

I wrote a letter to my love, but on the way I dropped it

Well, here I sit at Heathrow. I said I would leave, I said it again, and then finally I left. When it came to it, when the moment arrived, it had to be done immediately. You were out; I was pondering things. Again. I wondered to myself how much a flight to SA would cost. I phoned. I could just about cover it. And I thought, Just do it, Oliver, just do it. Cut the Gordian knot. No point in waiting till you got back. We'd just have another of those conversations, one-sided conversations, monologues really — me talking, you listening (or shutting me out) in what can only be called stony silence. Me saying, "We've got to do something, we're falling apart, you don't want it to fall apart, do you?" ("It" meaning relationship.) Stony silence. "Come on," I'd say, "speak to me." You: "I don't want to talk about it." Me: "But we've got to talk about it, we've got to sort it out, or we can't go on." You: stony silence. And so on. OK, you said a few things now and then. When I said, "Maybe I should just leave," you said, "Well, if that's what you want to do ..." in a threatening tone, as if to say, Well, go then, but then you take responsibility for the end of the relationship. And, in between, me thinking to myself, "It can't end like this", or just "It can't end", except it could, and the feeling of ending was overwhelming.

How many awful months between ... between what? — the beginning of the end and the end of the end? How to pinpoint the beginning of the end? We can, at least, pinpoint the end proper — the official end, the moment I left. Someone had to leave. Someone had to go, to end it. I think I was the one hanging on more tightly for a while, but then the moment came. I actually performed an *action*, even though it was

in that instant only a whim — I phoned the travel agent. And suddenly all sorts of actions were possible, *action* was possible. Once I had the price, I computed it ... How much for a ticket, I asked, as soon as possible? Was thinking, even then, in my sudden rush of adrenaline or whatever, that my “cover story” would be Family Crisis. Ticket (one way) £600. I said OK. Didn’t even think about it and phone back. Bought ticket on credit card at once. Started packing. I thought, At least two hours till Andries comes back, plenty of time. Packed — how little there was to pack once I’d thought, had framed it as “How much would I take for an emergency trip to SA?” — an emergency, say, like if Mom was very ill. Except of course Mom’s in Australia now. (And thinking of her ill I at once thought, God forbid. Even our totally imagined scenarios have consequences.) But that “as if” saw me through. I walked straight to the hallway cupboard, got out the suitcase, and then went straight to the bedroom and started packing. The “as if” made it easy — pack as if for an emergency trip. (Well, it was, is, an emergency.) As many clothes as would fit in one biggish suitcase. As many books as would fit in the carry-on bag along with toiletries etc (two books, actually — the Philip Roth I’ve had sitting there beside the bed for ages and not reading, and the poetry-criticism one supposed to get reviewed for the *Guardian*). The rest can be sorted out later. All my books, the rest of the clothes, the *things*. Even if I never see them again, I thought, it will be OK — if I can kiss you goodbye, I can kiss *them* goodbye too. Kiss you figuratively, of course, because of course there *was* no kiss, would be none, much though I’d’ve liked one. But the thought was: if I can leave you, I can leave the rest. Leaving you is the hard part. The rest is easy.

So here I sit. I thought of writing a note, just to let you know. Then thought it’d be a bad idea — you might come rushing to the airport and drag me back. Then thought that was highly unlikely. If you didn’t try to save “us”, didn’t even talk back to me

when I tried to talk about it, well, you're not likely to come rushing to the airport for a last-minute kiss-and-make-up like in a Hollywood movie. So started writing a note: It's clear that it's over between us, and this is the only way I can think of to finish it without it dragging on any longer — I'm leaving. I'm going to SA. I've talked of going, but not wanting to go alone (like last time, to Dad's death), but with you by my side, etc.

Or that's the letter I would have written had I finished one, had I not crumpled up each incoherent draft (suddenly getting panicky, wanting to finish packing and go, catch my plane) and thrown it away. Thrown it away, moreover, in a dustbin in the tube station. (Well, three sheets of paper. Three crumples.) Because, after I'd packed, I got the idea *you'd search the bin* and then you'd come rushing to the airport and stop me — and *that* would be a bad thing? I suppose that that fear represented a half-hope it *would* happen, that you'd want me back, that it would be a sign of reconciliation and a "fresh start". But another part of me knew, knows, that is impossible, it's too late, it has to end — I have to go, be gone. No fetching from airport. No note to give the game away until it's too late. Besides, I'd phone — better, more sort of intimate, personal. No note like a suicide's. But the shock of finding me gone? Would you realise I'd packed and gone? And so on. I changed my mind about what to do several times, while packing, interrupting the packing to write a note, packing some more, leaving for the tube ... Changing my mind all the time, write, no, phone, no, write, cancel the ticket, no, go — except I kept doing what I was doing, I kept leaving.

Phone from Heathrow, I thought, no, phone from SA — let him worry, let him sweat ... But of course that's childish. I would never *really* do that. So I got here and got my ticket and checked in and all that (many hours early), calmed down, and *then* phoned you. You'd just got in (so it wouldn't have made any difference if I'd left a

note; you'd've just seen it at that moment). I said, "I'm at Heathrow." "What are you doing there?" "I'm going to South Africa." Silence at the other end of the line; you thinking, working it out. Then a cautious, "O ... K ..." with a rising intonation at the end, like it was half a question. And I started burbling, "It's the only thing, we have to end it, it's over, why drag it out, why make each other suffer, I'll always love you but I can't love you like this any more ..." Silence. I stopped burbling. You said nothing. I said nothing. For God knows how long we just listened to each other's silence.

Then I said, "I'll call you from Jo'burg," and you said, "OK. Take care."

Suddenly I didn't feel like reading the *Guardian* book, or the Roth, and I went to the nearest WH Smith. Looked for something to read, didn't feel like anything there. It's all fat paperbacks with metallic intaglio lettering on the covers anyway, the kind where the author's name is bigger than the title. OK, that's not entirely true, but none of the tasteful autumnal "shortlisted for the Booker Prize" appealed either. Then saw out of the corner of my eye this notebook, pretty little thing, British Museum merchandising. Not really my kind of thing, a notebook, but what the hell, I thought, and then I had to have a pen, which I'd need anyway, had needed already — had to borrow one earlier from a rather disgruntled older chap in the queue behind me.

And so here I sit, and write, to you, Andries, I suppose, the continuation of the note I tried to leave when I was leaving. I'm still leaving; I'm in the process of leaving.

When will I be able to say *I've left*?

Andries:

On the plane. In this jotting, this notebook, I'm addressing you. It's not a note to me, in which I'd surely call you "Andries" or just "A" (you are — were? — the first letter of my alphabet). I'm referring to you as "You". Does that make this a letter? If so, this is the kind of letter one writes but does not send. Like Kafka's letter to his father. Published after his death — like the rest his work, he wanted it burned, but it wasn't, and when you read it you can't say he didn't have at least the corner of one eye on what it would look like in print. A public accusation.

Maybe I'll end up burning this like Kafka wanted his writing burned. (Something symbolic in that — don't the Japanese or some other orientals have some ritual that involves writing things on bits of paper then burning them? Or is that prayers they burn?) But it also won't get sent because you won't want to read it, you will be angry if you do, it will seem like an imposition, blackmail maybe — forcing you to *hear* me after all the hard work you did not to listen. Not that I could force you to read it anyway. You'd look at it, see what it is, and toss it aside. You don't, it is apparent, want to know precisely how I feel, in every detail; my feelings are uncomfortable to you. I know. They are uncomfortable to me too.

I need to write, though, to put stuff down. I think that was my half-aware thought as I stood in WH Smith — feeling of stuff "welling up", wanting to come out, stuff I needed to say but couldn't. So write a poem, you'd say, and you'd say it with a mixture of respect and disdain. (And of course, a poem you wouldn't have to read — somehow you excused yourself from that activity. I read some to you, so long ago now, but they embarrassed us both. Especially the ones about you.) But even poets (and that word, that role, that enterprise, seem increasingly untenable to me) can't write poems *all* the time. Or can't write, when they write, *only* poems. Not that I've

written any for ages — if I were in poem-writing mode, I'd've remembered to take poetry-writing materials when I left, the clean blank sheets of A4 I like, the pencils that seem the right tool for poetry-writing — they link it to drawing, somehow, but also make it provisional. (Until that moment you sit down at the computer, or typewriter as used to be, and think, OK, the final version ... Except of course that will in time acquire its palimpsest of pencil marks ... and have to be retyped, or fixed on the computer, printed out once more, dated ... “Dated” could mean something else, too, of course.) But, no, no blank sheets of A4, no pencils — the thought didn't even cross my mind. Despite the fact that they were sitting there, on my desk, neatly, on my desk, as if waiting ... No, didn't even think of that. Suppose I'm so used to putting it out of my mind, the thought that I *should* be writing poetry, that that's my job, my real job, my vocation. (Nearly wrote “vacation” — poetry as a holiday from real life? Well, did write “vacation”, but all I have to do to change that is add a little swish to the right-hand side of the “o”, and it's an “a”. Somewhere in my mind, the American word “vacation” — thinking of reasons I may have to give to anyone about why I'm going to SA — they ask, Pleasure or business? What to say? Hardly “pleasure”. Just “holiday”, maybe, “vacation” — vacation from the rest of my life, the life I have now vacated.)

Odd that I'm writing this when I have found it so impossible to write anything of late — for months, perhaps even a year. Forced myself to write reviews, etc, painfully —but otherwise nothing, nothing of my own volition. Certainly no poetry. Does that say something about how poetry comes about, where it comes from? Or just that it's hard to work when you're depressed? That when depressed all such enterprises feel futile? And that the depression in fact makes all previous such work seem utterly pointless? What did poetry do for *me*?

