

1761 – 1798



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Come and see! The lizard on the rock, white ant in its beak. Its jaws start churning. It surveys its surroundings, all along the kloof. Its chomping subsides, its eyeballs roll. The colour of its head and forepaws proclaims its readiness to mate. It displays its red-brown back and ruff. It looks up, swivels its neck to the right. The blue skin of its neck strains and stretches.

See, behind the crag lizard I arise from the rock. I dust my hat, light my pipe. Behold me: I am the legend Coenraad de Buys. Come, let me contaminate you, my reader of tainted stock. If you read this, you see what I see. And I see everything. I am of all time, I am immortal. Do not call me soul. I have a multitude of names. Call me rather Coenraad, or Coen if you are my mother or sister. Pen me down as De Buijs, De Buys, Buys or Buis, just as you see fit. Call me King of the Bastards, Khula, Kadisha, Moro, Diphafa or Kgowe. I am all of them. I am omnipresent. I am Omni-Buys. You will find me in many embodiments. You will come across me as itinerant farmer and anthropologist, rebel and historian. I am a vagabond, a book-bibber, a smuggler, lover and naturalist. I manifest as hunter, bigamist, orator, pillager, patriot, stone-shagger. I am a warrior and a liar; I am a

scoundrel and a teller of my own tale. I am going to blind you and bewilder you with my incarnations, with my omnipotent gaze. I am a bird of passage, I am the wind beneath your wings. Stroke the small of my back and you will know I am no angel. I know you well. I know you can't look away.

May I bewhisper you further? The little hairs in your ear vibrate as my breath comes closer. Migrate with me through human memory, over the unmarked dusty wastes as far as the primal footprint, the first built fire, the troop of ape-like creatures heaving erect in the grasslands. Hear the feet stamping in the caves. See the half-human animals scratching and painting on rock faces, how they trace the trajectories from animal to human, voyages between hand and paw, snout and nose, transitions to the other side.

How far are you prepared to follow in my footsteps? Have you taken fright already? Behold the scars of my passage, the marks of my skin on mother earth. Note well: My hide is this dust and sand. Hear me in every footfall, every hoof-fall. See me reflected in every eye gazing into a fire: I am both mark and mirror. I am of this land, bred from stone.

See, the crag lizard swallows the termite, minutely adjusts its foot, scarcely skims the soil. Listen, history is starting to quake, the dust of forgotten battles and unrecorded deaths is shaken up, quivering under the seething surface.

Rush headlong with me in the frantic flight of time to where the hunters and diggers of roots are shouldered aside by herdsmen and tillers of the land. Onward, through eras of wandering and settlement. Hurry past seafarers planting crosses in their wake. Skim past shipwrecks named for saints, smashed to smithereens on the rude rock of Good Hope. Come wade with me through the rivers of blood: pulsing from noses during dances, spurting from bodies, pouring down hafts and blades of wood and iron, later from bullet wounds, primordially from the wombs of mothers, from hymens and umbilical cords; all the blood always slurped back into the soil.



As through the spiral in the barrel of a gun, more rapidly with every rotation: Streak over hills and dales and Company's Gardens, over the land, this dumping ground for northern brigands and heretics. Skim along over the cries and sighs of animals and humans. Fly over the importation of slaves and then the importation of horses, over the bones of the Strandloper and the remains of Van Riebeeck's midday meal, over forts called castles here, over the first Dutch Reformed sermons, the first sugar, the first brandy, over the blood, over riot and revolution, over drawn-and-quartered rebels and black holes of incarceration. Flash over wars and Christians and Hottentots and Caffres and Huguenots and Dutch courage and chicanery and pox and Groot Constantia and the Great Fish, over rivers that erode and borders that overgrow. What are you looking for here? Do you know why you're looking for me? What are you going to do when you find me? Go on, go kneel by any carcass and see the flies cluster like a cosmos opening into bloom; see! This here ground obliterates and digests. It slurps up history and boils it down to nothing.



Listen, the songs of the land resound over it all. Hear the songs of men, the songs of the veldt, the skirling and screaming. Just listen to the beat on metal and sticks and stones and oxhide, on bellies and hoofs, on stoneware from the earth. All over this wretched earth the roaring and bellowing, the yowling and yelping. The claps and the cracks. So loud, so quiet. So delicately the salamander places its foot, I could swear it can smell the blood in the soil.

Perhaps you feel safer in the back rooms of museums? I am the feeler of the fish moth in every archive. I have access to every page. I feed as I read. So let us riffle through the names on maps of new rivers and new mountains and lines of longitude and lines of latitude and missionaries and old gods and a new nailed-down god and churches and caves and the cradle of mankind. Speed-read through murder and mayhem and scouts and pioneers and rebels and vagabonds and clashes and punitive expeditions and slave rebellions and cattle rustlers and colonisers and corpses, all the corpses. Verily, even at this distance

the echoing blows and gunshots, yes, even from the pages of blushing historians. I have seen it all, read every word. I forget nothing and forgive mighty little.

Come and see! calls my voice in this semi-wilderness. Come see the land break open its seals for you. Here where the shepherds shall have no way to flee, nor the principal of the flock to escape. Here where the Milky Way is spread out like the spine of a half-dead dun horse deliriously holding up the heavens over De Lange Cloof. Plains with flakes of rock and sand sometimes as red as old blood and sometimes as white as bone. In the north and the south serried mountains lie like petrified elephants heaving themselves out of the earth and then slumping back halfway and over centuries are once again buried under bush and stone. You can still see the wrinkles of their shoulders, the old necks and flaccid trunks, stretched out, spent, for miles across the landscape, but when you think you can hear them sigh, it's only the wind. The mountain slopes are lush, the kloofs wet and overgrown with ferns. The rock ridges gash open out of the green hide of the hills. The people build their houses near the rivers and name their farms after the rivers. The farms lie in a row, cattle territory at the far end of the kloof, a world of sitting and contemplation. If you get up and look around you, you can see your whole farm and from afar you can spy your damn neighbour approaching.

If you look carefully, you'll see the little house of stacked stone and bulrushes. If you listen carefully, you'll hear the people in the house bustling around the dying body of a father. The lizard you will not see again. It was rapt at sunset by the hawk.

