



PERHAPS IN DECEMBER

WORDS LIEN BOTHA

Lien's deep love for her Betty's Bay home transcends having to move out.

WE LEFT OUR HOUSE IN THE WINTER OF 2015.

There we lived for nearly 12 years in a nest of brick, corrugation and wood – on the south side of a circle named after the August flower Senecio.

It was Easter 2003 when we purchased a small piece of land in a place neither of us was familiar with at the time. We had roamed the rural Cape for many years in search of a site outside the city and on that Sunday in April we had found it in Betty's Bay. Rabbits clapped and we tasted chocolate.

Raymond Smith, my partner and architectural practitioner, designed the house on a gentle hill, facing the sea to the south and a mountain named Blesberg towards the west.

In February 2004 we moved into the double-storey house that resembled a farmhouse by the sea (sometimes it felt like a basilica). It had Kahlo/Riviera wings – me on the east and Ray on the west – and a fireplace in the centre, the heart of the house next to the galley kitchen, because some of the sassiest culinarians have the smallest kitchens, not so?

We would cook and kuier through many Easters, followed by Christmases and birthdays and nights in the company of rock-and-rollers of which one – a guitarist – once woke up at three in the morning thinking he was on a ship and with loud alarm raised us with "Captain, we are sinking!" while staring at the "porthole", a large round window facing Voorberg to the east.

Music filled our hallowed space, birds flew in and out of rooms, and mongooses warmed themselves in the sun on window ledges. In our beloved house Raymond became a heritage practitioner and I wrote a novel. Our neighbourhood filled out with

interesting people; with some we would enjoy a weekend braai and others we baptised Paddavis, Captain Chaos and Flying Dutchman.

In the fynbos garden we planted nearly 100 trees and shrubs such as white pear, forest silver oak, milkwood, sagewood, dune crowberry, camphor and Cape beech. Aloes turned orange in winter and provided nectar for sunbirds; a mauve forest of September bush screened an inquisitive neighbour with her harsh voice. We loved and argued, worked and played. Once or twice we received some bad news, but joy and sorrow alike were absorbed by that empathic cave.

Every smell and sound of that house on the soft slope shaped a familial body in my mind; it became instinct and refuge.

Trees grew tall, the sea's voice ebbed in on tranquil nights, and from the deck you could see fishing boats in winter. In windless summer, a man would fly his model aeroplane against the distant dunes. In November the greenbladder grasshopper announced summer and moths circled candles.

We never felt unsafe when meranti louvres closed the day. How I long for the dusk ritual of such and for morning's slits letting light through.

In leaving that house, we packed tables, chairs, lamps, beds, couches, a fridge, a washing machine, garden tools, and 80 boxes containing mostly books. I wrapped the blue-and-white vase my mother once gave us and the silver-plated trophy my father-in-law received when he was part of the mining team who broke the World Shaft Sinking Record at the President Steyn GM Co Ltd mine in November 1959.

Deon's N2 Movers arrived on a Monday. It did not rain. Twelve men sang and whistled while carrying our house out into the world. It took about an hour.

I returned to the empty house three days after we and everything in it were gone. I returned to pack a fire for the new owners. On the south stoep a mongoose appeared and gave me an inquisitive look. None of the birds sang. The entire house sighed.

There, on that slight slope, we left the voices of loved ones who were no longer alive, their conversations set inside walls, under the floor their gentle feet, in the air their hearts. When we left our house in the winter of 2015 everything changed forever and it felt to me as if I had lost a member of my family – a love done.

The animals will look for us; they will leave messages under stones and in the trees. They will follow us home when we inhabit the next house – Veldhuis – on the north side of the same circle. Perhaps in December. **V**

DID YOU KNOW?

1. Artist Lien Botha was born in Pretoria on 21 March 1961, a year to the day after the Sharpeville massacre.
2. On 21 March 1960 in Sharpeville, after a day of demonstrations against the pass laws, police opened fire on a crowd of protestors, killing 69.
3. Lien and her partner Raymond Smith are long-time residents of Betty's Bay, a coastal village in the Western Cape. Rooted within a biosphere, Betty's Bay, says Lien, provides a good barometer for life.
4. She says the best feature of her home is the way in which light moves through the different spaces as the seasons pass.
5. Her first memory? The sound of her mother's voice. Her favourite fragrance? Those of the tubular flowers of sagewood that herald the coming of spring.
6. Waitressing at the Spur while she was a student was, says Lien, her worst job ever. And the worst thing anyone has ever said to her is, "You broke my heart."
7. To unwind, Lien swims. And walks.