I suppose if I were more creative (more “motivated”, horrible word), I could try a diary in poetic form, a poem-diary, a daily log in verse, like Breytenbach or Ted Hughes on the farm. A more robust poet wouldn’t hesitate; a more garrulous poet. But at the moment I can’t seem to get it up poetically. Nothing turns me on. Clearly I’m not the kind of poet who writes poetry out of grief, out of sorrow. Or I’d’ve written my *Cantos* by now.

Perhaps I just need to write a journal of My Trip to South Africa after a Decade’s Absence. You wouldn’t really want to read that either, though, would you? You’d prefer the executive summary, the efficient précis, with jokes in the right places, suitable for a dinner party. (An anecdote that has been polished.) You don’t really want to know what goes on in my head, in my hand as it scribbles, in the electricity between them. You don’t want to know. You don’t need the detail.

Of course this isn’t a real letter, Kafka-style or not, because it’s in this pretty notebook (thanks, BM. The museum notebook — will this notebook be a “museum” to our relationship?). Yet I address “You”. If it were really a letter, what would I do? Tear out the pages and pop them in an envelope, address it to You?

Andries:

Back in SA — weird. So many years. It’s the same, only more so; it’s changing, as it was when I was here last, only more so. Central Jo’burg is now a black city; a few white faces here and there. White businesses have fled north; Sandton is now a new commercial centre of some kind, replete with horrible post-modern pastiche buildings all over the place, many with dreadful little pyramids on top of them — why? There

are billboards everywhere, many of them electronic and animated, words, logos, flashing by in dot formation. It looks more and more like America. Is Australia like this? And, if so, do my brother, my sister-in-law, their children and thus inevitably my mother, now rehoused in Perth, notice it? Jo'burg, it seems, has sold every inch of sellable space to someone. There are billboards in the suburbs. There are new office parks down many of the bigger roads that used to have just big houses with big walls along them. Even suburbia has been colonised by business. There are garages, service stations I mean, on every second corner, it looks like; there are branches of McDonalds on every other.

Why did it take me so long to come back? Because, as always, you refused to come with me? I could only come, now, now that I need to run away from you. The coming home was the separation, the leaving. The last time I was here was when Dad was dying, when Dad died. I suppose I didn't want very much to come back anyway after that. London felt like "home"; this place felt like somewhere one had left and had no need to return to, the hometown preserved in ambivalent memory, which was enough. SA was for poems, not for experiencing.

I didn't come back to SA ("home"?) before because it felt like it would be disloyal to you, in some way. Because you hated SA, always did. You spent so much time and energy ceasing to be an Afrikaner and becoming an Englishman, or at least a Londoner — a cosmopolitan, that is to say, in some way. (Ceasing to be what you never really were in the first place.) You succeeded. At the price of never wanting to set foot in SA again. It felt to me as though my coming back to SA, even for a visit (and I toyed with it, many times, without telling you) would in some way compromise that new allegiance of yours, and God knows I felt I had to support you in your allegiances, had to mimic them. And it wasn't as though I missed it that much. E-mail

made it easy to pretend I was in contact with everyone I wanted to be in contact with here in SA, and they came and went from London, staying with us, bringing a little flavour of SA with them, which was enough for me. Too much for you. “Let’s not talk about it,” you’d say when the discussion about SA’s past, present, future, its discontents and glories, came up. Even when we were happy, so happy, about Mandela coming out of jail, successful negotiations, etc, etc. No, you didn’t want to talk about it. Or you’d just leave the room — “I must start on supper,” and you’d closet yourself in the kitchen and start chopping things, if supper was on the cards, or “I must just go over my accounts — the accountant’s coming tomorrow” — and then disappear for hours, emerging only (and sheepishly) when the guests were going home. Some kind of denial, I’m sure; a renunciation, in a way, but a superstitious one.

And I was happy. Or I thought I was happy. It is too painful, really, at this stage, to interrogate that notion any further: was my happiness an illusion? Let’s assume that if one thinks one is happy then one is happy. There is no gap between what one imagines and what one is in that respect, not as far as happiness is concerned. I was with you, that was all that mattered; you and I, alone against the world, against SA, if necessary. What more did we need? We had a comfortable life: a nice flat; you had the antique shop, going very well, and once I had the university job, the financial situation was fine. Inside, though, I had to wonder about teaching poetry even as writing it seemed to become an ever more marginal activity, a private game, like the poetry written by teenagers in states of angst. (Only a South African, with that special kind of colonial naivety, and the excitements of politics charging the notion that every artistic activity had some kind of purpose, would have come to London thinking it a good idea to try to be a poet.) Publishing it began to seem pointless, even when *The Guardian* started putting a poem on the back page of the *Saturday Review* section and

even accepted one of mine (submitted by my publisher, not by me). Poetry, in a box on the back page. I was happy, yes, but I didn't write much poetry. Maybe being happy made it hard to write poems; Dad died and I was drafting a new sequence in five minutes, it felt like. So being happy didn't help writing poems, and being unhappy, after that, didn't either. But let's not go down that road again.

Andries:

Now in Cape Town; left Jo'burg after two days. I drove around, saw a lot, saw various friends, but what was the point of staying? Without the family there, even thought I would have dreaded seeing them, it seemed hollow. And Jen isn't there any more, as you know. Now that she's a single mother, or at least a divorced mother, she could choose to go back to Cape Town, her hometown. Where she could take the kids to the beach, etc. Found a nice little house in Woodstock. I gather Boiler, absentee dad, unfaithful husband, now ex, exed, visits now and then, when he's in town. I called her, made an arrangement to see her; will go there tomorrow. CT is a city strange to me in many ways, stranger still now that it seems to have become an international holiday resort, a kind of Third World Club Med, most beautiful beaches in the world, etc, though the sea's too cold to swim in on the Atlantic side. There are child-beggars on Long Street, which is the new kind of entertainment strip of bars and so on, a nice stretch, but it's not a black city like Jo'burg; it's a tourist city, mostly (sunburned) white with a little bit of brown here and there. Jo'burg feels ever more like part of Africa, central Jo'burg at least, Jo'burg City, but CT doesn't. Everyone (by which I mean all the whiteys one speaks to) seems to think it's a haven from the rest of SA, which they imagine to be descending into chaos as we speak. Are political

attitudes so unchanged? Or is this a new spin on an old problem, the haves running away from the presence of the have-nots? I don't know. CT is a beautiful city, certainly, a unique city, with its mountain and so on, its habitations perched on slopes, the sea surrounding it like an embrace (even if it's a chilly one). There is much to please the eye. I do feel comfortable here, I think, or will do for a bit; my pounds, at any rate (though they won't last much longer), have assured me of being able to stay awhile, in a reasonably cheap hotel, though Jen says I'm mad and there's no reason I shouldn't stay with her. She's got plenty of space, etc. I wonder how much noise her children make in the early hours of the morning.

Conversation with Jen, the inevitable conversation: "So what went wrong?" "I don't know ..." How to answer that question? Trying for a neat summation: "He fell in love with someone else." "But he didn't fuck him?" "No." But Jen understood that. She was clear on the fact that you basically fell in love, if one can use that old phrase, with someone else, someone other than me, and of course that meant it was over between us. But that doesn't explain it all ... There must've been something happening before that, some turning away from me that you did, that happened for you, slowly, almost imperceptibly perhaps — imperceptible until Merlin came on the scene, though. That was the "catalyst". More than that we're not clear on, though Jen and I keep talking about it, keep analysing it. Even if we never reach a conclusion, the talking is good, the turning it inside out, upside-down, every which way. Women are good at this. It such a relief after your silences, your taciturnities.

At least we're clear, me and Jen, on the fact that it *is* over, that you and me are done with.

"Do you want to get back together?"

"No. Yes. It's impossible, it won't happen."

Andries:

And as for the catalyst — as for “Merlin” ... The name seems to want to be in inverted commas. He smiled when I asked him if he’d chosen it himself. He said, simply, in a way that showed he’d said this a thousand times, “My parents were hippies.” By “hippies”, we later discovered, he meant young rootless unemployed people who travelled around these (those) Isles, doing drugs, having parties, etc — travellers, New-Agey types. People who went to the Glastonbury festival every year and danced around a makeshift maypole on the night of the summer solstice. Not real hippies as in the Sixties, but their descendants. Realised, here in SA, paging through a film book in the bookshop the other day, that John Boorman’s *Excalibur* came out in 1981 — the year, I’m pretty sure, of Merlin’s birth. Did they name Merlin after Boorman’s or Nicol Williamson’s Merlin in that movie? Did they deliberately go for a sort of cockney, downbeat, rather cynical and reluctant Merlin? A reluctant enchanter ...

But he wasn’t Merlin the Enchanter, at least not at first, was he? He was just Merlin the Assistant. It didn’t seem odd at the time. Of course, you’re an antique dealer, I *expected* you to be travelling around the country, ferreting out precious objects from the attics of half-senile widows, bargaining with aristocrats fallen on hard times, all that, attending the antiques fairs, and so on. And I *expected* you to have an assistant. And I *expected* you to have a good-looking assistant — what self-respecting queer wouldn’t? I even *expected* you to start lusting after him. What ordinary lustful ageing queer wouldn’t? Especially when the assistant was so good-looking — so attractive overall, sexy, a walking talking wet dream, whatever the cliché is. How do you describe “sexy”? In Merlin’s case, sexy meant what sexy means to most people — the very picture of what gay men nowadays are supposed to aspire to in themselves, if they’re young enough, or at least expected to desire,

young or old. Blond, square-featured, muscled, though perhaps a bit short. Maybe he was the Enchanter from the start. I *expected* you to want to fuck Merlin, and later even to actually fuck him, go ahead and fuck him — it wouldn't have bothered me. Would it?

