WELCOME TO WELKOM

Utterly Unbelievable, Totally Trues Tales from a City of Gold That Was

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Declaration

I declare that this research report is my own unaided work. It is submitted for the degree of Master of Arts by Coursework and Research Report in the Department of Journalism, at the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg.

It has not been submitted before for any other degree or examination at any other university.

Shelley Roberts, 30 March, 2020

Dedicated to Marco

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METHOD DOCUMENT

1. INTRODUCTION

Do not talk to me of gold, the element which brings more dissension, misfortune and unexpected plagues in its trails than benefits… Pray and implore Him who has stood by us that He will continue to do so, for I tell you today that every ounce of gold taken from the bowels of our soil will yet have to be weighed up with rivers of tears.

~ President Paul Kruger, 1885[1]

I grew up in Welkom, a city literally and figuratively built on gold. It had, and still has, no other reason to exist. As a child in the 1980s, I felt the daily tremors of the work going on deep below, but until I was 37 years old, I had never been underground in a gold mine. I lived a charmed life on the surface, in "the prettiest city in the country", oblivious to the hot, dark, dangerous system of shafts and tunnels, where the toil of thousands of men made my life possible. An unknowable number of lives have been lost, wars fought, territories seized, industries created, cities born and obscene fortunes built on that yellow metal, hauled from dark places as glittering particles in millions of tons of disposable rock.

The discovery of gold in the Witwatersrand in 1884 is the beginning of a wild story; it set in motion a series of events that changed the fate of South Africa utterly and irrevocably. It is an interesting exercise to imagine what the country would have been today if it hadn't been the preordained location of, by far, the greatest gold find in history. What would the South African economy look like? Would Johannesburg exist? Would the South African War have happened? Or the Land Act of 1913? Or apartheid? Or the system of migrant labour that forever changed rural and urban life? In all probability, just about everything that dictates our current moment in South African history, would not have happened. One thing is for certain, the city of Welkom would not exist.

Prospectors first began searching for gold in the area in the early 1900s. In 1904, prospector Arthur Megson gathered samples from an outcrop on the farm called Aandenk, near what is now Odendaalsrus (a small town neighbouring Welkom), but at the time he failed to get any interest from mining companies in Johannesburg. It was only in 1932, when Megson presented his findings to Allan Roberts, that any interest was generated. Roberts passionately pursued the possibility of a gold find in the area for many years, and by 1940 his company, Wit Extensions Company, had sufficient evidence to get the

[1] Cited in Meredith 2007

investment required to grow the Free State Goldfields. Ernest Oppenheimer, through his company Anglo American Corporation, was one of the first major mining magnates to invest significantly in the fields, as is testified by the many sites named after him across town. Welkom officially came into being in 1947 and was proclaimed a town on the 23rd of July 1948 (Roberts 1984).

It should be noted that Welkom is in the heart of the Free State - previously the Independent Boer Republic of the Orange Free State. In the days before South African democracy, the province was a stronghold of the apartheid regime and racism, segregation and the mistreatment and exploitation of black labour was the norm. The Free State was arguably the least liberal province in the country and, until the time that I left Welkom in 1999, it was a community starkly divided along racial and cultural lines. This is well illustrated by an incident that took place in 1989:

> Race relations during the decline of the Apartheid regime were particularly problematic as many Whites felt threatened by the eventuality of a regime change. Reactions to the perceived changes were often quite violent. This was the main cause of the events that transpired on the 13 May 1989 in Welkom, a small town in the then province of the Orange Free State when the mayor, a Mr Gus Gouws, was tarred and feathered, after officiating at a multi-racial wheelchair marathon event. According to sources, the National Party mayor, ran foul of his White constituency when he proposed the opening of a taxi rank in the business district of Welkom. The aggrieved members of the town then sought to humiliate him in order to dissuade him from authorising the erection of the facility by assaulting him and a security guard while he was officiating at the event. Though only four men were arrested and charged with the assault, it is believed more were involved. However, their sentences amounted to little more than an insignificant punishment, as the town banded together to protect the culprits and frustrate the investigating officers (sahistory.org.za).

I was not often exposed to the black community growing up, least of all the men who worked on the mines, nor did my family mingle much with the Afrikaans community. Welkom society was not only divided along lines of race, culture and language, but also along class lines. Some members of the community, of all races and cultures, were exceedingly poor, and some on the other end of the scale, were exceedingly rich. While my family were not in the class of the “exceedingly rich”, we were certainly, thanks to my father’s successful business supplying the mines with valves, in the higher echelons of privilege. The story of my family who went, in the space of one generation, from “on-the-

bread-line" poor, to beyond well-off, is in many ways one of the classic stories of gold. Of course, it is only one of many.

2. AIM

This research report explores the human aspect of mining in South Africa through telling a story, a personal narrative about the Free State gold mining town of Welkom. It was my aim, in revisiting the town where I grew up and writing this narrative, to capture both the current lived experience of a mining community on the brink of collapse, and the reminiscences and stories of that community, noting the importance of shared stories in small towns and how they bind people together. I have attempted to describe the details and textures of this small mining town through observing and engaging with "ordinary people", listening to their stories, and attempting to connect this to a larger national narrative. In this I was following the example of Gay Talese - one of Tom Wolfe's "New Journalists". In his essay *Delving into Private Lives* Talese said:

> I grew up hearing the stories of ordinary people and I thought they were interesting. I thought those people had a sense of what was going on. I believed if we could bring them into the larger consciousness, they could help us understand the trends happening around us. I wanted to spend more time with people who were not necessarily newsworthy. I believed then - and I believe now even more - that the role of the nonfiction writer should be with private people whose lives represent a larger significance (2007, 6 - 7).

I have attempted to capture the character of small town South Africa, with its comical eccentricities as well as its dark undercurrents of prejudice and inequality. I believe that small towns are a better reflection of the true national character than large, cosmopolitan cities which obscure ugly truths behind a facade of global connection and chaotic activity. The effects of national issues - the current political climate, the collapse of the gold mining industry, job losses, economic strain, municipal corruption and incompetence - are more viscerally felt in small towns than big cities. I would argue that this is even more pronounced in places like Welkom because of its total dependence on gold. As Katherine Boo put it in her piece *Difficult Journalism That's Slap-Up Fun:*

> Narrative can convey vividly and potentially the greater failings of government and industry, iniquities of class, and fractures in the infrastructures of opportunities… It can engage the public, almost against its will, in crucial questions of meritocracy and social justice" (2007, 14).

My narrative is composed of observations from time spent in Welkom, during which I observed and engaged with the locals to gather their own stories, memories and current points of view and opinions. Although the central focus was on my own family and the community to which we belonged, as part of my research I spent time exploring sites that were previously outside of my personal sphere of experience, such as the old miners' hostels, the local township and underground in a gold mine. I attempted to engage with those outside of my immediate circle of friends and family, with the intention of gaining some perspective on the larger story of the town and the reality of the different lived experience of the various communities that make it up.

3. RATIONALE

> *The discovery of the Witwatersrand Goldfields probably exerted a greater influence on the course of South African history than any other event. So many of the political, sociological, and economic problems which beset the country today had their origins in the finding, on the Ridge of White Waters, of amounts and concentrations of gold never before, and never since, revealed elsewhere in the world.*
>
> *~ D.A. Pretors, 1987*[2]

Welkom did not grow organically over a period of time as most cities do, with streets, suburbs and commercial and industrial centres added as and when needed; it was carefully planned out almost in its entirety. The streets, the retail centre, the industrial area, the racially segregated suburbs, even the sports clubs and recreational areas, had been mapped out before a brick was laid. When the location of the town was still just a farm named Welkom, the mining magnates put a pin in the map and declared that it would be the centre of the gold boom they knew was coming. While they were waiting for the water and power supply required to start mining, they had the opportunity to plan the town to the last detail, making it as pleasant as possible for the many people they would have to attract, to the middle of nowhere, to run the mines. The city exists as it does and where it does entirely at the behest of the mining industry. Unlike Kimberly or the towns on the Witwatersrand reef, it did not grow quickly in a ramshackle way. In its heyday, it was renowned across the country as a beautiful, well-planned town, famous for its parks, modern architecture, monumental municipal buildings, broad streets and traffic circles. In fact, the Welkom High School song proclaimed:

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[2] Cited in Hadley 2004

Let Welkom boast her stores of gold
Her modern well-built town.
Her buildings tall, her pleasant parks
Have brought her some renown.

With such a beautiful, user friendly city, built on a massive reef of gold, it would seem that Welkom was destined to be as great, powerful and developed as its predecessor, Johannesburg. Indeed, at one stage, it was the fastest growing, richest place in the country. So why is Welkom now, after only seven decades, on the verge of death, disintegrating from the outskirts to the centre? The answer, according to many of the locals, lies in its distance from Johannesburg. It is just far enough away that it couldn't merge into that city's broader economy, as towns like Benoni, Brits and Springs did. But it was also just close enough that there was no need to build up an alternative industry; any supplies required could be manufactured in Johannesburg and quickly picked up by a driver in a day. So gold remained the sole life-spring of the town, and it was so plentiful that it could support the whole population, and the national economy, for decades, a century they said. But everyone in Welkom was so focussed on the here and now, that they never thought beyond that century, no-one seemed bothered by what would happen when the gold ran out.

As a result Welkom is something like an elaborate factory, purpose built by the mines to produce the gold, and when the gold runs out the factory has no reason to exist, so it shuts down and gets sold for scrap. This is what is happening to Welkom. Structures that are left empty are dismantled within a few days by Zama-Zamas[3], who start with fittings and metal and eventually pick apart the bricks and sell them for a few cents a piece. Large office buildings or hostels abandoned by the mines can be reduced to foundations in a matter of weeks, mere geometric patterns on the dry baked ground. The titanic steel headgear of closed-down shafts are pulled apart in unfathomable ways, in the dark secrecy of night, by men working with no safety harnesses using only rudimentary hand-held tools.

For these reasons Welkom serves as a litmus test, or a canary in the mine so to speak, to examine the impact of mining on a community, to measure the potential impact of the death of the gold mining industry in a larger, national context. Here you can see,

[3] Zama-Zamas (meaning those who take a chance, or "chancers") is the colloquial term for informal miners operating illegally on abandoned mines in South Africa. While mining is the primary occupation of Zama-Zamas, in Welkom the term is applied more broadly to those involved in various informal - usually illegal - economic activity, such as salvaging materials from abandoned buildings. In Welkom they are regarded as dangerous, violent criminals. There is evidence, however, that this informal economic activity is significantly propping up the economies of small towns like Welkom, and some researchers suggest that it would make sense to legalise informal mining. See particularly the work of Robert Thornton for more on Zama-Zamas and what he terms 'artisanal mining'.

undiluted by other industries, the social, economic and environmental consequences of mining. Here too, it is clear to see the extent to which the gold mining industry in South Africa is downsizing. This has had a disastrous effect on Welkom. Thousands of people, from top management to underground labourers, lost their jobs as one shaft after another was shut down and plugged up with a cork of concrete. Businesses that relied on the mines (which, directly or indirectly, was all of them) shut down or went bankrupt. Some moved to the cities in search of other jobs. Some of the wealthy citizens packed up and moved to the coast or abroad to enjoy their riches. But many were left behind. Those who made fortunes but didn't bother to plan for the future are stuck in their mansions, now worth so little that the proceeds of selling them wouldn't buy a flat anywhere else, with only sufficient savings to keep them going in a town where expenses are relatively low. Most of the people who lost their jobs on the mines never made enough to secure their futures in the first place.

The population of Welkom is also a microcosm of South Africa, with every racial and cultural group represented. People from all over the country, many from neighbouring countries, and some from Britain, Europe, Australia and America were drawn into the town during the boom years. The economic crisis caused by the collapse of the mines has intensified the long standing tensions between these population groups. It was a place where apartheid was systemically enforced. The economy of the town depended on the mines and the mines depended on the exploitation of black labour. The resulting economic disparity, the legacy of apartheid, has left an ugly scar.

The gold mining industry has played a critical part in both the past and the present of South Africa. The future of the country too will be impacted by what happens to the gold industry, which is currently on the brink of major changes, the repercussions of which are uncertain and not optimistic. The past, present and future of Welkom are closely connected to the gold industry and as a result, many of the issues that face the country today: xenophobia, racism, crime, poverty, corruption, economic instability and municipal mismanagement, are concentrated there. The diversity of races, cultures and classes and the clear correlation to one of the country's most economically and historically important industries, makes Welkom a relevant and interesting location for my narrative. I have attempted to capture, implicitly more than explicitly, the ways in which these macro forces play out in the day to day lives of the community of Welkom, including the effects of the failing economy and municipal corruption and mismanagement and the pervasive issues of inequality and racism which are exacerbated by all these factors.

4. LITERATURE REVIEW

4.1. Who writes history?

The history of gold, as already discussed in brief, has had far reaching implications across every imaginable aspect of our lives, not just locally but globally, including: the economy; the still continuing exploitative labour system; the formation of influential and politicised labour unions; migratory patterns, which in turn have had massive impacts on family structures; gender issues; health, with mining directly linked to epidemics such as silicosis[4]; the countless deaths and injuries that result from the dangerous work underground; the environment; politics and countless others.

While all of these macro issues play an important part in the complex systems and attitudes which make up the Welkom community, for the scope of this method document I have chosen to narrow the focus of my literature review to the expression of the daily lived experience of the individuals who make up mining communities and the ways in which their stories are told, by whom, with what intent and for which audience. It was important, while writing the narrative, to be conscious of the vast differences in these accounts, what these differences say about our inherent biases and how this is betrayed in our writing. While it is probably not possible to overcome this bias, it is important to acknowledge that it exists and that every account, whether a poem, a memoir or a historical epic, is inescapably an expression of the writer's personal point of view. This includes my own point of view as expressed in my narrative.

The way that history is recorded and understood is not only influenced by the individual writer's point of view, but also by who gets to write it - as the saying goes, "History is written by the victors". The further back in time one goes, the less diverse the demographic of those who recorded history becomes. This is particularly evident in South Africa, where colonialism soon gave way to apartheid; the former made it difficult for black writers to publish their work, the latter made it virtually impossible.

The limited scope of written history in South Africa is particularly evident in early texts, dating from the late 19th century. At this time Lord Randolph Churchill travelled through South Africa and recorded his observations of early mining activities in the Transvaal - from a distinctly English, colonial perspective - in a series of articles written for *The Daily Graphic* newspaper in London. In the early to mid-20th century, industry publications and epic histories of mining, such as A.P. Cartwright's "definitive" histories written in the 1960s, appeared, recording the mining industry from a distinctly capitalistic point of view, lauding the Lords of Industry and presenting mining as a grand and noble enterprise. From the 1970s, as the political climate in South Africa began to shift, more nuanced texts appeared, including academic research into the lived experience of black

[4] See the documentary *Dying for Gold* for an expose of the ongoing health crisis of silicosis - a life threatening disease and long-term consequence of working underground in a mine - and the accountability, or lack thereof, of the mining companies.

miners, such as the thorough work of T.D. Moodie, who interviewed miners in their home languages, with the assistance of Vivienne Ndatshe who conducted and translated the interviews. From the 1980s onwards, the first hand accounts of the experience of mining is taken more seriously academically, as seen by the study of Sotho working songs by David Coplan and the more recent research undertaken by Robert Thornton into the lived experience of illegal miners, or Zama-Zamas, working in closed down mines today.

It should be noted that all of the writers I have mentioned here are white men, not unintentionally, as the vast majority of texts about mining in South Africa were indeed written by white men. This is not to exclude writers like Sol Plaatje (who wrote more about the political climate surrounding mining than mining itself), and B.W. Vilakazi, whose poem *Ezinkomponi (In the Gold Mines)* powerfully evokes the experience of miners working underground (although there is no evidence that Vilakazi himself ever worked underground on the mines, and it is unlikely that he did.) Mining has always been, and remains, an extremely male dominated industry. While women's voices do appear in the telling of the history of gold, they too remain in the minority. Olive Schreiner, like Sol Plaatje, wrote more about the political climate surrounding the advent of the discovery of gold than of the industry itself. The research compiled by Moodie and Ndatshe includes, through their interviews, the first hand accounts of women living in close proximity to the mines, including the girlfriends and wives of miners. These are among the only first hand accounts of black women and their experience in the mining communities. Gladys Roberts, the wife of Allan Roberts (who is widely credited with the discovery the Free State Goldfields) wrote a personal memoir of this important advent in the history of South Africa. It is one of the most complete accounts of the establishment of the Free State Goldfields and Welkom in particular. However, her account focusses more on her husband and his industry partners than on her own experience as a woman.

Examining the variety of non-fiction texts on mining - while keeping in mind the particular writers' perspective - has been valuable in understanding the ways in which history differs, sometimes vastly, between one account and another. It has been valuable too in identifying the sources of some of the attitudes towards race, class and culture, still finding expression in Welkom, and South Africa as a whole, today. Both of these aspects of the literature review were helpful in composing my narrative.

4.2. First Hand Accounts: Memoirs and Journalism

Accounts by first hand witnesses of the various periods of mining history have been of particular interest to me as they are closest to the approach that I have taken in my narrative. They tend to be more creative in their style and describe first hand observations of people and place, as I have attempted to do. They are also useful in identifying those

previously mentioned expressions of attitude towards race and culture. Welkom is in the heart of the Free State, previously the Independent Boer Republic of the Orange Free State, and the history of conflict between English, Afrikaans, black and white during the South African War, although more than a hundred years passed, remains evident in the tensions between these still divided communities today.

The *Daily Graphic* articles, written by Lord Randolph Churchill in 1891, give insight into what was the common attitude of many British subjects to South Africa, specifically regarding the recent discovery of gold in the Independent Boer Republic of the Transvaal, and to the Boers themselves. The following is one example of many which illustrates Churchill's decidedly low opinion of the Boer government in the "lost province" of the Transvaal, before thought useless but now, thanks to the discovery of the Witwatersrand gold reef, of such great value:

> Having had given to them great possessions and great opportunities, [the Boers] will be written of only for their cruelty towards and tyranny over the native races, their fanaticism, their ignorance and their selfishness; they will be handed down to posterity by tradition as having conferred no single benefit upon any single human being, not even upon themselves, and upon the pages of African history they will leave the shadow, but only a shadow, of a dark reputation and an evil name (1891, 82).

