

Sample translation from

Moenie kyk nie by Henk van Woerden
(Amsterdam: Podium, 1993)

Translated by Stacey Knecht

—To the Sea—

Grandma's here. She packed her bags the moment she heard.

When she came ashore she pointed out the Willem Barentsz, trailing seagulls in a bend in the bay.

'A real Dutch summer,' she said, holding onto her hat. The mountain drifted away in the rain.

I knew we were in for a storm, by the restlessness of the ants. And sure enough, after a balmy morning the day turned black, a tepid, rusty smell rose from the streets and the first drops pitted the sand, a moonscape that, moments later, was washed away by streams of water. Broken twigs and cadavers were flushed out of the hedges, and all at once a mighty river came thundering down the mountainside. The Liesbeek, usually so calm, is now churning under the bridge at Newlands toward the plain, as people lean over the railing and wonder where all the mud is supposed to go; floods and rumors of floods. The ants are never wrong.

Grandma can't read ants. The showers and squalls always take her by surprise. On the way to the hospital her hat keeps flying into the spikes of her umbrella.

Mother is lying inside. Her expression is meant to be cheerful.

Before the storm, she spent an hour sitting in the sun. Then back to the ward, exhausted. On her right is a terminal case, on the left, a lady who can't give up smoking. Even the radio has seen better days.

She accepts the fruit with trembling hands; her arms are emaciated, her wristwatch has slid down to her elbow.

'How's Careltje?' she whispers.

Grandma's not staying with us, she's got a room across the street.

‘The diseased bit is still there. Once that closes up, there’s nothing more they can do...’ she tells the English lady, then returns to her needlework, a handkerchief for Sis.

‘I expect she’ll go without warning...’

She doesn’t tell us much. She doesn’t tell Father a thing.

As soon as the specialist gets back from Palestine, they’ll cut off another piece of intestine.

‘This is an exploratory operation!’ shouts Hans, who has no idea what’s going on. He grabs a pointed stick and lays waste to the anthills in the backyard, so I can see what’s inside. Visits to the ward have become a grim obligation; Mother is no longer ours.

Most Sundays the nurse sends us out after only a few minutes. We sit in the Peugeot, which smells of carbide and crackled plastic, and wait for Father. Laura sits up front; she peers in the mirror to see if her lipstick is smudged. Now and then she smiles at Hans, but only with her cheeks.

‘Cheese,’ says Hans.

Go Puke! he thinks.

Puke and tubes.

The tubes. Soon there are tubes that run from Mother’s stomach to a bag on the floor. Must be more holes in her gut. That’s how they clean her out. And she’s stopped ‘breaking wind’, which had been proof ‘that the healing process was underway.’

Mother can barely eat; her lips tremble even more than her hands.

‘What’s this?’ I want to know.

‘Blood plasma,’ Grandma explains.

‘And this bottle?’

‘A drip’

Just what I thought.

September's gone. October keeps frowning at us. But we're off to the sea with Grandmamma, we're off to the see-saw sea!

'You can't expect them to endure such grief,' she snaps at Father. He's too tired. Laura hides in the bedroom.

The air is clear, the station, freshly painted. Hans licks a lollipop while I lug our suitcase, my belly full of milkshake: melkskommel, rommel-de-bommel, train says hoot, owl goes toot, skiet, skop, donderkop, the sun jabs knives in your skull; since Grandpa always wore his hair short, we've had to leave behind most of ours at the barbershop in Rondebosch. Grandma punches the tickets in her wallet. Off to see the sea.

After Wijnberg we wave good-bye to the hills and go rattling into the light, across the plain to the Falsebay. No more hedges with purple lilies. No gardens full of lemons. The cactuses and aloes on the platform at Wittebome slide past a mosque with onion dome and sandy minaret. Outside a church a gray plaster Christ hangs on a cross, flanked by figures that momentarily blind me.

We leave the holes of light behind us.

Once the dunes begin and Hans has given the rest of his lollipop to Grandma to wrap in a handkerchief (so he can poke his nose in the sea breeze), we don't have far to go; salt eats away at concrete and steel, laundry flaps on the line. Under the Muizenberg the breath of ancient fish blows in from the bay: whitecaps as far as the eye can see; briny mist and sun bleached houses.

The sea is fierce. When we step out onto the platform at Vishoek, the wind plays havoc with Grandma's long pleated skirt; she's wearing bloomers that end at the knee. Her hat flies off again, into a cloud of seagulls. We go chasing after it through barren, sand swept streets; the resort is empty at this time of year.

In the cusp of the bay, a path runs under the rails along the coast. Hans and I fish through the cracks with homemade lines, float, sinker, a worm for bait, or bread. If the lines get caught and the sinker won't rise to the surface, we dive down into

the icy world among the rocks, searching for hours until finally, jelly-kneed, we go hobbling back to Grandma.

She's found a place to sit out of the wind, next to the sign 'Men's Changing Room Only'.

When she sees us coming, she flips up her sunglasses and does her utmost to be impressed by our catch. We shouldn't be carrying fishhooks around in our pockets. Our legs are all bruised. And where are our sandals?

Hans points to the deserted beach.

And would he please stop picking his nose—she can't stand it. Grandma has stuck a long pin straight through her hat and gray hair.

