

The struggles of an enslaved African woman and two emigrant German farmers generate a sweeping saga of oppression, estrangement, and redeemed memory that binds together America's "Trail of Tears," South Africa's "Great Trek," and our contemporary search for reconciliation.

Red Clay, Blood River

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Red Clay, Blood River

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Maps by Anita Oser

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Ecologue

We are an argument of land and water enveloped in air. Though seas could cover all of us, they argue constantly with land. Ocean frightens land, gnawing at land's flanks, invading from below and raining from above, stealing from land's heights the stones thrust up from deep beneath our crust. Land struggles to rise higher, to thrust beyond the air. Ocean seeks to swallow land in constant pounding tides, become a mirror to the sun.

When ocean nibbles at land's toes and invades its inner spaces, we feel it quiver in an anxious joy. Land and ocean ooze and join in muck, a coupling of the different same. Sometimes the waters sit a while on mountain shoulders or lie nestled in the hands below. They play among the fistful rocks, the fattening mud, the thirsty tongues of sand. Then they steal a little soil before they leave.

We need the ocean's spume and constant probings, for without them land would never sport luxuriant life. There would be no dance upon our skin, no scratching of our hide. Our wondrous colors, glistening shapes, and massive forms would lose their conversation. Land is wedded to ocean, covered with green forests and grassy plains, with roots that tickle us to fecund mirth. Their coupled care feeds the moving creatures, gives them shelter and a place to hide.

Sometimes land erupts, pouring fire in our depths. We swallow it with clouds of offering to the air, that strange rushing mystery enfolding us. We live in it, it bubbles up within us. Though it communes with us, it is yet a stranger. Though it tickles us to laugh with foam or burst with fire, we know it only as a door to emptiness. The creatures bound with us are also bound to air. The fire is the friction of our life together.

When creatures came in ocean, air, and on the land, we found delight in how they streamed in many colors back and forth. Their sounds reverberate throughout our wet and roiling body. Their footsteps echo in the hollows of our land. Though only punctuations in our life, they are our song, we are their stage and deepest memory.

The humans came in tiny numbers. We supplied them on the shores and in the trees in great abundance. Then they moved out on the plains.

They fought when rain was scarce and other creatures left them only dust. They walked unceasingly to find our body's offerings, and they were filled. They began to talk, but in their wanderings they soon forgot a common tongue. Their arguments turned into fights, their life together into fear.

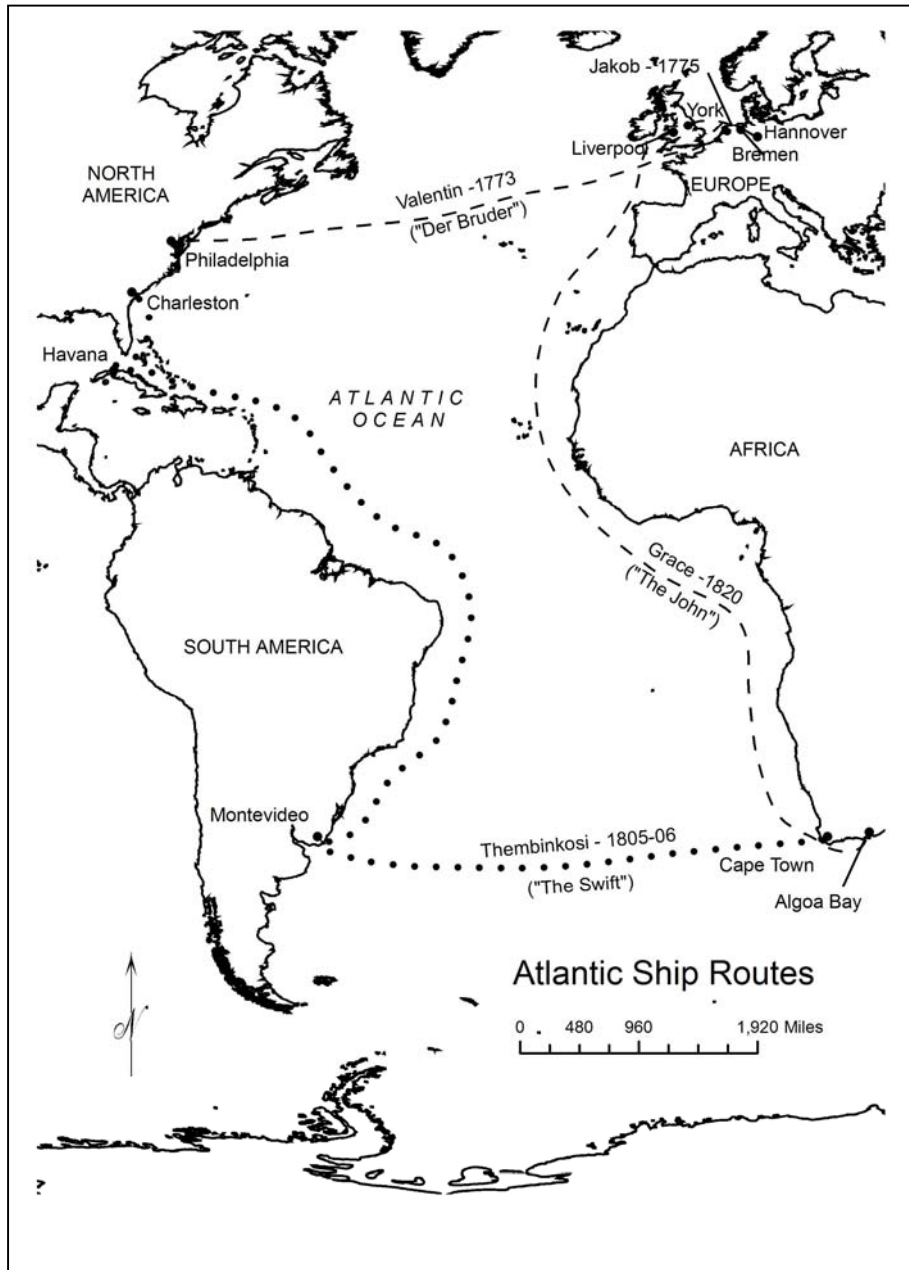
They do not know our language and have forgotten how to feel our mind, to live according to our time and listen to our memory. They are all one voice within us, but in their swirl of words, they struggle to abandon us. Drawn by fire, they try to flee us all, to leave their home, return back to the sun. Their fear and need drive them unceasingly across our body, drawing lines of separation to protect them from their deaths. Forgetting us, their aspirations turn to greed. They may poison us and kill each other every one, and we would lose their special beauty and delight.

If they could talk with us and feel our time and memory, perhaps they might come home. They could rejoin our now and always play of the clay and river, cloud and rain, sand and the sea. They would remember rightly and be reconciled.

From the place where they began some humans moved slowly toward the rising sun. Others followed the setting sun. Their journey brought them to our waters, waters stretching farther than their eyes could see. They learned to float on logs and their need began to overcome their fear. They began to leave the land. They returned to our waters, their womb of ancient origins.

In the rhythms of the icy times they found their way across the two great oceans. The wanderers toward the sunrise finally met the followers of sunsets. They saw each other's eyes at the elder mountains where the great trees bound earth to sky. Their hands touched at a worn old scar that remembers the ancient parting of the land. Their bodies found reunion and children came forth in our long watered valleys. Yet in the wooded shadows fingers closed in fear around carved wood and sharp metal. They left their cord of common life bleeding in the mountain's lap. Though children of the one sun, of the one earth, bound together with one blood, they died together in their fear upon the land. The waters carried their blood back to the sea that bore them.

There were humans in those mountains who called themselves the Ani-Yunwi-ya, the Primary People. They lived in the heads of the waters that ran down from the hills through many limbs into the ocean. They walked among the trees and wept as the people from the boats cut them down. They wanted metal things the strangers brought, but they fought to save their life among the mountain's trees. The humans from the sunrise called them Cherokee. Their struggle for the land still echoes in our depths and whispers in their memories.



Valentin



THEIR feet press the shreds of corn stalks into our fresh thawed furrows.
We are awakening to the sun, yawning with worms.

“So what’s the story here, Clayton? Is this where your top secret project is taking place?” Marie’s shoes are lightly dodging the prints his boots are laying out as they walk into the field.

“This field is where they forced us out. My people.” Clayton’s dark eyes reflect the mud and then the trees along the nearby stream as his mouth forms the words.

“Eighteen thirty-eight.”

“Oh...” falls like a stone from Marie’s lips. “How strange. That’s an important year in our history, too.”

Lanier’s shadow catches up with them, his voice a cloud coming from behind. “You mean in South Africa?”

She turns, her blond hair blowing in the late winter breeze. Lanier’s stiff curly hair is unruffled, haloed by the sun.

“Yes. Some of my parents’ friends still talk about it as if it was yesterday.”

“So do Clayton’s people, Marie. So do Clayton’s.”

Marie shifts her weight on the brittle stubs of corn and grass tangled in the wet soil. “Tell us about it, Clayton.”

“The little stream across there feeds into the Ocoee — the river I showed you where they had the white water Olympic events in ninety-six. It comes down from the mountains, then joins the Hiwassee a little ways from here before flowing into the Tennessee.”

“And then,” Lanier’s boots punctuating the names with wide strides, “to the Ohio, the Mississippi, and the Gulf of Mexico.”

“The elders call it Yunwi-gunahita, the long one. Our connection to the big waters beyond. A single eco-system that’s like a living human being...and a wisdom we lost.”

“The Institute would like that, Clayton. It’s amazing what a roommate can teach you. Someday I may even learn some Cherokee.”

“Tsalagi.”

“Oh, yeah, I know. But it just sounds so...uh, foreign.”

“That’s the idea, Lanier.”

“See, Marie, now we’re all in the same boat.”

“Guys, please. I want to know about the land.”

“Yeah, man, tell us.”

“Just over there is the Cherokee National Forest. This field seems to have been farmed and then let to pasture before the brambles started taking over. Just this little section grew some corn last year. There may have been an orchard here, since there are still some apple trees over at the edge by the stream and on up into the forest land.”

“Is that a little grave plot there by the fence?”

“I think so. I guess it belongs to the farm that was here.”

Marie walks over the brown grass toward the fence as Lanier turns to Clayton.

“So, what’s the ownership story, Clayton?”

“You mean the present claimants?”

“Uh-oh, you been talkin’ with lawyers!”

“Not exactly. But I think the family that lives in the frame house might be the owners.”

Lanier’s long lanky frame pivots slowly, his voice barely reaching the soil around him.

“Ownership. A power word, man”

“Well, there’s power, but there’s also what’s right. I think rightness can generate its own power. Even after all these years.”

Marie, having left them to their words, kneels down on the matted grass.

“It looks like you’ve had a good rest, earth. Your hair is all this way and that, sleepies on your eyelids. Clayton says that you and he dreamed together in some season that he can’t remember. Is it true? Can you tell us how to find the road to bring you back together?”

He is one with us, as we are with you. The old path back he may not find, only in new growth can his feet find a way to walk this land. Stay close to us and listen. Our buried memory will work its way among you like stones emerging in the spring from frozen fields. But you must listen. Listen deeply.

“Hey, Marie, what are you doing?”

Their heavy prints trail to her side.

“I’m just listening. Just talking to what’s here. It feels so peaceful in this place.”

Clayton's hand reaches out to Marie. She leans against him as she stands up.

"Yeah, this place...it's almost sacred ground. Timberlake said..."

"Who?"

"Thomas Timberlake. He's the one I had the vision with. He called it a 'seeing,' like you were seeing into the earth's memory. I saw my ancestors working this land, hunting in it, raising children. He thinks his family had some title to this land and there's a legal way to get it back, especially with the National Forest. He thinks my family might have some claim to it, too."

