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CAPFARM TRUST  
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THE MTHEMBU GIRL

The hills were leafless when the Mchunu queen died in November. It had been a hard year. Another drought. Red dusts blowing. Thin cows dying of exhaustion as they calved.

She had watched through the doorway of her round, thatched room. For months her strength had been ebbing away, but she never lost touch with the world of the tribe. A small world, with questions of infinity all around her. Outside was the palisade of the royal cattle kraal, curving around a bare, hot yard. It was going to seem empty without her. Listless goats waited in the heat where once her long skirts had swept the ground as she lived barefoot among the spirits of the kings.

*Ntombizethu. Our girl.*

She had grown up as a daughter of the Mthembu royal house, learning the old traditions of respect that would keep her constant during rough years of change. She made few public appearances. She lived with simplicity, out of sight, a reticent woman with a quiet heart who followed the faith of Shembe.

"I'm better," she insisted in the weeks before she died. "Much better. A little better". Her concern was for the Nkosi. They had both been ill, but he was the one that mattered. At 86 he was still a big man, his mind clear, and impatient of his frailty. He had handed his duties to his son, Gangandhlovu, and after 65 years was ready to retire. He was not allowed to abdicate. He was still the spiritual head of the tribe, but he had been released to follow his own interests. He could have time off – if he was well enough, not coping with the growing infirmities of age.

"Inkosi S. O. Mchunu is trying to be better," Nokulunga Mchunu, the tribal secretary, reported in October. "On 17/10/2010 the appointed izinduna as well as members of the Mchunu Traditional Council was a meeting between them and Inkosi. They request him to go back to hospital." The tribe had collected R50 000,00 to cover hospital fees and private doctors." Finally the meeting was so successfully and Inkosi accept the requisition. We hope our Inkosi will be recovered soon."

He was not a willing patient.

"Have you ever been stung by a scorpion?" he asked. He felt as if his body had been stung all over. He leaned on his stick exasperated. He would abscond from hospital when it suited him. He was tired of lying down.

He was back at home at the royal kraal when the Indlunkulu took a turn for the worse. She had been much better in the weeks before she died, surrounded by the clarity of light that comes in advance of death. It made her light-hearted with the friends who came to visit, although nothing had changed in the world outside. The bush shimmered in the heat haze, while faltering cattle dropped and died and were left unclaimed to rot in the sun.

The rain started falling with the first prayer at her funeral, drenching the gravediggers out on the veld. The mourners pressed a little closer. They had been streaming in barefoot since early morning, many in the white robes of Shembe, sitting on the ground among fallen jacaranda flowers. The Nkosi loved the jacarandas. He had had them planted in among the thorns, and watched them endure the long years of aridity. They were part of the spirit of his royal kraal. Nhlalakahle. Live well. The hope had been implicit during conflict and hardship. Even in drought years his jacarandas flowered.

He wouldn't be present at the funeral. He was in seclusion at his birthplace, Zondenhleka, observing the tradition that keeps the king out of reach of death. His indunas would tell him about the funeral, about the squalls of rain that blotted out the hills, and the tents that dripped, and the candle on the floor of the round, thatched room, close to the body of the Mthembu girl, who would go to her grave wrapped in a blanket.

She was younger than the Nkosi, and he'd proposed five times before she accepted him – a fact that brought a moment of laughter to the crowd.

It was never going to be easy. She had come as a stranger into the tribe, an unknown girl, who would conform to tradition, finding her place among older wives.

"Do you love the Nkosi?" she was asked on her wedding day. Did she love the man watching her? She wouldn't say. The question was repeated in front of the regiments. She dropped her head, refusing to reply.

"Makoti, this is the last time I'm asking," the chief induna was conducting the formalities "If you don't answer now your father will have to pay three cattle. In front of the Mchunu nation I ask: Do you love ..."

She raised her spear.

They had been married 48 years when she died, sharing a belief in the reality of the spirits, and the need for a life guided by prayer. If there were no clear answers, there was faith. A higher power ordered events, like the showers of rain that pelted down on the mourners as they watched wet earth being shovelled on her grave. The women sang softly, legs tucked under them, feeling the cold seep from the ground.

