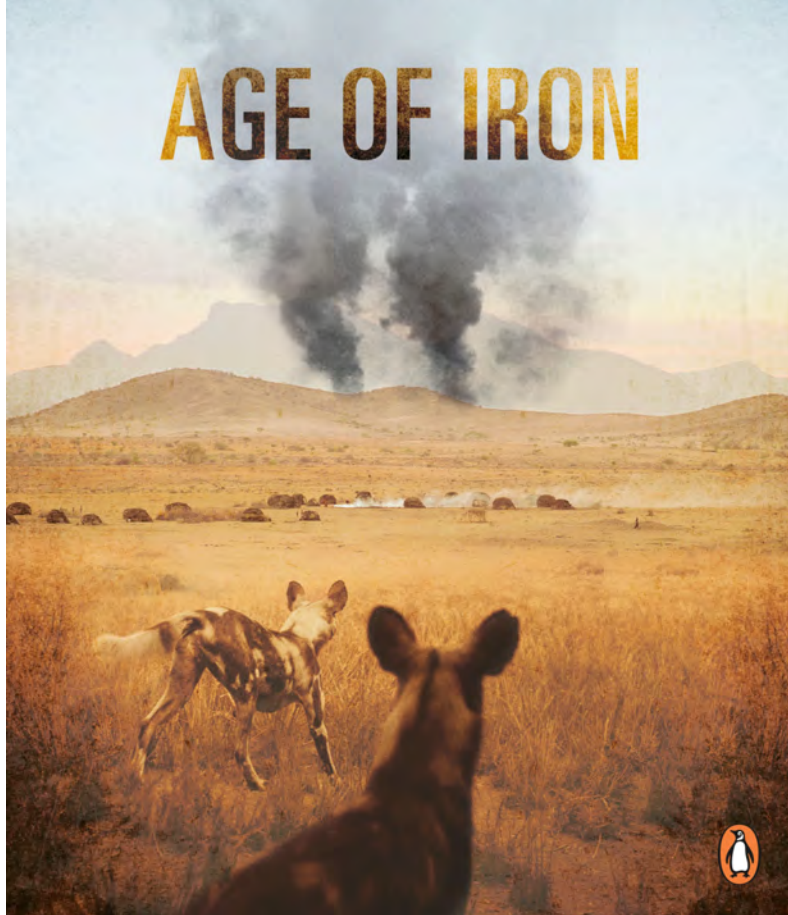


J. M. COETZEE

WINNER OF THE NOBEL PRIZE FOR LITERATURE

BOOKER PRIZE-WINNING AUTHOR OF *DISGRACE* AND *WAITING FOR THE BARBARIANS*

AGE OF IRON



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Age of Iron
by
J.M. Coetzee

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1

There is an alley down the side of the garage, you may remember it, you and your friends would sometimes play there. Now it is a dead place, waste, without use, where windblown leaves pile up and rot.

Yesterday, at the end of this alley, I came upon a house of carton boxes and plastic sheeting and a man curled up inside, a man I recognized from the streets: tall, thin, with a weathered skin and long, carious fangs, wearing a baggy gray suit and a hat with a sagging brim. He had the hat on now, sleeping with the brim folded under his ear. A derelict, one of the

derelicts who hang around the parking lots on Mill Street, cadging money from shoppers, drinking under the overpass, eating out of refuse cans. One of the homeless for whom August, month of rains, is the worst month. Asleep in his box, his legs stretched out like a marionette's, his jaw agape. An unsavory smell about him: urine, sweet wine, moldy clothing, and something else too. Unclean.

For a while I stood staring down on him, staring and smelling. A visitor, visiting himself on me on this of all days.

This was the day when I had the news from Dr. Syfret. The news was not good, but it was mine, for me, mine only, not to be refused. It was for me to take in my arms and fold to my chest and take home, without headshaking, without tears. "Thank you, doctor," I said. "Thank you for being frank." "We will do everything we can," he said, "we will tackle this together." But already, behind the comradely front, I could see he was withdrawing. *Sauve qui peut*. His allegiance to the living, not the dying.

The trembling began only when I got out of the car. By the time I had closed the garage door I was shaking all over: to still it I had to clench my teeth, grip my handbag. It was then that I saw the boxes, saw him.

"What are you doing here?" I demanded, hearing the irritation in my voice, not checking it. "You can't stay, you must go."

He did not stir, lying in his shelter, looking up, inspecting the winter stockings, the blue coat, the skirt with whose hang there has always been something wrong, the gray hair cut by a strip of scalp, old woman's scalp, pink, babyish.

Then he drew in his legs and leisurely got up. Without a word he turned his back on me, shook out the black plastic,

folded it in half, in quarters, in eighths. He produced a bag (AIR CANADA, it said) and zipped it shut, I stood aside. Leaving behind the boxes, an empty bottle, and a smell of urine, he passed me. His trousers sagged; he hitched them up. I waited to be sure he had gone, and heard him stow the plastic in the hedge from the other side.

Two things, then, in the space of an hour: the news, long dreaded, and this reconnaissance, this other annunciation. The first of the carrion birds, prompt, unerring. How long can I fend them off? The scavengers of Cape Town, whose number never dwindles. Who go bare and feel no cold. Who sleep outdoors and do not sicken. Who starve and do not waste. Warmed from within by alcohol. The contagions and infections in their blood consumed in liquid flame. Cleaners-up after the feast. Flies, dry-winged, glazen-eyed, pitiless. My heirs.