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Research Report

Mourning, linguistic improvisation and shared histories in Marlene van Niekerk's *Agaat*

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INTRODUCTION

Certain novels ensnare their readers. Like the 'wag 'n bietjie' thorn tree or *Ziziphus mucronata* with its vicious paired thorns, one straight thorn pointing forwards to the future, the other pointing backwards, the reader is hooked, perhaps wounded, unable to walk away unscathed, but caught up and forced to reflect a moment. In all likelihood, there is a breaking of skin and perhaps a scarring, a haunting, a reckoning with loss, akin to the tree's association with burial. Such a novel is Marlene van Niekerk's *Agaat*, translated by Michiel Heyns (2006). Staged at the bed-crypt of the dying matriarch Milla, who now has become prone, paralysed and voiceless, the novel exhumes, through a slow, almost wake-like recall, the complexities of her relationship with Agaat, her one-time daughter, now servant.

Memory and mourning are fundamental to *Agaat* and become manifest in Agaat's ruthless reading aloud of Milla's diaries, which often vindictively edits, annotates and paraphrases Milla's rendition of Agaat's life. What emerges with every re-reading is the brutality of an abusive relationship with its history of trauma, inequality and racism, evocative of T.S. Eliot's words that frame the English translation of the novel, "And last, the rending pain of re-enactment". This might have the effect of a thorn being driven progressively deeper in an urge to escape further wounding, with a result akin to Judith Butler's belief that in mourning "we're undone by each other" (2004: 23). Yet at this very site of trauma, Van Niekerk appears to effect a poignancy and intermittent affection in the improvised communication between master and servant. The intricate shadow play which arises points to the location of a potential space of opportunity, begging the question Van Niekerk herself poses in an interview: "Can a person with the tools of the master, break the master's house down?" (2008: 48)

The project of the novel is prophetically captured in Milla's words: "The remembering, the reading, the dying, the song" (p. 212). This essay offers a reading of the novel as an examination of inheritance, memory, haunting and mourning, both psychoanalytically in the distorted relations between Milla and Agaat, and linguistically through the haunted language she and Agaat construct. Milla herself merges these strands in her opening statement: "It'll be the end of me yet, getting communication going" (p. 9).

Firstly, in my psychoanalytic investigation, I intend to consider the usefulness to a reading of *Agaat* of Freud's analysis of mourning and melancholia and of Abraham and Torok's extension of this, according to which the child (Agaat) internalises the secrets buried in discourses she hears, having a direct empathy with unconscious or denied material from the parental object (Milla). In this process the child becomes the bearer of a phantom, a radically alien, uninvited other, buried within her unconscious. Agaat's task might, from this perspective, be seen as putting unspeakable and silenced secrets into words (or perhaps other symbolic forms, like embroidery). This approach links to André Green's concept of the dead mother, which is "an imago in the child's mind, following maternal depression, brutally transforming a living object, which was a source of vitality for the child, into a distant figure, toneless, practically inanimate" (Green, 1999: 2). Consideration will also be given to Derrida's theory of ghostly voices, which he describes as the trans-generational spectres in every text that bear the undisclosed traumas of their predecessors. In this sense, both Milla's diaries and the novel itself contain more than they know: the limitless traces of other words which lie beyond simple truth or falsehood.

Central to the task of understanding the process of mourning in the novel is a close reading of the language Agaat and Milla invent to negotiate their histories through the re-iteration and appropriation of the diaries: a unique communication at once angry, vengeful, obsessive, compassionate and poignant. In the scholarly criticism on *Agaat* referenced in the bibliography, there appears to be a dearth of in-depth textual analysis on *Agaat.* This is understandable in a text that is both vast and multi-layered. An analysis of the role of language in the novel must, however, explore at least part of

the text in detail in order to gain insight into the texture of the linguistic game that is played between the two main characters. My second broad aim, therefore, is to offer such a reading of chapter sixteen, a seminal chapter where Agaat and Milla's attempts at communication are foregrounded.

In conclusion, or rather in speculation, I will attempt to unravel some of the implications of the interpersonal improvisation between the two women. This includes the question whether Milla's departure may inaugurate the end of Agaat's trauma, or whether with the loss of Agaat's internal support, her mourning may be interminable. Levinas' proposition that death is a relation with the other might be instructive in this regard (quoted in Davis, 2007: 117). If Agaat and Milla's shared 'language' comes to terms with the past, there may be a possibility of a new relationship, beyond the play of phantoms. This invites speculation on whether the novel offers any kind of closure. If Agaat has 'written back' to Milla there may be a sense, as Agaat and Milla's experience is reworked and reworded, of Proust's project to retrieve and 'conclude' lived experience through the act of writing. From this perspective, Van Niekerk's novel could also be read as a radical commentary on productive lacunae in post-apartheid South Africa. On the other hand, given the density of the text and the traumas it uncovers, the innovative communication may be more indicative of shadows and hauntings, in a closed-circuit version of shadow boxing that offers little prospect of a new dispensation.

CHAPTER ONE

1.1 The trope of mourning

The decision to focus on the trope of mourning as my chosen entry point for investigating the multi-vocal and linguistically experimental nature of the novel might appear counter-intuitive. Given serious claims that *Agaat* is the quintessential post-apartheid novel and that, in the proposition of a visiting Mellon scholar to the University of the Witwatersrand, Rita Barnard, in her seminar of 10 August 2010, it might deserve the appellation of encyclopaedic novel in the company of Dante's *Inferno* and Joyce's *Ulysses*, a reader could well have reasonable doubts about the justification for a reading of Agaat's mourning of Milla where – for 642 pages – both protagonists, still alive, battle it out to the death.

Such an approach, though admittedly not an obvious one, interprets the struggle between Agaat and Milla as a process of mourning in anticipation of Milla's impending death. Agaat's dramatisation of the ambiguous memorial to Milla's life, her diaries, bears all the hallmarks of mourning and its less resolved accompaniment, melancholia. Agaat's reworking of Milla's memories and writing may be an adaptive process, where there is the recognition of an unconscious reparative process and an opportunity for self-examination, transformation and maturation. It may equally be the enactment of a more morbid and pathological obsession. Both characters acknowledge the gravity of their communal task to rework their shared history. Milla registers Agaat's desire to "manicure the whole imminent carcass. [ ] As if relieved of unwanted hair and nails and calluses, my shell will become transparent so that she can see my inner workings" (p. 333). Milla perceives a macabre compulsion in Agaat to carry out a premature post-mortem on her in suspended animation. "The note-perfect rehearsed death I shall be, the virtuoso performed" (p. 308).

Mourning and forgetting require the working through of lived trauma. Trauma and loss for Agaat infect every level of the novel. Agaat is separated from her birth parents by Milla in what David Kirschner would call a "primal wound" (quoted in Willock, 2007: 161), Agaat is forced to slaughter her own pet lamb, Jak dies and Jakkie leaves for school and the airforce and later flees the country. But the most significant loss that drives Agaat to mourn the dying Milla is Agaat's traumatic loss of Milla as a mother-figure when Jakkie is born and her subsequent relegation to servitude. The most searing loss of her adopted mother compels Agaat to bury the suitcase containing everything she has of value from her childhood and her childhood itself, with the epitaph, "Now, Good, you are dead" (p. 689). With parallel symbolism (which will be analysed in detail in section 1.6 of this chapter), the young Agaat buries, within herself, the imago of the mother who has just rejected her. My thesis is that in the face of Milla's impending death, Agaat is compelled to resurrect what André Green calls the 'dead mother' before she can either let her go, live with her or forgive her. Milla cannot die for Agaat until she comes into being as the mother and this is only possible through an exhaustive exhumation of their lives. It would not be an overstatement to claim that Agaat is locked in a vice of triangular mourning. She mourns the embalmed psychic imago of Milla she created to stave off her childhood rejection; she mourns the obliteration of her true self; and she mourns Milla's imminent physical death.

There is an inexorability with which the novel proceeds. Milla captures it as "clearing-up and fitting-in, emptying out and filling-in, [a] never-ending improvisation. With the bellows-book opened wide to blow out one long sustained blast of air, to keep the ember alive for as long as may be necessary" (p. 648). It appears to be fuelled by an unspoken and potentially unconscious pact between Agaat and Milla to stave off Milla's death until their mourning work is done, a collusion that sometimes seems

ghoulish rather than productive. Agaat wrings the words out of the diaries, interprets, edits and annotates them to force a reckoning with Milla. She translates Milla's every movement. The two are so intimately bound up that when Agaat is asleep and Milla plays a trick on Beatrice by peeling back her eyes, Beatrice imagines a suicide pact: "a joint, a shared, how does one say it? a linked, perhaps they decided it's the only way òùt of the misery, a team effort,[] a double-decker!" (p. 276). When Agaat shows Milla the finished shroud she has embroidered, she cautions: "Before I wash and starch it, I must first put it on and go and lie in your grave with it" (p. 584). Both Agaat and Milla's identification with this mourning work calls for theoretical examination.

1.2 Mourning and melancholia

Psychoanalysis offers several possible readings for the tropes of the crypt, haunting, mirroring, inheritance and commemoration that populate the novel. The most obvious place to start with a theoretical investigation is the work of Sigmund Freud, where I focus primarily on his paper, "On Mourning and Melancholia" (1957: 243-260). Freud considers mourning to be a comprehensible and conscious reaction to loss which loses its traumatic force over time. The mourner exhibits loss of interest in the outside world, reduced capacity to adopt a new object of love, a turning away from activity and an inhibition and circumscription of the ego (1957: 244). The demand that the libido withdraw attachment from the object arouses intense opposition, so that a turning away from reality takes place, as well as a clinging to the object in a "hallucinatory wishful psychosis" (1957: 244). Although the existence of the lost object is psychically prolonged at the expense of time and cathectic energy, reality gradually prevails (1957: 245).

Melancholia occurs when the normal process of mourning is blocked, affect remains attached to the dead and the passing of time does not alleviate suffering. In this case the reaction is that of dejection, cessation of interest, the loss of capacity to love and the inhibition of all activity. Unlike with mourning, there is a lowering of self-regard, an impoverishment of ego and an ensuing expectation of punishment and self-abasement. The loss, in cases of blocked mourning, becomes more ideal in nature; the object is lost as an object of love and is withdrawn from consciousness. Freud sees this as a shattering of the object-relationship, where the free libido is not displaced into another object but withdrawn into the ego. There is a continued identification with the abandoned object and the ego is like a forsaken object. Object-loss is transformed into ego-loss (1957: 249). Significantly, as strong as the fixation on the love object was, because the object-choice was effected on a narcissistic basis, the object cathexis regresses to narcissism, an identification (regression, in Freud's terms) where the ego attempts to incorporate the object into itself and devour it. A precondition of melancholia is thus a conflict due to ambivalence: if love for an object takes refuge in a narcissistic identity, then hatred comes into operation on the substitute object. This 'inward turn' gives rise to a kind of self-torment, signifying a satisfaction of sadism and hatred, turned around upon the subject's own self. Revenge on the self is often effected via illness, so as not to express hostility openly (1957: 251). Jed Sedkoff remarks that the paradox of mourning and melancholia is that what is to be forgotten must first be remembered, and remembering is a kind of forgetting or letting go (quoted in Kohon, 1999: 114).

In the Epilogue, before ending with Agaat's bedtime story, Jakkie gives the work of mourning gravitas. "Mourning is a life-long occupation, says my therapist. This is what I must do then. Must learn to do. Mourn my mother, my mothers, the white one and the brown one. Mourn my country" (p. 683). Agaat's rigorous 'advance' mourning rituals often resonate with Freud's concept of melancholia, in their obsessiveness and angry, ironic charge. When Agaat re-reads Milla's 'commemoration' of the diaries, Milla feels that she "wants to come and force it down my gullet" (p. 11). Milla calls the garden project her 'paradise', but Agaat twists the reference to signify the

furnishing of her back room, "Hr little rm that you fixed up so nicely for hr in the back here, remember?" (p. 57). Although Agaat's need to chastise Milla is palpable, the fact that Milla is – for almost the entire novel – the sole narrator, throws into question the level of attack Milla bemoans. Part of the complexity of the novel lies in the fact that Agaat's enactment of rituals is filtered through Milla's attempts at interpreting them.

Most of Agaat's barbed comments reveal Milla's neglect, abandonment and abuse, which is reminiscent of Milla's troubled relationship with her own mother. Thus Milla compares botulism from eating skeletons on the farm to her mother's power: "Soil sickens slowly in hidden depths." Because she didn't resist her mother "it has struck will strike at me [] for I have done as was done unto me the sickness of us two" (p. 35). Her mother leaves her feeling "fed and fed-upon at the same time" (p. 145). It can therefore be argued that Agaat has learnt from a wounded narcissist preoccupied with fantasies of her power, yet troubled by a sense of inadequacy. Milla responds to criticism or rejection with indifference, rage or emptiness; her relationships are disturbed by exploitation, idealization or devaluation of others as well as a lack of empathy. Perhaps Agaat's apparently melancholic inability to divest herself of Milla (ignoring her obvious material constraints) stems from the narcissistic mother she has introjected as a defense against Milla's initial abandonment of Agaat, a proposition Andre Green theorises on and to which I refer later in the chapter.

1.3 The uncanny

Although Freud provides a framework for discussing mourning, of greater interest to my reading of *Agaat* is his argument that the uncanny (*das Unheimliche)* comes about through the awakening of something familiar which has been repressed, although he does not sanction a belief in ghosts per se. This view is modified in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920), a work in which he speculates on the death drive and suggests that every subject is already inhabited by death. This would imply that the child – Agaat – internalises the secrets buried in discourses she hears, which have a direct empathy with unconscious or denied material from the parental object (Milla). As such the child is the bearer of a phantom, a radically alien uninvited other, buried within her unconscious. Agaat's task, might, from this perspective, be seen as putting unspeakable and silenced secrets into words, or, given the usurping of her voice through Milla's narration, other symbolic forms, like embroidery. In embroidering Milla's shroud, Agaat, according to Milla, "counts and measures as if her life depended on it" (p. 16). Agaat's bedtime story, her one sustained monologue in the book, forever unheard by Milla but heard nightly by Jakkie and recorded in the epilogue, explodes the secrets Milla imagines were unknown to Agaat. Agaat's tale announces Milla's unacknowledged racism, arrogance and cruelty through Milla's assertion that once Agaat has learnt housework, reading and writing, "now you are a human being" (p. 688). Agaat's awareness of her otherness in Milla's eyes surfaces in her description of herself as a child in the labourer's cottage as "a pitch-black something [[the thing had legs [] the thing had arms" (p. 685). She also explodes the myth of domestic happiness in mentioning the beatings Milla received from Jak and that "she crawled into Good's bed at night for comfort" (p. 689). After her expulsion to the back room, Agaat buries her childhood treasures and prophetically pronounces her own death: "Now, Good, you are dead" (p. 689). And in a reversal of the outrage Milla has performed on Agaat by abducting and then abandoning her, Agaat christens Jakkie "You-are-mine" (p. 690). This notion of the individual inhabited by phantoms opens the way for deconstructive readings of the notion of haunted subjects whose identity is founded on the death of the other.

1.4 Derrida's spectres

Hauntology is the name given to modern studies of the relation to the dead. Most recently, in the deconstructive paradigm, Jacques Derrida coined the French word *hantologie* in *Spectres de Marx*

(1993), replacing the ontology of being and presence with the spectre which is neither absent nor present, neither dead nor alive. It occupies a place similar to the Levinasian 'other' and suggests the slipperiness of the living present (Davis, 2007: 8-9). "Derrida's spectre is a deconstructive figure hovering between life and death, presence and absence, and making established certainties vacillate" (Davis, 2007: 11).The spectre cannot be conversed with; rather, it may open us up to the experience of secrecy or unknowing which underlies and undermines our understanding. This secrecy is the "structural openness or address directed towards the living by the voices of the past or the not-yet formulated possibilities of the future" (Davis, 2007: 13). "The ghost cannot be articulated in language available to us and is not about a secret to be uncovered but about secrecy or the structural enigma of writing".

Van Niekerk's text alludes repeatedly to the enigmas of language and communication. Agaat learns the master's tongue, often inadequate to her needs, as seen in her incantatory rote answers from the *Handbook for Farmers* when she is flooded with pain or emotion. Accused by Milla of stealing Jakkie and breastfeeding him, Agaat's oblique reply is in the idiom of sheep farming, that "weaning time is the most critical time" (p. 491), referring both to Jakkie's needs and her own abandonment. Her borrowed use of an Afrikaner text is poignant and unsettling. The reader is often left unsure of how to position Agaat, as Willie Burger notes, because Milla's language and perspective predominate in the novel, controlling the reader's access to her (Burger, 2009: 8). The text comprises Milla's current musings and forgettings (which often dwell on the slipperiness of words), her diaries, read or interpreted by Agaat, but through Milla's lens and Milla's italicised stream-of-consciousness. What remain, Burger suggests, are the prologue and epilogue, narrated by Jakkie; they convey his own struggle with language and interpretation. Even Agaat's seminal bedtime story is narrated by Jakkie. This results in what Milla momentarily realises is a "story in a mirror, second-hand", a story which unsettles and perplexes (p. 163). Van Niekerk herself admits to misleading the reader methodically into trusting a seemingly chronological story, only to frustrate her with flashbacks and perspective shifts ("*terugvouings en vlakverskuiwings*") and an ending enmeshed in the beginning, so that the reader never escapes the labyrinth and discovers the multiple permutations of the self in language (Burger, 2009: 153). The italicised sections suggest a search for expression beyond language and syntax, but using language, the only tool available, to enter the realm of death and the other – an uncomfortable technique, in my opinion, whereas Agaat's embroidery and dance rituals are infinitely more evocative of her otherness.

It is the co-created communication of gesture and translation that Agaat and Milla broker once Milla is speechless, that most invites a comparison to a kind of spectral 'language'. It is an interplay that is as frustrating and misleading as it is poignant and uncanny and it will be discussed more thoroughly in the close reading in chapter 2 and the reflections on the implications of this interpersonal improvisation in chapter 3. In Hélène Cixous' words, texts which deal with the structural enigmas of writing "teach us how to die" because they show that "each of us... must do the work that consists of rethinking what is your death and my death, which are inseparable" (quoted in Castriciano, 2001: 18). Indeed, Mark Sanders correctly suggests that Agaat's coercion of Milla in force-reading the diaries "discloses an operative silence in the story of lives intertwined. The process may not make what is operative speak, or bring it into presence, but it may reveal how the story that is being told, with the events it brings to memory, covers for another story or set of events, which resists a coming into speech or writing" (Sanders, 2009: 104). There is no process whereby the joint narrative of Agaat and Milla can succeed in its unearthing. Their attempts at communication can only encircle or hint at a 'story' that can never be told. Such is the challenge of the novel.

Fundamental to my argument is Derrida's contention that Freud's withdrawal of attachments, in the work of mourning, involves an interiorising idealisation of the other where the body and voice of the

other are ideally and quasi-literally devoured (quoted in Castriciano, 2001: 37). The conclusion, the interiorising idealisation, is an assimilation, an introjection which expands the self. This differs from an incorporation where the lost object is not assimilated into the self but sustained in some way. This sustaining of the object is what Castriciano calls 'cryptomimesis'. Here the implication of sustenance rather than assimilation with the self suggests that the mourning process is not concluded. The psychic space within the mourning subject is occupied by the other.

A novel staged around a deathbed, in a crypt-like setting and formulated around the re-telling of traumatic histories offers much room for speculative interpretation. One such possibility is clearly offered by the theory of "cryptomimesis". Agaat and Milla's enmeshment throws into question Agaat's potential for self-expression and independence and her potential for displacing the twice-lost love object, Milla, within her psyche. Without space within the self, Agaat cannot do the work of mourning and assimilate the lost other. The limited access she has to language concurs with Derrida's location of the spectre primarily in language.

1.5 The phantoms of Abraham and Torok

The other source of hauntology is the work of psychoanalysts Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok, particularly the essays from *The Shell and the Kernel*, first published in French in 1968 and revised and translated in 1994. Working within the Freudian paradigm but in an arguably radical re-orientation of Freudian theory, they reconfigure the Freudian unconscious as a psychic 'crypt'. The crypt is constructed when a significant loss cannot be admitted as such, but is preserved inside the subject, which swallows and preserves the lost object. Abraham and Torok investigated the phenomenon of trans-generational communication, where undisclosed traumas of previous generations disturbed their descendants, particularly when these were ignorant of the traumas. For them, *phantoms* are the presence of dead ancestors in the living ego, intent on keeping their secret. They may thus be seen as lacunae left inside us by the secrets of others.

If the novel could be read as a post-script to apartheid and its collateral damage, the secrets Agaat is destined to carry are manifold: she is not only the labourer's child subject to bodily abuse or abuse of alcohol, not only the charity case promised salvation and then conveniently put aside, not only the slave at the master's behest, but a creative and resourceful human being so attached to the master that she suffers in her devotion to and care of her. A difference in approach is that where Derrida might wonder whether every text had deconstructive phantoms, there is an assignation of determinate meanings to identifiable secrets for Abraham and Torok. Deceased loved ones inhabit the subject without its conscious knowledge. Their existence is predicated on the unspeakability of shameful and prohibited secrets. What returns is the disguised evidence of someone else's shameful secret entombed inside the subject without its knowledge. It has no interest in allowing the secret to come to light. Abraham and Torok maintain that "[the] 'shadow of the object' strays endlessly around the crypt, until it is finally reincarnated in the person of the subject...This kind of identification is destined to remain concealed...Accordingly it remains behind a mask...The mechanism consists of exchanging one's own identity for a fantasmic identification with 'life' – beyond the grave – of [a lost] object of love" (1994: 141-142). Agaat's urgency to lie on Milla's grave in her shroud is a worrying enactment of this loss of identity. The return of the deeply repressed consists of the return of a "phantom", an entity that might be that of an unsayable other.

Torok suggests that the phantom calls into question the notion of the integrity of the "I" as it "is alien to the subject who harbours it" (1994: 181) and who is haunted by the "living-dead knowledge of someone else's secret" (1994: 188). In Castriciano's words, the concept of the crypt "designates an intrapsychic topography which inexpressible mourning erects inside the subject as a secret tomb which houses the idealised dead other as living" (2001: 36). Where the loss is maintained, incorporation is seen as anti-metaphorical because it maintains the loss as radically unnameable. The

fact that the novel resists giving Agaat a voice, that Agaat speaks in the master's tongue and has to find authentic but chiefly non-linguistic ways in which to express herself and can only retaliate against her loss via the distortion of Milla's words are semaphores for the unspeakability that sustainment and incorporation of the lost object elicit. Where the loss is devoured, an empty space is established, literalised by the empty mouth, which becomes the condition of speech and signification, according to Abraham and Torok. Seen differently, this is the space "where the displacement of the libido from the lost object is achieved through the formation of words which both signify and displace the object" (Abraham and Torok, 2001: 37). In the case of introjection, speaking replaces unspeakability; once the loss is objectified in speech there is a separation. A question central to my later discussion is whether the mourning process of Milla's lying-in-state resembles both the devouring (introjection) and ingestion (incorporation) of Milla.

1.6 The dead mother

Of particular significance to an analysis of Agaat's childhood abandonment by Milla and her compromised ability to mourn Milla, is the work of the recently deceased French psychoanalyst, André Green on 'the dead mother'. For Green, the mother who has a lessened interest in her infant, whether due to post-natal depression, loss or narcissistic wounding creates an imago in the child's mind that transforms the child's source of vitality into "a distant figure, toneless, practically inanimate … [she is] a mother who remains alive but who is, so to speak, psychically dead in the eyes of the young child in her care" (Green, 1986: 142). The child loses maternal love suddenly and this transformation produces a psychic catastrophe, which constitutes a loss of meaning for the child. Responsibility therefore falls upon the child for "resuscitating the depressed, bereft or absent mother" (Willock, 2007: 71). Resuscitation becomes the child's mission in life, so that finally all the child has is what he is missing, which Green calls "the negative sublime" (Green, 1986: 147). In this scenario the absent other becomes the graveyard of the subject and the child is in the grip of the dead mother. The solution to catastrophic object loss is a kind of blank psychosis, according to Green, and the child introjects maternal depression, what he terms the 'dead mother' syndrome. The worst scenario is that the emptiness the child feels is the only alive part of the self, so that absence becomes presence. Whereas constituting absence may be seen as a potential space allowing subjectivity to emerge, Sedkoff states that Green "depicts the dead mother as never absent, overfilling an inadequate psychic space … we find an ego shorn of its backdrop, and therefore floating unhinged, anchored only by the weight of its damaged objects" (Green, 1999: 114).

Green describes the decathexis of the maternal object as an act of "murder"; although the primary object is killed "without hatred", what remains is a psychic hole (Green, 1986:151). As the infant needs to survive a life without meaning, he/she might develop a "frantic need for play" and/or a "compulsion to think". The hole in the child's psychic world might be covered by a so-called "patched breast" (Green, 1986: 152), and in this respect, sublimation might produce outcomes of artistic creativity or productive intellectualisation, although the child might remain vulnerable in terms of an incapacity for love as "the place is occupied, in its centre, by the dead mother" (Green, 1986: 154). Certainly Jed Sekoff's analysis of the 'dead mother' herself describes "a murderous envy that the dead mother holds for the living, and a killing rage that those held within her grasp hold within them". He rejects the term 'dead mother' as a misnomer as she is more "compressing" or "entrapping" than lifeless, and he sums her up as an object that is "deadening" rather than dead (Green, 1999: 121).

With an eerie intuition of how she has deadened Agaat, Milla refects upon her legacy: "You watched her, her gestures, her phrases, her gaze. She was a whole compilation of you, she contained you within her. [ ] That was all she could be, from the beginning. Your archive" (p. 554). As chilling as the observation is in its arrogance and complicity, it captures the incorporation of Milla into Agaat, the living phantom who sucks her dry and is incorporated within Agaat's psyche. Not only has she made Agaat within her image, Agaat is the bearer of Milla's baggage. With a similar nonchalance Milla contends that the giant emperor butterfly that she has taught Agaat to seek out "is like the soul of a person, it dries out in captivity" (p. 571); ironically this is the same butterfly whose sighting with Jakkie Agaat keeps from Milla, which might be interpreted as a hopeful sign of resistance. Although she tries to placate Agaat, in reference to her deformed arm, by saying "Together we make up a whole person with two strong hands" (p. 572), Milla's unconscious assimilation of the two of them does not

bode well, particularly when this assurance is followed by the following exchange: "Am I your child? asks Agaat. You're my little monkey, I say" (p. 572).

Ominously, when Agaat is six years old Milla is enthralled by the idea of the abused child in the hovel, as if she is compelled to replay an archaic cycle. Not only does Agaat bear the scars of being kicked in utero and of a mother who "didn't want to give the child tit" (p. 664), the one event Milla omits from her records is Agaat's origins and abduction, effectively obliterating her history, which Agaat gleans later from hearsay. Milla's clean-up of the newly abducted four or five year-old Agaat is reminiscent of Agaat's nursing of Milla, but Milla executes it without remorse. Agaat is doped, shorn, her teeth extracted without anaesthetic. Internal examinations are conducted by a doctor (who pronounces her to be in a state of shock) with a diagnosis of multiple penetration. She is locked in the windowless back room, force-fed, punished for soiling her nappy after a laxative is administered. Milla feeds her horror stories about devils and damnation, feels nauseated by the "small, deformed, pig-headed, mute child" (p. 576), threatens to call the police to lock her up if she is 'bad' and claims dominion over her: "You're mine now" (p. 672). A window is built into the room to allow Milla to spy on Agaat, so that she can watch Agaat's gradual submission to Milla's bribery of sweets. Agaat is won over through the bluffing game of gazes, which becomes a naming ritual – "she's in thrall to my eyes now" (p. 483) is Milla's prophetic claim – though even here Milla scares her sadistically and uses the bells as communication ploys. Other victories are Agaat's fascination with fire (Milla's ceaseless source of arson accusations later) which entices her to communicate. When Milla eventually secretly observes Agaat speaking (in a litany of Milla's words and rhymes) on the in-breath, she creates the impetus for Agaat to speak her name aloud for the first time, an incident that Milla describes with apparently maternal emotion as "something heavenly [ ] a tingling fulfilled feeling through my whole body, as I imagine it must feel to suckle a child [ ] We are one, Agaat and I, I feel it stir in my navel" (p. 521). The charged moment over, Agaat's speaking correctly becomes barter for food; it appears that Milla deals only in conditional affection.

Nevertheless Milla is the only mother Agaat effectively has. In a note written in Milla's diary, it is Agaat who writes, "I rite in my meme's boke. I love hir very mutch" (p. 672). (Milla corrects Agaat's spelling into the bargain.) Agaat comes to love Milla despite the fact that the first time Milla calls Agaat "my child" (p. 642) is when she is already pregnant with Jakkie. She draws Milla "with wings because you are my angel" (p. 623) and she compares her gift of a fossil to "our ship, just the two of us where are we sailing to?" (p. 637). After an ecstatic dance with Milla Agaat says, "Close your eyes open your eyes my Même you're my only mother" (p. 633).

