Four poems from (**don't fall, ma said**)

by Alan Finlay

(Deep South, 2026)

barbed wire

Mr. Stemmet's tractor grumbled
up and down his rows
of peach trees.

Across the dangling barbed
wire, that ran its rusted
splinters between the plots, as if to say
roughly here.

Beneath the creaking
of the pines
I watched his tractor go, up
and down, through swollen
Ground.

We had peaches too,
in our backyard, like thick
Red teardrops.

Our lemons
were bright as koki suns,
above the dry grass.

My gran-in-durban
who was visiting
collected the apricots,

that'd tumbled to the ground
and boiled them on the gas stove.

Jars burst in the kitchen with apricot eyelids,
and skew pips.

Up near
the pumphouse,
the mulberries bled
their peppercorns

and further
down, a bitter
apple tree

leaned with its
chapped elbows
on a paddock fence.

Ma said the oranges
were too sour to eat.
So they stiffened

on their branches,
mouldering

on the sides
like old planets.

There were figs
and plums,
by the vegetable garden
tap,
guavas bursting

beneath a bathroom
window, in a bed of mud & light

And a sky shooting through a vine,
until someone
burnt it down.

(My uncle, ma said quietly, a little
unsure, if she missed
the grapes)

2.

When winter came, my Gran-next-door
packed Mrs. Stemmet
some old clothes,
And invited her for dinner,
“bring the kids”.

There were always ghosts in her house.

When things got tough
she plucked the chickens,
her arms swelling.

My uncle,
a laatlammetjie,
sat alone
In the chicken hok, with
His red hair. The chickens
Clucking around him. The hissing

Of eggs.

3.

Mr. Stemmet was a professor
at the university,
Economics or Chemistry I think.
One night

my dad watched him,
jump the only stop street
on the way home.

Drunk, looking for relief
he didn't see it coming.
The barbed wire and the cosmos stopped him.
"Where am I," he said, dazed,
as my dad helped him out
his tangled car.

His kids, Afrikaans, like
lots of plot kids, were
"a bit odd" (my ma's words).
They watched me
ride my wooden go-cart
My dad had hammered together
with old Lawnmower wheels.

"Can you borrow it
to me?" the eldest said.
And they took it
back with them
stepping across,
the rusted barbed wire.

Into a land of thickening peaches.
To a father "with a problem".
To a mother sighing to the bone.

When they finally sold the plot,
to a nursery – I forget its name –
the peach trees were ripped out.
The nearby roads got tarred.

Big trucks came with small trees,
settled, waiting, in long hot rows.
A sign was bolted at the gate.

One afternoon,
I watched the new boy marching up and down
the lonely rows.

Practising for cadets. Red-faced,
sweating in his brown beret,
and grey school shorts.

Saluting a sapling as he passed.
Stomping his right foot, to halt.
Swivelling.
Stiff as a fork.

Mejuffrou Els

Mejuffrou Els insisted
we call her Ms.
not Miss in English,
I think because she was quite old.
She was the first team netball coach,
and trained school athletics.

She arrived at school
in white takkies,
with a clipboard
Sticking out her basket,
in tracksuit pants, and a
tracksuit zip-up top

her silver hair
tonged up at the edges
so it flared

a whistle,
tied, tightly,
with a yellow ribbon, to her wrist.

It made her look like
she wasn't really a teacher.
And longed, like most of us
for the end of class.

The yellow meant she was Impala,
one of the school houses,
and the quickest on the track.
The others were Kudu (green), Nyala (blue);
I was Eland, a slow and deliberate bull.

I was fast in grade 1, until Jan Hendrick
overtook me. He would have been
the fastest boy in school. But his ma
flipped her car, at the trick bend
just down the road from us,

after the corrugations;
where the riversand started
and the wattles gathered
the dust.
He came back to school
weeks later, with
blotched cheeks, looking down at his shoes.

Pietman van Rensburg was the
fastest boy in the school. He was in Impala,
and in standard 5.
Yolanda was the fastest girl.
She was in Kudu, who always came nearly last. She huffed
heavily as she passed. Wheezing,
on the final bend of the 400 metres.
Each step planted into the ground. Her hands out flat like a train
to make her go a little faster.

Mostly I went stiff up inside,
when Ms. Els was near. With her little silver whistle
wound tightly round, her wrist.

She took us for substitution once.
If the class got too noisy, she'd shriek or blow her whistle.
Or do both. (there
wasn't much difference between her whistle and her shriek).

Sometimes, things got worse,
my sister said, who had her for health I think.

If you stepped over the
line, where they poured the
poison to kill the grass.