Lanier nods. "Turn right into power, is that it?"

"Yeah."

Marie plants her feet in front of Clayton, hands on hips, looks up to find his eyes. "So what's your plan?"

"The clearing over there with the apple trees is National Forest. Timberlake thinks they took it illegally. I'm going to start...I'm going to plant a garden there."

Marie's brow wrinkles. "Wouldn't that be illegal?"

"It depends. Not if one of us has legitimate claim to the land."

"But you could be arrested before all that got settled."

"Yeah, maybe. But that would only be part of the fight."

The shadow of a cloud clips the field as they stand in silence.

"I just want back the land they took. The life they took from my people. It's like a hole in my side."

Lanier looks into Clayton's eyes. "It's about the White man, isn't it, Clayton?"

"It's about what they did, Lanier. The effects. It's not a racial thing."

"Cause you have White ancestors, too, right?"

"Yes, but this is about the land and about what's right."

Marie's feet press the grass into the mud beneath her. "Right for whom?"

Clayton leans over and plucks an empty pod from a milkweed stalk.

"It's about duyukta."

“What is duyukta, Clayton?” Marie’s voice floats softly in the cool air.

“Harmony and rightness. Everything connected in the right way. Thomas talks a lot about it. It’s part of the old Tsalagi wisdom. Somehow, we have to find a path to duyukta.”

Marie looks toward the rippling creek. “But how can you get to duyukta by breaking the law?”

“I can’t answer that, Marie. Our whole history is violent.”

“Yeah, I know. So is ours. So complicated. It’s hard to know if we’ll ever get out of it.” She reaches over, takes his jacket by the elbow. “Clayton, you have your work, your research, your career. Would you jeopardize all that?”

“This feels like my life, Marie. I can’t have my life if I don’t have this. It’s been working in me for a while, then Thomas helped me see it, see this land. And now I have to do something about it.”

“I think Marie’s saying we don’t entirely understand what’s going on here, C. You’ve given us bits and pieces, but it’s hard for a Black guy from Atlanta and a White gal from South Africa to get inside your brain, you know? It’s all foreign ground.”

Clayton looks at the stubble at his feet, then at his friends. “Would you go with me over to Red Clay? It’s a historical site...I’d call it a sacred site. It’s not far.”

A short trip to Red Clay, a long trip for them to meet Clayton’s people and find their memory buried in our folds. His ancestors are all with us, both now and then. Their voices still reverberate within us. Their blood and tears are elements in our soil. Clayton’s story is much longer and more complicated than he knows. It is in our deeps –where lies what humans call the past. It is a story of water and land. Beneath their trip to Red Clay, many layers down, is a journey from the land of Germany many generations earlier. They called it the year of seventeen hundred and seventy-three in the shadow of the man who died upon a tree with nails in his hands.

“We simply don’t have the land. If you want a farm where you can raise your own family, you’ll have to go to America. That’s what your cousin Stephan did, and I hear that he is doing well somewhere in Pennsylvania.”

Martin Trask’s stout frame stood anchored in two boots slathered with the rich loam laid down by rivers reaching for the North Sea. He loved his cows as much as his sons and his sturdy wife, for they were all one with his work. He was a farmer. A real earthling.

“I am torn, Valentin, but the farm will have to go to Markus. I want all of you to carry on this farm, but I also want the best life for you. To have land, you will have to leave the land. That is the way it is. You’re eighteen now. You must decide while you can still build a new life. You have always worked well with wood. If you can’t find land maybe you can apprentice with Karl Forster in Hamburg.”

“Father, I do love joinery, but my heart is with farming, just like yours. I don’t feel right doing anything else. In America there is land for everybody. A man can make his own life there. I know a little English, and many Germans are there already. I think I should go to America.”

How often we have heard this exchange— in German, English, Swedish, and many more languages. Humans have always moved around to find food, and yet they also long to stay put, attached to land, to plow in us, to build houses on us, to smell the peculiar odors of our soil and see our varied contours; they long to call a certain place home. But to do that now they had to move, millions of them. Move to America. They had to entrust themselves to ocean’s deeps.

~

“Father, there is a family south of Philadelphia that needs a foreman. They advertised that they would cover my passage if I would stay with them for at least two years. Some friends who know their family in Hannover say they are honest and hard-working. With them I can get settled and then find a way to get into farming. Jakob can still stay a few years and help you here.”

“Ja, Jakob is strong and ambitious. But there may not be a way for him to stay long either. Maybe he will end up joining you. In the meantime he and Markus will fill in the gaps. We will miss you, Valentin.”

Valentin left early that spring to sail on the merchant ship *Der Bruder* out of Bremen. Tears fell on the ground as he climbed into the carriage with a leather case containing all that he could take from the land that had nurtured him. His father’s boots shuffled back and forth in the dirt beside the wheels. He would be removed from his family and their fields forever. He was being thrown into the wind like the seeds of autumn, unable to control where they land and whether they will take root and live.

The carriage wheels dug into the ruts heading toward the sea. Small boots and large turned back to house and barn. A pitchfork stabbed into manured straw beneath a milk cow. A ladle splashed the garden earth with soapy water from the kitchen. Valentin was gone.

~

Der Bruder had parted our waves at Bremen a few years before. For the humans aboard, the cost of passage was more than money. It was language, customs, family ties, and old affections—everything that bound them to the soil of their ancestors. We would do more than carry them to new land. We would dissolve their past, just as we had dissolved three centuries of wooden ships before *Der Bruder*. We sleep on their remains even as they sleep in us, reunited with their source. In his passage, Valentin was being reborn as well.

Wind filled the sails, as if hoping for reunion with the land. The sails clapped in percussive reception of its invisible conduction. Valentin and his fellow travelers searched the sunset horizon, straining for sight of the new land they could call home. We cradled the ship slopping in our waves. Some of its passengers adapted to our rhythms, but the legs of others never left the level land. Some got sick. Some looked over the rear of the ship, watching their memories disappear into the frothy wake and devouring eddies. They were young men and women, children, even babies. Very few were old. We were carrying seeds of new life to our other shore.

Some ships we welcome into our bosom when the wind and storms tear their ribs asunder, but this ship was spared. As it found the mouth of the river Delaware, shore breezes welcomed the immigrants. *Der Bruder* joined

other ships along the docks of Philadelphia where humans of all shades and circumstance negotiated their arrival in the New World.

“I am looking for Valentin Trask.”

“I am over here.”

Johann Straub’s boots hit the dock’s timbers like a drumbeat as he ran toward Valentin.

“I’m Herr Straub, Johann Straub, but you need to call me Mister Straub in public. It’s part of your new life. At home we can still talk German. Is this your baggage? Let me help you through the customs gate here, and we’ll be off. Do you have your indenture papers? They’ll need to see them. You are officially my servant for two years. That’s all they need to know.”

Valentin tried to speak, but the chattering of English rolled over him like a fog. He struggled to understand the customs officer as Johann interceded for him in the flush of immigrants whose hands, legs, and bodies were their passports to this vast, strange land. They wound their way among the knotted ropes smelling of pitch and found the boardwalk to the street lined with carts and carriages.

Their sturdy buckboard sank into the muddy ruts as hooves bit deep to pull the men and provisions up the long slopes from the Delaware. Large trees began to overshadow the lane as city houses yielded to farmsteads and forests. After two nights at inns along the road Johann and Valentin stood at the edge of a wide river, waiting for a ferry.

“What’s the name of this river, Herr Straub?”

“The Susquehanna. Indian name, like most places here. Settlers name towns, Indians name wild places. Pretty soon the names get mixed up. The Susquehanna comes down from the mountains inland and winds up as the head of the Chesapeake, a huge bay full of fish, shellfish, and birds. After we cross, we’ll make Baltimore in two days if we’re lucky. We’ll pick up some more supplies and head out to Bottle Hill.”

“Why is it called that?”

“The Irish. They had a legend about the little people of Bottle Hill who magically brought great wealth to the poor, right out of the ground.

They thought it might be their lucky place. All we've got now in the ground is crops. Sounds better, though, doesn't it?"

"Yes, crops. What are you growing?"

"Corn, wheat, some tobacco. Some pigs, too. Just took on more acres growing crops on the widow Janz's land. That's where you come in. That land hasn't been worked well ever since her husband died. So now we have to turn that earth again and bring it back. Are you ready for that?"

"I'm ready to plow. It's a strange land, and some of the ways here might be different, but just show me what to do. I'm here to learn. Someday I want a farm of my own."

"That's the deal. You work hard for me, and someday you'll have a farm."

Three more days found them at Bottle Hill among soft, undulating fields embroidered with trees. A stream ran through the farm, seeking the Chesapeake. Valentin's boots were soon crusted with the clay and manure of Johann Straub's farm.

~

When humans came to walk this land, our sand and clay had been settling here at the foot of the mountains for hundreds of thousands of turns around the sun. The bodies of many million trees had married with the sediments of mountain stone. Myriad rains had carved the land, forming hills and beaches where innumerable creatures lived as food and beauty. The feet of people fell lightly on the land. Then the humans came in boats. First they hunted. Then they opened up the ground and grew plants. They cut down the trees instead of using them for fruit or nuts. They settled on the shoulders of the rivers and sprawled across the land. They built houses, boats, and bridges. They forged metals and cut stones. Their smoke filled the air. Their wheels cut the land. They changed us, seeped into our memory like the glaciers of ten thousand winters. We waited. They didn't talk with us. They couldn't listen.

"Valentin, now that we've got the barn shored up, I have another job for you to do. That acreage I told you about at the widow Janz's needs some heavy weeding if we're going to have any success with that tobacco.

Besides, you need to meet her daughter. You can practice your English with her.”

Valentin clambered into the buckboard. The Janz house was only two hills away, some heavy breathing for the patient horses at a steady pace. Their hooves and wheels soon stopped at the edge of a rolling field. Among the tobacco, oats, and wheat, stubborn thistles, milkweed, and blueweed competed for our moisture, our nitrous compounds, our mineral traces. Valentin and Johann set to work evicting plants they did not want and piling them for removal. As the sun reached its zenith, they paused.

“Let’s go up to the widow’s porch, Val. You can meet the missus and, if you’re lucky, her daughter.” Drops of sweat fell from them as Johann winked.

“How long has the missus been a widow, Herr Straub?”

“About three years now. Sad story.”

“Death is always sad, isn’t it?”

“Well, this was sad because he was a good man, but he had a fault that took him down.”

“May I ask?”

“Seems he couldn’t avoid the whiskey...and the trouble it brings. Went into Baltimore one day and was found the next morning on the street in front of a much-frequented house, shall we say, a hunting knife still sticking in his chest. We told the missus he fell off his horse and broke his neck. She’s a good woman. But the gambling left her dead broke, so that’s when I arranged to buy the land and let her stay till the end of her days.”

“And her daughter...?”

The heavy beam door squealed open and clunked shut as they neared the porch. The women were ready for them with pitchers of cool drink. The men doffed their hats and eagerly bounded up the porch steps to sit down on the cane bottom chairs.

“This is Valentin. Just come from Hannover. He’ll be with me for at least two years.”

“I am pleased to meet you, Missus Janz,” Valentin faltered forth in his newly minted English.

“Valentin, hier ist meine Tochter Barbara.”

“Barbara, I’m glad to meet you. It’s a real pleasure.”

Valentin's well rehearsed words hung in the air like a cloth covering up his curiosity.

"Willkommen in Bottle Hill. Sie sind herzlich willkommen. I'll be glad to help you with your English, if you want," she replied, her German melting effortlessly into English like the marriage of two rivers.

