

Also by Marlene van Niekerk
Triomf

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Hoort
a novel

Marlene van Niekerk

TRANSLATED BY MICHIEL HEYNS



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INTRODUCTION

Agaat is a story about violence. It is first and foremost about institutional racial violence expressed through the bodies and souls of its victims and perpetrators on a quotidian basis. It is also about intimate domestic violence, human violence against the natural world, and the subtle violence of pride, folly, and self-deception. *Agaat* is at the same time a story of love that is by turns twisted, corrupt, and simply, naturally good. It is about survival in the interstices of these intensely oppositional forces.

Agaat is set in the apartheid era of the 1950s into the '90s, on an upscale South African family farm contentiously run by Jak and Milla de Wet, a desperately unhappy Afrikaans couple, and their half-adopted, half-enslaved African maid, Agaat. The novel is narrated almost entirely by the widowed Milla, who has become paralyzed in old age by a motor neuron disease. She is unable to communicate except with her eyes, and only then with Agaat, who is now her nurse. Their understanding is preternaturally, near-wordlessly eloquent, expressing every shade of feeling between them:

Say 'ah' for doctor, says Agaat.

I close my eyes. What have I done wrong?

The little mole-hand nuzzles out my tongue. The screw has squashed it in my mouth. . . .

My tongue is being staked out for its turn at ablution.

The sponge is rough. With vigorous strokes my tongue is scrubbed down. It tastes powerfully of peppermint. Three times the sponge is recharged before Agaat is satisfied. My tongue feels eradicated.

Then:

Her fingers move more gently, more kindly on my gums.
Then it becomes caressing. Forgive me, ask the fingers, I
also have a hard time with you, you know.

And then:

More passionate the movement becomes. Agaat curses me
in the mouth with her thumb and index finger. Bugger you!
I feel against my palate, bugger you and your mother. . . .

She takes her hand from my mouth. . . . She wipes my
face, the tears from my cheeks.

Thank you, I signal briefly.

You're welcome, says Agaat.

Any intimate relationship in which a servant wields such complete physical power over the body of a privileged mistress is fraught; in the case of Agaat and Milla, it is profoundly so. For their relationship began when Milla, as a charity project, rescued Agaat as a tiny child from an abusive family of miserable drunks living on her own mother's land—indeed, Agaat's birth mother, whom Agaat will never see again, was Milla's nanny, toward whom Milla has no feeling whatsoever. Against the scornful judgment of her abusive husband, Jak, and her neighbors, and in spite of her own insipid conceit, Milla falls in love with the little girl, whom she nurtures with methods both harsh and kind, caring for her basic needs and introducing her to a world of whimsical knowledge that includes music, books, private games, and elaborate embroidery. Woman and child go on long, enchanted explorations of the veld, where Milla gives instruction on the names of roses, the scent of herbs, "insects, birds, small reptiles, small mammals, grass varieties, wild flowers, stones." They revive drowned butterflies in the sun; they collect fossils; they invent songs, build fires and dance before them.

Told her about the giant emperor butterfly that's black on the outside and inside blue like an eye when it spreads its wings. The jewel of the forest. Apatura iris. The eye that guards the secret of the soul. Only good people get to see it. Has M^ême seen it yet? asks Agaat. She looks at me like that, I can't lie. I hope to see it in my lifetime, I say.

The sections describing such outings are so beautiful and so convincing that Agaat might almost be considered a "white savior" story—except

that the salvation plainly comes at a very steep price. For, as part of her heavenly tutorial, Milla plays cruel mental games with Agaat, exposes her to rejection by her peers, betrays her to the cruelty of white outsiders, humiliates her both deliberately and indifferently, and at least once punishes her so brutally that even Jak is appalled. Milla knows all along that there is no room in the world of apartheid for her fleeting tenderness with Agaat, a reality that she finally accepts by teaching her beloved girl her “place,” that is, reducing her to a kind of privileged servant, complete with an absurd, ugly uniform and a rigid white-peaked cap that Agaat must keep rigorously pinned to her head. When Milla gets pregnant, she ruthlessly cuts Agaat out of her heart (or tries to), all the while believing that her behavior is noble.

It is here that the stories of violence and love most painfully intersect—so painfully that one might wonder if the word *love* is appropriate at all. The primary relationship in *Agaat*, which was first published in the United States in 2010, could be seen as a realistic depiction of Jordan Peele’s “sunken place,” a trope in his 2017 satirical horror movie *Get Out*. In that film, a young black man named Chris is hypnotized by a white mother figure (in this case, the mother of his white girlfriend) under the pretext that it will help him stop smoking: instead he is sent to an internal prison called “the sunken place” in which, while still basically conscious, he loses agency over his body and behavior. Milla’s nurture of Agaat can be seen as an elaborate process of hypnosis that, under the guise of loving help, sends Agaat into a permanent sunken place in which her agency is even more severely limited than that of most African servants under apartheid.

But the horror movie metaphor doesn’t fully correspond to the realistic gestalt of the novel . . . because it’s a metaphor. Agaat is too strong and too subtle to be kept down entirely (her grotesque white hat will slowly transform from an icon of submission into an icon of power), and Milla is ambivalent about keeping her down. Agaat is also integral to the functioning of the household and farm; she is more competent than Jak and Milla put together, and, while they don’t admit it, they know it. In addition, Jak and Milla themselves seem to exist in their own self-created version of the “sunken place.” Both are driven by false and grandiose images of themselves that have led them into a mutually abusive nightmare of a marriage. Jak beats and humiliates Milla, but she is no innocent: she manipulates and undermines her husband so adroitly that he can’t see straight. (At one point during an argument, Jak tries to bond with Agaat against Milla by shouting, “But flattery means nothing, that we all know, don’t we Agaat, your missis here also

has nothing but good words . . . no matter what she's done to you in your life and how she treats you behind the scenes. . . . And you do your very best every day, don't you, to show her how good you actually are, hmmm? Do you think you can convince her, my girl?"

Given that Jak and Milla are privileged adults who appear to have chosen their sunken place, the reader may not feel great sympathy for them. Marlene van Niekerk feels a *particular* lack of sympathy for Milla, whom she described as an emotional vampire in an interview with Toni Morrison. But vampires have, after all, been made the way they are by other vampires; they can be quite desperate and yearning creatures. As I read her, Milla wants, from the bottom of the murk, to find something more genuine, to actually love—to *get out*, as much as the feeble better angels of her nature will allow. And sometimes it seems that she actually does, especially during the time that she is first earning the little girl's trust.

Twenty to nine . . .

Then I bent down and whispered in her ear.
What did I say to her?

Ten to nine

I'm so hungry, I'm so thirsty, I said, because you don't want to talk to me and I know you can talk. . . .
Perhaps you can say your new name for me?
I blinked with my eyes to ask, big please!

Twenty past nine

Why is it taking me so long to write it up? I'd rather just think about it again and again. It's too precious! It's too fine! Words spoil it. Who could understand? . . .

I imagined the tip of her will as the rolled-up tip of a fern. Did I say it out loud? That she should also imagine it? A tender green ringlet with little folded-in fingers?

I bent it open with my attention.

Then it came into my ear, like the rushing of my own blood, against the deep end of the roof of her mouth, a gentle guttural-fricative, the sound of a shell against my ear, the g-g-g of Agaat. . . .

Then we said her name at the same time. Sweet, full in my mouth, like a mouthful of something heavenly. Lord my God, the child You have given me.

In such moments, Milla's feeling seems genuinely tender, even if it also seems a trifle . . . hungry. However, it is tragically that very genuineness that makes Milla's love dangerous; the sweetness of it binds Agaat to her more thoroughly than simple cruelty would. It is less easy to reject and makes Agaat's servitude complete. When Milla compels Agaat, at the age of twelve, to deliver the new baby when they can't make it to Milla's family in time, we feel this servitude being driven into her core—and, paradoxically, combining with what will become her power over Milla, particularly Milla's body:

You talked fast, emphasised the main points. Water. Breath. Push. Head. Out. Blood. Slippery. Careful. Slap. Yowl. Bind. Cut. Wrap. Bring to. Wash. Hitch-hike.

That was the easy scenario.

If the little head can't get out, she has to take the scissors and cut, you said, to the back, do you understand? Towards the shitter, she had to cut through the meat of your arse, so that he can get out. Saw if necessary, she mustn't spare you. If he's blue, she has to clean his nose and wipe out his drool, out from the back of his throat and from his tongue and blow breath into him over his nose and mouth until he makes a sound. As we do with the calves when they're struggling. She can leave you, you said, even if you're bleeding something terrible, it doesn't matter. And that again is different from the cows, you said.