*Ashes to ashes.*

*Dust to dust.*

A few white-robed women stood up quietly and disappeared across the veld. Had the cold got to them? They returned with pale yellow wildflowers, scented armfuls that were passed among the crowd. *Bulbine* were the daffodils of Msinga, sturdy perennials, rooted in hardship, growing unnoticed on barren ground. These were the flowers of the last rites. The rites of spring?

When the grave had been completed the women formed a line, wet skirts clinging, single flowers in their hands. They circled the grave, dancing slowly. It was common ground, this road to eternity, and some went ahead, and some stayed behind, and all you had for tenure was gratitude and love, and the pale stalks of wildflowers in the rain.

(The Mchunu Tribal Court was closed for two months to mark the official period of mourning).

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A NEW IDENTITY

In the 45 years since Church Agricultural Projects started work on mission farms, there have been changes of locality, identity and law. The result has been a legal nightmare, formally resolved with the creation of two new trusts – the Mdukatshani Rural Development Trust, and the Mdukatshani Craft and Welfare Trust. The same trustees serve on both trusts, which run different programmes, but share space, time and services.

### THE GOLD BOWL EXHIBITION

There was a moment of panic before the opening. Gcinani Duma and Ntombizini Mbatha studied themselves in the mirrors of the Gold Museum, Cape Town. Their ochre headdresses looked plain. Unadorned. They had borrowed finery, just in case, and spilt out the contents of a plastic bag. Christmas tinsel, plastic baubles. They started to attach them to the ochre. No? No.

They gave a tug to their goatleather skirts, and adjusted their silver leggings. Upstairs there were Photographs of leggings like theirs, made of gold wire, wound around a core. The design hadn't changed in a thousand years. Did that make them old-fashioned? They were suddenly insecure. It was easier for their colleague, Zamani Madonsela. All he had to do was decide on his cap. On or off? He was sensitive about his baldness. At an evening function the cap should come off, but he wanted to cover his head.

They would laugh at themselves afterwards, when they were back in the valley, under the thorn trees, telling the craft group about their 12 days away. The words came in a rush, out of sequence. They had been stopped in the street, and photographed by strangers, and caught the wrong train, but found their way back. Up in a plane the cars looked like small bicycles, and the sea went on forever, not like a dam. And they had been in the streets for the opening of Parliament, and had taps with hot water, and wonderful food. And there were no trees on Cape Mountains. Without wood how did people cook? And they'd worn their purple bhayis when they went on TV because TV said stripes would spoil the cameras. ("It's a feel-good story," said the eTV presenter, and the interview was aired again and again).

The Gold of Africa Museum was a wonderful venue for the exhibition, which had been in the planning stage for months. For years? It was a collaborative venture between Mdukatshani and Julia Meintjes, who guided the project with imagination and love. Nothing would have happened without her. She was involved in every stage of production – the design of the bowls, the manufacture of the wire, and the technical problems of weaving with gold. It was a difficult medium but she loved the possibilities, gradually adding silver and shakudo to a range that started with copper and brass. She extended the skills of the weavers - and that's where her heart lay, close to their lives.

This was a profit-sharing venture, and she watched them gain in confidence, closing her eyes to the cost of their mistakes. The weavers needed the encouragement, working in isolation, far from ideas, in a year when crafters everywhere were sitting without work.

"It was the hardest retail year ever", said one of our customers, who had made large orders in anticipation of World Cup tourists, and at Christmas, like many others, was sitting with unsold stock. American orders dried up, several local suppliers closed shop, and we struggled to find essential items like thread for the beads.

Total craft sales for the year were R 431 522,00 of which R 272 439,00 was paid in wages. Average earnings for the year were R 4 402,00 per crafter, although one woman earned R 10 078,00 for her work. ( Exhibition sales are not included in this financial year).