A year or so before Merlin turned up, I said to you, feeling older (the big four-oh in sight) and thus, inevitably, lusting hopelessly after younger men (those gorgeous young students, so “fresh-faced”), but saying it with a light, joking tone, “You wouldn't mind if I had a the odd fling on the side, the odd one-off, would you?” (This a phrase, a sentence, I think I rehearsed mentally a few times before I said it to you, perhaps even waited until I thought the moment was right — but can't remember that context now.) You wouldn't mind? You looked at me as though I were mad. You couldn't muster a similar light tone for your reply. “If *you* want to get Aids,” you said. I tried to laugh. “Condoms,” I said. You made a violent noise that was a sort of choke and a cough at the same time. No more discussion. I might've known — I could have predicted. Your derision at Frank and Ralph, their famously “open” relationship, their threesomes and foursomes and all that confusion, the roughs and toughs, the one who tied up one of them, beat the other one up, stole half the house — I remember your disgust at their adventures. Well, a sort of glee at their misfortunes when they went wrong, but at just the fact of their fucking around — disgust. Unpaid whores, you called them at one point. And added, then or later, “At *their* age” — like they weren't pretty much the same age as us. Or maybe that was your point. For myself, I was interested in Frank and Ralph's adventures, but kept my distance, because you really didn't like to be with them at all. If we bumped into them somewhere and you saw them coming you'd mutter, “Oh, fuck, those two,” and try to hide, almost. And we didn't see much of each other in the end, me and you and Frank and Ralph (how did we even meet them in the first place?) — our social life was theatre, concerts and dinner parties, and their social life was sex.

Not that I really wanted to go off and have little “things” or flings on the side, really, even when I asked that — I also believed, as you do, in marriage. Not as in frilly white dresses and bells, like the straights do it, but as in “long-term commitment”, yes we both believed that. And I knew, without our ever having had to discuss it, that an “affair” of any kind would be unthinkable. I wouldn’t, at that point, have done it with any of my fresh-faced students or anyone else. But if I didn’t really want that, what did I want? Did I just want my fantasy indulged? Perhaps I wasn’t really asking that; perhaps I was testing something else. But what? We were happy, weren’t we? We were long-term? I suppose “long-term” doesn’t mean it won’t end. Though of course when it’s going, when the motor of the marriage is running, you don’t think about the end. You don’t think about how it *could* end. You just go along, presuming it’ll last and last. You “take it for granted”. (Me to Jen: “The worst of it is that I feel like such a cliché.” Is that really the *worst* of it?) And I suppose if you don’t talk about it, if you don’t do that “relationship stuff” (which we didn’t), when the end comes it’s a surprise. I always just assumed we’d always be together.

And yet it ended. You hired Merlin. I see that as the beginning, at least, of the end. Well, no, the end must have started before that, it must have started ending long before that. But Merlin was the catalyst, the symbol of some long slow estrangement that had been taking place for ... for how long? Or did that estrangement seem only to have taken place once the Merlin situation blew up? I can’t work this out; I can’t think about it. I don’t want to talk about it.

Merlin. You told me about him, what a “dish” he was — “But he’s straight.” Did you ask him that? Or did you just decide that? And if so, based on what evidence? And why didn’t I ever ask you how you knew that? Or were you telling yourself that so you

wouldn't be tempted to made a pass at him? You should have asked. Except that you probably wouldn't have got a, well, a straight answer.

And then you introduced Merlin to me; he even stayed with us while he was finding a place of his own in London. The country boy, down from somewhere practically the other side of Hadrian's Wall, come to London to seek his fortune. Lucky, too — he'd walked right into the shop, while you happened to be there, too, which wasn't often in those days, and asked if you had work for him. And just when you'd had to let that other completely unreliable pretty boy go, the red-haired one from Cardiff, just as you'd started looking around for a new assistant. Lucky for him. "Lucky for me," you said, amazed and amused at how he'd fallen out of the sky, as it were, just when you needed him, and of course much taken with his looks, not to mention his chutzpah. He could start immediately; he didn't mind the hard labour part of it, the lifting and carrying. He *liked* the hard labour. So he got the job. And he came to stay.

How long was it? Three weeks, four? And he was sweet, charming, and, yes, good-looking, good to look at, nice to have around — nice to glance at as he made his way from the shower to the spare room with only a towel around his waist, unembarrassed, or perhaps even, subtly, exhibitionist. Showing off a torso (that pale, pale skin) that would not have looked out of place on a Greek kouros, on a plinth in the BM — one of those carvings that are the foundation of all our images of male beauty. The "natural beauty" of youth, the beauty of a twenty-year-old with an "active lifestyle", *not* meaning the gym and/or sports, meaning a job that involved manual labour — days spent lugging heavy old furniture in and out of the van, nights spent dancing for hours on dancefloors striated by green laser light. The kind of young man who can wear a tight teeshirt, when the sun's out, and even sometimes when it isn't, and get away with it — who can flaunt it, flaunt the flat flat midriff, the firm pectoral bulge, can show off the contours of his arms. Who looks

good lugging furniture. A study in youth versus age; young man, old furniture. (I should have written a poem about it.) Yes, I lusted after him too, of course. But I didn't fall in love with him.

We chuckled together, you and I, at his exhibitionism, if that's what it was, unless it was just a charming lack of shame, though of course I *would* see it in a negative light, as some kind of pride or seductive ploy. But we chuckled, lying in bed together, at his way of wandering around with the towel around his waist, unwilling it seemed to get dressed. When I said, "Aren't you cold?", he said, "Ach, no, this flat's lovely and warm." (His Scots-sounding *Ach* or *Och* versus the South African *Ag* I keep hearing, am beginning to say again — *Ag*.) He said it was a pleasure not to have to get his coat on the minute he got out of the shower. Told us about some miserable squat or somewhere he'd stayed in up north (far, far, up north now — now that I'm down south, far south), how freezing it had been, how he'd got chilblains. A plea for sympathy of some kind? Maybe. Appealing to the older men who'd "taken him in". But he told it in good humour, laughingly.

And I even said to you, one night, when we were in bed, and we started making love, and I groaned a bit as you touched my cock, and you went "Sssh, he'll hear," I said, "So what? He might even want to join us." You were silent at that. Or at least you didn't *answer* that; you just said, "It's embarrassing." So we made love silently, trying not to moan and groan, and thus (for me, at least) constantly aware of the presence in the other room, a thin wall away — a sexy presence, moreover, a lithe muscled young body, a mere twenty years old, a "wet dream". And it turned me on, I admit, as it no doubt turned you on, though you would never admit it, even if I asked, and I would never ask. You didn't want to talk about my feelings, you never did, and you certainly didn't want to talk about yours, whatever they were. Exactly like the classic fucked-up straight partnerships you

read about in women's magazines, women who have trouble with men who aren't "in touch with their feelings".

I should have taken the conventional view: my partner of many years has a sexy young assistant, he's taking long trips across the country with him, they're staying in the same hotel in each small town they stop at. Clearly something is wrong. How could you let it happen, Oliver? Was I pretending it wasn't happening? Thinking that by acknowledging the danger in some way that it'd become true? Thinking, maybe, with half my brain, Well, you're so dead against anything but bog-standard monogamy, let's see how you deal with *this* one. Perhaps in some part of me I *wanted* Merlin to be the catalyst, to change something in the chemical composition of me and you, of our union. Like he was a detached electron that could bond in some odd way with our crystal, transform it. Well, he did. Or we used him to do it.

But of course it wasn't that simple, was it? I was ambivalent, of course. Trying to balance something against something else. And this all begs the question of what was happening to us before Merlin arrived on the scene. Some current of discontent, of boredom with each other? Some sense that in some way we'd come to the end of each other? Maybe. I don't know. Jen interrogates me on this issue but all I come up with are little things, the kind of things that couples routinely negotiate away, deal with, move on.

And after a while Merlin became something I wanted to move on from, or at least from his constant presence in our home. After he'd been with us, in our flat, for those three or four weeks, I said (to you, not him) that it was getting a bit crowded, that it was too much, he'd overstayed his welcome, and you acquiesced and told him he had to find somewhere of his own, which he did. With ease. But of course he was still working for you, was still assisting you, was still in your (and my) life. And when you started going to clubs and raves with him, a man almost half your age, I just said, "Oh, go, go, I don't want to." I

said, “Have fun,” nonchalantly, when you left, he in his tightest possible teeshirt (luckily it was high summer), you in a newly acquired compromise garment, a kind of teeshirt, but one with long sleeves, a sombre grey, not bad-looking, and you carried it off, I admit — not “mutton dressed as lamb” (I quote from the communal idiom-bank), not looking old next to him, but like a slightly older man (though forty-two is ancient in gay terms, isn’t it?) who’s kept his youthful shape, or most of it, still looking good, still holding together. You looked good, yes, I admit it, dammit, you and he, you made a fine couple. I’m sure that when you hit the dancefloor there were admiring, even envious, glances from all round; a good-looking couple, you made. *I* was envious.

