

BENEATH THESE SALINE STARS

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Beneath These Saline Stars

Matthew Wilhelm-Solomon

*There is one more sea to cross
oh, one more sea to cross
before I invent my lungs*

Aimé Césaire, *Notebook of a Return to my Native Land*

What is the ocean but a space of fermentation, a dark saltwater brine?

Tao Leigh Goffe, *Listening Underwater*

It is sweet to die at sea.

Jorge Amado, *Mar Morto*

Chapter one

Walking along the lakeside promenade, I felt as if I were slipping into the water. I stopped a moment and placed my hand upon a palm tree to steady myself. I watched the still surface of the lake and the lamps of the fishing boats passing in the dark. Nearby, a line of docking warehouses – some in use, others abandoned – were shut for the night. In one, the unhoused gathered, their voices vibrating off the cast-iron roof. In the distance, a few cargo ships were arriving through the river's mouth, a day's journey from the ocean. The cranes of the port were lit up. Everything seemed in its correct place and yet I seemed to have become unmoored.

After a few minutes, I carried on walking – slowly so as not to stumble. I passed parked cars, a stall selling coconut water, the silhouettes of couples embracing in the dark. Outside a communal centre for fishermen, a few stubs of still-burning candles circled the pale sculpture of a mermaid. The murmur of music washed into the evening waves.

I reached the club, a converted house. On the veranda, a small crowd lingered in the haze of cigarette and cannabis smoke. Some guests gathered for warmth around a fire, where a man grilled fish; they chatted and watched the water, which reflected a nearly full moon and the constellations of stars. I paid my entry fee to the doorman and climbed the stairs.

Opening the old steel and glass door, I felt a cool and moist breeze meet the heat of bodies and breath. The interior of the club was crowded with people, some on couches and chairs, others sitting on the parquet floor or standing. Images of musicians, along with various saints and the orishas of sweet and salt water, hung on the walls beneath pressed-iron ceilings. It was a place where I knew many faces but few names. I would often come to the club to look out for new acts to review. To get here, one had to drive past the port, on the frontiers between suburbia and gangland, a territory occupied by second-hand furniture and clothes stores, cafes,

liquor outlets, newly gentrified lofts, and a variety of churches. That evening, however, I felt that I was an intruder I had violated some unspoken boundary.

Crossing the threshold, I noticed the newspaper's editor and my boss, Sita. She wore an indigo linen dress and a white scarf. Her long black hair framed a small face with an aura of burnt-out beauty. She was sitting at a table with some of my colleagues, sipping tea from a chipped cup; the steam rose, veiling eyes like mulberries and skin soft as earth. I had barely spoken to her for two years since my demotion from the investigative unit to the arts pages. She looked towards me and I turned quickly away. Reflected in the glass of the open door, I saw a man in his mid-fifties, his face marked and slightly bloated, barely more than a refraction of light, almost unfamiliar – Lüderitz Edward Leveza – and I felt the reflux in the back of my throat burn.

'You coming in or not?' an irritated waitress said, shaking an enamel cup at me, 'You're letting the cold in.' I turned to leave but the music caught me. Through the audience, a voice flowed, rising from deep growl to a tender melody. It navigated the drum's rhythms and the piano's tides, climbing and falling between pitches. It sounded like incarnation, divination. I turned back and closed the door.

On the small stage, the singer moved as if on the point of falling. Expanding and contracting, their diaphragm rippled the purple blanket they wore over their shoulder and torso, revealing only their forearms tattooed with black lightning. Their bare feet leapt up and down as if burning coals covered the floor. Below their wine-dark lips swung a hemp cord of blue beads. They had eyes of fire and a voice of sirens.

They shook in a staccato seizure, seeming brittle, before their tall frame gathered the discord into a flowing motion. As they stumbled across the stage, their braids swayed from side to side beneath a maroon skullcap. They seemed about to crash into the audience. But, at the very moment all seemed lost, as if pushed by an unseen backwash, they would find their

balance and become still. Against their body and the back wall of the stage, a projector flickered images of x-rays, maps, old medical journals.

I navigated around the chairs and clusters of people. Against my intentions, I was ushered towards the sides of the room, and I had to pass in front of Sita and my colleagues sitting around a table of wooden slats drinking wine and beer.

‘Lüderitz,’ Sita said, looking up to me, ‘why don’t you sit with us? There is space here.’

‘Yes, feel free to join us man,’ said Zé, another of the journalists, and a poet, who was wearing a khaki overall. Zé, in his late twenties, and Sita, now in her mid-thirties, had been interns under me in the paper’s investigative unit.

Zé’s eyes seemed to be swimming, somewhat bloodshot, but his forehead was oddly uncreased beneath a beaded afro. He had suggested I come tonight, insisting I would see a rising star.

The performer’s name was Isiwa, a friend of Zé’s. I knew little about them except from what he had told me, and what I had gleaned from social media. Almost forty, a practising public health medic and forensic surgeon, Isiwa had only been performing for a few months, but their audience and social media following were rising rapidly. In the online whispers, they had been called a witch and healer, a force of nature, the voice of the city’s underground. Students, activists and artists praised them for generating a new musical and poetic form. They seemed, from what I had gathered in the online maelstrom, a kind of mirror onto which their fans might project whatever facile hopes and grievances flitted through their minds. And so I was suspicious of them from the start.

And yet, now, in person, they were entrancing. I wanted to be nearer to them. ‘Thank you,’ I said to Zé and Sita, ‘it’s a little crowded here.’

I sat, alone, on the stairwell leading to an upper lounge beside the stage. The throat of a trombone, green with light and oxidation, and the fists of a DJ rising above an aluminium laptop, blocked my vision. But for the hour that followed, I could barely take my eyes off the singer, only looking down to jot a few illegible lines in my notebook. They held the mic close to them, their breath heavy and guttural as if they were struggling to inhale.

‘This is an old migrant song we’ve reinterpreted,’ they said.

The words were alien to me, and yet within them surfaced an intimate landscape – sodden mountains lined with muddy pathways. But the vision that appeared to me was unpopulated, emptied of people and animals, even insects. The only sound was their voice calling from a distance, beyond the horizon. They kept on returning to a single refrain: *A storm is coming*.

After the show, I went out onto the deck and stood beside the fire that burned in old barrel and cast shadows on the wall’s unfinished plaster. I was shivering, perhaps from the late autumn winds which blew off the lake, though perhaps something else – it seemed that I had ingested the music. The enchantment from the concert sank into a soft ache that ran from my lymph nodes to my belly, and I could not tell whether what I had taken in was an analgesic or a poison. Trying to gather my thoughts amid the noise of poly-lingual conversations surrounding me, most of which I could not understand, I ordered a tea from the waitress. I watched the steam rise from the mug, mingling with the smoke from the fire. And then I noticed that there was an odd vapour rising from the lake and wafting into the city. Nearby, a flashing billboard bled red light through the haze.

‘You want a drag?’ Zé asked suddenly appearing beside me, inhaling on a thickly rolled joint, its end flaming and then fading. He reminded me, for a moment, of when he had been an intern. Then, he barely spoke and when he did it was with a stutter.

‘Sure,’ I said, putting my tea on the banister, and accepting the offering. I inhaled deeply, held my breath and then exhaled a soft cloud which soon dispersed. I felt a sense of calm slowly rise, a sense of being both adrift but also at home.

‘Have you noticed,’ Zé said, ‘something unusual about the lake? A kind of mist over it, you know, weird for the autumn.’

‘It’s probably just the weed,’ I said, unwilling to share my earlier observation, and passed the joint back to Zé. The haze seemed to be deepening, the forms of the city dissolving into it. The others on the veranda were moving inside as the chill of the wind cut into us.

‘No, I noticed it this morning, in the office.’ Zé said.

‘Nothing seemed unusual to me,’ I said, ‘just the usual chaos and drudgery.’

‘Hmmm,’ Zé tapped the ash out into a glass, returning to the now glowing ember. ‘So what did you think of the performance?’

‘I’m not sure yet. Interesting I guess. Perhaps a little affected.’

‘You’ll do a piece?’

I paused, inhaling, and then flicking the butt onto the paving below. ‘I think so.’

‘Cool.’

I zipped up my jacket to keep in the warmth and sipped on my tea which was now cold, the heat of the fluid and mug dissipated.

‘You don’t drink anymore?’ Zé asked.

‘From time to time. Booze upsets my gut. Irritable bowel. The blessings of age.’ The wind was howling on the surface of the lake now and I could feel the spray against my cheeks.

‘Come,’ Zé said, ‘I will introduce you to Isiwa.’

Isiwa was sitting at the bar when we shuffled up beside them. After hugging and kissing Zé , they regarded me fiercely. ‘You were taking notes during the show,’ they said. They turned from us and then sipped on a whiskey. Their voice was raw, and they rolled their r’s.

‘Yes,’ I said.

‘How can you both listen and write?’

‘I don’t know,’ I said, ‘The words arrive with the music.’

‘Your words, though, not mine,’ they said. ‘People like you think you are invisible.’

I said nothing and only looked at Isiwa. Their brown pupils were almost purple and the dark clouds beneath their eyes were visible now beneath the leaking makeup.

‘This is Lüderitz Leveza,’ Zé said awkwardly.

‘Yes, I know who he is. We’ve met.’

‘We have?’ I asked. They stared at me for several seconds, beneath wild false lashes, with a gaze of delicate contempt. I felt a strange pressure in the centre of my chest, a kind of blockage. Their face seemed cloudy as if I were looking at it through a filter. Eyeshadow ran in small rivulets from bloodshot whites down cheeks like bruised petals. Their jaw muscles contracted into a blank mask. Then they laughed, a resonant sound, like warm soapy water squeezed out of a sponge.

‘Online, you know,’ they said. ‘You’ve been through some shit man.’

‘I suppose I have,’ I said.

‘But you write the blues well. For a white man.’

‘Thanks.’ Zé had by now shuffled off into another conversation, leaving us forced to continue with ours.

‘You writing about me?’ Isiwa asked.

‘No, not tonight. But I would like to profile you.’

‘I’ll give it some thought,’ they said. ‘Take my number, send me a message. The week after next, though. I’m cutting cadavers all this week.’

‘Mmm?’

‘The body and the word, you know. The liver and the love.’

They borrowed a pen from the barman and scrawled their number on the back of a receipt. *Isiwa* was written.

‘Is this your real name?’

‘It’s real. But also a stage name.’

‘I’ll be in contact. But I wanted to ask you one question, if that’s ok.’

‘Maybe. What is it?’

‘Why now? You clearly have been creating for many years. A performance like that, the words, the images, does not come out of nowhere. Where have you been hiding?’

‘To my patients, to my mother, my friends, I have not been hiding.’

‘But from us, the public.’

‘Or perhaps just from you Lüderitz Leveza? Or are you the public?’

‘No. But you know what I mean. Why now?’

‘I have been waiting to find the right voice. The voice to speak what I think needs to be spoken, to speak of the things I’ve seen. And that has taken years, decades. And I have not found it yet but I think I am close. I’ve always seen things, you know, a little differently. Moved a little differently. Navigated this world as if it were a different terrain to my neighbours. And if you are somebody like me, to survive, you need to learn when to keep silent and when to speak. Because a word misplaced, a pathway mistaken, a hand held or let go, can lead to annihilation. This is something my mother taught me very early in life, a gift she gave me, when she was still able to give. But I am not sure this is something you can understand. You sit and take your notes and think that you are invisible. That your presence and your words do

no harm. That you can merely float on the surface of things, observing whatever and whomever you please, that you can look into the depths of others, and take notes.'

I looked away, checking in my jacket pockets to see that I had my phone and my keys. On the loudspeaker an old samba was playing, its sweetness a rebellion against the cold wind that was battering the glass.

'I'm sorry,' Isiwa said, placing their hand on my arm. 'I see I have wounded you, but that was not my intent.'

'It's ok, I should go now, before the storm arrives.'

'Oh, it's too late for that. Do you want to dance?' In the room now, the clientele that remained were swaying and turning in the soft red and blue lamplight, some dancing in couples, others alone, holding up their phones and filming, forming a rising and falling montage of images. Beyond them waves beat on the lakeshore.

'I don't dance,' I said.

'You're not going to get me a drink?'

'I don't know. Isn't that a breach of boundaries?'

'Don't worry, if I was looking for a blesser, I wouldn't go for a journalist.'

I bought them a whiskey, kissed them on the cheek, and said goodbye, before I fled along the promenade, battered by the rain and afraid that one of the coconuts, flung by the wind into the street and sea, would strike me.

Driving home, I circled up the mountainside. The road, lined with jackfruit and flowerless jacaranda trees, was almost entirely clouded in mist and the streetlights were out. Some of the large green fruits had fallen into the street and broken open, spilling their white flesh. I could barely see the way up, though I knew this road well. The mansions on the mountainside were now invisible but I imagined, within them, families around fire places and televisions. Behind

the walls of these grand houses, as I knew from years of investigation, the new elites made alliances with the old. The cartels that dealt in bodies, fruits, and minerals mingled with board members of banks and technological visionaries. Among them, almost indistinguishable, were the traders in coco leaves, illicit lumber and opiates. These were the masters of the paramilitaries that stalked the hills and the plains. When the city's electricity went out – which it did with ever-increasing frequency, sometimes for several hours each day – the lights of these houses stayed on the wi-fi continued to work. These families were immune to the loss of energy that enervated the rest of us. But they still had to breathe the same air, smelling – more and more each day – of rot and ferment.

I parked in the underground lot of an old Art Deco block, where I lived, at the top of the hill. The wheezing elevator took me to my thirteenth-floor apartment. The teak flooring of the flat creaked beneath my footsteps. Everything seemed damp. The enamel on the pressed iron ceilings was cracking, exposing the rusted panels, and leaving white dust on the floor. My grandmother's cat, an old Maine Coon called Dom Pedro, ambled out to greet me and coughed up a hairball. My grandmother had gone now, but this rancid beast, against all odds, had survived. The cat and the furniture, the cabinets and tea sets, were what remained of her.

The storm had moved on and the air was quiet aside from the slow hum of traffic in the valley below. I went out onto the balcony. I heard the scratching of a cicada and looked around for the source. It came from a potted lemon tree, its leaves blistered. The insect was a translucent grey with ridges on its belly as if it carried within it a miniature speaker. I wondered how such a small being could give rise to such an intensity of sound, one so rare these days. From where had this tiny grey angel arrived, and from what had it fled into exile?

Below the hill, the city spread out in a sickle of light surrounding the lake. The forested suburbs coiled amid an archipelago of shacks and concrete high rises. To the north, hotels and malls sprung in fungal forms. Beyond them was an open plain with a slimes dam that exuded

a sulphurous breath over the periphery's settlements. Beside that I could dimly see the chimney stacks and metal grids of a coal power station, on which the city relied. One of its chimneys had recently collapsed and its units, one by one, had begun malfunctioning.

A silty movement drew my eyes back to the city. Something rose towards the night sky, now littered with stars like scattered salt. Elliptical plumes of white rose from the vast concrete arc that towered over our great Freedom Square, constructed in celebration of the end of the dictatorship. I first assumed these shapes were smoke, but there was no visible fire. They stemmed from something else. Then I noticed that the frothy forms were rising all over the city, from the mountainside favelas to the gated compounds. They circled above the stadiums, the car lots and botanical gardens, dancing like soap bubbles blown by children.

Feeling dizzy again, I leant on the balcony, clutching it. I feared the thin infrastructures of nerves that held my reality together were breaking. A bronchial pain burned my chest. I felt as if my body were slowly expanding and filling up with fluids. But perhaps it was just the cannabis and fatigue. Don Pedro jumped on the ledge beside me, nestling into my arm. I stroked his matted fur as he purred loudly, and felt calmer. When I looked up from the railings, the city itself had returned to its usual suffocating self. I tried to light a cigarette but it kept flaring and then fading. I took out the folded receipt from my pocket. It felt damp and the ink had run. I could barely read the name: *Isiwa, Isiwa, Isiwa*. I sent several messages to them that night and over the following weeks, which they ignored. I checked my phone frequently, watching as the ticks turned unrequited blue.

Chapter two

When I had given up hope of any reply, after a desultory and unproductive month, Isiwa reappeared:

‘Can you meet soon?’ they texted.

‘Sure. Where and when suits?’

‘The weekend when I’m off? Somewhere public.’

‘The market? Saturday morning?’

‘Yes.’

The tin roof of the market was spreadeagled, a vestige of an old train station whose tracks and wooden sleepers still crossed the floor. Traders lined the ruin in an intricate geometry of trust and treason, gift-giving and gossip, con and credit. Long needles of light pierced the ceiling and lit up the dust wafting through the air from the multitude of commodities below.

Coffee beans filled the bellies of hessian sacks lying beside piles of blushing apples. Bananas and plantains formed intricate architectures that towered over clusters of bell peppers and cashews. Bunches of parsley and coriander lay beside rhizomes of ginger and turmeric. Barrels held pools of grain, chickpeas, kidney beans, black beans, maize and millet. Vivisected heads of watermelon lay wrapped in plastic. Their scent mingled with the fumes of fish and flowers.

To navigate the space, without succumbing to the seductive tongues of the market women and the sorcery of pickpockets, was the skill that divided the insider from the tourists and backpackers, who soon retreated to the overpriced coffee shops and restaurants offering local delicacies, flat whites and wi-fi on the market’s periphery. But the frontiers would shift: a

migrant worker who for some months might pack boxes or sweep the floors could, if a space came available, open a store of their own. Here, borders dissolved and the state had no fixed hold: we were bound only by the unspoken codes of fruit and flesh. It was here that I felt most at home.

I wandered through the aisles with my two-wheeler trolley bag bumping over the cobbles and sleepers until the sweet ferment of graviola stopped me. I squeezed one to check its ripeness, stroking its rough, reptilian skin, probing for the perfection. The seller regarded me suspiciously, like an owl watching over her eggs. I paid and placed the fruit in the trolley. Looking up, I saw the traders turning in unison towards a figure moving down the aisles, a figure wrapped in an indigo cotton cloth who walked as if on the point of falling.

‘You smell of rotten milk,’ Isiwa said as they stopped beside me.

I picked the fruit out of my bag. ‘It’s the graviola.’

Isiwa smelled the fruit. ‘Do you always try shift the blame, Lüderitz?’

‘I was not sure you would come,’ I said.

‘Neither was I. Meeting with you would not be one of my weekend priorities. I’m exhausted and it’s my day off. But I’m here. So, let’s get something to eat. I’m famished.’

‘There’s a good crêpe store beside the flower market.’

‘You think there’s a crêpe stall in this city I don’t know?’ Isiwa swivelled and I followed.

We wandered through an avenue of potted azaleas. The whites of the flowers opened to purple interiors cradling small beads of reddened pollen. Isiwa placed their nose in the flowers as we passed, encouraging me to do so. I sneezed and they laughed.

‘Allergies,’ I said.

In another row the heads of decapitated sunflowers hovered over us, orbited by black bees feeding on their sticky stamens.

‘How sad,’ Isiwa said, ‘suns without solar systems.’ Isiwa was silent a while, picking up an orchid, its pink petals spilling from a green stem, and paying with their phone banking app. We carried on walking. ‘You asked me,’ they said, ‘that night we met why I took so long to start performing. I’ve been giving it some thought. My answer was not complete. For a long time, I couldn’t sing, because I didn’t know who I was. There was always a veil over me, a sense of loss, as if I had been removed from the place I belonged but I could not remember what that place was. And when I found that place, the place within me, if you know what I mean, I don’t know exactly where it is, whether it resides in my DNA or my heart, my dreams or my spirits – who can tell the place we begin or where we end? – but when I found that place, I also was able to sing.’

All I could see were their eyes, eyes which stirred in me a place of my own that I had thought was gone – a landscape I had folded up like origami and discarded in the recesses of my body.

‘Did you ever sing or play music?’ they asked. ‘You seem to understand it well.’

‘I used to,’ I said, ‘many years ago, but I stopped.’

‘Why?’

I thought a moment as we walked. ‘I don’t know. My mind, my life, became too noisy I guess. Too cluttered with stories. I could no longer hear the music inside, so it made no sense to play.’

We arrived at the crêpe stall and waited in the queue besides a serving table where head-scarved ladies dripped honey over the fattened cakes of fried dough or stuffed them with olives and feta. Near them, boys, perhaps their sons, frothed mint tea in glasses crammed with leaves and small bricks of dissolving sugar. As we waited, a young couple came over to Isiwa to ask for selfies, saying that they had watched and loved their most recent video. The couple took the photo, and then looked quizzically at me.

‘He’s doing a story on me.’ Isiwa said and they nodded, smiled and disappeared.

We took our food and glasses over to a small wooden table. ‘Can I start recording?’ I asked.

‘No, not yet, what I have to say is private.’

‘So why did you want to meet me in public?’

‘People need to know you are writing about me.’

‘I thought you were worried about being associated with me.’

‘Well, yes, but that’s just it, if you know what I mean?’

‘No, I don’t know what you mean.’

‘Lüderitz,’ they said, ‘I am not the story.’

‘You aren’t? What am I doing here then?’

‘I am the ruse.’

‘So what’s the story then?’

‘Eat first, I don’t want to ruin your appetite.’

The crêpe was creamy, scented with rosemary, figs and eucalyptus honey stolen from wild bees. I was lost in the flavours a moment, as was Isiwa. I watched them eat awhile. They ate with their eyes closed, their wild lashes flickering, and then they seemed to wake suddenly. They handed me their phone and reached over to me, placing the wi-fi earphones, like two amputated digits, into my ears. Their hands were shaking.

‘Watch this,’ they said.

The image on the phone was just black dotted with specks of light. The phone emitted the beeping of machines, the distant sirens of ambulances, the rumble of wheels. Then the screen was suddenly bleached white with a cathode glare. The pink undersides of fingers covered the screen. The image shook and I began to discern forms in the dismembered light. In the

reflection of glass doors I saw the image of Isiwa, their braids held in a haircap, the phone in the chest pocket of a stained white overall, partially hidden by the coils of a stethoscope. They were gripping a gurney, terror visible on their face. The image grew larger and then disappeared, opening to a white passageway.

Against white walls stained with the faded marks of what might have been blood, groups huddled in the passageways. Their faces seemed contorted with pain. Some of the patients were gagging and choking as if they were being strangled. Mucous and blood ran down their faces, while their companions held them, whispering and crying. Beneath the hurried footsteps I could hear a background noise: the terrible rasping of human breath escaping some collective lung.

‘We’re coming back,’ I heard Isiwa’s voice say, their footsteps hurried on the floor.

The parade of faces passed by. The camera blacked out and then the pixilated image of a ward appeared. The image moved back and forth at a nauseating speed, blurring into fractals of light. There was a fleshy thump and a mechanical growl. Then the image of a mechanical bed being raised, a blue face upon it.

‘We need a suction catheter now. Immediately. He’s going into hypoxia.’ Isiwa shouted.

‘Nasal or trach?’ an unidentified voice said.

‘No time for trach.’

There was a flurry of white coats. I glimpsed tubes, screens, a hospital bed and machines. The light dimmed and the amorphous form of a brown, twitching hand passed into view, dominating the frame, and in the background were spasms of coughing and the hammering of a convulsing body. The hand leapt up like a tarantula and then fell still. The image zoomed back from the lifeless digits to reveal a tattooed arm.

‘He’s in cerebral hypoxia, his heart’s stopped,’ said Isiwa. Their hand appeared, seeming to reach for the stethoscope as lines of black tubing passed through the frames, and then all that could be seen was the white roof and a cathode light.

‘Carry on the suction. I’m getting the defibrillator.’

The movement and the sparking of the machine continued, and then there was nothing but a metallic silence, a background hum vacated of life.

‘He’s gone,’ I heard Isiwa say. Sighs and footsteps, and the cacophony of voices drained away.

‘What was the cause of death?’ a new, gruff, masculine voice said.

‘Lungs filled with water.’

‘Pulmonary edema?’

‘I don’t know,’ Isiwa said. ‘Like none that I’ve ever seen. Too much water. Like the others.’

‘Could be delayed laryngospasm.’

‘Dry drowning?’

‘Yes.’

‘You know the medical evidence for that is weak.’

‘We can’t fucking preclude anything, Isiwa,’ the voice now exploded.

‘You speak to me like that again, and I will lay a complaint.’ Isiwa’s voice had the cold rage I recognised from the performance. There was silence.

‘Sorry. It’s just the stress,’ the voice said. ‘We can’t put drowning again. Drowning on a fucking football field? In the street. In shacks. Factories. Fields. Mines. Forests. Office buildings. Management is demanding we put a different cause of death on the certificates.’

‘Has the Department of Health been alerted? We could be facing a new epidemic,’ Isiwa said.

‘Yes, they say they are monitoring the situation. But since then, silence. From them and the department. Only the order to put down a different cause of death.’

‘Why?’

‘Who the fuck knows?’ The other doctor’s voice sounded exhausted.

‘I won’t lie,’ Isiwa said. ‘So what do I put down?’

‘Cause unknown. Let’s leave it to forensics to deal with. You still working there?’

‘Yes, Tuesdays and Thursdays.’

‘Well, maybe they have a better idea of what’s happening. Jesus, what *is* happening?

How many cases have we had now?’

‘I don’t recall exactly. Something like a hundred. It could be more. Should I tell the boy’s mother?’

‘If you don’t mind,’ the other doctor said, ‘I can’t face this again. How do we tell them their child has died and we have absolutely no explanation why?’

Something rustled. Then the phone vibrated with a cry so shrill that it seemed to slice through walls and shake my earlobes. It was barely human. The sound of pure, undiluted pain.

After what seemed a minute of silence the image moved and was filled with a circle of light, and another shape took form. It was a body covered in a white sheet, outlined only by clefts of shadow like a desert observed from very far away.

I felt a burning in my chest, a kind of corrosion flowing through me. Honey-flavoured bile spilled from my oesophagus over my tongue. I stopped the video and handed back the phone.

‘What is this?’ I asked angrily, coughing. ‘Why have you shown it to me? What has this got to do with the story?’

‘Don’t you see?’ Isiwa asked.

‘No. This is tragic, whatever it is, but what has it got to do with me?’

‘This is the story.’

‘No. I’m an arts writer now. I met you to do a profile. That’s all. We have a health editor.

Why not contact her?’

‘Lüderitz, listen. I’ve given this a lot of thought. It must be you.’

‘Is this some kind of joke? A prank for your social media?’

‘No, this is serious. Lüderitz, listen to me.’

‘Ok.’

‘But what I tell you now is absolutely confidential. Until we agree it’s not.’

‘Just don’t tell me.’

‘It’s too late now. Lüderitz. I need to trust you.’

‘Why me?’

‘I can’t say. But I need to trust you.’

‘Ok fine.’

‘What you saw was not unique. The hospital wards are full and there have been many unexplained deaths. These cases are taking up all the beds. Other patients are having to wait on the floors for treatment. Our morgue is filling up.’

‘How many?’

‘I don’t know. Over a hundred, just at our hospital, over the past few months. Maybe many hundreds, even thousands, if this is happening elsewhere. And I’m hearing whispers that it is.’

‘And what’s causing them. A virus?’

‘Well, that’s the thing. We know the symptoms, but we don’t know the cause.’

‘And what are the symptoms?’

‘You heard.’

‘I didn’t understand. I’m not a doctor.’

‘You did.’

‘Drowning?’

‘Yes.’

‘Is there more evidence?’ I asked.

‘Yes.’

‘Where is it?’

‘I will bring it to you.’ Isiwa got up and left, the crêpes uneaten. I had also lost my appetite.

Once Isiwa had left, I went to the square beside the market. In its centre a fig tree spread its vast branches. Its trunk was the width of five human bodies and its roots blistered the paving of the square. Its branches spread out, silhouetted against the backdrop of the lake. Beneath its canopy gathered the city’s vagabond life – clouds of pigeons militantly devouring seed, a few stray ibis, clusters of addicts sleeping on the benches, couples smoking cigarettes, and men like me with no particular place to go, no one waiting for us.

I scrolled through the messages on my phone. They were all advertisements for insurance, 5G and shopping discounts. I put my phone away and instead just sat on a bench. Pedestrians passed between me and the tree, but I allowed them to decay into a soft blur. A white spider’s web spread over the bark, surrounding a hole in the wood as if a cleft of its flesh had been removed.

‘Leveza, you old villain,’ a voice said. ‘What are you doing here polluting public space with your filthy thoughts?’

It was Saron Solomon, my neighbour and oldest – only – friend. I turned to him. He had long black hair, and the interrogating eyes of a bureaucrat, which watched me over a nose ring.

His beard, like mine, was greying and soft lines of skin were beginning to fall from the lean and tense muscles of his neck.

‘Shopping,’ I said, ‘I had an interview earlier.’

‘You fancy a game?’ he asked me, gesturing to the chess board in his hand.

‘No, that’s crossing the thin border that remains between us and the abyss.’

‘Come on Leveza, we’ve always been old men. Even when we were young, we never could conceal it.’

‘Fine.’

We set up our board on a table, among the groups of men playing cards, checkers and chess. The air was heavy with liquor, smoke, mint tea and garbage.

Saron was beating me easily when suddenly a man emerged beside us, his sneakers shuffling along the cracked paving. Tender eyes appeared above a pile of books. It was my colleague Zé. Somehow from over the books he had spotted me and stopped.

‘Hey, hey, hey. Lüderitz. Playing chess in the square,’ he said, ‘Very retro.’

‘What are you doing Zé?’ I asked.

‘Got a book launch at The Point. Come join, I’ll give you a copy of my book.’

‘Why don’t you give me one now and save us both the pain.’

‘Cool, cool.’ He handed me the slim volume. It had an elegant cover. It was totally white but marked with blotches of red and brown ink. It was called *Postcolonial Psoriasis*.

‘Thanks Zé.’

‘Sure, sure. Isiwa told me you met them earlier. You’re doing a profile. That’s great. What a fucking talent.’

‘Did they say anything to you about the story?’ I asked.

Zé looked at me with half-closed eyes and didn't reply. Then he said, 'Only that you were writing a profile. Why?'

'No reason.'

'Cool, cool. About time. Would've written it myself, but we're too close. It would be insider trading. Anyhow man, must be off.'

'Take care.'

'Peace man.' He shuffled off.

'Who's that?' Saron asked.

'Zé. A feature writer at paper. A poet. An influencer.'

'And Isiwa?'

'A jazz artist. Well, not jazz exactly. I can't quite place them.'

'They? It's a group?'

'No, an individual.'

'Right. Are they good?'

'Yes, I think something rare. The type of artist who only appears every decade or so. Their sound seems very old, very intimate, and yet estranging. Incomparable. But I don't trust my own judgement anymore.'

'Sounds like it could be a good piece.'

'But that's the thing. I think I've been deceived.'

'In what sense?'

'Well, they led me to believe that the story was them, but it's not. It's something much bigger.'

'I don't understand.'

‘I can’t say right now. I’m still making sense of things. But they have information that’s not been publicly revealed. Information which, if true, could be huge. A story as big as anything I’ve written since the torture piece.’

‘And they want to share that with you?’

‘Apparently yes.’

‘But why? I mean, no offence, but why not with that guy?’

‘Zé?’

‘Yes. I mean if they were close. Surely Isiwa, if the information was real and important, she, he, sorry they, would share it with someone they trust and not ...’

‘A discredited, old white guy?’

‘Well, that’s not exactly what I meant.’

‘What do you mean Saron?’

‘Well. Middle-aged.’

‘You’re right,’ I sighed. ‘And that’s what bothers me. Why? But maybe that’s the point. Maybe it’s precisely that nobody in their right mind would share something important, something dangerous, with me, that makes it safer.’

‘Or maybe, if somebody’s going to be taken out doing the piece, better you than their friend Zé?’

‘Thanks. That’s reassuring. But there’s something else. Something personal.’

‘Personal?’

‘Yes, but I don’t know what it is.’

As we spoke Saron casually, without much expression, annihilated my pawn’s defence. ‘So will you write it?’ he asked.

‘Once I had the strength to carry the stories of others, but not anymore’ I said. ‘I’m too drained. I can’t even make sense of my own.’

‘It’s your gift, though.’

‘All I ended up doing was damaging myself and others in the process.’

‘You have nothing left to lose,’ Saron belched coffee breath. ‘Who knows, perhaps there’s something that can be salvaged from your career.’

‘And what if it ruins me? The few traces of credibility I still have. What if it takes the last energy I have left for living. I’m so fucking tired all the time. It’s like I’m carrying a concrete slab in my chest. I just want to wait a few years to take early retirement without courting any more controversy. Sell the apartment, take my savings and buy a small place along the coast, or move to an island, where I can vanish. Where no one has any recollection of what I was. Though you can visit if you like. I’m fading you see, Saron. Whatever harm or good I’ve done is slowly dissolving, and it’s for the best.’

‘I’ve had the same sense. That, how do I say it, that we are becoming more and more, uh, indistinct.’

‘Us?’

‘Well, not just us. You see at night when I look out from my balcony through my telescope at the stars, there seems to be an odd haze. Not just the usual light interference. Something has been changing, slowly and for some time, so that it’s been barely perceptible. I can’t quite tell if it’s my eyes, the telescope or something out there. Or something in-between, neither what’s out there, nor within, but a quality of perspective.’

‘I don’t understand.’

‘Neither do I.’

We played on, game after game which I lost, in silence and enjoying the autumn sun. The branches of the fig trees cast long shadows over the square and the men’s voices lulled us into a daze. Beyond the market, a mist crept over the lake’s surface, slowly enveloping its frontiers.

Chapter three

I opened the door, the following Thursday, and Isiwa was outside, wearing a tracksuit and looking exhausted. They slumped with their rucksack against the doorframe.

‘What are you doing here?’ I said.

‘I have the files.’

‘What is in them?’

‘Absence. The lists of the bodies that arrived and those approved for burial. The lists don’t match.’

‘Come in.’

‘No, I can’t,’ Isiwa said, opening their bag and reaching inside.

‘Relax. No one visits here. No one will see you. Come inside. I’m making soup. There’s enough for two.’

They hesitated a moment on the threshold and came inside. I slid into my open-plan kitchen. It was immaculately organised. Each pot and pan, each whisk and grater, each sponge and drainer, was in its right place. The soup boiled, and Isiwa circled the lounge.

‘Where is your laptop?’ Isiwa asked.

‘We can go over the files later,’ I said. ‘You want a tea?’

‘You have a beer?’

‘Sorry, no.’

‘You don’t drink?’

‘No. Not anymore.’

‘You have chamomile?’

‘Sure.’

I placed the stainless-steel kettle on the stove, which required a few attempts at lighting before the gas sparked into flame with a hiss. I watched Isiwa over the kitchen counter, scented with lavender and alcohol. They seemed disoriented, a body in motion unsure where to come to rest. We were silent, accompanied only by the bubbling of water, until the kettle whistled.

‘We had one of those when I was a child,’ Isiwa said. ‘It always reminded me of a train.’

‘Yes, me too.’

I poured and handed them the tea, the steam rising in front of fading eyes. Cradling the ceramic mug, Isiwa looked at the photographs and framed pictures on my lounge wall. There was one of my first front page story: State Denies Evidence of Torture. Another was a black and white portrait of my grandmother looking over a rose garden. Isiwa stopped for several moment staring at one of the images: a woman and I held one another on a mountain trail, the ocean behind us. Her long braids coiled around my neck.

‘Who is the woman?’ Isiwa asked.

‘My ex-wife.’

‘How long have you been divorced?’

‘Fifteen years.’

‘Is she still in the city?’

‘No, she moved to the coast.’

‘She looks somehow familiar.’

‘She left a long time ago.’

‘What was her name?’

‘Sarah.’

That day came back to me with startling clarity. Sarah and I walked along the pathways on the incline of the cliffs bristling with spiky succulents, rock formations covered with vines, small bushes and trees battered and bent by the sea winds. Sarah, strong and tall, turned her shoulders against the sea spray and the wind blew her braids behind her, long black lines against the deep blue of the sea. We climbed down to the rocks and nearby a fisherman was stand, his line arcing into the ocean.

‘Any fish?’ Sarah asked.

‘No, they are rare these days. Overfished by cargo ships.’

‘Why do you still come here?’

‘No particular reason, just to watch the waves, and wait, for nothing in particular.’

‘Various types of nothing,’ Sarah said, smiling.

‘Yes,’ he said. The man soon packed his gear and departed, leaving us sheltering from the midday sun in the shadow of a boulder. Once he was out of sight, Sarah stripped off her hiking gear and climbed down into the water in her bikini, gesturing to me to follow. I had not brought a costume and stripped to my boxer shorts and dark glasses. We climbed into a small pool, slippery with seaweed and coral and covered with the sharp shells of mussels. In the pool, Sarah clutched me, coiling her legs around my back.

‘We’re a crab now, with eight legs,’ she said. Together we crab-walked around the small pool, slipping and sliding on the seaweed, lacerating our skin on the molluscs and laughing. A large wave washed through and knocked us over and we were both submerged. The water flowed out to the ocean, taking my glasses with it, but for thirty seconds we stayed under the waist-deep water, gesturing to us each other in crab gestures, and blowing large bubbles to the water’s surface. When we surfaced, we kissed deeply.

‘I adore you,’ she said, stroking my stubble.

‘I adore you too,’ I said.

‘We should always walk together sideways through this life, facing each other, not looking backwards or forwards,’ Sarah said. ‘That seems a better way to move through this life, no?’

‘Yes,’ I said, ‘let’s do that.’

Isiwa was silent, interrogating the photograph as it were withholding something. Then they moved on and looked at an old Polaroid of me taken over three decades ago when I was barely twenty. I was standing in front of the old tin house where I had lived. Enamel paint peeled from its variegated walls. I stood with a group of friends. Our pale hands clutched each other and our eyes glowed with self-regard and defiance. In front of the house was a communal garden filled with spinach, maize, potatoes and Amaranthus. Behind us were the mountainous forms of mine-dumps.