Milla's abandonment of Agaat is characteristically brutal. The day she chooses to disinherit Agaat and move her out of the house into the back room is also the day on which she wilfully allows herself to forget Agaat's birthday. She admits that in terms of moving Agaat out, "I must also forget. Otherwise I'll go mad" (p. 95) – and forget she does. Rather than break the news gradually to Agaat about her dislodging, she works her to the bone on her birthday so that she has no time to think and treats her to a lesson on slaughtering sheep, with the particular bonus that the sheep in question is Agaat's own hanslam (her own hand-reared pet lamb), a vicious 'mistake' that Milla never admits having prior knowledge of. Her plan is to show Agaat the room after dinner as a *fait accompli*. The lessons Milla metes out for the slaughter are a chilling parallel for Agaat's excision from the household, as well as an indication of Milla's tacit knowledge of the damage she is perpetrating. Contrary to her dragging out the moment of Agaat's exile, she explains that sheep get panicked before they're killed: "they secrete something from the adrenal with the fear so never dawdle with the killing" (p. 96). Throughout the process Agaat remains tight-lipped; Milla is the one who faints. She glosses over the fact that Dawid cuts the lamb's ear off and puts it into Agaat's pocket "without notches not marked for slaughter as we do with the hanslammers" (p. 99). After the slaughter, Agaat is drenched in blood; she stands in the foetal position she adopts when her stress is overwhelming. Defenceless and alone she consoles herself by throwing her arms around her body (p. 122). Milla's riposte is to berate her for dripping blood and for having her hand in her mouth. Rather than allow potential questions from Agaat as to why her clothes have been removed (prior to their move to the outside room), her gratuitous indignity is to forestall Agaat by grabbing the hanslam's ear from her pocket and throwing it into the bin.

Shortly before midnight – the witching hour – Agaat is eventually invited to view her domain with the false promise that "in the back is a surprise for you" (p. 124). Years later she exposes her prior awareness of Milla's deception, revealing that Saar had told her (gloatingly) about the outside room already. In a callous exhibition of Agaat's new domain, Milla enumerates Agaat's changed status. Not only is the seven year-old now located in the bare outside room with its cast-off linen, zinc bath, bare lightbulb and cracked mirror, for which she must be grateful, she is now officially the maid (her lost status of daughter avoided) and is to wear a black uniform, starched apron and cap. She is to be, with no intended irony, "my right hand in your case my left hand" (p. 125). For Milla the lost gaze, the instantaneous loss of Agaat's mirroring presence, is both catastrophic and poignant. "I wanted her to look in the mirror but the mirror was too high & I was afraid it would crack further if I took it down so I said look into my eyes how do you look to yourself? – like a smart Dutch house but she looked right through me and didn't look for her reflection" (p. 125). The symbol of exchange is the £5 coin Milla presses into Agaat's hand, with the promise of more wages. Milla's parting gift is her vomit in the drain outside Agaat's room which she orders Agaat to wash out. The symbolism of this violent transition is brutal and a clear commentary on social conditions. The novel suggests that in the legacy of apartheid, the madam usurps, woos and promises to protect the subaltern in a quasi-maternal generosity. What ensues is a complicated attachment, a slavery riddled with deception, cruelty and abuse, forever binding the subaltern in a stranglehold of duty, love and hatred.

Characteristically it is Milla who spies on Agaat's act of mourning – or burying – her lost love object, but who misses its full import for her culpability. What is significant, though, is how enigmatic the italicised stream-of-consciousness passage preceding this surveillance is, written (or experienced) over three decades afterwards and containing images of damnation, loss and abandonment: "*descended to hell my right hand a fall of stars it is raining the bleating in the fields all night long I lie awake"* (p. 147). Milla trains her binoculars on a distant hill, where Agaat enacts a ritual dance of stamping feet and waving and pointing arms. Milla wonders whether it signifies judgment, blessing, a farewell ritual, the dressing of a slaughter animal or "separating the divisions of the night. Or dividing something within herself. Root cluster" (p. 151). Her guesses are unnervingly accurate: Agaat appears to be exorcising her childhood, making a space within herself to bury what she holds dear, the living but yet psychically unavailable mother. Not until the end of the epilogue does Agaat's bedtime story reveal her own analysis of this ritual. Her enormous sadness "grew hard as stone and black as soot and cold as burnt-out coal. And she took the suitcase filled with the dresses and shoes and things of the child she'd been and went and buried it deep in a hole on the high blue mountain across the river. And piled black stones on top of it. And trampled it with her new black shoes and cocked her crooked shoulder and pointed with her snake's head and said: Now, Good, you are dead" (p. 689) In this story one witnesses Agaat's own desperation as a child to survive and the imperative to bury, deep in the psyche, what might sustain her: the imago of the mother, alive within her psyche together with the other lost objects of her childhood, more literally in the buried suitcase. Her mourning goes unnoticed, Agaat adds, "because she cried without tears" (p. 689). This formulation depicts her own stasis, the emptiness located within herself, the psychic hole.

Agaat's psychic isolation doesn't end with her excommunication, however. Milla finds every opportunity to wound and control her. Should she ever have sexual relations (and therefore her own emotional life), she would be "give[n] the boot in the blink of an eye" like the lamb whose mother casts him off. "We can't go round raising them all as hanslammers it takes too much time and trouble… Count yourself lucky that you were chosen and kept on" (pp. 166-167). Within the idiom of the 'dead mother' Agaat's embroidery and rituals on the mountain suggest psychic attempts to sublimate intrinsic loss and to manufacture a 'patched breast' through creative endeavour. Her delivery on the mountain, annexation and breastfeeding of Milla's baby are an almost inevitable reparative (and also retributive) gesture; the absent breast is literally usurped and exchanged. The poignancy of her reparative love for Jakkie is palpable and almost mythical in her bedtime story rendition of his birth, where "she took the child out of the blood and the slime and she cut the string and she cleaned him and she covered him in cloth and she gave him a name that only she knew about. You-are-mine she called him" (p. 690). This is finely balanced by the threatening mantra she always whispered in Jakkie's ear before handing him over to Milla: "I am slave but You-are-mine" (p. 691). Milla unwillingly and almost fatalistically recognises Agaat's claim on her child: "It would be

Agaat's baby, you knew, but you didn't say it aloud" (p. 178) turning away from Jakkie in the hospital and keening for Agaat: "bring her to me, you cried, bring Agaat, I want Agaat" (p. 183). In the very throes of Milla's abandonment of Agaat, she summons Agaat to her side, echoing her life-long colonisation and swamping of Agaat's psyche, withholding, accusing and yet insatiable. She regularly acknowledges her parasitic reliance on Agaat to herself. "Perhaps I'll manage to usurp her will on the sly, and keep it warm in me, without her even noticing that I have it, meld it with mine so that we can have òne will for these last days" (p. 132). The tragedy is that Agaat has kept Milla's will warm in her for decades, in her unconscious urge to resuscitate her. There is a moment when she dons Milla's oxygen mask, literally trying to breathe for her (p. 277). With ghoulish clarity Milla observes that Agaat spies on her eyes every day: "My need her reins. The steerer and the steered and the bit. In whose mouth is it? It must be like sleeping in someone else's dream. Your own journey abandoned, your own repose an iron in the mouth" (p. 307). She realises that Agaat has held out with her for "Three years' dying. A lifetime's diaries. Perhaps she feels like a ghost by this time. Perhaps I'm sustaining hér with my dependence" (p. 396). Is this a hollow prophesy with no prospect of transformation for Agaat?

These details of Agaat's loss, together with the theoretical insights provided by writings on the "dead mother", lead to the conclusion that Agaat's compulsion to mourn Milla by the book, to rehearse her second burial of Milla minutely and then live past her death would be crucial to her psychic survival. Whether the novel allows for the possibility of such survival is, however, a complex matter inviting analysis and interpretation. A powerful scene in the novel is provoked after Agaat facilitates a cataclysmic bowel movement in the constipated invalid, a simultaneously symbolic release for Agaat. Aided by the inhibition blocker of a bottle of sherry, Agaat goes on a tirade, goose-stepping around the sickbed and expelling her psychic wounding: "Mailslot! Lowroof! Candle-end! Lockupchild! Without pot! Shatinthecorner! Shatupon! Dusterstick on Agaatsarse. Neversaysorry! Sevenyearschild…. Báckyard! Skívvy-room! Highbed! Brownsuitcase! Whitecap! Heartburied! Nevertold! Unlamented! Good-my-Arse! Now-my-Arse! Now's-the-Time!" (p. 407) This is a moment of profound insight for Agaat, her first public venting of her tale, where she is able to make use of the significatory and symbolic system of language (in an idiom peculiar to her and not to Milla) to embody her plight. Her acknowledgment that her loss is unmourned and untold provokes an energy prompting her to seize the moment and to use Milla's dying to express her own sense of loss. To this end she searches frantically for the old suitcase shortly before Milla dies, exhuming it to satisfy Milla's repeated pleas for it, but surely also to facilitate a freeing of her own psyche. She observes the perfect state of conservation of the suitcase. "It was as if I'd buried it there yesterday. As if it'd been sulphured" (p. 647). The question to be evaluated by the end of this essay is whether there is anything that renders Agaat's loss transformative and that creates the possibility that Agaat might allow personal re-invention and a final burial of Milla. One of Agaat's final gifts is to place something from the suitcase – the source of her childhood comfort - against Milla's cheek. "Feel, she says, there's nothing as soft as moleskin. She nestles it in my neck. [ ] She pushes the point of the stick into the rim of the wheel, rolls it over the covers over the incline of my body" (p. 648). This symbolic gesture might signify a forgiveness and resurrection of Milla as mother that rivals any speech Agaat and Milla have negotiated, but a close examination of linguistic improvisation in the following chapter may offer more a more modulated interpretation.

CHAPTER 2

Analysis of Chapter 16

2.1 Context

To arrive at a multi-vocal reading of chapter 16[1] requires much preliminary unwrapping and exfoliation, as the novel is swathed in layers of signification that have resonance for the chapter. As the first extract the reader encounters, T.S. Eliot's poetry encapsulates a major theme in the novel, with the extract from "Burnt Norton I" referring to the pain of re-enactment and providing a pointer to the living autopsy Agaat and Milla proceed to conduct.[2] References to Eliot pervade the novel, appearing in Milla's own thoughts where she imagines Agaat singing a song at her graveside "of which the ending is like the beginning" (p. 644); she follows this with the personal reflection that "In my end is my beginning" (p. 645). This circularity and arrival back at the point of departure hearken directly to T.S. Eliot's "Little Gidding V" where Eliot refers to time as being unredeemable: "What we call the beginning is often the end / And to make an end is to make a beginning. / The end is where we start from" (lines1-3). Eliot continues: "We shall not cease from exploration / And the end of all our exploring / Will be to arrive where we started / And know the place for the first time" (lines 26-29). These lines would seem to be exhortation to the reader to look for shadows and phantoms, just as Derrida would urge a reading that locates the past and present within the future, and the future within the past, or, as Eliot expresses it in "Burnt Norton I": "Time present and time past / Are both perhaps present in time future / And time future contained in time past" (lines 1-3).

The second contextual overlay of the novel contains a trio of Afrikaner reference works, namely the *FAK Volksangbundel*, Hetsie Van Wyk *Borduur Só* and the *Hulpboek vir Boere in Suid-Afrika*. These three canonical texts refer to farming methods, typical female activities and popular songs as expressions of identity. They provide an ideological backdrop to Afrikaner nationalism with its framings of church, home and state, while masquerading as useful self-help literature. Their contents become – at least temporarily - gospel truth for Agaat. A further preparatory frame is Jakkie's Prologue, in the form of his thoughts as he leaves Canada to fly back to South Africa for the first time in eleven years, for Milla's imminent death. Milla's tale is thus directly preceded by the deracinated but melancholic reflections of her estranged son. Jakkie spies the figure of the ferryman of the dead, Charon in all the officials at the airport, which provides an avenue into the mourning rituals of the novel. Jakkie's Epilogue, following Milla's funeral and containing his thoughts on his return journey to Canada, would appear to bring closure to the novel, as the son's qualified elegy destabilises his mother's 665-page lamentation. Yet Jakkie's rather stilted and off-hand renunciation of his heritage is itself radically undercut by the symbolic objects he takes to England and the story that calls to him, the novel's only sustained passage containing Agaat's own narration, her 'last story', told nightly to Jakkie and attaining almost biblical proportions in his own mythology. The undercutting of Jakkie's apparently over-arching benediction to the novel is critical to his judgment of Agaat. As dismissive of Agaat's ability to escape her frame as both Jakkie and Van Niekerk are, ultimately relegating her to being trapped within melancholia, I would argue that the possibility of new modulations of the past do open up for Agaat, if not for Milla. With a few small exceptions, all of Agaat's utterances in the novel are controlled by Milla in her mediated offerings of Agaat's history and reported speech. The

[1] See the appendix for a scanned copy of chapter 16

[2] This analysis of *Agaat* refers to Michiel Heyns' 2006 English translation, not the original Afrikaans text. There are substantive differences between the two texts and the English translation is studied as an autonomous text. The translation takes numerous liberties with the original, among which is the insertion of an extract from T.S. Eliot's poem "Little Gidding", which frames the text, as well as other extracts from the poetry of Eliot.

story reported by Jakkie is the tale Milla forever longed to hear, the tale which is only disseminated after her death. It is a tale of cruelty and revenge in classic Brothers Grimm mode, where the evil stepmother ousts the stepdaughter and treats her inhumanely, but has her come-uppance when she loses her own son to the stepdaughter's vengeance. Even here, of course, it is not Agaat who narrates the tale. Jakkie narrates her story in yet another partial and mirrored rendition; crucially, though, it is the faithful rendering of a tale in which not one word was ever allowed to be left out, and as such, the closest the reader comes to Agaat's own interpretation of her life.

An initial examination of the convoluted structure of *Agaat* reveals that each chapter - with its quartet of voices separated by asterisks - unveils different aspects of a familiar paradigm and might resemble nested Matryoshka dolls, the layers of an onion. On reflection, however, what Van Niekerk devises is infinitely more troubling and intricate. In the shadow-play between Agaat and Milla, the more Milla tries to divest herself of her past in preparation for death, the more the intricacies of Agaat's past are hauled up for minute inspection. The closer Milla's death looms, the deeper the reader trawls Agaat's childhood and the more the abandoned child gains prominence. These crossing and contrary trajectories could be read more like mirror pivots (De Kock, 2007: 18), illuminating and imitating each other and offering scope for investigating Agaat's loss of identity in her subsuming and mirroring of Milla. But this more nuanced analogy for examining the structure of the novel has the potential disadvantage of over-simplification. In fact, the linearity of a movement towards death and concomitant materiality of the lifelong shadow is confounded by the overlaying of different vantage points of time, voice, style and provenance in the four parallel sections of each chapter. This process is suggestive of the musical relationship of counterpoint, which involves musical voices that sound very different and move independently of each other, but are played together and often create a harmonious effect. This contrapuntal technique combines melodies so that they establish a harmonic relationship while retaining their linear individuality. Milla reflects repeatedly on various aspects of music, referring to Bach's Fugues (themselves contrapuntal compositions), to how every piece of music requires a final note of closure (p. 645) and to how the shroud Agaat embroiders has areas resembling musical notation, perhaps resembling a symphonic tone poem (p. 649). In establishing the context for chapter 16, it is useful to situate it within the structure of the novel as a lamenting chorus of contrapuntal voices.

2.2 Contrapuntal voices

Van Niekerk has expressed herself most eloquently on the enmeshed structure around which she weaves her novel. Her interest as a writer, she states, is "to complicate matters…in such a densely patterned way that the text will not stop eliciting questions" and to seek a text patterning that "might be so impenetrable that it will keep on producing questions even when current conditions in real life on real farms have changed" (Pienaar, 2005). Not only are we offered, by virtue of Milla's unreliability as narrator and also of Agaat's narrative silence, a "story in a mirror, second-hand", a story which unsettles and perplexes (p. 163), but an admission by Van Niekerk of the construction of a seemingly chronological story, peppered with flashbacks and perspective shifts ("*terugvouings en vlakverskuiwings*") and an ending enmeshed in its own beginning, "*'n slot wat vasgedraai is in die bek van die begin"* (Burger, 2009: 153).

Each of the twenty chapters gives the initial appearance of following a similar downward trajectory of Milla's illness towards her death, but Van Niekerk's linguistic project is too broad for a fixed series of harmonious echoes. It is a novel which plays with the possibilities of a language that might integrate the world and the self, to unite rather than divide, ever seeking a possibile utopia. Towards this endeavour, virtually every narrative mode available to language for 'knowing the self' is employed in

counter-balance in each chapter of the novel, creating an almost encyclopaedic narrative. In each chapter the reader is presented with (occasionally in a juggled sequence) the immediacy of first person narration, the distance and possible self-reflexivity of the second person recounting past experience, stream of consciousness and finally the confessional mode of the diary. What is being postulated is both the potential for a fullness of language and its tendency to be undermined through its connections to power, played out specifically in the 'madam-maidservant' relationship between Milla and Agaat. The varying perspectives of each narrative mode imply not only the need for the novelist to experiment, but also that no single mode is adequate by itself. Each mode implies a varying distance from the self as it augments and contradicts previous and subsequent modes. Of crucial import to any attempt at reaching fullness, though, is the absence of Agaat's voice. Her muteness echoes across the text, every one of her utterances mediated by Milla. In a sense, there is a corrective to this lacuna. Agaat's absence of speech accords her unacknowledged narrator-status, as theorised by Wayne Booth (1996: 177) and situates her at the centre of the consciousness of the novel, undermining Milla's attempts at framing the narrative. (Jakkie's voice, which might appear to have the force of external transcendence, is vested with sufficient personal interest and attachment to divest it of agency, keeping it firmly within Booth's category of narrator observer.) The question of whether this panoply of narrative perspectives facilitates the debate at the heart of what occurs between Agaat and Milla must remain in abeyance until the conclusion of this essay.

A sense of immediacy characterises Milla's current (in terms of the novel's chronology) first person present tense reflections on her state of mind, her observations of Agaat as she nurses her and her frustrations in trying to communicate. Milla's prose is often sarcastic and angry in tone, self-righteously focusing on how aggrieved she is at Agaat's apparent cruelties – both current and past – but her reflections are also skittish, sometimes nostalgic and profoundly distressed, and at other times downright maudlin and self-pitying. The power of her narration stems in part from the mediating role she assumes, as first person narrator, between the author and reader. She veers from intense gratitude and awareness of Agaat's sacrifice, to resentment, cruelty and high-handedness and back to moments of self-awareness and intimacy. These passages cover the period of approximately ten months in 1996 ending in Milla's death on 16 December, although the time-span is virtually imperceptible to the reader, so interminable does Milla's lying in state appear. Improvisatory attempts at (or rejections of) communication in these sections unveil profound resonances and symbiosis between Agaat and Milla, as well as profound disfunction. One tracks Milla's physical deterioration from her descriptions, but also from silences and periods of apparent unconsciousness. The strident and warlike prose becomes increasingly pensive and philosophical, focusing less on physical hardship than on musings on existential issues, Milla's place within her cosmology of Grootmoedersdrift maps and the significance of Agaat as her companion in life and in death. This first person mode of narration always takes places within vivid interactions or conflicts between Milla and Agaat. As a result, many of the myths or justifications that prevail within the other three modes are unsustainable here and Milla's narrative is exposed as being, in Booth's terms, fallible or unreliable. Her fallibility relates to Henry James' idea of 'inconscience', where she aspires to certain qualities, but is found out in the implied conversation between author, the implicit picture of the author that is created as she stands sensitively and god-like behind the scenes, the other characters and the reader (Booth , 1996: 183).

In the second mode of each chapter Milla remembers selected episodes in her past, ostensibly viewing herself as a character in the drama of the farm and addressing herself as "you". She potentially also suggests her inability to move past a narcissistic grandiosity to inhabit anyone else's space. The parallel trajectory of this mode is also linear, but encompasses a period far removed from Milla's paralysis, starting with Milla's engagement to Jak in 1946, their marriage, disagreements and seven

childless years and moving to Milla's awareness of her pregnancy in 1960. Crucially, Agaat's arrival in 1953 and seven-year presence in the house go unmentioned: Agaat is simply there in the flesh at her life-saving delivery of Jakkie on the pass seven months later, and no mention is made of Milla's ousting of Agaat from her room to the outside room prior to the birth. She remembers the botulism of 1960, the measly pork of 1961 and the docking by Jakkie of his hanslam's tail in 1968 (with no mention made of Agaat's compulsory slaughter of her own lamb on her birthday in 1960). The breakdown of her marriage (as observed by ten year-old Agaat) is vividly re-enacted, as is Jak's emotional breakdown and subsequent wooing of Jakkie away from Milla through physical endurance activities. Examples of Agaat's power over Jakkie surface in her concealment of his phantom injury in 1976, countered by Milla's interception of Agaat's letters to Jakkie in the airforce in 1981 and her wooing of Agaat to create the paradisical garden. There is the subsequent mistreatment of Agaat at the medal parade in 1984 and Milla's jealousy over Jakkie's birthday in 1985, culminating in Jakkie's abscondment from the army and defection to Canada. Only in chapter 20, when Milla's thoughts have no possibility for transmission, in the last (secret) communication before her death, does Milla tell the tale of Agaat's origins and the subsequent child-snatching in poignant detail, redolent with Milla's vicious treatment of the toddler. And so Agaat's beginning lies in Milla's ending. What Milla omits in this mode (or delays until she is incapable of any communication whatsoever) is as significant as her mode of remembering. The choice of a second person mode affords these admissions and omissions great potency, as this mode conventionally allows for critical reflection on subjective experience. It comes as no surprise that she would make several corrections of her first person narrative in these sections. Second person narration, according to Dennis Schofield, has subversive and transgressive aspects as it lends itself to an unsettling "unseating of the autonomous subject and the interrogation and dissolution of certainty". He locates a shape-shifting quality in the inability of the reader to specify and identify to whom the "you" is uttered. There is a lack of clarity about this figure, "so that its utterances are at once familiar and deeply strange, its engaged readers at one and the same time identifying with and repudiating a seeming direct, even intimate, address" (Schofield, 1998: 1).

The third mode of each chapter consists of extracts pointedly sequenced, edited and performed by Agaat. They derive from the younger Milla's diaries, written in the first person past tense, between 16 December 1953 – the time of Agaat's arrival on Grootmoedersdrift – and approximately 1980 when Jakkie joined the Defence Force. One is left to presume that they are printed in their original form, without Agaat's additions, corrections or commentaries. They also appear to be placed in the order in which they are read, relative to each section of Milla's present tense sickbed musings. The confessional mode with its contractions and abbreviations (notably of Agaat's name to A.) is revealing both in terms of Milla's version of her stealing, taming and renunciation of Agaat and in terms of Milla's limited self-awareness, compassion or shame and the extent of her self-absorption, even in her private admissions. That these are the diaries that Milla orders Agaat to burn makes them potent relics of what Milla wished to erase. Agaat, however, realises that there is more purchase in their horrors when read aloud to their paralysed progenitor. Although again, the diary entries originate from Milla's experience of reality, the fact that the extracts and their timed re-enactment are of Agaat's choosing accord her the power of the magus, bringing seminal moments to life, with a tone, emphasis, editing and timing of her choice. Milla complains that Agaat comes "to force it down my gullet," (p. 11) "to squeeze anew from history a last pressing of indignation" (p. 236). She imagines that Agaat accuses her: "Haven't you perpetrated enough writing in your life?" (p. 16). The reader might be tempted to read these entries as unadulterated reality, but the rationalisations, justifications and defensiveness that populate the entries suggests that the suppression of truth for Milla begins here. Her selective self-censorship continues for twenty-seven years in this particular confessional mode – though her avoidance of truth infects the full forty-three year term of her association with

Agaat – and suggests that her obsessive recording might provide her with a tangible platform both to defend her actions and paradoxically to assuage her (unacknowledged) guilt. Agaat's subversive power over the diaries (and the narrative) is to requisition specific entries for inspection. She targets extracts which highlight Agaat's abandonment by and loss of Milla as a mother. The first thirteen revisit the back room expulsion, the burial of Agaat's heart/childhood suitcase and her punishments and forgotten birthdays. Subsequent extracts focus on Agaat's stealing of Jakkie's affections, the gradual estrangement of Milla from Jakkie and Agaat's mourning of Jakkie once he separates from her and leaves home. The tide turns full circle in the last three entries as Milla's death encroaches and Milla's earliest (and often chilling) records of Agaat's arrival are exposed. Milla's confessions begin where they end, with her clumsily planned preparations for Agaat's abandonment. The vacant diary entry in chapter twenty provides almost paradoxical relief to the reader: Milla is no longer alive to have her cruelties up for display and Agaat's need to dissect her abandonment is laid to rest. The interactions between Milla and Agaat that take place around the deathbed (in the first mode of each chapter) partially serve as a process of correction to the diaries. Milla is confronted with her own truth and Agaat, through her control of Milla's narrative and impetus for closure, writes herself back into the story.

The most enigmatic of the four modes is the italicised and poetic 'stream of consciousness' section, the last of the quartet of voices, where Milla, who is perhaps oxygen-deprived at this stage, is conceivably in a dream-like state of semi-awareness. Logic, sequence and syntax are all but abandoned and the writing appears to track her unconscious. Stream of consciousness, as a literary technique, is a kind of interior monologue which aims to render a character's mental processes visible through spontaneous associations and fragmentary thoughts. It can present the unconscious or preconscious thoughts and musings of a character which may appear random or incoherent. This mode contributes a new perspective to an already layered representation of Milla's state of mind. Franz Stanzel suggests that this mode creates a "figural narrative situation" where the mediating first person narrator (Milla of the first mode) is replaced by a reflector, a character in the novel who thinks, feels and perceives, but does not speak to the reader like a narrator. Since nobody apparently narrates, the presentation appears to be direct, creating the appearance of immediacy (Stanzel, 1986: 5). Images of a nagging conscience and illness predominate. The central signifier of conscience is the 'hanslam' who haunts Milla's psyche, though she never consciously admits to the sacrilege she forced Agaat to commit on her own lamb. Milla becomes ill in spring, which is lambing time and the season of re-birth. Amidst ramblings of how her illness began is the haunting extract from the children's rhyme "everywhere that Milla went the lamb was sure to go" (p. 94). She imagines baking an Easter cake for the lambs, but in the poem she composes to the hanslam, the words are confused, so that Easter becomes eater and honey, money, a degradation of her mission. In a vision of hell in chapter six, she hears lambs bleating all night. The minutiae of her disease haunt her; hers is "the sickness of grootmoedersdrift the mother of all sicknesses" (p. 235) which suggests a level of awareness of a maternal rot, a fetid secret. She rails against the loss inherent in death, the burning and bequeathing, and lists endless household items, all reduced to nothing, as she fixates on the heritage she leaves Agaat and Jakkie. With reference to Agaat, she says, "I am her sick merino sheep her exhausted soil her fallow land" (p. 423). Milla's lack of control is suggested in all her references to machinery, walking frames and water chairs. Her panicked vision in chapter nineteen is of impermeability, but the ending of chapter twenty alludes hopefully to her being "a meniscus that transmits an image…a permeable world without end" (pp. 673-674) and refers to the relief of the sense of supporting hands, a buoy beneath her. She calls for Agaat and uses the biblical reference from Ruth 1:16 "where you go there I shall go" (p. 673), as she leaves "in my hand the hand of the small agaat" (p.674).

The justifications for selecting chapter sixteen as an exemplary unit for textual analysis are manifold. It is positioned immediately after a darkly comic battle scene involving the minutely described physical evacuation of Milla's bowels – what Milla calls catharsis, but what to Agaat might represent the exorcising of the 'bad mother' – and Agaat's delivery of the maps Milla has desperately tried to request. In Milla's words, this may be a scene of "anagnorisis", although her understanding of the true nature of her situation is necessarily questionable: she seems to resent Agaat's humiliating her - "Mrs De Wet is going to see her arse" (p. 406) - rather than having an epiphany. Agaat's sherry drinking (and the effect of so much voiding of baggage) provokes an uncharacteristic parallel explosion in Agaat, an evocative barrage of terms summarising the abuse she has suffered under Milla. Agaat literally spits out her lamentations, which include her isolation in the back room, punishments, indignities and the burying of her heart on the mountain. The outburst ends on a note of expectancy, where Agaat appears to be seizing the moment to articulate the "nevertold, unlamented" nature of her plight. Her resolve appears in her words "Good-my-Arse! Now-my-Arse! Now's-the-Time!" (p. 407). This production of words and excrement is a crucial foreshadowing of the childhood diaries which will be unearthed in chapter sixteen and is juxtaposed with a key question posed by Milla in relation to language: "Sometimes I wonder whether, if I were suddenly to recover my speech, we could in these last days find a language to understand each other" (p. 393).

In the present tense mode of chapter sixteen, communication between Agaat and Milla is at a fascinating juncture, given that Milla has three days left to live and Agaat has brought in the old alphabet chart, giving extended scope to their improvised system of verbal and non-verbal language. Agaat's silences, oblique responses and assumption of different voices provide profound material for a development of a both a linguistic and psychoanalytic critique of the journey of Agaat and Milla; the bulk of the analysis will focus on this section. The past reflection mode offers a narrative focused on Milla breaking intimate boundaries between Agaat and Jakkie, and trying to redeem her loss of Jakkie by luring Agaat back into the fold: an extension of her need to possess the other fully. The diary entry shifts from 1979 to Milla's earliest records of Agaat's traumatic arrival; as the end approaches, Agaat brings her beginning with Milla into focus. The stream of consciousness mode offers a striking image of mimicry, projection and identity in Agaat's testing of Milla's walking frame; their selves are so defined by the other that their imminent loss, through Milla's death is unthinkable. From all these perspectives, chapter sixteen appears to be seminal for understanding the complex dynamics between the two women.

