just walked like that naturally. She had the kind of slim build that would not run to fat, even after childbirth. If he ever looked for a wife... but that was still far off. He didn’t plan to remain at the Cape of Good Hope. It was a good transit point but the gold, like the sun, lay in the East.

Whistling, he ambled on. His mind returned to his dream farm. He would build a gentleman’s library. At Leiden University he had studied French and Latin. He loved Dutch literature, especially Vondel. A captain of a ship at anchor had been persuaded, after much wine, to part with Joost van den Vondel’s play *Gysbreght van Aemstel*. Nostalgia grabbed at his waistcoat’s brass buttons. Every New Year’s day in Holland this play was performed. Oh for some culture in this backwater!

*The male black widow spider follows the pheromones
of the female. He knows that
even if he arrives last the other males will still
be sitting on the web, waiting*

to mate, and taste the air for signs that she is hungry.

Amberike's tongue peeped out of the corner of her mouth. She was learning embroidery at Anke's house and the small intricate stitches took all her concentration. In, out, around...

"Not like that." Anke hit Amberike's hand with the copper spoon. "Take it out."

Amberike sucked at the small wound and carefully removed the stitch. She looked over at Gerda sitting opposite her in an armchair. Gerda wore a clean blue dress with a white apron. Amberike smoothed her coarse dress, and tried to hide the torn hem. She felt grubby next to Gerda's pale skin and rosy cheeks, which hid her pimples. Gerda studied the open book; she was replicating a butterfly design with coloured silk.

"Like this, Mother?" Gerda simpered.

Anke nodded, approving. She glanced at Amberike. "Look how dirty that cloth is."

Anke wiped the beads of sweat from her brow and fanned her face with her hand. Her pregnancy was just visible under her voluminous skirts. She held up the piece of stained material in disgust. "I don't know why you should learn a lady's craft. It's a waste of time."

Like all the external mothers of the lodge slaves Mevrouw was supposed to teach Amberike sewing, making clothes – practical skills, yet Egbert had implored Anke to break the convention and teach Amberike the finer crafts of a lady. The latter didn't know why, didn't question it, but was grateful for the respite from housework.

"It's to have good manners," Amberike volunteered. She clapped her hand over her mouth, glancing at Anke wearily. She'd overheard the ladies of the Cape saying it at the market, usually about another lady. Amberike understood good manners to mean embroidering animals, plants, flowers, birds and insects out of a book and learning to speak proper Dutch.

“A waste of time I say.” Anke huffed as she walked to the window with green shutters, and then left the room.

Amberike had heard Egbert enquiring about her progress. For that reason she supposed Mevrouw was compelled to teach her. She’d learnt that the masters spoke to each other as if the slaves weren’t there, as if they were invisible.

“You’re the perfect one to teach her. You are such a great lady,” Egbert had said, smiling. His compliment had made Mevrouw blush.

Amberike only knew the kitchen language of the slaves that she had struggled to master on her arrival, but now she was learning high Dutch. Secretly, she thought straining to learn a new language after she had already learnt one was unnecessary. Where would she use it?

Among all the workers who, like her, had been forced to undertake journeys across the sea from their homes where they spoke different languages, and from the language of the Khoi people they’d found here, had grown a dialect to understand each other. In order to communicate with the master, whose needs came first, it was based on Dutch, but carried traces of the language roots of all who spoke it, Portuguese, Khoi words, Melayu (Malay) and words from elsewhere in the East. But it lacked click-words.

Maria loved to name the places where all the people had come from. Mozambique, Madagascar, India, Indonesia, Java, Bantam. Amberike couldn’t remember the other names. Her favourite place name though was Madagascar. It sounded mysterious. She’d not met anyone from there yet; but if she did, she’d ask them if their country’s name ended with a click, like the language of the Khoi people who came and went. She tried saying Madagascar with a click on the first syllable, then the second, then the last syllable but grew bored.

She didn’t care for this manners thing. Unless, a brilliant thought entered her mind – good manners could mean sitting in an armchair like Gerda while being served. Drinking tea

from a porcelain cup and saucer. That would be heartening. Why, it could also mean wearing shoes!

Amberike's eye fell on a picture on the wall. She'd noticed it before but had never really looked at it. Studying it now, she decided she'd like to be that young girl, about her own age, with a blue and gold cloth wrapped around her head and a pearl earring. Behind the girl was blackness, darkness. Amberike could relate to that. Maybe the girl was also sad? The girl had dark eyes, a white shirt and brown coat. Her earring was big, beautiful. To Amberike it seemed that the girl probably wore shoes. She turned to inspect Gerda's shoes, black, comfortable. Her shoes, if she ever had them, would have flowers and a bow.

"You could never learn good manners, it is inborn," Anke spat. She'd re-entered the room after using the chamber pot. Lately she did that a lot.

Usually quiet as a flower embroidered on a skirt, Gerda sniggered.

Amberike's happy thoughts shrivelled. She dare not contradict her mentor. Open defiance would make her life like a thorn in the sole of her foot. She plastered a grin on her face. "How's this one, mevrouw?"

Anke inspected the stitching. "That's better," she grumbled, waddling off, leaving Amberike to return to her pleasant dreaming about the possibilities of having good manners: wearing lace, being carried in a chair and a myriad other things that distinguished a lady from a slave.

Maria called out to Amberike when she reached the lodge. When Amberike stood in front of her, Maria held up a piece of cloth.

“It arrived yesterday. I cut off a piece for a new scarf and an underskirt. This is what’s left. It’s big enough to make you a new dress.”

Amberike beamed. She was tired of pulling down her hem. “Who will sew my dress?” she asked. She hadn’t learned how at Anke’s house.

“What’s that woman teaching you?” Maria’s stern expression was habitual.

“Mevrouw’s teaching me how to embroider things.” Under Maria’s knitted brow Amberike experienced a twinge of shame.

“Now why would she do that? *Allemagtig*. She’s not right in the head. Where would you use that skill?” Maria’s eyes bore into Amberike. “Did that Master Egbert have a hand in it?”

Amberike chose to forego an answer.

“I know everything that goes on in this lodge. It is my mission. And I’m telling you now, that Master Egbert will bring danger on your head. Stay away from him, do you hear?”

“Yes, Maria.”

“I’ll sew your dress,” Maria continued. “I can cook, bake, plant, harvest and do a lot of other things you don’t know about. You can learn from me how to survive in this wretched place. Come here.” Maria measured the cloth from Amberike’s shoulder to the floor. “You’ve grown taller.”

“Well I’ve been here for ...” Amberike couldn’t remember.

“Just over half a year,” Maria said. “I’ll be happy not to see those skinny ankles of yours.”

Amberike giggled.

“It’s not funny. A respectable girl doesn’t show her ankles.”

Chastened, Amberike bit her lip.

Maria measured the cloth between Amberike's shoulders, eyeing her breasts. "You've grown in other places too." She gave a heavy sigh. "You're growing up too fast."

Maria cut out the dress and starting sewing. Every evening Amberike threaded the needle in the lamplight. Sometimes Maria allowed her to sew but she was strict. The stitches had to be neat and of equal size. Eventually the dress was finished.

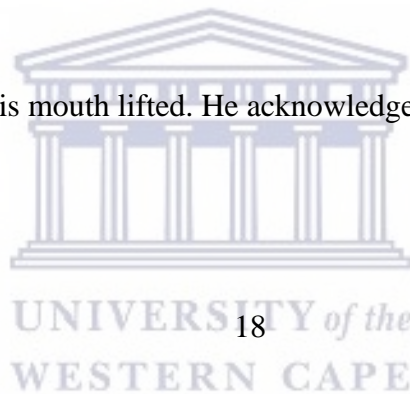
Excited, Amberike put it on and twirled in front of Maria. "How do I look?"

"Like normal." Maria appraised her handiwork. "Now, go outside and fetch water."

On the way to the well Amberike saw Egbert. He was leaning on the wall next to the well, peering into the distance, when she came upon him.

"Good day mejnheer." She was self-conscious; her curves were more visible in the new dress.

The deep lines next to his mouth lifted. He acknowledged her greeting and walked off.



Katy's mother had not told her that Dad's ancestor had an interview in the APO newspaper. Did she know? Did Dad ever talk about his family? Why was it a secret? Somehow between 1910 and now Kaatje's story had been lost.

Katy was removing her bead bracelet to do the dishes when Norman entered.

"Being cooped up in the house is torture. And I need a cigarette. I saw you sorting through stuff in a box last night. Maybe it's time for you to tell me one of your stories again. What stories has your research turned up?"

"Do you want to hear about my paternal ancestor? The one Mr De Bruin was talking about? Kaatje Jacobs, the one that was interviewed in a newspaper."

“Which newspaper? You didn’t tell me that.”

“Just wait here.” Katy went to fetch the APO newspaper and gave it to Norman.

Norman perched himself on a kitchen chair to read. “Wow. This is fascinating. Tell me more.”

Katy assessed the content of the interview in the newspaper. It was just dry facts. She rued the dearth of real stories about her ancestors. It came to her to transmute her deep thoughts about Katy into a narrative. “Okay, I’ll tell her story.”

It had taken Kaatje more than twenty years of freedom to even begin to think negatively about Baas Kootje. A wrong thought can lead to a wrong act. She could still hear her mother saying that. A slave had to be careful. So Kaatje had been obedient. She had not owned her body for a long time and was unused to making decisions about it. That had been the realm of the master.

Kaatje looked at the old men sitting idly on the stoeps of their houses in the inner-city slum where she now lived, and thought that they were waiting for someone to tell them what to do. She empathised, because when they said she was free, well, she did what had come naturally – she stayed on to help the mistress.

Sometimes she woke up in a sweat hearing Mr Mostert’s voice. She’d jump up searching for shackles on her hands and feet. When she couldn’t find any she would fall on her knees, praying: ‘God. Thank you for your mercy.’

She was a stupid woman like Jacob said, for not leaving Baas Kootje’s farm when she had the chance. She mourned it now, especially after that baby she stayed for had grown up to be rude. At three years old he would command her, ‘Gliet shoes,’ ‘Gliet come,’ and insult her too ‘Gliet dom.’

He couldn't say Grietje, the name given to her by that particular family. Before that, when on another master's farm, Kaatje had been Mieta. But at last she was in charge of her body and she wanted everyone out of it.

She stretched lavishly on the bed, and ran her hands over her long body, still strong from working with pick and spade. Mine. Mine.

Kaatje's new-found confidence in the world grew slowly. It functioned in a small sphere, her house, and her community. There she felt safe. Outside of it, faced by the unfamiliar, she became anxious. Even though the erstwhile slave owners had not treated them well, they still expected her goodwill."

Katy stole a glance at Norman but he was absorbed in the tale.

She continued: Kaatje went to town with her great-grandchildren once. She was living with her grandson and his wife. While waiting to pay at Garlicks, a store that opened in 1875, a white man dragging a heavy suitcase said to her nine-year-old grandson, 'Take this to the car.' Bewildered the boy didn't know what to do. Kaatje was surprised at her sudden anger which left her trembling. She was ready for murder.

She shoved her grandson behind her and squaring up to the man spat out, 'Carry your own damn bag.'

Kaatje's great-granddaughter was shocked. 'Ouma! I don't understand you today.'

'Neither do I,' Kaatje said.

She'd thought of herself as a gentle person, only to discover unexplored depths of rage she didn't know existed. Being aware of her suffering was bearable, but to be aware of a long line of suffering had tipped the scale.

Later, after feeding the baby, Kaatje walked to the Moslem traditional healer who lived in the same place.

'Hello Aunty, how can I help you?' The healer opened the door before she'd even knocked.

'Let's talk inside.' Kaatje walked past him and sat down on a riempie chair. 'I have a problem with ghosts.'

'What kind of ghosts?' The healer tapped two fingers on his chin to think. He was wearing a kurta.

'The ghosts of the past.'

He was taken aback. Most of his clients required assistance with the ghosts of the present. He disappeared into an inner room. When he returned he gave her an amulet.

'Garlic,' Kaatje wrinkled her nose. "May I ask what else is in it?" Kaatje sniffed the amulet, waved her hands in front of her nose.

The healer helped her hang it around her neck after she'd paid a sixpence. Kaatje hated the smell but was prepared to endure. She asked for another one for the baby, to protect him against evil. Didn't she learn how valuable family was? They could be snatched away; you could lose them in an instant. That's why she'd drilled into all her children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren, family is the cornerstone of survival, treasure them.

Katy was silent to show that she'd come to the end of her tale.

"I love your story. Remember we said we could ask questions at the end?"

"Yes?"

"Who told you that story? Was it an older person, like in my family, where stories of our heroic ancestors are carried forward from one generation to the next?"

Katy was going to confess to the invention of the tale, but now she hesitated.

"Is it true?" Norman asked.

"Yes and no."

“Ah, that’s how the stories are among my own people, some truth, some invention, but you can never tell which is which. Thanks, we must do this again.”

Norman left the kitchen. It was as if the story and its similarity to his family had energised him. Whistling to himself he took the garden implements from the garage and headed to his vegetable patch.

“Katy, you liar, you,” she whispered. Katy lamented that her family tree ended with two sets of grandparents. There was a record of everyone issuing from them, but the branches higher up had been chopped off, a veil of darkness pulled over them, and in its place stood a headless tree.

After his beating, the Cook’s skin was hanging down in strips. The burning was unbearable. He gritted his teeth. He heard a commotion and saw Maria, twisting the mole on her chin, rush to where he was lying on his stomach on a reed mattress in the corner of the big room he shared with other slaves, male and female. Maria, as the lodge matron, occupied a different room. Amberike followed on her heels.

His roommates had left to bestow their free labour, promising to cover up for him if the *mandoor* or any master should ask after him. He didn’t expect that to work, the masters kept a close watch on their slaves, and was expecting one of them back soon to summon him.

“What are you doing here?” he said gravely when they came to stand at the foot of the bed.

Maria knelt down next to the mattress. “I told you to stay away from me. Now look what you’ve done, *Allemagtig*.” Maria joked, trying to hide her concern.

“Everything is not about you.” The Cook was going to add “woman” – he and Maria jostled regularly – but he had to be careful. He was negotiating passage to a girl’s heart.

The Cook watched Amberike from the corner of his eye. She was standing, her arms folded tightly across her chest. He noticed the tears shivering on her long lashes as she studied his wounds. She's crying, for ME. It felt so good he squeezed out an uncharacteristic groan. He hit his fist on the palm of his hand; he was acting like a buffoon.

Maria's face softened. "Poor man, the pain must be dreadful." Maria wiped his brow with an old torn dress. She inspected the flesh hanging from his back. "What are we going to do about this?"

"My Khoi friend says that he will bandage it with buchu and it will heal."

"Do you trust him? Does he know what he's doing?"

"Ask Meine to take me to the barber-surgeon then," the Cook said.

"There's no need to get on your high horse," Maria said.

"Bossie taught me all I know about local herbs when I came to this place. The Khoi are masters of herbal medicine. I'm just saying that—," he abandoned his sentence and turned to Amberike. "When are you going to start talking to me again? Aren't we friends? I want to introduce you to Bossie and his family."

She giggled.

"Leave the child alone," Maria said severely.

"I just want to introduce her to my friends. I think she'll like them. Will you come?"

He looked at Amberike. "They don't live far from here."

"I'll come," she answered.

"No good will spring from this," Maria grumbled.

"Thank you."

The Cook put his head down. It was hard work trying to be gallant when his skin was torn. The agony of his suffering threatened to escape in a groan, which he could not permit in

the presence of these two ladies. Amberike touched his head cloth hanging over a chair and ran away. In spite of the pain the Cook was the happiest he had ever been.

The fire crackled, sending up little shoots as Amberike kneeled in front of the four big stones that contained the blaze. She broke down the burnt-out wood stump with an iron poker. She wiped the sweat from her brow with her apron and coughed. Smoke swirled around the room she shared with Maria and four women. She placed the heavy iron on the embers of the burnt-out stump.

The Cook usually chopped the wood stump with an axe into firewood but Maria preferred them whole on a Sunday, ironing day. Although the stump produced more smoke, as it burned down steadily it created a fire which lasted until the ironing was done.

Amberike mulled over her and Maria's visit to the Cook's sleeping quarters. She inspected every detail: him on his stomach, the dark clotted blood, the clear fluid oozing from his wounds, the flesh hanging. He seemed taller and bigger on the bed than when he was standing. She thought he was very brave to make light conversation after such an injury. It must hurt like a hot iron on naked skin. If it had happened to her she would just cry and cry.

She thought about Mevrouw and Maria's punishments and resolved not to make such a noise, jumping around and screaming "Eina", the next time she was due for correction. Once she'd even said *gadverdamme* like Master Egbert but that had earned her extra lashes from Maria.

Maria appeared, a small boy by her side. Four years old, he was the youngest of Maria's children. His older sister was probably outside. "Please take care of them. I'm needed for baking at the house of the purser."

Maria had lost three children. The first son had a chest problem and died at the age of two. The next, a daughter, suffered a sudden death at five months, prompting a few slave women to suspect witchcraft. But Maria was a devout Christian and would not listen to such nonsense. That comes from having one foot in the bush, she said. However, Maria regretted saying it because the following week the woman who made the remark was flogged to death. God bless her soul, Maria said. Death excused even idiots.

The third child had come into the world with its feet first. The *vroedvrou* had never seen it before. She had called in the help of an older midwife from a nearby farm but they had been unable to save him and he was born dead. Now she only had two children.

“Yes, Maria.”

Amberike had learnt to be a good surrogate mother. “Stop that!” she said to the boy who stood in the doorway kicking at the floor. Amberike had spent the morning taming the dust with water and a gannabos broom where the cement had broken up and the floor was in danger of being ruined.

“We’re hungry,” he said. Amberike noticed his sister, a year older, timid, trying to hide behind him. He was the braver of the two.

Amberike mumbled under her breath. It was only two hours before the evening meal. “Here,” she held out two pieces of left-over bread, thinking that she was spoiling them. They had to get used to waiting between the morning and the evening meal.

“After eating please sweep the yard. Don’t bother the adults who are working and don’t go near the masters.”

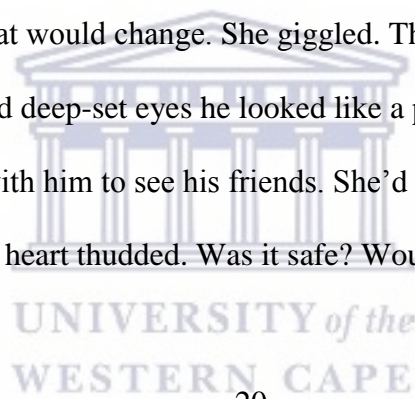
They scooted out. Amberike dragged the wooden trunk closer to the fire, it snagged on her skirt. She clicked her tongue like Maria as she yanked the garment free. Alas, her new dress had a nick in it. She studied the small tear, shaped like a hook. She should’ve asked the boy to move the trunk; with the amount of food he was eating he needed to earn his keep.

And she should've sent his sister to fetch water. Their water, kept in two buckets, was depleted.

But no matter, she would darn the tear in her dress. Picking up a blanket she folded it and spread it over the trunk. Using a cloth she clasped the heavy cast iron and wiped it with an old cloth. It left a streak of soot. She glided the iron over the Cook's shirt, checking if there was any sign of the blood stains she had soaked in cold salted water. She lamented the insipid cream-white colour of the shirt although she had bleached it in the sun.

She hoped he would be pleased with her washing his shirt. On second thought she didn't want him to know. She'd asked Maria if she could do it because she was appalled by his wounds. Normally the Cook washed his own clothes but he was still unwell. She still didn't talk to him but maybe that would change. She giggled. The Cook would break many hearts. With his longish hair and deep-set eyes he looked like a pirate.

She anticipated going with him to see his friends. She'd not been alone with a man before here at the Cape and her heart thudded. Was it safe? Would Maria allow her to go?



Katy went to the bedroom. The window faced onto the backyard where Norman's building sand and bricks were. He had planned various building projects after his retirement, but it had come to naught. She inspected the stacked windows and piles of sand and rubble, disappointed and disheartened. She saw a shadow. Was that a rat scuttling? She was uncertain. They needed an exterminator after the lockdown. They lived in a middle class area and the neighbours would soon start complaining.

She had more time to think and examined the details of her life over and over, trying to find a reason, a pattern, but it was just loose change in a pocket. Lately she was ruminating on how unemployment had changed Norman.

A few weeks ago, which seemed like years, before the confinement the spiky virus had enforced on their lives, she'd come home from work to find him in a dark fury.

"You're late. Where were you?" After seeing her frustration he added: "I was worried."

"I'm sorry, I meant to call you but we started talking."

"Who were you talking to?" Norman's eyes narrowed in suspicion.

"Sonia." Katy had been reluctant to come home to his unstable moods and had called on Sonia. "Your sister asked me to help her bath the new baby."

"Why did you agree when you knew I'm waiting?"

"I couldn't say no."

"Am I not important?"

Katy fiddled with her coat button.

"I'll tell you why," Norman said bitterly, "it's because you hate me."

"Don't say that." Katy held her hands in front of her in supplication.

"I have something in my blood that has caused you a great deal of heartache. Say it; say what you think. You want another man to give you a baby because all my children die."

His voice cracked. "How many miscarriages have you had? We've lost count."

"No, no, no." Katy couldn't stop her tears. "The disease comes from both of us, remember?"

Norman sat down and put his head in his hands. "My beautiful Amy, I don't want her to die."

Katy put her hand on his shoulder. He put his arms around her waist. She held his head, pressed it against her. “Amy is not going to die. Dr Sloan said there are many ways to treat this disease. She could have a bone marrow transplant, she could—” Overwrought Katy started sobbing.

They held each other for a long time. Afterwards they talked about going for counselling as Dr Singh had suggested, and informing their respective families.

She made an appointment for counselling the next day but for Norman it was a difficult bridge to cross. He believed in Oom Kallie’s teaching that hard work could sort out most of life’s problems. Instead he had started an online class. It was still in its infancy but tentative hope had kicked a place in her heart. At last they would rebalance their life.

Then the pandemic arrived.



Norman went to the supermarket and Katy decided to straighten her hair. A pungent odour permeated the bedroom. Katy sat in front of the mirror pushing a wide-toothed comb through her hair, from the front to the back, her scalp burning. The white cream on her head caused the hair to stand out, stiff. Occasionally she removed loose hairs from the comb with a towel or used the towel to dab the thick line of Vaseline encircling, and protecting her hairline.

Norman entered.”Wha...” He wrinkled his nose.

“What are you doing home so early?” Katy rose in shock.

Before the pandemic she scheduled her hair-straightening at the salon. Of late she planned this activity when she was certain Norman would be away for a while. Yet here he was, uninvited and unwelcome.

“The supermarket was full so I turned back. I’ll go tomorrow. What is that you’re putting on your hair? The smell —”

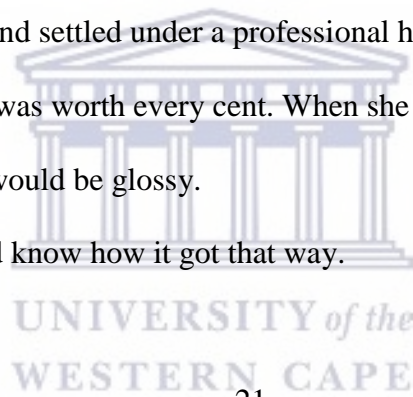
“It’s none of your business. Please leave.” Katy had a resolute expression.

Surprise shone in Norman’s eyes as he left. He had not seen her so agitated before, even if he happened to step in while she was showering or dressing.

Ashamed that he had seen her like that, Katy had tears streaming down her face as she rinsed her hair. This was a time that revealed all secrets. A horrible time. She applied conditioner, rinsed it off and rolled her hair onto big orange rollers. The breakage of her hair due to the stress he was putting her through would soon reduce her to small blue rollers. What a mess. She exhaled. For now, orange spikes still peeped through her hair.

She found a magazine and settled under a professional hairdryer like the one at the salon. It had cost a fortune but was worth every cent. When she removed the rollers and applied her *swirlkous* her hair would be glossy.

But now Norman would know how it got that way.



The Ghost Whisperer was sad. He would never rest, never have peace. It was his destiny to roam the earth until the end of time – the fate of the damned, those who impersonated God, the soulless ones, who would search and search but never find.

He was commemorating the incident in 1690 that led to his predicament. Four of them murdered a burgher on a farm in Stellenbosch and wounded another. They were hunted by soldiers. Three of them died. He remained. He was tortured.

*And this most rotten branch of human shame,
Object, so seemed it, of superfluous pains
Would fall together with its parent tree.*

“The Prelude”, a poem by William Wordsworth (1805).

Egbert strolled through the Company’s garden. The section dedicated to the planting of vegetables had a grid of *grachts* to water them. He nodded approvingly. They were a smaller version of the long *grachts* of the Cape of Good Hope, Amsterdam, and Batavia, a Dutch innovation to regulate water.

He was proud of their achievements. A resourceful people, they had built dikes to wrest land from the North Sea. About a quarter of his country’s flat landscape lay below sea level. And they had so many merchant ships, almost one for each square mile of the country.

The brilliance of the morning sun at the Cape fascinated him. On a leaf it brightened the green, on coarse white *neger* cloth it was blinding. The sun had a fresh, clean-scrubbed quality here at the southern tip of Africa.

He was admiring the trees when he came across a sickly one. The trunk had different shades of brown, the leaves yellowing. One dead limb covered in white pox had branches that curled inward instead of seeking the sun. The leaves were discoloured at the tips, fading into an autumnal brown. On both sides of this tree, two young saplings grew exuberantly, encroaching on its space. The parent tree behind them, each branch choked by the white fungus, stood strong in defiance of the young interlopers.

He inspected the camphor, oak, the *butia bonetti* from Brazil, palm trees from Australia, and the sweet gum and swamp cypress from America. These were all places the Dutch ships frequented. He stroked the dwarf fan palm from Northern India and the broad leaf palm from Southern China. They’d come from the mythical East, his desired destination, where his pewter pot of gold was waiting.

He spent a long time in front of the first vine brought to the Cape three years after van Riebeeck arrived, admiring its gnarled roots and branches. The first wine, made in 1659 wasn't good, but now they were producing good wine. He picked a leaf and chewed on it thoughtfully.

Amberike exasperated him. Yesterday, when he had saved a pear whose seed had travelled in a seed box for six months across three oceans from Holland to be planted here in new soil, she had declined. She was testing his patience. He was saving her from a bad life yet the ignorant girl just kept running away from him. When she saw him coming she would disappear behind the nearest skirt.

Who was the hunter here? He knew what he wanted. And he wanted that little springbok. His tongue slipped over his teeth. He could taste her innocence and that made his quest more urgent. He wanted her willing, begging. Those dark eyes would soften; her body would lean forward... But she should learn culture and civilization only a white matron could teach her. That's why he had arranged for her to go to Anke.

His thoughts were never far from sensual matters. They flitted to other conquests and alighted on the redhead on the Dutch East Indiaman that had brought him to the Cape.

In his late twenties, he was tall, slender, with frown and smile lines equally deep, carved into a perfect oval of flawless skin. He was a good-looking specimen, even if he had to say so himself.

"Goedemiddag. Je mag mijn schip gebruiken," he'd said to the redhead. Assuming the role of the captain had amused him.

His smile lines started next to his nose and ended in dimples. The corners of his mouth had lifted in mirth and displayed these assets in their full glory. While he'd waited for her answer, he'd clasped his hands in front of him, a preacher at mass. Some said he had

horse teeth, but to him they were perfect. His teeth decorated his mouth, the top lip a cupid's bow.

She'd tossed her head at his impudence. But he could see that she was intrigued. When he smiled at her she was caressed by the sun. When he looked away it dipped. Unlike the obscene cleft she'd seen in the chins of lesser men, his was small, delicate.

Gallantly he'd taken the small trunk off her and accompanied her to the cabin paid for by her prospective husband waiting in the Cape. His eyes resting on her appreciatively, he'd winked, his smile brilliant. But when he placed the trunk on the ship floor his eyes were hooded, his frown deepened, his mouth hardened.

This change from smile to frown had caused her alarm. He could sense it. Then she looked into his eyes, the green-blue of a roiling sea. When he walked away he swung his shoulders, leading with the right, his arms stiff at his side. His right foot he threw to the side in a devil-may-care strut, the walk of a man in charge. He knew she was smitten.

What happened to her? Did she marry? By now she was probably thoroughly bored by life at the Cape. Women loved him, his eyes, and his shapely legs in breeches with a ribbon tied in a bow to hold it over his white cotton stockings. Wherever he went they flocked to him. All he had to do was look at them – not even an admiring glance – in this Cape of many men and few women. And if a woman intercepted his gaze from under coy lashes, there it was, romance, unasked for but always welcome.

Can one blame the sun for shining? Or the wind for lashing cold against your legs? He was a force of nature. His eyes could undress a lady forthwith, from her fichu, jacket, stomacher, and three skirts to her chemise. He could tell which ones had lace on their petticoats, or a nicely turned ankle.

Even slave women quivered before him. They would be falling at his feet if he didn't keep them upright with his stern gaze. Amberike didn't know it but she had fallen with her

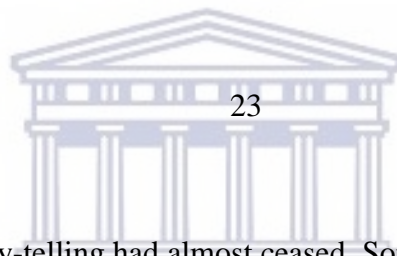
bare feet into the butter. He was offering her a gift, his full attention, and her response was fear? *Gadverdamme*. Did she not know that Egbert was a name derived from old Germanic meaning "bright edge", such as that of a blade? Yesterday when she saw him coming she'd hidden behind a body, he couldn't recall which one. He did not take that lightly.

Granted she was still young, but she had to learn her place. Women were there to serve men. Their hysterical nature prepared them for nothing else.

He stopped as he neared the summer house built by Simon van der Stel who had arrived in 1679 and retired in 1699 to make way for his son Willem Adriaan.

"Does Seur need someone for work?" A ragged body he didn't recognise.

"Get out of my sight."



Katy and Norman's story-telling had almost ceased. Sometimes they were both energetic enough for the effort but most times they let it lie. Katy determined to be more proactive. Their long days of doing nothing were taking their toll. Her brain and responses had slowed to the most important question of the day – what to cook for dinner.

After supper they sat in front of the television. Norman clicked from one channel to the next, searching for something to watch. He settled on a channel with an update of the infection rates.

"No, please, not that," Katy said. "It's depressing."

"At first it was interesting but now it's just plain scary." Norman switched off the television and turned to Katy. "So what should we do?" He looked at his watch. "Two hours to kill before bedtime."

"I can tell you about asking my family about thalassemia."

Norman groaned. “That sounds even more depressing.”

Her parents didn’t approve of Norman. He was fourteen years older than her. But the real reason was that Norman, when he was teaching at the high school, had reprimanded her brother Rohan in the first semester of grade 11. Rohan brought the history of the struggle for emancipation into the discussions in class. Their father, politically active and involved in various political organisations, was incensed and wrote a letter to the school which led to a meeting with the principal. Katy didn’t know what happened in the principal’s office, but later she could discern tension whenever she talked to Norman about her father.

Having been detained and tortured during the apartheid era, her father abhorred any sign of discrimination and reacted strongly.

“How about the story of how we met?”

“Right.” Norman gave a thumbs-up.

Katy stroked his arm lovingly. He smiled. She tossed her head, imitating his gesture when he tried to clear the hair out of his eyes. Mirroring was said to induce love in the person being mirrored. Dramatically she cleared her throat.

We met when I drove Rohan to the matric banquet. His date had stood him up at the last minute and he was miserable. Mum suggested that I accompany him. Rohan objected. “I get to go with my sister?” he moaned.

But Mum had given him one of her unnerving stares and he consented. However, when we arrived at the venue he hopped out, leaving me behind. “I’ll be the laughing stock of all my mates,” he said.

He left before I could explain that I had to wait for him otherwise he wouldn’t have a lift home.

I was bored listening to the matrics' loud partying, and opened the car door to get fresh air, and banged into the passenger door of the car parked next to me. "Are you alright?" someone asked. A tall, handsome man got out of the car.

Norman grinned.

Since then I've learnt that you had been assigned to oversee and limit the matrics' exuberance, but, remembering your own youth, you'd left them to enjoy their last function before embarking on their adult lives.

Katy smiled back at Norman. His face softened.

"Did I damage your car," I asked inspecting the door, assessing what Dad would say. A strip of paint on the edge of the door had been scraped off. Dad loved his car. He washed it every second day.

"Just a small scratch," you said, examining the door. You stared at me. I was so nervous I adjusted the strap of the off-the-shoulder gown I had worn to accompany Rohan to the ball, but he had ditched me as a date.

"You were beautiful in a navy dress," Norman interjected dreamily.

"It wasn't navy, it was midnight blue."

Katy continued her narration. *You asked, "Would you like to go for ice-cream?" "No thanks," I said. In my family, because of my father's politics it was not the norm to date a white man, especially an older white man who was the teacher of a sibling. You got into your car and left.*

Later you returned with two ice-creams. You handed me one through the open window. I dropped the ice-cream onto the grass when I reached for it. I'm not sure why I was so clumsy that day.

"I remember that," Norman said, laughing. "Admit it. You were hooked. Like a love-sick puppy."

Katy joined in, spontaneously indulging in her full-throated unrestrained belly laugh.
“In your dreams.”

Norman reached over and patted her knee.

Katy continued. *Anyway I searched the surrounding area to see who had noticed us. I'd never been alone with a white man before. I said, "Please, we shouldn't be seen together." You said, "Give me your number then."*

I was reluctant. I'd heard stories of white men fraternising with non-white women under the cover of darkness, and leaving them pregnant and destitute. But I gazed into your eyes and gave you my number.

“There, I told you, you fell for me,” Norman joked.

Katy smiled tenderly. *Our friendship, mostly conversation from a public telephone booth, and meeting on your sister Sonia's farm, grew into love. Your brother-in-law John, one of the few enlightened whites, had participated in the struggle against apartheid.*

“For me it was love at first sight.” Norman declared. “What did you think of this old Boer approaching you?”

Katy giggled. “You were quite sweet.”

“I was, wasn't I?” He reached out to touch her again but let his hand fall to his side. “I wanted to give you so much.”

“And you have.”

“You would've done much better with a man your own age. Instead you have an old fart like me.”

Katy racked her brain to come up with the appropriate words to say, words that would lead them to find each other instead of fencing like this. But she couldn't find any.

“I think I'll read for a while.” She picked up her book from the coffee table.

“Go ahead. Don't mind me.”

Katy read without seeing the page. She watched Norman from the corner of her eye, he was nodding off. If only her parents had tried to get to know him they would've realised what a strong, gentle man he was.

Although Norman wasn't interested to hear about it, Katy experienced sadness when she recalled talking to her mother about thalassemia. It foregrounded their estrangement.

"Hi Mum." She'd practised various greetings but in the end that was what she said.

"Is it—"

"Yes, it's me." Katy took a deep breath; she had not spoken to her mother since she and Norman had eloped to the neighbouring kingdom of Swaziland.

Mum shouted to someone in the background, "It's Katy!"

"Who?" Katy recognised her father's voice.

"Katy!" her mother screamed in her ear. Dad was deaf.

"What does she want now? She's back in the country for so long and she never thought to come and see us."

Katy's fingers tightened around the receiver. She'd been fearful to contact her family.

"I don't know," Mum said.

"She still owes me for my car. It cost me a fortune to fix it. She was supposed to pay me back but she just disappeared. Tell her to leave us alone."

To Katy his last sentence came as a visceral blow. This was going to be more difficult than she thought.

Mum closed the telephone with her hand, but Katy could still hear her gently scolding Dad. She made out the words “still your daughter” and “forgive and forget.”

“He married her to spite me,” Dad huffed.

“That’s not true,” Katy said.

“She says it’s not true,” Mum related her answer to Dad who made a sound of disdain.

“How are you?” Mum asked cautiously, caught between loyalty to her husband and errant daughter.

“I’m fine.”

“That’s good.”

Silence followed.

“And how are you?” Katy stuttered.

“I’m also fine.”

“Oh.” Katy swallowed, “And how is Dad?”

“He’s still his old, stubborn self.”

“What did you say?” Dad in the background.

“She’s asking about you,” Mum said to Dad.

“Tell her I’ve never been better,” Dad shouted.

“You heard?” Mum enquired.

“Yes. I’m glad he’s okay.” It was now or never. Katy held the telephone so tight against her ear that it hurt. “Mum I have to ask you something.”

“Ask away.”

“Who’s going away?” Dad in the background.

“Shush,” Mum said to Dad. “Please go and check the oven.” Katy heard Dad’s receding footsteps. “What is it, my child?”

Katy started crying silent tears. With an effort she kept her voice neutral. “Do you know of anyone who has a genetic disease in our family? My daughter Amy has thalassemia,” Katy said, speaking too loud.

“Thala-what?”

“A disease of the blood.”

“No. Your father and I have healthy blood. But you would think that the problem lies with our family, wouldn’t you? What about the in-breeding of the Afrikaners?”

“Please, Mum.” Katy sniffed. Her generation was not so hung up on race.

Mum softened. “Well, there was Aunty Sharon from Nelspruit who wasn’t all there. You met her when you were only a baby and won’t remember. And a cousin, Jeffrey I think his name was – from your father’s side – who had a big belly and a deformed face.”

“I didn’t know that.”

Silence.

“Thanks,” Katy whispered.

“How is the old man?” Mum said. “He must be a good age by now —old enough to be your father. People probably mistake him for Amy’s grandfather.”

“He’s fine.”

“And how are you coping, being an old Boer’s wife?”

“I’m good.” A steely note had crept into Katy’s voice. “He’s a wonderful husband.”

“And Amy is your daughter? Do you have any other children?”

“No.” Katy remembered her miscarriages, wishing she could speak to Mum about it.

“Are you still on the telephone?” Dad hissed. Katy had not heard him re-enter the room.

“I have to go now. Now that he is retired Dad watches *Sewende Laan*.”

Dad was retired? She did not know that. She always just assumed he would work as a signwriter forever.

Overcome by emotion Katy said, "That's alright. Bye, Mum, and thanks." Warily, she put the phone down. She'd forgotten to ask about Kaatje.

24

*Slavery, O Slavery! I cannot conceive
Why judges and magistrates do not relieve
My down-trodden people from under thy hand,
Restore them their freedom, and give them their land ...*

"Address to Slavery", a poem by Samuel Wright

They'd been walking for an hour with the Cook pointing out interesting trees and shrubs to Amberike. He stopped to admire the foreign flora, wondering what their names were. Maria had reluctantly given permission for Amberike to accompany the Cook to visit his friend Bossie.

Amberike trailed behind, uneasy and timid. The Cook kept stopping, waiting, trying to discern how to put her at ease. He told her that among the Khoi each cow, ox or calf had a name.

They approached fourteen huts in a circle under a huge iron wood tree. The round huts were made of young trees planted in the ground and tied together with leather thongs to make a frame for the reed mats that were placed over them, a portable house which could be disassembled and packed onto the long-horned cattle grazing nearby when the season ended.

Six hunting dogs started barking. Children were playing with mud oxen. They chattered as the Cook and Amberike approached. One gave his ox to Amberike.

“Thank you.” She knelt and grazed her toy animal on the grass to the delight of the children.

Bossie came out of the biggest hut. He gave a command and the dogs subsided. “You came. I’m honoured.” Bossie’s wrinkled face creased further into a smile.

“We are humbled by your invitation.” The Cook turned towards Amberike. “I brought the one I told you about.”

Bossie put his head to one side. “I’m happy to meet you.”

Amberike placed her hands together and bowed.

“Welcome.” Bossie indicated for them to enter his hut.

The Cook bent to get into the low door of the hut. Amberike followed. Bossie’s wife, even more wrinkled than him, was waiting inside. The Cook and Amberike sat on a grass mat, quite close to each other. The Cook’s heart raced, he moved respectfully towards the edge of the mat.

Bossie’s wife poured sour milk into an earthen mug. Inside the hut it was cool, a welcome change from the heat of the midday sun. The Cook relished the tart, refreshing drink, and passed it to Amberike. When she handed it back he tried to put his mouth in the exact place where Amberike had sipped.

“You’ve just performed the Khoi way of courtship by sharing a cup,” Bossie said.

Amberike blushed. The Cook, noticing, asked Bossie where he was from. He told them about his journey from the north, across the Drakensberg Mountains, to seek grazing for his livestock. His sheep and cattle were growing fat on the Cape grass.

“We will move away when winter comes,” he concluded.

The Cook in turn spoke about his long journey from his homeland in the East to the Cape, leaving out details such as being transported on a slave ship.

Bossie followed up with an intriguing story about a red-haired white man with a fat stomach who sweated a lot. The latter had come to barter cattle, but stole cows and a little boy.

“Do you know him?” Bossie asked.

“I don’t believe I do.”

“I think you work for him sometimes.”

“Baas Meine?”

“Yes, he is a bad one that one.”

The Cook turned to Amberike. “I saw the little boy but thought he belonged to one of the seasonal workers who came to help with the harvest.”

Bossie took out tobacco; he offered some to the Cook who declined. The latter didn’t smoke nor drink wine and other strong spirits. Bossie rolled the tobacco. When he was done he studied the Cook and Amberike. “Bring him home. His mother is sad.”

The Cook contemplated his hands. It was impossible. It would place him in extreme danger.

Bossie laughed. “I’m jesting. I will fetch him myself.”

Outside they heard chanting.

“They’re waiting for us.” Bossie led the way to a procession of men and women stamping their feet, singing and dancing in a circle.

It was a hypnotic song accompanied by a small drum held by an old woman. On and on they went until they appeared to go into a trance. Amberike joined them, taking up the rear of the snake. The Cook was pleased at her spontaneous decision to participate in the dancing. He wouldn’t join them in spite of numerous invitations – his feet were unsuited to stomping.

The sun was setting when they embarked on the way home. Amberike walked next to the Cook, animatedly talking about their visit.

“Thank you for accompanying me,” the Cook said.

“I rather enjoyed it.”

“They are good people. What you see is how they are. We could maybe do it again?”

Amberike hesitated. “I like them but —”

“Me too. There I see Maria waiting. She has her hands on her hips. That is a bad sign.”

*Blest Babe ! it at length has withdrawn,
The Seraph have rocked it to sleep;*

“On the Death of an Infant”, a poem by Phillis Wheatley

The Cook worked under the oak tree on Verkeerdevallei braiding a *riem*. He was on loan for the day. Anke used the influence of a family member in the VOC to wrangle access to company slaves when Meine needed extra hands. The Cook wasn't sure if it was legal but it was not his concern. He saw Amberike when he worked here, which gladdened his heart.

In Meine's absence – he had gone to a neighbouring farm – Egbert and Anke sat on the veranda, drinking coffee.

Since the Cook had not joined Egbert in laughing at Arrie when they met earlier, tension had come between them. Whenever they met Egbert stopped to glare at him. The Cook thought it best to pretend not to notice and usually walked away. Even now he was sitting with his back against the trunk of the tree, invisible in its shadow.

Mankbeen sang where he was busy sweeping the yard with a broom made of tall grass. “So early in the morning,” He loved to sing. He was always humming and warbling, doing a little jig when no one was looking. The words didn't matter; he would choose a

phrase and sing it the whole day. He had been doing it since he arrived on the farm, since he had been sold away from his mother. Countless whippings could not cure him. He simply seemed to forget. “So early in the morning.”

“I’m not going to tell you again. Keep quiet!” Anke said.

She rose, went into the house and came out with Meine’s best whip of hippo hide. She flicked it across Mankbeen’s shoulders. He uttered a howl.

Egbert said, “That’s right, show him how to behave. Singing is against the law.”

Before he could think the words came out of the Cook’s mouth. “That’s not true,” he said and bit his bottom lip. Working on Meine’s farm afforded him the privilege to watch over Amberike and he had just risked that by correcting a slave owner.

Egbert head snapped back. He jumped up. “Who asked you?”

The Cook thought of explaining what he meant, that it used to be a law but was no longer one. But he recognised the folly in that as Egbert strode towards him, his blue eyes flinty.

“Forgive me, Seur. I wasn’t thinking.” The Cook lowered his head.

“Be careful, sour face. All you Eastern slaves are the same; you have no respect, always running amok.” Egbert wiped his brow, it was a sweltering summer. He looked at Anke. After her exertion she was breathing fast, her bosom going up and down, fine beads of sweat on her upper lip. He forgot his duty to punish the insolent slave.

“It’s so hot. Let’s go inside,” he said to Anke.

Anke dabbed at her wet bodice with a lacy cloth. “I have cheese and lemonade.”

“What type of cheese?” Egbert’s tongue briefly touched his lips.

Anke smiled coyly. “You’ll see.”

She went into the house followed by Egbert.

The Cook had learned not to have an opinion about what the masters did. He turned to Mankbeen. “What’s that song you’re always singing?”

Mankbeen had resumed his sweeping, sniffing loudly. “Meijnheer?” Mankbeen sometimes muddled the difference between how to address an older slave and how to speak to a master and often thought it better to err on the side of caution.

“It’s always the same tune. The words change but it’s always the same tune.”

“My mother used to sing it to me.”

“So you sing to forget but also to remember,” the Cook said under his breath.

“Meijnheer?” Mankbeen put his hand on his back, rubbing it like an old man.

The Cook looked at Mankbeen’s tattered shirt. He judged the boy to be about eight, maybe ten. Not that age mattered. Nobody cared about your name or your age. “You can call me Mustapha. Have you ever heard of Allah, the most glorified?”

“Does he live here?”

“In a manner of speaking, yes, Allah is god, the only god, and we are his subjects.”

Incomprehension shone in the dark eyes. The boy wiped his snot on his sleeve and started singing again.

The Cook returned to his work on the rope. His back itched. It had healed but ropes of excessive skin had grown out of the wounds. They bulged like snakes under his shirt. He scratched gently there where he could reach and pressed his back against the tree.

He’d befriended Mankbeen to convert him by telling him about Sheikh Yusuf who was banished to the Cape in 1694. He admired the determined cheerfulness of the little fellow. Why this morning he was singing “It’s such a good day,” on a cold, rainy winter morning. Still using the same tune and with such gusto.

“That was a good song, my friend.” The Cook slapped Mankbeen on the back, and rewarded him with a warm smile.

The Cook rarely smiled. There was nothing to smile about. He had had five owners, all irascible men determined to break the spirit of all those around them; self-proclaimed gods who brooked no opposition – not from slave, wife or child.

He was attracted to Mankbeen's spirit, how did he do it? He had lost his mother, and his previous home. Heaven knows what happened to his mangled leg and still he found reason to sing. The Cook was in need of such brightness.