"Oh. Help with English? I need that, but you'll have to arrange it with Herr Straub. I don't know when I would have time."

"We'll work that out, Valentin. You need to learn and it will make you more valuable to me, anyway. You work out some off hours with her. You couldn't have a nicer teacher."

Barbara smiled. Valentin's sun-reddened cheeks burned slightly brighter as the four of them settled back into German, exchanging pleasantries along with news of weather, crops, and sick animals.

Soon Johann and Valentin returned to the field, their hoes chopping hard in the soil. They worked until thunderheads drove them back to the barn.

"That Barbara, Herr Straub. How old is she?"

"Ah, that's the right question, Johann. She's seventeen. Pretty, huh?"

"Yes. Very. I was just wondering how much English she knows."

"She knows enough for you, boy. Who knows what you might learn from her? Her mother says she knows a heap of farming already. You'll see."

~

We offered up another harvest to their browned and leathery hands before the sun began to disappear farther to the south and the trees covered their fields and footprints with spent leaves – gold, red, and russet brown. The wagon went back and forth increasingly between the Straub's barn and the Janz's porch. Then it was just a horse and rider. Some evenings the lessons went on after the lamp was out. When the snow covered us, Valentin made sure the Janzes had enough wood and that their livestock was sheltered and fed. When the snow had melted into our deep spongy humus and seeped into the crevices of our stone mantle, his plow began to make its lines upon the face of our land. New life was beginning.

His hoe still leaning on his shoulder, Valentin sat on the edge of the Straubs's porch, sipping from a cup of water, his wide brimmed hat pushed back on his yellow curls.

"Herr Straub, I don't know how to proceed with this matter, but I need to ask you a question."

"What is your question, Valentin?"

"It's about Barbara, sir. We've gotten pretty close and, frankly, sir, I have decided that I want to marry her some day."

"Well, that is no surprise, my son. It wasn't such a bad winter after all, was it?"

Johann's slap on Valentin's back ran down to his boots, making them shudder like a fence post being pounded into the ground.

"I guess you're right there, sir. It's just that I'm not sure how that works with my relation to you, with working out my service with you."

"Ach, Valentin, I can't stop you from getting married, if you two and Frau Janz agree. After all, this is the land of freedom, isn't it? You're very young, and so is she. But you both are mature for your age. I think you can do it. The real problem is where you can live until you finish off your service."

"Well, I've been thinking about that. I was wondering what you would think about my building a cabin over on the side of that hill near the woods, over by the spring. And when we left, you could have the cabin."

"That sounds like a fine proposal, Valentin. But I hope that you would consider staying on after your two years are up. You are a fine worker. And besides, I'm sure Frau Janz would want Barbara to stay nearby."

"I can't promise anything beyond two years, Herr Straub, but I'll consider it seriously if you agree to the arrangement with the cabin."

"If you get married, Valentin, then I agree. It would be with my blessings and congratulations. Then you must call me Johann just as I call you Valentin."

"That would please me very much, sir."

"Good. So when are you going to ask her?"

"I'll wait for the right time, when I can look my best. I'd like to somehow find out how Frau Janz feels."

“Oh, I’m sure she’ll agree. Sure she will.”

“How do you know?”

“We’ve already talked about it. A fine match. Yes. A pair of good workers, we agreed. So go any time, Valentin. Any time.”

Valentin’s heavy boots nearly danced on the rutted road, sending up little plumes of dust as he hurried over to the Janz’s home. We were dancing with him, trembling with growth, with the exuberance of spring, of the fresh fields ready to bring forth new life. He was as eager as newly sprouted corn, smiling at the sun.

Barbara was standing on the porch as he drew near.

“Well, you look especially happy today, Valentin.”

“I guess I have to say I am, at least so far.”

“And why so far?”

“I need to see your mother about something, if I may.”

He took her hand in his. She gripped his tightly in return.

“She’s inside. I think she knew you were coming. She thought you might be here today.”

The sounds of shuffling feet, some muffled, faltering sentences fell upon us. We heard some questioning tones. A loud laugh reverberated in the boards. The dogs stirred and looked up from under the porch.

“Of course, Valentin. How wonderful. Your eyes told me everything the first day you two met. And you’ve proven yourself. You’re a hard worker and you’ll do well.”

“Thank you, Frau Janz. This makes me very happy.”

“But Valentin, aren’t you going to ask me?”

“Oh, Barbara, I thought I had... or maybe I’ve just thought about it so long... and we’ve talked so much.”

Valentin’s knees hit the wide boards with a thud.

“Oh, Val, you hopeless gallant, of course I’ll marry you. I’ve wanted to marry you ever since you walked through that snowstorm to see if we had enough wood to keep us warm.”

As the days grew cooler, Valentin laid stones in a large rectangle across from the spring in the lee of the hill, cut chestnut logs, fitted and

chinked them, roofed them over, and took his bride over the threshold as the colors turned to red and gold in the harvest of the year.

~

Valentin kept Barbara warm that winter. Hickory and oak burned in the fireplace. The ashes went into a large pot for making soap in the early spring. Hooves and shoes crunched in the snow between the houses of Bottle Hill. Soon the mud sucked at their boots, and another year of planting began. Although the rope bed had creaked all winter, Barbara looked out at the budding trees as slim as a fresh oak splint.

“Valentin, who were you talking to out at the road?”

“A traveler from down south. He says there is plenty of cheap farmland in the Carolinas. Things have settled down with the Indians, and there’s land for everyone to farm.”

“That may be so, but I don’t think things are settling down between a lot of folks here and the British government. There’s frightening talk of war.”

“That may be even more reason to think about getting away from here when my service is up. There’ll be fighting here, for sure, this close to Baltimore. It’s an important port. But nobody will want the wilderness of the Carolinas.”

“But Valentin, what about my mother? What about Herr Straub? It doesn’t matter who wins any war. The land will still be here. Farming will always be here, as much as the trees or the rocks or the streams. We can raise a family here.”

Valentin looked down quietly. We could feel the urges in his feet even though he stood stock still before her.

“Only as long as your mother lives, Barbara. Herr Straub says he can’t pass the land to us. It will never be ours. We need to have a new start on our own land. I want to own my own farm. I feel it in my bones, just as I knew I had to come to America. That’s how I found you.”

“And so we’re together. For life. Life on the land you choose. I know that. But we need to be practical, too. And we need to think about Herr Straub and my mother. We need to make sure that she will be all right.”

“I will. My indenture is over in a month. I’ll talk with Johann about it. I’m sure we’ll be able to work something out.”

After the crops were planted, Valentin and Barbara left Bottle Hill in their small buckboard drawn by two horses, with all their possessions and the little dowry Barbara’s tearful mother gave them as they parted.

They passed through Georgetown, crossing the Potomac, and then ferried and forded the rivers flowing down from the distant mountains to the mouth of the Chesapeake. Their wagon passed well-established plantations nestled up against exuberant woods. As they pressed farther toward the sun’s arc, plantations gave way to dense forests until they reached the ruddy red soils of North Carolina. They stopped in the town of Hillsborough, where they found some partially cleared land to the west. They could use it in return for fencing it off from the surrounding forests. They cut down more trees, removing the brush where little creatures hid.

As the leaves began to fall, the hooves of many horses pounded the earth along the coastal roads. People crowded together around the courthouses talking of war. Valentin and Barbara hurried to gather late corn and beans against the coming winter.

*

The narrow tree-lined lane receives Clayton’s truck and ushers the travelers to a frame building opening out to a field dotted with aging oaks. They walk out across a field to a hollow in the ground cupping water of a blue-green spring, their voices merging with the breeze rustling in the overwintered leaves.

The squirrels startle at Marie’s laughter as she kicks through leaves the wind has gathered in a gulley. Her blond curls bounce in time with her dancing feet. Her legs are taut and strong, like firm young trunks deep in dark soil. Her laughter comes from a face slightly rounding like the moon, her eyes bright blue like a winter sky. Her arms move in the breeze like young branches, her hands like poplar leaves, balancing her as she spins among the leaves.

“Hey, Marie, you’ll wake up Clayton’s ancestors!” Immediately the two men rush and grab her, carry her off beside the spring, making gestures they will throw her in.

“Hey, stop! I apologize! But even ancestors would like to kick the leaves, don’t you think?”

Clayton pauses, his dark eyes distant, gazing across the field. They all are silenced as a crow lifts cawing from a nearby oak.

“Don’t they like the laughter, Clayton?”

“I’m sure it’s welcome, Marie. You are welcome. But there are a lot of their voices here at Red Clay. Many sad and angry voices. Even now.”

“So what makes this place so special? What does it remind you of?”

“Many things, I guess. Many things.”

His brown eyes reflect the lowering shafts of sun, his dark hair weeping over his forehead. His voice comes out in measured blocks, like bricks set out to bake before the sun.

“Painful memories are buried in this earth. When my people had their last council here in eighteen thirty-seven they still thought they could appeal to the White man’s laws. They wouldn’t have to leave their homes. But they were betrayed. They were forced to leave. And that’s why I’m from Oklahoma. But I still feel like I’m really from here. That’s why I need to reclaim something in this land.”

“Trail of tears.”

“That’s what they call it, Marie.”

“So it started here?”

“It’s where the hope died and the fire went out.”

Marie sets out across the browned grass. “But isn’t that a little fire up on the hill? Right in that... well, we call it a braai place.”

The men follow her, Clayton soon taking the lead.

“It’s the eternal flame, Marie. It goes back to when my cousin came here for the reunion of the Eastern and Western Bands in eighty-four. He said he wanted to rebuild his bonds with this place and with the Eastern Band who had been able to stay behind. I remember him telling about how they brought the eternal flame from Cherokee, in North Carolina. The runners carried the torch just like the Olympics. They said it was a flame from the coals that had been here in Red Clay at the beginning. It was very

moving, just to hear him talk about it. The council fire was being rekindled here, here at the center. And it kindled hopes in me, too. Dreams. It's been fifteen years now, and... well, I'm still hoping... Just like the flame here."

Lanier is jumping lightly on his toes in the chilly breeze. They speak impatience to the web of humus, sand, and clay.

"I want to hear more, but maybe we should get back to a little warmer place."

"I'll race you, Lanier!" Marie starts running, but is soon overtaken by Lanier's long strides. Clayton walks in slowly to find them catching their breath, sitting on some rockers on the sunlit porch.

"OK, you Olympians, let's go inside. The history lesson isn't over."

Inside, the lowering sun breaks up in colors through a stained glass mural.

"So this mural tells the story, eh, Clayton? I never heard you talk this much about it. Nice glass work."

"Right, Lanier. Just like the glass I only knew the story in little bits and pieces. It took a while to put it all together."

"Lots of sharp edges."

"Yeah. Not just for the people but for the land. What's happened to the land since then."

His voice descends like the whisper of leaves in the slight breeze after a storm. They walk quietly among the artifacts, soon step back out to take some rockers soaking up the setting sun. The runners creak as Lanier turns to speak.

"Does all this have something to do with why the Tellico dam was so important for you?"

"Yeah, when they built that dam it flooded old Echota, and we lost the chance to touch the earth where our ancestors had their councils. When I came back east to study at the Institute, it was already too late. The water had covered it."

Marie and Lanier lean forward to catch his words as they emerge like vapor from an old kettle.

"For a while it looked like a little fish would save us. They thought it was its only home – sort of like us. An endangered species. But they took

it away to other streams where it could reproduce, and so the dam was closed, the water backed up, and another removal had been completed. They cut the long man in the middle. We lost. The fish lost. We both survived, but without our river.”

