

*The Edge of Things* brings together twenty-four South African short stories selected by award-winning author Arja Salafranca, and features writers such as Jayne Bauling, Rosemund Handler, Liesl Jobson, Aryan Kaganoi, Margie Orford, Fred de Vries and Hamilton Wende.

The stories range across a spectrum of themes exploring the complexities of relationships, childhood, the effects of solitude on individuals, and the crucial issue of identity in post-apartheid South Africa. Sometimes straddling the lines between fiction and nonfiction, and between reality and fantasy, the stories are an invaluable contribution to contemporary South African literature.

As Salafranca writes in her introduction: 'The short story is a delightfully supple and varied form. *The Edge of Things* is a testament to its vitality, and to the mastery of the writers who choose to play, practise and work in this exciting genre.'

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# THE EDGE of THINGS

South African SHORT FICTION Selected by ARJA SALAFRANCA

# THE EDGE of THINGS



SOUTH AFRICAN SHORT FICTION SELECTED BY

Arja Salafranca



# Sinners And Sinkholes | Perd Booyesen

Southern Africa has been home to a vast range of small magazines, many of which have long since disappeared into obscurity. We thought it might be interesting to dig up something from a little-known magazine for a new generation of readers to appreciate. The extract comes to us from *Sigms Magazine* (1955-1958) and is of its editor's popular 'Ask The Doctor' column. Dr Ali Allen (PhD), something of a legend in the South African anomalous phenomena community, penned 13 of these columns before the magazine closed down due to dwindling interest and the ill-health of its editor. This particular column caused a small stir when it was first published in the second quarter of 1956, and was picked up by several major periodicals of the day including the *Huisgenoot* and the *Witolly Hoof*.

'The Editor,  
Max Goldberg'

Dear Dr Allen

I am an enthusiastic reader of your column. I wish that *Sigms* would publish more than four times a year. It is becoming exceedingly difficult to find it in our news agent. I think some of the more lurid covers – like the baby with the scorpion's tail – might be scaring the manager! In your last column, 'Stigmata

<sup>1</sup>First published in *Mysteries of the Old Cape*, Number 4, Spring 1983: pp 87-95.

and Magnetism' you fleetingly mention something called 'The Vredfontein Abyss' in relation to strong magnetic activity in the northern Cape. I live in Graaff-Reinet and have never heard of a town called Vredfontein, let alone something called 'The Vredfontein Abyss. Could tell me a bit more about it?'

Yours,  
Marie Naude

Dear Marie

Today not many people recall the strange events which took place in 1923 in the small town of Vredfontein in the northern Cape. There are those who say that the town never existed and that all the talk of this secluded community and its mysterious fate is nothing more than an elaborate hoax.

Vredfontein first came to prominence in 1940 through the work of Jan Bruinhuis, a PhD candidate at Wits Archaeology Department. Bruinhuis penned the one and only journal article on what would become known as the Vredfontein Abyss. The article, 'Ghost Town: The Case for Finding Vredfontein' was widely dismissed by the South African academic archaeology community and was the last article which Bruinhuis (now a resident in Den Haag, The Netherlands) would write for a mainstream journal.

According to Bruinhuis, this quiet rural community managed to survive virtually isolated from the outside world by means of its agricultural produce as well as by the skilful application of traditional methods of animal husbandry. Then on the evening of 23 July 1923, in the middle of a particularly cold winter's night, the Vredfontein townspeople were awoken by what Bruinhuis described as a dreadfully loud, yet somewhat dull sound. One of the townspeople, Albert Cronje, purportedly a seventh-generation sheep farmer, wrote in his journal: 'It was like thunder, but not from the sky. It was from the ground, from

the dirt. The only thing I could describe it to was the sound of hundreds of ewes in labour, a sort of keening sound. It gave me the horries, I can tell you.'

Cronje's journal was the source of much of Bruinhuis's initial reconstruction of the event, but later entries in it devolved into what the archaeologist described as 'deranged hieroglyphics'. It is not known where this journal is currently located if indeed it exists. Bruinhuis's refusal to divulge any further information about his source was the reason for much of the initial criticism of his article.

Another inhabitant of the town was the fourteen-year-old Chantulle Wessels. Her recording of the events which transpired were written in her journal and it is my belief that her diary forms the entirety of Bruinhuis's conjecture about the Vredfontein incident. Unlike Cronje's journal, the whereabouts of Chantulle's journal are well known. It is currently being preserved at the Klerksdorp public library and is actually a tourist attraction for tourists of a more 'Transcendental' persuasion.