‘Mmm, you used to be handsome when you were young, hey?’ Isiwa said, spinning away from the image.

‘Used to be?’

They yawned and stretched their arms. ‘Yoh, I’m tired. An eighteen-hour ward shift, no breaks. I’m rotating my clinical and forensic work.’ They finally looked at a black and white image of my mother wearing her surgical scrubs, holding me as a child. It was the only photo of us together that I still had.

‘Is this your mother?’ Isiwa asked.

‘Yes,’ I said.

‘She was a doctor?’

‘I’m sorry, I don’t want to speak about her,’ I said. Isiwa nodded. I put on some jazz, through my phone, on the Bluetooth speakers. The Hammond organ washed against the double bass and then stalled before instigating a riot of instruments.

‘Man, this album is my style,’ Isiwa said, changing topic. ‘I first heard it as a kid, you know, the soundscape of someone just about to drown, someone who’s drowning but is at peace with it. They’re just floating about there on the currents, slowly sinking, but it’s ok, you know, they’re just chilling there. Drowning and chilling. But then, suddenly, the panic comes on. The sense that death is close.

‘And then it’s ok, the fear has passed. It just lasted a few seconds. The time for a single chord. But that chord resonates with you, the sax, the trumpet, the bass, they’re drifting around too on the tides, but once you’ve heard it, the fear never quite goes away, you know. It’s like when someone beats you to the point of dying, and you survive. But you always remember the moment you felt you were sliding away.’

The music flowed to a crescendo. The guitar notes formed constellations over a soft growl like a generator.

‘It’s as if there were all these dimensions to the music, these secret, submerged languages,’ I said. ‘They eclipse one another, call out to each other, but can never quite reach one another.’

‘Why are people like you always looking for a hidden language?’ Isiwa said. ‘You can barely speak the surface ones. This is the music of the drowning. What do you know about that?’

‘A little maybe,’ I answered.

I stirred the soup, its currents catching potatoes, maize, basil and rosemary. I placed the bowls and soup on the table.

‘Thanks,’ Isiwa said. ‘It’s good. Warms the heart.’

We sipped the soup in silence, listening to the music. Dom Pedro, the old cat, circled around our feet.

Isiwa's phone rang and they picked up. 'Hello, hello, hello?' Isiwa shouted. 'This thing keeps buzzing, but when I pick up, there's nobody there.'

We looked at one another, a single and inchoate thought taking shape.

'Ah man, what type of shit have I got myself into?' Isiwa said. 'Trusting you. A fucking disgraced white man. What the fuck was I thinking? You know, forget it. Forget this whole fucking thing.' They stood up to leave.

'Don't panic,' I said, placing my hand, across the table, on their arm. 'You're here. Put it on silent.'

'This is some heavy shit, man,' Isiwa said. They picked up their bag.

'Wait,' I said softly.

I went to the fridge and took out a small bottle of viscous syrupy liquid.

'Smell this,' I said.

'Amen. Smells like the Blessed Virgin Santa Maria,' Isiwa said.

'Open your mouth,' I said. They opened their mouth, and I dropped three drops into the crevice on the underside of their coiled tongue.

'Ah, white magic. Stolen witchcraft,' Isiwa said.

I took a few drops and picked up my plate.

'Sit outside?' I asked.

'No man, I must go.'

'Stay.'

'Why?'

'A storm is coming.'

They looked at me with their gaze of delicate contempt. In the background was silence. We went outside to the balcony. Beneath us, the city glowed like the rings of a stove.

‘I used to believe in the power of language,’ I said, ‘its power to change things. I’m not sure I do anymore.’

‘So what power do you believe in?’

‘I don’t know. Song, I suppose.’

‘You sing?’

‘No,’ I said. ‘Other people’s songs. I have belief in others’ beliefs, hope in their hopes.’

Isiwa regarded me with an opaque look. I could not decipher whether it was sympathy or disdain. They leant on the balcony’s railing, watching the emptied streets, which webbed across the mountainside. Cumulonimbus clouds were gathering over the lake and city. They herded together, veined with purples, greens, greys. They thundered, but there was no lightning, and the noise had no discernible source. A haze of mosquitoes hung in the air. Strange for late summer. I lit a citronella candle.

‘When I was child,’ Isiwa said, ‘I always felt like I was falling from a precipice, and the only thing that would stop me hitting the ground was my mother’s song. And then that was stolen from me.’

‘What happened to your mother?’

‘I must go,’ they said, sighing. ‘I’m exhausted.’

‘Stay,’ I said.

‘Do you mind if I lie down a while?’

‘No. There is a futon in the lounge.’

‘Out here.’

‘Sure.’ I took out the cushions from an old couch and some chairs and laid them on the balcony. Isiwa lay down, their braids forming an arabesque around tired cheeks and a slowly decomposing gaze. I lay down beside them, my feet facing the opposite direction, our heads

almost touching. They remained still. I listened to their breath which was slow as tides. Dom Pedro came out onto the balcony and lay on my chest purring.

In the sky above us, I noticed a phosphorescent motion. Gelatinous shapes passed, emitting a soft light. They had the form of deflated balloons dragging behind them long tails like beaded necklaces. Upon their heads, I glimpsed bulbous blue protrusions that seemed to catch the drafts of wind, turning the shapes in spirals and then onwards in a new direction. The figures moved as if in a singular choreography. Dom Pedro jumped onto the ledge and also looked towards the stars, chattering.

I did not ask Isiwa if they saw the same vision. I imagined that we were both oriented towards the same sky, the same stars, and observed the same unidentifiable entities passing across them. To put this shapelessness into sound, to dredge words out of this silt of silence, would have been to risk violating this intimacy. The only evidence I had that we shared the same perspective was the openness of Isiwa's eyes when I turned to them, their dilation swallowing the moon's reflection and the shortening of their breath, as if calming a shock.

I closed my eyes and the shapes remained as an afterglow. And then, from the blue lighting the inward dark, my grandmother's face appeared. It was creased and tender like an un-puffed pillow. In her hands was an old book with a fraying fabric cover adorned with an image of the ocean smashing into an outcrop of rock. 'A Deluxe Golden Book', the cover said. My grandmother allowed me to take the book. I handled its cracked spine with great delicacy. She read to me with a voice tinged by lozenges and cigarette smoke.

I opened my eyes and crept inside to the study, away from Isiwa who seemed now to be sleeping. The room was crowded with piles of boxes, kitchenware, tea sets, old vitamin and medicine bottles, Tupperware, accounting books, a pine desk and a darkly stained teak bookshelf. I traced my fingers over the unevenly shelved volumes, opening a few of them.

Their pages were yellowed and blistered; frontiers of ink and binder-boards contained their slowly dissolving worlds.

I found the book I wanted and paged through it, its prints of oceanographic expeditions, shipboard laboratories equipped with telescopes and spherical gas lamps, an illustration of a dead whale beside which the artist had drawn an elephant being ridden by shirtless brown figures, a giraffe, and a line of men in top-hats. I found the page I was looking for. In pastel colours was the drawing of the creature. From a bulbous head, fell long tentacles with ridges like leaves. *Man-of-war*.

I started at the noise of feet. I turned to see Isiwa standing in the doorway. I closed the book suddenly.

‘What is all this?’ they asked.

‘My grandmother’s things,’ I said. ‘It was her apartment.’

‘When did she pass?’

‘Years ago. I don’t know what to do with this stuff. I can’t keep it all, but neither can I give it away. So, I just live with it. The ever-expanding clutter of the past.’

Isiwa walked into the room and, from a corner, picked up an old guitar.

‘You play?’

‘I used to,’ I answered, ‘years ago.’

I remembered the last time I had played, two decades before. Sarah and I had just moved into our first apartment, a one-bedroomed penthouse in a newly built apartment block near the lake. She had finished her candidacy and was starting work at a new law firm. I had just been promoted. The mortgage was heavy but the block – newly developed – had a lake view. We moved in, full of excitement, and filled the apartment with art and plants, trying to make the

newly painted walls into a home. But when the spring rains came, the structural defects of the construction began to show. The roof began to leak. The dripping was ceaseless and seeped into our work, our sleep, our sex. We complained to the contractor, opening a legal case. We hired various roofers to fix the leak but none seemed to have the answer. Our days grew tense and full of petty accusations and recriminations. One night when I could not sleep I went to the lounge to play, accompanied by the metronome of drips. Sarah, in the middle of the night, opened the door abruptly, her braids held in place by a bandana.

‘Can you keep quiet,’ she said, ‘I’m trying to get some fucking sleep.’

‘I’m sorry.’

‘You’re so selfish. What were you thinking?’

‘I was writing you a song.’

She paused a moment. ‘You think that your words, that a song, will keep this rain at bay?’ She turned away and I put the guitar down.

‘Why did you stop playing?’ Isiwa asked.

‘Too much work,’ I said.

‘My mother had to work, often until late,’ Isiwa said, gazing out the window. ‘But every night, no matter how late, even if I was already sleeping, she would come into my room and sing to me. I lived in a world full of terrors, but in those moments, I was completely safe. During the day, I would have the freedom to roam around with the other children. But as I got older, it became tougher. I wasn’t like them. The other kids would mock me. The way I spoke, the way I walked.’ Isiwa shuffled as if shaking something off them. ‘Not just them. Adults too. So I spent more and more time alone. Either at home watching TV or just wandering around. I went to school but could never concentrate. I liked to read so would spend a lot of time in the library.’

‘It was only the two of you?’

‘It was just my mother and me at home,’ Isiwa said, moving from the window and sitting down in an old arm chair. Dom Pedro, who had joined us in the room, jumped onto their lap, pressing his head into them. Isiwa stroked his ears. ‘I never knew my father. Sometimes, though, people would come to stay. Some spent the night in my mother’s room – men, but also sometimes women. Small groups came to have meetings. My mother would cook for them and give them warm beer. We didn’t have a fridge then. We used a paraffin stove and oil lamps, so the air was always heavy, you know. As a child, I had asthma and always struggled to breathe, you know what I mean?’

‘Sometimes, the visitors slept on mats in the kitchen and left in the early hours of the morning. When they came, I often couldn’t sleep. I knew these were secret meetings, as they would speak softly. I would hide in a small cupboard next to the kitchen amid the brooms and spy on them. I never understood what they were saying, but they would speak about guns and money and freedom. I didn’t know what the words meant, but they sounded so nice, so nice, they sounded like omelettes which we would only eat when my mother had extra money, so not often. And then one day, when I was seven or eight, I was hiding in the broom cupboard, while my mother was putting out the mats for some of the visitors who were to stay. The door burst open, and our house was full of police. Everywhere. And I just stayed in the cupboard, hearing the noises. Terrible noises.’

Isiwa stood up, displacing the old cat who complained, and began pacing around the study, littered with files and discarded ornaments. Their trainers squeaked on the parquet tiles. They crossed their arms around their body, as if grasping at an elusive itch.

‘I need some air,’ they said.

We went back out onto the balcony. I placed the pillows scattered across the floor back on the couch.

‘More tea?’

‘Please.’

I went to the kitchen to make some tea and Isiwa followed me, sitting on the couch in the lounge. I brought them the tea and they looked at me as they took the cup and placed two teaspoons of brown sugar in it. Then they held the pot high above the cup and allowed a thin stream of tea to fall, producing a foam. They performed the action again several times. I watched, mesmerised by these slow cycles of falling and frothing. At the end of the ceremony, they handed me the cup. The tea was both bitter and sugary, with the faint residue of salt. The steam seemed to soften Isiwa’s lips and eyes. The clouds had passed on now, and the stars had appeared – a thousand delinquent points of light escaping dying matter and taking refuge, for a few moments, in our tired retinas.

‘Have you ever heard the sound of a head being hit by a fist?’ Isiwa asked me. ‘The noise of bone on bone has stayed with me after all these years. The sounds of breaking furniture and my mother crying out, then suddenly a terrible silence. I waited in the cupboard a long, long time to hear my mother’s voice, to hear her footsteps going to my room to check I was ok, but nothing. When I came out the cupboard, the house was empty and a mess. I didn’t cry, I just started cleaning up. Putting back the furniture that had been knocked over back. Putting the papers and magazines in piles. Sweeping up the broken glass. I cleaned and cleaned for a day without eating so that when my mother came back, the house would be nice and tidy. But she didn’t come back. That evening some of the neighbourhood women came to me. They brought me food. Some nice, nice boiled eggs and rice and beans. They told me my mother would be back soon. And that’s how it rolled for days and weeks. But they didn’t invite me to their houses because I was strange. I heard them say they didn’t want me to influence their children. I attended school when I felt like it. The principal would put me in detention, but he was never very serious about it, and I could just read my books.’

I sat down beside Isiwa on the old couch, its coiled springs spearing foam and mouldy linen. Isiwa slumped deeply into the pillows.

‘The principal knew my mother was missing,’ they continued, ‘and there was a sadness in his eyes when he punished me, even sometimes tears. And I got used to those looks. Those looks both of pity and fear. The children were less kind. They laughed at me and told me my mother was a terrorist, a communist, a lesbian, a prostitute and that there was something wrong with me, that I was God’s punishment for my mother’s sins. I had no friends.

The principal and his wife, though, would sometimes invite me to their house after school, and he would play records for me. Jazz, samba, rock, classical. He spent a lot of his small salary on these records, and they were like rare, sacred objects. Like black moons, spinning in their own orbits. The record player was shit, man, and the needle would sometimes jump and skip, but this added, for me, to their mystery, the mystery of how the world could never handle such power, you know what I mean? Yoh, those discs carried such beauty. Sometimes he would even let me lower the needle. I did this such care and love. That was my first training to be a doctor. I realised that if my hand slipped, I would ruin something sacred. I would ruin the only thing that was keeping me alive, you know. I learned that no matter what was happening outside and inside of me, if I wanted to survive, I had to learn to keep very, very still, and move very, very slowly.’

I realised I had closed my eyes. Opening them, I sensed that the world had imperceptibly but irreparably changed. I noticed that Isiwa, now leaning forward, had a scar running from their left jaw bone to their scapula. The wound was covered by a tattoo on their right shoulder of what appeared to be a flower or skull but was obscured by the sweatshirt. The muscles of their neck twitched as if a charge passed through them.

‘My mother didn’t return for months,’ Isiwa said. ‘And then one day she came back. She didn’t explain anything. She was thin and her face bruised. She held me for a very long time

without speaking but with no tears. I felt her breasts against me, like those plastic bags of milk, but the ones that the milk has mostly leaked out of in the shopping trolley without you noticing. She was diminished. I knew the word diminished because I had started piano lessons at the church. The principal and his wife would take me. I said I didn't want to go, I was angry with God for stealing my mother, but they said I could start learning piano. I learnt about diminished and augmented chords. And I knew when my mother came back that she was somehow diminished. That something had been taken away from her. She was sad too. She was a diminished, minor seventh chord. And at night, she would no longer sing to me. I cried and begged her to sing to me, to sing my favourite song. And she would look at me and tell me she was sorry, that she could no longer remember the song, that her songs had been stolen from her. I told her I would learn the song, and that I would teach it again to her. But she could not even remember its name. And neither could I. The name, the words, and the melody were gone. It was as if the police had also stolen my childhood. Since then, I guess I have been looking for that lost song.'

'I think I understand you,' I said.

'No,' Isiwa said, 'I don't think you do.'

'Can I meet your mother?'

'Why?'

'For the profile.'

They were silent. Through the fire escape railings, I could see the men-of-war as the creatures circled around the cell phone tower on the mountainside and carried on across the plains. They appeared as an iridescent battalion, moving through faulty grids of light, over derelict tenements, car parks, warehouses covered with solar panels, and towards the plains. I sank back into the pillows and fell into an anaesthetised sleep.

When I woke, Isiwa was gone. They had washed the dishes and left the memory stick and a folder on the kitchen table. Dom Pedro was sleeping on top of it. I booted up my laptop and made notes.

Chapter four

I was late for the editorial meeting the next day. I hurried out the elevator, my face red and my armpits streaming. Through the glass panels of the editorial office, I could see the newspaper staff already seated and gathered around, notebooks and laptops out, like congregants in some ritual, awaiting a sacrifice. I wanted to turn back and leave. Leave this office for good. Leave and start a new life somewhere, perhaps on a remote island. I was turning away when I recalled my last pension plan statement, and how a third of it had been wiped out after the stock market crash precipitated by the petroleum scandal. I worked my way through the open-plan labyrinth of desks, carrying my folder with my work notes and medical report from that morning, and entered the room.

‘Welcome, Mr Leveza, glad you could grace us with your presence,’ Sita said. She was seated behind the pine desk from which she could survey the newsroom, her laptop glowing. Her large eyes, puffed with dark rings, looked at me from within a small face with otherwise perfectly harmonious and tender features. She wore a silk scarf around her neck, over which her black hair fell.

I took a seat beside the window, on a grey felt chair. ‘I’m sorry, I had a doctor’s appointment.’

‘A doctor’s appointment? And doctors only work on Friday mornings?’ she asked, her eyes opening terrifyingly wide before contracting.

‘A specialist ... gastro ... you know you have to book weeks ahead ...’

‘Ok everyone, let’s continue,’ Sita said, cutting off my justification, and looking down at her laptop. ‘Congratulations everyone on this week’s edition. The investigation into the petroleum scandal was particularly strong. Circulation is rising again, after the troubles last year.’ She glanced quickly at me before returning her gaze to her computer. ‘We’ve also had a

surge in digital subscriptions particularly as a result of the increased sports coverage. Unfortunately, advertising has fallen off a little, and we're still struggling to fill our allocated page spreads.' A wordless disquiet circled the room.

'But we will get through this period, and management will cover our losses, at least for the time being. So, let's get back to work. Let's take a round of the stories you're planning to file for next week's edition.'

The voices soon dissolved into a background hum. I turned away from my colleagues and looked out through the window. The lake outside was covered in a soft haze and there seemed no clear borders between the surface of the water and the city's miasma floating above it, refracting the summer sun. The water stretched out for kilometres arcing around the city's edges and I could not see its end.

On the western banks of the lake, perhaps half a kilometre away, were large tracts of indigenous forest. Even from a distance, its green and shadows, exuded an unsettling charm. On the shores beside the trees were pockets of people, likely students playing music and drinking, or perhaps small camps of the homeless, modern nomads who navigated the city and its outskirts evading the police.

Closer were the shacks of the fishermen. Their multicoloured boats lined the banks amid a bricolage of nets, ropes, gutting benches. They sat outside on plastic chairs drinking bottles of beer in the shade of a few palm trees, surrounded by vultures and stray cats eating the guts of fish already trucked off to the market on the backs of vans. Unusually, a few sea gulls had appeared.

The smell from the rotting innards sometimes wafted to our offices, even finding its way through the air conditioners. Our neighbours on other floors of the building – an array of marketing firms, architects, consultants, lawyers and small businesses – had petitioned the municipality to remove the fishermen to the peripheries of the lake and city boundaries. The

fishermen, in turn, had complained that the additional transport costs to the market would destitute them. We, as a progressive publication, of course opposed the petition. The price of our virtue was to work with the stench of viscera wafting into our workspace.

I opened my work folder. In it were the results from the endoscopy that I had collected from the gastroenterologist that morning.

The doctor had handed the folder to me. ‘You have a small hiatal hernia, Mr Leveza, along with some oesophageal erosion.’

‘Is that bad?’ I asked her.

‘Well, it’s not great, but manageable.’ She had a well-trained gaze of concern, static beneath coiled blonde hair. ‘It seems that you may have a leaky gut.’

‘What’s a leaky gut?’

‘Well, it’s still a condition under research, but it’s when bacteria from your gut leak out into your body causing a more generalised inflammation.’

So I was both leaking and inflamed – a landscape in disequilibrium.

‘Do I need antibiotics?’

‘Well,’ she said, smiling smugly, ‘that has been the traditional solution for gut issues, along with proton pump inhibitors for stomach acid. But more recent research, the so-called new biology has shown how our bacterial life is very important to our health and disease prevention. Did you know that 99 per cent of the genetic material in our bodies is made up of microorganisms, bacteria, protozoa, fungi and so on? This is called our microbiome. Only 1 per cent is our mammalian genes. So, in fact, that we consider ourselves humans is slightly misleading. In fact, we are more like forests or coral reefs made up of a host of organisms.’

‘Look,’ I said to her, ‘this is all very interesting. But I have an editorial meeting to go to, and I’m running late. I just want to know what I need to do to get rid of my reflux, and to stop

my gut leaking and this inflammation. Do you have a solution? Should I call a plumber? A fireman?’

She looked at me coldly, her concern gone.

‘Well, I can prescribe you antibiotics and proton pump inhibitors, which may help in the short term but is unlikely to deal with the issue. My recommendation is that you first take probiotics and exercise more, and perhaps try some mindfulness exercises, yoga and meditation, for instance.’

‘Just give me some antibiotics please,’ I said.

In the newsroom, amid the dim murmur of voices, I looked over the endoscopy images. A coral reef? The images looked more like a galaxy. One image appeared like a vast and cracked perigee moon, its surface pocked with craters and sandy dunes, filling the dark.

My grandmother’s skin had been this texture in the last hours of life, as the moonlight seeped into her room, bleaching it, as her breath slowed to a slow rasp, as her immune system failed. Yellow fungus flowered on her lips and mouth, the tender omniscience of rot and renewal, an invisible multitude, reclaiming what was rightfully theirs, a life so easily eviscerated and digestible. All around was a world we could not see, a sentient and unseen host that built its cities upon us, on our skin, our tongues and teeth, our organs.

‘Lüderitz?’ A voice intruded like an unexpected guest into my reflection. ‘Lüderitz!’

‘What?’ I started.

‘It’s your turn,’ Sita said. ‘You zoned out.’

‘Sorry, it’s just that ... um ... I received my endoscopy report. Suffering. Acid reflux, you know?’

‘Mr Leveza,’ Sita said. ‘The universe does not orbit around your belly button.’

The room chuckled. My acid rose, corroding my oesophageal tract. I felt like I was leaking.

‘So what are you working on?’

‘My profile on Isiwa.’

‘Good. Good. But it’s been over three weeks now since you’ve filed.’ The other staff, quiet now, stared at the dull cream coloured walls.

‘It will be a long feature. A full spread. Isiwa has an interesting family history. Their mother was politically involved against the dictatorship. Isiwa’s a forensic pathologist. Please ... some patience ... please.’

‘Ok, let’s move on. Zé?’

Zé spoke softly, mumbling into his cloud-like beard. His shoulders bent into his sternum and when he spoke he looked at the floor and held his head twisted.

‘I have a story about the lake.’

‘The lake?’ Sita glanced outside.

‘Yes. I have been speaking to the fishermen. There is something odd going on, they report.’

‘Something odd?’

‘Yes. Well, large numbers of tilapia are dying and washing ashore. That’s partly why the stink from the lake has got worse.’

‘And do they know why they are dying?’

‘That’s the mystery,’ Zé said, twisting his hair sharply to the point of grimacing. ‘There are various theories. One is that the mercury from the informal miners is seeping into the lake, poisoning them. The other is that there is acidification from the old gold reefs. But there is an anomaly here, which nobody seems able to explain.’

‘We’re waiting,’ Sita said.

‘Well, there is the recent appearance of flounder.’

‘And ...’

‘These shouldn’t be in a freshwater lake, particularly so far from an estuary. Some species of flounder are’ – he checked his notes – ‘euryhaline. They can live in either salty or fresh water. So, I gave the university biology department a call, and they’ve been finding a phenomenon they can’t explain. The water tests show the increased salinisation of the lake.’

‘Salinisation?’

‘Yes, the salt content.’

‘I know what the word means, but why?’

‘There is a theory I’m exploring.’

‘Yes?’

‘Perhaps it has nothing to do with the mines. There’s a possibility that one of the fisheries is deliberately salinising the lake for a fish farm. At least this is a rumour among the fishermen. There’s no evidence for it. Something I would like to explore.’

‘Good work,’ Sita said. ‘And, I have an idea. Lüderitz, why don’t you help ... out on the story? Zé, would that be ok with you?’

‘Um ... well ... it is my story ...’ Zé looked up for a moment with an expression that might have been disgust, although it immediately softened.

‘Don’t worry, you will remain the lead writer. Lüderitz can do some additional reporting.’

‘Let me continue by myself,’ Zé said, obviously unhappy. ‘If I need any support I will let you know.’

‘Ok,’ Sita relented with a smile, ‘let’s see how it goes.’

I glared at Sita, saying nothing.

The meeting ended and the journalists, photographers, subeditors, and section editors descended on the coffee and biscuit table like a pack of freshwater piranhas and then ambled out, their voices and the clink of coffee cups on saucers ricocheting off the glass panels. I went to Sita.

‘What was that about?’ I asked.

‘What was what about?’ she replied.

‘Additional reporting? Are you trying to punish me? Humiliate me even more than I have already been? Zé’s a good guy, a good journalist, but he’s twenty eight and I’m fifty five. And you want me to do additional reporting for him? Remember, I trained both of you.’

‘I am trying to humiliate you?’

‘Yes.’

‘Lüderitz. You need no help with that. I’m trying to give you a way back into reporting. In what ways, exactly, have I punished you?’

‘Moving me from the investigative unit to arts, for one.’

‘Management wanted to fire you, and I intervened. I saved your job.’

‘Why Sita? What’s at stake for you?’

‘What’s at stake for me? Lüderitz, let me speak plainly. I don’t give a shit about you. I just want you to do the job you are paid for.’

‘Then why? Why did you save me?’

‘Don’t you see? It had nothing to do with you. It was a matter of principle. I believe, as a matter of principle, that nobody is absolutely irredeemable. Prisoners and patriarchs alike, even supporters of the dictatorship. We are human and make errors, and those errors, even when grave, need not annihilate a life. You made a very serious error which damaged this paper. Nonetheless, I believe that people are somehow reparable and should be given a space

to repair. You were once a good journalist and perhaps still can be. But these chances are not unlimited and let me tell you ...'

'What?'

'You will no longer be given any special treatment. You are on a senior reporter's salary and doing less work than our interns. The paper is under financial strain, and let me be clear, if the call for retrenchment comes, I need not tell you who is at the top of management's list.'

'I have been unwell.'

'Yes, we are aware. But if this continues.'

'What?'

'We will file papers, which I will support, to have you medically boarded.'

I looked at her blankly.

'Sita,' I said.

'Yes?'

'Whatever you are holding against me from thirteen years ago, it's time to let go.'

Her lips, coated in purple surrounded by a shining haze of base, fell open revealing the soft slug of her tongue beneath slightly skew teeth.

'Are you fucking serious?'

'Yes.'

'You think this has anything to do with that? You think I give one bad fuck about what happened thirteen years ago. Lüderitz, let me tell you this. Thirteen years ago, I learnt a few things about writing and investigation from you. I am grateful for that. But whatever I learnt from you has been well surpassed by my own work and by better, more considerate, teachers. You were also shitty to me, but at the time that meant little and now it means absolutely nothing at all. The only thing you are to me is ...'

'A matter of principle?'

‘Yes. Exactly. Let me ask you something. When you were a child, did you have shatter-proof rulers?’

‘Yes.’

‘And did you ever try bend them to their limits to test their claim.’

‘Yes.’

‘I’m sure. A good little empiricist. And what happened?’

‘It shattered.’

‘Now, think of my patience with you as that ruler. Please leave this office and find some work to do because I have no time left for you today.’

I left, wordless, and returned to my desk in the open-plan office beside the window which bled the stench of fish and salt. I looked over the lake. The noon sun burned in it. On the beach nearby, a church was conducting baptisms. A white-robed priest shoved the heads of adults and children alike into the oily water as if this could cleanse them from the stains they were born with. A few windsurfers and sailboats crossed the water in geometric lines, cutting the water’s skin covered by a soft white froth. From the shimmering liquid, a memory of Sita surfaced.

We had first met when she was awarded an internship on the newspaper. I was head of the investigative unit at the time and responsible for the training of interns. I was in my early forties, and it was a time of my life when I was in public demand, frequently interviewed on television and radio, both national and international, on matters of corruption, affairs of the state, political intrigue.

Sita had just finished her postgraduate journalism diploma. She was slight, and walked with an off-centre gait, a calculated swagger, her left shoulder higher than her right. She dressed often in overalls and thrift-shop gathering. Her immaculately conditioned hair was free of split

ends, and her nails painted purples and pinks. The whites of her eyes dominated her petite face, like the glare of the sun invading the frame of an image. Her writing was confrontational and searing

She would mirror everything I said, a technique perhaps learnt in journalism school, but always with the slight curl of her mouth.

‘When dealing with sources,’ I would say, ‘you always have to establish trust and make them believe you serve their interests.’

‘Serve their interests?’ she said, smiling.

‘Yes. But remember. You are not serving anybody’s interests. Only that of the truth.’

‘Of the truth,’ she nodded.

One Thursday afternoon, a few of the staff were going out for drinks, and I invited the interns. The paper had already printed in advance for the Easter weekend. We walked to a local bar, an old wood-panelled colonial establishment with faded wallpaper, framed black and white photographs of famous sports people, musicians and writers on the wall, beer on tap and a good collection of spirits. I ordered an expensive, peaty whiskey.

‘You say you’re a socialist but you drink that?’ Sita asked.

‘When I drink, I like to drink a landscape.’

‘A landscape?’

‘It’s like drinking a burnt world.’

‘A burnt world?’ she mocked, sipping her cocktail. ‘My preferred landscape is a beach with umbrellas. Or maybe, depending on the mood, a parking lot. No, no, no, better yet, the lake. But that makes me piss a lot. So, I’ll stick with the beach or parking lot. Depending on my mood, that is.’ The other interns laughed. Informally, she had become their leader.

When the group was stuffed with pizza and alcohol, Sita said, 'If I spend any more time in this old place, I will be compelled to colonise a country, or at least commission a minor massacre. The Seven Solitudes is open, free entry. Who wants to come?'

I had, by now, drunk too much to drive and so I abandoned my car in the office parking lot. Sita and I, along with another intern whose face and life have blurred for me into indistinction, and the news editor – a balding part-time DJ – got into a taxi. The club was packed, playing house and dubstep. Sita went to the bathroom and changed out of her overalls, putting on a canary-yellow linen dress and purple lipstick.

'Now your lips match your nails,' I said.

'Observant, well-trained,' she responded.

We danced, her off-centre frame composed, rhythmical and elegant; mine was like a typo in the elegant crowd. We moved and swelled in an entanglement of bodies. With the soft-sour scent of sweat, the heartbeat of bass, our bodies pressed, with the breath of the crowd, into and away from one another. I do not recall what happened to the other intern and the news editor. They have dissolved in my memory.

'It's too fucking hot in here,' Sita eventually said. She took my hand and led me outside. We shared a cigarette and I interrogated the whites of her eyes, slightly reddened by smoke and disturbed by a violent blinking. There was a small courtyard adorned with mosaics of mermaids.

'Come with me,' she said.

'Is this a trap?'

'Only if you want it to be.'

She led me down a back alley that led to a metal fire escape, and started climbing the steps. Looking down from several metres above, she gestured for me to follow. I remained on the ground, my palms sweating against the cold steel.

‘Come,’ she said.

‘I have vertigo.’

‘You have vertigo? You, Lüderitz Leveza, the fearless investigative journalist have vertigo?’ She laughed until tears streamed down her face. ‘Poor thing. Perhaps I can help?’ She came down until she was standing on the step above me. She pressed her cheek against mine and I could feel the warmth of her tears on my skin. Placing her mouth over mine, she drew my lower lip into her, biting gently.

She took my hand and I followed her up the steps, shaking. Each time I looked down a wave of nausea passed over me. On the third floor, we sat on the landing and looked out.

‘I’m nervous,’ I said to her.

‘This might help,’ she said.

She took from her linen bag a pillbox and spilled some white powder on a small mirror.

‘Cocaine?’

‘Khat,’ she said.

I inhaled and the narcotic washed through me, cleansing my sinuses and synapses. I looked over the city and it appeared renewed – its terror upended. Everything seemed clean. A city without loss, without decay.

Beside us an old water tower with a turret cast its shadow onto the revellers below. Beyond that Freedom Square stretched out, its immense arch illuminated by candy-coloured lights. The square was empty except for a colony of pigeons which sheltered, a shadowy mass, in its alcoves. In the distance was the lake, its shimmering skin needled by stars.

‘I have a lakeside apartment with a beautiful view,’ I said

‘A beautiful view?’

‘Would you like to see it?’

‘Sure.’ Her eyes were still moist but now the laughter was gone.

In the wake of our divorce, I had redecorated the apartment Sarah and I had bought together. Turning our bedroom into a study, I moved into the lounge. I sold or gave away most of our art and only kept a few white-framed lithographs and some photos I could not bear to put away. I repainted the place but the same patches of damp that reminded me of her always returned, even though we had finally fixed the leak. An expert had remade the entire roof for us, putting us further into debt, but giving the relationship a lifeline. The summer after those heavy rains was sweet – filled with early morning coffees and lovemaking, walks to the lake, evenings watching films in the square, and taking salsa lessons. Our friends would often visit and we would go up to the renovated rooftop to have sundowners or a joint and watch the sun fall behind the lake and forests.

But soon, the corrosion set in again, only this time it was within us. We began working long hours again, Sarah in her legal activism, I in my investigations. It was a decade since the end of the dictatorship but the traumas of the past were seeping back, with rising crime and protests, threatening our cocoon of domesticity.

After we separated, I bought Sarah's share of the apartment, I do not know why. Perhaps it was that it seemed to contain, within it, a happiness that I had not known before and have not known since. I was worried that, if I gave it up, I would be closing a passageway back into that joy. That it would be completely erased. And so I remade my life, if that's what it could be called, within the walls of memory. I put a green futon beside the large windows, which turned into a couch during the day. This makeshift bed was like a station. A crossing upon which many strangers, acquaintances, and a few friends, stopped. They were mostly women, with a variety of styles and motions – I had no particular type, requiring only that they did not ask too much of me – though sometimes when the light and music were right, when a certain sculpted shadow caught my attention, and when the liquor had flowed freely, my visitors were also men.

All of these sojourners would have a drink, perhaps a joint or a coffee, stay for a night or a couple of days, and enjoy the lake view. Some would come and go for a few weeks, rarer still a few months. But they never stayed too long, and all of them journeyed on elsewhere.

Sita and I made the trip to my apartment in the cab mostly in silence. When we were in the elevator, she pressed herself against me, almost aggressively, but watched herself in the mirror as if she both wanted to be in the scene and on the outside observing it. In the apartment she went straight to the window and looked out over the lake. I poured us each a glass of white wine, lit a joint, and put some music on.

Sita was silhouetted against the glass and the water of the lake; in the reflection, the lights of boats passing through her. A river cruiser crossed the water, one of those that had come up to the city, carrying wealthy tourists.

‘I have always wanted to go on one of those,’ she said.

‘I was about to ask.’

‘I know,’ she smiled. ‘I imagine myself as a magician, performing for wealthy tourists. Only the trick would be to make them disappear. One by one. Until at the end of the journey only I was left on the boat, moving down the river through the rainforests.’ She turned to me, sucking on the joint and holding the smoke in her lungs for half a minute before letting it out, allowing it to snake over her hair. ‘Sometimes when I wake, I feel like there is a precipice at the edge of my bed and that, if I roll out of it, I will fall into the lake and drown.’

One by one, she pressed the straps of her canary-yellow dress from her uneven shoulders and allowed the linen to fall to her feet. She was only wearing a grey sports bra.

‘You don’t wear underwear?’

‘Sometimes not. I like to let my vagina breathe. It gets so suffocated. It’s like an ecosystem.’ Her smile returned.

I knelt before her, and she opened to me, leaning against the window frame. With my mouth, my language, my fingers, I explored the contours of her inner map, moist and soft as a mushroom.

She sighed heavily and pushed me away onto the floor. I lay on the cold tiled floor which provided some relief from a burning heat that was rushing through my body. She took a condom from her bag, first placing her mouth over me and then unfurling the latex.

‘You were expecting this?’ I asked.

‘I like to keep open many potentials,’ she replied.

She took off her bra and pressed her breasts against me, guiding me into her with her left hand. Her form was a perfect sketch against the white page of the ceiling. It shimmered and moved like a stop-frame animation, flicking on and off, although I could no longer tell if it was her or the room that was moving. My heart was beating fast and lines of nerves were running through my body from a dead centre.

‘This isn’t happening,’ she said, and pulled away. I rolled onto her, looking down.

Between the purple and grey shadows of her thighs, beside her unveiled skin, the condom lay soft and lifeless, like a plastic bag washed up on a shore. A wasted and illegible thing. I pulled it off, coiled it into a knot around my thumb and flung it onto the floor. She pulled herself from under me, and went to take her wine glass from the window ledge.

She drank deeply as if satiating a terrible thirst, emptying the glass, and then looked out of the window towards the lake, her back to me. A tattoo of a flame spread from her sacrum to her neck. Her spine was a vine. Moving towards her in the dark, I saw that her elbow was moving rapidly. I came close and tried to place my arm over hers. She pushed it away and lay down on the futon beside the window. She was lost now, in a remote place, her hand a soft blur, an electric fan, in a zone of pleasure I was unable to give, a landscape in which I was

merely burnt matter. I stood watching her. She arched her back, pressing up with her knees and became a sighing, shaking, bridge.

I turned away and vomited.

She stayed and watched over me that night, giving me water, and chamomile tea and ensuring I lay on my side on the now-opened futon. She did not sleep but read a collection of essays from my bookshelf. In the morning she made us coffee and boiled eggs. She tried to speak to me kindly, without her sardonic tone, but I barely acknowledged her presence. She took a taxi home.

