

## The Resurrection of Olive · *Etienne Van Heerden*

I RECEIVED the Schreiner documents from Miss Elsabé Bouwer of the Cradock Public Library this morning. She had gone to considerable pains: photographs of the stone grave on Buffelskop, an edition of the *Nuwe Afrikaner*, photostats of documents. And suddenly, along with the smells of sun-baked stone and bruised spekboom leaves rising from the documents lying open before me, that sad summer rose up again before me: unbidden, with all the disagreeableness of unassimilated recollection.

My intense love for that piece of earth first found expression in a brief newspaper report. In the small town library, my grazed knee still stinging after a game of bok-bok at school, I came across:

“Olive’s body was embalmed and placed in a teak coffin, zinc-lined, and after a simple service laid to rest temporarily at Woltemade No 1. Meanwhile the sarcophagus was being built on the top of Buffelskop out of ironstone, by a local stonemason, Joe Mann. When everything was ready, Olive’s body was brought up by train and at De Aar, Cronwright was waiting with two small coffins. One of the baby and the other of their beloved dog, Nita.

“On 13th August a little procession of friends climbed up Buffelskop, the coffins being carried by ten staunch natives.

“How good it was that Olive should sleep in nature’s open temple with its magical beauty and vastness of space.

“Cronwright Schreiner, who spoke a few moving words, ended by repeating a verse from Tennyson’s ‘In Memoriam’:

Thy voice is on the rolling air,  
I hear thee where the waters run,  
Thou standest in the rising sun . . .

Miss Barber had seen me earlier that afternoon limping through the door of the Schreiner Room.

“Have you heard of Olive Schreiner, boy?” she asked, in English, as she had so many times before, peering at me over her little round glasses. “Do they tell you about her at that school of yours?”

True to our ritual, I shook my head, signalling: No — as so often before.

Oh, the wide open winds of Buffelskop! With the rock kestrels swooping over the stone ledges, tumbling down into the valley, as you stand high on the roof of the world, among hot ironstone and spekboom shrubs: nothing round you, just wisps of fleecy cloud and Joe Mann's stone paunch!

As usual Miss Barber and I played out our ritual. I had to spend every afternoon after school here in the town library waiting till Ma could fetch me for our drive back to the farm.

Once more we sat down in the quiet, sour Schreiner Room, with its handwritten manuscripts behind glass, and the Victorian severity of Olive's portraits on the wall. I paged through the yellowing books which Miss Barber spread open in front of me, not listening to her ceaseless chatter in bastardised English and Afrikaans, picking up only an occasional, familiar sounding word. Mainly place names: Gannahoeck, Kranzplaas (our neighbouring farm, where Olive lived after her marriage to Cronwright), Leliefontein . . . Once Miss Barber grabbed me by the cowslick and gave my head a couple of jerks. "Wake up, boy," she said. "Wake up to your heritage. Your mother is English, isn't she?"

And a while later: "Olive understood this country. *She* could unite. She could write life back into the country . . . not those soldiers out there."

Outside, the soldiers' boots clattered on the square between the library and the Karroo Garden with its melancholy palms and dead frogs in the lily pond. They were drilling in preparation for the parade which the town council was planning for the visit of the Prime Minister. Later, when Miss Barber went out to make herself a cup of coffee (the town gossips said she used to lace it with a shot of brandy), I stepped carefully across the creaking board floors and went outside. Leaning against the pillars in front of the library, I watched the soldiers. They had fallen out and were half-sitting, half-lying in small groups on the hot tarmac. Looking bored, they smoked idly, lying with their heads on their upturned helmets, or beckoning to local girls who were hurriedly ducking in and out of cafes and shops.

Later I went indoors again. Miss Barber was stamping books. I noticed that she had put away the books we had been paging through. The tabletops in the Schreiner Room gleamed. In the centre of the main table there was an ashtray, waiting for someone in this desolate little town, in this time of war and decay, to come and read up about the woman lying buried

on the mountaintop beside the railway line that ran from Port Elizabeth to De Aar.