"I want to teach you how to defend yourself," he said during a lull in the singing. Ever the pessimist, he saw no reason not to prepare the youngster for tougher times. Slave men were tempestuous.

Mankbeen stood eagerly in front of him.

"Make a fist. No not like that." The Cook put away the rope he was braiding. "Let me show you. Now, hold up your hands, like this." Mankbeen was beside himself with excitement.

"Put your one leg back to steady yourself. No, that's not working. The other leg is too short. Just stand firm. Now punch, punch. You're a natural."

Mankbeen did a little jig, punching the air.

The Cook saw Egbert and Amberike returning. "Get back to work. That was your first lesson."

Mankbeen skipped away singing "I am a fighter na-na-na."

The Cook suppressed a smile.

Amberike was sitting in her chosen place at the well. The sun was warm on her chest. She saw the *mandoor* walking towards her and got up, uncertain. Was she supposed to have reported for work somewhere? Her duties were to help Maria and go to Mevrouw?

One of the residents of the lodge walked past, a woman. “Don’t you have work? We are all working here.”

Amberike put her hand on her chest. She’d heard whispers. The others said that she was getting preferential treatment. That she should’ve joined them long ago at the public works or the silver mine where the women of the lodge were employed to crawl through small spaces. (Maria had done it before she became the matron.)

“Watch out for these women,” Maria had warned. “They have sharp nails. Master Egbert’s interest can get you into trouble.” Amberike was bewildered. Was he interested in her? She hadn’t noticed. She touched her birth mark. She struggled to live with such enmity. What had she done? She was still the same Amberike, still greeted everyone. And now the *mandoor* was walking towards her with such a purposeful stride. Should she speak to him? What would Maria say? But he was the overseer?

“Good morning,” Arrie said.

“Morning.” Amberike played with the end of her long plait. Maria had told her that her hair must be piled up under her headcloth but sometimes she forgot. “Did I do something wrong?” She twisted her hair around her fingers.

Arrie’s eyes followed the movement of her hands. “I just came to ask how you are.”

Amberike put her hands behind her back. “Me?” She averted her gaze to hide her surprise. “I’m better.”

“That’s good news. Did you get the blanket I sent for you?”

Amberike looked up into his face far above her, and noticed he had green eyes. From afar she'd seen his blonde hair and deep brown skin but this was the first time she was this close. Freckles were sprinkled on his nose.

She coughed, embarrassed. "Yes, thanks."

Arrie smiled. "I'm glad. If you need anything, just ask. Would you walk with me?"

"Maria doesn't want me to—" She remembered his authority sat just under the masters'. Surely she couldn't disobey? She followed him. He walked in front of her, his tall body erect.

They reached two men digging a grave. One was hidden inside the hole in the ground working up a dust cloud while the other stood at the edge peering down at him. Amberike recognised the latter as Frans who occasionally worked with the Cook. When he noticed the *mandoor* he took up his spade to tidy the mound of sand beside the grave.

"Come come, we haven't all day. You should've finished already." Arrie planted his big feet beside the grave, arms akimbo.

Frans gave Arrie a tart look. "We're almost done."

Amberike became uncomfortable under Frans' frank admiration. She pulled at her hem to cover her ankles.

Arrie stepped forward, blocking Frans' view of Amberike. "Let's go." He strode back to the lodge. Amberike trailed behind.

"Do you always walk behind people?" He waited for her to catch up. They walked together for a while.

"Do you know what a quagga is?"

Amberike tested the word in her mouth, quagga, quagga. It sounded like it should have a click at the start. "I don't know what it is. Should I?"

Arrie reddened. “No. I just want to tell you that the grave is for someone who was kicked by one. A quagga looks like a horse, but smaller. It is rounder with stripes.’

“Stripes?” Amberike had not seen an animal with stripes. It sounded comical. She giggled, clamping her hand over her mouth.

“They use it for candles. They take what they need and leave the rest.”

Amberike was confused but nodded anyway. They had reached the lodge.

“They get through many.” Arrie picked a grass stem and started chewing on it.

“You’re working on Baas Meine’s farm now, aren’t you?”

Amberike thought if he was the *mandoor* he should know that. “Yes.”

“Have you heard any stories about my brother?”

Another person accusing her of listening to gossip. Amberike squared her shoulders.

“No, I haven’t heard anything. I don’t—”

“They cut off his head.” Arrie had a distant look in his eyes. He shivered.

“Oh.” Amberike put a hand on her throat.

“I’m not like him; he was a fool, rebellious, and a troublemaker. And he died for that, but I’m different. As you can see I’ve worked hard and received recognition.”

Amberike knew he was waiting for a response and she didn’t know what to say. She’d heard about his brother and that some thought him a hero. She fiddled with her hair.

“I haven’t told this to anyone, but since my brother died I keep hearing someone sneezing.”

Amberike was still searching for an answer to his previous statement and wasn’t listening.

“Thanks for your company.” Abruptly he strode away.

“There you are. Come this instant. You cannot just sneak away like that. You have to work.” Maria appeared, wiping her hands with her apron.

Amberike was hanging up Maria's washing when three women came to her. She'd seen them around the lodge but she had not spoken to any of them. "Good afternoon."

The first to approach, a young woman thin as a rake, flashed a toothless grin. "What do you have that we don't?"

"Pardon me, I don't understand." Alarmed, Amberike searched for a familiar face but the courtyard was deserted.

The second one, with auburn curls, laughed. "Well, let's see." She walked menacingly towards Amberike, her eyes cold.

Amberike stepped further back, touching her birth mark. "If I said or did something to hurt you I apologise."

She turned her head, searching for an escape, to run, but there was a third one behind her. Maybe they wanted her new dress. "I can give you this dress if you want. Really, it's no problem. I still have the old one."

The third one gripped Amberike's arm. "You want to be grown up before your time. We'll show you."

They pounced on Amberike. One grabbed her hair and pulled while the others lifted her dress. Amberike put up a hand to free her hair from the hand that was pulling too hard, hurting her, and felt the rough hand on her groin. The humiliation made her face burn.

They hooted with laughter. "You're still a baby."

One sniffed her hand, and pretended to sneeze. The other scraped her nails across Amberike's cheek. They left, as suddenly as they came.

Amberike wiped her cheek with her palm and examined the blood on her fingers. She had fallen down on the grass in a foetal position. She cried hysterically but tried to do it noiselessly by stuffing her fist into her mouth. Do not bring any attention to yourself. Maria's voice echoed in her head.

She heard Maria calling. She straightened her dress, dusting off dirt and stems of grass.

Maria's eyes narrowed when she saw her. "What happened to you?"

"Nothing." Amberike was afraid that if she told Maria the women would return.

"It doesn't look like nothing to me. Out with it."

Amberike was torn between her fear of Maria and her fear of the three women. Maria grabbed Amberike's chin and studied the scratch on her cheek for what seemed like a long time, and appeared to come to a decision.

"Did you hang up my dress and underskirt like I asked you to?"

Amberike remembered the task she had to complete. "I'm not sure. I'll go and see if I did."

Relieved to get away from Maria she returned to the courtyard. There was no one there. She had in fact hung Maria's clothes. She re-arranged them on the line and went back to Maria to report.

"My friend drove past the station in Phillippi. He says because the trains aren't running people have moved in and built their shacks on the railway lines," Norman said. He'd just come back from the supermarket.

“I suppose there are no passengers. And with the severe lack of housing in this country—”

“I suppose it was inevitable,” Norman interrupted. “I didn’t believe him but he had a photo, look here.”

Katy studied a blue shack sitting precariously on two rusted train tracks. It had a fence around it, an open door. A woman with a baby on her back was washing clothes in a tub and two shirts were flapping from a pole to dry. A man, shirtless, sat on a stool beside a fire rolling a zol. Gay yellow flowers grew on the side of the house. A dog slept in the sun.

Norman put his head in his hands. “It’s the central line in and out of the city for God’s sake. They have stolen the cables, the paving on the platform, the stair railings. They are digging pit latrines!”

Katy knew that he was about to have his tirade about the state of the country. As her father had been involved in the anti-apartheid struggle she somehow felt responsible, embarrassed even, about the failings of the new government. “Do you want to hear the story about Kaatje’s first trip in a train?”

“She’d better not live in one, or on the tracks.” Norman wiped his hand across his face, a gesture of angry despair.

“No, she didn’t.”

“Do you know what they’ve called this informal settlement? Lockdown!” Norman said.

Katy exited the lounge to make coffee and rusks, and brought the tray to Norman.

“*Boeretros*. Thank you.” He stirred in three teaspoons of sugar and dunked the rusk in the milky coffee. “You can start your story.”

Katy swallowed and plunged in.

Kaatje and her husband were in a rural area. Red dust coated the passage of their “hotel”, a rambling house on the outskirts of a town. Dust bunnies and dried twigs rolled in the wind that came down a staircase that led to the sky. Their room had two beds covered with cerise bedspreads and a broken cement floor.

Kaatje walked down the long passage not knowing where their room was. She tried to find landmarks, a side passage that led to a grubby window; the staircase ... How far down was it? She tried to count the doors with torn pictures pasted on them. She marched up, down, stopping here and there, where was it. Finally she saw Jacob on the cerise bedspread; he was looking out towards her. Did he not see her walk past? Why didn't he call her, he must have seen that she was lost. She tried to wave and stumbled on clothes covered with dust. She recognised his threadbare jeans.

“What's this doing here in the passage?” she asked, holding it up.

“Someone is coming to wash it.”

“Oh.” She put the jeans down and shook the dust from a shirt.

“Leave it,” he said

She saw movement and peered into the room next to theirs. A woman, tall, lean with a scarf wrapped like a turban around her head, was making the bed. Kaatje wanted to ask her if she was the one who would wash their clothes. Her voice wouldn't come. She tried again, nothing.

Jacob added more clothes to the pile.

She cuffed him on the head with her bag because he had not informed her of his intention to have their clothes washed, then turned and retraced her steps. “I'm going to the market. Are you coming?” she said.

He passed her and walked ahead. Other men joined him.

Her bag, heavy on her shoulder, cut into her clavicle. She followed, wobbling on her heels, falling behind. She wasn't used to shoes, they pinched her little toe which had grown upwards without the constraint of habitual footwear.

Norman was frowning; "On the train tracks!" Her idea to distract him wasn't working. Nevertheless she continued.

A homeless boy accosted her. "Please Aunty, a penny for food."

She searched for a coin in her bag, pushing away the fried lamb chop in a brown paper bag that was part of their padkos on the train. "I have nothing."

The fat-cakes she had made for their journey on the train to the nearest station at Wellington had been eaten. A cousin had said that she'd heard that Kaatje's mother lived nearby, and that a train served the wine lands. Frenchhoek was sure to be close by. She was excited at the prospect of seeing her mother again.

Kaatje had nagged Jacob to arrange the trip after they finally left their last farm. She had to find her mother. He'd complained about the cost because taxes had increased and wages were down but eventually, after many years, they had enough pounds saved.

At the station Kaatje gawked at the railway tracks. Soon a pitch-black locomotive with puffing smoke thundered into the station, blowing its whistle. Kaatje screamed, she'd not seen a train before. She'd grabbed Jacob's arm. "We don't really have to go."

He shook off her arm. "Come. There's nothing to be afraid of. Look. The iron horse is wearing an apron like you."

Kaatje stared at the front grille; thinking it may look like an apron —to scoop people's brains off the track! She wrenched free and started to run. Jacob caught up in two strides, picked her up and handed her into the train car.

She beat on his chest. "Put me down."

He laughed, and gently placing her on her feet, kissed her forehead. “You are one of the most scared people I know.”

No doubt he thought how stupid she was again because there was no trace that her mother had ever lived in Frenchhoek.

When Kaatje finally reached the door of their humble accommodation, Jacob was gone. Her heart galloped, she looked up and down the street. She didn't know which way to turn.

She chose a direction and walked as fast as she could. The road, a foot path really, led towards a village on a dusty slope. She turned again and followed another path which led to an old building. Directionless she turned yet again.

“Where's the market?” she asked a woman, brown like her.

“That way.” The woman smiled, revealing missing front teeth.

She followed the broad, scraped road indicated. It ended in the veld. Again she asked for directions, her palms sweating. The sun was going down. She followed the latest directions, praying that this time it would be correct, and it was.

Katy glanced at Norman. She had just related a dream she had the previous night. It had come out as a jumbled story that reflected her unease. She had punctuated her story with nervous laughter. She was deeper in the quagmire of disquiet than when she started.

Kaatje had a secret that she couldn't share in the interview with the newspaper. She'd been born with the caul over her head and, unbeknown to most, she had the gift of prophecy. It wasn't very accurate because she had not developed it but occasionally, when it was tested and proved true, she stood in awe of it.

It had been handed down in her family. Her seed grandmother had predicted that a ship with billowing sails would come to Madagascar to take her and her son across the sea to

a strange place. “And when that day comes I’ll be ready,” she’d said, packing a small bag with dried seeds and herbs.

Katy put her face in her hands. “Sorry I can’t continue. This land has a lot of people who can’t rest.”

“Do you believe in ghosts?” Norman asked.

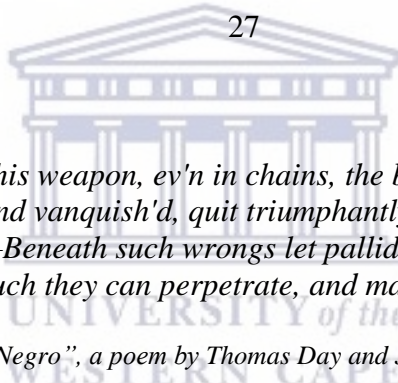
“I don’t know. I haven’t seen one if that’s what you’re asking.”

“Maybe I should look over your left shoulder.” Norman approached.

Katy backed away. “Let’s not look for them.”

They smiled at each other, a grimace to relieve the tension.

27



*This weapon, ev'n in chains, the brave can wield,
And vanquish'd, quit triumphantly the field:
—Beneath such wrongs let pallid Christians live,
Such they can perpetrate, and may forgive.*

“The Dying Negro”, a poem by Thomas Day and John Bicknell (1773)

After working on his translation for a while Egbert thought it wise to have practical experience. So far he had only managed to write a guide on *How to Punish a Slave*, his own contribution. However, a good master had to subdue his slave before they reached the stage of punishment.

On his desk, next to his drawings of experimental torture instruments lay a book with the handwritten title *What if*. In it he annotated his research. Currently he was making notes on what if a needle penetrated an eye? He wanted to add to the normal coterie of punishments prescribed by the VOC such as beheading, breaking on the wheel, hanging, impaling.

He cursed Meine who had not trusted him enough to train Meine's slaves. And because of that he had to dip into his own pocket. *Gadverdamme*. But training his own slaves would give him insight. He would add a few comments in his translation from English to Dutch. He didn't really trust the English, they were hated competitors.

He'd wrangled an agreement from Meine to place his slaves with Meine's workers at Verkeerdevallei. He was sure Anke had a hand in Meine's acquiescence. His investment in her had been worthwhile. She was not high on his list of preferred conquests but everything required a sacrifice.

Meine had welcomed Egbert to prospective slave ownership with a sermon and ended with: "We are the chosen people and don't you forget it." Supercilious buffoon. He had a clutch of verses which he repeated from memory. His favoured one was 1 Peter 2:18: Slaves, submit yourselves to your masters with all respect, not only to those who are good and considerate, but also to those who are harsh.

Egbert wasn't religious, couldn't stand the quoting of Bible verses. The assertion that they were God's chosen people chafed him. If there was a God why did he allow his followers to lose wars? Look at the Spanish madness that had laid waste to his home country. Why did God command his popes to search and destroy people who didn't agree with their Catholic faith?

No, he wasn't as cosy with God as his father was. The latter had looked to the church his whole life, for community, for worship, and even for recreation. Egbert's nod to religion was expedient. In order to do business at the Cape you had to go to church. Period. And he, Egbert, was a practical man.

"God bless you," he'd mumbled to Meine's disappearing back.

He looked in the Cape newspaper for advertisements and found an announcement for the sale of a young woman, her husband and their three-year-old boy. Slave prices tended to

fluctuate and they had gone down since he last checked. Three for the price of one. Perfect. The outlay would use up his savings but he would recoup it in book sales.

On the appointed day he walked over to the slave tree behind the slave lodge. A crowd was already gathered. The settlers were happy to meet old acquaintances, smoking their pipes and catching up on each other's news. There was a carnival atmosphere. Egbert stood a little apart from the main crowd. He didn't like meaningless chatter.

The woman and her child walked to the slave tree. Egbert studied her, she was probably from Madagascar. Most settlers held views about the qualities of slaves, based on their origin. Madagascar was good—hard workers.

The auctioneer started the bidding. Some settlers wanted the woman, others the man.

“How much for the whole family?” Egbert asked from the back.

There were rumbles of disapproval. A settler with a stomach almost hanging to his knees said, “That's not a good idea. You have to split them; otherwise they'll plot against you.” The others grumbled their agreement.

“Mind your own business,” Egbert said.

The man moved away, followed by a few others. Nobody had time for such foolishness. Egbert could guess their thoughts, to be rude when a concerned settler tried to give good advice was just arrogant. Everyone stopped bidding. *Wie niet wil horen moet voelen.*

Pleased, Egbert ushered the unkempt family onto his wagon. “You sit in front,” he said to the woman. “Your name will be Siena.” He pointed to the man. “Fielies.”

“Who, me?” The male put his index finger on his own chest.

“Yes you, you lazy *kut*.”

“Yes, Seur.’

“Walk next to the wagon.”

“Yes, Seur.”

“Carry the child.”

After a few miles to Meine’s farm, Fielies started lagging behind. Siena craned her neck, worried about the child who was hanging low, slipping from Fielies’ grasp.

“Eyes to the front.”

“Yes, Seur.” Still, she tried to sneak a backward glance every time she thought it safe. The tired Fielies had slung the child over his shoulder like a sack of mielies. Siena frowned and frowned.

Egbert started whistling, his experiment was going to give him hours of pleasure. Pitch male against male, female against male, that was what his handbook said.



28

“Another story, please.” Norman had showered and kept an appointment with Katy as she cleared the breakfast dishes and tidied the kitchen.

“Sure. Take a seat.” In spite of the disastrous tale the previous night Katy enjoyed their time together. For a brief time it took them away from the gloom of their confinement.

Kaatje was sad; she was living in town after the abolition of slavery. She sat on her low stool, feeding her grandson’s baby and watching the street. Her friend Bella’s grandson had brought the news that Bella had died, and she was expecting him back with news of the funeral arrangements.

“How did she die?” Kaatje had asked.

In her sleep, Ouma. My wife went to wake her with tea at five o clock and discovered her ice-cold.’

Kaatje nodded, wiping pumpkin from the baby's chin. He blew a bubble. She picked him up and kissed his chubby cheek. It was good that her friend had a peaceful death. All her other contemporaries were long dead. She did not know why God had granted her such a long life.

Her husband Jacob had died when he was only in his fifties. He had remained an angry man. His master chasing him off the farm like that, and being unable to get an apprenticeship as a skilled woodworker, had left a boil that just kept festering.

Due to his lack of education he was unable to find work or join the woodworkers' guild. He was excluded from it.

With each story Katy found it easier to talk about the issues that had remained unspoken between her and Norman, such as race, culture and the differences between them.

Bella had lived two streets away and Kaatje would walk over. They would make tea and discuss their past in whispers. Whenever someone came close they would stop talking. Occasionally they burst into spontaneous laughter at this or that foolish master or mevrouw. They'd come to a feeling of disgrace because they had allowed bad things to happen to them. Kaatje was especially upset about what Mr van Niekerk had done to her.

"Show me your petticoat," Mr van Niekerk had said. When he got up off her he removed Kaatje's hat, dusted it off and put it under his own. He imitated her fake male stance, smoking her clay pipe.

"What do you have in here, cattle dung?" He coughed, splattered and broke the pipe with his heel. He threw the pipe into the bushes, swearing in rhymes. He took her torn jacket.

"Please." She reached for it. It was necessary for future herding.

He tore it further.

After that Kaatje learnt that her task was to make her abuse as comfortable as possible for everybody. The integrity of her body violated. Smile. Her possessions destroyed.

Be affable. She had to make herself as small as her muscular body would allow. It was at the behest of the masters and, for that reason, she had acquired an appropriate stoop.

Her thoughts were interrupted by Bella's grandson approaching.

"When is the funeral?" she shouted when he was still a few feet away.

"On Saturday."

"Tell your mother we'll come round later."

He tried to hide his surprise at the dismissal; he'd expected his usual cup of tea.

"Okay, Ouma." He turned and retraced his steps.

Kaatje didn't want him to enter the house and see the un-emptied chamber pot or the unwashed dishes. She was sluggish, her heart heavy with grief.

She burped the baby and put him on the bed to sleep; arranging pillows around him to make a nest. Opening the old battered kist she had brought from the farm, her only possession, she took out her long black dress and shawl. A tram trundled past, shaking the hovel. Kaatje nabbed a tear before it could reach her cheek. Bella also had a terrible master, but now she would rest.

She tenderly stroked the kist. She'd lived long enough to feel the aftermath of slavery, to see it around her. As she'd told the nice man from the newspaper, there was too much shouting. People were angry, and, given a start with earning wine as wages, they were drinking too much.

There were no schools, children congregated at corners, gambling with small change and telling stories, laughing, always laughing. What did they have to laugh about? Old men sat around aimlessly and the young adults had coalesced into gangs.

She and Jacob had not achieved their dreams. He wanted to work for her. She remembered how excited they were. She'd emerged from slavery with high hopes but the fact that someone hadn't seen her as human gnawed her self-esteem like a rat nibbling on wood.

She'd found herself reluctant to discuss her past. She and Bella had been in agreement, talking about it upset their families. When her grandchildren told their friends she'd been a real slave and the friends wanted her to relay her stories of slavery, her grandchildren cringed.

She'd had time to reflect and saw now that her mistress had been selfish. She didn't realise what she was asking. "Stay, Grietje," she'd said, "the children will miss you." But whose children were they? They were not hers. And were they not children who'd been schooled to love a slave mother until they were old enough to reject her?

Katy saw Norman squirming. She swallowed, continued.

Jacob didn't forgive her. Until his death, he referred to her as a stupid woman for staying on as a slave after abolition. She had begun to think that slavery was an unconfessed sin. It was as if it had never happened. But how could she deny the helpless fear it had caused in her bones? She still woke in a sweat, dreaming of wearing men's clothes to avoid assault or rape – not that that had helped.

At Bella's funeral people stared at her in her long black dress, white cape and kapje. They whispered and pointed. She could read their lips, "There's a slave."

"Wow." Norman was embarrassed. "That was quite a story."

"Today the commemoration of the concentration camps during the Anglo-Boer war doesn't mention that there was a separate camp for black and brown slaves with half the meagre rations of the white people interned."

Norman went red, and hurried out.

Katy had allowed her anger to show. The anger she'd buried in order to make her marriage work; the anger that manifested when dark-skinned people talked about racism and oppression among themselves, but hid from their lighter-skinned compatriots. Worse, she'd trampled on hallowed ground – the Afrikaner grief over the British concentration camps. She

deeply regretted it and hoped Norman would forgive her. He had grown to love the stories about Kaatje and Katy was happy telling them, it made their isolation easier. Now she had blown it. Would he hate her for it?

Katy had inherited an uncomfortable feeling at being “Coloured”, a racial category that had been created to include all the former slaves, the Khoi and the San. Most of her family shared this classification. They were embarrassed by the annual parade of the Cape Minstrels, who celebrated the one day of the year when slaves were given a day off, by singing Dutch and Eastern melodies, some about life during slavery.

Moreover, Katy’s mother was ashamed of Kaaps, a new version of an older Afrikaans that had originated in the Cape, and they spoke only the “standard”, the official version developed by Afrikaners during apartheid. Mum was prickly about not having a culture, as people said.

Defiantly Katy hummed the well-known “Daar kom die Alibama” about a Confederate ship at the Cape in 1863 during the American Civil War; then launched full-throated into the second and third verse.

Nooi Nooi die rietkooi nooi,

Die rietkooi is gemaak

Die rietkooi is vir my gemaak,

Om daarop te slap

Nooi Nooi die rietkooi nooi,

Die rietkooi is gemaak

Die rietkooi is vir my gemaak,

Om daarop te slaap

Die Alibama, die Alibama,

kom oor die see

Die Alibama, die Alibama,

kom oor die see

She ended with a flourish and fell about laughing. If Norman should see her now. But had the Afrikaners not claimed it too? It was listed in the Federasie van Afrikaanse Kultuurvereniging song book as song number 257.

Katy had confided to Sonia, Norman's sister, that as she grew older, she wanted to reject this burden of embarrassment.

"You can't reject it," Sonia said, shaking her auburn curls. "It's carried from generation to generation."

They were in Sonia's lounge having tea. Sonia had spoken with conviction, as if some authority had deemed it right and proper that coloured people should carry shame. Sonia was the only one of Norman's family who approved of their union and Katy didn't want to antagonise her.

Norman's mother, a real lady with coiffed hair and a powdered face, wearing a blue coat-dress, had not deigned to acknowledge her presence. They'd met in Sonia's house when *Moeder*, as they called her, arrived unexpectedly. Katy had gone to the kitchen to allow them to greet their mother and only came out when Norman fetched her.

She entered the lounge with Norman's arm around her shoulders.

"Is this the new South Africa?" *Moeder* inspected Katy, her eyes cold.

Katy had turned and ran.

After she and Norman returned from Swaziland, Sonia was the only one who supported Katy when Katy thought her family had rejected her. She remembered Aunty Brenda, Mum's sister, a real witch, saying, "You probably think you're too *grênd* now."

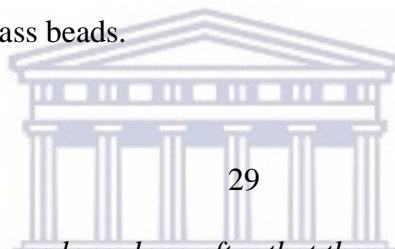
Katy wished she had not spoken about this intimate topic and prayed that Sonia would let it go, but she didn't.

"Some call you the mud people," she'd continued, warming to her subject, "but not me. You have such beautiful skins."

"Why mud people?" Katy was shocked. She'd not heard the term before.

"I don't know. My grandmother used that word."

Katy had fingered her glass beads.



29

*It was long, long after that they came with guns, disease,
in ships with death for figurehead,
stained sails and Christ spreadeagled in the cordage.*

"Middle Passage", a poem by Robert Hayden

The Cook had lost his battle not to escape and was roaming the countryside, striving not to get caught. He was crestfallen. In spite of a titanic struggle to overcome his weakness, he had succumbed and run again. He missed Amberike and struggled with the guilt of abandoning her. What if something happened to her? But he was not ready to give up his freedom, not yet. Punishment would be severe.

He couldn't explain the strange urge to bolt, neither could he control it. He was a principled man yet he was helpless in the face of this compulsion that had manifested since his capture. He'd seen men become addicted to strange things here at the Cape, tobacco,

wine, women, violence. His addiction was to escape. He tried to analyse the process before he acted, hoping that by understanding it, he would find the key to overcome it.

He bemoaned taking the step to care about someone. With his affliction it was better not to get close to anyone, to be extremely independent. That way nobody worried about him and he was not in debt to care for anyone. He could focus on the task at hand, survival. That alone could fill his days. Otherwise life became cluttered. He'd watched grown men cry at a loved one being sold and had vowed that it wouldn't happen to him.

The desire to be near Amberike drove him to the rectangular slave building after dark. He hid in the shadows. Overcome with emotion he kissed the rough wall separating him from her while reciting Nizami, "He who searches for his beloved is not afraid of the world." He was grateful to his father, a nobleman, a traveller, who had taught him the literature of his home country and those his father had visited.

He considered a compromise. Hanging around the lodge was a sure way of being caught. But he could be free and close to Amberike – he would search for her sister. Venturing into the fledgling town and surrounding farms wasn't safe but he would try to fulfil her wish.

He started enquiring from the Khoi travelling from farm to farm looking for temporary work. It was a tiresome process. At last one of the indigenous people referred him to one of their leaders, someone called Nommoa. He would know. The directions were vague. Go there and speak to this one and that one will refer you to speak to another who may know. The Cook trod on wearily.

He was sleeping on the slopes of Table Mountain and hiding in its caves. He found a tree stump, dry and brittle, perfect for fire wood. However, making a fire was a hazard. Smoke could easily give away his location, or the whole mountain could burn if he was not careful. Instead he made a pair of wooden Javanese clogs.

Food was scarce. He ate berries, insects and tortoises. He was grateful to his Khoi friend who had taught him what they ate. He searched for the *klipspringer*, a type of antelope, but couldn't find one.

The Cook was dozing against a rock when someone prodded him. He looked up and saw a wiry man of medium height wearing a loin cloth, a kaross of sheepskin, and self-made sandals with two bands across the foot. Instinctively the Cook knew that the proud erect man in front of him was the person he was seeking.

"Why didn't they tell me it was you?" The Cook knew Nommoa as Bossie. They'd met when he worked in the Company Gardens. The Khoi man and his family had erected their huts nearby.

"I heard you were looking for me." Nommoa hit at the flies around him with a jackal's tail fastened onto a stick. The Cook could smell the fat on his skin. The last time the Cook had seen him he was wearing tattered Western clothing.

"You look different. I almost didn't recognise you." Nommoa carried a walking stick. Rings made from elephant tusks decorated his right upper arm. He handed over a mat made with reeds threaded together. "A gift from my wife, you'll need it."

"A reed bed, thanks." The Cook wanted to ask how it was made, but was distracted by the ivory rings. Ornately carved, they fitted snugly around the biceps. "I hope I'm not rude to ask, but what are those for?" The Cook pointed to the rings.

"These? It's to block in combat." Nommoa demonstrated, brandishing his spear.

Behind him a medium-sized dog appeared. The Khoi dog had pricked ears, a pointed muzzle and a ridged back. Legend had it that Jan van Riebeeck had been furious that Autshumao's dog had wanted to mate with his imported dog. A hunter, the dog had a bird in its mouth. Nommoa uttered a command and the dog came to offer it to the Cook. He looked into its yellow eyes. He tried to put out his hand, but the dog showed its teeth.

“Don’t.” Nommoa said. “He has a terrible temper but he is a fine guard-dog and a good hunter.”

Upon a command of clicks the dog put the bird down at the Cook’s feet. The Cook eyed the dog, afraid to pick up the bird.

“We’ll be back. I know where she is.”

“Who? Amberike’s sister?” But the Khoi man had disappeared. The Cook set about preparing the bird for cooking. He plucked the feathers and singed the fine down over a small fire housed between stones. Then he removed the entrails and held the bird over the fire with a pierced stick.

Later, Nommoa reappeared and motioned to the Cook to follow him. He led him over a great distance of streams and valleys to a farm in Stellenbosch, named after the commissioner Simon van der Stel who became the first governor. The Cook entered the gate while Nommoa turned towards the mountain; bow and arrows slung over his back, a short and long spear in one hand.

“The girl you brought with you, Amberike. Is she going to be your future wife?”

The Cook shook his head. “It can never be.”

“What an injustice. I see how much you care for her.” Nommoa took off, trotting in an easy canter that could be kept up for days.

The Cook saw a dust cloud then a wagon coming towards the gate. He hid in the grass. A young woman stepped off the wagon to open the gate. He gasped, was it Amberike’s sister? She heard him; he lifted his upper body above the grass. She stared into his eyes. He was about to greet her when a command from the wagon made her turn and hurry towards it.

With the farmer gone the Cook approached the house. An old woman was hanging up sheets.

“Are you looking for the German Seur?”

“I’m actually here for his wife.”

“That poor girl. She cries every day. I pray for God to take her away from here.”

“Why?” the Cook inhaled sharply.

“She is from Madagascar and is struggling to adjust.”

“So she’s not from Abyssinia?” The Cook exhaled in relief. It wasn’t Amberike’s sister. He was grateful because when he heard it was a German he’d feared that it may be the one who was sleeping with his daughters and granddaughters to make their skin lighter, because light-skinned slaves fetched a higher price.

“That one left. Would you like to come in?”

“No thanks. The one from Abyssinia, where is she now?”

The old woman shrugged. “These girls they come and go.”

On the way back he agonised over the choice: freedom or Amberike. Every time he thought about losing his freedom he broke out in a sweat. No. No. No. He couldn’t bear it.

Unthinking he walked to the gate of the slave lodge.

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He wobbled from side to side on his heels, trying to invent a new way of walking. His wounds bled as he put weight on the ball of his foot. The pain was excruciating. He sat down to re-bandage and massage his feet, rested for a while, and then got up to try again.

Shoes would’ve helped. He could stuff ballast into the front to compensate for his missing toes. Moving too fast he lost his balance, and fell down on his face. Slowly, spitting out dust and grass, he rose to a standing position, swaying until he achieved equilibrium, and put one foot forward, learning to walk.

*Yet was I born, as you are, no man's slave,
An heir to all that liberal Nature gave;*

Epilogue to 'The Padlock', a poem by Anonymous (1787)

Amberike had heard that the Cook was back. At dusk, after returning from Anke's house, and before she had to report to Maria for her evening chores, she went to the courtyard to find him. He was tending the blackened pot as usual. He'd lost weight, his eyes sunken. He could hardly stand; they'd chopped off all his other toes. He no longer just had missing big toes. Amberike couldn't bear to look.

"How are you?" she said softly. He didn't appear to hear her. She spoke louder, the words spilling out of her as it did when she was nervous. "I haven't seen you on Verkeerdevallei for a while. They say you probably won't be able to work in the fields anymore. That you have to become a rope maker now."

He turned to look at her, a strange expression in his eyes. "I have a gift for you." He sat down on a stool and reached under it. He produced something wrapped in a cloth. "I made these."

Amberike's eyes fastened on the wooden objects. Shoes. He had made her a pair of *kaparang* sandals. Her hand shook as she took them from him. She put them on the grass and slipped in one foot. How did he know her size? They fitted snugly.

She looked up to see him smiling. The Cook, always quiet and stern, was smiling. She returned his smile, grabbed the shoes and ran off.

"Wait!" he shouted.

She turned, coyly. "I forgot to say thank you."

"No, it's not that." He looked at her steadily. "I went to look for your sister."

Amberike came to kneel in front of him, tears streaming down her face. “Did you see her? Please tell me about her. It’s been such a long time.”

“No, I’m sorry,” he cleared his throat, “I didn’t have the good fortune to meet her.” He continued gently: “I searched but she wasn’t where they said she would be. She had left. Nobody knows where she went.”

Amberike emitted a desolate cry. “Take me with you to look for her, please. I miss her.”

A pained expression flashed across his face. “You know I can’t do that. I want to, in the name of Allah – the most Glorified – I want to so much, but I can’t.”

The Cook leaned forward on the stool and helped her to her feet. She stumbled away, her shoes forgotten.



Amberike’s tormentors, the three women who had assaulted her, left her alone after Maria talked to them. They greeted her with fake smiles. Amberike didn’t know how Maria found out. Nonetheless, she was still unsettled. Maria had warned her against the men but she’d forgotten to include the women. Their attack had brought the vague sense of danger she’d felt since her arrival at the Cape from the recesses of her mind into reality.

She tried to follow Maria’s advice; not to allow their behaviour to crush her spirit, but it was difficult. Surrounded by so many strong women she couldn’t buckle and show her fear, but the burden of it weighed her down.

As a protective measure she chose to evade Egbert, the source of her predicament. The three women somehow saw her as a competitor for his affections. However, dodging

Egbert took some doing as he was very persistent. He would appear with unnerving regularity.

Once, he found her hiding behind the well. When she saw him she ran away.

“Amberike! Kitten!” he called.

She kept running, she didn’t care to be a small cat and his baby talk made her uncomfortable. She ran so fast she left her *kaparangs*. Egbert picked them up and followed her. She was forced to stop, her shoes were precious.

He walked up to her and said, “Who gave you these?”

Instinctively Amberike knew she shouldn’t mention the Cook. “Maria gave them to me.”

He inspected them and handed them back to her. “Not bad, good craftsmanship.”

“Thanks, Seur.”

“Why did you run away when I called you?” Egbert said severely. “I’m the master and a slave should always obey her master.”

“I ... I ...”

“What, has the cat got your tongue?”

Amberike didn’t know what he meant, but he seemed to know a lot about cats. The only cat she knew was a wild cat tamed and given to Mevrouw by her husband. It lived in a cage on the veranda and scratched her regularly when she was told to feed it. She didn’t care about cats, with or without their tongues.

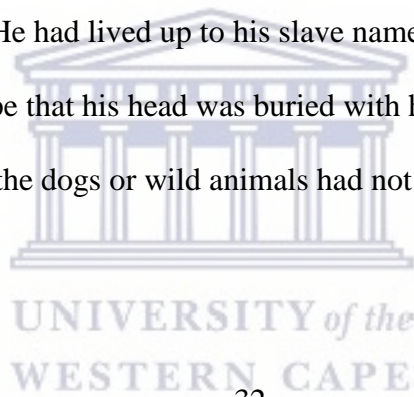
“Next time I won’t be so lenient.” Egbert pointed his finger at her and walked away.

Amberike bent to put on her shoes. Foolishly she’d run away and left them when the Cook gave them to her but he had brought them to her. She did not wear them every day; she wanted her shoes to last for a long time. How would she replace them? Maria was right, she was growing. Already her heels were beginning to hang over the back of the shoes.

The Ghost Whisperer was named after a Japanese spirit, the god of blackness or darkness. He was swarthy whereas his half-brother was light– the vagaries of a mother who could not choose. The choice was made by men, numerous men, who visited her body like a watering hole.

He was fond of his brother and grieved that he had caused him pain. As the eldest, he was supposed to take care of him but he had given way to his emotions. Who could blame him? How much could a soul take before succumbing to baiting? Their mother would turn in her grave at his foolhardiness. He had lived up to his slave name of an ass.

All he could do was hope that his head was buried with his mother, in a safe place, a loving place. That, god forbid, the dogs or wild animals had not gotten a hold of it. He planned to search for it.



The tension between Katy and Norman was intolerable. Katy wanted to apologise but the opportunity didn't arise. She temporarily shelved the telling of stories to find another way of re-kindling the goodwill they had while she talked about Kaatje. Then she remembered the slave play. Would Norman be interested in that?

The day she'd heard about the play she'd been reading during lunch time at UCT when someone came up behind her.

“Hullo there.”

She recognised the deep voice of the man she'd met at the lodge and turned. "Hi."

"May I join you?"

"Sure." She moved some of her books on the table outside the cafeteria. Dean sat down and picked up one of the books.

"So you are into English literature?"

"That's correct. And what is your field of study?"

"History."

"That explains our conversation at the Slave Lodge."

He smiled ruefully. "Forgive me, that was very forward of me to accost you like that. I think I scared you."

"I don't scare easily. What sort of history are you interested in?"

"South African history. It's my bread and butter."

"And what is the jam?" He was attractive and to her surprise Katy found that she was flirting.

"More history." Dean laughed and Katy liked the sound of it.

She had to redeem herself. "That must be very," she was going to say interesting but searched for a better word, "topical?"

"Yeah. South African history is lit at the moment." He spoke like a young person, probably the influence of his students. Katy feared he would say "duh" before long.

"I'm trying to build my family tree," she said.

"Then we have something in common. I've been delving into my past and I found..."

He conversed at high speed, as if he couldn't get the words out fast enough. Katy said little as he talked. She studied him. He had Norman's eyes but darker. By what he said she figured that he must have a Khoi ancestor. Eventually he said, "Would you like to join me for lunch?"

“I don’t think that’s a good idea.”

“Ah but you should.”

She managed a half-smile. “Why?”

“Why?” He did a drum roll with his fingers, “because I am a descendant of Doman, the first Khoi warrior to fight the Dutch. I can tell you more about him.”

Katy leaned forward, he had engaged her curiosity.

Dean noticed and continued. “He was from the same tribe as Krotoa and Autshumao, also a translator, and he travelled with the Dutch to the East. What he saw there made him realise what a dire future his people faced and he started the first Khoi/Dutch war. The story among my people is that he died outside the fort.”

He rushed on. Five minutes later he stopped, continued. “And then the smallpox came. People were dying. They sent some of my ancestors to clean a ship that had come into the bay. We were becoming troublesome, no longer happy to give our cattle and sheep for tobacco and beads. And they wanted the land. They had a mania for land. On the ship to the East my ancestor heard them talk about their home country, how cold it was and how small. That they had to win land from the sea, and only the nobility and the rich had servants. When they came here the warm sun thawed them out, but only on the outside, it left their insides frozen solid. Anyway I’m getting off topic.”

“Once you get started...” He reminded her of her father, always fighting for a cause.

He laughed. “Yeah, I know. Do you know that the slaves performed a play during the smallpox epidemic? A private investor owns it now. It was one of the first, if not the first creative work in South African literature. But tell me about your family history.”

Katy told him about Kaatje who witnessed the founding of the Union of South Africa (the Cape Colony and Natal Colony merging with Transvaal and the Orange River Colony) in the same year as her interview. About her being freed from slavery and then living in poverty.

That is how they started eating together on most days, both captivated by South African history.

Surely Dean would've located the play by now? The constraints of the lockdown provided her with lots of free time and she called him.

"Hello, how are you?" Dean said.

"Hi. Remember that play we talked about? Did you ever manage to track it down?"

Dean coughed. "I read that the poet Stephen Gray mentioned it in an interview. How are you coping during this awful time?"

"We're trying to survive."

"Me too. By the way the department phoned me to tell me that one of my students had tested positive just before the lockdown."

"What?! Which one?" They sometimes shared first year students who studied English and History.

"Dawn. I forgot her surname. Stuart. Dawn Stuart."

Katy visualised the tall girl sitting in front of her lecture group. She had also spoken to her just before lockdown. "How is she?" Katy breathed deeply to calm down. "How are you?"

"She's fine. She only has a mild form of the disease. I've been ill. I couldn't walk four paces without getting short of breath. But I'm better now."

"I'm glad to hear you're doing well. Why didn't you tell me?"

"I didn't want you to worry." Dean started coughing incessantly.

Katy listened for a while but the coughing didn't cease. "I'll call you back." She disconnected the call.

"Norman!" she shouted, "I've been in contact with someone who has Covid!"

Norman entered. “That doesn’t mean you are positive as well.”

He tried to hug her but she jumped out of the way. “We have to be careful.”

“Tell me, when do you think you may have contracted the virus?” Norman said calmly.

She explained about Dean being ill and that they shared the same student who had infected him. She’d made calculations and judged that she’d probably seen the student a week or so before Dean had contact with her.

“That’s a while ago. I’m sure you’re out of danger by now.”

“No, we have to be careful. I don’t want to give it to you or Amy.” Katy tried to control the rising panic in her voice.

After discussion, to humour her, Norman agreed that she should isolate in the spare room. Katy envisioned health workers in protective gear covering them from head to toe coming to the room and taking out a long swab from its plastic encasement and pushing it through one nostril so far down that it touched her throat.

She insisted on going for a Covid test at her local clinic. She gagged at the long swab touching the back of her throat.

“Hold still.” One of the nurses held her head. “We will inform you of the test result in seventy-two hours.”

The days stretched long. While Katy had found the house confining, now the four walls of the spare room closed in. Everything that came in had to be decontaminated before going out. She had a plate, mug, glass and cutlery set aside for her use only.

“Mummy! Mummy! Open the door. Amy wants to see you.”

Katy put on her mask and opened the door only slightly. Amy tried to burrow into the opening. “No! Don’t do that. You can’t come in. Listen to me, Mummy is sick. As soon as I’m better I’ll come out and we can play. But for now you must stay away.”

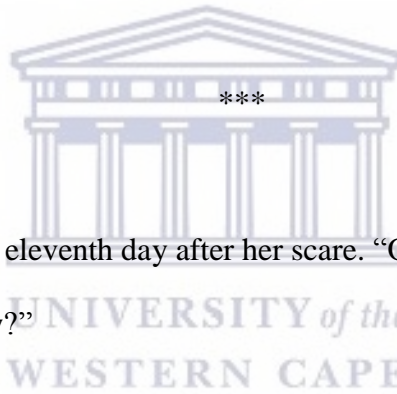
Norman appeared. "I'm sorry she got away from me."

He picked Amy up. She wriggled. "I want Mummy. I want to go to Mummy!"

"Couldn't you have occupied her with something?" Katy's frustration had turned into anger. Amy's disease placed her in the high-risk group who could have severe illness and die.

Norman's eyes flashed. Without a word he turned around and left.

The test result came back negative. Katy, relieved, counted the days on the calendar. She was determined to isolate for ten days. Norman suggested that she start a routine. She divided her day into activities slotted in between meals. She listened to music, exercised, read, slept. By the time her isolation came to an end she had calmed down enough to serenely deconstruct the sick room into a spare room again. Amy would be safe.



Katy called Dean on the eleventh day after her scare. "Our conversation was cut short the other day. How are you now?"

"I'm good."

"What did you do to keep busy?"

"Exercise, read. And wait for the bell when my food was delivered at the door. I thought I'd use the time to lose weight –I couldn't get to the food anyway - and work on acquiring a six-pack. Would you like me to have a six-pack?"

"Maybe."

"Don't take away my motivation."

Katy laughed. Dean always managed to lift her spirits. There was something about another man thinking you are attractive that boosted the flagging ego of marital neglect.

"I can't wait to see you again," Dean said.

When she looked up she saw Norman's shadow disappearing. Did he listen in on her conversation? He'd never done that before.

She didn't want to, but it was time to make amends. She went to the bedroom; Norman was lying with his eyes closed.

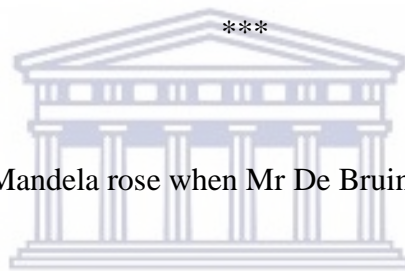
"Would you like anything special for dinner? I could make your favourite —"

"No thanks."

"Well, then you can just eat bread and jam," she huffed, her good intentions forgotten.

"Fine."

"Fine."



Katy was watering her Mandela rose when Mr De Bruin appeared on the other side of the fence.

"Morning, neighbour, how's the research going?" he said.

Katy walked towards the fence and stopped two metres away. "It's going well, thanks. I meant to come and tell you but..."

Mr De Bruin indicated his mask. "...life has changed. Do you know that slaves wore an iron mask? Life has become strange. Due to my age I'm in the vulnerable group so I stay indoors."

"That must get pretty lonely."

"I've taken up the Japanese art of origami. So far I've made a collection of birds."