They lean back, runners groaning on the old boards as Marie finds her voice.

“Yes. Removal. We had a lot of that, too.”

Lanier brings his rocker sharply forward.

“In South Africa, you mean?”

“Yes. Blacks and Coloreds from White areas. I don’t know how we’re going to repair that, not to mention what it did to the land... But I don’t want to talk about that now. Maybe later.”

She looks back at Clayton’s lowered head. “When you talk about cutting the long man in the middle, it reminds me of what you said about... what was it? Duyukta?”

“Right. Duyukta. The path of balance and harmony. It’s duyukta that I – we – have been trying to recover. That’s probably why I’m here, doing what I’m doing.”

“So that’s why you got into environmental research.”

“Yeah, a friend told me about the ecology program at the University of Georgia. That’s how I met Lanier and then that’s how you met me.”

“I must say, meeting you two wasn’t something I imagined when I came to the States. There couldn’t be three people more different!”

Lanier slaps his leg sharply, startling some birds just outside the rail.

“Hey, Marie, don’t let the colors fool you!”

“It’s more than skin, Lanier. Seriously, we’re so different, don’t you think there’s a reason we have ended up doing things together?”

“Good point, Marie. Clayton, maybe it’s your duyukta that’s drawing us together from our rootless paths.”

“Rootless? Not really. I’ve got all kinds of roots. I just don’t know where they go. That’s why I keep coming back to places like Red Clay. I won’t find my own duyukta until I come to terms with what happened here.”

“Some day you need to tell me more of this story about how your people were forced to leave this area and go to Oklahoma.”

“I’ll tell you my story if you tell me yours.”

“Well, it was so complicated and painful. People are already trying to forget it. And it’s tangled up in a whole history I’m still trying to figure out. Just when I think I’m getting it right, somebody pops up and says it wasn’t that way. Everyone has their own version, and the versions keep changing.”

“Yeah, that’s the way it is with us – tourist pageants, movies, ceremonies – but there’s still a lot of pain and blood here in the earth. Things that are lost. All sorts of things buried along the trails west. They’re buried so deep and we needed to get on with our lives.”

“Hey, guys. Nobody’s asking me about my roots, and, hell, Alex Haley invented the whole thing.”

“But Lanier, you’re the one who’s always telling me to forget about the past, the roots, get on with building the future.”

“Got me, there, C. I acknowledge roots. I just don’t want to get mucked up there. But it’s a good spectator sport. I’ll let the movie run. And speaking of running, I think that’s what we need to do. Athens is calling.”

Lanier uncurls from his chair, Clayton behind him, and Marie jumps up to follow them as they head back to the truck.

Marie stops Clayton as he opens the pickup door.

“Clayton, thanks for bringing us here. I think I have a little better idea of what you’re about.”

“Thanks for listening, Marie. I don’t want to screw up your life here, but you’ll be welcome in the garden any time.”

She pats his arm and gets in, the men flanking her. Blond hair glows between the black as she turns to look back at the oaks circling the field beside the spring.

The truck’s descent from the Blue Ridge takes it into some tight curves. Clayton is moving with the turns, his hands slapping the wheel like lapping waves.

“I’ve been noticing that interesting ring, Clayton. What’s the story?”

“It belonged to my grandfather, Marie. My parents gave it to me.”

“Is it silver?”

“Yeah, with some other metals. He had a lot of jewelry like this. Stuff he inherited and stuff he bought and traded for. It gives me a sense of connection, so I wear it.”

“Did you know him?”

“A little bit. He died when I was pretty young. You know, when I saw you kneeling in the field it reminded me of him. He used to tell me how his grandparents talked to the trees, the animals, and the earth – even the water. That connection slipped away with him and now we’ve lost it. Too much noise. Too much concrete.”

“Well, I don’t think it’s really about words and noises, Clayton. When I really think about it, it’s more about a state of mind you get into, where you’re on a different wave length, in tune with earth or the animals. I think you can do it anywhere. The problem is within us, whether we can revive the connection.”

“Connections are good.” Lanier’s voice erupts like a shot and startles them.

“Yes, Lanier. Connection. Right now I feel so disconnected.”

“From your family?”

“Not just that. From everything going on in South Africa right now.”

“Since Mandela came out.”

“Ten years ago. I was only thirteen, but it was so vivid. Now he’s stepping down from being President. Things are changing. I feel guilty that I’ve run away just when they need me. Or maybe I’m feeling the need to be there for the big changes, scary as they might be.”

“But you need to be doing this studying, Marie. You’ll have something to offer when you go back.”

“Yes, but I may have lost the connections, Lanier. I worry that I might lose the return ticket.”

“Don’t forget, your degree is your return ticket.”

“The degree isn’t it. I could get a perfectly fine degree in Cape Town or Pretoria or Pietermaritzburg. America doesn’t have a corner on the intellectual market, you know. If Americans know so much environmental science, why are they making such a mess of Atlanta? Or the Smokies?”

"Then why are you here, Marie?" Clayton brakes hard to avoid a semi-trailer as they merge onto the four-lane.

"It's important, I think, to experience some other parts of the world, get some outside perspectives, see some other connections. And I just feel that there are connections here that I need to discover."

Lanier pats her hand. "You've come to the right place, Marie. Connection is the name of the ecological game. Just hang on to your hat."

The rush of wind absorbs their silence as they drive across our rolling red earth among the pines. Dark has descended on the daffodils as Marie steps down from the truck in front of her apartment building.

"A distinct pleasure, my friends. Will you both be at the Chattahoochee seminar next week?"

"Yeah, Clayton's our outside expert."

"Maybe we can talk after that, especially about your plans, Clayton. I know it's important. I feel somehow I need to stay in touch about them."

"Thanks, Marie. You're on board as long as you want to be."

~

A few days later, around the table in their concrete box, the experts run their words all over the tortured body of the Chattahoochee. They trade visions of how to rearrange the water and the land. The clock tells them to stop. They begin to leave the room. Clayton's feet land heavily on the walkway, a counter beat to Lanier's ambling gait.

"That was so frustrating. We can't leave the river alone, but we can't make it healthy, either. Too many words, too many artificial ideas. What I was trying to do was get them to think like the river. Get inside of its mind."

"Lanier and I thought we might get a snack at the café. Maybe something in your stomach will make you feel better."

"Sounds good. I need a soul massage, but a burger and coke might fill the gap."

"You need some real soul food, man, but it looks like we'll have to settle for a burger." Lanier tries to poke Clayton. Their feet drum faster down the sidewalk.

Clayton plops his straw into a voluminous coke and Marie requests some cream for her simmering tea, while Lanier, his lanky frame angled in the corner of the booth, regales them with a story about growing up in Atlanta. The late afternoon sun plays off his burnished brown face, his gleaming teeth dancing on his words. As their laughter dies down, Marie turns to Clayton with her slight crescent smile.

“Clayton, what are you going to plant in your garden?”

“Garden.” Clayton’s fingers play with the edges of his placemat.

“It’s funny. I haven’t really done much gardening. My grandparents, even my parents, had a big vegetable garden. But somehow I haven’t had much of a chance.”

“My folks always had gardens. I remember going to my ouma’s near Ladysmith where the old farm was. She always had vegetables and flowers. Lots of vines and melons. I miss it. I’ve started a tomato plant to put on my back deck when it gets warmer.”

“Ladysmith. Makes me think of ladybug – a ladybug for your garden.”

“Ladysmith, Lanier,” and now Marie arches up as if speaking in a high school play, “was named for the glamorous Spanish wife of Sir Harry Smith, a British general, who swept her off her feet after a British victory in Spain. He came to South Africa to...to... Well, he settled a lot of problems in the frontier areas. He has a city named for him just up the road from Ladysmith. So they’re together forever. I always thought that was very romantic when I was growing up.”

Clayton lets go of the straw, muttering. “I guess I would have been thinking of all the frontier problems, as you say, that he was settling.”

“Well, it’s back to that. Can’t you see how it’s all a complicated history? Just like yours?”

“I’m just saying that maybe it has something to do with the garden, after all. It’s like trying to tell the weeds from the flowers.”

“What do you mean?” Marie presses insistently. Clayton brings himself slowly forward.

“I mean that a garden implies that some plants are weeds, but I didn’t know a weed growing up. The woods and the fields were always my garden. I loved to roam along the streams and wooded places around our

home in Oklahoma. I picked the berries when I found them, gathered some nuts – I was firmly told never to eat the buckeyes! I watched the praying mantises for hours, hoping to see them catch something. I heard that the females ate their mates, but I never did see that. Gross, isn't it?"

"So you always were an ecologist but you didn't know it?" Lanier's eyes meet Clayton's as they both look up from their plates.

"I guess. I think the more important thing was that I found out that my ancestors preferred nature's garden to one they had to make. The women cultivated the clearings, but the men gathered the fruits of the forest and hunted the game..."

Marie lurches forward.

"Women did the hard work, right. Same old story, isn't it?"

Lanier sits back in the booth, creating a space for Clayton's response.

"Whoops. Looks like we're even for the day."

Clayton returns to his straw.

"Yeah. I'm a greedy colonist and you're a male chauvinist pig!" She laughs.

Marie's retort catches Clayton in the middle of swallowing his coke, which explodes out of his mouth like a geyser, splattering them both.

"Oh, wow. I'm sorry, Marie. I got your shirt all wet."

"Check out your pants, my friend. We're both a little indecent. Looks like we'll have to head out and get cleaned up."

Lanier's voice cuts through their sputters. "You guys are a case! A heady seminar, a pleasant bite to eat, and you end up like little kids who've wet their pants and fallen in the lake."

"Ah, Marie, how embarrassing. Terribly sorry."

"That's OK. I have to get home anyway. We can talk about the garden later, OK?"

"Right. And take care of your tomato plant."

"And you guys get cleaned up before the seminar next week. You're presenting again, aren't you, Clayton?"

"Yeah, about the Tellico. If I'm not in jail."

"What does that mean? You aren't takin' on the man, are you?"

"Yes, Clayton, please don't do anything rash."

“You guys haven’t gotten the drift, yet, have you? I’m not doing anything crazy, but I’m not going to stop taking my path, either. Really, you’ll have to trust me.”

He rests his hand on her shoulder, squeezes it lightly, turns, and leaves.

“Sometimes I worry about him, Marie. He’s never been like this since I’ve known him.”

“Do you think we should do something to change his mind?”

“There’s a road he’s walkin’, Marie. You need to think hard about how far you’re going to walk it with him. Got my meaning?”

“I know, Lanier, but somehow there’s something on that road I need to see, too. I just don’t know what it is.”

They are silent a moment in the white water of noise around them. They stand up. She slims her hands down the sides of her pants and straightens her wet shirt as they leave.

~

“I think I need to apologize, Marie.”

Clayton’s voice floats through the scurry of electrons jostling each other in the air, over the wires, in our soil.

“It was no problem, Clayton. I needed to wash that blouse anyway. But I thought you had left town. Are you all right?”

“Yeah. I’m OK. I’m going back this afternoon, but I thought your question deserved a better answer than you got, so I’m wondering if you have time for lunch.”

“Sure, but I have a lab at two.”

“I’ll pick you up at noon.”

“I’ll bring a wet suit. See you then.”

She is standing at the curb when he drives up. With a slight hop she quickly mounts the step to the cab.

“I got some picnic stuff. I want to take you over to the Oconee for lunch. A little riverside park.”

“Agreed. You can even fish while we talk, just like your ancestors.”

“I fish. Really I do. But the work has really made it difficult. I’ll get back to it one of these days. You garden. I fish.”

“Watch out for proposals like that. You better not talk that way to women if you want to settle down. Some of the old ways have to change, you know!”