When we returned to work the following Monday, I heard the whispers and repressed laughter of the other interns. For the next few months, I only communicated with Sita about professional matters, and at the end gave her a good but perfunctory reference. She got a job easily at another paper. I only realised, years later, when eventually packing up my apartment to move, that she had taken the book and not returned it.

We did not speak again for a decade until Sita was appointed as editor-at-large, the youngest in our paper's history, a position that I had come to expect was to be mine.

‘Yo Lüderitz.’

‘What?’ I spurted.

‘Hey man.’ It was Zé standing beside my desk, staring at me.

‘Oh, Zé, hi.’

‘You ok man?’

‘Yes, why?’

‘You don’t seem, uhh, quite here today.’

‘It’s just you know, my stomach, my ...’

‘Reflux. Sorry about that man.’

‘What can I help with?’

‘Well, I just wanted to apologise.’

‘For what?’

‘For my response in the editorial meeting. I don’t have anything against you man. What’s past is past as far as I’m concerned. It’s just I prefer working alone. You get it?’

‘Of course. Thanks for explaining.’

‘But I may need some help.’

‘What type of help?’

‘Well, I was thinking of going out to the wildcat miners’ settlement in the forest.’

‘Why?’

‘I’ve heard some whispers that they might be connected to what’s happening in the lake.’

‘Ok.’

‘Would you be interested in going with me?’

‘Why?’

‘I know you’ve been out there before and know the route and the reefs’

‘That was a few year’s ago.’

‘Well anyhow, it’s just an idea. Let’s see how things roll and then chat.’

‘Ok.’

Zé backed off, his sneakers dragging on the floor.

I turned on my desktop, keyed in the password. I put in the memory stick and opened the files Isiwa had given me, typing in the decryption code they had texted. The documents were mainly case files and mortality reports from the hospital, unreadable to me at first. I opened the folder they had left me, which had a set of codes and descriptors for the data. And as I looked closer and closer, a pattern began to take shape amid the lists of numbers. I turned away from the

screen and gazed out over the lake. The spreadsheet reflected in the glass and it appeared, for a moment, as if the water itself was divided up into rows and columns, into reams of numbers, whose meaning, opaque at first, could be decoded into a mass disappearance of bodies.

‘We need to meet again,’ I messaged Isiwa

‘My mother says you can visit,’ they replied immediately.

Chapter five

We slid along the highway through the plains. The traffic was slow. It was winter now, but the noon sun dispersed the chill and heated the car.

‘It’s the derby today. Cars are heading to the stadium,’ Isiwa said, their face lined with moisture. They pressed buttons on the radio, trying to connect their phone with Bluetooth before giving up, and settling on a station crackling with static. Sweat folded around their copper earrings, falling onto the shoulder straps of their dress, which was patterned with yellow, green and red triangles. They turned on the air-conditioner again, hopefully, but it just blew tepid, dusty air.

We moved past high-rises that thinned out, reflecting in the lake like a felled forest, into an area of incomplete concrete blocks that splayed steel wire. Their walls were marked with distorted faces. The tags of local youth mixed with scrawled curses about semen and love. The flags of unlawful occupations hung from balconies and broken windows. We crossed the stagnant river and the rancid smell of chlorine and biomass came in through the air vents. On its banks, rose the walls of unplastered houses, entangled with the black piping of solar geysers. The white eyes of satellite dishes on the roofs watched over a landscape of seemingly endless construction and demolition. From within the monopoly of browns and yellows, patches of green rebelled.

‘Are you a fan?’ I asked.

‘My mother is.’

‘Well, I hope there’s time for the interview before the game. At this rate, we won’t get there before kick-off.’

‘I know a quicker route if you like.’

I hesitated a moment. ‘Sure,’ I said. ‘Why not?’

Isiwa signalled to me to take an offramp off the highway. We were entering, now, into the territory of the traffickers and paramilitaries. Their zones of control were illegible to outsiders. An innocuous footbridge, an offramp, a street sign could mark the frontier between opposing factions. Lines of nerves sparked like wires running from my diaphragm around my abdomen and up to my lymph nodes. Isiwa drew a sharp breath.

‘Are you afraid?’ I asked.

‘Why would I be?’ they answered. ‘This is my place.’

The roads were potholed, jarring my already worn shocks, but we still moved more quickly than on the freeway. We skirted a soccer field where children played beside a community centre constructed of old shipping containers, and passed dwellings in various stages of completion. On the corners, teenagers were illicitly trading from rucksacks, their bicycles nearby if the police came. As the car shook on, I glimpsed a garden where a group of women lay smoking on beach chairs beneath the canopy of a bougainvillea. We wove through small crowds at street-side bars, gathered to watch the game, and passed a palm-lined square where a group of girls were doing Zumba, men played cards and backgammon on circular tables, and a preacher evangelised to the wind. His voice travelled with us out to an open plain where we could see the stadium, its steel form like a vast boat, silhouetted on the horizon.

I opened my windows, though the air was little relief from the oppressive heat. I was dripping with sweat, which smelled slightly of smoke and lemon. In a landscape of yellowing grass, figures wearing white robes appeared. They sang hymns as they made a pilgrimage across the expanse. They appeared to be getting stuck in the mud, although it hadn’t rained for days.

‘Apostolics,’ Isiwa said.

‘Why do they worship here?’

‘They believe God will appear in the wilderness as he did to Moses.’

‘And does he?’

‘The evangelicals have also driven them out. My mother is one who’s been stopped from giving sermons. She preaches in the open air.’

We drove into the open expanse and alongside mine dumps, these old accretions of waste and blood. Spiky grass and dandelions grew around pools of caked salt and chemicals. I noticed on their edge, some people who appeared to be singing and protesting. When I looked towards them, though, they had dissipated into the landscape.

About a kilometre from the stadium, we turned into a small settlement. Powerlines hung over the houses like webs. The houses were scattered, with small gardens of beans and maize. We slowed to barely a walking pace as a group of men passed us. Blowing trumpets and horns, they were adorned in green and white. Their leader wore a necklace of cowry beads and carried a ceramic pot from which some liquid steamed. Another banged a large drum nestled on his belly. They greeted us warmly, and Isiwa waved at them through the window. Isiwa signalled for me to turn into a small, muddy driveway. We stopped and Isiwa got out and opened the wire gate.

A cluster of hibiscus bushes and citrus trees grew beside the driveway. Beyond these was an open field in which two languid bulls beside the fence stole oranges with long purple tongues. A police helicopter circled overhead.

The house was one of those prefabricated concrete houses that the dictatorship had produced en masse to keep poor, and mainly black, neighbourhoods away from the centres of power. They spread across the landscape in immense grids. But within them, as I knew from many visits, worlds were woven with great care. The entry of this one was framed by yellow roses.

We climbed out of the car. In the doorway, stood a woman wearing a dress adorned with an intricate red and black mandala. She smiled, and then limped towards us, her head tilted slightly to one side.

‘Welcome, welcome, my dears,’ she said.

‘Lüderitz,’ I said, holding out my hand.

‘My mother,’ Isiwa said, ‘Nkosazana.’

Nkosazana finally took my hand between hers and squeezed.

‘Such soft hands you have, my dear,’ she said. ‘You two are very bad. I prepared lunch, and it’s now cold. I will have to heat it again. And the game is starting soon.’

‘Sorry ma, the traffic was bad,’ Isiwa said.

We went through the door. Inside was a green lounge suite, a glass coffee table, and a worn armchair. A wooden sculpture of a woman carrying fruit on her head stood on the coffee table, while a gilded frame of Christ, and a clock with no hands, hung on the wall. The ceiling boards were black with mould and sagged with damp. Nkosazana gestured to us to sit down. She turned on an electric fan which shook as if in spasm.

Isiwa’s face was clenched, but they were oddly muted. We listened to Nkosazana clattering around the kitchen. Then she emerged, wearing a denim apron and carrying our lunch on rose-patterned trays: clouds of soft maize meal with a garlicky soup of spinach. Her eyes were constantly in motion, like two tiny tumble dryers. She turned on the television set. It showed images of the teams, dressed respectively in black and yellow, warming up. These scenes were interspersed with archival highlights, beer adverts and propaganda for a men’s health clinic promising to save us from impotence, failure, shame. We ate watching.

‘Do you like the food?’ Nkosazana asked.

‘Very good,’ I replied, wiping my hands on a napkin.

‘It’s vegetarian. We are vegetarians, you know. You can put that in your story.’

I took the opening. ‘Has Isiwa explained I am writing an article about them as a performer. An up-and-coming talent.’

‘Yes, yes, my child has told me. I am very proud. Isiwa will be in the papers and on people’s phones.’

‘And are you happy for me to interview you for the piece?’

‘Yes, my dear.’

‘Thank you. Do you mind if I record?’

‘For the radio?’

‘No, just for my memory. So I write what you say correctly.’

‘Of course, of course, do what you must.’

‘Can we mute the television?’

The game had not yet started. Isiwa reached for the remote and silenced the TV.

‘To begin, can you spell your name?’ I asked.

‘My real name?’

I paused for a second. ‘If that’s ok.’

‘It’s N-K-O-S-A-Z-A-N-A. My surname is L-U-A’

‘Ok, let’s begin.

First, where were you born, and in what year?’

‘Oh I don’t remember such things. I was born near the sea. In a village of fishermen.’

‘You don’t remember the date and year?’

‘No, but just a moment.’ She rummaged around in her bag and then took out an identity card and gave it to me.

I noted down the date and year and then paused. ‘The surname on this card is different from the one you gave me.’

‘Oh, yes, my dear, that’s because it’s my sister’s ID card.’

‘Your sister’s?’

‘Yes. She passed away. Shame.’

‘You were twins?’

‘No, we were born at different times but in the same place. Next to the sea.’

‘You have the same first name?’

‘Yes.’

‘Ok. Do you have your own ID?’

‘No, only my sister’s. I keep it to remember her.’

‘What happened to your own?’

‘I threw it away. I have no need of such things.’

‘You have different surnames?’

‘Yes, different fathers.’

‘But the same first name.’

‘Yes. Well, I took her name in her memory.’

‘Why did you share this with me? Out of interest.’

‘Sorry, I thought you might like it. To write down in that book of yours.’

‘That’s very kind,’ I said.

She smiled.

‘Ok, so let’s move on. First, have you watched any of Isiwa’s performances?’

‘No, I don’t go to clubs. I’m a Christian, you see.’

‘Have you listened to Isiwa’s music?’

‘Yes, my child plays the songs and videos to me on the phone.’

‘Do you like them?’

‘I’m very proud.’

‘What do you think of their political message?’

‘I’m not interested in politics.’ She gazed at me intently.

‘Isiwa tells me you were involved in the struggle.’

‘Me, no, no, I am a Christian. I don’t involve myself in those funny, funny things,’ she said.

‘You weren’t involved in the resistance during the Old Regime?’

‘I mind my own business. You know what God told Ezekiel about living in a rebellious house,’ Nkosazana said, looking out of the window. ‘Thou shalt burn with fire in the city.’

‘So, you were never arrested?’

‘No, my dear, I am very law-abiding. A good Christian.’

I looked at Isiwa. Their face was blank and turned towards the carpet.

‘Isiwa told me you were arrested and went away for a while when they were a child.’

‘You know how children are. They get these strange ideas in their head. I went away a few weeks because my father was ill. Isiwa’s aunt, the one who died, watched over my child.’

‘Your father still lived by the sea?’

‘Yes, he would never leave the sea. He was a famous healer, you know. At night we would sit around the fire beside the ocean, cooking fish, and he would tell us stories. He told us how he disappeared under water when he was a young man, and that was where he had his initiation. He never told us what happened beneath the ocean. He said those were his secrets. He said that one day he would share his secrets with Isiwa. But he never did. He died when Isiwa was a child, and that was that.’

I stopped taking notes. ‘Did you used to sing?’

‘No, I was never part of the choir. I always helped the priest and cleaned up afterwards. I’m so shy, you know.’

‘And what do you think of Isiwa’s career?’

‘Oh, I am very, very proud. So proud. Isiwa, such a talented child. Naughty though, they never listen to their mother, but so talented. They send me money each month to pay for the electricity and water, and they are saving to fix my ceiling. It has too much water in it. Such a good child. Naughty but good at heart.’

‘How do you feel that Isiwa does not use the name that you gave?’

‘Names,’ Nkosazana answered, ‘are like this sauce. If they do not have the right body they mean nothing.’ She dipped the starch into the thick green gravy.

‘Did Isiwa struggle when growing up?’

‘Yes, you know how people are. They are afraid of things that they don’t understand. But my child was good at school. Always reading books. But wandered around a lot. Do you have more questions now, my dear? I am a little tired, and the game is about to start. I never miss a derby.’

I turned the recorder on my phone off and put down the notebook.

‘Isiwa, my child, won’t you fetch us some tea, and there are pastries in the oven.’ Isiwa left the room. Their shoulders were hunched, and they seemed turned in on themselves, somehow diminished. The game began, and Isiwa returned with a tray of mugs and soft warm cakes. They poured the tea. Nkosazana raised the volume and we turned to the television.

It was a rough and goalless game, with only momentary bursts of improvisation. At half-time the score was unchanged. Isiwa coiled up and slept in the armchair.

‘I’m just going outside to have a cigarette,’ I said at half-time.

‘No problem.’

I went to the door, and Nkosazana followed me outside. I stood beside the rose bushes and took the cigarette box out of my jacket pocket.

‘Could I have a smoke, please?’ Nkosazana asked, unsmiling.

I stared at her and then gave her a cigarette. I noticed my hands were shaking.

She lit it with a matchbox she took from her apron. 'Isiwa tells me I shouldn't smoke, that it will give me cancer, but an old woman needs her pleasures.'

There were loud noises in the distance. In the street outside, a group of soccer supporters ran down the road.

'Mr Leveza,' Nkosazana said, 'what is it you want with my child?'

'I want to tell Isiwa's story,' I said. 'Isiwa is very talented.'

'And afterwards?'

'Afterwards?'

'What will happen once the story is told?'

'I don't know. Maybe it will help them get a recording contract. Maybe not. Life goes on.'

'Does it?'

'Does it what?'

'Go on?'

I looked at her and, for the first time, caught something in her expression that seemed familiar. I could not place it. 'Have we met before?' I asked.

'I was wondering when you would notice, Mr Leveza. Isiwa didn't want you to come here. It was me. I wanted to see if you remembered.'

And then, within the soft folds of her flesh, I caught the after-image of a younger woman, her faced bruised and scarred, sitting in front of me at a table, a Dictaphone between us.

'You remember, now, Lüderitz?' Nkosazana asked.

I nodded.

'Don't be embarrassed, you are no different from the rest. When you grow old, it's like you grow innocent again. It is as if the rotten leaves and limbs slowly fall off until there is

barely anything there at all. Our bones become lighter and snap like twigs. We are light, our hair as white as cotton. Hardly there at all. That we once lived, danced, made love, gave birth, betrayed each other, hurt each other, plotted to kill our enemies, all of this floats away, like pollen. The young think we were always old, that we didn't once drink and fuck, that we weren't once dangerous and still aren't. The young think that osteoporosis makes you an angel or a witch or a ghost. Those are our choices. But what if we choose something else?

'You were one of them?'

'One of who?'

I could not speak its name. 'One of those whose story I recorded.'

She smiled.

'I'm sorry I didn't recognize you. Isiwa said nothing.'

'Mr Leveza,' she said. 'I learnt something valuable from you. I learnt that with whites there is always something they want from us. Perhaps our bodies, our land, our stories, and sometimes our very spirits. They always have some hidden agenda. They are never quite what they seem. Their smiles are not to be trusted. You seem like a lonely man, someone in pain, but those in pain can be most dangerous, like animals they can attack. You come here to write about us, but what happens when our lives are made into ink or put on computer screens or phones or those applications? Will it save us, will it heal us when people carry our lives in their pockets along with the sports scores? I am a Christian, and we are taught to welcome the stranger. But I have my ancestors too, and they tell us that strangers can also be monsters. How are we to tell who is who?'

'The story had an impact. It helped people know what was happening. That the state was torturing prisoners.'

'Perhaps it did, Mr Leveza, who knows? But for us, nothing changed. Our skin remained scarred, our brains damaged, our lungs filled with black dust. And you, you became very

successful, didn't you? We helped start your career. I followed your work over the years. I read the newspapers in the houses I cleaned to survive. And then you threw it all away. And here you are again. Like Lazarus. And you don't even remember my name. I thought, let me give this man a clue. I put my identity document under your nose, and still you did not see me. How wonderful this capacity to forget the past. Does writing things down allow you to forget, Mr Leveza? Is it a form of magic, my dear?'

Now a crowd was running down the street as if in flight. They flung away their flags and vuvuzelas as they passed. A man sped across the gravel, a drum bouncing arrhythmically on his head. At the same time, another hooted on a conch, his knees rising as high as his shaking belly.

'What is happening?' I asked Nkosazana.

'Don't mind them. You know these fans, they get very excited.' She turned to me. 'So how has it been Mr Leveza? Your life in these three decades since we last met?'

'How can we speak about these things?' I said. 'We would need years. But something changed in me after the piece. I guess I lost some innocence. It was as if the stories, your stories, took seed in me, in my mind, my liver, my belly. They continued to multiply and grow, inhabiting my dreams. It was as if voices were speaking in me constantly and I could not quiet them. I would wake myself at night crying out. Years later, after I was married, I would sometimes cry out at night, disturbing my wife's sleep. I tried to write the voices down, transcribe what they were saying, and calm them a while. But stories, if you listen close enough, come to dwell in you. They live a life of their own. And then there was the backlash. The accusations. The cars in the night following me. The phone calls with nobody on the end of the line. Sleepless, I would just watch the traffic at night or go out. My career was going well, but it was as if it were a parallel life, something I was no longer attached to. The words had become

dislodged from my body. I looked at my by-line – Lüderitz Leveza – and it seemed strange to me. As if the words named someone who was familiar but was not me.’

‘Shame, my dear,’ said Nkosazana. ‘I’m sorry we caused you so much trouble.’

The crowd fleeing down the street grew. In the distance, shouts and explosions echoed in the stadium.

Finally, a young man stopped in front of the gate. ‘Ma! Get inside! There have been riots at the stadium.’

‘What is it about my son?’ she asked.

‘Haven’t you heard? It’s about the disappearances. Get inside. I must go.’ He rocketed away.

Nkosazana’s brow furrowed. She looked up to me, and said, ‘Why don’t you rest inside. I just have to make a phone call.’

I went inside. Isiwa, hearing me come in, yawned and got up. Languidly, they went to the kitchen, to boil the water and warm the pastries. I watched Nkosazana through the window heatedly speaking on the phone. Then a young man came running to the gate wearing a cap and a football t-shirt. They spoke over the fence for several minutes and then he ran off.

Nkosazana came inside and found me standing beside the window. She ushered me to sit on the green sofa and turned up the sound on the television. The second half of the game was well underway with no apparent disturbance.

Nkosazana clapped. ‘My boys,’ she said, smiling. The home crowd on the television roared with approval. Outside the window, the fleeing crowd had grown to a large mass of bodies and noise. I saw the blur of what appeared to be a police van passing by in pursuit. I stood up to see what was happening.

‘Oh, Mr Leveza, don’t mind those boys. They are always getting into some sort of trouble,’ she said.

Through the window, the crowd receded. In the opposite direction, I could see the stadium across the plain, cloaked in a soft mist lit by flares of red. It was sunset and the sky was a dirty lavender.

Then the lights of the living room pulsed. The old box television sparked and emitted a blue glow from its blown plastic frame. The plugs on the wall crackled. The television image broke up into lines of pink and grey noise. But the voices of the commentators continued over the formless storm. Then the voices on the television were silent. The electric fan danced a little samba and came to a halt. The room was now dark, crossed with the pallid pink and long shadows of evening. In the distance, the stadium lights still burnt and its belly thundered.

‘Loadshedding,’ Nkosazana said coldly, clapping her hands in agitation.

Isiwa returned from the kitchen without the pastries. A barrage of messages reverberated on their phone.

‘Shit,’ said Isiwa. ‘My battery is almost dead.’ They texted furiously. ‘The police have locked down the stadium. The roads are being closed by military. We better stay indoors.’

The streets were silent now, the only noise was the distant shriek of sirens. Nkosazana went to the kitchen, and I heard her opening the back door.

‘What is happening?’ I asked.

‘It has begun,’ Isiwa said.

‘What?’

‘The manifestation.’

‘What manifestation?’

‘The protests against the disappearances. Our rebellion against absence.’

‘Did you know this would happen?’ I asked Isiwa.

‘I had heard rumours.’

‘And you said nothing?’

‘The word that people are missing has been spreading. Do you think it’s only us that has noticed them? No. There are who knows how many families out there whose children, brothers, sisters are disappearing. Do you understand this? Do you grasp what all of this means? It’s not just a story. It’s not about us or you. My colleagues and I have been making connections with groups on the peripheries, sharing information, trying to document the numbers of the disappeared. Planning a response.’

‘And you didn’t tell me? You didn’t think this was important to share?’

‘I don’t owe you anything. Your role is to investigate the files. And write the profile. That’s all.’

‘Not even to tell me who your mother was?’

‘So, you know now,’ Isiwa said. ‘She wanted me to bring you here. Not me. You think I want you invading my life any more than is necessary?’

‘But you chose me. Why? If you knew, why did you choose me?’

‘I didn’t *choose* you. You just arrived that night at the club. It seemed too synchronous, you know what I mean? When I was young, I collected all your articles about my mother and her friends. I cut them from the newspapers in the libraries, even though it was not allowed. I thought that somehow in your words and articles, I could find the key to the mother who was taken from me. I thought perhaps because you met my mother, you might have some insight.’

‘Into what?’

‘I don’t know. Me. The situation. Now I realise how stupid I was. Just because you wrote those things doesn’t mean you understood them.’

Nkosazana returned with a paraffin lamp, and we fell silent. She sat on the couch beside Isiwa. I looked at Isiwa’s face: their shadowed eyes lashing out at the contorting light, tears sliding over their cheekbones, now still, towards soft blue lips. Nkosazana pulled Isiwa into her breast. Mother and child held one another closely while I watched them in silence.

‘Do not stress, my child,’ she said to Isiwa. ‘You are tired. Rest. Fight tomorrow. There is a bed for you in the backroom.’ She took her child by the hand and led them out. They were gone a while. It was dark now, and the night was humid. Mosquitoes circled the room. I tried to check for news on my phone, but the 4G had gone now too. The reception bars on my phone were red, like burning towers.

Nkosazana returned with a pile of sheets, a towel, and a bar of soap. ‘You can sleep on the couch, Mr Leveza,’ she said. ‘You can shower. It’s a solar geyser, so the water should still be warm. I’m sorry I don’t have a spare toothbrush. I was not expecting guests to stay.’ She handed me a T-shirt. ‘Someone left this here long ago. Please take it.’

‘Thank you.’ It was still early, but I felt a wave of intense fatigue coming over me. I took the lamp to the bathroom, shat, and showered. I waved the flame around to cleanse the pollution from the air and rinsed my mouth with toothpaste, rubbing my teeth with my finger. I put on the old T-shirt, which was clean but a little moist. Nkosazana was gone when I returned to the living room, but the sheets had been spread out on the couch. I lay beneath them and pulled them over me, falling quickly into a dreamless sleep.

I was woken, I don’t know how many hours later, by the sound of singing. The voice was unearthly. It had a bass current and an aching falsetto. Its rhythms were as circular as an incantation, and the words were in a language I did not recognize. I got up quietly and followed the voice out through the kitchen and into the backyard. The power was still out, but the moon and stars illuminated the yard’s contours, its well-tended flowerbeds and gravel pathway. In the corner of the yard, candles burnt before a white plaster shrine. Within the alcove was a sculpture of the Black Madonna. Beside that was a figure of Iemanjá, the mother of the seas. From her blue gown porcelain arms were stretched out, and she wore a white crown above a dark face. Beside the sculpture, a shell reflected the purple flame.

Nkosazana did not see me or pretended not to. The cold was biting, but she did not seem to notice. She stood facing the entry of a backyard shack constructed of tin and wood and continued to sing. The door was open, and her voice echoed in its interior. It lilted back and forth, high and low, in sombre tones, gathering with it the timbre of wood and tin, sky and soil. It had the rhythm of a lullaby offset by a call of supplication. Her voice circled as if its source was outside the cavities of her lungs and throat. I silently took out my phone and recorded surreptitiously.

Once the song was finished, Nkosazana turned to me. Her face was ashen. 'Isiwa is sleeping. Please do not disturb my child, they need rest. Troubled times have arrived, and they need protection.'

Chapter six

The next day, I drove Isiwa back into the centre of the city. There were roadblocks everywhere, and the traffic was even worse than it had been the day before. At one checkpoint a police officer rudely demanded we get out of the car and searched it before allowing us to carry on. On the journey, Isiwa was anxious, constantly check their phone, sending messages.

‘I need you to take me somewhere,’ they said.

‘Where?’

‘Just follow my directions.’

We drove into an old suburb of the city, whose streets were lined with palm trees and now flowerless jacaranda. Many of the houses with their patios and corrugated-iron roofs were now derelict, the paint blistered, the plaster falling. Isiwa direct me through a series of pot-holed streets until we arrived at an innocuously-painted house. A young man stood at the gate and looked agitated at my presence. Isiwa got out of the car and spoke to him. He let me in and directed the car down the drive and to a sandy and empty lot in which several cars were parked.

‘Please stay here,’ Isiwa said.

‘No, I would like to know what’s going on.’

Isiwa sighed, looking angry, and then said, ‘Just wait a minute.’ They went inside for several minutes and then came out. ‘Ok,’ they said. ‘You can come in but everything is off the record.’ I agreed. At the door, a large tattooed man insisted on searching me and taking my phone. I objected but Isiwa looked at me viciously and I relented.

We entered a lounge with a large, stained Persian carpet. The corners were cluttered with objects – a drum, a shell, tennis balls, a broken tagine pot, piles of books. The room was almost

full with people of various ages, sitting on the carpet, packed into a worn sofa, some standing in the corners. Some men were smoking and a baby was crying.

‘Can you put the fucking cigarettes out,’ the mother, a woman with dark black hair and wearing a beige coat, said, trying to console the child.

‘This is Lüderitz Leveza,’ Isiwa said, introducing me to the group. They mostly ignored me and a few just nodded in my direction by way of greeting.

‘I still don’t understand what he’s doing here,’ one man said, putting out his cigarette in an old can.

‘Just trust me,’ Isiwa said angrily. ‘Let’s start the meeting. Luiz, can you give us an update?’

A short, bearded man with a pot-belly and a beret stood up. ‘Friends and comrades,’ he said, ‘today is a bitter day. Yesterday, the protests began, prematurely and undemocratically one might say. I don’t know who gave the call. We don’t know whether the militants are within our networks and acted without authorisation, whether they belong to another group, or are state agents. But the horse has bolted and the repression has begun.’

Another man, well-built, with a stark and handsome face interrupted Luiz. ‘What is this shit?’ he said. ‘Luiz, you are meant to be in charge of intelligence gathering and you don’t even know what’s going on, when every child in the streets knows. The protests were started by The Ultras, good comrades of ours, who have grown tired of this endless pontificating, this endless talk over strategy, comrades who are filled with anger that our brothers and sisters that are dying and disappearing and are tired of waiting for answers. They aren’t here today because they are sick of these meetings, if that’s what one can call them – more like tea parties for intellectuals.’

‘Noah,’ Isiwa said, ‘let’s try treat each other with respect. We are all frightened. We are all mourning. The stress is taking its toll. But turning on one another won’t help. We were

delaying so that when we start the protests we have a base on which to argue. Evidence, data. Otherwise we will easily be dismissed as lunatics.'

'I'm sorry doctor,' Noah said. 'Let's all just wait for you and your white friend here to gather the evidence. To make a portfolio. Maybe an art exhibition. And when you're done, we will all be dead.'

Isiwa took a deep breath. 'Noah, I more than you have to live every day with what's happening. Every day, I have to face the families of the dead, who, against all logic, have drowned. I have to explain to mothers who have lost their children what has happened, even though I have no explanation. How do you think that makes me feel?'

'Why don't you go write a song?' Noah said. 'Or perhaps maybe make a conceptual video, while we carry on mobilising.'

'Noah Cabral, don't speak to Isiwa like that,' an older woman said, rising as she spoke. She wore a white robe and a necklace of shells around her neck; her head was wrapped in a turban. 'We know as much as we do because of Isiwa. I have lost my own daughter, and Isiwa was with me, holding my hand, bringing me food when it seemed that the grief would kill me. Whatever this is, this terror, we cannot just confront it by beating our chests, by getting the Minister to call a Commission. It seems to me, to us mothers, to come from a source, even deeper than the state. We cannot deal with this thing, whatever it is, unless we deal with our loss, with the wounds that are growing deeper every day. We, the mothers of the drowned, have also been meeting, have also been consulting. Isiwa has been kind and good counsel, as has Ma Nkosazana. We understand that this thing is affecting the youth worse than us. I understand you are angry. But we also need time to think, time to make sense of what is happening. Rage will not halt this storm.'

'I'm sorry Ma, you are right,' Noah said. 'Isiwa, Luiz, take my apologies. But we can't wait any longer. The Ultras are already mobilising and we need to join with them.'

‘Noah is correct,’ Isiwa said. ‘It’s now time to occupy Freedom Square. I will lead an occupation of the highway by the medical workers to draw the media and distract the police. Wait until they are there, and then you all start mobilising your units to occupy the square. Is everyone in agreement?’

A murmur of approval went around the room. The woman in the white robe was silent, lost, it seemed, in memory.

Isiwa entered the highway in the mid-afternoon, leading a group of around 50. They up their hand against the coming traffic while other protestors set up a blockade of rocks and scrap metal hurled into the road. They remained calm amid the oncoming rush of metal and light that hooted and circled them. Isiwa’s white doctor’s gown billowed in the passing motion. I watched them, cautiously, from the emergency lane, unwilling to place my body before the cars. But the group on the tarmac grew. I looked over the metal railings and saw other protesters arriving to join these renegade hospital staff. Municipal workers and students marched up the offramps banging samba-reggae rhythms. Throughout the city below I saw small groups snaking toward Freedom Square.

The crowd of demonstrators on the highway expanded into a large embolism, completely blocking the circulation of cars, trucks and buses. To me, standing on the peripheries, the crowd seemed to have grown to close to 1000 people. They only parted to allow an ambulance to pass, while a few motorcycles slipped through. Some drivers shouted support for the protestors; others cursed them. Several vehicles tried to reverse and return the way they had come, amplifying the chaos. A few students set up a stage of plastic crates onto which Isiwa climbed. They stood on the platform above the crowd. Hanging over their gown, their necklace of blue beads refracted the sky into prisms. Beneath them, the health workers in their white

coats waited, surrounded by the crowd in a carnival of red and black, some wearing scarfs and sweatshirts, many carrying umbrellas to shield them from the afternoon's glare.

Isiwa shouted into the megaphone. Those in the front line repeated the words, and then those behind them, so the words moved like a wave through the collective.

'We have gathered here today,' they say, 'unlawfully. A wildcat strike, our employers say, as if the savagery was ours and not theirs. The cabinet and media say we are essential workers here to heal the sick. But we cannot heal a sick state. We cannot heal a sick city. We cannot heal a dying landscape. We cannot heal these toxic winds nor the acid of mine waste. Our wards are full, and our words are empty. Only our bodies are left. We are useless in our clinics. There is no oxygen supply left. We submit our procurement forms, submit our emergency memos, petition the ministry, and yet no support arrives. There are corpses on the floors and not enough antiseptic to protect us from their rot. Our ventilation systems, when they work, carry pathogens and not fresh air. They say we are meant to heal, but we cannot heal a sick building, we cannot heal our faltering and deadly power supply.

'We cannot heal this malediction, this plague which is among us and which nothing, nothing in our medical training has prepared us for. And yet our managers, our leaders, remain silent. And the bodies continue to go missing. Where are they going? We demand answers but are given none. The paperwork disappears, our computers are infected with viruses. We gather here today because we have no words and no medicines left. We cannot vaccinate ourselves against abandonment; we cannot vaccinate against the wildness in which we live.'

As Isiwa spoke, the riot police marched in at the far edges of the crowd. They wore black helmets and carried shields before them. They appeared as lines of plastic bottles in a recycling yard. But then the police looked upwards, unsettled. In the windows of the tower blocks alongside the highway, silhouettes synchronously gathered. I could not see them clearly, but they held, in their hands, circular objects. And then cacophony began: from the apartment

windows, the crowd started banging pots and pans. The metallic noise thundered down the highway, drowning out the hooting cars and echoing in the city's expanse. Amid this syncopated orchestra, floated a single voice. *A terrible storm is coming*, Isiwa sang.

And the firing began.

Rubber bullets ricocheted off flesh and tar. A water cannon knocked a few of the protestors off their feet. A group of women stripped their sodden clothes and formed a line, bare-breasted, against the police but were brutally pushed aside. Bombs of mace burst into billowing plumes. A few cars from the now kilometres-long stream of traffic circling the city tried to push their way through the conflict. One hit a protestor near me. The crowd, reacting as a single organism in defence, threw concrete blocks on the car and pulled the driver out, stripping him. Isiwa stepped into the fray, roughly grabbing the man and pulling him away from those who were beating him, and screaming at them. They let him go and he limped towards the police lines. Isiwa spat behind him and attended to the student who had been hit and appeared to have a head wound.

I watched all this from the elbow of the road, having wrapped a wet cloth around my face as protection from the gusts of tear gas. I climbed on the dented shell of the abandoned car to get a better view, taking notes and making videos and photos with my phone. Riot police hit the strikers with their shields and batons, driving them back towards the offramp. As the pressure grew, Isiwa signalled to the crowd to retreat. Some had climbed on the car alongside me. While some groups continued hurling stones at the police, most protestors fled towards the offramp. A few SUVs broke through the barricades, driving over the detritus, while the police regrouped trying to clear the highway.

From my vantage point, I could see that barricades were being set up in Freedom Square in the city beyond the highway. Most of the protestors were fleeing the highway, but some remained to slow the movement of the police. My eyes burned from the chemicals, as did those

of the nearby motorists, some of whom temporarily abandoned their vehicles. Only around a hundred protestors remained, using whatever they could find to keep blocking the highway. But a few of these, I noticed, had grown still. They ceased to pay attention to the battles and cacophony around them and stared past the encroaching police line towards a distant point in the sky above.

I followed their gaze beyond the burning tyres and emulsion of smoke. A large cumulus of teargas wandered above the cars. From within it, there appeared a silver shape: at first, it was merely an iridescence but gradually it emerged as a dark and dense mass. The shape moved towards us along the freeway; it moved over and beneath bridges scrawled with graffiti; it spilled over into the canals, filled with sewerage, which ran alongside the road; it dispersed the fumes and effluvia left from the battle and showed itself to be over a kilometre long and several storeys high, a protean thing that contracted and curled and expanded in a militant and malignant choreography. The mass revolted against the sun; it eclipsed and mutilated light and then liberated it into shimmering spray. Through stinging eyes I saw it was not a single body but a composition of thousands of smaller cells, silvery punctuation marks, like sperm, like spume, like spin foam; the mass spun like a spinning top, it spun like moons, and it foamed with a furious moan. As it moved above me, almost completely blocking out the light, I saw every cell was a fish – the collective a vast shoal.

The crowd of motorists, police and protestors paid no attention to its passing overhead. Perhaps they thought the shadow was merely a fleeting cloud or that the dark was the winter's early setting sun. But a few of the strikers who had seen the oncoming shoal were now on the ground gasping and clutching at their throats and chests, writhing on the ground in paroxysms.

'I can't, I can't, I can't,' one of them cried. I thought to help, but I could not move. My heart was pounding and all I could hear was the blood pulsing in my ears. I fell onto my knees and vomited, my puke running down the sides of the car. The voices of the struggling protestors

were now quiet and their bodies lay lifeless on the tarmac. A few of their comrades knelt beside them checking their pulses. But the police had cleared away the barricades and were moving closer and so those who had survived fled. The police vehicles encircled the bodies briefly, and then left. The fallen bodies were now gone. I could not process the vision. I reopened the note app on my phone and at the end of my observations on the protest wrote: *sardine run*.

I climbed down from the car and walked shakily through the traffic which was now slowly moving again. I leant against the steel barrier on the side of the highway and rinsed my mouth with water I had in my rucksack. Then I felt a hand on my back and started. It was Isiwa, looking dazed.

‘You ok?’ Isiwa asked.

‘I think so,’ I said, ‘and you?’

‘No. No, not at all.’

‘Did you see it? That thing.’

Isiwa nodded and just pointed. Against the deep orange of the evening skyline and the silhouettes of tower blocks, the dark mass still moved, weaving in and out of the buildings rising and descending like a black sun in its own orbits. And following the shoal, feeding off it, a pod of dolphins shun the light of billboards. They pirouetted, darting in and out of the mass, circling the spike of the television tower, dipping down almost to the level of the streets below, before disappearing into the city’s mass of glass and concrete.

Isiwa suddenly reeled, and I put my arm out to catch and steady them, even though I was still feeling weak and nauseous. We stood a while, arms around each other and leaning on the railings of the highway so as not to tumble into the traffic. Once Isiwa had steadied themselves, my nausea took over and I leaned over the railings and vomited onto the, retching in the winter sun, until my stomach was empty. I remembered how when Sarah and I would fight, I sometimes puke; it was as if my body had no capacity to hold our bitter words.

In Freedom Square below us a multitude had gathered. Groups were busy assembling tents and shacks. A truck arrived with portable toilets, others with gas canisters and wood. Police had gathered around the peripheries but were keeping a distance from the occupation.

‘You ok?’ Isiwa said, placing their hand on my back as the spasms quietened.