2.3 Chapter 16: present tense mode, pp. 431-451

Throughout the novel, Agaat and Milla painstakingly negotiate whether they can construct a common language, but this first section of the chapter dramatically highlights the dynamics of communication between them. The text provides unequivocal evidence on how infected and contested this project is. One tool at the women's disposal is a compromised alphabet chart from which Milla taught Agaat to spell, conducted by Milla's weapon of corporal punishment, the personified duster, Japie. In the current dispensation of role reversal, Milla's eyes blink to Agaat's code-tapping on the chart in order to spell out her thoughts, while Agaat uses Milla's former weapon as a pointer. Milla is habitually suspicious of the tardy unearthing of the chart, guessing at Agaat's reluctance to face "what hád to come out between us" (p. 434), the revelation of which signals to the reader the stakes of the game. Milla realises prophetically (at least for a moment) that she is unlikely to know where the ultimate truth lies in their interaction and that she might be "the one who's being tested to see whether I have the words to arrive there" (p. 435). The suggestion is that the ensuing linguistic battles are neither solely determined by the mastery Milla fondly imagines she owns, nor by Agaat's extensions of

Milla's truncated thoughts: there is a co-creation at work. Milla summarises this joint venture: "There's a lot to talk about. Now that we've found a way with the alphabet chart" (p. 432). It is not without enormous psychic dangers. Agaat's cryptic summation as she hangs the chart, "Here I'm cutting my own throat now" (p. 435), also suggests that the process may be psychically suicidal. The fact that she whispers the words on an inhalation of breath, as was her mode of speech on arrival on the farm as a four year-old before Milla's elocution lessons, reinforces the infantile psychic position she assumes when she risks empowering Milla with speech. Her task might also be seen as having to put Milla's unspeakable and silenced secrets into words as she gives flesh to Milla's truncated sentences. Later in the section, when Agaat reads the early diaries in a whispered intake of breath "as if she wanted to vacuum the words" (p. 439), it is almost a re-iteration of her psychic ingestion of the lost object, in terms of Green's concept of the dead mother.

Agaat has to pronounce Milla's words and complete her sentences, yet Agaat's playfulness and strategic inventiveness render this task interpretative rather than merely formulaic. Carvalho and Van Vuuren argue successfully that Milla is "compelled to condense a lifetime's questions [ ] into the smallest possible linguistic unit" (quoted Burger 2009: 39). In 'reply' to Milla's accusing and painstaking question regarding arson (a flashback to the fire mentioned in chapter 15), a glimmer appears in Agaat's eyes, which Milla interprets as a question Agaat poses about her culpability. This question is then answered positively by Milla's negotiated signal of one blink; Agaat's oblique reply, "Hottentot madonna" (p. 431) is what is spoken aloud. A whole silent interchange has ostensibly taken place, prompted only by an initial trigger and dependent upon a non-verbal set of signals between Agaat and Milla. Whether this silent question resides only in Milla's projections is gainsaid by Agaat's complex allusion to the racist slur she overhears Jak making about her annoying saintliness in Milla's eyes (p. 203). Agaat's answer is elusive. She may be mockingly suggesting that Jak's mythology points to her unblemished character; she certainly side-steps the allegation. The repeated half-question from Milla is similar, except that Agaat anticipates its conclusion, "In the hayloft?" (p. 431), suggesting her full knowledge of Milla's suspicions and also affording Agaat control of any further probing through her setting the duster aside, ending the interrogation. Milla's understanding of Agaat's resistance to accusations "[and] complaints. And criticism" (p. 442) suggests that her reading of Agaat is often incisive and accurate; they are seasoned adversaries. Agaat's verbatim response from the farmers' handbook is again evasive and obliquely referential. She quotes a passage about the functioning of the cream separator. Her references relate to the equilibrium the separator needs in order to function, citing elements such as its foundation, speed adjustment, calibration and careful observation. The trope of systemic imbalance on Grootmoedersdrift is regularly cited to justify illness and disfunction. Thus Agaat appears to be supplying a philosophical analysis of the general destruction they have experienced, rather than only the ravages of fire.

Milla's minute observations of Agaat's movements and her obsession with ascribing motive to every gesture suggest not only the enmeshment of their identities but also their urgent desire to de-code and analyse their exchanges. Milla overlays Agaat's nursing with motives of dissection and autopsy, as if she were capable of laying bare some over-arching truth. "All my orifices interest her," Milla thinks (p. 432). Even the feeding of hydrangeas with Milla's urine invites punitive reflections on the original fertiliser of the "mother stock" (p. 433), Agaat's emptied chamber pot (both an image of loss and maternal abandonment, although here maternal roles are reversed). Milla second-guesses Agaat constantly, to the extent that she imagines Agaat calculating the range of her reflection in the mirror, so as to be always in Milla's sights. Such is her desire to interpret Agaat that Milla imagines the alphabet chart imprinted on Agaat's face, accessible to her through the tapping of the feather duster. Milla is attuned to the futility and frailty of this reading, however, as she will be offered the "alphabet

of the underworld", a treacherous text (p. 443). Milla unequivocally expects Agaat to interpret the varied meanings behind her flickering eyes; when Agaat fails to respond appropriately, Milla justifies the brush-off with the fact that Agaat is ignoring her (p. 432).

The intricacies of the alphabet chart suggest the convoluted system that Agaat and Milla construct for communicating, a "skeleton of language" (p. 436) which allows them to rehearse the past in the present and (possibly) to uncover potentialities as yet unexplored. There is a sense in which this language is bigger than both of them and might even free them in their improvisation and shared journey. The chart has multiple extensions (in the form of slips of paper) which are highly allusive and almost alive and responsive to the wake-like atmosphere. "They stir and rustle with every draught or current [ ] in the room, they flutter up and down when Agaat walks past" (p. 435). They are symbolically reminiscent of Derrida's ghostly voices that bear witness to the undisclosed traumas of their predecessors, neither dead nor alive but between presence and absence. The opening phrases and conjunctions facilitate economical access to conversation. The modal verbs "I wish, I fear, I hope, I believe" suggest the need to express conditionality, frailty, trust and agency; the qualifiers and conjunctions "Because, but, and, nevertheless" complicate and relativise in the presence of context and experience. The fragility of language (and relationships) is evident in the reference to words that "strain, crack and sometimes break" (p. 435). Tenses are suggestive: simple tenses are complicated and become the hypothetical conditionals of an altered universe in "I would be able to" or the more regret-laden "I would have wanted". The wisdom of T.S. Eliot and the circularity of mourning prevail: "What might have been and what has been point to one end, which is always present" (p. 436).

That Milla prophetically says "I am one might say permeable" when she thinks of the fleshing out of their language relative to her frailty and lack of physical substance (p. 436) is enormously relevant. It refers in part to the whirligig, *Gyrinus natans* that Jakkie mentions in the prologue and that Milla refers to in her penultimate passage: the insect writing on water with one eye above and one eye below the water level, enabling it to break the hard surface of self-reflection and straddle two worlds, the external and internal simultaneously. Milla remembers it as "the water insect and its little twin shadow" and their reflections that have two sets of claws, "between above and below, a single ripple inscribing the surface of the water with rapidly successive perfect circles, overlapping, circling against one another, fading away, starting anew, a weltering writing on water" (p. 658). She is drawn to the image throughout the novel, but it is only in her dying moments that she envisions herself as "membrane between a willow and its reflection…A meniscus that transmits an image…a permeable world" (pp. 673-674). Van Niekerk suggests to Michiel Heyns that in these final moments Milla "aims for her soul something of a world that is more harmonious…a permeable world" with a permeable meniscus, suggestive of the establishment of possible communication, however tardy, between Agaat and Milla and of the potential a writer has to "get beyond describing [ ] reality in an external way only" (Burger: 2009, 147-148). This is reminiscent of Cixous' writing (referred to in Section 1.4) about the kinds of texts that lay bare the structural enigma of writing (quoted in Castriciano 2001: 18). It is notable that Agaat rails against the assumption that she is transparent to Milla and that Milla can read and express her thoughts. Her insistence that "I'm not made of glass" is heightened by the words (once again) being made on an inhalation (p. 441).

Needless to say, Milla's unconscious intimations of a less polarised state are fleeting. The predominant tone of this section is adversarial. Every word matters and Milla reacts violently when Agaat's guesses are inaccurate; as much as she has force-fed her language and mores to Agaat in the past, she resents being second-guessed now. "Don't put words into my mouth, exclamation mark, [ ] don't impose the wrong stress, wrong nuances on me" (p .436). One of the remarkable qualities of the

writing is the way in which it highlights the importance of minutiae of inflection in this battle to the death. Of interest, also, is that Milla and Agaat are both energised by the possibilities available to them: Milla's exclamations are exhilarated and Agaat taps a rhythm to her rather enigmatic snatches of battle hymns: "Don't shirk! There's a nation to lead" (p. 437). As much as Milla wills Agaat to answer, Agaat often resorts to silence, declines to answer, shrugs her shoulders or makes an irrefutable exit from the room (p. 437). These instances of resistance often proceed from moments when Milla is self-righteous or makes excuse for her ill-treatment of Agaat, ostensibly moments of anagnorisis, but powerfully deflated by Agaat's reaction or lack thereof. In reading Milla back to herself, through her voicing of Milla's sentences, Agaat overlays the words with her own intonations, which Milla experiences as "Disbelief, emphasis, mockery. She adds on and improvises" (p. 437). A deeply ironic example is Agaat's prepositional improvisation which questions Milla's defence of her abduction of Agaat as a desire to do something for her "fellow human beings". The play on the prepositions 'for', 'with' or 'to' radically undercuts Milla's posturing and suggests her culpability, as does her modification of Milla's use of the word human. As she morphs the word into "ín- or super-human, [ ] half human, [ ] less human than yourself" (p. 438) Agaat's pain at her ritual objectification and denigration becomes palpable. Milla also details the labour involved in the process of communication: "It takes so much time, [ ] clarity is not guaranteed, [ ] it causes misunderstandings, [ ] her prefabricated phrases block me rather than help me, my language feels like a brutal instrument with which I'm torturing myself" (p. 438).

The linguistic questions posed in this section are at the core of whether Agaat would ever be able to create a space around herself – a space not swamped by the dead mother – to enable mourning to take place and assimilate the other. Milla insists with reckless indifference that she cannot tell Agaat's story for her and refuses to take responsibility for Agaat's being "tongue-tied" (p. 439), oblivious to the power she has exercised in her creation of Agaat. At the same time Milla exhibits infinite narcissistic curiosity about Agaat's motivations towards her, as if she wanted to know her for the first time. Towards the end of the section, in complete contradiction to her declaration of Agaat's voicelessness, Milla poses the cryptic question, "How many voices has Agaat?" (p. 450). The remaining episodes of the section provide numerous examples of Agaat's nuanced tonalities within the maze of language Agaat and Milla explore.

Agaat's complaints about the laziness of the labourers, overlaid with racist references to their inhumanity as "creatures" who "guzzle and guts" and the preferable docility of "Transkei kaffirs" (p. 440) have overtones of Milla's own rancour and distrust of her subordinates. Here Agaat's is the acquired and ventriloquizing voice of the master, a deadening voice leached by phantoms. Yet even then, this mimicry proves unsettling, communicating both Agaat's subjectivity and "the ironising of control, power and parentage" (Burger 2005: 1). A more successful appropriation of the language of the master is Agaat's embroidery, which affords her a rich non-verbal eloquence in relation to her reading of her life with Milla. Agaat embroiders throughout the novel, and it is at this point in the section that she picks up the shroud, as if it allowed her, from Milla's perspective, to "gather strength for the next conversation" (p. 440). The shroud, the very garment Milla's corpse will be draped in, is a palimpsest and "contains all the stitches in the book" painstakingly fitted in to a schematic pattern Agaat envisions, in which everything has its place (p. 440). It can be considered as her life story or "magnum opus" and the re-arrangement of the memories of a life (Burger 2006: 181). Further consideration of the function of embroidery will be made in the final chapter of this essay, but what is relevant in this section is that Agaat's pieces afford her the opportunity to create an ordered counter-narrative to Milla's dominant one.

One of the strangest and most potent voices Agaat assumes is in her embodiment of Milla's suspicions and accusations in a deadly approximation of Milla's own voice and inflections. At three different points in this section, each time following significant goading by Milla, Agaat answers Milla subversively in Milla's own idiom, her whole body, as it were, possessed by Milla. In the first instance, Milla initiates a climax of spelled-out demonic tags, calling Agaat "H.A.G" and "N.O.O.N.D.A.Y W.I.T.C.H" (p. 443). Her frustration is heightened by the dissipation of the force of the insult in its slow delivery and by Agaat's various deflections. Agaat feigns ignorance as to whom the curse is directed; she doesn't react to the weight of the insult, calling it a mere parting shot; she resists Milla's insistence that she should know Milla's inference and forces her to spell it out; she deliberately misreads Milla's reference to fire, choosing instead the plant by the name 'fire on the mountain' in a wilful obtuseness. At the point of Milla's question about the brown suitcase, the signifier of Agaat's buried heart, Agaat rephrases the question in an enactment of the way Milla has repeatedly harangued Agaat: "Whát, I ask you for the how-manieth time, happened to your brown suitcase that I put in the half-shelf of the washstand in the outside room, on the day of your birthday, twelfth July in the year of our Lord nineteen sixty, when you moved in here? What happened to all your possessions from the back room? To the pretty dresses that I hung up there for you on the railing behind the curtain, a read and a blue and a yellow one, specially made for you with my highly pregnant body and all?" (pp. 443-444). The effect is uncanny as Agaat reproduces Milla's overbearing self-righteousness, her strident questions, her disrespect and her resentment at Agaat's act of rebellion and secrecy. She pointedly includes Milla's neglect of her birthday with the inclusion of the date as well as the pregnancy that ousted her, all within the register of Milla's insensitive justifications, as if she has borne them internally all her life.

The first and second ventriloquisms are separated by a series of escalating exchanges. Agaat's reply to the suitcase question comes in the form of a recitation of methods for cutting up an ox, an allusive reference to her own mistreatment and - in her introduction of hanslam cuts – an acerbic reference to the slaughtering of her own pet on the day of her banishment from the family. Her intense anger and pain are palpable in the macabre accusatory avowal that "skivvy and lamb both cut up much better that an old tough cow, let me tell you that!" (p. 444). She introduces an added connection to the excruciating task of the metaphorical dismembering of Milla's life in her selection of "old tough cow" over the ox she referred to initially. A litany of accusations around Agaat's dancing rituals and nightly wanderings elicits another indirect and obscure answer in an idiom of embroidery, based on the technique of "shadow-work", a white-on-white embroidery stitching (p. 445), which is a "use of texture rather than obvious adornment" (Carvalho and Van Vuuren quoted in Burger 2009: 51). This is a resonant reference to Agaat's subtle subtext in the novel, buried within Milla's control of the narrative, about which Carvalho and Van Vuuren suggest that "Agaat's account [ ] must be searched for among the layers of Milla's focalisation" (quoted in Burger 2009: 51).

Amidst Agaat's evasive strategies and a further onslaught of accusations, is the sudden emergence of one of the most direct exchanges of the novel. In an uninflected statement, suggestive of a cessation of artifice and manipulation, Agaat says that the hanslam was her own pet, Sweetflour. Milla gives the first (though silent) recognition of culpability in that she hadn't checked which lamb was about to be slaughtered. Agaat's calm detailing of the indignities of the day is unbearably poignant. "On top of that it was my birthday, twelfth July, you'd very kindly taught me that that was the day on which the Lord gave myself to me as a present. So then you forgot it in your hurry to get me out of the house. Then you pretended the outside room was heaven" (p. 446). This moment has vast significance for Agaat. Not only does she give her account of the day, she also names Milla's hypocrisy and cruelty and the implications for herself. That it almost kills her to voice this directly is evident in her infantile

ritual gesture of solace seeking, the stuffing of the "knuckle of her small hand into her mouth as if she wanted to push in a stopper" (p. 446). Agaat's vocalisation is one of the most hopeful pointers to the possible evacuation of the legacy of the dead mother from her psyche and the potential for space (albeit tenuous) within her to assimilate her lost 'other' in a work of mourning rather than melancholy. It is also a firm recording of a voice Milla has never heard before. But despite Milla's internal recognition of the energy Agaat has expended in this communication, any admission of guilt goes unexpressed and Milla continues with her abrasive attack.

Agaat's second voicing of Milla's internal thoughts follows the accusation that Agaat is playing God with her spelling stick. Agaat's ironic riposte arrives via a quotation from part IV of the Westminster Confession, "By nature utterly indisposed, disabled and made opposite to all good, and wholly inclined to evil" (p. 447), and refers to Adam and Eve and the concept of original sin. Her choice of excerpt serves as a kind of ventriloquism in which Milla might wish to vent her anger at Agaat's frustrating power over her speech by linking her to the original sin of humankind. The reference is economical as it simultaneously suggests an ironic perversion of Agaat's name. The etymology of the name Agaat is explored in the diary entry later in this chapter and is ostensibly a self-fulfilling destiny, originating from the Greek 'agathos' meaning 'good' (p. 487). Given that Milla has just complained about the difference between the sentences she originates and the translations Agaat produces, Agaat's perversion of Milla's gift of her name demonstrates a similar baiting of Milla, by the thwarting of meaning and frustration of potential.

The third example of this spoken 'shared' consciousness is a lengthy passage which draws Milla and Agaat inexorably together. Agaat mimics Milla's prissy self-fulfilling prophesies about her, given her apparently 'base' origins, by saying "Conceived in sin, I'd say" (p. 447). The adjoining sentence is Agaat's own admonishment directly to Milla for her repeated excuses for inaction or failure to protect Agaat; she implies the paucity of Milla's ethical choices. She proceeds to accuse Milla directly for her contradictory strength in destroying the christening robe Agaat embroidered, another signal of hyprocrisy and warped behaviour. Agaat's oscillation from Milla's voice to her own suggests a con-joining of voices, a sign that Agaat spends much time inhabiting Milla's domain, but it also enables her to subvert Milla's self-righteousness. Her ventriloquising grows increasingly unsettling. Milla feels that as Agaat whispers intimately into her ear, she "takes my eyes and reads me direct. [ ] Softly she interprets my thoughts for me. [ ] I listen to myself" (p. 448). Agaat's performance is perfectly consistent with the tone of Milla's soliloquys throughout the novel, indicating that she is aware of Milla's vacillating attempts to apologise, undermined by her own narcissism. It is a ranting self-pitying lament that captures the essence of Milla's self-absorption. It includes her heroic rescue of Agaat, Agaat's transformation into a human being, and Agaat's unreasonable forcing of Milla to account for her actions. The irony of "It's yòùr story, it's for yòùr sake" is testament to Milla's inability to conceive of what is at stake in their re-working of their lives (p. 448).

At this point Agaat's performance enters something approximating the realm of telepathy. She voices the resentments in Milla's voice that Milla is unlikely ever to have vocalised, such as "Why do you torture me on my deathbed?" (p. 449) and enacts an uncanny awareness of Milla's horror of the indignities her illness has exposed her to. "Why do you let me be ravaged by itching, push and pull my limbs, screw open my mouth, taunt me, threaten me with enemas and suppositories, dig in my ears as if you think I have ear-mite, have holes punched into me, shove tubes into me, cut my hair so that I look like a prisoner of war?" (p. 449). At this point the novel may be de-stabilising the reader's sense of a growing intimacy between Agaat and Milla with the likelihood that Milla's narration is no longer that of a conscious person. Instead of hearing these words, Milla might equally be embellishing Agaat's words and substituting her own worst fears in her slide towards diminished awareness. This

conjoining of identities might suggest the possibility of permeably boundaried communication between them. Possibly it denotes a new way for them to imagine one another, with Agaat confronting Milla with what she could or might say, giving new modalities to the past. Whatever the process, this section seems less substantial, as if physicality were yielding to a different level of communication, brutal as the contents may be. It points to the kind of structural openness that Derrida suggests might make established certainties vacillate. In an almost staged swing to a detached instructional voice, Agaat stands back and sings a derogatory line about the nutritional advantages of extended boiling of meat for "the kitchen-maid or kaffir", a presumably standard apartheid practice (p. 449). Agaat then swings back to her creepily intimate awareness of Milla's distrust of Agaat's midnight vigils at her bed in Milla's voice, like "Why do you still leave me hanging?" (p. 450) and changes gear to a sung commentary on sulphured fruit, before returning to a witch-like whispering of Milla's furtive whispered fears, containing images of necrosis, revenge, exhumation and the scavenging off corpses. "Soon I'll be in a hole where even yòù won't be able to get at me. Except if you dig me up to chew my bones. Bone hunger!" (p. 450). This scavenging image shows Milla's unconscious awareness of Agaat's need for her provision of nurturing and sustenance. Agaat now appears almost supernaturally powerful to Milla. The words drip from her tongue. She "appears" (like a sorceress) next to the bed and utters the word "abracadabra" as she twirls her index finger (p. 450). What seems likely is that Agaat's soothing assurance, "it's just the little light, it's going on and off now. In your head" (p. 450), is an accurate description of Milla's confusion. Agaat's final stance with her knuckle in her mouth points more at her dismay with Milla's deterioration than horror at her own cruelty, yet the crucial point is that there are no certainties anymore in this twilight-communication. The infantile pose might well suggest a registering of the full horror of impending loss. Agaat's benediction-like shutting of both their eyes suggests compassion for their shared ordeal rather than the exultation of victory. That their journey is something they negotiate together is suggested by Agaat's final blessing: "Rest, she says, it won't be long now, we're almost there" (p. 451).

This section of the chapter delineates the urgency of the linguistic struggle in which Agaat and Milla fight to the death. They improvise with existing language modes available to them to approach a new medium for communication. Theirs is an imperative (however unconscious) to integrate the external world and the self, to find and recover what is lost. Stakes are high; emotions are charged; positions are often entrenched; their process is unconventional. What unfolds is sometimes a blurring of boundaries between Agaat and Milla. Despite the trauma of picking the flesh off the carcass of their relationship, there is the hint of a relaxation of territory, a mutual permeability and an acknowledgment of the resilience of the bonds of love and affection over the pain of loss. Later in the novel Milla articulates this yearning for merger with Agaat very explicitly as the urge to "devise an adequate language with rugged musical words in which you could argue and find each other. The language of reed and rushes" (p. 555): a language where Milla's "sentences [would be] erected on other sentences like walls built on a rock" (p.673). In some of the extracts above, the language Agaat intuitively produces (and Milla understands) seems to obliterate the distinction between signifier and signified. In the very next sentence, however, the language is apparently irredeemably lost, contaminated by the power differential between Agaat and Milla and Milla's projections of her own guilt onto potentially liberatory experiences. Nevertheless, the elusive experience of this kind of healing language forms the basis of a persistent yearning for a language of perfect harmony.

2.4 Chapter 16: second person past tense mode, pp. 451-468

In contrast to the crescendo of Agaat's multiple voices seeking to be heard against Milla's master narrative in the first section set in 1996, Milla's second person past tense narrative launches directly

into her theft of Agaat's voice via her interception of Jakkie's letters in the 1980's. This irreparable breaking of boundaries and trust provide a correlative to the exploratory and potentially hopeful search for a shared language of the previous section. Milla's appropriation is brutal; it eradicates communication and reveals a historical abduction process. Yet the second person mode suggests that Milla's wariness of her own actions lies just beneath the surface. Beneath her rupture of trust with Agaat lies an inadequate individual trying to compensate for the intimacy she has lost with Agaat and Jakkie. The reader is constantly alert to the disparity between Milla's inconsistent recollections of the past from memory, her half-hearted attempts at self-reflexivity and her overarching need for validation.

Milla's sleight of hand sets the tone for the second section. She announces a cavalier possessiveness of Agaat's property when she corrects her habitual prevarication about her postal hi-jacking being a recent activity; she has been tracking Agaat's intimate missives since Jakkie was at school. The linguistic shifts from "Your loving Nêne" to "Respectfully yours" and from Gaat to Agaat Lourier signal Agaat's diminishing right to public intimacy (p. 451) and the poignancy of a communication that is compelled to grow increasingly distant, given military security constraints and Milla's insistence on the appropriate codes governing communication, a convenient shield against her confronting the love Agaat and Jakkie share. Blinded by her own loss, Milla immunises herself against Agaat's loss: she recoils from Agaat's tenderness for Jakkie. Milla's is a desperate jealousy, which mutates into an obsessive urge to possess. She is uncomfortably aware of the delicacy of Agaat's sensitive and comprehensive descriptions of farm life; she holds the thirty-page love letter up against her own meagre offering. Her defence is to belittle the letters as incomprehensible to the Defence Force censorship: they would read it as "encrypted writing, [ ] some code or other" (p. 452). In the context of the revivifying code she and Agaat will ultimately need to crack, her dismissive contention that Agaat's words are impenetrable is poignantly short-sighted. She is galled by the tenderness of Agaat's questions and has observed their affectionate interchanges minutely. In defaulting to defeatism, tranquillisers and neurosis she excludes herself from all loving relationships.

Rooted in the guilt arising from her own betrayal, Milla projects her own growing sense of isolation from everyone onto Agaat. Milla dreams that Agaat abandons her and interprets Agaat's walks on the farm as a betrayal. Milla monitors Agaat's movements with binoculars, isolating herself from Agaat in the process and robbing herself of agency. From a distance Agaat looks "unimpeachable, [ ] as if she were in a play" (p. 456). That she carries her head high, "her white cap like a prow above the stalks of wheat" (p. 456), makes her appear doubly unattainable. The mistrust that is projected onto Agaat throws suspicion on her absences, culminating in Milla's verbal abuse of Agaat. Milla takes the child's role in these interchanges. Her projected feelings of guilt lead her to interpret Agaat's stares as accusatory. It is Milla who lands up after the explosion with her hand in her mouth - an identification with Agaat's familiar gesture of pain and discomfort - and it is a similar impulse of projected guilt that leads Milla to interpret the silence from Agaat's room against herself as "the sounds of damnation" (p. 457). It is finally Milla's deceit turned violent onto Agaat that causes Milla distress, though inevitably she is unable to turn it into remorse.

The garden project is conceived as an unconscious substitute for Milla's losses. When her culpability is not at stake, her second person self-interrogation hits the mark. She wonders accurately if she wants the project as "a spell, a safeguard against the distant war and its hurt? Or to gain Agaat for yourself?" (p. 457). This is Milla's poignant quest for paradise regained, something to lure Jakkie home. What she seeks is the harmony that exists nowhere else, "a composition, a sonata with theme and developments and repetitions in varying keys" (p. 459), something akin to what she ultimately wishes to share with Agaat. Ironically, her urgency to achieve it results in a physical spat with Jak (who

refuses to help with the project). Agaat's interruption of Jak's manhandling of Milla presents a strikingly symbolic tableau. Agaat has the iron poker in her good hand. "Sometimes, Agaat said, [ ] sometimes I wish I could… [ ] It was superficially evident that she was referring to Jak. [ ] But her gaze was fixed on you" (p. 460). Characteristically, Milla fails to reward Agaat's intervention, berating her for it not being any of her business. That Agaat retorts with, "It is most certainly my business" and exits with "her head high" hints at a certain grim determination in Agaat to preserve whatever identity she has managed to carve out within the family (p. 460). Needless to say, Milla prevaricates about whether Agaat in fact speaks these words. Such an assertive statement of ego would confound Milla. The reader is similarly kept unsure as to the degree of Agaat's psychic individuation.

A battle plan is conceived to lure Agaat into sharing the garden project, but an uncharacteristically hospitable invitation to coffee and rusks brings Milla face to face with Agaat's otherness, in a scene of primal recoil where she recognises something in Agaat that she would never be able to tame. Agaat is embroidering in her room and is without her cap for the first time in twenty years. Milla's words dry up as she encounters what - for her - is Agaat's nakedness. She sees Agaat's hair as "unkempt" and "feral"; it is the antithesis of "everything in league with daylight and subordination" and her room is a recreation of "her unkempt self [ ] in low relief" (p. 461). This encounter with Agaat's 'shadow' unseats Milla and makes her feel naked. That Milla's vision of Agaat as the domesticated, courteous, subservient and efficient re-creation of herself has been overthrown, robs her momentarily of speech. She has no story to tell of Agaat in this realm of perceived untamed otherness and can only resort to coven-like imagery. Her reflections, however, contain two moments of clarity. Without her cap (on which Agaat constantly writes her story), Milla experiences her as vulnerable, without the "rampart before her head" (p. 462), in a momentary flash of compassion. She makes a connection between seeing Agaat embroidering and the intercepted letters - parallel communications - and feels (again momentarily) "terribly guilty about the letter" (p. 463). Rather than encourage apology, however, the nervous energy spurs Milla on to coerce Agaat into agreeing to the garden plan.

Agaat bargains strategically against the interception of Jakkie's letters. "He says they called him on the carpet to ask who this Agaat-person is and why her letters arrived sometimes open, sometimes gummed shut," (p. 465). She vests authority in the military and calls on Milla's maternal instincts when she refers to Jakkie's sensitivity and nightmares without openly accusing Milla. Milla avoids acknowledgment by waxing eloquent about the idyllic period of garden building: the planning, the laughter, the excursions, the picnics. Brief mention is made of moments of self-mockery in Agaat's proclamation, "Well, would you believe, here I am actually seeing Table Mountain" (p. 467), a gloriously ironic undercutting of their paradisical sojourn, but Milla's pride in her tour guiding wins the day. The description of the formal opening of the gardens ends on a sublimely unconscious note. Milla is overwhelmed with a vision of her helper silhouetted against the blue beyond, singing a hymn in her fine descant. The hymn's lament, however, "O goodness God's ne'er praised enow" (p. 468) goes uncannily to the heart of Agaat's (Good's / God said it was Good's) scant appreciation by Milla.