Rather than paraphrase Bruinhuis's entire article perhaps it would be best to offer you the journal entries themselves. The following extracts have been translated from their original language, although names have been changed to protect the ancestors and living relations of those concerned. So without further ado then, let us leap straight into the notes left behind by this bright, newly pubescent child, to see what they might divulge.

On 26 April 1923, a few weeks before the incident, Chantulle is preoccupied with subjects familiar to every adolescent girl – dreams, boys, and fish:

#### Dear Diary

This morning I woke up from a wonderful dream about me and S... we were both swimming through the most beautiful clouds... I often wonder where these dreams come from. What a strange thing to dream! Swimming through the clouds! S- and I were like little fishes,

like tadpoles. I had gone swimming with Pietie in the Kannemeyer's well on Tuesday. I wonder if that had any thing to do with the dream.

There are several more of these innocuous entries that don't warrant reprinting. Heaven knows what fish have to do with boys, these are clearly the ramblings of a consciousness still aslumber. But then – at the start of May there is a distinct change in tone:

#### Dear Diary

The rags and medicine man came through town today. I don't understand why everybody makes such a fuss about his arrival. Yes, there was that story about how he raised Tani Siemnie's dog from the dead last winter, but weren't even the lesser disciples able to do such things?

Chantulle's reference here is to a common northern Cape phenomenon at the time. Itinerant clothing (the rags Chantulle alludes to) and other household goods salesmen often doubled as doctors or pharmacists, though they were in truth much closer to what the Americans would call 'snake oil salesmen'. The braver amongst them pretended to possess supernatural abilities and often, with the blessing of the local clergyman, ministered to the townspeople. The reference to the resurrected dog is an old trick employed by the salesman. The night before the resurrection the medicine man would sneak into a small holding and administer a dose of a crude but very effective muscle-depressant. To untrained eyes, it would very much appear as though the dog was indeed dead. The medicine man would then take the dog to a secluded place and wait for the depressant to wear off. The interesting thing about this entry is Chantulle's somewhat cynical attitude towards the medicine man. For Bruinhuis, this marked her as a trustworthy source.

Dear Diary

The rags and medicine man has moved in as a *bywoner* on Oom Wessels' farm next door. I don't know if father is very happy about it, although mother doesn't seem to mind. Pietie wanted to visit the medicine man and take him a pumpkin and some smooth glass as a present. I told him not to be stupid and return the pumpkin to the pantry before father comes home. The people here in Vredefontein are too generous for their own good. I think even if the devil himself came here they would invite him to be a *bywoner* and take him gifts of pumpkins and smooth glasses. I am sure people in Graaff-Reinet do not behave in such a fashion.

Dear Diary

I was forced to accompany mother to visit the rags and medicine man today. Mother has been complaining about her arthritis and even though Doctor Wilhelm gave her two different ointments she was sure the medicine man (everyone calls him Meneer K), had some ointment that Doctor Wilhelm hasn't hear about in his 20 years of medicine. Meneer K gave mother a vial of a purple liquid that looked and smelled like methylated spirits but he said it was made from seaweed from Natal coast. The magic of the ointment will only work, he says, if he rubs it in himself.

Dear Diary

For the last week mother has been taking me to see the rags and medicine man. I have to sit on the stoep while he applies his healing ointments to her in the *blinnekamer*. I'm tired of playing with my dolls on the hard clay. The Wessels' stoep is so dirty. Do they want me to sweep it for them? Well, I won't.

The next entry marks the appearance of a strange boy named either Ralph or Corson (her writing, possibly due to her becoming emotionally charged at this point, becomes less precise). Bruinhuis refers to him as the messenger, though what this 'message' may or may not be does not ever become apparent throughout the journal.

Dear Diary

Today, when we went for mother's medicine, something strange happened. I was sitting on the stoep waiting, when a small boy walked passed the house. I've never seen him before, he had red hair and freckles and was clapping his hands as he walked. He looked at me as he walked passed and said something very strange. He said 'Wouldn't you like to know?' 'Know what?' I shouted, but he just laughed and skipped away. If I see that little boy again I think I'll hit him on the ear so hard.