### NATTY`S ROUND-UPS

When Natty collapsed with “ a cardiac condition” in November, one of the doctors brought his chair to her bedside at night. She hadn` t finished her job, he told her. There were so many people really ill with AIDS, but too afraid to be tested. If she didn` t get better, who would bring them in? She was making a difference with her round-ups – a familiar figure in the hospital corridors, limping heavily, leaning on her stick, accompanying another scared group to be tested. Young men and women, husbands and wives, widows with their children...she arrived in their yards, loaded them up, and then regularly checked on their treatments.

It would be awhile before she was back on her stick, a little frail, but ready for battle. Were her patients still taking their treatments? In February she returned to work, riding the hills in our ageing bakkie, busy on another round-up.

### WOMEN, LAND AND CUSTOMARY LAW

Msinga has a high rate of marriage – and cohabitation is almost non-existent. Not unexpectedly this was one of the findings of the 1 000 house hold survey published in February by CASE, the Community Agency for Social Enquiry.

The survey was launched to investigate womens` land rights in three rural ex-homeland areas : Msinga, Ramatlabama ( North West Province), and Keiskammahoek (Eastern Cape), and results from Msinga showed higher rates of marriage, larger homestead size (8,9 members),and the lowest level of education. More than half the Msinga women surveyed reported they had no formal education, a quarter had some primary schooling, while only 1% had post school qualifications.The solidity of traditional marriage was reflected in the number of homesteads containing men, women and children – 83% at Msinga, compared to 65% at Keiskammahoek, and 60% at Ramatlabama. Women-only households accounted for only 1% at Msinga. (Copies of the report can be obtained from CASE, 31 Oxford Road, Forest Town, Johannesburg).

### CLARA

In May the Constitutional Court declared the Communal Land Rights Act (CLARA)“unconstitutional in its entirety”, a decision that was hailed by the rural communities that had challenged the Act. Originally enacted in 2004, the Act had provisions that would affect an estimated 21 million people living under traditional leadership. Government did not defend the Act, as shortly before the case was heard the Minister of Rural Development and Land Reform, Mr Gugile Nkwinti, informed the court that his department intended to repeal the law as it was inconsistent with government policy. One of the objections to CLARA was the lack of consultation with rural communities, and NGO`S are hoping no new legislation will be drafted until there has been a proper consultative process

### RESEARCHERS

During the year Mdukatshani continued to provide a base for researchers, including Professor Ben Cousins of PLAAS, University of Western Cape, Aninka Claassens and Sindiso Mnisi Weekes of the Law , Race and Gender Unit, University of Cape Town, and Brigid Letty of the Institute for Natural Resources.

### KWAMAKHONYA

A new voter registration station appeared on Electoral Commission maps this year – the Mdukatshani Learning Centre, officially named, without his knowledge, KwaMakhonya (Rauri's Zulu name). Registration took place in February, despite the fact there was no telephone Communication with the outside world.

“Do you know I can't SMS here?” an official demanded in agitation. He had never been without reception, and had to drive a few kilometres down the road to pick up a signal. Like the rest of us.

### NW 1540

After 16 years of mainly off-road travel, our turquoise-green bakkie is showing its age. The local mechanic who has nursed it through many ailments, has a simple diagnosis: “Bad roads”.

No roads at all, most of the time. The valley is hard on vehicles, and our distinctive bakkie does most of its work on illegible tracks and a district road eroded to bedrock. While efforts are underway to improve local roads, a better surface won't answer the needs of our vehicle, which cost R 24 456,95 in repairs this year – half the insured value of R 49 000,00.

“Upgrade”, says our mechanic, trying to patch another worn part. Few NGO's can match our record of vehicle longevity. Our last bakkie lasted 17 years, while NW 1540, bought with a grant from the British Embassy in 1995, is almost as old. We make our bakkies last and last ... but have to acknowledge that with the cost of repairs, there's no way to save for an upgrade.