Milla's second person narration is stolidly resistant to revision, signalling the intensity with which her identity clings to the idealisation of her relationship with Agaat. The reader is left unnerved by her inability to reconstruct her motivations more transparently; the "you" to whom she addresses her narrative is a shrouded figure of concealed truths. It could also be seen as the construction of an alter ego, a better self: self-reflection becomes confession to a postulated rational self and thus is also a form of self-justification. That the reader is confronted by this after the first person mode in which many of the myths that Milla tries to sustain about herself are debunked, causes a progressive destabilising of Milla's rationalisations.

2.5 Chapter 16: stream of consciousness mode, pp. 468-469

The stream of consciousness mode inhabits neither the present nor the past and is neither physical nor immaterial. It is a hovering presence/absence that rambles, fixes on a point and rambles again. It contains no capital letters and only intermittent punctuation, irregularities which signify a break with the conventional structures of language. Burger suggests that although Milla still has recourse only to language to re-work her story, the collapse of syntactical structure and the conventions of incident and plot in the italicised sections bypass linguistic convention to attempt to express what is unknowable, death and the 'other' (Burger 2009: 14). As a possible pointer to Milla's (or a shared) unconscious, this mode might also point to buried psychic material that would otherwise go unvoiced. Given the openness of the mode, I would suggest that in these sections one might see glimpses of the core of the trauma – the story that can never take shape in any familiar linguistic structure.

The italicised extract hovers around the prosaic subject of the acquisition of Milla's walker, but is structured like a fable or child's riddle. Although the repeated question 'who does these various actions?' is never answered, the accrual of questions is sometimes interrupted by observations on the constituent parts of the walker or instructions in its use. The extract is reminiscent of the repetitive structures of a nursery rhyme, bringing to mind Milla's lack of autonomy and dependence on Agaat. It also has overtones of the call-response in a jazz standard, with its soothing regularity but space for innovation or surprise. The initial questions are specific references to a particular model of walker. The initiator of the actions unpacks the boxes, cuts open the tape and reads instructions. At this point, the metaphoric reference to the walkers as Milla's "externalised skeletons" (p. 468) evokes the image of disease, but also of the exo-skeleton of language Agaat and Milla attempt to flesh out in unison. The walkers are personified as somewhat menacing and zombie-like presences, the poisonous "tarantula" and the less than fortunate 'fortuna'. What follows is a competent demonstration by the energetic and resourceful 'who' persona, now reminiscent more fully of Agaat, who grabs the spider by the head, so to speak, and gets walking, offering gentle advice on how to optimise the experience.

The questions now become increasingly philosophical, referring to the boundaries between walker and frame, wheel and revolution, imitator and imitated. The conundrum points to the trope of mimicry and mirroring at the heart of the novel. Death, the ultimate 'other' becomes a mirror for Milla in which she investigates her history and relationships and comes to know herself better in the confrontation (Burger 2006: 2). Burger suggests that the process of having her voice and memories translated by Agaat affords Milla a view of herself. Milla's question might refer to the blurring of boundaries between the self and 'other' at the point of death – the meeting with the 'other'. The relevance of the questions for Agaat's identity is equally profound. Is she only the product of Milla's training, her mimic, her creature, her voice and the repository of her phantoms? Does she draw her own circles on the water and cast her own reflection? Does her own voice reverberate or is it merely an echo of Milla?

Agaat deliberately tries Milla's walker with an exact replication of Milla's rigid knee and flattened foot, straining under the effort - "retracted chin and pursed lips" (p. 468) – of getting it right for Milla. There is something ominously sacrificial in Agaat's total identification and merging with Milla: "we support your steps so god willing twofold" (p. 469). Milla's insertion that Agaat "cries soundlessly without tears" (p. 468) is a reminder of Agaat's habitual subsuming of her identity and a macabre nostalgia on Milla's part for Agaat's abnegation of herself. Perhaps the familiar proviso is that this is merging of the kind Milla demands. She cannot envisage Agaat as functioning separately from her, except in moments of panic where Agaat becomes feral and 'other'; this dedicated servility is her solace and she skews her viewing of it to suit her needs. The experience of reading this section is an

unsettling one. Agaat and Milla appear as twilight figures, dancing to the prescribed moves of a familiar story; there is an atmosphere of entrapment and inevitability in the outcome. The muted voice seems slightly smug, pleased with Agaat's application and the reader is pulled towards Milla's constricting ownership of Agaat. What is suggested is a dystopian claustrophobia rather than a utopian openness. There is an experience of palpable relief at the arrival of the diary extracts, an escape from purgatory and Milla's ensnaring consciousness.

2.6 Chapter 16: diary entry mode, pp. 469-487

The diary entries that Agaat selects to accompany the alphabet breakthrough come from the third and last parcel of blue books about Agaat's arrival on Grootmoedersdrift, and constitute a break in the chronology of Agaat's reading, the previous entry coming from 1979 when Jakkie left home. As Milla's end approaches, the entries move deeper into the past to the beginning of her relationship with Agaat in a turning gyre and tightening of the noose. Their significance is heightened by several cumulative factors: Agaat avoids them for several days, eventually reading them on an intake of breath (p. 439); she threatens repeatedly to make selections from them for Milla with an ominous reference to the "useful bits and pieces of all kinds" that they contain (p. 449); Milla expresses misgivings about her earliest writings "without abbreviations, full of particulars with the explicitness of the beginner" (p. 439); Milla orders Agaat to burn them. Milla's unexpurgated text is a powerful one and restores some of the power she has lost lost during Agaat's improvisations. Ironically, what is most destructive to Agaat's reconstructive project is what Milla fails to write down, perhaps what she cannot bring herself to admit. Her ultimate suppression of truth - the unspoken tale of her first moments with Agaat - remains in her own head, forever kept from Agaat. Because the diaries contain a form of self-address that is associated, in narrative theory, with critical self-analysis, self-justification, and self-absolution, the diaries have a double function: they contain Milla's self-reflection but also (assumedly) unmediated evidence of her past actions.

That Agaat arrives on Grootmoedersdrift on the auspicious Day of the Covenant, the commemoration of a Boer victory over the Zulus at the Battle of Blood River and of a promise reputedly made by the Boers to God goes unremarked in Milla's diary, an early sign of suppressed commentary. Her description of Agaat's disinfection is military in its inability to voice compassion. The nameless child, temporarily given the label indicative of a dirty or naughty child, Asgat, is seldom given a gender. Milla's avoidance of personal pronouns - "scabs, raw patches everywhere" (p. 469) - and her terse, condensed prose reduces the child to a distasteful 'other'. This is a classic case of dehumanisation and objectification, reminiscent of colonial discourse about the unwashed and uncivilised other in need of having a hygienic and orderly regime imposed on her. What predominates in this quasi-confessional mode is a dearth of adequate self-reflection. Within Milla's world it is possible for her to rationalise her actions as a necessary charitable intervention, so that the unbalanced and overzealous cleaning ritual is given tacit approval. Agaat's shock at being transplanted to a foreign place is deflated to, "Suppose to be expected" (p. 470) and her incarceration in a windowless room is justified as a necessary precaution. Milla merely dismisses her own overwhelmed reaction of being "exhausted/weepy/angry with myself or something" (p. 470).

Milla fails to recognise her objectification of Agaat or the implication of wanting to use a lead on her. Rationalising her actions as charitable, she force-feeds Agaat without an appreciation of the brutality of her method: "clamp her between my knees, force open the jaws with one hand, [ ] rub her throat to make her swallow" (p. 470). Milla's access to compassion is so limited that when Agaat 'plays dead' Milla accepts this to be the instinctive behaviour of ensnared wild animals without being receptive to the trauma this would cause in Agaat. Milla misses the poignancy of Agaat's gesture of her knuckle in

her mouth, smacking and threatening her with Japie, her surrogate source of power for years into the future. The unquestioning manner in which Milla metes out discipline (a customary practice at the time) and the knowledge that Japie ultimately becomes a source of Agaat's control over Milla's language allows the reader a critical perspective over Milla's entrapment in her own power relations and rationalisations. Given Milla's epiphany about Agaat at the dam the previous day, her actions suggest a perverted act of mothering, not unrelated to her childlessness and own inadequate parenting, but an act of mothering nevertheless. She is unable to appreciate the strength of her avoidance in recognising what occurred in her first meeting with Agaat. She is dismissive of the difficulty of the task: she must "simply go and sit and write how it came about" (p. 471), something she never achieves.

As much as Milla's control over Agaat's body is intrusive, it represents an endeavour to create a bond of affection. Agaat's initial refusal to make eye contact with Milla is significant, fuels Milla's fear of exclusion. Milla beats Agaat when she accidentally soils herself (having taken worm medicine) but is vexed that she is "closed, shut as a vault" (p. 475) and unavailable to her. Milla's obsession with controlling Agaat's secret life starts with her installation of a spying slit over a hole sawed in Agaat's door. Her understanding of motherhood is to make Agaat yield to her, inventing rewards to coax the correct behaviour out of her. She is unaware of the patronising attitudes inherent in her musings on whether Agaat is deaf and dumb or retarded due to "generations of in-breeding, violence, disease, alcohol" (p. 474) and to the violence of her language where bunnies are shot through the tail and put into pots (p. 475). It is Jak's sombre prediction that prevails for the reader: "Now you've broken her in. Clay in your hands. A blank page", but Milla fobs off its accuracy with, "Lord, he can be so terrible" (p. 478).

Milla is insensitive to Agaat's mistreatment at the hands of the doctor and is surprised that Agaat should show repeated signs of trauma and regression, given "all my trouble the last few days to tame her (p. 478)". Her zealous sense of purpose insulates her against Agaat's pain; Agaat's otherness prevents her from being seen as human. Agaat has to submit to an internal examination and diagnoses of probable infertility, multiple penetration and malnutrition. Her teeth are removed without anaesthetic at the out-patients' clinic for coloureds. Milla's verdict that Agaat was "fairly upset" by all the shiny instruments, given her squeaking noise (p. 479) is not unlike her own amazement at her unexpected storm of crying when Agaat wouldn't eat or Agaat's "crying without tears" (p. 480). The diary mode highlights the similarities existing between Milla and Agaat and demonstrates, in her obsessive need to record every trauma faced by Agaat, Milla's imperative to shield herself from any uncomfortable self-analysis.

Milla's reward to teach Agaat by singing and talking to her concurs with her charitable project, but her nightmares about pulling out metres of Agaat's tongue are more revelatory of her unconscious awareness of the consequences of imposing learning on Agaat. The importance of the first eye games that Agaat and Milla play cannot be underestimated in the context of the linguistic games of exploration and commemoration the two women later conduct at Milla's deathbed. Milla entices Agaat to move by scaring her (via her gaze) with the threat of danger behind her, a hollow tease, but one that teaches her to "bluff back with her gaze" (p. 483). Punishment and reward are inexorably linked, a probable model learnt by Milla in childhood, as are (accidentally) the roots of unreliability in communication with Milla. The reward for Milla of Agaat's learning of the eye game is complex: "She's in thrall to my eyes now" (p. 483). There is a delight at her succeeding in evoking a response from the child she seeks to mother, but the undermining suggestion is that it is also the dubious victory of the narcissist, as well as being a prophetic reference to her future paralysis and reliance on Agaat's reading her gaze. Just as the diary celebrates Milla's delight at Agaat's ritual to greet the sun,

later diary entries record the threat this poses to Milla when the ritual is performed independently of her. The obsessive control with which Milla records her life in the dairies mimics the control she unconsciously needs to wield over Agaat in her understanding of the demonstration of love.

The section concludes with the well-intentioned choosing of Agaat's name, and its references both to the semi-precious stone 'agate' and to its Greek derivation meaning 'good'. Other narrative modes within the novel undermine the neutrality of the name. In Agaat's bedtime tale to Jakkie, she refers to being baptised with the name Good (p. 688), her happiness made complete with the knowledge that she had become a human being. After her rejection by Milla in the same tale, she announces her own psychic death, "Now, Good, you are dead" (p. 689). The rejecting mother archetype congratulates her by saying, "My good slave, your work is good" (p. 690) and consequently her name evolves into, "I am slave" (p. 691). These later readings of Agaat's name raise questions for her around appropriation and ownership, yet the diary mode is central in presenting Milla's well-intentioned though deluded approach to the project of Agaat as one component in the novel's multi-faceted presentation of Milla's relation to Agaat.

CHAPTER 3

Conclusion

3.1 The frustrations of speculation

Attempts to speculate on whether Agaat and Milla succeed in preparing a medium in which to communicate on autonomous and adult terms are inevitably frustrating. Instances in which Agaat vocalises her position are rare; Milla's railings almost drown them out. While there are moments of compelling tenderness, references to cruelties and abuse tend to unseat fragile intimations of love. When Milla is close to death, the often unspoken communication between her and Agaat appears at times telepathic, but even then the reader cannot ignore the fact that every word of the novel apart from Jakkie's prologue and epilogue (containing Agaat's last story) is controlled by Milla. The reader is never given an assurance that Agaat would be able to mourn in a way that opened up a future. We merely have pointers in the text and Jakkie's perspective on Agaat as someone who will remain pathologically fixated on Milla. Van Niekerk's stated view – which I would contest – appears to reduce the ambiguities in support of Jakkie's reading of Agaat. Her suggestion is that Agaat ultimately succumbs to a role of diminished power and submission, with an unresolved fixation on Milla: "*Agaat verval aan die einde terug in ['n] rol[le] van verminderde potensie en onderworpenheid aan die status quo. [] Sy sit met 'n onopgeloste melankoliese fiksasie met haar dooie meesteres wat haar steeds uit die graf regeer"* (Van Niekerk, 2008: 116). Like Agaat's embroidered caps, the novel is a play of shadows where any clear focus is undermined by multiple kaleidoscopic lenses. The attempt to return to a single clear frame could therefore appear to be futile.

In a gesture towards arriving at some concluding comments on this difficult matter, I propose to conduct a brief examination of how (or whether) the concluding chapters of the novel enhance the strategies Milla and Agaat have adopted for getting communication going, particularly in the present tense mode sections in which Milla tracks their final interactions.

3.2 Chapter 17

This chapter gives eloquent expression to Agaat's grief in the painful re-working of her history with Milla and the processing of her deep feelings for Milla in preparation for losing her. Chapter 17 begins with another of Milla's escalating multi-pronged attacks on Agaat for breastfeeding Jakkie, keeping their butterfly sightings secret, stealing her child from her, aiding Jakkie in his exile from the country and causing Jak's death (pp. 490-491). Agaat's neutral translation of the accusations without replying is familiar, but the subsequent unbuttoning of her dress and baring of her crooked shoulder are a remarkable departure from protocol, as she has always kept her shoulder and deformed hand strictly hidden from sight. This poignant bodily exposure precedes a rhythmical song-like lamentation on the weaning of lambs, an analogy for both her own abrupt separation from Milla (and even possibly her birth mother) and the justification for her refusal to expose Jakkie to the same cruel abandonment. The searing words plead for the suffering of the lambs to be minimised and recommend a period of acclimatisation, because "once marred in their development, they never mend again" (p. 491). Lambs shouldn't hear the bereaved bleating of the ewes: "a child as is well-known, can tell her mother's voice from a thousand others" (p. 492). Milla's reactions are to close her one eye in recoil against the rawness of Agaat's vulnerability - her familiar mode of denial - and at this moment her other eye symbolically gives up the ghost, so to speak, and is fixed in a permanent stare. She cannot survey the pain she has wrought, and pays more attention to her distorted one-eyed visual field than Agaat's ongoing lament. Her hearing also becomes muted, and Agaat appears "like an underwater

statue singing" (p. 492). While the reader's perceptions are swamped by Milla's visual breakdown, Agaat's predicament almost escapes notice. She wears her heart on her sleeve in the intimate exposure of her bodily weakness. The child who has forever dammed up her tears is the adult whose mouth is "twisting as if she were weeping the words" (p. 491). The suggestion is that Agaat's mourning and re-working of her past have little chance of being consciously recognised by Milla, particularly as her consciousness ebbs, but it is very important for Agaat herself that she is able to show her woundedness as a necessary element in the process of possible healing.

Subsequent scenes in the chapter reveal Agaat's grappling with a more internal expression of her consciousness. By strapping herself into Milla's wheelchair and reading from the earliest diaries, she appears to ride through her grief, manoeuvring the embodied chair (of the dead/dying mother) and moaning and sighing out the story of her childhood. It is an intimate ritual in which Agaat's intense focus and deep distress can be heard in her raw, strangled calls, "the fluttering of pages, the tearing sounds, the groaning, the sighing" (p. 493). Milla's destabilising eye confounds the potential for healing through her apparent dismissal of the power of what she has witnessed: "Could I have dreamed it all? [ ] Did I think it all up?" (p. 493). The potential always exists, given Milla's tendency to underplay the intensity of Agaat's pain, that there is a deeper level at which she would profoundly register Agaat's devotion and suffering.

In these passages, as elsewhere, Milla tends to make Agaat the personification of evil rather than critically re-evaluate her own actions. From Agaat's position in the darkness, sounds emanate of "discord, of lamentation, [ ] screams in the night" (p. 493). To Milla, however, Agaat's three nocturnal bedside visitations have a demonic quality, like Satan's tempting of Christ three times in the wilderness: "All the kingdoms of the world, if thou therefore wilt worship me, all shall be thine" (p. 494). With grandiose paranoia she interprets the marking of forty days on the calendar up to 16 December - thirty-eight days of which are over - as an incontrovertible reference to herself as the Christ figure, being tested both spiritually and physically, except that the import of what she might be meditating upon gets lost in her self-absorption. Her use of religious and liturgical language may be a late attempt at framing her interactions with Agaat, given the context of conflicted feelings of unexpressed guilt and a desire for atonement in the face of death.

Agaat's rolling up of her sleeve in front of Milla to lay bare her withered arm a second time is the preamble to memories of her ritual arm-waving dance, performed at crucial intervals in her life, involving loss and fear or an attempt to gather strength (observed only through Milla's spying tactics). Agaat is in extremis, drawing blood from the knuckle she puts in her mouth, but Milla's instinct for self-preservation forestalls compassion. She opts rather for blindness to Agaat's exposure and is disingenuous: "What am I supposed to see that I haven't seen yet?" (p. 495). Milla transmutes the frail arm into a crowbar or a "brazen snake" rather than a vehicle for prayer so compelling that it might draw blood (p. 495). Agaat's answer to Milla's demand for a prayer is an intimate merger of her voice and Milla's. The liturgical "Héár me" is unexpectedly followed by a curse-like inventory of the fatal animal and plant diseases that they might both be familiar with, like Milla's diary references where she unconsciously refers to systemic contagion on the farm: "Foot-rot! [ ] Glanders! [ ] Contágious abortion!" (p. 496). This enumeration offers an insight into the torment of Agaat's current emotional world, as well as her immersion in pathology, although the incantation itself is touching in its naming of plant and animal maladies on the farm that she is familiar with and able to control or medicate, just as she seeks to offer Milla her own sincere and authentic version of absolution. It equally well replicates the state of paranoia and affliction of Milla's psyche. The prayer then launches into a confusingly imperative invective: "Who do I have other than you? Don't go away from me! Don't leave me! What would I ever do without you, with my words?" (p. 496). The words could be

Milla's humble admission of agonised solitude; they could also be Milla's harsh but unconscious demand for companionship and interpretation. Their imprecise origin makes it possible that they are Agaat's recognition of her imminent loss in Milla's death, the words in this case referring to her need for Milla as a foil or mirror. This haziness of origin and reference might point to a shared domain, where their voices merge. The sudden interjection of Agaat's "I'm looking for the suitcase! Have mercy on me!" seems like her terse promise to fulfil one of Milla's nagging requests. The interesting following of her promise with a plea for mercy might suggest a standard liturgical framing of a prayer, yet there is also a strong case for her own ironic nod at the symbolic enormity of what she might uncover in the process of laying open her buried heart.

In terms of the construction of a shared language, what the remainder of chapter 17 highlights is Agaat's acquisition of speech as noted by Milla's diary entries. There is a poignant unfolding of trust and familiarity through games, reward and the promise of fire that Milla maximises to get Agaat talking. Milla irrevocably links her wellbeing to Agaat's mastery of language in her seemingly tender statement, "I'm so hungry, I'm so thirsty [ ] because you don't want to talk to me" (p. 520), making Agaat responsible for her ultimate survival, an ironic portent for Agaat's life mission. The power of Agaat's speech on Milla is arresting and engulfing. Agaat says her own name which Milla experiences as "a rushing of my own blood". Their repetition of Agaat's name in unison provokes a "feeling of satiety [ ] a tingling fulfilled feeling [ ] as I imagine it must feel to suckle a child" (p. 521). The overtly maternal feelings Milla experiences lack balance; rather than appearing authentic there is a suggestion of obsession and infatuation, a question about what Agaat is a surrogate for, in terms of Milla's own wounded psyche. The shadow of the idealisation is seen ultimately in how easily Milla disposes of Agaat when she gives birth to Jakkie, but is immediately evident in the harsh punishments Milla metes out for incomplete sentences, an example of which is starving Agaat for three days. The power over speech resides in Milla. Just like the fire bellows that teach Agaat to speak on the exhalation because "Agaat has no faith in her own store of breath. As if she might jeopardise her life by talking" (p. 525), Milla linguistically breathes life into Agaat, but ultimately fears the symbolic fire that speech ignites, ever suspicious of Agaat's arsonist tendencies.

3.3 Chapter 18

The closer the novel comes to Milla's death, the more internal or unshared Milla's sickbed communications become. In chapter 18 she often intuits what Agaat is thinking without Agaat vocalising her thoughts. Although I read this partly as Milla sliding away into an imaginary world, my understanding is that another version of the potential telepathy or utopian possibility of a new language between Agaat and Milla is being explored in the narrative. When speaking about bathing, Milla writes, "Small baptism she calls it. She doesn't say it out loud. I read it in her eyes" (p. 531). Leading from bathing to thoughts of embalming, Milla imagines her own burial and its implications for Agaat in a ground-breaking series of compassionate and remorseful musings. Her empathy is for how her death might leave Agaat at a crossroads, facing questions about her origins and place in the world. The image is rustic and gentle and links to the circularity of time and experience. Agaat stands at the gate of her world. "The way is back and forward. And even further back to its unfindable starting point like all ways" (p. 539). Milla offers her companionship in the form of a breeze; Agaat's awareness of its presence will indicate Milla's desire for her to have "a new beginning, a fern-tip of courage" (p. 539) rather than being utterly dejected. She astutely and compassionately fears Agaat's loneliness in the face of the vastness of the world ("You will want to crawl into your hearth") and phrases the hereto unexpressed acknowledgment of her abandonment of Agaat. "Why can I only now be with you like this, in a fantasy of my own death? Why only now love you with this inexpressible regret?" (p. 540) However satisfying this realisation is, the very precision with which it is phrased is

troubling, suggesting perhaps a hint of the formulaic, rather than a life-changing realisation. Its position in the narrative naturally precludes the reader from knowing whether this constitutes genuine remorse or simply a defensive mechanism. Nevertheless, the anxious and repeated returns to the fate of "you who remain behind" (p. 541) and the impossibility of "how must I let you know this?" (p. 540) insist on some capacity for remorse.

Milla's granting to Agaat of symbolic and partly material, partly immaterial gifts, the very gifts she has ritually denied Agaat, indicates an appreciation of the depth of the preparatory mourning that both she and Agaat are undertaking through their joint project of commemoration. The gentle Jersey cow has "bucketfuls of mercy in those defenceless pupils (p. 540)". The arum lily opens "with starlight in its throat" just as Agaat was essentially silenced. The bokmakierie has "all love contained within (p. 541)", a generous rejoinder to the paucity of Agaat's own experience of love. Finally the gift is of consolation, which crucially only arrives after language has forsaken Milla. "Now I find this longing in my heart to console you, in anticipation, for the hereafter" (p. 541). Milla is suggesting a kind of peace found in the mutual acceptance of death, as if Milla is also mourning Agaat's death in anticipation of that event and attempting to describe something that might replace language, a gentle space beyond words that holds love and forgiveness. In this mode, Agaat will instinctively know the timing of Milla's death and bestow her final attentions. She will make her own gift in exchange, albeit temporarily, of her cap - an encapsulation of her being, her character, her distinctness - for Milla to hold for the first time. The lyricism and gentleness of this section mark a unique departure from Milla's relation to language and position language as space for potential healing and resolution. The fact that this can only emerge within Milla's consciousness and not in relation to Agaat is problematic, as it suggests that for Milla the experience of compassion is essentially uncommunicable, leaving open the question whether an enactment outside of language may provide a way out. This is an indication that although there are many instances where Milla and Agaat arrive at understandings beyond the domain of language, the limitations hereof are contingent upon the nature and capacity of individual human beings.

In relation to the shortcomings of language to convey individual relationships satisfactorily that are explored later in chapter 18, Milla recognises Agaat's referential function before Jakkie's eighteenth birthday: "Without her you and Jak would have known nothing of yourselves" (p. 554). One of her few attempts to imagine life from Agaat's point of view concludes that language has severe shortcomings. Agaat "would have to explicate it [her experience of the world] in a language other than the tongue you had taught her. How would you understand her then? Who would interpret for her?" (p. 554). The search for another type of language becomes the focus of the bedridden years. When planning the garden at Grootmoedersdrift, Milla suggests the mode (previously quoted) that would allow them more leeway in their communication: "The language of reed and rushes" (p. 555). This pre-figures the dialogue they achieve when Milla is no longer capable of speech, an improvisatory game-like negotiation where the rules of engagement have to be flexible. It is also suggestive of the changing rugged musicality of every chapter. Just as the delightful sense of a playful and creative adjunct to language is mooted, the chapter concludes with the terrorisation, punishment, scrutiny and abuse that Agaat is exposed to as she is taught to read and write. Her delight in the energy of fire is mercilessly doused through harsh punishment; her origins go unexplained. The very vibrancy that Milla later welcomes is inconvenient to her when Agaat learns to speak independently. "Punt, shunt, cunt, I had to put a stop to it, she's getting too forward, but I taught her to rhyme myself" (p. 659). The adamic language shared by the two women in some earlier passages is lost, which raises an abiding question of whether a new language, built from scratch, can be found. Agaat has become a repository of other people's language. She would have to find another language in

which to communicate her feelings – but that language would not be understood. One is left either having to work with the available language, distorting and twisting it to yield meaning, or having to communicate through gesture and ritual.

3.3 Chapter 19

In chapter 19 Agaat offers Milla the vicarious gift of a last meal - a return gift of consolation – starting with whetting the knives and peeling the vegetables in the sickroom. "I was supposed to be able to hear the kitchen. In full concert. Pull out all the stops. Toccata and fugue. I had to smell and hear what it would be like when I'm gone. [ ] It was supposed to console me" (p. 580). This is a fascinating attempt at out-of-language communication, the sounds and smells interacting to convey a complete experience. Speech is kept to a minimum, as Milla infers Agaat's position from the movements of air against her face. The unspoken memory is of an early knife sharpening lesson when Agaat was young, a calming memory for Milla in the familiarity of the ritual despite her cynicism toward the gesture. Several sentences might be spoken aloud by Agaat or might simply exist within Milla's head; their familiarity seems to side-line the necessity for speech (pp. 579-580). Milla's mind also wanders from the food to baked bats and caves, in a fantasy of merger with Agaat, where she gets "between her teeth" (p. 584). Milla's experience is of a merged consciousness; she seems unaware that her standard suspicion of Agaat remains active in every gesture she interprets. The text that Milla can read is the embroidered shroud, which illustrates many aspects of their shared lives. Her enumeration of the individual episodes has a Biblical ring to it. Milla reads Agaat's initial expression as a touching plea for Milla's approval of the shroud. Her spoken words simply present the work as her best attempt, but remind Milla of the provenance of the material: "For one day when I'm a master, you said" (p. 585). This mastery is a reference towards Agaat's mastery of the art of embroidery, but instantly Milla's interpretations become menacing: Agaat suddenly wears the insincerity of a "substitute smile" and "the eye of the master" (p. 585) which has now become an appropriation of Milla's domain. It is also an insight into the impossibility of Milla ever according Agaat the status of master.

The chapter's past tense second person mode about Jakkie's party, his parting gift of flight to Agaat in the aeroplane, his fleeing the country (in cahoots with her) and Jak's fatal accident begins with Milla's reference to "the end that is always a repetition of the beginning" (p. 585), which details how her loss to Agaat of Jakkie as a child is replayed in his hurried and betraying exit. It also suggests a backward link to the first section of the chapter. Milla's interpretation of Agaat's last meal is that this is a gesture towards Milla's gifts to Agaat upon arrival at the farm, the food, the lessons in knife sharpening, her wish to get inside Agaat's psyche and her gifts of dresses. Even a day before her death, Milla's thoughts, although intermittently drawn towards recognising her guilt in relation to Agaat, remain obsessed with her own inventory of losses, not the losses she has provoked. This section details the dissolution of the unstable Milla-Agaat-Jakkie triad and a Yeatsian implosion of the centre, while Milla positions herself as the helpless onlooker-victim. She eavesdrops on Jakkie's pronouncement to Agaat that Milla and Jak are pathetic and "blind and deaf against the whole world" (p .590). Jak's rant about the role of the Afrikaners (with reference to Elsa Joubert's *Die swerfjare van Poppie Nongena*) in "making a name for themselves with coon stories that they pick up in the backyard" (p. 597), alluding partly to Milla's patronising diary project, raises the central issue of the subaltern writing back. In taunting Agaat to do just that, Jak can't resist offering her his brutally acerbic version of her story: "White woman childless steals baby woolly with one arm stop one-armed woolly catches baby boy on mountain pass stop toy aeroplane explodes stop woolly saves stop gives tit/shit/bread/head" (p. 598). He accuses her of writing spineless and "sentimental chirry-chirping" in

her (intercepted) letters (p. 600) and invites her to think up a conclusion to their story, as she is used to embroidering. He would tauntingly seem to accord Agaat power over various modes of textuality, while usurping her voice in telling his rendition of her story. There is an irony in Jak's death: he is (in all likelihood) charging to the police station to deliver Jak's incriminating letter to Agaat, detailing his flight from the country. That the letter is a forgery, written after the fact by Agaat, suggests that she has some influence over Jak's demise, but again the words are her translation of Jakkie's exit and intended communication rather than her own.