This condescending attitude of the English towards the Boers, or Afrikaners, was still evident in Welkom when I was growing up. The Afrikaner's "cruelty towards and tyranny over the native races" was also a commonly held view on the part of the English community in which I grew up. I recall many times hearing the full blame for apartheid and all the attendant woes laid, fairly or not, on the shoulders of the "racist dutchmen"[5]. On the part of the Afrikaners, the tyranny of the "rooineks"[6] towards the Boers during the South African War was still, almost a century later, a subject of deep bitterness and resentment. These tensions found expression in many subtle and unsubtle ways in everyday life in Welkom. Even among my own peers as a child and teenager, fights would occasionally break out between the English and Afrikaans schools after sports matches for no apparent reason beyond this long-standing resentment.

These tensions between English and Afrikaans were not as apparent to me on my research visits to Welkom as they had been when I lived there. I am not sure if this is because they are no longer as pronounced or if, as an outsider, they were less visible to

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[5] A derogatory term for Afrikaners, referring to their origins as Dutch settlers

[6] A derogatory term for the English, a reference to the English soldiers in the South African War who, being unaccustomed to the African sun, who would get sunburn above the collars of their uniforms

me. For this reason, these tensions did not feature in my narrative as prominently as I first assumed they would. Perhaps in a project with wider scope and with more time spent on location for research, this might become a larger focus.

The Discovery of the Orange Free State Goldfields (1984), a memoir written by Gladys Roberts, recounts the early discovery of gold in the Free State in the 1930s. Like A.P. Cartwright and many other chroniclers of gold mining in South Africa, Roberts focuses on the white, surface level characters of the story, in particular her husband Allan Roberts and other mining magnates who played a key role in the early development of the Welkom mines, such as the ubiquitous Ernest Oppenheimer.

It is telling of the attitudes of the time that, despite the huge role played by black miners and migrant labour on the Goldfields, Roberts mentions them only twice in her 84 page memoir. The first is at the pivotal moment when her husband and his partners broke ground at the first borehole drill site in what is now Allanridge (named after Allan Roberts) in 1932:

> They had managed to secure some native labour to work on the shaft, taking out rubble. After seeing the native employees at work with their buckets, long ladders and ropes, hauling out rock of various sizes from the shaft … Allan approached the owner of the farm Aandenk, to obtain from him the names of the farmers and farms in the surrounding districts (1984, 25).

The second, more revealing, mention of black miners recalls one of the first serious accidents in the Free State Goldfields in 1952, on the Jeannette Gold Mine's Number One Shaft:

> Eight native employees were killed and 16 injured along with one European miner, who was not critically hurt. The accident was the result of an overwind when the upgoing bucket, known as a kibble bucket, which was carrying rock to the surface, overran the headgear at the top of the shaft. The winding rope broke, and the kibble bucket plunged more than 1000 feet to the bottom of the shaft, where a crew of native employees were busy breaking rock. The kibble struck a sinking stage on the way down and carried it with it to the bottom of the shaft. The falling equipment crushed and killed the eight natives, who were unable to scramble out of the way in time (1984, 77-78).

This quote gives some idea of the horrifically dangerous conditions of underground work on these deep mines, and also of the numbers and relative positions of the underground men: only one "European" mine-worker, who would have been in a supervisory position, was involved in the accident and not critically hurt, while the majority of the men facing the majority of the danger where the black miners.

Roberts was telling the story of her husband and the founders of the Free State Goldfields, so her focus on them is not surprising. Given the place and time in which she was writing - 1970s South Africa - it is also not surprising that the focus was entirely on the white Giants of Industry. The segregated nature of South Africa (and particularly the Free State) at the time meant that she, as an upper-class white woman, would have had so little exposure to the black miners that it would have been presumptuous of her to attempt to tell their story, even if she had wanted to. Nevertheless, as these two short paragraphs are the only ones that mention the black miners in the entire memoir, their part of the story becomes all but invisible.

My narrative bore similarities to Roberts's in that it is a personal memoir, set in the Free State Goldfields and written by a white woman. Additionally, in the time she was writing, as in the time I was growing up in Welkom, South Africa - and perhaps the Free State even more so - was heavily segregated, giving both Roberts and myself a limited view of the lived experience of a large portion of the Welkom population. I attempted, throughout researching and writing the narrative, to present a fuller picture of the Welkom community than only my own, white, English-speaking slice of it. At the same time, it was important to acknowledge the limitations of my own first hand experience in telling the stories of those outside of my immediate community. Thus the process of writing the narrative was a constant balance between the aim and the limitations.

In his memoir *The Hostel-Dwellers: A First-Hand Account* (1998), author Rrekgetsi Chimeloane recounts his time living in a hostel while working for Sasol. While not set on the mines, the memoir nevertheless provides important insight into the experience of industrial hostel life as a black labourer in South Africa. It describes the unique conditions existing within these unnatural environments - where men from all over the country and continent, with different languages and cultures, live in very close quarters - and the dynamics and social structures that result. This memoir has the distinction of being written by a black man who lived in the hostels and recounted his own experiences first-hand, without the intervention or interpretation of a white writer or academic. This account was therefore useful in providing some first hand insight into life in the migrant labour hostel system.

4.3. Epics and Histories - The Unknown Miner

The story of mining in South Africa lends itself particularly well to epic histories, like those of Allan Patrick Cartwright in the 1960s and, more recently, Martin Meredith's *Diamonds, Gold and War: The Making of South Africa* (2007) and Jade Davenport's *Digging Deep: A History of Mining in South Africa* (2013). The dramatic ups and downs, the fortunes made and lost, the conflict and the characters, make for captivating reading. Apart from providing

the essential background into the history of mining and how it impacted the broader South African story, they are also useful in the way in which they show, between the lines in the case of Cartwright, and more explicitly in Meredith and Davenport, the power disparities between white and black and the animosity between English and Afrikaans, capitalist and socialist. Again it should be noted that these histories are all written by white ‘surface people’, although there are some key differences as a result of the time in which they were written and for whom they were written.

Meredith writes of gold and diamond mining in South Africa as part of a broader story, encompassing the South African War and the political and social turmoil of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. His could be called a book on the history of South Africa, rather than a history of mining. Davenport, on the other hand, focusses on mining as an industry, including broader elements of history only as context. Writing as they were in the early 21st century, both take a notably more politically modern and sympathetic approach to the side of the black, Chinese and 'socialist' miners than older texts. *Diamonds, Gold and War* concludes with an epilogue focussing on the plight of black South Africans post the Union of South Africa in 1910, including the Native Land Act of 1913, the Native Urban Areas Act of 1923 and the 1948 election which brought D.F. Malan’s National Party into power, ushering in apartheid. Meredith in particular draws on many primary sources, including the writings, letters and memoirs of Sol Plaatje, Mahatma Ghandi, Nelson Mandela, Olive Schreiner and Emily Hobhouse, among others.

While Meredith and Davenport referred to a wide range of sources and endeavoured to be as balanced as possible in their accounts, they, like all historians, were nevertheless limited to what they could find in source records, those written and unwritten artefacts that are the raw material of history. There is a near-complete dearth of first hand accounts written by ‘underground people’, the miners themselves, who did the hard, physical work to retrieve the gold. This lack of primary source material means that even thoroughly researched, socially and politically balanced historical accounts of mining and South African history, like those of Meredith and Davenport, are limited to discussing the miners as a group, a nameless mass. This silence and namelessness of the many thousands who worked and died on the mines is aptly captured in Herman Wald’s sculpture, *The Unknown Miner*, which currently stands at the entrance to the University of the Witwatersrand School of Mining Engineering in Johannesburg.

The “invisibility” of the underground miners was something that came up in my own research. Throughout my trips to Welkom I found it difficult to capture the daily lived experience of the underground miners in particular. It proved to be one of the primary challenges that I faced in attempting to give a relatively balanced account of the community of Welkom. I attempted to overcome this by arranging a day underground in a

gold mine and recounting this in the narrative. While this did give me insight into the experience of the underground environment, it was nevertheless very limited. I discuss this in more detail in the ethics section.

A.P Cartwright is perhaps the most prolific writer on mining in South Africa, his works include historical epics of mining such as *The Gold Miners* (1962), *Valley of Gold* (1961),*The Corner House: The Early History of Johannesburg* (1965) and *South Africa's Hall of Fame* (1968); more industry focussed books like *Gold Paved the Way: The Story of the Gold Fields Group of Companies* (1967), *The Dynamite Company: The Story of African Explosives and Chemical Industries Limited*,*1896 - 1958* (1964) and *West Driefontein - Ordeal by Water* (1969); as well as broader contextual works such as *Johannesburg* (1973), among others.

After reading the 21st century histories, it is a fascinating exercise to go back to these works from an era so different to our own post-1994 South Africa. Cartwright had unprecedented access to source material, witnesses, geologists, and had the full support and cooperation from the mining houses[7]. As HC Koch, then president of the Transvaal and Orange Free State Chamber of Mines, put it in the preface to *The Gold Miners*:

> In collecting his facts, Mr Cartwright had the cooperation of the mining houses and the Chamber of Mines. He also had the benefit of detailed comment from Sir Theodore Gregory, the eminent economist and historian. He interviewed many of the consulting engineers, geologists and directors of mining companies who have had a hand in recent developments. From this store of information he has made a lively and readable book which I am sure will prove a valuable contribution to the history of South Africa (1962, v).

This industry support and access to source documents, his keen understanding of mining, an ability to speak local African languages and a gift for storytelling, make Cartwright's books an invaluable resource in understanding the history of mining in South Africa. *The Gold Miners* in particular is probably the most complete, compelling story of gold mining in South Africa up to that point in time (the early 1960s).

That said, there is something tacitly, unintentionally, written between the lines of his work. Looking back from the perspective of sixty years of hindsight, Cartwright's voice rings true to his context and that of the community to which he belonged: the English-speaking, white, male, capitalists - the lords of the gold industry for the majority of the 20th century. The contradictions between his accounts (based as they were on such

[7] It should be noted that none of the sources mentioned, by Koch or Cartwright himself, include interviews with actual mine labourers, nor does his bibliography include a single source giving the perspective of the underground miners.

unprecedented access to experts and source materials) and later, more balanced accounts, is further evidence that any text, no matter how well researched or understood, is a product of its author and its time. In his descriptions of the Chinese indentured labourers, the "socialist" strikers of 1913 and 1922 and the "400,000 workers" (black mine labourers from across the country and continent), as opposed to his description of the Giants of Industry which are the overwhelming focus of the book, he betrays his identity. He does this not by falsifying facts, but in his perception and portrayal of the 'underground people' (black, white and Chinese), based on the presumptions and misinterpretations of the experience of those so far removed from himself.

For example, while not unsympathetic to the plight of the Chinese indentured labourers, his description of them reveals something about how men in his context understood (or misunderstood) the conditions these underground labourers found themselves in:

> All Britain was plastered with posters showing the Chinese being led to the mines in chains and 'Chinese Slavery' became the liberals' war cry… It was unscrupulous propaganda, for the system by which the Chinese were indentured to the mines was, if anything, an improvement on the conditions in which they worked in many other parts of the world (1962, 139).

Of the participants in the General Strike of 1913 and the Rand Revolt of 1922, Cartwright is wholly unsympathetic, referring to the embryonic labour unions as "a fiery red balloon" (1962, 165), outright communists and socialists (virtually swearwords in 1960s South Africa). Looking back at 1913 and 1922 from the capitalist world of the 1960s and from his own capitalist stance, he says of the strikers' pamphlets and editorials:

> In studying the documents today…one is struck by the extraordinary tolerance the authorities showed in allowing speakers 'free speech' that went far beyond the bounds of anything that would be permitted [today]…It is not hard to imagine what would happen to the author of such a pamphlet in our time (1962, 210).

But the chapter titled "400,000 workers" (1962, 218) reveals the most interesting interpretations of life on the mines for underground workers, in this case specifically the black mine labourers from around the continent. Cartwright's portrayal of life on the mines for black workers closely resembles that of the industry sponsored propaganda of the time: that "to the young man who is making his first visit, the mines are rather like a school of which he has heard his brothers speak. They represent his first big adventure, a journey to the outside world, the beginning of adult manhood"; that "the system by which they live in a

bachelor mess where everything is provided for them suits them very well indeed"; that the "boredom" of their rural lives drives them to return to the mines:

> A compound manager, who in his time had seen half-a-million mine workers come and go, once said to me: "To the old hands this is like a club. They get away from the squabbles of the women and domestic worries and then, just as sailors do, they go home and are received as heroes. They love it" (1962, 219 - 220).

If it were to be taken at face value, without question or critique, and indeed without a stated viewpoint of the miners themselves, Cartwright's portrayal of the lives of "native" mine workers and "boss boys", would sound almost idyllic:

> They can go visiting or shopping. They can play games of all descriptions of which skittles is probably the most popular of all. They can practice for athletic meetings. They can dance their tribal dances and sing their tribal songs or they can sip their beer, dose in the sun and dream of home…Such is the life of the mine worker, day in, day out. He works much harder than he ever did at home. But he counts as his reward for that the good food, the free beer and the cash he receives. He also counts the club life that is his when he is off duty. And having weighed the amount of work he must do against these rewards he comes to the decision that this is the job for him (1962, 223).

What is particularly interesting in Cartwright's writing is how his perspective is so closely aligned with many in the white, English speaking community of Welkom today. In most of my interactions with this particular group, the general view of the industry, the role players, the history and the meaning of gold mining, is consistent with the accounts in books like *The Gold Miners* and their attitudes closely reflect those of Cartwright. It is perhaps understandable why those who have benefited from the mines to such a degree would wish to accept Cartwright's view without too much scrutiny. I too, as acknowledged in the narrative, was a beneficiary of the system which exploited black mine workers, and it would be nice to believe that it was all a mutually beneficial arrangement. Of course, first-hand accounts of miners, like those recorded in Moodie's *Going for Gold,* squarely contradict this rose-coloured view. It was important when writing the narrative, therefore, to be circumspect when attempting to understand or describe the lived experience of the underground miners, without the benefit of first-hand experience and reliance on conjecture.

4.4. Critical Academic Work

As the political situation in the country began to shift in the 1970s and 1980s, more nuanced texts emerged, with more balanced and critical commentary on the mining industry. These texts are often sociological or anthropological works, which record the lived experience of miners - the 'underground people' - and analyse and interpret them, often through a Marxist lens. This is particularly evident in books like *Going for Gold: Men, Mines and Migration* by T.D. Moodie (1994). Moodie extensively interviewed migrant labourers on the mines in the 1970s and 1980s, including President Steyn Mine in Welkom. These interviews, which were conducted in Sotho with Vivienne Ndatshe acting as interviewer, translator and interpreter, provide some of the best insights into the lived experience of the underground workers on the mines during these decades, particularly those who came from their homelands as part of the migratory labour system. That the interviews were conducted in the miners' home language and are often quoted word for word (as translated by Ndatshe), made this one of the most useful references for my narrative piece. The first hand accounts of the miners stand in stark contrast to the idealised view, as presented by Cartwright and the mining industry as a whole, of the mines as a sort of "club" which the miners were pleased to return to over and over again. Contrast, for example, the description of the experience of mine workers arriving at the mines by Cartwright:

> …the new employee is shown to a room which he will share with some 19 other other men. He is then issued boots, protective leggings and a helmet and shown how to wear them. After this he goes to classes where he is shown what working conditions will be like underground. He begins to learn Fanakalo, the lingua franca of the mines. He has to learn the names of the implements he will use, how to handle a shovel and some of the elementary rules of safety. He also has to learn the elements of hygiene. Once this preparatory school course is completed he goes underground and takes up his job.…At the end of their day's work they return to the compound for a hot shower and a change of clothing. After that the hours of recreation begin and it is each man to his taste. Conversation remains, as ever, the greatest joy of their lives - Long talks among a group of friends on subjects that range from the weather and the crops at home, to what happened underground that day, and, inevitably, the foibles of women (1962, 222 - 223).

with first hand accounts of miners as recorded by Moodie:

> According to Sotho men recruited for the mines in 1976, management quickly asserted its control…so began a potent process of socialisation. "These people are altogether not regarded as human beings", said [a] Sotho

> informant, “they are treated no better than animals because they are being insulted… they are being kicked about like dogs.” After a crowded train journey to Welkom in South Africa, the men arrived at the recruiting test centre, where they again had “to strip naked and run in droves.” They were “kicked and pushed to the doctor” after being doused in bitterly cold water… Having been assigned a number they performed aptitude tests, and only then were they fed for the first time, on a thin gruel. Finally a “police boy” escorted them to the mine. To further their acclimatisation to strenuous work underground at high temperatures, once they arrived at the mine they were subjected every day for a week to four hours of monotonous exercise in a steam chamber to the metronomic beat of drums, supervised by unfeeling black overseers (1994, 12 - 13).

Many other valuable critical academic studies, which began to appear in the 1970s and 1980s onwards, contribute to a better understanding of the lived experience of underground mine workers. *Labour in the South African Gold Mines*, *1911-1969* (Wilson 1972) and *A Tale of Two Mining Cities: Johannesburg and Broken Hill 1885 - 1925* (Kennedy 1984), both present a useful Marxist perspective on the conditions experienced by black labourers on the mines in Johannesburg. More recently, anthropologist Robert Thornton has researched and written about illegal mining, or what he refers to as artisanal mining, particularly in the Goldfields around Welkom (Thornton 2013). This research has been especially useful in understanding the situation of the Zama-Zamas in Welkom, which made relatively frequent appearances in my narrative piece. As it would have been difficult, if not impossible, for me to interview the illegal, or ‘artisanal’, miners in a thorough way that would add value, Thornton’s research was invaluable in contributing to my understanding of this economic activity in Welkom and the lived experience of these miners, with such details as:

> The illegal miners work in small groups of 5 to 15 men. More than this number, they claim, leads to internal conflict. Teams often include people from many ethnic, linguistic or national backgrounds. Usually several teams work together in mines that they know well, and shifts can last up to a week or more underground. A leader helps to provide material and tools, and assists in selling the refined gold produced by the teams. Such a person also provides a place of safety where miners can store their personal possessions (cell phones, ID books, money, clothes) while they are underground, and usually brokers payouts and divisions of food or other resources to the teams. Leaders also provide religious services and arrange contracts with sangomas (‘traditional healers’ or ‘shamans’) to supply medicines that protect the miners while they are underground and that help them to identify dangers (2013, 4).

