

Thresholds, Blood spoor

And shall the earth
Seem all of paradise that we shall know? The sky
will be much friendlier then than now, A part of
labour and a part of pain, And next in glory to
enduring love, Not this dividing and indifferent
blue. — Wallace Stevens

I am looking again at a picture I know well: it is a roughly drawn representation of a sort of squat Christmas tree. Distributed about the boughs, like awkward ornaments, are five white wolves. Each of the creatures stares out at the viewer with an eerily fixed gaze.

This illustration is of course the famous drawing from one of Freud's key works, the "Wolf Man" case study ("From the History of an Infantile Neurosis" [1918]). Not only was this case crucial to the formation of psychoanalysis as a discipline, but it also provided a radically new understanding of representation generally: images, it suggested, distort and displace earlier events, substituting new equivalences that retain the link to original traumas only indirectly. For Freud, the fixed stare of the wolves repeats the child's castration anxiety when witnessing a primal sexual encounter between his mother and father. What seems to be external - the animals, the tree - is thus demonstrated to be a complex reformulation of an interior drama. On the face of it, therefore, this seems to be the exact opposite of the sort of representational concern we find, say, in genres like landscape painting.



Christine Dixie's work is concerned with landscape. However, it is also interested in the relationship between vision, surveillance, and trauma. Instead of the azure distances and aerial perspective we find in topographical illustration, her printmaking offers a different view of gendered, threshold spaces. "Landscape" has been displaced into a series of citations: a forgotten lithograph of a picturesque view curling on a wall; a partial prospect glimpsed past the shoulder of a man staring back towards the house. Within the claustrophobic spaces of the frontier home, a different economy of looking is set in motion, one that has nothing to do with distant prospects and which is triggered instead by Oedipal crisis, sexual violence, voyeurism, and the irruption of the Uncanny. This intensely self-conscious understanding of vision also seems troubled by the act of framing itself. It is as though the moment one describes a border around a field to be viewed, another narrative is triggered, something that cannot be contained. As if in answer to some terrible catastrophe at the heart of the family drama, a group of brown hyenas, or wild dogs begins to lope, with terrible intent, apparently following an invisible blood spoor.

For the white communities of the Eastern Cape, the idea of "landscape" was a key way in which the settler self accommodated itself to foreign terrain. This is an aesthetic paradigm best epitomised by the work of Thomas Bowler. Typically, a calm, unseen observer scans a picturesque prospect of valley and hills - dotted perhaps with aloes, indigenous bush, or even fringing kraals - receding into the purple distance. Like its British counterpart, the South African picturesque found a way of managing contradictions inherent in violent land practices: peasant labour, prior occupation, and traumatic land clearances are all effaced by an image of distant vistas that open up accommodatingly to the enlightened landowner. This form of pictorial understanding was as powerful in the work of amateur painters as it was in military illustrators. It continued in an obsessive landscape emphasis in the work of many later Eastern Cape artists, and culminated in the stylistic parochialism of the Grahamstown Group.

If the Eastern Cape has been the place where landscape was the dominant idiom, it was also a traumatic frontier zone. Violence was so pervasive in the mid nineteenth-century, that to many it must have seemed part of the topography. When the settler Thomas Stubbs provided British cartographers with intelligence about footpaths leading out of the colony, he is reported to have said the following: "On this path, my father was murdered, on this, Johnson was murdered, on this one, Anderson was murdered, and on nearly all of them someone [has] been murdered" (13). Violence took many forms, from the intense firefights between British troops and Xhosa guerillas, to the intense racism of Grahamstown journalists who called for the extermination of the entire indigenous African population. Out of this brutal experience, a new topographical need emerged, exemplified by what might be called the architecture of surveillance: chains of forts and signalling posts, military rayons, barricaded churches, Panoptic prisons, the gridlike quartering of the

ground in military maps. In this manner, the contrast between conventional picturesque representations of Eastern Cape landscape, and fiercely defended, militarised space, became exaggerated.

Is it possible to figure the experience of the Eastern Cape outside of the gendered language of landscape and surveillance? Thankfully, some glorious precedents exist. In Schreiner's *The Story of an African Farm*, for instance, Lyndall has that unutterable longing for blue distances normally reserved for male explorers. Most dramatically of all, there is the world of Coetzee's Magda, for whom the idea of landscape is inextricably tied to her experience of the confining labyrinth of an isolated farmhouse and a domineering father:

I am a thing that he holds by the shoulders and steers down the passage to the cell at the farthest end.
The wind blows everywhere, it issues from every hole, it turns everything to stone, glacial, chilled to the core. . . .
The wind blows out of my room, through the keyhole, through the cracks; when that door opens
I shall be consumed by it.

(J. M. Coetzee, *In the Heart of the Country* 55-56)

In Christine Dixie's etchings, the implied observer is never hidden. She materialises in shadows and reflections; she is the subject of trauma and a creature of the threshold, someone for whom the house is an extension of the body. What becomes visible, therefore, is a radical new imagining of space and history from the perspective of violent domestic interiors. Walk into any ruined dwelling in the Karoo and look out through the wind-eroded window frame upon the darkening land. Listen to the noise of the house. From this perspective, now, here, you are looking with an attentiveness to your own vantage point that places you outside conventional landscape, conscious of the body and of its historical implications. Where better than Nieu-Bethesda, down the road from the visionary edifice built by Helen Martins and Koos Malgas, its narrow spaces starred and multiplied with a myriad, psychotic glassy fragments that reach and tear the flesh, where better than here to be reminded that what seems to threaten from outside has always-already crossed our threshold. We cannot live by landscape alone; we must always, it seems, come home. This is the hard truth that generations of artists working from the Eastern Cape have yet to face. Yet it is a message hammered out in the noises of any abandoned Karoo house: the ruined screen door that creaks and slams repeatedly, moves to the rhythm of an old catastrophe, of a body twisting slowly at the end of a rope, and the inconsolable sobbing of a blind king.

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