The final diary excerpts in the novel further unsettle the possibility of a potential freeing of Agaat's voice. External criticism of Milla's Agaat project comes in the form of Jak's evaluation of it as "the worst case of megalomania & control freakery south of the Sahara". This is reinforced with Milla's ironic insistence that the young Agaat has "been given to me to learn something about myself" (p. 623). Despite Milla's dogmatic teaching methods, Agaat's need for her mothering binds her inexorably to call of the inconstant Milla. The relationship, from its very beginnings, appears to be a perverted mix of the mother-child and the master-slave relationship, and as such a powerful commentary on apartheid. Agaat draws Milla as an angel with an idyllic farm background, although when interrogated, she says she is hiding from Milla in the fireplace, a painful early awareness of her vacillating attachment (p. 624). She presses her head against Milla and falls asleep on Milla's bottom shelf amongst her jerseys. She burdens Agaat with the confusion of having to be her nightly comforter when she is mistreated by Jak (p. 630), but will not protect Agaat when Jak trashes her collections of insects and flowers. The dance rituals that later become treacherous to Milla, are initially dances that Agaat explains and that they enact together, culminating in expressions of love from Agaat: "Close your eyes open your eyes my Même, you're my only mother" (p. 633).

Milla's lesson on the interconnectedness of names ostensibly teaches Agaat about the enormous power of words within a chain to move in endless permutations, with reference to how the mineral, agate is linked to cloud, plume, fire, iris, snakeskin, moss and rainbow agate, so that there are endless worlds within Agaat's name (p. 625). The concept here is of a language with a seamless web of interconnected words with the potential for liberatory and utopian play. At the core of this language is the name Agaat, in which "*alle goed*" (everything, everything that is good) comes together. This is the domain in which language is not yet connected to power and social hierarchies. When Agaat creatively extends the analogy to the interpretation of her name as "Good", exploring the equivocation that "good" as a quality also extends to less glorious plural objects, such as goods, loose goods and stolen goods Milla merely shuts down her definition and limits it to what is true, beautiful and noble (p. 626). What Agaat problematises goes to the core of the trauma of the novel. Her earliest lessons underline the power of words to locate and be distorted by power relations. Her earliest letters of love are insensitively corrected: "lov" has to become "love" (p. 627). She uncannily locates the inconsistencies in Milla's definitions. In explaining the term "holy" Milla insists that Agaat's soul is holy, as it refers to what is free, wild and cannot be tied down; Agaat's logical rejoinder is that because "you caught me & tamed me" her soul cannot be free (p. 627). It is the destruction of this almost primeval language that also defines the trauma in the novel. Instead of language becoming fluid in the hands of power, the opposite happens: language fixates the potential openness of meaning and closes down the exploratory aspect of play with language. The entries end with an ominous exemplification of the lack of fluidity of language in the hands of power. On the day Milla gets confirmation of her pregnancy, she (apparently unconsciously) calls Agaat "my child" in conversation with her. Milla interprets Agaat's staring at her as a reaction to the unexpected appellation. Her sleight of hand is instantaneous. "Oh gracious heavens how unthinking of me. Now I'm going to have my

own child. What will she make of that?" (p. 641). The continued play with language by Agaat in the novel is thus enmeshed with her experience of power as determined by that language.

3.4 Insights from Chapter 20

The final chapter is the novel's most schizophrenic one. On the day of her death Milla appears to merge seamlessly with Agaat as she dwells on death in a shifting in and out of conscious awareness. In the second person past tense narrative Milla finally goes back to the beginning and tells the untold story of Agaat's origins and arrival. What is striking is that this overdue account will never reach Agaat's ears; the reader is privy to the confession, but reparation can never be made to Agaat, not only because time, in this sense, cannot be regained, but also because Milla's nature could never accommodate serious active reparation until the moment had passed. Her relationship with Agaat has always relied upon Agaat's accommodation to her needs, not the reverse. The hollow gesture of leaving a record of Agaat's arrival within the unnaratable space of death serves only to assuage Milla's conscience and is reminiscent of Claudius's empty prayers: "My words fly up, my thoughts remain below. Words without thoughts never to heaven go" (in William Shakespeare's *Hamlet* III iii lines 97-98). What would have been accessible to Agaat in a conversation or recorded in Milla's diaries now becomes a lacuna of infinite procrastination. Within the stream of consciousness mode, past conscious communication or language, Milla perceives that she is joined by a supporting presence and faces death hand in hand with "*the small agaat*" in an imagined restoration of the mother-child dyad (p. 674). The dizzying swings from union to fracture and back again pull the reader into a vortex of uncertainty regarding not only Agaat's inheritance, but also the kind of mourning that has been possible in their commemoration of their life together and the power of their shared language to forge a relationship beyond the play of phantoms.

In the first section, a dream-like sequence tracks Milla's identification with Agaat's journey into her grave. She visualises inhabiting Agaat's enshrouded body, looking up at the same stars and experiencing the same bodily chill Agaat would feel. She can even hear the song that rises from the grave, whose ending is like its beginning (p. 644). This is reminiscent of the solidarity Milla experiences when she watches Agaat try out her walker and also suggests that the mourning ritual that constitutes the novel is a joint process: each mourns in anticipation of the loss of the other. This if anything seems to suggest something rarefied about the connection and communication between Milla and Agaat. Milla's interpretations of Agaat's footsteps appear to be finely attuned to Agaat's moods, without the need for linguistic signals to clarify matters. Milla senses a lifting of Agaat's spirit in the weight of her footfall and can feel her shadow falling on her skin (p. 645). She anticipates Agaat's curtain-raiser to the final gesture of closure as her eyes are opened. Agaat is her saviour from the water, just as they were when they dried out and saved sodden butterflies in the sun decades before. The revelation of closure is the production of the buried suitcase, the exhumation of Agaat's heart, now laid bare before Milla (p. 647). Yet Milla gives no credence to the enormity and intimacy of what Agaat has just exposed. She appears to accept the gift with magnanimity and accepts Agaat's caresses with the beloved soft moleskin. Agaat's symbolic liberation of what she has had to repress for a lifetime - the dead mother embalmed within her - passes virtually unnoticed as does the gesture of infinite gentleness and forgiveness with which Agaat soothes Milla. Milla is more interested in analysing the concluding notations Agaat has embroidered on the shroud. She refers to the preparations for death they have initiated, which is like Agaat's work on the shroud, "this clearing-up and fitting-in, this emptying-out and filling-in, this never-ending improvisation" (p. 648).

The benediction that Agaat chooses for Milla's farewell to the staff is enigmatic but highly significant. Her bible-substitute is the farmers' manual; the lesson is about soil erosion and the

disappearance of the '*vleis*' (areas of low marshy ground that feed streams), which causes the water to run right off the ditches without being conserved (pp. 651-652). The extract's appreciation of established traditions of water catchment within an ecologically sound system, as well as the specific naming of the reeds surrounding the '*vleis*' seem to suggest that this is Agaat's pledge to Milla to uphold her established farm practices and to farm with an awareness of what might be lost if meaningful traditions erode. It is a deeply significant sharing of Milla's love of the land, a tangible attestation to Agaat's appreciation of her inheritance, all within her familiar strategy of conveying important information tangentially and ritually through the texts that formed her. Whereas before Agaat's pointed choice of quotation has been a method of expressing deep hurt or anger obliquely, this benediction, though well within the context of a painful parting, seems to be more about future promise than past sorrow.

As firmly as Agaat guarantees Milla a legacy for the farm, Milla denies Agaat a history by avoiding the penning of the story of Agaat's arrival on the farm. Her fall-back position, the untransmittable second person past tense confession begins with a series of justifications for omitting Agaat's history, aimed at avoiding guilt. Remembering that this is Milla's final summation of her life, the most honest admission she makes is that she made a vain attempt to "make of the whole Agaat a separate chapter", as if she could "quarantine" the relationship without synthesising it into the family saga. The ambiguity at the core of the novel is that Agaat becomes integrated, but this is not something that can be allowed fully within the private and political narrative that Milla has developed. Implied here is a whole history of 'farm novels' in which master and worker are placed within two linguistic and performative domains: the novel questions whether these divides could be overcome (Olivier, 2013). Milla recognises Agaat as her "first child" and that this "was never a story on its own" (p. 653), but her analysis of her culpability stops short of remorse. She acknowledges how the subject of Agaat's origins was closed to Agaat, but settles comfortably for shallow reasons like forgetting, difficult times or that "it dried up of its own accord" and she "suppressed that thought that you'd ever had such a plan" (p. 653). She reduces her omission to a chance missed. She soon reverts to detailing her resentment at Agaat's exhumations of her diary where her "deathbed became the fireplace", ironically accusing Agaat's editorial license of "so many omissions and additions" that nobody could ascertain its true facts, an emphatic ducking of the power of her own uncontested rendition of Agaat's tale (p. 654).

The significance of Milla's tale of abduction lies firmly in its indirect revelation of Milla's pathology and her absolute power over a defenceless child. Milla is fatally drawn to her mother's story of a child to whom bad things are done: she is "enthralled by the tale. A bad mother, a discarded child" (p. 655). Her urgency to meddle in the situation points to her own psychic yearning for adequate mothering. For Abraham and Torok, Milla will have internalised the secrets buried in her mother's discourse, giving her direct empathy with the unconscious or denied material from her mother, buried within her unconscious. Milla wonders whether her mother dangled the story of the abused child in front of her "to avenge herself on you" (p. 655). She sees her mother as terrifyingly powerful. Her voice is like "a dipping-rod in your neck, down you had to go, down in the milky white poison" (p. 144). She makes Milla feel "undermined and underpinned at the same time. Fed and fed-upon at the same time" (p. 145). An engulfing mother draws her to the act of rescue, but without the tools for humane mothering.

Milla experiences her meeting with Agaat as a revelation. She describes the scene in the cottage with recoil; her focus is on the crouched child in the hearth. With a meticulous build-up of Agaat's abjection, Milla's focus is on how elemental the experience is: "of iron she smelt, of blood, of soot and grass" (p. 657). The hook comes in Agaat's attempt to say her name; it reverberates with Milla in several ways. It is subterranean, coming "from the cavern of the child's body" and is "like a sigh [ ],

like a rill in the fynbos", a link to Milla's love of Overberg indigenous abundance. She locates the sound of her voice as central. "You felt empty and full at the same time from it, felt sorrow and pity surging in your throat [ ] as if it were a sound that belonged to yourself. [ ] Something convulsed in your lower belly" (p. 657). The imagery is ominously similar her own mother's effect on her; parallels between feeling both "fed and fed-upon" by her own mother (p. 145) and the paradoxical "empty and full" effects of Agaat's voice signal an unhealthy trans-generational continuum; the effect of her mother's voice is as poisonous as Agaat's is enticing. Milla's accords her intuitive reaction an incontrovertible rightness, based on the compelling effect it has on her; she yields to this secret addiction without the rigour of any self-scrutiny. Her inclination is "to gather it, fold it away inside yourself in a place from which you could safely retrieve it" (p. 657). Her blind urge to keep her attachment to Agaat separate from the rest of her life partially accounts for her ability to split off her abusive treatment of Agaat from her urgent need of her; she feels perfectly justified in seeking comfort in Agaat's bed while beating her for insubordination. Her need to find a place within herself to protect this attachment from scrutiny has an interesting parallel with Agaat's enforced internment of her imago of Milla once Milla renders herself dead to Agaat by abandoning her. The difference is one of degree. The adult Milla regresses to a child-like compulsion; Agaat's folding away of Milla inside herself is a life-saving act which ultimately threatens her ability to function autonomously or to assimilate Milla in a healthy process of mourning.

The intriguing references that have been made to whirligigs by Jakkie in the prologue and indirectly by Milla in a declaration of her impermeability in chapter 16 are now contextualised in Milla's epiphany at the dam as she observes the water beetles that the Dutch call *schrivertjes* (little writers). They appear as a sign Milla is waiting for, in answer to her plans for Agaat. The specific message Milla takes from the observation is unclear. "I myself happened, my almost forgotten self," (p. 658) is what she plans to tell her mother, but the urge to confess dissipates. This is a seminal moment for Milla, where she experiences the lifting of her 'false' self in favour of something authentic. What she has observed is the twinning of the water insect and its shadow, its eyes above and below the water surface as it inscribes perfect circles on the water. The movement reminds her of a fugue (p. 658), a contrapuntal musical composition in two or more voices built on a theme that recurs throughout the composition, similar to the structure of the novel itself. Milla's intimations of an integrated type of communication that breaches prescribed boundaries suggest an aptitude within her to develop this with the young child. In the positioning of this epiphany at the novel's conclusion, the novel invites the reader to consider whether Milla, by her (imminent) death, attains the stature of the permeable meniscus, with perspectives above and below the water, enabling her to communicate on diverse levels with Agaat. Not only have Milla's historical interactions with Agaat questioned this attainment, but even within this first/last bearing witness to Agaat's origins, Milla's own necrotic maternal binds and her own engulfed response to rescuing a child subdue positive expectations. In addition, having borne witness to tales of Agaat's mistreatment at the hands of her biological family, including details such as the denial of breast milk in an effort to kill her, rejection by the community and physical abuse, Milla proceeds to turn on Agaat the moment she shows the urge to escape from Milla. Whereas her assurance to Jak on the telephone was, "It's mỳ child and I'll raise her" (p. 661), the shadow covenant becomes a de-humanising, tyrannical threat: "You're mine now. [ ] I'll thrash your backside blood-red for you if you don't behave yourself now. [ ] If you carry on being naughty and running away [ ] we'll tie a rope around your neck and tie you to a pole like a baboon, the whole day long until you're tame" (p. 669). Although this shows irreducible complexity and ambivalence, determined by psychic forces which Milla herself doesn't understand or control, it suggests a pathology that would impede integration between the world and self. Milla's instantaneous retraction palls in the face

of her locking Agaat in the outhouse and dosing her with a sedative with the words, "I'm not taking any more nonsense from you" (p. 672).

Within the contrapuntal patterning of the novel, Milla's final stream-of-consciousness passage presents an elegy to unity and fluidity, but it ultimately jars with competing prior voices. Her initial apocalyptic awareness is of duality and lack of cohesion. She poses the question, "who can reconcile my moieties?" in the face of the inadequacy and termination of language where "no sentence is completed" and her tongue is "abscised with exhaustion" (pp. 672-673). Her consolation arrives in the form of familiar tropes: supporting hands squeeze her breath in and out, reminiscent of the fire bellows with which she taught Agaat to speak. Her chin is lifted and her gullet cleared and she is sustained, crib-like, in someone else's body; her pulse and sentences erected on Agaat's. Their relationship has moved full circle. Agaat's survival mechanism of the sustained and introjected dead mother is now inverted in Milla's need to merge with Agaat. Agaat is her 'other', her candle in the mirror. Milla's fantasy is of being undifferentiated, "a meniscus that transmits an image" (p. 673), enacting itself in the global merger with the sedge at the water's edge which has reference to the stones, the dam, the clouds, wheat: the whole system down to the whirligigs reflecting everything on the water. In a parallel union, Agaat conducts her to her final exit, "in my hand the hand of the small agaat" (p. 674). Milla's vision competes with other clamouring voices for legitimacy; the volte face of her dying speaks of fear and solitude, its lowering of boundaries tardy and futile: the wish-fulfilment of a dying woman.

3.5 A space for the assimilation of mourning

In an effort to summarise the linguistic implications of the dissection and vivisection that Agaat and Milla conduct throughout the novel, due consideration should be made of how productive and justifiable psychoanalytic theories of mourning are as a foundation for investigating the novel's mourning processes, linguistic improvisation and shared histories.

The novel hovers interminably over the matriarchal crypt: death is its central trope. The dissection of the past, through contested memoir, memory and multi-pronged re-tellings of shared histories, takes place over a nearly dead, yet living corpse. Death cannot prevail until Milla and Agaat can "manicure the whole imminent carcase" (p. 333). The vivisected present is compelled to acknowledge and mourn, however painfully, the phantoms of the past. Psychoanalysis offers not only powerful access to the subject's confrontation of loss, but refers to the implications for language of profound loss and the paradoxical potential for language, according to Gayatri Spivak, to do the work of the crypt: to efface the presence of a thing while keeping it legible (quoted in Castriciano 2001: 51). It appears that little literary criticism on the novel to date has been undertaken through a specifically psychoanalytic lens, even though the importance of Willie Burger's Lacanian reading of the novel (2006) has been recognised.

This essay is an attempt to contribute towards a perceived need for redress; it is equally an intuitive response to what the novel appears to 'call' for, in the sense that Walter Benjamin says that a text which 'calls' for translation - as this one has – lives on or comes back (to use Derrida's idiom) in the very distortion of the translated echo (in Castriciano 2001: 16). From this perspective, Agaat can be seen as a novel that is haunted by the manifestation of the voices of one generation in the unconscious of another. The novel seems to do the work of ghostly writing, hinting at Van Niekerk's ability to invite the reader into a text that resists understanding and that writes on water, on the meniscus, like the little whirligigs.

The pathologies at play in the novel are so extreme that many readers abandon it well before its ending. They report an almost primal revulsion against its unremitting examination of aggression, abuse and death. They feel choked, shocked even, by the levels of rancour and damage they are confronted with. Their sense is that the novel is too much, too dark, overwhelming. These responses indicate that Van Niekerk hits a nerve; she provokes an unconscious response to issues such as the perversions inherent in an apartheid paradigm, the pitfalls of an abuse of power, the vulnerability of the dispossessed, the potential for human beings to damage one another and the inevitable repetitions of these cycles. It is these deep responses and an investigation into the psychic forces at play in the novel that allow access to what is so troubling in the novel and what is so nuanced in Van Niekerk's writing.

Agaat's obsession with arranging Milla's "note-perfect rehearsed death" (p. 308) and her keeping Milla resuscitated until their mourning work is done are deeply resonant when read in conjunction with Freud's concept of melancholia. The manifold mournings are not Agaat's clinging to the love object in a wishful psychosis of conventional mourning, but a desperate effort to re-work the shattering of and withdrawal from consciousness of the object of love, transformed into ego-loss, in an act of melancholia. The cruelty and inhumane treatment of Agaat by Milla are magnified in the reader's understanding of the psychic 'death' Agaat suffers. Milla's ruthless appropriation of Agaat's body, education and speech present an enormous threat to Agaat throughout her life on many levels, but an awareness of her psychic vulnerability highlights Milla's propensity to colonise her entirely, putting Agaat's capacity for independence in question, or as Torok expresses it, compromising the integrity of the subject. The work of mourning involves an interiorising idealisation of the other, where the body and voice of the other are ideally and quasi-literally 'devoured'. The conclusion is an assimilation or introjection which expands the self. This differs from an incorporation where the lost object is not assimilated into the self but sustained in some way. Sustenance rather than assimilation with the self suggests that the mourning process is not concluded and the psychic space within the mourning subject is occupied by the other.

Agaat's crying without tears suggests that her energies are spent on nursing this secret space. The incorporation of the phantom or lost object makes it unnameable to the subject. Loss needs to be objectified in speech both to signify and displace the lost object. This link between psychoanalysis and linguistic effect enhances the reader's awareness of what Agaat and Milla's struggles over language signify. Agaat's speech is never independent of Milla's mediating consciousness: Milla controls the narrative, so the reader can only guess how vital or autonomous Agaat's language might be. André Green's concept of the specific psychic crisis for the child if the mother withdraws her interest from the child shows the child's resuscitating solution to be a similar filling of a graveyard within the subject, which overflows its already inadequate psychic space. Agaat's ritual on the mountain after her expulsion is finely nuanced if read within the dead mother paradigm. Milla's speculation as to whether the arm waving signifies judgment, blessing or a farewell gesture is an uncanny interpretation of the incision Agaat is making within her psyche. It appears to Milla as if "she's separating the divisions of the night. Or dividing something within herself" (p. 151). It is doubly devastating that Milla has unconscious knowledge of the destruction she has wrought.

The ritual of remembering through the salvaged diaries and exhumed suitcase is a healthy signal that what is eventually to be forgotten through the healing of mourning must first be remembered; remembrance itself is a kind of forgetting and letting go. It is the dedication to this task, coupled with painful attempts to describe her wounding that are ultimately hopeful for Agaat's psychic coherence. The rending pain of re-enactment in constructing her story as "Heartburied! Nevertold! Unlamented!" has the potential for catharsis and reparation and suggests a potentially intact (though inevitably

compromised) psychic life for Agaat once Milla is dead. Agaat's triumphant "Now's-the-Time!" denotes her internalising of the life-saving mourning ritual and her commitment to seeing it through (p. 407). There is the likelihood that her mourning will not be interminable. For Milla, her ultimate inability to express remorse to Agaat or to fulfil the promise of revealing her history reveals her inability to escape her narcissistic chains and familial phantoms. Agaat's restorative act of caressing Milla with her most treasured childhood comforter, the moleskin, concludes their prolonged interaction on a note of forgiveness, but is revelatory of her ultimate sacrifice and Milla's stasis.

Derrida's deconstructive work on hauntology straddles psychoanalytic and literary theory and provides an intriguingly cogent frame for assessing the relevance and scope of Milla's introductory prophesy: "It'll be the end of me yet, getting communication going" (p. 9). Derrida's ghost is the metaphor for the voices of the past and the not-yet formulated possibilities of the future that destabilise our understanding - the structural enigma of writing that can ultimately not be articulated within language. In their grammar on the wall, Agaat and Milla improvise a system of communication, an often para-linguistic space in which they rehearse the past through all the potentialities that reside within language.

The question posed in the introduction to this essay was whether, in their shared language, there is the possibility of a new relationship (or dispensation), beyond the play of phantoms. Given the extreme pathologies of Milla's behaviour and a lifetime of enmeshment for them both, the most that Van Niekerk accords them are the few dislocated moments of communion and joy (mentioned at points in this essay). These moments are consistently undermined by their presentation from Milla's frame of reference, and the clamouring voices of other discourses. Milla's blindness to Agaat's agony, the bitterness with which she counters Agaat's invitations and her inevitable self-absorption negate the possibility that there might be a sense of time regained as their experience is reworked and reworded. The reader never has the consolation that Milla hears Agaat. A more pertinent question, however, should be whether, through Agaat and Milla's linguistic exploration of what might have been and the contrapuntal linguistic modes that compete for interpretation, Van Niekerk has found ways of using language to delve beneath an external description of reality.

One of the most lateral linguistic elements Van Niekerk's text sets in place is the intricate language that Agaat and Milla co-construct around the grammatical skeleton on the wall. It is an improvisation, but there are rules of engagement. There is a tapping of a code and a completing of sentences as they try to find a language. They pick up signals from each other for the next move; the signals are often gestural and finely nuanced. At times signals are intuited merely from the coolness of shadows or the sound of a footfall. Milla's plea for accurate translation is often frustrated and subtly shifted by overlay, interpretations and edits. Their shared history makes their interaction relatively fixed, but what emerges is a shared adventure, which often has exhilarating or dangerous possibilities. The seat of power is not pre-determined; sometimes power is shared and there are moments in which the differences between Agaat and Milla are obliterated. What is crucial is that Agaat cannot play the game without Milla, a fact which Milla grasps with alacrity. "You think you can wrap me up here, I flicker. You think you can tidy up and finish off this whole story as you do with everything, but you can't, it's not in your sovereign power, you need me for it!" (p. 448). Agaat's vacuuming of the words in the diaries is more than simply a gesture towards forgiveness or revenge; it involves the chewing, tasting and mulling over words that are noxious and assaulting on one level, but that also contain a range of possibilities in their re-composition. The language that they flesh out is bigger than both of them. The variety of ways in which they take over each other's voices, particularly in Agaat's confronting Milla with an uncannily accurate version of what she might say, offers the potential of

new modulations of the past, for Agaat, if not for Milla. In this sense Milla's prophesy that the cost of communication would involve death is confirmed.

If this negotiated language is heard through the filter of the three other modes of language within each chapter that seek their own versions of truth - all framed within Jakkie's prologue and epilogue, itself ruptured by Agaat's final story, which is framed within the paradigm of Afrikaner manuals, themselves framed within prophesies about the circularity of memory and experience - the reader begins to appreciate how multi-vocal Van Niekerk's creation is. The beauty of this harrowing novel is undeniable. It is a crypt-like text which mimics the slipperiness of the living present and makes established certainties vacillate. It is like the whirligig whose writing is reflected both above and below the surface of the water.

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Appendix

Scanned copy of chapter 16 from Marlene van Niekerk's *Agaat* to accompany the close reading in chapter 2 of the research report[3]

[3] The considerable thickness of the novel causes shadows to be cast on the pages of the chapter when they are scanned and mars the clarity of the text. Unfortunately, no electronic version of the novel was available at the time of submission.

aspects of the farming. Perhaps with Jakkie finally gone there will in any event now be less occasion for tension here in the house & she'll from now on be able just to live with us without strife.

Maybe bake a large chocolate cake? Place a nice bunch of flowers in front of hr door as a surprise & on the 12th drive with her to Witsand? She's so fond of the sea when it rains. So many shades of grey & white she always says such an almost black sea.

16

W·H·O S·T·A·R·T·E·D T. F·I·R·E O·N M·O·U·N·T·A·I·N, I ask.

I look at the alarm clock. It's taken ten minutes to spell out, even with Agaat's abbreviations of articles and conjunctions.

Do you think it was me by any chance? Agaat asks with her eyes. She looks away quickly.

Yes, I signal, according to our customary code. One blink with both eyes.

She looks at me just long enough to catch my reply.

Hottentot madonna, she says.

She pushes at the side of her cap, she grasps the stick of the duster more firmly, she lets me continue, she taps on the chart. After every tap she looks at me. A tap B tap C tap D tap.

D is right I blink with my right eye. It must be so boring for her. Then she ticks from A again. I stop her on I, I is right.

And then she has to start tapping again from the beginning, as far as D. D·I·D. We again spelt 'did'.

D·I·D Y·O·U S·T·A·R·T T·H·E F·I·R·E ...

In the hayloft? she completes my sentence.

Quite correct, that's what I wanted to ask.

She places the duster upright in the corner. End of conversation. I should have stuck to the weather, to the rainfall figures, the sheep-stealing statistics for the year of Our Lord 1996. I should have kept to pure farming matters, to how she wants to run things henceforth here on Grootmoedersdrift. I should have known that by this time.

She comes to stand by my bed. She folds her hands on her stomach. Her reply comes direct and without hesitation.

The cream separator, she says, to ensure that it works properly, place it on a solid foundation and make sure that it is dead level. If a machine separates badly, that may be because it is turned too fast or too slow. The speed can be adjusted only when the milk-supply tank is half empty. If a first-class machine does not separate properly, it is because the supply tank is out of balance and vibrates excessively, or because the centrifuge is not calibrated in the spring when the milk is poor and again in the autumn when it is richer. Watch the spout where the cream runs through. If the cream tends to cover the spout, the speed is too high for the quantity of milk passing through the supply tank, if it emerges from the spout in scallops, it is being turned too slowly. If the cream falls from the spout into the cream dish almost but not quite perpendicularly, that is in the case of the vast majority of creamers about the right consistency. In any case rinse the supply tank regularly with skimmed milk.

Farmer's Handbook. I was asking for it. Douse the fire with cream. Extremely original. What argument can I bring against that? She will recite all her texts to me rather than talk to me openly.

I flicker my eyes. Bravo! that means.

She ignores me. She bends to unhook the urine bag. She drags the chamber pot under the open tube to catch the drops. Tip, I hear it drop on the enamel, tip.

Leroux first came to fit the catheter for the urine bag and then came to make the hole for the gut bag. Home surgery with local anaesthetic. Agaat's decision. The wound was supposed to heal first before the bag could be attached, but it wouldn't. Now every time she empties the bag she has to perform a major disinfection around the stoma. She enjoys it. All my orifices interest her. The more I have the better.

I had to be moved as little as possible, was the consensus. The pan was too high for me. So lower the madam. That was what Agaat decided. Make a hole in her side. She threatens me every day with the feeding tube in my trachea as well, but I refuse. I don't want another artificial portal punched into me. I don't want to eat anything more. I want to talk. There's a lot to talk about. Now that we've found a way with the alphabet chart.

She holds up the full urine bag for me to see. Dark yellow, almost amber-coloured it is, but not clear.

Cloudy, she says, but it makes the bluest blue.

She opens the stoep door, holds the bag far away from her, walks out with small brisk steps. I watch the mirror. There she is in image now. She knows the range of the reflection, she'll see to it that she stays within it.

Douse the fire with cream, put out the flames with my last dark fluids.

I mustn't complain, I was asking for it.

The hydrangeas are deep purplish-blue, just the colour for my funeral arrangements. That's what she wants to say with the whole palaver of emptying the bag so conspicuously. She knows I can see her in the mirror. There are other hydrangeas around the corner as well where she could go and empty it out. But these are from the mother stock. Here she learnt to empty her own little chamber pot.

