MY EYES HEAR NOTHING

by Creina Alcock

We sang our cattle down the hills, and the hills sang with us.

"Hawu hawu hawu! "

"Mayebabo"

"Beautiful, beautiful! "

"Zimnandi nkomo"

And only on the third night did the song grow quieter, and the hills were quiet too as the moon led us home.

Even then it was home, this unfenced vastness where we had pitched our tents four months before. **Mdukutshani**, we called it—the place of lost grasses. A new home, and one that must be paid from the work of ten years—those 900 cattle we had marched from the highveld down to the warm Tugela valley.

There are 400 cattle now. The rest are dead, stolen or strayed. And sold, of course, for many **were** sold to pay off the farm. One year later we are oldtimers, Oldtimers to shots in the night and knocks in the night, to guns hidden in porridge pots and burning huts that explode in a fireworks display with all the ammo hidden in the thatch. A year later we have learnt to speak with nonchalance to a man sharpening his spear.

"Nobody in his right mind would buy there," said the storekeeper, who had first pointed out the farm. "The kaffirs cut your fences, steal your cattle . . . ."
"Msinga? " whistled others. "Do you know Msinga? "

We did. Nowhere else in KwaZulu was such a population, such poverty, such staggering soil erosion. Msinga was a by-word for destruction, for hopelessness, and we had found a farm next door to Msinga.

There were other men who had once called this place home, who now watched us from across the river. For them Mdukutshani meant lost years and lost laughter. Although no White had lived here before, it was "White" land, and although the Blacks had been here 100 years, they were "squatters", and six years ago had had to move away. All 20 000 of them. Then the Whites had offered this land for KwaZulu consolidation, and a KwaZulu Cabinet Minister had travelled down to examine the offering.

"Monkey country" he snorted. "We've got enough monkey country. No thanks, you can keep it."

So although they don't want it, the Whites have kept it 86 000 hectares of uninhabited, unfenced, eroded land.

Mdukatshani is on a corner, and although we knew it would be best to delay our move until we had built homes, fences, a dip, a school, we had no time, so we piled our possessions in the veld and hoped the winter would soon pass.

But the Winter was a long one.

As the fences went up, so the fence cutting started. Donkeys and goats invaded the farm, while axes tapped a tune of falling trees. It was White Man's land now, and everything was up for grabs. Shirts vanished off bushes where they had been spread to dry. "While I was building some boys came to help me. Now I can't find the nails . . ."

"Remember that man who stopped for a chat? I hate to be suspicious but the hammer's gone missing . . . "

Food, cups, plates, spoons vanished from our outdoor kitchens, while torches, money, clothes dissolved into thin air if we left the tents unwatched for a minute. White ants got busy on our boxes in the veld and there was heartwater among the cattle.

It came suddenly. An animal would jerk, totter, lie down. Within two days, sometimes within hours, it would be dead. If we saw the symptoms quickly we could save it, so the men herded the hills armed with syringes. Before the worst was over 38 had died. Women came crowding in from the Reserve to rejoice at the carcases. With gusto they skinned, hacked huge chunks of meat and carried the dripping portions to our makeshift butchery. If nothing had died that day they would find a sick animal and sit down to watch it.

"Hasn't a hope," one would say cheerfully. "Should be dead by nightfall. I brought my knife just in case."

Before we could control the heartwater, stealing started. At first there were only six cattle missing. Lost in the bush somewhere? We were not worried. But when they climbed to 15,20, 40,60 short, we knew the cattle were being stolen under our noses.

We blundered as only strangers could blunder.
Bheki got spekboom sap in his eyes while chopping a new track. He was clutching his head in agony when some women passed.

"What a pity," they said sympathetically. "There's only one cure but not one of us is lactating at the moment."
"Won't condensed milk do as well? " pleaded Bheki. We tried powered, and it helped a bit, but it was three weeks before he had recovered. Kwenye was luckier. Blinded and groaning he was groping his way home when he met an Msinga matron.

"Wait my son," she said, and lifting a massive breast squirted hard. Kwenye sighed with immediate relief from the pain. Learning can be a painful process.

Long before we were ready the world was clamouring at our tent flaps.