And I, of course, wouldn’t go — another “warning sign”? I told myself I didn’t want to go clubbing or raving or whatever, which was true, is still true, truer still now that I’ve been once or twice, and I certainly didn’t want to be the “spare wheel”. I left you to it. You were so clearly enjoying yourself, feeling some kind of new “lease” on life, even. That night you took e — and then raved about what a fabulous drug it was, you who wouldn’t do *any* drugs when we were young. Was it just that Merlin, for a while, made you feel young again? Did I think that perhaps you’d submit, you’d let go, and have a little shag with him? Was I “tempting fate”? I admit (to myself) that part of it, part of my not wanting to go to the club, even famous old Heaven, or the latest hottest place (been there, done that), was just not feeling as though I could slip into a teeshirt, no matter how long the sleeves, and feel comfortable, that I couldn’t “do” the right look, that I’d feel odd (and old), and if I went in an ordinary old shirt and jeans I’d feel even odder in the fashionable up-to-the-minute sexy crowd jammed sweating in some club. It just wasn’t “me”. It wasn’t a role I could play. But there was also some resentment, and some element of performance on my part, as if I was saying, Oh, go out and have your fun, then — I’ll just stay at home and mope like an old spinster. I’ll be Miss Havisham tonight.

Was that only three weeks he stayed with us? It was toward the end of that that you went to your first rave with him. You went to a few more, of course, and I wasn't going to object to that — go out, have your fun. If that's what you want to do, do it. I was determined not to act like the jealous lover, not to act like the cuckold. And when someone said to me, someone who'd seen you and him out in Old Compton Street one day, having lunch at the sidewalk café, "Looks like your husband has got himself a toyboy," and I repeated that to you, lightly, jokingly, and you said, rather crossly, "Well, we're not having *sex*, if that's what you mean." (As if "sex" were a dirty word.)

No, you weren't having sex. I believed you; I believe you still — but that was your bad faith. You should have had sex with him. You should have got it over with. That might have cleared the air, cleared the deck. Instead, you let the infatuation grow, I let it grow, I was temporarily satisfied with your denials — They're not having sex, I thought, so that's OK. You were the one who was saying you weren't sleeping with him and if you weren't sleeping with him then what could possibly be wrong? You were friends, colleagues (employer and employee, I should have interjected), and what was wrong with that? And so I accepted your denials in terms of your world-view, your philosophy, your ideology — if you believed in fidelity, and if you weren't screwing Merlin, then you were being the faithful "husband" and that was all I could ask for.

But, somehow, somewhere, under it all, you were changing; you were, in some way, in a way you wouldn't admit to yourself and least of all to me, you were falling in love with him. Or you were just falling out of love with me. At any rate, you were transferring your affections from me to him. That much was clear. I would have liked to believe that couldn't happen, that you couldn't turn away from such a very long relationship, a "permanent" relationship, and fixate on a twenty-year-year old, but you did. I wouldn't

admit it, either, until it became so staggeringly obvious that it just couldn't be ignored any more.

When you chose to do what *he* wanted to do instead of what *I* wanted to do; okay, what I wanted to do was make supper and sit quietly at home reading, by the fire, and what he wanted to do was try out the new club in Fuck-Knows-Where, which was obviously the more enticing option, but still you should have given more attention to what I wanted. By choosing, again and again, to do whatever Merlin wanted to do, instead of what I wanted to do, you were sending signals I should have interpreted earlier. You wanted to spend as much time as possible with him, and only the minimum with me. He became more important to you than I was; his good opinion of you was more important than mine. With him, you felt young, you were rediscovering your fun-loving, outgoing side (you said as much, grudgingly), while with me you felt like the same old you, the *old* you, the domestic stay-at-home you. Some people would call that a midlife crisis.

And now I'm blaming you — making it all your fault, your problem. Was it just you having a midlife crisis? What about me and my not writing any poems? The increasing itch to come back to SA, to come "home"? Not that I thought of it quite like that — didn't think of moving back to SA in such clear terms. It was just a vague fantasy, "at the back of my mind" ... But it was there. Some desire for change, some restlessness on my part too ...

Could I have put a stop to it? You and Merlin, I mean. Maybe. Maybe I could have said, right at the start, that he was just *too* sexy, too much of a temptation. But didn't we trust each other? And didn't we both rather get off on the fact of having this young thing around? When we went out, the three of us, those one or two times, out for dinner in Soho or that one evening to the Antique Dealers' Association's Christmas party, I felt rather proud, in a bizarre way, to be with these two attractive men, felt almost as though I'd be

happy to be the envy of those who might look at us and think, or say to one another, “Oh, look, Andries and Oliver have got themselves a toyboy.”

We *should* have treated him like that; we should have invited him into our bed and both fucked him, used him, then discarded him. But I registered, almost subconsciously at first, then more consciously, the way you looked at him, the light in your eyes when you looked at him that wasn't there when you looked at me. And for months I did my best not to act like the jealous husband, or wife, or lover, or whatever. Oh, I thought, it's just Andries's little flirtation, what's wrong with a little flirtation? If going out to clubs with Merlin makes him feel young, then let him do it — God knows we all need something to make us feel young. I at least had the university, the pretty young things who came to ask me questions about Emily Dickinson and Wallace Stevens, about Thom Gunn. Especially Thom Gunn ... I didn't tell you about the very handsome young half-Greek boy who came and told me, with tears in his eyes, how much Thom Gunn meant to him, how studying Gunn and my tutorials on Gunn had opened his eyes to all sorts of things about himself (he meant, I think, his sexuality), and how I sat there gazing at him, at the compact body and the dark skin and black lustrous eyes, lusting after him, mistily, but telling myself (a tune as monotonous as your fidelity jingle) that making a pass at a student was the worst possible thing I could do. If it was unsuccessful, I'd be had up for sexual harassment, and if it was successful things would be even more complicated — what would I tell Andries, Andries who set so much store by sexual fidelity? Or I'd have to lie, and that would be worse.

Until the Stephen episode, at least. That was when I ceased to be faithful to you — when I broke the contract you were claiming you weren't breaking. Yes, there was revenge in it; yes, there was an attempt to shock you into seeing something. Something about us, something about your bad faith. Something about what I would no longer

tolerate. But I went about it in the wrong way, didn't I? I did the worst possible thing I could do. Apart from anything else, I gave you an excuse to start leaving me, or at least turning away from me — making the ending of “us” more concrete. I did it, and I told you about it, and I said, like the philandering heterosexual married man, “It doesn't in any way change what's between you and me.”

Because I still loved you. It made no difference to how much I loved you, how much I love you still. Your leaving me, or my leaving you (you “left” me first, really), none of that makes any difference to the fact that I loved you and love you. I will always love you, in some way or another. That much I will not let go of.

Andries:

Having written that last night, a dreadful screed, almost unstoppable once I'd started, and I was rather drunk, having had a good few with Jen (who says I should come and stay with her, fuck the hotel), I started thinking about Stephen. Of the poetry reading (God, to think we pathetic poets still get up and read our poems in public — in some semi-fashionable art institute, maybe, but it's still rather pathetic), of how he came up to me afterwards and said how much he admired me, this skinny pale boy nearly twenty years younger than me, how he wanted to be a poet too, unfashionable, untenable, even, though it was. How I made sarcastic self-deprecating comments about poetry, about being a poet, about selling a couple of hundred copies of a book you'd sweated over for years. How one got one review and a note in a journal or two. How pathetically useless a vocation/vacation it was.

And how he took it all in, Stephen, and yet still smiled, and smiled seductively, and said how his favourite work of mine was the book of lovepoems dedicated to you (the one I used to refer to jokingly as *Anus Mirabilis*), and then he quoted lines of my own back at me — lines written to, about, you, poems celebrating my love and lust for you, now used to seduce me. And how I just began to melt, how I wished I could hold this straggly boy in my arms, how I could stand to hear him quote my own lines (which I can barely bear to reread now) at me endlessly. And how, without my having said anything of a seductive or sexual nature, after two or three drinks in some gloomy bar, he said, in a way I'd have thought him too shy to do, "Do you want to come home with me?" And then, hastily, before I could reply, "It's close by, it's not far." I said, "I can't spend the night." He said, "That's OK. I understand."

And how we walked the not-so-short distance to his place, with him chattering all the way, talking and talking, out of nervousness no doubt, and how we had to climb all those flights of stairs to his attic apartment — so poetic, so poet-like. The cool stale air, the steep stained stairwell — vertigo. And still he was chattering, nattering, his poems, his impoverished bohemian life after dropping out of university, etc, etc, while he got out his keys and fumbled at the lock, and how as he turned to me to gesture me into the flat I just grabbed him and kissed him, and then felt his crotch, felt the hardness there, and we stumbled together into the flat. I was trembling, no, almost shuddering, all through the walk to his place while he talked and talked; it seemed like an anxiety attack (What am I *doing*? — my whole life, all those years with you, seemed to hover on that brink), my own nervous reaction, so that all I could do to end the trembling was to kiss him.

cinematic moment:

a pale hard cock ...

the cool stale air of the stairwell

steep stained vertigo

And then there was the happy week, a rather confused week, in reality — ten days, even, with my lying to you about where I was going, heading out to meet Stephen at that bar, seeing him in what seemed his best outfit, his going-out outfit, with his friends, and there was confusion about who was going where with whom, and I felt as though I'd be very much the odd man out, the older hanger-on, out of place, and backed out, went home (to an empty flat — you were in Germany that weekend, as I recall. To a whole bottle of red wine which made me feel the next day as though I were a piece of toxic waste). But then we met again, and when you were travelling to Cornwall to check out the family heirlooms of some deceased estate (with Merlin in tow, naturally) I spent the night with him, and he was so nice, so gentle, yet so abandoned. He abandoned himself to me, or that's how it felt. Yet he delayed. We'd eaten, takeaways, drunk too much wine, talked and talked, and I was beginning to caress him, to drag him towards the rather shameful narrow single bed, and he said, "Let's talk some more. I'll suck your cock at midnight." The easy frankness of it!