These instructions given to a twelve-year-old girl who has been so severely damaged by repeated rapes before her "white stepmother" found her that she can't have her own child.

However, it is also Agaat's instinct for love that allows her not only to survive, but also to enact a revenge that is equal parts tenderness and rage, and that is as lifelong, exacting, and daily as her servitude—the emotional appropriation of Jakkie, Milla's son, which happens as naturally as Milla's appropriation of Agaat from *her* mother, and more thoroughly, for Jakkie grows to love Agaat far better than he does his brutal father or convoluted mother.

The love between Jakkie and Agaat is also compromised because it comes from Agaat's loneliness and her need to take something for herself. Nonetheless it eventually emerges as the deepest love in the novel, in part because it is the most intimate and the most honest; it is to

Jakkie that Agaat can tell the truth of her relationship with his mother and what she felt about it—first metaphorically, in the form of a dark tale she tells him as a child; then literally, after his mother has died. In the time between, they play the same kinds of magical games together that Milla once played with Agaat, inventing songs, telling stories, and going for long explorations on the veld during which Agaat teaches him everything; together, waiting patiently in the forest, they get to see the magical “eye” of the giant butterfly. This loving magic is a closed circuit between Jakkie and Agaat; Milla and Jak are effectively locked out. However, the whimsical form of this love, originating as it does with Milla, echoes and honors her small goodness, making it not entirely worthless or in vain. Perhaps a message has risen up from the sunken place and has been heard and recognized; perhaps Jakkie will be able to escape his family’s vile legacy.

In revealing this much of the plot I am scarcely giving away the story, because it is the telling that makes it so extraordinary: the texture of each life described, human and animal, the deep patterning and imagery, the complex mirroring between Milla and Agaat make you feel viscerally everything I have rather dryly described. The details—a silver handbell, a red jersey, maps, a mail slot, fossils, stones, tiny insects called whirligigs, and most of all, Agaat’s fanatically embroidered white cap—are like musical notes forming and refraining a shape of life beyond words, anguished in its violence and abiding in its will to love.

—MARY GAITSKILL

AGAAT

'This new volume seeks to interpret the growth, passion and expansion of the soul of the nation. May the indefinable element—the force and flavour of this Southland—be found, felt and experienced, then the nation will press it to their hearts and adopt it as their own.'

From the Introduction to the first edition of the FAK-Volksangbundel [National Anthology of Song of the Federation of Afrikaans Culture Organisations]. H. Gutsche, W.J. du P. Erlank, S.H. Eysen (eds.). Firma J.H. De Bussy Pretoria, HAUM. V/H Jacques Dusseau & Co, Cape Town, 1937.

'That is the beauty, the value of this book: that it was born out of love and inspires to love, that nobody can doubt. And with that a great service is done to the nation, for who feels for beauty, on whatever terrain, has a contribution to make to the cultural development of the nation.

'The area this book makes its own, is a specifically feminine one and through that contributes to the refinement and beautification of the domestic atmosphere. Such an atmosphere distinguishes the culturally aware nation from the uncivilised.'

From the Foreword by Mrs E. (Betsie) Verwoerd to Borduur So [Embroider Like This], Hetsie van Wyk, Afrikaanse Pers-boekhandel, Johannesburg, 1966.

'This Handbook . . . serves as a key to the unlocking of the treasure chambers of climate, soil, livestock and marketing potential on each of the 93,000 farms of our country.

'Just as the Bible points the way to spiritual perfection so will this Handbook also point to ways and means to more profitable farming and to greater prosperity for every farmer in every part of the country.

'I should dearly love to see this Handbook finding its way into every farm dwelling and coming into the hands of every person who farms or who is interested in agricultural matters, because it is a rich mine of useful information.'

From the Foreword by His Honour General J.G.C. Kemp, Minister of Agriculture, to the Hulpboek vir Boere in Suid-Afrika [Handbook for Farmers in South Africa]. Written by civil servants and other experts, Government Printing Works, Pretoria, 1929.

PROLOGUE

Matte-white winter. Stop-start traffic. Storm warning. And I. In two places at once, as always. Snow on my shoulder, but with the light of the Overberg haunting me, the wet black apparitions of winter, the mirages of summer. Tumbling lark above the rustling wheatfields. Twitter machine. A very heaven, the time of my childhood. How could I tell that to anybody in this city? Heaven is a curiosity here. Hereafter. Strange word in my head. My reaction to the telegram strange too. First numb, then anxious, tears later. An aperture in the skull. Now the memories are a stream, unquenchable.

For parting is no single act, it is like a trailing streamer.

That first descent here eleven years ago, stiff in all my joints. Didn't close an eye on the whole fourteen-hour flight. Fear, worry, feelings of guilt. What was I? Who was I? A ten-day beard, a vacation visa in a passport, a loose cannon without letters of accreditation. A farmer seeking asylum, as far as the Canadian bureaucracy was concerned. A deserting soldier with his training certificates, his pilot's licences, his oath of secrecy. What more could I give them? A confession?

Left home without greeting or explanation. That morning, still dark, the smell of wet soot, Gaat giving me the little key to the sideboard so that I could take out my papers. Her face grey and sad, her cap askew. Four o'clock in the morning, the only one who knew where I was headed and why. Will I ever be able to forgive myself? For saddling her with such a responsibility?

White drifts of snow banked on both sides of the road. Windscreen wipers at full speed. I can't wipe away the images. Banded watermelon under the Herrnhuter knife, Boer pumpkins nestled in hairy dark-green leaves, a brown-tipped fleece of merino wool breaking open, heavy with oil, on the sorting table. Blue lupins chest-high in flower, yellow cream of Jersey cows, the sound when you crack open a pomegranate, the white membranes gripping the clustered pips. Red and white, just like blood on freshly shorn sheep.

Lord, I sound like my mother. Melancholy over-sensitive Ma. Now dying. Will she recognise me? With the beard? Gaat will. Willy-nilly.

Have been having the same dream, over and over recently. Gaat calling me, us calling each other. Awake. Disturbance. An abyss where sleep should be. The calling with our hands cupped in front of our mouths, she in the yard down below in her white apron, visible to me where I'm hiding in the kloofs above the house. Later long whistlings that you could pick up on the dryland at the back if you were below the wind. Later still the blowing on Hubbly Bubbly bottles.

Slowly to the surface, awake to wind-borne whistlings. Sleepless in Toronto. Night music. Till I drift off again, dreaming that we signal to each other on the ram's horn, soft low notes. How careful we had to be when we were looking for the purple emperor in the woods. Grey-black, folded shut in the shadows till it opened its wings, blue on one side only, scintillating, vapoured with silver, blood shaking my heart.

Leaking heart.

On and on the blue flickering sliced by the sharp sweep of the wipers. Salt on the road, broth of snow-slush on the windscreen, on the rear window. Lapis lazuli, it flickers, the colour of the dream, a blue iridescing from moment to moment, between inhaling and exhaling, first on one wing, then on the other. Book of vespers. *Apatura iris*. The giant purple emperor butterfly.

Miracles. Catastrophes. Continent that tops up its water level with blood, and that fertilises with blood. Who wrote that?

Here the blood has long since been spilt. Cold. The massacres efficiently commemorated, functionally packaged, sanitised. Only I, more freshly cut by history, trying to find my own way in the cool archives. Cut grass lies frail. My smell attracts other vulnerabilities. Found the Sainte Marie files yesterday, Bleeding Heel, Broken Shoulder, Wounded Knee, for the new instrument studio in Toronto. A percussion theatre where the visitor will rattle seed pods, brush the tin cymbals with a handful of grass.

When I got home, there it was. On the doormat, in the snow. Post office envelope.

MÈME DYING STOP CONFIRM ARRIVAL STOP LOVE AGAAT.

Eleven, almost twelve years. Will I still recognise Ma? In the last photo Gaat sent, she was tiny amongst the panache plants in the front garden, eyes deep in their sockets. Almost completely grey. Had a book with her, index finger between the pages, *The World's Famous Piano Pieces*. Recognised it by the dusky pink cover. Always used to sit and sing to herself from the sheet. So as not to get rusty, she used to say.

Ma and her airs, Ma who dreamed: Little Jakkie de Wet, the lieder singer, famous from Hottentots-Holland to Vienna. *Lieder eines fahrenden Gesellen*. Indeed!

And Agaat, poker-faced, her pop-eyed glare with which she could flatten you without a single word, the glance which she could switch off for days to punish you. Wooden eye. How old was she when I left the place in '85? Thirty-seven?

Gaat, Ma's nurse. Lord, what a piece of theatre that must be. Mourning Becomes Kamilla. Or, better still, The Night of the Nurse.