I never want to go home again, just want to spend my days gazing at the spray drifting over stormy water, my thoughts on seafaring, on rope and weathered wood; flotsam, jetsam, cold white sand, and the sun, the cold, haughty sun, bearing down on my shaven head; burning ears filled with light and wind. To feel, forever, the sharp knife of the heavens against my crown.

There's nothing and nobody here.

I've found a secluded spot where, like Grandma, I can watch the surf pounding away at the coast.

It seems as though the longer you sit, the flatter the world becomes. A curtain of water shoots up before me and hangs, motionless, above the shell-covered cliffs. Then it drops to the ground, bubbling through the chinks and eyes in the basalt.

Cormorants skim through the air toward the hills across the water, a flock of tiny specks caught in the chalky light. Every so often a star flashes through the haze: the sun bouncing off the windshield of a car; then more emptiness and, in the distance, the silhouette of the Hottentotshollandse Mountains.

Every hour a train comes chugging down the single track; rusty rail and iron ore screeching round the bend. The seagulls join in.

The seagull is the ugliest bird I know. Hans has found a dead gull on the beach and he's abandoned the sand pies he was baking to play with it. He runs along the water's edge with a rope around his waist, flapping his arms, a little hop now and then. The bird drags along behind him, raking its wings through the sand. Grandma doesn't notice.

What is it about seagulls that makes them so repugnant? Is it their steely gaze, the way they lower their heads and widen their eyes when they screech?

K...ooarrk. Kek kek kek.

Gluttons, that's what they are, the greediest birds on the Cape, scraping the air like fingernails; sharp, treacherous.

One of them keeps diving at my head. What does he want? He spews a black sound. His fellow gulls stand chattering along the shore with their flaps open; stone and seaweed are caked with shit. Guano birds. Dagger birds.

Kek kek kek.

This coast is haunted. A feeling that there's no more past, that here, all will be forgotten, washed away.

Every afternoon we go to the only restaurant in town, and eat more or less the same meal, with an extra order of fries for Hans. Grandma hasn't got the peace of mind to do any cooking. At the table, she writes letters to her mother, the oldest lady in Holland.

'Paterswolde is no more than the vaguest of memories to you children,' she sighs. I remember, I tell her, that Great-grandmother once gave me ten cents for the fair. She removes a speck of grit from my eye.

Hans, she writes, as he slides a bundle of seagull feathers, unobserved, towards my table-leg, Hans is the worker. And I'm the studious one. And Careltje has to smile for the camera, or else he looks like a moron because he's always got his mouth open—ever since he was born, in fact, but they still won't have his tonsils out.

Grandma sends news to the home front, and takes snapshots. Her bag bulges with yellow Kodak envelopes with black and red checked edges. Great-Grandma in Groningen can look at these pictures through her magnifying glass, while Geertje reads her the letter.

Outside, salt beats against the windowpanes.

Through the dull glass you can just see a corner of the beach where the waves keep pulling back and pitching forward. Fish on our plates. Brine and vinegar salad. Cake for dessert, with a splash of hot custard; it fogs up Grandma's spectacles.

When she goes off to the bathroom, Hans starts doing even sillier things with the feathers. They stick out of his custard like candles, which isn't very appetizing.

I snatch the letter out of the sewing bag, and read.

'Dear Mum, ... the boys are on holiday, we're spending a fortnight at the seaside. This may be my last chance, for the time being, to do anything nice for them. We have our dinners at the local restaurant...' that part was right. Quick, down to the bottom.

'... she seems relieved to know that she can trust me, completely, with the bits and pieces she's leaving behind...'

Grandma would rather be with Mother, who's leaving bits and pieces behind. I won't tell Hans. His feathers have toppled over.

I tuck the letter away in an envelope in my memory.

They've just finished painting the Groote Schuur Hospital.

It took six thousand four-litre cans, twenty-four thousand litres of paint in all, to whitewash the building, which dazzles more brightly than ever against the flanks of the Drakenspiek, so that Grandma, who traipses up the slope three times a day for visiting hours, always has to pause in the lobby to catch her breath and rest her eyes.

She's getting used to the mountain, but not the light.

The last few days, Mother's been having very strange cravings. She expects they'll be selling those baskets of Boland apricots and peaches at the market around now. She'd give anything for a strawberry, so Grandma goes down to the stalls under the Saltriver viaduct to buy some. When she asks to taste raw ground beef, Grandma patiently feeds it to her. Oranges are sliced, lemons squeezed. A chunk of boiled tongue arrives from the Dutch butcher in town, which the head nurse later takes home with her, practically untouched.

Finally she asks (parched lips, and that chin!) for fish.

Sardines, mackerel, shrimp, mayonnaise and pike; Mother babbles deliriously about the oceans, about salty air and herring, about Knokke, Oostende and a voyage on the North Sea, before the war, aboard the motor ship Slammat, 1935, or was it '36, when being a child meant splashing about in silken waves and watching the summers go by... ah, the sea, to see the sea...

None of the fish she eats comes out the normal way anymore.

When her stomach starts festering they take out the tubes; she overflows, dissolving into wet, piercing white. Black-headed gulls stare down from the railing, bone-white birds that gobble up the undigested scraps and then fly to the far corners of the room, where they soil the curtains with their muck. The ward has to be cleaned every four hours—what a chore. And she can't seem to hoist herself up, isn't that strange?

Good thing Grandma's here.

When Mother dozes off, Grandma reads us a letter from Paterswolde. The potatoes aren't doing too well this year.