‘Yes,’ I said, my mouth still acidic. ‘Have you been preparing for this some time?’

‘Weeks,’ Isiwa said. ‘It is time now.’

‘For what?’

‘For you to publish the evidence I’ve given you.’

‘It’s incomplete. There’s so much we still don’t know.’

‘And what is that?’

‘What this world we now live in is.’

‘I’m not sure we will ever know that Lüderitz. But we need to publish evidence to support what most of know already.’

‘Ok, I will call Sita.’

We walked together down the offramp of the highway. The evening traffic was moving at its usual pace. We could see the square with its large archway lit up below. The rebellion of the day had already reverted to a kind of domestic normalcy – those who had occupied the square had started cooking on fires; parents had set up a space to take care of children; tents were being organised with sleeping spaces and informal showers. The skyline, now a darkness tinged with red, showed no sign of the shoal that had passed through it. All seemed to have settled into a crepuscular calm.

We paused on the offramp a while. I called Sita on my cell.

‘Lüderitz,’ she said. ‘It’s late now. What is it?’

‘I have a story.’

‘Yes?’

‘I was at the protests today. I’ve documented what happened. How they began and what unfolded.’

‘You were at the protests?’

‘Yes. But there’s more.’

‘There is?’

‘I have data about the disappearances. Hard data. Medical data.’

‘Lüderitz, am I to understand that without my knowledge or authorisation you’ve been carrying out an investigation? That you’ve been doing reporting even though you were explicitly barred from it?’

‘It’s an important story.’

‘Yes, it is. But it’s not yours to tell. Ze’s started covering it.’

‘We can report together.’

‘No. From tomorrow consider yourself suspended. If you hand over what you have to Zé, we will consider this a mitigating factor. You might escape with a medical boarding, and at least keep some of your salary. But from now on Lüderitz, you are no longer writing for the paper. Do you understand what I’m saying?’

‘This is fucking ridiculous,’ I said and hung up the phone. I stopped for a moment, barely able to breathe. I looked out over the square, over the lights and the lake, over the only city I had loved and known and which, it felt to me, had ejected me. Isiwa put an arm around me. I rested my head on their shoulder, and then tears, whether of shock or sadness, I could not tell – it seemed I was observing myself as an island from a distant shore – flowed.

‘You heard that?’ I asked.

‘Yes,’ Isiwa said.

‘I’m sorry,’ I said. ‘I wanted to help. But it is beyond me now.’

‘It’s ok,’ Isiwa said. I lifted my head and we carried on walking down the offramp. ‘You know, Lüderitz, there is something I think you’ve forgotten. You met me before that night at the club.’

‘When?’

‘When I was a child, you came to our house. You barely noticed me, you were only interested in my mother. I was only ten years old. It was after my mother returned from prison and she was changed, irreparably changed. Something in her had been stolen. And you came into our home like an alien from a distant planet, a world from which I was completely excluded. And it seemed to me, as a young child, that you brought with you a kind of magic, as if you were Father Christmas or the Easter bunny, someone who might heal or restore my mother, bring back to us what your people had taken.’

As they said this I recalled, dimly, the image of a tall, frail child hovering around us, quiet and just watching. They wore a scarf and a superhero costume that fitted badly and they had painted nails. They drifted around the space like a spectre, appearing here and there. The child had struck me at the time and yet seemed so out of place that they soon slipped the grasp of memory. ‘I remember now,’ I said. ‘I’m sorry I could not bring what you wanted.’

‘No, you could not. But there is more. We met once again, years later, well not quite met. That image of your wife on your wall, so familiar, reminded me. When I was a medical student, we occupied the Faculty office in protest against the cutting back of public funds for research and student support. The university threatened to expel protesting students. A young attorney came to see us and represented us pro bono. She had a wild afro and a voice like burning coals. We were all quite smitten with her. She sat with us in the students’ hall we were occupying for a very long time, after hours, taking affidavits, listening to our stories. And then you arrived. You seemed in a kind of rage and called to her very rudely, telling her it was late, and you had been worried about her, looking for everywhere. She seemed wounded and

humiliated by your anger, packing her things and apologising to us. I recognised you, but you looked at me with no recognition at all. In fact, we were not even there for you, we were just a backdrop to your rage. And I remembered you from a decade before, I remembered how closely and carefully you had listened to my mother, but you seemed to have aged much more than ten years, and I wondered what had happened, how time had disfigured you so much.'

We were now at the beneath the highway walking through a dark underpass. A few of the unhoused were lying beneath blankets smoking. They asked for money, and Isiwa apologised, unafraid. We walked on.

'Why are you telling me this now?' I asked.

'I don't know. I guess I'm disappointed and angry too. I wanted you to write this story. But perhaps not the person you are now. Rather, the person you were then, who listened, listened so so closely, to my mother, so closely I thought you could still hear the mother I had lost.'

'You are right,' I said. 'In the years since then I became so consumed with my work, so consumed with my own troubles, I could barely see what was in front of me, what I was losing, what was slipping away. I thought that through my writing I could keep my world intact, but that was deluded too. I didn't even notice that my words were also escaping.'

We were now nearing Freedom Square, walking through stone alleyways, the old houses beside us disintegrating. Through the windows we saw the shadows of families eating, washing the dishes, watching television – imprints on a faded cloth.

'We've forgotten about your car,' Isiwa said. 'It's at the house.'

'I will collect it tomorrow. I'm tired now. My apartment is not far.'

'Is it safe to walk?'

'No. There's a gang that sometimes robs people on the hill. But there's nothing much left that people can steal from me.'

The highway was behind us now, cutting across the night sky, a kind of barrier between the mountains and the water.

‘What was that thing we saw today?’ I asked.

‘I don’t know. But we should not have seen it and still lived.’

I looked at them. Their face seemed very fragile, washed with streetlight and blurred eyeliner.

‘Call me if you need me,’ I said.

‘Ok, I will,’ Isiwa said.

We arrived on the peripheries of the occupation. The arch of Freedom Square was lit by a green glow. The hanging lights that cut across the tiled concrete floor, connected illicitly to electricity posts, and the fires in the braziers, made the protest seem like a kind of fair.

‘Lüderitz,’ Isiwa said.

‘Yes.’

‘Take care of yourself. And come visit the occupation. We will need help of many kinds. For who knows when, or if, this will end.’

We hugged and I left them on the threshold. I made my way, on foot, up the hill, winding up between the gnarled trunks of jackfruit and jacaranda. The power on the hills was out and the light of stars guided me, oddly bright.

Chapter seven

A week later, the cache arrived. I threw the laptop against the wall. It fell to the floor, its aluminium corners slightly bent from the collision, where it had left a chip in the paint. I felt a small sun of anger in my belly; its rays leak around my liver, my pancreas and kidneys. I could not believe this was happening again to me.

The method had been the same as two years before. I had received an anonymous call and then a text message with an encryption key. And when I opened my email, I found the link to an encrypted ShareRoom. In it was a cache of encrypted PDF documents, requiring encryption certificates to unlock them, which shared through another link. The PDFs were signed by state officials and watermarked and the email chains shared in full. Two years back, I had called my contacts, spent weeks making corroborating phone calls, checking text matches in email chains, meeting with sources in fast food restaurants around the city to validate the information.

And yet, when the story was published, cracks began to appear. There were accusations that the leaks were false and politically motivated. When I reread my source material and the published stories, details started surfacing that I could not make sense of, whose origins I could not trace. It seemed that dates were shifting. The organograms I had made were changing shape. And then, one day I awoke and an article had been published that I had no recollection of writing although my byline was beneath it.

The language over which I had once held mastery began to take on a life of its own. Words and phrases would suddenly arrive out of nowhere, like passing figures or motorcycles in my blind spot. In my notebooks, my handwriting, once so clear, now bled into a scrawl. Swells of ink – both brutal and vague – were annihilating my attempts to document the world. I reverted to smart phones to take notes and record interviews, abandoning my old recorder and

their fast vanishing audio-formats, but my phones would be broken, corrupted, stolen at bars. I was constantly misplacing interviews, misnaming files, losing myself in the passages of folders. I once left the door of a hotel room open and my laptop was stolen from my bed.

My sentences were unravelling and revealing what lay beneath: an ageing and fading man – a soft belly of loss. And then the attacks began.

A swarm of bots on social media accused me of being a state agent. A former friend and colleague humiliated me on a national radio station, pointing out the flaws in my story, even mocking me for the pain which I had shared with him over many post-publication-day beers. I was plagued all day by furious calls and hate mail.

And then Sita called me into her office. For a long time, she said nothing. She stood looking over the lake. She wore an elegant dress, patterned with black and white spirals. Finally she spoke. ‘Lüderitz. It’s clear that your reporting had grave errors. Not minor fact-checking problems. You’ve been misled. And the consequences on the lives of those you’ve written about, the political fallout, has been huge.’

I said nothing.

‘You helped establish the paper and trained many of the reporters and we won’t forget this. But neither can we ignore the errors you’ve made and the reputational consequences for us. We’re taking you off the beat.’

‘You’re firing me?’

‘No. You’re a good writer and you know a lot about the music scene.’

‘The music scene?’

‘Yes. As you know, there’s a vacancy. And in recognition of your history here, we’re offering this to you.’

‘Fuck off, Sita, no.’

‘Lüderitz, look, you’re not understanding. This is a very generous offer and the board was divided on it. I weighed in on your side. Who knows why? It’s this or you leave.’

I was silent a long while. ‘I will give it some thought,’ I said. But I had no option. What had happened? I wondered. The leak had all the marks of legitimacy. But something in it was amiss. It continued to slip through my grasp, my vigilance, my skin.

And now another cache had arrived. Unsolicited. At a moment when my career was over. An unwelcome guest in an inhospitable time. I ignored it for two weeks.

During this time, I watched the occupation from my thirteenth floor apartment on the mountain. There was a line of vision into Freedom Square half a kilometre away, only partially interrupted by a few telephone poles and an apartment block in the dip of the valley. With an old telescope that my grandmother had used for watching the stars, I watched the comings and goings, taking meticulous notes. The square, at night, became divided into an asymmetrical geometry of flame and electric light – drawn from illegal connections, sparking in green boxes on the pavements. The glow lit the large fig tree in the centre of the square and the thorny acacia on its peripheries. Around the edges of the square, a row of portable toilets had been set up beside the public toilets. In the interior, the protestors had erected lines of canvas tents, that formed, in the evening winds, a parade of white translucence.

As the days passed, beyond these formal frontiers of light, new settlements began appearing on the lower ridges of the mountainside. A group of what seemed to me heroin users had set up on a stony outcrop, where they assembled a line of mattresses like fallen dominoes. Through the telescope I could glimpse these dim forms smoking, injecting themselves and fucking in the half-light. A few emissaries from the occupation would wander out in the evenings to provide them with food and what I guessed were clean needles. And one evening

I caught a glimpse of a tall, white-coated figure, braids falling over their shoulders, setting up a stand and giving consultations: Isiwa.

I had not contacted Isiwa since the day the occupation began and since the call with Sita banning me from reporting on the occupation. I expected Isiwa to call but they did not. I checked my phone ceaselessly waiting for some message, some sign, but nothing came. I felt abandoned. There was nothing stopping me from walking to the occupation but a sense that I would be seen as an intruder, a spy, an eye from a world outside.

During the day, barricades of riot police and armoured vehicles lined the blocks around the square, hassling those who tried to pass with supplies. Sometimes, when crowds gathered too close, they fired on them with rubber bullets, but they did not attack the square. An informal economy grew at the place as market women from around the city gravitated towards the encampment with their bundles of fruit and vegetables, clothing, cold drinks and blankets. Some of them stayed and formed part of the growing multitude, which after a week, it appeared to me, had grown to over a thousand people.

But each night there were departures. Distantly, I would hear hymns and laments drifting up the mountainside as crowds gathered. Ambulances and sometimes hearses would arrive at the square and soon depart. Sometimes small groups followed the cars, at other times they moved alone. I watched their lines, their movements, imagining the faces of the bodies that lay within them.

I followed, in the online newspaper and on social media, Zé's accounts of the protest and the unexplained deaths. A tent had been set up specifically to keep the corpses as the graveyards were filling up and there were delays in collecting them. But the flesh did not rot even without embalment; it stayed perfectly preserved with no stench or fungus. It was as if, Zé wrote, their youth were distilled – for it was primarily the young who were sacrificed to this unnamed

malady, although there were a few middle-aged and elderly among them. It was as if they had found a kind of stilled immortality, as if they were preserved by brine.

Zé's reports were written with a beauty that pained me, a language I had always aimed for but which had eluded me. I mocked the reports to Saron and told myself that I could have written better, when I knew I could not. I wondered if this was some technical deficiency – whether in my search for fact, for figures, for dates and scars, I had forgotten that language had other ways of taking form. And perhaps I lacked something other, an overflowing of spirit, which Zé exuded easily and which I could only long for.

I also learnt from the reports that divisions within the occupation were becoming sharper. The assemblies that I could see and even hear from a distance were becoming more fractious. Isiwa's leadership of the movement – which had started among health workers and grown rapidly to include students, workers, traders, itinerants, mourners and wayfarers from many neighbourhoods of the city, all gathering in the square as a rebellion against the disappearances – was slipping. Many were unhappy about Isiwa's project of providing methadone to the addicts, and condoms and prophylaxes to sex workers. There were reports of harassment and theft in the occupations.

A figure was emerging as a voice for this opposition: Noah Cabral. Cabral, it became known, had been leading The Ultras who had started the protests. The deceit alienated him from many other organisers. However, others credited him with establishing the occupation, including some former allies of Isiwa. Some Ultras had joined the protests. They were often drunk and sometimes violent, accused of harassing their comrades. Groups of them continued to mobilise around the city, fighting. Isiwa argued for peaceful resistance; Cabral for violence.

Cabral argued that the purity of the movement was being polluted, that they were militants and needed discipline: the homeless, the users, the prostitutes should be expelled.

They would never build a rebellion with such dissolute behaviour. Cabral never attacked Isiwa directly but spoke about the dissolution of tradition, of order, about how the boundaries of morality were breaking down. He shouted that a people were like a family and that there were among them individualists and hedonists who threatened the harmony of the family: seemingly weak but dangerous beings, strangers with unknown intentions, who aimed to corrupt the heart.

Zé had looked into Cabral's past and found in it a litany of lies, omissions, falsehoods, and opaque connections with families close to state power. A few days after his revelations had been published, Zé had been beaten by a group of Ultras who accused him of being a traitor and spy, of reporting on them to sow dissent: of being a counter-revolutionary, an avatar of a pseudo-identity politics, of the corporate media, and an enemy of the working class. I read about all this in an editorial, penned, I presumed, by Sita. In it, she argued how, within so-called progressive politics, the assault on Zé represented a grave attack on the freedom of the press. I gave Zé a call. He seemed distant and disoriented, and spoke with a slur.

'How are you?'

'Awful.'

'It was Cabral's men who beat you?' I asked.

'I won't speak about that now, Leveza. Go see Isiwa. They've asked for you.'

I tried to ignore the cache but I could not. I was drawn to it like an addiction. I printed it out, and it came to hundreds of pages. I asked Saron to help me look over it with an independent and scientific eye. We sat in the lounge with coffee, cigarettes, files and highlighters going through the documents. The bulk were dull or irrelevant. But on seemingly innocuous pages were lines of chilling clarity.

'Outcome of the marine scientific exploration of unexplained oceanic inundations';
'confidential inquiry into unexplained oceanic swells'; 'levels of freshwater salination in inland

aquifers and dams exceed levels compatible with human metabolic processes. Confidence interval 95%'; 'temporal analysis of air humidity psychrometer readings indicate gradual increase of mg/m³ readings over the past decade, now approximating 100%, 95% confidence interval, levels incompatible with human habitation.' Saron scoured the scientific reports, guiding me on their meanings.

And then there were the inter-ministerial memos and emails with some of their content redacted. Whoever had leaked the mails still had people to protect. 'Confidential meetings have been held between Ministers to discuss potential evacuation and provision of emergency accommodation. Such measures have been postponed due to resource and land scarcity, constitutional protections against displacement, and risk of protests.' 'Confidential conversations with development finance institutions have begun about potential concessional finance models for forced evacuations and shelter.' 'The past six months have shown excess mortality increase by up to 5%, potentially close to 100 000 individuals. Under [REDACTED] orders these data have not been publicised due to the risks of public disorder. Forests and slimes dams are being investigated as burial sites and new crematoria built in academic hospitals.' 'The risk of public disorder remains acute. Cabinet and [REDACTED] should obtain legal advice on the possibilities of exceptional emergency and disaster provisions being implemented.'

We tried to match the statistics with the files Isiwa had shared with me: they corresponded. The data and information were fragmentary: they came as a deluge of pointers and clues, a dirty foam which formed patterns but never a complete image. No single document, no single fact, gave a clear answer. But spread across my lounge floor, viewed in relation to each other, the cache kept pointing to a disquieting and unspeakable conclusion.

Dom Pedro played among the papers, scattering them, chewing their corners, as if all this were just a game designed for his amusement. We shooed him away, and organised the papers into thematic files. We created a folder of the most important ones. We cross-checked the

authors of the reports. Some were old university colleagues of Saron whom we called to check the authenticity of the studies and data. I knew some of the political sources in the email chains from my days as an investigative journalist. We called and called. Most shut down the conversation or hung up if they answered at all. But a few, even if they would not speak much, confirmed the authenticity of the cache.

One evening we drove out in Saron's blistered blue car to a mall on the city's periphery. There in a fast food restaurant beside a games arcade we met with a leading government scientist. We drank milkshakes and ate fries while on his phone he showed us some of the email chains which mirrored, word for word, those we had. He was shaking all along and could barely hold the phone. 'A catastrophe,' he kept whispering in a broken voice before filling the void of his mouth with chocolate-sprinkled cream.

Saron and I came back from the meeting and sat on the balcony watching over the city, watching over the lights and fires of the occupation below. It was the tail-end of winter now, nearing spring. Aside from a slight chill, the weather was temperate. But both of us were shivering uncontrollably. I tried to speak several times but the words failed. The significance of what we had found was seeping into our bodies and voices. All I could hear was my heart beat: the drumming of terror. When I looked at Saron, he was pale and his eyes wide. Eventually, I found my voice.

'And so we are under the sea,' I said. 'But alive. For now, at least.'

'I have suspected this for a long time,' Saron whispered. 'There was something amiss when I watched the stars. Something odd about their lines of light. As if they were refracted through water. But I doubted myself.'

'I suspected this a while too. I've been having odd visions,' I said. 'I thought I was going insane.'

‘Perhaps we all are.’

‘And so it’s everywhere.’

‘Yes.’

‘Covering the city?’

‘Yes.’

‘How high is it?’

‘I don’t know whether that question makes sense any more, Lüderitz. Our language has failed. Our numbers have failed. It is everywhere. It is our world now.’

‘For how long?’

‘I don’t know. Months? Years? Centuries? The waters clearly rose slowly, seeping into us, but few of us noticed or if we did could make sense of what was happening. Or perhaps the sea has always been with us, in us. But we didn’t have the capacity to see it, and still don’t. We live on the frontiers between our perspectives and the sea, or whatever this is, but our delusions sustain us – for a time at least.’

‘And so we go on living,’ I said. ‘Even when we should all have drowned.’

‘This is the mystery,’ Saron replied, blowing out smoke into the night air.

‘Though perhaps it’s no more mysterious,’ I said, ‘than the reasons we choose to go on living.’

Saron was silent a long while. ‘Yes. I wonder too why some of us live, continue to live in spite of this impossibility, while others die.’

‘So what is to be done?’ I asked.

‘Breathe deeply.’

We both inhaled. The breath in our lungs, the breath that we could not be breathing, but breathed, calmed us.

From the occupation, the nightly sounds of the funerals reached us – the cries and hymns which rose in the night air. And both Saron and I noticed, above the square, a barely perceptible pattern of grey within grey. And then the shapes and skins of the vast and ancient creatures emerged. The pod of sperm whales was not moving at first, but floating vertically, as if in repose – large, grey commas suspended in the multicoloured dark of the city air. Their apparently sleeping but open eyes seemed to hold within them an infinity; the grooves beneath their mouths were like cuts in the surface of things. The creatures hovered there for around fifteen minutes and then they awoke and moved. They slowly circled above the tent where the bodies were kept, and over the square where the mourners had gathered. And then they sang. The pitches of their voices were high and scattered; they seemed discordant with the gravity of the bodies from which they came. It was as if they were a flock of birds and not these vast sea mammals. Some sounds were rapid and punctured, a kind of morse code, as if they were trying to communicate something in a language we could not hear or understand, or had forgotten how to. And there were other cries, slower and more mournful, and these fused with the laments of the multitude below them, they intertwined with the rhythms of the hymns and funeral rites, until it seemed that there was no division between them, only a single collective dirge.

The next evening I visited the occupation. I walked past the police barricade, between their sirens and those of the arriving ambulances. I walked past a chaos of uncollected litter and the unisex toilets which stank of urine, which stank of men – the floors around them drenched. Around the large canvas tent, the nightly crowd had gathered – a concatenation of grief. I looked to the skies above but they were empty except for a few stars dimly visible amid the clouds. I felt the absence of the gigantic creatures.

I asked a group sitting around a fire where I could find Isiwa. After a huddled conversation between them, they pointed me to a tent in one corner of the square.

Around this tent the market women's fires burned in braziers whose rusted holes cast demonic forms on the street paving and the cobbles of the square, on the branches of the large fig tree heavy with beards of moss, on the street signs now scrawled with graffiti. The women had created a barrier of fire against the hyenas of the street, against the poisonous dark. They sat in a circle tending to their fires and armed with various weapons, whips, hammers, poles and knives. Their faces were grim, as they scanned the surroundings for signs of threat.

They were reluctant at first to let me through their barricade. After consulting with each other and sending one into the tent, they agreed to let me pass. I entered through the ragged canvas doorway. The interior had six beds and was cluttered with pots, gas stoves and books. The beds were empty except for one, in which a solitary figure was coiled in a foetal position.

They were coughing with a wet guttural sound. When they saw me, their eyes tried to focus and penetrate my form before they signalled with a shaking hand for me to sit on the bed. Their brow was beaded with sweat and their breath smelled acid.

'How are you Isiwa?' I asked.

'I don't know. Perhaps the plague has come to me,' they said. 'Or whatever this is. This nightmare we're in. But I don't think so. I think there are enemies within.'

'Within the movement? Cabral?'

'I do not want to say, and perhaps this is just a delirium. But there are those among us who fear what I represent. Who fear my body as if it were a tumour growing in the multitude. They cannot make sense of it. And there are others with connections we best not speak of. Connections deep in the spleen of the state. Who knows what their agenda is.'

'And they have got to you.'

'Yes, I think I have been poisoned.'

'By who?'

‘I cannot say. The market women feed me now. They cook the maize, the greens, the beans in front of everyone, and no one else has fallen ill. But they also have their old wisdom, their old mysteries and tricks, and perhaps there is one among them who wishes me harm. There were men among them who were helping with the cleaning and the fires, but they grew lazy and were sent away. How easily in times of revolt the old orders return. I do not like these ideas, Lüderitz, I do not wish to harbour suspicion against those I love, these mothers who protect me, but I feel the poison in my belly, in my blood.’

‘You should go to hospital.’

‘And you think I would be safe there? After all the chaos I’ve caused for my bosses. No, I will remain here.’

‘I could call your mother.’

‘No, she is at risk. You mustn’t go there or contact her.’

‘She could care for you.’

‘No Lüderitz.’

‘So why have you called me here, Isiwa? What have I got to do with all of this? You know I can’t write the story. When I received Zé’s call, I wanted to tell him and you to leave me alone.’

‘But you came.’

‘Yes.’

‘Why?’

‘For you.’

‘Why?’

‘Because over the past few weeks there seemed no reason to get up. No reason to carry on. The only thing driving me was habit. I made a coffee and sat outside on the balcony watching the city. And one morning, as I listened to one of your songs, I felt a kind of clarity

that has been absent for a long time. The weightlessness that comes when you have lost everything you once valued, and yet you can still be touched. Both by the things that remain and by those that still arrive. Even when it's too late. When nothing whatsoever can be done.'

They looked at me, their face drenched in sweat, their lips trembling, the apples of their cheekbones small and fierce, their eyes tender. 'So you came for a song?'

'Yes, for a song.'

But Isiwa's eyes were no longer on me. They were looking far above through a hole in the canvas, through the mist which now hung over the city glowing red from the light of billboards, and which swam through the high-rises and tenements, some sad and sentient thing – split apart by starlight. 'Once long ago, I read a book about a girl who had a star in the place of her heart. And when she died she became one. Falling, endlessly falling.'

'Why did you ask me here?' I said.

'I am hungry. I would like you to bring some food for me.'

'Why me, not the others?'

'There are others who help and whom I trust, but they are busy. You have nothing to do.'

'Yes. But why trust me? What if I'm a spy working for the state?'

'Lüderitz, the intelligence agencies would never employ someone so incompetent.' They saw their words had wounded me and placed a hand gently on my face. 'I am sorry, I never meant it that way.' They smiled. 'I am not asking for you to save me. Only to bring me some of that soup you made on the night I visited, that broth of basil and rosemary and maize. It would warm the belly.'

'Ok,' I said.

I returned an hour later, with a thermos of soup that I had heated up on the gas stove and a bowl and spoon. Isiwa drank the liquid slowly and deeply, sweating, but it seemed to bring them some relief.

‘Thank you,’ they said gently.

‘I have something else for you,’ I said.

I handed Isiwa a folder with copies of the most important documents that Saron and I had selected. With a torch from their phone, they read the pages slowly, repeatedly. They seemed very weak and shook as they held the pages. First, they looked at me blankly, and then with understanding.

We both breathed in synchronously. Isiwa then opened their mouth to speak but seemed unable to. I took fright thinking that it was their time, that what had happened to so many others was happening to them. My heart beat quickly at the thought that they would soon be among the bodies in the tent, in the songs of the grieving protestors. The surface of their mouth seemed covered by an oily skin that reflected the shadows of the trees above and the stars. It shimmered and swelled and then formed into a perfect sphere. And then Isiwa exhaled a soap bubble that danced in the cold air of the tent. I reached out to touch it and it lingered a while on the tips of my fingers and then burst, releasing, for a moment, a single and clear note.

Chapter eight

I grew accustomed to my new role as a soup-maker. I had given the cache to Zé, who was still recovering in bed from his beating. By passing it on I felt a sense of a weight lifting, a clearing out responsibility and anxiety.

Each morning I walked to the municipal market in the old train station with my trolley bag bumping over the cobbles and sleepers. Multicoloured light streamed through stained-glass windows, depicting scenes of abundance and harvest. But an uneasy quiet had taken over the place in the wake of the deaths; this did not stop the vendors trying to tempt passers-by with slices of exotic and overpriced fruit – blood-red oranges and granadillas with mysteriously dark and delicious innards.

The coffee shops for the tourists were mostly empty, some shuttered. But aside from those at the occupation, the market women remained: these stalwarts of cabbage and kale standing firm in their rebellion against the rot.

From them, I bought large bushes of rosemary and basil, rhizomes of ginger and fat pods of garlic, and slices of swordfish, taking these back to my apartment where I, protected by an apron, brewed them in a large cast-iron pot. Don Pedro would sit beside me on the counter, purring and awaiting scraps of the fatty skin and singeing his tail on the gas stove. At these times, as the mist of herbs filled the kitchen, I forgot about the troubles for a moment, thinking, yes, I remember, this is what happiness is like. Wordless.

Saron helped me carry the pots and containers, and we drove in my old jalopy down the mountainside, bribing the police to let us pass the barricades, to the square to make our deliveries to Isiwa. As we carried the food, some occupiers insulted us as white saviours and Isiwa as a sell-out. The occupation had become further divided between the followers of Cabral and Isiwa, each camp accusing the other of illicit agendas, of being part of networks of funding

from political elites and international forces, of being manipulated by hidden cabals, of betraying the dead.

‘It brings me no happiness to have to trust you,’ Isiwa said one night, ‘but there are those here who wish me harm.’

‘Let me contact your mother,’ I said, ‘she can help take care of you.’

‘No,’ Isiwa said, ‘she must never come here.’ They were becoming thinner and more exhausted on each visit. In the morning, they would attempt to dress well, even with the clothing creased and filthy from life in the occupation, to make their face up in a cracked mirror and style their hair, protected in the tent at night by a bonnet. But by night, their face was a blur of cosmetics, and their untended braids were frayed and unravelling.

‘Zé has been unable to publish the cache,’ Isiwa said one night, sitting with us by the fire, frustrated. ‘Sita won’t allow it until there’s more evidence of its authenticity. I can’t wait much longer, Lüderitz.’

‘She knows that it comes from me?’

‘Yes.’

‘I’ve shared all the supporting documents I have with Zé, even contacts.’

‘I know.’

‘But it’s not enough.’

‘No.’

‘So, what are you thinking?’

‘I can’t say yet.’

One evening after cooking the brew, I heard a terrible racket in the valley below. I went out to the balcony and looked down. The light of police cars surrounded Freedom Square.

There was a knock on the door. I opened, and Zé was standing outside on his crutches. His face was still bruised from the beating. His afro was uneven and knotted. 'Have you seen it?' he said.

'Seen what?'

'You aren't on social media?'

'No.'

Zé took out his smartphone and opened the app. Isiwa, who now had over 200 000 followers, had made a post in the early morning hours. He showed me the post.

'We are *drowning*,' it said. And attached to the post as a series of images was the cache I had given them. It had, by now, already over a million shares.

'Oh shit,' I said.

'Yes, precisely.'

'Isiwa spoke to you about this?'

'No, they acted on their own. They are now in deep danger.'

'Have you called or messaged?'

'Yes, but there is no reply.'

'We should contact Nkosazana. She could help. Provide a safe space for Isiwa to go.'

'No,' said Zé firmly. 'Under no circumstances must we do that.'

'Why?'

'She's had enough trouble, so leave her out of this mess.'

'So, what do we do now?'

'The President has called a lakeside press conference tomorrow. Sita has asked me to cover it. Will you come with me?'

'No. Sita would use that against me in the disciplinary hearings.'

'Listen, I will speak to Sita if there's an issue. I need your help.'

‘Why would she listen to you?’ I said. ‘She doesn’t listen to anyone.’

Zé frowned and looked uncomfortable. ‘Trust me,’ he said.

We met the following morning. Unable to drive, Zé had asked me to. I collected him from his nearby apartment block. On the way to the event, he asked me to stop by the newsroom.

‘You want to come inside?’ he asked. ‘I have to pick up a camera and some notebooks.’

‘Better not.’

‘It’s a Saturday; nobody will be in the office.’

I helped him from the underground lot into the elevator, which we took to the third floor. It had been a little over a month since my discharge, but already the office seemed a distant and alien place. Its open-plan design appeared a kind of labyrinth, a map of the past in which I had somehow lost myself. My desk had been given over to someone else, an intern I guessed. I looked around the room, half expecting to see an earlier version of myself wandering about, a version that had taken a less ruinous path. Or perhaps I was the less destructive path, who was there to tell? The room was silent except for the humming of computers and printers on sleep mode.

I went to the window and gazed over the lake in mid-morning. Crowds of the President’s supporters had gathered on the beaches, preparing barbecues alongside ice boxes packed with beer. The air was already heavy with the smell of charred meat and smoke. There was no sign of the fisherfolk and the homeless who usually occupied the areas; they had presumably been cleared out by the military police, who now watched over the lakeside.

On the lake itself, expensive motorboats and yachts were gathering in designated clusters. They were too far to see clearly, but I imagined that upon their decks, bottles of champagne were being opened, oysters shucked and cleaned, sucked by soft lips.

I thought back to that night with Sita so many years back. What had passed between us, I wondered? It seemed, now, something very delicate and dangerous, like a piece of pottery thinly wrapped. Not love, but not merely lust either; instead, a kind of affinity unable to survive its contact with living skin, with living words.

‘You ok?’ Zé asked.

‘Yes, I was just thinking.’

‘About what?’

‘The past. This animosity between Sita and me was not always there, you know. We were once’

‘Lovers.’

‘If one night counts, then yes. That was a while before your time. How did you know?’

Zé seemed uncomfortable. ‘Gossip.’

‘Anyhow, that’s past. But no, not just that.’

‘Then what?’

‘Zé, I know now that my career is finished. But it doesn't really matter. There was something I hoped to pass on, something that was passed to me, a trade, or a gift, I guess you could say, something that never really belonged to me but which still meant the world to me and I which I tried to protect. Protect despite myself, despite my capacity to do damage. Protect to pass on, to Sita, to you, to others who, I see now, are better able to take care of it than I ever was.’

‘And what was this gift?’

‘I think you know Zé. The capacity of conjuring up a world in language, one that resembles our own, but is not quite it. I think this helps us stay alive. Because this world is too much. But this gift also deceives us. I’m sorry I’m becoming sentimental.’

Zé nodded. ‘I get it. You were a good teacher, in your way.’ He took out the folder I had given him, a copy of the one I had given Isiwa, and threw it down on a desk. ‘When I read this, I could not breathe. I thought, like the others, I was drowning. But I was not. It was merely a panic attack that passed. I survived, and I felt terrible for it. I woke up this morning, watched the sun rise over the lake, and I was among the living when so many others were not. I was tempted to pray, to thank God or the cosmos, that I survived. But I do not believe something sacred divides those who live and those who die.’

‘Then what is it?’ I asked. Beneath us, on the banks of the lake, there was a roar of voices, repellent and drunk and boorish. Figures dancing to country music flung cans into the water and shouted the name of the President. Others leaning out from the apartment blocks around the lake banged pots and pans and sang, trying to drown them out.

‘Certainly not justice,’ Zé said. ‘I have a terrible feeling about today.’

Plastic barriers hemmed in us, on the banks of the lake, in a kind of playpen for the media. The journalists who supported the President had been invited to a luxury boat with drinks and a buffet; the rest of us were made to stand in this muddy zone without so much as a water bottle or a place to piss. The ‘watercade’ began from a jetty in the distance where the President exited his armoured vehicle wearing a luminous yellow wet suit and surrounded by an entourage of security in black vehicles with blue lights flickering against the blue winter sky.

A military brass band played, and the President strode down the jetty, his knees unbending, to where a white-robed pastor, a prominent evangelist, waited to bless him. After receiving this sanctification, he climbed down a small ladder onto a jet ski adorned with his party’s colours. He paused as his entourage gathered on their own machines and boats and they departed in a spray cloud.

The entourage sped past our playpen with no acknowledgement and towards the beach where the President's supporters howled their appreciation and ran, drunkenly, into the water to swim towards him. He stood up on his jet ski, his fist raised, shouting, though we could not hear the words, before spontaneously leaping from the still-moving machine into the water to swim towards his supporters. His security, taken by surprise, anxiously followed him while a security boat swung around, attempting to cut off the crowd. But the President disappeared into a cluster of hands and bodies and seemed, for a moment, to sink beneath the water before the hands of his guards pulled him to the surface and onto the boat.

The brash men pushed away the crowd and stood on the hands of those who grabbed the boat, shouting for them to withdraw. The swimming mob slowly turned towards the shore. But a single body remained, floating near the boat, bobbing up and down like a cold drink bottle.

The crowd on the shore quietened, watching the lifeless figure. A dinghy was let loose from the President's boat to collect the abandoned jet ski and the body. The country music was quiet now and the smoke from the meat hung in the air like sandalwood at a mass. It hovered over the water and, blown by a breeze, covered the lake. The body disappeared into the haze. When the miasma lifted, blown by a gentle breeze, the body was gone.

The President disappeared for a long while into the boat, and when he returned, he was in dry clothes. He stood on the motorboat's deck while a member of his entourage pinned a wireless mic on him, connected to large speakers placed on the boat.

'My friends, our society is under threat. It is under threat by vagabonds and criminals who seek to illegally occupy our squares, our forests and land. Those who wish to corrupt the sacredness of the family and the nation which is a family too and of which I am the Father. These vagabonds and criminals,' he looked towards us, 'seek to spread lies in the name of Science. The media spreads its lies to support its friends who wish to sow disorder and rebellion. To challenge democracy. But we will not allow this. So today, we are calling a state

of emergency so that we can nullify these threats to our nation. So that we can cure us of this ...’

The President’s voice faltered. A cluster of voices grew in volume coming from the trees to our right. From the shadows of the trunks and branches, a group of women emerged. Among them I recognised the woman who had been in the meeting with Isiwa and Noah. The women were dressed in plain blue robes and headdresses and carried framed black and white photographs of young men and women. Singing an old hymn, they began to enter the water. As they did so, the images on the photographs blurred, the ink leaking into formless shapes.

The President gestured with his arm towards the military police on the periphery. The police entered the water, splashing and shouting and dragging the women away into the forest.

‘It’s the Mothers of the Drowned,’ Zé pulled on my arm. ‘We need to leave now.’

‘Who are they?’

‘A rebellion against loss.’

‘Why do we need to leave?’

‘So we can warn Isiwa. The police will be coming after all protestors. The occupation will be targeted.’

‘Wait a moment.’

There was another boat moving towards the President’s entourage. It was larger and more luxurious houseboat with the name *Almost Heaven* in cursive written across it. As it drew alongside The President's boat, there was a murmur from the crowd. The boat, it was rumoured, was owned by the Minister of the Presidency, a coal baron turned politician known simply by his nickname uXamu. He would never appear in public, and no reliable photos of him existed; or rather, many of them did on the internet, each with different features, races and comportments, so that nobody could tell which were real and which were false.

‘I am taking this matter of insecurity very seriously,’ The President said, ‘and so have entrusted the oversight of the state of emergency and the army’s entry into the city to my senior Minister. Unfortunately, at the moment, he is ill. But he is with us now, watching over us. So all those committed to the truth, order, progress, and development may sleep well.’