Gaat with her starched cap, distant snowy peak which she sometimes inclined towards me so that I could look at it from close by, so that I—only I—might touch it, the fine handiwork, white on white, of which I never could have enough. The needle flashing in her hand in front of the fireplace, Gaat's left hand with which she fed logs into the Aga's maw, stoked it so that it roared, strong warm hand on which I explored the world—pure fennel! The little hand on the wrong-way-round arm hidden further than usual when she had to serve Ma's friends, or the dominee on his house call.

And I, having to sing to the guests, Ma accompanying. Good Lord. O bring me a buck in flight o'er the veld, *Heidenröslein*, depending on the audience.

What's it like, there where you grew up? Your country? The eternal question when I first arrived. Always had Larkin's reply ready: Having grown up in shade of Church and State . . . Took me years to fashion my own rhymes to bind the sweetness, the cruelty in a single memory. Later nobody asked any more. Only then could I fantasise about an alternative reply.

Pass under the boom, a red elbow. Parking disk in my hand, cold, smooth, obol with lead strip. Fare forward, traveller! Not escaping from the past. *International Departures*.

Was it on Ma's behalf, or secretly dedicated to her, the fantasy of a song, an alternative reply to my inquisitive interlocutors?

Look, Mother, I've forgotten nothing of it. I'll sing for you. Of the foothills fronting the homestead, one piled on the other, the varied yellows and greens of fynbos, pink and purple patches of vygie and heather. Or of the mountains I'll sing, but in a sparser register, a wider perspective, the powder-blue battlements furnishing a fastness to the eye of the traveller along the coastal route.

My fantasy. Always the exordium on the rivers, the vleis full of fragrant white flowers in spring. This music crept by me upon the waters. A cantata of the great brown river, the Breede River, its catchment deep

in the Grootwinterhoek, the great lair of winter, fed by the run-off from fern-tips, from wind-cut grooves in stone, to a hand's-breadth rill, a leap-over-sluit amongst porcupine-rush, a misty waterfall where red disas sway in the wake of the water. Until all waterfalls flow together over a base of black rock, and the stream starts cutting into the dry land, finding a winding of its own making, at last becoming a waterway, wide enough for shipping, deep enough for bridges, for ferries, for landing-stages and commerce.

This stream, the first which a European would deign to give the name of river, according to Di Capelli. Afterwards Rio de Nazareth. Le Fleuve Large. Hottentot names, certainly, but what remains of those, and who still cares? The Sijnna River, possibly derived from the Nama, Quarrel River?

Who first told me that? Must have been Ma.

Quarrel country.

Cacophony.

Check-in counter. Window seat or aisle seat. Tweedledum and Tweedledee. Boarding-pass. Charon behind computer screen.

Woods. Deep mysterious woods. Koloniesbos, Duiwelsbos, Grootvadersbos, the woods of the colony, the devil, the grandfather. And mountains. Trappieshoogte, Tradouw, Twaalfuurkop, the height of steps, the way of the women, the peak of noon.

The rivers of my childhood! They were different, their names cannot tell how beautiful they were: Botrivier, Riviersonderend, Kleinkruisrivier, Duivenhoks, Maandagsoutrivier, Slangrivier, Buffeljagsrivier, Karringmelksrivier, Korenlandrivier: rivers burgeoning, rivers without end, small rivers crossing; rivers redolent of dovescotes, of salt-on-Mondays, of snakes; rivers of the hunting of the buffalo, rivers like buttermilk, rivers running through fields of wheat. Winding, hopeful, stony rivers. What can have remained of them?

The rivers could not be blamed. Not of thy rivers, no.

My country 'tis of thy people you're dying. Where, from whom did I first hear that? Buffy Sainte-Marie with quaver-tremolo and mouth-bow, a musical weapon? That moment of enlightenment, the realisation! Twenty-five, not too old to start my studies afresh. Arts, music, history. Less ambitious than some of my contemporaries. The finely cultivated, the intellectuals, incredible how they elected to live after the foul-up in Angola. Attack and defence as always, one after the other self-exculpating autobiographical writing, variants on the Hemingway option. How you get to an uncivilised place in a civilised way. And stay there. A grim tussle with mother nature. I was not in accord.

Took a sheet of paper and a pencil when people here questioned me. Drew a map, lifted out a little block from the map of Southern Africa, from the lower end, from the south-western Cape Province, enlarged it freehand onto a sheet of paper. On the dirt road between Skeiding and Suurbraak, parallel to the motorway of the Garden Route, parallel to the coastline from Waenhuiskrans to Witsand, between Swellendam and Heidelberg. There. Five little crosses. Five farms in a fertile basin, nestling against the foothills of the Langeberg, the range running all the way from Worcester to eternity where it turns into the Outeniqua. Grootmoedersdrift, the middle farm, between Frambooskop to the east and The Glen to the west. There. From the middlest, inbetweenest place. Ambivalently birthed, blow, blow—that story!—waterfalls in my ears. Perhaps that was what delivered me from completedness.

Translate Grootmoedersdrift. Try it. Granny's Ford? Granny's Passion? What does that say? Motor cars there weren't yet, when the farm, named after my dreaded great-great-granny Spies on Ma's side, was given its name. And after the shallow crossing near the homestead. Dangerous in the rainy season, the bridge flooded, slippery with silt, sometimes cut off from the main road for weeks. You have to go slow there. As we all know. As we all always warned one another.

Careful on the drift!

Now I have only myself to remind. Face scanned by the passport controller. Charon behind bullet-proof glass.

Only once in my life did I see the drift totally dry. Skull-like stones, the dusty wattle bushes. No water, only rock. Just stood and stared at it, flabbergasted by the silence of the frogs, the disappearance of the whirligigs.

Gyrinus natans. The question always bothered me: What happens to the whirligigs, the little writers on water, when there is no water?

Such matters would not interest them, Mother. I could see their attention straying from the details, the topography of my first world, the thin, unsteady lines leading there, to your yard, Grootmoedersdrift. A little further down next to the drift, on the road's side, the labourers' cottages.

Dawid, would he still be there? Next to the turn-off to the farm, in the first of the cottages on the bank of the furrow?

Black fireplace and tin guitar. Wire-car world. White bone-whistle in exchange for a Dinky Toy. Was I inside once, twice? Gaat and I? With medicine, a little bucket of cinnamon porridge? The smell of soot and human bodies, the half-light. Shame, Gaat, but they don't even have beds. Never mind, Boetie, let be, let's go now, if you help one of them, you get stuck with a whole history before you know it.

A hanging bridge from Dawid's front door into the black-wattle wilderness on the opposite bank. Rickety and full of holes. Forbidden ever to set foot on it.

Flight AC 52 to Cape Town now boarding. Voyager for the sake of the voyage. Nomad without a flock. Safer like that. A listener outside the tent, an ear, an eye, that's all, that's enough. But who can play the ethnographer at his mother's deathbed?

When the inquisitive insisted, I sometimes played the draughtsman, roughly sketched on a second sheet of paper the house in which I grew up.

The homestead of Grootmoedersdrift, half H-shaped, the left leg shorter than the right. The stoep in front and on the east, the backyard open to the south, with storerooms, a servant's room. Gaat's room. In front two jerkin-head gables with big windows, Ma's room on the right, Pa's room left. The weathered doves in low relief under the overhang. Thatch. In front of the house to the north, the strip of level river-grazing up to the river's edge. Planted pasture for cattle, a seam of indigenous trees next to the water, wild olive—blaze at the core—(*Olea africana*), true yellowwood (*Podocarpus latifolius*).

The song. The other answer for my questioners. Fantasy for a snowed-in farmer. For reed pipe, for Jew's harp, with sniffles, wordless. Lord, am I up to this? All these years. Please fasten your seatbelts.

Rapidly rising range of hills on the other side of the river. Deep kloofs overgrown with protected bush, the old avenue of wild figs next to the two-track road. Poplar grove—whispering poplars. Yard with sheds, stables, milking-stables and feeding-stables. Ma's garden that she used to live for. Used to live. To the left, the dam. At the back to the south, on the other side of the drift and the dirt road, the dryland, for wheat and sheep. Smallish round-backed hills, the upper stretches cultivated, in between steep patches of rough scrub. Hills with plots of grass and soft brushwood for the sheep to overnight, and bluegum plantings around their drinking troughs.

Swill-trough. God, the word. Pa's word if he didn't like somebody. Swill-trough, dung-hole, choke-weed. My pompous headstrong old man, drilled the shit out of me with running marathons on farm roads. Obstacle courses through dongas and drinking troughs. Spleen-stitch. Inguinal hernia. Up and down those mountains. It will make a man of you. What would he think of me now, a woollen cap with six summer shirts in a suitcase, butterfly in the heart? Open and shut, open and shut go the wings. Are there windscreen wipers for melancholy? No electronic equipment, please.