They spread out a quilt beside the slowly moving river.

“Is the river always this muddy?”

“It’s the rains. Too much construction going on. Poor erosion control. Are you still working on that erosion project?”

“Erosion and reclamation. We have huge problems from overgrazing on unstable lands during apartheid.”

“What does it have to do with apartheid? I’m curious.”

“When the government forced people back to their so-called homelands it often produced overcrowding. And, of course, these were usually the less productive, fragile lands. Most of the tribes still held cattle in high esteem. Cattle are a way of life, you know? So the cattle overgrazed the land, broke up the sod, and left it open to the rains. Pretty soon the homelands were clawed open by deep dongas.”

“Dongas?”

“Gullies, ravines. Anyway, apartheid left scars on the land as well as scars in people’s brains. So that’s why I’m here – to help with the healing, to help heal what my people did.”

“White guilt.”

Her feet stiffen, her toes curl up the edge of the quilt.

“Maybe. Or just sorrow. Trying to get rid of the sadness. Trying to love the land again. My grandparents loved the land. I guess they just didn’t know what they were doing with the people.”

“Same old White story, isn’t it?”

“And same old moral superiority!” Her words bounce explosively into the pine branches. Their long soft needles absorb the anger from her voice.

“I’m sorry. I don’t like these one-up, one-down games. OK? I mean...”

She gets up from the quilt. Her feet scrunching in the pine needles, she faces the river. Her back is turned to Clayton’s half-open mouth.

“Sorry, Marie. I don’t know what makes me say these things. I just think there are still some moral differences. There’s history and what happened.”

“I don’t think we really know what happened, how complicated it was. And anyway, there’s a difference between what people meant to do and what happened. Even apartheid had some good intentions.”

“Like what? Sounds like the reservation system to me. Whites take the good land and send the natives to the poor land, claiming that they’re preserving their culture, right?”

“Clayton, I’m just saying it’s not so simple. I think there’s more stuff about your history than you even know... or are willing to recognize. Like your White ancestors.”

Her feet swivel. She walks back toward him.

“That’s enough of that. What did you want to talk about?”

“It is about that. It’s about the past, and the garden, and the path I’m on.”

Marie sits down next to him and puts her hand on his arm. Her feet settle beside some ants that have come for the crumbs from their sandwiches. Clayton’s voice quiets and deepens.

“On the one hand, I really want you to be part of this, and yet I don’t want to get you off track. I have no right to expect a thing. No reason. It’s just a weird feeling, like I see you there in the garden with me. And then I say things that push you away. I’m sorry.”

“Clayton, I think I understand something of your reasons. It’s just your passion for it that I haven’t grasped. But you mustn’t worry about me. I do want to be in that picture, I just don’t know how.”

“It’s not romantic, what I’m saying, Marie. Please don’t get me wrong.”

“No, no. Of course not. A friendship has grown up, even if it’s a little testy sometimes. But it’s important to me, so I want to continue. But we have to be honest with each other, OK?”

“That’s why I wanted to see you. To get back on the right foot before I leave.”

She holds out her hand to him. He takes it in his.

“Start over.”

“Keep going.”

“Who knows, Clayton, maybe your search has something to do with mine.”

“Search? I didn’t know you were on a search... personally, I mean.”

“Well, I wasn’t, but maybe I am. Maybe I should be. Maybe that’s why I’ve just fallen into talking with you. Maybe I wanted to be on a search.”

She throws a pebble into the dark waters. “Well, there you are. We’re searching, but we aren’t sure for what.”

“Or where it will all end up.”

They stare for a few moments at the trickling water pouring over the rocks. Clayton stands up with a bounce.

“And that’s all for today, folks. Hey, let’s get in some wading before we head back.”

“Best thought of the day. To the water! Wet suit or not.”

His ancestors went to the water for purification, but now these two are splashing in the water for fun. It is human ritual, dissolving people’s fears in the rush of waters from the mountains to the sea. They are joined together in a search for knowledge only we contain, for the past that is present in our veins. The water takes them on a journey. For Barbara and Valentin the waters had slowed, pooled deeply in waiting. Snow had settled on the ice.

*

The winter had brought snow and rain, but Barbara and Valentin had survived in their newly built cabin. The goodness of a nearby family and the deer and turkeys in the woods sustained them. The mud of April would soon be ready for the plow to bleed us of our offerings for animal life. A horse splashed among frothing puddles in the road, bringing its rider breathlessly to the little porch. It was Valentin.

“Barbara, where are you?”

Barbara emerged from behind the cabin carrying a bucket of water. He hurried to her.

“Barbara, there’s been fighting in Massachusetts. It looks like there’s going to be war.”

“But Valentin, that doesn’t need to affect us. We have to raise our crops and get settled here.”

“Maybe not right away, but they are saying that all the Indians will join the British so they can control the land and keep us from getting our own farm. So it can affect us. I may have to fight if we’re going to have any land at all.”

~

Declarations echoed in the public houses, committees covered tables with their papers, guns thundered over us, cannons shook the ground. Warring men made guns from our metallic ores, explosive powder from our minerals and trees. Bandages of fibers drawn from sheep and cotton staunched the flow of blood.

As the summer sun brought tassels to the corn, blossoms to the squash, and melons bursting on their vines, blood splattered on the land between native and settler, immigrant farmer and red-coated soldier. When night began to cloak the fields they laid their dead deep in our soil.

~

“Barbara, they’re forming a militia to go with General Rutherford into Cherokee country and punish them for siding with the British. I need to go. For our sakes, for the sake of our future, I need to go.”

Barbara silently nodded, turned, and went into the house, weeping as she began to assemble supplies for her mate to carry into war.

In late summer Rutherford and some twenty-four hundred men set out across the foothills and into the mountains. They devastated thirty-six Cherokee towns, ruining the crops just before their harvest, killing women and children, and scattering the Cherokee defenders into the higher mountains. Valentin returned unscathed but his feet fell heavily when he dismounted, kicking dust on moss encircling the pines.

“Barbara, we beat them bad. We had a tough time getting there, though. The rivers have strange names – French Broad, Swanna, Pigeon, Tuckasegee. You can’t tell where English leaves off and Cherokee begins.

And one mountain ridge follows another. Trees as far as the eye can see. We destroyed their towns completely. All but their capital. Some terrible things happened. It was sad work, but we had to do it.”

Valentin looked at his hands, rubbed them on his pants, stared into the trees at the edge of the field. The sun’s rays glistened on his trembling cheeks.

“Some of the settlers have married Cherokees, and the Indians I saw were handsome and proud. It’s all because of the land that we’re fighting. They are going to lose it. We are too many for them. But they will only lose it if we defeat the British.”

“Thank God you are safe, Val. That’s what matters to me. I just hope we can settle down now and make this farm work and raise a family.”

The wooden prongs on Barbara’s pitchfork twisted in the ground, scratching us, trying to wake us up, relieve her fears of a hungry life. A beetle disturbed by her agitation scurried off under the porch.

“I don’t think it’s the end of the fighting yet, Barbara. The Indians are out of our way but the English won’t give up this country without a lot more fighting. I may have to go out with Rutherford again. He’s old Scotch, you know. They just love to whip the English.”

And they did.

We saw five more summers before the ties across the ocean were cut, the wound bound with leaves of paper and clasped hands of parting. The blood was turned to ink. The Cherokees gave up much of their hunting land to those who had defeated the British. That was the victors’ pay. The land paid the debts of war. We were blood money.

~

“Barbara, we’re in luck. Real luck.”

Valentin’s breath was coming as fast as his horse’s as they neared the barn where Barbara was bringing down hay to the stalls.

“Good news is always welcome, Val, even if it’s only brought by luck. What is it?”

“We’ve been awarded a hundred acres of river bottom on the edge of the old Cherokee country because of my service in the war. It’s out on the French Broad River where I was with General Rutherford. It’s beautiful

country. Deep soil on the rivers, even though the hills are rocky from top to bottom. We can finally have our own farm!”

Valentin was practically dancing, the dry ground clapping with hands of dust around him.

“But Valentin, we’ve already put so much effort into this place. How can we just abandon it?”

“Can’t you see? It’s clear that we will never really own this land. And anyway, it’s too small. We need more land. We can start with a hundred there and I know I can get more. We’re already hemmed in here. There won’t be enough for our children to inherit.”

Barbara, still childless, fell silent, her feet like old stiff roots.

“Barbara, I think it will be easier when we are really settled on our own land. I hear there are some homeless Cherokee or mixed breed who need work and places to live. They don’t want to be slaves. They need protection from the settlers, but settlers like us are the only help they have. They could give you some help so you wouldn’t be exhausted all the time. You’ll see. It will be better. We will have a family.”

Early the next spring, their two wagons rolled heavily up the long shoulders of the blue-gray ridges sheltering the rivers flowing from the gaps. They came down into the French Broad basin and put their hands and feet into our soil. They cut down trees, cleared brush, put up a rough cabin. Their feet pressed down our topsoil, their plow turned it over, and their hands laid claim to our fruits and our promise.

Some Cherokee remained on the land, though it was no longer theirs to control. They had traded with the English and the French for generations. Some of them had traders for their fathers. The fathers came and went. The women stayed on the land. They knew how we could yield them corn and beans. But we could not grow kettles, cloth, and guns. We could not protect them from their enemies. They fled to the mountains. They fled into the arms of their invaders.

“I am Jenny. I can help you. You can help me. My people leave, but I live here.

“You are Cherokee?”

“Yes.”

“And you know some English?”

“Yes. Some English. My father, he was English. I was little when he went away. I am alone.”

Valentin leaned into the slender thread of English that connected their ancestral worlds. Jenny was muscular and tall, her burnished skin testifying to a basketful of summers. A few gray hairs announced the coming winter of her life. Her hands had worked a hoe and ax, her feet had traveled many miles.

“My wife needs some help. We can build you a cabin. You can live here.”

With these simple words and gestures Jenny came to live on Valentin’s farm. They learned words from each other. Jenny taught them about the plants and the ways of the animals. Barbara showed her how to spin yarn and make cloth the European way.

One day Jenny appeared with a young woman at her side. We had laughed with her feet on the sunset side of the mountains when she was a little girl. She sang at the songbirds and clicked at crickets. When she walked behind her mother, she learned quickly how to match her step for step. She ran before her, laughing, as they went to get the water from the spring. Before she reached a hoe’s height she was cutting into us, culling out unwanted plants. The young men followed her to the headwaters when she left to help her aunt.

“This is my brother’s daughter. Her name is Nancy. Her family lives in the Overhills. It is near the Tennessee River. She comes here to help me. She can help you. She knows some English and wants to learn more.”

Nancy’s clear brown eyes glimmered in the morning sun. She was slender like her aunt, but her face was unworked by winters and grief. Her hands were strong but not yet tough. Her face spoke of tulip trees and deer. Valentin’s mouth opened silently, his eyes brightened with quick movements.

“Yes, you are welcome, Nancy. Very welcome. We have a lot of hard work to do.”

“I am glad to help. I can learn things fast. We can grow many things here. It is a good land.”

Jenny and Nancy turned back to their cabin. Barbara turned to Valentin.

"If this keeps up they all will end up living with us. Whose country is this, anyway? Is it clear what they expect and what we will get? I don't know whether they are hired hands, servants, slaves, or relatives."

"Ach, Barbara, I don't think it's so bad. We really can use their help. There's so few here now, but they're not going away just because we got their old hunting grounds. They learn how to farm from us, we learn how to survive here from them. A good deal, I think."

"Well, yes, and we may need them more than it seems."

"What do you mean?"