That's the kind of risk I run since I've been able to talk to her. Her punishments become subtler. The message is: Your influence will be felt for a long time yet, even unto the capillary roots of the plants of your garden. I'll keep up the old traditions for you.

I see her crouch down between the leaves. Only her behind sticks out.

I understand, Agaat. You turn your arse on the last conflagration that you've perpetrated here in the sickbay.

She stands back. She examines her handiwork. Beautiful voluptuous, purple orbs of flowers.

Pissy, pissy in the pot, who makes the bluest of the lot?

Am I imagining things, or is she shaking her head there?

How dare I ask her such things? Imagine, she an arsonist! Am I going out of my mind now?

Go ahead and shake your head, Agaat. I know it was you. Who else?

She puts the empty bag down on the lawn. Here come the little scissors from the top pocket of her apron. She snips one, two, three,

four, five flowers. She moves out of range. She'll go round the back to the kitchen to put them in water, then go and select a vase in the sitting room. Perhaps I'll be lucky. Perhaps I'll be given flowers next to my bed today. That will teach me to keep my questions to myself.

I wonder about the timing of the sudden appearance of our new means of communication. The old alphabet chart. Would she have remembered it all of a sudden out of the blue? A technique she read about long ago in the pamphlets and conveniently forgot about? Or did she avoid it because she was too tired? Because she realised she would be empowering me in my last moments here where I no longer hesitate to speak my mind? Because she could guess what would come out, what hád to come out between us?

Perhaps it will never come out, perhaps there's even less of a chance now than before. Perhaps that which has to be said has nothing to do with the truth.

And do I myself know what it is? Is the truth beyond what happened or didn't happen, what happened hów and whére? Beyónd the facts? I'm the one who's being tested to see whether I have the words to arrive there.

Perhaps it was the maps that gave her the idea. The place names. The pointing at the dots of the towns till I nod, yes, tell me about Protem, tell me about Klipdale, what happened there, what we did there, who we saw there.

Shall I ask her? How did you come upon the idea of hanging it there, the alphabet chart, the old yellowed, varnished cardboard sheet with the fold down the middle, with the ornate capitals and the Bible pictures and the scenes from the history of salvation, stiff prophets and visions amongst grapevines and sheaves of corn?

I could ask, now that I can pose questions.

Why did you keep it till now? After all, you've known all along that I'm itching to talk, you could surely have guessed that I'm lying here brooding over all my life?

I could confront her with it. Perhaps she'd only wave a little blue book in front of my nose. Because she did find it after all then, the third

parcel. About her first life on Grootmoedersdrift. Barely alive and I her source of life.

Now it's the other way round.

Me dying and she to accompany me.

Who's going to give in first? On the facts of the past? Or does our assignment lie here in this present?

Here I'm cutting my own throat now, she said when she hung up the alphabet.

Did I hear aright? She whispered it on the inhalation.

Here I'm cutting my own throat now.

But whose throat is it really? It's mý spelt-out words that she has to pronounce for me, it's mý sentences that she has to complete aloud for me.

Who'd want to bluff at the end? That everything is in order? Forgive and forget and depart in peace?

Perhaps it would have been better to have kept to eye signals to the very end, without any chance of a retort on my part. Perhaps we could have brought the matter to a workable conclusion if we'd resigned ourselves to the list of questions?

Are you cold? Are you hot? Are you hungry? Are you tired? Too dark? Too light? Do you want to poo? Do you want to pee? Do you want to read? Do you want to listen to SAfm?

Yes and no.

But it's getting more complicated. Now she's added to the alphabet auxiliary lists on slips of paper, opening phrases and conjunctions. She's stuck them up there close to hand around the chart, short cuts by which we can arrive more quickly at the point. They stir and rustle with every draught or current here in the room, they flutter up and down when Agaat walks past, the loose slips, as if they were alive.

I am, I wish, I fear, I hope, I believe.

Because, but, and, nevertheless, notwithstanding, even so.

Words strain, crack and sometimes break, who wrote that again?

Milla. Jak. Agaat. Jakkie.

I'm no longer hungry, and I'm beyond tired ...

Whom did I love in my lifetime and why?

I have, I will, I can, I want. Or not. I would be able to. I would have wanted. If I could have it over, thén ... What might have been and what has been point to one end, which is always present.

There's a whole grammar developing there on the wall. Every day there's more of it. Question mark, exclamation mark, swearword, dots to mark an implication. A skeleton of language, written down in print and in script with a Koki chalk, bigger, more complicated than Agaat on her own, than I or the two of us together could think up. If it had to be fleshed out as well ... muscles, skin, hair, nerves, glands ...

How, when, who, why, what ...

But my nerves are extinct and my muscles are moist cotton wool, my hair grey strands, my skin worn, my glands dry dumplings. My secretions trickle out of me through tubes. My poo and my pee are no longer my own. My sphincters no longer open and close me. I am one might say permeable.

Why would she want nów of all times to invest me with language?

Up, down, under, before, behind, above, in.

Or perhaps 'invest with' is the wrong expression here.

Goad with, perhaps.

Shé is the one who takes up Japie. She can put him down whenever she wants. Or she can pick him up and walk out and go and dust somewhere. Or she can turn him round to point his stick at the map.

Japie mostly stays in the corner of the room. She holds him in the left hand, she always starts from the beginning again, she points, letter by letter. A is for Adam, B for Babel, C for Christ, our Redeemer and Lord. She looks at what I signal and she points and she points until there's a word, three words, half a sentence, and then she starts guessing.

Don't put words into my mouth, exclamation mark, I then have to spell out for her. Don't anticipate my meanings, don't impose the wrong stress, wrong nuances on me. Exclamation, exclamation, exclamation!

My protest is not of much use. She gets impatient when it takes too

long. She wants to make my sentences flow for me. She wants me to sing. She's looking for a rhythm. A march from the FAK.

Onward, onward, ever onward, by forest and by foam, ever shall we wander, ever shall we roam.

I can see it in her face. Shift-boss habits. She taps the beat on the railing of the bed. Then the words come.

Don't shirk! There's a nation to lead, there's a war-cry to heed, there's work! There's no glory or fame, there's no compromise tame, there's but following the hot bright flame. Come on!

If I have managed to produce something, an exposition, complete with nevertheless and notwithstanding, it's my turn to exert pressure. Then shé must reply. It's only common decency, her responding, I spelt out for her. But she often remains quiet. Or she says, next sentence please. Or she shrugs her shoulders, which means, you answer it yourself. Or she puts down the duster and walks out. Or she looks at me until I shut my eyes.

Put in a bookmark, she says then, then we can remember where we were, this is one of your long stories again, and I can't see how it's to end.

I was alone, I felt useless, I wanted to do something for my fellow humans.

She goes to stand by the stoep door and looks out. Or she takes up after a while where we left off, and leaves me talking to myself.

I did not realise what a big responsibility it would be, I did not think far enough.

Just go ahead and forget that I'm here, her face says, I just spell out everything for you and say it out loud so that you can hear what you sound like.

Jak was always against it and I resisted him, for years I resisted him but the pressure was too great and then I gave in.

She can't always keep her voice neutral. She charges my sentences with her own resonances. Disbelief, emphasis, mockery. She adds on and improvises. To my own ears I sound like running commentary rather than original intention.

Do something for your fellow humans? Or do something with your fellow humans or tó your fellow humans? Féllow human or ín- or súper-human? Or half human? Less human than yourself?

Sometimes when we've completed a sentence, she doesn't repeat it at all, so that I lose my thread amongst stray words.

Sorry. Powerless. Guilty. I am. I shall be. But. How am I to. Die. Question mark.

Then she changes the subject. Or she says, for heaven's sake get to the point, Ounooi, you're much too long-winded again today.

As if there were endless days extending before me. As if tomorrow could be much different for me from today.

It takes so much time, this business. Clarity is not guaranteed. It causes misunderstandings instead, that we then laboriously have to clear up again. The tapping and winking and spelling is harder on my eyes than the splint ever was heavy on my hand. Her prefabricated phrases block me rather than help me, my language feels like a brutal instrument with which I'm torturing myself. How long will I still be able to blink my eyes? The left wants to droop shut, the right opens wider than I'm used to. If my eyelids freeze, that's the end.

The chance, I'm getting a last chance. Perhaps I should rather associate freely than try to explain point by point, let her see who I've become in the meantime, here speechless on my bed, delirious, yearning, a poet of losses, a teller of legends.

The task weighs more heavily on my mind than the writing of my last words when I could still write. It's more momentous than the making of my inventories for the clearing-out, my will, my self-determination codicil.

It's more difficult than any last wish. It causes complications at a stage when she, and I, had hoped that things would become easier. Now the close will be more difficult than either of us could ever have predicted.

I can understand very well that she wants to keep the talking within limits, has established a fixed structure for it. She keeps us to it strictly. One hour in the morning, one hour in the evening.

Before she goes to bed, I'm granted another few sentences, if she feels the need herself, when she's done reading from the blue booklets, the last parcel from the sideboard, the first lot that I filled with my writing, without abbreviations, full particulars with the explicitness of the beginner.

She took a long time to remove the string with which it was still bound. The first few days that it was lying here, she fiddled with the knot a few times, but then let it be again. At length she snipped it off with her scissors and started reading in a whispered intake of breath, as if she wanted to vacuum the words.

When she's had enough, then she gets up, then she takes the duster. Then I know it helps her to talk to me, but mostly about trivialities. Harmless.

It helps her to believe that I'm harmless. She even wants to believe in my goodness, it seems to me. But then I have to be potent as well, because what would virtue be for Agaat without power?

That's something she can't tolerate.

If on the other hand, as happens on some days, she makes me out to be entirely bad, then she feels that she's bad herself. And that she doesn't want to be. That she cán't be. Her name is Good.

Would it be good to forgive me? It would be too easy. And it would solve nothing.

Would it be good to take revenge? It's been a long time since that satisfied her, avenging yourself on a helpless victim is not interesting.

How can I help her?

Too many sentences to spell out. I must keep my text simple. I can't tell her story on her behalf, and if she's too tongue-tied and has too little pride to do it herself, then it's not my fault.

How many Jerseys do you now have in your herd? That I'm allowed to ask. How many heifers are you going to sell in autumn? What's your price? What does the market look like? She supplies the figures.

If you carry on like this, you're going to be a rich farmer one day, I'm allowed to say.

What good is it going to do me? her face asks then. When she sees

that I've caught her out in self-pity, she backtracks quickly. As with the tirade yesterday.

Yes, I just have to give, give, give nowadays to keep the labourers happy. The creatures of late seem to want to guzzle and guts, even steal the dogs' food out of their bowls around the back. Before you fell ill they were still happy with flour and coffee and now and again their smoked pork and their sack of beans and onions and pumpkins. But no, now it's a sheep a month on top of it, and then I have to provide for the women and children as well, if the one isn't suffering from this, then the other complains of that. They eat you out of house and home and they're too lazy to work, they just want to lie in their hovels. I told Dawid a long time ago the whole lot must go, I want casual labourers, or better still, I get in a team of Transkei kaffirs every now and again, they're happy anyway with mealie-meal porridge and sour milk.

I said nothing in reply. And she knew why.

In the silence that followed, she took up her embroidery and sat working wordlessly for two hours. That's the way it often goes since we've been able to talk, as if she's trying to gather strength for the next conversation.

She's sitting just too far away for me to see what's she's doing there on her cloth.

She'll show me when she's done, she says.

Apparently it contains all the stitches in the book.

Diagonal ripple-stitch, odd wave-stitch, step-stitch, honeycomb-stitch, blanket-stitch, hemstitch, paving-stitch, wreath-stitch.

There's still a lot to fill in, she says, filling-in patterns for drawn-fabric work, sheaves, ears of corn, stars, eyelets, flowers, diamonds, wheels, shadow-blocks.

Some parts she has to unpick and redo, though much smaller, otherwise not everything fits in so well. It takes much longer than she thought to get everything in place, she says.

Everything? Every what thing? Rather say it's a pastime till I'm in my place six feet under.

Sometimes when I can no longer bear it, the two of us together

like this, trapped in the room, without any escape, I plead without disguise. I flicker through my tears. One eye flutters more rapidly than the other.

Please, tálk to me, I want to tálk, I want to explain things.

Sometimes she consents, but venture one sentence into the maze, and she stops.

Lóók for the butterfly, Agaat! Yóú've seen it before! Shów it to me!

But mainly she ignores it when I'm like that. Mouth set in a sulk. Chin out. Her eyes flash. The message is clear.

Your soul! Me having to look for your soul! Bugger your soul!

I can guess what she's feeling, what sentences she's addressing to me in her heart. Once I spelt it out for her word by word.

It's too late for tears now, tears just make you choke. So choose. Choke or talk about things you can afford to talk about.

She pretended not to understand whose words these were.

I never cry, she said, yóú're the one who cries.

Just so, I said.

She just gave me a look and walked out.

I'm not made of glass, she said later, while she was soaping my arms.

She was washing me very gently. I don't think I'd ever felt her touch me so gently, as if she were afraid I'd break.

I'm not made of glass.

She knows she's transparent to me, she knows I can read her thoughts and express them too. It's no longer all that safe for her in this sickbay. She's decided to restore my voice to me. And she wants to honour her decision. She knows she's caught in her own snare.

Gently she soaped me. Once more on an inhalation she said: Nót of glass!

She was washing my arm with her strong hand. The washcloth disappeared a long time ago. My skin is too thin. When she saw the dampness in my eyes, she stopped immediately.

No, not agáín, she said, and rubbed me dry with a rough towel.

That was yesterday.

This morning I woke up again with the headache. Through the haze in my head I wanted to understand it, the dynamic between us. I can't understand it. It's too difficult for me. I wanted to explain it when the talking-hour struck.

Then something entirely different to what I'd planned came out of me. Because I feel so powerless, so needy, then I attacked her, then I started casting aspersions upon her.

You and the fires of Grootmoedersdrift, Agaat. The fire on the mountain, the fire in the hayloft, was that you?

Accusations have always set her off. And complaints. And criticism. If I can't mollify her, that's the only alternative. I can anger her. And if I can anger her, I can get angry myself. That would be better than nothing.

Who's the arsonist here on the farm? Who's the great setter of fires amongst us?

That hit the mark. All that she could do, was to draw off my pee and get out and turn her backside on me to pick hydrangeas, the ones far down, those that are a bit tousled already with sun and water. The prettiest ones, the strongest, those she's saving. It's a matter of timing.

Blue-purple hydrangeas for my funeral, with the white dahlias and the white Joseph's lilies, nicely rounded off with a little ribbon of crape, I can just see it.

The quarter-hour strikes in the front room. Here comes the preview. In the grey vase. The vase that was not on the clearing-out list. Could still be used at my funeral, I thought to myself. Scenes from coming attractions, as Jak would have said. Not yet quite the demure style of the funeral arrangement. Pretty, lively, informally arranged are the voluptuous blue heads with the yellow privet branches and the bronze-coloured foliage of the prunus nigra, sprays of abelia, orange Cape honeysuckle, a few orange roses. And to round it off, under the base, how else? a few large exuberant bronze leaves of coleus, the plant we call fire-on-the-mountain.

Just lóók at the hydrangeas, says Agaat, they're flowering as if it's Christmas, I must take cuttings.

She clears a space on the night-table next to me. Her neck is stiff.

Just picture it, is written all over her face, what it will look like on the half-moon table at the front door, there where the guests will be entering. *Sincerest condolences, Agaat, it must be a great loss for you.* Will that be good enough for you? Or do you think the orange and all the branches are a bit too wild?

If I could I would like to tap the stick of the feather duster on her face. Alphabet of the underworld. Percussion band.

Hands on hips she stands and surveys her handiwork. Well then, Ounooi? Looks as if you want to have a bit of a chat, we have half an hour left.

She takes the duster by the head.

We'll gather lilacs, she sings on an inhaled breath.

A B C D E F G H

I blink H and A and G and swearword on the auxiliary list that's supposed to indicate feeling.

Wow now, says Agaat, which one now?

Y·O·U, exclamation mark, I spell, N·O·O·N·D·A·Y W·I·T·C·H.

Well I never, says Agaat, how's that for a parting shot. What else?

S·A·R·C·A·S·T·I·C, I spell, Y·O·U K·N·O·W W·H·A·T I M·E·A·N.

No, I don't know, says Agaat, you'll just have to spell it out.

F·I·R·E O·N T. M·O·U·N·T·A·I·N, I spell. I roll my eyes at the flower arrangement.

Yes, dóésn't it look pretty with the blue, says Agaat.

If I'm trying to be difficult here on my deathbed, is the message, she'll pretend to think I'm senile.

Can there be a doubler barrel? How do I deal with it?

B·R·O·W·N S·U·I·T·C·A·S·E, I spell.

Where, when, why, question mark, Agaat taps for me on her scraps of paper. They flutter like leaves. I blink Y·E·S Y·E·S exclamation mark.

She puts down the stick. She reformulates my question for me in my own strain, with all my modulations of indignation. And with her own increment of pepper.

Whát, I ask you for the how-manieth time, happened to your brown suitcase that I put on the half-shelf of the washstand in the outside

room, on the day of your birthday, twelfth July in the year of our Lord nineteen sixty, when you moved in there? Whát happened to all your possessions from the back room? To the pretty dresses that I hung up there for you on the railing behind the curtain, a red and a blue and a yellow one, spécially made for you with my highly-pregnant body and all? To your first shoes that I had bronzed?

Absolutely right, I blink. How excellently you can guess at the senile thoughts of an old woman. What is your reply to this?

Agaat stands back a little, hands on her stomach. She looks me straight in the eye. The cutting-up of an ox is her reply. Fluently she recites.

Sirloin, cut into flat slices and fried in a pan.

Wing rib, suitable for pot-roasting, bones may also be removed and meat rolled.

Flat rib, suitable for pot-roasting, may be rolled.

Prime rib, suitable for pot-roasting, may be rolled.

Mid-rib, suitable for pot-roasting, may be rolled.

Silverside and topside, suitable for corned beef, pot-roasting, biltong. Shank, may be roasted, but more suitable for salting and boiling.

Thick flank, may be salted and boiled or stewed.

Cheek, can be stewed.

Neck, for soup or stewing.

Collarbone, for soup.

Brisket, best suited to pickling and boiling.

Bones, are generally sold to kaffirs.

Tail, soup and stew.

Hoof and shin, brawn.

Pauper's rib, for soup and stew.

Do you want to hear about the cuts of the birthday hanslam as well? Agaat asks, the nice fresh braai chops for the nice fresh kitchen-skivvy? The two of them, skivvy and lamb, both cut up much better than an old tough cow, let me tell you that!

She falls in with her stick. Oh Japie is my darling she sings, so early in the morning.

Next? she asks.

V·E·R·Y F·U·N·N·Y, I spell.

She waits for the follow-up. Doesn't bat an eyelid. Lets me spill my guts. Fills me in. Tops me up.

W·H·A·T W·E·R·E Y·O·U D·O·I·N·G F·I·R·S·T N·I·G·H·T O·N M·O·U·N·T·A·I·N I·N Y·O·U·R U·N·I·F·O·R·M, question mark. S·A·W Y·O·U W·I·T·H B·I·N·O·C·S, full stop. F·U·N·N·Y S·T·E·P·S + L·A·T·E·R W·I·T·S·A·N·D E·A·R·L·Y M·O·R·N·I·N·G I·N Y·O·U·R C·L·O·T·H·E·S I·N W·A·V·E·S, full stop. S·A·T·A·N·I·C R·I·T·E·S, exclamation mark. M·A·I·D·S S·A·Y Y·O·U A·R·E P·O·S·S·E·S·S·E·D W·A·N·D·E·R A·R·O·U·N·D A·T N·I·G·H·T + L·E·A·V·E M·E H·E·R·E A·L·O·N·E, full stop. N·O·T T·A·K·E·N I·N B·Y Y·O·U·R I·N·N·O·C·E·N·C·E, comma, W·I·T·C·H, exclamation mark. = M·Y D·E·A·T·H N·O·T E·N·O·U·G·H F·O·R Y·O·U, question mark. O·N W·H·A·T C·L·I·M·A·X A·R·E Y·O·U S·E·T, question mark, swearword.

Agaat stands back from the chart, the wall full of fluttering bits of paper. She presses against her cap. She places the duster in the corner. This time her answer is taken from the embroidery book.

Shadow-work, she says, is a form of white embroidery that is within the reach of all because the technique is very simple. It is suitable for table linen, bedspreads, pillow covers for babies, bridal veils, blouses, christening robes, children's clothes. Shadow-work is done on transparent cloth and from Italy we get special fine linen for the purpose. It can however also be done on silk organza or a good-quality Swiss organdie. Artificial fibres are not recommended.

M·O·C·K, I spell.

Mock turtle, says Agaat.

D·I·D Y·O·U D·R·O·W·N T. K·I·D T·H·A·T E·V·E·N·I·N·G O·F T. F·I·R·E, question mark. + W·H·Y, question mark. B·E·H·I·N·D M·E S·A·T·A·N, exclamation mark.

You're really jumping around this morning, says Agaat, I can't keep up.

She pulls her cap lower on her head, she stands alert for my next instalment.

W·H·Y D·I·D Y·O·U D·I·G U·P T. L·A·M·B E·A·R F·R·O·M T·H·E

B·I·N, comma, W·I·T·H W·H·A·T S·U·P·E·R·S·T·I·T·I·O·N·S D·I·D Y·O·U I·N·F·E·C·T J·A·K·K·I·E, question mark.

It was my own hanslam, says Agaat, her voice uninflected. She looks out of the glass door.

What hanslam? Agaat always had nurslings, lambs, pigs, meerkat, every kind of nursling.

Sweetflour, says Agaat with her back to me.

Sweetflour? I remember Sweetflour. Discarded. One of a triplet. Full-milk Agaat fed her with extra cream and a teaspoon of clean slaked lime, from the bottle, eighteen times a day, at blood heat as her book says, reduced to six times a day, until she started eating oats and lucerne by herself. She was five months old and she came when Agaat called her. The one we slaughtered that day was a nursling wether with a fat belly.

Agaat turns back from the door. Her eyebrows on question marks. I blink at the board, show I want to spell something. She takes her stick.

Y·O·U L·I·E, exclamation mark, I spell.

I would surely never have made her slaughter her own hanslam? I would have checked up first. But did I? That ear wasn't marked. That I remember, and Dawid had called I should come and have a look when he'd caught the lamb, but I didn't go, I wanted to keep an eye, Agaat was busy ironing her first double sheet on her own that morning, I showed her how one folds it along its length on the ironing board, how one sprinkles water on it.

And, says Agaat, on top of that it was my birthday, twelfth July, you'd very kindly taught me that that was the day on which the Lord gave myself to me as a present. So then you forgot it in your hurry to get me out of the house. Then you pretended the outside room was heaven.

Agaat stuffs the knuckle of her small hand into her mouth as if she wanted to push in a stopper so that nothing more can come out of there. She regards me over the hand, for a long time. I see the entreaty in her eyes: Please, Ounooi, don't force me to get angry, I've long since given up being angry, I don't want to be angry, you provoke me, what is

it you want from me? Tell me and I'll give it to you, whatever you ask, if it's within my power.

She stands ready with the stick.

H·Y·P·O·C·R·I·T·E, exclamation mark. D·O·N·T M·A·K·E T·H·O·S·E S·O·P·P·Y E·Y·E·S A·T ME, exclamation mark. H·O·W M·A·N·Y T·I·M·E·S M·O·R·E A·R·E Y·O·U G·O·I·N·G T·O C·O·N·F·R·O·N·T M·E W·I·T·H I·T, question mark exclamation mark.

It's going too slowly. I think too fast. I only get the odd word out.

W·H·Y A·R·E Y·O·U O·N T. S·C·E·N·E S·O S·O·O·N A·T E·V·E·R·Y D·I·S·A·S·T·E·R W·O·N·D·E·R A·B·O·U·T Y·O·U·R T·R·U·E C·O·L·O·U·R·S S·I·C·K C·O·M·F·O·R·T·E·R F·I·R·E E·X·T·I·N·G·U·I·S·H·E·R S·L·I·M·E·K·N·O·C·K·E·R D·I·S·T·R·U·S·T D·E·V·I·L.

Agaat composes her own sentences from the words. I compose mine. They're quite different, the versions that emerge.

That's enough now, Ounooi, you're just upsetting yourself. I can't understand you. She puts down the stick.

I insist.

She picks it up again.

Y·O·U D·O·N·T W·A·N·T T·O U·N·D·E·R·S·T·A·N·D M·E, exclamation mark. Y·O·U P·L·A·Y D·I·R·T·Y, exclamation mark. D·O Y·O·U T·H·I·N·K Y·O·U A·R·E G·O·D W·I·T·H Y·O·U·R S·T·I·C·K, question mark exclamation mark.

By nature utterly indisposed, disabled and made opposite to all good, and wholly inclined to all evil, says Agaat.

H·O·W D·I·D Y·O·U G·E·T T·O T. D·A·M S·O Q·U·I·C·K·L·Y T·O P·U·T T. P·A·R·C·E·L W·I·T·H T. C·H·R·I·S·T·E·N·I·N·G R·O·B·E T·H·E·R·E, question mark. W·H·Y S·O D·E·V·I·O·U·S, question mark. Y·O·U K·N·O·W I C·O·U·L·D·N·T D·O A·N·Y·T·H·I·N·G A·B·O·U·T T·H·E W·H·O·L·E M·A·T·T·E·R, exclamation mark.

Agaat puts down the stick. Now I've got her. I know how angry she was about that.

Trailing-stitch, she says, morning glories, pomegranate pips, ai where are the days. Conceived in sin, I'd say. You too, you always imagined your hands were tied, with everything. But the work of mý hands you

were strong enough to pick up and throw into the dam! Tsk, I'd rather not think about it!

She lifts up my sheet. For a moment I think she's going to pull it over my head. She folds it back neatly, pulls it up under my chin.

You think you can wrap me up here, I flicker. You think you can tidy up and finish off this whole story as you do with everything, but you can't, it's not in your sovereign power, you need me for it!

Whiter than snow, says Agaat, she strokes my hair.

I roll my eyes to the open books with the folded-back pages on the chair. She follows my eyes.

And she takes my eyes and she reads me direct, she no longer spells with the stick.

She bends her head, I feel the hard cloth of her cap against my temple. Softly she interprets my thoughts for me. She whispers in my ear with her sweet rooibos breath, I smell the borax in the starch.

I listen to myself. Would that be what I would say if I were suddenly to have my tongue restored to me? Can I believe my ears?

What do you think you're going to achieve by rubbing my nose in what I've written in the diaries? the voice asks in my ear, a perfect imitation of how I talk.

It's yóúr story, it's for yóúr sake, so that you may have something in your old age to remember how you were rescued from destitution. How I made a human being out of you. You were nothing, you'd have stáýed nothing, if I hadn't taken a chance with you. I'm not saying I did everything ríght, I constantly made mistakes, I hurt you, I humiliated you, but by what example was I to measure myself? You know what it was like in those days. Your case was highly exceptional. But I tried, under the circumstances and by the light that was available to me, I tried. Now you're making a circus of it.

A C·I·R·C·U·S! Agaat's voice sounds the letters. There's a pause before she recommences. I see the trailing-stitch on her cap, white on white violence.

It wasn't easy. Nothing was easy about your whole story, let me tell you, it ruined my marriage. And look what I have to show for it now! A C·I·R·C·U·S, A C·O·U·R·T O·F L·A·W!

Agaat straightens up, she stands back, my ear feels cold without her warm breath. What will she reply to her own ventriloquism?

Didn't know you were so interested in the little old books, Ounooi, but not now, I'll read to you again tonight. Useful bits and pieces of all kinds.

She tidies up the blue booklets on the pile. For the first time I see the *Embroidery Book* and the *Handbook* and the orange *FAK* on the dressing table. Exhibits. Chapter and verse.

The lid of the bouillon pot, sings Agaat, must be removed overnight otherwise the bouillon will go off.

A recitative from the *Farmer's Handbook?* What's that supposed to mean?

She looks at me.

It doesn't have the desired effect on me. I flicker at her: Go ahead and pronounce it now, Agaat! Stop your unfathomable parables. Go ahead and pronounce it all for me so that you can come to your senses, perhaps it will help if you can hear yourself say out loud what yóú think Í think! What yóú think I óúght to think! Mind rape, that's what it is!

Again she bends by my bed, this time on the other side. Must my ears take turns in this devilish business?

Why do you torture me on my deathbed?

Is Agaat whispering that? In my ear? Am I hearing aright? Her voice is emphatic.

Why do you let me be ravaged by itching, push and pull my limbs, screw open my mouth, taunt me, threaten me with enemas and suppositories, dig in my ears as if you think I have ear-mite, have holes punched into me, shove tubes into me, cut my hair so that I look like a prisoner of war? Why?

She stands back. She answers from her own corner, a smile as if she's ascending unto heaven. She opens her mouth wide.

When meat is cooked for the kitchen-maid or kaffir, she sings, or even for the house, it's good to boil it in the bouillon pot for the first hour or so, to extract as much nutrition as possible into the water.

Again her lips are at my ear, I feel the moistness of her mouth.

Then why do you still leave me hanging? she whispers. Why do you come and stand by my bedside in the dark? Do you want me dead? What prevents you?

Sulphured fruit must not be eaten raw, comes her reply, a floating contralto, but first boiled again to drive off the sulphur.

How many voices has Agaat?

Calm down, Ounooi, she says, close your eyes now. Think of other things. You're wandering again. But it's not serious, just relax, I'm here, I'm staying with you, I'm not going away, here I am, right here.

