

**Jan Rabie & Marjorie Wallace Memorial Lecture**  
**24 April 2018**  
**Ronelda. S Kamfer**

**Like a milking post on the farm**

**Grabouw**

The last time that I visited Cape Town, was on invitation of the “Woordfees”, the Afrikaans literary festival that is celebrated annually in Stellenbosch. It was to launch the publication of “*Hammie*”, my poetry collection about the life and death of my mother. Today it feels like many lifetimes ago.

To enter Cape Town through Stellenbosch’s vineyards and wine farms, makes me feel like a space capsule falling back to earth through the earth’s atmosphere. It burns, my skin tears away and my bones show. I grew up on farms like these, in Grabouw. So, I can never drive through Stellenbosch without thinking about Grabouw. It is like when I run into my cousin, I will always say, ‘Send my regards to your mom.’ The one follows the other.

Further, it’s impossible for me to think about Grabouw without thinking of my grandmother, and when I start thinking about her, I start missing my mom. I am a third generation over-expected-expectations-achiever in my family, a matriarchy of diverging obstinacy.

My grandmother is now deaf in both her ears. And I, as if I need to always stand with one foot in her world, am busy going completely deaf in my one ear. My mother is dead now, deaf and dumb into eternity. I think so, because my mother does not speak to me from the grave, or if she is, she is whispering into the wrong ear. My grandmother speaks to me, but her I pull through my teeth, and pretend that I cannot hear her.

**Now that sleeping dogs are awake**

Ten years ago, I wrote and had my first collection of poetry published. The evening when the “Suid Afrikaanse Akademie vir Wetenskap en Kuns” called on my father’s work phone, I fell to the floor dramatically and announced, ‘Maaamie, I have won the Eugene Marais prize!’ My mother continued rubbing the red skins off the peanuts in her R5 packet and asked, ‘How much does Gene Marais pay?’

I am the first woman to receive the Jan Rabie/Marjorie Wallace bursary and the first black recipient of the bursary. I imagine sometimes what my mother would have said if she had been there to hear that. I lie in bed sometimes and put words into her mouth.

My initial introduction into Afrikaans literature was so wrong-footed that I felt I would never find my balance. Once I had to do a reading in Stellenbosch and I had to take a lift with my father in the Council truck, I did not want to show the white people that I was poor or that I couldn't drive a car. Or that my father worked for the city council. Or that my mother had to work overtime so I could have a nice jersey at the end of the month when I had to perform poetry at a private book club for rich housewives in Durbanville and so I could have taxi fare to UWC. At UWC, after I did a reading, I ended up in conversation with Prof Van Wyk who asked me if I would be interested in studying.

If you are coloured or black and you are paying black tax, generational debt and someone offers you the opportunity to study it's as good as Edgars and Foschini scrapping your mom's debt. It's a clean slate. It's someone saying, 'Here, I'll give you the same opportunity that other people get.' My mother stayed out of work just so she could call the work to say that she had to go with her daughter to the University of the Western Cape for registration. For her it was the validation that I deserved for years of writing poetry.

Prof van Wyk, I owe you a bag of apples that my mother sent you, which I was too embarrassed to carry with me in a Bellville taxi.

When I was compiling my first manuscript I did not have a computer, my father knew someone who built computers, in every township there is a man who builds computers. And in keeping with the tradition of the township man who built computers, this man lived in his mother's yard in a Wendy house and he built computers while at the same time doing renovations and extensions to his mother's house.

He gave me a computer and my father got a bag of floppy disks from work. I typed "*Noudat Slapende Hond*" on this computer and saved it to those floppy disks. I did not know how to use Microsoft Word and when my publisher sent me corrections I didn't know you could copy and paste. So, for every draft I would retype the whole manuscript. I asked my cousin who stayed with us at the time to do ten poems during the day when she came home from the night shift and a friend of mine who had just started becoming addicted to tik, and who was eager for the repetitive work, to do ten poems as well. I will forever be grateful for their assistance.

I never thought that those poems would carry me so far. I never would have thought in standard nine when, we read "*Ek het jou gemaak*" as prescribed literature, that my lifeline and that of Jan Rabie and Marjorie Wallace would cross. But I am unbelievably grateful for it.

### **My grandmother and I are cut from the same cloth, she cut the cloth herself (a few words of acknowledgement)**

When I was a young child, my grandmother showed up on our doorstep one day, like Gandalf the Grey in Hobbiton. Without explaining too much she packed a small bag of clothes and took me with her to Grabouw. From then I would stay with her and my grandfather on the farm.

