

Memories

The thought of rain drenched Karoo dust conjures up a bitter sweet fragrance in my memory.

A memory for so long replaced by the flat, black, steamy, impersonal, bitumen stink of water-slick tar in a late afternoon shower. A welcome change from the stench of the city around me, but for just a few, special moments before it's all sluiced down the drains and disappears forever into the long suffering, distant sea.

I wonder if the horizons back there are still the only boundaries in that infinite land - and whether those who stayed could imagine how I long to stand with them just one more time, shading my eyes to watch the clouds massing far, far out.

I wonder if the smell of moer koffie travels as far as it did back then and if the skins stretched to cure on the roof have that same sour, salt-meat odour that only fades when they're as stiff and dry as the surroundings,

When the night has drawn in and the flock has settled down under stars that make the sky seem top-heavy; are the night scents and perfumes still there - now that I cannot smell them? Night-flowering plants and shrubs mixed with the ammonia of the goats and woodsmoke, honest sweat and simple food? Maybe a brief trace of aromatic tobacco if Pa was lucky and sold a lamb or a day's labour.

Now that I think of it, one of the smells I remember best is the bird. The bird, that lost and startled by some night hunter, flew into the window pane, perhaps mistaking the orange candle light for an early dawn and safety. When I ran to see, it lay there, its wings trembling and twitching in the dust outside the house.

I scooped it up and held it against my throat, believing that I could will life back into its tiny body. It smelt of far away wheat-fields in the sun. Perhaps the wheat-lands on the calendar in the voorkamer. The dates were long gone, but Pa had left it there. He said it made him feel prosperous. As always, Ma just smiled her tired smile and said nothing.

I was almost asleep when Pa took the bird from me, his big, hard hands with the broken nails as gentle as a nurse. I heard him open the door and take it out into the night. He told me afterwards that it had revived and flown away, but I don't think it did.

Smells and memories. Memories and smells. That's what my life has been about.

I used to think that if one day I woke up blind, I would know where I was – just from the smells around me.

Do you know the smell of the post office in Kwaggagat? It has the smell of ink from the stamp-pad that the clerk banged down with such unnecessary force before he turned to changing the date with the little, ridged wheels, squinting behind thick glasses in the thin steel rims until he got it right and could slam the stamp down on Pa's army pension book. Like it was something he wanted to kill. He never looked at the little medal on Pa's lapel. I think it embarrassed him. The few notes he counted out twice on the counter had an ink smell of their own, and the rails he thrust them through smelled of Brasso. When we left, past the square wooden sandbox at the door, I would avert my face from its scattering of rancid cigarette corpses, glad of the open sky and the dry, clean breath of the open veld.

Benjy and Fossa smelt better than that sand-box. Like salt and old hessian. Somehow it went with their quiet patience, standing there in the sun waiting for us, with one hind-hoof cocked to rest that leg, then the other, with their long ears drooping in the heat. I never asked Pa, but he always got down off the cart and went into Potgieter's, to stand like Benjy and Fossa, waiting to be noticed, eventually coming out with a little something for me.

If it was black balls in the brown paper packet, I would hear them clicking together before I caught the scent of aniseed. If it was Wright's treacle toffee, that heavy, sugary perfume would come right through the wax wrappers. I still remember the arrowroot tang of Wicks bubblegum from the one and only time he bought it for me. I chewed that until there was nothing left of it.

There are no wheatfields here. None that I can see from my bed. These smells are clean and chemical. I would remember them if I ever again

came across them. But I don't think I will, any more than I believe that the bird got better. I think my father buried it to save me from sadness. Buried it somewhere out there in the bushes, where the balsams and sweet fragrances would confuse the night hunter when it came to claim its prize.

I wonder if it's tonight that it will come for me and if I'll smell it first.

Mike Job