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Site C

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A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the award of the degree of Master of Arts in Creative Writing

Faculty of Humanities
University of the Witwatersrand
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SITE C

Lwandile Fikeni

Part I

I have lived a life of shame. My hair has grown into a *bushel of sorrows* and my feet are as hard as wood. In Gardens, outside the Presbyterian Church where I sleep most nights – my head buried in my knees, my arms tight round my legs – morning finds me fumbling for the receding fragments of a dream whose terror prised me from sleep.

I am standing in a field of Chrysanthemums that stretches beyond the curved horizon in dazzling purples, yellows and whites, and the sky is a clear gunmetal blue expanse. I stretch a hand to pick a tender purple head of such arresting beauty I quiver as I bring my hand to pluck its stem. That's when I see them, first a head, then two, a fine coil of black snakes glistening as if dipped in crude oil. They slither in the undergrowth with a sharp sibilance that fills me with dread and I pull my hand away fearfully, and the ground begins to undulate like a boat pitching on rough seas.

They come sliding and twisting, a slimy black orgy menacing a sublime spring. I take a small careful step backward, nearly losing my footing, my heart about to detonate inside my throat. It is my own palpable fear that makes the dream more horrific; the more I fear, the more I engender fear. As I turn to flee my legs sink into the earth as if the field were entirely made of mud, as if the entire world were a pool of shit, and then I slip into a deep hollow pit, without a beginning, and with no end.

That's when I wake up.

There are two palm trees standing tall next to the church, their heads rustling softly in the morning breeze. At the intersection behind them a man leans against the traffic light with his eyes closed, his legs stretched out in front of him. His head rolls

on his shoulders as if it would peel off, but he catches it with a jerk before it does. In wobbly movements he arranges it back onto his shoulders – the large forehead turning this way and that like a satellite dish in a stop-motion infomercial about technology and the future. He brings his chin down to his chest and nods off. A second later his head hangs as loosely as before. The jerking movements start up all over again, his eyes still shut, as morning climbs over The Mountain, sprinkling crumbs of sunlight on the street. I watch the morning stretch the shadows of buildings and street lamps, I watch it turn windows, which were hollow and ghostly before daybreak, into shiny mirrors of dazzling little suns.

A rotten smell of something foreboding and natural, like a scab of a healing wound, rises from the black bins across the street and spreads itself evenly over the morning scene. The bins are big and heavy, filled with Pampers and rotting peels of vegetables and paper plates and newspapers soggy and stinking of spoiled fish, and sour cartons of fresh milk and empty bottles of La Motte, Haute Cabriere, Vendôme, and cans of *Coke* with that joyful font that always prompts a deep sadness in me. There are trays of Rainbow chicken and lamb bones with strips of flesh still clinging to them, there are used condoms (some full of spunk, others torn and empty – no longer holding the seed of regret) and beer bottles, tabloid magazines, and sometimes the odd book.

The Cape Doctor gently shakes the palm trees and a car skids at the intersection – its skirl tearing through the morning calm as it speeds away, the engine growling faintly in the distance.

Mindlessly, I begin to pick lice from my hair and squash them between the backs of my thumbs and they pop like bubble wrap, leaving a brown ooze of blood on my fingernails.

I scratch my head roughly and lice fall and disappear in the damp tar outside the church like tiny black grains of wheat thrown in the wind. I treat the lice with sea water and seaweed at Three Anchors Bay, where the poet drowned herself.

Except for rats, which scuttle across the street at night, I otherwise live alone. There are others who live like me, of course, like the man now catching his head again under the traffic light. But they all leave me be, which is a tremendous mercy.

In this way, I have attained absolute autonomy from society, so much so that no one could be accused of finding in me some quality that connects us as a species. If anything, I am a rat scavenging for food in the sewers.

If you saw me today you wouldn't tell that I was once the most promising painter this country has ever seen.

Of my old life, it is Julius Eastman's *Unjust Malaise* that holds the fondest of memories. I kept a poster of him in my old room at Perspectives, the apartment block I lived in before my life degenerated. It showed him with light gathered round his head, the poster. His face a picture of calm as he fondles the keys of his instrument. It is this image that first drew me to his work. I had come across it at the vinyl shop on Rheede street, where I used to buy compressed *Swazi* from the mighty Rasta who worked there.

