

The Voices Who Live in Us

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My mother writes ...¹

One morning a man who owed my husband a substantial amount of money, pitched up in a rattling, worn-out bakkie.

‘My husband is not here,’ I said. ‘No, it’s okay, Antie, I just brought the uncle a sirprais.’ And he took some scaffolding down and a white wooden box. ‘Doesn’t she look beautiful, Antie?’

‘Are there bees in it?’ I ask carefully. ‘Tjok and blok, my antie, tjok and blok. You see, this hive will create three, four other swarms a year and soon the uncle will have a whole bee farming business.’

‘But bees sting!’ I interrupted. ‘Sting?’ he seemed utterly astonished. ‘These bees do not sting, Antie. These ones are not the small nasty kind of bee, it is the fat striped one. When they know you, they actually fly out of the hive towards you to welcome you...’

We both heard my husband’s bakkie coming up the road and before I could say anything, the money borrower was back in his own bakkie and revving away. My suspicion was correct, the uncle was not pleased about this goldmine dropped in his yard.

‘Who does he think will work with these bees?’ he asked angrily. And to my own surprise I said: ‘I. I will work with them.’ And yes, there it was: in my mind’s eye I could see how I was marketing hundreds of bottles with honey under my own label; how I would secretly eat life-strengthening queen bee jelly, while he just doddered around on his kierie; how I would become an expert in the growing philosophy around bees, attend symposiums on bees... I would even pay off all our corporation debt if the uncle was nice to me.

I carefully carried the hive and its pedestal to the orchard and took delight in seeing the masses of white almond blossoms, the first flaring of the early Dawn peaches. I positioned the hive so that it also had a view of the flowering bluegums nearby. How happy these bees would be when they send out their first scouts.

That same day I bought a new hive so that my flock could expand. In the mornings, instead of concentrating on school sandwiches, my thoughts were with that small community outside among the trees. I began to read up on bees, and turned warm with thoughts about that immense, invisible mighty radiation of the queen bee sending hundreds of workers to and fro in rites of duties. It seemed like a transcendent kind of love of which we humans in our blunted lives knew nothing. I began to talk about bees, used them as metaphors to brighten up all the platitudinous conversations around me. I found that I looked people burningly in the eye when, like a new convert, I explained the omnipresence of bees in life and literature, not to talk of the Bible.

* * *

It's my first visit home after spending a year abroad. As the rented car takes the high road from the local airport, my eyes throw themselves obsessed on the landscape of my youth. The world is all wintersky and grass. I grab the steering wheel – clawing at the colour of that specific wintergrass – fondling, nestling my senses in the endless plains with their blinding blondness and soft-seeded grassplumes flaxened by frost. I stop. I get out and breathe the pure swirl of air and blessed depths of veld.

This is the landscape of my bones. Its vast expanse of sky, its undulating grass horizons made me. I'm of it.

The N1 road leads north from Bloemfontein to Kroonstad, the small northern FreeState town in the middle of the country, where I grew up. My sister and two of my brothers still live there. And my 89-year-old mother. Although the two of us corresponded the past year with ordinary old-fashioned letters, I haven't seen her for a long time.

The two-hour drive to Kroonstad is marked by my favourite sites and I greet them like long lost relatives. Oh, there's that clump of thorn trees where I once saw the amber smear of a jackal; here is that plain that has no single human blemish—no wire, no border, no telephone pole, not even trees, just a lush of rustling grass; and beyond this farm with its eucalyptus cluster, I will see the transparent smokeblue tips of the far away Maluti mountains, leaking their blue as air.

Yes, and suddenly my neck flows, the seams of my body loosen, my wrists feel light as spittle, this is where I found my tongue, where my marrow was made, where the I, who is poet, was moulded.

It's already dusk when I enter the town. The weak streetlights suddenly seem inadequate to negotiate potholes, dirt stretches and the enormous sombre bulks of transport lorries that have parked along the main street for the night. The railway system has more or less collapsed and most of the freight is carried by trucks ceaselessly shredding the smaller tar roads of the country.