Translations for *wolfneusgewels*, *rûens*, *droëland*, *drif*: jerkin-head gables, ridges, dry farming-land, crossing. Prosaic. Devise something: wolfnosed gables, humpbacked hills, dryland, drift. Always the laughter at the office, good-natured, collegial, at my attempts: grove of whispering poplars. I romanticise, they say. Quite a fan of the homely hymn, that's true. Homesick for the melody and so on. But that's only the half of it. The rest is granular precision, unsingable intervals.

Charon with passenger list. Dr de Wet, are you comfortable? Do you need assistance with your coat?

Everybody wears a coat.

Do they see through me nowadays, the older students? Do they want to set me talking, get me going? Do they think I need bloodletting, like a feverish horse, moonstruck lovers, inconsolables? What would they know in any case of such old folk remedies, a bunch of contemporary musicologists, what as much as suspect? Of the compulsion to tell? Of the subcutaneous refrains?

The bottom of the bottle.

Now ready for take-off. Please check that your seatbelt is securely fastened, baggage safely stowed away, emergency procedures in the seat in front of you.

For the most part I keep to the climate when they question me.

Sometimes drop something by accident, an impression, of the Breede River, *De Breede Rivier* above Malgas.

Aeolian harp.

1

It'll be the end of me yet, getting communication going. That's how it's been from the beginning with her.

This morning I had to stare and stare at the black box where it's been lying for eleven months. Eventually I managed to catch her eye, and point my stare, there, where the shiny black varnish of the box showed, under the pile of reading matter. Under the growing pile of little blue notebooks, under the *Saries*, under the *Fair Ladys*, under the *Farmer's Weeklys* on the dressing table in front of the stoep door, there!

At first she thought I wanted her to read to me. She smirked. It wasn't reading-aloud time. It wasn't even breakfast time yet, before eight, right after she'd wound the grandfather clock in the front parlour, right after I'd heard the door of the sideboard go tchick and she came in here with her little book.

She'd already marked the bit she wants to read tonight, the corner of the page emphatically dog-eared.

The blue booklets on the pile all seem thicker than they are because of all the dog-ears. Sometimes she says I have to guess which bit it's going to be. Then she says she could never have guessed everything she was going to read there. But sometimes she opens the book on her lap and recites what's written there, long stretches. As if they were rhymes, or a lesson. Then she asks me if it was good like that, whether I can remember when it happened.

As if I can reply.

She always checks to see whether she's left anything out, marks it with her red pen.

How long ago would she have started learning it by heart? Or does she invent bits as she goes along?

As if I can remember everything exactly as I wrote it there. Thirty, thirty-six years ago!

She tore out my inscription in the front of the first booklet and fixed it on the reading stand right up against my nose. *As directed by the Almighty God*, it says there, next to the other text which she wants me not to lose sight of. The table of my sickness. The table of symptoms, medicines and therapies.

She never removes them from there, the two sheets.

As if the one should be a constant reminder to me of what I'm suffering from.

As if the other is proof that everything she reads to me from the little books was written by myself.

As if the two documents belong to the same order of truth.

I'm sick of staring at the two tattered pieces of paper every time she removes my book or magazine from the reading stand and packs it away. Sick of having to listen too, because she spells it out aloud for me, presses her finger on it, on the table, on the dedication.

Symptom: constipation.

Medicine: Pink Lady.

Therapy: Exercise, increased intake of fluids.

As if I can do Canadian Air Force exercises.

As if, in these barren regions, there is anything that can quench my thirst.

As if medicine can help. You take medicine to get better.

The writing on the torn-out page doesn't even look like my handwriting to me.

As directed by the Almighty God, Ruler of our joint Destinies and Keeper of the Book of Life . . .

I was young. And it was not the first entry. The real beginning of it all I never wrote down.

Never felt up to revisiting those depths.

Not after I'd found out what I'd brought upon myself.

Where, in any case, does something like that begin? Your destiny? Where does it begin?

The 'dedication' I thought up much later, when things were going well for a while, just after Jakkie's birth. Then I inscribed it in the front of the first booklet on the inside of the cover. Date and all, 14 September 1960.

Now she wants to come and force it down my gullet. My unconsidered writing, on an empty stomach in my sickbed, and to come and confront me with my constipation. What's the sense of that?

As if I can protest.

As if I can eat.

Breakfast.

Can one call it breakfast?

I have no choice but to swallow it.

I heard her talk in the kitchen. Dawid was there and Julies and Saar and Lietja. They were waiting for Agaat to come and issue the order of the day. At eight o'clock sharp they have to fall in. They were talking loudly. Agaat was in a hurry. She wanted to go and silence them. They fall silent when they hear her approach.

I pointed with my eyes, the box, the box.

Just wait a while now, she said, later. She didn't catch my drift.

Do as I say, I gestured.

Now who's carrying on agn so ths mrning, she said.

A new thing, the speaking without vowels. Mocking me. Nastier than Jak ever was about the diaries.

She moved the bridge closer over the bed, brought the reading stand and set it up.

Do you want to read your covenant once more? Just can't get enough of it, can one? Perhaps it will give you an appetite.

That was a good start. She thought I wanted to read myself.

No, I could signal, that's not what I want to read.

That's my technique nowadays. Progress through misunderstanding. I just had to get the misunderstandings going first. The first would lead on to another until I had reached my goal. It's a kind of retarded logic, a breaking down of each of my intentions into the smallest intermediate steps. Gone are the days of the shortest distance between A and B. Now we're doing the detours, Agaat and I. By rolling my eyes at a pile of reading matter I can see to it that she ends up at the black box. I always have to fix her attention on the surface first. It's a start. And then I have to get her delving. This morning she obliged me, she put the pile of blue booklets aside and started rummaging through the magazines.

What do you want to read, Ounooi? She paged rapidly though a *Sarie*.

Four ways of getting your husband on your side and keeping him there.

No.

No, she said, I don't think so either.

I looked again at the pile on the dressing table.

She took a *Farmer's Weekly* and opened it.

New developments in the practice of crop and pasture rotation: The south-western districts after 1994? Nay what, you know all about that. What about: The future of small-grain cultivation in South Africa? That's just up your alley, Ounooi, the future.

Lietja laughed loudly in the kitchen. There was a jingling of milk cans. They're getting out of hand there in the kitchen, I have to go and check, said Agaat.

She clamped the magazine to the reading stand, on top of the torn-out sheet, on top of my symptomatic-treatment list, set it up more upright so that I could see, put my glasses on for me.

The future. She placed her finger under the words.

No, I signalled with my eyes, no, no, don't come with your silly games now.

Again she turned to the pile and went through the magazines.

Now where are all the *Fair Ladys* then, they were here?

She started to unpack the whole pile, fixing my eyes in the mirror.

Ounooi, you're making me late now. I don't see the *Fair Ladys*, wait, there's one here. Fine Foods for Fine Occasions.

It was the last magazine down. I forced her eyes down, still further down. There was the shiny black box now, open to the eye. She couldn't follow my glance in the mirror, had to turn round to see better where I was looking.

Tsk, she said and shook her head, no.

Yes, I said with my eyes.

She took out the contraption. It was still assembled just as she'd packed it away. She straightened my fingers and fitted it over my hand. It wasn't necessary to unfasten the buckles. All the brown leather bands were tightened to the first hole and the chrome wing nut was screwed in as far as it could go. A long piece of wire stuck up above the head of the nut like an antenna. The thing looks like a glove for handling radioactive waste. Long since been too big for me. Long since too heavy. Like all Leroux's gadgets that he comes peddling here, it works for a while and then no longer.

I looked at my hand. I braced myself. I gestured, pen please. And paper. I can't write on air.

Agaat looked about her.

Now she knew what I wanted to do but she pretended she'd forgotten where to find writing materials. It's been a long time since I wrote myself. When I made the lists, when we cleared the house, a year, year-and-a-half ago. Eventually I dictated and she wrote. Or she wrote, and with my last strength I ticked off what had to be thrown away. The blue booklets. I said throw out. She read the instruction and ignored me.

Now she's acting stupid. As if she doesn't regularly get out the clipboard to press on when making her latest lists, take out her red pen from the top pocket of her apron. And there's the pencil, hanging from

its string next to the calendar. She's always making notes. Writes them up everywhere. What do you want the people to eat at your funeral, Ounooi? Stewed tripe? So what do you want me to have inscribed on your headstone, Ounooi? *And then God saw that it was good?*

Yes or no I can signal. Or I can close my eyes.