One day I passed
her class, and through the window
saw Ms. Els, shrieking

close, at the boy's face
she had told to stand,
like a sergeant in an American army movie.

He shrunk his shoulders,
from her shriek. And clutched
his dog-eared A4 book.
And then she grabbed

his book, chucked it
to the floor; and bashed his head
Against the wall.

Quick, like
the way you bounce a ball.

So when Ms. Els
took us for substitution,
I tried my best
to get a desk
in the middle of the class.

She shrieked
in the tiled classroom. She shrieked and shrieked
her whistle on the track, on the hot, baked netball court,
where the girls puffed, in their team bibs.

As their takkies twisted, and squeaked
on the cracked cement. And the leather ball slapped, hard into
their raw hands.

Weekend wages

ma took the meat out from the old Kenwood deep freeze,
And let it thaw on the top all morning;
When it'd softened, she weighed it out, on her baking scale,
cut and chopped a little of this, that, adding some back
so they all got the same amount;

They came, down, in their blue overalls, in a group
quietly, humbly, as if asking
for something they already expected.
Washed the dog's dishes, while they waited; swept the courtyard
again with the stiff broom.

My dad counted the money and brought the register
out with the cash in gemclips.
The ones who'd been the longest got more.
The youngest, the least
of the sugar brown and green notes.

They signed the register, one by one
Izzie putting a shaky X
next to his name: Isaiah.

Then ma handed them the mielie meal,
with their meat wrapped in sticky plastic.
The older ones bending their knees slightly, to give thanks.

Sometimes my dad gave them a Castle beer,
frosted from the fridge, and said:
"Don't get too babalaas –
there's heavy lifting to do tomorrow."

When they left they'd be boisterous,
laughing loudly, as they headed back
up to the khaya behind the stables.

For breakfast my ma
cut thick slices of white bread,
six for each, ladling them
with apricot jam.
Sometimes there was peanut butter.

She cut the bread buildings in half,
and settled them in the tin plates.

They brought whatever container they had
for the tea – a mug, a big empty
jam tin, with the label soaked off,
or a battered tin tea pot,
so there was extra for the family.

They'd come after feeding the horses,
or collecting the bones the dogs left on the lawn.

There'd be a rest until 9.

When someone new started, he got blue
overalls from the hardware,
and a pair of fresh gumboots.

5 o'clock was knock-off time.

Outride

The frog
is rotten
in the hoof,

so he yanks it out with a pick.
Then smears
the tick grease

near the soft
of its contracting anus.

I scrape the
tufts of pelt back,
with a curry comb.

Turn to
the tail, tugging carefully at the burrs.

Take the brush,
to the shuddering
lake in its back.

shift
the bit
between

the bones
of its long teeth.

(it grinds, at the metal.)

I load,
the saddle.

My dad returns
and heaves,
the girth up,

a few more notches.

Until it winds.

“There,” he says.

He snaps down the stirrups,
to let it
know there will be a weight

I
place
my veldskoen in the pressure,
and he helps
me hitch myself

up into the furrow.

Then he
Mounts, and twists

his horse’s
neck
to lead the way

down the driveway,
past the pines.

*

My Father rides up ahead of me
through knots of riversand.

slaps
His riding boot with his
crop, to warn
his skittish horse.

His hips rock
in the saddle
where they're

settled in the hull
of a small boat.

He's looking up
across the plot

through the restless bluegums
at the run-down stables.

We ride past Mr. Landman's stoep
with its rusted swing for two,

The turn-off to the Warrens' house
(Mr. Warren fixed Wayne's motorbike

in the syringa's crackling shade,
the garage door rolled up behind him).

The houses I still don't know
Hidden behind the bushes
tangled in dust and dried out rain.

We follow the path down the
slope,
dumped with scrapiron;

The gulley that leaked
its black water.

  mist, rising like smoke
from a ruin.

Up past the lopsided gate,
no-one used anymore,
its lock rusted

  & swollen
long ago. And behind
the fence, the angled wattles
beating everything dry beneath them.

The cranes and pulleys, are still, in the distance.
rested on a Sunday. The trucks they used to mine the sand
parked along the ledges, coated in a grey dust.

On the left the pottery workshop
we visited for school.

'Danger/Gevaar' signs wired
to the diamond mesh that ran all the way along the
perimeter up to Paul Kruger,

where ma had to slow down
because of the corrugations,
Flash through the spill left by the vlei.

waves of icy wind rush up to my face
the long grasses up to my veldskoens.

*

Down by the dam we take
them through the shallow. Reeds, splashing. red
bishops flaring in a blur