Dear Diary

It's very cold today, even for winter. Pietie says he heard father say that this was the coldest winter in 14 years. It was too cold to go out so I spent the morning in my room laying out everything I own on my bed. 4 regular dresses, 1 church dress, 2 petticoats, 3 undergarments, 1 pair of good shoes, 1 pair of bad shoes, 4 pairs of socks, 1 school knapsack, 2 pencils, 2 dolls, 3 books (2 Bibles and 1 comic), 1 ring, 1 necklace, 1 Alice band, 2 jam jars of magnetic rocks collected from Oom Cronje's farm, 1 jump-rope, 1 shell from Cape Town and a piece of the smoothest glass in the whole wide world. If I had to leave town tomorrow I think the only thing I would take is my diary and my pair of good shoes (and the glass).

'The second appearance of the 'messenger' comes through Chantulle's little brother, Pietie. Bruinhuis's critics have highlighted the rhyme as a crude foreshadowing literary device, and argue that it proves that the journal is a work of fiction.

# Dear Diary

Pietie says he played with the red-haired boy today. He says the boy is called Ralph and is English. It is very convenient that he only mentioned 'Ralph' after I told him about my encounter with him. Pietie says 'Ralph' taught him the following English rhyme –

*Ring a ring a Rosie,  
A pocket full of posies;  
Ashes, Ashes!  
We all fall around!*

I don't know what it means but it is a stupid rhyme if you ask me and I am sure that Pietie picked it up from the Wessels boys whose older brother attends an English boarding school and who doesn't even know anything anyway. Well, I find Pietie's lies gets (sic) worse every day. Father should have a talk with him.

Here we approach the explosion and Chantulle complains of sadness and of headache. Again, critics attacked its crude foreshadowing.

# Dear Diary

'Today I felt sad. I don't know why. If I knew why, then maybe I wouldn't feel so sad. It might be because my head hurts, but I don't think it's that. I'm just sad. That's all.

Then the explosion. Notice the strange behaviour of the father. He says that they have not found the source of the explosion but leaves the house with a torch and shovel.

# Dear Diary

Last night in the middle of the night there was a loud explosion. Everyone in the house was woken up by it. Pietie began crying and mother had to rock him back to sleep. Father left with a horse and his gun to the Wessels' place where the explosion had come from. I asked mother what was happening but she told me to shut my mouth up. Pietie, mother and I stayed under the kitchen table until morning. I couldn't get to sleep because of the rats under the kitchen floorboards. Father returned at about 7. He didn't say anything, except that they couldn't find the source of the explosion. He told mother to make him a big flask of coffee, then he took his torch and shovel from the shed, and rode off again to the Wessels' place. Auntie Ingrid came to visit us still wearing her nightgown at about 8. She said Oom Simon had rode with father to the Wessels' place. Auntie Ingrid said that the explosion meant trouble was coming to Vredfontein. I rolled my eyes to the sky to show how obvious this was. I mean really now. Auntie Ingrid is so stupid sometimes. And her nightgown is so faded, she should ask the rags man for any piece of sack he's got, it'll be better than that gown.

The 'messenger' appears again. And the litany of strangeness: the red hair, the burning lips, the modern clothes, the triangular hopscotch field with its strange numbers.

# Dear Diary

Today I kissed the horrible English boy with the red hair. I didn't want to, but he said he would destroy the whole town if I didn't. What a silly thing to say. He said his name was Corson. My lips are still burning. I met him two kilometres into the path that leads to Oom Wessels' farm, where father has been since yesterday. I don't know what they are doing there but there is a lot of talk among the women. Father sent word for me to meet him at the

gate to Oom Wessels' farm with a basket of bread, brandy, cheese, and his Bible. I saw the horrid Corson as I came down the last pasture hill before the farm. He was wearing fancy modern clothes and playing hopscotch in the middle of the dusty path. I tried to walk passed but he shouted for me to stop and to play with him. I looked at the hopscotch field he had drawn in the dirt and it didn't look like any field we used in town. Instead of squares with numbers, he had drawn triangles with funny looking letters. His kicking stone was one of the magnetic rocks that you find all over Oom Wessels' farm – these make for horrible kicking stones. Maybe it was how the English play hopscotch. I told him I had very important business and tried to run away. 'That's when he forced me to kiss him. He is a brute. Anyway, if this Corson thinks I am going to marry him he is mad. He is also mad to think a little boy like him can destroy Vredfontein. There are 40 grown men in town and each of them has a rifle.