—Don't Be Sad—

I know immediately, by the way Father opens my foster parents' garden gate and stalks along the path, his face screwed up tight, that it's all over.

We're left alone in the dark little room next to the stairs. He sobs, and tries to hide: his hands, his face, his glasses; something surges through his shoulders.

How could this happen to him?

I lend him my handkerchief, the new one, the Scottish plaid.

He doesn't have to tell me. When he's calmed down a bit, he lifts his head and stares at the enamel housing of the 16-millimeter projector, screwed to a solid plinth, which he's just been leaning against. This is where they do trail runs of those Christian films.

'Shine on, shine on harvest moon,' I hear from upstairs. Martin, my foster brother, plays that record day and night.

'... up in the skaaai...'

Father runs his fingers through his hair and slips his hand in his pocket. He looks at me questioningly, then shifts his gaze to the screen on the back wall.

No, I don't want to go to the funeral.

That's a relief.

In the hallway: light, at last. 'Harvest Moon' rings loud and clear in the stairwell, but suddenly stops.

Next thing I know, he's walking back down the garden path.

Has Laura really been sitting all this time in that sweltering car under the jacaranda blossoms?

Everyone hates Laura. 'That girl,' my foster mother lets slip in an unguarded moment, 'will never find a decent job. Touch of the tarbrush, you know.'

In this house I've translated almost the whole world into English. They speak virtually nothing else, they sing it, too, and cook and pray and eat and bless in it: 'Uncle' Roger is a kind of missionary, he's got a moustache.

His wife, ‘Aunt’ Judy, and her younger brother, Martin, used to be Frisians, but you’d never know it, says Father.

In every room there’s a machine: in the parlour, a colossus with a ribbon inside, half black half red, very handy if you want to do two-tone typing; in the side room are a number of portable projectors, in the kitchen, a special stove with a window in the oven so you can see what’s cooking. And instead of a maid there’s a washing machine: the clothes go in grimy and come out clean and nearly dry; everything’s automatic, draining the suds, filling it up with clean warm water, rinsing, spinning the wash dry—pretty amazing. All you have to do is hang it up.

Aunt Judy cooks English food and eats for two. There’s a baby growing in her stomach whom they’re already praying for.

Martin is two years older than I am, but really stupid.

Judy would like me to help him with his homework, because I’m so good at concentrating, and he can’t keep still.

Couldn’t I teach him how to concentrate? she asks hopefully, with eyes that want only what’s best for me, so I have to choke back the tears that come from I don’t know where. I promise to do what I can.

Concentration is an English notion that stands for diligence. Or maybe it’s just the ability to shut out everything else, to be empty.

I’m often empty. Empty with a book on my lap. Empty when a cloud drifts over the mountain. Empty when I smell the sea. And empty, though a different kind of emptiness, when I think of my brothers and sister who’ve been sent to an orphanage, half an hour’s walk from here.

Martin is anything but empty. He’s full, brimming with something I don’t understand. He’d rather play records than read a book, and the whole time, I can see, he’s skinning his weenie, like he’s flaying an animal; hands in his pockets, left right left; his favorite hobby: eyes on the wall and mouth half open, doesn’t hear a thing, just jerks his gherkin, squash squelch squash, nothing like a good

game of pocket billiards. Shine on. Shine on harvest moon. Way up in the. Way up in the. Way up in the sky.

You can't see him at night. But you can sure hear him.

On Sundays Martin and I have to go to Scripture Class. It's taught by Mister Parsley, whom we call 'Sir'. He's got psalms coming out of his ears.

Twenty boys are packed together in a warm attic to profess gladness under his guidance. Then we pray, it's up to us which God. Parsley always leads. He whines on and on.

As ye sow, so shall ye reap. Verily.

After the prayer of thanks, a wooden box is passed around with parchment scrolls inside: the gospel in a nutshell. He expects everyone to give their own interpretation of the text. The most diligent among us carry around fat bibles and mull over their words as long as possible, with much clearing of throat and nodding of head, because Parsley likes that. The word is deed. And it's not too late.

Outside, the greenery exudes more midsummer boredom in a single hour than it otherwise would in a week.

'Yea, thy law is within my heart.'

My English is suffering from cramps.

Fortunately Martin's no good at this either. He yearns, like most of us, for the cake and lemonade which is served on narrow tables in the garden at the end of Parsley's class. A breeze ruffling the tablecloths. Sun-drenched suburbia, and men who give dark-browed boys encouraging pats on the back.

It's about time I had long pants.

Afterwards, I walk through the pine fields to the orphanage where Hans is staying, and where, at this very moment, he's undergoing much the same thing: smothered in a fog of good intentions, with cake and lemonade for dessert.

As I walk up the driveway and through the gate of the Marsh Memorial Homes, people pour out of the little church. Around a large field are five separate buildings, each with its own housemother. That's where the orphans live.

I see Father with the English lady, who has carelessly parked her Anglia 1936 in the sand beneath the pines. Grandma is standing alone, taking pictures. We're all doing very well. The children are settling in quite nicely. Careltje has sprained his knee, and rides about on the arm of his housemother.

The Wesleyan bells chime. A pigeon is so startled that he tumbles off the roof and briefly strikes the jagged pose of a seagull. The sparrows bathe in the dust and have no idea. What Jesus can mean to us.

At night, there's Martin.