Although the above-mentioned academic texts, and many others, were written by people who were clearly critical of the mining industry and sympathetic to the situation of the miners, they were “with” with miners, not “of” them; they were surface people, not underground people.

4.5. Art

Another category of text related to the mines was important to consider: the Arts, including music, photography, visual arts and poetry. This was relevant particularly as my aim in writing the narrative non-fiction piece was to present it more as a creative work of narrative non-fiction than a straight journalism piece or memoir. Thus it was useful to consider how mining is portrayed in these forms, again noting how the different perspective or point of view of the creator of such texts influenced their final works.

On The Mines (2012), the photographic collection by David Goldblatt, with text by Nadine Gordimer, attempts to capture, in stark black and white images and poetic prose, something of the experience of mining and of life in the mine compounds. The images of a team sinking a shaft at President Steyn No. 4 in Welkom in 1969, reveal something of the terrifying and hellish environment of this most dangerous of all mining activities. As Gordimer narrates:

> In the confines of that hole, men use great force to tear into the unyielding but not inert mass of rock. They are not remote from the point of confrontation, they are in it. Indeed they are of it. Some are maimed and killed. Rock from the sidewall slips; kibbles topple over; steel snaps; men forget and machines kill (2012, 91).

Concluding the shaft-sinking section of the book, is a poignant photo with the caption:

> Funeral of 58 Basotho Shaft Sinkers, Buffelsfontein, November, 1969: The shaft-sinking crew on the bottom and most of the men on the stage were killed. The stage was wrecked, 27 men were injured and 60 were killed including two whites who were buried separately (2012, 93).

This caption is strikingly reminiscent of the story told by Gladys Roberts, in which “eight native employees were killed and 16 injured along with one European miner, who was not critically hurt” (Roberts 1984, 78). While Goldblatt’s photographs and Gordimer’s accompanying narrative give some idea of the gruelling conditions underground, these works are, once again, produced by sympathetic but removed artists, and will be read and viewed by an even more removed audience. It is ultimately impossible to experience, from

the comfort of a couch by the coffee table, the heat, deafening noise, choking dust and fumes, darkness and mortal danger of sinking a shaft thousands of meters deep.

The photographs of Ernest Cole are some of the most viscerally expressive portrayals of the brutality suffered by blacks in South Africa during apartheid. While his photographs range across various themes, there are many images, on and off the mines, that closely capture the conditions described by the miners in Moodie's *Going for Gold*. While Cole's photos, unlike many of the other texts mentioned here, were produced by a black South African who was himself embedded in the black experience of the apartheid system - and therefore from a far more authentically empathetic perspective - Cole too was a surface person.

One of the most expressive and poignant examples of art based on the experience of the gold miners, is in the poetry of Dr B.W. Vilakazi, most particularly in the poems *Woza, Nonjinjikazi* (*Come, Monster of Steel!*) and *Ezinkomponi* (*In the Gold Mines*) (Vilakazi 1962). Vilakazi, although a black man with a poet's sense of the suffering of others, could not have been more far removed from his Zulu contemporaries who worked underground in the mines. While most underground mine-workers were from rural areas with little access to education and primarily moved between hard labour on the mines and hard work at home in their fields, Dr Vilakazi had the exception of being the first African man awarded a Doctorate and was the first black lecturer at a white university, when he took a position in the Department of 'Bantu Studies' at the University of the Witwatersrand in 1936. So while Vilakazi too was a surface person, and in no way typical of those who worked on the mines, he nevertheless seemed to capture something true about their experience:

> Roar without rest, machines of the mines,
> Louder still and louder roar!
> Drown our voices with your uproar,
> Drown our cries and groans of pain
> As you eat away our joints.
> Jeer machines, yes, jeer and mock us,
> Let our sufferings cause you laughter,
> Well we know your terrible powers;
> We, your slaves, and you, our masters![8]
> (Vilakazi 1962, 171)

Music is another art form that commonly captured the experience of black miners during apartheid. Many songs, produced by black South African artists, had hard labour,

[8] From *Ezinkomponi (In the Gold Mines), Verse 7*

mining and life in Johannesburg, the ‘City of Gold’, as a key theme. For example, Hugh Masekela’s *Stimela*, one of his most renowned songs, captures the experience of migrant workers on the mines:

> This train carries young and old, African men
> Who are conscripted to come and work on contract.
> In the golden mineral mines of Johannesburg
> And its surrounding metropolis,
> sixteen hours or more a day for almost no pay.
> Deep, deep, deep down in the belly of the earth.
> When they are digging and drilling
> for that shiny mighty evasive stone,
> Or when they dish that mish mesh mush food
> into their iron plates with the iron shank.
> Or when they sit in their stinking, funky, filthy,
> Flea-ridden barracks and hostels.
> They think about the loved ones they may never see again.
> They always curse, curse the coal train,
> The coal train that brought them to Johannesburg.[9]
> (Masikela 1974)

In music too, we find among the very few texts produced by underground people, those who worked, at least for some period, deep underground in the gold mines. Sotho work songs, composed on the mines and sung in groups while working or traveling between the mines and their homelands, give some first-hand insight into the lived experience of the the migrant mine workers. These songs, however, were not intended to be historical documents, or lasting accounts of their experience. Without the efforts of anthropologists like David Coplan (1987), who recorded the songs and gained insights into their meaning through his interactions with the miners, many of these songs would be lost to time. While reading them in text in English translation does not do them justice, they nevertheless give insight into their composers’ experiences. One of South Africa’s most famous songs, so much so that it is often called the ‘second national anthem’ is *Shosholoza*, a song composed by underground workers, which expresses solidarity in the hard working conditions on the mines.

4.6. Impact on Narrative

Reviewing the literature of gold mining, as well as the broader accounts of South African history, informed and shaped my narrative in two important ways.

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[9] From the album *I Am Not Afraid*

First, it provided the background information that was essential in telling the broader story of the town. As I mention in my narrative piece, despite having grown up in a mining town, I knew very little about the industry or its greater national significance. Therefore it was essential for me, in returning to Welkom and attempting to understand the story of the town, to learn as much as I could about it. While the history of gold mining was obviously of great importance, the history of the Free State province, the conflicts between the Boers and the British in the South African War, and the many tectonic political shifts that took place in the wake of that war, proved to be of almost equal importance in understanding the current attitudes, divisions and culture of the town.

The second important aspect was to see how others, at various times in history, have told the story of gold and those involved in the production of gold in South Africa. What I found, perhaps not surprisingly, is that these stories have overwhelmingly been told by white men and in English. An important part of reviewing the literature then was to seek out as many alternative accounts as possible and try to piece together some semblance of truth. This turned out to be very difficult, as the "truth" differed greatly depending on who was telling it. This in itself was enlightening and helped me to be conscious of the challenges that I would face attempting to tell a "true" story from my own perspective. In response, while telling my own story, I tried to make it explicit that this was only one of many stories, and while I might only be able to access those stories as an outsider, that it was important for them not to be invisible. This was a particularly difficult aspect of writing the piece, to what extent I have been successful is perhaps up to the reader.

5. NARRATIVE

5.1. Intent

I chose to approach the narrative long-form in the style of a creative work of non-fiction, rather than a journalistic research piece, as I wanted to convey a personal, intimate account of ordinary people in a way that would be engaging and entertaining to the reader. There have been many texts written about mining and mining communities, as already discussed, but there have been few written from a personal perspective in the form of narrative non-fiction, in that sense I hope that this piece plays a part in filling that gap.

As already mentioned, I was influenced in this respect by the work of the New Journalists, as defined by Tom Wolfe (1973), and Gay Talese and Joan Didion in particular. Their approach to time and place and people - and how this in turn tells a bigger story about the times that we live in - is something that I have attempted to achieve in my story. I focused my narrative on the people of the town and their stories, the stories they told me and the stories they tell themselves. As Talese put it, "…all that is now the story of my

trying to deal with reality, with all its misadventures, its wrong turns, with an ever-energised quest to know something about people who tend to be ignored" (2007, 9).

5.2. Positioning

While I did not find many examples in the literature of South African gold mining of the creative narrative form I have taken, there are many examples of it in other contexts, and these have served as inspiration for what I hoped to achieve. Herman Charles Bosman wrote many short stories about small towns, or "dorps" in South Africa, capturing both the humour and darkness that resides there (1981; 2000; 2003). Joan Didion's *Slouching Towards Bethlehem* (1964) was a particular inspiration in the way that she captured the essence of a bigger problem in America by spending time with locals and describing the community and physical space and energy of Haight Ashbury in San Francisco in the late 1960s. Other American works of narrative non-fiction, such as John Berendt's *Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil* (1994) and Lawrence Wright's *God Save Texas* (2018) were also inspirational in the way that they described similar environments to Welkom. Wright's account of Texas in particular, as a state so reliant on a single commodity (oil), closely resembles the Goldfields, with a similarly segregated, religious and conservative community whose prosperity and struggles are so closely tied to the rise and fall of the price of oil.

5.3. Style

The style of the narrative piece is inspired by the written texts I have mentioned, as well as a genre of film, based on real events, which has achieved critical and commercial success over the last decade. Recent examples include: *The Wolf of Wall Street* (2014); *The Big Short* (2015); *I, Tonya* (2017); *Vice* (2018) and, most recently, *Bombshell* (2019). These films have various features in common, in terms of style, tone and narrative devices used, which suit the aims of my own narrative piece.

They all have as their subject matter "real-life" stories. However, unlike many films based on real-life events, they do not present the stories in a "straight", docudrama style, attempting to create the impression that the objective truth is being presented to the audience. Rather, they draw explicit attention to the inconsistencies and contradictions inherent in stories told by human beings, with their own subjective point of view based on their historical context, their own identity and fallible memory.

The films present their stories in a humorous, ironic style, using surprising and unexpected methods to keep the attention of the audience. In some cases the subject matter of the films has the potential to be dry and boring to many in the audience (the financial crisis of 2008 in *The Big Short* or the political complexities surrounding the Bush administration and the war in Iraq in *Vice*), but the use of humour and unusual narrative

devices make the stories more entertaining and accessible to a broader audience. Similarly, I have presented my narrative in a humorous, ironic tone with unusual narrative devices, partly to make the potentially boring subject of mining more entertaining and accessible to a wider audience and partly because this suits my own writing style.

Finally, these films focus on the personal and intimate, telling the stories of people and their lives, expanding to take in the larger context of the political and social shifts, then contracting back to the personal. They have used observant details that give texture and serve as indicators of a time and place.

While it is not necessarily possible to employ the same devices in writing as in film, these examples nevertheless make use of story-telling techniques which have served as an influence in my own work.

6. METHODOLOGY

6.1. Observation, Interviews and Immersion

During the course of the research project, I visited Welkom as often as possible. Over a period of more than a year I spent a total of roughly five weeks there. I immersed myself in the day-to-day life of the town: attended a church service, watched a sports match, visited the flea market, hung out at the local coffee shop, had a few drinks at the local golf-club, tried to avoid a fist fight at the “Plan B” nightclub and closely observed the comings and goings of the locals, the state of the infrastructure and environment and the changes that have occurred since I was a resident local myself. While I didn't conduct formal interviews, I engaged in conversations with as many people as possible to gather their memories, stories, views and opinions of the town, its history, its current state and its future. My uncle and aunt, Ian and Winnie Roberts, played a key role in all of my visits, in taking me around, sharing their stories, introducing me to people and giving me deep insight to the town as it is today. My father, Clive Roberts, was another key source of information; the stories he told me about the town in its heyday, my grandparents, the mining industry and the characters and quirky stories from 'the old days', formed an important part of my narrative.

6.2. Visiting Sites of Memory

A key feature of the narrative piece was the observation of “sites of memory”. These included some of the buildings and neighbourhoods from the photos and home movies taken by my grandfather of the Harmony Gold Mine, Harmony Village and the miners’ hostels. Most of these sites are now ruins, disintegrating or being actively dismantled. They served as an allegory of the death and disintegration of the town itself, and the collapse of the hubristic system which created it.

6.3. Visit to Underground Mine

In 2018 I arranged to spend a day underground in one of the deepest gold mines in the world, 3000 meters below the surface. The account of this visit forms an important strand of my narrative, as a counterpoint to my experience as a privileged member of the mining community on the surface.

6.4. Public and Private Archives and Museums

Public Archives

I searched out relevant archival texts and artefacts, including articles, letters, photographs and physical items in collections in Welkom and beyond. The Witwatersrand Historical Papers collection contained a few fascinating documents, particularly the minutes of a meeting of the *Native Affairs Commission* from 1954 and 1955. I also sought out archives in Welkom which, although not easy to find, did unearth a few interesting and useful artefacts, including a script for guides taking tours through the municipal buildings (which made it into the narrative) as well as a visit to the local museum which contributed an amusing line or two. I also attempted to visit the editor and journalists of the local newspaper *Vista*. Due to scheduling challenges and limitations, this unfortunately didn't happen, but a collection of old issues and the website archives were very useful.

6.5. Desk Based Research

Contemporary and historic publications on mining

There are a wide range of in-print publications, in the form of books, newspapers and magazines, industry reports and pamphlets which discuss the history and background of the mining industry in South Africa, as well as the broader South African history surrounding the discovery of gold. Additionally, many of the historic narratives I have referred to are either out of print or were never released to the public (for example, some industry commissioned pamphlets and reports). Most of these I was able to source in the Africana Collection in the Cullen Library at the University of the Witwatersrand or in private collections. Both the contemporary and historical publications served as primary research sources and are discussed in more detail in the Literature Review.

7. ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS AND LIMITATIONS

7.1. Defamation and Privacy

Welkom is a relatively small community and it would, in some cases, have been obvious who was being quoted or portrayed in the narrative piece. Some of my interviewees, particularly those still working for the mines, specifically asked not to be identified.

Consequently, some circumspection was called for when recording these interactions and observations, as there was the possibility that there would be consequences for a negative portrayal of certain people's behaviour or view-points or a retelling of their stories.

It must also be noted that my family are to a greater or lesser extent still embedded in this community. Had I recorded conversations with members of the community that showed them in a negative light, this could have had consequences for my family's own personal and professional relationships due to their association with me. Therefore, there was necessarily a certain amount of self-editing. I realise that this has possibly made the piece weaker than it could be, but I believe the alternative would cause unnecessary harm and would not be justifiable in the balance.

7.2. Access, Representation and Bias

Although it was my aim to present a balanced and unbiased view of Welkom in the narrative piece, there were many practical challenges and fundamental limitations that made this ultimately impossible. To begin with, I had different levels of access to different segments of the Welkom population. As a former local with family connections, I had far greater ease of access to the English-speaking, white community in which I grew up. By default, I spent the majority of my research time with my family and the memories and family stories which form a large part of the narrative are also rooted in this demographic. Therefore the narrative, as a largely personal account, has a conscious imbalance of focus on the white, English speaking community.

Apart from ease of access, language and gender barriers presented a challenge. In interviewing the Afrikaans mine foremen, more than once my uncle would paraphrase my questions in better Afrikaans and the foremen, being accustomed to dealing with men, tended to direct their responses to him rather than me. It appeared to me that there was some discomfort on their part in speaking to a young woman that made them more guarded than they would be in other company. However, I was still able to understand their responses in Afrikaans, allowing me to access the nuances of meaning in the language they used. Unfortunately, as I am not fluent in any of the African languages, I was unable to communicate with any of the black community members I spent time with in their own languages, limiting my ability to capture those same nuances in the narrative.

The circumstances of my interactions during the research and the scope of the project also presented challenges. While it was my intention to spend time talking to the miners I met underground, to gain insights into their experience and thoughts about the mining industry, it transpired that there was no time or opportunity for these conversations. The underground environment was not at all conducive to conversation and, as I was shuffled to the womens' dressing room as soon as we reached the surface, I was given no

opportunity to talk to the miners at the end of the day. As I conducted this research part-time, and due to the geographical distance, I was only able to spend a limited amount of time in Welkom. As a result, I had to be selective about the material I gathered, necessarily limiting the scope of the project and the ability to present a comprehensive profile of the town. Due to the limitations on the length of the piece, not all of the material could be included; the day spent at the mine processing plants with the Afrikaans foremen for example, did not make the final edit, while the day spent in Thabong did. Taking into account the limitations of both time and the length and scope of the narrative, I was not able to give a fully comprehensive account of the town. I hope that I made these limitations clear in the narrative and that a longer project would allow me to expand on those shortfalls.

Finally, I had to be conscious of my own inherent biases when doing the research and in writing the final piece. As my literature review shows, we are all prone to the bias of our own point of view and our own historical and cultural context. Therefore, I tried throughout my research and writing to be cognisant of these forces and to avoid, as far as possible, the pitfalls of making assumptions, making excuses, simplifying, misrepresenting, misunderstanding or turning a blind eye. To what extent I have succeeded in this is, once again, for the reader to judge.

WELCOME TO WELKOM

Utterly Unbelievable, Totally True Tales from a City of Gold That Was

Eventually the earth will give up its treasure… I have unshaken belief that gold is to be found on these Free State fields, payable gold, a new goldfield.

~ Allan Roberts, 1935[10]

Welcome to Welkom

Travelling on the N1 South, from more than fifty kilometres away, I see a massive dust-cloud rolling over the paper-flat horizon, a mountain-high wall of fertile red soil, dry baked in the Highveld winter and whipped away from the farmlands beyond Welkom by a hurricane wind. On the stretch of highway where I am driving however, the sky is a clear, cold purple that dominates everything, pressing down on the horizon, uninterrupted by any mountain or hill or natural feature. Only windmills and cows, the occasional small dam and a lonely tree here and there break the monotony of planes of ripe wheat moving in the fore-wind of the coming storm, almost violet in the early twilight. A lot of people say that it's a flat and boring part of the country, a tedious stretch on the road from Johannesburg to Cape Town. Maybe only native born Free Staters can see the stark beauty in it.