"Valentin, I've been meaning to tell you this. I think I am finally going to have a baby."

Eight hands were gripping hoes. Four hooves were pulling a plow. Seeds were dropped into our open furrows. The rain seated them. The clods fell upon them, bedding them deeply. Days later the warmth of life entered into them. They broke open as the sun rose higher, awakening them, drawing them upwards, their stalks struggling for the heat and light.

Barbara's hands swelled up more than usual. She moved more slowly. She came to the field later. She left early to rest. She rested with us. We were growing things.

"Jenny, I will need help with my baby. I will need help with the birth. They say you are a healer. Can you help me?"

"I can do that, Miss Barbara. I bring many babies into the light. We will do it together."

"I think I am getting close to that time. Can you feel the baby? It is my first baby, but I don't know if it is in the right position."

Jenny rolled her hands around Barbara's belly as if it was a ripe gourd, searching for a particular place. She pressed her ear to the belly and listened. She hummed against the belly and felt the baby struggle in the womb. We waited in the silence.

HER toes clutched at the wisps of grass clinging to the clay knoll by the river. They writhed in the dirt, trying to weave themselves into the grass's roots, digging deeper into our soil, trying to speak to us, tell us not to let her go. Her long, graceful legs were scratched, the blood dried in rivulets. Her hands, with their strong young fingers, were tied together with coarse rope. Above her proud young breasts a chain circled her neck and looped back to a young man behind her. Above this imprisoning necklace her mouth and full lips were set toward the ocean, her eyes gleamed like little suns setting on her world. She was being cut off from the land that had nourished her. And so we spoke to her, yielding up the comfort of her home.

You are a special sister, Thembinkosi. Remember that your name means "Our trust is in God" -- the God your people call iNkosi yeZulu, the God of the Sky.

"My dear earth, my trusted Umhlabati, what good is my name to me now? My people have trusted in the sky, for it is a great rock far above us, sheltering us from the darkness beyond, anchored at its corners on this earth. It has been our shield, the face of the Great One. But it has failed us. I fear I am even losing you."

Our dear Thembinkosi, the sky and the earth are united to protect you and all creatures of the forests. Yet we feel your salty tears falling upon our face. Dear sister of Nomkhubulwana, trust in us. Drink back your tears.

"O Umhlabati, I fear that you have failed me! The Great First One, our Unkulunkulu, does not hear me and turns away from my voice. I am at the end of my world. My feet and hands are tied. I can smell the ocean drawing near to swallow me. I am broken off from my people. All I can do is cry! Why do you speak now of Nomkhubulwana? Help me!"

You are special, Thembinkosi. That is why we say that Nomkhubulwana, the Great Princess of the Heavens, is your sister. She will always be with you. Just as she brings the harvest and gives you mealies to eat, so she will go with you and protect you wherever you go.

"She has deserted me. She is far away in the forests where my people live. She is with my father and the amaNdwandwe. And my father no longer walks the earth in feet of flesh. My strong father has been cut down by the impis of the amaMthethwa. I know my people will defeat them and become strong again. But I, I am cut off. Why?"

We still sustain your people, just as we do the ones they call their enemies, but you are special to us. We ask you to remember how your feet grew large in the grasses of our land, how you wove together the leaves of the ubendle plant to cover you. We remember when the first drop of your blood came into our soil and how you went out with the other maidens then to talk and play with Nomkhubulwana. We remember when you took her mealies and made the beer you drank among the round hills. We remember, we can still smell, the red dust of the land that you spread among the crops to protect them. We remember this red dust of the Princess, your sister in earth. And we remember when you took the red clay from our hand and rubbed yourself with it to tell the world that you were ready to be a woman.

“I am afraid, Umhlabati. My womanhood will count for nothing with these men! Even the red clay will be snatched away from me! My skin will not shine with my fullness. It is now only the meat these men will devour. These are wretched men, as cruel as the Mthethwa who have taken me from my family. My father is dead and can only torment their souls, but why have my brothers in the flesh deserted me? Why have they not come for me?”

Your brothers will not come, Thembinkosi. They fear you, for you are too close to our powers and to Nomkhubulwana. They do not understand how you speak with us and with her. They know that you do not fear the snakes, even the poisonous ones. They do not understand why, after you laughed in the face of that young man, he died in the shadows. They fear the gifts from her that you carry in your skin bag.

“Why, my friend, do they fear even the bright and shiny metal mirror in my bag? It is all that I have now from my father. My mother was so angry when he gave it to me. The other women were only getting beads but our family had a precious covered mirror. For the first time I could see myself clearly and I loved to look at my smile and my white teeth. When she knew it would not be hers she said it was cursed because he had gotten it from a White trader – and for so little ivory! But my father said it was a bond between us that would never break. And so I will hold onto it for all my life, even though it is now broken.”

Yes, we could feel the snap when one of your captors broke off the other half and ran away with it. We could feel the strength with which you

held onto the mirror; how you held onto it even when the slave traders tried to take it from you. How they believed the Mthethwa men when they said that it would curse anyone who took it from you. And when the lightning came that day, they said that Nkosi was seeking the whiteness of the mirror and would strike any Whites who held it. Though the cover is gone with the Mthethwa warrior, it will not be lost. We will never lose it. We will make it whole again. This is our promise to you.

“Umhlabati, what difference does your promise make if I am swallowed by the sea? They are going to take me down to the pale people in their big boats and I will be lost forever to my family, my people, and to you.”

Hold tight to your mirror, to Nomkhubulwana’s clay and colors in your bag, Thembinkosi. The pale men will take you in their ship, but ocean will not swallow you. We know their waves and currents and their struggle with our land. You will feel the pains of death, but you will not die. You will have a new life. You will claim it and fight fiercely for it as a newborn baby fights for air and milk. You will live by your name, Thembinkosi, and your eyes will be filled with the mirror’s light.

The rough men came and took her away from the little hill by the bay. They led her in a long chain with others who had been dragged down from the hills to the waiting ship. Thembinkosi fell among the strange languages of the pale people of the ocean. She could not understand the Portuguese and English words that bounced off the water and buried themselves in the mud. There was a waving of hands and arms. The men on the ship gave the men from the hills metal and cloth and boxes of beads. The men from the hills pushed the people in chains toward the boats. Bits of grass and dirt clung to their toes. They stumbled onto the ship called *Fanny* from the port of Salem in America. Ocean folded their arms around it and accepted the cargo of greed and suffering. The grass sprang back where her feet had clung to her beloved earth. It was the year of the slavers’ water child, seventeen ninety-three.

The *Fanny* sailed out of De Lagoa Bay into our deeps with a hundred and fifty men and women, young and old, pressed so hard against its timbers we could hear their moans and cries echoing down among the

fish, the sharks, and the settling murk. The sailors saw Thembinkosi's smooth young skin, her firm breasts, and her darting eyes. As she was being forced into the hold they tried to snatch away her skin bag and skimpy ubundle, but she resisted them. The captain shouted when he saw their grasping hands.

"Any man who touches that girl will have his greedy fingers in a thumbscrew! She's a special prize for the Company in Cape Town. You can have your pleasures at the slave lodge when we get there, but don't give her your bloody diseases!"

The sailors froze at his words just as our warm waters danced high with the cold air from the south. Dark clouds swirled above the masts. Lightning snapped and lit up their eyes. Thembinkosi clutched the mirror hidden in the bag at her waist. Rain came down and washed the deck. The sailors jumped to the sails and she was rushed below to the fetid air of the hold. The timbers bruised her as the ship rocked roughly in our arms. People retched and screamed until our waves stretched out unfoamed beneath the stars.

When the storm had cleared, the captain came on deck and sighted on the stars. The ship headed away from the rising sun. The sailors threw some baskets of mealie bread into the hold and slammed the cover shut. Thembinkosi fell into a tortured sleep, clutching her bag in one hand like a lifeline, her fingers fisted around Nomkhubulwana's gift of color and her father's mirror.

We carried the *Fanny* in the warm waters along the coast toward the colder waters from the south. Our salty waters gushed from the eyes of her weeping cargo. They were one with us behind the fingers of wood. They were all like fish to us, the captives and the captors, and many before them had returned to our womb. But these, these we saved to carry on their race, to struggle with the other humans, feeding on each other and our land.

The plank benches deep in the hull thumped with bodies thrown upon them, chains clicking against hooks on the timbers. Their tears dripped into the bilge, only inches from our living waters. In the darkness Thembinkosi heard a woman's voice in accents similar to hers.

"Don't cry, my sister, even these waters are filled with the spirit of Unkulunkulu. They will take us back to life. We must trust in his spirit."

"I am trying, but I feel like I have left my soul behind. I can't live up to my name. Unkulunkulu is far away at the beginnings of things. He can't help me now."

"They say you are Thembinkosi."

"That is the name they gave me."

"It is a good name. It will sustain you. I am also Ndwandwe. We must be strong and carry our people's spirit wherever this boat takes us."

"But your name. Who are you?"

"I am Nokuthula. I, too, have been torn away from my children and family. They are gone to their ancestors before their time."

"Mother of Peace. I am glad that you are here. You can be my mother, too."

As she said these words the hold cover slid partly open and a sailor slipped quietly through the crack. He paused, letting his eyes adjust to the murk. The wind was still whistling in the masts but a stillness had come over the ship. He inched down the planks toward Thembinkosi. He grabbed her leg and wheezed out "Now you come to Daddy, pretty one."

Suddenly a dark arm, chain flying, came sharply up against his face and a chained leg struck into his groin. The sailor fell back.

"What the hell, you black devil!"

He pulled out a short stick and began beating on the dark figure in the semi-darkness.

The commotion roused the crew. Faces appeared at the cover.

"What are you doing down there, Flint?"

"This fellah was at the women. I heard them crying and came down to stop him."

The Captain's voice penetrated into the hold.

"Bring that man into the light."

The young man, his sinewy arms already bruised and bleeding, kneeled on the cramped deck, his eyes still bright. The captain slashed his back once with a short whip and then hit Flint with the butt end. Flint reeled back hard against the rail.

"Chain that boy securely in the hold. And Flint, if I catch you down there again, you'll have more than thumbscrews to reckon with."

Thembinkosi's slender body was shaking with cold and fear. The boy's faint groaning roamed the hold, seeking her ears. The hand of Nokuthula reached out to her in the gloom as the hold cover slid shut again.

"Nokuthula. That man, that boy. He protected me and now he's badly hurt. Do you know who he is? Why did he do it?"

"My dear child. He has done something very noble. He is Mthethwa and yet he tried to protect you. I do not know his name, but he was taken in a raid by our people and sold to the traders just like you. Now we are together in this ship of death. But he has chosen life for you. We must be grateful. We must help him when we can.

"Now try to sleep, child. Hold my hand. Let the ocean rock us. It is like riding on our mothers' backs. It is soothing."

Thembinkosi tried to speak to us through the wooden sides. She spoke like a little child to her mother, walking among the trees and grasses. We could hear her faint, faint voice. "Mother. Mother ocean. Mother waters. I am afraid. If I return to you will I be cut off from my people? Are you my mother's waters? Please don't wash me overboard. The beasts in your dark deeps, they will eat me up. Keep me safe in your arms. Please protect me. Let me live."

We held all those words, echoing them over and over. We told our little daughter Thembi that she was not alone, that we are one with her.

