

2015

# Apartness

Ashley Dawson

Follow this and additional works at: <https://ir.uiowa.edu/iowareview>



Part of the [Creative Writing Commons](#)

## Recommended Citation

Dawson, Ashley. "Apartness." *The Iowa Review* 45.2 (2015): 142-151. Web.  
Available at: <https://doi.org/10.17077/0021-065X.7614>

This Contents is brought to you for free and open access by Iowa Research Online. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Iowa Review by an authorized administrator of Iowa Research Online. For more information, please contact [lib-ir@uiowa.edu](mailto:lib-ir@uiowa.edu).

## *Apartness*

The pomp and regalia of Napoleonic-era armies were my passions as a boy in South Africa. When I was four years old, my mother's brother, my dear uncle Jim, gave me a stack of books about Napoleonic-era soldiers. Each page of these books featured a soldier standing proudly upright or against some sort of weapon—a musket, sabre, or cannon. The names of regiments rang in my head: the Coldstream Guards. The Royal Regiment of Fusiliers. The Royal Scots Dragoon Guards. The Blues and Royals. The chasseurs and tirailleurs of Napoleon's Grande Armée. I spent hours fantasizing about their splendid battledress. The stovepipe shakos of the light infantry, with their bright red pompoms and brass regimental badges. Glamorous hussar cavalry units wearing tight, golden brocade-covered dolman jackets and loose hanging pelisses. The high bearskin caps of the grenadiers. Big-boned cuirassiers with glorious, fluffy horsehair helmets, like Trojan warriors. The bright red tunics, cascading white ostrich feather helmets, and shiny black jackboots of the Lifeguards. These various uniforms gave life to a rich array of strutting, peacock masculinities. Men with big, fuzzy handlebar mustaches and long, Gallic-braided blond beards. They mesmerized me. I dreamed of dressing up in such gorgeous drag. Since there was no television in South Africa when I was small, these images were some of the first I saw of a time outside the present. Of places where men wore clothes infinitely more flamboyant than the khaki shorts and button-down shirts favored almost universally by my dad and most of my teachers. Oh, how I longed to wear such exorbitant costumes, to be dazzlingly arrayed like a dragoon, to be a beautiful Lifeguard.

My uncle surely did not intend to stimulate fantasies of ostrich-feathered adornment when he gave me those books. They were part of a continuum of war culture in which I and other young white South African boys were steeped. As I grew older, I was inducted into the strategic fantasies of this military imaginary: I gradually accumulated a sizable collection of one-inch-high plastic figurines of Napoleonic-era military forces. These toy soldiers were butterscotch yellow and came in full regimental attire. Cavalrymen were accompanied by plastic horses, fusiliers by lead cannons, infantrymen by prickly plastic bayonets. I lay alone for hours on the wooden floor of my bedroom lining these armies

up in mock battles. Some of the artillery pieces actually shot small cannonballs, so I was able to play out the decimating impact of modern weaponry on the long lines of infantrymen, who marched with nary a whimper into the jaws of certain death. Not once, though, did it occur to me that there was any link between these games and any contemporary form of warfare. If there were plastic figures for the South African Defence Forces or SWAPO, they were never given to me. My military imaginary remained firmly grounded in the distant past.

I was not the only one who was permanently arrested in a bellicose nineteenth century. My best friend Paul's father, Doug, who was a master at Bishop's, the white boys' Anglican prep school I attended, had an entire room devoted to Napoleonic-era warfare. His figurines were made of lead, and he lovingly painted each one in full regimental colors. On top of a large table, Doug constructed a panorama that reproduced one of Napoleon's great battles. Austerlitz? Sebastopol? Waterloo? Probably the latter, given the overwhelming Anglophilia of most of my parents' social circle, but the details of the battle, of Napoleon's guise as an emissary of the French Revolution come to liberate the masses of Europe from feudal tyranny, or of the Duke of Wellington's determination to overcome a globe-gobbling reign of republican terror—none of this was ever discussed. To visit Doug's war room was to have my imagination kindled by the rush of clashing armies, a thrill otherwise unavailable in a period when South Africans had no access to television and when my family seldom attended the cinema.