"That's great."

"You must come and see them sometime. But that would have to be after this awful illness of course. Bring the little one with you."

“I will. Do you mind if I ask something?”

“I’m here to help.”

“Have you ever heard of the slave play? Apparently the slaves performed it during the smallpox epidemic.”

Mr De Bruin scratched his head. “No, I’m sorry I didn’t come across a play. But you can search the British archives online; they came after the Dutch in 1795.”

“Thanks, I’ll have a look.”

Mr De Bruin bowed. “I did nothing. Good luck, my friend. Look after yourself.”

Mr De Bruin limped away, he looked thinner, frailer.

Later during her research Katy came across a post on Facebook about a faction of South Africans who refused to wear masks. A conspiracy group who declared masks were from slavery, and by wearing it they were assenting to be ruled as slaves.

She searched for the mask of slavery Mr De Bruin had mentioned. She found the scold’s bridle used in England and Scotland in the 17th century to punish women who were “troublesome”. An iron rod pressed down on the tongue. The rod was fixed to an iron frame enclosing the head.

Then she located an entry about the slave iron bit and understood the association the conspirators were trying to make. Called The Mask it was an instrument of torture used on slaves in South America. An iron structure, with a plate covering the mouth and nose, surrounded the head. Holes in the plate allowed breathing and a slightly bigger hole permitted sloppy food and liquids. A similar contraption was mentioned by Toni Morrison in her novel *Beloved*. Katy remembered that clearly.

She thought about the conspiracy theory. It was odd that the previous rulers used this argument to object to masks, whereas the descendants of the slaves didn’t. Why? This question awakened the intellectual in her and she spent hours ruminating.

*The evil that men do, lives after them,
The good is oft-interred with their bones.*

“What to a Slave is the Fourth of July”, an article by Frederic Douglas

Egbert and Anke were walking towards the stream for a picnic when they saw Egbert’s male slave at the vegetable patch. Anke twirled the parasol in her hand; her pregnancy could no longer be concealed. Meine had gone up-country for an obscure reason which he did not explain.

“What’s he doing here?” Egbert said.

They didn’t want to be seen, and ducked behind a bush. Egbert’s female slave came swinging her basket. She knelt next to the pumpkins, and selected one for dinner.

“Watch, this is a lovers’ encounter.” Egbert winked.

Anke tittered. Egbert’s eyes narrowed. He made a slashing sign across his throat. Anke pushed her laughter down with her fist. Egbert mimicked a hanging rope, sticking out his tongue. Anke placed her hand on his arm, blushing. They held each other’s eyes, Egbert confident and Anke demure. She turned towards the vegetable patch. Egbert studied her pink cheeks and joined her in observing the slaves. He was getting impatient when at last they turned to leave.

As Egbert and Anke stole past he was approached by a ragged teenage boy.

“Afternoon, Seur. Do you have work for me?”

“Get away from me, I don’t have work.”

The boy disappeared as silently as he had appeared.

“Do you know him?” Anke asked.

“No. But I think I’ve seen him before, at the Company Gardens.”

After dinner, Anke, in high spirits, informed Meine about the slaves at the stream. The latter had arrived with ten cows he had bartered from the Khoi tribes. Inexplicably he also had a small Khoi boy with him.

“For that he’ll lose his Sundays off. From now on he won’t be allowed to leave the farm.” Meine fumed. He turned to Egbert. ‘I know he’s your slave but he is on my farm.’”

Egbert frowned. “I understand.”

“He’ll have to be punished.”

“Of course.”

Egbert and Meine were sitting on sacks of feed when the slave came in. The slave took off his shirt, revealing a scarred back. Other slaves tied him to a tree. He knew them, supped with them, but in a situation like this they tried to melt into the background, wanting to be invisible.

Egbert spat in disdain. They even snitched on each other.

While Meine was huffing and puffing, counting the blows, Egbert fixed his mind on Anke. Things were coming along agreeably.

Meine forbade the slaves to leave the farm because he had a surprise for them. He and Egbert had collected all the equipment for an experiment.

“Right, let’s start,” Meine said, stretching his neck and shoulders. They were in the cornfield.

“You still haven’t told me what we’re going to do.” Bemused, Egbert watched the slaves gathered in a bundle, uneasy, not knowing what to expect.

Mankbeen was hiding behind a tree. Egbert detected a foul smell and didn't know where it came from. Meine had proposed a special punishment that Egbert could use in his translation of the pamphlet on how to train slaves; something that would make Egbert's version stand out.

Meine slapped him on the arm. "Be of good faith."

Egbert touched the spot irritably, resenting the informality. "I'm not sure what to expect."

"You, you," Meine pointed to the strongest men, "tie him up." He pushed Egbert's slave towards them.

"What did I do, master?" the slave said.

"Shut up." Meine had started sweating. He wiped his forehead and cleaned his hands on his breeches.

When the slave had his arms around a tree, Meine ripped off his shirt and unfurled a stick with four leather thongs. Egbert had earlier worked a few spikes into it.

Meine started beating. When he was tired, Egbert took over. The female slave watched, holding the hand of her little boy, silent tears running down her cheeks.

"Bring the horse," Meine shouted. Exhilaration was coursing through his veins. To prolong the buzz he lifted the limp body onto the horse, and tied a rope around his neck to the branch of a tree.

Meine struck the horse with his whip, a smirk accentuating the upward curl of his red moustache. The horse bolted.

Egbert noticed Meine's fleeting smile, and knew he was no match for Meine's cunning. As Meine had probably calculated, Egbert did not realise that he was about to lose half his investment. Egbert's eyes bore into Meine's back.

"What's the value of a single life?" Meine said.

In spite of Amberike's efforts to prevent it, her breasts continued to grow. The strip of hem she used to cover her chest barely covered them. She looked at them in disgust, and cupped her hands over them. They were the size of unripe peaches. She would have to find a larger piece of cloth. She eyed her hem, but Maria would be furious if she tore her new dress. Her headscarf stitched to the piece of hem would suffice, but Mevrouw insisted on a covering for her hair. Cleanliness was next to godliness she preached. That reminded Amberike she had to wash her dress.

She walked to a nearby stream, waded in and took off her dress. Where to find a longer, wider piece of cloth? She thought of the sheets she and Maria sometimes washed for burgher women. That could work, but tearing any of those sheets would earn a whipping. Unlike the other women who bragged that after a while you don't feel it anymore, her skin was sensitive. She felt every lash cleaving her skin. The burning was unbearable. She couldn't wait for the time when she would also not feel it. What bliss.

She day-dreamed of that beautiful day; she would look Mevrouw in the eye and smile. She would say, nonchalantly, "Are we done? I didn't even notice." It would be like a pestering fly to wave away. She would look at that simpering Gerda and say...

Her reverie was interrupted by the Cook. He appeared silently from behind a bush, startling her. How long had he been there? She clutched her dress to her naked body. She was only wearing her chemise. Wet, it was clinging to her curves.

"You must be more careful," the Cook cleared his throat.

Embarrassment made her angry. She was careful. Hadn't she waited for most of the residents of the lodge to go to the public works?

“What did you see?” she whispered, mortified.

“Nothing.”

Was that a blush that flitted across his face? She wasn't sure. Reassured by the fact that he'd never shown that tongue out look that some of the men gave her, she relaxed.

“You shouldn't sneak up on someone like that.”

“I don't. I came to call you. Maria says Mevrouw has visitors and she wants you to come immediately.”

“Oh.” Amberike bit her lip. How to explain about the strip of hem, without explaining about the strip of hem? She felt naked without it. But didn't Maria say that the Cook was a good man? Surely he wouldn't care about her growing breasts. A good man wouldn't do that, would he?

She remembered that the Cook did not look at her breasts. “I need a cloth.” She dangled the intimate strip. The Cook didn't look at it. Now how would he know what type of cloth if he didn't look at it?

The Cook unwound his headscarf. It was long, a turban. “Like this?”

Amberike eyed it eagerly. It would fit and still have room if these pesky breasts grew into big peaches. She'd seen others with breasts that grew long like a loaf of bread, or big like a pot. *Gadverdamme* Why don't these growths just go away? She would be much happier and feel safer.

“That's fine, thanks.”

The Cook held out his hand, hesitating to come closer.

“Just put it on the grass.”

He bent down and carefully placed it on a gannabos. Without a word he turned and disappeared as silently as he came.

Amberike breathed a sigh of relief. Her nakedness had created a tension between them that had previously not been there. She scrubbed her dress, slipped the wet dress over her body and went to pick up the scarf; it was a lovely red colour. She put it to her cheek, it smelled of rough soap and sweat. She inhaled it deeply. Was this what the Cook smelled like? She'd thought he would smell dusty.

She wound the cloth around her breasts. It was softer than her scratchy hem and long enough to make a bow at the back. She smiled. Even the pair of pots could come now, she was ready.

That evening she came across the Cook standing under a tree in the dusk. For a terrifying moment she thought she saw the tongue out look but dismissed it when she came closer and he appeared normal.

“Good evening. And thanks again,” she said.

He nodded and walked away. Of course she had been mistaken; he was eyeing her breasts because he was missing his headscarf! Sympathy washed over her. The poor Cook, she knew how attached one could grow to a scarce item of clothing that would be difficult to replace. She knew what it was like to lose something or someone. She hoped his head would not be too exposed in the hot sun. That could give one a headache.

*Go seek the soul refin'd and strong:
Such aids my wildest pow'r of song:
For those I strike the rustic lyre
Who **share** the transports they **inspire**.*

“A Poem on the Inhumanity of the Slave Trade” by Ann Yearsley

When Amberike reached Mevrouw's house she recognised Egbert's roan horse tethered under a tree. She heard male voices coming from the veranda and made a detour to the back of the house.

"Why did you take so long?" Mevrouw scolded as Amberike reached the kitchen door.

An older replica of Gerda stood next to Mevrouw. "Hurry up, maid."

Amberike lowered her head, waiting for them to move from the door so she could enter.

"What are you waiting for?" Mevrouw frowned.

Amberike made for the space between them to squeeze past. They jumped out of the way.

"You'll ruin my dress," Gerda's twin said. "Is this the insolent one?" Holding a nosegay, she eyed Amberike. Mevrouw wrinkled her nose.

Amberike wanted to smell her armpits. The run-walk to get here had obviously made her sweat. She entered the house and found Maria at the table. The latter handed Amberike an apron.

"There's a lot to do."

Only then did Amberike notice the tub in the kitchen.

"Mother, please tell her to help me bath please." Another girl, younger than the one who had met Amberike at the door, eyed her imperiously.

"And be quick. My sister has come a long way and she fell off the wagon," Gerda said gleefully.

"Mother, please tell Gerda to stop." The girl was about sixteen and had Mevrouw's long nose.

Amberike soaped a cloth and washed an exposed arm. The owner of the arm pouted. The water was grey. Amberike guessed Meine had already had a bath, followed by Mevrouw then Gerda. After washing and drying her charge, Amberike stepped into the grey-brown water. The women of the house shrieked, while Maria pulled Amberike's arm.

“Not here,” she whispered. “Take it outside.”

Amberike pushed and pulled on the wooden bath. The grey-brown water with white residue on the sides and floating on top made a wave every time the bath moved. It threatened to breach and spill over the top. At last the bath was outside. Amberike pulled it towards the horse under the tree and tilted it to empty it. The water disappeared into the grass, leaving white particles on top of the green.

Now what to do, she had lost her bath water. She gathered grass away from the spill with white scum and scrubbed under her arms. With the arrival of her breasts, tiny hairs had appeared under her arms, which made her sweat more. She scrubbed the half-moons of sweat on her dress as well and sniffed. That wasn't so bad. She offered the grass to the horse.

“Amberike!” Maria stood in the door.

“Coming.” Amberike pondered what to do with the bath. She gathered more grass, scrubbed it and turned it upside down. Immediately the ants showed interest in the human residue. “The ants,” she pointed towards the bath. Maria frowned.

“Leave it.” Mankbeen approached. “I'll clean the bath.” She'd met him a few times. Amberike sensed his eyes on the Cook's scarf. It wasn't quite tongue out but obviously he was in training. She clicked her tongue. He smiled, and dragged the bath away, singing, “Washing the bath. Washing the bath. Yes, I'm going to wash the bath.”

Amberike stared after him. What a strange one. What was there to sing about? She hurried towards the kitchen. Maria had flour on her hands. She was known as the best baker.

She slapped around the dough, rolled it into long shapes and put the two loaves into copper pans.

“Put this in the outside oven.”

Amberike carried the two loaves to the blackened bricks lining a hole in the ground. On top of them coals glowed. She slipped the pans in and replaced the cover, a copper sheet. She placed hot sand that had been heated by the coals on top of the sheet.

Back in the kitchen, the range built into one side of the wall had various pots on hooks hanging above the fire. It was going to be a feast.

“Tend the fire,” Maria said.

Amberike stacked more wood, carefully positioning them with the long poker. Her aim was to cause minimal smoke. Smoke was good for making bacon but not for cooking food. When they made bacon she stacked oak wood onto the fire. She sweated, stirring a pot Maria had indicated. Surely in this heat her smell would return?

She moved closer to the range to improve her stirring and to put distance between her and the visitors in case she smelled. The edge of her dress caught fire. Gerda and her two sisters screamed. They were seated on a bench, watching the cooking eagerly.

Maria threw water on her dress. The flame sizzled and died. “Be careful!”

Amberike inspected her dress; the scorch mark had made it shorter, her one calf almost showed. She was practically naked! She glanced at Maria; her frown had deepened. Amberike stepped back onto a hot coal that had rolled out onto the wooden floor. She suppressed a cry, glancing at Maria’s set face. There was no sympathy there. Amberike scooped up the errant coal with tongs lying next to the range and returned it to the fire. She limped towards the floury table to clean it.

Amberike helped Maria to serve the dinner.

Meine's eyes wandered to his daughters. "Gerda may be unsuitable, Meijnheer, but I have two other daughters. They will be an asset, they can run any household. The oldest is eighteen." He bit on the last word as if it was distasteful.

Mevrouw held out a plate to Egbert. "Have some more cheese, Meijnheer."

Egbert took a piece eagerly and turned to Meine, "You should be proud. Anke makes the best cheese."

Meine nodded, and continued: "They are strong and will bear many children."

Egbert squirmed while the visiting daughters smiled at him. Amberike couldn't remember their names. She searched her memory, one of them was Anna, Betta ... she couldn't recall.

"I can do sewing, embroidery and play the pianoforte," the eldest one said.

"Anna!" Anke was horrified at her immodesty.

"Grandmother says we should be allowed to speak."

"Not at my table," Meine warned, turning to Mevrouw. "What's your mother teaching them? I knew it wasn't a good decision to send them to live with your mother after your father died. One cannot trust an old woman – they get all these ideas. You can see there isn't a man in the house. Girls should not be so forward. They should know their place. I have a good mind and—"

"I can sing," the youngest chimed in.

Meine held his head. "Dear God, they're not going to get husbands," he muttered under his breath, overcome by the calamity.

"Allow me to introduce my daughters, Meijnheer," Anke pursed her lips, staring at Meine, "before we discuss such intimate matters and that without a formal appointment to do so. This is Anna and this is Rika."

Amberike's attention rose. Her practice, still in its infancy, of regarding dinner conversation as background noise to respect the master's privacy, as Maria had taught her, was non-existent, a failure. Rika. That was almost her name. Sometimes when she was especially mellow, say after a good day, Maria called her Rike with an almost gentle inflection. Those occasions were rare so Amberike treasured them.

She glanced at Maria to see if the latter had detected her transgression. Maria was removing empty plates. Amberike observed Egbert from under her long eyelashes; he was fidgeting with his collar. Clearly he did not relish being in the middle of a family conflict.

Mevrouw came to his rescue. "Egbert is waiting to meet the right person. Or maybe he has already met her." She laughed, a strident sound.

"Not at all," Egbert turned to address Meine. "I'm just not ready to take a wife."

"You've spilled enough wild seed," Meine said shortly. "It is my duty as a friend to help you get settled."

Silence followed. The two girls looked disappointed and Gerda was her usual simpering self.

"Mother, may we be excused?" Gerda said.

Anke nodded. Gerda led a reluctant duo to their bedroom. Anna craned her neck for a last look at Egbert. He noticed and winked surreptitiously. In a fit of giggles the girls left the room.

Meine glowered at Egbert. "That is not the way to do it."

"I was just bidding them a good night."

Mevrouw's face was a study. Amberike recognised her anger but there was something else: embarrassment? Mevrouw's emotions deformed her features, her long nose grew even longer and she practically swallowed her lips. She kept scrubbing her hands together, making

a small clink sound with her many rings. She glanced at Egbert intermittently, angry, pleading, but his head was resolutely bowed, his jaws working.

Meine looked suspiciously at his wife, then at Master Egbert, puzzled by her response.

35

Katy had ample time to think now that Norman was avoiding her. The idea came to her that maybe, just maybe he wasn't as enlightened as she had assumed. Racism dogged her daily life; yet he was unaffected by it.

She recalled her experience at private accommodation just outside the city. There had been a glitch in her booking at All Africa House on the University of Cape Town's (UCT) campus, so she had decided to book at Nicklewick Lodge. She needed a few days away from home to finish an article and meet a deadline. The establishment had sent an email starting with "Good day." Very professional she thought. The email stated that they had a room for her.

The Uber inched along in unexpected half-past-nine traffic. Cape Town roads had the habit of narrowing from four or three lanes to two then one, causing a bottle-neck of fast-moving cars braking on each other's tails.

When she arrived, the receptionist, a chubby man, greeted her cordially and showed her to their "beautiful lounge". Suspicious rhino skin couches furnished it, the black ones arranged in a standard catalogue pose and the cream one standing aloof to good effect. Rhino poaching was illegal in the country.

Paintings of fishing villages, with ungrammatical English descriptions of the art and artists, decorated the walls. More artworks of women with fat knees squeezed in on the walls towards the passage. There was a kitchenette with a black marble top and a circular cement kholi pond at the far end of the big room. Red and yellow fish swam deep in murky water-wise water. An extreme drought gripped the Cape Province and water-wise had been coined to encourage water saving. Above the toilet a sign had been taped: Don't flush. Save water.

She called Norman just before her mobile's battery ran out. "I've arrived. It's such a beautiful place, lots of art. You'll love it."

"I don't see why you have to stay in a hotel when you live here in Cape Town," he grumbled.

"I told you, I need to finish my work. And the noise..." Norman was renovating the bathroom, his first project after his retrenchment. "I left a chicken pie for you to warm up. Please tell Amy I love her."

Norman grunted. She put it down to a bad job interview that morning.

Her heart was humming as she slung her jacket over a high stool usually found in bars. She had uninterrupted time to work on her journal article. She set up her computer on the black marble top while she waited for her room. It would be a pleasant wait.

Another guest arrived, wrinkled in face, attire and temperament. He sat on the black rhino chair studying his mobile phone, wrinkling an already furrowed brow.

Chubby announced, "Your room is ready." A singing voice, just the right amount of friendliness and professionalism intertwined. Katy climbed off the chair. Chubby directed Mr Wrinkles to follow him, gesturing to her to sit down.

She put her head sideways. Didn't Mr Wrinkles arrive after her and now he was being served first? A familiar apartheid ache that she hadn't experienced since 1994, when she gained the right to vote, made her face flush. Chubby did not even look in her direction.

Rendered invisible thus she looked around to see who had witnessed her negation. She shook her head in rebellion. This didn't happen to her when she was with her husband. He provided a protective barrier.

Mr Wrinkles gone, she waited. And waited. In the afternoon she asked a blue-skirted cleaner to find out if her room was ready. The cleaner came to report that it was. Five minutes later Chubby arrived.

His "friendly" had gone brittle. "Now where is she?"

She realised that he was referring to her and stood up to announce that she was indeed there, hadn't fallen into the pond, and followed him out of the glass doors of the main building, past the pool and out into the backyard. A white van with its entrails on the paving blocked her path. She navigated around it, her heart sinking.

Chubby led past workers having lunch in the smaller building, past a battered kitchen, into fewer than three-star accommodation. Shell-shocked she could only say "yes" every time Chubby took a breath and it seemed like a response was required. Yes. Yes. Yes. A fake smile froze on her face.

She was in a daze. Why did she have to put up with this perversion of apartheid discrimination? Were they not in the new South Africa for more than twenty years? A dragging down sensation made her ill. She did not unpack, but wandered in her room in the dun building which had damp rising halfway up the front wall.

She closed the lid after each pee and only flushed when she had a motion. She tackled the shower which worked for a short while then switched off. Left standing still full of soap she vowed to do better the next morning.

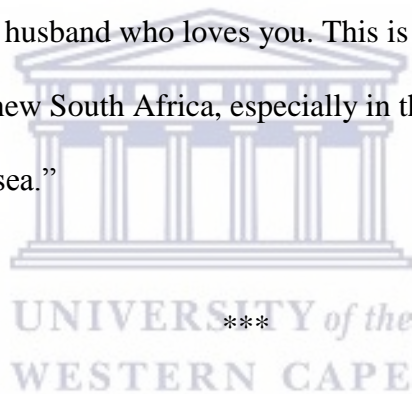
She was unprepared for her strong feelings which sat like lead in her stomach, pushing her down, down under the white tiles into the earth. She had been judged and found

wanting. And she couldn't share it with Norman. He would not understand. He was protected by his privilege. She enjoyed that protection when with him; now it irked her.

Katie's dignity demanded a sacrifice and it had to be food. She would not eat anything they cooked at this lodge. If the bobotie was delicious, it would be a betrayal of her tongue and digestive system. She would digest her anger instead.

The bacon smell brought by the light breeze in the morning tested her when she opened the window. She clung to the bed, reluctant to face the world outside. She tried to cry but she was in too deep. She needed food; food was more nourishing than anger. But she took out her sternest voice.

"No, Katy, you have to do this. You are a successful woman, with a great job. You have a beautiful daughter and a husband who loves you. This is to remind you that things have not really changed in the new South Africa, especially in the Cape. You have sailed on a white cushion in a treacherous sea."



"What are you daydreaming about?" Norman came into the bedroom. Katy's book lay forgotten on her lap. She picked it up. "Oh, I was just thinking."

Norman gave her a searching look, and stumbled into bed. A haze of alcohol settled over her. Soon he was asleep. Where did he get the alcohol? He probably had a stash of beer, wine or brandy.

Katy sighed, inspecting Norman's face in repose. What had happened to them? She detected a strange perfume: realised he was wearing cologne. She fetched pen and paper and wrote.

Dear Norman,

I want to apologise for offending you. That was not my intention. I know you have been through a difficult time and my attitude has not helped.

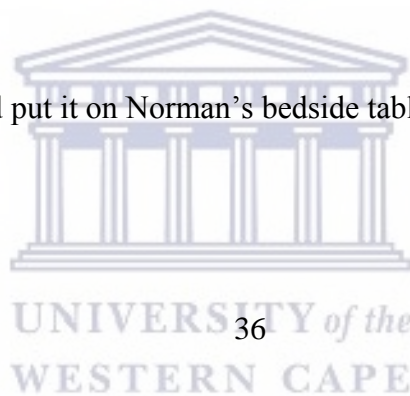
Long ago a friend who was studying psychology told me that I suffer from extreme independence, and that it is a trauma response which could be passed down from one generation to the next. I don't agree with her but since you were retrenched I have tried to help but instead of helping I have stepped up to almost take over the day-to-day running of our lives.

I'm very sorry, I have not been easy to live with but I still love you and would appreciate it if you give us a chance.

Your loving wife,

Katy

She sealed the letter and put it on Norman's bedside table. Days later it was still there, gathering a layer of dust.



The Cook was hidden behind a bush where he had gone to relieve himself. After he had the rest of his toes cut off, he had been given more sedentary work. He had become a rope maker. Just before he had to go he was sitting under the oak tree, working on a new rope that Meine needed urgently while helping Mankbeen who had been given the task of chopping down a tree.

He swore under his breath when he heard Meine approaching. Now he had to hurry. He peered out. Mankbeen was singing the refrain he liked best when alone: "One day she's a coming, Mama's coming back for me."

Meine sat down on a tree stump next to Mankbeen who was chopping kindling. The latter had been shocked into silence at Meine's sudden appearance. He continued swinging the axe under Meine's watchful eye.

"He tells me everything about you. He says you are bad at boxing."

The Cook knew immediately that Meine was referring to him. Now he couldn't get out of from behind the bush. He crouched into a more comfortable position but it hurt his feet. He'd constructed a pair of support shoes from sail cloth. He was forced to kneel, peering out from behind the bush, trying to ignore his brown stool which had attracted a buzz fly. He inhaled the green smell of the bush.

"Seur?" Mankbeen was bewildered. The Cook had said that he was a natural.

"That stupid cook tells me your crippled leg gets in the way."

Mankbeen flinched. "No, Seur. I'm strong."

"He tells me when you're naughty. You think I don't know what you get up to but I do."

"Like what, Seur?" It had slipped out. Mankbeen placed his hand over his mouth.

"Everything. Are you contradicting me?"

"No, Seur." Mankbeen sniffed.

"Do you trust him?"

"Mustn't I?"

"He is a brutal man."

Mankbeen digested this information. "The Cook wouldn't hurt me, he likes me."

"Does he really like you?"

Mankbeen hesitated. "I ... think so."

"He only likes himself. You have to be careful around these older men."

"Seur?"

“You don’t want people to use you or make a fool of you.”

“No, Seur.”

“So why do you trust him.”

“Because... Seur...can’t I trust him?”

“Definitely not.” Meine got up and walked away.

Mankbeen’s happy song forgotten he worked in silence.

The Cook had to lower his trousers again for a sudden bout of dysentery. Although he’d been careful, it was possible that Meine had noticed his interest in Amberike. Why would he target him if not for that? If Meine told Egbert... The Cook feared for their future.

The Cook joined Mankbeen to resume his rope-making. “Was that Baas Meine I just saw walking away?

Mankbeen wouldn’t even look at him.

“He’s a wily one. Someone to watch out for,” the Cook said conversationally.

Mankbeen was determined not to answer.

“We can have a long boxing session tonight.”

“I don’t box anymore.”

“But you love it!”

“I’m not a fool, no, Seur, I’m not.”

The Cook didn’t know how to handle the situation. “We’ll talk later.”

When he left he heard Mankbeen singing, “One day she’s a coming, Mama’s coming back for me” in the saddest tone.

to life upon these shores.

“Middle passage”, a poem by Robert Hayden

The news arrived that Anke had a baby. Egbert heard it from a friend who had heard it from one of his friends who had heard it from another friend who had heard it from his concubine. The Cape of Good Hope had an active *skinner* wheel which disseminated news very fast, especially if it was salacious. Egbert hoped no-one had news about his dalliance with the new mother. But if it had not come out yet, then he was safe.

A new thought struck him, what if this new baby boy had some of his characteristics? It would probably have Meine's head and ugly face but it could have his hands or feet. That was the problem with completing a baby someone else had started. What was he thinking? He was sweating like that fat Meine when he wore a wig. He wiped his neck and addressed himself, “Bertie you have to be more careful. It is tough being handsome but you have to think ahead. Look what you've gotten yourself into now”. The sweat dripped from his forehead. *Gadverdamme*. He would be expected to call on them, to have a celebratory drink and he was unprepared.

Just then he heard the hooves of a horse. He peered through the window and saw Meine, awkward in the saddle as usual. Egbert searched frantically for a hiding place, behind the desk? No, he was a big man. The door opened slowly. Egbert instinctively jumped behind it. When would this man learn to knock?

“Egbert? Where are you?” Meine boomed.

Egbert stopped breathing.

“What are you doing behind the door? I could've knocked it into you.” Meine peeped around the door.

“I was just hanging up my frock coat.”

“But you are still wearing it?”

Frowning, Egbert unbuttoned the long coat and hooked it on a nail behind the door.

“What can I do for you?”

Meine was overjoyed. “What can you do for me? Why you can help me celebrate.

Let’s go to the docks. Do they still have that inn there?”

“I think so. But I can’t leave right now.”

“Why not?”

“I’m waiting for... for a... VOC officer to discuss school supplies. They expect me to do a job but they don’t provide me with the tools.”

“What type of tools?”

“Let’s not talk about my work. I heard you have a baby?”

“Yes.” Meine beamed. “At last a son to carry my name.” His eyes shone too brightly, a hint of unmanly tears.

“Congratulations,” Egbert said quickly. The last thing he needed was to have this man bawl on his shoulder. “How is Mevrouw?”

“She’s healthy. I brought the midwife back to town and wanted to give you the good news.” He slapped Egbert on the back. “You are my best friend. When are you coming to see the baby? The midwife advised bed rest for ten days and no visitors for a month but—”

“I’ll wait.”

“That is a great pity. But we have to abide by the rules of childbirth.”

Egbert put on his coat. He was thinking that he wouldn’t sleep from worry. “Let’s go. I want to see the baby now.”

Meine was pleased. Talking companionably they left for the farm. When they got there Anke was dismayed.

“Meijnheer, you should’ve told me you’re coming,” she scowled at Meine, smoothing her hair and pushing it under her *kapje*, “and waited in the *voorkamer*.”

“He’s a close friend.” Meine beamed.

Egbert bowed, hat in hand. “My apologies if I startled you, Mevrouw, it was not my intention.” He tried to locate the baby under the blankets.

Anke followed his gaze. “He’s being fed.” Just then the wet nurse brought him in. Anke unwrapped the baby’s cloth to reveal the guest of honour. “Why, isn’t he just adorable?”

To Egbert most babies were ugly with red, wrinkly faces. This one was no different. “A work of art.”

His eyes fastened on the tiny hands and short, stumpy fingers. He breathed a sigh of relief, those were not his hands. He had the beautiful hands of an artist. The baby’s feet were covered. “I take it he has all his fingers and toes?”

The proud mother peeled back the covering. “He is perfect.”

Meine’s big hand caressed the short, stumpy toes. “He is, isn’t he, Mother?” He leaned in for a kiss which landed on Anke’s shoulder. Blushing deeply, she pushed him away.



Egbert was working on his inventions when Meine kicked open the door.

“You scoundrel. If I had a sword I would dare you to a duel.”

Egbert rose slowly and walked around his desk. “Meijnheer? May I ask what this is about?” he said coldly.

Meine fixed his frog eyes on Egbert in disdain. “You, sir, have been guilty of dallying with my wife.”

“Did she... who said it? This town is saturated with rumour and gossip.”

“You can’t fool me, I know. I’ve suspected for a while, but your friendship persuaded me otherwise. Now you will pay.”

Egbert ran his finger around the rim of his collar, aware of choking. “Please. We are both gentlemen and this conduct is unbecoming.”

“I sold your slaves,” Meine sneered. “That Siena and her baby are gone.” He shook a money pouch.

Egbert paled. “That’s illegal.”

“I just changed her name. And the man I sold her to changed her name as well. You’ll never find them.”

“My life savings. Gone.” Dizzy, Egbert stumbled to his chair.

“You should’ve thought of that before you were familiar with my wife. She’s joining my daughters. My son will stay with me.”

“You can’t separate a mother from her infant.”

“I can and I will. Nobody toys with me. My son has a wet nurse. I thank God for that.” Meine’s face was as red as the cloth used to cover the smallpox of Elizabeth I.

Meine, to Egbert, resembled a baby rat. Egbert curled his lip, revealing his hitherto unseen contempt. “That is so low as to not bear comment.”

Meine stormed out.

With trembling fingers Egbert pulled the pages of his work on the pamphlet closer and shred them. Without the experience garnered from training his own slaves, his book would be useless, just a repetition of another man’s words.

He’d acquired a second-hand hanging library, a gift from Anke. She’d had it shipped from her prestigious uncle in the *Here XVII*. He caressed it where it hung on the wall. At least he would be rid of that cow. The wooden structure contained one book, Vondel’s play. His book was going to be the centrepiece. Remembering the two worn books he’d cadged from a

drunken sailor, he took them from the desk and laid them side-ways to take up space. He stood back, there, that didn't look too inelegant?

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Katy dialled Norman's number. When Norman answered she said: "Amy had biltong."

"I'm coming." The phone went dead.

She didn't have to explain the implications to Norman: dried beef had a high iron content and was harmful to persons with thalassemia.

She'd discovered Amy sitting in front of the side-board in the dining room nibbling on a stick of dried wors. When Amy saw her, she pulled her face.

"It's too salty."

"Give that to me please."

Amy handed it over. "I don't like it."

"That's good. Never eat it again."

Norman came home from the fruit and vegetable shop with screeching tyres. He forgot his usual safety protocol of taking off his clothes and having a shower. "Where did she get it?"

"Where else? In the cupboard." With his illegal brew made from pineapples, since the sale of alcohol was prohibited, Norman had purchased biltong and nuts.

"I forgot to lock the cupboard. What do we do now?"

"I already called the ambulance."

"No, we can't wait for them. Put Amy in the car."

Katy sat with Amy's head on her lap, adjusting Amy's mask which she kept pulling off, and watched the speedometer climb to 180 kilometres per hour. She swayed on every turn and once Amy slid across the seat.

"Mummy," Amy grabbed towards Katy.

Katy gathered her in her arms. "You are going too fast." She spoke calmly.

"We're almost there."

Indeed the hospital loomed ahead. "Did you pay the outstanding amount?" Katy had visions of being denied treatment.

"Of course I did. What do you take me for?"

Katy carried Amy into the emergency room, worrying how they were going to pay this time. However, Norman was prepared and paid the fee while she sat with Amy. The doctor said his examination did not reveal a serious problem but he would admit Amy for overnight observation.

When arriving at the hospital they were screened. Their temperatures were taken and they were asked a set of questions to ascertain if they'd been in contact with anyone who was infected. They had to supply their address and identity numbers. Each one received a sticker, similar to the ones the staff wore, to indicate they had been screened.

Norman wasn't allowed to go up to the ward. Amy was admitted to the isolation section until a negative result came back. Then she was transferred to a "green" ward.

Katy called Dr Sloan and asked him to come to the hospital. They were in the ward when he arrived. Dr Sloan, wearing a mask, disposable gown and blue gloves, pulled the curtain around the bed. It was a disposable blue curtain installed for its ability to be changed often to comply with the hygiene regulations. The beds were far apart. On top of the normal hospital smell was that of a strong antiseptic cleaning solution.

Dr Sloan put a stethoscope on Amy's chest. "Her heart is a bit fast. Does she have any chest pain?"

"No, doctor." Katy smoothed Amy's hair, her hand shaking. She swallowed. "Is there something wrong with her heart?"

Dr Sloan scanned Amy's small chest, listening intently. "Her heart is fine. Does she have headaches?"

Katy started worrying about Amy's brain. "No, she doesn't," she said, her voice almost breaking.

Dr Sloan looked up, the stethoscope dangling from his ears. It reminded her of Norman who had taken to listening to house music. She'd grown tired of the noise and, after an argument, he'd produced ear phones. Now she watched him bobbing his head to the modern music. He used to like rock; the Rolling Stones were his favourite band. She didn't know him anymore and wasn't sure if she liked it.

"Excuse me?" She had not heard what Dr Sloan said.

He gave the stethoscope to the nurse who wiped it down with disinfectant and took off his gown.

"You worry too much. Amy is doing fine, considering." He playfully touched Amy's cheek. She stuck out her tongue. He smiled, "Oh yes, we haven't looked at that today, such a pretty tongue."

Amy giggled.

Katy fretted that Amy would contract the dreaded infection from being admitted a second time. Hospitals were notorious for harbouring germs, the so-called nosocomial infections.

On the way home Norman met Katy's eyes in the rear-view mirror. "I'm sorry."

"It's okay."

"No, it's not okay. I messed up. I forgot to lock the cupboard and put Amy at risk."

"I should've checked it too."

After a short silence Norman said: "I read your letter,"

"Oh." Katy didn't want to discuss the letter. It was a source of embarrassment now.

To have her effort at reconciliation treated so callously rankled.

"I'm sorry," he said again. "I've been a real jerk. Can you forgive me?"

"Sure." Katy was tired; she'd slept in the chair next to Amy's bed. What she needed was a bath and a nap. She yawned, "Let's discuss this later."

"Right." Norman's eyes hardened but softened again. "You and Amy are my family. I don't know what I'd do without you."

Katy attempted to lighten up the atmosphere. "You could tell a story," she said playfully.

"After your nap I'll tell you about my naughty ancestor, Ouma Ansie."

"I'm looking forward to that."

The soothing effect of the moving car caused Katy's eyes to close. She yawned again and gave in to the overwhelming desire to sleep.

Katy woke up the next morning. Still fully dressed, she found that her shoes had been removed and Norman had pulled the bedcovers over her. He wasn't in bed.

"You must be starving." Norman came in with a tray and placed it on the bed.

Katy eyed the bacon and egg appreciatively. The egg was cooked as she liked it, well done, and there was brown toast instead of the *boerebrood* Norman loved. She devoured the food while he sat on the bed.

“Thank you.” Katy said.

Norman removed the tray with the empty plate. “Would you like some coffee?”

“Not now.” Katy smiled at Norman as he retreated to the kitchen.

She wanted to hold onto the fragile peace that had sprung up between them and followed him to the kitchen. “You said you wanted to tell a story?”

Norman was doing the dishes. “Oh yes. Ouma Ansie was quite a character. She was ordinary looking but... I need to gather my thoughts first, how about an update on my life instead?”

“I’d like that.”

“I thought my new venture would tank, but contrary to expectations, my online teaching classes are thriving. This pandemic has some positives after all. I have twenty students!”

“That’s great,” Katy gave him a peck on the cheek.

He blushed with pleasure. “What’s more, I started a history blog.”

“Wow. What’s it about?”

“It’s a new project. So far I have written one blog post on the history of Camps Bay. I’ll give you the web address. For the first time in a while I feel like myself. Come here, give us a kiss.”

Katy ran to the bedroom and he gave chase. She giggled like a young girl but had to stop when his lips closed over hers. Katy put her arms around his neck, pulling him close. She deepened the kiss, pressing her body against his. He lifted her up and placed her on the bed.

“Let’s practise what you read in those romance novels.” Gently he removed her dress; she could feel her nipples harden.

“Why do you read them? I thought you literature lecturers looked down on them.” His lips caressed her neck; he licked her nipples then traced a line of kisses from between her breasts down her body.

Katy opened her eyes, they were heavy with passion. “I like them.”

“What are you doing?” Amy’s voice piped up.

Laughing they jumped apart.

Katy received a note in the letter box. After Norman had sterilised it with spray disinfectant, it was barely legible. From Mr De Bruin, the note respectfully asked Katy to come and look at his collection of birds.

“Should I go?” Katy was anxious.

Norman shrugged his shoulders. “It’s up to you.”

Katy called to mind how frail Mr De Bruin was the last time she saw him. “I think I’ll go.”

“Just be careful,” Norman said. “Wear a mask and don’t touch anything.”

Leaving Amy in Norman’s care, Katy selected a jam tart and coconut tart from the many cake tins on top of the kitchen dresser. Armed with a mask, gloves and sanitizer she opened the gate to her neighbour’s property. It screeched.

Mr De Bruin appeared in the open door. “How are you, my dear? I’m so glad to see you.” He had no mask. Interpreting Katy’s slight hesitation he went inside and reappeared with a blue mask. “I keep forgetting,” he apologised. He stood aside for Katy to enter.

Unlike the previous time, the house was spotless. Katy breathed a sigh of relief. She didn't know if the Corona virus loved dust the same way dust mites did, but she was glad the dirt was gone.

“Please make yourself comfortable.”

Katy stood in the middle of the room. Her eye fell on the exquisite origami collection on the window sill. She moved closer. “They are beautiful.” She reached to pick one up but thought that she had touched the gate which was probably unsanitary. Leaning forward, her arms wide, she inspected each tiny bird.

“An ostrich,” she pointed, smiling behind her mask.

Mr De Bruin picked it up and held it close to her for inspection. “A bird for the times,” he said. “A lot of people prefer not to acknowledge the threat of this pandemic.”

Katy nodded, wishing Norman had accompanied her. He had such an easy way with people. She perched on the couch, sitting right at the end, her hands cupping her knees. She searched her mind for a suitable topic that Mr De Bruin would be interested in.

He saw her discomfort and talked about his interest in the history of the brown people. He had written two books on it, hitherto unpublished. His passion made his body, frailer than the last time, come alive. His arms moved, his hands talked, his eyes lit up. He smiled, his eyes crinkling behind the mask. For the first time Katy noticed that he had very light brown eyes with a tinge of green.

In the middle of his outpouring of stories and facts on a subject close to his heart he stopped to make tea. Katy accompanied him to the kitchen. They talked companionably. She cut the coconut tart and they had a lovely tea.

After tea, she noticed Mr De Bruin fading, his gestures were slow and uncoordinated, his speech slurred. She excused herself and left.

Amberike had mastered the intricate stitches of embroidery and was engrossed in it when Anke entered the *voorkamer*. Instinctively Amberike put the tablecloth she was working on down to give Anke her full attention.

Just before Mevrouw entered, Amberike had run her forefinger over her design on the tablecloth, it was looking decent. Anke had not been present for the embroidery sessions in weeks, and Gerda had taken over Amberike's tuition which consisted of Amberike having to redo each stitch five times. Gerda had gone outside to play with the instruction that Amberike continue without her.

Amberike retrieved the tablecloth from her lap and held it out to Anke, sure that Mevrouw would be proud of her progress.

"Don't think you can replace me." Anke was shaking with fury.

Amberike was puzzled and apprehensive. Having a baby seemed to have affected Mevrouw's memory. How could a slave replace her? It was unheard of.

"Mevrouw?" Anke was angry and Amberike didn't know why. She went over her actions since she arrived at Anke's house. No, she didn't do anything that could be construed as her fault.

"Don't think now that I'm leaving—"

"Mevrouw is leaving?" Amberike was alarmed. Who would teach her to be a lady? "I don't want Mevrouw to leave. Look, I can embroider now." Indeed a brown butterfly was beginning to take shape.

"Don't pretend innocence with me. I know your kind. A *naijmandje!*"

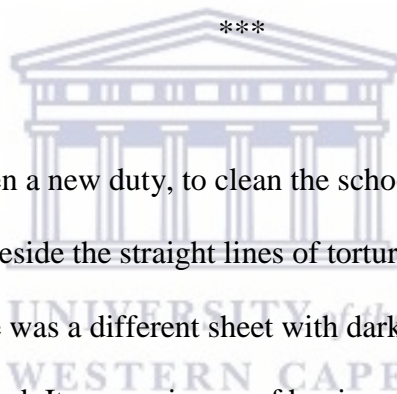
Amberike started crying. She knew the insult. "I'm not. Ask Maria. Please, Mevrouw, I want to be a lady."

“Get out of my house. I never want to see you again.”

Amberike put down her embroidery work and moved towards the door. Never? That meant she'd just lost her mother in the community, where she learnt things that perhaps would help her in future. Where would she go? Who else would take her on to teach her the skills of a lady? Working for Mevrouw wasn't perfect but she was used to it. An unknown future gaped with its mouth open, ready to swallow her.

“Please, Mevrouw, I didn't do anything wrong.”

She recognised the expression that Anke usually had before striking out and hastened to the door. Amberike knew something bad had happened that she did not know about.



Amberike had been given a new duty, to clean the school room. Something on Egbert's desk caught her eye. Beside the straight lines of torture instruments that normally occupied the desk surface, there was a different sheet with darker hues.

She lifted it up and gasped. It was an image of her in sepia brown. She knew her image because she had seen it in Gerda's hand mirror when she cleaned Mevrouw's house. But unlike that image that showed her ragged clothes, this one had her in a low-neck dress with a bodice, a flared skirt, many petticoats and a scarf around her waist. Beads hung around her neck and adorned her ankles. Barefoot, she had rings and earrings, and carried a handkerchief in her left hand.

The picture fell out of her hand. As she bent to pick it up she saw another paper that had also slipped off the desk, a meticulous drawing of two gallows on a hill, complete with a body dangling from one. In front of it a grey sea. She heard footsteps and quickly put them in place.

“What are you doing?” Egbert was in a good mood.

“Cleaning, Seur.”

“Don’t touch my papers. Otherwise I won’t know where everything is.” Egbert picked up the picture of the gallows. “This is a drawing of the Netherlands, my home country, as you come in from the sea.”

Amberike knelt to gather imaginary dirt.

“And this,” he laughed, “is one of you. Quite accomplished, I’d say.”

“Of me?”

“Yes, you *onnozele skaapje*.” He looked at her fondly. “Do you like this place?” He made a sweeping gesture to include the whole of the slave lodge.

“It’s my home now.”

“But do you like it?”

Amberike shrugged her shoulders; she didn’t know what to say. It could be a trick question. What would the punishment be if she said no, or yes? She’d learned to be wary of being drawn into conversation by the masters. It could lead to grief.

“I don’t know,” she said.

Katy was reading when Norman said he was ready to tell the story of Ouma Ansie. She put her book down, switched off her bedside light and settled back onto the pillows. Norman took it as a sign to start his story.

“Let me start by saying that the people of the 17th and 18th centuries had different values. They believed in the economics of slavery and its potential for wealth and prosperity.”

“That’s true,” Katy said.

Ouma Ansie was quite a character. She strived for gentility and loved to wear elaborate clothes. My mother has a portrait of her with an upswept hairstyle, jewelled ribbons in her hair, a starched ruff collar and an embroidered dress open in the front to reveal her under-skirts and petticoats. During that time only married women could wear such a dress. Young girls had to wear a dress closed all around.

The picture was considered scandalous in that era because her bodice is open, revealing her pink stays. Ouma Ansie was a bit wild. She was rumoured to have the most attractive foot – narrow with a high instep and delicately formed toes. The gentlemen salivated over it.

Katy laughed. “Really?”

Well, they were covered from head to toe. Her foot was considered very important because it was accessible after removing her stocking. She was bored by the suffocating, closed society at the Cape and passed her time with many (Norman coughed) dalliances.

To protect her clothes she loved to be transported by slaves through the muddy streets in a heavy chair of burnished wood with long legs and a square frame at the bottom for two slaves to hold.

One of the slaves who carried her chair, an Eastern man who was fair with brown hair and dark eyes, was her favourite. When he arrived he was in a deep depression. Nothing could rouse him from his apathy. However, he grew to love transporting Ouma Ansie.

They became friends. Family legend has it that there was a child born from the friendship.

Norman looked straight ahead. “Somewhere I have relatives I don’t know. It’s a family secret. *Moeder* promised banishment to anyone in the family who reveals the secret.”

Norman turned to look into Katy's eyes. "Because of a superior Dutch identity the child was not acknowledged. There was something wrong with him; he had a disease of the blood, and it recurred in our family tree."

