

THE QUARRY

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The Sideboard

The past is not gone. We carry it about with us, in our genes, or in our characters, or in our faces, or in those secret places within our souls where the present is denied access. And sometimes we carry the past quite literally as baggage. In the corner of my lounge, or lounge-room as it's called here in Australia, an old item of furniture stands eloquently mute, taunting me to unravel even a little of its knotted and unwritten history, to decipher some of the code which has been willed into my life. It should really be in the dining-room, because it's a sideboard, but it's been pretty banged about in the one hundred years it's been around, and I've decided to give it a break from its dining-room duties.

For all the dents and scars on its surface, it's a remarkable piece nonetheless. It stands almost a metre high, its dimensions cut deliberately to the golden mean, so that it's over a metre and a half wide and half a metre deep, drawn in simple lines, with no showiness or flourishes at all. The polished wood on the outside is a deep walnut colour, and there are lighter reddish shades visible in the grain even after years of either vigorous polishing or benign neglect. Inside, the wood has never been polished or varnished, and it's lighter than its outside flank. This is where the wood of the sideboard can be coaxed to reveal its identity, its provenance.

Scratch it just a little, sand it briefly in a hidden spot, and its scent rises rich to one's nostrils and throat, so that a wine merchant would say it was redolent of cinnamon, with low notes of black pepper and subtle tones of dark cherry. This sideboard, on light duties in the Blue Mountains west of Sydney, is made of a distinctive African wood from a tree which has become rare. *Ocotea bullata* is a tree species which thrived for hundreds of millions of years in the high Afromontane forests, but now it's officially endangered and seems destined for extinction. Its English name is 'black stinkwood', because when the timber is new-felled and raw, its scent is headily rich – so strong that the first Dutch settlers into the southern African interior called the trees *stinkhout* – 'smelly wood'.

In a convoluted way, it's partly because of these Dutch settlers that I have this sideboard at all. The Dutch settlers didn't call themselves, 'settlers' – they called themselves *trekboers*, which means literally, 'itinerant farmers'. The British called them trouble, and were glad to see them leaving the Cape Colony, round about 1830. One of the regions they moved to was where my sideboard grew, or rather where the stinkwood tree which became my sideboard grew, before it was felled. When the *trekboers* started arriving, the reigning great chief of the Basotho people was named Moshoeshe, pronounced 'Mo-shwee-shwee'. Initially he believed the *trekboers* that they were itinerant. They weren't, really, and he spent the rest of his life preventing their complete appropriation of his territory. Once they had been allowed to grow a crop to feed their stock, which Moshoeshe argued was natural hospitality, the *trekboers* argued that the land was now theirs, and they were willing to fight and die – and kill – for it. And if they did uproot themselves to move further into the interior, they sold their farm to new arrivals and then hastily whipped up their oxen to draw their wagons northwards, leaving the newcomers nastily surprised when the Basotho wanted the land back. Land is like time: it's a tricky thing to own. Perhaps it even possesses us for a while, until we move off or are pushed off, or are lowered under it. In fact, the land the *trekboers* wanted and claimed hadn't always been Basotho territory, either. It had belonged to the San Bushmen, hunter-gatherers who had wandered the region for at least forty thousand years, making their strange clicking sounds and telling their Creation myths to each other as they followed the game from water-hole to water-hole, owning almost nothing but the instant of their being.

Then, probably round the time Macbeth was killing his cousin in Scotland, the Basotho people started moving in, and the Bushmen were killed or assimilated – or else driven westward into drier lands. Land is only yours for as long as you are able to defend it, unless your society is unusually prosperous and peaceful – and that’s always an aberration in history. Land is a resource rather than a possession, and in the brutal war for resources, you can’t always will the rights to your land to your children. Sideboards are a different matter: they can be owned, sold, given away – or willed to the next generation.