And then, two days after that, one fuck later, my fear overcoming me, my fear of you, of losing you, and I told him that it was impossible to continue, that I had a lover, which I'd been a bit vague about before, or at least I'd been vague about the precise status of the arrangements between me and my vague lover, and his sudden coldness toward me. "All right," he said without inflection. Go then, he seemed to be saying. Go then, it's over. And I left the rather smelly little attic with a sense of relief — going back to you, back to my life, invigorated, in some way, filled with some new sense of a life outside of our closed

circle, something beyond the tangle of me and you and Merlin, but definitely *going back*.

I'd enjoyed the week with Stephen, yes, indeed, it was a holiday from my life, but it felt as though I'd always known the enchantment had to end, I would have to go back to my captivity. And I'd be glad to.

What did I expect? That you'd welcome me with open arms? That you'd hear my confession and give me absolution? That my infidelity would cancel out yours, that now we were even? Even Stephens.

No. You heard my confession, you listened silently all the way through. And then you said, "Let's go to bed. It's late." And that was all. And in bed, when I reached out to touch you, reached out for the act that, consummated, would have signalled forgiveness to me, you said nothing, but lay there, like a dummy, an unbreathing sex toy, your cock resolutely limp, as if all sexual desire for me had drained out of you. I told myself it was just lateness, tiredness, this has happened before (though not often), that I shouldn't push it, shouldn't insist. So I took a pill and slept. And the next day, it seemed okay; you said nothing. I got my kiss as you left for work; it felt just like it always did. As long as I got my kiss, my kisses goodbye and hello, everything felt okay. But you didn't want to have sex that night, or the night after, or the night after that; and when I bluntly asked you what was wrong, you said, as bluntly, "I just don't feel sexual at the moment." Why didn't I think then more clearly about what that meant? What that meant to *you*, not to me, to you and your investment in fidelity. Perhaps it would not then have been such a shock when you said to me, months later, months of painful half-discussion and my trying to make you talk about it, about *us*, about Merlin and Stephen and me and you, with you saying all the time, "I don't want to talk about it," ever more emphatically — perhaps it would not then have been so surprising when you finally said to me, in so many or so few words, "I don't feel sexually attracted to you any more."

Which was to say, I'm not in love with you any more. So suddenly? I wanted to ask: Can it happen so suddenly, as though a switch had been flipped? (And was it I who flipped the switch?) And my saying *I* was still sexually attracted to *you*, that I still loved you, and so on, well, that didn't make any difference. The switch had been flipped; your attraction to me had been turned off. You were turned off.

And when Merlin, in the final or penultimate irony, departed suddenly for France to chase some boy — yes, some boy! That's how straight he was, is. Some boy he'd fallen in love with, some Anglo-French hunk he'd met some night, out on the town, with you, moreover, at his side. Did you try to stop him going? Did you try to express to him, then, how you loved him? How you'd withdrawn your love from your partner of all those years and instead invested it in him? Or were you unable to admit or to articulate that even then, in extremis? Did you say you'd thought he was straight, that that was why you'd never laid a finger on him? More fool you. What on earth did you say to him, if anything? I suspect you kept quiet and swallowed your suffering. And then you came home to me, told me blandly that he'd left all of a sudden, and then, moreover, that you didn't want to talk about it. And weeks later, under the pressure of my quarrying after some odd comment you'd made, you confessed that Merlin hadn't just left, he'd also helped himself to the cash float you kept in hand for travelling purchases. So *he* betrayed you too.

And I, pathetically, went in search of Stephen. Went back to the gloomy bar, the smelly attic. But he was gone. No-one knew where. He'd vanished entirely, as though he'd never existed, or as though he'd only ever been the product of my imagination.

Andries:

Went to see Sean, my longtime e-mail correspondent. (How did *that* start? We were both in that gay SA anthology, and when its editor came to London I said how much I liked Sean's story in it, and he gave me his e-mail address. I wanted to know — what? — about the state of SA literature or something. I suspect, though, that even then that was an excuse to make contact with, and keep in touch with, someone I felt some kind of kinship with.) So finally we met. He's got a nice little flat in Tamboerskloof, and we sat on the balcony and he opened a bottle of red wine. Then he made a joint and we chatted — no, *talked*. Talked and talked — like old, old friends who hadn't seen each other, hadn't been in contact, for years. As though we had whole lifetimes to catch up on. First about books and writing (some of this very pretentious — trying to impress each other, and each realising it, and forgiving the other), my writing, his writing — his last book, like his anthology story, very "out" gay, all about sex, rather raw sometimes, or perhaps what I'd really think of in my bourgeois way as "indiscreet". Then talked about ourselves, our lives, what had happened to us in the recent past — and in fact the distant past (where we grew up, what our families were like, etc). We'd e-mailed about his stories and my poems related to Dad after they finally came out, but that night talked about it some more, about family and memory and places. Mostly recent personal past, though, or at least from me. Of course I told him I'd split with you, had finally left, that's why I was in SA. So then of course he wanted to know all about you, about our marriage, the whole history of the thing: how long? etc. I gave him all the "gory details" as the sun went down somewhere over on the other side of Kloof Nek and the city's lights began to sparkle beneath us and the clouds over Table Mountain went all chiaroscuro. "Wonderful view," I said; "it makes me feel all poetic." "Yes," he said, "costs me a fortune." (Property in CT is not cheap — all those foreigners, Germans especially I'm told, buying holiday homes here.) Then, "Pity

I'm not a poet!" (Him, not me.) I said, "I'm not either, or at least I don't feel like much of a poet at the moment." And then my confession, the one I'd held back from everyone else, had lied about when asked directly — admitted I wasn't writing any poems, hadn't written any for more than a year, had no "project" on the go. And thus back to the personal history. He's never had a long relationship; lots of short, apparently stimulating ones — though also very traumatic, it seems, most of them. Wagnerian. But he seems OK with it; does a lot of cruising, lots of casual sex. Seems he's one of *those* moffies — the endless cruisers. He's candid about it, admits it's compulsive. Says lots of casual sex would be good for me in my state — "A period of rampant promiscuity, then you can start auditioning for a new boyfriend."

I laughed, but also said, "Oh, no, I couldn't ..." Felt like an old conservative, wedded (ha) to the idea of marriage. But don't want a "new boyfriend", and not sure either I want to fling myself out there into the mad whirl, cruising at Sandy Bay and in the steam rooms and the clubs and the bars, me, at almost 40, doing the big promiscuity thing.

But the talk of sex did something to me and Sean, as I'm sure also did the red wine (nearly two bottles down now) and the joints he kept rolling. It segued into sex, sort of stumblingly stonedly segueing ... I went to the loo, came back to find he'd stood up and was looking out over the city, and it seemed natural and easy to put my arm over his shoulder. We stood like that for a while, gazing, then at exactly the same time turned and kissed. At exactly the same time? Or was one fractionally earlier, the other's move a response? We were, at least, of the same mind ... And so had sex, going from the languid open-mouthed kiss to pressing our bodies against each other and then his leading me, sort of chuckling, and stumbling, into the bedroom and on to the bed. The sex itself not incredibly exciting, but undemanding too — relaxing. Again, as though I'd known him for ages, as though he in fact had been my boyfriend, my "partner", all along. Somewhere

towards the end of the sex or after we'd come I thought and almost felt him thinking too that that was nice but we wouldn't be doing it again, in all probability ...

I had to joke, post-coitally, "I hope that doesn't get into a story of yours."

He laughed. "Oh, no, I'm finished with all that sex stuff. Writing about it. Now I want to write a novel about my mother. She went mad, you know."

And so we talked some more, went out for supper, talked some more. Arranged to meet the next day — I was chastely going back to Jen's, not back to his place to spend the night, not that I was invited, or not that he said anything about it when we got back to the parking lot and I said, "Can you drop me off in Woodstock?"

Andries:

Conversation with Jen.

She says, "But how were you feeling *before* Merlin?"

"I was OK. I wasn't feeling anything."

"You mean you were depressed."

"Maybe I was depressed. But what was I depressed about?"

"I don't know. You tell me. Your e-mails — I got the feeling you were feeling sort of ... becalmed."

"Becalmed?"

"Yes. Stagnant, maybe, I mean. Come on, help me out here, you're the fucking poet."

We laugh. "OK, stagnant."

And how was Andries feeling? She asks that too, and I can't answer. Wasn't I paying attention? Was I so sunk in my own stagnancy, my own depression, that I didn't take note

of what he was doing? Until Merlin, there was no sign ... But you wouldn't have given one, would you? No, you'd've kept it secret, gone through the motions ... And of course if you can't express your feelings, how was I to know? Was Merlin your way of acting on subconscious feelings, your own feelings of stagnating, of being "becalmed"? Were you just pointing out to me, despite your conscious intentions (I never fucked him!), that our relationship had reached its expiry date? We'd just stagnated, then.

But what does that really mean? Jen's got a better excuse, a better narrative — Boiler was always fun, a fun guy, always a laugh, but after they got married and had the kid his fun-guy-ness just got irritating, says Jen — out late at night, God knows where, coming home fucked out of his brain, drunk as a Lord, waking the child, etc. And the more she tried to get him to stop doing it, of course, the more he did it. But no lingering farewells for her — oh, no, when it came to the moment, when Boiler had worn out all his second chances, had had his warnings, she just laid down the law. It's over, get out, it's finished. Divorce? Fine. Let's talk about custody. Let's work out how often you can see our child. She's very clear about all that, Jen is. But then she's got all that practised feminism behind her, all that clarity about what a woman should and shouldn't stand for. Me? I've just got a marriage model, a twisted marriage model — we're married, like the straights, but not quite. Well, not any more. Now we're divorced.

