



**Marion Molteno's** fiction reflects the breadth of her life experience. She grew up in South Africa where she was active in opposition to the apartheid regime. She has lived in Zambia at a time of profound social change, pioneered educational projects in multi-ethnic communities in the UK, and has worked for Save the Children across Asia and Africa. She studied Urdu with the scholar Ralph Russell, and edits his writing on Urdu literature.

Her novel *If you can walk, you can dance* was awarded the Commonwealth Writers Prize for the best book in the Africa region and was selected for the top 20 books in the Women's Writers Festival in New Zealand. *A Shield of Coolest Air*, set among Somali asylum seekers, won the David St John Thomas Award for fiction. *Somewhere More Simple* explores tensions in an island community off the coast of Cornwall. Her short story collection, *A Language in Common*, reflects the experiences of South Asian women in Britain in the 1980s, and has been translated into Punjabi, Urdu and Bengali.



## *Praise for Uncertain Light*

I took up Marion Molteno's new novel with high expectations, having greatly enjoyed her Commonwealth Writers Prize success a few years ago. She has written a quite different story, but one I admire every bit as much, introducing me to a new terrain, an adventurous plot, and characters who will remain with me for a very long time. A moving and necessary book.'

—ALASTAIR NIVEN, JUDGE OF THE 2014 MAN BOOKER PRIZE

'A terrifically absorbing, topical and quietly affecting novel of interlocking worlds and relationships. Commonwealth Writers Prize winner and former aid worker Molteno takes inspiration from a life lived across cultures.'

—THE BOOKSELLER

ALSO BY MARION MOLTENO

## *If you can walk, you can dance*

Commonwealth Writers Prize winner

'Suffused with the colours of Africa and the sounds of song. An exhilarating book that celebrates the power of music as universal language, healer, political tool—the thread that links humankind across cultures and continents.'

—DIANA BURRELL, COMPOSER

'An ambitious and gripping story. Her eloquent exploration of what music can mean in life is handled with a zest that outshines most of this year's cacophony of musically-themed fiction.'

—THE INDEPENDENT

'Combines epic breadth and intimate detail to build to a poignant crescendo.'

—SUNDAY TIMES

'Illuminating—very unusual and original.'

—SUNDAY TELEGRAPH

'A novel of the human condition, tragically yet beautifully recognizable.'

—AFRICA BOOK JOURNAL

## *A Shield of Coolest Air*

Winner of the David St John Thomas Award

‘A beautiful piece of fiction, uncovering hidden realities. Its significance extends beyond its setting in Britain to anywhere where cruelty and injustice prevail.’

—NAWAL EL SADAAWI, EGYPTIAN NOVELIST

‘So successfully has Molteno breathed life into her characters that we get a real sense of their vulnerability, their fury and their astonishing resilience.’

—INDEPENDENT ON SUNDAY

‘Her writing has a poet’s sensitivity and grace. Poignant and deeply empathetic.’

—THE SCOTSMAN

‘She writes with intense sympathy of the bewildering experiences confronting Somali refugees.’

—THE OBSERVER

‘This is one of those books I didn’t want to end. It affirms the triumph of the human spirit in the face of adversity and honours the power of love. It is moving and beautiful, and if that sounds corny I don’t care.’

—NORTHERN STAR

## *Somewhere More Simple*

‘Confident evocation of the islands’ atmosphere, the mix of sensuous beauty and extreme parochialism. The passages describing her characters’ childhoods are wonderful. At its darkest hour her plot has a Peter Grimes tragic potential.’

—THE INDEPENDENT

‘This superbly well-written, intelligent book sounds not a jarring note as its deceptively calm prose leads the reader into a maelstrom of unresolved emotions.’

—DAILY EXPRESS

‘Molteno’s sensitive exploration of her characters’ inner lives is the real treat of this novel, as she eloquently sketches a tale of desire, loss and forgiveness against a backdrop of indifferent sea and sky.’

—FINANCIAL TIMES MAGAZINE

‘An intense, deeply personal novel. Molteno shows great compassion for and understanding of her characters, allowing the reader to care for them as much as she does. A muted, reflective meditation on the need for resolution.’

—SUNDAY HERALD, NEW ZEALAND

### *A Language in Common*

‘The most extraordinary book of short stories, straddling in fiction the social divide between white Britons and Asians. Her compassion never degenerates into sentimentality, and her sensitive perceptions come from a decade of getting to know her characters.’