I sleep in his old striped pyjamas; a button-down top, bottoms with a cord and an opening at the crotch. They sag around my waist.

We share the front balcony, where the sun shines all day long. It's like a greenhouse. We toss and turn, he, on his spring mattress, me, on my stretcher. Every time a 'harvest moon' slides over the balcony, he throws back his sheets and invites me to have a look at that big pecker of his, which keeps popping out of his fly. He lures me with tales of milk that flows from his nipples, like the stuff he squeezes out of his pimples.

That boy's cup runneth over.

His skin is unpleasantly numb, even with your eyes closed.

After several weeks I don't feel like crawling into bed with Martin anymore, no matter how much he whimpers and whines.

I miss Hans.

My foster father takes me to neighbourhoods where whites rarely go, the lokasies of Langa and Nyanga, at the edge of the Pinelands.

We wave our papers at the sentry, drive through the barbed wire fencing past endless rows of barracks and dusty buildings; garbage swirls around our tires.

The shadow of Roger's forehead falls low over his cheekbones. The films he shows out here, in classrooms and hospital wards, come from the USA. He

entertains his viewers with American miracles and optimism, because there's such poverty and suffering in this land. I'm his assistant.

In a clinic where the windows let in too much light, we set up shop. Film reels and metal-trimmed suitcases are carried in, Roger fiddles with the projector, I post myself at the door so I can hold onto the screen while the patients, in wheelchairs and hospital beds, are being rolled into place.

The curtains billow. The walls sweat. Mouths drool, mouths cheer, though tonelessly. It's hot.

The images are pretty impressive.

For instance, you see a boat skimming across the Panama Canal and then in reverse, faster this time, its sluices shrieking, all the way back to the Gulf of Mexico.

Next there's a drop of water that falls slowly, almost motionlessly, into a puddle, to the accompaniment of celestial music; dark heads gasp for breath and gulp in amazement.

When a dash of milk pours itself into a pitcher and then leaps back onto the table, a deep sigh runs through the audience and mouths disappear behind awestruck hands. Time flows every which way. We are faced with great events that move towards us, inexorably, out of the past.

When nobody's looking, a sparrow sails in through the gap in the curtains and crashes into a wall. Stunned, the bird hops back and forth along the baseboard. Meanwhile, Roger hands out pamphlets.

Across from me, a matron is crying. Patients sing and sway; the end is drawing near.

I decide then and there that I'm going to be a doctor, or at the very least, a surgeon. My fingers are cramped from holding up the screen. The air stinks of disinfectant, and decay.

When it's over everyone wants to thank us, but there's no need; as ye sow, so shall ye reap. That is, if the Lord's not fast asleep!

In the corner, somebody's trampled on the stray sparrow.

After a final look around the ward to make sure nothing has been forgotten, we go lurching down the path to the exit. Next to the sentry box, men in uniform lean against armoured cars.

Along the plain, groups of black men are heading back to the lokasie, dark brushstrokes in the fading light.

Behind the mountain, there's a cloud on fire.

At the end of the last class we have to go straight home, no dawdling; there's trouble.

All day long we've been hearing helicopters in the distance, and I can still hear them at home in my porch room, hours after high tea has been served and cleared away.

When the sun has stopped blazing in through the curtains above my bed, Martin comes to announce, scornfully, that I've missed my tea, then goes off to the sitting room to give the Mormon Tabernacle Choir another spin on the turntable.

Everything points to a world beyond our own.

I'll pray for a submachine gun. And that all hell breaks loose and leaves this balcony riddled with holes; especially his bed, his cupboard, his models and, while we're at it, the garden and office, everything in ruins: nearer my God, nearer my God to Thee...

Father has failed, once again, to send the five pounds he's promised to pay for me each month. My foster parents think he's nasty, and after several phone calls back and forth, exceptionally nasty. I lie in bed and dream of the sea. Or listen to the rising and falling drone of the Dakotas.

Downstairs, my absence goes unnoticed. The trouble and discontent among the Bantu, as they call the natives, demands all their attention. Now and then they'll gaze silently out the window, but usually they're having a discussion, in hushed tones, during which my foster father tugs at the reddish hair above his lip and

Aunt Judy nervously slides her feet in and out of her slippers, as if she's feeding her toes to a pair of fluffy pink, insatiable mouths.

There are also days when these palavers flare up and the phone won't stop ringing; you'd think Roger was maintaining a whole network.

That's when I sneak into Judy's bedroom to sniff at the contents of her jars.

'Innoxia cleansing cream, for extra dry skin.' The ointments are supposed to mask her sour smell; the lotion is for smoothing the damage done by sun and a swollen belly.

Judy is round as a top by now. She has a maid these days who's equally round, only there's no baby inside her. As soon as the washing machine stops whirling, the maid hangs up the clean clothes, while Judy just sits there with her milk legs, plucking at the skin on her throat, and tells her what to do. The black girl passes on rumours from the lokasie.

They're murdering whites up north, says the radio. Roger says if it's thundering in the Congo, it'll soon be raining here, because they refuse to talk with the Bantu. 'They' is Verwoerd, that pig-nosed cheesehead.

At the end of March, when people no longer go out alone into the streets at night and I'm forbidden to walk to the orphanage without Martin, the maid and two of her friends take refuge at our house; the townships are on fire.

In Langa the roads are blocked with oil drums and acacias; an office, a school and the post office have gone up in flames. The Methodists were spared. All that remained of the Dutch Reformed church was a single wall.