Early in the morning, I would wake up, take a warm shower, and put on *Unjust Malaise* while making myself a cup of tea and getting ready for class.

If I could play an instrument as well as Eastman, if I could compose a piece of music as well as him, I believe I would be able to escape the things that visit me in my sleep. I find no use whatsoever for art except for this harmless arrangement that shields one from the things that stalk the tiny corners of one's consciousness, nudging him closer to his total annihilation.

In the kitchen, with Eastman in the background, I'd imagine myself breaking the membrane of society, forcing my way through its skin, and standing at a great height among the clouds, with the wind whistling in my ears, watching the trees and fields of flowers beneath my feet, the thin lines that traces the ragged silhouette of this country, the innocuous violence of the sea as it hurtles to shore, hurling itself against the beach, and sinking back to the ocean, to repeat the action again and again for all eternity.

The sky is as clear as gin. I shake off the morning cold from my bones, then amble up the street to bask outside Number 9, an old Cape Town apartment with white wooden shutters and a balcony that overlooks the Lower Reservoir.

Across the street from the apartment is The Flower seller fussing over her wares. Her skin, fair; her body, sturdy. Always the two small children – a boy and a girl – attached to her hip. The children argue and fuss around her as she arranges flowers in white plastic pales. Vygies. Lilies. Daisies. She regards me with a gentle smile when she sees me but says nothing. Between her and I words are never spoken, which is my own doing. The day I came out of Site C I found I no longer had any use for speech. As such, she and I only speak with eyes and subtle movements of the muscles on our faces to say only that which needs to be said, and nothing more.

Joggers in brightly coloured outfits sweep down the street with headphones on. The maids and the gardeners struggle in the opposite direction, towards The Mountain, the men in blue overalls and the women in plain civilian clothes and handbags that swing too easily on their shoulders, their strides quick and short and their eyes staring ahead with noticeable dread. Late for work, I think. The 103 follows behind with a steady stride, carrying a miserable-looking human load to the great houses and boutique hotels of Vredehoek and Devil's Peak.

A dog walker with a Boerboel on a short leash heads towards De Waal park.

He brings to mind Litha, the boy with whom I shared the flat at Perspectives, in the last days of my old life.

He was a film student, Litha, and that year he was shooting scenes for his graduate project: *Aleen.* A short film about a poet who never leaves his flat for fear of death. I was working on my own graduate show, which I based loosely around Alejandra Pizarnik's poems – a series of drawings on paper I had intended to name *Sketches of the Interior*.

I had come across Alejandra's work by sheer chance at the school library. I was scanning the shelf, fingering spines, searching for Jane Alexander's work, but instead found hers.

After reading one poem of hers I immediately set off for The Book Lounge to see if they held any of her collections. The bookshop was around the corner from the flat. Luckily, they did. It was a collection of her poems from 1962 to 1972. A few days later I returned with Litha to steal the book.

He and I built a respectable library in our flat this way.

In its modest proportions, the flat never failed to reminded me of the backroom me and ma shared in Norwood, back home, when I was little. Ma divided the bedroom and the kitchen with a thin lace. An old primus stove stood on the cupboard of drawers reeking of paraffin fumes. On the cupboard ma made supper and I washed dishes after we were done eating.

I remember the evenings when ma would climb down from her bed to let in some air because she found me twitching on the floor – where I slept – because of the fumes that lingered after supper.

The door would squeak as she drew it open, the moonlight would fall on my legs as if a ghost carrying a candle had walked into our room. With the light also drifted in a cool evening breeze, which always smelled of rain, especially in the summer.

I remember her taking me to church. I remember her walking me to school. I remember the long stretches of silence between us, silence like the one that exists between The flower seller and myself. A silence like the deadness that greeted me when I walked into the museum on York Road after school. The silence gathered on the surfaces of forgotten objects: the bleached black and white photographs of untarred streets and mud huts – the silence of dust. I remember, too, the milky teeth of taxidermized wildlife; the emptiness that enveloped the note perched on the receptionist's desk which said she would be Back in 5 min, although she never turned up.