She moves in behind the bed, above my head I hear the words that well up in me, lisping they drip from Agaat's tongue.

And the slops you feed me! I'll choke. And that will be too soon for you. You still want your pound of flesh from me, remember! Living flesh. What satisfaction would a dead liver give you? A dead heart? You want to pluck me out of the hole with a wire. Like a mole. Well, kéép your wire! Soon I'll be in a hole where even yóú won't be able to get at me. Except if you dig me up to chew my bones. Bone hunger!

Agaat appears next to my bed. She looks at me.

How are we doing? she asks. She goes and writes something.

Who marks the day high up there on the calendar? The thirteenth of December, I recall and I remember. Could I have imagined it all? Am I dreaming?

She looks at me, smiles, writes something again.

Abracadabra, she says, twirls a little circle next to her head with her index finger.

Could she mean that I've lost my wits? I'm raving? It's not mé, witch! Yóú're the one who's raving, yóú're the one who's trying to rave my rave for me! Not a word past my lips for three years now. The mute cannot rave! But they can hear!

There, there, Ounooi, don't be scared, she says, it's just the little light, it's going on and off now. In your head.

That's a good one! Interprets me to the brink of Babel, to the threshold of death. But there are limits! Back! Stand back! You're too close! My death is of mé! And my béd! There are bóúndaries!

Agaat goes to stand by the door. She clasps her hands round her body, the knuckle of the small hand in her mouth.

Take the stick, take the stick, I signal.

She comes nearer, takes the stick.

T·H·E·R·E A·R·E B·O·U·N·D·A·R·I·E·S, I spell, B·O·N·E M·A·G·G·O·T.

Agaat taps seven exclamation marks of her own. She puts down the stick. She bends her head over me, regards me, presses shut her eyes with the thumb and index finger of her left hand. And with the fingers of her small hand, mine. Her fingers are cold on my eyelids.

Rest, she says, it won't be long now, we're almost there.

*

The first letter that you intercepted was addressed to Jakkie at Langebaan, his official numbers and codes written in stiff black block letters on the envelope. You wanted to know what Agaat had been writing to him, sitting there in her room for hours on end.

The first letter, no it couldn't have been the first. There were many. When you unfolded it the change in form of address struck you. No longer Dear Boetie as when he was at school or Dear Private when he was doing his basic training. Dear Airman Captain De Wet it was now. Your heart contracted inside you, sitting there reading next to the road, pulled off into a gate entrance on the way to town.

You'd told Agaat that Jakkie was now in a high-security position and that her correspondence wasn't private. Jakkie had warned you and Jak. No searching questions about his movements, his further specialised studies, would be answered, and your private declarations and revelations might just end up under eyes they were not intended for. And here was Agaat's camouflage now. All that she thought she could hide, was how close she was to him.

The words with which she concluded that letter, were even more poignant. No longer: Your loving Nêne. Respectfully yours, she now wrote. And no longer just Gaat. Now it was her full name: Agaat Lourier.

But as your eyes wandered over the densely-packed lines, it was mainly the loving that you discerned, thát was undiminished. It was in her descriptions. The jackal so delicately sniffing at the twig, its wide green eye in the night, as it approaches the yard with plans of its own. It was in the specific selection of things that she named. The three pink eggs of the little nightjar on the footpath to the old orchard. The way in which she wrote up the tiniest impressions, struck you. A love letter compared to yours. What would the Defence Force censorship make of it, you wondered. Like encrypted writing it would surely seem to them, like some code or other.

Your own letter was in your handbag. On the slender side. What you had to report was really rather meagre against Agaat's epistle.

She held forth on everything that happened on the farm or didn't happen. A chronicle. With wetted finger you counted, thirty pages, all in the precise upright handwriting she'd taught herself. You were amazed at the grasp she had of everything, from piss-ups amongst the farm workers to the service schedule of farm vehicles and the number of bales of wool, the variation in the quality of the milk and the cream in the spring and the fall, the treatment of the wheat seed against fungus. A record keeper's statistics. She predicted the rains for Jakkie – a fine grey mizzle in the early morning just enough to make the eels stick out their noses – and guessed the wind for the following week for him and estimated the surge in the mountain streams and rivers for him with the naked eye and compared it with the average of the seasons. As if the farm belonged to him and to her.

What could you shore up against that? Against the number of cows covered, the report on the first signs of nasal bot among the sheep? What she left out, were the dreadful daily quarrels between you and Jak and the swearing and the tears. To judge by Agaat's letter the Grootmoedersdrift homestead was a model of peace and harmony.

Why did it infuriate you so immoderately that day next to the road? The prettification to which every paragraph bore witness, was in the best possible taste. You couldn't have done it better yourself.

You read the whole thing. At the end, for a whole paragraph, she

asked questions, intimate questions from the nêne of old. What do they give you to eat there in the mess? Do you see meat in those army stews? Do you sleep warm enough? Is your pillow filled properly? Are your superiors well disposed towards you? Are you healthy? Are you safe? Do your subordinates listen to your commands? Are you getting used yet to taking off, to the blow to the heart and the horse rearing up? (rein it in) Do your ears still close up when you come down? (chew a dried peach) When are you coming home again?

The disquiet that was also in your and Jak's hearts, she formulated as: *I pray for your blessed and kept return from the distant skies.*

It was herself she was comforting with the quince-mousse dessert she was thinking up for him, the roast of hare in pomegranate sauce that she would place steaming before him.

You wanted to read the letter again, you put it back into your handbag. Agaat's blue Croxley envelopes you usually licked, and pressed close again as best you might, asked at the post office for a bit of sticky tape. Your transgressions you trusted would be covered by the far more visible and sanctioned incursions of the military security that according to Jakkie opened and stamped everything. But this letter you didn't want to let go, there was a tenderness and an obsession to these formulations after which you hungered.

Jak had his own formulae in which to clothe this new situation for himself.

How is Pa's soldier? he'd ask on the phone when Jakkie phoned.

You listened in on the second phone. Jakkie could give him answers pertaining to his number of logged flying hours, the sensation of breaking through the sound barrier, the training with the ejector seat in the simulator.

He was a body of potentials for his father, a model of endurance, of physical discipline, of drilled limbs and sharpened reflexes.

And you? What could you ask this child about whom you felt your knowledge was of the second order, of the third, after Jak with whom he had had his baptism of fire in the mountains, after Agaat on whose bosom he'd grown up?

She was the one to whom he handed his laundry bag every time he came home, and who packed his suitcase for him when he left again.

What could you respond, what add, to the smile, the poker faces exchanged with the handing over of the bag, the handing back of the suitcase?

You knew of the little surprises with which from childhood they'd spoilt each other. Quartz pebbles, mouse skulls, tanned moleskins, under a pillow, in a shoe. Later, Agaat's jerseys and pullovers for Jakkie, a bow tie and a new shirt that she went to buy him in town with her own money, cellophane packets of fudge and taffy and fennel cookies that she hid amongst his clothes.

And Jakkie's gifts to her, boxes of fine chocolate, sachets of saffron and cardamom from the spice stores of the Boland, story books, Croxley writing-pads and envelopes, magazines, headscarves and fragrances.

Not that she ever used the perfume. The little bottles stood untouched, like an exhibition of trophies, on the shelf above her washing-table. The scarves she used as wall decorations for her room. She scrutinised them for new designs that she could embroider.

Yóúr attention and interest you felt passed Jakkie by, unheeded. Was it for your sake that he joined the Air Force choir? He sent you their record. Side one, *The Lord is My Shepherd*. Side two, *Oh for a gun in my strong right hand*. He was more attuned to his father's ideals, to Agaat's favour than to your concern. From the sidelines you watched things develop.

As a member of the Permanent Force's elite corps of highly-trained personnel Jakkie made rapid progress, just as Jak had predicted. He could study and earn a salary at the same time. He obtained a degree in aeronautical engineering. In case he won't be able to fly all his life, he said, then he can design machinery for the Air Force.

Like what? Jak wanted to know.

The plans are there, but it's classified information, Jakkie sent word. All that you got to know in that time, was that the Bureau of Mechanical Engineering at Stellenbosch was a kind of front for Armscor. You had some misgivings about this, but Jak said why could the Afrikaner's

cultural headquarters not also be his arms factory, it goes without saying, that's how all honourable nations consolidate themselves.

You both knew that Jakkie wasn't really interested in politics, all he wanted to do was fly the Air Force's modern fighter planes. That was Jak's great dream. At supper table he read you and Agaat extracts and showed you pictures of aeroplanes from *Paratus* and *Jane's Defence Weekly*, to which he subscribed.

You knew that Jakkie was flying Impalas and Mirages. You and Jak knew that it wasn't child's play in South West. You knew that it was the supreme game of heroes, that those who took part in the war against the Cubans in Angola were awarded the highest honours. You had the right to be proud, he was the child of all three of you.

But what was it that you felt there at the supper table when Agaat received a thick letter from him, thicker than that to his parents, and you and Jak asked her to read it aloud? It wasn't pride, it was loss that united the two of you there under the lamplight. As united as you could ever be. Because you and Jak were suspicious of Agaat whose eyes sometimes glided rapidly over the lines, over the bits she left out. Jakkie's letters to hér you didn't dare open or intercept.

You were dependent upon each other's fictions about Jakkie. You were his family, but he belonged to the war, to secret operations. Later when it leaked out in the press, Jak bloodthirstily speculated about Jakkie's part in the preservation of country and nation.

Oh please just shut up! you shouted at Jak when it became too much for you.

You locked yourself in your room, went to lie down on your bed, crying. You couldn't figure out with whom you were most angry. With Jakkie who wasn't open about his activities, with the Defence Force that employed him for its own purposes, or with the government that maintained a dour silence.

But it was the scene there in the dining room that really irked you, the scene with Jak and Agaat, she standing opposite him on the other side of the table, her hands on the back of the chair, half of her face in

shadow. Jak telling tales of bombed-out enemy positions, of smoking Migs exploding in fireballs. Was she flattered to serve as audience to the fantasies of the baas?

It sickened you. You tried to keep yourself going with hard work, but then there was always the apprehension, the suspicion in those years, the late seventies, early eighties.

You went to see the doctor. He prescribed a stronger tranquilliser, better sleeping draughts. That helped, but it made you feel as if you were only half alive. Agaat checked your consumption closely. She was particularly interested in your faints, in the weakness that sometimes overcame you in the middle of wool-classing or during the stamping of the wool bales. Exaggeratedly solicitous she'd be then. Irony, no, sarcasm was in the crook of the elbow of the strong arm she offered to accompany you to your room.

After such an episode, after she'd attended to you in your room, she could go missing for hours. Stay with me, Agaat, you asked, but she closed the curtains. Stay with me, I feel scared, you said, but she remained standing there for just a moment, in the twilit room, with her hands folded under her breasts, her white cap, her white apron like nurse's clothing, before walking out tchi-tchi on her thick-soled school shoes.

Was it one late afternoon that you woke up after such a collapse, after a dream that she had run off, that you went out? You had to look very closely, with the binoculars. She was walking with her head held high. From far away you could make that out. Unimpeachable in her solid body with her even tread she approached, unswervingly, as if she were in a play. This time she wasn't on the koppie in front of the house where she always, in full silhouette, looked larger than she really was. She was approaching along the footpath in the dryland through the twilit wheatfields, her white cap like a prow above the stalks of wheat.

After half an hour she came in by the back door. All innocence, a castaway lamb under her arm, a story about a hare that had ended up in the jackal trap, a basket of lay-away eggs. That's the way it always was.

A report of a gate lying wide open, of an empty drinking trough, of a windmill that doesn't cast, of another kerbstone washed away from the bridge over the drift, of a plume of smoke in the poplar forest. But you knew that there was much more than met the eye to her walks. That evening again, when she'd brought in the food for you, she waited, emphatically and intransigently, for you to tell Jak what she'd found, noticed, suspected. And then she listened, expressionlessly, because the actual information you couldn't communicate. You didn't know what it was.

You shut your ears to your own voice pronouncing the deceitful words. You screamed at Agaat.

Stop staring at me as if I'm false! What have I done to you? What do you want me to say?

You slammed your fists on the table. Your glass broke. You put your hand in your mouth, you wanted to pluck out your tongue.

Jak looked at you askance.

My toastmistress, he said, lifted his glass, and carried on eating.

Agaat picked up the shards and took you to your room. She made you take your medicine and covered you with blankets, switched on the night-light by your bed. You listened to her serving Jak's dessert and coffee, clearing up, closing the windows of the living room for the night.

Those sounds, that silence in which Agaat at length ate her evening meal behind a closed kitchen door, the back door that she pulled shut and locked behind her, the slamming of the screen door, the scuffing of the door of the outside room, all those black sounds to which you were listening in your room lying on your back, they were the opposite of music, they were the sounds of damnation.

Is that what's become of my paradise here this side of the Tradouw? you thought.

Is that why you wanted to create the garden? Was that your response to the war stories with which Jak entertained Agaat evening after evening? A spell, a safeguard against the distant war and its hurt? Or to gain Agaat for yourself? To win back something of your dream?

You steeled yourself, went in to Jak at night, lay down next to him on his divan in his stoep room, satisfied him while he was half asleep.

What is all this, the stories of keening engines and missiles and explosions and blood and smoke and disembodied limbs and blackened ruins? you asked him after he had come, softly, persuasively, as one would talk to an upset child, so that he would answer you half in a daze, so that you could get the truth out of him.

I know you're scared, just like me, you said, I know you're worried. Who do you want to punish with such premonitions? What do you want to achieve by it? After all, you love him, he's our son, why do you make him out to be one who sows destruction and death? With whom are you angry? Of whom are you afraid?

For a long time you listened by his mouth, to what he would say.

Our minerals, the white man's future, he mumbled, the terrorists, we must prepare ourselves spiritually against the enemy, there are sacrifices to be made ...

Jak, that's not what I'm asking, you said, that I can hear on the television any day that I have a mind to. Jakkie's your child, he's the future. For the sake of what exactly do you want to sacrifice him?

He defends the borders, Jak said, that's what we whites should have done from the start in this country. He's obeying orders, and fortunately it's no longer your and your handmaiden's orders.

You're fighting against mé, you said, you won the child over to your side and now you're inciting Agaat against me as well with your bloodthirsty talk.

If the people at home weaken, it's bad for the morale of the men on the border, Milla, you can support him by showing a bit more fighting spirit instead of taking to your room on any pretext. Why don't you join the Southern Cross and do something useful for the war?

A paradise, you whispered, your head on his chest, that's what you promised me, do you remember? Long ago. A flower garden without equal. Let's make a garden for Jakkie, he won't always want to fly jet fighters. He'll come home one day, and then we can show it to him, a sign of ... a sign ...

You couldn't say it, of what it was supposed to be a sign.

Go ahead, he mumbled, make your garden, you do just what you want to in any case.

You went out onto the stoep. The sweet clove smell of carnations was in the air, the intoxication of the hedge full of white moonflowers. There had always been a garden on Grootmoedersdrift, in summer always a show of hydrangeas and agapanthus, but you wanted more than a higgledy-piggledy farm garden, you wanted to create a bower of beauty, on a few hectares, a park in which you could lose yourself, with arcades of rambling roses and round ponds with fountains, garden rooms such as you'd seen in the magazines, with laid-out paths and boxwood hedges and vantage points, with mixed beds throbbing with larkspur and poppies, striking accent plants, conifers and flaxes, and flowering trees and shrubs in all seasons. Formal of design you wanted the garden to be, but informally planted. Like a story you wanted it, a fragrant visitable book full of details forming part of a pattern so subtle that one would be able to trace it only after a while. That's how you wanted your garden to be, a composition, a sonata with theme and developments and repetitions in varying keys, something that would form the jewel in the crown of Grootmoedersdrift farm.

Jak grumbled about money when he saw you were in earnest.

You brandished in front of his face the quotation for a de-wrinkling operation that Agaat had found in one of his pockets.

Thousands of rands! It's yóúr vanity that will ruin us, you said. Why don't you ever want to help me with anything?

He grabbed your wrists. Keep your nose out of my affairs, to look at you, you're actually the one who could do with a bit of plastic surgery. Reconstruction for Kamilla!

He pushed his fingers into the corners of your mouth. You tried to resist, to take his fingers out of your mouth.

Just lóók at you, this misery who calls herself Mrs De Wet. Permanently down in the mouth!

Agaat came upon you. Jak threw your hands from him and wiped his thumb and forefinger, which he'd had in your mouth, on his pants.

What do you want here? he asked.

Agaat's voice was hard, her businesslike housekeeping voice with which she often broke up your quarrels.

I beg your pardon, Mr De Wet, she said, I just wanted to return the ash pan to the fireplace.

You kept your hands in front of your face, ashamed of her coming upon you like that.

Sometimes, Agaat said, and what she said did not accord with her tone, sometimes I wish I could ...

You looked round. There she stood, the iron poker in her strong hand. It was superficially evident that she was referring to Jak, to something that she wanted to do to him. But her gaze was fixed on you.

Get out of here, you managed to say, it's none of your business.

It is, she said, and flung the poker into the copper tray, it is most certainly my business.

Did she say that? Had you heard correctly?

Get out of here, immediately, Jak said.

Without looking at you, she walked out with rapid little steps and her head high. If she didn't say it, her crooked drawn-up shoulder said it: It's the only business I have, you and your husband and your child and your buggering around.

You kept wondering about Jak in that time when Jakkie went to the border. From his first breakdown on the night of his great nursery rhyme – how old was Jakkie then? eleven, twelve? – you felt that he was working at and building and adjusting his theory of you, of who you were, and what you had done to him. It hurt more than any shove or slap.

So if you don't want to help me with the garden, you said, please do go ahead and write it up some time, all the stories that you've been accumulating against me for years, everything that you sit and think up about me, so that I can read it, because I don't get the whole picture, only the tirades and the obscure parables.

Go ahead and write yourself, it's no use your trying to pretend all of a sudden that you're interested in what I think, I've been thinking it for

a long time and I've been saying it for a long time, from the very start. Your problem is that that you don't notice a thing, Milla. And now all of a sudden you want me to be your gardener, get knotted, I say.

You were sorry for him. His face and still-fit body were at last starting to show their age. It wasn't only yourself, you realised, you wanted to console him as well with the garden, you wanted to soothe him as well.

You woke up one Sunday morning towards six o'clock with the garden layout practically complete in your mind.

Jak was away, the house was quiet. On Sunday mornings Agaat was off duty. You walked to the kitchen to make yourself some coffee. On an impulse you walked out into the backyard in your nightdress and knocked on the upper door of the outside room. It was wide open.

Come, I'm making us some nice coffee and rusks, I have a wonderful idea, Agaat, you must help me.

You started talking before you'd seen her. Your words dried up when you looked into her eyes.

The curtains were open. The room was bright with light. Agaat was sitting and embroidering in the deep chair in front of the window, her bare feet on a little mat of sewn-together moleskins. She was without her cap. Her hair radiated in combed-out peaks from her head. It was the first time in twenty years that you'd seen her without her cap. You felt as if you'd caught her naked, but you stood there and kept gazing.

The unkempt hair mass made her look feral. You wanted to look away, but you couldn't. The hair filled the otherwise tidy room like a conspiracy against everything in league with daylight and subordination. From the enormity of hair your eyes strayed to the grisly cement-work around the fireplace. To and fro you looked, at her head and at the clusters of shells and skulls and quartz pebbles and marbles and little slivers of iron, rivets. It was as if Agaat had recreated her unkempt self there in low relief.

Her embroidery basket was standing by her feet, with the tight balls of thread and needles stuck into their proper places in the pockets

and loops. The high white bed was immaculately made, with all her large embroidered pillows neatly arranged against the bedpost. On her clothes-rail the black dresses and the white aprons hung neatly serried. On the shelf above, fitted into one another three-by-three, the starched white caps, densely embroidered like mitres. But all of that, plus the zinc bath in its place under the washbasin, the table scrubbed white, the kettle shiny with scouring, the hearth-opening clean, the buffed noses of three pairs of black school shoes peeping out from under the curtain in front of the apple-crate cupboard, the Singer's black body neatly folded back into the stowaway cavity, was not enough to reassure you. The clumps of steel wool on her head, the manner in which she looked at you in her ungroomed state, there where you stood in the door, yourself with sleep-fuzzed hair and an unwashed face, with your thin shins and white knees sticking out from under your pink flannel bed-jacket, that unnerved you. You clutched the front of your nightdress, even though it was buttoned. You felt as if she were assessing you naked.

I'm cóming, she said, and stuck out her chin to manifest her displeasure, but the effect of it, without the cap, was one of vulnerability.

With an odd, reprimanded feeling you went and flung on a dress and dragged a comb through your hair so that when you went to sit down at the kitchen table you would at least not compare unfavourably with her. You knew how snow-white-starched she would report for duty.

She declined the rusk and drank her coffee with tight little sips. Her chin was stuck out and she listened to your plan with her eyes fixed to the wall, her cap a rampart before her head.

You had to control yourself not just to gather again all the papers and the coloured pencils and the gardening books that you'd set out and say to her she may leave now, thank you. Why should you suddenly become an apologist for your idea? A sort of sycophantish subordinate?

But you didn't want to give up, you wouldn't let yourself be quenched, and you changed your tack, excitedly you explained, elbows on the table, as lightly and merrily as you could.

Was she upset because you'd seen her embroidery-work? Nobody was ever allowed to see Agaat's creations before they were quite complete,

the cloth neatly washed and ironed and spread out for inspection. And this one was a huge cloth that she must have started that very morning, only the edges had been seamed. Were there sleeves attached? A neck-hole? You didn't want to look too hard. Those unruly wads bowed over the fine white cloth, the hand working rapidly and accurately with the needle. It was the sight of that that suddenly made you feel terribly guilty about the letter. The one that you'd read over and over again. How long had it been in your handbag before you'd eventually posted it? Hád you ever posted it?

Without looking up you filled one page after the other with your drawings and slid them in front of Agaat. One to explain the structure of the terraces, wider and narrower for variation, with stone walls and connecting steps that were supposed to lead the eye to the front door of the homestead. One to explain the scheme of arches and arcades and trellises that would grant the visitor access to prettily-framed pictures of the garden. Another one to chart the location of the fountain and the fish ponds and the watercourses connecting them with one another, and one to indicate the irrigation pipes. The last one was to illustrate the colour scheme, blue and purple and white and green would predominate, with here and there an accent of bronze and copper and ochre. And then on the west side there had to be a formal herb garden with everything fragrant and tasty, with a sundial in the centre and paths of fine gravel as you'd seen in the books.

You took your time over every map, coloured in the levels unhurriedly, and kept talking softly all the time as if to yourself before presenting the end result at higher volume.

Coax, you thought, soft-soap, even it if takes hours. At length you got up to fetch a jar of green-fig preserve, Agaat's favourite, from the pantry shelf. It was eleven o'clock and perhaps she could be won over with something to eat. Bread and butter and green figs. Anything to get her to open her mouth.

How about something special for the two old sweet-tooths on a sunny Sunday morning, you called airily from the pantry, and added even more airily,

So what do you say, Agaat? Do you feel up to it?

With a scraping sound you dragged the stepladder across the pantry floor and mounted its creaking rungs. You had to gain a bit of time to consider what your next move would be, perhaps a suggestion to go outside, to view the area under consideration, to assess the old garden as it was? That might bring some relief to the atmosphere, a displacement away from the square table-top where you were trapped together, something to break through the tension of the presentation and approval.

But the tension was even more palpable there where you were standing four shelves high on a rickety stepladder facing several seasons' jars of preserved fruit, chutneys, jams, syrups and pickles.

Suddenly the thought occurred to you to fall off the ladder. That would be an instant solution. All balances would be restored in the wink of an eye. You would be paralysed with shock and pain and Agaat would jump to help and attend to you, and then you'd be able to exploit the situation of badly-sprained employer to get her where you wanted her.

Where exactly you wanted Agaat, was what you asked yourself while you read the labels.

Albertas (old orchard) thick syrup 1970, Clingstone (old orchard) in brandy syrup 1971, Quince jelly 1973, Prickly-pear syrup 1975, Fine apricot 1980, Whole-fruit apricot and peach pickle (curried) 1981, Peach pickle (chilli) 1981.

Every preserving-jar in front of you on the shelf Agaat had handled, the picking, the peeling, the slicing, the boiling, the bottling, the labels were all in her upright handwriting.

Wholefruit kumquat jam (front orchard) 1972, Lemon marmalade 1972, Bitter orange marmalade, Wild watermelon (Gdrift, dryland), Sourfig cinnamon-sugar syrup (Witsand dunes), Green-fig (Pink fig tree) 10 October 1980.

You felt dizzy. For a moment the fall was a definite possibility. You supported yourself against the shelf.

Then you saw Agaat beneath you, head buried in one of the garden books that you'd set out on the table, the strong hand firmly clamped around one leg of the ladder.

Are you managing here? she asked. I see here they also talk of colour schemes.

The tone was sticky with sanctimoniousness. You were recalled from the faint to sudden fury. You could sweep off the whole shelf of bottles with your arm onto her head. She wouldn't even know what hit her. A cluster bomb of preserves.

Jakkie phoned yesterday, she began, her voice low.

He says they called him on the carpet to ask who this Agaat-person is and why her letters arrived sometimes open, sometimes gummed shut. They're scared of sabotage, he says, but he doesn't understand it, because it's mainly the other side's people who are sent letter-bombs, he's scared his superiors will think he's turned wrong or something and it's the secret police who want to eliminate him. He says he's had it with war. He says he has nightmares.

That's how your garden began.

After her deposition Agaat took the garden books to the outside room and made her own study of them. You kept thinking of the letter. Would she have seen it, you wondered? Would she have looked in your bag? When she went to take out the new pills from the chemist? You tried to remember when you'd eventually gone to post it, tried in vain to recollect licking and resealing it.

In the evenings after supper when Jak had gone to the stoep, Agaat would come and sit with you at the dining room table and make recommendations and see to it that you planned it all in the finest detail until your eyes were ready to fall shut. Then she made strong coffee which in turn kept you from sleep.

Take an extra Valium she'd say if you complained.

She persuaded Dawid to help you with the big things.

Jak stood on the sidelines, now and again when you weren't looking, lent a hand when Dawid asked him.

You had a strong pump installed at the dam and on Agaat's recommendation had a reservoir built for the summer on the rise behind the house. She saw a small bulldozer and scraper at Barlows in town and you hired it to construct the terraces.

Of compost material there was enough. You had big heaps made up from manure and straw from the stables. Agaat pushed a length of steel wire into each one and went and felt it every morning. It mustn't be too hot, otherwise it kills the microbes, she learnt from her book.

She reckoned that the farm hotnots, as she called them, were too idle and too few for the garden work and at her insistence you got a team of convicts from town to dig trenches, stack stone walls and dig out the flowerbeds three feet deep to improve the soil texture with additions of compost.

Agaat cooked great pots of rice and pork for the convicts and kept them lively with jugs of sweet Frisco every three hours. With a short quirt she walked to and fro behind the lines with the guard to see that there was no idling.

When it's spring again, she taught them, and the second and third voices of the refrain, day in, day out.

She had more or less burnt herself out by the time you were ready to go to Starke Ayres in Grabouw to buy seed and bulbs and trees and shrubs.

Those were your best times together, those excursions, those long hours in fragrant nurseries with your reference books and looking at the exotic flowering-habits and feeling the leaves of all the unfamiliar plants. And the names of the roses that you translated for Agaat, crepuscule, evening twilight, and explained, Mary Stuart, queen of the Scots with her long jaw, and wine-red Mario Lanza that she knew from your record with the songs from *The Student Prince*. Overhead the moon is bee-a-ming, you hummed together there in the nursery avenues. For the first time you had picnics again alone together, in the rose gardens of Elgin, in parks, on a bench under the huge wild fig tree with thirteen trunks, Ficus craterostoma in the botanical gardens of Kirstenbosch.

Cold sausage, sandwiches with thick butter and apricot jam and coffee with condensed milk from the thermos flask, Agaat's favourite picnic fare. Together you sat on the old green travelling-rug in the Gardens, after you'd shown her the statue of Jan van Riebeeck and the Castle and the fountains in Adderley Street and the flower market

where the Malay women tried to speak to Agaat in their Cape tongue and she didn't really understand them.

People stared at you, the formally-clad servant and the older white woman, as if you were a psychiatric patient, they looked at you, let out in the custody of your housekeeper.

See, I told you I'd show you Cape Town one day, you wanted to say, but you thought better of it.

She read your mind.

Well, would you believe, here I am actually seeing Table Mountain, she said and swallowed the rest of the sentence.

Let's go for a drive, you said, then you can see it from the back as well.

With the map on her lap Agaat followed as you drove across Kloof Nek and read the names out loud of the corners and the bays and the heads. Lion's Head, Kommetjie, Kalk Bay.

Beyond Simon's Town you stopped at a little nature reserve next to the sea and went to show her the penguins.

Agaat's face at the sight of the waddling nestling colony, to see her face as she gazed at the great world passing her by, the tanker on the horizon, the streets, the buildings, the shifting peninsula with its two horizons. On the way home she didn't say a word.

After the structures of stone and wood had arisen in Grootmoedersdrift's new garden, you did most of the work yourselves, sowed the seeds and planted the seedlings and thinned them and transplanted them from the seed trays and made cuttings and tied up the tendrils and scattered the snail poison and sprayed the roses. And now and then transplanted a thing that wasn't in the right position, or grafted a little struggling tree onto a stronger trunk.