### A LINE IN THE DUST

If you are trying to make contact with somebody avoiding you - try leaving a note in the middle of the path. The idea wasn't ours, but it proved useful when we found a new dagga garden inside the farm. Who was the owner? Did anyone know? It was an isolated area, near the big Tree Fuschia - but not out of reach of the police. They had been there before, checking on the crop, and then dropped in to say they would have to prosecute. It wasn't our dagga, but we were the landowners, and we couldn't have an illegal crop on the farm.

On ? *Outside*. Just outside. Since the fences were removed, the boundary has been invisible although everyone observes the invisible line. Or they had done until the new garden appeared. The matter was settled with a note under a stone. *Umncele*, it said, indicating the boundary, and by the end of the day the garden had been removed. It was another bad year for the crop, however, and by September the growers had given up watering, leaving their plants to wither in the heat.

### A PRISON SENTENCE

In April three Mchunu men were sentenced to six years imprisonment for their role in the death of an Mthembu youth, Qondisani Mtshali. ( *A Rusty Mechanism* , Annual Report 2008 – 2009). Mtshali was beaten, hanged and set alight while looking for a cow across a tribal boundary. A Greytown regional court magistrate found Xolani Mchunu, Nqabayeza Sibiyi and Zaka Sibiyi guilty of culpable homicide, while the case against Nonhlanhla Sibiyi was withdrawn.

## HANNAH

Forty years ago Douglas Blausten arrived on the night train at Wasbank station. "Nare plek," the conductor called it. A dreary place. It wasn't where Douglas wanted to be. He was a radical young British university student who had intended to spend his summer holidays doing something useful in Africa. But not South Africa. Definitely not South Africa. He came to us reluctantly after a visa application had failed to come through. In fact there was reluctance on both sides. We had stopped taking volunteers when Doug arrived - tireless, critical, questioning everything. He made vigorous debates out of mealtimes, organised revolts among the staff, challenged our defences, laughed at the setbacks, and was there with support in the moments of defeat.

Doug was eighteen when he arrived on the night train to work with CAP, and his daughter Hannah was almost the same age when she arrived at Mdukatshani in March to do some volunteer work in her gap year. One of the results of her stay is a website for the crafts. A sign we are moving into the electronic age? The website has already drawn new customers - who assume that we will respond at the touch of a button. Unfortunately we continue to struggle with communication. We have no landline. Emails are delivered once a week. Post is a two hour drive away, and we are out of range for mobiles. (To check our website see [www.mdukatshani.com](http://www.mdukatshani.com))

## THE DROUGHT

The Tugela River valley was not the only part of KwaZulu –Natal afflicted by drought. When Msinga's thatch-cutters set off for the highveld on their annual winter exodus in search of grass, they were soon back emptyhanded. There was no thatch anywhere, which has meant unfinished roofs and leaky huts.

Only Devil Thorns flourish in drought, and they appeared from nowhere to cover bare spaces with starry yellow flowers and spiny thorns. Aptly named *Tribulus terrestris*, the thorns are really hard on the hooves of livestock, and make walking uncomfortable, even in boots. Because of the death of thousands of cattle, many traditional ceremonies had to be curtailed, while lobola payments were put on hold.

Another two kudu bulls died this winter when they were chased into the river by packs of dogs. One kudu leapt off the top of the cliffs, and was killed on impact on the rocks below, followed by one of its pursuers. This makes a total of five kudu bulls killed at the river in the course of a year.

In January heavy rains flooded the streets of Ladysmith, bringing floodwaters rushing past our terraces - and leaving litter hanging in our trees. It took weeks to clear up the mess. Sack after sack was filled with the rubbish. Plastic, paper, shoes, bottles, deodorants, cooking pots – and a purple plastic toilet seat.

Despite the heavy rains in January, rainfall for the year was again below average, and in February thorn trees were leafless, the grass shrivelled, and for the second year no reeds flowered on the river banks. As the Tugela River receded, the Sahlumbe island was left high and dry, depriving the crocodiles of a favourite basking area. They had to move downriver to deeper pools, where they were regularly sighted by passersby.

Rainfall from March 2010 – February 2011: 431, 5 mm