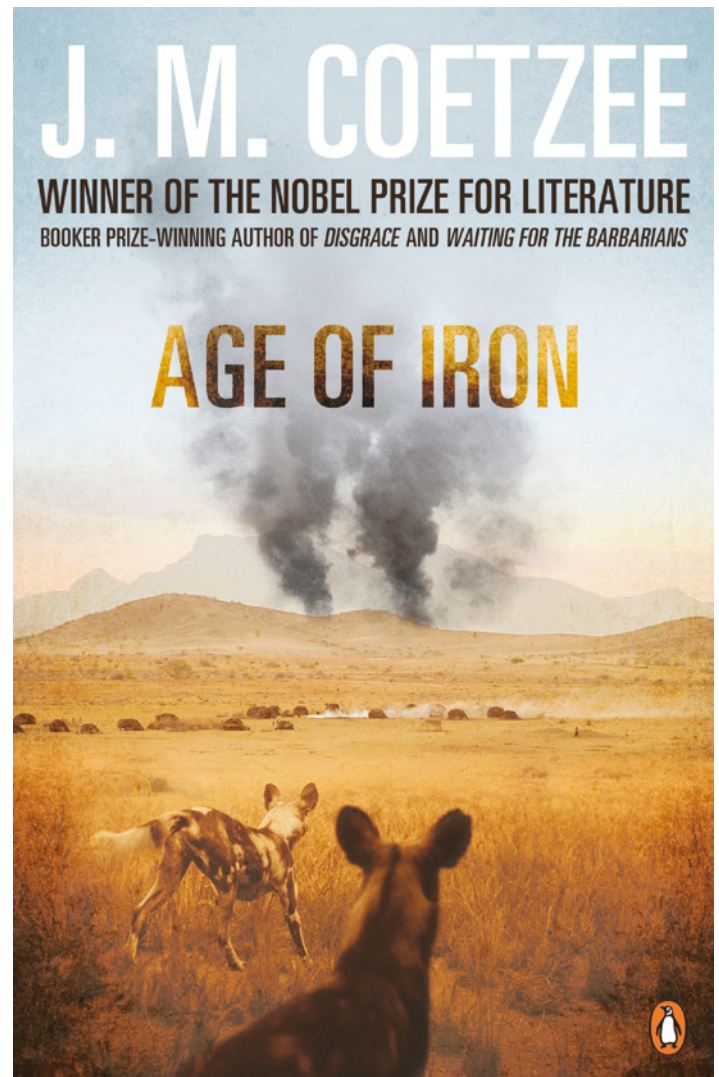


J.M. Coetzee, *Age of Iron*

In the following extract from Coetzee's *Age of Iron* (1990), a retired professor, Elizabeth Curren, is shocked when her maid's black son is murdered by police security forces at the time of apartheid.

He turned the car, drove back up the hill, and parked in a picnic area high above the bay. He drank and offered me the bottle. Cautiously I drank. The veil of greyness that had covered everything grew visibly lighter. Dubious, marveling, I thought: Is it really so simple – not a matter of life and death at all? 'Let me tell you finally,' I said: 'What set me off was not my own condition, my sickness, but something quite different.' The dog complained softly. Vercueil reached out a languid hand; it licked his fingers. 'Florence's boy was shot on Tuesday.' He nodded. 'I saw the body,' I went on, taking another sip, thinking: Shall I now grow loquacious?¹ Lord preserve me! And as I grow loquacious will Vercueil grow loquacious too? He and I, under the influence, loquacious together in the little car? 'I was shaken²,' I said. 'I won't say grieved because I have no right to the word, it belongs to his own people. But I am still – what? - disturbed. It has something to do with his deadness, his dead weight. It is as though in death he became very heavy, like lead or like that thick, airless mud you get at the bottoms of dams. As though in the act of dying he gave a last sigh and all the lightness went out of him. Now he is lying on top of me with all that weight. Not pressing, just lying. 'It was the same when that friend of his was bleeding³ in the street. There was the same heaviness. Heavy blood. I was trying to stop it from flowing down the gutters⁴. So much blood! If I had caught it all I would not have been able to lift the bucket. Like trying to



lift a bucket of lead.

'I have not seen black people in their death before, Mr Vercueil. They are dying all the time, I know, but always somewhere else. The people I have seen die have been white and have died in bed, growing rather dry and light there, rather papery, rather airy. They burned well, I am sure, leaving a minimum of ash to sweep up afterwards. Do you want to know why I set my mind on

Glossary

¹ talkative – ² feeling nervous or frightened – ³ losing blood from his body – ⁴ the edges of the road where water flows away.



burning myself? Because I thought I would burn well.

'Whereas these people will not burn, Bheki and the other dead. It would be like trying to burn figures of pig-iron⁵ or lead. They might lose their sharpness of contour, but when the flames subsided they would still be there, heavy as ever. [...]

'You must understand, it is not just a personal thing, this disturbance I am telling you about,' I pursued. 'In fact it is not per-

sonal at all. I was fond of Bheki, certainly, when he was still a child, but I was not happy with the way he turned out. I had hoped for something else. [...]

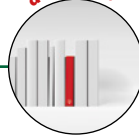
'So why should I grieve for him? The answer is, I saw his face. When he died he was a child again. The mask must have dropped in sheer⁶ childish surprise when it broke upon him in the last instant that the stone-throwing and shooting was not a game after all; that the giant who came shambling⁷ towards him with a paw full of sand to stop into his mouth would not be turned away by chants or slogans; that at the end of the long passageway where he choked⁸ and gagged and could not breathe there was no light.

'Now that child is buried and we walk upon him. Let me tell you, when I walk upon this land, this South Africa, I have a gathering feeling of walking upon black faces. They are dead but their spirit has not left them. They lie there heavy and obdurate, waiting for my feet to pass, waiting for me to go, waiting to be raised up again. Millions of figures of pig-iron floating under the skin of the earth. The age of iron waiting to return.

Glossary

5 iron that has not been treated – 6 pure – 7 walking slowly – 8 was unable to breathe

activities



↓ TEXT COMPREHENSION

Answer the following questions.

- 1 Where are Elizabeth and Vercueil?
- 2 Why is Elizabeth upset?
- 3 Why does she think black people's dead bodies weigh more than white people's ones?
- 4 Why is she grieving?
- 5 Why does she have the feeling of walking upon black faces?
- 6 How does she refer to this period of South African history?

↓ CLOZE EXERCISE

While reading the following short synopsis of *Age of Iron*, fill in the gaps with the words given: stone – horrors – cancer – drinks – daughter – beggar.

Walking upon Black Faces

Mrs. Curren, who is dying slowly of 1, writes letters to her long-gone 2 in a day by day journal form: after a life dedicated to books and culture, the murder of her maid's son has opened her eyes to the 3 of apartheid, which in return is causing the violent reaction of the black youth; it might be the beginning of an 'age of iron' after the age of clay and 4 during which their slave

parents lived. Mrs. Curren's depression turns into dead calm when she finds a 5 at her door, a man named Vercueil. He only wants food and 6, but later he finds himself becoming fond of this old lady, finally promising to make sure that these letters will be delivered to her daughter in America after she has passed away.