~

As the *Fanny* rounded the place the Portuguese call the Cape of Gulls, it began to smell the colder waters of the middle ocean, fed by the great ice to the south. The winds picked up to gale force, flinging spikes of cold water into the sailors' eyes, tearing at the sails as their frightened cargo tossed about in the dark hold. Deep below our surface we played in the folding combinations of warm and cold, delighting in the kaleidoscope of fish gathered between our roiling currents. We threw up waves against the mountains rising from our deeps. At the point of rocky land they call Good Hope the boat almost capsized in our spray until it pointed north and found a steady breeze upon the undulating waves. The great flat mountain with its flag of billowing clouds soon welcomed them into the harbor dotted with boats. An island of seals barked at them as they sailed in. The *Fanny* let down its sails, threw its fingers of iron into our bed, and raked to a halt.

When the sun once again sat like a red fruit on the mountain's ocean side, a small boat bobbed toward the Fanny to deliver some men to its deck. A clatter of guttural Dutch and clipped English spilled over the rails.

"Captain Scott, I am Andries van der Groot, representative of the Vereenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie. We need to see your papers in order to approve the auction of these slaves under our auspices."

"Herr van der Groot, my communications with the Fiskaal said that the Company would purchase these slaves directly. Here is the letter with the purchase prices."

"Ah, but we have not imported slaves for the lodge for several years now. The Fiskaal was overly optimistic. But I assure you, sir, that there are eager buyers for whatever you have brought if they are healthy."

"I understand. We have a hundred and fifty from De Lagoa Bay. They seem to be in good health for the most part, both men and women of an age that can give some years of service. You will notice in the letter he sent that the Fiskaal himself said he wished to have me secure, with special pains, a strong young woman for his household. What is to be done with her?"

"You may set her aside for the moment until you meet with him to see what his wishes are. I am here only to supervise the sale and collect our duties. Ten rijksdaalders each. The boats will come after my return to begin the process."

Waves slapped at the transfer boats as they knocked and creaked at the ship's sides. The hold covers were thrown open to the eyes of gulls and the shimmering sun. The darkness escaped into the light like a bat at dusk and we could hear the frightened weeping of the captives as they were ushered rudely to the deck. Some were so weak with hunger and disease they could not stand. Thembinkosi struggled off her knees until she was erect, drawn upward like a mast, her shadow falling across the sailor holding her chain. Her hands trembled as she clutched her bag, but her eyes were still alight, claiming her name.

"That's the one. The princess. Make sure you take her directly to the Fiskaal when you get ashore."

Nokuthula still gripped Thembi's hand. Thembi could now see her in the light. Her face was peaceful like her name, but its surface was ragged

with tears and dirt. Her breasts were past milk, her feet were large and flat. Her eyes met Thembi's and silently claimed a common spirit.

Calloused hands grabbed Thembi and squeezed her in among the others in the sloshing boat. As the boat cast off, Thembi looked back, her eyes searching for the one who had protected her. Her gaze picked its way among the bruises, but there were too many. Her eyes captured the image of Nokuthula and then closed wetly, communing with the salty serenity of our depths.

As the boat reached the stone pier a seal bowed before it in the waves, catching her eyes, giving her a small comfort that we were yet her mother as her feet returned to land. The chain dragged over the boat's worn wood and she was taken ashore.

The iron links clattered on the cut stones. We have heard so many chains amidst the soft padding of bare feet, the dragging toes, the bleeding heels. Pebbles fled from the flailing chains as the dark slaves shadowed the gray stone walls and the pale citizens passing by. Loud laughs, cries, and conversation fell on deaf dark ears. There were no words from pursed full lips except a slow, deep wheezing as the captives trudged toward a large stone fort. They were prodded inside a stone building divided into cells. It was dark inside save for a slit of light prizing its way through a crack near the ceiling. The ascending sun was soon cut off from them. In the darkness Thembi realized that Nokuthula had been thrown in with her.

"Nokuthula, what is going to happen? Are we being left here to rot on these stones?"

"No, my daughter, they want us to work for them. That is why we are here. Soon they will take us to be sold. The men will do very hard work. Some of the stronger women will work with them. You are too young and I am too old for such hard work. We must wait and see what will happen to us. If they separate us, remember that I will always remember you, like the earth remembers the bones of your people. I will speak to Nomkhubulwana and she will protect you."

Footsteps approached the doors of the cells. Dark hands pulled them roughly into the light. Thembi's frightened eyes looked up at the massive mountain, rising like a prison wall before her. Soon she saw the other

shackled people and their guards. Some pale men were with them, holding pistols. Barking voices echoed off the fort's stone walls as they were pushed and dragged toward a large open square. Pale hands and faces turned toward them. Dogs ravaged the streets, looking for food and fights.

"Heer van Rijneveld, that is the one we picked out for your house. She is young enough to be trainable, old enough to work hard. And she has striking features, don't you think? If you are pleased, we will offer her to you for only three hundred rijksdaalders."

"Turn her around. I have to see the rump. Not too big, not too small. Yes. She will bear water and children. Good. She has intelligent eyes, yes? We can teach her Dutch. Send her to my house. Mevrouw will take charge of her. And, yes, proceed with the auction, except take that older woman with her for the slave lodge. She looks like she can take care of the children and invalids there."

A wiry dark boy took Thembi's chain and began leading her off like a dog. She stopped, straining back to see Nokuthula and, for the last time, to look for the brave Mthethwa boy. The dark knot of people from the ship's hold was only a blur in her teary eyes. Her feet dug into the gritty dirt. The chain stabbed into her flesh and she bit her lip so it bled. The boy's feet hit the ground and he whirled toward her with his hand raised.

"Stop! I am not a dog."

The words of her people fell blankly to the ground. He spit some jagged phrases at her. Their eyes locked. She placed her feet together and raised her arms as if she were a tree. He watched her speak.

"Umhlabathi, I am walking on strange earth. Help me. Tell this boy that I will go with him but that I am a person, too. If you will help me I will work on your earth for them."

The boy stood motionless at this prayer. He cocked his head as if awaiting our answer. He came beside her, pointed forward with his hand and they began to walk slowly together. A chicken scratched in the gutter as they passed, scaring the worms into the muck, but the chicken pulled one out victoriously at the last second. They ascended the slope toward the great flat mountain, her chain stuttering at the stone and stucco walls.

The mountain towering overhead anchors the end of the continent where humans began. The next land to the south is covered now with ice. The mountain has often been an island, tethered to the continent by a sash of sand. Strange plants and animals live marooned on its upper reaches. The pale people from the north call it a table, as if its lichened rocks were offering victuals to the air above. Its white streaming cloth shadowing the people down below is the first sign of hope for sailors far at sea. The mountain broods and watches as they bring their slaves, seek the pleasure of their groins, and press them down upon the ground to suck sweet harvests from the land. We wait for things to pass. We remember ancient footsteps in the sand, feet that wandered freely over all the earth.

They arrived at a heavy door set into a thick stone wall. The boy tinkled a bell and pushed the door open, leading her into a garden fronting a two-storey house. The roof looked like waves coming down from the peak. Our warm brown soil greeted her bare feet. We welcomed her to flowers, vines, and small trees she had never seen. Her clinking chain dragged grudgingly over the stones. He took her into the cellar, sat her down, took off the chain, and left. Hands in the darkness gave her a cup of water and some warm bread. She leaned back against the cool white wall and fell asleep.

“Hey, daughter, wake up.”

A slap against her thigh reverberated across the stony floor.

“You got a new life here. Speak! Say some words.”

Thembi looked up hazily to see a large, very dark woman standing over her. She broke her silence with her people’s speech.

“I am Thembinkosi, from the amaNdwandwe.”

“So you speak like the Eastern people,” came the reply in a dialect that animated Thembi’s face. We could feel her heart begin to race. A line to her new life had been secured.

“I will teach you the speech we use with the White people. I will show you what you have to do here. Mevrouw van Rijneveld is strict but fair. You are lucky to be here and not working with big stones on the waterfront.

Heer van Rijneveld is the Fiskaal. You obey every word from him, just like the White people, or you will be dead and gone. Hear?"

"What do I call you?"

"Maybe you should call me mama." A rolling laugh emanated from her wide face. "Call me Susanna. That's a name from the Christian book. That is what they call me from my birth here in the Cape. I don't think they will let you keep your old name, but I will tell Mevrouw."

She bustled off, leaving Thembi alone in the kitchen. She looked around at the black pots and copper skillets, the smoldering fire, and the thick wooden trestles. She stood up. Her legs wobbled. She shook her legs toward the window, placed her hands on the cool ledge and looked out.

"Oh, Umhlabati, open up your mouth and swallow me like the ocean. Tremble so that these walls fall down and bury all these wicked people. Save me!"

But we could only answer with the mountain watching overhead, the warm earth of the garden, the stones taken by the men who laid a thatch roof over them to shelter slave and free. We drew her eyes through the window to the reddening flowers. They blushed warm against her eyes, fed her for a moment. She became calm.

"I will go on loving you, my dear Umhlabati. My dear earth, let me take care of you. Help me live in such a cruel place."

She cried a little and we swallowed her tears. She stood up straight and tall as Mevrouw van Rijneveld appeared in the door.

"Susanna tells me you are Thembinkosi. I like that name. Maybe we will use it. For now we will call you Thembi. If you stay long we will give you a Christian name. You will help Susanna in the garden and the kitchen and do whatever else I want you to do.

"Susanna, find some clothes for her and show her where she will sleep. And get rid of that little bag she's got with her. It's probably got some magic potion in it that will upset the superstitious slaves. We don't want any of that devil's medicine around here."

Her skirts swept the stones as she exited, her full form filling the door frame.

Thembi received the Dutch words blankly.

“What’s in this bag, daughter? You don’t have some evil muti there do you? Some old bones? We can’t have that here.”

“It is a precious mirror my father gave me, Susanna. And some white and red powder that makes me a woman. Please don’t take it. I will die. Please let me hide it where I sleep.”

She pulled out the mirror. It flashed a pinpoint of sun into the corner. Susanna stepped back, surprised by its reflection. Then she smiled, closed her hands around it, pushing it back into the bag.

“You keep your face inside there, daughter. We will let you be a woman here, but hide it carefully. Don’t ever let Mevrou see it or we both will surely be whipped. Now I’ll show you where you will sleep.”

That night she slept so hard, lying on the dirt floor, that we thought she would melt into our soil. Her heart beat in the rhythms of the waves that had borne her to this place. We told her that her people also lay within our arms.

In the morning, Susanna began to instruct her about the chores. She hovered over her all day. Thembi began to learn Dutch. Her hands and feet became a part of the house van Rijneveld, the Dutch Cape’s leading family. Her bag of white and red earth was tucked into a crevice near her reed sleeping mat. Sometimes at night, secretly, she would brush away the dirt covering it, take it out and dab the tiniest bit on her forehead to remind herself she is Thembinkosi, a woman who belongs to us.

*

“Say, Marie, I’ve got a new little research project you might be interested in. How about being a colleague for the day?”

Lanier’s familiar voice, with its charming drawls and patina of polite formality, strains through the earpiece of Marie’s phone. She smiles. Lanier’s professional manner lies like a skiff of snow in spring on the warm dark earth of his playful energy.

“Well, hey, what’s the project, Lanier?”

“It’s the kaolin industry, at the intersection of environment, economics, local culture, poverty, the works. And erosion. We’re doing a

comprehensive study to help the region with some ideas for sustainable development.”

“Ah, all the right buttons. Lanier, you already know me too well. But I hardly know a thing about kaolin – except it’s white, right?”

“Good start, but you don’t learn another thing unless you go with me next week. I need the best researcher I can find. Tempted?”

“Your skills of negotiation are unparalleled, as always. What about Tuesday?”

“You’re on. I can swing by and pick you up. The kaolin country is just an hour or so south of you. I’ll pick you up at eight sharp. Wear some comfortable clothes.”