Without Agaat you couldn't have managed it, you said in your little speech at the first spring celebration the following year. At Agaat's suggestion you presented a garden festival and fund-raising drive for the border soldiers. You invited the local branches of the WAU and the Women's Mission Union and the Southern Cross and the tea-drinking

was opened by the dominee's wife with scripture and prayer and closed with a hymn.

You peeped at Agaat where she was standing behind the cake table with her hand held in front of her stomach. Her eyes weren't shut during the prayer. And with the closing hymn she stared straight into the blue sky and swayed lightly on her heels as she sang along, her black-and-white clothes sharply etched against the purple irises in the bed behind her, her fine descant floating above the hymn there in the open.

O goodness God's ne'er praised enow, who would it not profoundly move.

*

who unpacks the boxes from bockmann independent living aids? see the fat green letters on the brown cardboard it's fall 1994 land of hope and glory who cuts open the brown packing-tape? who pulls off blocks of foamalite and plastic packaging? it's metal tubes chrome rods support surfaces who reads the instructions? who click-clacks the pieces into one another there they stand my externalised skeletons my walking frames one with legs one with wheels

tarantula or fortuna

choose!

who grabs the spider by the head? who shows the way? this is how you do it you lean forward on the crossbar who says it's like walking with a little table but without the top? don't look at your feet your feet are of no importance you drag them after your legs you keep straight you make a rigid knee the other one is like walking with the tea-trolley but without the tea you roll ahead you drag behind the wheels are braked you can adjust them if they turn too easily you fall

who shall tell the walker from the frame? and the wheel from the revolution? the imitator from the imitated?

who walks demonstration laps on the red polished stoep? who turns round at the furthest point with retracted chin with pursed lips? who cries soundlessly without tears?

I see she makes a rigid knee she flattens her feet she drops the arches drops her shoulders they bulge under apron bands her knuckles show white on the chrome

we'll take both she says

the frame for the morning the wheels for the evening we support your last steps so god willing twofold.

*

Wednesday 16 December 1953 quarter past three (day one Day of the Covenant!)

The great clean-up has begun. She's still groggy with the valerian. I thought I'd grasp my opportunity. Cut off the hair and washed with tar medicine and then with shampoo and applied ointment. Bad ringworm. Fiddled out the gouts of ear wax with matches and cotton wool and cut the nails. Big struggle to get the teeth brushed. Gums inflamed, lots of rotten teeth. Milk teeth fortunately, must be extracted, the whole lot while we're about it. Disinfected the mouth with extract of cloves. The whole body first rubbed with oils and then soaked in a hot bath for half an hour, afterwards scrubbed down with hard sponge and nailbrush and soap. Scabs, raw patches everywhere. Half limp, the little body. Eyes keep falling shut. Look at me, Asgat, I say, everything will turn out all right. Must think up another name.

Dried well and the whole body rubbed with oil again, all the nicks and cuts disinfected and covered with plasters. Full of little black moles. Must have them looked at, some of them don't seem right to me. Privates extremely tender and inflamed. God knows what happened to the creature, discarded, forgotten. Tomorrow to the doctor so that he can have a look at her. Who knows she may have all kinds of diseases. Must get inoculated.

Pox. Diphtheria. Polio. Can't have an infection erupting here on the farm.

Made her bed in the back room. No window, door can be locked. Immediately fast asleep. In old pyjama jacket of Jak's. Quite lost in it. Gave her another double dose of tranquillisers so that she can sleep for a long time. Suffering from shock it seems. Suppose to be expected.

Still 16 December half past eight
It's dead quiet but a different kind of quiet to the usual. As if the house has acquired an ominous charge. Went to see, she's out like a light.

Have brought something huge upon myself here. Feel exhausted/weepy/angry with myself or something.

Jak goes about grinding his teeth chronically. Selfish, he mumbles, what about me? I wait for the explosion. I'm trying to think of a name that will suit her, that she will take as her own, something not too far from what she's used to. Agnes, Aggenys, Anna. Perhaps then Aspatat provisionally, it's better than nothing and it's better than Asgat, ash-pit, ash arse, good Lord above!

18 December ten o'clock
I must force her to eat, clamp her between my knees, force open the jaws with one hand, push spoon between the teeth, tip, quickly press the mouth shut. With the other hand rub the throat to make her swallow. Only thin milky porridge, lots of sugar. Won't chew anything. Put down a bottle with teat next to her, she doesn't even look at it.

I'm scared she'll take to her heels again, I keep her locked up in the back when I can't be with her. I feel bad about it but what else can I do? A lead? Perhaps not a bad idea for the first while. Dog lead with harness? Perhaps she doesn't even want to run off.

When I put her up straight, she won't stiffen her legs. Falls over, plays dead when I get close. What wild animals do, insects, when they feel

danger threatening. Fall over. Protective colouring. Try not to be seen. Instinct.

Today she's sitting in the corner in a little heap with her knuckle in her mouth. A sign of progress already, I suppose, that at least she's sitting up. Yesterday she crawled in under the bed. I had to drag her out of there three times. Clung to the bed-leg with the good hand. Surprisingly tough, the little monkey, that hand I just about had to prise open to get her to let go. The third time I gave her a sharp slap over the buttocks. She must learn, my goodness. She can't come and play her tricks on me. Showed her Japie. A good old-fashioned duster with a solid wooden handle.

How old could she be? Four? Five? Could be anything, she looks badly undernourished and underdeveloped to me.

I must first get her into condition a bit before I take her to the doctor. Don't really want to hear what all he'll have to say. Mother says I'm off my rocker. Who put it in my way? I ask. You, Mother, as you put everything in my way.

Jak paces up and down scolding. Do you think you're a saint? he asks. Who are you going to wear yourself to a rag for now? Whose victim are you going to make yourself now? All I need to concern myself with is becoming a real mother, he says. Better that he insults me than that he says nothing.

19 December ten o'clock morning
Must simply go and sit and write down how it came about, the whole story, right from the beginning. The dam, the whirligigs round and round, the door creaking open. But it feels too long, too much. Where does something like that really begin? I must make time, before the details of it fade. I must supply the background, put into words the commission. Perhaps that will help me to look beyond the trees and see the forest.

19 December half past two afternoon
Dense as a stone. Not a peep. Close, black, dense, light, like coal. Won't talk. Won't eat. Clenches her hands in fists, one knuckle in the mouth, it's all pink and raw already.

She refuses absolutely to look at me. Her eyes just scamper furtively past my legs. Shrinks away when I come closer, turns the head away as if expecting a blow.

I try everything. Today pulled her in an apple box cart (OuKarel's handiwork with a strap around the legs and across the chest so that she can't escape) to the dam. Sat by the water's edge. Won't look, won't see. Showed her the whirligigs again, ducklings, everything that she should be able to recognise, but she shows no reaction. Pulled her to the drift, showed her the little boat, one day we'll row in it, I say, but the neck stays between the shoulders.

Dug up a cap because the head looks bad, all bare like that and full of sores. She doesn't like things on her head it seems, she pulls it off when I'm not looking, at least it's a sign of life.

Gave her worm medicine. Soiled her panties something dreadful. Scolded and gave a good hiding with the duster handle, what's the use? She's very far behind her age I think. Could see the worms, flat pieces of tapeworm, round dog-worms.

Ordered nappies from the chemist, waterproof drawers. Wet her bed three nights running. Mattress ruined. Had fourth bath, still tightly-rolled into a bundle. Pitch would sooner soak out of a ship than the stiffness in this child's limbs. Can't reach anywhere with the washcloth. She keeps her head pulled in, arms rigid against the body, knees clenched together.

21 December
Aspatat has a cold! Coughing and snottering. Must be from the first washing there in the dam on Goedbegin. Fancy a bit more co-operation with the eating, maybe because the nose is blocked, so she has to open her mouth to breathe. At least she's swallowing better. Jaws more relaxed. Must start with proteins. Today fish oil and vitamin C. Hellish battle. Gave malt syrup and lecithin on porridge. Sweet things do the trick, it seems. Will have to start using it as reward.

Sawed a hole in the door of the back room. Had Dawid install an old copper post-box flap over the slit. I must be able to see what she does when she's alone. Suspect she's sly, suspect she's pretending to be stupid. Remembered the hessian sack Lys gave along, put it in the room with her. She looks at it for hours. Doesn't move.

Head-sores healing nicely.

Went and dug up my old children's books in the cellar. Read rhymes to her. Who'd have thought that! I remember them bit-by-bit as I come across them.

Old mumblemould
I have a cold
I have it now
I give it to you
I tie it up here
And I'm in the clear.

Jak says I'm wasting my time and why am I spoiling our Christmas? I ask where is your faith, where is your heart? I possess neither the one nor the other, I do it exclusively for myself, for nobody else, he says. I don't dare use other people for my own purposes like that, he says. I'll see what comes of it, apparently.

He's just jealous, feels neglected. I devote all my free time to her.

Must succeed in this, I must make it work, make it worthwhile.

It feels as if the whole world is against me. First Mother, now Jak.

Must go and see the dominee about this, the child can't remain so nameless.

22 December

Now Í have a cold! Must have got it from her. Jak says it's but the beginning. He doesn't want to go anywhere near her. She gives him the creeps, he says, the idea gives him the creeps. He says I'm sick. He taps against his head when I peer through the slot at what she's doing. What a whopper of a Christmas present I've got, he says. Unto us a child is born, unto us a woolly's given, out loud down the passage, I say, Jak bethink yourself, what if she can hear and understand you?

Perhaps after all better get to the doctor if he can still see me before Christmas. Her poo is completely yellow from all the runny food she's eating.

Made red jelly and custard, showed it to her dished up in a bowl and said if she was good and allowed me to wash her nicely in the bath, she could have it. She's still not looking at me, but it does seem as if she hears me. (Must have ears tested. Deaf and dumb perhaps? I remember the funny high squeaking sounds. Retarded perhaps? You never know with these people. Generations of in-breeding, violence, disease, alcohol. Children of Ham.)

Fifth bath, still no relaxation in the limbs. It's almost as if she's holding her breath. Teeth do seem to part more easily, I fancy. She bites the spoon. Let go, I say, let go then you get more. I have to pull at it and wiggle it, then she lets go after a while.

Just like a dog. Reward works. Got down a fair amount of jelly.

She can have it every day if she's good, I say. If she learns nicely to sit on the pot for me, learns nicely to look me in the eye, eats her other food nicely and takes her medicine. Learns to sit nice and upright and to walk smartly. If she's a good girl. Ónly then.

Practise every day with her on pot at regular times. Hour after breakfast, hour after supper. Sit, I say. Pee. Poo. Push. I make little moaning sounds to encourage her. Pour water out of a glass into a jug for the pee. She is closed, shut as a vault. She presses her head into her lap. Then I walk out and lock the door and watch her through the slit. She hasn't noticed it yet because she's always looking down at the ground. She crawls off the pot as soon as I'm out, slither-crawls into the corner of the room as if she's trying to squeeze herself into the wall. Then I relent and put on the nappy. The privates look better but they're stretched and loose. Shudder to think what happened there. Wanted to put in my finger to feel, but she locks closed her legs. Doctor will have to look.

She has to get moving, then the poo will also get going. I tell her she mustn't be so timid. She could run like a hare that day at Mother's. I tap out the rhyme of the rabbit for her on the table-top.

There goes a bunny
says Sarah Honey
Shoot her with an arrow
shouts Mrs Farrow
It's too short
says Mr Port
It's over the hill
say Jack and Jill
Overshot the mark
says Jenny Dark
Right through the tail
says Dominee Heyl

It's hit the spot
says Auntie Dot
Put her in the pot
says John the Scot
Add a bit of mustard
says coy Miss Custard
Now to carve a fillet
says old Doctor Willet
Tastes very good
says wicked Willy Wood
You're a killer
says little Miss Milla.

27 December half past eleven morning
Both of us recovered fortunately. Christmas day rather quiet. Ma came but she didn't even go to look in the back room. I put the radio in the room with Agaat while we were eating so that she could listen to the Christmas carols. It can get hot there in the back room with the door shut like that, but I can't really let her wander around at will.

Definite progress in the eating department. Little by little, but we're getting there. This morning mealie-meal porridge with a little lump of butter and syrup, this afternoon mashed potatoes, meat sauce, sweet pumpkin puree. Cinnamon porridge this evening. And red jelly and custard. A bit more lively, I think. Jak's gone to friends in town, but I can't yet leave her here alone.

Half past seven evening
Great breakthrough! Got the bright idea just now, after reading her a bedtime story. Put three pink Star sweets in her hessian sack, left it at the foot of the bed.

I wonder what's in here, I said. Do you still remember? They're your own little things that you know! Do you remember Lys? Lys packed it

for you to play with when you came here. Don't you just want to have a look? Perhaps there's something good inside that I put in there for you. Go on, you like sweet things, don't you? Then I went out and peeped through the spy-hole to see what she would do.

The room was in twilight. I switched off the light in the passage to see better. Stock-still she lay under the covers for a long time. Then she sat up straight, there's a hand creeping out! First the strong one, then the little paw like a flat-iron. Then she sat up even straighter. First stared fixedly at the sack. Then her eyes moved. The first time in just this way, I could see the whites showing. Forward inclination in the body, the head rigid on the neck. My heart beat very fast. I could feel myself straining my own body forward, as if it were I that had to get to the sack. My knuckles I see are raw where I bit them from the tension, didn't even notice.

Fist in the mouth, fist out of the mouth she sits there, sits weighing and wondering, an eternity it felt like. Hand creeping cautiously to the lip of the sack. Gauging with the fingertips the hessian fringe, then the ravels of the sack between thumb and forefinger. Then she pulled in her breath sharply. Open is the hand, in slips the hand, mole wriggling in the sack! Deeper and deeper up to the elbow. Further still up to the armpit. Then the other hand, the weak one, like an outrider. Feel feel feel. There! Got it! Then both hands are working. Wrapping off. Teeth apart. Quickly she slips it into the mouth-hole. Lump in the cheek. Sucks. Smoothes flat the bit of paper, folds it, can you believe it! with quick precise little fingers, and puts the paper back into the bag!

I trembled. I couldn't believe it. But that wasn't all.

Then she took the moleskin and the little wheel and the stick out of the sack. Mole in the neck, stick in the wheel. Head at an angle. Fur against the cheek. Point against the rim. One, two, three, small revolutions she makes with the little wheel on the cover. Everything together again, from

the beginning, breathe in and once more. Mole in the neck, stick in the wheel, roll! Bull's-eye! Her own game! I told Jak when he came home.

Fantastic! he shouted, bravo! He clapped hands loudly. His face was ugly. Now you've broken her in. Clay in your hands. A blank page. Now you can impress anything upon her. Just see to it that you know your story, Milla. It'd better be a good one. The one that you fobbed off on me didn't work so well.

Lord, he can be so terrible.

So phoned Mother instead. She just listened. Right at the end she said what I suppose I could have expected: You're making yourself a bed, Milla, but it's your life, you must do as you see fit. She did though ask whether I'd taken her to a doctor. Suppose I must do something about it.

4 January 1954
Took her today for a once-over. Don't know if it was a good thing. She's terrified all over again. Ai, it breaks my heart, after all my trouble the last few days to tame her. While I was about it I had all the milk-teeth drawn at the out-patient's clinic for the coloureds there next to old Kriek's rooms. Set up a commotion, certainly not mute. They don't give anaesthetic there. Blood on the new frock in front. Had to apologise to the next doctor because I didn't want to drive back all the way to the farm then to go and get clean clothes on her. Ramrod-rigid and wild and convulsive she was all the time, threw her little hat as far as she could. It took two sisters to hold her down on the trolley bed. The internal examination showed exactly what I'd suspected. Multiple penetration, says the little chap, Leroux's holiday partner. He's too young, looks pretty inexperienced to me, but on top of that he was arrogant as well. He doesn't know if she'll ever be able to have children. All the better, we both of us thought. Apart from that there's nothing wrong. The flat black moles are not malignant, he can burn off the one on her cheek, he says, but he thinks it gives her face a

bit of character – I think he's making fun of me. There are, though, signs of malnutrition. Weak right hand and arm probably an ante-natal injury. Eyes, ears, throat, nose, pooper, examined all the holes. Tonsils will have to go. She was fairly upset by all the shiny instruments. The squeaking noise again. Inoculations high up on the little deformed arm. Took blood samples. Pale gums and rim of eye suggest anaemia, but that can be put right. She has to be fed lots of liver and spinach. Doctor can't say if she's mentally in order. Looks to him like a state of shock. I must bring her again when she can talk, then he'll be able to form an opinion. He stares at me with such blunt eyes, the little doctor. How do I get her to talk? I ask. I must decide how much I want to spend, he says. Remediation is nowadays possible for all kinds of handicaps. It depends on what your ultimate goal is with someone like that, he says. Half provoking, as if he suspects me of something. Got annoyed with the man, as if I had to account for myself to him. I'll work on her myself until she's caught up, I said. I'll look after her, she has nobody else on the face of the earth. There are few people who are prepared to do so much for the underprivileged, Mrs De Wet. Drily. Felt humiliated when I walked out of there. What kind of attitude is that to somebody who wants to do something that everyone is forever preaching and praying about? Love thy neighbour as thyself? Then they should by rights rather be asking: What can we do to help you with the poor child on whom you've taken pity? Hypocrites! The old wall-eyed nurse Schippers and so-called highly-educated Sister Goedhals with their po faces in their white uniforms, tchi, tchi, on the crepe-soled shoes, they stared me out of the door of the consulting room, as if I were trespassing on their territory, as if I'd polluted it. That's the last time that I'll take them Christmas prunes! How is the world supposed to become a better place if that's how the medical profession feels about the underprivileged?

Bought a cup of ice-cream for A. and myself afterwards from the café. Needed it. Went and sat in a quiet spot next to the river with her. Couldn't get the ice-cream into her. Knuckle in the mouth. Quite closed up all over again. On the way back bought a celluloid windmill on a

stick and showed her how it works. Sang her an old song, The Magic Mill, from my childhood and was moved to tears by it myself.

Turn the mill in the mountain's fall
turn the mill in the sea
turn the mill in the time of joy
nobody ever content can be.

She didn't want to take it from me. I held it out of the car window with one hand so that it could spin.

Turn fine the good white salt
turn soft the falling snow
grind small the grains of wheat
nothing's too hard for the mill of God.

Watched her in the mirror. Sits there with large eyes fixed in her face. It looks as if she's crying without tears.

Nothing to cry about, Aspatat, I say, we're getting you ready for life, that's all. Just the tiniest flickering when I mention her name. But it's not your real name, I say. Your name you still have to be given.

Still 4 January after supper
Had a terrible storm of crying, couldn't stop. Too many emotions for one day I suppose. Jak says I'm putting it on. He says it's New Year's disease.

She would take in absolutely nothing. No tea. No jelly. So took her to the room early. I can't any more. Feel as if I have to start all over. Have just been to peer through the slot at what she's doing. Sits in the corner all hunched up with rigid eyes and looks at the door. She's cottoned on to the spy-slot. I put all the drawn teeth into her shoes so that the mouse can bring money.

Can still not stop crying. Don't know what about.

Jak mocks me by repeating the rhymes that I say to her.

Oh bat oh bat
butter and bread
you come in here
you're good as dead!

He says I mustn't blubber now, I must now chew what I've bitten off, he says I must go and cry somewhere else, he wants to sleep. So now I'm sitting here in the living room. The house is heavy and still. It feels as if a disaster has struck. Is it of my doing?

6 January 1954
Jelly for breakfast, afternoon and evening. That's all she'll eat. I can see the mouth is still sore from the drawing of the teeth. Sit with her in the garden in the morning. Sing everything that comes into my head, talk non-stop everything I can think of, all the names of the flowers. Clack my teeth, smack my lips, click my tongue, show all the speaking mouth parts. Imitate all sounds, brrr goes the tractor, bzzz goes the bee, clippety-clop gallops the horse, moo says the cow, baa-baa says the sheep.

Tried to explain her surname, Lourier, to her with the twigs of the laurel tree. Aspatat Lourier, down at the weir, Aspatat Lourier feels no fear. She slowly started to thaw a bit today. Watches me surreptitiously when I'm not looking. Still won't take anything from me. Sweets, yes, but only when I'm not looking. I don't want to teach her underhand ways. I close my eyes with the sweets open in my hand, she doesn't take them, she's more wary than a tame meerkat.

Have a sore throat from all the singing and talking. How long still before she's going to become human? I feel I must prove something. To myself, to Jak, to my mother, to the community. Why do I always give myself the most difficult missions? The most difficult farm, the most difficult husband, and now this damaged child without a name?

I've exceeded the limits of my abilities with her. As if I'm trying to come to terms with something in myself. What exactly is it that's driving me? With something like this most normal people would give up before they've even started on it. Perhaps those nurses were right after all, the little sceptical doctor? Perhaps I'm just wasting everybody's time here? And then without any guarantee of success either, without support from the community. But is it fair? People here are quite prepared to clap hands if you've accomplished anything unusual, are only too fond of bragging of an achievement from among their own ranks, as long as it never cost them any extra money or effort. If it had been another country, would it have been better? But every country has its share of pettiness, I suppose.

10 January
I have nightmares about the child. Dream I pull out her tongue like an aerial, one section, two, three, longer and longer I pull it out, my hands slip as I try to get a grip on it, there's no end to it, she laughs from the back of her throat, thousands upon thousands of red tonsils wave like seaweed, her tongue shudders in my hands, like a fishing rod, there's something heavy biting and tugging at the line, pulling me off my feet, drawing me in, into her mouth, then I wake up screaming. Jak shakes me by the shoulders and slaps my face. He says he's not giving it much longer. He says the day will come when I'll open my eyes and she'll be gone for ever. He'll see to it, he says, and nobody'll breathe a word. I, I say, I'll breathe a word.

16 January
Breakthrough! This morning in the garden, all of a sudden, her gaze perks up. She raises her little eyebrows, the mole on her cheek moves up and down. She looks past my shoulder, looks at something behind me. Then she looks straight in my eyes for the very first time, and then back again over my shoulder, as if she wants to say: Look behind you! Look! Beware! Look! I play back with my eyes, raise my eyebrows: What do you see? Behind you! she signals with her eyes. What can it be? I make my eyes ask to and fro. She looks more and more urgently, she holds my

gaze, she directs my eyes, I'm almost overcome with feeling her own will stirring, the very first time!!!

So then it turned out it was Jak all the time who'd stood there making faces at her behind my back. He gets more out of her than I. He laughs, says it's easy, all it is, she knows who's actually the baas here on Grootmoedersdrift, just maybe she'll succeed one day in bringing it home to his wife as well.

17 January
I use Jak's code now. It works well. I look past her. Lóók, I say with my eyes, look behind you. What? asks her gaze. Look, look, beware behind you, there's something. Then I step back, pretend I'm trying to get away from the 'something'. It's the only way to get her to move in my direction, a kind of scampering crawl, then she stops, on all fours, just before she reaches me. I don't want to scare her, but it's the only way. When at last she dares to look round, I show her, ag, it's only a cloud, it's the sun, it's a tree, it's a bird. Nothing to be scared of!

Now we play it all the time. She's starting to bluff back with her gaze. She understands quite well how it works, the eye game. Now I can at least spare my voice a bit, I was getting quite hoarse. Now there definitely is communication, I'm certainly not imagining it. I set my eyes in every possible way, I look in surprise at a spot right behind her, then she jumps round, or I stare soulfully at a place far behind her, she gazes into my eyes for a long time before turning round to see what it is.

20 January
She's in thrall to my eyes now. She looks everywhere that I look. Ever more complicated bluffing games we play, surprise games, guessing games. I could never have dreamed you can achieve so much with your eyes.

For instance I look past her but she doesn't look. You'd better see what's going on there, I signal with my eyes, but she doesn't look, she holds out. It's very very pretty! I signal, or, it's really ugly, or, it's terribly creepy, or, it's very nice, or, it's going to catch you!

At last she looks, mostly there's nothing in particular and when she looks back I evade her glance, all innocence. Then she comes and stands against me until I look at her. Then I shut my eyes to indicate: Close your eyes. Then I put down a cookie or a sweet somewhere. Then I signal again, look there, behind you is something nice. But then I have to look away until she's eaten it. I must just take care that she doesn't react to reward exclusively. There won't always be a reward. She múst simply learn to speak now. You can't live by looking alone. I take out the duster. She's going to get Japie, I say, on her backside, if she won't talk.

21 January 1954

I always have a struggle with her in the mornings, she lies all huddled up and doesn't want to budge. Just like a little cold animal that has to warm up first. Now I've thought up a warming-up exercise. 'The Greeting to the Sun' I call it. I demonstrate it to her, first nice and high on the toes, then strétch with one arm, then strétch with the other (the little weak arm I still have to operate for her, but I'm sure it'll catch up), one bíg step forward, one bíg step backward, dip at the knees, dówn with the head, úp with the head, good morning, o mighty king sun!

If she doesn't want to, I rap her with the stick of the feather duster, that usually does the trick. I simply have to apply discipline here. We're going to do it every morning, I say, until you jump out of bed in the mornings and do it of your own accord.

22 January

She must guess what I'm looking at, we play, she must point to what I'm looking at. At first the hand was close to the body, just a little

protruding finger pointing, this or that, now she's pointing with the whole arm, has even been running these last two days to the tree or its shadow, or the red-hot pokers, or the row of agapanthus, or the tap, or the fish pond or the stoep steps and then I call the name of the thing: Flower! Stone! Water! then she touches it quickly, as if she's afraid it'll bite. Perhaps she learns more from my saying a few words than from my talking non-stop.

27 January

I no longer have to lock her up all the time during the day. She follows me everywhere. Are you my tail, I ask? She only looks for my eyes. I show her in my picture book: Horse's tail, pig's tail, sheep's tail, dog's tail. There is a little finger pointing now, with its own will and purpose. Horse's eye, pig's eye, sheep's eye, dog's eye, she shows. I leave the books with her in the room. She pages for herself when I don't look, but with such cautious fingers as if the pages are scorching her.

30 January

First day without nappy and without accident. This morning there was pee in the pot, so she must have got up by herself in the night, or early this morning. Saar says she poos in the garden when we're not looking.

Don't poo in the garden, Aspatat, I say, you'll get worms again, poo in your pot otherwise you're not getting any jelly.

1 February

Jelly threat works well. For two days didn't get any jelly. Comes into the kitchen today to show me with the eyes: Come and see! Come and see! until I follow her down the passage. Look! the eyes signal. Look! the protruding finger points. A fine turd in the pot it was!

Oh sis! I say, one doesn't show people one's poo, it's impolite, you say nicely: Excuse me, I'm going to the bathroom, and you do your number two nicely and wipe your tail nicely and then you get jelly. Now you've

pooed in the pot nicely, but don't think it's that easy, jelly you'll get when you've learnt to speak nice full sentences.

Then it looked at the ground and jutted out the chin! First sulk! First clear facial expression to play on my feelings! It excited me very much, but I can't show it. Tidy up your face, then you'll have jelly, I say. Then she rearranged the face and looked me straight in the eye, ever so sanctimonious. I had to look away. Couldn't help wanting to laugh. Just like a little puppy that begs even though she knows she's not allowed to.

5 February
Is eating well now, every day. Chicken and vegetables, with the hands when I'm not looking. First little slice of brown bread as well. Just has to be hungry enough. Doesn't want to handle cutlery herself yet. Just as if she doesn't want the insides of her hands to be seen. A few times already I've forced open the hands, pressed in the palms, felt through all knucklebones, couldn't feel anything wrong, except that the small hand is colder and limper. Perhaps also it's just become lazy, from being hidden all the time and never being used, the little arm though is clearly deformed.

You could fold the pink sweet's wrapper, I say, don't think I didn't see it. You can do everything with those little hands of yours. She just stares at me with big eyes.

6 February
I open the little weak hand and put the hand-bell in it, I shake it with my hand folded around hers, but when I let go, she drops the bell.

7 February
Devised a little game, call-each-other-with-bells. I take the bronze bell and she has the silver one with her in the room. If she answers my ringing with her ringing, I'll unlock the door of her room, I say. I ring it in the kitchen and creep closer and peep through the slot. What would

make her so scared of picking up something, I wonder? She sits and just looks at the bell, does though hold it now for a few seconds if I put it in her deformed hand. We're going to make it strong, I say, we're going to make it clever just like your other hand, we're going to exercise it and give it nice things to do every day.

8 February
Went to see Ds Van der Lught in town this morning. Quite patient and fatherly. It's a very big responsibility, he says, but the Lord put it in your way to teach you patience and humility.

Only over tea could I bring myself to touch on the matter of the name. The nicknames with which she grew up in her own home, he just shook his head, was immediately very helpful, took thick reference books off his shelf. 'Agaat' he suggested then. Odd name, don't know it at all, but then he explained, it's Dutch for Agatha, it's close to the sound of Asgat with the guttural 'g', it's a semi-precious stone, I say, quite, he says, you only see the value of it if it's correctly polished, but that's not all, look with me in the book here, it's from the Greek 'agathos' which means 'good'. And if your name is good, he says, it's a self-fulfilling prophecy. Like a holy brand it will be, like an immanent destiny, the name on the brow, to do good, to want to be good, goodness itself. We'll have her baptised accordingly when she's a bit bigger, when she can understand what's happening to her, he says. Then we knelt and he prayed for me and for Agaat and the commission I'd accepted and he thanked the Lord for another heathen soul added to the flock by the good works of a devoted child of God, a stalk gathered into the sheaf.

I must write the commission as Dominee helped me to clarify it today. My task and vocation with this. Now I no longer feel so alone with it. And I must write up the beginning, the beginning of everything, before I forget the feeling, of how I found her and knew she was mine.