

DARK, DARK COUNTRY  
DONKER, DONKER LAND

*Lyrics by* RALPH RABIE (A.K.A. JOHANNES KERKORREL)  
*Originally performed by* THE GEREFORMEERDE BLUES BAND  
*translated from the Afrikaans by* ANNEKE RAUTENBACH

Die klein wit republiek  
Is in 'n droë wit seisoen  
Die bome dra nie meer vrugte nie  
Die damme is almal droog

Uit die vlaktes van die Noord Karoo  
Kom 'n sprinkaanplaag  
Wat uitstrek na die Noorde  
En die mielielande knaag

En in die dorpe en die stede  
Ly die mense honger  
Kos is skaars en al het jy werk  
Word jou geld al minder werd

En dis 'n donker donker land  
Die seisoene draai, die sterre brand  
Die son word rooi ons het beland  
Aan die maan se verkeerde kant

In ons huise teen die heuwels  
Agter tralies skuil ons teen alle ewwels  
En ver sien ons die rook trek  
Die lokasies is aan die brand

En die soldate kom al aangemarsjeer  
En elkeen dra 'n gelaaide geweer  
Daar's 'n bom in elke supermark  
En die klank van glas wat breek  
En iets moet breek!

The small white republic  
Is in a dry white season  
The trees no longer bear fruit  
The dams are all empty

Across the plains of the North Karoo  
Comes a plague of locusts  
It stretches out to the North  
And gnaws out the cornfields

And in the towns and the cities  
People go hungry  
Food is scarce and even if you have work  
Your money has less and less worth

And it's a dark, dark country  
The seasons turn, the stars burn  
The sun flares red and we've landed  
On the wrong side of the moon

In our houses on the hills  
Behind bars we hide from all evils  
From far away, we see the smoke rise  
The locations are on fire

And the soldiers are marching on  
Each carrying a loaded gun  
There's a bomb in every supermarket  
And the sound of glass breaking  
Something's got to break!

En dis 'n donker donker land  
Die seisoene draai, die sterre brand  
Die son word rooi ons het beland  
Aan die maan se verkeerde kant

Maar na sewe jaar se droogtes begin dit reën  
en die reën val neer hier  
Die reën val op my hande  
Die reën val op my arms  
Die reën val op my oë  
Die reën val op my lyf  
Die reën val op my gesig  
Die reën val op my rug  
O, reën val neer hier  
Die reën val neer op Voortrekkerhoogte  
Die reën val neer op doringdraad  
Die reën val op berge  
Die reën val op valleie  
Die reën word strome  
Die reën word riviere  
Die reën word 'n see  
Reën was alles weg hier  
Was alles skoon hier  
Reën kom weer en weer  
Weer en weer

And it's a dark, dark country  
The seasons turn, the stars burn  
The sun flares red and we've landed  
On the wrong side of the moon

But after seven years of drought  
It begins to rain  
And the rain falls down  
The rain falls on my hands  
The rain falls on my arms  
The rain falls on my eyes  
The rain falls on my body  
The rain falls on my face  
The rain falls on my back  
Oh, the rain falls down here  
The rain falls down on Voortrekker Heights  
The rain falls down on barbed wire  
The rain falls on mountains  
The rain falls on valleys  
The rain becomes streams  
The rain becomes rivers  
The rain becomes a sea  
The rain washes everything away here  
Washes everything clean here  
The rain comes, again and again  
Again and again

TRANSLATOR'S NOTE: The 1980s was a dark time in South Africa, to say the least. Media was censored; subversive literature, art, theater, and music were banned. Resistance groups like Mandela's African National Congress and the Pan-African Congress were still outlawed, their leaders in prison or in exile. People of color were still disenfranchised, in large part barred from any kind of meaningful education, and forced to live as second-class citizens in crowded "homelands" in rural areas and in "locations" in the cities, serving as a source of cheap labor for the comfortable white minority. Protesters clashed with police more violently than ever before. According to an opinion poll in 1985, the majority of South Africans believed the country was heading toward a civil war. A brutal system was beginning to crack for the very reason it had once been beneficial to its designers: economics. South Africa had become economically isolated, and business suffered; economically, Apartheid no

longer made sense for anyone. If anything was going to make the ruling National Party relinquish its grip, this would be it.