That night I dreamt that Joe Mann and I were rolling ironstones down Buffelskop. He was wearing a floppy little khaki hat and his stonemason's hands were huge and calloused. We were standing alongside the sarcophagus. The stones went bounding exuberantly down the mountainside, bounced glancingly past the flaming candelabra of aloes, ploughed a swathe through the spekboom and rang down the mountain like the bells of the local church, down, down, down, right to the railway track at the foot of the mountain, right up to the rails carrying the smoking engines as they hurtled past, manned by their dull-witted, faceless drivers.

We were sitting on the front veranda of the homestead the next evening, waiting for Miss Barber and Mr Crafford. The two of them and Pa had formed a small committee to protest against the participation of us school-children in the welcome for the Prime Minister.

"The country is dying," Pa said to Ma as he screwed the head onto the soda-siphon. He squirted the cold soda into plastic glasses, Ma added Oros and we all sat staring into the night with the fizzy cooldrink in our cheeks. Ma was wearing a light summer frock and had her hair scraped back into a bun. My face close to the red splash of a geranium, I lay on my back on the veranda, its concrete still warm with the heat of the day. As I looked up at the stars, taking in deep breaths of the scented geranium, I was thinking of Isabel, the girl in the pharmacy, with her fragrance and her tumbling hair bending over to hand me my cough mixture in a brown paper packet.

Around us lay the breadth of the night. A while later Ma said: "You wouldn't have thought the country could be in such bad odour, would you?"

We were all suddenly shocked rigid by the sound of a gunshot in the dark. It echoed off Buffelskop and reverberated round the bowl of the valley. Pa was worried about our expected visitors. Hands at his sides, he stood at the low veranda wall, looking in the direction of the gate.

We didn't know whether the shot had been on our land or the neighbours'. In earlier times Pa would immediately have picked up a torch and his gun and gone to investigate. Now he simply remained standing there, and then said: "We'd better go inside." But just as we were gathering up the plastic glasses, there was a sudden beam of light on the road and then a

pair of headlamps appeared at the gate. "There they are now!" Pa called out happily.

Mr Crafford (the owner of the only bookshop in the town) had donned a sea-green bow-tie for the occasion. Miss Barber looked stern in a high silk collar. We shook hands, and Ma served tea in the sitting room. Soon afterwards I had to say goodnight, and Ma came to my room with me. For a while I lay on my back thinking about the months and months of drilling the cadets had had to put in in preparation for the Prime Minister's visit. Later I slipped quietly through my bedroom window and crept round the house. On my stomach I crawled between the geraniums on the veranda and peered in through a crack in the curtains. The windows were opened wide, so I could hear perfectly well.

Pa was sitting in his leather armchair, with Mr Crafford and Miss Barber on the sofa opposite him. I was flabbergasted to see Miss Barber take out a long gold cigarette-holder, slip a cigarette into it and then look expectantly at my father. He hurriedly jumped up with a lighted match in his hand, but in his haste it flickered out and he had to strike another. Then he fetched a decanter of sherry from the sideboard and poured a glass for each of them.

"And this," exclaimed Miss Barber indignantly, in English, "here in Schreiner country!"

Mr Crafford's glasses steamed up and he shook his head.

Pa poured more sherry. When a drop splashed onto the carpet, Miss Barber squashed it as one would a brown beetle, with a grinding motion of her foot.

"And we think we know our country," she said, with sudden sadness. Tears trickled down her cheeks. (I stretched my neck, trying to see properly, because I didn't believe my own eyes.) She shook a handkerchief out of her sleeve, sniffed, and excused herself. I heard the bathroom door bang, and directly afterwards the flushing of the toilet, but even above the rushing of the water I could hear her sobs. The long filter lay deserted in the ashtray, a smear of red lipstick at one end and a smouldering caterpillar of ash growing longer and longer as I heard Ma going out to Miss Barber, while Pa and Mr Crafford sat waiting in deathly silence.

That night, after Miss Barber and Mr Crafford had left—promising to allow the telephone to ring three times to signal that they had reached town safely—Ma and Pa, under the impression that I was fast asleep, were talking in the bathroom.