~

The hum of Lanier’s Toyota hails Marie from the parking lot. A warm drizzle has plastered last year’s leaves to the underlying bed of pine needles. His feet kick them aside as he moves toward the door. Marie is waiting for him.

“Hey, nice shawl, or poncho, or whatever you’ve got on.”

“You like it? It’s from kwaZulu. It’s patterned after the blankets they wear. It’s sort of an adaptation. But I like it. It’s just right when the Georgia sun is hiding.”

“Yeah, I like the zig-zags. Nice colors. Kind of goes with your personality.”

“Colorful and zig-zag? Lanier, you might be dancing on quicksand.”

“Watch me back off from the danger.” Lanier performs a little backward hop as she moves through the doorway, brushing against him playfully.

“Well, Lanier, a jacket and tie. I feel underdressed.”

“Professional armor, Marie. Every mile out of Atlanta is a year back in time. Don’t forget it.”

“Well, it will be nice to get out of town for a few hours. Have you got the heater on?”

“Broken. The sun will warm us up soon.”

“So tell me about kaolin.”

“A hundred million years ago – I’m giving you the big picture – this area we’re heading to was a swampy shore. The Atlantic was playing footsy

with the Appalachians, which were very big mountains in those days. So the rivers brought down sediment from the hills. The Oconee River, which we're coming to shortly, was one of them. One of the minerals was kaolin, a pure white fine clay. The rivers laid down sheets of it fifty to seventy-five million years ago. More recently, say thirty million years, the ocean rose and spread red clay over these beds. Red over white, you see. Clayton would like that."

"Now you're wandering, Lanier. Geology first, politics later."

"Right. But not much later. You see, when people started digging this kaolin out, the local farmers, most of them poor descendants of slaves and White sharecroppers, didn't know how valuable it was and sold their land and mineral rights for a song. There have been some lawsuits about it. On top of that, the mining companies haven't had to pay taxes on the actual value of the kaolin. No severance taxes, for instance. Since some of them pretty much run the economic show in the rural counties, they also haven't done much of a job on run-off and reclamation."

"So exploitation of land, exploitation of people. Sounds familiar. But what makes kaolin so valuable?"

"It's used to make porcelain, glossy paper coatings, whiteners for paint, and lots of other industrial uses. Mainly it's the whitening properties."

Lanier's teeth glisten through his smile, reflecting off her eyes. His hot tires protest a quick turn off the highway onto a side road but are soon rewarded by cooler streets under ancient oaks.

"Why the sudden turn-off, Lanier? Engine problems?"

"Just wanted to take a detour here to show you a really quaint relic from the past. Madison. Big old mansions from before the Civil War."

"Marvelous. Looks like a movie set. Gone With the Wind, that sort of thing. Very spiffy."

"Yeah, Sherman didn't burn it 'cause the citizens gave him such a warm welcome and begged him not to. So he had a nice night here. Now it's a tourist mecca. It's about to get very pricey."

"Sherman."

"General Sherman. Cut a gash of fire and ruin from Atlanta to Savannah. Eighteen sixty-four. Broke the South's back. A lot of people here

think it was yesterday. Some are still mad. Some just want to make money off the story. These folks, they've got the story *and* the mansions."

"I wonder if that's how we'll be in a hundred years."

"How do you mean?"

"Whites, Blacks, Coloreds, Indians, Bushmen. Who will still be bleeding? Who will be rich? Who will be poor? Who will still glory in the story? What will happen to the land? What will the scars look like?"

"A lot of generations have to go under the sod before things change. Even then..."

Lanier presses the accelerator as they emerge from the canopy of oaks and roll back to the main road.

"And your people, Lanier, did any of them live here?"

Lanier swerves to avoid a dead possum as he ponders her question.

"I don't think so, Marie. They say most of my folks came to Atlanta from Alabama or Tennessee after the war. My Daddy says he's always going to look into it but then it doesn't happen. He's too busy."

"Like you."

"I guess. No time for time, Marie. It's just lost and we need to get on with things. We got to push the train forward. Keep your eyes on the prize."

"I remember someone back home telling me, 'No past, no future.' She's a secretary with the commission that's trying to find out what happened in the last forty years."

"That's a good thing, Marie. Try to do that here and the ship might sink. Good will is a shallow sea. The past is hidden as deep as the kaolin under the red clay."

Their conversation dissolves into the noise of the engine, the air, the traffic, and the whine of the tires. The sun has driven back the morning chill. We can feel the beat of time slow down, century collapsing into century, eon into eon, like the waves beating against the now high-grounded shore. Another colonnade of mansions breaks their silence.

"Where are we now? Looks like another movie set."

"Milledgeville. The original state capital. Great collection of old buildings. There's a college here, too."

“Milledgeville. A name like that didn’t have a chance against Atlanta, did it?”

“Chamber of Commerce screw-up. Probably had the wrong P-R firm.”

Their laughter wafts out the windows. Unperturbed, the stately oaks and pines usher them on. An older lady looks intently at them as they pass by. Columned porches stare at them open-mouthed as they hurry through the town.

“So where exactly are we going?”

“Sandersville, McIntyre, Gordon. Right in the middle of the kaolin belt. It’s all part of the Oconee River basin. First, let’s visit a fairly typical mining area.”

A few miles off the highway a pit yawns open before them. Below them the sun dazzles off a white basin of clay. Trucks and a large shovel beetle over its surface.

“First, they have to strip off the trees, top soil, and clay – our old friend, the overburden – and then take out the kaolin. Then, if it’s done right, they put the overburden back, haul in the topsoil, and turn it into grazing land or pine plantations. If it’s done right, that is. Right in their eyes. But the laws are weak. That’s part of the problem.”

“And erosion?”

“Again, the progressive companies try to block the run-off. We need better regulations, better enforcement. And then there are the economic arguments. It’s about the only industry in the region and a lot of poor folks feel they got ripped off, even though they need the jobs.”

“Nothing’s really the same, is it? I mean the earth really isn’t put back the way it was. Even a lawsuit doesn’t really repair the injury, does it? The body of roots and worms is never reconnected. All those layers that tell the ancient story are all mixed up. It’s like a lobotomy on the earth’s memory, like rewriting our own history.”

“Yeah, the white stuff just ends up in our cupboards and we don’t remember it either. It’s just part of us, but we don’t know where it comes from. All that’s left here is the red earth and the pines.”

Marie’s feet have wandered off the roadside, stubbing into the humus beneath the shreds of bark and needles.

“What is all this red about, my earth? And what about the white sand laced through and through your veins? Has there been blood here? Have you been a bleeding beach for boats and crawling things? Feel my toes, my friend. Can I feel at home here, let you squish around my feet? Feel the white and black mixed in amongst the red?”

We speak to her of fire, and death, and flood. And why we are red and black and sandy white. And how our memory is disturbed and broken by machines.

“What are you doing, Marie?”

“Oh, just musing. Just feeling what it must have been like to stand on the shore here fifty million years ago. To be looking out from here at an endless expanse of water lapping the land. And just to think, Lanier, that even earlier the land we’re on was joined to Africa.”

“That’s the old tectonic theory. A couple of hundred million years ago. Pangea. You might say this is the breakoff point.”

“The connection point, Lanier. We are all still joined to Africa. It’s just a few steps away, like we could jump across. See, it’s not as far as you thought!”

Marie skips back and forth over her imaginary boundary like a little girl skipping rope, lost in a childhood reverie. Tap-tap, tap-tap, tap-tap. Lanier stands still, his tie motionless, not getting into the rhythm of her dance. She pauses, grinning, her neck glistening, her breath coming in smooth undulations.

“It’s been a long time since then, Marie. Just think of how big that ocean is now. Whole mountains in the center of it, prying it apart. Even here, we’re still a hundred and fifty miles from the ocean. That’s a pretty wide beach.”

“Yes, it is a long time. It took millions of years to lay it all down, didn’t it? Now we’re gobbling it up in a day. It feels somehow sad. As if the land were crying, making a sound like the wind in the pine trees. Can you hear it, Lanier?”

“You’re the earth-talker. You tell me what the earth is saying. You keep that up and I won’t know whether we’re in Africa or America.”

“I don’t really know either. All I hear from the earth is a feeling of robbery and sadness.”

“Well, Marie, look at it this way. Maybe the earth is happy with what we do with the kaolin. I mean, the beautiful pictures and the china. The china, Marie. Maybe the earth wanted to give its colors for the china.”

“Lanier, you amaze me! Here you’re talking about how the earth has given itself up for, for... civilization. Yes, for civilization.”

“Hey, Marie, it’s Clayton who’s the primitive traditionalist, not me. I just meant that maybe it’s not all bad that we could make something beautiful from the earth, even with the exploitation and violence. I mean, take the china. Like beautiful wedding china. And weddings are for children and all those good things of the earth.”

“Lanier, you really do amaze me. I’ve never heard you talk like this.”

Her laughter is taken up eagerly by the pines as the trucks growl away relentlessly below.

“Here you are talking about weddings and children in the midst of a serious research trip. Is something else on your mind? Somebody?”

Lanier turns away from her, leaning his hand against a small oak as he looks down toward the pit. The trucks drown out the clearing of his throat.

“No. No. Just things my mother might say. That’s all. I don’t know what made me say it.”

“I think the kaolin was happy to hear it. Makes it all worthwhile, somehow.”

“Well, maybe we need to get back to the research, okay?”

“I agree. Where do we go from here?”

“Well, I want us to meet some people who are bringing these lawsuits and then talk to a mine manager about the proposed regulations. But first, let’s get some lunch. We’ve got a lot to do before getting you back to Athens.”

“And I have a lot on my plate when I get home.”

“Are you going to Perry for that workshop next week?”

“I think so. Are you offering a ride?”

“Me and Bob Stratton are going. I’m sure he’d enjoy your company, too.”

“It feels funny without Clayton.”

“He’ll be all right, Marie. He needs this time, just like you need this degree.”

“Eye on the prize.”

“So hold on, and let’s go.”

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“Thembi, clean yourself up. We are going to the slave lodge today with Mevrou van Rijneveld. She has some business there.”

“Yes, Susanna. But what is the slave lodge? Why are we going there? Am I going to be left there?”

“The slave lodge is where the Company keeps slaves to do the work on the Cape – building docks, fixing the roads, taking care of the Company’s buildings – that sort of thing. They keep the worn out slaves there, too. Fiskaal van Rijneveld has the final say about what happens there. Like I told you, his word is law. Now you come along, but you have to do exactly what I say – or maybe you will get left there.”

The sun was catching shadows along the cracks, kloofs, and crevices of the mountain as they walked up a long street to the slave lodge. Mevrou nodded occasionally to people as they passed. Boys and young men with checkered cloths around their heads jumped quickly aside as they moved along the dusty street. Susanna whispered that all the slaves wore those kerchiefs. Their skin was of many shades, their faces and their bodies had many shapes, their speech was strange to Thembi’s ears. Her feet stumbled because her eyes were searching theirs.

Just before reaching a stand of trees surrounding some gardens, they stopped in front of a large square building. It was plastered in white with two rows of shuttered windows spaced along on its walls. They knocked at the large wooden door. A few guttural words admitted them into the cool darkness. Mevrou began to talk with an older bronze-colored woman, who left the room and then returned with a woman carrying a large bundle of cloth. Her bare feet hit the cold stone with an easy slapping sound. Thembi stared. The darkness yielded up an image that brought a smile to her face. It was Nokuthula. An exclamation of delight exploded from her young lips.

The struggles of an enslaved African woman and two emigrant German farmers generate a sweeping saga of oppression, estrangement, and redeemed memory that binds together America's "Trail of Tears," South Africa's "Great Trek," and our contemporary search for reconciliation.

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