She hauled out the clipboard from the lowest half-empty rack of the bookshelf.

Tsk.

The books fell over. She had to go on her knees to set them upright again. Shiny jackets and old canvas covers. Some of them were still my mother's. I threw out most of them in my great clearing-out. Agaat kept them. As she kept the diaries. She recited the titles as she put them back. With a straight voice, the whole list. *Late Harvest, The Mayor of Colesberg, Carnival of the Carnivores, Seven Days at the Silbersteins.* That was nothing. *Forty-three Years with the De Wets, Floodwaters in the Fall, On Veld and Ridge, Chronicle of Crow's Crag, Circles in a Forest, Straight Tracks in the Semi-desert, Turn-off, July's People, As I Lay Dying, The Downhill of the Day is Chill, She Who Writes Waits, The Long Journey of Poppie Nongena, Breeders Don't Faint,* tsk, try *The Midwife of Tradouw, This Life That Death, Miss Sophie Flees Forward, The Portrait of a Lady, The Story of an African Farm,* hmf, rather than *In the Heart of the Country.* That's what she read last, recently. Nay what, she said, she could farm up a piece of land better than the wretched old Johanna who lost her marbles for no reason at all, and she wouldn't let a bunch of forward kaffirs get her down. That was before she read *The Seed is Mine* which the woman from the library brought along last time. That shut her up. I know what was in her head. Fennel seed.

Like old acquaintances all the titles sounded as she put them back, like the names of family. She read them all to me in the last few months, or turned the pages on my stand so that I could read for myself. She'd read all the old ones herself long ago and first sampled all the new ones before reading them to me. She knew whole sections by heart. She said not one of them was as good a read as my diary, all you had to do was fill in the punctuation and write everything out in full, then you had a best-seller.

And then on top of that there are all Jakkie's books and magazines, sent on over the years, in which there are chapters and articles written by him. Agaat reads aloud from them regularly, very taken with her own importance, struggling over the long English words, but I've never really understood much of it. *Private Speech, Public Pain: The Power*

of Women's Laments in Ancient Greek Poetry and Tragedy, Mourning Songs of the Dirty Goddesses: Traces of the Lamia in Orthodox Baptismal Rites of the Levant, Echoes of the Troll Calls in Romantic Scandinavian Choir Music. Terribly obscure, all of it. Another one about the polyphonic wailings of Australian aboriginal women when somebody dies off. The stuff he finds to waste his time with, the child, after all, he has a perfectly good engineering qualification in aeronautics. Chucked into the ocean. For ethnomusicology, whatever that may be.

There was something written on the front page of the clipboard. Agaat looked to see what it was. She looked at me. She wanted to say something, I could see. She thought better of it. Ten pages she had to turn over. On every page her eyes took in the contents. Funeral arrangements to date. She wants to create work for herself. And for me.

She opened the clip and pulled out a clean sheet from underneath and slid it in on top. She let the clip snap shut loudly, tsk-ed again with her tongue.

Then she made a great show of burrowing in the dresser drawer for a pen, every gesture exaggeratedly emphatic. In the mirror I could see her pushing up her sleeve and testing the pen on the back of the little feeble hand. Provoking me on purpose, where was the red pen all of a sudden with which every day she underlined in my diaries, and annotated and rewrote on the counter-page? As if she were a teacher correcting my composition. As if I had to pass a test.

It writes, she said with a long jaw.

She placed the pen between my thumb and index finger and pressed them together as far as she could reach amongst the buckles and the leather and the screws. She pushed the clipboard in under my hand. It was a laborious arrangement. She had to push and pull and balance the splint and the pen and the board and my hand. She made a ridge in the bedspread to support the whole lot. As you do with a rag doll when you want to make her sit up in a chair. Pummel her in the ribs. Punch her in the chest. Head up. Tail down. Sit, doll, sit. Filled with sawdust. Or lupin seeds. Or clean white river sand.

Then she put her hand over mine, the strong hand. The effect was comical.

Ai, Ounooi, you're making life so difficult for yourself. How on earth do you think?

I could see what she was thinking. Haven't you perpetrated enough writing in your life? That's what she thought.

Be quiet, I said with my eyes, you just be quiet and leave me in peace. Take away your hand.

She jutted out her chin and replaced the Foamalite packing and the plastic in the box and closed the lid.

Tripple-trot out of here. In passing she snatched up her embroidery from the chair. I know what that means. That's the other punishment. Today I'll be seeing her only at meal times and medicine times. Otherwise she sits here with me for hours embroidering, a big cloth, I don't know what it is, looks complicated. She counts and measures as if her life depended on it, the whole cloth marked out in pins and knots. It's been carrying on ever since I haven't been able to get around by myself. Otherwise I would have investigated long ago. She's mysterious about it. Taunting at times. Sometimes she looks at it as if she herself can't believe what she's embroidering there. Or like now when she flounced out of here, she grabs it as if it's a piece of dirty washing that she wants to go and throw into the laundry basket, glares at me, as if I was the one who dirtied it.

All that was quarter of an hour ago. The grandfather clock in the front room struck. Quarter past eight.

Now I must begin. Now I must write. Now I must make it worthwhile. What I unleashed.

I gather my resources. I try to find handholds inside myself. Rye grass, klaaslouw bush, wattle branches to anchor myself against the precipice. Diehard species. I feel around inside me. There's still vegetation, there's water, there's soil.

To start I need a preamble. The preamble is just as important as the action itself.

Everything on this farm must be properly prepared, everything foreseen and anticipated so that no chance occurrence can distract you from your ultimate objective. That was the first commandment, has always been. I instructed Agaat accordingly.

You don't just blunder into a thing, you examine it from all sides and then you make an informed decision and plan it properly in distinct phases, always in tune with the seasons. And then you round off the phases one by one, all the while keeping an eye on the whole, the rhythms, the movements, just like rehearsing a piece of music.

That's how you retain control, that's how you prevent irksome delays at a later stage.

That's the one principle of a self-respecting farmer, especially for mixed farming. That's how you get results. That's how you build up property. With built-in rewards in the long and the short term so that you can have the courage to carry on. A foothold.

But my preamble here is not mine. It's been marked out for me on the surfaces of the room as Agaat has arranged it. Nothing has been

left to chance. Death is her objective. She has prepared it excellently. I couldn't have done it better myself.

First she emptied the room.

Everything redundant she carried out. To the cellar. I heard her bump and shift, here right under my bed, to make space for the stuff. The sofa and footstools, the doilies and cloths on the dressing table, the ornaments and wall hangings. The clothes horse, the hatstand, the walking stick stand, the walking frame, the wheelchair, the snows of yesteryear, the posies of dried everlastings.

So that she could move fast and clean easily, she said.

Because there shall be no dust or obstacle. It will be the best-managed death in history, you'll see, her eyes said. Her mouth was a thin line.

The carpet was taken out, the wardrobes with my coats and dresses, the chests of drawers with my jerseys and blouses.

I was the one who started it. I planted the idea of the great clearing-out in her head.

Only the bookshelf from Jakkie's room she carried in here to hold the extra reading matter. She selected all the books in it. And the television she brought in from the living room and took away again later because the contents would upset me, I ask you.

Perhaps she was the one who was upset.

There are already too many things happening in this room, she said, without our having to make space for *People of the South* and *The Bold and the Beautiful*.

Now she wheels it in only when she thinks I want to watch a video. But I no longer want to see Agaat's selections. *Ben-Hur*, *Mary Poppins*, *My Fair Lady*, *A Day in the Death of Joe Egg*.

The radio was permitted to stay. For the idle hours, she said. Morning service. Praise the Lord. Listener's Choice. *Moto perpetuo*. In these sacred halls. Almost time for Christmas carols. They've been starting earlier every year. Then Agaat will walk through the house again singing high and low with her descants and her second voices.

You like your music, don't you, Ounooi.

She switches the radio on and off. She selects the station. She selects the tune. Sometimes she pushes a tape into the slot. Not always what I want to hear. Red Indian croakings from Jakkie if she wants to irritate me.

That she left the three-panel dressing table, that's a miracle. It hunkers there like a museum piece, its dark wood conspicuous against all the other stark objects in white and chrome. I can see myself in the

central panel, the one that was put in later and reflects bluer than the others. She turned the dressing table exactly in that position for me.

So that you can keep yourself company when I'm not here, she said.

The drawers are empty now. But that wasn't my doing. I didn't have the heart to clear them. The trace of Chanel No. 5 and lipsticks which hovered in them, must have evaporated a long time ago. Sometimes I miss perfume. Would she have given it all to the servants?