But why the Napoleonic era? The toy soldiers I was given as a boy immersed me in the era when war games were first developed. But they also conjured up a time when war seemed to be fought according to more gentlemanly rules than the total warfare that defined the two world wars, as well as subsequent anti-colonial guerrilla campaigns in places like Vietnam, Algeria, and Kenya. This, of course, was an illusion. War is always ghastly and blood-drenched. More importantly, though, these toy soldiers allowed me to inhabit a specifically European military imaginary, an imaginary that was a safe distance from Africa. My Napoleonic toy soldiers meant that as a boy I could play at killing other people without having to imagine for a moment that those people might be part of my quotidian reality. It never occurred to me that one day I could be ordered to shoot my family's gardener, or that he might try to kill me.

When I was eight, my mother called me into the drawing room of our house on Palmboom Road. I knew before entering the room that this

was to be a serious conversation. My parents had only recently allowed me to sit with them at the candlelit dinner table rather than with my baby sister Georgina and our maid Janet in the kitchen, so I was overawed at the prospect of this mysterious grown-up affair in the drawing room. When Janet brought me to the threshold, my parents were solemnly awaiting me on a Victorian-era overstuffed settee. I was suddenly filled with dread, and felt myself struggling to be the brave little boy I thought they wanted me to be.

My mother beckoned me over to her in soothing tones, calling me by my bizarre family nickname Tav, short for the Scottish surname McTavish, a clan we had nothing to do with. As I sat down next to her, my father explained to me that we were going to leave Cape Town. We—my parents, my sister, and I—would travel alone across the yawning, shark-filled Atlantic Ocean. Why would we do such a thing? I fought back the hot tears that welled up. But what about Gran and Papa? I blurted. What about the dogs? My mother held my hand and explained that they had made this decision for me. That we had to leave our home, our South Africa, to secure my future. Not their future, not my sister's future, *my* future. All young men, my mother told me, had to join the army in South Africa. My father, who is English, had avoided military service, although as a boy he had seen the impact of the Second World War on his father and was not anxious to see me join the military. Were we to stay in South Africa, sooner or later I would be conscripted. And the apartheid regime was fighting wars on all the country's borders, in places with exotic names like Namibia and Angola, and even at home. This logic defied me. I loved and trusted my parents, but what did this remote future that they were describing have to do with me? How could this distant threat strip me of my birthright and shatter the world that I loved, the only world that I knew?

As I struggled to take in what my mother was saying, I looked away from her and around the room where we were sitting. I had grown up crawling around the legs of the desks and chairs in this room and rolling around on its Oriental rugs. I had spent hours peering mournfully out of the French windows that lined one side of the drawing room into our walled garden during Cape Town's weeks-long winter rains. I built endless castles out of wooden blocks on the floor of this room and had rejoiced in the motes of dust moving languidly through rays of summer sunlight. The colors of the paintings on the wall and the grain of the wood in the furniture in the room felt like a part of my body. How could all of this, such an intimate part of me, be insecure, as transient as late-summer sunlight?

Looking back, I still feel a painful nostalgia for the world that I began to lose at that moment. The drawing room of the house that my parents built in Cape Town was saturated by the mellow tones of Cape Dutch furniture, polished with beeswax to a warm glow that felt as smooth as warm skin to the touch. My parents, who were not well-off when they were first married, could never have afforded to buy such things in the expensive antique stores of Cape Town. Instead, they went to auctions, where they bought battered pieces recovered from poor Afrikaner farmhouses around the Cape. Some of our cupboards still had cow dung on their feet when they arrived in my parents' garage for restoration. I remember my mother working long hours, sanding, oiling, and polishing these paint-choked objects back to their original, spare beauty. She seemed to caress the wood back to life—the golden-hued yellowwood from giant trees that still grow in Knysna and Tsitsikamma, and the stinkwood, dark-colored and used for the cupboard surrounds, gaining its name because of its smell when wet. Her work restored the honey-smooth patina to this wood, grooved by time and use.

These pieces of furniture, so humble in origin, conjure up a lost world. The *meelkis* leaning against the wall in the drawing room on long, raised legs designed to keep the weevils away from the flour. The squat *warkis*, designed to be slung into a *Voortrekker* wagon, in front of the settee. The big *jongmanskis* cupboard, and a simple square chair with a seat made of tough slats of woven kudu skin that looked like strips of biltong, so thick that I imagined you could actually eat the chair if the need arose. Our furniture seemed to me an extension of my mother's tender solicitude, so that it never occurred to me to ask about the people who had built these simple objects, nor about the harsh colonial order that shaped their lives.