Jen spoke to you on the phone. I'd phoned London and left a message, I was staying at Jen's now, etc. This is the number. You called back; I was out. You didn't wonder where I'd gone, or ask who I'd gone with, or anything like that. It seems, from what Jen says, that you just about managed to squeak out a question about me — "How's Oliver? Is he OK?" And Jen said, "He's fine, he's OK, but of course he's very upset ... it's hard breaking up after so long." Or something like that; she reported it to me verbatim, but I've forgotten the exact words. You didn't ask, Is he coming back? You said to Jen, "There are

arrangements we have to make. I may sell the flat.” But she wasn’t interested in that. Rather: “And how are *you*, Andries?” He said he was OK, managing, and repeated what she’d said — it’s hard breaking up after so long. “And why,” says Jen, and I can just *hear* her saying this, “*did* you two break up, Andries? I haven’t had a clear answer from Oliver ...” And you must’ve mumbled, hummed and hah’d a bit, then said, like pulling teeth I imagine, “Oliver had an affair, didn’t he tell you?” As though that settled the matter; as though that was all the explanation you had to give. Naughty of her, squeezing even that out of you, asking a question to which I’d already given multiple answers — but just like her, too: wanting to hear the “other side” of the story, or just to corroborate my evidence. I don’t know. Did she want to mediate, try to get us back together? No, I don’t think so. Just fishing for information, and how you felt, how you’d explain it, was more information. And said to me, “He’s in denial.”

Poor old Andries. Always in denial. Always *denying* something. Denying SA — “denying” in the way characters in the Bible deny something. Not just say it isn’t so, but turn their face against it. Denying the past, the place, you’d run away from. What would you have said if she’d tackled you on that, asked, “But you fell in love with Merlin first, didn’t you, Andries? You’re the one who really had the affair, weren’t you?” And you’d’ve denied that too.

So angry, somehow — angry, deep in yourself. I can understand that. You had a shit father, a half-dead mother. You had a bankrupt culture based on white supremacy (mine too). You had things to be ashamed of. You wanted to put it all behind you, turn your face away. Understandable.

And me? You had a lover, boyfriend, husband, wife, “partner”, whatever, who wrote poems and taught at the university and dragged you to classical concerts. You went to those because you’d see clients of yours there, and the whole antiques business needed to

feel upmarket, classy, classical ... You'd greet them, so suavely, so elegantly, "Yes, the second movement was particularly lovely" — and whisper to me, later, as the grey old people shuffled back to their seats (better seats than ours), "They bought a whole Louis Quinze set," or, "I want to sell them that sideboard ..."

Going back to the beginning — is it possible to go back to the beginning? Young love, all that. The naivety; the sense that you can just let it happen to you, that it will happen, that Fate has taken a hand. The romance of fleeing SA, no more army, no more angst, a new life ... Battling it out in the cold, the foreign land — more foreign to you than to me. But more attractive to you for that reason, perhaps. Yet standing sheepishly at the margins at the launch of my first book, embarrassed, not wanting to be identified — not wanting others to see that you were the "you" in the poems. Not wanting to be *exposed*.

But, before that, my first memories of your face — I can just about recall that, get it back, go back there. Your sandy hair, your classic "Afrikaner" look — the physique of someone bred to play rugby, I thought. Your slight stolidness. "He's a plank," my queeny friend Carel said. "In more ways than one," I said. But that stolidness, even solidness, comforted me. You felt strong, physically at least — something I'd never felt, still don't feel. I lack that physical solidity in some way. I remember your body, then, better than I do your face.

I know what your face *held*, though — its vulnerability, so hidden under that macho scowl. How we spoke about politics (of course) and we students, good children of the Eighties left, were shocked to hear you say capitalism was the answer, making money was good. Good for everyone, even "the blacks". There was a drunken argument. You clammed up. People moved around; I saw you again later, in another corner, went up and said something — what? And was I thinking, He's gay, he's open to a pass? I don't know. But I was trying my luck; was trying to find out, maybe, if you were straight or gay. And

some more talk, again I can't remember what it was. Going outside, the party winding down ... pissing in the flowerbeds. Stumbling against each other, then sort of leaning against each other, then after some unimaginable transition the kiss.

And so "happy ever after", some random moment that extended itself into years. That survived in cold soil in another country (I encouraged you to leave SA, said it was the only way to be free of that stifling family of yours ...). The comfortable slide into domesticity, ordinary life, daily life. Days upon days, slipping easily over one another. Sex un-thought-about, just there. Never spoken of. Happily ever after, till now.

Andries:

Vivid dream of early this morning — woke from it about 5am. I dreamed I was sleeping and then I woke up, found myself in bed with you but in some strange place — walls seemed almost liquid, greyish, not quite dripping, not quite wet, but liquid in some way. They seemed to move now and then. I turned to you and tried to wake you up, wanted to ask where we were. You were in a deep sleep, didn't want to wake. I persisted — Andries, Andries! Finally you groggily half-turned toward me: What? I said, Where are we? The walls are liquid! You said, Don't worry, we're on a ship. I asked, Where are we going? You: You know where we're going — in this exasperated voice, tired, wanting to go back to sleep. I didn't want you to go back to sleep; wanted you to stay awake, but you'd already turned over again and seemed to be breathing heavily. I waited a while. I was afraid. I put my hand on your shoulder again, shook you, shook you some more. Finally you turned, half-rising up in the bed, and even though it was still you in some way

it wasn't — some guy with very dark heavy brows, a red-faced look ... I woke up, fearful, but with a raging hard-on.

I suppose that's pretty easy to interpret. But why the hard-on? Just a physiological thing? They say you get them when dreaming as a matter of course. Don't know. But there I lay, crack of dawn etc, obviously not yet ready to get up, and still the hard-on. So jerked off (did I think of you? or someone else? Merlin, even? — can I still jerk off to thoughts of Merlin, my jerk-off fantasy fodder for some time? Or is his image now tinged with something else?). And then went back to sleep till about 9am. Woke feeling very thick-headed.

the walls close in

a strange man next to me

answers to your name ...

(who is he “really”, if not you? me? Merlin? Sean?)

Andries:

A week later, but still thinking of sex with Sean, and dream of you the other night ... Went cruising with Sean, a “safe place” he said — the Hot House. This an upmarket sauna-type place, like all those old gay steam baths and the like, except all done up ever so tastefully, with jacuzzis and so forth ... We cruised around there a bit, separating for a bit then meeting up again at the bar or wherever, occasionally passing each other in the darker

passages between the little cubicles where men who've connected go to fuck, him winking at me, me winking weakly back, as though we were mildly flirting with each other, but of course we weren't going to be scuttling into a cubicle — we knew each other, we weren't two strangers making a quick compact. I suppose we could've done that (might've been interesting, in that place), but I think in my mind the deal was that we were cruising for others, not *each other* ... I don't know. Wasn't sure if he wanted to, anyway. After a while I sort of plonked myself down at the bar and waited for Sean to return from wherever he was, somewhere in the labyrinth. Chatted to some pretty but vapid boy who obviously wasn't going to want to have sex with me, but did perhaps want some attention. I gave it, minimally, half-listening to his account of his extremely boring life. Finally Sean reappeared; he'd exchanged blowjobs with some guy, told me candidly and without my asking that he hadn't come. Maybe that was the seed of what happened after that — we went back to his flat, without having really agreed in so many words to do so, we just did it, and had sex. Not like the time before, the sort of relaxed only-half-aware slide into it, it was clear from the moment we walked in the door what was up, and our clothes were off (they'd been off at the Hot House, yet we'd barely looked at each other), and we were having a hard, quick, no-kissing-just-grunting kind of sex — sort of angry sex, though also perhaps parody-angry sex ... Not sure. Anyway, it seemed in a weird way like a fulfilment or culmination of the dream, a playing out of its logic — again, not sure ...

the walls close in ...

beside me a strange man

answered to your name

my angry cock

Andries:

Still writing; still pouring it out. It's compulsive once you get going. (I have breaks, though, as long as a week or ten days — days in which I seem anchorless, drifting ... How do I fill those days? Not sure.) I remember how, when I was young, still at school, all confused, the poetry used to come that way — an outpouring. Pages and pages of it — like an epic poem by Byron or someone, except of course it wasn't very metrical, or very organised, and it was all over the page — lines starting in the middle of nowhere, ending oddly ... Though I do, still, recall the one short poem I finally chiselled from some other mess, and turned into a sort of cummings fragment, lower-case "i" and all —

to love you (and o god i do)'s
perhaps the tearfullest of all
yes since that halfnight when we laid
o touch me and i shall be whole

(Can only vaguely now remember who that was about — so deep was my love! Some boy I had a crush on early in my varsity career. Hazy memory of upright frame, floppy brown hair — eyes? Don't know. We had a sort of drunken fumble, lying in someone's garden, during or after a party, staring up at the stars, trying out the odd kiss, which wasn't working ... What was his name?)

I have episodes; I sit in cafés like an old existentialist, coffee and cigarettes nearby, scribbling in this notebook. I suppose that's the result of feeling as though I had so much to say to you that wasn't said. Well, a lot was said, by me, but somehow it felt as though

you weren't taking it in. Of course you aren't taking *this* in, either. So why this graphomania? In words like weeds? (And somehow, despite all that teaching of old Alfred Lawn Tennis, and explaining "widow's weeds" to my students, it's hard not to see weeds as in plants — to see Ophelia, self-drowned in her stream, surrounded by floating green stuff, not pre-Raphaelite flowers but weeds ...)

The walls close in and judder.

