The incredible beat of my heart (Deep South, 2021)
Henali Kuit

By Jo-Ann Bekker

The thrill of reading Henali Kuit is that you never know what will come next – which sentence will follow the sentence you've just read, which phrase, which word.

My father turned it over in my open palm and right away my palm held it proudly: a bullethole right through my hand, next to the swell of my thumb. Right away it ached like something I'd misplaced but never lost. I lifted it to look at the world through its bloody frame. I could see the white of my tendons when I tilted my hand away from me. I brought it up to my face to smell it. It smelled like rust. It smelled like the farm late at night. (12)

The unexpected juxtapositions often made me bark with laughter. *'I am a man,' he says. It is true and a fairy tale. He touches the hair on his face. His hands look small and virginal. He jumps when the doorbell rings. / ... It is Jesus. He has gained a lot of weight...* (27)

Even the book's title – eerily lit in an apartment block's neon lights on the black and white cover – is deceptive. It comes from this sentence: *My life has become nothing but a strategy for avoiding the incredible beat of my heart.* (38)

I've been interested in Kuit's writing since hearing her read at the 2014 National Arts Festival Wordfest. She smiled sweetly, thanked the small audience for coming, and then disorientated me completely by reading: *My killer flipped me over and opened the flap of skin he had cut into my torso. He sighed like he was happy. My killer has the ugly sort of hands that a lot of male bass guitar players have. These sorts of fingers taper in a very bad way. As though they have upside down ice-cream cones growing out of their palms.* Her provocative, strangely hilarious stories in *Ons Klyntji, Itch* and *Prufrock* quickly earned her a following and many of them appear in this, her first book (e.g. "My killer's fingers", 16).

The stories are set in the farms, suburbs and school yards of Gauteng, then travel to South Korea – where Kuit lived for six years, working as a language teacher – and back to Tshwane.

Character-wise, they feature a range of self-reflective narrators, including a fridge: *At night I pray for redemption and the ability to distinguish between night and day. If I had hands, I would touch myself to know where I am. But I have only my own sighs, soft and incessant things, as affirmation*

of only my cardio-vascular person. I heard that when you're not able to sigh, parts of you will actually blow up. These are the things you never think about when you are fully functional. (11)

Kuit's protagonists are often strangers, not only in the foreign lands where they work, but also in the childhood homes and routines they return to. They cast the same cold, unflinching eye on themselves as they do on their surroundings and fellow humans. Speaking about her mother, one narrator says: ... *the way I love her is as jagged and hideous as the way she loves me.* (81) Another narrator goes through her elderly parents' cupboards, filling black rubbish bags. *'This is trash,' I say and smile like I'm doing them a favour. But I am not doing them a favour. I want to deprive them of what they have collected.* (86)

Some narrators are trapped in routines. *'I am compulsively compulsive'*, a list-making, map-drawing woman tells us. (9) *'It's time for sex'*, another declares (21). A third has a fridge filled with onions – *'What are you?' her lover asks – and suffers from Something blunt and nameless... 4am starts arriving as a time like any other... The sun and moon change place ceaselessly.* (84)

Personal anxieties are exacerbated by the pressures of war, racism, inequality.

In "Beau", set in Korea: *There is a cold hole halfway between my tits and my ass that gapes a little larger each time I picture the bombs falling. I think of the bombs and what will happen inside of me when they come. I am not afraid of the bombs as such. I am afraid of how I will feel when I realize that I am done for. In one sharp flash – or a series of flashes perhaps, lord knows I'm no expert – every feeble attempt at connection I made over the years will be retroactively obliterated by the bigness of the bombs. You have not done enough, boom! You barely loved, boom! It is comforting to know that death will come right after that, when I will most need it.* (70)

In "The blue crane Sanctuary", set in South Africa: *'This place,' Tim says. /.../'I dunno,' he says and puts his hand on his chest. As if the blue crane sanctuary is one of the many horrible places I made him go to because he is a tourist and he should know the truth about what happened in this country.'* (88-89)

Family members, strangers and lovers hurtle through life alone and side by side, in trains, on foot, in living rooms, in bed, exchanging awkward words and silences. Sometimes Carel's father says "fine thanks" and looks at the TV instead of the person who asked the question. Sometimes his mother says "no thanks" and looks up. This is what

looks are for: finishing a sentence. (25)

Amidst this alienation, fleeting connections of sex, touch, glance or word feel startlingly tender.

'Do we have to use a condom?' He swipes a thumb over my eyebrow, a second-hand gesture of affection, I suppose. 'I don't want to.'/ 'Yes we do, I have gonorrhoea,' I say, leaning forward, enjoying the smell coming off him: cigarettes, flannel, another country, my saliva. (70-71)

'If you could have done other things, what would you have done?' I ask my mother. Unwanted conversation is the only gift I can force out of my tiny heart. / 'I would have been like you,' she answers. She twists her mouth to one side. / 'The whole world –' she says and stops herself. (82)

Although most of the stories are no more than three pages long, this 95-page volume is not a book to be devoured in one sitting. I found myself reading slowly, partly to savour the choppy, discordant sentences and curious but resonant story endings. And partly because – in spite of the spiky humour – a feeling of bleakness, isolation and disconnection accumulates.

The harshness and desolation Kuit conveys in stark, carefully punctuated sentences feel true, honest. Her fiction makes me think of other story collections which resound with a similar off-kilter dislocation and estrangement – by authors like Dorthe Nors (Denmark), Evelyn Hampton (US), Claire-Louise Bennet (England), Sheila Heti (Canada), Stacy Hardy (SA). Perhaps it is just me. Perhaps it says something about whiteness and centuries of colonialism and capitalism – and about what this violence does to women and their psyches.

I bring my smell because that is the one thing I always bring. (37) How to categorise Kuit's writing? Perhaps absurdist fiction comes close. Or as her publisher describes it, "varying in style from suburban-realist to surrealist". It is a book from which every reader will draw something different.

I marvelled at how her serrated gems are paradoxically stripped of and yet saturated with emotion. The musicality and rhythms of many lines linger like song lyrics: *I carried your oxygen because you loved me. I'm not stupid. These are the facts. Our hearts in our suits, loving each other in the soundless liquid black of space. Two bowls of noodles twisting and squelching in warm bowls of blood.* (43)

Henali Kuit has translated *The incredible beat of my heart* into Afrikaans: *Geruisloos, ongemerk* (Deep South, 2022).