After my mother died, three pain-wracked years after my father’s sudden death by heart-attack, our family sat reading their will. My father’s flowing hand divested them in death of their possessions, item by item. The sideboard was to come to me, and my first thought was that my father must have written the will before I’d emigrated with my wife and children to Australia. Surely he wouldn’t have left me a sideboard to take halfway across the world? There were no manufacturer’s marks on it as clues to where it had been made, though my mother had told me once that the sideboard had been her father’s, and that it had travelled by ox-wagon to her parents’ home.

I was puzzling how to transport the sideboard in my Honda when my eldest brother offered to help me move it. ‘It folds up,’ he said. ‘Look.’ He opened one of its doors wide, and lifted the door gently. It popped out of its hinges and came away in his hands. ‘Try the other one,’ he said. I opened it so that it was at right angles to the sideboard’s length, pulled it upwards and it slid up to meet me.

‘Wow,’ I said. ‘Will we need a screwdriver?’ I hadn’t ever helped my parents move house; I’d been the first child to move away from our home town at twenty-one. Before that we’d lived in the same house for ten years, so it was a revelation to me that the sideboard came apart.

‘No screwdriver – just hands.’ My brother pulled out one of the draws. ‘Look at this,’ he said, and he slid the bottom of a draw carefully out of its grooves, then folded the draw’s hinged sides inwards so that it tucked flat. I did the same for the other draw, compressing it gently together like the sides of a wooden accordion.

The shelves inside the sideboard lifted out easily, and were stacked in the little pile next to us. The rest of it looked pretty solid still. ‘What now?’ I asked.

‘Hold that side,’ he said, and he unhooked two diagonal iron strips which crossed

the back of the sideboard, then he used finger and thumb to pluck out four small hand-carved pegs which had been hidden along the back. ‘Now pull,’ he instructed, and I did. The backplate fell away, but the sideboard stayed upright. ‘It was designed so that one person could take it apart, or put it together,’ he said. ‘Tug the bit in front.’

I did, and it glided easily toward me. As it came away in my hand, the whole superstructure of the sideboard swayed, unmoored from its rigidity but not collapsing under its own weight. ‘Now we just lift it,’ said my brother. We flipped it onto its top, and its two sides folded softly into each other so that its bulk had disappeared. What a moment before had reached to my waist was now stacked flat, its entirety about twenty centimetres high. ‘There,’ said my brother. ‘I moved that a few times.’

I believe that my sideboard started life on a mountainside in what was one day to become the kingdom of Lesotho. It may already have been a sapling when Columbus sailed westwards, and it certainly would have been a magnificent and mature tree by the Napoleonic wars – a green force towering thirty to forty metres tall in its mountain fortress in ‘Basutoland’ as the British had begun calling the area. Perhaps its bubbled leaves were fluttering in the wind in 1833, when Moshoeshoe realised that he needed to fight *trekboer* fire with gunfire rather than spears. In that year he requested a white missionary for his territory, suspecting correctly that missionaries would gain him access to guns, and he got three missionaries instead of one. One of those was to become a lifelong friend of his, passionate about protecting Basotho lands from both *trekboer* and rapacious British officials. That friend was the French missionary Eugene Casalis, and his connection to my sideboard and to me runs in an almost straight line: Casalis’s daughter Adèle would be born in Basutoland, and she would marry the young Swiss missionary Adolphe Mabile – and he was a close friend of my great-great-grandfather Paul Germond.

It wasn’t my great-great-grandfather who felled the five-hundred-year-old tree that became the sideboard. If my detective work is right, it was his grandson, Theodore. Yet indirectly and genetically, I suppose, he had a hand in it. Where does any chain of responsibility or causation begin, I wonder? In this matter of the tree, Mabile was also a link in the chain, and of course his wife Adèle: as missionaries they moved to Basutoland because she spoke fluent SeSotho as well as French and English – and it was

their enthusiasm which persuaded my great-great-grandfather to go too. By his calling on the missionaries in the first place, even Moshoeshoe himself is linked to the felling of the tree and the building of the sideboard. And of course the *trekboers*, for invading Basotho lands and precipitating Moshoeshoe's need for guns. The roots of causality run deep, like those of responsibility, and they're hidden in the tunnels of their subterraneality, so who's to know? At that time the black stinkwood trees were as plentiful on the mountainsides as passenger pigeons had been on the North American plains; the result of a connected series of events, though, is that here in my lounge is a stinkwood sideboard, cut, dried and polished, while its few still- surviving cousins reel under an ongoing arboreal genocide.