I do not know why my mother said nothing, but she said nothing. It is like one of those things where you have to fill the gaps yourself, because no one really had the time to explain things. I was not my mother's child; I was my grandmother's child and had to find my place on the farm in my own small ways mostly by copying my grandmother. I found my place on the farm in small ways, mostly by copying my grandmother.

As young as I was you could always find me on the porch, busy dispatching curses in the direction of every passer-by for one or other sin I felt they committed. My family is deeply religious, but they believe in cursing as they believe in throwing salt over one's shoulder when you come stumbling into the house after midnight. 'You mustn't come and *suip* every weekend and then you want to turn the whole farm upside down Pietie! If you drink, you drink for yourself and then you go to sleep, you *moerskonner!*' And so on and so forth - that was how I rambled on.

My grandmother and I cleaned the house together, I helped with the food. I was like my grandmother's shadow, which made things difficult with my mother later, as it was precisely because she wanted to get out of my grandmother's shadow, that she had left the farm.

My grandmother taught me to fight all the time. I never even realized they were farm workers. In my childish understanding of farm workers, they were not proud or sober.

### **"Bry" (aspirated pronunciation of "r")**

Before I went to go and live on the farm, my mother tried hard to make me speak English. She always tried to pronounce my name nicely, Row-nel-da or Roo-nel-de. By the time my grandmother was done with me, I had such a heavy "bry", that my mother forgot about the English entirely.

You never lose your "bry", it's woven into your DNA, like the little islands of plaits that my grandmother wove my hair into, that was so tight that if you walked into a whirlwind, not a hair would've moved out of place. After all this time, it takes only about five minutes back on the farm, for my "bry" to resurface.

I think I get my obsession with accurate representation from my grandmother as well as my mother. Anyone who is familiar with the Overberg, knows that you are not just from the farm, you are from a specific farm and the farm has a name, Molteno or Applethwaite or you live in Pineview north.

You do not have a name of your own, you are Trei's child or uncle Tom's granddaughter. Everyone had a story, every family had a history and irrespective of how you lived your life, there is someone who knows you and who can retell your story. This tradition was the inspiration for my second collection of poetry "*Grond/santekraam*".

In a climate of land claims and questions over who the rightful owners of the land are, it was important for me to write from within those voices retelling my family's history, in order to capture the retelling –tradition.

My grandparents never owned their own house, they worked on the farm and when they could not work anymore, they had to move.

My grandfather who worked with his hands until they were hard and covered with calluses, died in a cold hospital bed in Karl Bremer's emergency wing with two dry slices of bread and a mug of weak coffee next to his bed. "*Grond/santekraam*" was for everyone like him, the old people who must now live in shacks in Wesbank and Delft because in their youth, they had to work the land for other people.

### **Like a milking post on the farm**

There was a milking post on the farm in Grabouw, but no cows. Just apples, lots and lots of apples. For those that do not know, a milking post is the post, to which stubborn cows are tied when they are milked.

I liked looking at the milking post, without wondering why. I searched for my place on the farm for years and then realized one day while I was staring at the milking post, the milking post and I were the same: I was there, but there was no use for me between the apples, but no one wanted to remove me, because they had already decided that I belonged there. But I didn't really belong there and when my father started working at Waterworks (not certain if the department still exists in Cape Town), and they got a council home in Blackheath, I didn't belong there either. And when we moved to Eersteriver my comfortableness with not fitting in became normal to me. Wherever I stayed, felt like it was only temporary and the only reason that I can think of for this, was that I could see what happened to people once they started to believe too much in where they belonged.

In 2008 when I started writing my first poems for "*Noudat Slapende Hond*", the first three poems in the collection came out of the three worlds that shaped me. 'Waar ek staan' was for my mother, 'Baas van die plaas' was for my grandmother and 'Klein Cardo' was for my sister and Eersteriver.

### **A farewell to arms**

I am sixteen years old, I am sitting in my room in Eersteriver and reading *A farewell to arms* by Ernest Hemingway. I write these words down in my notebook in which I write poetry that I don't show to anyone:

*“The world breaks everyone and afterward many are strong in the broken places. But those that will not break it kills. It kills the very good and the very gentle and the very brave impartially. If you are none of these you can be sure it will kill you too but there will be no special hurry.”*

It makes me think of my grandfather, he was good, gentle and brave. And he had an early death, he didn't have the robustness that the Cape flats required of you. He was not a weak person, on the contrary, he was very strong and proud. A strong man, as is expected of men. A strong man never lets anyone humiliate him.