From a circular window in the boat, the silhouette of a figure looked out, as if towards us. And then the boat started to rise almost imperceptibly. First, it revealed an underbelly of green algae. Then the keel slowly appeared until it was hovering entirely over the water, and the boat seemed like a shark with its belly up.

Looking around the lake, I noticed some boats sinking while others were floating. Several yachts beside the wealthy lakeside condominiums had sunk almost entirely, though their masts stuck out of the water like flag poles. A shoal of multicoloured fishing boats hovered in the air above the forest, their nets falling beneath them and catching a few passing birds.

The crowd seemed utterly unaware of what was happening, their eyes turned solely towards their leader. And with that, the President sang a deep gravelly lullaby, and the crowd on the banks began to sit and then lie down, drifting into sleep. Bubbles rose from their mouths.

‘We need to go now,’ Zé said.

As we neared the site of the occupation, we entered a bottleneck of traffic. An army barricade had already been set up and was turning cars away. The scene was chaotic: cars trying to turn around in the jam. Pedestrians streamed through the streets, many appearing to be fleeing the occupation with rucksacks and carrying possessions and mattresses. The army was haphazardly firing rubber bullets where clusters of people formed, but there was nowhere to run to. We were stuck amid the cars and could go nowhere. Finally, when a gap opened, we pulled up on the pavement, parked there and got out. Zé hobbled on his crutches against the tide of fleeing

people, and I held his arm. In the chaos, we passed the army barricade quickly and, moving down a side alley, managed to access the square.

Security guards dressed black and red insignia jumped from armoured vehicles, and moved through the square with batons beating its occupants. A bulldozer crawled over the ground, like a deranged and brutal insect, crushing the tents, the wooden tables and the corrugated iron structures that the protestors had assembled. The portable toilets had been knocked over, spilling a dark fluid, which stank of bleach and excrement, over the cobbles. The police stood by and watched over the carnage. In the middle of the square, the grand old fig tree hissed softly in the wind, a silent witness.

A group of protestors smashed the concrete benches and tiles and hurled the pieces at the security and the police, but the groups were easily scattered into the streets surrounding the square. Above the fray, a single figure stood upon the shell of an old car, their form frail and curved as a palm leaf, swaying in the barrage. Their image, encrusted by the limpid light of the winter afternoon, silhouetted against a smoky air, was captured on dozens of phones around the scene. In the image, seemingly oblivious to the oncoming tumult of bulldozers and tanks, Isiwa points upwards towards the stars.

I looked up and saw that the whales had returned. They circled, their rough skin glistening and reflecting the scene below them, their vast eyes witnessing the unfolding devastation. They watched as the private security broke down the medical tent and dragged the bodies into a large pile in the centre of the square. They watched as the men threw garbage and splintered wood upon the pile, doused it with kerosene and set it alight, so that it began to exude an acrid smell of flesh and hair. But these creatures were mute now, as if abandoned by their voices, emptied of song.

I took Zé's arm and we moved through the detritus towards the place where Isiwa had been. We covered our mouths in cloth but soon drenched these in bile. By the time we arrived

at the car, Isiwa was gone. The few protestors who remained said that they had been taken away in an armoured vehicle. And the looting had begun. The fleeing protestors had set a tenement beside the square on fire. From the square, we could hear the breaking of glass, the sirens, the screams. Zé sat upon an old canvas suitcase that had been abandoned, placed his crutches at his side and wept. 'Perhaps those who were taken were the lucky ones,' he said. 'What world is this in which we who have survived must live?'

We sat there a long time, untroubled by the security who had completed their work of demolition and were departing. Fire engines had doused the flames, and an unsettling quiet spread. It was evening now, and our throats were burning with thirst. Zé took photos of the scene on his cellphone. We made our way through the army barricade. A soldier screamed at us, asking who we were.

'Media,' I said.

He laughed and spat on the floor. 'Look,' he said, waving his hand over the scene, 'how beautiful freedom of expression is.'

We reached my old jalopy, but it too was a charred wreck. I put my hand to it and withdrew from the heat. My heart felt charred too.

'Are you insured?' Zé asked.

'Yes, but I think there is a clause that riots aren't covered.'

'What about floods?'

He took my arm tenderly, and we slowly moved up the mountain pass towards my apartment. It was only a kilometre, but it took us over an hour, and Zé had to stop repeatedly to rest. Dom Pedro met us at the door, crying for biscuits. We rushed to the water filter to drink. I gave Zé a towel to shower. Exhausted and injured, he took an age. From the living room I could hear the sounds of water running and his coughing. When he came back to the lounge,

he started calling sources and friends about Isiwa's disappearance. Nobody knew where they were.

'You need to rest,' I said to Zé.

'I need to file the story,' he said, 'before ...'

'Before what?'

'It's too late.'

I also called old sources in the police department, but none of them knew anything or none would say. There was no word from Isiwa, and nobody knew where the police had taken them. Then Zé received a call.

'It's not good,' he said. 'They have been put in a holding cell for men. As some form of punishment. Who knows what will happen? The lawyers are challenging this urgently but it's difficult with the state of emergency.'

I made tea and we went out onto the balcony. Nearby a building was engulfed in a vast flame shaped like the nib of a fountain pen. It coughed ash over the neighbourhood. The streets beneath were a constellation of broken glass, and the spray of the fire engines reflected the starlight.

The city's electricity was out, and large fires burnt across the metropolis. The night was becoming acrid with smoke. In the streets below, the looting continued. Crowds smashed the windows of electronics and clothes stores and ran off with their wares, chased by police cars, around which they parted and came together like a murmur of starlings.

'We need to write,' Zé said.

'You write, Zé. I will make us soup.'

Chapter nine

When did the dissolution begin?

Perhaps with the curfew. I lost track of how long it had been enforced, and when, precisely, it started. The electricity supply constantly failed, frequently for entire days. We were only allowed for work or to shop in the increasingly empty stores. Their shelves were filled with packets of mouldy grains, some tins of tuna and tomatoes. Fresh goods – lettuces, spinaches, carrots – quickly turned to green slime. But even these state-sanctioned trips to the stores were becoming too much for me. Saron, noticing my decline, did my shopping. I left my debit card for him and he returned with his pickings, which at times included some contraband cigarettes as a gift.

No gatherings were allowed, although the residents of my building sometimes broke the regulations to loiter on the terrace below, whispering, smoking, perhaps sharing a beer. I watched these neighbours from a distance in the same way I observed the police and armoured vehicles that patrolled the streets – with curiosity but as entities to avoid. I no longer knew how to make small talk even to myself. Sentences were becoming unanchored from their meanings, words detritus. Drifting things. The sea's incessant slur had drowned my inner voices out.

I struggled to maintain the apartment. There was a woman, Jasmine, who had come to clean once a week but since the state of emergency she had not arrived. I tried to call her to explain she could get a travel pass for work, but there was no answer on her cell phone. Perhaps she had become one of the disappeared. Sometimes, too, the electricity outages led to municipal water pumps failing and Saron would have to buy bottled water, which we dragged up the thirteen flights of stairs to use for drinking and washing out of a bucket. And so the dishes piled up, coated in grease and rot.

A colony of crabs had made their home in the kitchen. They scuttled obliquely across the surfaces in a deranged geometry. Occasionally at night, during periods of insomnia, I walked barefoot and stood on them, howling in pain. When the water was back and I could overcome my chronic fatigue to try wash the dishes, the pipes became blocked with fat and food. My efforts to clear them with bleach and a plunger had no effect. And it was impossible to find a plumber anymore. The sea had been a blessing for them. There were leaks everywhere.

The art in my lounge yellowed; even the signed prints on archival paper had taken on a jaundiced colour. An anemone took root – if that is what they do – beneath the images and was splitting off, its glutinous tentacles spreading at an unnatural speed, reproducing through an open orifice. I envied its self-containment. When, infrequently, the internet and electricity returned, I did some research. Apparently the creature could live for over 60 years. I wondered if this single organism and its offspring, along with its cohort of striped orange clown fish, would outlive me and inherit the apartment.

At times I wondered if it wasn't older than me. Perhaps it had been here all along, throughout my childhood with my grandmother, watching over me unseen. Sometimes I wondered if it could be an incarnation of my mother of whom I had no memory, only the photograph of her in her doctor's gown, holding me. But when I had these thoughts I caught myself. I knew were are magical thinking, something I had always resisted, even during my youthful forays into meditation and tantra. They were likely a neurological effect of living under water too long.

When did the dissolution begin?

With Isiwa's imprisonment? Without them, I lost a sense of direction as if, somehow, without me noticing, they had become a point of orientation. When, on the rare occasions Saron got

some fresh vegetables and herbs, I would make soup so the aroma would recall Isiwa, their wild lashes and expressions of outrage and tenderness. It evoked an inexplicable sensation around my thymus. What shape, I wondered, had they formed in me? What were these reservoirs of feeling now overflowing that I thought were irreparably dry. But interrogating the question, I did not think that the answer lay only with Isiwa.

It is hard now to pinpoint the precise point in time or in space I began to come apart. Perhaps the disintegration was always there, a kind of inner dereliction, something as present and banal as sunlight, coffee, breath, the taste of toothpaste. Or perhaps it was just a code waiting to be activated. When I turned towards the past, it appeared so – as if it were there from the outset: in the demons of childhood; the drip drip drip of drains in the night; the sharks in the public pool; and the ghosts in the apartment passageway.

I recalled that one day on holiday my grandmother turned to me, looking at the reflections of branches in the window of an old hotel, and said, ‘Look Lüderitz, all these windows are broken, each one, broken.’

‘No gran,’ I said, ‘it is just the reflection of branches on the windows, it is the trees, look at them, they are moving.’

‘Ah yes, my dear,’ she said, ‘I was mistaken.’ However, beyond the glass, beyond the indeterminate and mysterious play of photons, she was looking towards something I was not yet ready to see.

The corrosion was seeping into everything, even memory; it appeared in places where it had once been absent. How easy it is for everything to come apart, these years of love and labour. How easy it is for worlds to dissolve as if they were nothing more than globs of honey in tea, spiralling away.

And I wondered, during that time of near complete isolation, to whom I addressed my inquiries. To myself? To Saron? Sita? Isiwa? Sarah? The sea itself?

In these musings, I frequently returned to a particular day of 2 February – I did not recall the year, the years had been washed away but the days still remained, solitary figures in the tide. It was the celebration of the queen of the sea, who came by many names – Iemanjá, Mami Wata, Janaína, the Princess of Aiocá.

Sarah, my wife, and I followed the muddied path carrying our bunches of hydrangea, their fat purple faces sagging with the humidity. The forested area was damp and clammy and filled with a choir of mosquitoes and midges. I stopped a while to watch a blue bee sip on an orchid. The heat seemed prohibitive to life here, but the soil was rich and still wet from the recent storms. Sarah traced her hand through the soil and it was webbed with slightly luminescent blue threads, which from place to place popped with fleshy bell-shaped mushrooms. Beyond the forest we crossed a wooden bridge through the mangrove swamplands to the coastline. The tumorous roots heaved from the water in a laboured rebellion.

Across the bridge we reached a house on a patch of dry land beside the wetlands and on the frontier of the dunes. In the garden was an old satellite dish, its surfaces frayed like a fishing net. The grass was overgrown around a child's pool, its water green with algae and its skin indented by dead insects. Around what might once have been the peripheries of the property, bougainvillea and hibiscus bloomed, their flowers turning towards the searing late afternoon sun, although their leaves were yellowing, and at the rear of the wood and brick structure, on the dissolving boundary, was a green fibreglass water tank. A pair of wild peacocks wandered aimlessly, as if drunk, and monkeys and marmosets sucked on the purple flowering bananas.

Sarah and I stood on the veranda of the house taking photos of each other against surfaces in various states of decay – stone, pine, araucaria, red brick. The sunlight wove a macramé with the lines of spider webs and cracked tiles. We carefully entered the ruin, treading lightly across the dust, leaves and lizard shit, watching the large ceiling beams, which bled dust from termite holes. Crabs scuttled across the slate floor.

To the left of the entrance hall, upon which a photo of a bent tree still hung, was an office. Beside a large bay window, which opened up to the garden, was a pine desk and a bookshelf, mostly empty, though a few volumes remained. I traced my fingers across their spines: a jumble of computer manuals and coffee-table books about films and animals. Sarah opened the drawers and started emptying the contents: piles of yellowed paper, mainly old bills and receipts, along with various types of computer cords and floppy discs.

‘It’s amazing the shit we collect across a life,’ she said, turning towards me. Her eyes were like seeds splitting open, leaving small punctures in the surface of things. She brushed off the desk and sat on it. She took my hands and drew me to her. I kissed her neck, which tasted of perfume and sweat. She tremored slightly and I felt weak with the heat and humidity.

Just then I heard a noise and turned towards the doorway.

‘What the fuck is that?’ Sarah said.

‘Let’s go.’

As we were leaving the room we came across two long-haired men, one dark-haired and the other blond, in the lounge. They were shirtless and tattooed, wearing shorts with patterns of palm trees. One was drinking a beer, the other smoking a joint.

‘Ah,’ the dark-haired man said to the blond, ‘you were right. The house is haunted.’

‘But who are the ghosts?’ Sarah asked earnestly. ‘Us or you?’

The dark-haired man laughed. ‘Perhaps all of us.’

‘What is this place?’ she asked. ‘Did the owners die?’

‘Salt,’ the dark-haired man replied. ‘The house is off the water grid and so they relied on a borehole into the aquifer. With the increased salination of water, life here became impossible.’

‘What about the animals?’ I asked.

‘They survive from fruit and rainwater, or they migrate, or they die,’ said the dark-haired man.

‘The place is becoming too salty for even the mangroves,’ the blond one said. ‘So enjoy it now. In a few years, there will just be dunes.’

‘Thank you for the warning,’ I said.

‘You on the way to the beach?’ asked the blond.

‘Yes,’ Sarah replied, ‘and you guys?’

‘We were there this morning,’ he answered. ‘Good waves. Now we’re just chillaxing, waiting for the sun to cool and for the waves. We use this old place to hang out.’ Chillaxing. Bile burned in my oesophagus. I noticed their surfboards in the corner of the room.

‘We’re heading back soon and know a shorter and more shady route than the main track. You want to follow us?’ the dark-haired one asked, looking Sarah over in a way that unsettled me.

‘It’s ok,’ I said, ‘we’ll find our own way.’

‘Lüderitz,’ Sarah said, ‘you’re about to pass out. Let’s go with them. Or do you just want to leave the ceremony and go back?’

‘No, let’s go on.’

By the time we arrived at the beach in the early evening, the ceremonies had begun. White-robed celebrants danced and gyrated to rhythms that had once migrated across seas – they were wordless remainders of something unspeakable. Some in the group beat the bass

drums in syncopated divination rhythms, while others clapped and circled, drawing an intricate arabesque in the sand. On the incline of a dune was a shrine of candles, a woven basket, offerings of fruit and flowers and a large portrait of the sea goddess, her pale form translucent in a long blue gown. She wore a crown of shells and a veil of pearls.

‘They have whitened her,’ Sarah said.

‘What do you mean?’ I asked.

‘She is a Black spirit, and they have turned her white. Even the dead, our ancestors, are not safe from you people.’

‘It’s true,’ I said, ‘we are a tribe of thieves. Even deities aren’t safe from us.’

Between the tiny apples of Sarah’s cheek bones, her nose creased in disgust before returning to its usual illegible serenity. Her braids had become entangled and formed a double-helix around her slight shoulders. Her white linen dress, now wet with sweat, held close her moist flesh and breath. The sun seared the lining of the dunes and the air was coiled with smoke and salt and sand. We seemed, in that moment, barely human: merely a pulsing of blood and water: a density of granular light.

Beside us, the surfers watched the ritual for a while before losing interest. They lit a joint before stripping their clothes to put on their wetsuits, their muscular and tattooed frames reflecting the water’s glare. Both Sarah and I watched them silently, our gazes following the contours of their torsos and backs as they waxed their boards. They swam out to the breaking waves, disappearing and reappearing as darkened figures amid the blue. Their forms circled and cut through the white blur of the beach dancers, forming an intimate choreography.

Sarah, suddenly smiling, summoned me to the water. ‘We need to jump over seven waves,’ she said, ‘and make seven wishes.’

We rushed into the water, leaping over the waves, over our seven waves, their chilly froth circling our calves, and after each hurdle we made a whispered wish, our voices mingling:

for our love and happiness, for a restful holiday, for my grandmother's health, for Sarah's father, for the nation's healing, for the child that we hoped would come. The seventh I do not recall; the sea has swallowed it. We threw our stems of hydrangea into the water, watching their purple petals grow heavy and then disappear into the waves, our offerings seemingly accepted, our wishes given consideration by the sea's deity.

In cold currents we held each other and kissed, encircled by the salty haze of evening, the sky's pink freckling our skin, the waves washing between us, rising and falling, dragging us into the water, the current no longer distinct from our pulses, rising and falling, our bodies water in water, held by films of skin, and in the distance thunder clouds gathered and a battalion of sea vultures descended upon discarded fish guts. Rising and falling. As we left the water, Sarah pointed to the black rocks on the shoreline. In the granite were carved a series of perfect circles, barely the size of a hand, like black moons.

'What are those?' I asked.

'They are the remnants of a community that once lived here,' she said. 'Now they are completely gone. Annihilated.' Water rushed over circles.

The sun bled its last green light into a palate of blues and the ocean reflected the early sliver of the moon. The rising shoreline shifted, cutting the division between land and water, rising and falling – a white frontier on white sand, broken by crabs and the feet of dogs and children. The shadows spread and while we dried ourselves with gritty towels the dark was suddenly upon us, pierced by candles and voices and a few headlights on the sandy coastal road. In the gathering of night, the surfers had disappeared.

Sarah and I held each other close and watched the sickle-celled moon, sipping on the white wine we had brought, and eating slices of palm and roasted cassava. It seemed then that the frontiers between our bodies and breath were corroding, that the sea was washing into us, and I was filled by what I think of now as something approximating peace, approximating

happiness, or at least the closest to those words I have known. It seemed that the sea goddess had accepted our supplications.

But perhaps later that night, once we had left, our offering was reconsidered and rescinded. The flowers sent back to lie like garbage on the now dirtied sand. Worlds in dissolution. The inner entropy of the heart. The shoreline like the reflection of a branch in a window.

We arrived home late that night, brought by the car the guest-farm owner had arranged to collect us from the beach. We lit a fire in a black cast-iron cauldron hanging from the roof and bathed in water scented with lavender oil; we made love and fell into a dreamless sleep. In the morning, as I was making coffee on the gas stove, Sarah found a note for me under the door which she handed to me sullenly. It was to call the office urgently.

‘You gave them the number of where we’re staying?’ she asked.

‘Yes, in case.’

‘In case of what?’

‘An emergency. In case one of the interns needs help on the investigations. In case of a crisis.’

‘Fuck Lüderitz. There is always some crisis in your life. Always some emergency. I can never ...’

‘Never what?’

‘Never just have you to myself. It is always like sharing you with a multitude of others.’

‘I’m sorry. I’m here.’

‘We agreed no work. I made a commitment to be with you during the court recess and told the firm I was unavailable to take urgents. I’m still a junior and that wasn’t easy for me.’

‘Thank you.’

‘So will you ignore the call?’

‘Let me just see what it’s about.’

In the old farmhouse, I called the office on the dial phone, rolling the numbers around, each making a pleasant whir as they circled back. And then I returned to the cabin.

‘I’ve been asked to go to the Commission on State Atrocities,’ I told Sarah.

‘When?’

‘The day after tomorrow.’

‘But this is our holiday. You promised. Surely they can schedule another hearing.’

‘No, the hearings on torture are finishing this week. This isn’t work, Sarah, this is history. All my work, all these years, it can be written into this country’s history. I will just be gone a day or two and then I’ll come straight back.’

‘You’re so fucking obsessed with writing yourself into history that you can’t see what’s happening to you. What you’re becoming.’

‘And what is that?’

‘You’re becoming nothing. You’re barely there. Barely there at all. I can’t take it any more, these disappearances.’

‘You’re overreacting. It’s just a few days. Just chillax.’

‘Fuck off.’

I turned the gas off. The coffee was bitter and acrid.

Sarah did not call at the times we had planned. After the hearings, I sat in our apartment waiting, anxiety spreading through every muscle and nerve-line of my body, which felt full of cavities that would eventually implode. I called the farmhouse repeatedly from a public phone whenever there was a break in the hearings, but the farm owner said that Sarah was out and

had walked to the beach. At night he said that the lights were off and he did not want to disturb Sarah if she were sleeping. She did not return any of my messages.

I was away for three days and had not been able to contact Sarah. Once the testimonies were done I left in the early hours of the morning, breaking the speed limit on the highway, only stopping to piss and for petrol. I arrived at the rusted steel farm gate and drove along the sand road which wove through the mountains and forests, alongside a ravine. Through the gaps in the mountains I could glimpse the sea watching me.

When I arrived, I found the cottage was empty. The bed was unmade but her bags were packed and gone. My heart burned, but the pain, oddly, seemed to extend beyond the confines of my body and became a quality of the room itself. It seemed to linger on all the surfaces and objects – the fireplace, the kitchen table and gas stove, the yellow watercolour of a beach and palm trees on the wall, the ceramic fish. It seemed to hang in the air itself. The pain seemed less a quality of my body than a kind of substance that leaked from me and filled the space where once there was a life, once there was a world, and which was now vacant.

I looked around the room to see if I could find some signs to explain this sudden gap between present and past, the irreparable fissure that had opened up in my life and would continue to grow until it consumed everything. But right then it seemed less an abyss and more a source of curiosity. Calmly I conducted an audit of the objects which remained and those which had departed. The olive oil, the beer, the tin foil remained. The sparkling water and fruit had gone. The hiking backpack remained, but the cooler box and ice packs were gone.

And then I noticed something odd on the floor, something unrecognisable. It looked like a misshapen and used bar of soap, worn thin. But, when I picked it up, it had neither the smell nor texture of soap. Rather, it had the feel of a candle, but when I rolled it around in my fingers there was no wick. And then the thought came, not in one piece, but slowly dripping into consciousness and taking shape. I realised what the object was.

Surf wax.

The memory, when I returned to it one day during the curfew, made me vomit. I retched and retched for hours, the force of the expulsion leading me to bang my head against the toilet seat, leaving soft bruises and red dots from burst blood vessels. It was as if my body were trying to purge itself of the past. I lost any sense of time and orientation so consumed I was in the spasms. I was disintegrating and only returned to some semblance of order when I felt a hand on my shoulder. It was Saron.

‘Are you ok?’ he asked.

‘No,’ I said. Tears were streaking down my face and my mouth was furry, stripped by the acid. I noticed that Dom Pedro was beside me, watching me, and sniffing at the puke that had dripped down the sides of toilet.

‘You need to wash,’ Saron said. He helped me stand up and undress and put me into the rusted enamel bath. He turned on the hot water and the gas flame of the geyser lit up. The water that could not fall fell on a body that should not have been alive but lived nonetheless, and I breathed deeply the breath I knew had been taken from me, irretrievably.

Once I had washed and dried, I returned to the lounge where Saron had been waiting for me where my stained white dressing gown. ‘How did you get in here by the way?’ I asked.

‘The door was open. You weren’t answering and your phone was off.’

‘Thank you.’

‘For what.’

‘For not disappearing.’

‘How are you feeling?’

‘I feel, Saron, like I am barely here at all.’

‘We were never really here, Leveza. We were always superfluous. There’s no shame in it really. We are not alone. Even the most beautiful things, people, landscapes, are superfluous. It’s why we can never own them, never keep them.’

‘You know Saron, I used to think that if we put things in words we could keep, if not the whole, then part of them. Some trace that they were here. But now I realise the sea has come for even them.’

‘For what?’ Saron asked.

‘The words.’ Rising and falling. ‘I used to think that they were a type of refuge. That if I learnt to work with them well enough, that if I could find the right form or syntax, I could make an island of them. A place that I could retreat to in safety. A place I could take exile in.’

‘From what?’

‘The deluge.’

‘It is too late for that Leveza. Perhaps it was always too late. Perhaps if we had acted sooner, if we had read the signs, we might have left on time. Fled to higher ground. But we were too incompetent. It was too much hassle, really. Packing our things. Buying boxes. Buying tape. Looking for reasonable flight tickets. It’s always easier just to stay where one is until it’s too late. Have a whiskey. A cup of tea. Play a game of chess. Pass the time or be passed by time. The signs were there, but who knows if there’s anywhere really to flee to. It seems the sea is everywhere now. If we had woken up earlier, it probably wouldn’t have made any difference.’

‘At least we might have rebelled.’

‘Like Isiwa?’

‘Yes.’

‘And look where they are now. In prison.’

‘But at least they tried, Saron. It is better than this. The fish feed on my skin when I’m sleeping, Saron. Without my consent. I did not consent to becoming fishmeal. It’s unconstitutional. A violation of both privacy and of dignity. I feel I am coming apart.’

‘You need fluids,’ Saron said, going to the kitchen to boil the kettle. ‘I like your anemones.’

‘They are my friends now.’

‘Ah, well then perhaps I should go? Maybe I’m not needed.’

‘Stay a while. I’ve yet to teach them to play chess.’

Saron opened the fridge. From it rose the stench of rotten broccoli. Everything in it was rotten. The cheese, the tomatoes, the tahini and marmalade, a plastic container of rice and beans.

‘This is disgusting, can I throw everything out?’

‘Thanks. You’re a good friend. But please leave the sauerkraut. The fermentation is good for my leaking gut.’

Dom Pedro scuttled over the kitchen counter, and Saron scratched his ears.

‘Have you been feeding him?’ he asked.

‘He eats fresh fish now. At least with this disaster I save on cat food bills.’

Saron found a few eggs and boiled them in silence, bringing them to me with tea. I cracked them open with a spoon. Their yolks were orange and dense, almost the texture and colour of a blood clot. I put salt on them and ate them greedily, the nausea having subsided.

‘You know the worst of it,’ I said.

‘What Leveza?’

‘Everything I worked for was undone by a fake leak and a fucking surfer. A surfer, Saron. A fucking surfer. We always thought we were better than them, but those shitheads won in the end. They won with their big boards and their tattoos and hot bodies and stupid smiles

and perfect teeth. We made bad decisions in life, Saron. We should have been surfers. We thought they were idiots but, in the end, it was them and not us who saw what was coming. They were practising and preparing all along.'

'Perhaps, but not even they can escape the sea forever.'

A deep moan rose from the streets below. 'What is that?' I asked Saron.

'You haven't been following?'

'No.'

'It's the truckers' strike. Against the state of emergency. They've blockaded the highways and the inner city for days now, even burning down some buildings.'

'Didn't they call on the army to come?' I asked.

'Yes, but now the tides have turned, so to speak.'

We walked out onto the balcony. The moaning of horns echoed through high-rises, the offices and apartment buildings. It washed through the streets like the cry of a creature in pain. Saron and I tried to speak but our words, which we could not speak, were drowned out by the horns we could not possibly hear. And then I noticed something in the block below.

A figure walked down the street, wandering unnoticed amid the armoured vehicles and police barricades. She wore a gown of pale blue, a crown of shells, a veil of pearls which, reflecting the streetlights, gleamed like stars over skin dark as the night sky. In her hands she carried a candle which could not burn but was burning. Behind her followed a crowd, a small multitude dressed in white, playing drums and tambourines and mandolins; they climbed, unhindered, over the police vehicles, their faces reflecting in riot shields, and they played in mournful and binaural rhythms that somehow cut through the blaring of the vehicles; they sang in inhuman and amniotic voices, voices we could not hear but heard. And from their eyes rose a soft mist – a gas of tears.

And from the recesses of my thought came a voice, one resonant of my own, perhaps that was once my own but no longer, or that I had buried and forgotten, and which had grown to be independent of me, to be something other, spreading in the alcoves within me:

– you, who rejected our offerings, who walked from the notary with our contract of stamens and petals unsigned, who discarded our wishes, our pleas – have you now returned to take what little remains? A white pulse on a pale sky. Rising and falling. Burning and fading. Your salt sharp on a still-open wound. Rising and falling. Insubstantial as breath, insubstantial as the evening haze. To what have you returned? A white pulse on a pale sky. Barely here. Barely here at all. A mere remainder. A leaking gut. A receding hairline. A patterning of sand. A map undone by crabs and the feet of dogs and children. Everything without substance. A moistened cavity. A moistened mouth. A circle in black granite beside a black shore: the black moon of atrocity pooling with white froth. A receding shoreline. Barely here. Barely here at all. The white glare on the water's skin. Rising and falling, rising and falling, rising and falling. Everything leaking into everything else. Drained and burnt out. Utterly drained. But we will renew ourselves, we will learn to breathe your saline water.

Chapter ten

I had almost entirely retreated from the world outside my apartment, when Zé called. It had been a month since the state of emergency was declared, the occupation destroyed and Isiwa imprisoned. Spring was arriving and, in the streets below, Jacaranda were blossoming.

‘Lüderitz,’ he said, ‘I need your help.’

‘With what?’ I asked.

‘Sita has disappeared.’

‘She’s drowned?’ I felt my heart beating hard.

‘No. She’s been taken. A few days back. I think by the Ultras. As punishment for my pieces.’

‘Where?’

‘To the forest. To the reefs. A few sources have tipped me off.’

‘You’ve reported her missing?’

‘To the police? Are you fucking serious?’

‘Sorry. But what can I do?’

‘You’ve been to the reefs before.’ Zé said. ‘You know the Colonel. I need you to guide the way. Can you do it?’

‘What are the Ultras doing at the reefs?’

‘What do you think is funding them and Cabral?’

‘Gold?’

‘Among other things. Yes.’

‘Ok, fuck it. But I don’t have a car.’

‘We can take mine.’

From the recesses of my cupboard in the study, I took out a yellow tin box. In it, I found an old map, hand-scrawled, which – miraculously – I had filed. More miraculous was that I remembered where it was after five years. From the same folder in the box, I took out the yellowing newspaper clipping. It was a double-spread on the wildcat gold miners gathering on the forest's peripheries to mine abandoned gold reefs. There was an outcry – led by the fisherfolk – about the mercury poisoning the lake. And so miners were driven, by the army, from the abandoned shafts deeper into the forest, into the areas under land-claim, outside the view of the state. Here they gathered in encampments hidden by rainforest, collecting arms, minerals, the leaves and vines of the forest with psychoactive properties that they could sell in the cities. They attacked the local forest villages from these encampments, burning them down. These men, the poor who had migrated across the state in search of their salvation, once good men, family men, had been transformed as if by the earth's alchemy into murderers.

They guarded the routes with ambushes, burning the police or NGO vehicles that tried to cross into the forest. But they had invited me into their enclave. Their leader, in his fifties, once a union shop steward and a poet, now grizzled with time and with his mind addled by mercury, had invited me to their encampment to speak his mind. He was known as the Colonel.

Zé picked me up from my apartment. We took sand roads along the lakeside leading to the forests where there were unlikely to be police road blocks. The police, Zé told me, had grown lazy with the curfew and set up in the same daily check points. When we entered the forests, the old map proved still to be accurate. As we drove, we passed a few figures on the road. They tried to flag us down but Zé sped on.

As Zé drove, he was unusually silent. His hands shook.

'Should we turn back?' I said.

'No, we need to move on.'

‘This is madness,’ I said.

‘We must move on.’

‘Zé, you need to tell me why the fuck we are doing this. Where did you get your information about Sita?’

He was shaking. He slammed on the brakes, got out of the car and lit a cigarette, gazing into the forest's shadows. It was windless, but leaves were falling as if carried by a hidden current.

‘People have been leaving the city for the shafts,’ Zé said. ‘There have been rumours that there is some kind of protection down there. Some have returned. They told me Sita was there.’

‘Protection from what?’

‘From these drownings.’

‘Are we going because of Sita, or because of you?’

‘Both, I guess. I’m afraid, Lüderitz.’

‘Of the miners?’

‘No, not of them. Of this.’ He turned, looking around and circling his arm.

‘We’re in the same boat, so to speak.’

‘But we’re not, are we? During the occupation, you weren’t there when they carried the bodies away each night. I was there, and each night I thought these could be my brothers and sisters, these men could be me. They did not look like you, Lüderitz. You complain about your solitude and your fear. But something protects you but not me, not my kin. And I wonder what that is. We’re all in this same nightmare, but we’re not watching it from the same place. We’re on different islands.’

Zé lit another cigarette, and I walked around the car to him, placing my arm on his shoulder and drawing him to me. His body was shaking, and he allowed the embrace. I could

feel the shuddering of his body in the cold wind. The warm smoke from warm lungs dissipated. We got back into the car and drove on along the sand road.

We arrived at a roadblock. A group of men blocked the way carrying rifles, whips and bottles of spirits. Some wore old army gear, others the green and white football t-shirts associated with the Ultras. They pulled us out of the car and demanded to know who we were. Their breath smelled of fermented sugar.

‘My name is Lüderitz Leveza,’ I said, ‘and I have come to speak to the Colonel.’

‘And who are you to demand to speak to the Colonel?’ a man with a beard like a lichen and wide demented eyes asked.

‘He knows me. Tell him my name.’ The man made some phone calls on his cell, sent some messages, and waited. They offered us some of the spirit: it was pungent and tasted of hand sanitiser and rotten fruit. Zé shared his cigarettes with the men, and they spoke with one another in a kind of creole I could not decipher. Then the phone rang, and an indistinct voice gave the authorisation. We left Zé’s car and carried on in the back of a van.

As we drove, the trees thinned out into a series of stumps and the landscape was wounded and scarred with diggings, deep pits and the open mouths of abandoned shafts. All around was garbage and broken glass, the remnants of old headgear now covered with vines. Finally, we reached the encampment – a clutter of tents and tin shacks. Groups of women, half-naked, their eyes blurred with both desire and terror, lingered at the roadside.

On a patch of land, some women crushed the stone that the miners had brought up from the earth’s belly. The men washed the fine dust on ramshackle machinery made of old pipes and reworked aluminium. Gloveless, they filtered the silt and rolled beads of mercury in it, searching for beads of gold.

On plastic chairs, scattered around the site, those not working sat playing cards or gathered around preachers who screamed the words of the Lord in the humid air. And then there were the mounds dug everywhere – they looked like gardens of sweet potatoes, but they were fruitless and leafless: mass graves, as our bearded guide told us, nonchalantly.

In a bare patch of land near the banks of the lake, an old rusted Ferris wheel was turning, powered by a diesel generator that puked a black smoke which hung in the air. Drunken men sang or molested the women they had bought or stolen in the rocking carriages. The engine turned with a terrible squeal like the cry of a child or a goat.

We stopped outside a corrugated-iron house, more prominent than the surrounding shacks. It was painted enamel blue, and its walls were adorned with murals of various saints. The pathway leading to the door was a mosaic of coloured tiles, pebbles and glass. Our guide told us to take off our shoes, and we entered the house, which was mostly dark but lit by paraffin lamps which hung from the roof.

The Colonel, a large man with a brutal face, sat in the corner of the room, playing the guitar and singing a samba of terrible sweetness. His voice was like a boy's – a tender falsetto which rose and fell like a mantra.

We listened for a while to the song, and then he put down the guitar and turned to us with an asymmetrical grin. 'So, Leveza, my friend, you have returned to us after all these years. And you have brought with you this handsome and talented young man. I even have a book of his poems.' He picked from a small coffee table a copy of Zé's book. 'He will have to sign it for me.' He handed the book to Zé with a fountain pen. 'Address it to the Colonel,' he said. Zé signed the book.

'It is good to meet you,' the Colonel continued. 'Poets are rare out here, although in a sense, we are all poets of the ground, extracting the last vestiges of worth from this sick sand. I have been reading your work Zé. Our friend Lüderitz here has gone silent. Your writing is

good. But you have been overly critical of some of our friends, if I can call them that. People who are actually doing something. Our friends who know that politics is violence and money, and not music and poems,' he laughed gesturing at the guitar and book. 'People are dying like flies, and we do not know why. The multitude wants concrete actions, not ephemera.' He looked at Zé. 'And so our trade has never been better.'

'People are still buying gold?' Zé asked.

'Some. But more are coming here for another reason: protection from this plague. They think that we who dwell in the forest have the answers.'

'And do you?'

'The old villagers of the forests have their secrets, you know.'

'But you are their enemies.'

'Perhaps so, but we have chosen our enemies wisely. And there are those among them who work with us. And those who work underground have their secrets too. Would you like to see?'

'We haven't come here looking for your protection.' Zé said.

'And so why have you come?'

'We're looking for a friend. Sita.'

'Ah, Sita. I heard she was no friend of yours, Lüderitz,' the Colonel said, 'I'm surprised to see you here.'

'I've told your story fairly in the past,' I said.

'And so I'm in your debt?'

'No, but I expect you to at least act fairly towards me and my colleagues.'

'Your former colleagues?'

'Yes. But it's not about that. It's a matter of principle.'

‘And what is that principle? Freedom of the press? Freedom to spread lies, Lüderitz, as you proved so adept at doing? And what is that freedom when you can’t even call this nightmare by its name? Explain to your readers what the fuck is going on?’ Zé and I were silent. ‘So, we will return your friend to you. I think she has learned her lesson. But first we want to take you on a little tour of our operations. Call it a PR exercise if you will.’

We were given hardhats and headlamps. We had our own rucksacks with water rations. Two allocated guides took us to the mouth of the shaft. The two men, one slim, the other bulky, said little, only signalling us to follow their lead. The shaft was like an open gullet that would devour us. We climbed down into the dark on a rope ladder that lacerated our soft hands.

I felt terrible vertigo, though I could not see what was beneath me, only the flickering of flame and shadow in the caves below. The heat was intense and the shaft filled with dense steam. My hands were sweating, and I clung to the rope desperately. Beneath me Zé was muttering a half-formed prayer.