It's the last time, Agaat said, on the morning of my birthday, go ahead and enjoy it. A woman has to look her best on her birthday, not so?

She marked the date on the calendar. 11 March 1996. Seventy years old.

Then she made me up for the guests. I could see them blanch when they came in here.

She never liked making me up. She had to do that from quite early on, when only my hands were paralysed, when we still went into town together.

But I know by now, birthdays always bring out the nastiness in her.

Then I looked like a blue-headed lizard, white spot between the eyes, the one I'm always given right there when she makes me up, to warn me against spying, to remind me of what I shouldn't have seen that time with my head against the whitewashed window sill of the outside room. Mascara. Blazing Bat on my drooling mouth. My neckbrace doused with six kinds of perfume and the powder-puff creating clouds around my head. And drowned the sense in odours. Just about choked in powder that day. So then she had an excuse. So then she tipped out the drawers of the dressing table into black plastic bags.

Claims she was acting on advice from Leroux, but she's always been one step ahead of him.

There must be nothing to irritate the nose, he's supposed to have said to her.

We've thought of that already, she said. No dogs, no plants, no dusty shoes or dirty things ever enter this room. And from now on no face powder, no perfume, no under-arm sprays that can make her sneeze or snort.

She had to stop herself. It was one of those days.

So now she'll just have to shine and stink, was on the tip of her tongue. But Mum and calamine it was to be.

Keep a good record of everything, Leroux said, and Agaat pointed out the farm calendar where she'd long been making notes in the empty columns. With her hands clasped in front of her she listened while he read out her list. Urine, bowel movements, eat, sleep, headaches, phlegm,

temperature, breathing, state of mind, force of deglutition, medicine, exercise.

She'll want to judge me in as many categories as she can think up, that's certain. Sphincter pressure, melting-point, share suction, sowing density, rust resistance, siphon level, tailwind, drainage slope, crimp index, inverse proportion, *Sphaeropsis malorum*, core rot. O rose thou art sick.

I can see that you're a very good nurse, Agaat, said Leroux after studying the calendar. Excellent records. Keep up the good work.

And she did. Unstoppable she was. She unscrewed the inside door of my bedroom because my new bed wouldn't pass through.

Don't be stupid, I wanted to say, bring it along the stoep and through the swing-door. But by that time I couldn't really speak all that well any more.

Perhaps it's better like this. Now I can hear everything that goes on in the house. I can hear Agaat approaching. I can hear what her foot-steps sound like. I can adjust myself.

My bedroom door was the last door she unscrewed. The other doors in the house disappeared one by one.

So that Ounooi shouldn't have to turn doorknobs, so that Ounooi can get in and out easily with her walking sticks and her walking frame and her wheelchair, she said.

But that was just one half of the reason. The other half is her own problem, Agaat doesn't like closed doors. And she doesn't like cluttered surfaces.

She carried in a melamine surface on trestles and on that everything we need is arranged in rows and piles against the wall. Packs of swabs, neckbraces for every occasion, quick-drying sheets, mattress protectors, clean hospital gowns, bedpans. Under the trestle table are three enamel pails with lids.

There's a triple-level stainless hospital trolley with washbasin and clean cloths and towels and disinfectants and medicinal soap.

And a smaller trolley of hard plastic with removable baskets containing my medicines and pills in bottles and boxes. Fresh water in a carafe. Sponges, cotton wool, ear-buds, ointment for my lips that dry out, paper towels for accidents, tissues for drool, for tears. Things get disordered quickly in the trolley. Agaat tidies it every day, sees to it that all the bottles and tubes are tightly shut.

And then there's the bridge, a broad flat shoulder on one steel leg that fits over my bed, and on which my little bowls of food and my spout-jugs full of thickened tea can stand. And my reading stand.

Above my bed is a reading lamp, 100 watts with an adjustable head on a long arm, which can extend.

Enough light in the shearing shed, says Agaat, you don't dip a sheep in the dark.

But normally she doesn't switch it on at night. Only when absolutely necessary.

Next to my bed is a wooden stool on which she sits when she's feeding me. In front of the window is her upright chair on which she sits when she reads to me or when she embroiders. She brought it in from her outside room in the backyard. She never sits there anymore anyway she says, she only washes and changes there. It's now just her locker room, she says.

She sleeps in the passage. She needn't, she knows that. There are many rooms in the house.

All the rooms of my house, the progress to where I am now, the history leading to this last room, the domain remaining to me. Shrinking domain. I'm locked up in my own body, my limbs form a vague contour under the bedspread.

Now my preamble stretches over my feet. They're flat, they lie open. The bedspread subsides over my shins. My kneecaps form two bumps, the flesh has fallen from my thighs, between my hips there is a hollow. Further than that I cannot see myself. My neck is locked at the angle determined for me by Agaat. Her pillows are stacked like bunkers around me. In the mirror I can see something, a shadow of myself, my sloping shoulders, my face on which my features appear vague, as if an artist had rubbed his sleeve over a preparatory study, or flattened the modelling clay with his palm. Because the beginning failed, because the first attempt came out wrong. Because the underlying structures were not clear.

I resist. Give me a chance. Let me try myself, a self-portrait, an autobiography, life and times of Milla de Wet, her place of origin, her purlieu, on Grootmoedersdrift, her hereditary home. An honest likeness. From the mirror, over my feet, along the length of my paralysed body, all the way into my head. Between my temples, above my nose, behind the frontal bone, there.

In the marrowy pulp I feel for the beginning, for an inspissation, the graininess of a germ cell. I continue only until I can imagine fine threads in the uniform texture. I roll them between my fingers until they find a grip in my imagination. And then, carefully, so as not to disturb their vague beginnings, I start drawing them together in strings, until they're thick enough to plait, first three, then nine, then twenty-seven and so

on. Three hundred and sixty-three. Until I'm ready to feed the whole coil securely into the hollow of the brainstem, into the hole of the first vertebra. I wait, I hold everything together well, before I pull it through and spread it open on the other side like a sheaf. Finer and finer I imagine the filiations, a mesh just below the surface, until I'm sure that all points are served by my will.

I want to write.

To the string running down my right arm I devote particular attention. I imagine that it's dark brown. I gather it into a thick smooth bundle, shiny as kelp in the swell, an elegant tassel at the far end, long sensitive strings of seaweed with fine ramifications in each of the first three fingers of my right hand.

I wait for the right moment. Nothing to lose. Breathe in, send the signal, breathe out for the leap.

Write!

With precise electrical flashes I mark each bight of the current, from high up in the brain pulp through all the plaitings of nerves I've laid down in their circuits. With extra momentum I force the command down into my hand to the furthest extremities.

Write!

I manage to draw one leg of the m before the pen slips from my fingers and rolls over the bedspread and falls from the bed.

My hand lies in the splint like a mole in a trap.

...

The first time you slept with Jak was the day after he came to declare his intentions to your parents. He was eager to get away that morning after the engagement, eager to get away from under your mother's eyes after the sermon he'd endured from her the night before, and especially eager to get his hands on you.

You knew it, Milla Redelinghuys, you played him.

How did you experience him then? Can you really remember it?

Don't forget the keys, Ma called. She jingled the great bunch of keys to the Grootmoedersdrift homestead behind you as you walked down the steps of the stoep to Jak's red Spider.

Catch! She called and threw the bunch at him.

You were watching him closely all the time, that much is certain. He snatched the bunch out of the air with a flourish. Ostentatiously, from a height, he dropped it in your lap, showing off to your parents, seeing you off on the steps. Frail they seemed against the house and the sky. But you didn't want to notice that, you looked down at the keys

nestling between your thighs in the dip of your dress. You jingled with your fingers amongst them, you fondled the old worn key-heads. The front door, the kitchen, the loft, the outside rooms. You imagined how you were going to unlock all the doors.

Thanks for everything! Jak called and waved.

Old Sweet 'n Sour, he said under his breath.

Jak, please, she's my mother, show some respect, you said. But you laughed with him, because she'd been at her worst the night before. It started at dinner when Jak put the expensive engagement ring on your finger. Diamonds are forever, he said. Too expensive, you could see Ma thinking, too showy. It was a burl of a diamond set in gold. You could read her mind. That kind of money would have been better put to some practical use, something for the farm that had now become yours because you were getting married. But she said nothing. Because you who hitherto could never find favour in her eyes, would at last be complete. Somebody's wife. In the normal course of events, somebody's mother.