On the walls of the drawing room were paintings by my grandmother and great-grandmother, Madeline Pettit and Frances van der Bijl. The room was dominated by a huge still life by my great-gran, a bowl overflowing with green and red grapes. An oil painting in the style of the European masters, there was nothing particularly African about this still life, no freesias or proteas. But on the walls around this centerpiece were watercolors depicting Kluitjieskraal, or KK, the homestead near Paarl where Frances spent most of her life and where my grandmother Madeline was born. Like the name of the farm, which mixes the Afrikaans word for an African homestead with a Dutch surname, these watercolors spoke to a far more hybrid legacy than the grand still life. Scenes of horses contentedly nibbling grass in front of pine stands and gum trees, of clouds massing over the distinctive twin peaks of

Mostert's Hoek, and of wildly prolific banana trees, my great-gran painted what she saw, and in doing so created a visual archive of the unique flora and fauna of the Cape. But there are no people in Frances's paintings. She excised the workers who made KK bloom, creating an enameled world of pain-free natural beauty.

Madeline's paintings were far more experimental than her mother's. Her lodestar was Cezanne. A deep cerulean blue dominates her still life compositions. I loved to watch my gran as she applied the forms of the fruit and vases to the canvas with the broad slashes of a palette knife. Once she ventured outdoors, Madeline's paintings came alive to everyday scenes of Cape life. My favorite was an oil painting of three fishermen tending to their nets on the beach at Muizenberg. The bodies of the men are bright geometric blocks of color, burnt orange triangular heads setting off the deep rectangular blues of their shirts and trousers. Gran loved to tell me the story of how she had my grandfather Reg pose for her so that she could get the fall of the fabric just right. So brightly hued and bucolic seeming in her painting, these men were probably members of the Cape's "Coloured" population. Descended from the indigenous Khoisan people of the Cape, indentured Malaysians brought to Africa by the Dutch East India Company, and the mixed-race people who are a living testimony to the sexual oppression of settler colonialism, the Coloured fishermen my gran painted could have told many tales about the abuses suffered prior to the advent of formal apartheid. But, conveniently, they were mute on the canvas, silent symbols of a violent legacy that my family hid in plain sight.

This mixture of European and African worlds, which as a child I took for granted, was born of colonization, slavery, indentured labor, and sexual violence, and was maintained by a skein of laws that visited enduring social inequality on the second-class citizens of the Cape. All too often white South Africans, including my family, chose not to see these brutal realities, even when they were looking directly at them. This was a convenient stance, since it meant that we never had to confront the ways in which we benefitted from oppression. When I was growing up, for instance, I had little idea that the house my parents built, the one whose drawing room I remember so clearly, stood on land confiscated from Coloured people under the apartheid-era Group Areas Act.

What makes someone like my mother swerve from the spiral of violence that suffuses a culture such as apartheid South Africa's, and what does it take to really turn away? Why did she reject the militarism in her country rather than grimly support it like so many others? Two experi-

ences, recounted to me repeatedly over the years, leap out as I turn my family's vexed history over in my mind. While the direction of a life is built by the gradual accretion of experiences and decisions, I believe that there are flash points, pivotal moments in which a life's diurnal rhythms are interrupted and the compass of one's life is redirected. These two experiences of my mother's catalyzed such a reorientation, one that led her to abandon her country, if not to question fully the oppressive social structures and cultural perceptions on which it was founded.

When she was a teenager, my mother, whom her relations called Annie, used to visit members of her extended family on their farms in the semi-desert Karoo area of the Eastern Cape. These relations owned a series of sprawling sheep farms near the town of Graaff Reinet. The family had moved to the Karoo during the late nineteenth century after an outbreak of phylloxera killed all the vines at High Constantia, the family vineyard in the Cape. Annie often visited these family farms during her school breaks, staying most frequently at two, Blakeridge and Rooiberg. There she learned to integrate herself into the rhythms of country life, waking early, watching farm workers shearing sheep, and riding around the farm checking the fences with her beloved cousin Charlie, who was four years older than her.

One day, when she was eleven, Charlie asked Annie to come along with him and be a horseman during a shoot. Annie agreed to accompany him without giving much thought to the expedition. Charlie's generosity toward her bowled her over, but he was leading her into an alien world. The shoots were an important part of farm life, since they helped keep down the population of wild animals such as springbok and kudu that ate the sparse Karoo vegetation the sheep grazed on. Shoots were organized systematically across a series of neighboring farms, the goal being to keep the vegetation evenly matched on all the farms. At regular intervals during the year, the farmers would band together and drive to a neighbor's farm, where they would have a big meal together before heading out on horseback for the shoot.