‘I thought you were an atheist Zé?’

‘Fuck you Leveza. I’ll take my salvation wherever I can get it,’ he replied, his voice ricocheting off the stone.

After an interminable time, we arrived at the bottom of the ladder. Above us, the surface was merely a sphere of light. We were in a cave whose walls were littered with rotten pieces of lumber, likely exhaling methane, making the air gaseous and toxic. On the ground was a thin pool of water. Zé took out a cigarette and was about to light it when one guide screamed at him. ‘Are you fucking crazy? You will kill us.’ He grabbed the matches and threw them into the pool of water at our feet. The man, furious now, signalled to us to follow.

We entered a tunnel, around two metres in width and height, the irregular forms of the rock creating a crystalline structure. The tunnels echoed with a strange sound, a kind of hissing,

and nearby we could hear hammering. We turned into another tunnel and came across a group of men chipping away at the rock with picks, gathering a pile of the stone that they would carry to the surface to grind.

They looked at us suspiciously. One asked: ‘Who the fuck are they?’

‘The Colonel’s guests,’ the bulky guide said bitterly. ‘We are tour guides to the abyss,’ the slim one said with a malevolent smile. I felt dizzy and could barely breathe. Coughing, I leaned against the wall.

‘You ok man?’ Zé asked, shaking. ‘Should we go back?’

‘I don’t think we have a choice.’

The tunnel descended at a 45-degree angle, and I lost track of how deep we were and how far we had walked. Our guides had torches, and I turned on my phone torch, its light weak but illuminating the rock’s surfaces which were scrawled with odd hieroglyphs. I could not recognise the script or the letters; they were a mangled language, disfigured by these depths.

And then the light of my phone fell upon a shrine. It was a perfectly smooth egg-shaped alcove carved from the rock as if by an expert sculptor. Beneath an altar were a variety of smoothly carved gems and crystals – malachite and jasper – gleaming in greens and blues. Above them, suspended from a steel wire, hung a mosaic made from blue and white tiles shards. An image took shape from this brokenness, a woman with a blue veil and a fish’s tail. Beside the sculpture were offerings of plastic flowers and a gas mask.

We moved on, deepening our way into the labyrinth of tunnels. As we walked, a hypnotic singing, a kind of lullaby, echoed in the passages. The men whispered angrily at us to hurry and we exited the tunnel into a wide open cavern. As our eyes adjusted, we observed the swirling of pink and blue phosphoresce on the stone walls.

‘Holy shit,’ Zé said.

The floor blossomed with a multitude of forms and colours. Corals, red and intricate as blood vessels, spread along the walls near us, swaying slowly in an unseen current. Thousands of white protuberances rocked and grasped like fingers in a hollow beneath us. Mushroom-like shapes grew out from the stone walls. The reef emitted a haunting light in which I discerned outlines, indistinct and blurred at first but then taking shape. We walked slowly, touching the swaying fingers and open mouths that the minute creatures had created. It was as if we had entered a womb.

I felt calm now, sedated. Zé walked with light steps as if floating. His face was relaxed, and he seemed a child at play, gazing into the labyrinths and cities of polyps formed along walls and banks of rock and sand. Spirals and alleyways shimmered. Long calcified structures resembled intricate demarcations, minute walls and towers protecting from unseen threats, but unable to ward off the moon-shaped butterfly fish with their haloes of dark orange that fed on the coral.

The two men watched us coldly. Zé took out his phone to take a photograph. ‘No,’ the bulky one said. ‘No photos. It’s enough. Come now.’ They ushered us along a pathway through the enormous cavern and then through a short tunnel into another.

‘Welcome to our clinic,’ the thin man said, grinning. ‘Our healers.’

In the cavern were lines of metal hospital beds. Moving between the beds were men and women wearing surgical scrubs. Beaded necklaces fell around their necks. They were chanting – the source of the incantation we had heard. Beside the beds were a series of drips and machinery to monitor respiration. The patients in them, if that’s what they were, were covered with white sheets and some wore oxygen masks. Others seemed to be undergoing a procedure of some kind.

The healers placed long intestines of fluorescent orange coral over the patients' bodies. Over certain organs, they put smaller tufts of different coloured corals and sponges. Following this, they injected the patients with syringes.

'Who are the patients?' Zé asked.

'They've paid to come here,' the large guide said.

'For what?'

'Protection from drowning,' the thin guide said.

'And are they protected?' Zé asked.

'They believe they are,' the thin one continued.

In the darkened recesses of the cavern, the singing grew louder. There were movements and glimpses of the fins of stingrays and the tails of large fish. Zé walked into the centre of cavern and stood beside one of the beds. I followed him. The healers seemed annoyed but ignored us. I turned back. Our guides were gone.

'He's from my neighbourhood,' Zé said to me, stopping at the bed of a young man. He looked up to Zé with kind and hopeful eyes and then looked around the room and seemed startled.

'I can see it now,' he said.

'What?' Zé asked.

'The sea. The lights.'

And then his face softened, and he wept. He wept and wept, and Zé held him. Then he gasped and his body went into spasm. Zé let him go and shouted to the healers who passed by seemingly unperturbed. The young man was trying to say something and Zé held him again. He coughed out his last words.

'I have a message,' he said.

'What is it?' Zé asked.

‘You live under our grace. And we can annihilate you at any time.’

His body fell still. And around us, spreading across the coral, I saw a soft wave, a whitening as they turned into skeletal forms, bony lifeless patterns. The whiteness spread across the reef, turning it into dead space, a multitude of moons and polyps, brain-like spirals desiccated of thought and life. The healers seemed unmoved by this whitening landscape. They continued their song and placed fragments of the now bone-like coral on the bodies of their patients.

‘He’s dead,’ Zé screamed at them.

One stopped before us, a young woman with a serene air. ‘Our treatment does not work for everyone,’ she said. ‘Some do not have the strength for it, while others do not really believe.’

‘We must go now,’ Zé said, taking my hand. We walked away quickly. And then we were swimming. Above us was an opening we swam towards and into. In the passageway were lines of swaying light. As we moved closer to them, I realised they were roots that had grown into the tunnel. Lines of colour ran through the roots, as if they were carrying a charge.

Zé and I surfaced beneath the arms of the forest. It was night now. We scrambled onto the ground from the tunnel. Turning back, we expected to be followed but there was just a vacant mouth of the tunnel. Mosquitoes buzzed around us, feeding on us, and marmosets and monkeys jumped in the branches above.

‘We need to get Sita and get back to the car,’ I said to Zé. In the distance, we could see the lights of the Ferris wheel. We trudged towards it over roots that cut our feet, our skin lacerated with branches, until we came to the lake’s edge over which an icy wind blew. Across the water, we could see the luminescence of the city. From afar, it glowed green and pink-red. We walked along the banks of the lake, looking for some way back to the camp.

Soon, we saw a pall of smoke was rising from a patch of forest near the water's edge. From amid the trees, we could hear the voices of laughing men and music. Zé signalled to us to move slowly toward them. We wove silently through the trunks and branches. The air became heavy and acrid. As we drew closer, we heard the voice of the Colonel, singing and laughing. Through gaps in the trees, we saw men around a barrel barbeque charring large steaks, and drinking beer in a clearing. The men had set fire to some of the large old-growth trees on its boundaries. Near the men, sitting on a tree stump smoking a cigarette, wearing a red dress, was Sita.

'Sita,' Zé called out as we entered the clearing. She recognised the voice and raised her head and smiled sadly. She did not look at me.

A few of the men raised rifles as we entered, but the Colonel signalled to them to put them. 'These are our guests,' he shouted. 'Welcome. Join us for supper.' Near us, the burning branches of a palm formed a bicycle-wheel of flame. 'Don't worry about the fire. The lake winds will take it away from us. This is our profession. And we are very professional.' He took a slug of beer. 'Sita has been having fun with us. So why not join in? I heard that you visited our clinic. You must be tired. Impressed? Healing these days is the new gold rush.'

We said nothing. Zé went to Sita and hugged her. 'Let's go,' he said.

'So soon poet? I'm sorry if we are too rough for your kind.' He picked up Zé's book which was beside him and threw it into the coals. 'But your words burn like the rest of us.'

'How do I get back to our car?' I asked the Colonel.

He signalled towards a pathway. As we walked off, he shouted. 'Remember, poet, to write both sides of the story.'

As we walked away, there was a gust of wind and the conflagration behind us grew, spreading deeper into the forest. Sita was shaking and said nothing, walking in a daze. When I looked at her face, lit by the starlight, her eyes were glazed. Around her feet, as she walked

barefoot along the sandy path, coral appeared in her footsteps, and she dragged behind her long strands of seaweed. Beside us swayed towers of kelp.

Chapter eleven

After our trip to the reefs, I did not hear from Zé for a week. I called him to see if he was ok.

‘I’m in bed,’ he said, ‘I’ve been ill with a cold since our trip.’

‘Do you want to speak about it?’

‘I no longer have the language to speak about what’s happening. What we’ve seen.’

‘How is Sita?’

‘She’s taken time off work to recover.’

‘What happened to her?’

‘That’s for her to write or tell when and if she’s ready.’

‘Can I help you at all? I can cook soup.’

‘Thank you,’ he said, ‘but I have someone taking care of me.’

‘That’s good.’ I said. ‘Have you heard from Isiwa?’

Zé sighed. ‘Yes, but nothing good. They are still in a men’s prison. Their lawyers have had some access. What they’ve heard is troubling.’

‘What’s happening?’

‘Not now Lüderitz. I’m not feeling well.’

‘We should let Nkosazana know, maybe she can help?’

‘No Lüderitz, you can put her in danger. Leave her out of this.’

I borrowed Saron’s car and drove past the mine dumps to the prefabricated house. I had slept most of the day and it was late afternoon. The winter roses that had been blooming when I last visited were now thorny stems, but the hibiscus buds were taking shape with the spring. Fat oranges and lemons still hung from the branches beside the driveway; many had fallen, split open, and were exuding a scent of sticky ferment.

Why had I come here? The decision to come seemed less an act of will than an inner tide that I had no power against. Images from the reefs continued to disturb my thoughts. I had lost all orientation and seemed simply dragged along by forces more or less indifferent to me. And yet I was afraid, as I neither could control nor understand what was happening to me.

I knocked on the door, and Nkosazana stood on the threshold. She was dressed in a robe of white with a white turban around her head.

‘I was expecting you,’ she said

‘How did you know?’

‘I dreamt of you last night.’

‘Visiting you?’

‘Not exactly. I was in a forest and in the forest was an archway, you know, the type that trains cross, although it was too narrow for a train. It was not connected to any roads. And you were beneath it. The young man you used to be, handsome, not like you are now.’

‘And how am I now?’

‘Diminished.’

Nkosazana ushered me into the small living room, signalled to me to sit on the old armchair and went into the kitchen. I noted that the framed picture of Christ was gone and in its place was a painting of the sea goddess, her face covered with a veil of pearls. From the kitchen, the kettle whistled like the warning of a distant train. She returned with the cups and teapot on a floral patterned tray. She poured the tea which was blood orange. A slice of lemon lay beside the cup like a waning moon. Nkosazana sat and stared at me a long time, just sipping in gentle inhales.

‘What I did not dream, Leveza, is why you would come to me,’ she said.

‘It’s Isiwa. They are in danger. They were arrested and put in male holding cells, denied bail, and now have been taken to a male prison. I am worried about them. What the other prisoners might do to them. What the guards might do.’

‘And you think this is news to me? You think I don’t have my own sources, my own connections? You think I don’t follow what is happening? What do you take me for – some kind of imbecile?’ She paused a moment. ‘I’m sorry to have used that word. The habits of the past die slowly, as you well know.’

I felt ashamed. What was I thinking? What delusion had brought me here? ‘I thought that Isiwa needs you. You still have connections with those in power. You could speak them. Perhaps they could offer some reprieve. Perhaps you could see your child and see how they are. I think they need their mother.’

‘And now, you think you know my child better than I do? How is that?’

‘I was visiting them in the occupation.’

‘I thought you were barred from writing. That was Zé’s role now.’

‘I was making soup.’

‘Oh yes, soup.’ She stared at me with an expression of bitterness that crossed her face before the calm returned. ‘And did Isiwa ask you to come to my house?’

‘No. They asked me not to.’

‘But you came anyway.’

‘Yes,’ I said.

‘And did Isiwa tell you why they did not want you to come?’

‘No.’

‘But you thought it better to go against their will.’

I was silent.

‘Lüderitz, did it occur to you that there may be a reason?’ Nkosazana asked.

‘I thought they may want to protect you from harm.’

‘And still you came?’

‘Perhaps I should go now.’

‘No, you are here now. Stay. Lüderitz. Do you recall, when I initially invited you here, what name I gave you?’

‘Yes. Nkosazana Luna’

‘Yes. And did you ever go back to your original notes to see if you had interviewed a Nkosazana Lua’

‘No, it was two decades ago. I used pseudonyms in my writing, anyway.’

‘Well, if you had, you might have noticed that you had never interviewed a Nkosazana Lua?’

‘You lied to me?’

‘No, I did not lie. I merely masked my original name. I was one of those you interviewed so many years back, one of those who showed you my wounds so that you could turn them into language. And you did Lüderitz. But you forgot me, and even when I reminded you, you had forgotten my name.’

‘It was many years ago.’

‘I remembered *your* name.’

‘I have interviewed thousands of people. And I didn’t publish the article anyway.’

‘And so I am just one of thousands? Thousands upon thousands who have showed you their wounds.’ Now she could no longer mask the bitterness. ‘Lüderitz, my dear, I did not tell you my name again for a reason. And that reason was to protect myself. Do you remember when you were here and the protests broke out?’

‘Yes.’

‘Did you think I was unaware of those? Did you think I was unaware of what was happening?’

‘I don’t know.’

‘I have been watching you, Lüderitz. You and Zé. I was there at the lake, you know. Last week when the President spoke. I was among those, the Mothers of the Drowned, who the military police took away.’

‘Have you lost a child?’ I asked.

‘Isiwa has not drowned, not yet. But the youth of this neighbourhood are like my children. And I share the loss of my sisters.’

‘I didn’t see you. I’m sorry.’

‘Oh, Lüderitz, you did. You looked right at me. But you did not recognise me.’ I recalled that I had recognised the woman from the meeting. How had I not seen her?

‘It was far from the media pen,’ I said. ‘My eyes are not what they used to be. My long-distance vision blurs easily.’

‘Perhaps you should see an optometrist. Or now that you have been medically boarded have they taken away your medical aid too?’

I felt a sense of panic. I had come here hastily out of a desire to help Isiwa, but this had been a mistake. My throat felt constricted, my heart palpitating. ‘I’m sorry, Nkosazana, or whatever your name is. I’m going to leave now.’

‘Before you leave, I have one thing to ask you,’ she said.

‘What?’

‘If anything happens to me, I need you to give Isiwa something.’

‘Of course, what is it?’

‘You already have it. It’s on your phone.’

‘I don’t understand.’

‘Lüderitz, do you think I was unaware you were recording me that evening you visited? Really, some think the elderly have no brains, no eyes, no ears. We are an invisible multitude which you soon will join – if you survive that long.’

Leaving Nkosazana’s home I saw a white care following me. I was not sure at first but at each turn the car took one too. I panicked and sped away, taking routes at random; the GPS on my phone continually rerouted me, the robotic voice stuttered as it adjusted to new directions. I sped through the settlements of the state housing projects — their solar geysers like a thousand reflective eyes — and into open veld littered with plastic and rags. In the open fields white-robed congregants gathered beside a grey stream praying to who or what I cannot fathom. I looked into my mirror, but seemed to have lost the car. Whenever I looked back, I saw only the endless differentiated tide of traffic – minibus taxis, pickups, municipal buses – slowed by the perpetual roadblocks. Now I was followed only by my anxiety. It seeped into the tar and glass.

I drove into mine dumps, old accretions of waste and blood. Spiked grass and dandelions had made their home on them, sapping the mineral moisture. There were pools of caked salt and chemicals. At the top of the mine dump was a screen from an old drive-in cinema. As a child I would come here with my grandmother to watch films. Now the screen was dirty and clouded with holes. Below me the city, the forest and lake spread out. It was nearly dark, and I watched the old screen a while, expecting it to suddenly light up and begin showing the old adverts and trailers from my childhood. On the screen, a gigantic shadow moved, cast by the sun falling behind it. And then a creature appeared, almost as long as the screen itself. It moved slowly, swaying in a slow meditative rhythm over the parking lot. A great white shark. I hastened to the valley below.

Three days later, while I was brushing Dom Pedro's matted hair, I heard a knock on the door. Outside the door was a short man wearing a beret and a grey suit.

'Yes?' I asked him.

'I am the court sheriff,' he said. 'Well, I was the court sheriff, but under martial law I have now been seconded to the police, well, technically the army, although who can tell the difference anymore, in any case, I have brought you a summons. You are to appear at the Central Police Station tomorrow at 10 am.'

'Have I done anything wrong?'

'Have you?'

'No. And what if I don't appear?'

'Mr Leveza, sir, esteemed sir. How do I explain this in a kind way? We are no longer in a time where appearing or not appearing, even disappearing, is a matter of free will. So, to be frank, your appearance or non-appearance is not a matter of your own choosing, but rather a matter of state protocol, so to speak. So, if you choose to breach protocol, and override an order of the court, well not exactly an order of the court, but order of my superiors, then ...'

'Yes ...?'

'We will fuck you up.'

At 10 am, I drove into an empty parking lot overlooked by the multi-storeyed police block. I climbed out of my car and navigated a way to the entrance. Fingers of coral swayed and clutched at my legs. Bearded sea clams cut into my skin. A cluster of shrimp-like amphipods surrounded the white tentacles of anemones (in my time of solitude, when the internet was working, I studied sea life). Swelling sea slugs and gas-flame nudibranchs pulsed. The cruel orange spikes of crayfish appeared and disappeared amid park, and seemingly abandoned, vehicles. Cuttlefish fled from me in clouds of black.

I entered the building. There were rows of wooden desks scattered with old police papers and stamps. The file cabinets were overturned, their paper bellies splayed over the floor. On the wall was an image of the President. The glass was smashed, his face defiled with lewd etchings. No one was there, but I went to the reception. I had been here before, two decades previously. It was the police station where Nkosazana and others had been tortured. And the place still terrified me.

I then heard the crack and scratch of the intercom coming on. The voice slid out with the weight and slowness of an old iguana.

‘Mr Leveza, we have been waiting for you. You are late. But we have time.’

‘Who are you?’

‘You know who I am surely.’ The accent was constantly shifting, its tonalities evading definition. But it was also familiar.

‘uXamu?’ I had heard the voice often enough on pre-recorded television press conferences, though never seen the owner of the voice. It was always played over a backdrop of images of the state of emergency and the police maintaining order.

‘Yes.’

‘Where do I find you?’

‘On the seventh floor.’

I went to the lift. But the power was. Now, only a few hours of electricity remained each day. But there was still light, a green luminescence radiating off the lichen spreading over the walls. I walked up the stairs to the seventh floor, where I entered a large boardroom cluttered with old furniture and desks. The desks were standard issue, from the time of the dictatorship, branded with a government number. On them were piles of old documents and papers. I scanned them. They were mainly old case files and reports. And then I saw something I recognised.

On one of the desks, I saw a pile of old newspaper clippings. I paged through them. They were my own work going back two decades. Each of them had pen marks and were underlined with notes, illegible to me, in the margins. As I looked through these old stories, ones of torture and rebellion, the ink, as if fresh, bled from these pages. It snaked into the air, into fat lines and spirals. These eels of ink sparked with an electric charge and then swam out, through the cracked windows and the ventilation system, into the city outside.

I heard a noise in the next room, but there appeared to be no doorway into it. There was a small hole in the chipped hardboard through which I looked. I saw a large man crouched over a desk, writing. He was in a grey suit, but his head was veiled in shadow. A vase of flowers stood on his desk.

An intercom in the waiting room crackled. It was uXamu. His voice lulling and seductive.

‘Mr Leveza?’

‘Yes.’

‘I invited you to thank you.’

‘To thank me?’

‘Yes, you have been of good service to us.’

‘Service?’

‘Yes, a valued emissary. And most valuable; you have never asked anything from the Ministry. You’ve been doing the work pro bono, so to speak.’

‘You are a liar. I have never even spoken to you.’

Over the intercom came laughter. But it was barely human, merely the hissing of static.

‘You seem, Mr Leveza, to think that your intentions have some sway here. But it is nothing to do with what you wish, or what you intended. All that matters is what you are, and what you have done.’

‘And what is that?’

‘You have been of great help to us. First you helped us greatly in discrediting the opposition media, for which you worked.’

I felt a chill. I thought back to the cache sent to me two years back. They had all the markings of authentic government documents – evidence of rogue intelligence units within the state. I had written the stories as a scoop, as front-page scandals. A minister and his staff were fired as a result. But the reports were false. The world was changing. The old methods of fact- and source-checking no longer held ground. Images, watermarks, electronic trails, email chains, and voice recordings could now be easily forged. The frontiers of truth were dissolving, becoming unmoored and easy to manipulate. I had wondered since then who was behind the leak. But I also wondered how I had become so disoriented, and how I had lost – perhaps irretrievably – my ground.

‘Your initial reporting on the movement,’ the voice over the intercom continued, now distorted ‘and on this creature you call Isiwa was of great help to us. Your notes on *its* meetings and who was in attendance were very valuable intelligence.’

‘But those were private. I never published any of that.’

‘That is of no matter. Your cell phone and computer records were kindly shared with us. Without them we could not have arrested the leaders. We could not have broken up the occupation so easily. We would have no evidence against that thing.’

A chill ran through me. It was as if my last remnants of heat dissipated into the water.

‘And you helping save Sita was so sanctimonious. It showed such moral clarity to turn the other cheek after what she did to you.’ The voice was now almost a whisper. ‘But most valuable, Leveza, was leading us to one of the leaders behind the rebellion, that thing’s mother. You were of course naïve to think she was uninvolved, and not implicated in the uprisings. As you should have known, if you had even read your own work, she is very well connected. She

was once part of our Movement, but is now, how do we say, an enemy of the state. Your tenderness and concern were so well performed.'

I hammered against the board furiously. I no longer had any control. I melted into pure rage.

'Really, Mr Leveza, there is no need for such a performance.' The voice went silent. I continued assaulting the partition. And then I heard some voices behind me. The short man in the beret was at the door with two other larger men. Wordlessly, as if my decomposing body were merely an instrument, the beating began. And as my consciousness turned inwards, becoming merely a ball of pain, I noticed that there was a third figure standing in the doorway. I had seen him before, though it took me a few moments to recognise him. It was Noah Cabral.

That evening, with the electricity on, the old elevator in my apartment block groaned into motion. In the dark of my closed and bloated eyes, atolls of pain surfaced. When I drew my attention to them, they were dimly recognisable as my organs – my liver, kidneys, intestine, heart – but these forms no longer seemed demarcated by the frontiers of skin; they flowered nerve-lines of coloured light that extended around me.

The opening of the metallic doors drew me back to the outside, and I hobbled to the entry of my apartment, struggling to retrieve my keys from my jacket pocket and open the door. Dom Pedro was waiting in the passageway and circled my legs, tripping me. I lay a while on the wooden floor and the old cat curled into the crevice between my neck and chin, purring, the vibrations resonating in my cavities of bone and soft tissue.

After a while I clambered up. I turned the kettle on, gave Dom Pedro biscuits, and when the kettle whistled, the whistle of a distant train, I made a herbal tea and went into the living room. The space now was almost entirely covered in anemones. I opened the windows and the eels of ink slithered inside. They had followed me here, living and lithe words, once my own

but now with their own life. I reached out to touch one and a charge of electricity pulsed through my arm. I recoiled.

I lay down on the couch and turned on the television set, wanting to take advantage of the electricity to distract, any way possible, from the pain. The only channels that remained were on the state television services – a deluge of misinformation, telenovelas, fluff and lies. On the news, were images of the army and police quelling the uprisings throughout the city, of tanks and riot police cordoning off large areas, while the news anchor reported on how law and order was being returned to the urban peripheries. The reels were repetitive, some clearly re-used from archives. But then the corner of the screen lit up with Breaking News.

The voice of the anchor, detached and emotionless, read from the teleprompter: the house of one of the leaders of the rebellion, one of the Mothers of the Drowned, a prominent cult and conspiracy theorist group, was attacked by community members and set alight. The screen turned to drone footage circling a neighbourhood. Within the grid of houses was a conflagration: the fire swayed and spiralled, surrounded by police cars and a fire engine spraying a plume of froth into the flame. The drone zoomed in, its mic catching the sounds of cracking brick and paint hissing, and from within the chaos I got a glimpse of a flowerless bed of roses and blooming hibiscus.

The drone image switched perspectives to a street view. A crowd had gathered around the police barriers encircling the house. It had begun raining but the multitude was still and did not move away. The rain fell on the burning house, it fell even though it could not fall, on these flames which burned even though they could not burn.

Two fireman emerged from the house carrying a body. Their red uniforms were covered in charcoal clouds, but the white robe of the woman they carried was unburnt, unblemished. And after the firemen left the crumbling edifice, another figure appeared in the doorway – a figure in blue, wearing a necklace of shells, her face behind a veil of pearls that glistened with

tears, that glistened like stars in the haze of smoke. The figure wore a blue robe which should have been burning, but did not burn, and watched – as if unseen by the police and paramedics – the now lifeless body that was placed in the ambulance.

As the crowd parted to allow the ambulance to leave, she walked past the police barricade, and followed the ambulance that bounced slowly over the sandy and potholed street, that bounced like a ball slowly coming to rest. The crowd that gathered around the house followed her, and as she began to sing, her voice a lament, the crowd sang too. Then the image cut back to the studio.

I turned off the television. I coiled into myself, into a foetal position. Dom Pedro came and curled up with me, the old cat wheezing, his own body failing. It was dark now, but I could not move. I seemed now a very small thing, not quite a body, but a kind of marble of pain: a glass skin inside of which was a cavity in which nothing could live, except ancient creatures and seaweed, life forms that have learnt to live without light.

After some time, I could not tell how long, whether minutes or hours, all time was corroded, I displaced Dom Pedro from his place of rest, his head upon my chest, and went to the book shelf. There, I found a book I was looking for, a volume bound in a blue material hardcover, an old anatomy textbook that had been my own mother's, and was the only thing that I still had from her. The pages were blistered yellow and stained with water, and I could not recall how the marks had been made. Decades were washing into each other; I perused these pages, the ink drawings of dissected bodies and their labels, this terrible taxonomy of life and lifelessness. I recalled how as a child I would go over these diagrams for hours, tracing the lines of the thyroid and parathyroid glands, the thymus gland, the lungs, the liver, the stomach, the pancreas, the adrenal glands, the spleen, the kidneys. I had thought that perhaps if I looked closely enough into myself, into my own body, I could find the place of absence, the door through which my mother had disappeared.

Chapter twelve

And so the mourning begins. The crowds gather in the street below. They pool together in the formerly-occupied Freedom Square, now razed and barren. On its outskirts are piles of cloth and wood torn apart by bulldozers. Intimate objects – pillows, notebooks, pans, lamps, underwear – are still scattered everywhere. But absent now is the white tent filled with bodies, absent now are the market women with their cast-iron pots, absent now the whales bearing witness. Although it is late afternoon, dense clouds cover the square and it is almost dark.

From throughout the city, lines of people, some singing, some silent, march towards the square. As I watch from my balcony, the apartment lights begin to pulse, illuminating the dead insects in the plastic lampshade as if in a stop-motion animation. And in the city too, the lights pulse, on and off, as if they were the surging and waning of a collective organism. Amid the convulsions of the lights, the crowd raises their cell phones, at first moving in unison, moving westwards as a single body, and then they split into small groups heading off in divergent directions, evading the police roadblocks and then rejoin one another.

The bodies gather, they press against one another, forming a mitochondrial mass, a being both singular and multiple, a being that breathes – the inhalation is collective, and the creature exhales song, an old hymn rising from the terrain in a gravelly voice, a voice with the texture of a vast burnt lung, a voice resonating in swollen lymph glands and constricted throats, but circling, circling, circling, a spiral outwards, a vacancy taking form.

As the crowd converges on the square, they part to allow a vehicle through. It is a long, white hearse, and I know instantly the body inside it, a body now cold and embalmed, its fires, its tenderness and fury, its books and telenovelas and football games, its rage and nurture, all of its enfleshed hope and sorrow now distilled into a mask of skin and wood – or perhaps

transmuted into the ocean's grammar, the ocean's flesh, the ocean's lung, the ocean's liver and a single thought: rebellion.

As the coffin is unloaded from the car, a line of mourners dance and swirl around the stained wood. They move both with military precision and the sensuous twists of samba, a movement of both control and freedom, pressing against each other, into the same body, their battles overflowing the borders of skin. And I cannot see, but I imagine their tears become sea water, or perhaps the sea water tears.

I lift my eyes from the square and to the lake beyond and see a larger formation moving across its surface, a bulbous thing forming vast eddies of blue, canopies of purple, splitting waves of white.

The formation is immense, irregular, its centre moving away and then turning inwards into a labyrinth of darkening cloud. It stretches across the plains on the city's peripheries and circles the coal power station. The storm seems to subsume the power of the entire city, and then the lights begin to go out. First, they do so in the forested suburbs on the outskirts and then the power failure moves inwards as the storm enters the inner city.

My visibility from the apartment windows almost disappears and a web of lightning and noise surrounds me. Dom Pedro hides beneath the bed. As the storm arrives, the mourners in Freedom Square scatter to find shelter in the hollows of old warehouses, beneath bridges, in the homes of those who open their doors. They abandon the coffin in the square.

I watch the storm swirl below and I can see its form etched in greys and dark blue: it has the shape of an ear, an almost human ear.

In the days after the storm, the only contact I have is with Dom Pedro. He struggles on although his energy is fading. He spends most of the time in bed with me, his kidney disease worsening.

His breath is rank but his spirit, if that is the word, strong – he still purrs with a bone-healing growl.

I try to call Saron repeatedly, but his phone is off. One morning, I decide to check in on him. I go next door and knock on his door but there is no reply. I feel a sense of emptiness and try avoid the thoughts that come to me. To pass the time, I make coffee and smoke a cigarette and watch the city below, taking mental notes of the ruination. In the days that follow, in the few hours of the day when we have electricity, I log into the internet and gather the news articles that drip through the webs of state censorship. From these fragments, I weave a rough image of the storm's aftermath.

The disaster destroyed the wealthy lakeside condominiums, whose barbed-wire coils have been lifted and scattered in the air as if they were merely the seeds of dandelion. Yachts were dashed upon the banks, their masts now rising like flag-poles from the sand. During the storm, the plague of drowning spread through the middle classes and elites of the city, whose children and animals were left floating in swimming pools, or even drowned in their beds or kennels. For the first time, the state and mainstream media used the term: drowned.

But they were not the only victims: the shacks and boats and bodies of the fishermen were smashed into shards of wood, corrugated iron and flesh. Only fifty or so families of a once large community survived. The storm flattened a swathe of forest and filled in the mine shafts. Avalanches of rock crushed many of the artisanal miners and their settlements were razed. The winds petered out as they entered the city, slowed by a fortress of high-rises, but one of these buildings, poorly built, had collapsed killing hundreds of families within it. The storm snaked through the streets carrying with it the wares of the market women.

All this I learned from the internet and television, and from Zé's reporting on the aftermath. I read in one of Zé's pieces that he was among the mourners. When the storm

subsided, they returned to the square to see if they could find Nkosazana's body. But it had disappeared. There was no trace either of the pine coffin. Search parties went through the streets, searching for survivors and also gathering the bodies of the dead to find their families, but the body was not found.

One day my phone buzzes.

'Is this Lüderitz?' a gruff, almost unrecognisable voice says.

'Yes. *Isiwa*?'

'Yes.'

'Are you ok?' I ask. 'I did not expect to hear from you again.'

'I have been in prison for months. I have lost my mother. Should I answer that?'

'I'm sorry.'

'Lüderitz, listen. There has been an agreement and political prisoners are to be released. With the state of emergency lifted, political prisoners are being released. I will be out tomorrow.'

I pause a moment. 'I'm glad Isiwa. But why are you calling me?'

'My mother said you have something for me.'

'She spoke to you?'

'Yes ... on the day ... on the day ...using her connections ... she called.'

'On the day she ...'

'Yes.'

'No, I can't.'

'You have to. It was her last promise to me.' I remain silent. 'Meet me outside the courthouse tomorrow at 9 am.'

'Why not settle in first?' I say.

‘I don’t know what that means.’

‘Take some time to rest.’

‘No. I need to leave the city. And I need you to take me.’

‘Why?’

‘It was part of my mother’s request.’

‘I don’t even have a car any more. It was destroyed in the eviction.’

‘Find one.’

‘Where are we going?’

‘To the coast.’

‘Why?’

The line goes dead.

Later in the day, I hear a knock on the door. I summon the energy to go and open. It’s Saron. I hug him close. ‘I was worried about you. That you had disappeared in the storm.’

‘I was worried about you too. I was visiting my mother when the storm hit, and we had no electricity or internet.’

‘My hope was that you had left with the others.’ Since the storm, lines of cars and people on foot have been leaving the city, searching for higher ground. Rumour has it that there are still areas of the country that are, so to speak, high and dry. Others claim there is no safe ground any longer.

‘Are you ok?’

‘Saron, how do I put this?’ I say. ‘I am barely here anymore.’

‘Come, let me take you to breakfast, the market is open again.’

‘Let’s take a drive through the city first.’

We drive in his old blue hatchback through wealthier suburbs. Streets have been cleared of fallen branches. A neon cross lies fallen on the sidewalk. Bouquets of plastic flowers mark the sites where some died. And the jacarandas that still stand are filled with purple flowers.

The corrugated-iron roof of the municipal market has been torn apart. But the market women have begun to return to reclaim and repair their stalls, as they always have and always will. With brooms, they beat away the sand sharks that sniff around the wreckage looking for entrails, and they hush away the packs of suburban dogs that have escaped their prisons during the storm and are feasting on rotting steaks fallen from overturned ice boxes and fridges.

We order crêpes at the stall beside the fig tree. There is no cheese or honey, but the crêpes are warm and fluffy. As we eat, I watch the roots of the tree protruding from the paving, breaking it apart. Since I was last here, the roots have spread as if the tree is retaking its domain. In its branches sits a toucan radiating reds and yellows in the sun.

‘It is time for me to leave this city,’ I say to Saron.

‘I know, my friend, I know,’ Saron says.

‘How do you know?’

‘Because if you stay here you will die.’

‘I need to ask a favour.’

‘You need the car?’

‘Yes, I will pay for it.’

‘It’s ok. Take it. I have no use for it anymore.’

‘Shall we have a last game of chess?’

‘Come to my place this evening, I have some chores to do now. While I still have the car.’

I walk from the market to the newspaper office. It is mid-afternoon now, and I imagine the office will be full. But I no longer care what the staff think of me. When I arrive, though, I see that the roof of the building has been damaged by the storm. There is only a security guard outside. He is suspicious of me, of my faded clothes, my overgrown beard, the bird's nest of hair over a balding head. I explain to him I was staff here and I need to collect some documents. Eventually, after some persuasion, he disappears and returns with a young man, an intern I guess, whom I have never seen. When he sees me, he just shakes his head.

‘I’m Lüderitz Leveza,’ I say.

‘I know who you are. Why are you here?’

‘I need to collect my documents.’

He gazes at me with suspicion. ‘Ok,’ he says. ‘But don’t be long. Since the storm everyone’s working from home, and I’m leaving soon.’

Inside is a mess. There are still pools of water and some of the filing cabinets have been knocked over by the wind. The intern helps me overturn one, and in it I find what I’m looking for. An old box, sealed with tape, with my name on it. I open it and it is mainly full of old notebooks. I take these and fling them out of the broken windows. They fall, fluttering, onto the lake’s surface and float around in the oily film. I keep only one folder.

‘I need to speak to Sita,’ I say to the intern.

‘Why?’

‘That’s nothing to do with you.’

‘Well she’s not in, I will give her the message.’

‘Forget it.’

I leave and in the street try to call her on the last number I have but there is no answer. I send her a message but it remains unread. Instead, I walk the twenty minutes to her apartment

block. I arrive at the building, an eight-storey covered with small blue tiles. I ring the bell and there is no reply. I ring again several times and eventually there is an answer.

‘Yes?’ Sita says.

‘It’s me, Lüderitz.’

‘Hi,’ she says wearily. ‘What are you doing here?’

‘I need to see you.’

‘I’m not feeling well, can we make it another time?’

‘Sita, it’s the last time I will ask anything of you. It’s the last time you will see me.’

She pauses a long while, and sighs. ‘Ok, come up.’

She opens the door to her seventh-floor apartment. Her face is sombre and she appears drained. She is wearing a blue silk dressing gown, embroidered with gold. As she signals for me to come in I catch the scent of her perfume which smells of jasmine. For a moment I am ushered back into the past, all those years back, and feel something like a sense of arousal which quickly dampens.

Her apartment is open plan and adorned with sculptures and prints. The sea seems not to have entered it. All is clean and dry, without corrosion. A stick of incense burns on the book shelf. She has a water feature made of copper lotus flowers. I look at Sita, as if anew, and am reminded of her beauty, the radiance, beneath the cloud of fatigue.

‘How are you doing?’ I ask her.

‘I’m recovering,’ she says. ‘Thank you for helping Zé find me.’

‘It’s ok, I’m glad you’re safe.’

‘Why are you here? Are you looking for me to return the favour somehow?’

‘No. I am leaving the city.’

‘When?’

‘Tomorrow.’

‘To go to your island paradise?’

‘Who know, perhaps, I can’t say.’