At the edge of the pinelands four white women were held captive in their car and pelted with stones. The blood flowed from their heads. They only just made it to the shopping centre, which is now being guarded by armoured cars.

There's no need to be afraid. Army and fleet are advancing on the Cape; they're going to cordon off Langa and Nyanga. Police and commandos patrol the streets. Brownings. Sten guns. 303 caliber.

And in the sky, imagine: Sabres, Allouettes, Harvards and those old bumblebees, the Dakotas.

In the townships, nothing was left of the dead. Just a field strewn with hats and shoes. Hats and shoes that I tuck away, as dark stains, in an envelope in my memory.

Rattaboom. Rattabang.

There's been a march through the city. A procession of seventy thousand people came in from the Cape Flats, snaked its way up the mountain along the National Road and then down, behind the hospital, to the centre of town, where people had been waiting for hours with bated breath.

At police headquarters, negotiations were held.

'Conniving bast—scoundrels!' screams Roger, newspaper in hand. He's angry, but he doesn't want to swear.

Afterwards the crowd returned peacefully to the lokasies, which everyone thought was odd. Last night the arrests began.

While Judy shuffles to the telephone, my foster father reads off the names of people who, early this morning, were dragged out of their beds: mostly black and Jewish names, one or two Methodists. He heaves something that isn't quite a sigh.

I'm summoned to the phone.

It's Father, who's no longer on speaking terms with my foster family. Would I please tell them that I'd be moving in with him after Easter, it'll be better for everybody.

Does that mean I can't go with them on a trip up-country, the way they promised?

Absolutely not.

And who'll bring me? He ignores the question.

Grandma and my foster parents have recently informed the child welfare office about Laura, who's been staying with him for weeks now. There's something fishy about that. And sad.

A couple of days before Easter, a little girl comes out of Judy's stomach.

I go to the harbour, where Grandma is sailing for Holland on the Oranjefontein. Hundreds of colourful streamers are thrown toward the quayside, but that doesn't stop the ship from pulling away. The streamers trail in the water.

'You look just like your mother,' Grandma said before she left.

—The Frog Who Flew—

The stormy weather has drifted behind the mountain, and melted away. High above the Atlantic, Father's red sports car screams full-speed around the bends. Below us is the Hout Bay. With practiced gestures—like a real racing-car driver—Father reaches for the clutch to change gear, and then for the leather-covered steering wheel; smoothly shifting, hand over hand, he keeps us from hitting the mountainside.

I'm squashed in the back, Laura sits up front. Each time we accelerate she yelps in alarm or squeals with glee.

The speed with which we zoom along the heights, the momentum and the thunderous roar of the engine, echoing from the rocks, the ease, the danger, make me shut my eyes and pretend we truly are flying. At the same time, and I don't know why this suddenly comes to mind, I can imagine how it must be not to be able to see anything. The wind against the left side of my face feels the same as it does everywhere else that people are blind: the elbows, the legs, the palm of the hand and all the other places where you'd never expect an eye; it rushes, with equal strength, past both closed lids, whether your power of vision is hidden behind one or the other.

It only lasts a moment. When I open my eyes again and see the vast stretch of sea, glinting and sparkling all the way to the horizon, I shout: 'Cliff Richard is a cunt!'

I immediately regret it. Father snarls something at me that gets lost in the wind and, just as we're rounding the bend, the car shoots angrily to the other side of the road, swerves away from the abyss and screeches to a halt. Dust settles on the running board and hood. The motor is stunned into silence.

Father stares straight ahead, saying nothing, face like a slammed door. There's a twist to his mouth, half wry, half glum, and I can see that 'Calvinist look' tightening around his jaws and temple again.

The chassis ticks away reproachfully, but Laura keeps her eyes fixed on the sea. If she turned around she'd burst out laughing, I can tell by her cheeks, which are grinning against the frame of her dark glasses.

The black hair that lashed my knees as we were driving, now ripples about her shoulders and in the hollow of her neck. Pretending to be lost in thought, she scrapes a mosquito off the windshield with a varnished fingernail.

Just beyond her hand, a ship glides along the horizon. It sails with the wind, chasing its own plume of smoke. Maybe some day it'll catch up.

Ever since Grandma left I've been living with Father in Three Anchor Bay, far from school and the orphanage where, for the time being, Hans and the others are staying.

Early each morning I wake him up with a bowl of oatmeal, prepare our afternoon sandwiches and then shake him, once again, out of a deep sleep. At seven o'clock I pull on my red blazer and grey felt hat and sprint, guerrilla style, to the bus stop opposite the Green & Seapoint Bowling Club, where I usually just manage to jump onto the back of the bus as it's driving away, swing myself around the pole and stumble up the stairs to the upper deck.

The prospect of us sitting together that evening in the Cafe-Bios makes the school day a lot more bearable: De Luxe Tea-Room Cinema, Kim Novak, hamburgers and hotdogs; watching the same movie twice in a row, till eleven o'clock if we have to; killing time with *The Devil's Horse* and then home again in Father's red sports car.

In the late afternoon I wander through the centre of town, a journey that takes me to the East India Company Gardens, behind the parliament building, where we've arranged to meet. It's nice and cool there and the trees have little signs with Afrikaans and Latin names. I spend a long time waiting on a bench under the gray myrtaceae, while all around me bits of golden resin flutter down from the treetops, like flecks of twilight, and a squirrel nibbles at the crust of a leftover sandwich.