Annie dressed excitedly for the day and then joined Charlie as he told one of the farm workers in Afrikaans to saddle up a small brown mare for her. She felt edgy about riding with a group of men, but once they were galloping through the Karoo scrub, the kinetic motion of the charging horses caught her up. She felt the excitement of the hunt suffuse her. The springbok had been driven into one quadrant of the farm from which there was only one escape. As the springbok charged out of the box of drivers, their bodies arcing across the sky in high, vaulting leaps, the men on horseback opened fire with their rifles. Body after

body crashed to the ground. Annie was shocked and terrified but felt that she couldn't say anything for fear of embarrassing Charlie in front of the other men.

As she accompanied the shooting party back to the farmhouse for tea, Annie kept her eyes on the ground, achingly aware that she was totally out of place. The men surrounding her were in a jovial mood, happy that they had culled a large number of springbok. For them, this meant ample pasture for their sheep for the year to come, as well as a fine supply of meat to be cured into biltong in the strong Karoo sun. As they approached the farmhouse, Charlie whispered to Annie that she was free to explore the farm if she wanted while the men talked over tea. "You can play anywhere," Charlie said, "but don't go into the shearing shed." Ridiculously provocative words. Annie of course sneaked off to the shed as soon as the men were engrossed in conversation. She pulled the rusty-hinged door open and walked into the heavy darkness. It hit her sense of smell first: an overpowering odor, like beaten copper, tinged with a slight undertone of rot. As her eyes gradually adjusted to the dark, she saw the carcasses piled against the wall. They hung upside down, their heads facing the ground, their necks cut wide open. Fresh blood dripped onto the pounded earth floor of the hut. Her head reeling, Annie stumbled out of the shearing shed. She turned toward the wall of the shed and vomited.

Annie managed to get to her bedroom to wash up without being seen by any of the celebrating farmers. As she sat on the bed, tears welled up. *I'm partially responsible*, she said to herself. At that moment, she decided not to eat meat anymore. She did not say anything to anyone, however, because the shoot was so central to life in the Karoo. The farmers believed that it was their right to kill the "game" that strayed onto their farms, and they believed in the necessity of having guns. Annie's brother Jim had in fact been taught how to fire a gun while they stayed at Blakeridge, but Annie, as a girl, was not inducted into this culture of deadly force. Instead, she recoiled from the shoot. Presented with one aspect of the violence on which the social order was founded, my mother turned away. She tried to divest herself of the blood that stained the land upon which our family lived. Yet the question of how my family came to own this land, from whom it had been taken, and through what violent means their ownership had been sustained—these questions neither she nor anyone else in the family discussed.

It took significant energy not to dwell on such issues at a farm like Blakeridge. After they took the land from the indigenous Khoisan people in the seventeenth century, the white citizens of Graaff Reinet rebelled



repeatedly against the Dutch East India Company, which administered the entire Cape Colony. It was in the district of Graaff Reinet that a republican government—meant exclusively for whites—was first proclaimed, and the town furnished large numbers of Voortrekkers, the Afrikaner settlers who fled east from the Cape Colony in the mid-nineteenth century after the British outlawed slavery. The Afrikaners' fiercely independent streak found expression in the *kommando* system, in which bands of local men grouped together in an armed unit in times of need. Although the people of Graaff Reinet saw military formations as symbols of oppression, and, after the Anglo-Boer War, even of occupation, the *kommando* system integrated military traditions into everyday life in the Karoo. The group with which Annie rode on the shoot might have formed the core of just such a *kommando*, should circumstances warrant. By the time that Annie traveled to Blakeridge, though, the settler colonial order at Graaff Reinet was long established and relatively uncontested. But although the informal apartheid that predominated when she was a teenager seemed the immutable order of things, reminders of the violence upon which this order was founded were everywhere. Annie needed only listen to a young cousin of hers referring to one of the elderly farm workers as “boy” to understand that this was a world fouled by injustice. No one got out of this world unscathed, including the perpetrators themselves.