And then, money wasn't everything, work rather, toil and sweat and grit. There was a great deal to be done on Grootmoedersdrift before it could be called a model farm. That you never hid from Jak. And you didn't fool yourself either, from the start you expected him to get cold feet. He was no farm boy. His hands were soft, he was the only son of the GP in Caledon, schooled at Bishops to be a gentleman. He would have to learn everything from scratch. From you and your family he would have to get it, because both his parents had died young.

Ma was sceptical when you first told her about him. About how he accompanied you to music concerts and plays in Cape Town. Pure flimflammy, your mother said, show me the man who prefers music and drama to rugby. You wanted to ask, what about Pa, but Pa put his finger to his lips and you bit back your words. And it was true, Jak got bored after the second act. Your mother was adamant. After Jak had got his degree in law at Stellenbosch, she said, you had to see to it that he did a diploma at Elsenburg Agricultural College to prepare him for farming. Either that, or he doesn't set his foot on my land, she said.

You knew you had to manoeuvre things very carefully between your mother and Jak. And you had to make sure that neither felt they were drawing the short straw.

Did you think then of what you yourself could lose in the process? Can you remember it clearly now, after all that has happened? Then was different. Then you were a winner. Was there love? Enough for a start, you thought. Jak blossomed under your encouragement. You

were in love with his pretty mouth, with his boyish way of doing things. And he would grow with you. That was what you believed. You didn't doubt his desire, from the start of your courtship you'd really had to lock up your rubies.

I want to see your papers, young man, Ma said on the evening of the engagement, and I'll ask you a few questions myself so I can hear whether they taught you anything at that college. She glared at you both in turn.

I hope you're as sensible as you're attractive.

Jak was riled, even though you'd warned him beforehand, only one person had a voice in the house where you grew up, and that was your mother.

Your father got up and went and stared out of the window. You kicked off your shoes and under the table you rubbed your feet against Jak's ankles. After a while he took your hand under the table. You pressed your leg hard against his during the whole sermon on the correct way of working with sheep and wheat and cattle. You stared in front of you at the table, at the dark grain of the wood. You'd never been able to look her in the eye when she spoke like that. It was as if she were talking about more than just the demands of mixed farming.

You protested, laughingly, trying to lighten the atmosphere.

Ma, you'll scare Jak off, talking like that.

He's man enough, she said. I thought you said he was such a good talker himself? But I'm glad to see he can listen as well. The expression on her face said: He'd better, otherwise what do you want him for?

What did I want Jak for? Wasn't it clear to her? He was rich, he was well educated, he was attractive, witty and well-spoken, and well-liked by people. He was everything that you felt you were not.

But even though you felt insecure at times, and even though you weren't exactly the most beautiful of women, you knew you weren't stupid. You had a BA with languages behind your name, with your extra music and drama subjects completed almost to licentiate level. In addition you had plenty of practical experience of farming. The two of you would be an asset to the Overberg, not only as farmers but also for the cultural life in the region. And you knew that he also thought he was getting a good bargain in you. He said you suited him, short but sharp and could carry a tune on top of it.

Your father observed it all ruefully. The most important thing is for you to be happy and healthy, my child, he said, the rest is incidental, and don't neglect your music. Once you've moved in and settled over the mountain, you must come over every Friday evening, then

we can listen to music. Remember, my whole collection will be yours one day.

Jak listened to your father with wary respect, they didn't really take to each other, you could see that. However fond you were of your father, you were irritated with him that weekend with his sentimentality and his reserve, there was a new kind of energy running now, and new priorities.

You're not scared of becoming my farmer boy, are you, Jak, I said as you drove away through the main street of Barrydale in the direction of the pass.

You were on your way to show him the farm over the mountain for the first time. You knew you'd have to open on a high bid.

Your 'farmer boy'! Jak snorted, but he looked down at the keys between your legs, and you knew he was snared, tail and trotters and all.

My Farmer then, with a big F, you said. You placed your hand high up on his thigh and leant over and kissed him in his ear.

You're a slypuss, he said. Move closer. I have my own schemes for you.

And you intend to tame me, if I understand rightly, you teased. You stroked his thigh.

So, Milla Redelinghuys, your story was launched. The situation provided you with an interesting kind of titillation. So here you have two fish hooked, you thought. A farm and a husband. But you didn't feel entirely at ease. Without the bait, would you have caught the fish?

So tell me again everything we're going to farm with, you and I? Jak asked.

You counted your words, you fed him a few trivial facts that wouldn't alarm him. You paddled your hand lightly, to the beat of the information you were feeding him.

Ma kept a couple of hundred merinos and a few Jersey cows on Grootmoedersdrift. There was a foreman on the farm, OuKarel Okkenel, of the Suurbraak Okkenels, and his half-grown son Dawid, who also lived on the farm. OuKarel was a widower, a respectable man, distant descendant of the Scottish mechanics who came out in 1817 under Benjamin Moodie. OuKarel sowed a few morgen of wheat for Ma every year for a share. She was worried that the farm was being neglected. After Pa inherited his land and they went to farm on Goedbegin, they used to go and check every week that everything was running smoothly on Grootmoedersdrift. Ever since you were small, she and Pa drove over the mountain at shearing time and lambing time and harvest time, and stayed on in the old homestead for weeks on end to

keep an eye and to take things in hand. Often it was only you and Pa, those were your best times, he taught you opera arias and took you on expeditions in the veld. Your father with his long stride and his perfect hearing, you couldn't believe that he had turned into the lopsided old gent with the shuffling gait.

They're getting old, you said to Jak, they can no longer keep crossing the mountain and manage two farms. We're getting married at the right time. We have to take over the wheat farming from the Okkenels, the local market is famished for fine white flour now after the war, we have to extend the sheep and cattle herds, there's excellent grazing next to the river for a dairy herd, we must make of Grootmoedersdrift what it can be, a textbook example of mixed farming, we have to live up to the name.

You moved your hand and massaged the inside of his thigh.

You're driving me mad, Jak said. He squirmed in his seat and accelerated even more.

Don't get carried away, darling, stay on the road, you said.

He tried to keep himself in check. He shook his head, brought up last night's conversation.

Lynx-hide thongs! What kind of story was that last night, he asked, I hope you don't take after that mother of yours too much, you'll finish a man off.

You laughed, you pinched the soft flesh of his inner thigh.

Well, I don't know who you take after, you teased back. You took a deep breath and said it, you were shy, but you said it.

You're very close to finished before I've even started, was what you said. With your eyes you gestured towards his fly.

You knew what the effect would be. He was the kind who liked off-colour comments. At times he said things to you that made you blush, but you never went too far when you were petting. You were a virgin and that was your price.

Good heavens, Milla, Jak exclaimed, tell me more!

There's a sentinel before my mouth, you teased.

Just you wait, Jak said, you'll end up with the sentinel in your sweet-talking mouth.

You weren't altogether sure what he meant but you laughed along with him.

Jak was right about your mother. She had finished off your father. He'd become ever more silent with the years. Must have been ill already the evening of the engagement. You could tell from his reticence while your mother took out the maps and spread the papers of

Grootmoedersdrift on the dining room table. It had been her ancestral land for generations back in her mother's line, from the Steyn and the Spies lines. They were the ones, according to her, who planted the wild fig avenue there and traced the foundations of the homestead with lynx-hide ropes.

You don't throw away your birthright, your mother said to Jak, that which your ancestors built up in the sweat of their brow, that you look after and that you live up to.

Yes, you said and winked at your father. You knew he knew, like you, what her next sentence would be.

Those were people who had to hack bushes and stack stones. There was no time for sweet talk and twaddle, you said, all three of you.

It was your mother's favourite expression.

You could see Jak glancing around, puzzled, not knowing what was happening.

It's in Kamilla's blood, you must realise, Jak, she steamed ahead. Her great-great-grandmother farmed there all alone for thirty years after her husband's death, way before the days of Hendrik Swellengrebel. There was a woman who could get a grip and hit home, blow for blow. She fixed Jak with a glare like a bayonet. If you can't do that, young man, then you'd better stand aside because then you won't do, then you're just a nuisance to others.

You were ashamed. You twined your fingers through Jak's and leant over him, so that your breasts rested on his shoulder while you were pretending to study the map. You knew the map by heart. Ever since you were a little girl your mother had slid it out of its long sheath to show you the farm that would be yours one day.

Jak heard her out meekly, his face expressionless. Now, as you entered the pass, he was openly mocking.

Once upon a time, long ago, when the world was young, in the time of the Lord Swellengrebel, he commenced, there was a great-great-grandmother Spies, a boer woman without equal . . .

He changed down to a lower gear on the uphill.

. . . And she called her farm Grootmoedersdrift after herself and laid out its boundaries with, can you guess with what? With lynx-hide thongs!

How does that sound for a beginning? He looked at you.