I'd shuffle quietly around the museum floor in my school uniform. With my forehead pressed against the glass cases, I'd stare at the meagre collection the museum held. I'd search on the unsmiling faces in the photographs for a clue of the day when the picture was taken, and I would draw a blank. My naiveté could neither fathom nor comprehend the time in which these people and these objects existed. To a child history is not a teacher. History doesn't even exist. What exists are the presently accumulating minutes of data, as if all there was to the world was what was before him, stimulating his senses.

In childhood, I am alone. I see me with a tie tied tightly round my neck, sitting at the back of the class, quietly drawing on my exercise book. I create scenes with Spawn and Batman in a fiery duel. Spawn is my favourite comic hero, so I draw him first, his fist having already swept across the page with a KAPOW! I draw concave

ripples that bulge outward from the word to emphasise impact. Once I'm finished with Spawn, I draw the Batman receiving the blow. I contort the Batman's face to illustrate his agony and add a splash of blood with red ink, flinging from his mouth. I close the exercise book knowing that I will colour in the scene fully when I get home, when I'm done with homework.

I find myself standing next to the primus stove, washing dishes, and waiting for ma to yell angrily and take out the leather strap that maintained order around the house. The scene often played out like this: there's something off, something terribly and profoundly wrong with the universe. A plate which hasn't been washed properly, a school shirt which needs to be ironed, an arithmetic problem left unsolved, or I'm planted in front of the television watching cartoons while homework begs to be touched.

When ma had that leather strap in her hand it appeared to restore her sense of purpose. Her shoulders – which were hunched from marking daft high school English compositions from kids who learned English in Xhosa, and from being paid very little for it – would loosen and she'd gain at least four inches vertically. It was a beautiful strap too: *Pierre Cardin.* When ma put it to work she did so thoroughly, with absolute abandon; you could even say, delight. Each stroke on my flesh seemed to remove a few years from her face; and a new vitality flickered in her eyes, like a blue flame from a gas torch. She looked younger, stronger, more dazzling, with that strap in her hand.

She'd lash my legs, arms, and face until we were both tired and her back hurt. When she was done she'd bring me two Panados. If we were out of stock she made me sugar-water in a pressed glass. I would watch the tiny grains of *Huletts* twist in a spiral before settling at the bottom in heaps of heavy sweetness. Gently, she'd tell me

to drink. I'd close my eyes and wince as I swallowed. Afterwards she'd take my head into her hands and place it on her lap. She'd plait my hair while we both watched *The Bold and The Beautiful* on television. Sure enough, I'd drift off to a peaceful sleep, a sleep free of dreams.

Because of her methods I've always held ma in high esteem. Whenever she seemed worn down by her work, or sad, I'd find myself praying for the universe to rip open and for that leather strap to crack, so that once more her sadness could give way to her strength.

To Litha I said nothing of me and ma's relationship. Instead I took to my vices like a new-born latching to her mother's breast. I drank steadily and painted. I spent entire weeks on campus, painting scene after scene, portrait after portrait, until I'd collapse with fatigue in one of the little studios allocated to students to work.

When Litha spoke of his mother his face lit up. He called her *The Marmalade* and would speak glowingly of her, something I could never do without feeling like a complete fraud. To me ma was a force, a hurricane, not the kind of woman whose name you dropped casually in conversation. Here was a woman who, with the scant means at her disposal – her humane violence – taught me everything I needed to know about life. As such I never saw ma as a mother in the classical sense. She was more like my equal, a colleague, and staying true to this principle I found that I could never sing her praises without a taste of vinegar in my mouth. Just as I could never sing the praises of any of the painters of my time without feeling like a sycophant.

I believe that that leather strap liberated us both in the end, in its own peculiar fashion. It was through that strap that I learned what it was like to be a human being, although the shame from the beatings made me recoil into myself more and more as I grew older. When ma and I were both quiet we easily passed as adults; when she took

out the strap we both became children, her chasing me around the house and me reacting to her nurturing violence with exaggerated terror. That strap stripped off the masks society intended for her: the loving grace and gentility of *The Great Mother*, the cradling caring statue of *The Virgin Madonna.* Instead, in those heightened moments of confrontation I saw ma for truly what she was: a woman and a human being. A ferocious, petty human being, one with vaguely carnal passions, which were illuminated in my mind by her weapon of choice – the leather strap – which assumed a phallic presence in our lives.

This made even more sense to me since my father wasn't around.

Growing up, this portrait of hers, which I still hold dear to my heart, sometimes filled me with great sadness, a sadness which drove me to draw and later, to paint.