I think that is why my grandfather has been buried for twenty years now and why my grandmother is still hobbling on through life. Their lives were one long humiliation. When my grandfather became too old to work on the farm, they moved to the Cape flats, where the world was grey and everyone was constantly trying to short-change you. In the Cape they stayed in a small bedroom with my uncle and his whole family.

My grandmother could live that way, because a strong woman is defined by how much humiliation she can tolerate. A strong woman is not allowed to graduate from girl to womanhood until she has been totally humiliated.

For men it is and was different, but especially for my grandfather. He was now away from the farm and the status his history gave him, he was now part of a group of people and his children and grandchildren all had their own names (lives). I think what was the most difficult, was that he could not say who he was anymore.

The irony of my grandfather's life was that although he could walk with his head held high in Grabouw, he was far from being highly regarded. He was exploited and his pride was false and his patriarchy was false and I wish I could have said that to him.

## **Skype**

My grandmother lived through World War II. She saw Apartheid from start to finish. She was a child in a time before TV, a time, it seems to me, before everything except books, and she could not really read.

I would never have thought that my grandmother would know what the internet is, but my grandmother wants to Skype or Snapchat with me and her WhatsApp profile photo is a picture of her in a fur coat.

She does not live in Cape Town anymore. She lives with her daughter who decided years ago that she will raise her family far away from her mother and all the drama that accompanied her. It sounds as if her life is calmer now. As if her life is now her own.

She and I, just as my mother and I, have always been angry at each other and most of the time we have forgotten why. And now she's ailing, she wants to make peace before she goes, but when she wanted to Skype or Snapchat, I said no, I'm still angry at her. Then she sent a voice note to my aunt to say, '*Daai blerrie klimmeid is harregat*' and laughed, 'I raised her well.'

And that is why, in my writing, I will return to the farm. My new book *Kompoun* is more than just a tribute to the farm, it is a way for everyone who went before me, to be part of Afrikaans literature with me. *Kompoun* is the fresh flowers on the graves of all those, who for decades, existed in silence. But it's also a thank you to the few people who judged me just on my writing: Antjie Krog who forced me to read "*Raka*" out loud as some form of cruel and unusual punishment, because she wanted me to learn that a writer can only write if he or she has read everything that has come before them and now I've read everything and I still don't like NP Van Wyk Louw.

Anastasia De Vries, when she was Rapport's book editor, put my face and my second collection of poetry on the cover of the newspaper's Book supplement and I think to this day that, that was one of the greatest gestures of defiance.

Someone asked me recently what I thought of all these new brown writers who being published now and I said that I think it's too few there should be more, there should be a lot more.

The German writer and philosopher Goethe said: 'He who cannot draw on three thousand years is living hand to mouth'. I think anyone who has any understanding of the value of ideas, knowledge, experience and history will not disagree with this sentiment, but it makes me wonder sometimes, where does this leave us, the coloured people of South Africa, because there is so much of our history that hasn't been unearthed through writing?

We are a community that is not just materialistically poor, but who spiritually also lives from one day to the next. Everyone from our community who succeeds is an exception and our success can only be achieved through isolation from your own community. I believe it is like this, because we have no history to draw our strength from, because so much of our history has been scrapped from the record, our heritage, our contribution to the fight against apartheid, our historical pain and humiliation as a group, our contribution to the food and culture of this country.

There are so many lives, experiences and knowledge that has already been lost. There is so much of our culture that is already extinct. And there are no monuments of stone, marble, bronze or captured as part of the literature in order for future generations to be able to rediscover it.

I think about Kassiesbaai and how, during my research for *Kompoun*, my grandfather's last surviving cousin oom Hendrick, made me sit and allowed me to film our conversation because he was also one of the last to be sat down and to be told the whole family history.

He believed that if you don't know where you come from you'll think you come from nowhere.

I think about all the stories that our grandparents retold and how they get lost and how all that remain are Afrikaans folk songs which, similar to the language itself, are being rewritten without the true history.

Our history is truncated, whole communities removed and moved to the side in their own stories, their lives reduced to footnotes.

Many of us here are the descendants of one of the oldest groups of people on the planet, but that history is written in sand.