I wish I could say that my mother fought against apartheid, but this would not be true. She did contemplate joining the Black Sash, a white women's resistance organization formed in 1955 to campaign against the removal of Coloured people from the voting rolls in the Cape province by the National Party government. As the decade wore on, Black Sash members demonstrated against the Pass Laws and the deepening hold of apartheid on every aspect of life in South Africa. But when my mother's parents pleaded with her not to join Black Sash, she listened to them. She loved and respected her parents, and heeded their fears about the Nationalists' attacks on opponents of apartheid, white or black. In heeding their call not to put herself and them in danger, not only did she fail to stand in solidarity with the white women of Black Sash who were courageous enough to take a public stand against apartheid—not only did she fail to throw in her lot, politically and psychologically, with the brave men, women, and children who were massacred at Sharpeville, shot in the back for peacefully protesting against the Pass Laws—but I fear that she also failed to confront the extent to which she and her family benefited from the apartheid system in very real material terms, no matter how execrable they might have found atrocities like Sharpeville.

Who am I to judge my mother so harshly when I did not live through the turbulent times she did? I can certainly never know what it must have felt like to be a young woman in such a harsh male-dominated society. Nonetheless, I feel impelled to be honest about my mother's and our family's complicity precisely because of how strongly I feel the pull of the South Africa we lost, of the forms of material and social privilege that genuine resistance to apartheid would have involved foreswearing. And I'm always aware of the dark heart of whiteness.

How and when does the violence of the settler colonial order flash up among those who are its beneficiaries? It's easy—if painful—to see the systemic violence meted out in South Africa to those who were not white, even before the advent of formal apartheid in 1948. We can even see how inter-imperial competition, between Holland and Britain in the case of South Africa, led to forms of prejudice between white groups in South Africa. Apartheid, after all, was not only a system of destructive racism but also in some sense an affirmative action policy for the Afrikaners who had been defeated, humiliated, and impoverished during the Anglo-Boer War. But how did the oppression that was fundamental to South African society surface within individual white families? In what ways did the militarism that was fundamental to settler-colonial power in South Africa manifest itself in everyday life within such families? I had been taught to revel in military regalia as a South African boy, but what secrets and bitter lies did this pomp obscure?

My uncle helped nurture my love of everything associated with the army, but he never spoke of what happened when he himself was conscripted. I learned later from my mother that he was sent out as a young man to maintain order in the townships following the Sharpeville massacre. I've asked him about it directly, but he doesn't have much to say about it: it was cold, dark, and frequently boring. He missed my family, who were terrified that something would happen to him after he disappeared into the maelstrom of unrest after Sharpeville for weeks on end. I can't escape the feeling that there's some truth that I can't get to. Indeed, it seems to me that there's something my uncle can't look at directly but also can't escape. He remains fascinated by warfare, and has amassed one of the world's largest collections of rare books about the Anglo-Boer War. What explains this enduring obsession with the military? How has his experience marked him, despite his best efforts to keep it silent and buried?

Another memory wells up, a story told to me many times over the years. It's two years after the traumatic shoot, and Annie is thirteen.

She and her older brother Jim, my beloved uncle, are having an argument. Annie wants to watch while Jim and his friends build a float for their school parade. Jim tells her that she can do so, but only from inside his bedroom, with the blinds drawn and the lights turned off. Annie argues with him, complaining that this isn't fair. Jim grabs her, throws her to the ground, and climbs on top of her. He pins her struggling arms to the ground and leans over her. As she lies underneath him, Jim hawks up a ball of sticky spit from the back of his throat. He lets this ball of spit slowly descend from his mouth toward Annie's quailing face. Just before it touches her, he sucks it back up into his mouth. She begins to cry and calls out for help. Jim holds her down harder, letting the ball of spit descend once again. Annie sobs, begging him to stop. Jim lets the ball of spit dangle over her.

Sitting next to my parents in our drawing room as they told me of our impending move, I felt the world I knew shudder and begin to slip away from me. I recognized at the time with utter clarity that this was an immense turning point in my life. The premonitory pangs of a nostalgia foretold gripped me. Yet, looking back, I realize that this was a world that was utterly obscure to me, a world saturated in silence. The silence of complicity. Of lives shaped by the reticence of convenient historical amnesia. So many silences, so much blindness. My father's ignorance about and lack of interest in the violence that saturated life in South Africa. My mother's disavowal of her Afrikaner heritage, a genealogy evident in my great-gran's Dutch surname. This repudiation was so deep that it prevented my mother from seeing not just the betrayal of turning away but also the costs of assimilation. My uncle Jim's enduring fascination with the military, and his silence about his deployment as a young man to the townships during the tense months after the Sharpeville massacre. And, born from and building on these silences, my own muteness as I sat trying to be the good little soldier that I thought my parents wanted me to be. How can I make these memories speak without losing the people who cultivated such profound silence? And what, I wonder, are the implications of looking back with longing on a family who averted their eyes for so long?