—THE INDEPENDENT

‘Powerful portraits. She has a remarkable understanding of her characters and their conditions.’

—SUNDAY TIMES OF INDIA

‘Written with honesty, determination and purpose. It is beautiful and wise.’

—CITY LIMITS

# *Uncertain Light*

Marion Molteno



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*for Star*





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*PART 1*

*This year it is the lightning, not the sun,  
that marks time's course*  
—Ghalib





## *The road into the mountains*

You travel first through a flat valley, barren except for a trail of green that follows the bed of a river. The view is long, the spaces wide and empty; all you will see of human habitation is an occasional yurt, the squat round tent of a herder family, where sheep with long floppy ears and fat tails huddle together in the early morning mist. Ahead the mountains loom, rising abruptly from the valley floor. Nearer, and the road begins to rise into an amphitheatre of gaunt hills, with tracks disappearing into small stands of forest. Up further, and the earth closes in as the road winds up the side of a steep valley, with a dramatic drop to the river below.

It is from here that the road becomes treacherous—you would never venture up it without a driver who knew it well. The tarmac has fallen apart, it hasn't been repaired since before the end of the Soviet era, and the earth beneath crumbles. Each time you come round a steep bend you expect calamity. But when you can forget about the road you are caught by awe at the shape of the land. Look down, and it is all boulders and humpy earth, the remains of some long-ago landslide. Look up, and the road winds constantly upwards. Hard to imagine that new valleys will open up high above, or that this mountain is a mere foothill to the massive barriers beyond: the Pamirs, that are called the Roof of the World.

You are touching ages past up here, for the road follows an ancient track that for centuries was a route over those mountains into China. But that fell into disuse, longer ago than anyone can remember, and the Silk Road traders found less hazardous routes across. In recent times it has had another function, for not far from here is a scarcely marked border with Tajikistan, a country so remote, so unconnected to the outside world that few elsewhere have

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registered its existence let alone know that its people have endured a traumatic civil war. For those fleeing from the fighting this was one possible route out; difficult enough in a vehicle, arduous beyond imagination for those who had to do it on foot.

If they succeeded they would arrive in a high valley, a place called Sukhunobod. Rahul Khan was one of the few outsiders to have been there, sent by the UN's refugee agency to check out the situation of those who had fled. When he and his team got up there they found over three thousand new arrivals, mostly women and children, crammed into the villages and former collective farms. It was September and if nothing were done they wouldn't survive the winter. Rahul had a month to get a camp set up, supplies in, and distribution systems in place before the road became impassable.

He had by then had years of experience of working with people displaced by civil war, first in Afghanistan and then in Tajikistan itself, but something unexpected happened to him in that brief encounter with a remote mountain valley. The place itself moved him, he told his friend Lance, beyond what he could explain. There are huge boulders up there, Rahul said, with strange markings on them, that look as if the gods had rolled them down the mountainside, and here they landed, aeons ago. The markings could almost be a picture script but if they are, no one has ever deciphered them. The people who live in those valleys shrug and say, they are just scratches in the rock. How will anyone ever know how they got there? But he could not dismiss them so casually. Perhaps they had some religious significance, long before any religions we know of today? Or told a story? A long-ago herder giving expression to his artistic soul while he watched his sheep? To Rahul they represented something profound, a refusal of mortality. *I exist*, scratched the artist, the herder, the priest—perhaps the soldier who had been separated by blizzards from his army and wandered now alone in this valley, facing death by exposure and starvation. Today still I live, here, now, on this piece of earth. I ally with this rock that is older than all imagination, that will survive the obliterating force of time, to scratch some mark of my being here. I exist.



First light, 19 December 1996.

It's a freezing morning in the small mountain town of Gharm in Tajikistan, last stopping point before the road climbs deep into the Pamir Mountains. In a snow-covered yard five vehicles with UN insignia are parked, and their drivers wait as gradually small groups of men emerge from the low buildings that surround the yard on three sides. They are in leather coats and fur hats, and stamp their boots to keep circulation going as they wait for the last people to assemble.