The room is smaller than it was

last night when I went to sleep,

and beside me a strange man

answers to your name: him soon

my angry cock will plunge.

Of course, even after the Merlin/Stephen business, those twinned episodes, it still took another six months for us to part. That was the worst phase, the uncertain phase — asking myself all the time if it was over or it wasn't, deciding one way one day and the other the next. I suppose we didn't want to admit it was happening, that we were "breaking up" (abominable phrase) after so long. It couldn't happen to us, oh no. We were the longest-standing "married couple" of anyone we knew. We'd get over this, we'd "work through" it. Ah well, perhaps a long marriage needs a long diminuendo. There were times when it didn't seem to be happening, when all the Merlin/Stephen crap seemed "behind us", "water under the bridge", when we were making love again, albeit gingerly. We were talking to each other like normal people, talking about who'd be where when, home at what time, who'd make dinner, whether we'd go to the Saint-Saëns or maybe skip that and just do the Bartók ... Not talking about what had happened, though, not talking about

Merlin or Stephen or what they meant. But there were times in that after-time that felt like old times. And then there were times when it all came back, when suddenly we were pulling apart from each other again, tearing away ... Somehow I imagine a ligament tearing, like when someone says “I tore a muscle”. It’s as though we were grown together like the sinews of a muscle, and it was a slow tearing-apart.

And, in that time, the reappearance of Merlin. After you’d just, it seemed, got over it (enough to even make the odd joke about his accent, or whatever — when you still had some of an Afrikaans one, of course), Merlin reappeared. I picked up the phone, said hello, and this sad little voice said, “It’s Merlin here.” “It’s Oliver,” I replied, not sure if he thought I was you. “Oh,” he said, and there was an audible attempt to brighten up, to put off the pathetic voice he’d just used. Was he putting it on in the first place, a manipulative plea for sympathy? Or was he genuinely in a state of dreadful unhappiness? Could have been either. Both, probably. At any rate, I said, “Andries isn’t here.” There was a longish silence. “Well,” he said, “will you just tell him Merlin is back?” Then it was my turn to be silent for a bit; I thought of saying, Well, I’m not sure he wants to hear that you’re back. But I said, “Okay. How can he get hold of you?” “Oh, oh, right,” he said, as if he hadn’t considered that. “I’m not sure where I’m going to be staying,” he said. “I’ll call you in the next couple of days with the number.” Or something like that; may not have been his exact words. Okay, I said, and Bye, and that was that.

Then I told you, when you got back from wherever you were. And you got very angry indeed; angrier, in fact, than I’d ever seen you, angrier than you’d ever been at *me*. “Fuck him!” you screamed. “That little piece of shit! He can go and fucking rot in hell!” And so forth. I said, “Well, he did sound pretty depressed.” You said, “He’s probably fucking depressed because he chased some stupid boy halfway across Europe and didn’t get him, and now he’s come crawling back for sympathy and ... and ...” I didn’t say, And what?

You? After a bit you calmed down a bit and said, “Well, you’re going to answer the phone at home until he calls, and when he does, you can tell him to go fuck himself. I don’t want to see him or hear another fucking word. Tell that little thief that if he contacts us again I’ll report him to the cops.” I just raised my eyebrows; said nothing. Though I think I thought, One should have seen this coming ...

A few days later, Merlin phoned again. I told him you didn’t want to see him, wanted nothing further to do with him. I didn’t say, Andries says Fuck you. Merlin sounded disappointed. He said, in his sad little voice, “But I wanted to pay him back the money I owe him.” I said, rather sarcastically, “The money you *owe* him?” — as opposed, I thought, to the money you *stole* from him? “Yes,” he said. I said, “I’ll let you know. Do you want to give me your number?” He gave it to me.

I told you; you had another fit of rage. It was quite scary — I don’t want the fucking money that’s not what this is about it’s about trust fuck him he betrayed my trust how can you even speak to the little shit I told you not to speak, etc. “OK,” I said, “if you don’t want me to speak to him I won’t. If the money doesn’t matter to you it doesn’t matter.” You: “Tell him he can shove the money up his fucking arse,” etc. I said, “Don’t shout at *me*.” You looked at me wildly, as though I *were* precisely the person to shout at, as though this were all *my* fault, then you stormed out, into the bedroom, and slammed the door. That night, after I’d waited two hours, drunk half a bottle of wine, then crept into the bedroom to find your silent, still form humped under the blankets, I thought again, Do I really want to be sleeping in this bed beside someone who either tosses madly or freezes into a statue, a reverse-Galatea, turned away from me, and shrugs me off if I try to touch him?

And then I did a strange thing. I called Merlin, the next day, when you were at work, and I said, “Andries doesn’t want to see you. But he does want his money back. Can we

meet somewhere? I'll come and get it from you." We made an arrangement to meet the day after that.

I met him, then, it doesn't matter where. He didn't look particularly well; some of the gloss had gone off him. Still beautiful, of course, perhaps more so in his somewhat reduced state. His hair badly need a cut and a style; his clothes seemed unwashed. But still he was attractive, and I won't pretend that seeing him, seeing his beauty, again, and seeing his beauty while he was at my mercy, as it were, was part of the reason I went and met him.

It was awkward, of course, though I pretended nothing had happened, carried on as though I had no grudge against him. I was "being big about it". (One should always be magnanimous in defeat.) I even offered him coffee; we sat and drank it. I started acting like his old queen of an uncle or something, even calling him "Merle", which was a joke I'd kind of tried to start up when he was staying with us, but it never caught on because you didn't think it was funny. "So, Merle," I said, "how was the continent?" ("The Continent" in the way someone like Oscar Wilde might have referred to it, "The Continent", with all its mystique, its aura of romance ... But Merlin wasn't going to get that.) "And how's, uh, what's his name, that boy you met?" To be rewarded with dire looks and then hangdog expressions, very little verbal response except "Mumble mumble it didn't work out mumble" — or something like that. Didn't get much information, but saw he was unhappy, embarrassed, all that. "Right," I said then, after we'd had our coffee, "the money? I'll pass it on to Andries." And then we got the truth: he didn't have all the money, only something around half, just under half. He was hoping that paying this money back, this half, would get him back into your good graces and that you'd reemploy him and he could, as he put it, "pay the money back by working". Oh, yes, I thought, that's a good idea. Andries will really go for that. I said, "I don't think Andries would go for that.

He doesn't want to see you. At all. Ever again. He feels betrayed by you." And I admit I said it with relish. I could have added, And *I* feel betrayed by you. But then any idiot would have asked, So why are you sitting here with me? Why did you come?

He just looked at me as though I'd hit him, slapped his face, though there wasn't a moment of shock; he just segued seamlessly from a face of sad, sincere regret to a face of bewildered despair. I admit, with mild discomfort (though who will ever read this?), that I took the opportunity to make him feel worse. "What did you expect?" I lectured, hectored. "You ran away with Andries's money, without telling him what was going on, running after some boy, for nearly six months, and now you want to just slide back into Andries's life? We took you in, we housed you, we did everything for you. Andries took you under his wing," and so on and so on. It's too embarrassing and painful to reconstruct now, on this page, everything I said. I ranted a bit; it was my revenge.

But not all my revenge. After I'd finished my rant, Merlin sat there, and finally looked up; from early on in my diatribe he'd hung his head and kept it hung until I was done. After a bit of a pause, he asked, "What must I do?" I looked at him as though he were an idiot, as if to say, You mean, after all that, after that catalogue of your sins, you still want to know how to obtain forgiveness? There was a silence. And then I did a crazy thing. It just came to me, right then, and it came with a rush of blood, it seemed, up my body, from the groin region up to my head, yet I didn't feel dizzy; I felt entirely clear-headed. I said, "I want to fuck you."

"What?"

(We'll do this like novel dialogue; it's a waste of space, but I'm tired of writing *I said* and *he said*. Fiction-writers must get *very* tired of those words.)

"I want to fuck you. And that's the way out of your little problem situation."

“Uh ...” He looked at me with his mouth hanging open. Never before did he look so working-class, so not-my-class, so *beneath me*.

I said, and it felt as though the blood was running icy cold through my veins, “Well, the idea is this. If you only pay Andries back half his money, less than half, it’s hardly likely he’s going to be very well disposed toward you. He hates you as it is. What’s the use of half the money? If you let me fuck you” — and I kept saying “fuck”, insistently: that’s what I meant, not “have sex” or “go to bed with” or “sleep with”, let alone “make love”. I meant *fuck*. I meant shoving my hard cock up his tight little ass. Nothing less would do. “— If you let me fuck you, I will put in the rest of the money myself, I will pay it back to Andries, not telling him of course, and I will persuade him to take you on again. He’ll calm down after a bit, if I give him the money, and if I work on him a bit. He’ll do what I say.”

Merlin looked at me a minute with that idiot-sheepdog look, and then suddenly his chair was flung back, crashing to the ground, and he was saying, “Well, fuck you too, Oliver, fuck you,” and he was storming out of the place.

So, I thought, that was that.

Until, two days later, he phoned the house again. “Listen, Oliver, I’ve got to talk to you.” I was rather cold in reply: “What have we got to talk about?” “Listen, I phoned Andries at the shop, and he won’t speak to me.” “I told you he wouldn’t speak to you.” This dialogue isn’t exact, not verbatim, but it’s the gist. (Why, then, put it down as dialogue?) He’d phoned Andries, Andries had screamed at him, slammed the phone down. So now he was back to me, trying to make a deal with me. I repeated myself (and it was an odd thrill, saying these words in my own house, as if you were bugging the conversation, or could somehow pick up later what I’d said): “I want to fuck you. If I can fuck you, I’ll sort it out. I fuck you, you get your job back.” There was a silence, then finally he said, in

a defeated voice, one in which I didn't have to wonder whether the depressed tone was genuine or not, "Okay."