Absurdly, it doubled down. In August of 1985, Prime Minister P.W. Botha was expected to announce the government's commitment to ending apartheid, and the world's media gathered with bated breath. Optimistically, *TIME* Magazine called it "the most important statement since Dutch settlers arrived at the Cape three hundred years ago." Instead, South Africa and the world were subjected to more of the same belligerent finger-wagging that had become Botha's trademark.

This could only be a sign of a general sense of panic, paranoia, and insecurity: the National Party was losing. Not least of all, its most reliable base—white Afrikaners—was crumbling as it aged, and the youth were rejecting the unconditional loyalty to *volk* and *vaderland* with which they had been raised. This was the background against which the punk

band, the Gereformeerde Blues Band, came to fame. Its lead singer, Ralph Rabie, a.k.a. Johannes Kerkorrel (John Church-Organ), was a journalist who was fired from his day job for using excerpts from Botha's speeches in his song lyrics. Unsurprisingly, his music was banned from the airwaves. The Gereformeerde Blues Band—meaning “reformed blues band,” a play on the *Nederlandse Gereformeerde (N.G.) Kerk*, or Dutch Reformed Church—created a satirical collage of every institution that had been forced down that generation's throats: the government, the dry Afrikaans of the classroom, the army, and, of course, the church: a central pillar in the Apartheid power structure. The new genre was dubbed *Voëlvry*, meaning both “free as a bird” and “outcast,” and the band's debut tour of the same name turned the church's Calvinist asceticism on its head with performative queer decadence. The cover of their one and only album, *Eet Kreef!* (Eat Crayfish!), features a Last Sup-

per-like diorama of its members—bearded, bejeweled—feasting on crayfish laid out on a white tablecloth inside a military-style canvas tent.

Biblical narratives had a special significance in upholding Apartheid ideology: Prime Minister Hendrik Verwoerd, acknowledged as the “architect” of Apartheid, referred to Afrikaners as the Israelites of Africa, a chosen race guided by God to claim their land and rule benevolently over not only “the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky, the livestock and all the wild animals”—as Genesis would have it—but also over people of every other race. The same biblical drama is being invoked in “Donker Donker Land,” but in a minor key: the grand narratives have failed—or, perhaps people are being punished for their perverted interpretation of the scripture. The first line may refer to the 1979 novel *A Dry White Season* by André Brink, the first Afrikaans novelist to have had his books banned by the nationalist government. Brink's

title is itself a reference to the poem “For Don M.—Banned” by the black poet Mongane Wally Serote.

In the sixth stanza, the “soldiers” with their “loaded guns” is significant: In 1985, Prime Minister Botha declared a state of emergency, sending 35,000 troops of the South African National Defence Force into the townships to quash the rebellion underway. Burning gasoline-doused tires, a common phenomenon during such protests, would have been just one source of the fires in the “locations,” an Apartheid-era word for “townships,” still used by older generations to refer to the over-populated settlements on the outskirts of the cities. Their makeshift housing stock, a combination of shacks and government housing, are still particularly prone to catching alight.

The song ends with the hopeful note of rain quenching the dry season, though the reference to “cleansing” also suggests the world-engulfing flood of the Old Testament, an effective “re-do” for

a corrupt earth. Kerkorrel, who witnessed South Africa’s first free and fair elections in 1994, was tragically found hanging from a tree outside the coastal town of Kleinmond in 2002. It would take a lot more than *Voëlvry* to end Apartheid, but the movement is still acknowledged for stoking resistance from the inside, and mobilizing Afrikaners against paternalistic leaders, like Botha, who claimed to be acting in their name. The 2017 film *Johnny Is Nie Dood Nie* (Johnny Isn’t Dead) is an homage to Kerkorrel’s life and his music. As one of its characters points out: they didn’t break Botha—they only broke his heart.

ANNEKE RAUTENBACH is a writer and doctoral candidate in Comparative Literature at New York University. Her academic work focuses on the role of journalists and public intellectuals in narrating societies in transition—in particular, South Africa at the end of Apart-



heid and Eastern Europe at the end of the Cold War.

JOHANNES KERKORREL, also known as Ralph Rabie, was a South African singer-songwriter, performer, journalist, and playwright, most active in the 1980s and 1990s.

