

Water

- by Barbara Toressi, 2009.

A heavy cloud of disappointment settles over my cousin's face as the skies open and the first drops of a heavy rainstorm start inching their way down my windscreen. Lazy at first, the droplets pick up speed as I hit the accelerator, soon breaking into a torrential stream being mirrored, I notice with a glance at the passenger seat, by the tears chasing each other at breakneck speed down Gabriela's cheeks. I burst out laughing. My cousin suffers from Seasonal Affective Disorder or SAD, as the condition is quite aptly acronymed, and miserable weather just knocks her to the ground. "Oh God, is it going to be like this for the next three weeks?" She is so shattered by the absence of, out of all things guide-bookingly African, a scorching sun, that she even fails to notice the roadside shacks that had jolted me out of my own climate shock a few months back. But since I clearly remember warning her about the "strange" phenomenon of antipodean season reversal, I carry on sniggering guiltlessly while I lecture her on the importance of rain for the landscape she seems otherwise so enthralled with.

The abundance of well-watered springs on the slopes of Table Mountain is in fact Cape Town's *raison d'être*, the prime motor that propelled the development of a makeshift 16th century fort into today's sprawling metropolis. In truth, after Bartholomew Diaz vanished into thin air while rounding the Cape in 1500, the tempestuous peninsula stayed off the radar of Europe's colonial interests for over a century, when a serendipitous shipwreck led to the establishment, on Table Bay, of a refreshment station for commercial fleets on their way to the Indies. The enterprise was formalised by the Dutch East India Company in 1652 with the creation of Company's Gardens, on which the cultivation of vegetables for scurvy-ridden sailors flourished. By the end of the 1600s the trading station had expanded to incorporate a granary, a mill, stables, and even a hospital, while a small settlement of elegant whitewashed houses began taking shape behind the bay's busy docks. Its growth, however, remained contained until the end of the 18th century, when political turmoil in Europe provided the catalyst for change.

"That's all very well" says a now composed yet bitter Gabriela "but is this deluge going to stop anytime soon?" Of course it is, and twenty-four hours later we are both gazing in astonishment at the bluest blues-beating sky imaginable at the former Oranjezicht farmstead, home to the mother city's aforementioned *raison d'être*. It is a glorious morning, with chirping birds, a northerly breeze and a carpet of green, lush grass that would make even the saddest SAD-stricken soul grateful for the vagaries of the Cape's weather.

Caron von Zeil of the 'Reclaim Camissa' project is our guide for the day, and from her we learn that the heavy condensation of south-easterly clouds, the so called Table Cloth, is the source of Cape Town's past and present fortunes. During the wet winter months, this misty curtain causes rainfall and moisture to seep through the soil's porous sandstone, before bouncing off the impermeable granite that lines its lowermost layers and snaking seawards along a succession of dramatic ravines and gorges.

Until the pace of the CBD's development switched gears in the early 1800s, Company's Gardens and the tanks of refuelling ships anchored at Table Bay were the prime recipients of this water, but with growing trade volumes being matched by an equally mushrooming population, demand soon began to exceed the springs' capacity. On the scare wave of the 1849 drought, dual plans to store rainwater and reduce wastage from mountain streams were thus made, resulting in the creation of the so called Lower Service Reservoir on the south side of Company's Gardens.

However, as hillside building intensified during the latter part of the 19th century, so did the need for a higher rain catchment system, which was eventually translated into the establishment of the Molteno Reservoir in 1886. With the ensuing completion of five large dams on Table Mountain, the thirst of the burgeoning urbis was thus temporarily quenched, but complacency about resource abundance ended up driving the perfectly functional Platteklip river into a stormwater channel. The last historical tie between mountain and ocean was finally severed in the 1990s, when water from Stadtsfontein was deemed unsuitable for drinking and cut off from the reticulation network.

“So, were these springs exhausted or too polluted to be salvaged?” is Gabriela’s quite legitimate question. But no, apparently neither the Platteklip nor Stadtsfontein were ever beyond rescue, but efforts to maintain them were deemed redundant in the face of the high-tech engineering solution. Water from either of these springs is not potable anymore though, and plans are being made to divert the Platteklip river upstream to an existing sand filter, which would clean it naturally and at little cost. Alternatively, water from Stadtsfontein could be driven down to De Waal Park, where pumps and pipes dating back to the Cape’s colonial times can be resurrected just as easily.

‘In fact’ adds Caron ‘this would amount to catching two birds with one stone, because as well as being functional, these original Dutch waterworks have the potential to become a tourist attraction in their own right. Moreover, they would create a heritage-rich, environment-friendly space in which Capetonians could reinforce their sense of identity and reconnect with nature’.

Reconnect. I have heard this term innumerable times apropos the aims of the new social space on Green Point common, which is also reliant on the creation of a strong sense of place for its ultimate success. And of course, it only makes sense that two parks striving to consolidate the connections between all Capetonians should also be linked by the same philosophy. But the similarities, or better the connections, are not just metaphorical, as water from the springs at the Oranjezicht farmstead will physically flow to Green Point in a re-enactment of the city’s first sign of urbanity. And while in the 1600s this was epitomised by subsistence horticulture, in our fast times of leisure and zoning regulations, the main beneficiary of the mountain’s fresh waters will be an eco-conscious public space.

‘Beautiful, beautiful!’ is my friend Simon’s commentary as I relay the day’s news “here’s another great idea, take some perfectly good water and use it to irrigate a golf course. Never mind if half the city doesn’t have anything coming out of its taps. But wait, why worry! Half the city doesn’t even have taps!” And here we are again, my caustic neighbour’s social conscience and penchant for playing devil’s advocate open cracks in my weeklong research. But is it really true that such a large number of households in Cape Town don’t have running water? And more to the point, can some of the potentially drinkable water from Table Mountain be brought to areas further afield than the CBD? I have no idea. So while Gabriela drags off a recalcitrant Simon to the beach, I go back out in search of more answers.

This time I head to the Media City Building, where David Kriel, Head Engineer at the City’s Water Department quickly dispels my doubts about both the feasibility of dispatching the Oranjezicht water to The Flats, and indeed the actual need for such an intervention. According to the latest municipal figures, over 90% of all households in Cape Town have access to clean water, and difficulties with supplying the rest stem from the fluidity of the city’s informal settlements, rather than from shortages of water or slackness in building new infrastructures. On the contrary, the water story in Cape Town is an ever evolving canvas, and with the recent completion of the Berg River dam, another engineering marvel is adding definition to the painting. However, even if this project has increased the yield of the Western Cape Water System by 18%, demand is expected to outstrip supply again by 2014. And while alternatives to dams such as desalinating plants and aquifers are currently being investigated, water

saving goals – which were the *sine qua non* for obtaining permission to build the Berg Dam itself – must become a consistent requirement in the nation’s resource management strategy.

In this light, Simon’s objections are indeed off target. The Oranjezicht/Green Point Park project is the epitome of Cape Town’s resource conservation efforts, as well as an unprecedented opportunity to educate the public about using without abusing one of nature’s greatest gifts. Moreover, by symbolically restoring the ties between past and present, Green Point Park will reinforce the city’s uniqueness through the diffusion of an enhanced sense of place, which, as Gabriela jokingly remarks while I drive her to the airport on another wet wintery day, won’t be lost to even the most clueless of tourists.