Katy understood that Norman had just acknowledged that one of his ancestors had thalassemia. That he was embarrassed to tell the story. That it was a gift he was giving her, a confession she was sure he would not have made under normal circumstances. The pandemic had created an isolation bubble wherein he could do that. She reached for his hand.

Katy hoped that her streak of independence would not interfere with the delicate new relationship that was developing between her and Norman. She was reminded of a conversation with Sonia regarding her independence.

Katy and Amy were at Sonia's place. Norman had dropped them off and would fetch them later. While Sonia's son and Amy were building a puzzle – he putting pieces in and Amy taking them out, the adults were having tea.

"Norman is very proud of your achievements," Sonia said. Slim, bordering on emaciated, she put xylitol in her tea, and stirred it. Although Sonia had made scones she didn't touch them, permitting herself only one block of dark chocolate in the morning.

"Did he tell you that?" Katy, carrying a few extra kilos, devoured her scone, not daring to take another.

"I can see it for myself." Sonia smiled.

“I didn’t know he felt that way.” Katy looked longingly at the scone covered with cheese. She’d just had one half with strawberry jam and cream. Another half would make it a whole. That would only be one scone. Surely that was allowed?

“He’s not much of a talker. I think sometimes that he may be intimidated by you.”

“I hope not.” Katy was alarmed.

“He’s not so educated, you know. After matric he went to teacher’s college and you, you have all these degrees.”

“That has never been a problem in our relationship.” Katy thought of her doctorate. Anxiety stirred in her stomach and drifted to her head. She would have to discuss this with Norman, but how?

Sonia shrugged. “Most brown women are very independent. A lot of them tend to be the bread-winners.”

“I never noticed.”

Sonia changed the topic but Katy was distracted. She remembered their recent battles over money.

Her anxiety, which had appeared when she reviewed their situation and the need to pay bills, overwhelmed her. Nausea threatened. The half scone lost its attraction, appeared unappetising. She forced her attention back to Sonia.

“Amy is gaining weight. Is she eating better now?” Sonia said.

“She’s still a picky eater.”

They discussed Amy’s health.

When they left Katy lamented that she couldn’t confide in Norman about her anxiety. It had come stealthily, leaving her fatigued. He would see it as criticism aimed at him.

However, during lockdown it seemed to have improved. She scrubbed at her eyes, her anxiety had flared up just thinking about her conversation with Sonia. To combat the fog in

her brain she searched for the web address Norman had given her. Slowly, while reading, the murkiness evaporated. Norman had a flair for history.

Katy was tired of housework. She missed her helper. Domestic workers were still not allowed to return to their madams. She'd heard stories of people undercutting this rule. While they were away buying groceries, the domestic helper cleaned the house and left just before their return. She had not wanted to participate in such illegal activity during a lockdown, and even if the rules were relaxed, she worried about her helper travelling in a crowded minibus taxi every day. But how she wished her helper could come back. She'd become used to someone doing the washing and cleaning while she concentrated on her academic career. She wasn't making progress with her research or her article. The extra housework and the burden of home schooling were enervating.

Initially she was proud of how clean she kept the house but the novelty had worn off. She wished that she had been kinder to her domestic worker, Anna. Although she'd tried, the norms of treatment of black domestic workers had seeped into the fabric of South African life, and were difficult to ignore. Sometimes one copied certain practices without thinking.

Katy didn't know Anna's age. Thirty? Forty? What was her surname? And her real, African name? Katy had not registered her as the law required. She'd worked for them for seven years but Katy knew nothing about her. Although Katy had a copy of her identity document, the name on it did not correspond to the name she'd given Katy.

Katy remembered an incident in their favourite coffee shop. Anna was sitting at the table with them, her shoulders bent; her worn hands clasped on her stomach. While Katy and

Norman sat forward, hugging their skinny lattés, Anna had her chair a little away from the table so that when she leaned back she was excluded from the circle of their conversation.

Anna's feet were drawn under the chair until she was on the tips of her toes, revealing the spaces at the back of the hand-me-down shoes Katy had given her which were too big. Now and then her eyes swept over their cups, lingering, a slight frown on her forehead. Anna wanted a coffee too but knew it was not her place to ask for it.

Katy determined to treat her domestic worker better when life reverted to normal – perhaps an increase in salary? But could she really afford it?

41

The Ghost Whisperer looked into every house, every inn, and every square but alas his head wasn't there. Where to look next? He attached himself to those who would help but people were not accommodating. Each one had his own sorrow. Even his friend the sprite of mischief could not help him, although the latter had left his misbehaviour to help with the search.

He sat down on Table Mountain with only the energy field of his missing head in his hands, looking far down to the people who were like ants building a nest. There was no queen, and therefore not any cohesion; they worked against each other, drone against worker, worker against drone. What a pitiful sight.

42

Egbert mourned the sale of his slaves by Meine as retribution for the humiliation the latter suffered because of Egbert's liaison with Anke. A fertile adult slave in her prime and a

female child slave were priceless. He'd tried to find them by enquiring at nearby farms and looking in the Slave Book where all sales were registered, but they were indeed, as Meine had promised, impossible to find.

He'd interviewed the neighbours. One in particular, a friend of Meine, appeared guilty. His squint stared past Egbert and not once did he look into Egbert's eyes. But that was not enough to hang a case on.

He sat at his desk, writing another letter to his mother. He dipped the feather into the ink, brought it to the sheet to write, then put it down, staining his desk. Swearing under his breath he wiped the stain with the side of his hand and studied it morosely.

After informing Moeder in previous letters about his glowing future with three slaves and a plan to own a farm, he couldn't bring himself to tarnish the shine of his impending wealth. His mother was a taciturn woman who'd not shown him much love. He wanted to impress her, wanted her to be proud of him although his maiden aunt, who had lived with them, had raised him. He thought fondly of his aunt as his real mother. Still duty called – he had to take care of his mother.

He wanted a big farm with many slaves. His endeavours to meet with the governor had been fruitless, as he expected. A merchant would always put acquisitions ahead of the duties of a governor. Word was that you could find such a place as he wanted inland. Roman-Dutch law at the Cape stipulated that a property could be owned by a grant from the governor, or conquest, plus expending effort to work it. He intended to cultivate whatever would grow. He wanted to experiment with different seeds, wheat, corn, fruit, and vegetables.

He was a cultured man and he wanted to take some of that culture to a new frontier. He was proud of the achievements of their golden age.

He would pack coffee, biltong, bread, and saddle his horse. He had no idea which direction to go but that would not be a problem. This was a land with vast empty spaces. But he would need permission. At the first outpost he would be stopped by a variety of bloodhounds, mongrels and sentry. The governor was regulating access to the hinterland.

He daydreamed about the size of his farm. If his horse trotted for five hours in each direction –north, south, east, west – on new land that had been cleared of the vermin Hottentot, he would plant a stake at each end to demarcate his place. And at last he would have a farm of his own.

Egbert was in a forest. Tall trees reached towards the sun. They spread their branches wide, careful not to touch each other. Their aversion to touching had resulted in an intricate pattern of leaves interspersed by light. The tall trees cast shadows in the undergrowth.

He became dizzy from looking up at the tops of the trees. Massaging his neck he kicked at the dry foliage on the ground. Unknown insects made a noise. He tried to differentiate between the buzzing of wings, chirping, humming and droning. Dutch acquaintances who had been inland told of a *sonbesie* waking the forest with its constant singing.

He moved forward in the oppressive heat, running his finger around the rim of his collar. Out of the corner of his eye he noticed movement. A tree was following him. He swung round. There was nothing. But when he moved again, the tree moved. Sweat puddles formed in his lower back, staining his shirt. He peered into the forest of unknown danger by unknown animals. He shouldn't have come walking alone. This unknown land with its unknown things unsettled him.

He quickened his pace. A few more trees followed him. He started running, pushing branches, which sprang back, lashing his face. Sweating profusely he broke through into a clearing, breathing rapidly. He loosened his collar, suffocating. He longed for the flat lowland of his home country, yet knew that he would never return.

As he stumbled out of the forest he met a slave.

“You again. Are you following me?” Egbert picked up stones and pelted the ragged youngster.

43

“Dear God of the masters, and God of the Cook, please hear me. I don’t want Master Egbert to give me things. He keeps giving me treats and although I want to say no, I always want to say no, but I taste the sweetness on my tongue. Amen.”

Amberike rose and wiped the remnants of dirt from her knees. She was praying next to the well. She fingered the white shawl; it was beautiful, and soft. She inhaled its new smell; and touched it to her cheek. She couldn’t keep it. Where would she put it?

Egbert had called her into the school room after school was out, and when she stood there scrubbing her toes against her ankles, he’d approached holding out the shawl. Eyes wide she looked at him. This close he had light eyebrows and white eyelashes that were set in red skin. He’d smiled like a horse and draped the shawl over her shoulders.

“This is for you.”

She was bewildered. No master had given her anything at this Cape of Good Hope-Cape of Storms. It was an unfriendly place.

“Keep it in a safe place.” He patted her shoulder and took a step back to admire his handiwork.

Dear combined God, I don't want this shawl.

"Thanks," she'd stuttered, touching the mark on her face.

Whistling, pleased with himself, Egbert had waved her away. He smelled like dust.

Next to the well Amberike folded the shawl carefully and went in search of Maria.

She found her sitting on a chair in the shade of the market tree, sewing. Maria was humming quietly, completely at peace. No wonder she had all those switches. They came from her favourite tree. Amberike couldn't imagine sitting under a tree where they sold people but that was Maria, made of iron.

"I don't want this. You can have it," Amberike blurted.

Maria's mouth fell open. "Where did you get that?"

"Master Egbert gave it to me."

"He did? Don't show this to anyone. They'll hate you for it. Nobody wears fancy clothes here, only discarded ones. The young women will scratch your eyes out, especially the ones who, the ones he..."

"You can have it." A vivid recollection of the three women who'd assaulted her flashed before Amberike.

Maria gently stroked the shawl with a calloused hand. "Only for a minute." She draped the shawl over her shoulders. "How do I look?"

Amberike put her hand to her mouth, and giggled. "Just fine. So fine."

Maria twirled. "I do, don't I? Now let me tell you this. I'm always teaching you and you don't listen. This gift is trouble. I'm going to give it to Claas to sell and buy material to make you a second dress, or maybe a scarf so you can return the one I gave you after you carelessly lost yours in the storm. A dress you can wear." She shook her head. "Can you imagine the ladies of the Cape seeing you in this? Already they don't want us to wear lace. They will have your skin."

“My skin?”

“Yes, they’ll tear it off your body. Our place is not to stand out but to blend into the background.” She swept Amberike’s long plait over her shoulder and sighed. “You are too pretty for your own good. That Master Egbert is going to get you killed. We are possessions. We don’t have lives or destinies except what is planned for us by the one with the papers of ownership.”

Amberike stroked the shawl. “It’s lovely.”

Maria took off the shawl and dragged Amberike by the arm.

“Where are we going?”

“You’ll see.”

Outside Egbert’s door Maria knocked and waited.

“Come in.”

“Allow me to do the talking.” Maria opened the door and slapped Amberike’s cheek. “Master Egbert, forgive this intrusion. This witch stole something from you and I brought her to return it.” She placed the folded shawl on the bench, and slapped Amberike again. “Say you’re sorry.”

“I’m sorry.” Amberike rubbed her cheek.

Egbert’s whole face was red now, to match the skin his eyelashes grew from. “I will deal with her.”

Maria unleashed a battery of fists on Amberike’s back. “I’ll do it for master. I raise this child and she makes me look bad.”

Amberike howled in protest. Maria grabbed her arm again and dragged her out.

“Forgive me, master, I have failed in my duty.”

*Ere with cold beads of midnight dew
Had mingled tears of thine,
I grieved, fond Youth! that thou shouldst sue
To haughty Geraldine.*

“Ere with cold beads of midnight dew”, a poem by William Wordsworth

Egbert cornered Amberike in the school room the next morning. She had been assigned to clean it.

“Meijnheer?” She touched her birthmark.

He coughed. “About the shawl, it was a mistake.”

He’d acted on impulse. He bought it for Anke, but then they were parted. Then he went in search of the redhead he’d met on the ship to offer it as an initiation gift to a new relationship, but he learnt she had deserted her new husband and gone back to Amsterdam.

Amberike cast her eyes down.

Egbert glared at her. “You shouldn’t have taken it.”

Her eyes flew to his face. He bit on his teeth, his cheek muscles working. “Next time you won’t get off so lightly.”

“Yes, Seur.”

“You like beads, don’t you?” Egbert tossed a string of multi-coloured beads at her.

“Here. You can make a necklace and ankle bracelets.”

Amberike bent to pick the beads up from the floor. At the door she sneaked a look back at him. He had his head in his hands. A huge sigh escaped him.

He caught her stare. “Do you know that a Dutch man can’t marry a slave? A law was made against it. Before this law he could marry one only if her father was a white man. Do you have a white father?”

“No, Seur.”

“I thought so. You are no good to me. I’m just wasting my time. Amberike—“

“My name is Afia.”

“What?!”

“Nothing, Seur.”

“Your name is what we say it is. You’re the property of the VOC. Never forget that.”

“*Gadverdamme*,” Amberike said under her breath.

“Speak up or I’ll have to take the whip to you.”

“I said, Seur, are we done?”

“That’s for me to decide. Come here.”

Amberike stood with her hands behind her back while he circled, inspecting her. She cringed, resisting the urge to adjust the cloth around her breasts and pull at her hem.

“Umm,” his hand on his chin, he was indulging in a side view. He pulled at her lopsided dress, whistling. “You’ll fetch a good price.”

Alarm replaced the embarrassment of being appraised like a cow. “No, please, master.” A cry from her soul.

“Don’t worry, I’m just teasing you.”

Norman did not speak about his estrangement from his mother and the rest of his family because he married Katy. Sometimes Katy felt guilty. She didn’t know the particulars, only what Norman had told her and that was that his mother never wanted to see him again. “It’s her loss,” he’d shrugged.

He’d said it on the day after their wedding when they were relaxing in the Cuddle Puddle in the neighbouring kingdom of Swaziland, which was now eSwatini, a name chosen

by the current ruler King Mswati III. The warm mineral water soothed Katy as she leaned back against the rough wall of the pool.

She didn't have a long dress and veil for her wedding but she was happy. In her cream two-piece with white flowers in her hair, and Norman in a brown suit, light green shirt and brown tie they were festive enough. Sonia and her husband, John, had served as witnesses and after the short marriage ceremony they had grilled baby chicken at a restaurant.

Her parents were also against the marriage. The separation of the races had resulted in such distrust that one could not see any good in the other. But she loved Norman and wished people would know that if you lived with someone in an intimate relationship, after a while you didn't see the difference in race, even though the outside world constantly reminded you.

Nevertheless, she could see that Norman missed his mother. When he spoke to Sonia he always enquired after her health. And sometimes when a stranger walked by he would say, "My mother had a hat like that," or "My mother had a bag like that."

His father had died when he was twelve. Apparently his father was a *slawe drywer*, a narcissist who had abused his mother, loaded her with responsibility, and taken many lovers. Norman, who'd been close to his mother, resented that.

"I'm glad he is as dead as a quagga," he'd said bitterly.

His elder brother had continued in his father's footsteps as an abusive husband while Norman wanted to be different.

On their return to South Africa Katy had high hopes for reconciliation with both their families, but that had not happened. Norman refused to contact his family, and her tentative efforts to connect with her family were spurned. Her father said she could come home only if she left Norman. They were therefore bound in love but also in pain.

Norman planned a romantic dinner. He cooked steak, baked potatoes, peas and added pumpkin because Katy associated it with a Sunday meal while growing up – with cinnamon and butter. He set the table with candles, Katy’s best tablecloth and three orange-red Mandela roses from the garden. Katy dressed for the occasion in a short black dress.

As they sat down to eat there was a knock on the door.

“I’ll get it,” Norman said.

“Who visits during Covid?” Katy followed Norman to the door.

A woman with two young children stood under the light on the stoep. She had her arms around them to protect them from the cold. They squashed their bodies against her, looking at Katy and Norman with large, black eyes, wearing masks made from a cut-off sock over their mouths and noses.

“Please, sir, my children are hungry. I lost my job and we have no food.”

Most businesses had closed and people couldn’t work to provide for their families. A government grant had been implemented but most were unable to access it because they didn’t have identity documents or simply didn’t know about it.

Norman looked at the children with threadbare clothes. The wind had come up. “Hold on a second.” He closed the door and said to Katy. “They need food.”

“Bring three paper plates and I’ll dish up for all of us.” Amy had been put to bed early.

Norman took the paper plates to the woman at the door. When he came back Katy had dimmed the light.

“You’re beautiful.” Norman kissed her cheek and took his place. He prayed and they enjoyed the meal.

Katy wanted to read the slave play to Norman and contacted Dean to find out if he had located it.

“I wish you were as interested in me as you are in the play,” he said, sounding playfully hurt. “Instead you spend your energy on trying to find a dusty old play.”

Katy was never sure if he was serious or not. Their repartee sometimes bordered dangerously on the beginning of an affair.

“Don’t be silly,” Katy laughed.

“I’m serious. Did you listen to that song I sent you on Whatsapp?”

Katy didn’t know if Dean was interested in a relationship but when he came too close, she shied away. The music he sent on a regular basis sometimes spoke about love.

“Not yet. Did you find the play?”

“No, my dear, I have not found the play. Something came up and I was too busy.”

Was he upset over her lack of a response? “I understand. Do you mind if I do some research?”

During lockdown more resources had become available online. She’d done a virtual tour of museums, watched plays and attended the opera, all in her pyjamas from the comfort of her home.

“Not at all. I hope you find it, my dear.”

She started searching for archives and found the site of the Latter-day Saints. After trawling through pages of useless information she found Cape records and entries of the baptismal records of the Dutch-Reformed church.

An advertisement for an antique sale caught her eye. That led to a site with old newspapers from the British and their time at the Cape of Good Hope. Hidden in a corner of

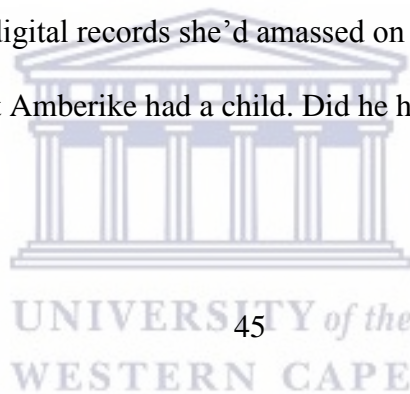
one page was the news about a stage production slaves had produced at the slave lodge. The information was scant, maybe two lines.

Happiness coursed through her veins. The play existed! She was so excited, she called Dean to tell him about it but the phone just rang.

She searched for information about Stephen Gray, a well-known South African literary critic, and found that he had recently died. How to proceed? She could not think of a way forward. Why was the play not mentioned in early South African literature? Why did it disappear without a trace? Who was the investor who had it? Why was he still holding onto it? Had he destroyed it by now?

These and other questions kept her awake. Finding the play had become an obsession.

She flitted through the digital records she'd amassed on her ancestors. In one of the documents she found proof that Amberike had a child. Did he have thalassemia? She didn't know, she would never know.



A big day was looming, *Tweede Nuwejaar*. Amberike couldn't control her excitement; she was running round and round. They were going to have a picnic. Maria was packing boiled cow's feet and bread roasted over an open fire into a grass woven basket.

"Stop. You're making me dizzy. Put all the washing into a sheet and tie it with a knot. That Meine," Maria grumbled, "giving you washing to do on the one day of the year when we are supposed to be free to do what we want."

Amberike spread the white sheet on the floor and dumped all the clothes in the middle. She gathered the corners of the sheet and tied it. Even this chore couldn't dampen her enthusiasm. This was her first free day since she arrived.

“Come.” Maria hoisted the bundle on her head, balancing it on her strong neck. She swung her hips as she walked. Amberike carried the basket. On the way to the mountain the basket grew heavier on her thin arm. She shifted it from one hand to the other.

“Put it on your head. But if it falls ...”

Amberike opted to forego the experiment. The basket kept slipping off her smooth hair because she’d taken off her headscarf. Besides, Maria swinging her ample hips seemed to make balancing the basket on top of her head easy. When Amberike swung her narrow hips it interfered with her gait and she stumbled.

At Platteklip Maria lowered the bundle, soaped the sheet and spread it on a clean rock to whiten. She kicked the clothes about, laughing. “Take that, and that.” Tiring of the game she sat down, pulling the basket closer. “Let’s eat.”

Amberike joined her, spreading Gerda’s dress to sit on.

“Why don’t you wear it?”

Amberike pulled the dress over her head without taking off her own. Giggling she plopped down on the ground.

“What a peaceful view,” Maria said. “Let’s hope 1713 will be a good year.”

Amberike followed her gaze. It was a great view of the slave lodge and castle with houses in-between and the blue of the horizon where the sea met the land.

Music filtered down the mountain. Maria shaded her eyes. “Look, there’s a procession.”

About eight or nine men had various instruments which Amberike didn’t recognise. The leader had a drum and they were marching in a line while a lone woman trailed at the back, dancing.

“Cooooeee!” Maria shouted, waving, but they were too far off to hear her.

Maria started dancing to the beat floating down, stamping her rough, dusty feet. Amberike joined her. They danced with wild abandon. Amberike had never seen Maria so carefree, her smiling dark face turned to the sky. It inspired Amberike to improvise a dance where she shook her belly. She and her sister had been taught that before coming to the Cape.

Maria stopped dancing to watch her and clapped to the beat of the drum. Amberike's feet flew. She was transported to her mother's house, and experienced the warmth of being safe and loved. Her hair, loose over her shoulders, glistened with sweat, and stuck to her face. She bit on a lock of hair and continued to dance. She was flying. She felt herself being lifted heaven-ward towards the birds. She danced until she dropped down from exhaustion. Then she burst into tears.

"What's wrong with you?" Maria started washing the clothes, beating them on a rock. After a while Amberike took off Gerda's dress and washed it.

With their music, dance, and songs the slaves had created an independent community, even though it was hemmed in by the restrictions of the masters. But amidst all the festivities Amberike missed the Cook. She had not seen him for a long time.

Maria had a bruise on her face. There were rumours that Claas had done it. Amberike couldn't understand. Claas had taken Maria's friend's place sleeping next to Maria? Concerned she approached Maria who was hanging up her spare dress and a colourful shawl she'd sewn from left-over pieces of cloth. Amberike loved the shawl and planned to make one just like it. Claas' shirt was missing. Usually his shirt hung next to Maria's dress.

"Is something wrong?" Amberike handed Maria a clothes peg Claas had crafted from wood. He was a skilled carpenter. Maria didn't answer.

“People are saying Claas beat you. Is that true?” Amberike rubbed her cheek from the stinging slap Maria had delivered.

“Shush, you don’t know anything so just shut your mouth.”

“I’m sorry,” Amberike started crying.

“And stop that wailing. You have to learn that your tears are of no use in this place. They are not going to help you in this corner of the world. So dry them and hand me my shift.”

Amberike hurried to comply. “Yes, Maria.”

“And stop calling me Maria, disrespecting me like these people. To you I should be Tant Maria.”

The rumour had indicated that the purser where Maria worked had forced himself on her. Amberike wanted to ask but knew it would invite further anger.

She wanted to tell Maria about the Cook’s bad behaviour. He had done to her what she’d seen Maria’s friend and Claas do to Maria (it was difficult not to notice such things in this place). He had put his arms around her, but she had not asked for it or agreed. Or did she? She wasn’t sure.

She’d grown to love Maria like a mother. As time went on, the memory of her own mother was fading although she tried to hold onto her with all her might.

Not long after she arrived she was walking home from Mevrouw’s house when she noticed a stone. It was the colour of the hills in her homeland. She’d picked it up and clutched it to her breast. The ache for home was so strong she had to stop. Enati! Ife! She missed her mother and her sister. She even missed her brother whom she’d found too bossy since her father died.

Sitting down right there on the path she’d picked up a sharp stone and carved a squiggle for Enati on one side and Ife on the other. The stone was her prized possession. She

carried it between her breasts next to her heart. When her breasts were smaller it looked like a third lump but she didn't care.

She put her hand on the stone nestled between her breasts. It comforted her. That it was held in place by the Cook's scarf used to be another layer of comfort. He was her friend, wasn't he? She didn't know now after what happened but she felt connected to him because of the scarf.

Since the incident with the Cook and what happened to Maria and Claas, Amberike felt even less safe. Surely Maria couldn't help it that the purser molested her? And Claas loved Maria, didn't he? So he should've understood that it wasn't her fault. If Master Egbert forced himself on her, someone who liked her, say like the Cook, would have to understand? Correction, maybe the Cook didn't like her but what if he did? She would then expect him to console her.

The rumour suggested that Maria was with child and Claas said it wasn't his. Amberike's heart bled for Maria. Although Amberike had a soft heart and loved small children, she wished that this child would die at birth because it would bring such misery.

Maria wasn't sleeping next to Claas anymore. She was sad and cried herself to sleep. Amberike heard her because she now slept next to Maria. She contemplated talking to Claas, but had learned to stay out of the adults' business. They saw it as interference and didn't see you just wanted to help.

*The male peacock spider raises
its colourful fan for
a mating dance.
The female lunges and kills
him if she does not like the dance.*

Amberike attended the gathering Arrie arranged every week under the tree where they sold slaves. It provided ample shade so she could see why Maria liked to sit under it. Usually Maria accompanied her to each service but today she had declined. Maria appeared to be in a dark mood lately.

Amberike stood on the outskirts of the little congregation, watching Arrie sing. He had a lovely deep voice. After the hymn Claas stepped up to preach.

“Men and women, boys and girls, it is an honour for me to bring the word of the God of the Worlds to you. Listen to your masters so God may favour you and grant you entry into the next life.”

There were sounds of approval and those of dissent. Claas was unpopular, his cruelty alienated many.

“Too many of us do not know our place. We step into the footprint of the master and then we fail. Take the massacre at Verkeerdevallei. A bandit wanted power. He influenced others to follow him. They looted and burned before they were caught and dealt with according to the law. Lives were lost, people died unnecessarily. And whose fault was it? The fault of the fool who wouldn't obey.”

Hoots of dissent mingled with agreement greeted the end of Claas' homily. Arrie blushed and lowered his head – Claas was referring to the beheading of his brother. Amberike expected Arrie to rush at Claas as he had at the Cook (the Cook had told her about the incident) but he didn't.

Claas stared at Arrie, dark hatred in his eyes. “Go in peace.” Claas lifted his hand to bless the congregation.

Arrie started another hymn, a mournful elegy fit for funerals. Amberike saw the smirk on Claas' face and it occurred to her that she did not like him.

Claas came to stand next to her, too close, his hip and shoulder almost touching her. She moved away. He leaned in, his face near hers; his nostrils flared as he inhaled her smell and smacked his lips. “Did you like my sermon?”

Amberike didn’t respond.

“You don’t think I preach well?”

“I didn’t say that.”

“Silence also speaks.” Claas grinned at her. “Watch yourself.” He cackled and walked away.

Amberike felt her skin prickle in disgust. She couldn’t understand what Maria saw in him. There was something about him that terrified her.



Every week day from eleven to twelve o’clock Katy home-schooled Amy. She had to get the curriculum from the school and in addition to their syllabus she introduced history. Not very complicated history, but along the lines of “Once upon a time ships brought people from different countries to work here as slaves.” Amy enjoyed these stories along with *The three little pigs*, *Cinderella* and *Dr Seuss*.

Amy was sitting on her small, green plastic chair at the child-size table, colouring in a dog. Her head was bent, her tongue sticking out of the corner of her mouth in concentration.

Katy stroked Amy’s fine auburn hair, so unlike her own, and inspected Amy’s effort. “Try to stay between the lines,” she said.

“I am, Mummy.” Her unwieldy strokes kept straying across the lines.

“Let me show you what I mean.” Katy coloured in a dog in another colouring book and showed it to Amy, pointing out the lines. Amy started pouting.

“Alright, now it’s time for baking.”

Amy brightened. Katy leaned back; she’d learned new respect for the teachers who worked with small children.

After school she kept Amy busy with baking and reading. She loved to make biscuits and take a tray to Daddy.

Keeping her indoors was almost impossible. At nursery school Amy had played outside and she asked to go to her friends. Every day Katy thought of new ways to prevent her from going out or missing her friends. She and Norman took turns and by the end of the day, the one on duty was exhausted.

“Amy likes biscuits.” Kneeling on a chair Amy was stirring the mix with two hands.

“We have so much cake and biscuits we’re going to get fat.” They had three tins full of cake and biscuits. Katy baked to entertain Amy but also to calm her thoughts by concentrating on precise measurements.

“Daddy likes biltong,” Amy’s voice had a permanent hoarseness to it.

“Yes he does.”

“Amy can’t eat biltong.”

“That’s right, my baby.”

“Cos Amy is sick.”

“But with the right treatment Amy can do whatever she wants.”

“Amy can run.”

“Yes.”

“Amy can skip.”

“Yip.”

“Amy can build puzzles.”

Norman came in, he patted his stomach. “Mm biscuits.”

Amy laughed gleefully. Norman lifted his eyebrows to Katy. She shrugged her shoulders.

Katy was running low on her birth-control pills. Getting more was out of the question because the local clinic was not safe – they did tests there so the risk of running into infectious people was great; and she was saving their medical budget for Amy.

She started avoiding intimacy with Norman. The second time she declined she said she had a headache. Norman sat her down for a talk.

“We’ve come too far to go back. Please tell me what I have done to offend you.”

“Nothing. You did nothing. It’s just...” she hesitated.

“I’m listening.”

Katy looked into his grey eyes and blurted. “I’ve run out of birth-control pills.”

Norman laughed. “Is that all? You had me worried.”

“It’s serious.” Katy didn’t see anything to laugh at.

“We’ll make a plan.” Norman leaned over, kissed her on the forehead and put on his jacket.

“Where are you going?”

“To the chemist for condoms. It’s not illegal. But do you know how easy it is to get items that have been banned? My brother-in-law sells peach brandy and I know of someone who imports cigarettes.”

“Really?” Katy was shocked.

“You can’t keep people away from their cigarettes and alcohol, especially during stressful times like this. They will always make a plan.”

“Have you tried those cigarettes?”

“They are terrible. Not worth three or five times what I would normally pay. I tried it once. I went to a designated shop and just showed the man behind the counter the gesture of smoking.” Norman demonstrated. “He showed me to another counter at the back, where we conducted a transaction in whispers. How much, he asked. Two, I said. Then he said, R350 per box. It’s too expensive, I protested. And guess what he said? Take it or leave it. I eventually came away with only one box. But that was good because they were the worst cigarettes I’ve ever smoked.”

When Norman came back Amy had crawled into bed with Katy and they were fast asleep. Norman watched them tenderly and found space on the king size bed where he could fit without disturbing them.



Later a stranger knocked on Katy’s door. She peeped through the window and saw a petite woman in black. Didn’t she know about the lockdown? Katy put on her mask, and opened the window. “Can I help you?”

“I’m intruding, I know, but my father died and he left something for you.” Swollen eyes, red from crying regarded Katy solemnly.

“I don’t understand ...”

“He lived next door. Mr De Bruin?”

“Oh. He died? I’m so sorry.”

“I’m his daughter. He was buried yesterday.”

Katy had not seen any vehicles other than his truck. She recalled his fragile countenance.

“He left this for you.” She picked up a box.

A gift during lockdown? What if ... “May I ask how he died?”

“The sickness got to him.”

“I see.” This presented a quandary. If he died of the virus Katy would be bringing it into the house.

Sensing her assumption, the woman added. “He died of diabetes and you don’t have to worry, I had this sterilized.”

“What is it?”

“A collection of paper birds. He wanted you to have it.”

Katy blanched at the notion of those delicate birds being doused with sanitizer.

“Thank you kindly. Just leave the box on the stoep. My husband will wipe it down later.”

“My father spoke well of you. Thanks for being his friend.” She broke down, turned and, her shoulders hunched, walked to her car.

Katy studied the box. Although she didn’t really know Mr De Bruin she was sad at his passing. She had not done much to earn the honour of being called friend. Caught up in her busy life, she’d usually only waved across the fence when she saw him.

When Norman came home he wiped the box down with disinfectant and moved it to the garage. It would have to wait until it was safe to open it.

The Cook and Amberike had stayed longer than he’d intended. It was dark when they returned from the Khoi homestead. In the darkness Amberike walked close to him. At one

point her shoulder touched his arm. A shock went through his body. The urge to be closer was so great he bit on his teeth to refrain.

A strange animal made a sound. Amberike took his arm. The Cook kept his mind on trying to identify the sound, a baboon? This strange country had strange sounds.

The sound came again, this time nearer.

“What’s that?” Amberike pressed her body into his side. He could smell her hair, clean with a hint of soap.

“I don’t know, but do not fear, we’re almost there.”

Without his toes his gait had changed. When he lost his big toes his arches had grown higher as the bone structure of his feet shifted. Losing all his toes resulted in him shifting from one foot to the next to stay upright, staggering like a baby learning to walk. Amberike so close interfered with his stability and he fell. As he fell she came with him. To cushion her fall he offered his body.

She was so close he could feel his heart thudding in his ears. He reached out to touch her face and his hand landed on her breast. He could feel his scarf holding her breast. He leaned forward and put his arms around her. She gasped. He found her lips. Amberike moaned.

Immediately he rolled away. “Forgive me. I ...”

Amberike set off walking into the night, heading for the slave lodge.

The next day the Cook was wracked with guilt. Did Amberike agree to what happened the previous night? Was she old enough to agree? His body had betrayed him. He prayed for forgiveness. He had stayed away from her, afraid that his interest would imperil her safety, and now he had let her down.

“Remember I told you about Allah –may He be glorified,” the Cook said to Mankbeen who seemed to have forgotten what troubled him earlier. They had just had a sparring session.

“Who? When are we going to have the next boxing lesson?”

“Soon.” The Cook smiled; thus far he had not been successful in converting Mankbeen. The little fellow seemed to have a deficit in his understanding.

They were cleaning out the horse stable. As they came outside for fresh air the Cook saw Maria far away, walking fast. She had taken to long walks, covering great distances. He shouted and waved to get her attention. She turned and walked towards them.

When she reached them, he saw that she had thorns in her feet. He sat her down gently and proceeded to remove them. Mankbeen couldn't stand the sight of blood and returned to the stable. One thorn was particularly deep and the Cook struggled to get it out. Maria did not seem to heed the pain.

“I'm attracted to healers,” she said. “I don't know why I chose Claas.” After a while she added, “Claas wants us to be added to the marriage list but I won't agree because he loans me to other men.”

“You've lost weight,” the Cook said, concerned. He had respect for Maria, she complained to every official ear about the women having to work as nurses in the company hospital where they were exposed to soldiers and sailors who treated them badly.

Maria laughed. Her laugh had changed. It approximated the cackle of Claas. “I'm starving this baby, before he gets the Venus sickness.” A sexually transmitted infection.

The Cook wiped the blood off her feet. Her heels were calloused, cracked. “You should care more for your health.”

That ugly laugh again. “I'm waiting for this baby.”

“It will come soon enough.”

“My life will be better after that.”

“I hope so. How’s Claas?”

“He has the wrath of the devil in him. I thought he would help me free my children.

This baby’s going to be sold; it will fetch a good price. Claas insists upon it. Are you done?”

Maria got to her feet, put her hands on her back for a moment and strode away.

48

Stone pine trees were imported when the vast milk wood forests that had lined the coast had been diminished, their hard wood used up for building ships and houses. The evergreen pine trees grew fast, ten to fifteen feet in five years. Egbert wanted to utilise this new product. His inventions had stalled; he didn’t have the appetite for designing and testing his contraptions anymore. But a pine-cone business could work.

The pine nut was a delicacy because of its difficulty to extract from the hard cone. However, he did not have a work force. He saw the Cook talking to two Khoi men digging a ditch and approached them. The Cook stepped forward while the others stood behind him, leaning on their implements.

“How would you like to earn a few guilders?”

Egbert raked his eyes over the Cook. Not a bad specimen. Probably strong despite his wiry build. He had seen him sniff around Amberike, so the buck was sure to take the bait. Most of them wanted to buy their freedom or that of their loved ones.

The Cook eyed him sceptically.

“It’ll help you earn enough to buy your freedom.” Egbert saw a flicker of interest. Almost imperceptibly a smirk flashed across his face.

“What do I have to do, Seur?” The Cook fixed his dark eyes on Egbert. Clearly he didn’t trust him.

“All you have to do is pick pine cones.”

“Just that?” the Cook sounded incredulous. New trees were growing everywhere.

“You’ll need the help of your friends. We pick the pine cones at the right time and then we chop them open to take out the nuts.”

The Cook looked into the distance, mulling it over. “How much would I make?”

“A guilder for every 20 cones. That applies to your friends as well.”

“May I talk to them first?” The Cook indicated his co-workers.

“Go ahead.”

Egbert watched them huddling together. What a bedraggled group: the Cook with his scarred feet and the others in dirty, torn clothes. There was no reason they would not be eager to join his venture.

The Cook staggered towards Egbert. The latter wondered what any woman would see in such a hobbling, crippled man.

“We will help you,” the Cook said formally.

Egbert’s spirits lifted. “That’s agreed upon.”

Egbert opened the letter from his mother. It had arrived with the latest ship. She was on her way to the Cape of Good Hope. She had borrowed money (which she was sure he would return) for the hazardous journey and couldn’t wait to see him.

Gadverdamme. He scratched his shoulder-length hair. If he and Meine had not fallen out, and if he still had access to Meine's house, he would take her there, and pretend that they were business partners. Now he had to secure lodgings, since his own accommodation was not suitable for a gentle-woman. He considered the place in the main street where Anke was staying while she waited for passage to Holland. He would have to ask her for assistance.

After refusing twice, Anke agreed to meet him. They met outside the boarding house and Anke led him to the veranda. When Meine tossed Anke out of their house, to save face, she had not gone to live with her mother and daughters. Instead she had opted to remain in town. Now she eyed him with hostility.

"You wanted to see me, Meijnheer?"

"Yes, I have to beg your goodwill."

Anke studied her nails. "And what pray would you have me do?"

Egbert coloured. "My mother is arriving soon," he stammered, "and she needs a place to stay."

"What has that to do with me?"

"I thought ... if you could vouch for her, she could stay here."

Anke directed her gaze at him. "How long is she staying?"

"I don't know." Egbert shifted in his chair, he was sweating.

"This is one of the good houses."

"I know."

"The best."

"How much will it cost?"

"We are not so vulgar as to talk about money. I'll ask my friend if she has an extra room."

"Thank you."

Anke's cool gaze raked his person. "It's nothing, Meijnheer."

Momentary panic grasped Egbert. He was allowing his mother to be close to a woman who hated him for abandoning her when their dalliance became known. But what else could he do? He'd tell his mother that the house on his farm was too rough for such a great lady.

49

After a month or two Egbert announced that the time was right to pick the cones. The Cook arrived with a band of agile workers who could scale trees. The picking went very well. Then came breaking open the pine cones to get at the nuts.

"This thing is too hard," one of them said. He dropped stones on it, kicked it, but the cone wouldn't release its seed.

"Try again." The Cook's hands were bleeding, trying to wedge a sharp stone into the pine.

No matter how hard they tried they couldn't open the pine cones.

"Where's the food?" Arrie said. He had dropped in to monitor the Cook's food preparation as usual.

"I cooked early this morning."

Arrie watched them struggling with the cones. "This is not the right time to pick them. They should've been picked before they became hard."

The Cook pointed to the cones. "But Master Egbert said—"

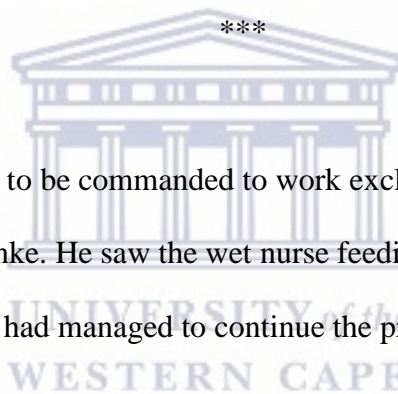
Arrie laughed. "Oh that Master Egbert, he thinks he knows everything and he won't ask anyone for advice. He's a loner. The others don't really like him. And he has all these schemes."

The Cook threw the pine cone as far as he could. “What a waste of time.”

His dream of buying Amberike’s freedom first, then his, with the money generated from the pine cones, had been sunk. He suspected that Egbert may have duped him deliberately. His anger rose. Normally he could control it but this was blatant provocation. He picked up the cones and threw them as far as he could.

A beetle crawled out of a cone before the Cook could dispose of it. The Cook killed it with another cone.

“What have you done?” Arrie studied the blood of the beetle. “You just killed your bringer of wealth and prosperity.”



The Cook was surprised to be commanded to work exclusively on Meine’s farm. It was strangely empty without Anke. He saw the wet nurse feeding the baby under a tree in the sun, and speculated how Meine had managed to continue the privilege of using company slaves after Anke left.

They were clearing a new field for wheat. Frans worked alongside him. Other slaves worked on either side of them, forming a line. The sun was bright and the sky blue with no clouds. The Cook straightened his back. It was good to work outside on such a beautiful day.

He wiped the sweat from his brow. Frans dug up the vegetation with a spade while the Cook, sitting on a small barrel, picked it up and stuffed it into sacks to be poured onto a pile later. He’d made shoes with the remnant of an old sail of a ship. Pieces of cloth were stuffed in front where his toes ought to be and it had improved his walking. He watched Frans turning the soil and noticed that they worked close to a gully. He could sprint down the slope and hide there.

“Get to work.” A big Mosbieder got up from where he was sitting under a tree. It was the first time he relieved Arrie in supervising the slaves.

Occasionally Meine would direct them from his horse. When he had guests he brought them to the field after refreshment and they talked while Meine did the overseeing. But today he was absent and the slaves were more relaxed under the greenhorn.

“How many children have you fathered?” Frans asked, winking at the Mosbieder. The other slaves laughed, some whistled.

The Mosbieder smiled, revealing small teeth. “I have three so far and two are on the way.”

Frans whistled admiringly. “And Siena, Master Egbert’s slave, the one that was sold?”

“She is with child.” The Mosbieder eyed the Cook who was listening to the conversation, nervously scrubbing his hands. “I said, work.”

The Cook hauled vegetation into a sack, working frantically. He stopped; the urge to run so strong he bit his index finger.

“What’s wrong with you? Work. Or the master will strip my back. You are his new slave.” The Mosbieder approached threateningly.

A river roared in the Cook’s head. He didn’t want to belong to Meine. His sale had gone through without his knowledge. He was just an object to be passed from one person to the next. Sweat poured from his brow.

Frans studied the Cook. “There he goes again,” he muttered under his breath.

“You’re not going to get away under my watch.” The Mosbieder came closer, swinging his whip.

The Cook sweated, his finger bore teeth marks which started bleeding. Not now. Not now. What about Amberike/

But the urge to be free took over his body. Unheeding of pain or danger it had a life of its own. He started running. The slaves stopped working to watch. The Mosbieker gave chase.

50

Heavy, cold rain flowed down the outside of the bedroom window. The inside was misted over while the wind shook the frame.

Katy missed the university, the students, and her colleagues. She missed going for coffee with a friend. She missed the petrol attendants, someone to wash her car or take care of her hair. Grieving the loss of her normal life sat heavy as stone.

She loved her family but would gladly trade a few days to be in the company of others, to have the outside world intrude as a balancing scale.

Her wet hair in a towel, she sat in front of the mirror listening to a lesson on YouTube on how to cut your hair. She gathered her hair in a ponytail at the back of her head and snipped off a chunk. This was supposed to be a basic bob, long at the front. She slipped off the hair band to check and gasped, it was dreadfully uneven. She watched the section on cutting into the hair with the scissors facing upward and attempted a repair. Now she had holes in her hair. Bravely she tied it back into the ponytail. Tomorrow she would attempt to cut layers.

Her phone beeped – an invitation to her family’s Whatsapp group. She called her mother. “I just received an invitation from Rohan.”

“Yes, he formed a family group so that we can support each other during the pandemic. I suggested he include you. You will accept, won’t you?” Mum sounded anxious.

Katy swallowed. “Of course.”

After joining the group her phone's notification system sounded more than ever. She established that none of her family members had thalassemia. Her father, after retirement, had become a heritage activist.

"What's that all about?" Norman asked.

"It's the Jacobs family group. Rohan asked me to join."

Norman frowned. "I hope they're not insulting you?"

"It's not like that at all," Katy hastened to add. "It's a support group. They put music on and if someone has been exposed to the virus everyone rallies to give encouragement."

"Hmn."

She could see Norman was not convinced and changed the subject. "I need someone to cut my hair."

"We can't have strangers coming in here. You know that!"

Katy agreed but her frustration at being confined pushed her to ask the question that she'd longed to ask for a while.

"Has my education ever bothered you?"

"What? What are you talking about? I thought we were discussing your family group."

"The thought just came up. Someone mentioned it to me once."

"That must be your father? That man doesn't like me." Norman left the room.

Dissatisfied with her hair and life in general, Katy ascribed his irritability to pain in the healed bones of his broken leg, usually brought on by bad weather.

Norman and Katy were reading in bed. Norman put his book down.

“This story doesn’t grip my attention. I was never one for reading.”

“Mm.” Katy was deeply engrossed in her romance.

“What happened to that ancestor of yours? The one you told me about. How did she die?”

Katy put down her book after inserting a home-made bookmark, a black ribbon with pink beads on both ends. “Do you mean Kaatje?”

“That’s the name I was looking for. I quite liked the stories about Kaatje. Tell me how she passed on.”

Katy’s dark mood had not lifted. She decided they could both do with some humour.

A deep sepulchral voice said: “What was it like to be a slave?” Kaatje looked around but couldn’t find the source of the voice. The voice came again. “You’re not thinking of dying are you?”

Norman shivered in jest. “It sounds like a ghost story. You seem to like scaring me.”

Katy laughed. “Do you want to hear the story or not?”

“Go ahead.” Norman grinned.

Katy went silent. As always when she thought about Kaatje a deep ache settled in her heart. She couldn’t use Kaatje for brittle humour.

She took a deep breath. *The arthritis in Kaatje’s shoulder was troubling her, and she had to take care of two children and do housework. Bella was gone and talking to young people wasn’t easy. She still couldn’t read. Any news had to come to her verbally, a limitation.*

She fell ill. Her grandson and his wife spoke as if Kaatje wasn’t there.

“She’s not the same,” they said, “she says she wants to die.”

“Self-pity,” the grandson’s wife said. “Ouma, are you tired?” she asked.

“Yes, my child.” Kaatje said.

“You just have to wait. There’s no way to hurry it.”