I particularly liked the bit about the woman who could get a grip and hit home, blow for blow. Tell me more about that.

You started rubbing his groin. The first time you'd ever done a thing like that. Jak lost his head completely, caught off guard, he took the

pass as if were a race track. The car kicked up stones. It was still the old pass, in 1946, with narrow hairpins, nowhere a kerb. Every now and again Jak would glance at you and you glanced back. If you had so many things in your head, you wondered to yourself, what must he not make of it all?

Slow down, Jak, you said, it's a pass.

What will you give me?

Anything you ask.

Don't you know?

I can guess, you said. You tugged open the buckle of his belt.

He looked at you in surprise, groaned.

So, and what are you going to give me in exchange? You wanted to know.

Anything you ask.

And don't you know?

I'm not as clever as you.

Well, in the first place you must slow down.

But you're making me want to get somewhere very fast!

You removed your hand. He took it back and you resisted, but not too much, so that he could put it where he wanted it.

Right, I'll slow down, he said, and in any case, it looks as if you've got a watermelon lorry on your side.

Some way ahead on the pass, with a long line of cars following, a lorry filled with spanspek and watermelon was trundling along.

No, it's you who has the watermelon on your side, you said, and pulled open his fly and put your hand inside.

My God, woman, Jak said, and threw back his head and closed his eyes for a moment.

Keep your eyes on the road, De Wet, you said.

That's what you said, but you thought: I'm the one who directs everything, the roughly ranked rock faces, the dark waterway far below, the curves in the road, the clouds far above.

So what problems are these that your mother talks of, there on Grootmoedersdrift? Jak asked with a charged voice, and swallowed.

He shook his head as if he were seeing stars. You had a firm grip on him, long-term promises in your grasp.

Tulips, you said, and sat forward so that you could work your hand in under his testicles. After that you could never get enough of it. The contrast between the silky shifting balls and the immense length of the erect flesh above. You were fascinated by it, surprised that you knew what to do.

There are wild tulips next to the river, and if the cows eat them and they drink water afterwards, then they die as if you'd fed them arsenic. They're little bulbs. You have to take them out by hand. If you plough them they just multiply.

Well then, said Jak, sounds easy enough. What else?

It's too wet down there next to the river.

Hmmm, rather wet than dry, he teased.

The cows get sores and fungi and things on their hooves from it. The horses get mud-fever.

Mud-fever? Never heard of it. So what can one do, my handy farm wench?

Drain, drain extensively. In any case, you can't plant grazing on waterlogged soil.

Still doesn't sound like a disaster to me.

Well, and then there are the slopes on the dryland. It's too steep to plough there. It washes away. We need contours there and terraces. And run-offs must be stabilised and grass courses laid on for the drainage.

You turned towards him and fumbled open his clothing and pulled down his underpants and added your other hand and made a quiver with your fingers.

Stabilised. Jak forced the word out.

It's a surveyor's job, you said, and it will take months.

You reckon, Jak said. God, I can't hold out any longer!

He sat forward and accelerated, and with one hand folded your hands tighter around his penis. Between your legs it felt warm, your head was ringing.

You were only half aware of the road, the few cars ahead of you, the lorry.

Hold on, said Jak and started overtaking.

Jak, careful! You shouted, but you were feeling reckless, floating, a regent of the whole Tradouw, the near side and the far side of the mountain, in the valleys next to the rivers and over the roundbacked hills from the Heidelberg plain as far as Witsand. It swam in front of your eyes. Everything your domain. You felt your mouth, your throat, there was a tang on your tongue as if you'd eaten radishes.

In a shower of stones Jak pulled off the road in a lay-by on the mountain's side and pressed you to him and kissed you and stroked your breasts. You thought of stopping him, the car's roof was open and you were visible from the road. But you didn't really care. You had a fantasy that your mother would see you. See with her own eyes how ownership and history and heritage all were finding their course,

as it was predestined, with the brute energy of a good start. That was your movie. As you'd always wanted it, as you thought your mother had wanted it.

What other problems? Jak panted in your ear. He was wild, out of control, he tried to mount you and get inside you but the gear lever was in the way and the space too confined.

Lynxes in the kloofs, you said. You bit him in the neck.

More?

Bearded vultures. They peck out the eyes of the newborn lambs.

You took your breasts out of your bra and pressed his head against them. You immersed him in them. He had to surface for breath. Something about his neck and head seen from above looked like that of a little boy. His mouth, the irresistible mouth of Jak, now desperate and trembling, endeared him to you. His voice was hoarse.

I will do everything, he said. Plough and sow and shear and milk, I promise.

And help me make a garden?

And help you make a garden.

Like paradise?

Like paradise.

And never leave me?

And never leave you.

You pushed him away gently. You stroked his head to calm him. You wanted to drive and get to the other side. On the other side of the mountain you would lie down for him, on your property, as it had to be in your story-book.

You helped him to arrange his clothing. Breathe deeply, you told him.

I don't have to tell him everything now, you thought, he'll get the whole picture in time.

You were the only child and heir of your mother, and your farm was the most difficult one. Your land-hungry cousins would inherit your father's farms. They claimed they wanted no part of the farm beyond the Tradouw in The Spout, as the area was known among the farmers. They were small deciduous-fruit farmers in the Barrydale district. They were intent on helping to put bigger and bigger sections of Pa's farms under irrigation for peaches and vine.

No thank you, they said when your mother wasn't around, Grootmoedersdrift is a nightmare. You'll end up on the bones of your backside there with all the capital outlay you'll have to make, the money you'll have to borrow, the time it'll take you to get the farm arable, and all the hay you'll have to make to pay your debts on top of it all.

You were pleased that your father's family wasn't present the evening of the engagement. All three cousins coveted your farm above all else on earth. They could make life difficult for Jak. You'd told him that, too.

Now you want to feed me to those cousins of yours as well, Jak said when at last you got up from the table, your mother's bad enough. The house was quiet. Your mother's house was always filled with that dense, ominous silence. Jak stood in front of the mirror in the guest room and ran his hand over his face as if he wanted to make sure that everything was still in place after his confrontation with his new mother-in-law.

You stood behind him, flung your arms around his shoulders, you were just glad the evening was over.

I know everything about farming, you whispered in his ear, I grew up with it, I'll help you. I'll show you everything tomorrow. Now rest, you're tired.

You nestled up against him, but his body was tense. There was something in his voice, in what he said then, that you didn't want to hear, you thought you were imagining things.

Yes, he said, you'd better, I can't wait, tomorrow's the day, you'd better teach me and you'd better help me so that I can get the taste of it. And you'd better show me everything. I want to see where I'll be farming. I can't wait. Seeing that I've allowed myself to be set up in a golden frame here.

That was the day that you crossed the Tradouw pass for the first time with Jak de Wet, the great Tradouw, the deep Tradouw, the way of the women in the Hottentot language, as your father had explained to you when you were little.

You were a real woman now, a ring on your finger. Now the two of you just had to get to the other side. You were excited about it. So many times you had fantasised about how it would be to make love to him, to lie with him, to kiss him for endless hours, feel his back under your hands.

Oh lord, no, not again, Jak swore.

You were behind the watermelon lorry again.

That's what you get for canoodling in a lay-by, my dearest Jakobus, you said.

Now the blue fumes of the exhaust were in your face. It was a ramshackle affair, full of dents and scratches, painted over by hand, and patched.

Just signal that you want to pass, you said, then maybe he'll pull off at the next lay-by.

Jak hooted and gestured and flicked his lights, swore.

It happened very fast. The lorry swerved to the left. The load shifted. Watermelons over the railing, bouncing all over the road, red flesh all over the windscreen of the Spider.

You were too close. You were going too fast. You grabbed the steering-wheel.

Don't brake, don't brake! you yelled, you'll skid, keep close to the mountain!

Old lessons from previous experiences, your mother's words.

The car jerked to a halt, cut out. Jak was stunned. You sat there for a while, watched the lorry driver trying to clear the road. Then Jak started the car again and you drove off slowly, stupefied with shock.

Fortunately, you said, you did the right thing.

You did, Jak said. He looked at you quickly and looked away.

Then he started.

I would have stepped on the brake and tried to pass on the right if you hadn't stopped me.

In his voice was the slightest undertone of a sulk.

You were wonderful, you consoled him, you drive well, I feel safe with you.

You shifted up your skirt and took his hand and pressed it between your legs so that he could feel how wet you were. All the way to Grootmoedersdrift he drove with one hand and touched you with the other. In your lap the homestead keys jingled as he moved his hand.

You closed your eyes, but you couldn't banish the image of the spilling spattering scattering melons from your eyes. The whole car smelt of it.

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