Lying in a side pocket of my satchel is the splayed body of a frog, whose heart will go on beating for hours. My biology teacher knows I want to be a doctor.

A frog's legs are almost human, and so is his skin, if you imagine it without the spots. I'll borrow the sharp knives that Father keeps in a red-lined box on his workbench and cut deeper still; the skin, the openings in the skin, the underlying tissue, the organs. And the heart.

Hans would like that too; a heart has four chambers.

One two three. One two three fier fyf.

The baker beats. The baker beats his wife.

He swings his wooden hammer, the blood flies round the chamber:
onetwothreefourfive; with all that English at school, I've forgotten most of my Dutch.

Hop, hop; the squirrel's back. Probably wants more Heinz Sandwich Spread. At least, that's the way he's looking at me. Nope. What's gone is gone, said Dumpling John. We're waiting for Father. Will the frog's heart survive two westerns? Wild is the Wind, in the Roxy, is sure to be exciting. At the Elstree they're showing The Cruel Tower: 'Reckless, on the Edge of DANGER!'

Evening shadows glide across the paths, etching scales in the bark of the apple gum, the acacia, the maple tree.

By the time the mosques in the Malay Quarter have turned orange and blue, Father had better hurry up; after six the park empties out and everyone races to the station.

There's a seagull perched on Cecil John Rhodes' bronze head. 'Your Hinterland lies there,'—he points across Table Bay to the heart of Africa: Cape to Cairo. Shit on his nose. The hand. The hat in that hand. No other skin is so heavy and lifeless.

Just as the imams begin to sing, Father shows up. He still wears lots of Bryl Cream in his hair.

On the weekend, Laura arrives. Every Friday she sails into the house, in starched hospital white, and acts as if it's her home port. On Saturday she wraps

herself in a flimsy housedress, nothing underneath but a slip, and stands around plucking a chicken she plans to cook, or marches out into the jaart to grapple with the laundry.

Her nurse's training has left her with fleshy shoulders and the malicious eye of a matron. In many things she's unyielding. My anatomical specimens have got to go: the bird skeletons, the remains of a previous chicken, the frog body, everything. Horrified, she pulls them out from under the bed and flings them into the garbage can.

If I complain, I'm met with a laugh that wells up from deep within her belly, yet fails to disarm.

Good riddance to you, Madame! No animals allowed, Sir!

The beds have to be made exactly the way she learned at the hospital. And she insists that I give Father a kiss before going to sleep.

Whenever she's around I retreat to the sitting room; she can't come in there.

Father has done up this room just the way Mother left it in Rondebosch. The throw rugs, the tea table with the copper kettle, the standing lamp, the chenille curtains which, since they weren't made to fit these windows, are gathered in soft folds along the sills; everything is, once again, hanging or standing in its place. And all those familiar objects, the relationship, unchanged over the years, of furniture to books, seem to restore something of the past. The comforting atmosphere of the room when Mother was alive, the novelty of the first darkened 'lounge' in the pinelands and, before that, the imperturbable Dutchness of the parlor in Leiden, come rushing back, even though the light in Three Anchor Bay is so different and the smell of seaweed, so emphatically nearby.

It has become a safe and private place.

By day, the windows look out on a palm tree and a cork oak in a white-walled, cluttered garden; with every gust of wind, acorns rain down from the leaves and go skittering across the patio in the caustic light.

After dark you can often hear the deep voice of the foghorn, moaning at the sea.

In the armchair from Paterswolde I thumb through the Winkler Prins, or make sketches, using examples in *Learning How to Draw the Nude, in Ten Easy Lessons*, or the *Atlas der Topografischen Anatomie des Menschen*, Jena, 1904.

Late in the evening Laura pounds on the door. The good-night kiss.

Father is sitting at his desk. He finds the kiss as awkward as I do, but has resigned himself to it, and does his best not to drum his fingers on the page before him, when I come in and press my mouth against his stubbly cheek. Sometimes, for no apparent reason, that resignation changes over into the ‘Calvinist look’. Most of Father’s expressions are two-faced: they die on him. You can almost taste the hypocrisy.

In the middle of the summer, when the children from the orphanage come to stay, Laura whips up a pair of bathing trunks for Hans out of tiger-striped material, a piece left over from her own bathing suit. They want to try out the suits right away, in the open-air swimming pool at Seapoint; he Tarzan, she Jane.

Father agrees, and loads his Rolleiflex. The whole family strolls down the wide promenade to the pavilion, which houses both the swimming pool and an aquarium. The ocean is cold—even in this season the Antarctic flows to the north—but during the day the pool is warmed by the sun; a sign says 68 degrees Fahrenheit.

Bikinis aren’t allowed here. Neither are running, dunking, petting, or coloured people. We change in tiny locker rooms that smell of Dettol and where, every so often, a hairy bath attendant pokes his head around the door.

‘Hold onto your tickets please, for inspection purposes,’ he reminds Father, who sticks them into the waistband of his swimming trunks along with his pack of Texans.

Hans and I splash about in the water, which is resplendent with glittering blue tiles and, after a while, begins to feel like sun warmed light—light that buoys you up, again and again, and bears you along to the edge of the pool, where gravity pulls you down.

Then my eye socket starts itching from the chlorine, and Tarzan, while taking his umpteenth running dive, collides with one of the ornamental trays of cactus and has to be consoled by Jane. Father gets it all on film.