“Take away that coffin,” Kaatje said.

“There’s no coffin, Ouma.”

“It’s in the sitting room.” Kaatje rolled around, delirious. She lapsed into Dutch.

“We no longer understand you, Ouma,” they said.

Kaatje clearly saw the coffin resting on two kitchen chairs, a candlestick with a white candle in the middle. She felt a stabbing pain in her abdomen.

Kaatje groaned. “Please, call Bella.”

“Ouma Bella died. Don’t you remember?”

“She’s not dead. I just saw her walking by.”

Her grandson uttered the longest sigh. Kaatje winced. Her husband had died and she had not a pound or penny saved. She had to kick her feet under the table of her great-grandson.

“Happy birthday, Ouma. May you see many more,” he said.

Rage filled her heart. Had she not lived long enough?

Katy was overcome as if her ancestor had really died like that.

“So she died on her birthday? That’s sad. You are a very good story teller,” Norman said.

Katy was glad that he had guessed the truth.

Early the next morning her cell phone rang; Katy saw Dean’s number and walked to her study.

“Hello, my dear.” Dean said.

Katy wanted to tell him to stop calling her “my dear” like Mr De Bruyn. “I’ve been trying to get hold of you, and you return my call a week later?”

“I had a bit of a scare. I went for a christening and someone there had the disease. But listen, I have the play.”

“That’s awesome. Where did you get it?”

“I had to pull a few strings. The pandemic has softened people’s attitudes. I hope that after this we will have a better world, more egalitarian.”

Katy knew Dean would go off on a tangent if she didn’t stop him, and gently interrupted. “The play, you were talking about the play?”

“I’m emailing it to you as we speak.”

Katy couldn’t contain her excitement. “Let me open my laptop. It takes forever to load. I need a new one.” Katy put the bag on the desk, unzipped it and retrieved her laptop. She plugged it in because the battery no longer charged.

“So how have you been? Did you miss me?” Dean asked.

Katy laughed. “I missed you so much I pined for you.”

“Good. This lockdown is a curse. I eat non-stop, mainly sweets and snacks.”

“Tell me about it. I bake so often we have enough cake for a church bazaar.”

“We can go to the gym as soon as it opens,” Dean consoled.

“I prefer to run out in the fresh air. The gym will be full of germs.”

“They’ll probably clean it well. All businesses must follow government regulations.”

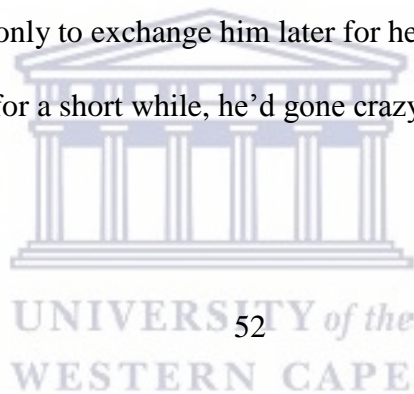
Katy glanced at her laptop. “I see your document came through. I can’t wait to read it.”

*Heitse Eibib.holy
Forbidding insect,
you still sit on the curtain, calm.*

The Ghost Whisperer had so many graves to inspect. He peered under every stone, overturned every rock but his head could not be found. He went to Vergelegen, the farm of Willem Adriaan van der Stel. There were bones there but they did not belong to him.

He would rather have lost his body. It had attracted the ladies but that had led to his downfall. A particularly comely lady had conned him. She'd declared eternal love and laboured for his manumission, only to exchange him later for her own freedom.

Having tasted freedom for a short while, he'd gone crazy when he was owned again, and stirred an uprising.



*On Banda the VOC killed
the Bandanese.
Took over the island, and
nurtured nutmeg, using
Slaves from nearby countries.*

The Cook was sitting on the wagon, his head down. With his toes cut off he couldn't run far and had been caught easily.

The Mosbieker had pursued him and he had fallen down, pretending to faint. Not knowing what to do the Mosbieker had towered over him, listening to the slaves on what to do. "Lift him up," some shouted. "Carry him." Fetch Baas Meine." The Mosbieker, afraid of punishment, accepted the last suggestion. He'd left the Cook in the grass to report to his boss.

The Cook had continued his awkward run until he heard a horse galloping. He had the painful image of him trying to run in a comical way and Meine, laughing, allowing his horse to mow him down.

News had reached the other slaves that he was to be sold. They avoided him, as if in associating with him his bad luck would rub off on them and they too would end up on the auction block. The threat of being put on the market was a constant presence, but being sold up-country where the Trek Boers were seizing farms, was each one's nightmare. And that was where the Cook was going. The Trek Boers had moved away from the centre of law.

Mankbeen came up to him. "You are leaving?"

The Cook looked at him pityingly. Mankbeen was too young to know to avoid emotional pain where he could. The Cook regretted befriending the boy. It had done neither of them any good. He'd not been a good teacher of life. He'd broken his own rule never to get attached to anyone. He'd let his guard down and now Mankbeen was crying.

"Amberike says she's coming." Mankbeen sniffed.

"Tell her I don't want to see her," the Cook said vehemently.

Meine came out of the house, whistling cheerfully. "I probably won't get a good price for you if I sold you here. But those people up-country will take anything. At the moment they're slaughtering the Bushmen on sight and taking their women and children into service. I will shoot a Bushman; I've been on many hunts, but to bring them into my house." He spat.

"Can we go now, please?" the Cook said.

Meine looked at him enquiringly. It was the first time the Cook had ever pleaded. Meine laughed uproariously. He had triumphed over the insolent Eastern slave.

"Who do you think you are? We'll leave when I'm ready."

Meine tarried, adjusting the harness on the two horses. "Maybe I'll seed her myself. The children will fetch a good price. It'll make up for the loss on you."

The Cook shrunk. Someone had told Meine about the friendship between him and Amberike. Did Egbert know? Meine's spy network had triumphed. How else would he have found out? The Cook damned the practice of informing on fellow slaves; it created distrust among them because they didn't know who was leaking information. The culprits did it believing that their lives would improve but that was seldom the case.

Amberike came running to the wagon. "May I give him something, Seur?"

"Why... what?"

"Just something to eat. He didn't have breakfast."

"You may." Meine enjoyed the spectacle of the Cook trying to make his body small enough to melt into the side of the wagon.

Amberike held out a small parcel. "Here, some bread hot from the oven."

The Cook refused to take it. She placed it next to his hand. He pulled back as if a snake had bitten him.

Meine laughed again and gathered the reins. The wagon pulled away. Amberike stood with her apron clasped in her small hands. She watched the wagon until it disappeared in a cloud of dust.

The Cook could feel her eyes on him but he refused to turn around. With great effort he straightened his sore back where Meine's lashes had re-opened old wounds. He held his head at a proud angle. He wanted her to remember him like that.

"Go with God," he heard Amberike whisper.

The Cook grieved that in her mind they all left her; Ife and now him. From now on she had to depend only on one person, the one standing in her own body.

Katy had missed her period. Was she pregnant? She worried about the implications. They had been warned by the specialist and the genetic counsellor that there was a 50% chance that the next baby would also have thalassaemia. Haunted by the image of the deformed foetus she had aborted and her three other miscarriages, Katy called Norman. Telling him over the phone was preferable; she couldn't talk about her miscarriages without breaking down. Her hands were clammy on the phone.

“What's up, love?” Norman said.

“I need... please buy a pregnancy test.”

Norman digested this information. “Are you sure?”

Katy could hear the tension in his voice. “I have to find out.”

“I'm in the queue at the supermarket. I'll go as soon as I'm done here.”

“Thanks.”

“But we've been careful,” Norman said.

“I know.”

Katy waited at the front door. Norman held out a small plastic bag. “I found it. I just want to wipe it down first.”

She grabbed the packet and ran to the bathroom. She opened the bag with fumbling fingers. It was a bottle of sticks to test urine for protein and other anomalies. She threw the bottle on the floor.

“Are you alright?” Norman said from the other side of the bathroom door.

“You brought the wrong sticks.”

“Ag no, I asked someone and they gave it to me. I should've checked. I can go back.”

“I'll go.”

For the first time Katy ventured outside. It was eerily quiet, there were not many cars on the road and few people walked about. Those that did had masks and caps covering their

faces. She wouldn't recognise a familiar face, she thought as she got out of the car, put on latex gloves, and walked to the chemist.

When she entered, an attendant held a thermometer gun to her forehead and announced her temperature, 36.5 (degrees Celsius). The attendant held the spray bottle ready. Katy sanitised her gloves and went to the shelves.

She put her hands in her pockets to stop touching the goods on display. Wearing the mask for long proved uncomfortable. She sweated on her face, her nose itched and she had to refrain from scratching. Fog misted up her spectacles.

A woman came into the aisle where Katy stood. She came too close, trying to squeeze past. Katy jumped out of the way. She put her hand out to prevent losing her balance and touched the shelf. Now her left hand was contaminated. She could no longer put it in her pocket.

Another assistant came to her aid. She showed Katy where to find the pregnancy kits.

"Thanks," Katy said through her mask. The assistant made a thumbs-up sign, and coughed. Katy hastily walked away from any germ particles suspended in the air. Apparently more were released on coughing and singing than normal speaking. Katy prayed that no one would start singing in her vicinity.

She made her way to the till. She'd been so busy concentrating on where not to touch that she had left her credit card in her handbag. She fished in her bag with her left hand, found the card and pushed it into the card machine.

As she punched in her pin number she realised she had contaminated her right hand by touching it. She threw the card into the shopping bag and headed home. She had a headache from all the stress. How did Norman do this twice a week?

Once home she threw the contents of her bag out on a chair on the stoep and, using their bottle of sanitiser with the recommended 70% alcohol placed at the door, carefully wiped every item in her bag.

She discarded her mask and gloves and went to the bathroom. Struggling to remove the packaging on the pregnancy kit she thought that she should've kept on her gloves. Finally the stick was free; she urinated on it and waited for the required time.

Katy was happy that she wasn't pregnant. She would've loved another child but what if she condemned more offspring to suffer from thalassaemia? They could barely cover Amy's medical expenses. It was more prudent to take care of the one child she had.

She wanted to tell Norman but he had moved away from the door. She found him at his desk. Katy noticed that he was creating a video lecture for his online students, who had increased by another twelve.

Norman closed his laptop, and swivelled his chair to face her. "What's the result?"

"I'm not pregnant," she said gently. Katy knew that he wanted more children. They'd talked about having a houseful. A painful expression flitted across his face.

He needed to digest the news so Katy started talking. "Dean found the play and he sent me a copy. It's a very important play, one that was performed by slaves."

Intrigued, Norman nodded his head. "I'd like to hear more."

The Cook's play

Amberike

A tragedy

1713

The Cook's Dedication
On Amberike's Portrait
The Argument
Dramatis Personæ
Act I. The Peaceful Joy of Freedom
Act II. The Cloud of Capture
Act III. The Gathering Gloom
Act IV. The Sea of Suffering
Act V. The Flaying of Beauty

Dramatis Personæ.

MUSTAPHA (THE COOK)

DEWI LANJAR – Goddess who rules the North Sea

DEWI RATIH – Goddess of the Moon

DEWI SRI – Goddess of Rice and Prosperity

CHORUS OF ANGELS.

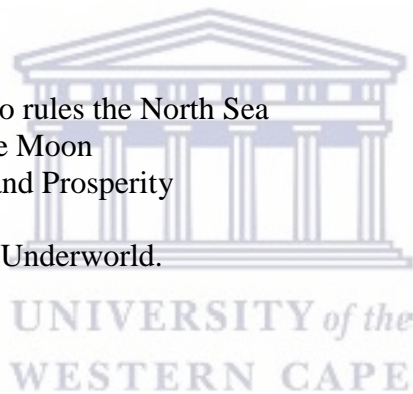
BATARA KALA – God of the Underworld.

BAD SPIRITS

MANDOOR – Field-marshal.

EGBERT – Guardian Angel.

CLAAS – Armour-bearer.



ACT I.

Mustapha: "Like the musk-deer, love, betrayed by its scent, cannot hide; like the sun, it penetrates clouds." Nizami

Oh Nizami. My Muse. My words are but a pale spectre next to yours.
I plead forgiveness for my impertinence, but I'm beseeched to say
I speak of love, deep as despair, and dark as the hair of your gazelle.

Hair indeed, like Layla.

My regard for my beloved is wide as the ocean free of ships. High as
the firmament above a tall mountain in a strange place. I'm in the waste-
land of no compassion. Choking sand. A drought. I wander in this desert

Bare indeed like Qays.

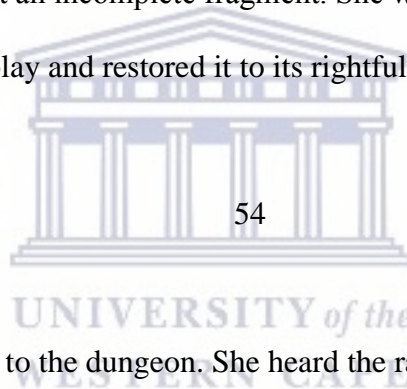
Where no one leaves food for me, I wait, if there's a grave I long to die on it. I'm but half a man, flailing against the censure of a Patriarch, a nascent Company. For my love I endure, I suffer ill-equipped yet willing to assure a

Memory leads me to her, I pray.

Take pity on my Fate, oh hero of many centuries galloping past, a man of letters and hearts. I'm in agony with none to give but a worn heart borne in servitude of predatory men who lead pious lives kept afloat by a system

Of iniquity, I say.

Katy studied the document of the play Dean had sent. She couldn't share it with Norman. She didn't think that Dean had opened the document before he forwarded it to her otherwise he would've noticed that it was but an incomplete fragment. She was disappointed but vowed to search until she found the full play and restored it to its rightful place in history.



Amberike was confined to the dungeon. She heard the rain, soft and insistent. She scabbled with her bare toes until she was crouched on a ledge. The lime and rock ceiling touched her head. Her small body wedged thus she was out of the seeping water pooling on the floor, and could just put her eye to a pipe hole she'd noticed earlier. It had slanted a streak of light into the gloom.

The rain stopped and the wind picked up. She could hear it rattle the shutters of the main house. Through the hole she saw a leaf, wet, shining. The rain had washed it clean, water still dripped from its tip. Mesmerised by the leaf she unconsciously stretched her cramped leg, and fell off the ledge into the icy water.

Shivering she removed her dress to wring it out. Her body was enveloped by the darkness. How long would she be confined here? She didn't know where she was; only that it

was her punishment because the Cook had run away. Each slave was responsible for the conduct of another. That caused fear to ripple through the community if one of them escaped. It caused strife for those who were left behind.

The previous week she'd witnessed Claas sliding towards Egbert to tell him that one of the slaves planned to escape. Claas had even produced evidence, a small cloth containing hard bread. Of course the slave had denied it. Amberike had witnessed his punishment, twenty-one lashes. As he screamed he had cursed out Claas, calling him a swine butt.

She did not know where the Cook had gone but everyone assumed she did. How would she know? She hardly spoke to him since the incident on the way home from the Khoi place. The helplessness of not being believed folded like a scratchy blanket around her shoulders. She. Did. Not. Know. But who wanted to believe her?

The lock on the door opened. Arrie peered into the dark. "Where are you? You may come out."

She stumbled towards him, and tripped over her own feet. He caught her as she fell.

"Don't break your pretty little head on these stone floors," he said.

"Where am I?" Amberike shook with cold and relief.

"They threw you into the basement of the acting governor's summer house." Arrie's grip tightened, he was crushing her. "Everything is going to be fine now, little one. Master Egbert has secured your freedom. If I get my hands around the neck of that selfish brute I'll squeeze until his tongue pops out. He keeps running away without concern for how it affects us. Dry your tears. I'll ask Maria for one of her old dresses while yours dries."

The bright light beyond the door blinded Amberike. She covered her eyes and allowed herself to be led by Arrie. She wasn't afraid anymore, she was safe. Maria said Arrie was a kind man, one that could be trusted.

When she reached the lodge Maria briefly embraced her, an unusual show of affection towards her charge. To distract from her weakness, Maria initiated a discussion about the Cook running off again.

“Why does he do that? Isn’t he afraid of the punishment?” Amberike feared for him. Maybe they will cut his heels this time, or roll him down a slope in a spiked barrel. A tear hovered on her eyelash.

Maria shrugged. “He can’t help himself.”

“But—”

“Yes?”

Amberike wanted to say I think he likes me, I can see it in his eyes. But the truth struck her. In the brief, dazzling light she saw the shadows – he could not care about her more than he cared for his freedom. It was a matter of his survival.

Even though she favoured him, a fledgling emotion that had taken hold after his first beating, she had to let him go. His destiny lay elsewhere. As long as he felt bound to her, he would love her but also hate her because she was keeping him from that which he coveted most, his freedom.

Her tender first love was willing to endure anything, forgive anything. It lacked pride, seeking only to be with the beloved. It was so vast it consumed her; and her only wish was for his welfare.

But now that he was gone she felt released somehow, from an affection that brought her joy, but also pain. She squared her shoulders, her body erect. In letting him go she had somehow appeased her body. It stood proud.

Amberike witnessed the birth of Maria's baby. Maria had been in labour for two days, her forehead glistening with perspiration, her lips dry.

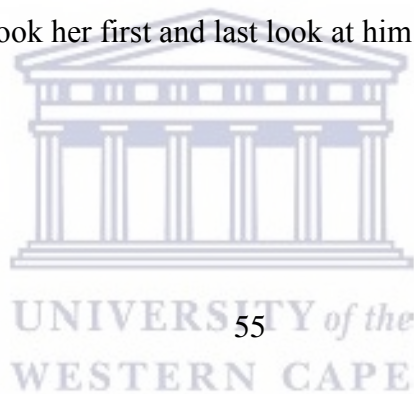
The old slave woman Catrijn massaged Maria's striated belly. "Not long now," she announced.

A big, pale baby came into the world uttering his first mournful cry in bondage. Amberike helped to wash the baby and brought him to Maria. "Would you like to hold him?"

"No, take him away," Maria said. The baby was earmarked to join an anonymous childless white couple.

As Amberike walked to the door where the baby's destiny waited, Maria lifted her head.

"Bring him here." She took her first and last look at him. After that she turned her head to the wall.



Egbert was waiting for his mother to disembark. He saw her erect bearing, her tight lips, and heaviness settled in his stomach.

"Good afternoon, Moeder." Egbert had taken care with his appearance. His nails were clean, his hair tied with a black ribbon and he wore a fresh shirt.

"My son." His mother held out a hand which he dutifully kissed.

He picked up her trunk, it was heavy. That meant she planned to stay long.

"Don't you have slaves for that?" she said imperiously.

"I do but its harvest time and every hand counts." He carried her trunk to the wagon.

"Beautiful horses, yours?"

“They are a fine pair.”

He helped his mother up onto the seat and took the reins for a sedate trot to her lodgings.

She held her nosegay closer. “What a reeky place.”

Egbert inhaled the air of animal manure and mud. “I haven’t noticed.”

Anke was waiting to welcome them. “What an honour, Madame.” She curtsied.

His mother, pleased, was shown to her room. “What a fine woman,” she whispered as Anke walked ahead, both hands lifting her skirts off the floor.

Egbert glanced at the farthingale under her skirts swishing back and forth and experienced a stirring in his manhood. “She is quite a lady, but married I’m afraid.”

“Regretfully so.” A tall woman, his mother looked down her nose at him. “One would’ve appreciated grandchildren.”

Egbert thought of the slave children he’d sired at the lodge, a result of his robust libido. They didn’t count, they were company property.

He tarried outside the bedroom as the ladies went in followed by a female slave bearing his mother’s belongings. He stuck a finger in his collar to relieve the sensation of choking. He didn’t know where he was going to find the guilders for her board.

“I’ll return soon, Moeder,” he called a little too loudly.

His mother appeared at the door. “Why Bertie, there is no cause ever to raise your voice. This place has coarsened your manners.”

On his way out he almost bumped into someone. The young slave. He kicked him, swearing.

Egbert avoided his mother for a week. After that his sense of duty prevailed and he saddled his horse. At the lodgings he waited outside after informing a short, fat lady in the front room that he wanted to see his mother.

She peered at him, short-sighted. “You’re Mevrouw Bol’s son, Bertie?” Without waiting for an answer she continued: “The one on whose account she’s staying?”

Egbert opened and closed his hands. “That’s correct.”

She smiled. “I’m so glad to meet you, Meijnheer. Mevrouw Bol has been entertaining.”

Who did Moeder know in this backwater? Egbert frowned. “Are you sure?”

“She’s a gracious lady, your mother. She befriended a couple on the journey here. They didn’t have a place to stay and—”

“There you are, Bertie,” his mother’s authoritative voice rang out. “I told you he would come,” she said to the landlady. “Come, we’ll have tea on the porch.”

She led the way. Egbert followed hat in hand. Anke sat waiting. He bowed in her direction. Her two daughters, who had arrived from Anke mother’s house to accompany her to the Netherlands, he guessed, joined them.

Egbert viewed the crude slab of plain cake on his plate. “Could I have some cheese, please?”

No one responded. He stabbed reluctantly at the cake, watching it dissolve into crumbs. He tried to coral some crumbs on his small spoon and put it in his mouth. The cake tasted as dry as it looked. He washed it down with a gulp of tea, took the napkin and delicately wiped his mouth.

“How are you, Mother?”

She raked her blue-green eyes, so much like his own, over him. “Just fine, dear. As well as any mother can be who has been deserted by her only son.”

He withered under her gaze and opted to study the girls. They were not as friendly as the last time they'd met at Meine's house, but it was no huge loss, they were disagreeable like their mother.

After tea the girls went for a walk. The conversation had flowed in stops and starts with them present, but at their departure tension settled over the adults.

Egbert turned to Anke. "And how are you, Mevrouw?"

"How thoughtful of you to ask, I've made new friends," she nodded towards his mother, "and I've secured a berth on a ship that arrives soon."

"I'm going with them," Moeder said curtly.

Egbert moved his blonde locks to scratch behind his ear. "Dear Moeder, I thought you'd stay a while longer."

"My dear Anke here informed me that your farm won't be ready for years as there is no farm."

Anke tittered.

"The manner in which you have treated this lady is, is, I'm at a loss for words." His mother fixed her steely gaze on him.

Egbert fastened his blue eyes on the imposing mountain that had been named Table Mountain although the locals called it *Hoerikwagga*, mountain in the sea. The mountain towered over every aspect of life at the Cape.

He drummed his fingers on the table. "I'm saddened that—"

"Restrain your explanations please. Goodbye, Bertie. We shall not see each other again." His mother gathered her shawl and stormed out.

"How long until your departure?" Egbert stuttered. He was sinking deeper into debt every single day.

“About a month,” Anke said. Egbert noticed the malicious gleam in her eye. “Time for more gaiety. I’m introducing your mother to all the great ladies at the Cape. We could have a masked ball. Would you come?”

Egbert winced.

“You’ll have the honour of years of outflow of riksdollars,” Anke jeered.

Egbert stood, squaring his shoulders. “Till we see each again, Mevrouw,” he lifted his hat, “Be well.” Egbert stole away to sidestep the proprietor of the boarding house.

56

“I love you,” Dean said.

Katy didn’t know what to say. She was fond of Dean and didn’t want to lose him as a friend.

“I’ve loved you since the first day we met. I know I joke a lot but this lockdown made me aware that life is short, and death is with us every day. I wanted you to know how I felt.”

The silence grew long.

“You don’t have to answer me now, but will you at least think about it?”

“I ... I”

“I caught you off-guard.” Dean tried to laugh, to regain their old camaraderie but failed. “I know this is a lot to take in. Even I was surprised at the strength of my feeling of loss when I didn’t see you every day. Don’t you feel even the tiniest bit for me? Mrs Marais, you’ve captured my heart.”

The reference to Norman jolted Katy into a response. “I’m married, and I love my husband.”

Dean sighed. “Don’t worry; I’ll never do anything to harm your life. I’m happy to love you from afar.”

Katy ended the call, put both hands on her cheeks, and experienced the heat radiating off her face. What would she say to him the next time they spoke? How would she say it? Her best friend had just dropped a sticky toffee in her lap.

Norman came into the room. “Who was that?”

“Dean”

“What did he want?”

“He found more information about the play.”

“That’s great. If he sends it please forward it to me. I’ve fallen in love with your history.”

Norman’s choice of words made Katy run to the bathroom.

Norman knocked on the door. “Did I say something wrong?”

“No, what made you think that?”

“I don’t know, just a feeling.”

“Everything is fine.” Katy enunciated each word carefully.

“Right.” Norman’s footsteps retreated.

Later Norman cornered her in the kitchen. “This Dean, what does he do?” They were having a late dinner.

“He is a history professor.”

Norman grunted, “How did you meet?”

“We met at a conference.”

“How did you become friends?”

“We share an interest in South African history.” Katy resented Norman’s interrogation.

“Of course. How old is he?”

“About my age.”

“Ah,” Norman said as if it had meaning. “And you are good friends?”

Katy blushed. ‘What are you insinuating?’

“Can’t I show an interest in your friends? Dean calls more than your other friends.”

“Maybe they are busy,” Katy said stiffly.

‘Yes.’ Norman wanted to say something, bit his tongue and abruptly left the table.

Katy sat eating alone, seething. Norman leaving the table like that was unconscionably rude. She was in no mood for his insecurity. And Dean, how dare he? She had not given him reason to think that they were more than friends.

They just had this easy relationship. She could relax and be herself, not like Norman where she had to be careful what she said or did – not to fracture his brittle ego.

As her anger abated Katy was saddened. Knowing Norman she expected tension and silent treatment. She had done nothing wrong. She resented the men in her life who became difficult whenever she didn’t give them what they wanted – her father, her husband. Would Dean change if he didn’t get the answer he desired?

She pushed away her plate, her appetite gone. Instead of going to the lounge or bedroom where Norman might be she opened the kitchen door and stepped outside. The full moon hung low, a yellow ball above the darkness of the trees. It appeared bigger than normal, suspended just over the horizon.

Katy remembered it was her mother’s birthday. She wanted to call Norman to witness the moon but it would wake Amy. Besides, in his current mood he might not be interested.

She knew that Norman normally waited for her to come to him to straighten the wrinkles in their relationship; but she just carried on sitting outside, breathing in the cool air.

57

*Must I dwell in Slavery's night,
And all pleasure take its flight,
Far beyond my feeble sight,
Forever?*

"The Slave's Complaint", a poem by Phillis Wheatley

The Cook was sitting forlornly outside a merchant building, waiting for his new master, who had gone in to procure goods before the long journey home. Bolts of material had just been loaded by a sturdy slave who'd tried not to notice his chains. The Cook was tied to the axle of the wagon.

Claas came out of the building. He walked past, stopped, and retraced his steps.

"Goeden middag."

"Did you come to gloat?" The Cook tasted the bitterness in his mouth.

Claas peered up and down the muddy street. "I know some people."

He explained. Unknown to the VOC, Claas was part of the free blacks at the Cape, manumitted slaves and those who had bought their freedom, who secretly helped runaway slaves.

"Why would you want to help me?" The Cook didn't trust him.

Claas laughed. "Slave, I like to perform a good deed, but without the good intent. Do you think all good deeds are accompanied by good intentions? I like to shove a stick into the throat of the masters. Now do you want me to help you or not?"

The Cook swallowed his pride. "Yes. Please."

Claas dropped his stick next to the axle. He swore loudly and bent to search for it under the wagon. When he finally found it he held it aloft for possible onlookers to see.

“You’re free now,” he whispered. ‘Wait until I’m gone before you move.’”

Claas sauntered down the street, his hands behind his back. The Cook anxiously willed him to move faster. Claas came to a stop, and languished, leaning against the stick. The Cook frowned. Claas noticed, and laughed before he sprinted away.

The Cook gathered the chain in his hand, and pulled. It gave. He shuffled towards the shop where his new owner had disappeared, “Water, water please, master,” he begged.

When he reached the door of the shop he ducked sideways into an alley and ran, the chain hampering his unsteady gait. He fell, got up, fell again and rolled under a bush to rest.

The Cook was glad of his freedom. He prayed, apologising to his god and Amberike for disappointing them. He detested this sickness that made him betray the ones he loved. Amberike was better off without him. He reverently touched the book where she’d handled it and kissed the spot. Again he was reminded of Qays in Layla and Majnun, kissing a wall. He opened the book and looked at the Makassar alphabet; he was writing a love story based on the story of Layla and Majnun.

Amberike whimpered, touching the back of her head. There was a big bump. Blood came away on her fingers. She sat up, disoriented. How did she get here, propped up against the wall in the cellar of the slave lodge? She couldn’t remember.

Water chilled her shoulder. She rubbed it. She wobbled when she tried to stand, her legs shivering, refusing to carry her weight. What had happened? A burning feeling and

blood between her legs. She squatted, washing it away in the icy water of the puddle in the middle of the floor.

What was she doing in the cellar? That was the domain of the people from Delagoa Bay, the ones with strange markings on their faces. Outcasts. They didn't mingle with them; they were inferior, beneath normal slaves.

A tattered man came in. "What are you doing here?"

Amberike shook her head, trying to hide the wet mark on the back of her skirt.

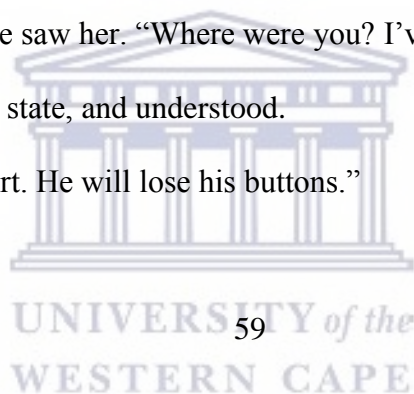
"Leave." He looked around wildly.

Amberike obeyed, she walked, stopped, moaned, and walked again.

"Hurry. We don't want negative attention. It's enough we get the dirtiest work."

Maria shrieked when she saw her. "Where were you? I've been looking for you." She took in Amberike's dishevelled state, and understood.

"Don't tell Master Egbert. He will lose his buttons."



Egbert sensed that there was something amiss. He remained in his office while Amberike cleaned, watching her. While dusting his library she dropped his books on the floor.

"My apologies, Seur."

Egbert rose, picked up the books and restored them to the wall library. "What's wrong?"

His voice was kind. He watched a solitary tear roll down her cheek. He caught it with a forefinger and tasted its saltiness. More tears dropped onto the floor as she bent her head to sweep.

“I can see you are upset. Come, let it out,” he said, his voice stern.

Amberike sat down on the floor, crying. He resisted the urge to pick her up. “What has brought this about?”

“Meijnheer hasn’t heard?”

“No, what was I supposed to hear?”

Great heaves of sobs shook Amberike’s shoulders. He allowed her to cry. Eventually when he spoke his voice was soft: “It happens.”

“Meijnheer?”

“It happens to a lot of women here, unfortunately.” He coughed, embarrassed. “It is regrettable, but there you have it.”

“Meijnheer is not... angry?”

“More likely, I’m sad. A great sin has been committed against you. I can’t be angry. Believe me I have no right to be. Now, get up from the floor. Go home, you’re done here.”

As Amberike left he raised his voice. “Nothing has changed.” He turned away, his Adam’s apple working.

Amberike watched his back, not understanding.

“Between you and me,” he added, “*onnozele skapje*.”

After Amberike left Egbert sat with his head in his hands. He suspected Meine had a hand in this but where was the proof? He remembered Amberike’s eyes, big with misery. It touched his core. The ravishing of servant women was so commonplace he had not given it a thought, but obviously it meant something to the girl-woman he’d grown to be concerned about. For the first time he questioned what it was that they were doing here.

Egbert strode purposefully towards Arrie who was stirring the Cook's pot. "May I speak with you? Now."

"Yes, Seur." Arrie left the long spoon in the pot and put on the lid. The stew bubbled gently.

"Did you know Amberike was brutalized?"

Arrie paled. "No, Seur, I didn't know."

"If I catch the scoundrel who did it, he will lose his head."

"Yes, Seur."

"I don't want you or anyone else sniffing around her."

"I never..."

"If you go near her I'll kill you." Egbert marched away.

"What's biting him?" Egbert heard Arrie say.

Arrie had an audience to observe him standing in for the Cook. Egbert stopped behind a tree to listen.

"Nothing has to bite them to have a bad day. Have you seen Amberike lately?" one of them said.

"I have not seen her in a while. Why?" Arrie said.

"No reason."

Egbert knew the speaker was lying. Every one of them was always hanging around to get a glimpse of Amberike. That Claas also liked to watch her. Egbert wanted to hang the lot. Who would do such a dreadful thing?

Egbert rode out to Meine's farm. Meine must've seen him from afar because he waited for him, gun in hand.

"You are no longer welcome on this farm."

Egbert reined his horse in and looked down at Meine. "You are responsible, aren't you?"

"What are you talking about."

"Amberike."

Meine laughed. "I don't know anything about your concubine. Now, remove your presence from my sight or I'll shoot."

"That won't be necessity. Meet me at dawn." Egbert said, his voice terse.

"Sword or gun?" Meine smirked.

"Which do you prefer?"

"Guns."

"See you at sunrise." Egbert kicked his horse to rear up, turned and galloped off the farm.

The next day at dawn Egbert waited but there was no sign of Meine.

The Ghost Whisperer found his head! He had to squeeze through the wormhole of time to another era, but, as providence would have it, they'd dug up many bones found during the excavation for luxury apartments in Green Point, which revealed many graves. Slave graves.

They couldn't leave the remains there, over seven hundred. Archaeologists and forensic anthropologists inspected the bones, classifying them by race, sex and height, and tried to establish the cause of death.

The City of Cape Town built Prestwich Square Memorial which houses many boxes of remains. There they found a head with no body.

He danced; he celebrated, until he fell down from exhaustion.

61

Katy texted her mother. She wished her a happy birthday and asked for her recipe for pickled fish, which Katy remembered from her childhood. Although she had not made it for the duration of her marriage, deferring to make Norman's favourite dishes of his childhood like bobotie and denningvleis, she had an appetite for it now.

She asked Norman to buy the ingredients and set about making it. First she fried the fish in a batter. Then she made the sauce: sauté five large onions cut into rings in olive oil, add fresh ginger, garlic, curry, bay leaves, turmeric, coriander seeds, cumin. Add the vinegar and sugar and stir. Cook gently for twenty minutes. She layered the fish in a bowl and poured the sauce over it.

Her mother had stressed that she had to make it the Tuesday before Good Friday to allow the sauce to seep into the fish.

On Good Friday she fondly remembered the three hour services of her childhood. She sat in front of her computer scrolling for church services.

Norman entered. "Tell me, since when are we religious?"

"I grew up in the church. My father was a signwriter and he was the head of the Sunday school."

Norman mumbled inaudibly.

“Amy loves picker fish.” Amy’s fingers were stained yellow by the turmeric. Katy had made Amy’s fish without sugar and salt.

“I love it too, my angel.” Katy rubbed Amy’s curls.

On Easter Sunday instead of their usual braai or barbeque she made pot-roast like her mother used to. The comfort food sustained her. She lamented not introducing Norman to the food she grew up with sooner.

His extreme confidence that everything about his culture was good had erased her always tentative pride and confidence in her own traditions and ways of living. She’d imagined his possible contempt if she should stand on her own beliefs and cultural practices, diverse yet united, in the face of his “superior” one.

“You’re different,” Norman said at the end of the Easter weekend. “Lockdown has changed you.”

Instead of reading her romances Katy read Daniel Defoe’s *A Journal of the Plague Year*:

It was about the beginning of September, 1664, that I, among the rest of my neighbours, heard in ordinary discourse that the plague was returned again in Holland; for it had been very violent there, and particularly at Amsterdam and Rotterdam, in the year 1663, whither, they say, it was brought, some said from Italy, others from the Levant, among some goods which were brought home by their Turkey fleet; others said it was brought from Candia; others from Cyprus. It mattered not from whence it came; but all agreed it was come into Holland again.

The President announced an extension of the lockdown. They were sitting in front of the television watching the news.

“No! I cannot go through another two weeks of this nonsense. I’ve had enough. My people are not used to restrictions. We have been free for a long time. And this president

didn't even give us the opportunity to lay in supplies of cigarettes and alcohol. How am I going to cope for another two weeks? I want this thing to end now."

Katy listened quietly. She also hated the extension. Being responsible for Amy's education had lost its rosiness. She was struggling to keep up. And the load of housework was an endless cycle of drudgery. Her article was still unwritten. She felt trapped, confined to the house. She burst into tears.

Norman rubbed his head in irritation. "Not now. Save your crying for another time. I can't cope. I'm struggling. All this and you cheating on me." He hit his hand on the armrest of the couch.

Katy put her arms around him. "I'm not cheating. I'm not," she said.

He broke free and stumbled to his vegetable garden. He pulled some of the weeds with green bean plants clinging to them from the ground.

Katy tried to stop him, saying "You're going to regret this tomorrow morning."

He stomped down the road without his mask, Katy ran behind him carrying his mask.

"Mummy!" Amy followed Katy, sucking her thumb.

Katy turned back, scooped Amy up and carried her to the house. By now Katy was crying, Amy was crying, and the neighbourhood dogs were barking. In the silence that had become a feature of the lockdown, someone started beating a spoon on a pot.

The Cook was roaming the lower regions of the mountain in early February searching for honey when a Khoi beggar staggered into view. He studied him to see if he was one of Bossie's people. Smallpox! He recognised it immediately. It occurred in Asia and Europe but it was the first time, in his knowledge, it had travelled to the southern tip of Africa.

“Go back, you’ll infect everyone,” he shouted, waving his hands.

The beggar looked at him with unseeing eyes, and stumbled on.

“You can’t go to your clan. Please go back to where you came from.”

“There is death there.” The beggar dragged the words out of his body. He came towards the Cook, stretching out his hand. The Cook ran away and only stopped when he was out of breath. Amberike! He turned and ran toward the fledgling settlement.

The Cook saw numerous Khoi groups, their grass mats and the pole infrastructure of their huts packed up. They were going home to their tribes, home – the instinct to seek safety in calamity. Sitala, the Indian deity of smallpox leapt out of the recesses of his memory. Islam was introduced in his homeland after Hinduism, one of the oldest religions, and retained many of its influences. People prayed to Sitala for mercy. He sent a quick prayer for Amberike.

When he reached the town he adjusted his head cloth to cover his nose and mouth as a disguise, but the smallpox had caused such an upheaval no one appeared to be looking for him. At the slave lodge he found Maria washing clothes. “Where’s Amberike?”

“In there.” Maria continued scrubbing the clothes. She appeared ill, dazed. Her pus-filled bumps with a dent in the middle like a button had fallen off. She had scabs on her face and arms. A baby was strapped to her back.

“Don’t fret, you’ll be alright,” he said. She was in the last stage of the disease.

“You think so? Thanks be to God.”

He took out the medicine clay pot, a gift from Bossie. “May I take a closer look?”

Maria nodded. He inspected the scabs, and prodded one.

“What are you doing?” she said.

“I’m trying to save Amberike.”

She allowed him to scrape dry scabs from her arms and pulverise them with a small pestle. “Where is she?”

Maria waved her hand towards the lodge.

He found Amberike tossing and turning, delirious with fear.

“Is it you, is it really you? I’m so glad to see you.” She made as if to rush into his arms, then hesitated.

“You’ll be fine, he said, patting her hand. He made a cut on her arm and smeared the powder into it, an age-old remedy from the East.

63

Amberike awoke to hear Claas pleading to do a bloodletting. “The masters know what they’re doing,” he said. “We don’t know; we are ignorant. Amberike must be bled.”

“That won’t be necessary,” Maria said coldly.

“Let me bleed her. Or at least give her a purge to clean out her insides, or salt water to bring vomit. I care about the child.”

“No,” said Maria.

“You are just being stubborn.”

Amberike held her abdomen, they were always squabbling lately.

“I’m not stubborn. The Cook already gave her medicine. *Allemagtig*, what are you going to bleed her with? You don’t even have the instruments.”

The silence caused Amberike to open her eyes. Claas had produced a *kris*, a ceremonial dagger from the East. The curved handle was gripped firmly in his hand.

Maria gasped. “Where did you get that?”

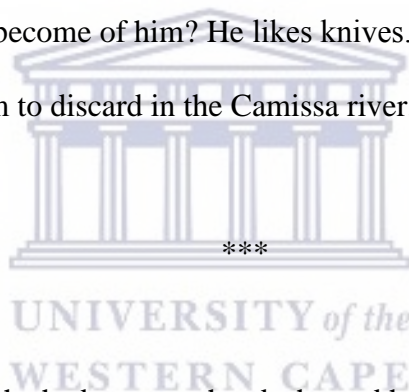
“I made it.” Claas struck a pose with the dagger pointing forward and started dancing, slow, deliberate movements. Amberike sat up to watch. He hummed a foreign tune, his eyes glazed over. Stab. Retreat. Backwards. Forwards. Feinting with the curved blade. Sweat gathered on his brow but still he danced. He started chanting in a strange language, pointing the dagger skyward.

“Shh. You’ll wake everyone.” Maria said in her stern voice.

If he didn’t watch out, Maria would take a switch to him. The idea tickled Amberike’s fancy; if her throat wasn’t so sore she would’ve laughed. She allowed herself a small smile.

Slowly Claas came out of the trance and left, his shoulders sagging, his head bowed, the dagger on the floor.

Maria said, “What will become of him? He likes knives. He’s always making one.” She put the dagger in her bosom to discard in the Camissa river.



Amberike lay stricken, she had a severe headache and her face was covered in flat, red spots. She whimpered every time she moved, her back ached. She placed her hand on her stomach. Through her fever she saw a male shadow.

“Get away from me,” she said.

Egbert’s handsome face appeared. “It’s me, *onnozele skaapje*.”

“Master Egbert.”

“How are you?”

She hid her face. He gently prized away his hand. “No need for that, you are still beautiful.”

Fatigue and sorrow overcame her. “You sent him away,” she sobbed.

He lifted an eyebrow.

“The Cook,” she said.

“You are mistaken, dear one. That *pisvlek* just ran away.”

“That’s not true,” she whispered, exploring with her tongue the lesions in her mouth which had prevented her from eating, Louder she said, “Master Egbert will catch the sickness.”

“Don’t worry about me; I had it as a child.”

He produced a red cloth and covered her tenderly. She pushed it away. Her fever couldn’t bear any covering. He gently spread it again, smoothing it with his fingers. She recoiled. A hurt expression crossed his face.

“I’ve never said this to any woman but I’m partial to you.”

Amberike stared into his blue eyes, so alien to her. She was used to seeing concern only in dark eyes. She recognised the same regard she’d seen in the Cook’s eyes. Where would it lead? It could only lead to her demise.

Yet her desire to belong somewhere or to someone in this strange, violent place was strong and hitherto unmet. She craved safety, emotional safety and physical safety, but she was too afraid to trust anyone. What if Egbert let her down? He was a slave master and, like all slave masters he only wanted, never gave. No, it was better to not even allow anyone near her. She frowned.

“Don’t look at me like that, with such hatred,” he pushed his hand through his hair, exasperated. “You don’t understand; you never do. Maybe you are too young.”

*Oh bird of many colours
you shiver on the wall as
the wind shakes your image,
light through a prism, translucent.*

The pain in Amberike's abdomen intensified. She rolled around on her bed; got up, walked, lay down again. Her back ached as if it was going to fall off, her loins were on fire. She touched herself, searching for the painless sore that had appeared after her ordeal. It had spontaneously healed. She looked for the red-brown rash under her feet which she'd hidden from everyone. That had also disappeared.

"Maria!" she called. There was no answer. Maria had probably gone to the river to get rid of Claas' dagger.

The strange pain moved from Amberike's back and her loins into her nether region. An uncontrollable urge to push took hold of her. She was in a private world of pain and the only way out was to push.

Something dropped out of her. A tiny, tiny human. It breathed. Amberike cowered away from it. What was it doing in her body? She crawled closer. Why was it still breathing? She leaned back on the pillow, exhausted by the effort of getting it out of her body.

She must've fallen asleep because when she opened her eyes again she saw Egbert standing near the door. He had wrapped something in his frock coat and was looking down at it, his expression tender. She remembered the thing she had birthed and stretched out her hand towards him. Her breasts were tight with milk.

"Don't worry. I'm taking it to Maria. She'll know how to take care of it."

Amberike fell back against the bed. Why was she so tired? She could hardly keep her eyes open.

Amberike recovered slowly. As soon as she could stand she went to find Maria. The latter was cradling an infant.

“Master Egbert,” Amberike stumbled over the words. “He came to see me. Something fell out. He took it and said... he said that he’ll bring it to you, that you’d look after it.”

Maria understood. “I gave it my breast. It came before its time, but it’s stronger now.” She pulled back the blanket to reveal plump cheeks.

Amberike reached out with her eyes towards the bundle. It belonged to her. But who did it resemble? Was it the Cook’s? Arrie’s? Claas’? The unknown assailant’s? Why, it could also be Master Egbert’s? Amberike didn’t know. She touched her aching breasts. They were hard, red and warm, warmer than the rest of her body.

Maria noticed. “I’ll give you leaves to treat it, to help the milk dry up.” She held the baby closer. “I promised to care for her. You’re too young. Take my advice, forget about her and make a new start. You don’t want to be burdened by an infant. What would you do with it? You won’t know how to take care of a baby. And I lost mine. I lost mine.” Maria had a faraway look then she started singing a lullaby to the child who looked up at her with large eyes, trusting eyes.

Amberike wanted to re-claim her baby, but Maria was right, she didn’t know how to take care of it. She wanted to tell Maria that the baby had caused a tear in her under-developed body, ask her how best to nurse it, but was tongue-tied. A chasm had come between them. Amberike could sense it. Maria now viewed her as a threat to ownership of the baby’s affections.

Although Maria was prone to violent eruptions, she was Amberike’s only mother figure after the latter had lost her own. (Anke didn’t signify). Amberike had therefore strained to please Maria, and attempted to learn from her and do everything she asked. She had not only lost her baby but also her friend.

Sadly Amberike ventured outside. The usually busy streets – wagons, people walking, children playing – were empty, everyone was locked away in their homes.

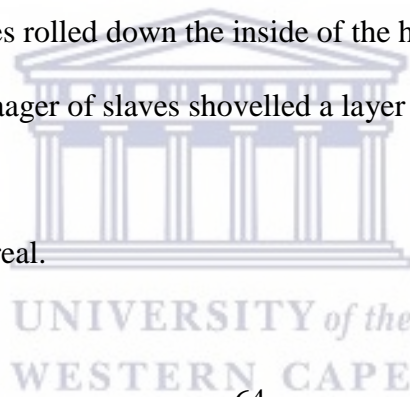
Flies came to sit on her face. She swiped them away. More came. The flies, previously just a nuisance at the Cape, had multiplied and grown bigger, buzzing around with their green bodies, threatening to enter her mouth.