The sand-storm and I arrive in Welkom at the same time. As I pass *Koppie-Alleen* (Little Hill All Alone), the semi-official beginning of town, a biblical red darkness descends. On cue, Leonard Cohen's *The Future* plays on my car radio:

When they said
…they said
Repent
…Repent
Repent
…Repeeeeeeeent
I wonder what they meant

10 Cited in Roberts 1984.

The sign welcoming you to town, rather disappointingly, doesn't say "Welcome to Welkom", but rather is just a set of multi-coloured plastic pipes thrusting out of the ground with a plastic "WELKOM" plastered to it. It's a bit ridiculous that a place can have a sign that both welcomes you and tells you its name in one word. Underneath "WELKOM" is the number "70" (it was Welkom's 70th birthday last year). For the last twenty years it had said "50". I imagine that, in another twenty years, they will get around to changing it to "90". Or - more likely - in twenty years the sign will be a plastic remnant that time cannot decay of a City that Was: *was* the fastest growing, *was* the prettiest, *was* the best planned, *was* the richest, *was* the wildest, *was* the biggest gold find in history, *was, was, was.*

From that sign onwards the windmills are replaced by titanic steel or concrete mining headgear, eerily lit up with floodlights, orange halos in the gloaming darkness. Hard-edged man-made mountains appear out of nowhere. Blowing from the peaks of these trapezoid mine-dumps, I see the pale yellow-grey, arsenic and cyanide laced powder swirling into the clouds of the rich, red, rural sand of the storm.
Jesus. No wonder I had sinus problems all through my childhood.

Driving through town is depressing. Welkom isn't "a beautiful woman with a dirty face", as the English Lady Astor once described the city of Savannah, it's more like someone who used to be young and vital and beautiful, reduced to a prematurely aged, toothless wreck by years of excessive sugar consumption and drug and alcohol abuse. And that refers not only to Welkom's once-famous physical beauty, but also to its psycho-social state of collective consciousness. Most of the people I speak to here have a love-hate attitude to the place now. The love comes from the happy memories of times gone by, of the town in its heyday, and the continuing close friendships and sense of community. The hate comes from a bitter disgust at what it has become. "Hate the town, love the people" is a common phrase now doing the rounds.

Everyone who has the means is planning to leave at some point in the future. But they delay year after year, sorry to leave the familiar comfort that comes from spending your whole life in a small town, where everybody knows your name (and your business), where shared stories and memories bind you to the place and the people. Even now, having been away for over twenty years, everywhere I go in Welkom there are people who vaguely or intimately know me, because they were close friends of my parents, or I went to school with their children, or they taught with my mom, or played sports with my dad, or did business with my uncle. They are almost all from my parents' generation. I never run into anyone I know, or knew, of my own age.

As long as I can remember there has been this saying, and I hear it often still: “You’ll only cry twice when you live in Welkom: the day you arrive, and the day you leave.” I suppose I cried the day I arrived, since I was born here, and truth be told, for all that I hated the place, I cried the day I left.

I drive all the way through town, hardly having to stop once. Welkom was designed with no traffic lights and very few stop streets, none on the main thoroughfare. Because of the mathematical, almost algorithmic, design of the roads there has never been a traffic jam in the brief history of the town. I curve around and around the park-sized, double-lane traffic-circles, trying to remember how they work exactly and nearly cause at least two accidents. The circles all used to be landscaped with velvety green lawns and trees and flower beds. Now most of them are paved over with bricks, some have billboards proclaiming things like, “This Circle Sponsored by Flamingo Pharmacy”. I pass familiar landmarks: the oak-lined street that leads to the house I grew up in, the Greek Orthodox Church, the fields of my old high school, the impressive modernist municipal buildings with their austere clock tower and roofs painted the turquoise-blue colour of oxidised copper. But then there’s the row of chain restaurants and fast-food outlets where the old cinema used to stand, referred to as “The Strip”. A casino across the road dominates the centre of town. Shop fronts, now closed for the evening, with steel roller-doors scrawled with graffiti in place of the glass windows that once displayed luxury goods. The towering gold-brick clock-tower has massive advertisements for an event that evidently happened three months ago hanging on every side. Each of the four clock-faces displays a different time.

The roofs of the municipal buildings by the way, *were* originally made of copper, which had tarnished over time to a beautiful Caribbean blue. When I was in high-school in the 1990’s we watched as the copper was stripped off (to be sold to help pay the debts of the failing municipality) and replaced with corrugated iron painted roughly, but not quite, the turquoise-blue colour of oxidised copper.

Hurray, the Christmas lights are still up! In June. Every year when we were kids we would watch with excitement as they installed the light display in “Central Park” at the beginning of December. Three weeks before Christmas we would go to the park in the evening, families and friends would gather to have picnics on the lawn, sing Christmas carols and watch the fireworks display before counting down to the main event, some duly appointed official flipping the switch. When I was 15 in 1995, the lights went up as usual in December, but this time they didn’t come down as usual in January. They were still up in July when Welkom, ever the location of bizarre and dramatic weather phenomena, experienced a freak snow storm, leaving the town blanketed in knee-deep snow. In a fit of

whimsy, the municipality turned the Christmas lights on for the day, to the delight of the locals. Journalists and news crews from the major centres arrived and took their photos and filmed their little inserts in-front of the lights, enchanted and amazed that the town had managed to install them so quickly, to celebrate a “White Christmas in July”. They were never taken down again, and the switching on of the lights ceremony quickly became a proverbial non-event, and then literally a non-event, as the town couldn’t afford the electricity bills to light them up anymore.

It’s the middle of winter and it’s already dark before my uncle Ian gets back from work, I’ve arrived just before him. So I pull over to the side of the road next to his driveway and switch off the car to wait. After about two minutes I see a torch light bobbing towards me in my side-view mirror, in a moment the car is surrounded by at least four large, apparently vicious, barking dogs. I open the window, blinking into the beam. When the man with the torch and the barking dogs sees my face he apologises, “Ag sorry man, I didn’t mean to come up to you with the dogs like this, I thought maybe you were one of our friends from the “Rainbow Nation” you know, ha ha ha.”

Oh God, I literally haven’t even gotten out of my car yet and I’m already being subjected to this fucking mentality. Ian’s car pulls up just then and saves me from having to deal with it. Before I have a chance to say anything more than, “Uh…” the man is bobbing back into the darkness from whence he came, yelping hell-hounds trailing behind.

As I get out of the car to greet my uncle, I hear the familiar, low, rolling rumble and the ground shudders beneath my feet .

A Source of Great and Abiding Interest

In a big city, it is the city itself that persists. In its monuments and its archives and its traditions, it is the city that endures. In a dorp it is life that goes on.

~ Herman Charles Bosman[11]

I don’t come to my home town very often. If it wasn’t for my three relatives who still live here I would probably never see Welkom again. Like everybody else, I have mixed feelings about the place. I had a very happy, idyllic childhood here until my family moved to Cape Town in 1989 when I was nine years old. At that time, the city of Welkom was starting to show signs of decline. After four decades of head-spinning growth, since payable gold was first discovered and Welkom was officially declared a town in 1948,

[11] Bosman 2003.

things were taking an equally dizzying downward turn. The political situation in South Africa in the late 1980s and the resultant international sanctions, combined with a drop in the price of gold, hit the town hard. In one decade, from 1990 to 2000, the town was completely transformed: the glamorous, glitzy party town was hit with a monumental hangover.

Despite the decline, my family retuned to Welkom in 1992 (there is some dark magic in small towns like Welkom that always lures you back). At twelve, I was old enough to see the cracks, to know that there was something beneath the surface of the place that wasn't right. A small mining town in the Free State is an uncomfortable place to find yourself as a naturally liberal young person. All through my high school years I made myself miserable with endless conflict, with the other school-kids, with the teachers, with the parents, with the church. I hadn't learnt yet not to "wrestle with pigs" as George Bernard Shaw brilliantly put it, "because you get dirty, and besides, the pig likes it." I took up every battle - against racism, against sexism, against homophobia, against religious fundamentalism, against pointless and unjust school rules - and it made absolutely no difference whatsoever to anyone or anything, other than to depress and exhaust me and stress my parents out.

So why the mixed feelings then? Well, apart from the afore-mentioned idyllic childhood, there were things I got from Welkom that I don't think I would have gotten anywhere else, and with my new-found "comes with age" wisdom, I realise now that they are valuable. Perhaps most valuable are the close friends that have been a part of my life since I was three years old. Maybe I'm wrong, but I don't think it's common for people who grow up in big cities to make friends when they're in nursery school who end up being bride's maids at their weddings, or godparents to their children. The friends I made when I was three are still my closest friends today. And that, I believe, is the gift of the intense ferment of a small town, especially one where there is really nothing to do but what you create yourself. Life in Welkom was interesting. It was interesting because we made it interesting. And those self-created adventures made for wonderful stories, bizarre stories, the kind you share over and over again within your little circle until they become legends, the kind of stories you just don't hear from big city people. My friend Leone's English husband, at a recent wine-soaked reunion of this inner-circle of mine, commented on how absurd our stories are, disturbing even. We found this hilarious and I said, "Our stories are marvelous! They're like parables!" To which he responded: "No they're not! Parables have morals - you learn something from them! You can't learn anything from these stories except how to be totally bonkers!" For this, I am grateful.

The town itself has its own shared stories, many of them to do with death for some reason. But I realise now, as an adult who has lived away from Welkom for many years, that we lived in our own worlds then, we made a small place infinitesimally small by withdrawing into our own communities, and our own little groups within those communities. There were people all around us that we didn't know at all. Considering the entire existence of my home town relied on the mines, it surprises me now how little attention I paid to it. My friends' fathers all worked on the mines, my father owned a business that supplied the mines. But as children and teenagers, I don't remember us ever talking about it, or caring about it. I had no interest whatsoever in the origins of our town, or its significance to South Africa, I couldn't have cared less. Despite the fact that I grew up in a gold mining town, until I was thirty-seven years old, I had never been underground in a gold mine. My privileged life was made possible by that honeycomb of dark and dangerous tunnels beneath the ground and those who worked there, but I had no interest in them. Only recently have I begun to understand the role that Welkom, and the gold that created it, played in our bigger national story. I've also only begun to understand how small towns are a clearer reflection of the true character of a nation than big cities. Here in small towns everything is concentrated, exposed, clear of the cosmopolitan swirl of activity and distraction in a big city that obscures the ugly reality of things. A small town is the image before it has been dressed-up, made-up, well-lit and photoshopped into a prettier, less real version of itself. I can't help but be drawn back to the place, difficult as it is to look straight at the ugly reality of things, curiosity compels me. I thought, going back now, that I might get a better understanding of the town, of the community that I grew up in. But also, I hoped to get a better understanding of the communities who, for reasons beyond my comprehension at the time, were for the most part invisible to me as a child. As Bosman put it: "dorps are a source of of great and abiding interest to the writer and to the person who is a student of life."

Harmony Village

After dinner on that first night, we watch old home movies, 8mm films taken by my grandfather in the 1950s that Ian recently had digitised. The grainy, muted colour footage is accompanied by some irritating plinky-plonky music that the man at the digitising place thought appropriate to add, so we put the volume off. There are images of a massive swimming pool filled with happy, splashing families; an open field crowded with people, a Santa Sleigh making its way over the field on rails; holiday shots of Ian and my dad, Clive, cavorting in a river or on the beach; back to images of the pool; men in World War II

uniforms, marching down a road, surrounded by an onlooking crowd, carrying a red wreath; a group of about twenty black men in Zulu traditional dress performing an impressive Zulu dance in a small amphitheatre with a large crowd of white spectators; more swimming pool shots; more beach shots; the soldiers marching again; a go-cart cruising between blue-gum trees; more swimming pool shots. Sadly the person who digitised and compiled the videos apparently had no sense of narrative continuity. But the images are mesmerising, we leave them playing in the background and they run on a constant stream, a tableau that looks like the opening sequence to “The Wonder Years” - that show set in 1960s America. All the while we talk about Welkom and how it started, about Ian and Clive’s childhood in the Harmony Village, a community purpose built by Harmony Mine for its employees and their families. As my grandfather worked on Harmony Mine for many years, it is where my dad and uncle grew up, it is where my family's part in this story begins. Ian agrees to take me to see what’s left of it in the morning.

I ask Ian if it’ll be okay for me to wear slip-slops, or if I should wear closed shoes. He thinks for a minute, “Slops should be fine, we’re not going anywhere too rough I don’t think. I’ll take my gun with though, just incase we run into any Zama-Zamas. I don’t want to end up shooting anyone, but I can just fire some warning shots if we have any trouble.” I laugh and he looks at me strangely and sort of laughs. Of course I assume he’s joking. But when I get into the car while he locks up the house, as I fasten my seat-belt I see his hand-gun lying on the driver’s seat. I feel like a naive city slicker now, realising that the threat of danger here is very real.

Ian and his wife Winnie live at the Sedibeng Waterworks outside of town. As we leave his house and drive through some of the open fields surrounding the waterworks I see mounds and trenches on the side of the road. They look for all the world like massive meerkat mounds. And, just like meerkats, I see here and there a head pop up and then down again. As we get closer I see about five men in the trenches, one pushing a wheelbarrow, the others digging into the hard baked ground with rusty pick-axes. They are all wearing purple balaclavas, despite it being a warm day. They stop and glance at us as we drive past, there is something menacing about them.

“Zama-Zamas” Ian says.

“Really? Right by the side of the road? In the middle of the day?”

“They’re all over the place out here, any time of day.”

Zama-Zamas, by the way is the colloquial term for illegal miners meaning, roughly, ‘Chance Takers’ - men who use extraordinary methods to get into old, abandoned mine-shafts and extract what gold remains down there. In Welkom the Zama-Zamas have

branched out into other more or less (mostly less) legal activities. It is true that the informal economic activities of the Zama-Zamas is contributing significantly to the economy of the town now, but they are considered dangerous criminals by most and are avoided and feared. Winnie and Ian have told me before that they try, whenever possible, to give lifts to the women who work as domestics in the houses in Sedibeng; the walk from the main road where they are dropped off by the taxis to the entrance to the waterworks is fraught with danger.

We drive over the bridge of the lazy, brown Sand River. In places there are large sections of land fenced off as game reserves with kudus, blesbok and even giraffe sometimes visible from the road. One of these lodges has an enclosure with lions in it, you can hear them roaring in the evenings and at dawn from Ian's house.

Ian hoots and waves cheerfully at a skinny black man in a heap of rags carrying a massive, lumpy, heavy-looking sack over his shoulder. The man smiles broadly and waves back as we drive past.

"You know that guy?"

"No. He's just on this road every day and he's always friendly and smiling, so I wave at him. He takes scrap metal to the scrap heap up ahead. Every day."

We slow down at a three-way-stop. On each side of the road there are two big yellow steel tubes sticking out of the ground, cut at an angle, like giant pieces of penne pasta.

I point at them, "What are those?"

"Oh. That was a robot."

"Like, a traffic-light robot?"

"Ya. It was such a big deal when they put them in, the mayor came down here to cut a ribbon when they were switched on, they had a whole little ceremony, it was in the newspapers and everything. They lasted a few days and then someone came and stole them."

I can't decide what's more absurd, that the mayor came to a ribbon cutting ceremony for a set of robots, or that they were stolen just a few days later.

Ian hasn't been to Harmony Village in years. He hasn't wanted to, it's better, he says, to remember it the way it was. It was a community, custom built around the mine, for the Harmony employees and their families, the white families that is. (The black employees were provided with far less idyllic living arrangements). Because the Village was purpose-designed, it was the model of an ideal suburban paradise. There were facilities like a nine-hole golf course, tennis and squash courts, an Olympic-sized swimming pool, bike tracks, a full sized field for cricket or football with a concrete stadium

seating thousands. There were forests of pine and blue-gum trees and beautiful, neat little houses, paid for by the mine. The mines had provided free water to encourage people to grow pleasant gardens, and there was someone whose actual job it was to drive through the suburbs and fine people who didn't keep their properties neat and attractive.

Now the houses are mostly run down, cracked up and down the walls from the constantly shifting earth they're built on, and the gardens are mostly plots of dry sand with a few scrubby bushes here and there. The mines certainly don't provide free water anymore, and the people who live here now can barely afford to maintain the houses, let alone plant and maintain gardens. The nine-hole golf-course has gone back to the pine forest, there is almost nothing left to be seen of the fairways and greens. We stop at the old swimming pool, the one I saw in the flickering images of my family's home movies. Now it is an empty, concrete hole in the ground, filled with broken bottles and plastic, cracked tiles, and graffiti on the walls. The surrounding buildings which were once dressing rooms and the tuck-shop and office are crumbling, roofless ruins now. Half of the bricks have been chipped away, the tiles and roofing were removed long ago.

Ian looks at it nostalgically, sadly, and paints a picture for me of how it used to be. "That's where Mrs. Brandon used to sit, to sell the tickets and chips and cool drinks and sweets. She used to blow the whistle and shout at us to stop jumping or diving. Here, on this strip of grass, we used to lay towels down and play long jump, see who could jump over the most towels. On the weekends, there would be hundreds of people here. All us kids from the neighbourhood, we would all come here and play and swim all day. It was brilliant."

We walk a little way to the old 'Club', through an entrance in the stone wall, with one gate hanging askew. Ian goes to the hinges and rubs some of the silver paint from a scar in the metal, it's been sawed through.

"This is recent, if you come here again in a few days this'll be gone."

The garden around the club is immaculate, the stone walls curve around a raised section in a purposeful way that leads you to a central point. I recognise this from the old home-movies Ian had shown me the night before. In the movies, my grandfather was among the line of men in uniform, marching proudly with a wreath, and laying it right at this spot on Remembrance Day. The walls and pathways and grass in the "Garden of Remembrance" still look the same as they did in that footage, but I can see, from four drill-holes and a square of dark brick on a sun-bleached platform, that a bronze plaque of some sort is missing.