My great-great-grandfather Paul and his wife Lucie launched their mission school at Thabana Morena in Basutoland in 1861; by this time they had two sons, a two-year-old and an infant who'd been born on the way. That infant, Louis Germond, was my great-grandfather – who almost didn't make it to fatherhood. On a visit 'home' to Switzerland it was discovered he had consumption and wasn't expected to survive. Louis returned to Basutoland with his parents in the hope that a drier climate would keep him alive a few more years; had he stayed in Switzerland, I suppose there would be no sideboard in my lounge and perhaps no me at all, only a Swiss grave marked 'Jacques-Louis Germond, *n.* 1861, *m.* 1885' – or thereabout.

Louis did survive, and married when he turned thirty. Between 1891 and 1906 he and his wife Nelly poured out nine children. I surmise that it was one of those – Theodore – who cut the black stinkwood and sawed its planks, then planed and sanded them into the sideboard I have now. My grandfather Paul Germond was born in 1894, a year after Theo, but my grandpa Paul wouldn't have been the one to cut down the great stinkwood tree and fashion the sideboard. When I was a boy I used to visit Grandpa on the occasional trip with my parents, and in his shed were spades and ploughshares and harrows, and seed-fiddles and barley-hummellers and potato- shovels and corn flails and scythes – but no great saws or planes, no wood-clamps or spokeshaves. My grandpa wasn't a woodworker; he was a sower and a planter of seeds, crops, berries, vines, fruit trees – anything edible. His chief aim was to teach people how to farm and feed themselves.

I have a photo of the second generation Germond family in front of a grass-roofed building on their mission in 1906. Louis is standing proudly to the side of his brood of children, and my grandpa Paul is squatting solidly on the ground right at the front, earthy and open and looking at twelve much like he did at eighty. On his right is his gentle brother Theodore, 'Gift of God', the child family journals say was sensitive and kind and obedient. He is slim compared to my grandpa, his eyes are darker, and even at thirteen he looks like a saint. Everyone knew Theo was going to be a missionary, even then. The other Germonds are scattered about in the photograph, my mother's paternal uncles and aunts whom I never met, not one of them, and my adult self wonders why not.

I'm certain it was Theo who cut down the tree and built the sideboard. It would be impossible to prove in a court of law, but logic dictates that it must have been Theo. He was intent on becoming a missionary, but his younger brother Roby dreamed of becoming a doctor, and Theo realised that their father wouldn't be able to afford Roby's medical studies in Europe. So, because he was clever with his hands and loved carpentry, self-sacrificing Theo became a woodwork teacher and saved all his salary for Roby's studies. In 1917, he and Roby headed to Europe, where Roby qualified as a doctor before returning to practise in Basutoland. Theo, the sensitive carpenter who went to Paris to study missionary work, the young man who worshipped both God and wood, was felled at the age of twenty-five by the great flu epidemic in 1918.

In that same year my grandpa was appointed to the faculty of agriculture at a startup college, a college which became Nelson Mandela's first university. Grandpa's appointment involved a five-hundred kilometre journey to the tiny town of Alice, where he would live until he died at eighty-two. From Basutoland went all his worldly goods and he travelled the mountainous roads the only way he could – by ox-wagon.

Grandpa Paul would have needed furniture for his new home, and I know, just know, that his dead brother Theo would have wanted him to have the sideboard, so lovingly crafted from the rich, dark, fragranced wood of the black stinkwood tree, crafted so that a tiny spark of Theo lives again each time the disparate parts of the golden mean glide and slide and fold outwards for travel. Here the sideboard stands, in my lounge in the mountains of Australia, or my lounge room as I'm learning to say.

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