Then I was businesslike. We made arrangements. He was staying with a friend in Putney. The friend was out during the day, working. I made a date for tomorrow. I got the address. I set the time. I said I would be prompt, he'd better be ready. And all he said was, "Okay."

And so I went there, to Putney. To a depressing little flat, barely bigger than a toilet. And I fucked him. I got there, he let me in, he stood there like a pillar of salt, not saying, Come in, or anything like that. I just went in. I said, "Well, shall we get it over with?" Like a schoolmaster administering a caning. But I said it with irony, and with a jokey tone, playing the role of the punishing schoolmaster. Not that he noticed.

He said, "We can't do it in the bedroom. That's John's room. I'm sleeping on the couch."

"Well, then, we'll do it here. Do you like it standing up?"

"I've never been fucked before."

I wasn't sure what to say. I decided to be Good Cop for a bit. I said, "Come on, it's not so bad. You might even enjoy it. You've got to learn to do it sometime if you're going to be a self-respecting gay man. I won't hurt you. I've got condoms and KY."

He just shrugged, then, and undid his pants, took them off; had to take off his shoes halfway, sitting on the couch, and then got the pants off.

"Come over here," I said. I went so I was standing behind the single, low sofa, in the little walkway that led past its back toward the bedroom. "Turn around," I said. "And put your hands on the back of the couch here." (It was like the old joke: What's Australian for foreplay? "Brace yerself, Sheila.")

He did so. I looked at his arse, there before me, the arse I'd fantasised about so many times. The one I'd seen bunched so attractively in his jeans, the one I'd got the odd flash of as he moved around the house in towel only. I'd wondered what exactly it'd look like fully revealed in its nakedness, and now there it was. And a very nice arse it was too.

I stood behind him. I undid my zip, pulled my pants halfway down. Got my cock out. Didn't even take my overcoat off. My cock, at first, didn't want to get stiff. I pulled at it a few times, looked at that arse. Reached my hand around and fondled his cock, which was quite limp. Resolutely limp, I might say, to coin a phrase. It wasn't terribly big, either, perhaps shrunken with fear. I got myself three-quarters hard. I struggled to get the condom on, but eventually I got it on by pulling it wide and popping it over the head of my cock and then pulling it down. So much for my big Myra Breckinridge moment. But then Myra didn't have to deal with condoms, did she? (Or with a real cock of flesh and blood, for that matter.) I greased my cock with the KY. All this was a bit awkward, getting it out of my pocket, getting it open, getting the goo out, putting it on my cock, getting the lid back on the KY with slippery hands. I jerked myself a bit; my cock got a bit harder, but it still wasn't fully hard. Then I tried to stuff my cock up his arse. I don't know if he was deliberately clenching, or what, but it was impossible. My cock wasn't hard enough. Still I shoved, feeling the pressure uncomfortably against my cock's head, which made it go even softer. I shoved more, desperately now, and seemed to more-or-less get the head in. Tried to fuck him, but it wouldn't go any further. I rammed against him, but my soft cock wasn't cooperating with this rape. Myra didn't have this problem. She had prosthetic assistance. I grabbed his cock again, trying to turn myself on, but it was if anything even smaller than before. He let out a pathetic little sob. His head was hanging down low, his back was arched. I had one hand on a shoulder, which felt like it was made of wood.

I tried one more lunge, then gave up. I took the condom off and dropped it on the floor. Let him pick it up and throw it away. I imagined him holding it with outraged fingers, trying not to breathe, trying not to smell it. I said, in schoolmaster or schoolmarm mode, “Well, I hope you’ve learned your lesson.” As if being suddenly magnanimous, as though I’d changed my mind, as though I was being generous and not, in reality, admitting that I had failed to administer this punishment.

I pulled up my pants and zipped up. I said, “I’m going to wash my hands.” I went to the bathroom and did so. When I came back, his pants were back on, though not his shoes, and he was standing disconsolately in the middle of the room. He said, “I can suck you off if you want.”

Andries:

Can’t remember why I stopped there, what was it — a month ago? Three weeks? At any rate, some time has gone by. Haven’t been writing in the front of this notebook, but in the back — drafting a poem. If it ever comes to anything I’ll tear out the interleaving pages and leave that one final poem on its page ... Which I may have to do soon, because I’m running out of pages. Two thirds or three quarters of this notebook are now full, or at least used up.

I imagine I had to stop there partly because my eyes were beginning to fail me and my wrist to ache (it was late at night, lying in bed in Jen’s cottage and awkwardly trying to write) and partly because that was such a good dramatic break. I’m back in the Long Street Café, which has a pleasantly European vibe, sitting at a table, drinking a cappuccino and

writing this. Now you *really* want to know what happened, don't you? I really *should* send you this letter, this series of letters. In installments — to heighten the tension.

He said, "I could suck you off if you want."

And I could have said yes, I could have made him do it, but I didn't. Why? Because I was afraid I still wouldn't get an erection, and then he'd have won, or something? That, in part. Also because now I was feeling ashamed of myself, and I couldn't go back (for pride's sake?) on my magnanimous (evil) schoolmaster pose. "No," I said. "That will do. Give me the money. I'll put in the rest. And I'll start working on Andries. By the end of the month you'll have your job back."

He started fumbling in his pocket.

I said, "By the way, why didn't you just phone Andries at the shop and tell him you were sorry, and you wanted to pay the money back?"

He froze. He said, "I did."

"You phoned him?"

"He told me to go fuck myself."

I considered this silently. Did he realise then that I had now realised that you hadn't told me that he'd phoned you at the shop?

I said, after a bit, "Well, then, let's have the money."

He said, in a quiet little voice, but a voice that was now devoid of the pathetic note, "Fuck you. Fuck you both."

Or perhaps he just handed over the money, silently, sullenly, and I smirked as I took it and put it in my pocket. And went and bought some beautiful flowers for the house with it on the way home, and never even told you I'd seen Merlin, just let you forget all about him.

And then what? Did Merlin phone again? If so, what did I say to him? What happened then?

I've lost the thread. I've lost the plot. Because of course my little plot never came to pass; that's my little fiction, all that drama above. With all the manoeuvrings to make it seem credible; the friend in Putney, the depressing flat, all that. I should go back and say exactly where we met, where we were (which coffee place?) when I put my "deal" to him. Well, I could do that. We met, we *did* meet, though I never told you that either. I could fill in all that detail, but to what end?

To what end?

I could have told Merlin on the phone that you wouldn't accept any money from him, that you wanted nothing further to do with him. But I suppose I wanted to see Merlin one more time, see how he was looking, see if that pathetic pleading note in his voice was real or a performance. And that, yes, was rather satisfying; he looked as I have described him. And the momentary fantasy of offering to pay the rest of the money in exchange for sex did cross my mind; I thought how piquant it would be for me to fuck this boy, this boy whom you had wanted to fuck but hadn't, how bizarre and symmetrical and piquant a revenge that would be. Or would it? In the event, I was rather nice to him. I said gently I didn't think there was anything he could do to patch it up with Andries, that Andries was intractable on this. That he might as well forget it all. The business about his having only half the money is accurate. He said, "But I've got nearly half the money." I said, and the sneer was only just present in my voice, and probably inaudible to him, "Buy yourself some new clothes. Get yourself a haircut."

Andries:

Again, a nice dramatic break (of several days). I had lunch (met Jen at the Gardens; it's near where she works) and now I'm back at the Long Street Café. Why did my little revenge fantasy take off like that, and then suddenly turn sour on me? Why didn't I write about triumphantly fucking the errant Merlin? Maybe just because I'm not Myra Breckinridge. But my revenge fantasy could at least have cooperated. Yet somehow first my pen led me away from the "truth", inventing as it went along, and then turned on me. Is that something that fiction does? Betrays one? (You can tell, can't you, rereading my little fantasy above, that it is fiction? Too many attempts to explain things, too much to explain ... the business about phoning you at the office, the "Did he realise then that I had now realised ..." How do novelists *do* this stuff?)

And what *really* happened to or with Merlin? (And why the urge to get it down, when this notebookful of jottings and ramblings has already spiralled out of control?) That day, I said I had to go, paid for the coffee, went. We never heard from Merlin again.

Andries:

Jen's trying very hard to get me to stay here, to *decide* to stay here. And I think I might. No reason why not, really. It'd be a perfect arrangement, as she keeps saying — the accommodation arrangements, at least. Even if it's only temporary. Even if something unforeseen happens; but then everything at this point is unforeseen. It's not as though I am going to go back to London, to you. The very idea fills me with fear. But then so does the idea of staying in SA. What future? What job? What happens when my pounds run out?

The thought strikes terror into my breast or at least gives me a sharp twinge in the region of my sternum. Like indigestion; like something I can't process, that won't go efficiently through the system. It sticks there, sticks and burns in the region of my heart. Like you.

Andries:

We loved the years through,
The fast years, the slow years.
The time that passed like a honeymoon
Sequestered, enclaved. Until.

The fine handsome days, days of white
sheets, white walls, peeling.
We moved the furniture around.
I loved you and I love you still.

The halting days, quick nights.
My slow vegetable love, quickening
At the pulse of your heart, the taste
Of your asshole. Until.

You will come back, but like a ghost
To whom one has said everything
And nothing. A shadow passing through
My soul, on its way to somewhere else.

Morning kisses, sweat, breath, brine,
Hands that hold the beat of my heart,
My lungs' breath, my life's rhythm.
Gone away now, you stayed until.