Inside the club we walk through a cool, dark corridor, and through wood-framed, glass doors into an open hall, full of natural light from the floor-to-ceiling windows on both sides, wooden floors, scuffed and smooth from years of wear.

“They used to have all kinds of community events here. I remember my mom and dad at the dances, mom loved to dance.”

Ian looks around and locates a door at the back of the hall, leading into another room, with a door on one side leading to yet another room.

“There used to be a big sweet counter there, for a penny you could pick and mix a whole paper bag of sweets.”

In through the other door, “This was the cinema, that’s where the screen was, and there were seats all the way up this side. On Saturday afternoons the kids would come to the matinee, cowboy movies, things like that. Old mister Du Preez would stand here and shout SHOOOOSH when we got too rowdy, which was basically the whole time. Sometimes we would blow up the empty paper sweet packets and pop them. Once someone popped a packet and he *shrieked*: “Who packed that poppet?!” and we all died laughing. It was the funniest thing ever.” Ian giggles just like a naughty eight-year old at the memory of it.

Nothing But Luck

Ian and I continue our tour of the past. Now we go to the mine itself. Harmony. A name that is built into my earliest memories, a part of my earliest vocabulary, the place where Grandpa worked. It is still running, although a lot of the buildings are now empty, many have been stripped down to the foundations.

Here and there we pass mammoth slabs of concrete, sometimes covered over with a pile of broken up concrete and dirt, many starting to grow over with grass and bushes.

“What’s that?”

“It’s a closed down shaft. They plug them up with a concrete cork and just leave them like that.”

We pull over and get out of the car.

“How do the Zama-Zamas get into the abandoned mines if they plug them up like that?”

“Ag, they easily dig underneath those things, then they find their way down the shafts to the tunnels.”

“Jesus, down those shafts without the lift? How do they do that?”

“With ropes and head-torches and stuff. They go from one crossbar to another all the way down.”

“Oh my God.”

My stomach churns just thinking about sitting on a crossbar above the gaping black, nothing but a piece of rope to lower yourself down to the next bar, nothing but a torch to hold back the darkness, nothing but luck to bet your life on.
“You know,” Ian says, “Some Zama-Zamas went down one of these shafts when they were being chased by the police. They disappeared for weeks, everyone thought they were dead, then they popped up again out of another shaft, about sixteen kilometres away. They had travelled through the tunnels underground for *sixteen kilometres*!”
“Holy shit! How do they live down there, how do they get food and water and stuff?”
“There are guys who do just that for a living, take food and water and... all kinds of things down the shafts to them. I heard that a bucket of KFC will get you about R600 if you can survive the trip down. And make it back up alive so you can spend it.”
I stare at him, “That’s unbelievable.”
He laughs grimly. He’s not joking either.
I can’t imagine the level of desperation that would drive me to dig around in those dark, hellish tunnels, even in a working mine, let alone an abandoned one.

COST OF GOODS IN UNDERGROUND VILLAGE:

- Amarula: R5 000
- Whisky: R3 000
- Black Label beer: R1 500 a six-pack
- 2-litre Coke: R100
- Tea/Coffee: R60
- Sugar: R50
- Sex with a prostitute: R2 500
- Toilet paper: R300/roll
- Steaks: R200
- Whole cooked chicken: R500
- Loaf of white bread: R150
- Carton of cigarettes: R1 000
- Lighter: R100
- Canned bully beef/chakalaka: R100

Dungeons of gold: Sex, booze and braais in underground mine cities
Sunday Times - Times Live - 22 May 2017

Ian pulls over to the side of the road next to a big open piece of land and gets out of the car. Opposite the open field is a rusting corrugated iron building, Ian points at it, “That’s

where I did my apprenticeship when I was a youngster, as an electrician. That was the "Appie Workshop."

Then he starts laughing to himself, a memory, a funny story, comes to his mind.

It was probably around the early 1960s, when he and my dad were kids, when a Lockheed C-130 Hercules plane landed on this runway.

"What runway?" I ask.

Ian points to a faint sand line running across the field, a short landing strip that would have been used by supply planes, or 12-seater passenger planes bringing executives over from Johannesburg. Definitely not the kind of installation that was made to land a massive four-engine turboprop military transport aircraft. It wasn't some expert pilot that managed this amazing feat, but rather a young, inexperienced lad on his first flight for the South African Air Force from Pretoria to Bloemfontein. It was the middle of the night when he saw the landing strip lights, he thought he had reached his destination. It was only after he touched ground that he realised he was in some serious trouble. He miraculously avoided smashing into the "appie workshop" by crashing through a fence which slowed his momentum. But that was just the beginning of his problems. He soon realised, after assessing the desperate situation, that there was no way he was going to get this beast back into the sky on such a short runway. No way. He was a tough young military man, but in the hours before he made that call to Pretoria, he broke down in tears more than once.

The air-force sent their best, most experienced pilot to see what he could do. By midday every single man, woman and child, black and white, from the surrounding area had gathered to watch this spectacle, *hundreds* of people. There was a carnival atmosphere as people laughed and gasped and gaped, the kids - and adults - in awe of the magnificent machine before them, and the real live air-force pilots!

After much to-do, the experienced hero pilot climbed into the cockpit, stopping to smile and wave at the crowd, they went absolutely wild! He taxied the plane to the start of the runway, the deafening sound of the massive engines built to a roar, the plane pulled off at full speed…closer and closer to the "appie workshop", faster and faster and faster, closer and closer and closer… and up, up, up… The landing gear missed the roof of the building by centimetres as it soared into the sky. The crowd gasped as one, then cheered like mad. The pilot even did a few loops and fly-bys, swooping down over the thrilled spectators, before he flew off into the distance and disappeared into the blue.

It was one of the most exciting things any of them ever saw.

Now the runway is barely discernible, a mostly healed scar in a field of weeds. The corrugated iron "appie workshop" is empty, pointlessly locked with a rusted chain and bolt,

a broken floodlight above it. I stand in the bright noon-day sun and look around, the cicadas humming in the surrounding trees the only sound. Everything is going back to nature, in a way. I suppose it will never really go back to the way it was before the Giants of Industry trod all over it. But the evidence of man's mighty works is disintegrating, rusting into the ground, overgrown with tall grass and sapling pines.

As we're heading back to the car the ground shakes, different to the kind of shudders I'm used to, that feel as if the earth had seen something disturbing and shivered. This was like a bang, one solid jerk, as if the earth had taken a massive punch to the gut. It sounded different too, not the familiar low rumble that builds up, rattles the window panes then fades away. This was a solid thud. I'm not used to it and I look at Ian.

"That was different."

"Ya. It's the water down there, fissures in the rock, it's slipping. It's just a blimming disaster waiting to happen."

I don't understand exactly, but it sounds serious.

Lunch at the River

Ian wants to take me somewhere new, a surprise. We drive a bit out of town to a small game farm. It is indeed a surprise. They have built a lovely restaurant with a big wooden deck overlooking the river, and luxury tent chalets on lush green grass all along the banks. I am suitably impressed, it is way beyond the current standard of Welkom establishments. Winnie meets us there for lunch. Below the deck, on a rocky part of the bank under a little gazebo, is a man playing old standards like *Bad Moon Rising* and *Spirit in the Sky*. I recognise him, even from a distance - it's Lesley. He used to play his keyboard and sing pretty much the same songs he's singing now, every weekend at *Siete's*, a restaurant owned by a Dutch man named Siete, which won "Best Steakhouse in South Africa" numerous times in the 1980s. Ian informs me that Lesley still plays there sometimes. Sitting one table away from us is the rugby legend, Gerrie Geldenhuis, having lunch and champagne with a big group of family and friends. From the raised deck you can see a few of the shaft headgear on the horizon, some close, some distant. They look more prosaic in this noon light.

"It looks like quite a lot of the shafts are still operating. I thought everything was pretty much shut down" I say.

Ian takes a sip of his Cream-Soda (he's hasn't drunk alcohol in twenty years, a necessary step to avoid becoming a member of the over-subscribed Welkom branch of the SSS Club, that is: death by Stress, Suicide or Substance Abuse).

“There’s still a bit going on, but it’s nothing like it was.”
Nobody that I've asked seems to know for sure, but Ian guesses that there are now only about twelve shafts still actively pulling ore out of the ground. At its peak, there were maybe eighty, maybe more. Now, he says, most of the activity is in reprocessing the tailings, the sand and rock left behind on the mine dumps decades ago. The technology has advanced, making it possible to extract a lot more gold out of it than they could when it was first hauled out of the earth, decades ago. Ian’s business supplies valves to one of these operations. By pumping the sludge through miles of pipes and valves from a dump back through the processing plant, the mine makes a R20 million profit a month. It's much more cost effective than deep mining, and less dangerous. Of course, it also employs only a fraction of the people, and there are only so many viable dumps left to process.
“What do you think is going to happen to Welkom, when all of the mines eventually close?”
“It’ll die I suppose. I don’t know. I won’t be around to see it. We’ll be in Port Alfred by then, or maybe New Zealand.”
Winnie comes back from chatting to Lesley on the bank during his break.
I notice what’s left of a brick building on the other side of the river. It looks like it was a chalet or bungalow of some sort. I say *was* because it clearly burnt down relatively recently.
“What happened there?” I ask.
“Oh, that’s where those hunters were staying when they were having Jerry Carlson's wake here at the restaurant, and they accidentally burnt the place down.”
I laugh. “How did that happen?”
“Ag man, you know these hunting idiots. They saw the wake at the restaurant and thought there was a lekker party going on, probably thought they could pick up some girls. So they came up here, but they left the fire going and left their bags right next to it. By the time people noticed, the fire had reached their ammunition. They say it sounded like World War II was going on, bullets firing ten to the second in every direction. Everyone hit the deck and covered until it finally stopped, by then it was too late to put the fire out. When the insurance inspectors came to do a report, all they found was a melted toothpaste tube and some melted condoms in the bathroom.”

City of Gold that Was

The next morning I decide to take a walk through town on my own while Winnie and Ian are at work. I find a parking space near the Municipal Buildings. I have a flashback to when I got my drivers’ license. I had learnt to drive in Welkom when I was about 13,

because that's what you do when you live in a small town in the Free State. But I did the official driving lessons and test in Grahamstown as a student. At the end of my first lesson I parked the car and switched it off, it started gliding backwards. The driving instructor pulled the hand-break up and said sarcastically, "I thought you said you learnt to drive years ago." To be honest, I had never understood what the hand-break was for, you don't need a hand-break when you park in Welkom. Don't even get me going on incline starts.

It's a warm, bright winter day. The Municipal Buildings look pretty much the same as they did, except that there is a lot of garbage lying around and they've built a palisade fence all the way around the perimeter, I can't comprehend why ("tenderpreneurship" the locals say). The buildings are designed in a U-shape, around a vast open plaza, lined with palm trees and scattered with benches. It is flanked by two slanted, tiled walls on either side. I remember - back when these walls were a water feature - the refreshing, cheerful sound of the water as it gushed over the slate tiles along the whole length of the square, making them gleam black in the sunlight. Now they are ash grey and dry and cracked, like everything else. I think I'll try to climb up to the top of the clock-tower, although I have my doubts that it'll be possible. Aha! Here is the Information Centre, I didn't even know such a thing existed. It's at the base of the Clock Tower - a small, old-fashioned room, straight out of the 1980s - with a desk and some shelves packed with tourist pamphlets. Yes, tourist pamphlets. There are two young women, about twenty years old I would guess, behind the counter. They seem very surprised to see someone strolling in.
"Hello!" I say.
Awkward pause.
"Uh… Hello? Kan ons help?"
"I hope so. I'm writing a story about Welkom, and I was wondering if you have any information about the town that I could use?"
They look at each other and back at me.
"Ummm… What kind of information?"
I try not to laugh, but there is something so fantastically absurd about someone who works in the information centre of a town asking me what kind of information I want about the town, and not because they have a great range and need me to narrow it down for them either.
"You know, like if there's anything on the history of the town. Archives or old photos, something like that?"
"Ummm…"

“Just anything, general information.”
One of them has an epiphany: “Actually, there is a file in the back, it might have some information in it. Not sure if it’ll be what you’re looking for…”
“That would be great, I’d really appreciate it if I can take a look.”
“Okay, I’ll see if I can find it.”
I hear her scratching around in a storeroom at the back.
The other woman looks at me with vague discomfort. Maybe she thinks they’re being tested, that I’m a secret agent working for the town council to check that they’re doing their job properly. That’s another idea that I find so funny I’m tempted to write it down to use in a stand-up routine someday.
I see the base of the staircase that leads up to the top of the clock-tower behind a big locked gate.
“Is it possible to go up to the top of the tower?”
She looks at the gate uncertainly.
“Well. It’s locked. So I don’t think so.”
Right.
The other woman comes back with a fat lever-arch file spilling messy papers and plastic sleeves stuffed with more messy papers. She hands it to me and I flip through it.
“Will that help?”
“I think so. Do you mind if I sit here for a bit and take a look through it?”
“Uh, okay.”
They don’t seem too pleased by the idea, but it’s too late because I’m already sitting down and looking through the file, which is so thickly coated with dust that the gritty feeling on my fingers makes me cringe.
Bingo. A dusty goldmine of information.
I flip through the photocopied and typed out pages. Here is a letter from a man who fixes clocks in clock-towers, it’s a proposal to fix the four faces of Welkom’s central feature. I guess they decided not to go for it. Production notes for a feature on Welkom for the SABC 2 show Pasella (apparently there was a time when Welkom was an appropriate location for a segment on a life-style TV show). A yellowing page with a public announcement for the Christmas Lights ceremony. Newspaper cuttings with blurry photos of the town blanketed in snow. A laminated newspaper article titled “Rampe in die Goudveld” (Disasters in the Goldfields) - with pixelated monochrome photos showing post-hurricane-like wrecked buildings, chunks of roof suspended from throttled trees, cars half buried in mud, and a chilling aerial photo of the broken slimes dam in Merrispruit.

On the evening of the 22nd of February in 1994, a 2.5m high flood poured out of the Merriespruit No 4 tailings dam carrying 600,000m3 of water and tailings over a distance of 4km through the Virginia suburb of Merriespruit. The flood engulfed 80 homes, taking the lives of 17 people relaxing or sleeping in their homes.

The Merriespruit mine's tailings dam had burst after a torrential thunderstorm that dumped an unprecedented 5cm of water onto the site in the short space of half an hour. The downpour led to the dam's wall being breached, releasing the flood of water and tailings onto an unsuspecting and peaceful suburb

Mining Minerals Council South Africa

Amongst the garbage and the flowers I find a little chunk of gold. An old, yellowing document, about five pages long, typed out on an old-school type-writer in two columns - the left column Afrikaans, the right column English. It's a script for taking people on a guided tour through the Municipal Buildings. I have visions of a small group of tourists wearing 1970s fashions, their cameras loaded with film, standing in the square with the water fountains gushing, the palm-trees swaying, the immaculately groomed lawns and flower beds luminous in the morning sun, waiting enthusiastically for the tour-guide to take them through the buildings and show them something apparently well worth seeing. There is only one copy, so I take photos of it with my phone and, thanking the young ladies, go outside to walk the tour myself.

After my self-guided tour of the municipal centre and the theatre - which I must say, although a bit shabby now, are still quite impressive - I decide to visit the Welkom Library. The building is a magnificent example of the brutalist architecture that was popular when these parts of the town were being built. When the whole town was being built. In the centre is a massive glass cylinder from the ground to the triple volume ceiling, flooding the internal space with natural light. When I was a kid it contained an aviary, lush with green plants and trees and alive with colourful song birds. Now it is almost comically dead, the corpses of plants clinging to the steel structure in the middle like dried fish. On the top floor of the building is a little museum, which is what I've come to see. It is slightly less impressive than I remember. It consists of three exceedingly dusty glass boxes and a three metre high to-scale model of mining headgear (which actually is sort of impressive). One

glass box contains a reconstructed underground scene: a life-sized mannequin miner in overalls and a yellow hard-hat, surrounded by the various paraphernalia of mining. One is empty. One contains a recreation of a wetlands scene: a stuffed flamingo ankle-deep in blue acrylic water, surrounded by other stuffed birds, including two seagulls. Welkom is very proud of its birdlife, once justifiably so. The great pans of water on the outskirts of town (a pleasant result of the mine cooling systems) used to attract what seemed like a million flamingoes. Sometimes on weekends my friends and I would drive to *Flamingo Pan* in the late afternoon and park at the abandoned Flamingo Golf Course clubhouse, or the old airport. We would drink beers on the bonnet of the car and watch the massive, sea-shell pink flocks gliding towards the sunset-lit water and landing with a hissing, glittering splash. The flamingoes are all gone now. Clearly they had the means to retire elsewhere. In the absence of flamingoes, I imagine it's a bit of a mystery to visitors why there are images of them everywhere and every second business is named after them. More mysterious perhaps are the seagulls. Many years ago, when I brought a friend of mine to Welkom for the first time, we stopped at the famous Lantern Roadhouse - where you can buy hamburgers the size of dinner plates - for a lime milkshake. He stared up at the giant billboard menu and said, "What the hell is that?"

"What? The menu?"

"Are those seagulls?"

I looked up at the flock of shrieking, shitting gulls, hundreds of them.

"Yes?"

"What the hell are seagulls doing here?

"Why wouldn't they be here? People feed them chips and they eat the scraps and garbage and stuff."

"No, I mean, why are there *sea*gulls *here*? We're pretty far away from the sea."

"Hmm. I dunno. I never thought about it."

The seagulls are gone now too.

In One Generation

In 1926 when Bill, one of seven children, finished primary school he had to drop out to help support his family. At twelve years of age he rode from Roodepoort to Durban on a bicycle, more than six-hundred kilometres on dirt roads, stopping in small towns along the way, sleeping in churches or police stations or train station waiting rooms. At some point he had learned how to make and repair tennis court nets, and this is what he did to earn money.