My mother is sitting at her table with her back to me. Her neck scrawny under clipped grey hair. She turns and stares at me. She doesn't bat an eyelid. 'Your hair looks rejected. What's wrong with the Germans?' We both burst into laughter, and I hold her, but it's hump I hold and bones brittle with old age, desperation and loneliness. We talk until late in the night, her carefully nurse-planned night structure completely disrupted. Just before midnight, after I switched off the light, I hear a commotion at the door. It opens and there she stands with her walking frame: 'I'm just making sure that it's truly *you* who are here.'

The next morning when I open the door, she's already sitting in her favourite chair, straight-up and neatly dressed. 'It's so wonderful to look at that door,' she says, 'knowing that it will open any minute with a child of mine walking through it.'

She gets up, moves to the kitchen to cook her special maize meal porridge for us on a primus. 'No electricity,' she says as both of us see how the sleeve of her blouse suddenly catches flame. She seems unable to move her hand, I dash everywhere, Oh God, no water in the taps, I yell but Regina Nqhabati with calm deftness rips the blouse open, pulls it off and smothers the bundle of flames in the basin using some leftover coffee from that morning.

As we sit down for breakfast, she asks: 'Do you shit in the mornings or later in the day?' My mother is a fearless and ferocious swearer, but for a moment I'm lost: 'What on earth are you talking about?' 'We are without water. I have one big bottle of drinking water, but that's for tea and drinking. If you shit in the mornings, then you must come with me out to the farm to shit there. We can also wash between our legs there. But if you are an afternoon shitter, you will have to go later by yourself. The only problem is that by then it is the turn of the rest of the family.'

Apparently, it happens often that the town is without water and those who can afford to drive out to nearby farms for their ablutions, the rest fall ill. My mother's nostrils flare: 'To think that the farm's main activity now is flushing-away a daily avalanche of communal defecations! And you cannot even regard it as a harvest, bringing an income ...'

Despite several dams in the beautiful river flowing past the town, it seems that they are mostly silted up and the one that is still working had a pump stolen as part of the massive

copper-theft industry in South Africa. Apart from not having enough water to supply the town, undiluted sewerage from nearby towns and townships is running unhindered into the depleted river anyway and the municipality does not have funds for purification.

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About two months before the South African war officially ended (31 May 1902), affidavits were taken from women about transgressions experienced at the hands of British soldiers and their armed black groups.

In his make-or-break strategy in 1901 Kitchener released 100 columns of between 1200 and 2000 soldiers plus armed African mounted scouts to sweep the countryside² creating an army with a 'gargantuan appetite'.³

Thousands of men 'overwhelming young and unmarried, in an institution designed to turn boys into men, could prove their masculinity through scorn for domesticity'.⁴ By the end of the war, many female-headed households had very little left to plunder except their bodies.

So apart from the usual plunder, killing of stock and abduction, there were testimonies of 24 incidences of sexual assault and rape. These became part of the Havenga papers which had a 25-year embargo that was lifted in 1982.

Although it is often assumed that rape annihilates agency, this small band of unknown and forgotten women verbalised the ways in which that notion was resisted. They accomplished not only their sheer survival on desolated farms (where at least family members were not dying like those in the concentration camps), by regularly negotiating survival and escapes from armed men or dealing with the after-effects of their wounded bodies and minds, but also chose to tell their stories before the men in such a way and not another, telling and also not-telling.

Individuals testifying about rape often have complex motives and agendas, experience a wide variety of pressures and expectations . . . Fears of reprisal, concerns about reputation, private enmities, as well as love – all these emotions and others could have some bearing on how a tale is told.

Close reading of these affidavits overwhelms one with the force with which they foreground sexual violence and its complex relationships with power, vocabulary, event and context: how they tell what has happened so that they can live with it, while simultaneously not hampering the glimpses of a future that their husbands / families / communities might have when their words are being used to seek some kind of justice.

Two of these incidences occurred on farms near where my mother lives in Kroonstad: Burnettsland and Stavoren. I visited both of these farms. Anna Geertruide de Jongh was with her mother on the farm Burnettsland on the night that three black men, searching for Boers on behalf of the British, hammered at the farmhouse door. One of them grabbed the nineteen-year-old and unmarried Anna, threw her on the floor, lifted her clothes with one hand and pushed her upper body down with the other. Both Anna Geertruide and her mother, Anna Catharina, gave testimony to magistrate H. Potgieter on 20 February 1902.