Pa: "I don't want the child taking part in this circus."

Ma (ever cautious): "But the whole school is involved. If he stays home now, you know what will happen. I think we should just let him go along. He's still too small to . . ."

Pa: "How many others are there in exactly the same boat, just going along because all the others are going along? That's the whole trouble with this area. In the other areas . . ."

Ma: "But he's only a child. Just let him go. He's spent so much time in bed with his chest lately . . . And he came home from school with another black eye the other day. I think it was that Reitz child. You know how people pass on their feelings to their children. And it was on the very issue of patrols in the black township that you and Reitz were at loggerheads . . ."

She was silent for a moment, for effect: "And now your child has to be on the receiving end."

Pa (gently, as he always was when violence was mentioned): "All right. Let him go if he wants to. But I shall tell him that we are not forcing him into this lunacy cloaked as education . . . so that in later years he will remember that he had a choice . . ."

Outside on the lawn the next morning, my father called me over.

"So, the parade is next week, is it?"

My beautiful beret! The months of drilling—I was one of the smartest marchers!

"Yes, Pa. Wednesday."

"And what are you going to do in the procession?"

"We're just marching, Pa."

"I see." We stood like that for a while, Pa looking at me, I looking at my toes. Then he stroked my head and clasped my face against his trouser leg. He walked away and never said anything more to me about the parade. But I know they wrote a letter to the headmaster, and that Pa even went to speak to the commandant at the civil defence headquarters beside the gaol.

Round and round him they walked, like slaving dogs, circling Pa on the farmyard, their shadows like the hands of a clock, round and round and round. Round him. Round him. If I had been on the farm then, I would have fled into the heavy fleshy embrace of Boo, our cook, close to the hot open mouth of the woodstove. There, where she would be going about her business, moving saucepans, arranging the black smoothing irons on

the hot plate, is where I would have hidden, if I hadn't been marching in the procession from the landing strip to the town hall, betraying my father. Thumb in mouth, I would have snuggled in Boo's arms, listening to their gravel footsteps circling round and round Pa in his upright study chair on the gravel of the farmyard, in the sun.

I found out afterwards that Boo had been made to fetch the chair from behind his desk and carry it out into the sun. Early in the morning, too, while at school we were puffing up our berets and jealously watching one another: Whose boots and cartridge belt were the shiniest? Whose fly had the biggest bulge? Who had hairs on his arms already?

At the moment when the band was practising the National Salute in the school hall, they must have burst through the farmyard gate, driven all the labourers into a bunch with their shouting, and made Pa sit out in the yard. While the major—the headmaster—issued each of us with a small flag and a Republican Medal and we romped across the school grounds cheering, they were locking Ma up in the study.

For hours on end they interrogated Pa about his programme of action for undermining the moral defences of the youth of the country. Boo made a mug of coffee and wanted to take it out to Pa, but they chased her back into the kitchen. In their dark glasses and the camouflage gear which the troops were then just beginning to wear, they circled and circled my father, occasionally glancing at the labourers as they waited motionless under the pepper trees beside the milking shed.

Our procession reached the black township at just about the same time as Boo was going down the kitchen steps with the mug of coffee. We had marched off triumphantly from the landing strip, following the cadet band and the floats showing off the Products of the District. The floats all depicted farming activities: on the leading one there was a cardboard merino ram surrounded by rounded heaps of wool; it was followed by a pyramid of baled lucerne; then a dairy float with a lowing Jersey cow surrounded by packets of buttermilk rusks and brightly burnished cream cans and great red cheeses from the cheese factory; a fruit and vegetable float came next, piled high with the produce of the irrigation farms south of the town.

As we marched into the township, we were expecting to see a mass of admiring black faces—the town council had recommended that all employers give their workers the day off. But the township was a ghost

town. Dogs howled at the ends of chains. Scraps of paper fluttered up against fences. Doors were shut tight and curtains drawn. Behind the closed door of one house, on a corner where the procession had to wheel to the right, a baby started to cry.