She saw a bloated body, its torn clothes dancing in the wind. Maggots crawled out of every orifice. Only a few pock marks scarred his face. It was a Khoi man, one from the settlement. She screamed.

A stray dog appeared, showed its teeth and bit into the blackened foot.

A wagon went by, piled with bodies. She followed. A huge hole had been dug into the side of the mountain. The bodies rolled down the inside of the hole, gathering dust and accumulated at the bottom. A laager of slaves shovelled a layer of sand over them and waited for the next load.

It was like a dream, surreal.



Dean had not contacted Katy. That was unusual. He always used to send a greeting or a funny meme but now there was silence.

Katy missed him, she missed their playful interaction. She looked for his emails with some debate or historical information. On a few occasions she almost called him and was deterred only by her confusion and indecision on how to handle the situation.

“I saw your friend’s car.” Norman had just returned from buying bread.

“Where?” Katy instinctively knew to whom he was referring.

“He was parked across the street. I know him because I saw him once. I wanted to surprise you at work and you were having lunch with him.”

“When was this?”

“Before lockdown.”

“Why didn’t you tell me about it?” Katy was embarrassed although she had no reason to be.

“It didn’t seem important.”

“Norman, please.” Katy searched for a way to reach him, to let him know that she had not slept with Dean. “Do you remember our wedding vows?”

Norman frowned, suspicious. “Yes?”

“Well, I don’t take them lightly. For better or for worse remember?”

“Yes, rub it in.”

“What are you talking about?”

“You are referring to my unemployment.”

Katy sighed. “No, that was not what I meant.”

Norman interpreted her sigh as an insult. “But that was what you were thinking.”

Katy put her hands on her cheeks. “Oh my, but you are difficult.”

“Admit it. You want to leave me and shack up with Mr History Professor.”

“You know what, this conversation is over.”

“Our marriage is over.”

“What did you say?” Katy’s exasperation had turned to shock.

“I didn’t mean it.” Norman’s face crumpled. “This lockdown is making all of us crazy. Forgive me.” He looked at her pleadingly.

“I’ll think about it.”

Katy called Dean. When he answered she took a deep breath. “I’ll appreciate it if you don’t stalk me.”

“What? I’ll never do that.”

“You were outside my house.”

“Hallo? Are you still there?” Katy pushed the phone against her head then held it away from her ear. “Are you still there?”

“Yes,” Dean breathed. “After my confession I wanted to see you. I’ll admit to that. But I promise you I’ve not been near your house. I respect you too much to do that.”

Katy threw the phone down. Dean called back but she refused to answer. She went to find Norman.

“Dean says he’s never been near the house.”

“And you believe him? I saw him out front.”

“Are you sure? Are you not just saying it to throw a stone in the bush and hope to catch me *in flagrante*?”

“What? Speak English. Why would I do that?”

“Because you’re jealous.”

“I haven’t got a jealous bone in my body.”

“So why don’t you trust me?”

“I do but —”

“There are no buts, you either trust me or you don’t.”

Katy took her bag, got into her car and drove away, not knowing where she was going. She stopped at a garage shop for a sugary drink. She rummaged in her bag for a mask. There was none. She sat in the car, gripping the steering wheel. Slowly her anger dissipated.

When Katy returned home Norman was waiting on the stoep.

“Where were you? You mustn’t drive when you’re angry. Maybe I was mistaken. I only saw him once, from afar.”

Close to tears Katy walked past him. He reached out and seized her arm. She shook off his hand.

“Please, let’s talk about it.”

Katy glared at him. “Old man, don’t play with my heart.”

She went into the bathroom and locked the door. She closed the toilet seat and sat down on it. Amy. She unlocked the door and went to Amy’s bedroom. Thank God she was still sleeping. Or was she? Katy touched Amy’s forehead, she had a fever.

Katy found Norman in their bedroom. “Amy, she is sick.”

Norman followed her to Amy’s room.

Katy cradled Amy in her arms. “Don’t die. Please don’t die.”

“She’s not going to die.” Norman took out his phone to call an ambulance.

“The hospital is not safe. Let’s call Dr Sloan.”

Dr Sloan asked them to come to his surgery. They sat in the waiting room, holding hands. Katy didn’t know who reached out to the other first, only that her hand was in Norman’s firm grip and she was comforted.

Together they went in to see Dr Sloan. He addressed all his questions to Norman. When did the fever start? Was Amy well before that? Was there any other symptoms? Katy was invisible.

Amy just had a cold, Dr Sloan said, nothing to worry about. Relieved Katy and Norman took Amy home. They gave her the medicine Dr Sloan had prescribed and put her to bed.

Katy fell asleep in Norman's arms. She concluded that the problem with them was the talking. If they talked less and cuddled more they would be all right.

65

The Cook and other slaves from the company, as well as those who were privately owned, were sent by their masters to provide their service: digging graves, moving bodies, cleaning the streets, homes, ships and taverns. They worked tirelessly.

One of the burghers approached the Cook. "I'm offering two guilders for someone to nurse my wife and children. They're ill."

The Cook agreed to help a fellow human being, but also to participate in the unexpected bounty. He knew of guilders offered to other slaves by burghers to nurse their ill. However, after his family died, the burgher disappeared into the interior without paying him.

The Cook and Amberike – she had become immune after recovering from smallpox – tended the sick Khoi in the town. He could tell that not one of the Khoi had seen this disease. He heard stories that the Goringhaiqua, Gorachouqua, Cochoqua, Chainoqua and all the other Khoi tribes were decimated. In their eyes ugly sores came onto their skin. The healers tried to make potions of plants they knew, buchu, aloe, and others, but it didn't help. Many died.

Khoi ceremonies to bury the dead were performed every day, then many times a day and then it stopped. There were not enough *kaross* skins to receive the bodies, not enough reed mats to cover them. The gods cried, they said. Corpses were lost in huts across the land. They were like animals, waiting for nature to bury them.

The stench, the dreadful stench, curled around their fear. They walked with a cloth in front of the nose. The flies buzzed and laid eggs on the dead. Maggots crawled. They turned on each other, killing those who came to their huts. Vultures hung in the sky.

The Cook came upon the boy Meine had taken from the clan. The boy was wandering the streets, lost. Mercifully the boy was unblemished. The Cook picked him up and carried him to Bossie's homestead just outside the town. Alas they had also not been spared. Bossie was confined to his hut. The Cook peeped in, Amberike was already there.

He admired her dedication and thought it would heal her strange malaise. Since he came back he'd found that she'd become very quiet and hardly spoke to anyone. Taller, gaunt, she seemed to have grown up.

Bossie opened his eyes, when he saw Amberike he whispered weakly. "There are others worse than me."

"I know, and they are being seen to, Father." Amberike sponged his face.

Bossie's longish hair had stripes shaved into it as a sign of mourning. "My wife died."

"I know." The Cook saw Amberike struggling to keep her emotions under control. He read her thoughts: this was not about her, she was only a spectator.

"Where is the Cook? He must bury the dead." Bossie rolled around, trying to find a comfortable position.

"He is here somewhere, Father."

The Cook wanted to step forward and announce his presence but hesitated, strangely reluctant.

"That's good." Bossie was silent for a long time. "The Cook learnt our language. Tell him I say thank you for his friendship and his care." His voice was fading. "This foreign disease is killing my people. Who will remember what happened to us?"

Amberike, who had nursed many, seemed to recognise the signs of death – the laboured breathing, the glassy eyes. She held the sick man's hand. The Cook entered the hut and put his hand on her shoulder. She flinched.

Awkwardly he tried to console her. "There's no cure. Their medicine is ineffective."

*Who takes responsibility for the destruction
of a people by slavery? Who?
It happened in the past and
those that should are long gone.
The ethereal past, a barrier
to what is and what was.
The refrain: we cannot restart history.
Or can we? Should we?*

The Cook wanted to stay overnight to minister to the sick in Bossie's compound.

He urged Amberike to return home. "You look exhausted. Please go before it gets too dark."

He watched her leave. "Amberike."

She turned around. "Yes?"

She no longer walked the same; now her head was down, watching her feet, and it troubled him. He touched his head in despair as he noticed the anguish in her eyes. "Be careful."

"I'm always careful. Maria has taught me well." She gave a bitter smile as she resumed her walk.

"Amberike?"

She turned, impatient. He had not mentioned the despoilment of her rape and the subsequent miscarriage. Maria had told him about it. The unspoken hung like a weight between them.

He wanted to explain that it was his love for her that had prompted him to kiss her. That he had done so with respect, like the prophet with Ayesha, and couldn't possibly be the father of her child.

He wanted to explain his conduct which must've caused her much suffering, but he had no explanation, because even he didn't understand why he kept running away, why he couldn't control the urge to run. He wanted to apologise for leaving her behind and increasing her vulnerability, but he didn't have the words.

“I'll see you tomorrow.”

66

When Amberike reached the lodge two white men approached her, one tall and one short and round. They said they knew where her sister was.

“We found her. Aren't you happy? We found your sister Ife!” The short one smiled at her, revealing stumpy teeth.

Although Amberike didn't talk about her sister as much as she did when she arrived, she had not forgotten. She touched her breast where she held Ife close to her heart – her name, and that of her mother, engraved on a stone.

“Where is she?” Amberike was overwhelmed; tears ran down her cheeks unchecked.

“We can take you to her,” the tall one said. “You can trust us. Master Egbert sent us.”

Amberike, distraught by all the suffering she had seen, and her own pain, yearned to see a familiar face, and meekly followed them.

67

*It was in sweet Senegal that my foes did me enthrall
For the lands of Virginia-ginia O;
Torn from that lovely shore, and must never see it more,
And alas! I am weary, weary O!*

*“The Slave's Lament—An Antislavery Ballad”, a poem by Robert Burns
(1792)*

275

When the Cook arrived at the lodge the next morning, tired, drained, he went in search of Amberike. He found Maria sweeping the yard. She had recovered from the smallpox but scars defaced her ample cheeks.

“Good morning,” she stopped sweeping. “How are your Khoi friends?”

“Not good. Where’s Amberike?”

“I thought she was with you.”

“She’s not.” Fear assailed the Cook’s heart. He searched every crevice of the slave lodge.

“I can’t find her,” he couldn’t keep the panic out of his voice.

Maria was still where he had left her. “She’s probably cleaning master Egbert’s room.”

The Cook ran to the school room. He knocked, and stood back.

“Come in,” Egbert answered.

The Cook reconsidered his mission. He could not go in and ask if Egbert had seen Amberike. With the tension between them it would be seen as an affront. He turned and walked away, his shoulders drooping.

Egbert opened the door, and saw him. “Hey you, did you see anyone knocking on my door?”

“No, Seur.”

Egbert scowled and closed the door.

When Amberike did not arrive to clean his quarters Egbert went looking for her. He established that she had not slept there. He rustled up a search party. One of them informed him that she had been seen with two white men.

“Where? Where did you see them, and in which direction did they go?”

“I don’t know, Seur.”

Egbert’s frustration boiled over. “You people never know anything. Search until you find her.”

Egbert turned to find Anke behind him. Had a month passed? She’d probably heard what he said because her usual frown had deepened into two parallel lines. She was dressed in austere black.

“Mevrouw, what a surprise.” He recovered enough to bow over her outstretched hand.

“Meijnheer, I came to say goodbye. I’m leaving today to go back to the motherland.”

The awkward situation made Egbert grimace. He pondered whether he should ask after his mother, but decided against it. He had his pride.

“Fare thee well. My sincere apology about what happened with your husband.”

“Cease this talk. I have no regard for him. He got his due. The smallpox dispatched all his slaves.”

“Your little boy, is he still staying here?” Egbert couldn’t resist the jibe.

Anke paled. The hand she used to secure her hat in the strong breeze trembled.

“At least he doesn’t follow me around all the time like one of your slave sons.”

She turned and left.

Whatever made her say that? Egbert stared after her, wondering what he had seen in her. He contemplated whether he should also leave these shores, take the baby and continue on to the East.

By that evening Amberike had still not been found, nor the following day, nor the day thereafter. Whispers started that she had been kidnapped by slave catchers.

69

Norman had gone to buy groceries, but after three hours he had not returned. Katy sat next to her phone, her mouth dry, wondering who she should call. The supermarket? The hospital?

She called his friends, the two who were still loyal after he married outside his race. They had not seen him since the start of the lockdown.

Five hours. A feeling of dread came to settle in her stomach. Where was he? She called the nearest hospital, No, he had not been admitted there.

Seven hours later she was pacing through the house, opening windows, closing them. She went outside to stand at the gate. She looked up and down the street. Every approaching car brought hope until it was close and she saw that it wasn't Norman's car.

After ten hours she was hungry and went into the kitchen to make tea and a cheese sandwich. The bread stuck in her throat. She put it aside and drank the tea.

A knock on the door. Katy ran to open it. Two policemen had arrived, the flashing light of their vehicle behind them. As soon as she saw them she knew something was wrong.

“Where is he? Tell me.” She was standing in the doorway in her pyjamas and bunny slippers.

“May we come in?”

“No, you may not. It’s lockdown and I have a child here.” Her worry had caused unreasonable anger.

“That’s fine, madam.”

The policeman told her that Norman had taken groceries to the destitute people who had gathered to live off the rubbish of the affluent. He had prepared ten parcels with mealie meal, sugar, tea, flour and tinned fish, but it wasn’t enough. They ran towards the car, each grabbing a food parcel. The ones who didn’t get started taking the groceries Norman had bought for their own use. He panicked, drove away too fast and had an accident. The senior policeman had compassion in his eyes.

“In which hospital is he?” Mentally Katy was planning the quickest route and where to leave Amy.

The policeman coughed. “He didn’t make it.”

Katy gripped her phone, her fingers white. She had taken it to the door in case Norman called. “What do you mean?”

“The ambulance came, they tried to resuscitate him but he died on the way to the hospital.”

Katy screamed, and pulled off her mask. She dropped her phone, it clattered on the stoep. The policeman picked it up, and tried to hand it to her.

“No, I don’t want to touch it. Leave it there for my husband to wipe down later.” The last sentence registered and she started sobbing wildly.

“We are sorry,” the other policeman said. He’d been quiet up to now.

Katy looked at them, wondering why they were still there. She closed the door and sank down onto the floor. Amy came to her, uncertain, hugging her teddy bear. Katy reached for her, sobbing into her hair.

She could feel Amy's heart thudding against her breast. She's scared. The thought stabilised Katy. She stopped crying and stroked Amy's hair, "Don't worry, Mummy's just upset. Everything's going to be alright."

It was possible Norman was still alive. For the first time Katy wished that the incompetence of the government and the whole country in general, that Norman complained so bitterly about, would prevail. There would be a mistake and he would return and all would be well.

Later, when Amy was asleep, she called Sonia. Sonia cried, and said she'd call back. Aimlessly, Katy wandered through the house. It was like a bad dream. She would wake up and all would be well.

Sonia and her husband arrived. Sonia folded Katy in her arms and they cried together. John became brisk and started making arrangements to move Norman's body from the hospital to the undertaker, and all the myriad things that accompanied an unnatural death: a post-mortem to establish the exact cause of death, police investigations, reporting the accident to the car insurers, etc.

Katy was grateful for his help. She sat around the house with Amy on her lap. Amy sensed her mood and was unusually quiet, sucking her thumb.

The Ghost Whisperer had found his head. There was no reason to roam about anymore. He was called to rest, but he resisted. There was no rest for the wicked, and had he not killed and maimed many with his knife in his brutal uprising for an elusive freedom?

Besides he'd gone through the worm-hole of time and couldn't return.

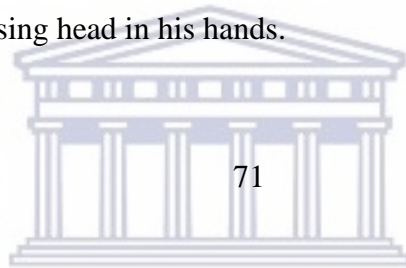
To be here or to be there, the dilemma of a wandering spirit. The Ghost Whisperer had inadvertently moved to an era over three hundred years after his death. He'd found his head but what was the recompense? He couldn't attach it to his body.

When he found it a praying mantis was sitting on it, perfectly still. It flew towards him when it sensed his presence. That was the last straw.

He'd therefore left his head where it was, for others to deliberate over, for specialists in the field of explaining the dead, to dream up solutions.

Instead he chose to remember the silent people who had all the bones in their bodies broken, who were beheaded or suffered the indignity of a slow death.

It required the enlightened to notice him still sitting on the crest of Table Mountain, with the energy field of his missing head in his hands.



Amberike floated in and out of consciousness. Her head ached. Nausea overcame her, she retched but nothing came out. Her body moved up and down in a painful movement although her stomach had already emptied. The acrid smell of vomit made her touch the front of her dress, her hand came away covered in a soft, green mess. Disgusted she wiped it on her sleeve. Where was she?

She tried to lift her head and became aware of a rhythmic movement. Waves. Terror struck her heart. The last time she was on water was after being caught with Ife and transported to slavery. Where was Ife? She called her name, whispering softly through her sore throat. Ife, where are you? I came to look for you.

She heard voices. Two men with oars were rowing a boat. Of course, she remembered now, they were taking her to her sister. She fell back into the darkness that had been her refuge before she wakened.

72

*My mother bore me in the southern wild,
And I am black, but O, my soul is white!
White as an angel is the English child,
But I am black, as if bereaved of light.*

“The Little Black Boy”, a poem by William Blake, (1789)

Egbert was smoothing a piece of iron to restart his production of torture instruments when one of the pesky children came up to him.

“Masser?”

A cheeky bastard, Egbert thought, and turned to see a boy of four looking up at him. He grunted in reply. The boy was probably too young, or a new arrival. Locally born children learned early to fear their master. But still, this one should learn his lesson.

“Go away.” He aimed a blow at the boy, who scuttled away laughing, thinking it was a game. Definitely fresh off the ship. The boy came back.

“What masser do?”

Gadverdamme. The little monkey wouldn’t go away. He lifted his hand to swat him when a smile crept into the corner of his mouth.

“Come here.”

Egbert grabbed hold of the child, overturned him and pinched his buttocks, his fingers burrowing into the soft flesh. The boy yelled like a slaughtered pig. The noise called into Egbert’s vision Catrijn. No longer able to do heavy work, her back bunched in an unsightly

knot in the middle of her shoulders. His skin prickled in disgust. These people did not age well.

“Sorry, Seur. I just turned my back and he was gone.” Pleading. Her left eye opaque.

“Take him.” Egbert thrust the child into her arms.

“It won’t happen again.” Catrijn shuffled out of his sight. He heard her remonstrate with the boy.

He forgot to ask her to bring one of the young slaves to him. Hanna De Dikkop or Nai Sakka. That was one thing he liked about this place. The rules of courtship didn’t apply.

The boy returned. Egbert shook him vigorously. Surprised he looked at the body. Why did they expire so easily? He was stuffing the small body into his trunk when the door opened.

“Your coffee, Seur.” The old woman had a tray in her hands.

“You didn’t knock. How many times must I tell you to knock?”

“But I did, Seur. Three times.”

“It couldn’t have been hard enough. Otherwise I would’ve heard.”

“Seur...”

“Bring the girl to me.”

“Who? I don’t know which girl Seur wants this time.”

“Amberike.”

Catrijn left.

Egbert stumbled to the bench and sat down, unsteady. He had not slept in three days. He gently touched his cheek, pretending that it was hers. He hoped that his dark act would not threaten her safety wherever she was. He was drowning and the remedy he always used to soothe his mood was not helping anymore.

Egbert awoke from a dream about a big farm with many slaves. He'd drunk wine until he passed out. He sat up, wiping the sweat from his face. The company owned the child slave he had accidentally put to sleep. They had lost property and future earnings and would want to be recompensed. Secondly, the lady of the boarding house where his mother stayed would come looking for him now that his mother had thankfully left these shores.

He had to disappear before the body of the child was discovered, and the East had become a castle in the sky. Instead he would follow the many who said that you could find such a place as he desired inland. He intended to expend effort to cultivate whatever would grow. He was a pioneer, a cultured man and he wanted to take some of that culture to a new frontier.

He took out his pocket watch from his waistcoat; it was twelve minutes past midnight. He climbed out of his sit-up cot, packed his few belongings and sneaked out. There the company would not be able to find him.

73

So many people had died the hospital was empty. Norman's body was kept on a bed, on his back, the bed tilted to lower his head, his eyes taped shut. His mouth clasped a circular tube. A respirator breathed for him, raising and lowering his chest, a rhythmical sound accompanying each breath.

When Katy entered the hospital room she saw Norman's mother next to Sonia and John. Mrs Marais senior's eyes were red from crying. She dabbed a frumpled tissue to catch a tear from time to time.

Katy, Amy and her Mum, who had come to support her, went to stand on the other side of the bed. Mrs Marais inspected Katy's mother in distaste. The wind had caught Mum's hair and it was in disarray. Mum noticed and flattened her hair. She returned Mrs Marais' sour look.

"How long has he been in a coma?" John asked.

"Five days." Katy's voice came out hoarse. She picked up Amy, and hugged her for comfort.

They stood in silence, Katy's eyes on the machine. They'd been given only five minutes. There had been an oversight, only one person could visit at a time, yet here they were all cramped into a small room.

Katy wanted to tell them about the hospital rules. Thought she should leave. No children were allowed. Yet she could not tear her eyes away from the body of the man she loved. He was pale, lifeless.

She loved him fiercely. She deserved to be there. If anyone should leave they should.

"I'll wait outside." Mum left.

As if awakening from a dream Sonia and John left. Katy put her hand on Norman's for a moment then left. Mum was in the corridor.

As Katy and Mum walked towards her car, Mrs Marais came to her.

"Is this his daughter?"

Amy was clinging to Katy's hand, intimidated by the unfamiliar surroundings.

"Yes." Katy pushed Amy forward. "Say hello to your grandmother."

Mrs Marais knelt in front of Amy and hugged her. Amy, always wary of strangers, allowed herself to be hugged.

Mum, who had lagged behind when she saw Mrs Marais approaching, caught up with them when Mrs Marias had left. "What did that old dragon want?"

“She wanted to meet Amy.”

74

The Cook collected pieces of leather. He would've preferred the skin of a water buffalo but collected whatever came his way, mainly the skins of goats and sheep.

“What are you going to do with that?” Arrie asked. “There are complaints that the food has deteriorated and not served on time.”

“Let that be so.”

Arrie studied the Cook. “I also cared about her, but we have to carry on, to survive.”

“Do we?” the Cook said tersely.

Arrie sighed. “If you are so determined, what can I do to assist?”

“You can help me find more skins.”

“What type of skins?”

“I long for the skin of a water buffalo.”

Arrie laughed. “We don't have those here. What about a local buffalo?”

The Cook was surprised: “You have such an animal here?”

“We have a lot of wild life.”

“If you can find a buffalo skin, that would be ideal.”

“I'll see what I can do.”

“You can sing?” It was more a statement than a question.

“I sing, yes.” Arrie said. “What of it?”

“You can join me in remembering Amberike.”

“She’s still alive.”

“How do you know that?” The Cook was angry.

“Hold your reins. I agreed to assist you, didn’t I?”

“This play is an act of love. When she comes back she’ll know that I love her desperately.”

“I hear you.”

With Arrie’s help the preparations flourished. As the *mandoor* Arrie had access to many things, such as the horns of cows to use as handles for the sticks glued to the bodies of the puppets to manipulate them.

The next day Arrie produced a buffalo skin. He did not say where he found it. The Cook softened and stretched the skin until very thin. It was a laborious process. When the skin was ready he cut out the puppets, two big ones, male and female, and many smaller ones.

The Cook finalised the words. Some were in his home-made book and some were in his head. For music he revisited the songs of his homeland.

On the dedicated night at nine o’clock the audience were seated. Most were pock-marked and some were bedraggled, recovering their strength. They sat on the floor in front of a thin cotton sheet on a frame.

The Cook sat behind the screen, an oil lamp behind him. He was ready. Claas called the audience to order.

With the oil lamp lighting the screen the Cook manipulated the shadows of the puppets. His stage had a shadow of Table Mountain created by a wooden tobacco box with a cloth over it, and cut-out trees. He told the age-old story of Layla and Majnun but had adapted it to the harsh conditions at the Cape to include the ravishing of a woman.

The performance lasted till 1am. The Cook sang, Arrie sang. Claas, wearing a black mask, danced. Mankbeen, who followed the Cook around since the latter's return, and Maria, beat two drums.

Egbert sneaked into the performance. No one noticed, their attention was focussed on the screen.

The Cook signalled for Arrie to sing while he recovered from Egbert's sudden appearance. The masters seldom attended their picnics or religious festivals. What was he doing here? The Cook had heard that Egbert had travelled inland and was roaming like Majnun. Egbert looked haggard; his eyes had an unnatural shine in the lamplight as if he was holding back tears.

The Cook was satisfied. He had invoked Amberike's spirit to be with them. She was a tender reed that had been blown away by the Southeaster.

When the Cook cleared up the room of the performance the next day he found Egbert's portrait of Amberike. The Cook traced the beads around her wrists and ankles. She was small for her age with pale, yellow skin. In his imagination she was free.

Glossary

Bundeltje – bundle

Mandoor – slave overseer

Pisvlek – urine stain

Moeder – mother

Gadverdamme – for God's sake

Gracht – narrow gully

Voorkamer – front room

Konfyt – jam

Rijstafel – an elaborate table of luxury foods

Droster – runaway

Enati – mother

Injera – sour dough flatbread

Grote palm – a big palm, used as measurement

Verenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie (VOC) – East India Company

Quagga – a species of zebra hunted to extinction by European settlers

Mevrouw – Mrs

Seur – respected sir

Bitterbessie – bitter person

Sleg boervrou – bad farmer's wife

Boerebrood – farmer's bread

Swirlkous – pantyhose cut to fit on the head.

Padkos – food wrapped to eat on a journey



Kut – a woman's private parts

Slawedrywer – slave driver

Onnozele skaapje –dumb sheep

Bredie – stew

Bobotie – a mince dish

Beeste pote – Cattle hooves

Denningvleis – A dish from Java (dendeng being a water buffalo) made with lamb or mutton and tamarind.

Kaross – animal skins sewn together.





UNIVERSITY of the
WESTERN CAPE

CRITICAL-REFLECTIVE RESEARCH ESSAY

The Buried Chameleon: A Critical Reflective Essay



Cornelia Elizabeth Fick

(Student Number: 3815333)

UNIVERSITY of the
WESTERN CAPE

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Abstract

The critical-reflective component of the novel *The Buried Chameleon* explores the background to the writing of the novel, how I conducted my research, the challenges of writing a historical and contemporary dual narrative, why I chose the romance genre and the application of the theory of romance as national allegory in a South African context to my work. The objective is to consider how slavery shaped love relations in early South Africa while indirectly continuing to influence the construction of contemporary identities. My novel positions itself in relation to a number of local and international intertexts about slavery. Local intertexts comprise five historical novels, namely, *Islands* (2000) by Dan Sleigh, *Turning Wheels* (1937) by Stuart Cloete, *An Instant in the Wind* (2008) by André Brink, *Unconfessed* (2007) by Yvette Christiansë and *The Slave Book* (1998) by Rayda Jacobs, all of which highlight romantic relationships in ways that read history through concerns contemporary with the writing of the novel. The international slave novel *Property* by Valerie Martin, set in the ante-bellum South in 1828 on a sugar plantation in Louisiana, informs my work in an international context. In my essay I reflect on my writing process, discussing plot, point of view, narration, setting, characterisation, dialogue, time, and the practical challenges I encountered in writing. *The Buried Chameleon* combines historical and contemporary narratives. The historical story is set at the Cape of Good Hope in 1713 at around the time of the smallpox epidemic. This story revolves around a young woman, Amberike from Abyssinia, and examines her life experience in the Cape Colony as a slave and her relationships with various men. Alongside the historical narrative is the contemporary story of Katy, and her husband, Norman, set in Cape Town during the Covid 19 pandemic. The lockdown aspect of Covid allows the abolition story of Katie Jacobs to be embedded in the novel, borrowing certain incidents in Katie's life and embroidering them into fragments of a narrative.

Keywords: Covid 19 fiction, foundational fiction, slave women, romantic historical fiction, Cape of Good Hope, dual narrative, frame story, writing process, South African identity

Introduction

This new country, post-apartheid South Africa, is a site of affirmation where speaking begins and silence ends. It is also marked by contradictions where the textures of this newness remain contested, questioned and are constantly being re-fashioned. Contradiction is complexity, creative inflection, play and newness.
(Gqola 2)

The epigraph from Pumla Dineo Gqola's *What is Slavery to Me?* eloquently compresses key concerns of my PhD project. Post-apartheid South Africa is a space that sanctions and facilitates the ability to speak, where previously there had mostly been "silence" during colonialism-apartheid on controversial issues such as oppression and violence. Slavery was inherently a violent institution. Orlando Patterson in *Slavery and Social Death* defines slavery as "the permanent, violent domination of natively alienated and generally dishonored persons" (13). This definition gets to the heart of slavery; namely the experience of powerlessness of enslaved people at the hands of the slave master. Gqola alludes to this violence, which is explicit and perversely gratifying for slave masters, by quoting David Dabydeen: "Empire was a pornographic project; it wasn't just economic or sociological or a political project, it was also a project of pornography" (12). Dabydeen, a British poet, fiction writer and scholar, revisits the history of the slave past in his homeland Guyana, the only English-speaking country in South America. In his first collection *Slave Song*, which won the Commonwealth Poetry Prize and the Quiller-Couch Prize, Dabydeen depicts violent life on sugar plantations by focussing on the body. Syed Manzoorul Islam in "Slavery, Sugar and Sex: David Dabydeen's *Slave Song* and the Colonial Experience"

describes it thus: “Lust for land and lust for profit easily translate into lust for body; and the chain of lust leads to lust for blood even of someone who shares the same space and same disprivileged position as the avengers.” (5). Lust for economic advancement, social development and political power was brutally transcribed on the bodies of black and Indian slaves in South America as a means of control, with particular violations of the bodies of slave women. Against the backdrop of slavery worldwide, of particular concern to me is the large-scale violation of slave women in the history of South African slavery, and in the racialised exploitation which ensued. Violation and exploitation impacted the personal relationships of female slaves even outside of the master-slave dyad. The objective of my novel *The Buried Chameleon* is to consider how slavery shaped personal relationships in early South Africa while simultaneously constructing identities out of gendered slave relationships. These personal relationships, I believe, are political, and often act as allegories of larger national questions.

Although the advent of democracy has not delivered on all its promises, which has spawned vigorous debate and contestation from different quarters, it has still provided the opportunity to create “newness”, especially in the area of my primary concern, namely, the field of literature production dealing with our slave past. Gqola explains: “there have been shifts from initially rare examinations of a past of enslavement as integral to memory in South Africa to a flourishing exploration of this phenomenon in literary texts” (14). The literary works Gqola alludes to include, for example, Achmat Dangor’s *Bitter Fruit* (2001), Botlhale Tema’s *People of Welgeval* (2005) and Nadia David’s *What Remains, A Play in One Act* (2019). This “phenomenon” overlaps with the climate of a sustained growth in consciousness of slave descendants after the demise of apartheid, especially since they feel they have been forgotten or marginalised in the contemporary national project. Nigel Worden in “The Changing Politics of Slave Heritage in the Western Cape, South Africa” describes

this movement as an attempt “to acknowledge and memorialize the slave past,” and use “heritage as both a resource and a weapon in contemporary South African identity struggles” (35). Interestingly, Afrikaners have joined in this quest to re-examine the slave past which debunks notions of racial purity. One sees this in many of the novels by André Brink, set in the period of slavery, and in the novel *Islands* by Dan Sleigh. Furthermore, the proliferation of contemporary forms of slavery worldwide, for example, forced labour, forced marriage, debt bondage and the trafficking of women and children, has also put traditional slavery under the microscope and in the public sphere in many countries, with the belief that an examination of the past history of slavery may help to find remedies for the scourge of modern slavery. South Africa has not escaped this trend, with the abduction of women and children recently dominating the news. Gemma Ritchie in her article, “Is kidnapping on the rise?” published in *The Outlier*; reports that the rate of abduction in South Africa has increased from seven in every 100,000 people in 2011/12 to 11 in every 100,000 in 2021/22.

There are also historical reasons for the media and cultural effacement of the slave past of the South African nation. Most important was the existence of the draconian Publications Control Board codified by the Publications and Entertainments Act of 1963. The board prohibited any text that dared to venture beyond their mandate, for example, André Brink’s novel *Kennis van die Aand*, about the love affair between a coloured man and a white woman, was banned in 1974 because it depicted a relationship across the colour line. Representations of non-consensual relationships between slave masters and slave women would in this context of conservative censorship have been anathema. Post-1994 cross-racial relationships and marriages are becoming more normalised. In this somewhat more relaxed cultural climate there has been a drive to deal more honestly with the past, especially our slave past, reflected in a proliferation of slave novels, films, and a weekly historical column in the Cape *Argus*, Jackie Loos’s “The Way We Were”. Gqola very perceptively links the

interest in the slave past with the formation of the nation post-1994, suggesting that “slave rememorying is entering the terrain of nation-building and therefore the consciousness of the larger South African populace” (14). This can only be beneficial to the public perception of the descendants of slaves who, in the erasure of their history under the previous dispensation, had been relegated by most South Africans to a vague grey area without a past and without a culture, a contentious issue to which I refer in my novel, *The Buried Chameleon*, which forms the creative component of my thesis.

Some of the literary texts created during the “flourishing exploration” of slavery mentioned by Gqola include part of the South African novels I selected as intertexts, engaged in writing my own novel. The following is an overview of, for me, the most significant slave novels in order of publication. All except one, *Turning Wheels*, were published post-1994. The local intertexts comprise five historical novels, namely, *Turning Wheels* (1937) by Stuart Cloete, *The Slave Book* (1998) by Rayda Jacobs, *Islands* (2000) by Dan Sleigh, *Unconfessed* (2007) by Yvette Christiansë and *An Instant in the Wind* (2008) by André Brink, all of which highlight romantic relationships between slaves and masters, and slaves and slaves, in ways that read history through contemporary concerns. In the ensuing discussion of Brink I refer to some of his other novels also, for example *Rights of Desire* (2000). My novel, *The Buried Chameleon*, is a dual narrative historical novel where the experiences of the characters in the past inform the behaviour or circumstances of the characters in the present. It is my attempt to join the conversation on slavery at the Cape of Good Hope, by adding my own idea of “complexity” and “creative inflection” to the growing oeuvre of novels about slavery written by the descendants of slaves such as Rayda Jacobs and Yvette Christiansë, mentioned earlier, and other novelists such as Theresa Benadé (*Kites of Good Fortune* 2012), and Maxine Case (*Softness of the Lime* 2017) among others.

South African Literary Intertexts

In researching my novel, I read as widely as I could into the area of South African slave literature. David Johnson in “Representations of Cape Slavery in South African Literature” provides an overview of literature dealing with Cape slavery and contends that throughout each epoch, slave literature in South Africa was “contingent” on the politics of the period. Unlike Johnson whose study kicks off with an 1823 poem by Thomas Pringle, my focus starts much later in the 1930s with Stuart Cloete’s *Turning Wheels* which centres on the Great Trek. I then moved on to André Brink who, of all the major South African writers, is the one who has demonstrated the keenest interest in the slave era, and who has written quite a few slave novels. For the purpose of this thesis I selected four novels by Brink, *An Instant in the Wind* (1975), *A Chain of Voices* (1982), *The Rights of Desire* (2000), and *Philida* (2012). The first one, *An Instant in the Wind*, is my main intertext, with incidental reference to the others. Post 1994 there has been a blossoming of imaginative writing on the topic of slavery. *The Slave Book* by Rayda Jacobs, *Islands* by Dan Sleigh, and *Unconfessed* by Yvette Christiansë fall into this category. They focus on personal relationships during slavery, especially the relationship of romantic love. The main points I am considering therefore are personal relationships, romantic love, and connections with politics in the order of their importance to the work. I shall present both what I learned from each of these novels, and what I felt I wanted to approach differently in my own novel.

With *Turning Wheels* the political background to the writing of the novel immediately comes to mind. Coinciding with the centenary celebrations of the Great Trek in 1938 it was banned in South Africa because it depicted an inter-racial relationship between a white man and a slave woman. In a gender reversal of a Khoi man and a white woman, Brink revisited the same plot in 1975 in *An Instant in the Wind*, and this novel was also banned. In addition Cloete’s book was seen as critical of the Afrikaner people at a time when their heroic image

was being constructed in preparation for the take-over of the National Party in 1948, which heralded the start of Afrikaner nationalism to create a nation to rule over all other nations. Brink, on the other hand, was seen to handle this controversial topic in a more subtle way which earned him a significant following, even among more liberal-minded Afrikaners. He cracked the cast of apartheid thinking, managing to walk a fine line between entertaining his readers while simultaneously educating the new citizen about the hypocrisy of ideas of racial purity.

Turning Wheels tells the story of farmers at the Cape who travelled in ox wagons to the Transvaal to escape the British while *An Instant in the Wind* is about the runaway slave Adam who leads a white woman left alone in the desert to safety. Regarding personal relationships, in *Turning Wheels* we see an exploitative relationship between Hendrik, the leader of the trek, and Louisa, the daughter of a slave, while in *An Instant in the Wind* we see a depiction of the most intense physical intimacy between the former slave, Adam, and the young white widow, Elizabeth, during their journey back to the Cape. A love triangle between Hendrik and his son Herman and Sannie features in *Turning Wheels*. Herman courts sixteen-year-old Sannie, his first cousin. Hendrik also lusts after her and in his patriarchal wisdom turns to religion for an answer. After an intense prayer session his Bible falls open on the story of God asking Abraham to kill his son Isaac. Although the biblical Abraham did not have to kill his flesh and blood through God's intervention, the trek leader and preacher Hendrik causes the death of his son in order to marry Sannie. Similarly in *An Instant in the Wind* a case can be made that the norms and suffocating values of the Cape act as a third persona in a triangle between the lovers Adam and Elizabeth. The love triangle is a dimension of a narrative which, through tension, allows many issues to be explored. In my work there is a love triangle between the three main characters, namely, The Cook, an Indonesian slave, Amberike, an Ethiopian slave, and Egbert, a Dutch slave master. While I

take the idea of the love triangle from Cloete's novel, my novel differs from Cloete's since I try to shift the focus from the representation of the violence of "big" history to the representation of the violence of "small" histories. My novel thus is not concerned with wars, assassinations and the occupation and exploitation of land through hunting people and animals – a bonanza of killing – but to a focus on the tensions and violences that occur in personal relationships.

Another aspect of Cloete's novel on which I draw, is the way in which *Turning Wheels* shows how slavery and colonialism were justified by a slanted reading of the Bible. Cloete uses references to the Bible throughout. For example, Hendrik looks for the Promised Land, and, when he finds it, he names it Canaan. Also, when he commits murder, he justifies his actions through a subjective reading of the Bible. Through the characters' interpretation of Christianity, Cloete is able to explore the dangers of a religion that places the believer in the realm of the chosen. In my project the slave owner Meine, whom I base on the traits of the character Hendrik in Cloete's novel, quotes Bible verses that endorse the legitimacy of slavery and interprets the Bible to suggest that the Dutch are a chosen people. I saw this particular viewpoint as very important in underpinning the relationship between master and slave at the Cape. In the very first segment of my novel, Egbert, the Dutch school teacher, proudly declares being one of the chosen. I also replicate the attitude of Hendrik in the contemporary story of my dual narrative, which considers the cross-racial marriage of the Afrikaner, Norman, and his coloured wife, Katy. Norman's father and brothers three centuries later, and in the "new" South Africa, still hang onto these beliefs of superiority. They demonstrate that foundational beliefs are deep-seated and cannot simply change by a change of government.

Brink's novel, *An Instant in the Wind*, overlaps significantly with my project since it focuses almost exclusively on the cross-racial love between a slave and his mistress.

Elizabeth, a young white woman at the Cape, marries a visiting Nordic explorer because she craves adventure. He dies on their travels through the wild interior of the country, and she is rescued by a run-away slave, Adam, who undertakes to return her to “civilisation”. In contrast to Sleigh’s meandering plot Brink’s novel is single-minded in its representation of a forbidden love that for a brief time – as long as the journey lasts – to the slave Adam offers love as freedom, a recurring theme in Brink’s work. Not only does Elizabeth owe Adam her life, but she experiences passion with him that seems impossible in the constraints of the Cape cultural context. The relationship has about it a sense of primal origins. The couple are an Adam and Eve in an environmentally harsh Eden that can serve as the origin of more open South African identities and unities across race. Their fall comes when they return to the Cape where social and cultural strictures implode their relationship, symbolised by the death of Adam. In my view, even though Brink implicitly condemns slavery, he does not go far enough to show how love could overcome prejudice. As soon as the possibility exists for Elizabeth to be reintegrated into Cape society, the transformative power of love seems to fizzle away, with the death of Adam as the only narrative solution. This is both similar and different to my own approach with regard to the character Egbert. Egbert also falls in love across the lines of race and class, but, in his case, his love for the slave girl Amberike overcomes ingrained prejudice and pushes boundaries, which leads to personal growth.

In addition, Brink is useful as a “discussant” for my project because he uses the harsh and arid setting of *An Instant in the Wind* as an allegory of the apartheid political context. In my novel I explore similar questions about how the Cape could have been a kind of Eden, rather than a “desert”, for positive new national identities which might have grown out of romantic relationships. The Dutch teacher Egbert falls in love with Amberike, a slave from Abyssinia. It is passionate and incontrovertible love that moves him out of his comfort zone to “desire” the well-being of Amberike. Although set in his ways he makes an effort to be

more accommodating, to grow in order to protect his beloved and come to be loved by her. Unfortunately, as in Brink's novel, there are also complex reasons why these possibilities are ultimately not fulfilled. In *An Instant in the Wind*, the potential of desire to unite lovers across borders is possible only outside of "civilisation", in the wilderness. As soon as the lovers return to the Cape, the conventions and constraints of Cape racialised society take over. In my novel, I do try to push further than Brink does the idea of the boundary-breaking potential of love within the closed confines of Cape society of the late eighteenth century. I also investigate the possibilities for love to heal rifts through my creative exploration of contemporary relationships in the parallel story of Katy and Norman. The social and political obstacles to love prove to be so deeply entrenched that, in my work, they recur again three centuries later. Brink's penchant for eros as a device in narration is clear in many of his novels. In his last novel before his death he writes about the relationship between Philida, a young slave girl, and her master's son. According to Willie Burger, four of Brink's novels were banned (*An Instant in the Wind*, *On the Contrary*, *A Chain of Voices* and *Looking on Darkness*) "partly due to the portrayal of love 'across the colour bar'" (207), suggesting how powerful a threat eros was to the racial order of the apartheid state.

Brink's novel *An Instant in the Wind* starts with an imagined background story of the main characters Adam and Elizabeth. Godfrey Meintjes in a lecture "*A Chain of Voices: The Prose Oeuvre of André Brink*" states that "the narrative commences with references to the imagined history of Elizabeth" (3), a device I use in my work. Although Brink's novel is about the relationship between a runaway slave and a white woman, at the same time it harks back to an older castaway/ship-wreck narrative, the Mrs Fraser stories. In 1836 an English woman was shipwrecked off the Australian coast on what is today Fraser Island. Mrs Fraser escaped from the Aboriginal people with the help of a runaway convict, promising him a pardon and a reward. But when they reached the outskirts of civilisation Mrs. Fraser

threatened to “complain of him, and he fled back into the bush” (Hassal: 4). Anthony Hassal states that this ship-wreck story has “been recently fictionalised in two major novels, Patrick White’s *A Fringe of Leaves* and André Brink’s *An Instant in the Wind*” (2). Brink admitted that he invented the history of Elizabeth and Adam, but that he used the Mrs Fraser narrative as inspiration. Like Brink, I have taken the liberty in my novel to imagine the history of Katie Jacobs, a historical figure I came across in my research, but whom I have named Kaatje, to distinguish her from the character Katy in the contemporary narrative. The story of Katie/Kaatje Jacobs represents the abolition narrative between the historical and contemporary stories, which I have embedded into the contemporary story as part of the historical record unearthed by the contemporary protagonist, and her rememorying of this forebear. Kaatje is based on the true story of Katie Jacobs who gave fleeting insight into her life in a short interview in the *African People’s Organization* (APO) newspaper in 1910. In the absence of a personal tale written from her perspective I was left with the task of “rememorying”. Quoting Toni Morrison, Gqola writes, “[r]ememory invites the creative writer and artist to ‘journey to a site to see what remains were left behind and to reconstruct the world that these remains imply’ in order to yield up a kind of truth” (8). Intrigued by what kind of life Katie’s interview implied, that is, the “remains left behind,” I endeavoured to construct the rest of her world “in order to yield up a kind of truth”. Rememorying counters a phenomenon also described by Gqola. She suggests that: “forgetting and unremembering are inscribed by power hierarchies, unremembering is a calculated act of exclusion and erasure” (8). The historical Katie Jacobs, except for her brief interview given at the age of ninety-six, is erased from the annals of South African history. In the absence of personal stories, *The Buried Chameleon* uses known slave names from the historical record such as Katy, Amberike, and Arie de Boer de Grood and develops fictitious character profiles to represent

them since so little is known about them as people. Morrison's "rememorying" is a useful tool providing fictional personal histories which track the traces left in the historical record.

Dan Sleigh's novel *Islands*, in contrast with Brink's novel, is a lot more "epic" in its approach. At 758 pages it examines the relationships of two Khoi women: Krotoa, who entered into an interracial marriage at the Cape in 1664, and the nuptials of her daughter Pieterella. Sleigh moves away from Brink's idea of love as freedom, which Willie Burger in the introduction to the publication *Flame in the Snow: the Love Letters of André Brink and Ingrid Jonker* describes as "the power of sex to liberate, to break established patterns, and to call into question restricted, bourgeois values," (Galloway: Location No 139). The relationships Sleigh describes are stories of love as constraint. There is no hope for Krotoa, the young Khoi interpreter living in Jan Van Riebeeck's household, and the Danish surgeon Peter Havgard. Not only does Sleigh depict Krotoa and Pieterella's relationships but he also proclaims them as progenitors, *stam moeders*, which ruptures the foundations of apartheid conceptions of Afrikaner racial purity. Krotoa emerges as the progenitor or *stam moeder* of important political leaders such as the late ex-President FW de Klerk, Jan Smuts and Paul Kruger.