Everything's more lively with Hans around. He sometimes wrestles with Laura, and kisses Father so passionately before going to bed that he knocks over the desk lamp. He's already told me, in the darkness of the bedroom, that he hopes they'll get married soon, because then he can leave the Home for good and walk with me, night after night, to the lighthouse, to watch the ocean pounding against the shore, and hide in the ditches until the stars are blotted out by the mist rising from the sea, and the foghorn, and the swimming pool, and sharks in the aquarium.

Hans is crazy about sharks.

At the end of the day the six of us line up at the aquarium ticket booth. Just for fun, Father has rolled a little pile of sand into the banknote, which he slides, sniggering, under the window.

'Two adults. And four children, please.'

A turquoise nail finds the note, angrily tears off six tickets.

'One adult,' snaps the coral red mouth of the cashier, 'and five children.'

Father gives her an Atlantic stare. Laura looks like she's just been grabbed by the scruff of the neck and blushes down to her sandals.

'A real bitch,' Hans confides in me later, in a low voice. Which is also what he thinks of the housemothers at Marsh Memorial Homes.

I wrestle with Laura, the way Hans does.

We tumble back onto my bed, and she flings out her arms. One hand rests on the pillow, the other against the wall. In her armpits are freshly shaven hairs. The shoulder darkens toward the throat. Under her housedress, muscles rise and fall, weary with tickling. Intercostals. Trapezius, pectoralis major; names which, with a likelihood bordering on confusion, disguise something dear, a crevice, a crease, skin that curves up and around.

As I lie there, I suddenly think of shower time at school; the whole tribe running around naked, singing and stamping out a Zulu song on the tiled floor, swinging their limbs like baboons. Anyone who doesn't take part is chased under the shower with a sopping wet towel; even the teacher joins in. What a bunch of cretins.

'How's school?' Laura asks.

She doesn't have to know. In the bedroom adjoining the kitchen, the light slowly fades. Laura rolls over on her side and shakes out her hair. She uses lots of pencil, and plucks her eyebrows, but in the twilight her eyes can be kind.

Then she jumps out of bed and switches on the radio above the stove.

I hear a polka-dot bikini song. Pan lids rattle.

Ever since she's moved in for good with Father and me, I realize how much she loves radio plays and popular tunes. While she's chopping herbs, I hover nearby. In the entrance hall, green and scarlet rays are refracted through the windowpanes to the corridor and kitchen. Laura wades from table to stove through a sharply chiselled spectrum, like splintered light. Suddenly her eyes turn brittle again, unfeeling.

Would I like a taste?

She offers me a small red fruit on the tip of a fork, which I accept with a bow. Immediately, table, stove, light and radio, spotted bikinis and all, vanish in a blaze of fire at the back of my throat; I'm chewing on razor blades: hot pepper. Laura laughs.

'Your eyes,' she cries moments later, 'Your eyes, they just came out on stalks!'

She speaks in dialect; a broad accent that's easy to imitate and which, with only a bit of declension, rings of the pondokkies and coloreds of the plain. I've learned to keep it up long enough until something finally snaps.

When Father comes in, the plates are flying around the jaart; one bowl bounces off the kitchen wall and the food goes running down Laura's legs. She

tears through the corridor and crashes into the doors behind me. As I escape through the front door, Father blocks her way.

They retreat to the bedroom, or rather, he drags her there, and then uses his healing hands to calm her down. This is followed by a lot of muffled thumping and squabbling; I put my ear to the door so I can hear better.

Unintelligible wails.

He protests. She shrieks and howls, he mumbles. From what I can make out, she has to have something removed, very soon.

After a brief silence, when the sounds change to cries and groans of a different sort, I decide to go visit Hans; just a vague plan, because it's a long way to the southern suburbs, and he's probably asleep by now.

A few hours later I'm trudging past the hospital, under the Drakenspiek. You can no longer tell the deer from the slopes. One sweep of my hand and the pines are felled, the countless lights on the plain, whisked away.

Laura's expecting a baby. It's not the first time, I understand; and she refuses to give this one up.

I'm sitting on a bench, waiting for the nothingness—only an afterimage remains of the splintered light that came through our front door—when the MG Morgan screeches up to the curb.

Father, to my surprise, has come after me.

He has to restrain himself from thrashing me into the car. On the way back neither of us says a word. We race along Dewaal Drive at a hundred miles an hour, to Three Anchor Bay.

At home, we find Laura stretched out on the floor of the corridor. She's still partly conscious. One shoe is caught in the front door, one hand clings stubbornly to the banister. The medicine chest is practically empty.

She vomits, but only after he's forced her to drink a mixture of mustard and salt water, and plunged his fingers so deeply down her throat that they turn the dishtowel red.

I go to bed without a good-night kiss.

The stormy weather has drifted around to the front of the mountain. It's hot, and lightning scrapes across the plain to the peninsula. On the Drakenspiek, kettledrums roll.

Today I'm going to a séance with Father and Laura, in the church where they'll soon be getting married.

We drive up a steep hill and park in front of a cast-iron gate. Paved steps lead further upward, through an overgrown garden, to a kind of villa; a big house with bulging eyes and turrets on top. When Father says hello to a group of people, a pleated skirt and flat shoes detach themselves and come over to welcome us. Laura's pumps sink into the lawn. Now and again, when the others aren't looking, she tosses me a wink, then saunters off across the grass. At the edge of the terrace, we practice our best moonstruck expressions.