He was sixteen when he returned to Roodepoort, where he got an apprenticeship on the Witwatersrand mines.

Janet was the daughter of a widowed midwife who travelled from farm to farm in the Transvaal delivering babies. Nothing really is known about Janet's father. She was a smart and hardworking child, top of her class and a champion sports player in her very small, very Christian farm school. Despite all her achievements, she didn't win a school prize at the end of the year; this because it was a requirement that you wore shoes when crossing the stage at prize-giving. She didn't have shoes, her family couldn't afford them. She was disgusted by a God who would punish a child for being poor, so she swore never to go into a church again, and she never did.

Bill worked his way up the ranks at the mine and went to night-school to get his high-school diploma. Janet, always exceptionally good with numbers, was a book-keeper for a car dealership and was the only woman in Roodepoort who was given a company car, which she often drove to Johannesburg on company business. Bill and Janet met, fell in love and got married - just before the outbreak of World War II. Bill went to fight in North Africa and ended up a prisoner of war on the Eastern front. He was listed as "missing, presumed dead" for more than two years, while Janet waited uncertainly at home, not knowing if he would ever return. But he did, and in 1952 their first son, Clive, was born.

About that time, the whole world was in a fever about a gold-find in the Orange Free State, unlike any that had ever been seen. As always happens in these cases, there was a rush, a gold-rush. Thousands of people from all over the country, the continent and the world, desperate to make their fortunes, uprooted their lives and headed for the Middle of Nowhere. Bill and Janet, not exactly desperate for fortune, but hoping to give their children a better life than they had had, went there too. Bill got a job at Harmony Gold Mine, which began production in September 1954. Soon after, their second son, Ian, was born. Bill was promoted to MET Foreman at the Harmony Uranium Plant and, within one generation, the little family had gone from dirt poor to middle class. They were by no means rich, but they were at least able to put both their boys through school, as well as university, which was the plan. But for whatever reason, fate, or luck, or the randomness of life, neither of their sons ended up going to university, there were more interesting opportunities on their doorstep.

A Less Honest Man

My dad loves to tell me how our family could have been swimming in gold like Scrooge McDuck if his father had only been a less honest man. When he was a child, my dad

would go visit his dad at the plant. He would casually run his finger through the slurry that poured in a constant, thick, muddy waterfall. So rich was the concentration of gold at this stage of the process that, when he took his little finger out he could see the particles glinting in the putty-coloured sludge. Of course, nobody tried to stop him from doing this, there were no stringent security measures, nobody was watching at all in fact and besides, Grandpa was the boss. It's probably an exaggeration but, according to my father, if Grandpa had taken just one matchbox a day of that perpetually pouring slurry over the years that he worked in the plant, he would have had millions and millions of rands worth of gold. But how would he have processed the amalgam to get the gold out? The chemicals and machinery required to pull the gold out of the sludge are not the kind of things that you'd keep in your garage. Or at least, if you did, you'd have to keep a pretty close eye on that garage.

Circa 1998

Clive was standing at the gate of his mother's house on a Sunday afternoon when a friend of his drove past and saw him. The man pulled his Mercedes over to the side of the road and got out to chat. Douglas was portly and greying, dressed in a dark suit and white shirt. He was one of the more successful black businessmen in town.

After a few pleasantries, Clive asked Douglas what he was doing on this side of town on a Sunday afternoon.

"Oh, just a bit of business."

He smiled slyly, as if the business was the kind of secret that's too good to keep to yourself. Taking the hint, Clive said "What business is that?"

"I'm off to buy some gold." He winked.

"Gold? From where?"

"From the mine... Well, from some contacts of mine on the mine, ha ha ha. Look here."

He took Clive to the back of his car, opened the boot and unzipped a big duffel bag. It was filled with cash. A lot of cash.

"Jesus Dougie. I'm really interested to know where you're going to buy gold on a Sunday with that kind of cash."

"Well, it's not official obviously. My "friends" work in the plant and they get some of the amalgam out, then I buy it and take it to ---Hostel."

Douglas explained how his secret contacts on the mine squeezed the raw amalgam onto the tops of sticks and then lobbed them over the walls, to be collected by other operatives in the night.

Clive nodded with interest, impressed. He didn't have to ask what happens at ---Hostel. It is well-known that ---Hostel is an 'informal' processing plant. They have, over the years, pulled together everything that they need, all the chemicals and machines, and have been processing gold from the raw amalgam for decades. They have developed a sophisticated underground communications system, so that when the cops come to raid, word reaches the hostel well in advance, and they make the entire thing disappear within minutes. So even though the informal plant is a more-or-less open secret, they have never been caught.

If only my grandfather had been a less honest man.

A Golden Opportunity

Today Ian takes me to his offices. He has worked for one iteration or another of this company for most of his professional life. It has been bought and sold a few times since it was established in the late 1970s, changing names and locations, it is a bit more modern and less extravagant than the original company, but other than that it remains fundamentally the same. Now it is in an unassuming, squat little brick building in the industrial area. Behind two or three offices and the staff kitchen, is the warehouse. The early morning sun beams in through the high windows, like gold blades cutting through the delicately suspended dust particles. That dust is everywhere, all the time, part of the very atmosphere. There are about seven black staff members in blue overalls back here, moving quickly, loading and unloading valves. They are laughing and kidding around with each other as they move the heavy steel things from here to there. Ian introduces me to three of the men who are not in the process of carrying something. We shake hands and I try to engage in conversation with them for a moment, but I can see there is a rush on and that they're caught between being polite to me and getting the job done, so I don't keep them.

The warehouse brings back vivid memories of my childhood: the dusty smell, echoing sounds of voices and the scraping and metallic clang of heavy things being moved over rough concrete floors and loaded onto the back of trucks, my sister and I playing on and around the steel valves that seemed so massive, strangely shaped jungle-gyms, painted in different colours. I remember tagging along behind 'Klein Boy' - one of the drivers - who was as familiar to me as any of my uncles and seemed to my young mind as much a part of my family as anyone else. I remember him stopping by our house almost every day, on his way to or from Johannesburg to pick up stock, and he would swing me around by the arms while he waited for my dad to finish off the orders and paper-work.

‘Klein Boy’ (whose real name, I’m sorry to say, I never knew and probably never will) died in a car accident on one of those trips to Johannesburg to pick up stock. I was very young when it happened, but I remember my dad crying, I remember being terribly sad, we were all sad. My dad always felt guilty, that the shy, kind, young man had died on a job for his company. Ian had a particularly close relationship with ‘Klein Boy’ and still gets quiet and distant when we talk about it.

Ian and I walk around the warehouse, looking at the myriad valves stacked on shelves or on the floor, all painted various colours to differentiate them from each other. Some are small, the size of a toaster, some are big, the size of a washing machine, or even a fridge. He explains what they would be used for, above ground, under ground, vertical pipes, horizontal pipes, water or sludge. Many of them are lined with a special kind of rubber, it protects them from the abrasion of the sand, the lining doesn’t last very long and the valves need to be refurbished or replaced regularly. So valves is a good business to be in. My dad started *Shaft Mining Supplies* in 1977. He was working as a sales rep for a company supplying odds and ends to the mines, but he found that the mines didn’t really need the things he was trying to sell, they already had suppliers for rubber boots and helmets and face-masks. What they really needed was valves. He saw that there was an opportunity, but he wasn’t sure about it. He was only twenty-four years old after all, with a wife and a two-year-old daughter. My grandfather thought he was crazy to consider leaving a good, solid job with a pension fund and a company car, the kind of thing Grandpa could only have dreamed of when he was a young man, and advised him strongly against it. But my mother encouraged him, told him they could survive on her teachers’ salary while he got on his feet. So he did it. He quit his job and started *Shaft Mining Supplies* with virtually no start-up capital. He still has his first log book, carefully kept in the neat hand of his book-keeper Denise, who only retired from the latest iteration of the company last year.

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The first log-book entry for the month of November, 1978:
Income: R13,000
Expenses: R10,000
Net Profit: R3,000
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That net profit of R3000 for the month is the equivalent of about R100,000 today. By 1987 the profit had gone up to R27,000 a month, the equivalent of about R275,000 today, at a time when the Rand was equal in value to the dollar. When Ian finished his apprenticeship

on the mines, he joined the business and eventually became a partner. My dad sold his share in 1989 and retired, he was thirty-seven years old.

And that was the rare, strange opportunity that presented itself in a gold rush town like Welkom. An opportunity for the children of people who couldn't afford shoes, or had to leave school at twelve to help support their family, to become millionaires in less than a year. For every valve that the mines needed, there was a pipe, and a pump, and a rubber seal, and a mill, and a crusher, and a conveyer belt, and air coolers, and water coolers. Each of these things represented a business opportunity, a chance to make a small or large fortune. And all you needed was open eyes to see the opportunities, some guts to take the chance, a basic knowledge of book keeping and friends in the right places. Oh, and of course to be white. And a man.

Sand River Club

It became fashionable then to talk about the new goldfield and its great potentialities, and, should anyone plead ignorance of what was going on in that now-fashionable part of the world, he or she was looked upon as indeed a lost soul and certainly not in keeping with the times.

~ Gladys Roberts, 1955[12]

I don't think the Sand River Golf Club looks any different now than it did forty years ago, or more. It is a fitting place to find out more about what Welkom was like in the 1970s and 1980s, I don't have to stretch my imagination too far. A blue cloud of cigarette smoke hangs over and around a line of men sitting at the bar, all in their late fifties or early sixties, most wearing golf shirts the exact colour of Ian's lime milkshake. They are the Sand River Club team, and the Club captain, Piet Haasbroek is standing behind the bar counter reading out the scores for the days' competition.

When the formalities are over Ian takes me to the bar counter to introduce me to people. Piet asks in a loud voice "Ian! Does your niece eat as little as you?" This a reference to my and Ian's lack of girth.

"What will you have young lady?" Piet asks me, it isn't clear to me if he is tending bar or not at this point, but I ask for a beer, which elicits whoops of approval from everyone.

"Ian! I like this girl! She's having a beer!"

I'm not the only woman in the place drinking a beer, so I assume this is a jibe aimed at my uncle who probably often takes flack for not drinking.

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[12] Roberts 1984.

“What kind of beer do you want? A Castle? Julian! Bring this little lady a Castle draft!”
Julian has been sitting on a bar stool behind the counter on the opposite end of the room, quietly listening to the conversations at the bar. He is a short black man with greying hair and the lean, light build of a long distance runner. In fact, there is a large picture frame above the bar with photographs of this same Julian crossing the finishing line at the Comrades Marathon four times. Beneath the photos is a plaque saying “*Sponsored by Haasbroek Prokoreurs.*”
Julian and Piet make a good comic duo, with Piet large, loud and charismatic, and Julian affecting a grumpy manner that occasionally gives way to a half hidden grin and an insult thrown Piet’s way. It looks like an act that has been perfected over many years and relished by both players.
I ask Julian how long he’s been working at the club.
“I started here on the 1st of August 1988.”
Wow, that’s really specific.
“And where did you come from originally, why did you come to Welkom?”
I’m sorry to say that a lot of what he recounts about his life is lost to me, he speaks so softly and and quickly and the ambient noise of the jukebox and golfers swallows up most of his words. He says something about “crossing the border” and “people would buy you for R1!” - which I don’t understand, but he finds very funny. I make out that he eventually found his way to the Goldfields but didn’t want to work on the mines, or couldn’t? So he got a job here at the Club. He couldn't be the bartender (he doesn’t explain why), but he washed dishes and cleaned the floors and “helped” behind the bar because, “the barman, he had a drinking problem” Julian says, miming someone slugging booze from a bottle.
“And one day, he just disappeared” (the bartender that is), “so that fat, ugly bastard over there” he points at Piet, “he and the manager pulled me into the bathroom one day and asked if I wanted to be the bartender, and I said yes, and they told me to sign something,” he mimes signing a contract or whatever it was on a toilet seat, “and I’ve been here every day since then!” He swipes his hands together and smiles, as if to say, “THE END”.
Our conversation is interrupted by the entrance of a tall man with a Northern English accent. He greets everyone, introduces himself to me, “Bernie” and shows us a hideous, seeping wound on his leg that was apparently caused by the viscous bite of a rabid cat on one of the mines.
“Did you go to the doctor to get a shot?” Ian asks.
“Yes! Thanks for telling me to do that, I wouldn’t have thought of it at all.”

Ian then tells us a story, in gruesome detail, about someone he knew who died of rabies after being bitten by a cat. Not a pleasant way to die apparently.
When I look back, Julian is on the other side of the bar serving drinks to two women who just came in.
After a few beers and casual conversation with the men at the bar, I ask them how they came to the Goldfields, why they came here, what it was like “back in the day.” None of them, by the way, were born here.
Lance grew up in Somerset West, and was working as a messenger for the courts. When he visited a friend of his who had recently moved to Welkom, the friend took him underground and, finding that he was relatively comfortable in the hellish environment, asked if he wanted a job. Apparently back then just not being scared down there was sufficient qualification to get you a job offer. He wasn’t interested until they told him the salary. It was four times what he was earning in the Cape, so he phoned his mother and asked her to send him his clothes. The mine organised and paid for his accommodation for the first three months.
Bernie grew up in Newcastle in a working class family and left school when he was sixteen. He didn’t know what he wanted to do with his life, but he didn’t want to end up like “the fat arseholes sitting around in bars all day, getting five bottles of milk and two bottles of orange juice a week from the government and going on holidays to Spain!” A reference to men on the dole.
I notice Julian, who is sitting on his stool at the other end of the bar again, laugh at this.
One day Bernie saw a poster advertising jobs in South Africa, New Zealand and Australia, interviews would be at the Newcastle Hotel between 10am and 3pm the next day, no further information. So he went. They asked him for his name, his age, his address, if he had any health problems, and let him go. Not much of a job interview. The next morning a brown cardboard tube arrived by courier, inside was a job offer letter, an airplane ticket and the address of the mine in Welkom that he was to report to when he arrived. Later that day another tube came with a ticket to New Zealand, and then another for Australia. He decided to take the South African offer, because it arrived first. He flew out the next day, “on the 8th of August, 1974”.
People are very specific about dates around here.
And what was Welkom like back then?
Piet says “Money was walking around on the streets back then!”
“This place was BOOMING in the 70s and 80s, BOOMING!” says Bernie. “Welkom was the *Flower City*. There was nothing like it anywhere in the world. It was crazy.”

This set off about an hour of reminiscences of the town at its height of success.
“Then the unions came in in 1989 and everything went to hell!” says Piet.
Bernie says, “What are you talking about?”
A lively debate ensues about when exactly the town started going under and why.
And why did you all stay here after it went down?
Piet says, “Well, I own a law firm, so my business didn’t really go down when the mines did. People always need lawyers. And this is a wonderful place to live. Even now. All the people, the friends, the community. You can’t get that anywhere else.”
“Hate the town, love the people” Lance says quietly to his beer.
Piet abruptly gets up to leave. He tells Julian not to forget to lock up, to which Julian replies, “Ag, fokoff man!” Piet comes over to me, takes my shoulders and gives me a kiss on the cheek, “Good luck with your article poppie.” I can’t help but really like him.

When I try to sleep later that night my mind is full of the images evoked by the men at the bar. Of a time when people were streaming to Welkom from all over the world. When the mines were so desperate for labour that they were dishing out international air tickets and arranging and paying for accommodation, in houses mind you. They didn’t even seem concerned about whether you had any relevant skills, they would teach you what you needed to know once you got here. I mine memories from my early childhood and conflate them with the mens’ descriptions of what Welkom looked like then, all shiny and new and modern, clean and green and flowering, everything designed and built to the highest standards, renowned town planners, architects, landscapers and artists commissioned to conceive every detail. People making the kind of money they had never hoped for before, that their parents could never have dreamed of. Luxury shops and award-winning restaurants, jets arriving from Joburg every Friday afternoon filled with businessmen in suits, who got here looking neat and tidy and left red-eyed and dishevelled on Sunday morning. A modern gold rush town, with all the qualities of every other gold rush in history. Rough, poor, young, skilled and unskilled people descending on this man-made, semi-lawless place in the middle of nowhere and, if they had but an ounce of natural ability and ambition, making fortunes from nothing.

Something about all of this is keeping me awake. I turn on my bedside lamp and pick up the book I’ve been reading, *Going for Gold: Men, Mines and Migration*. The author, T.D. Moodie, and his assistant, Vivian Ndatshe, spent years interviewing Sotho migrant miners in the Free State Goldfields in the 1970s and 1980s. I page through it and find the paragraph I’m looking for:

> After a crowded train journey to Welkom, the men arrived at the recruiting test centre, where they again had “to strip naked and run in droves.” They were “kicked and pushed to the doctor after being doused in bitterly cold water… Having been assigned a number they performed aptitude tests, and only then were they fed for the first time, on a thin gruel. Finally a “police boy” escorted them to the mine. To further their acclimatisation to strenuous work underground at higher temperatures, once they arrived at the mine they were subjected every day for a week to four hours of monotonous exercise in a steam chamber to the metronomic beat of drums, supervised by unfeeling black overseers.[13]

These chaotic and contradictory images warp like funhouse mirrors in my mind. A motion sick feeling of confused guilt, hot shame and revulsion, mixed with nostalgia, keeps me up all night.

Sunday

On Sunday morning we go to church. I haven’t been to church since I was a little girl, having “lost my religion” at a relatively early age. As in most small towns, church is big in Welkom. When I was fourteen I dutifully went to the evening confirmation classes at the Methodist Church, even though my parents aren’t religious and never went to church themselves. It was just the expected cultural norm, and not to do it would have been weird. Ironically, the final, frail thread that held me to my childhood church was effectively severed, in the space of five minutes, by the confirmation class teacher. When he went around the circle of young teenagers asking us how we saw God, I answered that I didn’t see God as a judgemental old man sitting in the clouds, I saw God in nature, in the perfection of a flower, in the way that complex ecosystems work together, atoms and galaxies, you know, the miracle of creation and stuff. This, to my surprise, was not only an unsatisfactory answer, but an offensive one. God is NOT a flower. He is, in fact, a judgemental old man sitting in the clouds deciding whether we will go to Heaven or to Hell. Yes, you will go to Hell if you’re gay. No, you can’t go to Heaven if you’re from a different religion and haven’t accepted Jesus into your life. How do I know this? The Bible told me! Who wrote the Bible?! God wrote the Bible! I don’t know where in the Bible it says that God wrote it, but he did!