We come now to the hole.

Dear Diary

I heard mother and a few of the ladies gossip about the explosion at Oom Wessels' farm. 'Tant Siemie said that it was the work of the Devil. They said that the ground burst open and a red dust settled all around Oom Wessels' cattle.

Dear Diary

~~There is a hole in Oom Wessels' farm.~~ I heard father telling mother last night. Mother has been nagging him each day to tell her more about what all the men are doing in the farm. 'There is a hole in Oom Wessels' farm. Maybe a cave. Father did not say any more.

Dear Diary

Last night I went with Auntie Ingrid's daughter Wilma to the hole. I did not want to go with her but she caught me in their shed trying to find an extra torch. I am surprised Wilma wanted to come with me. She is usually scared about the littlest things. At first I didn't want her to come with because her clothes are as stinky as her mothers. Anyway, we went over there and we were hiding in the bushes because of all the men standing around the fire singing. It sounded like they were in church except they weren't singing hymns. They were funny songs, very low down, and we couldn't hear what language they were singing in. It wasn't Afrikaans. While we were hiding in the bushes the red freckly boy surprised us. He was hiding there too. He was very cross with us for being there, saying we were going to ruin everything. I don't know what he was talking about, stupid boy. I got so cross with him I pushed him out of the bushes. One of the men at the fire turned around and saw him. The man was wearing a funny hat like a triangle on his head. He came and took the red freckly boy away. Good riddance, I thought, even though I did feel a bit sorry for him. The way that he was screaming you would have thought he was stuck like a pig or something.

Dear Diary

Well, nothing is normal anymore these days. But at least the freckly boy isn't bothering me anymore. He must have left with the rag and bones man. Maybe it was his son? I wouldn't be surprised. At least he's gone so I can get a bit of peace and quiet. That's what my mom always says 'When are we going to get some peace and quiet around here.' I didn't tell her that the stupid boy kissed me. I won't tell her now because I've got a horrid blister on my mouth still from where he kissed me and it isn't going away.

# Dear Diary

One hour ago father came back from Oom Wessels' farm and asked mother to pack clothes, food and camping equipment. He said we are moving to the farm for a while. I just don't know what is going on since that explosion happened. Doctor Wilhelm visited and tried to talk to father. Father called him a 'paganistiescheiden' and slapped him across the face. I don't know what is going on. Doctor Wilhelm and father were good friends and went fishing together at Duiper Dam at least once a month. Father is acting like such a silly. He says I can't bring my diary or any of my things. I will try to write more when we get back from the farm.

That was the last entry in Chantulle Retief Wessels' diary.

According to Bruinhuis, on 17 September 1923 the entire population of the town of Vredfontein disappeared. Then in 1938, Bruinhuis purportedly found the diary in a collection donated to the university some six years earlier. The collection was donated by the widow of a Mr P. Coetzee, a well-known amateur magician in Roodepoort (Coetzee started the famous Roodepoort Magic Performers Circle which still runs to this day). Mrs Coetzee has since passed away and it is not known how the diary came into her husband's possession. There has been much speculation of the diary's authenticity and even on the existence of Vredfontein itself. Certainly, there are tiny remnants of human habitation (levelled fields and rudimentary pathways) in the area where the town is reported to have stood, but these could just have easily have been camp sites for cattle herders searching for new grazing fields. Several amateur scholars have travelled to the supposed site of the town and even after extensive searches have found nothing that would suggest 15 people lived there in 1923. More crucially, absolutely no trace of the hole mentioned in the diary has been found. However, the area does have unusually strong magnetic activity, a fact that seems to tie in with Chantulle Retief Wessels' collection of magnetic rocks mentioned in the diary. The

formation of giant sinkholes in the earth is not as unusual as it may seem, but these are usually the result of extensive mining, excavation, or collapsing water tables. None of these conditions were ever present in the area where Vredfontein is supposed to have stood. The diary, with its allusions to possibly occult or Masonic rituals, makes for interesting reading but we must ask if it is indeed the work of a fourteen-year-old girl or perhaps an elaborate fraud by Mr P. Coetzee, amateur magician.

Perhaps nobody will ever know the answer, because the only people who know what really happened are now skeletons buried deep within the unforgiving soil of the northern Cape.