Hugo Laval, a senior official from the UNHCR, the UN's refugee agency, stands a little to one side, watching. He is in his late fifties, Swiss, and not a man people immediately notice. Slightly built, with grey hair and a small beard already white, the lines on his face show the effects of decades of strain and of living in harsh climates. Among his colleagues he has a reputation for effectiveness under stress but few of them know anything about his personal life. Tajikistan, he reflects, is likely to be his last posting. He has no wish to retire but there are rules about this, as about most things. But before he is forced to stop, he will see this peace process through to a conclusion. After years of painstaking negotiation a ceasefire has been agreed, and a group of UN military observers has arrived to monitor it. Today they will set off into the mountains to try to find the groups of armed men hidden up there, and make sure they know what their leaders have signed up to. With them are both Tajik government officials and representatives of the Islamic Renaissance Party—a historic moment, the first time that Tajiks from both sides of the conflict are taking part in a joint exercise. If they succeed, the end of the war may be in sight.

Yesterday they were all in Dushanbe, the capital of Tajikistan, where he was briefing them on the terms of the ceasefire. He has travelled with them this far to see that all the arrangements are in place, but when the five vehicles set off he will return to Dushanbe. His younger colleague, Rahul Khan, will be going with them.

Hugo observes the dynamics as everyone assembles. The two groups of Tajiks are keeping their distance from each other, old-style

communist officials in one huddle, those representing the Islamic opposition groups in the other, the suspicions from the years of bitter conflict very near the surface. You could guess their political affiliation by their appearance, he thinks. The government delegation are Brezhnev throwbacks, their heavy-jowled faces clean-shaven, their expressions unyielding, and underneath their thick coats they are in suits and ties. The Islamic opposition are full-bearded and wear long tunic-shirts with thick woollen waistcoats over loose trousers. The visiting UN internationals look strangely nondescript by comparison, and hover awkwardly at a little distance, not wanting to be seen to be associated more with one side than the other. Hugo is annoyed, for their separateness could so easily be interpreted as arrogance.

Rahul is—as so often—the exception. Hugo is his manager, but he watches him with something more engaged than the eye of a colleague. He has watched his progress since they first met in Delhi eleven years ago at a critical time in Rahul's life. Now at forty-one he has, Hugo thinks, an appealing combination of talents: the energy of one younger and the maturity of judgement of one older than his years. Physically he is not unlike the Tajiks: he has the same strong dark hair and marked features, but he is taller than most of them by a head and his trim beard is just a black line highlighting the shape of his jaw; enough to pass among the traditionalists as a beard, not enough to mark him as different when he is dealing with government officials. His clothes vary according to who he is working with. He adapts, without apparent effort; it is part of his function. Yet no one watching would mistake him for one of the Tajiks. They are all tired men, hardened by what they have gone through. Rahul's face has clean lines, unmarked by either defeat or aggression.

He has been talking briefly to the Russian journalist who is accompanying the mission, but now he begins moving between the groups of Tajiks. Hugo is not close enough to hear but from Rahul's body language he gathers that he is suggesting that there should be a mixed group travelling in each vehicle, someone from government, someone from the opposition. He's an instinctive mediator, Hugo

thinks, whether officially required of him or not. Conversations get going; the groups begin tentatively to coalesce. Rahul pauses, then leaves them to it and goes over to join the five drivers who are standing at a little distance. That move seems to Hugo to capture something essential about the man. The drivers have kept themselves apart, not presuming to talk to the important people they will be driving. Rahul saw and moved over to join them, to disturb the division of status, to establish their commonality. A kind of courtesy, you could call it, something bred in him? But it is more natural, more specifically Rahul. He is as interested in the drivers as he is in everyone else. He lacks that instinctive filter that enables people to sort out who is 'one of us' and who isn't. Such openness is too exhausting for most people to contemplate but it is obvious that it doesn't tire him. It is what makes life interesting.

Now everyone is there, they are ready to go. They climb into the waiting vehicles. The drivers start up and one by one they set off, tailing each other, snaking up the mountain road. Hugo stands watching, curious now about what is happening inside those vehicles.

Hold the picture in your mind. Five white Land Cruisers with UN insignia, and in them twenty-three people: Tajiks, UN personnel, military observers, a journalist, drivers. Perhaps they are quiet as they watch the awesome mountains take shape around them. Perhaps they are talking, maybe even the occasional joke, a tentative camaraderie developing.

Then the squeal of brakes, as the front vehicle pulls to a sudden halt.

## 2

Dawn comes to the ancient Himalayan city of Kathmandu and the day starts for Lance Bergsen, Rahul's closest friend. For some minutes after waking he lies still, holding on to the warmth of his bed; and before he allows the day to intrude he takes stock of his life.

It is not, he decides, satisfactory. He is forty-six and single still, and not by choice. His last serious relationship ended three years ago, and nothing has arrived to replace it. It is probably his fault—he