There was still school, of course, and while my coevals threw themselves at life with a pimpled innocence, an innocence bordering on wilful self-delusion, I withdrew into myself. At 13 I sensed about me the heaviness of Rodin's *Le Penseur.*

Ma said I seemed old for my age, like an old spirit re-incarnated. I felt it too, the heaviness of my heart, as if in the next minute it would stop. It was then, in those steely moments when I was alone and took stock of everything that had transpired between her and I, that I began thinking of killing myself.

In my final year of high school I asked her if she still had the strap. It had been years now since the last beating.

She laughed and said she'd lost it a long time ago.

What a pity, I said.

Don't think about it too much, the act of remembering is a violent act.

In our last year together, when she saw me off to varsity at the Shell Ultra City, in a Greyhound coach, she showed genuine concern for my well-being, she was scared of what being away from home would do to her sweet boy, as she was fond to call me when she was in good spirits. I, on the other hand, held no more than a vague contempt for my prospects at university and what the future held.

When the bus pulled away she raised her hand and waved at me with glass tears in her eyes. With a heavy heart, I waved back, and breathed a sigh of relief.

The ideal condition for the painter is loneliness, away from everyone and everything else. This was true for me in the years of my short miserable existence at university. Had it not been for the unpredictable element of life, which put Litha and I next to each other on registration day in our fourth and final year of uni, I would never have met Lukhanyo and Zan – his friends.

Presently, I find myself looking back at those long wet winter afternoons at Perspectives with warm mist rising from the street, listening to Eastman, with Litha and Lukhanyo smoking a joint, and Zan standing by the bookcase searching for a book to borrow. Days which traced the predictable pattern of weeks and months until the day my degradation set in.

Part II

1

It was a Friday, the last day of the semester, and rain fell mercilessly over the city. I couldn't leave my bed I was so miserable. On my window hung a white sheet through which a weak light glowed. I had placed it there myself, the sheet, thinking that someday I would hang up a proper curtain, but never did. In the silence, which was

tempered by the spattering rain, I stared at the sheet, at the naked lightbulb hanging from the ceiling, and thought about taking my life.

Zan was on her way, that's what her text said. Her sister, Ida, was dropping her off.

I texted her for a pack of cigarettes; afterward, felt embarrassed for asking.

I winced and placed the phone next to my pillow and got up.

In the fridge there was just the lousy jug of water, so I closed it and went to lie on the couch in the living room, a thin black faux-leather couch that Litha brought when we moved in together.

Through the window rain fell mercilessly over the city and cars with their headlights on swept along Roeland street. On the couch, under one of the cushions, I found a cigarette. It was half-torn. I fixed it, then smoked it. It felt good in my mouth, the cigarette and gave me a headrush.

I planted myself on the floor in front of the bookcase, picked up *Lol Stein* by Marguerite Duras and went back to the couch. Raindrops crashed on the glass, and sounded like pins pricking the sliding door, which opened out to Roeland Street. I'd stolen the book from The Book Lounge down the block.

Right then I heard the sound of keys by the door. Michael Richardson, Lol's fiancé, had just laid his eyes on Anne-Marie Stretter at the ball.

I hesitated, listening to the door, then closed the book. It was Litha and Lukhanyo. They were carrying beers. The bottles knocked against each other in the black plastic bag that Litha held in his right hand as they walked in. I asked if they had bought bread; Litha said he'd forgotten. I told them Zan was on her way. They both said great or good or dope. I cracked open a quart and went back to the couch.

They were talking about girls they had met the night before at Tagores in Obs and Litha was making a show of opening and shutting cardboards in the kitchen.

Shit there really isn't food in this house.

He said it as if it was new, surprising. As he spoke I began to yawn.

He ambled to the living room with a beer in one hand and plonked himself at the end of the couch, by my feet. Across the couch, on a yellow ottoman handstitched with beads and shells so as to appear Persian, Lukhanyo was busy rolling a joint. Litha wanted to know what I had got up to last night.

Nothing, I said.

You're a bore.

I feel like shit, that's all.

That's more like it. Artists ought to suffer.

I shook my head and went back to *Lol.*

Is that what you're into now? He said, sarcastically.