Below us lies Table Bay.

The medium, we're told, is an instrument; she receives vibrations from beyond the spectrum and translates them into the visible: a human television, if you can believe anything so silly.

'Believing has nothing to do with it,' our guide says to Laura, as if she's guessed our thoughts. It's knowing. In the vestibule we stroll past portraits of ghosts who have already been to visit, shades from a distant dynasty.

Father feels quite at home here.

Inside we sing without the accompaniment of an organ. Then pray without standing up. I sit between Laura and a bald-headed man who keeps his eyes fixed on a spot above the altar. To the right, where the late morning sun shines through closed curtains, is a burning candle. On the wall are watery prints of mediums, and to the left, a small blue light, above a vase with drab, colourless flowers.

Dun.

'..that they who know Your light may be allowed to use my body as an entryway,' says a woman, who has appeared through a hidden door.

It's about to begin; her body is merely a set of clothes. When she's finished speaking she wanders back and forth and around the room and then collapses into a chair, which somebody puts there just in time. She heaves a sigh. Her arms sink down to her sides, the sign of a deep trance.

Outside, pigeons coo, the city hums in the distance.

All of a sudden the medium sits bolt upright and points at someone in the second row.

'Your wife is among us. She's very happy on the other side. Or is it your daughter?'

Sniffles and nods.

The woman rolls her head and inflects her voice. One moment she's speaking in a deep bass, the next, it's as though there are whispers rustling along the curtains. After a few minutes of silence she suddenly bursts out laughing. Several of us join in. All around the room messages are passed on, as if there's an astral crowd jostling each other to send word to the living.

Beside me, Laura is wiggling and fidgeting, like she has to pee.

'There's someone standing next to you...' cries the spiritist, making her way around the hall toward us. She leans dangerously forward, eyes closed. The candle near the curtains flickers up and starts smoking. I look around to see if she might have the wrong person, but the seats behind us are empty.

'She's putting her hand on your shoulder, and she asks if you'll take good care of the children...'

I can't see a thing. Laura is so scared she shoots up out of her chair.

As thunder rumbles in Table Bay, the medium's voice rises and falls, struggling with reluctant spirits. Her hands flutter; she's about to turn back, but first there's something she wants to say to me. I, too, must take care of the children. And trust Lorna. Lorna, Laura... she searches for the right name. Then she slips uncertainly back into the present, a kind of backwards shuffling.

My attention is off somewhere in the centre of town. I follow the rattling of the buses as they race along the macadam, the shaking of the windowpanes, the gentle crackle of a cigarette butt that lies smoldering in the aisle.

When I look up, the wind tugs at the curtains and puffs out the smoky candle-flame, blowing it away to that other, faceless side, to the realm of innumerable lost flames that lick restlessly at astral hills, somewhere in the Kalahari Desert.

After the seance, tea and cake are served on the sloping terrace.

The storm has passed, you can only feel it at a distance in the breeze that flits, now and again, through the pine trees of Tamboerskloof. We're headed home, but since that strange message from beyond has somehow put Father in a better mood, we'll spend the rest of the afternoon touring the spots where the Malays are celebrating the end of Ramadan.

The red MG Morgan shoots down the Main Road, past the Three Anchor Bay police station and onto the esplanade. Heads turn, children wave, people stare.

The wide grassy field that runs along the Seapoint parapet is swarming with Muslims. Hundreds of black and red fezes are out strolling in the sea air; headscarves, veils and white robes stand out against the green: a meandering line of Arabic, written in milk on the grass.

Along the road a group of gammat burst into song:

'Abdul Ghaffa, why you shake?

You's afraid of the cobra snake?'

This is followed by boisterous laughter.

They all sit together on the lawn, waiting for the moment when the sun sinks into the sea and pushes up a new moon from below the horizon that will end the fasting.

At the traffic light next to the pavilion, we attract a lot of attention. People jump to their feet to look at the sports car; whistling, laughing, singing.

'Don't go and trust a frog with wings

He flies right up your sister's thing!'

Father has a roguish twinkle in his eye. Laura gropes about in the glove compartment for a cigarette. Then the light turns green.

On straight stretches of road, Father drums his fingers happily against the steering wheel. At Campsbay we even interrupt the journey for a quick stop at Sheik Jaffer's kramat, where the air is heavy with incense, but it's too crowded to get in.

From then on Laura yelps and squeals every time we careen around the bend, all the way to the neck of the pass, where we catch a glimpse of the Atlantic

Ocean and I wonder how much higher we have to go before we can see Rio de Janeiro on the other side.

Like a restless beast, the Morgan growls through the Hout Bay, past the Disa Valley, over a bridge, past an Algemene Handelaar/General Dealer, past the beach and up again: the wind roars in our ears.

In passing, we've ripped off a shred of some popular tune, right out of a window frame: Pat Boone, Jim Reeves or Cliff Richard.

Cliff Richard is a cunt, that goes without saying. Still, I probably should've just called him a jerk. Then we'd have kept on flying, and Father wouldn't look so glum.

The hood is still ticking away. Laura has stopped scraping the fly off the windshield. On the horizon, a ship chases its own plume of smoke: oh glistening spray, oh azure, oh scalloped clouds, pink and mother-of-pearl.