I considered Sleigh's novel very carefully for the following reasons: the detailed research into the first 50 years of South African slavery, his view of history as being "islands" and the book's much publicised acknowledgement and portrayal of a previously neglected slave history. The metaphor of islands in history is used to show how individuals may be quite isolated in their historical moment and how the historical past may be like an island one needs to reach across the channel of time. The title also reminds one of apartheid's policies of separateness, which in some ways has its origins in early history. Sleigh and Brink seem to share a fascination with the South African slave past; especially for the light it sheds on Afrikaner origins and culture. Their purpose and scope are the same. Both employ an

incremental pushing of boundaries not to alienate their readers, but to remind them of shared histories. In *The Buried Chameleon*, like Sleigh and Brink, I aim to shed light on coloured origins and culture, specifically the slave culture that contributed to the food, music and language-formation at the Cape. In the contemporary narrative which forms one part of my novel, Norman, an Afrikaner, and Katy, his wife, tell stories during lockdown which reveal their own but also their shared histories. Norman, alienated by his family because he married a coloured woman, still thinks his culture is superior. It comes across in their lifestyle (Katy only cooks Afrikaner dishes). Later, however, Katy reclaims her own culture when she makes pickled fish, while Norman obliquely refers to his mixed heritage by telling the story about his ancestor Ouma Ansie and her favourite porter.

The Slave Book by Rayda Jacobs and *Unconfessed* by Yvette Christiansë also deal with inter-racial relationships. These books are written by slave descendants. Just as Brink and Sleigh share the purpose of revealing a hidden Afrikaner history, Jacobs and Christiansë share the desire to investigate a hidden traumatic history, which in the past had been interpreted by dominant powers to fit their agenda. Set just before abolition by the British in 1838, Jacobs's novel focuses on the last five years of slavery, in comparison to Sleigh who concentrates on the initial years of slavery after the arrival at the Cape of the Dutch colonial administrator Jan Van Riebeeck in 1652. *The Slave Book* is a love story between Harman, a white settler with a secret (his biological mother is from the indigenous Sonqua hunter-gatherer group) and Somiela, a slave girl who has an unknown white father. As in Brink's *Philida*, Roeloff, Harman's father, had met Harman's mother, a Sonqua, as a playmate of his growing years to whom he had grown attached. During the slave era it was common for sons of the master to sleep with slave women in their reach before marrying a suitable partner. Harman's father, Roeloff, has no regrets about his relationship with his Sonqua lover. By contrast with the revisionist fictional histories of Brink and Sleigh, *The Slave Book* captures

the expectations and tensions of the anticipation of slaves at being set free. Harman plans to buy Somiela's freedom in order to marry her. This was a practice at the Cape and in other slave societies. A slave or a family member could work and earn enough money to buy the freedom of their loved one. Salie, an attractive male slave, also in love with Somiela, says "... she will just go from one owner to another. He owns her after that" (184). Harman sees his action as noble because it will entail sacrifice on his part. He has to face the pressure that the protagonists in Brink's novels balk at since he stands to lose his vaunted position in Cape society. Salie, however, has a different perspective and sees that a love relationship built on the master and slave dynamic would result in an extremely unequal power relationship. Even though Somiela will be free of her owner, she will still belong to her husband. In my novel Amberike faces the same dilemma. If she marries Egbert she will be "protected", or so she thinks, against the hardships of slavery, but her position will still be that of a slave to her master, and she will have to face the wrath of Egbert's ex-lover Anke and the broader community. If she goes with Egbert, like the hapless Krotoa in Sleight's novel, Amberike will be doomed to intolerance and rejection. And like Norman in the contemporary story of my dual narrative, Egbert also displays an ingrained habit of being dominant.

The Slave Book, the romantic historical novel by Rayda Jacobs, foregrounds the elements of romance most noticeably of all the books I selected. There is a likeable heroine and a handsome hero. They meet, fall in love, obstacles keep them apart, and they overcome the obstacles to be united in marriage. Many slave novels enact the theme of love as freedom during slavery. Unusual though in Jacobs's novel is that Harman, the hero, dies shortly after the couple get married. I also, like Jacobs, wanted to write a love story for the hope and potential for change romantic love brings, but I also wanted to complicate the romance formula to reveal the complications brought by the unequal relations of slavery and apartheid

in the contemporary narrative. In my work *The Buried Chameleon* there are quite a few love stories. There is the love of the slave master, Egbert, for the slave girl Amberike, the love of the slave, known as “the Cook”, for Amberike, and in the contemporary narrative the love between the Afrikaner, Norman, and his coloured wife, Katy. Both the potential of love to unite across boundaries and transform lovers in positive ways, and the hold of existing power relations to threaten and complicate love are explored in my novel. Like Rayda Jacobs I aimed for a conventional love story in this part of the plot, but with an unconventional ending. My novel ends in violence, highlighting the violence of the slave past feeding the violence of apartheid and contemporary South Africa, especially in its treatment of women of colour.

There is also a scene in Jacobs’s *The Slave Book* where the slave owner Andries’s wife calls Somiela a *naai maintje* (69). A literal translation of this Dutch word is “sex basket”. It was a term of abuse used specifically for coloured women during slavery, which was only highlighted recently by authors who are the descendants of slaves. For example, in Christiansë’s *Unconfessed* the protagonist Sila refers to herself as a *naai maintje*. The word does not appear in Sleigh’s, Brink’s or Cloete’s novels although Louisa, a slave woman in *Turning Wheels*, is referred to as a harlot: “Like an animal she had been bred by man for his own pleasure. Careful selection over many generations” (196). *Naai maintje* was a derogatory term used to describe slave women, especially those who were lighter skinned and of mixed ancestry, like Somiela in Jacobs’s novel. The woman, selected by the slave master or his sons, was pursued for sexual gratification whether she wanted it or not. The simultaneous desire for, and abuse of the body of the black woman, is a common theme in slave narratives. In my own novel I have explored this idea in Christiaan van Couwenbergh’s painting *Three Young White Men and a Black Woman* as well as the relationship between Egbert and

Amberike. Thus we see that relationships between white men and slave women were complex, and laced with coercion, exploitation, violence, hatred and extremities of power.

Yvette Christiansë's novel, *Unconfessed*, has been compared with Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987) because it shares the unthinkable act of infanticide, a cruel reality that occurred more regularly than initially thought in slavery. *Unconfessed* is the story about Sila, who is taken from Mozambique as a child. She is convicted for killing her nine-year-old son Baro and spends three years in jail awaiting a death sentence, but is then banished to Robben Island. In jail and on the island she is repeatedly raped, bearing two children who survive and a third who dies in early infancy. The endemic violence of slavery in Christiansë's work prompts a mother to reproduce the violence and murder her son as a solution to protect him. Sila, who is highly traumatised, says her "body has no say in what happens to it" (134). In my novel the topic of rape is an important theme that complicates the love stories. It finds expression in the rape of Amberike, the main protagonist, by an unknown assailant, as well as in the play written by her paramour, the Cook, which is about the violation of a woman. Christiansë's raw version of life on Robben Island casts doubt on Sleigh's depiction of Krotoa as a prostitute. Rape was probably her lot. A finalist for the PEN/Hemingway Award, *Unconfessed* is a story about a mother's love and a mother's inability to fulfil her role to protect her children. As in Brink's novels power is central to the relationship between master and slave. Sila's owner, Van der Wat, exhibits an attraction and cannot stay away from her. His wife becomes jealous, and it wreaks emotional violence on her psyche which she transfers by abusing Sila. Nicola Cloete in "The Politics of Unspeakability in Yvette Christiansë's *Unconfessed*" suggests that "the text focuses on what I term the refusal to support the comfortable imaginings of slavery. This is a vital contribution to understanding the history and legacy of slavery in South Africa as it troubles the conventional amnesia or minimisation of the role slavery has played in South Africa's history" (70). In my creative

work I do not “support the comfortable imaginings of slavery” in my depiction of life at the Cape of Good Hope. Slave women are seen as commodities by all, the masters as well as the male slaves – Claas, a slave, hires out his partner and, when she becomes pregnant, he is instrumental in the sale of her baby. Like Christiansë I aim to open up a more robust study of the lives of slave women to whom rape was a constant threat. For example, although Amberike is protected by the Cook and Egbert she is still raped. In my dual narrative I have the opportunity to give a forward as well as backward glance at this important but under-represented piece of history.

I have written my novel with an eye on the above intertexts, which provide echoes in my own work. For example, Kaatje, who in my novel is based on Katie Jacobs, pronounces slavery as an “unconfessed sin”. This is a play on the title of Christiansë’s novel. I have chosen these novels because they foreground narratives which take shape around an intimate relationship or intimate relationships. In most of the texts, love manifests in a complicated relationship intertwined with violence and hatred, for example, the relationship between Brink’s Elizabeth and Adam, Sleigh’s Krotoa and Peter; and the relationship between Hendrik and Louisa. In mirroring violence as an aspect of love in the historical context, my project implicates patriarchal contemporary society and South African identities in a propensity for love embedded in violence.

International Literary Intertexts

I have read many international slave novels, *Twelve Years a Slave* by David Wilson and Solomon Northup, *The Underground Railroad* by Colson Whitehead, *Beloved* by Toni Morrison, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, Written by Herself* by Harriet Jacobs and the well-known *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave, Written by*

Himself, among others. The first detail I noticed was the “*Written by Herself, Written by Himself*” in some of the titles to indicate a personally rendered narrative. In my reading I focussed on the representations of life under slavery, but tried to enter the subjectivity of the slave characters in particular, in order to emulate the experience embodied in “Written by her/himself”.

Most of the slave novels I read describe the American experience. The similarities and differences between the Cape of Good Hope and the African-American slave experience become clear when viewed through the number of slave novels produced by each country. Although historically South African and American slavery have much in common, South African slavery, unlike in America, has remained largely a silenced part of our history until recently. How that history has shaped contemporary society is also not a question that was explored after slavery and during apartheid. Yet both countries have a link to the Dutch slave enterprise: the Dutch West India Company started slavery in the American South by bringing twenty African slaves to Virginia in 1619; and the Dutch East India Company came to the Cape in 1652. Almost immediately after his arrival, Jan Van Riebeeck lobbied the *Here XVII* in the Netherlands for permission to import slaves and the first slave, Abraham van Batavia, arrived in 1653 (“History of slavery and early colonisation in South Africa”, South African History Online). Both countries developed a master-servant system founded on the conviction that slaves were inferior, in a culture based on a racial hierarchy with white supremacy.

However, in America after the Civil War the Federal Writers' Project recorded the lives of ex-slaves. The growth of African-American literature of slavery has therefore been phenomenal, from Phyllis Wheatley’s poetry (1773) to the focus on slavery in the Harlem Renaissance and beyond. An author like Toni Morrison could emerge because she found an intellectual climate conducive to writing her seminal novel, *Beloved* (1987). Texts like the autobiographies of Olaudah Equiano (1789) and Frederick Douglass (1845), and Harriet

Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861), novels like Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852), Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* (1952), Alex Haley's *Roots* (1976), and W.E.B. Du Bois' non-fiction *Black Reconstruction in America: An Essay* (1935), all memorialise the American slave past. Indeed, the Oxford African American Studies Centre suggests that: "Some 6,000 narratives written by African American slaves were published between 1700 and 1950" (Oxford AASC).

In contrast, in South Africa, we have only a few slave narratives. One of two that I know of is by Katie Jacobs, referred to above, who was interviewed when she was in her nineties. Most slaves at the Cape were illiterate and after emancipation no one collected their oral histories. Memoirs written by slaves or former slaves – full of description, emotion, and reflection – begin the canon of African-American literature while in South Africa that has not been the case. A number of historical novels have been written post-1994 which includes slave novels written by the descendants of slaves. Slave poetry by poets such as Diana Ferris and Tracey Heeger has also emerged. Compared with American literature though very little is written by the South African communities which had been affected by slavery at the present time. My historical romance developed as a response to the reading of these novels and reflecting on my own experiences and ideas about the significance of slavery in South African history. I therefore locate my work in the oeuvre of South African slave fiction, but my ideas have been shaped, in part, by reading African-American slave fiction.

The international slave novel which most influenced *The Buried Chameleon* is the novel *Property* by Valerie Martin. *Property* is set in the ante-bellum South in 1828 on a sugar plantation in Louisiana. Valerie Martin's book won the Orange Prize because it deals honestly with a little-discussed topic; that of the female slave owner's complicity in creating the conditions of slavery which made the lives of female slaves even more unendurable. *Property* tells the story of Manon, newly-wed to a domineering plantation owner. She is

bored and idle. Manon recounts her life and her negative views of her husband at the same time that a slave revolt is brewing. Childless, she is humiliated because she has to live with her husband's child, Walter, fathered through his sexual liaison with Manon's slave, Sarah. The latter was given to Manon as a wedding present. As in my local intertexts the practice of breeding light-skinned women for male entertainment is mentioned in *Property* when describing the slave Sarah: "Her appearance was pleasing, tall, slender, light-skinned, neatly dressed, excellent posture" (20). When Sarah, dressed as a man, escapes during the slave revolt (in which Manon loses her husband) and goes to New Orleans, Manon, in her determination to retrieve her property, meets a lounge singer whom she recognises as also a product of such breeding. Manon has a score to settle: Sarah, as a concubine, is no longer under the protection of Manon's husband, and so is exposed to Manon's violence. In Manon's view Sarah is in need of being put in her place, a time-honoured tradition among slave owners. In the culture of American slavery, the pervasive sexual abuse of slave women gave rise to the myth of the Jezebel, the lascivious black woman. To an astonishing degree that concept was repeated in South Africa in respect of brown women, as the term "*naai maintje*", discussed above, reveals. My novel alludes to this issue in various ways. One of them is that Amberike, the eleven-year-old historical heroine, gets into trouble for cutting off the hem of her dress to bind her budding breasts. My implication here is that even a very young girl would have been able to intuit the gender-specific risks faced by slave women.

A review of Martin's book in *The Guardian* states that *Property* is about "the corrupting, dehumanising power of ownership on those who own, [while] it also explores the jockeying intimacy of women forced to share a man – though with incomparable degrees of powerlessness". The reviewer suggests further that the mistress, Manon, in *Property* "persists in seeing [the slave woman] as a sexual rival, despite her having resisted and been brutally

subjugated, first by Manon's uncle, then by her husband.” (Jaggi n. pag.) Although illogical, such blindness was a product of social attitudes in the age of slavery.

Martin's novel does not enter into the subjectivity of the slave characters since it is written from the slave mistress Manon's perspective. In fact, a criticism may be levelled that she succumbs to the stereotyping of slave women in America as either the mammy – nurturing, caring, raising the children of the master, or the Jezebel. Sarah is described as sullen and inscrutable. Her impenetrable demeanour, seen through the eyes of Manon, makes her a problem and does not invite sympathy for her subjugation by Manon's uncle and husband.

In my novel the dynamic of the “jockeying intimacy of women forced to share a man” occurs in the relationship of Amberike and her teacher, Egbert. In the historical plot Egbert, impressed by his own manhood, flirts with many women including Anke, the wife of his friend Meine, a slave-owning farmer. Egbert has physical relations with Anke, leading him to fear that the child she subsequently carries may be his. Anke hates Amberike as a rival who is much more accessible to Egbert since she is a slave. She fears Egbert's interest in Amberike, worrying where it may lead. Anke, through her jealousy, makes Amberike's life perilous and unendurable. There is irony in the situation that Anke trains Amberike in the feminine skills of European civilisation, like embroidery, which make her culturally more familiar to Egbert, and thus more desirable.

My reason for choosing *Property* as a novel which my own novel engages is two-fold: firstly, it is an example of how to write about endemic violence against women. I learned that the way to depict unpalatable events during slavery is just to present them as normal, a daily occurrence in the lives of the slave characters. Secondly, in the absence of South African historical records and very few literary depictions of the subjectivity of the female slave, it allows one, by comparison, to get an idea of what may have happened to slave women at the

Cape. Orlando Patterson's ground-breaking study *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study* is relevant here. Patterson, by studying sixty-six slave societies starting from the ancient world, demonstrated that there were similarities in practices of slavery wherever it has occurred. I can therefore assume that the treatment of slave women at the Cape followed those of other slave societies.

Apart from novels about slavery, Tracy Chevalier's *Girl with a Pearl Earring* influenced my writing for its descriptions of art, which feature in my novel. Chevalier's historical novel first published in 1999 centres on Vermeer's well-known painting *Girl with a Pearl Earring*, a copy of which hangs in the house of Anke, one of my characters. The 17th Century was noted for an abundance of prints and copies in Dutch homes. Chevalier's novel is an ekphrastic work that encompasses the years 1664-1676, creating a fictional tale about the young girl in Vermeer's painting. Griet, a sixteen-year-old Dutch girl, lives in Delft, Holland, with her parents and two siblings. Her father, a tile maker, has been blinded in an accident. This plummets the working-class family into penury and she is sent to work in the well-off painter Vermeer's household as a maid. He notices her and eventually asks her to sit for him, wearing his wife Catharina's pearl earrings. Miriam de Paiva Vieira calls it a *Künstlerroman*, a "literary work, built by means of ekphrastic descriptions" (11). Chevalier describes in the novel how Vermeer painted *Girl with a Pearl Earring* using lapis lazuli to make aquamarine for the blue of the turban and ground up burnt ivory for the black colour – items acquired by Dutch expansionism, represented also in the Dutch presence at the Cape. Notably the ivory could have possibly been from the tusks of elephants hunted by the Dutch settlers. The novel provides valuable insight into life in the Netherlands during a time when the Dutch were actively settling at the Cape.

Chevalier has reported that she used Simon Schama's book *The Embarrassment of Riches: An Interpretation of Dutch Culture in the Golden Age* about life in the Netherlands

which I also read as part of my research. There are many parallels in the class distinctions highlighted in *Girl with a Pearl Earring* to the treatment by masters of slaves under slavery. Catharina, Vermeer's wife, has a nurse to feed her baby, much like the practice of a slave woman purchased or hired to provide milk for the slave master's children as depicted in Katie Jacobs' story at the Cape. Griet, the maid, wards off sexual advances from different men. Vermeer's patron, Pieter van Ruijven, of the rich merchant class that thrived because of the Dutch participation in slavery, actively pursues her and he eventually becomes the owner of the painting. Throughout the novel Chevalier presents men accosting lower class women as commonplace. Thus, attitudes to lower class women in Holland foreshadow the attitudes of Dutch men towards the slave women they encountered during colonisation which had repercussions, not only in the past, but also through transgenerational trauma impacting the present.

The discussion of this point makes it clear that the interest in slavery is both a historical interest and a contemporary interest since the impacts of slavery continue materially and psychologically for generations after abolition. The transgenerational trauma of slavery is presented in my novel through the dual storyline – the eighteenth-century personal relationships and the contemporary relationships.

What is historical fiction? The following quote, “The past is a foreign country; they do things differently there”, the first line from L.P. Hartley's *The Go-Between*, sums it up for me, since one is inclined to think of the past as a complete break with the present. The past is past – it is done. For this reason, research is required to be able to write in this genre competently because it seems so different from the present. However, researching the past and thinking about the issues which interest me, I saw the ongoing connections between the past and the present. For this reason, I felt I had to intertwine the historical narrative with a

contemporary story. I will discuss the challenges of writing a historical novel first and then go on to discussing the complexities of writing the present-day narrative.

Representing the Slave Past in the Present: The Challenges of Writing Historical Fiction

My novel is, in part, a historical novel using third person narration focalised through multiple characters set at the Cape of Good Hope in 1713 just before and during the smallpox epidemic, for which historical records exist. Most of the action takes place in the slave lodge at the Cape of Good Hope where the Vereenigde Oostindische Compagnie (VOC), or Dutch East India Company, slaves resided. My work, a fictional construct with fictional characters, offer a bird's-eye-view of the imagined interactions between slaves and the indigenous Khoi with colonists who came from the Netherlands and other parts of Europe to settle at the Cape. The name of the main character, Amberike from Abyssinia, is taken from a revolving list in a glass cage in the Slave Lodge in Cape Town where the name Amberike van Zanzibar appears. For the purposes of my novel, I changed it to Amberike from Abyssynia. I did not want to add another slave society, namely Zanzibar, as I wanted Amberike's first experience of slavery to be at the Cape. Other names mentioned in my novel, Nai Sakka and Hanna De Dikkop, are on the list in the Slave Lodge as well. Arrie de Boer de Grood is listed as a "Mandoor" under slave occupation in Robert Shell's *Slave Lodge Census 1714* (ID No 57). Meine, Anke and Egbert are Old Dutch names, which, for me, captured the dispositions of these characters.

Furthermore, my project is written as a literary novel, not constrained by genre rules or by genre expectations, but rather as an individual or personal quest to imagine the interior life of a slave, to provide a snapshot, if you will, of what slavery was like. Toni Morrison explains it better: "It's a kind of literary archaeology: On the basis of some information and a

little bit of guesswork you journey to a site to see what remains were left behind and to reconstruct the world that these remains imply” (*The Site of Memory*: 92). To this end I did not concentrate on the court documents in the historical archives, the main existing records of Cape slaves, as I found it limiting to imagine a people based only on the ones who broke the law.

The historical storyline revolves around Amberike from Abyssinia. Amberike and her sister are given to a member of the VOC as a gift but they are separated and Amberike never sees her again. Amberike meets the Cook, an exile from Sulawesi, an island in Indonesia. The Cook falls in love with Amberike. However, she has three other suitors: Klaas, a soldier from Ambon Island, the school teacher Egbert and the overseer or *mandoor*, Arie de Boer de Grood. With so many suitors it is difficult to find the perpetrator when she becomes pregnant after a rape. The Cook writes a shadow play, which is an ancient Javanese and Asian form of cultural expression. The play encapsulates dominant themes in the novel and, when it is rediscovered in post-Apartheid South Africa by the contemporary protagonist, Katy, it is also the link between the past and the present. The performance of the play brings everyone together and apart. It acts as a catalyst to simmering tensions. The idea of the play is based on a play that lodge slaves performed during the smallpox epidemic but which has vanished from the historical record.

Hayden White in the article “Introduction: Historical Fiction, Fictional History, and Historical Reality” has stated that writing history is like writing a story. He suggests that the sequence of events or dates of a period in history is shaped into a beginning, middle, and end – like a story. To make the story more coherent the historian chooses the genre into which his story falls: romance, comedy, tragedy and satire. Then, consciously or unconsciously, the historian selects an ideology, argument or explanation. White describes four explanatory strategies: idiographic, organicist, mechanistic, and contextualist; and four possible theories

of ideology: liberalism, anarchism, conservatism, and radicalism. In this process of emplotment the historian shapes and interprets the historical facts from his present-day perspective, thereby connecting the past with the present. Incidentally, that was my process in the writing of my novel, with the addition of fictional characters and events. From White's contribution it can be deduced that story is central to the writing of history, and what form it takes depends on the historian. This differs from the erstwhile view that history, by virtue of the "facts", was an undeniable truth.

A generally more accepted definition of the historical novel is that it must adhere to the elements of historical fiction. *Britannica.com* lists the following: it must have a period of history as the setting and convey the spirit, manners, and social conditions of a past age with realistic detail and fidelity to historical fact. But for the writer of historical fiction, the process is even more complicated. One is taking the stories of historians which have a claim on "real" history through their closeness to artefacts, and documents, and oral testimonies and making a story out of their stories. Relying on history written by historians can therefore be problematic. In the South African context, the belief in the immutability of history has been used to entrench certain "facts" selected and curated to distort and entrench white supremacy. This required me, at all times, to be alert and read with caution.

In trying to resurrect Cape slave society in the eighteenth century, I relied on multiple sources. I used book histories of slavery, archives, songs, paintings and visits to museums and places in Cape Town linked with slavery. The main books I consulted are Robert Shell's *Children of Bondage*, Simon Schama's *The Embarrassment of Riches*, Alastair Hazell's *The Last Slave Market* and *From the Spice Islands to Cape Town - The Life and Times of Tuan Guru* by Shafiq Morton. From Shell I learnt about slavery in South Africa, a topic I knew nothing about. I was fascinated by his work and met his wife Sandra Shell in the Company Gardens that still exists from the time of the VOC, and features in my novel, sharing the table

with squirrels that roam there. She pointed out Shell's other research and e-mailed some of his articles for which I am grateful. Amberike's young age – 11 years – is based on a “shopping list” I found in Shell's book. On it was the item, girls 11-13. In addition, Sandra Shell in her book *Children of Hope: The Odyssey of the Oromo Slaves from Ethiopia to South Africa* researched the Cape slaves who came from Abyssinia (today Ethiopia) and asserts that many came as children, an idea I have incorporated into my novel. From Robert Shell I moved on to other historians writing about slavery: Robert Ross, Richard Elphick, Nigel Worden, JA Heese, and Mansell Upham, among others. However, nobody fired up my imagination like Shell's *Children of Bondage*. Morton's book *From the Spice Islands to Cape Town* provided insight into the slave community, especially those from South East Asia who brought Islam to the southern tip of Africa. One can see the influence of this work in my representation of the character of the Cook who reveres Sheikh Yusuf, the legendary rebel leader who was banished by the Dutch to the Cape. Morton writes about the life and times of Sheikh Yusuf, who was exiled to the Cape in 1693. Sheikh Yusuf had memorised the Qur'an's more than six thousand verses and wrote texts in Arabic to educate the faithful.

However, books on Cape slavery did not tell me as much as I needed to know about life at the Cape. For me to gain enough insight to reproduce the interior lives of the characters in my narrative, I researched the geographical and cultural origins of the slave masters and the slave men and women. I delved into Dutch history in the 1600 to 1700s – and a smidgen of Indonesian history. The people who set foot on South African soil came with characters fully developed in their homelands because they came as adults (of course it was different for the children who arrived from Abyssinia, for example). As most of the slave masters came from Europe, mainly the Netherlands, I based Egbert's character on the facts and insights found in *The Embarrassment of Riches* by Simon Schama. Schama brilliantly examines the Golden Age in the Netherlands, depicting their lifestyles, beliefs, values, perspectives, and

the historical milieu of constant wars. The Dutch had an eighty years war with Spain (1566–1648), and wars with England (first one: 1652–1654) and France (1672-1678), among others. These are major events that impact character. I therefore imagined a war-like people. That was confirmed by the hiring policies of the VOC: everyone who came to the Cape had to be a soldier first. Schama discusses the background to the Dutch perspective of being a chosen people. Egbert, the school teacher in my novel, is very proud of being Dutch and of their achievements. In a moment of irony, he tells Amberike about their accomplishments but it goes over her head. He boasts of how the Dutch built many ships to go to the East and although a small country, the Netherlands became a great seafaring nation. This penchant for war has left its mark on the South African psyche with the popular Afrikaner notion of “n boer en sy roer” (a farmer and his gun). The *Last Slave Market* acted as a counterpoint to Robert Shell’s book because it deals with the old slave market in Zanzibar which traded slaves between Africa and the Middle East. It was the last slave market to be disbanded after abolition. Amberike and her sister travel from Abyssinia to Zanzibar and are destined for the Middle East before they are re-routed to the Cape.

I used the Western Cape Archives and Records Service in Roeland Street mainly to research the indigenous people (the Khoi and San), whom the settlers found here. Even though my book is about the imported slaves, and the Khoi and San were not really slaves (although their working conditions were the same), the setting or background would have lacked authenticity without the presence of the indigenous people. Some of the music and songs of the *Kaapse Klopse* (Cape Minstrels) have their origins in slavery. The “*klopse*” are groups of musicians from the descendants of slaves who perform on the second of January every year. It was fascinating to learn that some melodies such as *Daar kom die Alibama* had also leaked into Afrikaner culture. I spent time in the Jagger Reading Room, a beautiful library with wooden panels at the University of Cape Town that has since burned down. I

have the memory of standing in awe in front of books written in the 1500s in the basement, carefully handling them and thinking of the historical owners.

Another aspect to unravel the past was the proliferation of visual art created during the Dutch Golden Age. Two paintings appear in my novel: Christiaan van Couwenbergh's *Three Young White Men and a Black woman* (1632) and Johannes Vermeer's *Girl with a Pearl Earring* (1665). To counter the masking of "historical consciousness" by "later generations as a matter of survival" (4) as Gqola suggests, doubt has been created about the probably habitual rape of slave women during slavery and colonialism. But a study of Couwenbergh's painting may give pause. An oil on canvas, it depicts three white men in a room; the light falls on two of them, one sits on the bed holding a black woman on his lap, while the other stands, pointing at him. A third is in the shadows. The woman is coal black; from afar she has no face but on closer scrutiny one eye stares and her mouth is open. Using the ancient Greek tradition of *ekphrasis*, which the Oxford dictionary describes as "the use of detailed description of a work of visual art as a literary device," I allowed the sensory and affective experience of the painting to give form to parts of my narrative. I chose the painting *Girl with a Pearl Earring* for my protagonist Amberike to identify with because both girls exude innocence and vulnerability. John Michael Montias's article "A Brief Overview of the Dutch Art Market in the Seventeenth Century" in *Essential Vermeer 3.0* reveals that the Dutch used small replicas of etchings and paintings to decorate their homes, a result of numerous etching artists, and the Gutenberg press which was invented in 1436. They even had miniature paintings in doll houses. The wives of rich merchants had models of their houses built and decorated them lavishly, complete with paintings on the walls of the small-scale houses. Some Dutch homes had thirty to fifty paintings per room and the rooms were not spacious. Last but not least, studying artworks provided an idea of Dutch and slave physiognomy: their appearance, size and facial features. That's where Anke's long nose

comes from. In addition I took free online courses on historical topics. In April 2020 I registered for –“Learning from the past” – run by the University of Nottingham on Future Learn. It starts with the premise that language is “the key to history– but it is also, potentially, a trap.” (Outline of the structure of the course, accessed 29 April 2021). They explained that words change over the years, they gather new meaning, and that this evolution is a fundamental part of history. This renders South African history even more problematic because the primary texts of Cape slavery are in Dutch/Afrikaans and require translation. Needless to say, the resulting interpretations are heavily influenced by the translator.

I also visited the main museums of slavery at the Cape such as the Castle of Good Hope, the Slave Lodge and Groot Constantia. Built between 1666 and 1679 the Castle of Good Hope is the oldest colonial building in South Africa. It was constructed on five strong bastions as a defence against British invasion and exhibits a permanent ceramic collection, the second oldest bell in South Africa (which still works) and the William Fehr art collection. (The latter was closed when I visited, a great disappointment.) The guide explained the very upright chairs that the Dutch –not given to slouching– sat on. I also saw a sit-up cot. The slave torture room and the dark chamber were described in nonchalant terms. Only when the guide closed the door, and it was so dark one could not see one’s hand, did the full impact of the experience of those who were imprisoned become real. Groot Constantia, South Africa’s oldest wine producing farm since 1685, was once owned by a former slave, Anna de Koningh, after the death of her husband Olof Bergh. Her mother was Angela of Bengal, bought by Jan Van Riebeeck in 1655. Benadé claims her as an ancestor in *Kites of Good Fortune*. Constantia is a tourist attraction focused on the legendary wines of the Cape. I saw the first vine brought to the Cape here; however, for the purpose of my novel I located the vine in the Company Gardens. I asked the guide about the slaves. He showed me the dungeon. It provided inspiration to describe it in the scene of Amberike in a dungeon.

I also went to the Slave Lodge and Robben Island. The ferry to the island had to navigate choppy waters and I thought of Autshumao, the Khoi leader, who, with two friends, “became the first prisoners” on the island in 1659 and escaping “a year later... by stealing a rowing boat” (SA History online accessed 6 January). I studied the vegetation and thought of Krotoa living there with her two children after her marriage in 1664 when her husband was sent by the company to work as a superintendent. I studied the narrow cell of Nelson Mandela, who spent 27 years in prison and, strangely, thought of Sila van de Kaap, the protagonist in Christiansë’s *Unconfessed*, also being a prisoner on Robben Island. Most of the tourists wanted to know only about Mandela. I was fascinated as the guide explained the distinctions made by the apartheid government. Black men could only wear short trousers (addressed by Mandela in his book *Long Walk to Freedom* (1994)). The little detail that Indians and Coloureds could have jam on their bread, but not the black prisoners, had me thinking about the petty distinctions made between races by the apartheid government such as whether a pen would fall through hair or not.

Paul Tichmann, Head of Social History Collections at the Slave Lodge, told me about the background to the lodge and their exhibitions, one of which was “My Name is February: Identities Rooted in Slavery”. He then left me to do the tour on my own. When I left, I felt driven to write about the silent people who had all the bones in their bodies broken, were beheaded and suffered the indignity of a slow death with an iron rod stuck up the anus. These were stories which haunted me. I had to write them. But I found that in order to write a fictional account which summoned up people and places, I needed more than just scholarly works and archives. I also spent time in the Company’s Gardens in Cape Town. Sitting on a bench under a tree with a view of the mountain allowed me to imagine what working in the garden may have been like. It also allowed me to see what had not changed, for example, the colour of the light, and the mountain. Sitting in the garden made me think also of the other-

than-human creatures who shared the history of slavery ... I stood in front of the pear tree brought by the Dutch during slavery. It was fenced off. There's something about objects of history that cause awe and nostalgia combined, a strange feeling. Further trips were derailed by the outbreak of the pandemic. I had planned to visit Rondebosch East where Norman and Katy live to write vivid descriptions of their suburb, and Oudekraal in the upmarket Camps Bay area, the last refuge for the Khoi and escaped slaves.

I relied also on my own personal family "archive". My novel *The Buried Chameleon*, as the title suggests, is an attempt at excavating my heritage from a history that has largely been erased. During drought the Khoi tribes buried a chameleon to bring rain, and I hope my PhD project will facilitate in reversing the burial of some of the histories of the Cape. Until recently South African history has been told through the eyes of the coloniser. It is apt to repeat a quote from Gqola here: "historical consciousness is masked by later generations as a matter of survival" (4). My task is therefore not only hampered by the fact that my story is "untold", but also that it falls into the realm of the unknown and I have to revert to fiction, to "journey to a site to see what remains were left behind" (Morrison 92). In our country this method is necessitated by the status quo where according to Gqola, "[t]he relationship of mainstream [w]hite South Africa to [c]oloured South Africans appears caught in a continuous spiral of appropriation and erasure" (130). As important as the big historical narratives in my project are, my personal experiences of the impact of history on my family are what brought me on this journey. After my grandmother died in 1988, my mother gave me my grandmother's Bible. The size of a grade one school case and just as thick, it was printed in 1887 and was written in Dutch. The Bible was well-used and certain passages had been read until the pages were torn or came loose. Together with my grandmother's propensity for writing letters in a quaint language, half Afrikaans and half Dutch, it spurred my journey on a new writing path. Where did she get the Bible from? And why did she write letters in Dutch?

My grandmother's life was a closed book. My interest was heightened by an old pendant that had belonged to my grandmother. On one side there was a cut-out photograph of a plump blonde woman and on the other side a man so dark he faded into the background and was almost invisible. I searched for books on South African slavery and came across Robert Shell's *Children of Bondage*. Thereafter I devoured anything about slavery I could lay my hands on. I had deduced that the very dark man was a slave, after I visited a great aunt who said he was from Madagascar. As a registered nurse and midwife, my interest was stimulated by the topic of the 1713 smallpox epidemic. However, being in a pandemic brought the issue of pandemics to the fore and forced me to consider pandemics throughout history, from a healthcare perspective: the signs and symptoms, treatment and the outcome, as well as the social and psychological aspect. Being isolated with family brings tensions that normally would not arise. In my creative work I incorporated these tensions in the relationship of Katy and Norman. They are in lockdown, unable to escape, and it has a profound effect on their marriage. I spoke to people who might recollect a family history of slavery but, for the most part, there was a deadening silence. They seemed embarrassed to talk about a past with origins in slavery, but were more open about European forefathers.

The Contemporary Narrative and the Embedded Abolition Story

Writing a historical novel requires research into the available history that underpins the event or events being fictionalised. As demonstrated above this is rendered complex when one considers that in recent years, researchers have become increasingly interested in how history is written, who writes it and the biases inherent in its construction. In other words, the closeness of history to fiction has been emphasised. In fiction the latter aspects have been addressed through multiperspectivity, popular in mysteries or crime novels, and in major

works such as Salman Rushdie's *Satanic Verses* (1988) and Orhan Pamuk's *Snow* (2002) (Hartner 1). My novel, *The Buried Chameleon*, encompasses two eras in South African history: the 18th century during slavery and post-1994 following the elimination of apartheid. The early 1900s, a period where former slaves were still alive and their experience post-abolition may be ascertained, is included as a link between the two main periods considered.

According to Marcus Hartner's piece in *The Living Handbook of Narratology*, multiperspectivity, "frequently serves to portray the relative character of personal viewpoints" (1). He elaborates, it "seems to be particularly suited to stage perceptual relativism and scepticism towards knowledge and reality" (4). This "questioning of truth and knowledge" (5) is a useful tool in the South African context, where history was one-sided. In my novel I tried to create a broader canvas and a more varied picture to destabilise embedded perceptions about our history. It therefore has dual protagonists, Amberike and Katy, and multiple points of view, three in the historical story and one in the contemporary story. On top of that the 19th century abolition story is embedded as a frame story in the contemporary story. The parallel love stories are written in alternate segments all of which use omniscient third person narration; however, there are multiple focalisers. The three focalisers in the slave story are Amberike and her suitors Egbert and the Cook. Katy is the only focaliser of the contemporary story and she tells the story of the 19th century heroine, Kaatje, as she adjusts to freedom after being trapped in slavery.

The contemporary story is about Katy, and her husband, Norman, set in modern Cape Town. Katy is named after the historical Katie Jacobs, whose slave narrative is one of the few that has been transmitted. Katy is a middle-aged university academic. Strong-willed and independent she is in a troubled relationship with her older Afrikaner husband, Norman, who tends to be domineering. The plot centres on Katy and Norman's relationship during the lockdown of Covid 19. Her husband, a history teacher, has been retrenched. This causes

tension in the relationship since he feels emasculated and frustrated at home. Her three-year-old daughter, Amy, in addition, is diagnosed with thalassaemia; an inherited blood disorder where the red blood cells are fewer, smaller or deformed, which affects the oxygen-carrying protein, haemoglobin. Symptoms are fatigue, weakness, pale or yellowish skin, slow growth and, in the severe form, deformities of the facial bones.

Worried that she may be the genetic cause of Amy's suffering, Katy explores her past. She discovers Katie Jacobs in her lineage and that Amberike may be her ancestor. She starts researching Norman's ancestry as well, after Amy's physician reveals that the disease is inherited from both parents. Katie meets a historian, Dean, who researches early Cape slavery. He tells her about the slave play. Katy does her own research and discovers that the play does exist. Dean helps her find out more about the play script she has discovered. The play, which was performed during slavery, is a link tying the dual narratives together. Furthermore, as in Boccaccio's *Decameron*, Katy and Norman tell stories during the Covid pandemic to pass the time. Katy narrates Kaatje's story after the latter was set free from slavery. Hers is an invented history like Brink's in *An Instant in the Wind*.

In my research for the contemporary story, I focussed on information about language, Norman's Afrikaner heritage, Amy's genetic disease, the play, transgenerational trauma, as well as personal and anecdotal experience of the Covid 19 pandemic. As I do not reside in Cape Town I was not familiar with Afrikaaps, an old language spoken at the Cape, and fully developed by the 1500s. According to Adam Haupt, in his article "The First-ever Dictionary of South Africa's Kaaps Language has Launched: Why it Matters", Afrikaaps came before the South African version of Dutch, Kaaps-Hollands, which formed the basis of the official Afrikaans that reigned as a first language during apartheid. The descendants of slaves have always shared this language and, indeed, played an important role in its construction as demonstrated by Haupt. My novel stimulated interest in Afrikaaps, which has its roots in

slavery, and my reading is ongoing as I follow the efforts to have Afrikaans recognised with a documentary film of the same name (2010) and a dictionary, *The Trilingual Dictionary of Kaaps*. An early prototype of Afrikaans can also be found in Arabic scripts as shown by Achmat Davids in his MA thesis *The Afrikaans of the Cape Muslims 1815-1915* (1991). The setting of modern Cape Town would therefore not be complete without its large group of Muslims. Islam has successfully travelled from slavery to the modern era (Shell, 1992: 52) with many of its adherents claiming ancestors from the East, according to Gabeba Baderoon in “The African Oceans—Tracing the Sea as Memory of Slavery in South African Literature and Culture”. Although I was not going to use this information in my already over-burdened contemporary story, I still wanted to examine the modern version of Islam in South Africa. My neighbour, a retired lecturer at a teachers’ college, provided my education. Booklets and pamphlets found their way into my home. The discussions we had are a treasured memory because he later succumbed to Covid.

In order to build the character of Norman I read scholarly papers on heritage and nationalism, and Afrikaans novels, specifically the “plaasroman” or farm novel, which J.M Coetzee in “Farm Novel and ‘Plaasroman’ in South Africa” described as an Afrikaans novel that for two decades of the 20th century “concerned itself almost exclusively with the farm and platteland (rural) society” (1). Aletta Du Plessis in her thesis ““Between the Walls of Jasper, in the Streets of Gold”: The Deconstruction of Afrikaner Mythology in Marlene Van Niekerk’s *Triomf*” suggests that “the *plaasroman* of the 1920s and 1930s” was where the “Afrikaner’s national identity was constituted and deconstructed in literature.”(3). Coming from an Afrikaans background I revisited old books I used to read, like Mikro’s *Die Toiings*, and then went on to newer writers such as Dalene Matthee, Eben Venter, Breyten Breytenbach and André Brink. Rereading Mikro from an adult perspective, I did not find it as enjoyable as I did when in high school. But with Brink and Venter, Mikro put me in touch

with a life view derived from Afrikaans books which I grew up with and could access. Meine's character as a slave master in my historical narrative –cruel, violent, no empathy– is echoed by the attitude of Norman's father and brothers in the contemporary story. The depiction of the father figure as harsh, authoritarian, a law unto himself, can be found in the stories of André Brink. Stuart Cloete in *Turning Wheels* also creates a father figure with a grandiose complex who tramples everything in his path.

My choice of thalassaemia as a genetic disease for Amy, Normans and Katy's child, is based on research I conducted into genetic diseases in South Africa. Thalassaemia requires a recessive gene from two parents. I therefore used thalassaemia because I wanted to bring in the slave heritage of Norman as well. Researching the play that Norman's wife, Katy, is obsessed with did not yield much. This idea was based on an entry on the Iziko Slave Lodge Museum website of a slave play about the ravishing of a woman, written and performed by slaves during the smallpox epidemic in 1713 to lift the morale of the slaves. In my novel Katy discovers a fragment of the play which I constructed to fit the contours of my narrative.

Gqola, as quoted earlier, avers that “forgetting and unremembering are inscribed by power hierarchies, unremembering is a calculated act of exclusion and erasure” (8). So, although slavery is a traumatic history in South Africa, it was largely buried. It was “unremembered”, even by some of the descendants of slaves. Historical trauma was therefore not given the attention it deserved, yet it affected multiple generations. The idea of historical trauma originated in a study by Kellerman, *Psychopathology in Children of Holocaust Survivors: A Review*, about the suffering of the children of Holocaust survivors (Referred to by Mohatt M.V et al). Even though the generations who are affected by historical trauma were not present at the initial traumatic event, they presented with transgenerational, intergenerational, multi-generational and cross-generational trauma. Focussing on the overall health of the affected, such as colonised indigenous groups, Mohatt et al argue that historical

trauma is connected to the present in a public narrative among a specific group or culture, and that shared or public narrative impacts on their individual and communal health. They suggest that “[a] common narrative recounts how one has been irrevocably injured or tainted by adversity” (Degloma 72(2):105–122). Among South African slave descendants, one of the ways in which historical trauma manifested was in shame among coloured people. Zoë Wicomb addresses this in her essay “Shame and Identity: The Case of the Coloured in South Africa” and her novel, *Playing in the Light* (2006) about a woman who discovers that she is the daughter of “play-whites” who forsook their heritage to access a better life during apartheid. The aftermath of slavery’s effects, the “contamination narrative” if you will, is being addressed post-1994 by scholars like Wicomb, Mohamed Adhikari, Minesh Dass and others.

In my novel I attempt to deal with historical trauma in various ways, by Katy being ashamed of her woolly hair and of Norman seeing her straightening it, by Katy tolerating a jibe from Norman’s sister that coloureds should endure the burden of shame as it is their lot, and by Katy mimicking the extreme independence of the Cook as a sign of generational trauma. In the historical narrative the Cook’s desire to escape becomes a matter of survival. He cannot bear the rigours of slavery, and the only option is to escape, regardless of the consequences. His frequent attempts to run away were an example of a mental condition diagnosed in 1851 by Samuel A. Cartwright as Drapetomania. The Cook suffers from this condition hence his many escapes. As Drapetomania was only diagnosed in the 1800s, I could not really use the word in my novel. Another “symptom”, which I invented, is that the Cook develops the habit of not getting close to anyone, of being extremely independent. In spite of this he falls for Amberike and mentors the young boy Mankbeen, which he later regrets. This fierce independence is reflected centuries later in the contemporary story in the character of Katy. I was gratified to see Mohatt et al mention Post Traumatic Slavery

Syndrome, a concept derived from the work of JD Leary, *Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome: America's Legacy of Enduring Injury and Healing*. They suggest further that historical trauma has three elements: firstly, an initial trauma, secondly, the trauma is a shared experience among a group of people, and thirdly, the trauma spans multiple generations into the present, where it can be picked up in psychological and biological health issues. I try to place shame in the framework of historical trauma like Wicomb, to interrogate and shift the “public narrative” away from a focus on the embarrassment of being subjected to slavery, to the cause of it, that is, the wilful acts of the slave master. In my view, the Afrikaners have successfully managed to negotiate a path away from historical trauma by foregrounding stories that sustain “group resilience in narratives of historical trauma” (Mohatt et al 7). For example, Afrikaner literature abounds with heroes and heroines in stories of valour, such as Rageltjie de Beer who gave her life to save her brother. That leads to the question, where are the heroes and heroines of slave descendants? They are hidden in the dusty layers of history, “unremembered”. Mohatt et al suggest that “reconstruction of a strong cultural identity following collective trauma, such as war or disaster [or slavery], is critical in subsequent individual and community well-being.” (8).