In the town hall the Prime Minister addressed us on the Preservation of Our Own and the Onslaught on Our Country. A cowboy singer in a broad brimmed white hat sang to us and a magician conjured fancy white fantail pigeons out of a hat.

When we came tumbling out of the town hall after the freedom of the town had been conferred on the Prime Minister, it was Miss Barber's voice that rose within me, sad and rasping. The members of the band bent down to pick up their instruments from where they had put them outside the hall. The farmers towing the floats behind their tractors and light trucks stopped dead in their tracks.

Only the skeletons of the floats were left on the square. While we had been inside the town hall having tea and koeksisters and singing folksongs, the black population of the township had stripped the floats of everything edible. Also of cardboard and wire and planks for their squatter huts, since the rainy season with its violent showers was still to come.

And it was Miss Barber's sad voice which haunted me as I stood there with my pals in the hot sun looking at the stripped floats:

Thy voice is on the rolling air,  
I hear thee where the waters run,  
Thou standest in the rising sun . . .

Every stage in a man's life has its own texture. With the Schreiner documents here before me, thinking back to the frightened nights in the tightly bolted homestead while the railway lines shrivelled up like red-hot straws and the sound of the radio's emergency hooter faded through the open windows into the night, I recognised the textures of that summer: Ma's light blue summer frock, the warm fragrance of the geraniums, the stone smell of Olive's sarcophagus where I so often sat in those days. And, everywhere, death with its foul breath. But life, too, forcing its way up from beneath death: the first mealiefield Pa sowed after the Government had ordered the farmers to grow mealies to fill the stomachs of the troops on the borders, and the first mealie sprout lifting a tiny clod of earth, the calf

standing covered in slime on wobbly legs behind its bleeding mother . . .

And stubbornly my memory persisted: round and round and round. Out of the past he rose, heroic, the man who—perhaps gibbering, crying—pleaded there in his own farmyard for the preservation of his family, his name, his body.

But there was still no end to that summer. When they took to leaving our gates open, we suffered great losses. In a protest action which caught on over the entire district, gates to lucerne fields were opened and herds of cattle were driven into the lukewarm, dangerous green lucerne, standing high in bloom.

When we got back from town our Jerseys, too, were grazing up to their hips in the lucerne. We ran straight up to them: here and there some of the cows were already lying down, groaning, others were standing about, bloated and unsteady. As he ran, Pa hauled out his pocket-knife and before he had even reached the cows the blade was already flashing in his hand. Cursing the citizen force and the shooting practice that he had had to waste his time on, he sank his knife right up to the hilt into the bloated bellies of cow after cow.

Frothy green gas bubbled out as the bellowing cattle deflated like great balloons and then lay all over the fields, exhausted, their eyes rolling. We managed to pull some through like this, but others died, each in a pool of blood and bubbling stomach gas. As Pa was wiping the blade of his knife on his trouser leg, a patrol came through the gate of the farmyard: a motor-bike in the lead, followed by a light truck with Fanie Onkruid at the wheel and Reitz beside him, then a heavy-duty truck. Behind them was a strange machine, somehow resembling a corn cricket. It was the first time I had ever seen one: the high wheels made it look almost as though it ran on legs. Up above, taller than a man, were tiny windows, and over the top, higher still, the bouncing helmets of soldiers could be seen.

The memories of my dreams from those days are stronger than my recollection of reality. For me it was, and will always remain, a dreamed time. Not because the domain of dreams is any more beautiful or more assimilable, but rather that somehow dreams always interpreted reality better than I as a mere child could do consciously at that stage.

Night after night I dreamt the dream about the gaol on the bank of the Great Fish River. Rough, stony, the gaol the labourers were taken to by patrols who had stopped them on the main road and found knives or crow-bars in their possession.



In my dreams at night we would storm this Bastille with flashing knives and swinging storm-lanterns. I would be leading the attack with Willem-pie, Boo's son, and in my hands I held the emblem of our struggle: the writing-lady Olive on a cross, with a red turban round her grinning skull.