For weeks Lukhanyo had been carrying *Justine* by The Marquis de Sade. The dog-eared cover peeked out of one of his pockets as he fastened the joint. I'd been meaning to borrow it from him but never got around to asking.

Yeah I know it's de Sade, Lukhanyo said after licking the j. Get over it, cat, it's not like I'm fucking your mother.

Litha knocked him off the ottoman with a punch to his face. The beer bottle followed, spilling foam on the carpet. I closed the book and watched. Litha was on top of him kneading his face with his fists. Blood flowed from Lukhanyo's nose and now Litha was pressing his knees against his chest. He stretched out the arms and pinned them to the floor. Breathing heavily, like a bullfrog, he demanded that Lukhanyo apologise but Lukhanyo grimaced and spat blood on the carpet – the rug

absorbed the blood easily, much easier actually than beer froth. Right then the intercom buzzed. I got up to answer it. Zan was downstairs. I told security to let her up.

Zan is on her way up, I said.

They stopped.

Litha helped Lukhanyo up, then wiped his nose with the cuffs of his hoodie.

I won't even ask, Zan said when she saw Lukhanyo's face.

We hugged, then she passed me the pack of smokes. Litha and Lukhanyo both hugged her at the same time, like children, their arms wrapped around her small frame.

Zan studied math. She spent an hour on Dr Ziervogel's couch on Harrington Street every Thursday after class.

We smoked the joint Lukhanyo had made earlier, before Litha's anger found his face, and spent the rest of the afternoon drinking beers, smoking, and arguing about art. I tried to play them *Unjust Malaise* but Litha said it was too abstract for his mood. I gathered it was his adrenalin speaking, so I put on MF Doom to calm him down.

Lukhanyo had found a weekend gig at a call centre for extra cash, he told us. Lukhanyo had half a scholarship to study Design at an Ad School in town, the other half was covered by his parents who also took his younger sister through university in Bloem.

It's a Funeral Claims department for Standard Insurance, he said.

We raised our beers and congratulated him on his new job and he rolled us another joint. A potent Transkei Rooi Bud Skunk, which he'd bought from a dealer in Obs the night before.

Around 18:00 we got ready to go to David's opening in Woodstock. David was a conceptual artist. It was Zan who had introduced us to his work.

Lukhanyo stuffed his busted nose with toilet paper and I put on a trench coat while Litha changed into his favourite Levi's denim jacket. Zan borrowed one of my hoodies and we trundled down Buitenkant Street almost grudgingly – it was so cold.

***THE KNIFE ON THE TABLE* by David Goldberg**

26 June – 28 July.

An installation: a lone table set in the middle of the gallery, with a knife sitting on it – a gleaming open *Okapi* – and a chair pulled slightly back as if someone had been sitting at the table earlier and they were returning to take their place. No one was coming back and the scene appeared as an invitation.

The room was packed with curious murmurs, faces who didn't seem to know what to do with themselves, an effect of the artificiality of gallery spaces, I suppose. An artificiality I've never been able to penetrate, like a screen concealing me from whatever it was I needed to see. The white space as a kind of metaphor that obscures art objects to the audience.

We moved about the space saying very little to each other, performing our parts as audience, taking our cues from the word *exhibition*, and thus exhibiting our understanding of the expression "artistic curiosity": standing three feet from the table, moving languidly around it with our heads cocked at an angle, contemplating it and contemplating ourselves contemplating the objects, the scene, the space. A man in a greyish tweed jacket, a mauve scarf draped round his neck, tapped his forefinger on his lips. His *artistic curiosity* evidently more refined than ours.

From the installation we made a beeline to a table where beers were being served; then followed each other outside for a smoke.

By the way, Ida is not coming anymore, Zan said. She said to meet her at Rafiki's after the show.

We stood by the entrance, drinking beer, sharing a cigarette, watching the rain fall, and paying little attention to the crowd that murmured around us.

There were three girls standing by the entrance, with duct tape over their mouths.

What's that about, Lukhanyo asked.

Zan hailed a metered-taxi and we all jumped in, without answering him.

We drove in perfect silence, Zan and Litha and Lukhanyo on their phones.

I was in the backseat, squeezed between Litha and Lukhanyo, listening to the sound of rain on the roof of the car, thinking of the painting I was planning to make of Alejandra's *All night I hear the noise of water sobbing.* It was then that the apparition of my grandfather's house appeared before me.