As mentioned, the contemporary plot centres on Katy and Norman during the lockdown of Covid 19. The Covid 19 pandemic started with the first case in South Africa reported on 5 March 2020 by the National Institute for Communicable Diseases. The first Covid patient, a male, was part of a group of South Africans who had travelled to Italy, and returned home on 1 March. World-wide a renewed focus on pandemics in history occurred. Pandemics have been with us for centuries, and smallpox has been one of the earliest. It was found on Egyptian mummies and the Centres for Disease Control (CDC) state that smallpox started in China in the 4th Century CE. Smallpox, which the CDC labels as deadly, in the past killed one in three people. The smallpox epidemic of 1713 in the Cape has not yet been

explored in fiction. My reasons for choosing this period are two-fold: the chance to write about an epidemic or pandemic appealed to the health professional in me, and from a writer's perspective, it is an important historical event that should not go unexplored. I had chosen the first smallpox epidemic of 1713 at the Cape of Good Hope as a focus prior to Covid, and, when Covid started and I experienced a lockdown, it gave me insight on pandemics which I otherwise would not have had. Isolation for the Covid 19 virus started in my second year of study. During lockdown a few of my relatives became ill, some died, and my son, who lived alone in Pretoria, had a breakdown. The count for deaths from Covid19 worldwide stands at over six million. The constant guarding against infection, the threat of illness and death bring a profound change in psychological health. I used this experience to inform the writing of the contemporary narrative. Being isolated highlights the differences in Norman's and Katy's upbringing, their past, and ways of coping. In the midst of surviving a pandemic Norman's values change; he reverts to his heritage of dominance. This causes conflict which the couple, however, manage to resolve. The foregrounding of disease in the novel, smallpox, thalassaemia, and Covid depicts a society that has not yet healed. It is the lockdown dimension of the contemporary narrative which allows the abolition story to be embedded in the novel.

The frame story is based on the interview of Katie Jacobs. My character Kaatje enacts the abolition story, where I picked up certain incidents in Katie's life and embroidered them into fragments of a narrative. This device was inspired by Boccaccio's *Decameron* which also deals with a pandemic, the bubonic plague (Black Death) of 1348. The gentlemen and noblewomen in the *Decameron* gather in a rural area to isolate and tell each other stories to pass the time. Similarly, Katy and Norman tell each other stories to while away the time during lockdown. In my research I came across the story of Katie Jacobs. After reading her narrative I could not let it go. First, I tried to incorporate it as a third storyline, but that proved

to be too unwieldy. Eventually it became an embedded story dealing with the period just after abolition in 1838, where it acts as a bridge between slavery and the contemporary era. Katie's interview was first published by the *African Political Organisation* (APO) newspaper. The APO was a political organisation that represented coloured people in the early 1900s. I used Katie's name and life story in my novel but I changed her name to Kaatje to distinguish her from her fictional descendant Katy, the protagonist of the contemporary story. Initially I stayed close to the original story but then there was a need to address certain themes and this third story became my own creation, a vehicle to address the relationship of Norman and Katy. The embedded story presents them with the opportunity to talk about cultural differences and hitherto forbidden topics, such as race. It also acts as a bridge to reignite their romance.



Why Romance?

I came across an article in *Writer's Digest* titled "For the Love of Love: 8 Benefits of Reading and Writing Romance Novels," that attempts to answer this question. The writer, Angela James, lists the eight benefits as: hope, representation, knowledge, friendship, support, inspiration, empowerment and escape; but for the purpose of this discussion I will use only four: hope, representation, knowledge and empowerment. Kevin L Rand and Jennifer S. Cheavens in their chapter, "Hope Theory", in *The Oxford Handbook of Positive Psychology*, review "Snyder's (1994c) cognitive model of hope, including goals, pathways and agency" (323). They define hope as "the perceived ability to produce pathways to achieve desired goals and to motivate oneself to use those pathways" (ibid). In romance the goal is to be with the beloved. The pathways are the obstacles they overcome during their journey to get to that point, and agency is the ability or right to love. Rand and Cheavens

further define emotions, such as love, as “sequelae of goal-directed thoughts and actions” which function as feedback as to the success or failure of a “goal pursuit” (ibid). Pursuit is a serendipitous word here, as most lovers pursue the object of their affection with hope burning in their hearts. My dual narrative centres on the relationship of romantic love between master and slave, and slave and slave in the historical tale, and on interracial love in the contemporary story. The focus is on eros, which differs from other kinds of love (philia, storge, and agape) because it is “associated with intense sexual attraction” (de Sousa 3).

A two-pronged approach will suffice in my representation of love: firstly, how the romance unfolds on the page, that is, the set-up, build and denouement, and secondly, the distinctiveness of the characters who fall in love. The latter is important in the context of the history of South Africa. Historically marginalised people, such as the descendants of slaves, are empowered by seeing themselves positively represented in fiction. James studies feedback from Twitter where black women, the disabled and gay people write to say how it helped them to see themselves depicted in romance as worthy to be loved. Being loved is a primal drive. In Maslow’s hierarchy of human needs, love and belonging come after the basic physiological needs and safety (Commons, Wikimedia). Yet traces of love can be found in these basic needs as well. Physiological needs are listed as breathing, food, water, sex, sleep, homeostasis and excretion. Sex is pretty much the “goal pursuit” of love and intense attraction in romance. Safety is divided into security of body, employment, resources, morality, family, health and property. Family is usually the result of the “happy ending”, the lovers united in marriage, or some other form of union present in most romances. In my project I eschewed the happy ending for the sake of the realistic representation of the condition of slavery. Egbert really loves Amberike but their relationship never comes to fruition. I can see though why many writers of romance with a setting in the era of slavery, like Benadé, Case and others, use a happy ending. It functions to inject hope, to lift the dark

and gloomy subject of slavery, giving it a light touch, which the reader may experience as relief. I am cognisant of the “limits, of ... engagement with the complexities of representing slave subjectivity in the wake of its ... occlusion from historical and official data” (ii) which Maria Geustyn examines in “Representations of Slave Subjectivity in Post-Apartheid Fiction: The Side-ways Glance”. Literary representations such as *The Slave Book* that rely on a blend of romance and history, and *Unconfessed*'s use of rememory, are important Geustyn avers, but she highlights the difficulties inherent in bridging a gap of more than three centuries of silence in South Africa.

In the *Writer's Digest* article, some of James's Twitter readers applaud historical romance because they can gain knowledge by learning about history. However, this is a fraught topic as many critics complain about the accuracy of history details in historical romance and historical fiction. Some have no patience for it such as Douglas Kemp in “Alternative Truth: Historical Fiction: Does it Matter that We Get the Facts Right?” who says about John Boyne's novel *The Heart's Invisible Furies*, “a large number of fairly clear historical anachronisms and errors ... devalued the pleasure of reading”, while James Forrester's article in the *Guardian*, “The Lying Art of Historical Fiction”, argues that “[i]n creating good historical fiction, it is essential to tell lies”, citing many successful books such as Ken Folett's *The Pillars of the Earth*, James Clavell's *Shogun* and even Shakespeare who “knowingly conflated historical characters in historical plays” (n. pag). My view is somewhere in the middle. It is that if a historical event such as South African slavery prompts any reader to research it afterwards in respected sources, that is enough, my work is done. I cannot hope for more. I have researched my novel as best I could but I cringe at the thought of someone finding a glaringly obvious mistake which I have overlooked, because acquiring knowledge in historical romance or historical fiction is only as good as the author's research.

According to James, furthermore, romance can empower by giving anyone of a different race, sexuality, gender or economic status, representation and acceptance. It can give a voice to the voiceless. The very structure of a romance is conducive to empowering different voices. Normally it has two protagonists, and therefore two points-of-view, usually a man and a woman, but not always. They meet; they struggle to come together, and are united at the end. In the process of falling in love they are open to changing their outlook or behaviour to please the beloved. The voice given to women or the oppressed in a romance is therefore important.

In a romance the heroine can be a source of empowerment. In 18th century marriage laws a woman ceased to exist as a legal entity once she got married. Instead she was subsumed under the authority and patronage of her husband. As a result earlier romances, such as the epistolary novel *Pamela; or, Virtue Rewarded* (1740) by Samuel Richardson, portrayed a low-born and vulnerable 15 year-old servant girl trying to thwart the predatory seduction of her master. Pamela Regis in *Natural History of the Romance Novel* starts off by calling romance the most popular but least respected literary genre (xi). She assigns this fact to a misunderstanding of the genre and the heroine (xii). Addressing the criticism that romance novels enslave the reader she asserts that these novels are “to the contrary, about women’s freedom.” (xiii). Women are in the majority when it comes to identifying the readers of romance novels. The “freedom” Regis refers to may coincide with reading as escapism, another benefit James lists in her eight benefits of romance. The feminist potential of romance has attracted much debate, and Jane Austen’s novels, known for their irony, have been credited with advancing the cause of feminism in her depiction of assertive female characters like Elizabeth Bennet in *Pride and Prejudice*. Contributing a different view Brianna Bicho in “Violent Love: Jane Austen and Eighteenth-Century Marriage Laws” examines Austen’s depiction of “primary proposals” where the suitor, for example, Mr Elton in *Emma*,

uses violent language and actions to propose (10). Although Emma is not interested, Elton refuses to be stopped. Bicho sees this as Austen subtly questioning 18th century mores. Austen's resistance, Bicho avers, is in having pairs of proposals, the first reflects the status quo or attitudes at the time and the second proposal is more progressive. For example, in the second proposal of Mr. Knightley he shows a willingness to compromise by considering Emma's duty to her father.

However, as seen in *Pamela*, the nature of love in patriarchal societies has been shaped in such a way that it sometimes has negative consequences for the well-being of women. Writing in *Feminist Studies*, Brian Luke argues that hunting by men in North America exhibits an "erotic nature" similar to "the predatory heterosexuality prominent in Western patriarchal society" (628). He suggests that in describing hunting the vocabulary of love proliferates, quoting the eco-feminist Andrée Collard: "A romantic removes the 'love object' from the reality of its being to the secret places of his mind and establishes a relationship of power/domination over it. There can be no reciprocity, no element of mutuality between the romantic lover and the 'love object'. The quest (chase) is all that matters as it provides a heightened sense of being through the exercise of power" (48). Without the title *Rape of the Wild: Man's Violence against Animals and the Earth* one would think that Collard is describing a romantic relationship between humans. There is a "romantic lover", a "love object" and a quest, three elements that describe the majority of romantic fiction. In most romances the quest ends with the fulfilment of a union between the lovers, but in hunting it ends with death. Collard suggests "a heightened sense of being through the exercise of power", the power the romantic lover/hunter feels when stalking his or her prey.

Power is central to the relationship between master and slave in my novel. Although Egbert loves Amberike, when caught giving her a shawl he blames her for taking it, and

instead gives her beads to fit her station, a cruel act. This is a fictitious scenario because in South Africa there is a dearth of factual stories about slave women. Their voices are lost. Jessica Murray in *Gender and Violence in Cape Slave Narratives and Post-Narratives* (2010), based on criminal court cases of the 18th century Cape colony, puts it succinctly “The nature of available texts necessitates a reading strategy that teases out information from the gaps and silences in the narratives in an attempt to reveal the variegated texture of the lived experience of slave women in eighteenth-century South Africa” (3). However, as in many slave romances, some of these relationships moved from a hierarchy of master and slave towards a stable practical liaison that culminated in marriage (Krotoa), providing the progenitors of many South Africans.

The conclusion one has to make is that, contrary to the warm love and happy ending in conventional romance there is a darker side that needs to be explored. The scale of love and hate seems to fluctuate in most relationships. If it dips towards love, we find the blissful outpourings that are abundant in literature, such as Shakespeare’s sonnet 116 “Let me not to the marriage of two minds admit impediments”. However, if the scale dips towards hate, we find violent expressions of love. Depending on the author and the circumstances then, the voice given to women and the oppressed in romances could be used to empower. I want to go a step further and, by referring to Sommer’s theory of foundational fiction, suggest that empowerment in romance can be used for political reasons as well.

Romance as Foundational Fiction

Personal relationships can be linked to national discourses, as Doris Sommer suggests in her ground-breaking book, *Foundational Fictions: The National Romances of Latin America* (1991). By focusing on 19th -century Latin-American fiction, Sommer examines the link

between eros and politics, affirming the “inextricability of politics from fiction in the history of nation-building” (130-131). Sommer argues that the link between eros and polis becomes evident when one reads Latin American romance novels, not separately, but together, as a corpus of literature embodying a national goal, that of uniting the nation. Nineteenth century Latin-American romances, some of which were written by governmental figures, were political and address “the passionate investment I/we have in nationalism” (49). By performing the function of constructing and consolidating a new democracy in domestic novels, the romances advocated a coming together that is productive, linking passion with patriotism. Post-liberation, the new nations in Latin America were encouraged to enter into a “socially convenient” marriage and multiply. “Classic examples” of the Latin American literature Sommer studied were “stories of star-crossed lovers” whose “passion for conjugal and sexual union spills over to a sentimental readership in a move that hopes to win partisan minds along with hearts” (129-130). The purpose of the romances was to aid nation-building, “to bind together heterodox constituencies: competing regions, economic interests, races and religions” (233). Homi K. Bhabha, who edited *Nation and Narration* (1990) in which there is a contribution by Sommer “Irresistible Romance: The Foundational Fictions of Latin America” (p.71), describes her work in his introduction as an “exploration of the language of love and productive sexuality that allegorizes and organizes the early historical narratives of Latin America” (5). These early romances were disavowed by later novelists in the “post-Borgesian Boom” of postmodernism (Sommer 183). Furthermore, the nationalist romances laid the ground work for the preferred male protagonist: such a novel “valorizes virility as a self-evidently male attribute while it tries to distinguish between good and bad men.” (341). Sommer’s concept provides a valuable tool with which to examine the foundational fictions of different countries, and to study the ensuing results to gain an understanding of their national psyche.

For example, the discourse on foundational fiction offers insight into South African literature. During apartheid, a concerted effort to produce a matching literature demonstrated “the inextricability of politics from fiction in the history of nation-building” (130-131). Du Plessis, in her thesis which examines Marlene Van Niekerk’s *Triomf*, lists the building blocks of the “Afrikaner mythology” used to create a nation: the “Great Trek, the family, the patriarch, the matriarch, the future of a white Afrikaner nation and the binding character of Afrikaans as white national language” (3). To serve that nation, a corresponding body of fiction was curated. Sommer, in discussing context, explains this observable fact: “The writers were encouraged both by the need to fill in a history that would help to establish the legitimacy of the emerging nation and by the opportunity to direct that history toward a future ideal” (152-153). In South Africa this constrictive atmosphere generated poetry and fiction from authors who rebelled against the status quo, such as Athol Fugard and André Brink. The latter wrote novels of cross-racial love which could be interpreted as an attempt at “national conciliation through lovers’ yearnings across traditional racial and regional barriers”, to use Sommer’s formulation (51). The prevailing idea of nationhood during apartheid did not include diversity. "The fact of the matter is that nationalism thinks in terms of historical destinies, while racism dreams of eternal contaminations, transmitted from the origins of time through an endless sequence of loathsome copulations: outside history" (Anderson 136 qtd. in Sommer 535-536).

I have already discussed my local intertexts but would like to highlight here that in combining eros and polis they are all examples of foundational fictions. With a focus on religion, cross-racial love, culture and economic status they aim “to bind together heterodox constituencies: competing regions, economic interests, races and religions” (Sommer 233). These books seem to speak to ideas about a more egalitarian South African nation.

Cloete's novel, *Turning Wheels*, features cross-racial love which was forbidden at the time when the Afrikaner nation was being constructed. He is critical of their slanted view of religion, foregrounding its dangers by having his protagonist, Hendrik, kill his son. Fredrick Hale in "Defending the Great Trek Myth" avers that the novel "engendered one of the most bitter controversies in South African literary history" (102) because it painted the Voortrekkers in an unfavourable light. *Turning Wheels* could be considered foundational fiction for the following reasons: it was written at the beginning of the construction of Afrikaner identity and could have acted as a counterpoint to many of its excesses. Secondly, it tried to warn of the dangers of a religion based on a "chosen people" which relegates others to purgatory. And third, more visionary than most, Cloete could see that objective truth would be lost, as it always is at the prospect of unrestrained power and acquisition. He was ahead of his time. Although his book failed to prevent the imposition of apartheid, it had a vision beyond the draconian beast to a new era. Born in Paris of a South African father and a Scottish mother, Cloete drew on the writings of his great-grandfather Jacob Cloete, who arrived in 1652 with Jan van Riebeeck, to write *Turning Wheels*, his first novel. In my view some Afrikaners who are temporarily removed from the lifestyle, teaching and constraints of building the *volk en vaderland* (nation and fatherland), on their return home from a sojourn in a foreign country appear to have acquired the clarity of vision to engender a more critical perspective of apartheid and mythical constructions such as the Great Trek.

While Cloete encountered Afrikaner nationalism at its nexus André Brink encountered it at its worst. Writing in the 1980s in the midst of apartheid, he published a novel about forbidden cross-racial love in *An Instant in the Wind*. And just like Cloete's *Turning Wheels*, Brink's novel was also banned. Brink went to Sorbonne University (1959-1961) in France and on his return he became associated with 'Die Sestigers', a literary movement with Ingrid Jonker, Etienne Leroux and Breyten Breytenbach. They used their

home language, Afrikaans, to speak against apartheid policies and offered a glimpse of the possibilities of a new nation. In subsequent novels Brink returned to “stories of star-crossed lovers” depicting cross-racial love and succeeded in building a following, “to win partisan minds along with hearts” (Sommer 129-130). In fact, eros became a consistent theme in Brink’s novels and his oeuvre fits into the concept of foundational fiction by marrying eros to politics. Patrik Hall in “Nationalism and Historicity” suggests that “the nation is shown to be a historical subject, [a]s such, it is constructed and constantly reconstructed by discursive practices of power and knowledge” (5). Brink and his contemporaries in *Die Sestigers* “reconstructed” an alternative history during apartheid with the aim of constructing a more progressive nation. By revisiting slavery, which had been presented as mild, Brink’s historical novels played a role in correcting the history that had served the creation of the apartheid state. Arnaldo Cruz-Malavé defines antifoundational fiction as an “audacious and unrelenting unveiling—not resolving—of the entangled territory of trauma of a racialized colonial corporal history” (4). Cloete and Brink, when viewed through the prism of their status of writing in the midst of a restrictive Afrikaner nationalism, straddle both foundational and anti-foundational fiction. They achieve the latter in their “unrelenting unveiling” of the Afrikaner people, warts and all, but they also manage to speak to the contemporary South Africa as foundational fiction.

Post 1994 the following intertexts were created free from censorship. In an effort to build a new nation post-liberation, Sleigh’s novel, *Islands*, explodes the empty land theory that the settlers found no one here on their arrival, acknowledging that they found the Khoi, and depicts Jan van Riebeeck as ruthless and cruel. Like Brink, Sleigh’s is a carefully orchestrated resistance with an eye on a new inclusive nationalism. The publication of the novel coincides with what Gqola calls the period of a “flourishing exploration” of slavery in the new South Africa, which builds on a more open view of history in an effort to create a

new nation. This point demonstrates Sommer's view of "the inextricability of politics from fiction in the history of nation-building" (130-131). Writing in this new era and revealing his thinking about his choice of title, Sleigh said in an interview with Tycho Maas in 2018:

"Mense is eilande in die see van die geskiedenis. Daar is nie bloot een perspektief of een geskiedenis nie" (Voertaal n.p). (People are islands in the sea of history. There isn't just one perspective or one history). The symbol of the island was pertinent during apartheid where each nation or sub-group was encouraged to develop along "separate but equal" lines.

Sleigh's theory of islands therefore endorses and at the same time complicates a view of our contemporary society.

Jacobs places her "star-crossed lovers" in the setting of slavery at the Cape of Good Hope. Her book explores the relationship between Harman and Somiela, showing the triumph of love between them, even though they represent the unequal economic and social status of master and slave. *The Slave Book* also highlights the growth of Islam which binds the lovers together when Harman takes on Somiela's faith. This fusion of religion, Christianity and Islam, as well as of different races, depicts a vision of an ideal nation more tolerant of race and religion. In contrast Christiansë's *Unconfessed* appears to fall into the ambit of anti-foundational fiction as she explores the abuse of slavery. It strikes me that, at the end of an oppressive era like apartheid, it may be necessary to create fiction that functions, to repeat the comment cited earlier, as an "audacious and unrelenting unveiling—not resolving—of the entangled territory of trauma of a racialized colonial corporal history" (Malavé 4).

Unconfessed does this very well, it is an uncompromising exploration of the trauma of slavery, unflinchingly setting its gaze on exposing the wound it generated, before the task of nation-building can take place. Nicola Cloete, mentioned earlier, memorably said that *Unconfessed* refuses to "support the comfortable imaginings of slavery" (70). In my novel I

tried to do the latter, while at the same time building on Jacobs's vision of a future nation of unity and tolerance.

In creating cross-racial love I follow Brink in “national conciliation through lovers’ yearnings across traditional racial and regional barriers” (Sommer 51). *The Buried Chameleon* shows the relationship between Amberike and Egbert in the historical plot, and Katie and Norman in the contemporary one, as an attempt to develop nation-building across different cultures. Jerome de Groot provides an overview of the historical novel: “[a] historical novel might consider the articulation of nationhood via the past, highlight the subjectivism of narratives of History, underline the importance of the realist mode of writing to notions of authenticity, question writing itself, and attack historiographical convention” (*The Historical Novel: 2*). My historical narrative features historical romance which according to de Groot can be an “articulation of nationhood via the past” (ibid). This view coincides with Sommer’s theory of foundational fiction. *The Buried Chameleon* also highlights the subjectivity or interiority of slaves, and is written in a realistic mode which can only aim to approximate authenticity, given the lack of primary sources.

I manage to reproduce Sommer’s preferred male protagonist, that “valorises virility as a self-evidently male attribute” (341) in the character of Egbert. Where my novel may fail as foundational fiction is in trying to “unveil” a violent history while at the same time, like Brink, keeping an eye on the reader, trying not to alienate him or her – an arduous dance fraught with potential failure. However, the importance of the reader cannot be underestimated. By imagining themselves into the “small world” the writer creates, the reader becomes “active, as a hearer and a witness” (Morley 4). If the story resonates with them in some way or other, they will “lean towards that world” (2) and ponder difficult, even unpalatable truths.

Reflections on Writing *The Buried Chameleon*

“Rememorying” – as discussed, is a word used by Morrison and developed by Gqola to describe what marginalised writers do to retrieve a traumatic and forgotten past. The etymology of memory is from Old French *memorie* and Latin *memoria* for *memor*, “mindful, remembering”. When one studies the word and takes it apart into smaller pieces it yields interesting insights. The word *re* (about) and *me* (a personal pronoun) brings it into the realm of the personal. It describes me remembering a memory as it relates to my history. However, it is more than the sum of its parts. Adding “-ing” to rememory changes it into a noun as well as a verb, in active voice. Therefore, just as Morrison used rememorying as a process to access America’s forgotten slave past in *Beloved*, so have I aimed to use it in *The Buried Chameleon*. This is my personal journey, a “mindful remembering”, of delving into the past to access a history that has been submerged during apartheid. I aim to analyse and evaluate my writing process in the creation of this work by discussing the challenges of writing this novel – the theoretical challenges: plot, point of view, narration, characterisation, dialogue, dual timelines, as well as the practical challenges such as Covid 19 and writer’s block. Following the brief of Debra Adelaide and Sarah Attfield in *Creative Writing Practice: Reflections on Form and Process* I shall attempt to “combine the academic and the personal, to find ways to marry the scholarly with the creative, and to do so according to [my] subject and personal inclination” (5). Any journey starts from a place considered home and I’d like to remap my “place” in the world, the place where I feel I belong, the place that’s lodged deep in my psyche, my soul place.

The idea of remapping is based on an online writing workshop by Lydia Yuknavitch, “Ontologies: Writing your Way into the World”, which advocated this exercise as a first step. My response was to think about my place not only in the world at large but also in literature, as I am required to do here. South Africa is my birth place yet I feel conflicted about it. Mine

is a forgotten history, too embarrassing to discuss, too guilt-inducing for the coloniser. South Africa is the most unequal country in the world. The World Bank recently reported on its website that, almost thirty years after apartheid, 10% of the population owns 80% of the wealth. Its citizens are riven in rage; rage of the original landowner and rage of the current; rage of lost privilege and past injustice. Anger leaps like flames, reflecting the cinders of frequently burnt buildings. I feel a deep attachment to my land and, at the same time, an alienation. The places in it for me are the farm of my grandfather which was appropriated in Mafeking, before that the farm of my great-grandfather in Klerksdorp where gold was discovered and they were evicted. Family lost when racial classifications got underway and some had to move to a different area. My silent history of a white shopkeeper and a black girl. My birth place, a small village outside Johannesburg. Aside from physical spaces, there is the inherited place of being oppressed which has wrought an upbringing of contradictions: go to church on Sundays but stand on the throat of your worker, read the bible every evening but choose only the verses that legitimise what you are doing. Love thy neighbour but take his land. Yes, I feel a deep attachment to my land, at the same time a profound alienation.

Adrian May in *Tradition in Creative Writing: Finding Inspiration Through your Roots* states that our traditions can “be an access point to a huge amount of wealth that we already possess” (2). Citing Alex Haley’s *Roots*, May suggests that using this “hidden wealth” can help the novice to become a “roots writer”. Where would my roots be? To borrow Tanure Ojaide’s concept of the collective and the individual, I would have to start with my use of language. I write in English so automatically I tap into the English literary tradition which has a vast scope. However, being located in South Africa as part of the so-called coloured group that is not the sum total of my influence and experience. Moreover, my South African roots are complicated by a fractured literature represented by two streams, Afrikaans literature and South African English literature, and nestled in each stream,

mimicking apartheid, the output of white writers forms the main focus, while the writings of black authors are scattered between the two languages and indigenous tongues. Narrowing down then, my roots are South African English literature which has one foot firmly in Western literature and the other tentatively on African soil. Within that literature May's list of history and natural history, oral literature, folklore, folksongs (including protest songs), myth, religion, community, the self and family trees finds expression. May suggests that "[t]radition can ... be seen in cross-cultural respectfulness for time-honoured aspects of all arts, a kind of universal language, where locality is universal, where we have all things in common" (vii). Citing "modern traditionalists" in English literature his overall view is that traditions can and should be reinvented. Currently in South Africa there is a concerted effort to decolonise literature. Using May's model, another path may be open to build a home-grown literature – by concentrating on oral forms, folklore and myths, communities, history, and the self and family trees. The growth and success of performance poetry, which some critics disparage as not really being poetry, is an encouraging example. I guess the groundwork for a new, inclusive South African literature is being consolidated in the "flourishing" of new writing about slavery. For me it has functioned as a first step of writing into my authentic self.

From the place of belonging and not belonging, a tentative state that represents standing on tiptoe on the edge of a cliff, I started out my writing career in primary school writing "songs". The words were there, but the melody never came. Now, looking back, my early fumbblings were an attempt to write poetry in English, my second language. But, being marginally familiar with the high-flown language of the classic poets taught at school, and enthusiastically familiar with the English pop songs on Springbok radio's hit parade, my writings were "songs". The radio/display case blared at full blast until the battery gave out, and had to be warmed to coax more life out of it. I read voraciously, books from the school

library in Afrikaans and my father's subscription to *Readers Digest* in English. I still read, and do not limit myself to any genre or topic. I concur with Francine Prose in *Reading like a Writer: A Guide for People Who Love Books and for Those Who Want to Write Them* when she suggests that “[l]ike most—maybe all—writers, I learned to write by writing and, by example, by reading books” (2). I have read John Steinbeck's novella *Of Mice and Men* numerous times and consider it a lesson on how to paint a great story on a small canvas.

To find my niche as a writer I experimented with various forms. As a student nurse I wrote poetry from time to time which I discarded, and, after marriage, I attended writing workshops at COSAW, the Congress of South Africa Writers, where I learned to write short stories in English, the dominant language in that political and artistic context. I managed to publish one short story ‘The White Dove’, in an anthology *Soho Square V* (1992) published by Bloomsbury with the help of Nadine Gordimer who ran a series of writing classes at COSAW until she won the Nobel Prize. From Gordimer I learnt that it was permissible to write about my world, something I doubted because all my experiences with storytelling had been from European literature outside my ken. Since then I have published poetry and stories, worked as editor on a primary health care magazine for nurses and wrote a few training novels. Then I ventured into scriptwriting, working on *Takalani Sesame* (television and radio) for a few years. Thereafter I had the opportunity to do the MA Creative Writing course at Rhodes University, resulting in a collection of stories.

Takalani Sesame, a local off-shoot of *Sesame Street*, prepared me for the flash fiction and short stories I wrote at Rhodes. The very short stories of the children's programme (two and a half pages in scriptwriting format) in simple language to appeal to children in the foundational phase taught me two things, to write in a concise way, trimming the fat, and to write to a goal from a curriculum, for example teaching in and out, up and down and so on. It was great fun looking for innovative ways to teach these concepts. I carried this mind-set

(and playfulness) over into the writing of my novel. Familiar with the set-up, build and pay-off of the small stories of *Sesame Street*, I was able to write multiple story lines.

Similar to Prose's method of learning to read like writer, the MA course in the first semester had us draw up a reading list to suit a chosen genre, but also to read widely outside our genre. We were urged to choose good examples of our chosen genre, but also to venture into unknown territory because a spark of inspiration could come from an unexpected source. My choices of books were by Tolstoy, Lydia Davis, Philip Stevick, Flannery O'Connor, Maxine Chernoff, Rick Moody and Jamaica Kinkaid. From Davis, a master of the compound sentence, I learned how to refine my style of writing. Philip Stevick's *Anti-story: An Anthology of Experimental Fiction* describes eight ways of telling modern stories: anti-mimesis, anti-reality, against event, against subject or theme, against the middle range of experience, against analysis, against meaning and against scale. I wrote a few experimental stories during the course using his advice. It made me unafraid to step outside genre restrictions and search for new ways to tell a story.

My writing before *The Buried Chameleon* had focussed on social questions such as the precarious status of women, the dispossessed and the poor but my grandmother's death put me on a different path. Ojaide suggests that "influence, vision and aesthetic considerations are not static but dynamic in the life of a writer" (898). Therefore death, love, trauma or any life-changing event can "re-route the writer towards new goals" (ibid). I started my writing journey during apartheid and my output was, without aforethought on my part, considered to be political. Then I "discovered" slavery. Hence my PhD work foregrounds the lives of slave women in a patriarchal slave society. I intend to continue writing historical stories in the future. Thus Ojaide's concept of events "re-routing" a writer describes my departure in writing, from a focus on present-day South Africa to a preoccupation with the past. Ojaide also distinguishes between the collective and the individual, which contributes to

shaping a writer's direction: "[t]here is a collective choice and from that emanates the individual's choice" (903). The collective embodies the "zeitgeist" of a country or people. Consequently, in South Africa, writing during apartheid mostly tended to be either for or against the status quo. The latter, protest literature, became a powerful tool for the oppressed. David Morley describes it thus, "[t]here is a strong history, and mythology, of the weak defending their lives by their power to weave a story" (31). At the same time some writers, like Njabulo Ndebele in *Fools and Other Stories* (1983), moved away from the fire and brimstone of protest literature to concentrate on the ordinary. Ndebele wrote various essays at the time to elucidate his point that "[t]he issues ... and the questions ... remain key to a people who, after apartheid, have ... to rediscover the complex ordinariness of living in a civil society" (the description on his book *Rediscovery of the Ordinary: Essays on South African Literature and Culture* collected and published in 1991 and re-issued in 2006). In my novel I had to make a choice between the "fire and brimstone" such as slave brutality and the ordinary. As mentioned earlier I tried to tread a fine line not to get caught up in the cruel violence exclusively. I accomplished this by approaching the master and slave lifestyle through their eyes, as ordinary and unremarkable.

After packing my suitcase of hopes and dreams I embarked on my PhD project and found that I didn't know where to start. Jane Rogers in her chapter in *The Handbook of Creative Writing* poses the question, "How do you begin to write a novel?" and promptly answers it by saying "I don't know" (116). I suffered the same dilemma. After several false starts I eventually developed a feel for Egbert's character as a result of reading historical material, and wrote many pages from his point of view, thereby working my way into the novel. "There is another breed of writers, who work out whole novels" Rogers continues, but "[f]or the rest us, the early stages of a novel are a period of exploration" (117). The latter applies to me. In the two approaches to writing she describes, planning or pantsing (flying by

the seat of one's pants), I qualify as a pantser. I have this notion that planning would disrupt the sparks of inspiration that takes one into uncharted waters. Confirming my view Brendan Ritchie, in "Writing into the Dark", suggests that pantsing is "a viable writing strategy ... eliciting valuable outcomes" (1). I therefore struggled to provide a plot for my creative writing proposal. After sweating through it I carried the crude map on my smart phone. Ritchie states that these two writing processes, planning and pantsing, "are defined and analysed within various creative writing manuals ... [such as] *Writing Your Way: Creating a Writing Practice That Works for You* (2012)" (ibid). I believe that pantsing a story surprised me and became exciting, a matter of the conscious mind versus the subconscious, and the subconscious obliging by providing unexpected material. Ritchie lists prominent authors such as Hemingway, Stephen King and Cormac McCarthy who were known to "adopt a version of the 'pantsing' process" (3). For the historical narrative, however, I had to revise my approach to include at least some planning. I had to juggle so many elements and would have been lost without it.

The writing of *The Buried Chameleon* coincided with the Covid 19 pandemic. Like many others the pandemic impacted my family in several ways. My sister-in-law died, and two of my sisters contracted the disease, among others. This brought immense stress as I struggled with the task of completing my novel. When I look back I can see that the quality of my writing deteriorated during these stressful times. My circumstances at home also changed as my husband retired, bringing with it a change in routine and several adjustments. Sarah J. Ahmed in "An Analysis of Writer's Block: Causes, Characteristics, and Solutions" suggests that "[a]ccording to distraction arousal theory, the stress response decreases creativity by diverting limited cognitive resources to the stressor" (13). I first had to fight my way out of a fog before I could sit down to write and I found it exhausting. I had to be disciplined with regular writing even if I didn't feel inspired. Needless to say I developed

writers block. Ahmed defines writer's block as "the inability for a writer to produce new material" (2). Causes she lists are physiological or affective, motivational, cognitive, and behavioural (11). An extract from my writer's diary which I kept throughout declares my despair: "I have been unable to write and I am devastated". To break my inertia I read Toni Morrison's novels, starting with *The Bluest Eye* and came upon a description in the foreword that resembled the experience of shame in my focus group where shame is "the damaging internalization of assumptions of immutable inferiority originating in an outside gaze" (*The Bluest Eye* xi). I finished the *The Bluest Eye* four days later. Morrison deals with the kind of topics I encounter in my novel and I was interested to see how she handled it. I liked her experiments with different types of narration. Above all, I liked her narrative voice, giving opinions, discussing issues, and so on. I finished *Sula*, and after reading *Song of Solomon* I felt inspired to do free writing. Morley advises "If you ever feel blocked as a writer, reading popular science, history and biography will be certain to force you out of the corner in which you have placed yourself" (25). By reading I had stumbled on a solution although I had not sampled "popular science, history and biography". Half-way through the novel I suffered another bout of stasis, the "muddled middle", a more serious affliction of reaching the middle of the novel after a flying start only to have nowhere to go. James Friel in *The Writers' Workbook* explains it thus: "Inspiration is powerful but short-lived. The idea for a novel can come like a pentecostal flame ... [i]t can drive you to start but will not sustain you through the long age it can take to complete" (116). How to overcome it had me searching on Google, applying the various strategies, like creating a new walk-on character, but that did not help. In the end I took a writing holiday and when I came back, refreshed, I could see my way forward again.

To consolidate my progress I focused on the theoretical challenges of writing: the plot, point of view, narration, setting, characterisation, dialogue, and dual timelines. About

the creation of a plot Morley quoting Mark Turner (1996: 1) states “*Story* is a basic principle of mind”, and “the parable is the root of the human mind – of thinking, knowing, acting, creating, and plausibly of speaking” (8, emphasis in the original). He refers to Christopher Booker’s plot types to demonstrate his point. Booker in *Seven Basic Plots: Why We Tell Stories* suggests that “the human imagination seems to be so constituted that it naturally works round certain ‘elemental’ shapes and images ... what Jung calls ‘archetypes’” (12). That is the reason why, world-wide, diverse stories seem to resemble each other. Booker argues that there are only seven plots in storytelling: overcoming the monster, rags to riches, the quest, voyage and return, comedy, tragedy and re-birth. He goes further to explain the structure of these plots, for example in plot 1 the monster can be a predator, a “holdfast” – one who guards his lair, or an avenger. The story evolves over five stages: the anticipation stage, the dream stage, the frustration stage, the nightmare stage and the thrilling escape or the death of the monster. Each of the seven plots has five stages according to Booker, except for comedy which has only three. After some thought, I place my work under plot 7, rebirth: a young heroine falls under the shadow of the dark power. For a while all seem to go well. The dark power approaches, stronger, imprisoning the heroine. This continues until it seems the dark power has triumphed. Finally redemption comes and the heroine escapes. My heroine does not escape, however, which moves the last part of my historical plot into the ambit of tragedy. This plot structure allowed me to explore the endemic sexual exploitation of slave women.

The contemporary plot is about a couple isolated by Covid. Contrary to most writing advice, I wrote about the pandemic while still in it. Adelaide and Attfield advise that “the world has produced its own surreal narrative, one far beyond our wildest imagining” and “it is impossible to ignore it, yet at the moment, while living within it, equally impossible to convert it into story” (3). My reason for incorporating Covid is that it fitted into one of my

themes, that of disease. The contemporary plot also makes it possible to mention the origin of some of the slaves by incorporating Amy's genetic disease, which serves as a link between the first and second plot. Paring down each narrative to its bare essentials has been crucial. For example, in one of the earlier drafts of the my novel, the historical protagonist Amberike found her sister, but in the ruthless pruning necessary to run two plots plus an embedded story, I had to delete it.

I chose third person omniscient narration because in the dense plot structure described above it presented a way to link the stories and themes more easily to have the authorial voice of a narrator. Rogers describes third person omniscient as a "God-like third person voice of many nineteenth-century novels" with the comment that "[i]n contemporary writing it is uncommon" (119). I did not realise until I came across this quote that third person omniscient was slightly out-dated and uncommon in modern fiction. But for me it worked well in this particular story. There are four points of view, three in the historical narrative and one in the contemporary. The historical story paints a broader canvas, so it has more characters. A more intimate story, the contemporary narrative only has Katy as a focaliser within the third person narration. Overall the characters in both the historical and contemporary stories are divided into: four main characters, five secondary characters, three minor characters and extras or walk-ons whose function is to colour the background.

Both narratives, the historical and the contemporary, have a setting in Cape Town which, during the 17-18th century, was known as the Cape of Good Hope. Various landmarks such as Table Mountain and the Company Gardens feature in my story. The historical story is set in the Cape of Good Hope in 1713. That was the year of the first outbreak of smallpox in South Africa. Most of the action takes place in the Slave Lodge where the company slaves resided. Nigel Worden, in his article "Slavery at the Cape" declares the slaves lived there in "barrack-like accommodation" (6). When I visited the Slave Lodge in central Cape Town, I

saw the small-scale model of the lodge as it was in the 1700s. It had been refurbished in the interim. A rectangular building with barred slits in the walls as windows, it was known to be dark and damp. Built in 1679, it faced the Groote Kerk, and was a brothel which catered to the free burghers on most nights of the week between the hours of eight and nine o' clock. Robert Ross in his paper "Oppression, Sexuality and Slavery at the Cape of Good Hope", affirms that "[t]he Company's slave lodge acted as the main brothel..." (430). I also researched the apparel and manners of the 17-18th century society as well as the prevailing mores in the fields of "education, job, salary, interests, fears, prejudices, desires, [and] attitudes" (*Writers' Workbook* 123).

Characterisation was an on-going challenge. Amberike is the main character of the historical story. Attractive, she has long hair and a birthmark on her forehead. She mourns the loss of her sister while trying to adjust to the harsh climate of slavery. She has her first crush on the Cook and is afraid of Egbert's interest in her. Young, inexperienced, unsure of herself, a bit naïve, she is the ideal victim. However, she develops during the novel to find the fortitude to assist the Khoi during the smallpox epidemic. I drew a graph with links to other characters in the story and she, indeed, had the most links. By drawing the graph I was able to establish the connectedness of all the characters in my novel. That's how I discovered that Maria, the lodge mother, has only one link, to Amberike, so her story had to be developed more.

I kept a writer's diary during the writing process, making notes about story information to remember, dates, which stories still had to be developed etc. That way I could check my progress. It also helped me to overcome writing problems, for example, I struggled with Amberike's character initially as this extract shows.

Writer's Diary, 15/10/20:

I have been struggling with the character of Amberike. I just couldn't reach out and hold her in my imagination. Egbert came easy, very easy for some reason. Could be all my research. A new insight is that he is part of the original cast who embodied narcissism and left a legacy of narcissism that is so rampant today.

The Cook hesitated but eventually revealed himself. He starts the multi-generational trauma of extreme independence and suffers from Drapetomania which essentially is the uncontrollable desire to run away.

But Amberike, oh Amberike I couldn't find you. On the strength of the other characters I thought I would have to move you to a minor character but that would have been a disservice. And just as I found what you looked like while sitting on the steps of the UWC library, I found your character in a meeting with a friend after not seeing her for more than fifty years. You are an abused woman in training. Society is shaping you to serve others, to be invisible and not to count.

The extract summarises my search for the characters in my historical narrative. Even though I struggled with the historical characters, the characters of Katy and Norman in the contemporary narrative came relatively easy. Katy is the main character. She is a lecturer at UCT, and married to Norman, an older Afrikaner man. He is retrenched as a high school teacher, which causes financial difficulty. The claustrophobic conditions of lockdown severely test their relationship. Norman, who already leaned into depression after his retrenchment, grieves the loss of his freedom. In long-form fiction like the novel, even after creating all the characters, the issue of consistency arises: "In a novel you are not recording life but re-creating it, not presenting it but re-presenting it. In life people do not have to display a consistent character ... [but] one of your characters ... would have to be consistent within the world of the novel. You have to account for him [or her] (Newman, *The Writer's*

Workbook 123). To “account” for all my characters I had a list of questions to ask them, which helped to clarify who they were, what their thoughts were and where they were headed in the fictional world of the novel. For example, how old are you? How do you deal with conflict? What scares you the most? Who do you consider to be your friend and who is your enemy? Newman suggests that the writer should have a global view of their story world in order to discern problem areas. In my experience it is possible to err in the first few drafts but that should be remedied by the last draft, I hope.

I opted for the conventional approach in punctuating the dialogue in my novel. An experimental or modern approach would have jarred in a historical setting. To write dialogue that would be distinguishable in the conversations between the historical and the contemporary narrative, I employed a different tone and register. For example, in the contemporary story the dialogue came easy and has an informal tone, informal words and way of speaking, whereas in the historical narrative the dialogue is more formal in tone with formal words and a formal way of speaking. To locate it in early Cape Town where Cape Dutch was spoken, I interspersed formal English with Dutch words. For example, Egbert likes to say *Gadverdamme* (for God’s sake). Most historical novel writers find the dialogue in a historical novel to be tricky. If the language of the time is reproduced verbatim it may be unintelligible to the reader. I wanted the language to be close to the chosen era but also not alienating and stilted.

As mentioned my novel has a dual timeline, historical and contemporary. One story takes place in the 18th century and the other in contemporary South Africa. Embedded in the contemporary is the abolition story of Katie Jacobs set in the 1900s. Keeping track of the timelines proved to be difficult. My historical dates were not accurate and I had to sit down and construct a proper timeline. To remember what the different chapters contained I used an Excel spread sheet I had come across in an online Reedsy workshop on self-editing. The

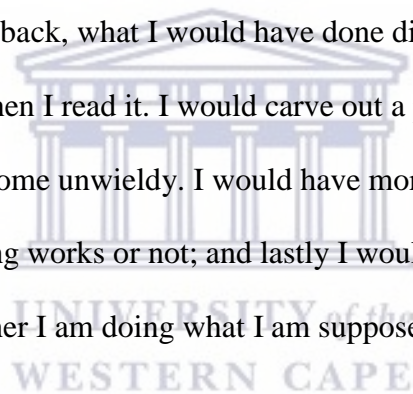
Excel sheet was recommended by the presenter who hailed from Fiction University, an online writing resource. I adapted the sheet to fit my novel and was able to see at a glance which scene dealt with what, in order to juggle the sequences and avoid repetition. This strategy paid off because the novel flowed after that. In the future I plan to use this method for all my work. The first draft was messy but as I went through consecutive drafts the novel read better and better and I could pick up problem areas. The second draft was a developmental edit to improve structure and storyline. In the third draft I looked at all the elements again: plot lines, character arcs, punctuation of a frame story, and so on. This necessitated cutting certain sections while expanding others.

The Buried Chameleon's story structure is fragmented; short scenes are arranged into mostly short chapters. Initially I thought a fragmented structure would reflect the theme of a broken past, but the story jumped around so much it was disorienting. I thought the problem was with the content but then recognised it was a problem of structure. It was too fragmentary. Organising the narrative into short chapters worked better. In the new structure I introduce Egbert and Amberike in chapter 1, the setting and Katy in chapter 2, then the Cook in chapter 3. Each chapter has a goal and I added text to link the scenes if there is more than one scene in a chapter. I put Egbert first for context and to orient the reader but also to show the insignificance of Amberike. Although she is the protagonist she is a slave.

However, I kept the fragmented structure in the story of *The Ghost Whisperer*. This narrative is scattered between the historical and contemporary stories. It is a tiny story in fragments about the execution of the nameless brother of Arrie, the mandoor. The Ghost Whisperer remembers his slave names but not his real name. He sparked a rebellion and as punishment had a rod inserted in his anus. After that he was beheaded. The story functions as a way of bringing in the horrific violence meted out to slaves, as well as to focus attention on

the recent discovery of slave graves accidentally dug up during a building development in the city of Cape Town.

It has been an eventful journey, a journey I feel privileged to have embarked on. I met so many interesting people. Paul Tichmann, the curator of the Slave Lodge, Sandra Rowold Shell, the wife of Robert Shell who generously passed on some of his research, and Patric Mellet, a heritage activist who uncovered 400 years of his ancestors and in September 2020, published his ground-breaking book *The Lie of 1652: A Decolonised History of Land*. The latter's passion and commitment to a hidden history inspired the character of Mr De Bruin (the characterisation and physical descriptions are fictional). Mellet is a co-founder of a new museum, the Camissa Museum – A Decolonial Camissa African Centre of Memory at the Castle of Good Hope. Looking back, what I would have done differently: be more vigilant to document everything I read, when I read it. I would carve out a particular era of history and stick to it, otherwise things become unwieldy. I would have more confidence in my judgement of whether something works or not; and lastly I would enjoy the process more and not worry so much about whether I am doing what I am supposed to do.



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