My troops wore rubber gumboots and heavy were the footfalls of the army of labourers. Ultimately, once victory was ours, the writing-lady rose again, and Windpomp, Boo's husband, came glowing and smiling out of the flaming red heart of the haystack. Brushing hot straws from his clothes, he strode through fragments of fiery red hay, his hands full of wheat that dripped melting from his fingers.

Dancing in among the flames, we rejoiced as we set the captives free. We dragged the guards along to the hide-shed at the station across the river, which meant that we had to drag them through the shallow water of the Great Fish. Their spluttering, wet, mud-covered heads swung from side to side as we dragged them along by the boots.

At the hide-shed we kicked open the hide-merchant's door and marched into the oppressive smell of flesh and salt straight to the stacking-racks where the newest sheep and cattle hides hung, still wet and freshly salted. The hides with their tiny wavy veins and strips of yellow fat felt cool and moist in our hands as we wound each prison warder in a hide, trussed all of them up in thongs of uncured leather and loaded them onto an empty railway truck beside the station platform.

In the silence of the night we waited, our lanterns flickering, for the first train to come. We switched the points, hijacked a train, and took the warders by steam loco to Halesowen, the station at the foot of Buffelskop, where we laid them out among the tall sisal aloes, their bodies the arms of a broken swastika, and left them there for the sun to bake, to render out their fat, to shrink their hide-jackets for them, to swell up their boorish tongues while their jackets contracted and hugged them tighter.

It wasn't a dream to be proud of, and I would never have dared tell Ma or Pa about it. Now, years later, I console myself with the thought that a child's fantasies are incapable of comprehending the salt taste of real blood or the tearing of metal through human flesh.

But I blame my dreams—both the dreams I had in those days and the ones I have had as an adult—on what happened that day as Pa and I stood among the Jerseys and the patrol with Reitz and Fanie Onkruid came thundering through the farmyard gate.

With swift strides Reitz and his party came up to us, grabbed Dad by the shoulders and hauled him off right to the kitchen door. I recognised several of the troops: the garage owner's son, Kleinpiet Brilletjies from Altydsomer, Erwin Moolman. At their approach the labourers had fled in all directions, so Reitz and Fanie Onkruid each blew a shrill blast on their whistles to call them back. They made them face the stable wall with their hands above their heads while Reitz strode up and down behind them.

"Who opened the gate!" he shouted.

I stood pressed against Pa's leg; there were green stains of stomach slime all down his trousers. "Stop that," said Pa. "Cut it out, Reitz. This is my farm. I'll speak to my workers myself."

"Who opened the fucking gate!" bellowed Reitz.

Reitz's farm was five sluices higher up the river. He knew our workers. Boo's husband, my friend Willempie's pa, was missing.

"Where's Windpomp?" he barked. One of his troops jabbed Dries in the back with the butt of his rifle.

"He's gone into the veld," Pa tried.

"Windpomp!"

Reitz set off towards the haystacks. Had Dries's eyes, either intentionally or involuntarily, flickered in that direction?

In front of the tallest of the haystacks Reitz stopped and took out the matches he used to light his pipe. The kitchen door, which the soldiers had locked from the outside, splintered and burst open. Boo came running out, yelling. It was the first and last time I ever saw Boo running. I was surprised to notice the thickness of the hunks of flesh round her thighs, the strong calves kicking her dress aside and eventually being exposed as she hitched up the skirt and charged at Reitz screaming: "No, Master, please, Master, no!"

The haystack caught fire; flames leapt nimbly over the back and down the sides.

Nobody spoke. Boo was standing somewhere in the open between the burning haystack and the kitchen door, which hung there crookedly on its hinges. She wasn't crying.