***

It is summer. A flytrap hangs on the kitchen ceiling trapping flies. Lumps of them like black raisins on the sticky flytrap. The black Dover crackles and coughs out splinters of firewood. A picture of *The Last Supper* hangs askew on the wall in the living room. Next to it a painting of The Battle of Blood river. It smells of wood smoke and cow dung. It's Christmas eve. Today Grandpa will teach me how to kill.

I am only five.

I stand next to him by the kraal with a stick in my hand, my face, arms, and legs covered with *ingceke* to protect me from the rash which litters my body. Ma

makes the cream from the fruit of sausage trees that stand at the edge of our garden, before the flat grazing plains, where boys herd goats and sheep and men tend to cattle. She grinds the fruit with a smooth grindstone with a cup of water, then applies the paste to my face, arms, and legs.

A man has a lamb by its hind legs and shoves it forward as though he were pushing a wheelbarrow.

I had raised the lamb myself, feeding it with a bottle as one might nurse a child who has lost his mother at birth.

While the first man places the lamb on a soft piece of grass, three others sharpen their knives with rocks. The sound of knives against stone is like that of sandpaper chafing grout. Luxolo, our neighbour's son, runs to the gate to let in visitors who enter our yard carrying their smiles like gifts.

Mangxabane amahle, greets an old timer in a black beret.

He speaks with a gruff voice full of phlegm as if a stone is lodged in his throat. His jacket is buttoned up and a scarf is thrown around his neck in spite of the heat.

Grandpa doesn't turn to look. He puffs his pipe broodingly, as if arranging his response.

The Ngxabanes weren't beautiful people, this we all knew. The story goes: when Grandpa's parents died the Ngxabane's had thrown him out of the clan and made him an orphan. He was flung from one stranger's house to the next until he completed school. From the ordeal he'd managed to obtain a teacher's diploma. It was at tertiary that he met Gran, who was on her way to becoming a nurse. They'd gotten married quickly after Gran fell pregnant with ma; she was forced to abandon her

studies to take on wifely duties which she performed gracefully. They had two children: ma and aunt Lydia.

I watch Grandpa tap the rim of his pipe and hear him clear his throat. In an ironic tone he says, still without turning to the man who was now standing next to us, Gxabane.

The man clasps his hands and stoops his head slightly. In grandpa's smile I sense an accent of cruel satisfaction.

The butchers place the lamb between them. In total they are five, the men. Four of them grab the limbs while another stands by the head feeling into the soft wool in the neck where he sinks his blade. I watch as blood shoots out and sprays the grass. The animal jerks like someone having a seizure, the eyes roll back inside their sockets while the windpipe makes a broken gurgle, the most tragic thing I've ever heard my entire life.

A basin is placed under the animal's neck to collect the blood, which will be stuffed inside one of the animal's entrails and cooked. Those who hold the limbs release them and we all watch the animal kick stiffly, the eyes now still and looking at us with a sadness that makes me uneasy all afternoon.

In the evening I come down with fever and ma, after placing a hand on my forehead, pours me a cup of camphor, then takes me to bed. For days I am visited by the same dream.

I am standing behind Ma, in a doorway, holding her dress. The sun pierces the corners of the sky and falls on a company of men harnessing oxen for ploughing, their copper arms glistening like polished brass.

A black ox breaks away from the harness, kicking up dust as it brays. I clasp my mother's dress tightly, overcome by fear. I want to turn and run inside the house

but I'm fixed on the spot as though my feet are sunk in its foundations. I howl and howl and howl into the plastic silence of the dream.

The ox dips its horn and picks one of the men and flings him to the heavens. There is blood everywhere – on the ground, on the grass, by my feet. Oily and sticky, it gushes out from underground, as if an artery has been torn in the earth's body. I look up at ma and can only make out the back of her head and the nape of her neck. The way she is standing it is as though she's turned to stone and her dress, which I clasp in my hands, has petrified into a dead thing around my fists, trapping me inside her hip. I howl and howl and howl and wake up with a sore throat.

When I tell ma about the dream she says my sickness has grown bold. Later that day, we go to sis'Masindi's homestead. She makes small incisions on different parts of my body with a Minora and stuffs the cuts with a black powder that burns.