‘And what do you want from me?’

‘I need some forms signed,’ I say. ‘I’m signing over the benefits of my pension and life insurance if anything happens to me. As my line manager I need you to sign.’

Sita gazes at me a while. A small expression, almost of empathy, crosses over her face, but then the blank gaze is restored. ‘To whom?’

‘To Isiwa and Saron.’

‘Ok. Well, let’s get this done.’

I take out the documents. They are sodden, creased with water stains. I have had them since my divorce but could never make the changes. I fill in the forms and give them to her. She signs.

‘So that’s it,’ she says. ‘Is that all?’

‘My resignation. I’m no longer disputing the dismissal.’

‘I see. We have a standard letter, will that do?’

‘Yes,’ I say.

She prints out the letter from her desk with a lake view and we sign.

‘Is that now all, Lüderitz?’ Sita says. She sounds tired.

‘I wanted to say thank you.’

‘For what?’

‘For not abandoning me. For remembering.’

She nods.

‘And I wanted to say sorry.’

‘For what?’

‘For being led astray. Being used. I was not careful. But I was also right in the end about some things.’

‘Like what?’

‘The sea.’

‘So you’ve come for vindication?’

‘No, Sita, it’s far too late in the day for that.’

I turn to leave. But as I am walking away, I hear a door open. I turn and there is a man in the door in his boxer shorts. I am struck by how the light falls on the muscles spreading from his diaphragm and his tattooed biceps. I have seen him before, although never really seen him, never noticed his beauty, and, as I do now, his presence there in the apartment makes complete sense; the surprise passes quickly, as if this is something I have known for some time but chose not to see. In the beauty of his and Sita’s bodies a barricade forms around me, a barricade between the present and a past which has all but ejected me. It is Zé.

‘You think it’s so easy, Lüderitz?’ he says calmly.

‘What is so easy?’

‘You think you can just come here and repair the damage that you have done by signing a piece of paper. You think your name on a paper is so powerful it can heal the wound.’

‘And what wound is that Zé?’

‘Isiwa has been dying in prison, subject to who knows what violations, and now they are without a mother.’

‘And what have I got to do with that, Zé?’

‘You know very well. Isiwa warned you not to go to Nkosazana’s house. I warned you not to go. But did you listen? No. I don’t think you’ve ever really listened. All those thousands of interviews you’ve done, but you’ve never really learned to listen have you? You think I

don't have my sources? You think I don't know you were there on the morning they killed Ma?'

'I never wished her any harm. I only wanted to get her to help Isiwa. And anyway, Zé, do you really think that whoever did this did not know where she lived? You think they didn't have other means of getting to her?' I think of uXamu in his office, at his desk, and I imagine him, for a moment, with my face.

'Who knows, who knows?' Zé says. 'But you put her at risk. When we went to the reefs, I thought I saw something good still in you. But now I know that you're too far gone for that. You're irreparable Lüderitz. Get the fuck out of here.'

'Neither of you would be where you are without me, Zé. And Sita might not even be here now. Do you think I wanted this? Do you think I wanted any of this?'

Sita went and put a hand on Zé's arm. 'Leave him,' she says. 'What has happened has happened.' And then she turned to me. 'None of us wanted any of this, Lüderitz. Who know how we got here, and who knows how we find a way out. I wish you peace on your journey. Good bye.'

Instead of going down the main stairwell, I take the fire escape. I think of Sita so many years ago, of her tempting me up the fire escape at the club, and how afraid I was of it. And as I descend, my palms dry, I suddenly realise something. I am no longer afraid.

Walking through the streets I feel a strange peace. I walk for hours until night arrives. It is a clear evening beneath the stars, and the streets are mostly empty except a few night bars; I learn from watching the television screens through the windows, and catching snatches of conversation, that the state of emergency has been lifted. Patrons sit at tables drinking and smoking as if everything that has happened was just a temporary abeyance of reality, and they will go home chatting, and make love, and wake in the morning and for a moment they will

think, yes, the nightmare has passed, thank God, it has passed, before they realise that they are still in it, that there is no escape, that this is our world now.

And as I move through the streets I feel insubstantial, only a few odd scraps of memory and flesh, a sweet packet dragged along in the wind. The streets, with their broken signs and smashed windows, their piles of garbage, seem absolutely clean, glistening, weightless and dirtless, everything in place as it should be. Cleansed by the deluge.

Saron's apartment is strewn with piles of books and papers. Each time I visit, it seems the disorder in the apartment grows. He makes us coffee in an espresso machine, the rubber handle missing. The gas flame burns pale blue.

'Is it not too late for coffee, Saron?' I ask.

'The longer we can keep away the nightmares the better now. Insomnia is a gift.'

I accept the cup. The arabica is delicious and only slightly acidic.

'My pension gets less and less each month,' he tells me, 'but I will be gone before I buy instant coffee.'

'I don't mind it,' I tell him. 'It reminds me of many things, my childhood, old union meetings.'

'Better forget them then.'

We go outside to the balcony. The chess set awaits us. We sit beside the board and sip on the black brew. We watch the army trucks in the street below. There are occasional skirmishes – soldiers fire tear gas or rubber bullets at pedestrians.

'Did you see the news?' Saron asks.

'Only in passing.'

'uXamu has announced the end of the state of emergency. But the army has grown accustomed to their abuses. Violence so easily becomes a habit, hard to throw off.'

‘And what now?’

‘There will be a Commission. An investigation into the causes and possible solutions.’

‘Of what?’

‘The sea.’

‘What is there to write or say?’

‘Perhaps nothing,’ he says, ‘but the investigation will pass the time.’

‘Until what?’

‘Who knows?’ Saron says. ‘It’s not really up to us any more to say. We are no longer young, Lüderitz. Once we had voices that might have mattered, and we tried to make them heard, in our ways. Imperfectly. And in moments we *were* heard, by some at least. We had one or two things to say. But now? There is wisdom in age, I suppose, but not the energy anymore to share it. And anyway we were always missing something, weren’t we? A language, a vision.’

‘And so what’s to become of us?’

‘Nothing. A slow leaking. We become swollen with life, and then it leaks out.’

I start the game with a queen’s pawn. The moon is half full and the stars leak light in a saline haze.

‘And the sea,’ I say, ‘what of the sea?’

Saron just shrugs and sips his coffee. The power goes out and we play on in silence in candlelight, neither of us caring any longer who wins or loses, merely comforted by the clicking of the wooden pieces on a wooden board and by each other’s breath, and the mystery that we still breathe.

Later, back in my apartment, I stand on the balcony and watch over the city, perhaps the last time I will do so. How much love and pain lives below, in the multitude of lights, in the myriad gas and paraffin stoves burning, in the livers and hearts, burning, in the grasslands on the

peripheries, the wood stoves, the last remnants of cigarettes, the last remnants of garbage bags gutted by wild dogs, burning, in the hidden files of civil servants, burnt, in the ashes of the buildings ruined in the protests, still burning, in the power station in the distance, ruined and almost abandoned now, but still burning, even though it cannot burn, in the ashes of the crematorium burning the bodies of the drowned.

It is as if the city burns in me, burns in my chest like a brand marking the inside of my skin, a brand made long ago which I could not erase and yet which no one else could see, a brand still burning. All this life, all this labour, all that was discarded here, irreparable, still-born, still, somehow, burning.

On the lake, I see a constellation of lights appearing. They are lanterns held above the water on the fishing boats, and the flames of the lamps form a haze, softly burning, and these lights mix and turn with those reflected off the water's surface, from the stars above. In this halo, the remaining fishing boats gather, boats painted in indigos, hibiscus red, lemon-yellow and each adorned with the names of families or the names of songs. The formation of boats is at first chaotic but slowly they form the shape of an arrow like a flock of birds, a pattern that points towards the lake's outlet and towards the ocean.

I go to the study and get my grandmother's old binoculars, and I return to the balcony. Through the lenses, I can just glimpse – in the boat at the head of the formation – a figure in a robe of blue, a figure with a crown on their head that reflects the starlight. And from the water, a kilometre away, across the valley and the noise of the traffic, I hear sounds, sounds I cannot hear, but hear, voices I cannot not decipher but make out. I hear the song that the fishermen often sing to each other, the song that Nkosazana sang that night only months back but what seems like years ago. And the words which should have been lost in the water, find me, a choir of voices that arrives with the strumming of mandolins.

I feel a brushing of my arm and Dom Pedro is now nuzzling into me. He makes a sound to me but his voice is almost gone, only a squeak comes out; his breath smells of kidney failure. I draw him to me and hold his matted fur, his fading body, and from it comes a deep purr, a hum which resonates in my chest and my bones, as I hold him to me. I close my eyes, feeling his failing breath, but then he struggles free and starts to chatter. I look up and swimming past the balcony is a shoal of sardines. There are thousands of them and they move together and break apart, as if in play, like a murmur of starlings. Their scales reflect the city fires, the still burning buildings below, and the starlight above. They move like a single organism, like a single flame.

Dom Pedro chatters, his tail rising. Then he arches his back, his furry paws clutch the balcony railing, and he leaps. I grab at his tail, but he quickly slips away, swimming in the shoal of fish, snapping at some of the smaller ones which writhe in his jaws and devouring them. As I watch him move away, he feeds himself well, but carries on paddling and swimming with all his strength to keep pace, until the shoal moves beyond his grasp; I call and call but he keeps swimming, swimming across the tops of the buildings, between the radio and television towers, until he is merely a blot in the night air, a child's balloon, a soap bubble, floating towards an already receded paradise.

Chapter thirteen

Isiwa stumbles on the steps of the court but manages not to fall. They are far thinner than when I last saw them. Braids gone now, head shaved, their face a stark outline of what appears to be bruising: clouds of purple on earthy skin. A small cohort of journalists surround them taking photographs, Zé among them.

The media had been returned their freedoms. The previous night uXama, in a press statement read by his secretary on national television, while announcing the lifting of the state of emergency, had established a Commission into the unexplained deaths by drowning. The agreement had been negotiated with the now leader and spokesperson for the protests, Noah Cabral. The Commission would be led by a judge of the Supreme Court and comprised a cross-party committee of parliamentarians, along with elected members of civil society. As part of the agreement, political prisoners were to be released as long as they refrained from any formal political activity. Isiwa was free to go.

‘I’m sorry,’ Isiwa says to the journalists, ‘I am still ... grieving ... I have ... no words. My language, you know, has been stolen. My mother has taken my words, my song, my heart.’ Isiwa falls into Zé’s arms, and he holds them a long while, caressing the rough stubble of their head.

I watch this from the parking lot gate. Isiwa looks up and sees me, and nods. The journalists drift off and Isiwa comes towards me, slowly, holding Zé’s arm for strength. They both stand in front me.

‘Why don’t you come home with me,’ Zé says. ‘Why go with him?’ He does not look at me.

‘I can’t stay in this city any longer, Zé. I need to go to the coast to heal.’

‘But why with him? I could take you.’

‘No. You need to be here. Your work is here.’

‘There is no escape, Isiwa. The sea is everywhere now.’

‘I know.’

‘There are many others who could take you, why him?’ Zé persists.

‘When I was in prison my mother called,’ Isiwa says. ‘She told me that she was in danger, but that she had something for me, and that Lüderitz had it with him.’ Isiwa turns now to me and looks at me.

‘I can give it to you here, Isiwa,’ I say, ‘I have done enough damage.’

‘No. My mother said that we needed to go to the coast.’

‘He could be dangerous,’ Zé says, ‘we do not know who he really is, and who he’s working for. He was seen visiting uXamu.’

‘Zé, my old friend. Lüderitz, like me, is no longer of use to anyone. Anyway, I like his company. His self-pity makes me laugh.’

‘Zé,’ I say, ‘I’m sorry. I should have listened to you.’

‘So listen to me now, Lüderitz,’ Zé says, ‘Destroy your laptop and your phone. Do not take anything with you. Just take Isiwa and go. And drive safely. Take this if you need help.’ He gives me a phone.

I go to the car, take out the rucksack I packed and leave it beside the garbage. I take my laptop and give it to Zé.

‘Your phone?’ he asks.

‘Just a second.’ I send a file from my old phone to the new and then hand it to him.

‘Have a safe journey,’ Zé says, hugging Isiwa, the tears on their cheeks blending into a soft film of light.

‘And Lüderitz?’ Zé says.

‘Yes.’

‘Thank you for helping find Sita. Take care of Isiwa.’ He turns away from us.

I help Isiwa into the car. We take a ramp onto the highway and pass the inner city, the high-rises now shimmering with shoals of fish. Around the fallen arches of Freedom Square grow forests of kelp. We drive past the mine dumps, past the lake, into the open stretches of land and the city’s peripheries; we drive past the petrol stations and fast-food restaurants, and everywhere there are groups of people, carrying bags and walking towards the coast. As we leave the city boundaries, we drive up a hill with a viewpoint for tourists. I park the car and get out.

‘Why are we stopping?’ Isiwa asks.

‘I just need a moment,’ I say.

I look out onto the lake and see it warmed by the sun of memory.

It was a spring day like today. Sarah and I had spent it beside the lake and forest, picnicking. We were burnt out, burnt out from work, from petty fights, from politics, and yet I recall that day with perfect clarity, how we fell asleep in the sun, how our skin touched, how her braids fell over the naked skin of my arm forming a net of shadow; I recall the apples and the salmon, the sour beer and the song of a church choir nearby; I recall how her breath smelled of ash and cannabis, and her neck of perfume, and how she said to me, how lovely it is, these many types of nothing.

And I recall how we took out the kayak, the kayak we had bought for the many trips we planned to make, to the mountains and the sea, which we never made, and which smelled of cardboard, mothballs and fibreglass. Even though we had forgotten the life jackets, and even though a storm was fermenting – a dark cloud on the water’s horizon – we took the kayak out for the first and last time, to capture the water, to capture the last vestiges of the spring sun, still burning.

Standing at the viewpoint, I can see the image as if it were that very day, although I watch it from afar. Sarah and I, two figures on a frail structure paddle across the lake's expanse. I watch us criss-crossing the water, forming a web of white and fading foam; it strikes me how in those moments we rowed in the same rhythm, with the same intent, in the same direction, even though that direction pointed nowhere in particular, only here and there, a zigzag across open water, two burnt-out creatures in search of the spring sun, in search of the forest air, in search of each other's breath smelling of ash and cannabis; above us the seagulls cried, seagulls far from the coast, and, now, they seem to augur some unknown future, but then they were just strangers like us, strangers to the water, strangers to the spring sun, burning, ash and cannabis, mere lines of light on the water's skin. As the storm and the winds moved in, the ripples of the water rocked the boat, and we laughed together as we turned to the shore, we laughed thinking that the water would hold us, that it would hold that love, still burning, that it would hold our ashes as we fell apart; we turned towards the shore and made it back before the storm came. We thought we were safe, but it was only a temporary reprieve: the water would return and overwhelm us.

The images fade and I watch them dissolve as if they were nothing more than ash, still burning.

I feel a hand on my shoulder.

'We must go,' Isiwa says, 'it's a long journey, and we have another stop to make.'

After driving for another hour, we enter a landscape reeking of sulphur, near an old slimes dam veiled in mist. The sun has gone now, as if suddenly swallowed, and a gentle rain falls which cannot fall; it falls on the rank and sulphuric coal fields, cleansing the black dust from the plant's lungs; the dark grey expanse leaks rivulets of ash. The rain falls on the barbed wire

fences washed away from their guard posts by the storm; their wire webs, seemingly as slight as silk, glisten.

‘Turn here,’ Isiwa says, pointing to an offramp off the highway.

‘Why?’

‘There is something I would like to see.’

I turn and drive along the road past these fields of burnt carbon towards the power station. The concrete chimneys, one collapsed inwards, form sculptural silhouettes in the haze. From a distance, a few lights burn through the mist, lights which cannot burn but burn, as the turbines are now stilled. And these lights illuminate the immense industrial architecture which appears now less a site of generation than an ossuary – a grid of steel and concrete, black reservoirs, the intricate assemblages of pipes.

The guardhouse is vacated; now molluscs rule these frontiers, their dark shells like a thousand eyes blooming into fibrous flesh. We pass the broken boom, the wire fences oxidised, fragile as thread; we pass the gardens where the bougainvillea still spread their purple through clouds of green algae; we pass the staff quarters where prefabricated houses crack and crumble, their visible interiors – upholstered furniture, framed pictures of people and deities, wi-fi routers and laptops, wooden sideboards, pressure cookers – now archives of a rotting world.

We park the car. The rusted shells of SUVs glare at us with malevolence; their paint is popped and they exude soft tongues of brake fluid and petrol. I get out of the car but Isiwa remains inside a while.

The sliding glass doors of the office block are open, the cameras above them stare out on the vacant lot. Isiwa gets out of the car, shrugging off my support. I watch them move slowly now, on the point of falling, and I reach towards them to help, but they move away from me, ever away, out of touch, out of contact; the lot seems an infinite expanse; I call to them, wait, wait, just a little while, let us walk together, just a little while, and they turn towards me and

summon me with an arm tattooed with black lightning; they open their lips to speak but all that rolls off their tongue is soap bubbles which float around me, forming tender constellations, before, one by one, they burst — the sea cracking as if a large edifice is breaking open.

Isiwa crouches down and when they stand, their eyes are bloodshot. The lampshade in the entry flickers on and off like a strobe light in a club and they appear to me less a solid form than as a series of disparate moments which I weave together into the semblance of a silhouette.

They hold out a hand to me, and I see that around their fingers is coiled the spiky form of a starfish. Its fingers move gently and musically, and then they let it go and it floats past me.

‘The renewal,’ they say, smiling.

‘Of what?’ I say.

‘Of the things we can never speak.’

The words sound odd to me, the sibilance and roundness resonant of a distant time. I follow Isiwa up a long passage, dripping with a gentle light which cannot fall but falls and runs in rivulets down the white-tiled floor. I should turn away but the drive in me is incessant; I feel as unable to turn away as to stop my own heart from beating, my liver from purifying fat, my lungs from breathing. I watch the soft sway of their form, its bruised musicality and arched spine, sauntering the bare passage as if it were a catwalk.

I follow them up the stairs to a row of offices. The doors of each of them are open revealing their gutted interiors: overturned filing cabinets, boardrooms scattered with coffee cups and projector screens, rotten bowls of fruit. At the end of the passage are a series of computers but no staff. On the screens are lines of spreadsheets and code – endless lines of numbers and symbols.

We walk from the office building across a long steel bridge leading past the turbines. Below us are ash pools covered by a brown-red haze of algae. We walk along the metal thoroughfares above the intricate mesh of green piping and steel, past the large khaki-green

rectangular roofs of the interior buildings and into the vast inner structure of the one of the cooling towers.

The cylinder spirals above us, within a large orb of metal tubing, silent now – an old industrial temple to a now vacant godhead.

On the interior walls of the cooling tower, white fingers of coral coil upwards like ghostly hands. Each intricate bone-white tendril seems to writhe, their millions of polyps pulsing towards the summit: a large halo of light forming a circle around grey sky.

Suddenly the light begins to darken, as if there were an eclipse. A black form surfaces from the centre of the cooling tower, rising up towards its mouth and the light all but vanishes, and then it reopens, and the dark form takes shape like the spokes of a bicycle wheel.

Above us hovers a giant octopus. Its head is like the cupola of an ancient building, rounded and perfectly formed. Behind this head sway its tentacles, billowing like sheets in the wind. The mammoth form pulses, contracting and swelling, moving towards the distant sun – a glutinous night.

‘Let’s go now,’ Isiwa says. ‘I want to get to the coast before it’s dark.’

The journey takes us into the mountains and into the late afternoon sun. Isiwa guides the way, away from the main road to the coast, away from the trucks and the minibuses filled with people, away from the lines of pedestrians hiking up the road’s elbow and the encampments that have formed along the way, away from the white crosses marking the moments of death, and onto a sand road; the blue hatchback hobbles and spits sand but draws itself higher and higher until we reach the crest of the mountain and beneath us is the ocean. It spreads out perfectly clear, except for the rough froth on a black beach below us, drawing in the afternoon sun. We stop the car a while.

‘Look,’ Isiwa points. ‘Whales.’

I follow their finger and in the ocean below, perhaps only 50 metres from the shoreline, grey figures emerge from the water, spouting fountains of grey light; the figures appear and disappear, immense forms that from this viewpoint are no more substantial than pebbles skimmed across the water by children.

‘Let’s go see them,’ Isiwa says.

I weave the car down the mountainside. Sheep and cattle are chewing on cuds of grass, rusted barbed wire fences demarcate various patches of nothing in particular, and large lungs of purple cosmos blossom across the incline. We weave amid the pine trees and wild flowers, the pine cones popping softly as we ride over them, the afternoon sun needling its way through rough branches and through the dusty window of the car, and we descend, as if carried along by an invisible avalanche towards the water’s edge. It seems that everything is in its right place, that the sea has retreated, for a while at least, to its rightful frontiers.

At the bottom of the hill, we park the car in an empty lot and cross a wooden bridge, scrawled with graffiti, over the wetlands. A family swims in a pool of water. We drink from the plastic water bottles we bought from a petrol station on the journey and take off our shoes, walking into the dunes.

The sand is warm and soft. And as we walk it starts to rain, although it cannot rain, it rains from a cloudless sky – all that there is above us is its emptiness, an emptiness marked by the misplaced sickle cell of a moon and a declining and delinquent sun. Across the emptiness, moon and sun grapple over the tides like brutal siblings and we can now hear, beneath the songs of sea birds, the sea’s irritable bowels.

The heat and humidity are intense, and we take each other’s arms, our skin wrinkled as raisins; we open our mouths to speak, but only sounds emerge: a kidney song, the braiding of ash and ocean, this want, this grasping impaired by grief: we who are now indifferent to loss, merely memory preserved in brine. The setting sun bleeds shadow.

We stop a moment to look at a web of minute wildflowers, yellows and blues and purples, which grow from the sand, as if alive from sun alone, and they form a minute grid of green lines, sustaining themselves from who knows what source. We pick the thorns from our feet and now, hand in hand, we cross the final dune and the waves open up before us.

In the waves the whales move, their grey ancient heads appear like stone, like ascendant islands, before disappearing, appearing and disappearing; they form, in the rough sea, a phantom archipelago, an uninhabitable place that I long to inhabit. Isiwa and I place, on the black beach, a linen cloth of indigo, and as we do so we are pelted with sand.

‘The sand is aggressive,’ they say, and we draw close to one another, buffeted by the sea winds. We try to speak against the wind, but our words are drowned out; or we can no longer decipher them. Which voice speaks now, perhaps the multiple, perhaps the whales: ancestral polyphony. All these lives: heat dispersed into water. All these memories: heat dispersed into the cold. Which speaks? The sea’s substantive.

Everything ferments. This deadening, a bacterial tundra. A world for a mother’s touch. We the supplicants of rot and grace – the sediment of sea-milk. Offerings in an alien landscape, each as fragile as continents, our breath the incontinent air, braided from salt and ash – organflowers.

The wind blows the cloth against us and we hold it down, clenching the fabric, as if it were a kind of anchor, our bodies pressing against each other. And then the wind quietens and our voices return although we are barely here, barely here at all. The whales have gone now, receded or ascended, to who knows where.

‘Isiwa,’ I say, ‘what happened to you in prison?’

‘No Lüderitz, that is not for your ears, it is no longer your story to tell.’

‘I know,’ I say and am silent a moment. ‘I wanted to say sorry for not listening to you.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘It may have been me that led them to your mother.’

Isiwa is quiet a long while. The wind now is quiet and nearby there are a few shrieks from children, who, evading the shelter of large umbrellas, umbrellas casting black shadows over the black beach, are venturing back into the ocean. A few stray dogs bark and play and a man in a wide-brimmed hat passes by on a horse.

‘You know,’ I say, ‘I wanted to help. I believed in you, and the struggle. I’m sorry for everything that has happened. I realise that as much as I kept running away from this violence, as much as I struggled against it, or thought I could, I kept on running into it. Because it was in me, in me all along.’ They are still silent. ‘Can you forgive me?’

‘I don’t know, Lüderitz. I wish perhaps we had met in another place, another time. We might have been friends, we might have been, I don’t know, something more. You have a good ear. You understand somehow, in spite of yourself, the meaning of song. But right now, it is too late, too late for forgiveness, too late for apologies. It no longer matters what you wanted, what your intentions are or were.’

‘When your mother died, I mourned her as though she were my own.’

‘I believe you. I think beneath all of this, behind all this trouble and violence, you and I share, all of us share, a single mother, one whom we mourn, and to whom we will return.’

‘I still do not understand why some live and some die,’ I say.

‘There are those,’ Isiwa says, ‘who see the sea and cannot live, who drown, and others who survive through the walls they create, even if they are just veils of language. But there are some among us, some who are gathering here now, who can see the sea and yet still live.’

‘And so there is hope.’

‘Yes, Lüderitz, but it is not for you.’

‘I understand,’ I say, ‘but I want to thank you.’

‘For what?’

‘For making me feel something I thought I had forgotten. Something I thought I was no longer able to feel.’

‘And what is that?’

I remain silent. After a while, I take out my phone and open the recording I made that night in their home, the recording of Nkosazana singing the song that Isiwa has been looking for since their childhood, the one that the police, that we, so many of us, had stolen from them. The voice sounds different now, as if renewed, resonating with the ocean, its source as much from the spray of the waves as from the phone in my hand.

The words, once opaque, become clear.

Navigar é preciso,

Viver não é preciso.

To navigate is necessary,

To live is not necessary.

Isiwa, tears in their eyes, places rough palms on my wet cheeks and then their lips on my own. The lips are salty and their tongue in my mouth has the touch of a newly shucked oyster. Then they move their head away, their eyes searching for mine above the apples of their cheeks.

‘Breathe,’ they say.

I breathe and my lungs fill with water. At first I panic, flailing my arm pointlessly in the air and struggling to keep my airway open. But then a calm descends upon me, and I am merely floating. I place my head upon Isiwa’s lap and rest upon the indigo cloth. Isiwa puts their hand upon my chest. On the beach, a family is packing up their things, putting the garbage in plastic bags, and folding up their umbrellas to walk to their car. Wild dogs are playing in the waves. I

watch the waves and, in them, I see surfers, silhouettes sliding down tongues of water, disappearing into the spray of pink and orange evening light.

And then I watch the fishing boats arriving from the lagoon; I seem to almost smell their indigos, hibiscus red, lemon-yellow. The fishing families row slowly, exhausted from the journey and, now diminished, they carry with them no song. Nobody seems to be leading them anymore and the boats begin to scatter in all directions, some dragged by the tides to the shore, others taken out to sea. But the rowers no longer seem to care. Each of them is rather looking up. I too look towards the sky, the clear sky from which the rain falls, although it cannot fall, in which a delinquent sun still burns, although it cannot burn. In the fading light, the stars have begun to appear and a barely visible line arcs across the sky like an inverted rainbow or the horizon of a distant planet. My vision is fading, blotted out by black clouds, but I can just make out what the line is, already receding – land.

Crônicas Atlânticas

Annotations on *Beneath These Saline Stars*



Matthew Wilhelm-Solomon

A uniquely Brazilian form, *crônicas* offered readers free-form writing from writers of all kinds, including poets and novelists ... Although many of her *crônicas* appeared autobiographical, many also seemed to bend the truth; Lispector, who rarely kept even her birthday consistent, felt most comfortable writing about herself when she was allowed to invent and embellish.

Gabrielle Bellot, 'The Tenuous Nonfiction of Clarice Lispector's *Crônicas*'
Paris Review, December 14, 2017

Lüderitz

We drove for hours through the desert. The towns on our GPS proved to be little more than settlements, some seeming abandoned – an empty train or petrol station. The emptiness of the landscape – its dunes like immense waves – produced an orange aura, a metallic sky. It was dark when arrived in the Lüderitz and after some back and forth we found a room to rent.

Lüderitz was an incomplete puzzle: old German-style buildings with facades of dark wood, a Lutheran Church, a few restaurants and warehouses near the port. How had these settlers arrived, so far across the desert, and to what ends?

The town was initially established by the agent of a Bremen merchant called Adolf Lüderitz. Adolf, seeing the potential for mining in the area, successfully petitioned Otto von Bismarck, the Chancellor of the German Empire, to make South West Africa a German protectorate – in doing so he laid the basis for the first genocide of the twentieth century.ⁱ

Lüderitz, the town, when I visited in 2013 with my partner A, was an eerie place. Its mostly empty beaches were hemmed in by barbed wire, protecting the area's diamonds that were dredged from the sea floor. Even the ocean here was not inured to the extractivist impulses of those who came. There was an oyster farm – their flesh fatty and salty, straight from the sea – a German bakery and a Spar, near which a poster advertised a visiting evangelical prophet.

Just out of town, tourists could walk through an old hospital. The sand had washed in here, a deep flood. Undulating and desiccated waves filled the old rooms. On a cliff further down the coast, was a winding pathway to a monument to Vasco da Gama, the fifteenth-century Portuguese explorer who had sailed past this point and whose explorations helped open the way for the European colonisation of Africa and the transatlantic slave trade.

The wind buffeted the point and A danced in it, circling the viewpoint in a kind of rite. We held each other close against the Atlantic winds, nestled behind the stone wall, and drank red wine. How easy it is to find intimacy in the alcoves of atrocity.

One evening we camped on Shark Island, one of the area's tourist sites. With a lookout point adorned with a lighthouse, palm trees and cycads, it is now a campsite and a 'waterfront area'. The campsite veiled a more insidious meaning of the word 'camp'. Shark Island was the site of one of the earliest German concentration camps of the early twentieth century, between 1905 and 1907. The camp, in which at one point over 2000 prisoners were interned, was one of the most horrifying sites of the German genocidal campaign against the Herero, Nama and other indigenous communities. It was a site of mass beatings, the rape of girls, malnutrition and dismal conditions: inmates were exposed in tents to the chilling winds of the Atlanticⁱⁱ.

The island is a crooked-finger of an outcrop extending from Lüderitz – its entry near the local Spar – out into the Atlantic. In the semi-circular alcove from which tourists can gaze over the Atlantic are several memorials. One is etched in sandstone in the shape of a tombstone against an outcrop of rocks. On it is written,

'We commemorate our heroes: Captain Cornelius Fredericks, 1864 - 1907 with 167 women, 97 Women, 66 children. Sons of daughters of the !Ama Community, Bethanie - Namibia'

It was here that Fredericks, the guerrilla leader of the anticolonial rebellion between 1904 and 1907, met his death.

A second memorial is striking in its contrast. It is a plaque, entitled the Klink Plaque, 'In recognition of the courage of Capt. Amir Khan Klink of Brazil when he rowed in the specially designed lifeboat The Paraty across the South Atlantic from Lüderitz'

Klink became a celebrity in Brazil as a result of his transatlantic voyage in a rowing boat, and his subsequent memoir ‘Cem Dias Entre Céu e Mar’ⁱⁱⁱ (Hundred Days Between Sky and Sea) published in 1985. The bestselling volume opens with a quote by the Portuguese poet Fernando Pessoa:

Valeu a pena? Tudo vale a pena
Se a alma não é pequena.
Quem quer passar além do Bojador
Tem que passar além de dor.
Deus, ao mar o perigo e o abysmo
Mas nelle é que espelhou os céu’

‘Was it worth it? Everything worth it?
If the soul is not small
Whoever desires to pass beyond Bojador
Needs to pass beyond pain.
God gave the sea danger and the abyss
But he also made it the mirror of the sky’^{iv}

‘Ceú’ in Portuguese also translates as ‘heaven’. Indeed, Klink’s narrative is filled with barely credible coincidences (meeting a descendent of Adolf Lüderitz in Paraty, among others) that give his journey a sense of an ordained destiny.

Klink, who passed through South Africa on his journey to Lüderitz, makes no mention of either apartheid or that he was arriving in a country in the midst of a war of independence and South Africa’s brutal border war. For him Lüderitz was both a strategic location for his journey, due to its winds and currents pushing offshore, and a ‘magical and mysterious place’ outside of history.

His only attempts at history merely make mention of Adolf Lüderitz and nothing of German colonial history. Perhaps he was infected by the town’s sense of historical amnesia.

At the local bookstore, an old woman who had met Klink personally told us gleefully that he had visited recently. But when I asked her if she had any books on the colonial history of Lüderitz she told us, ‘We don’t speak about those things.’ I also asked if Lüderitz was

affected by the civil war and she told me that it was a distant thing, somewhere across the desert.

A and I camped a night on Shark Island. It was an uncanny experience. We saw a shadowy figure on the rocks below; it seemed some type of feline moving in the dark. The place seemed shadowed by the past. The Atlantic beat against the rocks.

When Klink departed Lüderitz, a friend of his from Paraty, shouted out, ‘Iemanjá’ – the Afro-Brazilian goddess of the sea.

Klink would survive the journey. Adolf Lüderitz, who had also embarked on an Atlantic voyage in 1886, a century earlier, was less fortunate. In his journey along the coast, in search of the entry to the Orange River, his boat vanished into the Atlantic without a trace.

Iemanjá

Iemanjá is a travelling spirit. From the Ogun River in Yorubaland, where she was named Yemonja, the mother of all the orishas^v – Yoruba deities – she voyaged across the Atlantic, along the paths of the slave ships, where, free from the constraints of home she became the queen of the ocean ruling over the Brazilian coastline and the Caribbean Sea. She would change her name too, and become known as Yemanjá and Janaína among a variety of names.

I had never heard of her before I began visiting Brazil with A in 2013, a country that – with South Africa – would become, slowly, my home.

On 2 February we would attend the festival of Iemanjá in Florianópolis, on a beach popular with surfers. Forming a ‘roda’, a circle, groups of women would dance and sing. Those attending, would run into the water, sometimes naked, leaping over seven waves, making seven wishes and throwing offerings of flowers into the water. A and I would offer hydrangea, hibiscus or marigold from our garden. If the flowers were returned to the shore, Iemanjá had rejected the offering.

African in origin, Iemanjá’s race also shifted with the currents. In Florianópolis – an island in the South, within Santa Catarina, the whitest and most conservative state in Brazil – Iemanjá was often represented as white.

The Museu Afro Brasil in São Paulo has a collection of sculptures of Iemanjá. She is mostly represented as a mermaid, frequently with flowing blonde hair. The oldest sculpture dates back to the nineteenth century, a wooden carving of her bare-breasted, her hair long, carrying a fishing net.

In another print, in an image resembling those on the beach cloths of Santa Catarina, she is also represented as white, though with long, flowing black hair, floating over the ocean.

In Brazil even deities were not safe from *brancitude*, the gradual whitening of the country, symbolically at least, and with this the erasure of the transatlantic slave trade, and torture and horrors of the past. However, in the markets of Salvador, the capital of Bahia in the north – the spiritual home of Afro-Brazilian religions – the sculptures of Iemanjá, sold in the public markets, remain Black.

Salvador

I visited Salvador in April 2022, almost a decade later, at the tail-end of the most devastating period of Covid pandemic that had killed almost 700 000 people in Brazil under the ruinous leadership of Jair Bolsonaro. A and I had separated several months before.

On the trip, I went to the house Jorge Amado and his wife, the writer Zelia Gattai, called A Casa do Rio Vermelho, now a museum. The house was still adorned with the decorations of Jorge, who had died in 2001, and Zelia, who had died in 2008. Modest, it was beautifully decorated with Portuguese tiles with the symbol of a mermaid. In the lounge was a large wooden sculpture of Iemanjá represented as a mermaid.

Amado, though rarely read outside of Brazil these days, was one of the most influential Brazilian writers of the twentieth century. In the house, a slide show presents photographs of Amado with many other writers including Gabriel García Márquez and Isabel Allende (with whom he shared socialist sympathies) and some of the most well-known Brazilian musicians. In the early 1990s, José Saramago visited Salvador and met with Amado and almost certainly would have visited the house. But Amado's influence extended well beyond literature. He became an influential figure in Salvador, campaigning for the rights of Afro-Brazilian religions that were criminalised and stigmatised in the early twentieth century. Some of the most powerful Mães-de-santo, the priestesses of Candomblé and Umbanda, would visit Amado at home.

After visiting the house, I wandered down to the coastline. Salvador was one of the earliest and largest slave trading ports on the Atlantic. That evening its violence was hard to fathom: a soft orange and pink light fell over the bay and wooden fishing boats were lined up on the shore. The air smelled of salt and palm oil from the stalls selling acarajé, a local street food that resembles a fattened-up taco, and is made of bean flour and filled with chilli, salad

and shrimp. Along the coast was the Casa de Yemanjá, the home of Yemanjá, its walls adorned with murals of boats, and a sculpture of the deity, figured as a long-haired pale mermaid with a crown.

I went to a small music club, nearby, on the coastline called Casa de Mãe; it was adorned with images of the orishas and various saints. There was a samba show and the opening song was called ‘Malandro também chora’ (‘The malandro also cries’). The malandro is a figure of the Brazilian trickster – the wandering, life-affirming, vagabond who features in many of Amado’s novels. The words sung were:

Malandro, vira otário quando ama
Esperneia e reclama quando perde um grande amor
Chora quando ela vai embora, fica triste e se apavora
E de mal com o seu interior

Malandro, who becomes a fool when he loves
Protests and complains when he loses a great love
Cries when she goes away, feels sad and afraid
And ill inside^{vi}

I was still mourning for the loss of my marriage and yet, that night, something else was stirring. It was there, I think, I began to understand the meaning of samba – its joyful syncopated rhythms that had crossed the Atlantic and moved from Salvador to Rio de Janeiro. It was rebellion against sorrow. In samba, perhaps more than any other musical form, joy and pain co-exist.

Outside, a strange mist had fallen over the bay, mingled with the smoke from cigarettes on the veranda.