There is much muddling in these two versions. The young, unmarried and probably sexually inexperienced Anna Geertruida admits that she could only 'fight back' when her breath returned, and that at times she lost consciousness. She also felt the penis against her genitals, yet 'believes' that she was not raped. The mother says that 'I do not know whether he achieved his goal, because I was out of my mind with fear and anguish', yet in the next sentence she says 'while he was busy in this way wanting to rape the girl called Anna' and later 'I would rather see my daughter being carried away as a corpse than see her raped like this.'

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But in the mean time the new beehive remained empty. I didn't want to take out any honey as it might distract them from forming a new swarm for the empty hive. Fortunately, one morning a big swarm of bees was hanging on a pear tree. I sprinkled

sugar syrup in the new hive, caught the swarm and let them carefully down into their new home. The next morning, bright and early, I was there. Did you have a good night's rest, fellows? Have you settled in, my friends? Is the lavatory in order? All the plates on the stove working? I lifted the lid slowly. Dead silence. I looked deeper: gone, disappeared, completely and utterly, like flat dwellers that had not paid their rent.

A second swarm moved in under the roof and that was much more difficult to loosen, but the next day – gone. Perhaps the new hive still smelled too much of paint. I scrubbed it off, caught another swarm, but again, poeffff the next day. I began to feel personally affronted that no bee wanted to live in my hive. I discussed it at the highest level of the co-op with de Beertjie, the man behind the counter who sold me the new hive. He recommended a few home-remedies, but while I unsuccessfully worked through them I remembered that he once, in an offhand manner, said that one should first – if Mevrouw would pardon me saying so – take a leak in such a new hive. It gets rid of a) the new shopsmell of the hive and b) they come to know the smell of their boss, the very one who will in future rid them of their honey, and most importantly, c) bees have an equal need for specific body salts as sugar.

'But this is bullshit, of course,' I said.

'Oh yes, absolutely,' he agreed. 'It's just one of those ridiculous old wife tales. Mevrouw is just too hasty. You will see, one day you will open your eyes and find a swarm that has moved in without you even knowing.'

I waited. I drove 10 kilometers to remove a swarm in somebody's pigsty, put it in the new hive, sealing the openings with crumpled newspaper. The next morning they had actually gnawed holes through the paper to get away. Is there a ghost in the damn hive, or what?

Of course it was bullshit. I knew it was bullshit. After a week I began to wonder; after another week I was desperate. Yet another week and I began to defend myself against myself. Why not? Human secretion had always played a big role in indigenous medicine. It helped from pimples to footrot...

On a Sunday morning when everybody was away at church, I stood alone in the orchard in the interest of bee culture. I even locked the dogs in the house. I spied everywhere to make absolutely sure I was alone, and confronted the indisputable crisis moment of my bee farming. I removed the hive from its scaffolding and put it carefully on the ground. Quite a comfortable height I might say. I took off the lid and did what I had to do.

It was as if boiling lead was poured into a dynamite keg! The hive rumbled like thunder. A crazy cloud bulged from each crack and opening, but I was already far ahead to the kitchen. When the screen door whipped behind me, the bees fell like a wet rag against the wire gauze.

It was exactly like de Beertjie predicted: before you opened your eyes a swarm had moved in.

ENDNOTES

1. Serfontein, Dot. 1992. *Deurloop: Keur uit die Essays van Dot Serfontein*. Cape Town: Human and Rousseau.
2. Nasson, Bill. 2010. *The War for South Africa – the Anglo-Boer War 1899-1902*. Cape Town: Tafelberg: 233.
3. Bradford, Helen. 2002. 'Gentlemen and Boers – Afrikaner Nationalism, Gender and Colonial Warfare in the South African War'. In: G. Cuthbertson, A.M. Grundlingh and M.L. Suttie (eds.) *Writing a Wider War – Rethinking Gender, Race, and Identity in the South African War 1899 – 1902*. Athens: Ohio University Press; Cape Town: David Philip: 42.
4. Bradford: 42.