"Numzaan do you remember me? I helped your man Kwenye when he got spekboom in his eye. My baby has diarrhoea and is hot and cold and won't eat. There is no bus today, what shall I do? "

"My son has been stabbed in the eye . . ."
"My husband has been shot in the leg . . . "
"My daughter has started labour . . . "
"We have had to tie him up because he has gone mad . . . "
"Last night they stole my goats . . . "
"The taxi won't start . . ."
"My cow has a swelling . . . "

What were we doing there? We wondered too, at times. The theory was: We'd show KwaZulu how to handle monkey country and train the men who would have to do it one day soon. Together we would bring back the lost grasses of Mdukatshani. Together. We had meetings to introduce ourselves, to explain ourselves. Meetings to plead with donkey owners. Meetings to bargain with goat owners. Meetings just to get to know our neighbours. Endless hours politely passing the beer. Talk, talk, talk, till our tongues were tired and our ears echoed with our wasted words.

"My eyes hear nothing," they say in these hills. "My eyes hear nothing." Which means promises are pretty, but we'll wait awhile and watch. We learnt to say it too.
"You'll never cut wood illegally again? My eyes hear nothing, Gogo, my eyes hear nothing."
"You'll come and work with us tomorrow? My eyes hear nothing . . . "

Change came with the midsummer sun. It came first with one man then with many.
"You don't know me Numzaan, but you helped my brother's wife with her child. Don't ask my name and don't remember me. Yesterday I saw some of your cattle hidden . . . "
Soft knocks on the door in the night.
"Numzaan if you send a man to the dip at . . . . . you'll find some of your missing cattle."
Nervous men on lonely paths.
"It must never be known I told you, but . . ."

The cold starlit hours before dawn have become tracking time, and the quietness of the hour has become as familiar as the hidden valleys where the whispers lead us. Already 63 stolen cattle have been collected and brought back home.

We find hope in other things too. The fences are still being cut —but the fences are being fixed as fast. Yesterday a man came to borrow wire strainers, and we saw a line of Black neighbours rebuilding the broken fence.

On top of the mountain 250 Reserve cattle are grazing our summer grasses. This time the animals are legally there— and 30 Black families pay for the grazing by working on the farm. Daily these people hack thorn and heap it in piles for our biodegradable internal fences—they are beginning to call it 'our' farm too.

There is a man of 70 who walks 30 km to our weekly discussion group under the trees. He joins the others—stock-owners, gardeners, teachers, all learning about "amabacteria" that shun air, "ama-algae" and photosynthesis. They greedily absorb everything.

"Harvest the sun? " they laugh. "Never."
"Population explosion? Ha hau hau. Now that explains a lot . . . . . "
The teaching is a two-way affair, and we are also greedy.

"Money? " they tell us. "That stuff? It rots away as you look at it. What can a man do? He's only safe if he has a heifer. Then his money grows. This year R50, next year R70. But money means nothing."

And the money is thrust at us in handfuls and bagfuls. Hundreds and hundreds of rands of meaningless money.
"Just one heifer? " they beg. "One maybe two . . . . ? "
From that first morning when our cattle wandered uncertainly down to the river of this new farm, people have been begging us for cattle. They have sometimes come 1000 km—in buses, taxis, on foot, in hired lorries. Men and women. Money stuffed in shoes, in blouses, under skirts of skin. We sold cattle until we had no more to sell, but the pleading went on.

There is no cattle market for the Black man. Even when he has the means he is a non-starter at the White sales, ignorant of the language, the method, the money. (At Msinga all business is still conducted in pounds, shillings and pence). Eventually we gave in. Join our co-op, we said. Bring your money and we will try to buy for you at the White sales. We bought 49 cattle last month. There were requests for 160. Those who had made deposits had done so with anxiety, laughed at by a hundred doubters. Woe, woe—now the doubters are descending on us too.

With all this thieving, why buy cattle? we plead.
There is nobody anywhere at Msinga who has not had cattle or goats stolen. That much we have learnt. We are not the only ones. "We hear the cattle bellow as they are driven out of the kraal at night," they say. "But it is safer just to let them go . . . "
"So why buy cattle? " we insist.
"We don't trust money anymore."

White ants can't get at your cattle, but they can get at everything else. We have been doing the stocktake, and must concede victory to the ants—chairs, cupboards, suitcases, bedding, books, mats, clothes, they've turned them all to dust. Shaking the anteaten remains of a file we came across something we wrote a year ago:

"Are we scared? Of course. We look at our bare hills, our dried up streams. We look across the river at all those kraals. We look at the crowd of people already waiting and we wonder if the odds against success are too great, if the need will not overwhelm us. But we believe it is right to try and we keep our panics private. Most of all, however, we are happy. We feel as if, for the first time, we are living in Africa."

Yes, the year hasn't changed that. But as we listen to the drums across the river tonight a new thought is added. This path we're on, it's a meandering one, and we're not sure where it's going. How do you point the way when you are a stranger on the path? □