A Banda

The dance of suffering and sweetness at the heart of much Brazilian popular culture is expressed in the sambas of Francisco Buarque de Holanda, or simply Chico Buarque.

Buarque, handsome and charismatic, a former football player, a singer and later a novelist of books such as *Budapest* penned his first international hit in 1966, ‘A Banda’.

‘A Banda’ is a song of deceptive simplicity. It’s opening riff on a D6(9) chord is almost silly, carnivalesque and joyous, before the music moves into a complex exchange of seventh and minor chords – in the seventh the sweetness, in the minor, the sorrow.

The lyrics are about a band passing through an unnamed city. Hearing the band singing songs of love, the inhabitants forget their woes – a serious man stops counting his profits, a lighthouse keeper stops boasting to listen, an elderly man forgets his ailments and dances, an ugly girl at her window believes the band is singing for her.

But when the band leaves the town, each are left bereft, each are left alone ‘in their own corner’, and ‘in each corner there is pain.’

‘A Banda’ was one of the favourite songs of the novelist Clarice Lispector. Lispector, who wrote her crônicas for the Brazilian newspaper the *Jornal do Brasil* and other magazines – reflections on an enormous array of subjects from metaphysics, to conversations with her ophthalmologist, a short review of Márquez’ *Hundred Years of Solitude* (‘one of the few bestsellers with great literary value’), and interviews with popular musicians – was clearly taken with the absurdly talented and handsome Buarque, whom she affectionately called by a nickname Xico Buark.^{vii}

They had met in 1968 at a bohemian bar through a mutual friend. Buarque was surprised to see her. Lispector was a celebrity in Rio at the time, primarily due to her crônicas, but was very reclusive.

Buarque described her as ‘exotic’ and ‘very beautiful’ with a presence that rippled through the bar. He had been reading Lispector the day before. ‘Chico is beautiful and shy and sad,’ Lispector wrote at the time. ‘Ah how to give something – what? – that would diminish his sadness?’ She decided to invite Buarque to her house, but one of her sons, intimidated or envious of his celebrity, asked her not to.

Buarque did, however, visit Lispector’s home several times, though he found her intimidating. She would sometimes just stare at him and then leave the room. Once she invited him and the poet, and one of the founders of Bossa Nova, Vinicius de Moraes to supper. Buarque and De Moraes, who had a crush on Lispector, arrived drunk. They spoke banalities for a few hours before Lispector went to bed without giving them supper.

Buarque experienced Lispector as maternal, though her language about him is infused with strains of desire and mischief (once, she intentionally kissed him on the cheeks, leaving lipstick marks, to create trouble with his wife).

Lispector, in one of her 1971 crônicas, documented one of his visits. She described Buarque as a ‘pure and little melancholic.’ She commented on his smile and his open, unsmiling green eyes. ‘He is not a boy (garota),’ she wrote, ‘but if in the animal kingdom there exists a thoughtful and beautiful creature that is called a boy, Francisco Buarque de Holanda would be of this mountainous race.’ Buarque was 27 at the time. Lispector, herself blessed with an eerie beauty and the author of some of the most original books of the twentieth century, was 50 and only 6 years from her death.

At her home, Lispector asked Buarque to compose a new verse of ‘A Banda’ especially for her. She loved the song and would dance to it with her son. Buarque consented, while

Lispector waited in the pantry. Buarque called her back after a few minutes, laughing, and sang her the following verse,

*Como Clarisse pedisse
Um versinho que eu não disse
Me dei Mal
Ficou lá dentro esperando
Mas deixou seu olho olhando
Com cara de Juízo Final*

As Clarice asked
A small verse I've not sung
She made me feel bad
She waited over there
But with eyes watching
With a face of Judgement Day

Buarque told Lispector that for him the most important things in life were work and love. Lispector asked him what love was. 'I don't know how to define it,' he said, 'and you?' 'Me neither,' Lispector answered.

Mar Morto

Likely the first literary invocation of Iemanjá is in Jorge Amado's *Mar Morto*^{viii} ('*Sea of Death*'). Amado completed *Mar Morto* in 1936 in Rio de Janeiro when he was only 23 or 24 years old. For such a young man, the book is written with an astonishing poetic force and ethnographic detail about the lives of 'marinheiros' on the coast of Bahia – seamen who would transport goods across the Bay of All Saints and along the coast in small sailboats called 'saveiros'. Amado documents life on the dock, the sambas and cachaça in seaside bars, relationships intimate with loss and risk.

These marinheiros lived constantly with the threat of death, and were guided in the nighttime by the Lighthouse of the Stars. Frequently they were called to their deaths in the waves by Iemanjá, also known as 'dona Janaína.' Iemanjá was the 'mother of the water.' The bravest among them would also continue to live as stars.

Only those who died at sea could see Iemanjá, and their bodies would never be found. Iemanjá, in Amado's imagining is also blonde, her hair, as she walks or swims naked beneath the waves, often mistaken for moonlight. For the marinheiros, it was sweet 'to die at sea' because they would meet 'the mother of the water who was the most beautiful woman in the world'. It was a curse to be married to these men, for they would likely leave their widows poverty stricken and forced into prostitution.

Iemanjá was the figure of both mother and lover. She, like the ocean, was capricious and jealous. She was both 'mother and wife' and only she knew the desires of the marinheiros and how to console them for their sorrows. The women on the coast would pray to her not to take their men to her underwater kingdom, 'Aiocá'. Amado writes that she was known by five names: 'Iemanjá', 'dona Janaína', 'dona Maria', 'Inaê' and 'Princesa de

Aiocá'. Amado notes that, 'she used to live on the coast of Africa which they say is near the lands of Aiocá' before she moved to the coast of Bahia.

The central story of *Mar Morto* is of the volatile love between a marinhoiro Guma and his wife Lívia. They meet at the festival of Iemanjá, one of Salvador's largest festivals on 2 February each year, where white-robed supplicants enter the ocean to give offerings. And their love is lived under her shadow. In order to avoid poverty, Guma starts transporting contraband silk and one night his boat is dashed against the rocks. Guma survives but returns to the ocean to save the son of the silk-merchant. Amado writes,

The moon appeared and Iemanjá extended her hair around the space where Guma disappeared. And she took him for mysterious voyages in the mysterious lands of Aiocá, where the bravest go, the bravest men of the docks.

Lívia looks for his body but it is never found. In the final chapter entitled simply 'Star', Lívia, now a widowed mother, takes Guma's now repaired boat, and becomes a marinhoiro herself, mistaken by those on the shore as Iemanjá herself.

In this book, published three decades before *A Hundred Years of Solitude* – even though Amado is rarely mentioned in discussions of the supposed genre – there are certainly the seeds of what would later be named 'magical realism', the combination of a gritty socialist realism, overlaid with a spiritual domain – as real as the ocean and rocks — which orients the lives of the living.

Magical Realism and the Sea

In fact the sea often washes against the shores of the texts loosely labelled ‘magical realism’. In *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, José Arcadio Buendía journeys to the ocean with his family and followers, searches for an outlet to the sea to found the new village of Macondo. On the journey, they come across – inland – ‘an enormous Spanish galleon’ which had hanging from its intact masts the dirty rags of its sails in the midst of its rigging, which was adorned by orchids. The hull, covered with an armour of petrified barnacles and soft moss, was firmly fastened into a surface of stones. The whole structure seemed to occupy its own space, on of solitude and oblivion.^{ix}

Four days beyond the galleon, Buendía’s ‘dreams ended as he faced that ashen, foamy, dirty sea, which had not merited the risks and sacrifices of the adventure’. Macondo becomes a place where at first nobody dies, then which is plagued by insomnia and forgetfulness – the modern world enters only through travelling gypsies selling strange technologies, charlatans, and finally the murderous fruit company and the violence of the state.

As Michael Titlestad has observed, ‘wrecks are archaeological and arkeological – flood caissons of technology, artefacts, and social history.’^x The wreck sets the tone of Marquez’s epic (and perhaps his career – his first success as a writer was with a 1955 fourteen-part journalistic series about a man who lived on a raft for ten days, later published as *The Story of a Shipwrecked Sailor*)^{xi}

One Hundred Years of Solitude, published in 1967, surfaces amid the sea’s detritus, the relics of a violent past and the omens of a violent future. The ocean’s entropy pervades it.

Amid the endless scholarly wrangling about the definitions of magical realism, Amaryll Chanady's^{xii} formulation – that these texts reveal 'the coexistence of the natural and supernatural without antinomy' and that the magical is conveyed 'in a matter-of-fact realist narrative' – persists. Robert Wilson provides a spatial orientation to this, defining magical realism as a 'fictional space created by the dual inscription of incomparable geometries' and that dual spatial worlds 'interact, interpenetrate and intertwine, unpredictably but in a natural fashion'.

On the surface these definitions seems to capture the work of Amado and later Márquez (both aligned, politically, with a socialist materialism while writing from worlds abundant with spirits).

However, Márquez never embraced the term 'magical realism', describing his work as 'socialist realism'^{xiii} – and, indeed, journalistic realism was at the core of his practice. Spirits inhabited the towns of the Caribbean coast where Márquez grew up and were as much part of daily life as the dubious pharmaceuticals his father sold, as sex and deceit, music and meals. If there is a mysticism in Márquez, it is more the vitality with which he imbues the banal than otherworldly appearances.

But do the texts of Márquez and others labelled 'magical realism' (on which there is no consensus) in fact resolve, or even attempt to resolve, this antimony between the real and magical? As Eva Aldea asks, 'What if magical realism is defined not by the resolution of antinomy between two distinct "codes" of reality through realism, but by the distinction between these two levels, in the face of a dominant image of reality presented by the matter-of-fact realist narrative?' Her answer, drawn from Deleuze, is that the 'magic' is an excessive, deterritorialized form that is 'able to move across the boundaries of the segments of the State as embodied by the convergent series of realism' – 'it is without territory, the

magic is removed from, even antithetical to, the structure of society as embodied by the convergent series of realism.'

What then is this 'magic' in magical realism? Is it an uncontainable, un-representable natural force, the domain of deities and spirits, the surfacing of repressed colonial violence, the manifestation of the dream world or all of these all at once?

In Amitav Ghosh's book on literature and climate change, *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable*^{xiv}, he argues that the emergence of 19th century realism – and its concern with everyday banalities and journalistic descriptiveness – led to the failure of literature being able to represent the catastrophic – and, in particular, ecological catastrophe. Ghosh argues that this has been complicit in a collective failure to represent and imagine ecological catastrophe and climate change.

Simply put, the supposed materialism and 'matter-of-fact' character of the realist text is an illusion: one precisely premised on the suppression of excess and catastrophic material forces. Ghosh, however, notes in passing that the representation of catastrophe did not disappear from contemporary literature but 'from time to time, there have been movements that celebrated the unheard-of and the improbable: surrealism for instance, and most significantly, magical realism which is replete with events that have no relation to the calculus of probability.'

This poses an undeveloped, but distinct, view of magical realism: that the disruptive geometry of the magical realist text, the infusion of the 'real' with the 'magical' is precisely the return of the catastrophic real into the realist text that realism suppressed in the first place.

Leaving aside the fact that magical realism was never a movement in the way that surrealism was, Ghosh points to the significance of natural forces in supposedly magical realist texts. Márquez, when asked in an interview about exaggerating reality, seems to make this precise point:

Our reality is in itself out of all proportion ...How can the reader imagine the Amazon [River], which at certain points is so wide you can't even see across it? The word storm conjures up one thing for the European reader and quite another for us. This applies to the word 'rain', which cannot possibly convey the meaning of the torrential downpours of the tropics. Rivers with boiling water, storms which make the earth tremble, cyclones which sweep away whole towns, are not inventions but the vast dimensions of the natural world in our hemisphere^{xv}.

Brenda Cooper, in her 1991 reflection on this passage,^{xvi} part of a comparison between *One Hundred Years* and Isabel Allende's *The House of Spirits*, notes incisively that 'Nature, in Márquez's novel, is as much an avenging Latin American landscape, resistant to European conceptions, as it is a supernatural phenomenon' and characterises the language of Márquez as baroque rather than strictly realist. Cooper's insights, three decades ago, still stand, although her preoccupation with whether *One Hundred Years* is a good socialist novel or not ('*The House of the Spirits* is a far more radical and enlightened book', 'Márquez expresses too great a rift between his so-called "personal" politics of socialism and the contents of his fiction') have dated.

In fact, although Cooper does not comment on this, *The House of Spirits*^{xvii} is also full of allusions to the sea and catastrophe – the opening line is 'Barrabás came to us by sea'; Rosa, whose death precipitates the narrative is 'transformed into the mermaid she has always been in secret.' Could it be that the sea, more than simply being a motif or epiphenomenon, helps us understand what type of creatures these texts actually are?

Given that Amado is universally ignored, the most commonly cited founding text of magical realism, and the one that has the closest to a formal manifesto of the approach (which he termed 'the marvellous real') is the Swiss-Cuban Alejo Carpentier's 1949 novel *The Kingdom of this World*^{xviii}, about the Haitian Revolution.

Carpentier's Preface to the work is a diatribe against the 'boring,' oneiric literature of the surrealists. Carpentier's stay in Haiti which led to the novel informed the approach, and he wrote, 'I thought that the presence and relevance of the marvellous real was not a privilege only of Haiti, but rather, a patrimony of all the Americas, where, for example an accounting of its cosmogonies is yet to be completed.'

Carpentier's recounting of the Haitian revolution, its success, excesses, and subsequent ruination is permeated both with magic and the 'secret religion' of the slaves, which 'encouraged them and united them in their rebellions'. And yet, as much as these occult aspects of the rebellion permeate the novel, it is also filled with the evanescence and vitalism of natural forces, and particularly the ocean.

The changing sea is 'adorned with bunches of yellow grapes floating eastward', bringing forth 'needlefish that seemed made of green glass; jellyfish like blue bladders pulling long red filaments; toothy fish that looked threatening; and squid that appeared to become tangled in barely visible bride's veils.' The novel ends with a devastating storm crossing the sea – 'a great green wind coming from the ocean' destroying the old slave plantation littered with 'an armchair, the screen, the encyclopaedia volumes, the music box, the doll' and leaving, in its wake, the ruin of trees, 'their roots pulled out of the ground.' And, 'through the night, the sea turned rain left its salt on the mountainsides'.

There is a story – though perhaps apocryphal – that Márquez rewrote *One Hundred Years of Solitude* after reading *The Kingdom of this World*^{xix}. However, this neither appears in Márquez autobiography^{xx} nor in Gerald Martin's biography. Márquez, in his early years as a writer, was hardly aware of literary movements outside of Colombia and his early influences were a mix of his grandmother's tales, Kafka, Faulkner, and the political tumult of Colombia during his early years as a journalist. It was only later in Mexico in the early 60s that Márquez found himself part of a Latin American movement. As Martin, observes, until

Mexico, ‘Márquez apparently knew nothing of the greatest Latin American novelists of the century’. However, as a latecomer to Latin America’s ‘Boom’ generation, he was introduced more widely to Latin American literature – including the work of Carpentier.^{xxi}

What is clear is that what shaped the writers most prominently classified as magical realist (Carpentier, Márquez and Allende) was less a commitment to a movement of magical realism (no such thing has ever existed) than that these writers, who all grew up in near to the coast, wrote – as with Amado – from culturally plural and unequal postcolonial societies, shaped by the slave trade and the ecological ruination of colonialism – and of course the sea is always present in this.

The sea, in their work, is at once an excessive, annihilating force; a maternal source of solace; the elusive object of longing and desire; the abyss of colonial history; the domain of spirits and the dead. Magical realism is a style of sediments, of detritus, of wreckage, washed ashore in the movement of history. Its texts reveal no stable worldview – they are stories at sea.

But if the magic is merely nature’s return, what then of the ghosts? Where do they go? What then of the realm of Aiocá? Where must Iémanjá, our already migrant mother of the seas, live in the time of the climate crisis?

Martinique

The writer who gives us the best clue as to the role of the sea in ‘magical realism’ is the Martinican poet and philosopher Édouard Glissant, one who shares his origins with Márquez on the coastlines of the Caribbean Sea (part of the Atlantic Ocean). Glissant, in his seminal text, *The Poetics of Relation*^{xxii} doesn’t use the term ‘magical realism’ but understands Carpentier and Márquez (along with a number of others, including his friend Patrick Chamoiseau, and, surprisingly, Faulkner) as arising from the errant movements of the transatlantic slave trade and its historical erasure; the creolisation of language and culture in the Caribbean and the Americas and more widely; and the lifeworlds of the plantation.

He writes, ‘We take delight in the coils of time in García Márquez’s century of solitude. The ruins of the Plantation have affected American cultures all around.’

Glissant does not make the explicit connection between the work of Carpentier and Márquez and the Atlantic Ocean, though he might well have done so, as much of his book is concerned with the ocean, and the opening and closing chapters deal with it. For Glissant, the ocean is both an abyss and a site of creation. As he writes, ‘The entire ocean, the entire sea gently collapsing in the end into the pleasures of sand, make one vast beginning, but a beginning whose time is marked by these balls and chains gone green.’

For Glissant, such is the annihilating force of the Atlantic slave trade that there can be no longing for a return to a precolonial past – creole culture emerges from an almost absolute violence and erasure, from which the global entanglements of the colonial project emerge.

The ‘poetics of relation’, emerging from the slave ships and the collapsed plantation, is an assimilation of heterogenous elements – integrating the rhythms of African ceremonies from the slave ships with the aesthetics of the European baroque. He writes,

Night in the cabins gave birth to this enormous silence from which music, inescapable, a murmur at first burst out into a long – a music of reserved spirituality through which the body suddenly expresses itself. Monotonous chants, syncopated, broken by prohibitions, set free by the entire thrust of bodies, produced their language from one end of this world to the other. The musical expressions born of silence: Negro spirituals and blues, persisting in towns and growing cities: jazz, *biguines*, and calypsos, bursting into the barrios and shantytowns; salsa and reggae.

And one might add Brazilian samba, whose syncopated grooves come directly from the Black descendents of slaves in Bahia and Rio de Janeiro.

The sea, for Glissant, is a space of both historical erasure and creation, solace and ruination. As he writes in his chapter ‘The Black Beach’ – a Martinican beach black from volcanic lava – ‘The edge of the sea thus represents the alternation (but one that is legible) between order and chaos. The established municipalities do their best to manage this constant movement between threatening excess and dreamy fragility.’

The writer who best exemplifies Glissant’s philosophy, one of the founders of the *créolité* movement is Glissant’s friend and Martinican compatriot Patrick Chamoiseau (another writer rarely mentioned amid the canon of ‘magical realists’ although he clearly shares an affinity with Márquez and is, in my view, at least his equal as a writer).

Chamoiseau’s novel *Texaco*, which chronicles the rebellion of residents of an informal settlement called Texaco against town planners, is also full of spirits – *Mentohs* and *loas* – and is also hemmed in and haunted by the sea. As Chamoiseau writes in that book:

By the sea, in the havens, the culs-de-sac, the inmost depth of coves, at the meeting of the rivers and the four roads, the governors and parish priests had planted market town, through sugar, coffee, tobacco, or raw cocoa left for the European markets ... the first market town my Esternome saw had suffered from the hurricane and was spreading the seat of a few blackmen around its wounds. ^{xxiii}

To add yet another layer to these transatlantic literary histories, Chamoiseau and Glissant’s work needs to be understood within the longer history of Martinique. The small

island was one of the centres of twentieth-century post-colonial thought and poetics – the birthplace of both Frantz Fanon and Aimé Césaire. Here lie some of the sources of both post-colonial negritude and surrealism.

Négritude had its origins in the encounter between Aimé Césaire, Martinique's most famous poet and later mayor of its capital Fort-de-France, and Leopold Senghor, the poet who would later be the first President of Senegal. They both studied in Paris in the 1930s. It is unclear whether they read the Surrealists, the movement founded by André Breton, though they would have been aware of it.^{xxiv} Césaire published *Notebook of a Return to My Native Land*, certainly one of the most influential books in anti-colonial poetics, in 1939 after his return to Martinique. While the book invokes dream-like images, the influence of the Surrealist movement is at best tenuous.

It was only in 1941 that Breton and Césaire met in Martinique when Breton was fleeing Vichy France with Claude Lévi-Strauss. Breton read the journal *Tropiques*, edited by Aimé and Suzanne Césaire, and saw the affinity. Later he called the *Notebook* 'the greatest lyrical monument of our time' and helped promote the work. The Césaires certainly felt an affinity between the anti-colonial struggles of Martinicans and others and the anti-fascist struggles of Breton and his colleagues. Suzanne Césaire wrote in her 1943 essay 'Surrealism and Us',^{xxv} 'Our Surrealism will then deliver it the bread of its depths. Finally those sordid contemporary antinomies of black/white, European/African, civilised/saved will be transcended ... Colonial stupidity will be purified in the blue welding flame ... Surrealism – the tightrope of our hope.'

While Chamoiseau and his compatriots in the créolité movement, including Glissant, saw themselves as 'sons of Césaire', they also rebelled against the essentialism they saw in the Négritude developed by Césaire and Senghor (something Césaire denied).^{xxvi} They did

not see Africa as their literary or spiritual home, but rather the rogue oceans, cities and forests of the Caribbean archipelago.

Senghor

In 2013, I visited Senghor's house along the coast of Senegal. I was at a Senegalese resort for an extravagant German post-doctoral scholarship application. On the beach nearby were a variety of coloured fishing boats, some adorned with the icon of Barcelona football club.

There was an excursion to the house, but I was on the resort's computer, writing a love email to A in Paris, and was left behind by the bus. Feeling abandoned, I took a taxi to chase after the bus, catching it. We visited the village of Joal, where Senghor was born in 1906 and where he grew up, before his mother sent him to a seminary. Leaving the seminary, he would later study in Dakar and then Paris, where he met Césaire.^{xxvii}

Senghor came from a modest family home with white-washed walls and blue shutters, though it was prosperous for the area. Outside a large oleander bloomed pink flowers. Inside the house were black and white photos of his family.

In his poem, *Porte Dorée* (The Golden Door)^{xxviii}, Senghor writes of Joal:

J'ai choisi ma demeure près des remparts rebâties de
 ma mémoire, à la hauteur des remparts'
Me souvenant de Joal l'Ombreuse, du visage de la terre
de mon sang
Je l'ai choisie entre la Ville et la plain, là où
S'ouvre la Ville à la fraîcheur première des bois e des
 rivières.
Mes regrets, ce sont les toits qui saignent au bord des
 eaux, bercés par l'intimité des bosquets
Moi dont le plus modeste taxi roule et chavire le coeur
 sur les hautes vagues de l'Atlantique
Qu'une seule cigarette fait tituber comme le marin à
 l'escale sur le chemin du port.
Qui dis toujours aussi mal que le lointain écolier de
 Brousse
"Bonjour, Mademoiselle ... Comment allez-vous?"

I have chosen to reside near the rebuilt ramparts
of my memory, at the height of the ramparts
Remembering Joal l'Ombreuse, the face of the land
of my blood
I have chosen it between the City and the plain there where
The City opens to the first freshness of the woods and
the rivers.
My regrets, that the roofs bleed by the water's edge
lulled by the intimacy of the groves
Me, whose modest taxi rolls and capsizes the heart
on the high Atlantic waves
Who on a single cigarette staggers like the sailor
at the port of call
And always speaks as badly as the distant student of the
bush
'Hello, Madame ... how are you?'

Joal is a place layered with migration, having, since the sixteenth century, been inhabited by Dutch, Portuguese, French, Syrian and Lebanese voyagers.^{xxix} Beside it, in Joal-Fadiouth, there in an island, a graveyard for both Christians and Muslims, one of the few in the country. It is a place of extraordinary beauty. The entire island is covered in shells which crunch softly beneath one's feet. A large baobab grows from these shells and the island is surrounded by mangrove swamps.

Among the Sufi Mourides in Joal there is a heated debate about whether, when they die, they want their bodies to journey to the holy city of Touba, or to be buried in the graveyard in Joal. It is a choice between being closer to one's God and to paradise, or closer to one's ancestors and family. Many – particularly those whose descendants have been there for several generations – choose their family.

Accra

In late September 2016, I travelled to Accra for a conference. It was a few months after my grandmother had died and I was still in a haze of mourning. I stayed in an Airbnb near Oxford Street and took a kindle version of Ato Quayson's *Oxford Street, Accra*^{xxx} as a guide to the city. I shopped at Shoprite. South Africa's small-town shopping centres seem to appear all over Africa; it is as if, growing tired of their neglect in Barberton or Mokopane, they travel north in search of adventure.

At night I ate fish with chilli and drank beer at a street-side restaurant with a young man managing the Airbnb, a broad-shouldered Pentecostal, who expressed concern over rumours he had heard that in South African universities we teach witchcraft. It is true, I told him, we do. He was shocked. (In fact, I told him we teach *about witchcraft*, but the prepositional distinction seemed to make little difference to the impact. After that, he mysteriously disappeared from the house, and I ate fish and drank beer alone until the conference began.)

I took a day to walk along the Accra coastline, starting with the ruins of an old Dutch slave-trading fort I read about in Quayson's book. I went to the area Quayson designated, expecting to find some imposing structure.

A few concerned locals asked me what I was looking for, and I said I was looking for the old fort, which created some confusion, but then a friendly young man said he knew and would guide me. He led me down a rough mud path weaving between the tin and mud houses. We found a segment of stone wall amid them – an unmarked and nondescript memorial of the West Coast's slave trade surfacing amid this Atlantic settlement. The young man guided me to a coastal pathway and walked with me a while. He took me to what seemed some type of abandoned palatial grounds. There was what seemed to be an

abandoned zoo, with an enclosure in which a few dishevelled peacocks wandered around a greening pool.

After that, alone now, I went to Black Star Square, the square Kwame Nkrumah, the first president, had built in the wake of independence. It was empty aside from a few police, and I felt it to be a little eerie – the vast space and enormous arch. It seemed a monument to some vacated hope. I moved on to Nkrumah's memorial site, with a sculpture park and museum around his mausoleum. I bought a slim blue volume of Nkrumah's essays on African socialism which I carried on my walk along the coast until I found a small street-side bar doubling as a solar panel store beside a circular ruin which appeared to be some type of small amphitheatre.

In its interiors, women hung their washing and children played. I drank a cool beer listening to the rocking of the Atlantic on the shoreline, and read Nkrumah's essay, ‘“African Socialism” Revisited’^{xxxi}. The essay is a critique of Senghor.

Nkrumah rejects Senghor's metaphysics that the Black African, as ‘he’ faces ‘the Other: god, man, animal, tree or pebble, natural or social phenomena’ does not ‘draw a line between himself and the object, he does not hold it at a distance, nor does he merely look at it and analyse it’; rather he is a ‘pure field of sensations’. Nkrumah dismisses such a nostalgic metaphysics as a foundation for African socialism, arguing that it ‘is the elimination of the fancifulness from socialist action that makes socialism scientific.’.

After my beer, still guided by Quayson's book, I visited Brazil House, further up the coast. It was a rather non-descript old building, painted a dirty yellow and with a sign: ‘Tabon Hall and Memorial’.

As Quayson documents, between 1822 and 1899, an estimated 8000 freed slaves left the shores of Bahia in Brazil for Africa's West Coast. They were known as the Tabon, based on the Portuguese greetings ‘como esta?’ and ‘está bom’ (‘how are you?’ ‘I'm good’)

The Tabon, formerly slaves themselves, having found their way back across the Atlantic from Bahia, and accorded a privileged position by the Dutch, exploited slave labour on their plantations and became slave traders.

One night that week in Accra, out at a bar with colleagues, I received a message from a journalist friend. Protests had started at Rhodes University for free education, and police had fired rubber bullets at students. Trouble was coming too to Wits, the university where I worked. I returned to South Africa into a month of teargas and rubber bullets. Somehow these ran into the Atlantic tides.

Chapman's Peak Drive

The week before my grandmother died in July 2016, I was working in my father's office in Cape Town, preparing a lecture on medicine and colonialism. Looking out over the fynbos and forest covering the lower slopes of Table Mountain, veiled in a soft haze, I wondered at their accord of beauty and atrocity.

I prepared my slides on how the smallpox epidemic had, in 1713, wiped out about 90% of the Khoisan population. Now vacated of their inhabitants, except hikers and the homeless, these slopes were likely once a sacred site. I drank blood-brown rooibos tea – once an indigenous medicine, the bush had been commercialised by a Swedish syphilis physician working for the Dutch East India Company. I reread Fanon and Gqola about the slave lodges of the Cape where slaveowners raped female slaves with no impunity. These winelands were landscapes of the disappeared.

I was beside my grandmother in a health centre in Noordhoek, along with my father and aunt, when she died. In the loss of language that death brought, we surrendered our voices to the sun and birdsong. My partner, A, waiting in an adjacent room, held me, and it felt as if she was embracing something warm and sticky, a kind of sadness like molasses, a world sliding away.

In my last drive with my grandmother and A, we drove after lunch in Noordhoek along Chapman's Peak drive, the stark cliffs cutting down into the Atlantic. We stopped at a view point, the three of us, A, my grandmother and me. I do not remember what we said that day, only my grandmother's smile, and the sense of us holding each other in the winter sun, the

ocean behind us, as a tourist took a photo of us together. It was our last time together, the three of us, in the sun.

A would wear my grandmother's wedding ring after her death; and she would also, years later, return it to me.

When I was a young boy, my grandmother would read to me beneath a reproduction of Renoir's *Luncheon of the Boating Party*, from a blue fabric book. I felt loved and held in a kind of lagoon between life and imagination. The book was *The Water-Babies* by Charles Kingsley. The story was about a boy called Tom, a chimney sweep who escapes, with the help of fairies, from the trials of his work and life. He grows a collar of gills and lives underwater.

Lispector in Bahia

Clarice Lispector visited Bahia for the first time in her life in May 1977. She was there for four rainy and palm-oil infused days, which were ‘interspersed with clear spells that gave way to a dazzling sun, to that particular Bahian light, the cloudless sky, the dangerous sea, the particular luminosity of the sunset in Salvador, a sea of fire on the horizon.’^{xxxii}

She visited the public market and Alagados, one of the city’s slums, which was characterised by a ‘permanent smell of putrefaction’ but in which ‘even in the houses built on flimsy wooded stilts, there was always a flower in the window, or a red dress lying in the sun alongside old rags’.

In Salvador, she did not visit the house of Jorge Amado and Zelia Gattai, which was by then ‘an open house for anyone who turns up’. Amado had retreated to a farm forty minutes away in order to write. He was not receiving visitors but made an exception for Lispector. She did not record what they spoke about.

1977 would be the year that Lispector published her final book, *The Hour of the Star*. Written during the time of Brazil’s dictatorship, Lispector prefaces the book with the comment that ‘the story takes place during a state of emergency and a public calamity.’

The book is about a young woman, Macabéa from the northeast, from the state of Alagoas, north of Bahia. Dark-skinned and poverty-stricken, the woman tries to navigate the hardships of life in Rio de Janeiro. The narrator is a man, Rodrigo S.M, who has contempt for Macabéa’s story, which he describes as ‘almost nothing’, and who is reticent even to begin the narrative, constantly diverting the reader. Eventually he relents: ‘The thing to do is to start all of a sudden just as I jump all of a sudden into the icy water of the sea, a way of facing with suicidal courage the intense cold.’

Macabéa, struggling to live in the city, goes to a fortune teller who tells her she will meet a blonde and rich foreigner. Full of happiness, Macabéa rushes out into the street and is hit by a car. As she lies dying, the narrator's own voice returns. Rodrigo S.M, or Lispector through him, writes,

I substitute the act of death for a symbol of it. A symbol that can be summed up in a deep kiss but not on a rough wall but mouth-to-mouth in the agony of pleasure that is death. I, who symbolically die several times just to experience the resurrection. I find joy that the movie-star hour for Macabéa to die has not yet come.^{xxxiii}

Rodrigo S.M defers the inevitable death for several pages, reflecting on it, 'The best thing is still this: not to die, because dying is insufficient, it doesn't complete me, I who need so much. Macabéa killed me.'

When Lispector was leaving Salvador in May 1977, the rain abated and she saw, as she wrote in one of her final crônicas, 'one of the most beautiful rainbows I've ever seen'. 'I interpreted it magically as follows,' she wrote: 'a sign that one day I will return.'

Lispector would not return. In October 1977 she died of ovarian cancer in Rio de Janeiro.

Leveza

On the night of Sunday 2 October 2022, I awaited the Brazilian election results on the balcony of an eighteenth-century building in Florianópolis above an alley filled with the supporters of Lula De Silva and his Workers' Party (PT).

The previous four years of Bolsonaro's rule had been a social and environmental catastrophe and Lula, who had ruled previously, who had been unjustly imprisoned and then released, was the only political leader in the country who could beat Bolsonaro.

The alley below was scrawled with pichação, a kind of hieroglyph used by street taggers. The crowd was uneasy as Lula took a while to take the lead, finally doing so in the early evening. Red flares burned against a dark blue sky. When the final results came, the celebration took time to gather. For those on their phones, the newspaper, *Folha de São Paulo* called the election several minutes before CNN followed on the screen in the alley. When the screen finally announced Lula as president, the street exploded in elation and tears flowed.

Soon after, the loudspeakers blared Chico Buarque's 'Apesar de Você'. Buarque had written the song in his mid-20s, when he returned from exile in Italy to Brazil in 1970. He had returned to a country six years after a military coup and into increasingly repressive dictatorship (which Bolsonaro, as a military officer, had later supported). Buarque, determined to stay in Brazil, wrote these lines:

Você que inventou esse estado
E inventou de inventar
Toda a escuridão
Você que inventou o pecado

Esqueceu-se de inventar
O perdão

Apesar de você
Amanhã há de ser outro dia
Eu pergunto a você onde vai se esconder
Da enorme euforia
Como vai proibir
Quando o galo insistir
Em cantar
Água nova brotando
E a gente se amando sem parar

You who have invented this state,
Invented all the darkness
You who have invented the sin,
Forgotten to invent forgiveness.

Despite you,
Tomorrow will be another day
I ask you where will you hide
From this enormous euphoria
How will you prohibit
The rooster singing
New water flowing
And people loving without end?^{xxxiv}

With the joy of the night, the love and lightness in the streets, also came an unease.

Lula had won 50.9% against Bolsonaro's 49.1% – it was a narrow margin of victory over a president who had presided over an incompetent and corrupt response to Covid; who had displayed a complete lack of empathy for those dead; who had contributed to increasing deforestation of the Amazon, amplifying the planetary threat of climate change; who had fostered violence against Black, indigenous and queer groups; who had, in videos released in the lead up to the elections, admitted he would eat a human in a delirious fantasy of an indigenous ritual; and, a week before the election, said he had felt sexual chemistry with adolescent Venezuelan refugees. In a world full of political nuance, this election was about as Manichean as they come. On the streets that night, I also realised that, even amid the tides of

loss of the year, I had found lightness, *leveza*, again, with a person, with a place, beneath the Atlantic stars.

Later that week I travelled with S to Porto Alegre to see Chico Buarque, now 80 years old perform. On that Saturday a week after the elections, we walked through Porto Alegre. Outside of the military base, Bolsominions, dressed in their yellow *selecção* football T-shirts, having streetside barbeques, as if it were a party, were calling for a military coup.

We walked to the gentrified dockside. It was on a large lake with a port nearby where cargo ships arrived after a 300km river's journey from the ocean. The day was hot, and having drunk a cheap caipirinha, I felt ill. Going back to the apartment I vomited and vomited, tears running down my cheeks, thinking I would miss the show. Stuffed with medication and rehydrants, we made it to the arena in the middle of a public park.

At the show, Dilma Rousseff, the former Worker's Party president of Brazil – who had been unjustly impeached in 2015 in a soft coup by opposition in Congress – appeared. Around the arena circled the chorus 'Olé, Olé, Ola, Dilma, Dilma, Dilma.... Olé, Olé, Ola, Lula, Lula, Lula'. The crowd was full of happiness, and the sambas were sweet.

Buarque, in spite of his age, still seemed to radiate the sense of beauty and melancholy that Lispector had seen in him half a century before. The final song, sung as a duet, was the love song 'João and Maria', one with the most gentle and consoling melody one could hear. And yet the final verse ...

Agora era fatal
Que o faz-de-conta terminasse assim
Pra lá deste quintal
Era uma noite que não tem mais fim
Pois você sumiu no mundo sem me avisar
E agora eu era um louco a perguntar
O que é que a vida vai fazer de mim?

Now it was fatal
That the make-believe could end like this
Beyond the garden
Was a night without end
Because you disappeared into the world with no warning
And now am I mad to ask
What will happen to me?

ⁱ Hammer, Joshua. 2008. 'Retracing the steps of German colonizers in Namibia' *New York Times*, June 13, 2008. <https://www.nytimes.com/2008/06/17/travel/17iht-trnamibia.1.13695784.html> Accessed 13 February 2023.

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ⁱⁱⁱ Klink, Amyr. 1985. *Cem Dias Entre Céu e Mar*. Rio de Janeiro: José Olympio Editora.

^{iv} Author's translation. I also consulted the translation 'The Portuguese sea' by Richard Zenith from *Forever Someone Else: Selected Poems*. Lisbon Assirio and Alvim, 2008.

^v <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Yemonja> Accessed 13 Feb 2013.

^{vi} Author's translation. The song 'Malandro também Chora' is composed by Neginho da Beija-Flor.

^{vii} This crônica is based on the crônicas of Clarice Lispector in: Lispector, Clarice. 2019. *Todas as Crônicas*. Organized by Pedro Karp Vasquez. Rio de Janeiro: Rocco.

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^{ix} Márquez, Gabriel García. 2000 [1967] *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. Translated by Gregory Rabassa. London: Penguin. P.10.

^x Titlestad, Michael. 2021. *Shipwreck Narratives: Out of our Depth*. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan

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