It is unfortunate, perhaps, that many of the people attempting to usher the Welkom youth into an adult understanding of spirituality were utterly devoid of intelligence or just

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[13] Moodie 1994

outright mad. One of our high school teachers once stood up after assembly, during his usual weekly spiritual soundbite, and told us that he had finally, after giving it much thought, figured out why a woman has a hymen.

“Because, you see, in the Bible days, when people made an oath, they would cut their hands and spill blood, a blood oath. When a woman has sexual intercourse for the first time, the hymen tears and blood is spilled and a vow is made. So if a woman has sex with more than one man, she is breaking the vow she made to the first man she slept with and to God. So girls, save yourselves for your husband… Dismissed.”

The school (a public school mind you - not a Christian school) organised many interventions designed to enlighten us, including visits from pro-life organisations who projected images of aborted foetuses onto a giant screen, Christian amateur dramatics groups who danced and sang about the dangers of drugs, and, my favourite, a motivational speaker who was once a Satanist. This ex-Satanist stood alone on stage with a microphone, ragged in old faded jeans, a torn black t-shirt and long, greasy hair. He told us, with visible emotion, how the Devil had convinced him to take drugs and partake in homosexual activities. To stop himself giving in to the Devil’s influence anymore, he tied himself to a chair, but the Devil appeared to him in the form of a blue-bottle fly and continued to torment him, buzzing round and round his head, whispering temptations. Then, he summoned the power of God and cried “Out Satan!” and the fly dropped miraculously to the ground, dead. I glanced over at my friends and as we made eye-contact we burst into an uncontrollable fit of laughter, my friend Sandy’s laugh so loud that the entire school whipped around to look at us. The ex-Satanist got angry, then looked frightened, as if he had seen his old friend the Devil, and he ran off stage. My friends and I were branded witches from that day onward. There is no in-between thing in small, hyper-religious communities, you're either with us or you’re against us, you’re either a Christian or you’re a Satanist: Buddhist? Satanist! Muslim? Satanist! Hindu? Definitely Satanist! Atheist? SATANIST! A few hundred years ago we would have been burned at the stake for sure. Fortunately we were just cast out socially, which didn’t hurt us much, although it did bother our parents a bit when “concerned” mothers whispered their fears to them that we had been absorbed into a Satanic cult. There is always a Satanic cult. At least, this was my experience, twenty years ago, maybe it has changed since then. To be fair to those concerned mothers, there does seem to be a disproportionate occurrence of actual Satanism in these small, religious communities, probably not coincidentally, so their fear and paranoia is not entirely unwarranted. In 2011 a Welkom couple used a dating app to lure an unsuspecting twenty-three year old man to the cemetery, where they murdered him

and cut his body into pieces, some of which they buried in a shallow grave amongst the tombstones. When the police tracked the young couple to a townhouse in the suburb of St Helena, they found the remaining body parts buried in the garden, along with the dismembered remains of cats. His severed head, with the mouth sewn closed, was found in their fridge.

The church I go to with Winnie and Ian is not the Methodist church that I attended as a child, but the Welkom Baptist Church. We've come here specifically to meet the minister, Joshua. Winnie knows his family well, their children are in her school, and she has arranged for him to take me to a community centre he runs in Thabong, the local township, after the service. Joshua is standing at the doors when we arrive, greeting the congregants as they enter the church. When I introduce myself to him he smiles warmly and shakes my hand, which disappears in his huge fist. Winnie told me that he is Nigerian, so I am surprised when he introduces himself with a heavy South London accent. He is nothing like the ministers I remember from my youth; he is lively and loud, dressed in a powder-blue golf shirt, jeans and sneakers, with a chain of keys hanging from his belt. Also, obviously, he is black. He is a big man, with a big voice, a big beard and a big personality. The congregation too is nothing like the one I remember from the Methodist church in the 1980s, it is noticeably diverse, black and white, young and old. The little children aren't cloistered away in a Sunday School class, they are sitting on the pews with the grown ups or playing in the aisles. The service opens with announcements: congratulations to one family, whose daughter just graduated from nursing school; prayers for a family with a sick relative; and, to my surprise, a welcome to the Roberts family, who have brought their niece to learn more about our community. The service is not boring, as I was expecting. Joshua's cockney-accented, baritone voice uses stories and poetry and song lyrics along with verses from the Bible, to make a point about the love and forgiveness of God. Every congregant is riveted, even me. Unfortunately the dreary hymns are numerous and as dirge-like as ever. In the closing prayer, Joshua asks God for renewal in Welkom, for economic renewal, and also spiritual renewal, and to be with those who are struggling and suffering without work and give them strength. Even here, in the brightly lit, cheerful church, the shadow of economic doom hangs over everything like a depression.

After the service Winnie introduces me to a few people, including Connie, another teacher from her school. Connie was the first black teacher at St. Dominics (the private, Christian school) when she came in 1995, and she's been teaching there ever since. I ask her what brought her to Welkom.

“We were living in Vereeniging at the time, and we had to get out of there. Things were just really, really bad. The political situation you know? I mean, there were bullets flying through houses, we had to leave.”

Then she was offered the job teaching Sotho at the school and so she and her husband and children moved here. Welkom wasn't entirely new to her, for one thing, her husband had grown up in the area, and also, she had spent two years living with her aunt and uncle in Thabong when she was a teenager in the 1970s. I ask her what it was like back then. She thinks for a while and then says, "You know...I would say...that Welkom was a *model* town back then. Everything was so *clean*. They used to come collect the garbage twice a week, they swept the streets *every* morning."

This brings back a distant memory, from when I was about seven years old. My dad used to drop my sister and I off at school on his way to work, about twice a week we would stop at the post-office to collect his mail. We would take turns running in to fetch it (a most magical thing, to look into that little metal box and see, on the other side, a whole mysterious world of things going on, people walking back and forth, like Narnia in the wardrobe). There were always people in overalls sweeping the sidewalks at that time of day, the dust from their brooms beaming in the early morning sun. It looked so lovely to me. I said to my dad, "When I grow up I want to be a street sweeper." My dad said, "You can be whatever you like, so long as you do your best. If you're going to be a street sweeper, be the *best* street sweeper." I have no idea why that memory has stuck with me all these years, or why it feels like such a pleasant one. Also, it now strikes me as quite a strange answer on my dad's part.

"Even Thabong," Connie continues, "It was clean, it was safe. There were good schools and a good hospital, parks, a recreation centre. I remember being amazed at the food my uncle had, they ate so well. The mines used to give them food subsidies."

I ask, a bit skeptically, if the mines generally provided well for the people who worked there.

"Oh yes! And the sports facilities they had! Whenever the sports teams from one of the mines came to compete, we knew they would be the best, because they had proper fields and coaching."

It's not exactly the answer I was expecting.

"But that was when the mines had money. It's not like that anymore” she says.

I ask her if her family lived in Thabong when they moved here in 1995. No, she says, at the time there were problems with transport between Thabong and Welkom, so the school asked her please to rather find a place to live in Welkom. It was problem enough that the

kids from Thabong were struggling to get to school, it would be no good if the teacher couldn't get there! So they found a house on a corner in a suburb near the school and they've lived there ever since. It was 1995, in Welkom, so I imagine there weren't many black families living in the suburbs. She laughs, "No, not really. I think we were one of the first black families to live in this neighbourhood."
"And did they give you a hard time, did you feel welcome?"
"It was mostly fine. The people in the house across the road moved away soon after we came, I'm not sure if it was because of us, but I wouldn't be surprised. Then our neighbours once threw broken plates over the wall into our yard. But I just took them and threw them back over again. They didn't do anything else after that. But mostly we felt welcome, and the school has always been very good, we've been happy here."
I ask her what she thinks of Welkom and Thabong now. She shakes her head, "It's very bad, very sad. It has really gone under. With the mines closing, so many people without jobs. And the municipality! Now they *never* come to fetch the garbage, everything is so dirty, and so much crime. I don't know. I don't know if the young people have a future here. But I always tell my classes that they must work hard, do their best, and trust in God, and things will work out well for them."

Thabong

Finally Joshua finishes up with his Sunday morning duties and I get into the passenger seat of his beat-up old 4X4 bakkie to head out with him to Thabong. He tells me that he was born in Lagos, but moved to Ealing when he was six years old. He tells me about his single mother and how she taught him how a man should be, how not having a father around made him understand the importance of a strong male role-model, the role of the nuclear family, the need for spiritual belief; "I know some people disagree with me, but I believe that a family, with a married mum and dad, with God in their lives, is the only way to raise kids properly."

The drive to Thabong is through barren, dusty fields that emphasise the flatness of the place. In the far off distance I can see one of the abandoned, partially deconstructed shafts that Ian took me to the day before, this one a concrete monolith. A surreal spire of white dust is rising from the mine-dump behind it, it looks exactly like smoke from a volcano about to erupt, except the volcano is not a cone, but a table. Little dust devils next to the road whirl orange sand skywards. On the outskirts of Thabong there are large puddles of water, about the width of swimming pools.

“Sewage” Joshua says.

Of course, you can smell it. Raw sewage is a big problem all around Welkom. An entire nine holes of the Oppenheimer Golf Course were flooded by it and permanently destroyed. But as far as residential areas are concerned, Thabong has probably suffered the worst of it. In a 2018 audit that measured quality of administration, economic development, and service delivery, this municipality scored the second worst in the country: 4 out of 100. To put that in perspective, the highest score was Malmesbury in the Western Cape, with 86. “This is the real South Africa,” Joshua says. “People in the big cities, they don’t know what’s really going on in the country, if you want to see that, you have to come to small towns, places like this.”

You can still see the original grid pattern of the township, equally spaced out blocks with roads running at right angles to each other, but the tall, steel streetlights are gone, felled like trees and sold for scrap. The resulting nightly darkness keeps the residents imprisoned in their houses to avoid the perils of crime and raw sewage.

The wind is brutal today. A woman next to the road pushes into it as she walks; long grass, thorny shrubs, a green tarp and plastic bags flap and billow and swirl in the wake of her long, red skirt. Along this main road are small businesses in concrete blocks with their names painted in bright colours: *Morningstar Daycare Centre, Chapel Funeral Services, Dr Malephane Muti Services, Sky Car Wash*. But they are all closed on Sunday and everything is quiet and empty. There are piles of garbage on every corner, most of them burning, the smell of melting plastic is choking. I think back to what Connie said about how they used to collect the garbage twice a week, but not anymore. If nobody is coming to get it, what choice do you have but to burn it?

Joshua says “The biggest challenge here is lack of information. People don’t know what to do to get out of their poverty, they don’t know where to go for help, they don’t have an education. Most of them are from single mother households, no positive male role models to show them how a man should behave.”

The gears grind and the bakkie rattles over the potholes as Joshua regales me with horror stories of his times as a missionary in various rural and urban townships across South Africa. I try to take notes as he talks but the jolting car makes it almost impossible to write and afterwards, when I glance at my notebook, all I can make out is: “…Bronville…even police and ambulances wouldn’t go there…woman almost gave birth in Mercedes…told her to “hold it in” ha ha ha…Hani Park… invisible line between black and coloured… attacked by man with a broken glass bottle…girlfriend shouting “Stiek hom liefie!”… blood on the windscreen… seven murders a weekend….”

We drive through the entrance of a big compound, the old offices of Masimong Mines, now Joshua's embryonic community centre. We park in an old carport and walk to the main entrance of the building.

"All the good stuff was gone when the mine let us in to use the place. It was full of human faeces. Lots of snakes, I almost stepped on a cobra, it actually hissed at me! I'm surprised we didn't find any dead bodies" he laughs. For a long time, he says, they found people on the property stealing, or trying to steal, things. He caught a guy hiding in the ceiling and threatened to tazer him if he didn't piss off. "I grabbed him by the scruff and said, "Tell your mates, if I see you or any of them around here again, you and me is gonna have a growl. Understand?""

The trouble has died down now he says, but they still come and try their luck from time to time.

The once up-market offices are little more than a shell now, all the fittings have been stripped away, most of the floors and ceilings, all the electrical cables. I compare it in my mind to *The Pines* orphanage I went to see on one of my previous visits to Welkom, also housed in one of the old mining company offices. But in that case the mines had handed the offices over to the orphanage straight away, so there had been no opportunity for the Zama-Zamas to strip the place. At *The Pines* there is still a concrete cast sign above the entrance with "StH" for *St Helena* moulded into it. In the entrance hall hang photos of the previous managers, all old white guys, next to the "Paymaster Room" with its bulletproof glass. The matron's quarters are in the old manager's office, where commissioned watercolours of the building still hang on the wood-panelled walls and assay cores gather dust on the bottom shelf of a built-in oak cupboard. The children's play room uses the old draft tables, now painted Barbie pink and baby blue, as desks. Above two single beds with pink duvet covers in the girls' dorm, is a large blueprint showing the complex matrix of tunnels that make up the underground world of St Helena Mines.

But here in Thabong, the Masimong Offices were left standing empty and unguarded for just long enough to be reduced almost to uselessness. The mine is letting Joshua use the property for his community centre for now, but they haven't sold or officially handed over the building yet, which means he can only do minor repairs, and not invest too much until he knows its a permanent situation. In the first room we walk through is a makeshift classroom, full of little children from the community, quietly listening to their lessons, on a Sunday. I wonder if it's a Bible lesson, like Sunday School, but unfortunately I don't understand Sotho well enough to make out what the teacher is saying. I can't believe how well behaved the children are, especially since their class has just been

interrupted by three strangers and the minister. Ian shows them a trick where he pretends to remove his thumb which elicits a hell of a response. In the next room a service is in progress, with one of the youngest ministers I've ever seen, he doesn't look much older than twenty. He is doing a fantastic job though. The congregation sit on plastic chairs under a makeshift ceiling of different coloured sheets sewn together, resembling a giant quilt. Joshua quietly introduces me to the young minister's wife, a pretty woman in a white blouse and a broad rimmed hat, who is sitting on a low bench at the back of the room playing with their one-year-old child. He tells me in a whisper that he found the young man when he was thirteen years old, curled up in a corner of one of the shacks in Thabong, the victim of an abusive and negligent domestic situation. Joshua took him under his wing and mentored him and helped him get an education, "He worked so hard and he just thrived. All he needed was a positive role-model. Someone to believe in him."

We leave the makeshift church and walk around the rest of the grounds looking at the relatively new but dilapidated buildings. "He's a real success story. But some of these kids, they don't want to put in the work, they just want you to do it all for them. I organised a job for two of these guys from the community here, in a cement factory. But they came back to me two days later…*two days*… and said that they had quit, it was too hard. They wanted me to help them find something else. I told them to push off and never come bother me again. I can help you with an opportunity, but that's it. If you don't take it then and make something of it, I won't waste my time with you."

Fair enough.

There is a still clearly marked helipad at the front of the building. I wonder who used to pop over to these offices in a helicopter and why. Joshua tells me all of his plans, what he wants to do with the various buildings and how he plans to get the community involved, raise the money. He just needs to get the mine to commit one way or the other and let him have, or at least buy, the building.

On the way back into town I stare out the window at the quiet Sunday streets of Thabong while Joshua's voice rises and falls over the car's engine with stories of murder and rape and poverty and broken families and it makes me feel really, really angry and sad and impotent. This whole place - Welkom, Thabong, all of it - should never have been here to begin with. If it wasn't for the ridiculous obsession that humans have for that beautiful, utterly useless metal, all the people who live or have lived on the Goldfields might have been left to their own devices back in their homelands. Now everyone is being abandoned by the companies that called them here, more or less voluntarily, in the first place. And the award-winningly inept and corrupt municipality has left everyone to fend for themselves

while they stuff their own pockets. This is true of Welkom, Virginia, Odendaalserus and Allanridge, but it seems that, unsurprisingly, the community of Thabong has suffered the absolute worst of it. Welkom is feeling the pinch for sure, but what in God's name are the young people here in Thabong going to do to get out of this?

Only Ghosts

On Monday morning Ian and I visit the ruins of the processing plant where my grandfather had been the MET (Metallurgical) foreman. There is a small collection of red brick buildings, one big, warehouse-like structure, which was the plant, and a few others that were the offices. They are surrounded by open veld, quiet and peaceful, pine trees here and there. In places there are geometric concrete shapes on the ground, the foundations and floors of buildings that have been dismantled. Ian looks at one, surprised. "You know, three months ago this building was still here." A little way from the foundations is a triangular sign with the international symbol for nuclear radiation, three little triangles in a circle. Beneath the symbol it says "Beware of Radiation".

Next to the plant is a row of covered parkings, one has an old, peeling yellow sign above it that has MET FOREMAN written in big black letters - that was my grandfather. The plant is locked with a chain, but there is a hole the size of a side-plate in the massive steel doors, now rusted red and orange. Peeping through the hole I can see that a lot of the machinery is still in there, dusty and rusted. I'm amazed that it hasn't all been taken. I can't understand why. Above the rusty doors is a security floodlight, it's on. Something must still be going on here.

We drive towards the 'Miner's Hostels', or what's left of them, along a badly broken up tar road. Without constant maintenance, the ever shifting ground cracks everything up, like caramelised sugar on a creme brulee tapped with a spoon.

The ruins of the miners' hostel area are haunting. The skeletons and broken bodies of buildings surrounded by lush grass and a jungle of trees, the afternoon sun glaring from the peeling paint of the remaining walls, the sound of birds and insects creating the atmosphere of a wild forest. It looks completely abandoned. But then I notice a ladder, casting a stark black shadow on the wall it's leaning against, and a wheelbarrow on what's left of a roof. I hear Ian get out of the car behind me, I notice that he is carrying his gun.
"Is there anyone out here?" I ask him.
"Oh definitely."
"I don't see anyone."
"They're here, trust me. They're like lions, you can't see *them*, but they're watching *you*."