Round and round the burning stack strode Reitz. Under his feet the ground was swarming with millions of white ants. "Ants! Ants! Ants!" I screamed, my hands over my ears, when he grabbed a pitchfork and plunged it into the red oven. Starting from the tips of the tines in the hot

hay the pitchfork began to glow and the glow crept up into Reitz's hands and I knew: when a haystack has been properly packed, like ours had, it would burn for six months, black on the outside, but if you scratched away the crust the inside would be scorching red, and if the wind rose flames would leap up and transform the haystack into a torch which even the farthest neighbours would be able to see flaming against the night. Reitz's hands holding the pitchfork melted redly and then his body began to melt and all of him trickled into his red boots and shrank into a pile of crackling surrounded by his pocket knife, his pipe and the buckle off his belt, while I screamed, blocking my ears with my hands so as not to hear the ants. Then I felt Pa's strong arms picking me up and carrying me off, kicking all the while as I tried to stamp on the ants. Later, sitting on Boo's lap, with her thick warm arms round me, I forgot about pistols and the men who carried pistols, and about governments and the men who govern, and about bloodstains on the stable wall, and the skinny, sinewy workers, the original inhabitants, whose blood it was.

Boo was comforting me, the white man's son, while her Willempie, suddenly looking thin and worn, sat crouched in the shade of the pepper trees, watching us. This gesture of Boo's—as the soldiers clambered back into their corn cricket and rumbled out of the yard in a cloud of dust—was the most terrible thing of all.

In the days that followed, thousands of ants died, scorched to death, too stupid to turn round while their instinct was driving them to their nest under the glowing haystack. Willempie and I watched them, and on the third day we decided on the resurrection of Olive.

We waited till the spirit had entered the bones. Like my brave forebears, the Rebels, who refused to bend the knee before the British Empire, I led the assault with an ostrich feather in my hat. The cartridge belt round my chest was made out of a perished girth and some old shoe leather. Dauntless, my heart surged within me; dauntless because we were going to kidnap Death itself, rescue it from the cold domain of stone. I would restore the writing-lady to life: onward, Rebels! For liberty and life and the colours of the flag!

Ma had made us a flag out of a large Piet Retief tobacco bag, with the shield and spear of Dingaan in the centre and under it the motto of our republic: Choice Quality Assegai!

Our first stop was the haystack. The wind was still. Under that black

crust in the heat haze, Windpomp, the wandering shearer who had come with his wife and his son and had put down his roots on our farm, was being consumed. Then we tackled the long haul across the plain, clambered over the railway fences, hopped across the shining tracks, and started the steep climb up Buffelskop.

We sat resting for a while on the top of the sarcophagus, the stone hot beneath our buttocks. Then we set to work. We shifted the two loose stones at the bottom out of the way without any difficulty and I crawled in. In the coolness within I scraped the bones together and passed them out behind. Out in the sunlight, beside the sarcophagus after our sweaty struggle, the bones were a pathetic little heap. There they lay on an open hessian sack, badly weathered, as though in the course of the decades many hands had fingered and then replaced them.

Carefully I packed the bones into the sack which Willempie held open. They made sparks, just like flint, when they struck or scraped against one another. We could smell the gunpowder! I wiped my hands on my khaki shorts. We didn't show each other how squeamish we were feeling for the gentle winds of Buffelskop were playing through our hair, and below us a flock of storks was gliding dreamily across the floor of the valley all along the course of the Great Fish.

The bones tinkled gently as we carried them down the mountain. There is life in them, Joe Mann! sang the wind. Miss Barber was right! whispered the stone and the kriedoring. Our burden was a heavy one, slung first over one shoulder, then over the other. At the railway line we had to wait for a train to pass: coming up from Port Elizabeth, the loco with its headlamp on, thundered past with pistons pumping. The conductor waved to us.

Behind the avenue of tall sisal aloes, between the stone-covered mounds of labourers' graves, we lowered the sack and from behind the aloes we hauled out the cross that we had nailed together out of old fence-droppers and a cut down telephone pole. We spread the bones out on the sacking. The sun was high and burning fiercely as we argued about the precise position of every bone. Willempie had to go back to the farmyard to fetch wire and pliers while I kept watch over the bones. The skeleton was incomplete: one arm was—comically—only a shoulder and then the hand and finger bones.

I was growing uneasy. The skull stared at me fixedly.

Eventually Willempie got back. "Did Pa see you?" I asked, frightened.

Pa: with the death of Windpomp something inside him had died, too. He wandered up and down inside the house; once he collapsed beside the telephone and Ma had to revive him and help him to bed. There he lay, his head tossing from side to side on his pillow.

