

## The Flying Cows of Jozi

It is winter in Jozi when I wake up one night to the light of the full moon shining in my flat. Unable to go back to sleep I get up to make some tea. While waiting for the water to boil, I open a window and stick my head out to salute the big bold moon that proudly reflects itself in the glass walls from the Diamond Building across the road. A light breeze brushes my cheek and looking down in the deserted streets I see strange shadows crossing the intersection. The light of the moon is suddenly hidden as if covered by a passing cloud. I look up and I see a cow flying by.

'Huh!' I step back from the window with the back of my neck tingling with shock. I pinch myself and splash some cold water on my face. When I look out again, the cow is still floating. It is a beautiful cow, white with an intricate pattern of brown spots on her belly, and large, translucent wings which she majestically beats in passing. She's joined by a whole herd of winged cattle, flying between the Diamond Building and the old JSE, over the Reserve Bank and round the silver-grey chimneys at the Turbine Hall. Up, up, up they are flying, towards and over the moon and slowly dipping down again.

'Koe, koe, koe!' I used to drive my family crazy pointing my finger at every single cow we passed on the Sunday outings in the crowded blue Opel. The black and white Friesians in the lush green fields of the Dutch countryside have long been my favourite animals, I love those gentle mooing beasts with their soft eyes and swinging tails, chewing, watching, being.

But these are not the pampered Friesians of my youth. These are African cattle. Exotic. Majestic. Beautifully patterned Nguni's, Zebu's with their odd

shaped hump and large-horned Ankole-Watusi. They are not grazing in a field or being herded into their milking place, they are gracefully dipping, diving, floating and flying. Their moos and snorts changing the night air. Sipping my tea, I watch the sights until the morning call to prayer sounds from the Fordsburg mosque and the cows disappear in the brightening sky.

Normally when I wake up my last dream of the night sticks to me as if I've actually lived it, its reality only slowly wearing off during the day, leaving me sometimes sad and other times relieved that it was only a dream. Waking up later that morning I'm not sure whether my adventure during the night really happened or whether it was all a dream, a beautiful one, but still just a dream. When I find a big mark on one of my windows that could easily be from a wet cow snout I doubt myself even more. To prove that all that floating and mooing didn't just happen in my imagination, that evening I set my alarm for the early hours so I can have another look.

When the alarm sounds, I get up and make some strong coffee. Wide awake I look out to the north over the colourfully-lit Nelson Mandela Bridge and I immediately recognise the flying beasts, gambolling like Dutch cows freshly released into the springy green fields after a long winter indoors. Walking between my windows at both sides of my flat I realise the cows are flying everywhere, as real as the big black and white crows cawing past my building during the day. When I close the windows in the early morning light, the glass reflects my excited face with eyes that seem much rounder and browner, long straight lashes gently framing them.

Since that night I regularly get out of bed to enjoy the nightly flight of these beautiful animals. It makes me feel restful and, in a strange way, connected to a city that at times can be so overwhelming and impenetrable. The more I

quietly witness the cows flying by on their graceful wings, the more I start to see. My ears have grown soft and furry and I prick them up attentively to try and make sense of their mooing in the night. Telling each other of their hard work during the day, bellowing and snorting they still haven't found the wealth and fortune they've come looking for in the big and bustling city.

The precious gold of eGoli that once found will power their wings to fly back to wherever they came from. Down south to the rolling green hills of KwaZulu Natal and the endless wild coast of the Eastern Cape. Up north crossing the grey-green Limpopo river and the mighty Zambezi to the lands of ancient African kingdoms. Travelling back to a life of earthbound grazing and their families who eagerly await them.

My inner-city neighbourhood is not the only place where cows fly, driving through other parts of town at night I more often than not detect similar shapes in the sky. But somehow it is always the same herd that flies around my block; their particular shapes, the sound of their voices and their distinct behaviour have become very familiar. The recognition is mutual, whenever they hear me clip-clopping on the tiled floor of my flat, they greet me with a flyby past my windows or push their friendly snouts against the glass.

There they are: the two sleek young bulls, Vincent and Victor. With their shiny brown hides, they are the daredevils of the night sky, flying high and diving down fast while they shout of the big houses and fancy cars they'll one day own. Their days are spent collecting plastic bottles and paper from the dustbins on their fixed routes in town. At the end of each working day they push their trolleys to the pavement and build the cardboard beds for the older members in the herd.

Like Thulani who is old and grey and doesn't fly so high anymore. His voice is hoarse with age and illness, aching to go home to KwaZulu-Natal. But he is afraid his family won't welcome him, having first lost his job and then his savings so he can no longer pay the rent on his flat. If he can only hang on for one more year, then he can collect a pension and travel home with some dignity.

Tall and skinny, golden-eyed Mandla doesn't have a home to travel back to. His family in Soweto have denied him the share in the house that he rightfully inherited. His sister-in-law refused to deal with his alcohol soaked lifestyle any longer. He just makes his life as he finds it, most days he earns enough to get some food, and when he's lucky something extra to buy his beers. Those are the nights when he dances through the sky, joyfully bumping into the others.

And every bump makes Thandi laugh out loud, hugging her legs close to her soft brown body. I recognise her by that full belly laugh that daily travels up to my apartment from the sidewalk under the trees where she sits and sells cockroach poison to the people passing from the taxi rank on their way into town.

Simon is the sturdy dark one who, after a day tirelessly wearing out his shoes trying to find a job, at night sails by on his back clutching a book between his strong front legs. Drama's, detectives, chick-lit, he'll read anything to keep his mind from worrying about tomorrow.

And sometimes he reads to Nomfundo's little ones, settling the two gangly calves who so love playing freely in the sky after being confined to their tiny

spot on the sidewalk during the day. It gives matronly Nomfundo time to care for her lovely black and white speckled hide that gets so dirty from the dusty streets. Her big dark eyes never lose sight of her babies that she works so hard for, so they can go to school and on to a different life.

So many cows, so many stories, I hear the yearning in their bellows, aching for a life that is not yet theirs and fighting the daily struggle to just hang on. With resigned mooing they comfort each other and try to find some joy in their nightly flights. The night sky belongs to them, rising high to graze the fields of stardust, keeping their bellies nice and full. Warm in their beautiful hides they float through the city, far from cold pavements, far from rude police patrols that take everything you own. Up they go, up, up and away.

Mesmerized, I find myself balancing on the windowsill softly beating my brand new wings, ready to push off and join them in their magical flight.

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