Hmmm.

I pick my way through the rubble and ruins. I can see what remains of small rooms and bathrooms, pathways and open areas that look like they were once sports fields. I see a double story steel frame of what was a large building, trees growing around it and through it.

“What was that?”

“That would have been the dining hall and kitchens.”

I can faintly hear the sound of construction now (or deconstruction rather), hammers hitting steel chisels, scraping, raking.

“Shell… don’t go too far.”

The scene reminds me of those documentaries of ancient ruins in the jungle - peaceful and beautiful, overtaken by nature, afternoon sun-beams slanting through the trees - but also haunting and sad, an aura of things not quite right.

“Shell… let’s go.”

Ian’s tone and posture has changed abruptly, like a buck that has suddenly seen a slight movement, or a glimpse of eyes in the grass. I’m sorry to leave the place, I wish I could spend a few hours here, trying to piece together something of what it was like, but I can sense that it’s time to go.

Before I came on this trip, I started reading everything I could about gold mining in South Africa, particularly about the Free State Goldfields, trying to get a sense of the story of my town from other sources. There are a lot of books. Books about the whole history of gold mining in South Africa, from the finds near Barberton and Pilgrim's Rest, to the founding of Johannesburg, and finally to the discovery of the Orange Free State Goldfields by that determined prospector, Allan Roberts. There are also a lot of books written or commissioned by the mining houses themselves. Very informative. These books tell the story of gold in sepia tones of adventure and romance, or, in the case of the latter industry publications, in glossy hues of modernity and progress. According to these books, the black miners (if they are mentioned at all), were rather lucky to have the opportunity to live and work on the mines. The mines, these books tell me, were like "a club" to which the black miners happily returned year after year. A.C. Cartwright, one of the more prolific writers on mining in South Africa, described the experience of black miners like this:

> They can go visiting or shopping. They can play games of all descriptions of which skittles is probably the most popular of all. They can practice for athletic meetings. They can dance their tribal dances and sing their tribal

> songs or they can sip their beer, dose in the sun and dream of home…Such is the life of the mine worker, day in, day out. He works much harder than he ever did at home. But he counts as his reward for that the good food, the free beer and the cash he receives. He also counts the club life that is his when he is off duty. And having weighed the amount of work he must do against these rewards he comes to the decision that this is the job for him.[14]

I read these books with no small degree of skepticism. But then, who am I to say? I wasn't there. Certainly there is plenty of photographic evidence of "happy miners": a black miner smiles as he receives excellent medical care (a doctor with a stethoscope pressed to his bare chest); miners laugh together over a cup of beer; there are those Zulu dancers that I saw on the family home movies; a team of soccer players practicing on a well-groomed pitch. But then again.

I can find no books written by black miners. No first hand written accounts of their experience. Apart from poems and photographs and songs by black poets and artists and musicians (none of whom ever actually worked underground in the mines), I must rely on those stories told to T.D. Moodie and Vivienne Ndatshe in the 1970s and 1980s. Looking at the broken down buildings I think of another passage from that book:

> According to Sotho men recruited for the mines in 1976, management quickly asserted its control. Having signed on at Maseru, Sotho migrants were taken to an eighty room dormitory and told to strip naked for a medical examination. The medical examination was perfunctory. “The process seems to be unnecessary” said Tebanye Ramahapu, one Sotho informant, “except as a way of initiating the miners into a subculture which is deprived of any values about human dignity. The doctor examines the heartbeat and nothing more.” So began a potent process of socialisation. “These people are altogether not regarded as human beings”, said a Sotho informant, “they are treated no better than animals because they are being insulted… they are being kicked about like dogs.”[15]

I wish I could ask them myself, what it was like. Was it always as terrible as that? Was there any truth in the stories of pleasant days off, playing sport and drinking beer? Was there ever any joy or peace? Have things gotten better? What will happen when the mines close down? All the questions I've been asking everyone else and more. But there is nobody here to ask. They are all gone now. At this miners hostel at least, there are only

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[14] Cartwright 1962

[15] Moodie 1994

ghosts, and the faint “clink-clink-clink” of hammers and chisels, carefully taking it all apart. I don't think I'll ever know the truth or begin to understand. But if I even want to try, I will have to look deeper.

Underground

To thrust so deeply and yet so precisely into the density and blackness of the earth is surely an act of supreme audacity.

~ Nadine Gordimer[16]

“The Cage” smells like cold, rusty steel and dust and sweat. Suddenly there is a metallic clang and it drops, at an unbelievable speed, down the three-thousand metre deep shaft. I feel the pressure in my ears, have to equalise every few seconds. In front of me stands a Rastafarian with dreadlocks tied into a cloth, “Oh Jah bless me” is written on his yellow oilcloth jacket in black permanent marker. We rock in unison. The noise of the wind and clattering steal is deafening, like a train, the sound of speed and danger. Other levels we pass flash by like strobe lights. We all wear safety goggles, mandatory in The Cage to protect your eyes from dust, mine are smeared with grime, everything looks bleary. Even at this near-free-fall speed it takes forever to get to the bottom. I try not to think about the incident at St Helena mine, when the cable snapped and more than sixty men fell over half a kilometre to their death in the shaft. Nobody was willing or able to fetch what was left of the bodies, so they poured lime and enough concrete down to cover them and then closed the shaft for good. We’re dropping so fast that when we finally drag to a halt we bounce up again four floors, then drop slower for three floors, then up two floors, then down one, then up and down over and over again as the G-force dissipates, like a mass bungee-jump in a giant steel box. Finally we come to a stop, lock into position and the massive steel doors are rolled open with a bang. The water bottle in my hand is crushed from the air pressure. You can feel it down here, the weight of all that air above you, it’s heavy.

Working in the mines is an agonisingly painful experience.
Your work is in an extremely dangerous place. Anything can happen to you at any place.
Whenever you go down the shaft, you are not sure that you will come out alive.You don't want to think about it. But it keeps coming.[17]

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[16] Goldblatt 2012

[17] Words of an anonymous Sotho miner in Welkom in the 1970s, cited in Moodie 1994

This is one of the deepest shafts in the world. About two hours ago, at 6am, I was in the boardroom way up there on the surface, watching the informational video about the mine we're in. After the impressive 3D animation of the ludicrous, beyond belief things going on down here, they showed the safety video, while handing out indemnity forms clearing them of any responsibility. As I filled it in, the video outlined some key points:

Safety gear:
Self-rescue pack (hoping that I won't be in a position where I actually have to rescue myself down there), whistle, ear plugs, safety goggles, boots, gloves, helmet with lamp, flashing and buzzing warning light.

Health risks:
Noise, heatstroke, hyperthermia, hypothermia, dehydration, dust, silicosis, etc.

Dangers underground:
1. Slipping and falling (broken bones, etc.)
2. Eardrums popping while descending in Cage
3. Moving machinery (no loose clothing)
4. High voltage cables
5. Falls of gravel (most common and dangerous)
6. Explosives
7. Poisonous gasses
8. "Man-machine interface"

This last was a euphemistic way of saying "being crushed to death or ripped apart by monstrous vehicles and machinery". The live-action video that went with this particular warning was of a man napping on the ground when a giant vehicle comes past and rides over his legs, screaming, blood squirting everywhere. The special effects were really quite good. Then, even better, a man standing too close to the wall, giant vehicle comes past and squashes him, blood everywhere, bones crunching, more screaming. This was followed by a scene of a funeral, lots of people crying.
Then the suits came past and cheerfully collected the indemnity form I had just signed.

I'm struck by how loud it is, hissing pipes, growling machines, groaning walls, roaring tunnels - a cacophony of angry noise echoing through the tunnels. Some of it sounds like it

is coming from very far away, like the sound of the sea when you put a shell to your ear. I put the little day-glow yellow earplugs in and don't take them out again unless I have to. I'm with a group of young miners from Brazil (they won some sort of work competition and this trip to South Africa to visit the mine was the prize), none of them speak a word of English, so there's no need to speak or listen anyway.

Cool oxygen is pumped into the tunnel through billowing yellow canvas tubes above, I suppose it also must have travelled the 3kms from the surface and must be extremely disorientated at finding itself in this place. The main artery is lit by fluorescent lights at regular intervals, but some of the tunnels leading off of it are like black holes, they seem to suck the light out of the main tunnel and swallow it up into nothingness. There are unfamiliar smells, my nose doesn't know what to make of them, I haven't had a completely novel sensory experience like this since I was a toddler.

We are being taken to the stope, the face of the reef, on the back of a bakkie with a heavy steel cage around it and two rows of seats down the middle. We pile in and sit back to back facing outwards, strapping ourselves in. Everything is so uncomfortable. The seats are hard, the belt is tight, the heavy battery pack eats into the flesh on my hips, the "self-rescue box" (which I have no idea how to use or what it contains) gets in the way constantly, the headlamp is so heavy that my neck is already struggling to hold my head up, the thick wire connecting the headlamp to the battery pack on the belt keeps getting hooked on everything. The tunnel we're travelling through to get to the stope is low and narrow and steep, about 40 degrees, leading away from the main tunnel with its lights and rough concrete walls, into a dark, hot, wet place. The bakkie chokes to life and jumps forwards, but the wheels spin and it skids backwards about ten metres on the sludgy floor, banging loudly into another vehicle that was coming up behind us. This doesn't seem to perturb anyone (except me) and after a few more slips and slides we gain traction and head off. We pass massive dug-out bays on either side, some of them filled with mountains of crushed rock, some with sleeping machines - huge hydraulic monsters painted in bright primary colours, blue and red and yellow, like the toys of a child-giant - lying still in the darkness, paying no attention to us as we drive past, our headlights briefly disturbing their slumber.

One man told me that when he goes to work underground he leaves his intellect above, that when he is underground he is not a full person. Another said "When I am underground I do not think of anything else except coming out of the mine"[18]

[18] Ibid

The bakkie drops us off at a brightly lit briefing area near the stope, white-boards all around, shift charts, safety warnings. A poster warning of hypothermia. Why? It's so hot my thin calico overalls are soaked through with sweat. Rats, the walls are alive with them, crawling around under the metal mesh holding up the rubble over our heads. The miners sometimes feed them, their underground pets. Our guide is Hendrik, a young, tall Afrikaans fellow, shift boss on this stope. After a long, boring wait in the briefing area, he leads us on the two kilometre walk to the face of the reef, that thin streak of black, gold bearing rock, the source of all this insanity.

The walk through this tunnel is the most surreal, otherworldly thing I've ever experienced, it's like something from *The Lord of the Rings*. Almost unbearably hot, then cold and damp, hissing pipes, stuffy, dust particles in lamp light, going into my lungs. Ghostly underground lakes as black as oil, the light from our dim headlamps reflected on their glossy surfaces. We wade through some of them, almost up to the top of our boots. On the banks of these lakes the sludge is like glue, sucking your feet. I slip and fall once and hurt my wrist.

Trudging around in the hot, slimy darkness in these heavy, awkward clothes is the most uncomfortable I've ever been. Hendrik takes us up a steep hill of rubble, "fill" - the useless, non-gold-bearing rock. It is right next to one of these mysterious black lakes. About 5 meters up I slip on the unstable gravel and slide all the way down the hill into the water, am suddenly up to my armpits in liquid as thick as porridge. Again, no-one (except me) seems perturbed. Getting out would be impossible without the help of two of the Brazilians and Hendrik. I sit on the ground to empty the flappy rubber boots that filled with sludge like they were buckets, but for the rest of the day I can feel the wet-concrete-like stuff squelching around my feet, soaked into the thick wool socks I was given.

> *Whenever an accident occurs and someone is either killed or badly injured you think of yourself in the position, you think of your family and you become very unstable and lonely. You feel you want to see them for the last time, because the inevitable will come to you sometime…Death is so real you keep on praying and thanking God each time you come out alive.*[19]

Finally we reach the face of the reef. There are animal-like hydraulic machines: giant mechanical woodpeckers breaking rocks through a metal grate, scorpions squirting poison to tame the dust, lobsters drilling into the rock walls - one claw collapsing

[19] Ibid

downward as the hydraulics release - growling armadillos hauling gravel up and down the tunnels. Hendrik picks up a chunk of the black reef and shows it to us. As he turns to continue the walk, I hold out my hand and he passes it to me. I stare at it and handle it, I measure the weight of it. How much money and effort and misery goes into hauling this piece of rock up out of the deep? For what? They will dig tens of thousands of tons of fill just to get to the reef. A ton of reef ore, if it's a rich one, will be crushed and poisoned to produce a few morsels of gold.

The day feels like it will never be over. Life up there doesn't even exist anymore. But like everything else, this too eventually ends. Going back up in The Cage, I stand near the door, a thick steel sheet, it rattles so violently I'm sure it's going to fly off and suck me out with it, like a bad movie involving a plane crash. It's much louder going up, no-one is talking because of the noise. We come to such a rapid stop my stomach turns. Now I understand the hypothermia warning. In my thin, sweat-soaked overalls I am freezing, my body starts to shake violently and I have to clench my jaw to stop my teeth clattering. We walk through vats of water with scrubbing brushes, scrub the mud and sludge off of the boots and hang the heavy battery pack on a rack next to thousands of others.

From the moment I step into the glaring winter sunshine and breathe the naturally occurring air, the whole experience of the day seems like a dream, a dark and very vivid, visceral dream. My body and mind are drained and tired, everything is drained and tired. When I get back to the change-room, my own clothes folded up in the locker seem strangely foreign. I spend 20 minutes in the shower engulfed in steam, until long after the last trace of cement-like yellow sludge has washed away down the drain. Once I'm dressed in my jeans and soft t-shirt and fleece, I look at the mud-caked overalls and rubber boots, the mud-caked wool socks, with an actual shudder and leave the locker room, clean and warm.

In the natural light of the late afternoon, everything about this sunlit surface, the moist softness of the living organic world, looks different now. It strikes me so forcefully what a fragile layer of life exists on this massive, hard, hot rock of ours. Just a delicate, thin little crust, like moss on a mountain.

Later that day, about two hours after we surfaced, there were two "seismic events" in the area. Three people died underground.

Going Home

Before I leave town, Ian and I have breakfast at Roxie's Cafe, a recreation of a 1950s diner, with no apparent irony intended. Sitting at the table next to us are four teenage girls, two black and two white, drinking milkshakes and peering at one of the girls' phones and laughing. They make excellent lime milkshakes here. The owner, a guy named Rex, comes over to say hi to Ian. When Ian tells him I'm here doing research for a story about Welkom and the gold mines and so on, he gives us a fascinating interpretation of recent South African history that I will have to save for another story some day.

Ian and I talk about all of the places he's taken me and the people I've met. I realise something then. I came here hoping to get the perspective of other communities in Welkom, to try to find those stories that fell outside of my small, insular little group growing up that consisted of my friends, my family, and my family's friends. But thinking of it now, most of the attempts I made failed in one way or another. Connie and Joshua gave me a lot of time and information, but their perspective was rather closer to my middle-class background than removed. Julian, the bartender at the Sand River Club spoke so softly and quickly that I could only catch snippets of what he said. The men at the warehouse were too busy for anything beyond a short greeting. The ruins of the mine hostels and plants that I visited were inhabited only by ghosts. On the mines, my ears were literally blocked, and besides, I'm pretty sure there would have been little time for chit chat with the miners while they were operating those massive, extremely dangerous machines. And when we surfaced, I was ushered quickly to the only female changing room on site, and when I emerged, the miners were gone. The barriers of race and gender and class are not so easy to see through, or climb over, or break open. Not easy, but maybe not impossible. After all, if I didn't know what I know, I would have said that it was impossible to dig three thousand metres below the surface of the earth to blast metal stuff out if it. I would have said it was impossible and also insanely pointless. In the end, I just found my own story really. And maybe that's for the best. I don't believe that I'm the right person to tell those stories, they don't belong to me. But I hope that some day somebody will write them.

After breakfast at Roxie's I head back to Johannesburg, the original City of Gold. I drive past Koppie-Alleen, that lonely little hill, and I think of Allan Roberts, that crazy fool who believed with all his heart that there was gold hidden under these taut fields of mielies and sunflowers. I wonder why it was that Allan was so convinced that there was gold to be found in the Orange Free State, when everybody else dismissed it as absurd. Why could only he see what others - geologists, industry experts, seasoned prospectors - could not? What perverse deity put the idea into his head? And what would have happened if he had

given up when his doctor told him that this obsession was literally killing him? I suppose some other fool with gold-fever and a bore-drill would have come along eventually.

An hour or so later I drive over the Vaal River, leaving the beautiful Free State behind, and cross into that other independent Boer Republic as was: Gauteng as it is today, Transvaal as it was. A short way to the west of here - near the small town of Parys - is the Vredefort Dome, a gargantuan crater and semi-circular range of hills created when a meteor the size of a mountain crashed and skidded into Earth, changing the climate, extinguishing masses of species and altering the face of the planet and life on earth forever. That fateful collision heaved up an ancient seabed and all the gold that had washed to its shores, many millions of years ago, creating the golden crescent that curves from the Witwatersrand in the North to the Free State Goldfields in the South. Just about everything that dictates South Africa's current place in the world is because of that gold. The impact of finding it was as profound for our history as the impact of the crater was for the planet.

I think to myself for a vanishing moment, "If only that stupid meteor had missed Earth by a few hundred miles, then none of this shit would have happened, there would have been no gold and South Africa would have been a better place!" A thoroughly absurd idea. Soon the skyline of Johannesburg appears, a glinting, jagged steel edge on the horizon. As I enter the city I pass the faux mining headgear and rollercoasters and giant ferris wheel of *Gold Reef City*, a theme-park based on the gold mines. If you visit *Gold Reef City* - amidst the old-timey recreation of 19th century Johannesburg, complete with penny-farthings - you can see something amazing: a rollercoaster partially built into an old abandoned mine shaft. At just the right moment, you will see a bunch of screaming people, strapped into a "cage" on rails, hurtling towards the headgear and disappearing underground, free-falling into the old shaft to shrieks of terror and delight. There are surely few things in this world that are not thoroughly absurd.

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