Willempie shook his head; he'd managed to get away undetected. He set to work. First he threaded the shining copper wire through the slightly loose teeth, drew the lower jaw up to just below the earholes, wired a few loose skull plates together. The ribcage was more difficult. Why were there so few ribs? "It's because she's a woman," said Willempie.

Lower down the cross: the bones of the thigh and calf. Then the arms, stretched out and with each little fingerbone in place. Willempie had hardly finished before we loved and worshipped her. With my old pocket knife I carefully cut open the dress which I had stolen from the back of Ma's wardrobe of winter clothes. Gently we tied it round her shoulders, her beautiful slim neck, round her pretty hips, her legs, her soft, tender feet. We wrapped the dress round her breasts and secured it carefully with baling twine and a needle, finally arranged the material properly, and then hauled the writing-lady erect.

In silhouette she looked just like the aloes we were sitting among. We watched her, and waited. The wind bore the smell of the smouldering haystack to our nostrils. I recalled the portraits on the wall of the Schreiner Room; the sourish smell of the books which Miss Barber spread open for me. I thought of Dad and the Prime Minister and the shots which echoed off Buffelskop at night and Miss Barber saying: "She could unite. She could write life back into the country . . ." Could it be true that the country was dying, without our realising it, and that the Prime Minister and the headmaster and everyone in the parade were just imagining that they knew the country and their love for it?

Later we grew bored. We wandered down to the river for a swim, and frolicked about in the shining water with abandon. It was already late afternoon, but I was too scared to go home. Perhaps Pa would be lying in the bedroom again like he was yesterday, deathly and silent. Perhaps he would lie there like that right through the night, until morning, and perhaps even longer, all day tomorrow, too.

As the twilight silvered the water in front of us, we sat beside each other on the sand, masturbating vigorously. Willempie won: his shining seed spurted in an arc right into the evening waters of the Great Fish.

I thought back to what Pa had said: "The Government is falling. Only a man who is falling pulls others down with him like this."

I looked at Willempie contentedly pulling up his trousers. "That lady," I said, "she will bring life back again. You'll see."

What more can I say now, almost two decades later? Is the country, or this story, still dying on my hands? Two things, at any rate, were certain: the writing lady, motionless among the tall aloes, with the Karroo winds howling stories through her skull all through the length of that summer; and the haystack, which went on glowing right through the rainy season and deep into the winter.

No one ever discovered Olive. On one of the very last days of that season Willempie and I were sitting among the aloes, looking up at her in adoration. The prickly-pears growing round the avenue of aloes had unexpectedly burst open that morning and bees were swarming round their puffy colours.

It was quiet on the farm. Virtually all farming activity had come to a standstill.

"Your wiring is lasting well, Willempie," I said. He nodded.

Then we heard footsteps approaching across the dry veld. We sat petrified. Our prayer place had been disturbed! I heard the voices of Pa and Ma and Miss Barber. They were chatting as they came, feeling their way among the aloes: could they have seen us sneak in here?

We sat silent as mice, but when they came out into a clearing they caught sight of us. They stood with their hands on their hips, watching us for a while. Miss Barber was red-faced and perspiring, as she always was when she came for a walk on the farm.

I waited for her to walk over to me and say: "Have you heard of Olive Schreiner, boy?" But they merely waved to us and walked on, shaking their heads, as they took yet another of their many strolls on the run-down farm that summer.

What can I say?

Thy voice is on the rolling air,  
I hear thee where the waters run,  
Thou standest in the rising sun . . . ?

Yes, that too.

I shove the typewriter aside for a moment to re-read Miss Bouwer's letter. (How many down the line of successors to Miss Barber would she be?) On an official Cradock Municipality letterhead she had written: "Enclosed please find the necessary information as requested. I trust it will prove useful to you. In addition, may I recommend the following book: *The Reinterment on Buffelskop*—Guy Butler. It is available from the National English Literary Museum, Grahamstown."

I nod and draw the telephone directory nearer. I dial the Museum: 27042.