Ma forces me to drink lots of camphor and something else that I saw sis'Masindi fold into her hand. In the evening everyone gathers around my bed and Grandpa makes a prayer. He uses the word *Devil* a lot.

Candlelight trembles on the side of my bed as I absorb their weary faces. Ma is on her knees at the edge of the bed with her elbows resting on the mattress, a towel thrown over her shoulders; Gran sits on the bed with her shoulders hunched, her fingers laced together on her lap; Aunt Lydia is also on her knees and reeking of booze, her beret tipped to one side and her eyes pressed shut. Grandpa stands in the middle of the room holding a bible with a red tongue, saying a prayer. And then we sing *Masibulele kuYesu*:

Thina bantwana beemfama,

Oweza kuthi apha

Akwakhetha bala lamntu, wafel' abaziimfama

Taru! Bawo,

Yiba nofefe kuthi

Before I go to sleep ma makes a crimson paste with ash and this she smears across my forehead. She says it will protect me while I sleep.

***

At Rafiki's Ida jumped out of her chair and folded her sister in her arms.

She was with a man who studied us with pale blue eyes from behind thick lenses, a slicked down silver shock of hair bristled on his corn-shaped head. He introduced himself as Jean. After we took our seats a waiter brought us a round of Blacks. The air was leaden with cigarette smoke.

How was the show? Ida asked.

It was pretty dark, Litha said, taking a swig from his bottle.

And what happened to your face?

Life, Lukhanyo shrugged, then said, Litha is being modest. The show was just a knife on a table. By looking at it you couldn't immediately imagine the damage a knife can cause but you did sense it. It made me think of this country and all its betrayals. Maybe that's what that cat was alluding to.

No, no, no, Jean shook his head, no politics today. A knife by itself does no harm, it needs human agency to perform its tasks.

It sounded familiar what Jean had said, like something I'd read in a book. Maybe it was the way he put it that made it seem contrived, or merely the effect of the vague American drawl I sensed in his accent.

David deals with the present, Ida said. Lukhanyo is probably right. Maybe it's a grand metaphor about The Contemporary, so to speak. That's David's schtick.

But you cannot deny that he's resourceful, Jean jumped in, his smile taut round the edges of his mouth as though he was pressed and needed to run off to the loo.

Lukhanyo is being dramatic, Zan said. It was all pretty interesting at first, until everyone sort of became self-conscious about the whole thing. In the end you could tell that the knife allowed people this space to perform concern, to seem alarmed and curious, as though they had never used a knife before and that they were not holding invisible knives that very second, ready to plunge them into the backs of whomever seemed a good enough target.

Zan tapped her cigarette on the clear glass ashtray set in front of her and continued: What I found interesting, however – and I can't tell whether this was the effect of the show or something else – but once people became aware that the show could be an assumption about them inasmuch as it was probably about something else, they began shaking their heads, seemingly unable to accept being accomplices to the vile act suggested by the object. They began making excuses for themselves among themselves, trying to justify their actions, one them even said, I only use one when necessary. It was all really grotesque.

All too human, Jean interrupted.

Anyway, Zan said as if she hadn't heard Jean's comment. The way they were all gathered in small clumps, whispering to each other, it reminded me of something I'd read about the nosy neighbour being a small town phenomenon who has no place in a city. Just as a knife occupies a negative space in culture, unlike, say, a sword.

That's what the entire thing was to me. I think that was David's point, that the knife has its place, and that place is the kitchen table, not people's backs.

Well, Jean stretched, then straightened his back. The movements restored some vitality in his body – his face lit up and his eyes grew sharper.

That's the world, Zan, he said, while tapping an unlit cigarette on the back of his left hand. He'd been doing it all night, the tapping of the cigarette, but only now had it become apparent to me.

What's the point of living in a city, in relative anonymity, if people are going to follow you around, smiling, concealing knives in their pockets, Zan said.

Ida, who'd been listening and nodding quietly, suddenly sighed, God I hate this place.

The knife, Jean said, is another name for the phallus. It is our supreme judge and executioner. It keeps us in check. This is why society moulds itself around it. Iron. Steel. Cutting edge tech. Always the implied risk. Not very different from the penis. The intrusion of the neighbour's nose into your business is essentially a phallic intrusion. Very masculine. We stick our noses into people's affairs in order to destroy them; into other nation's affairs to cause wars. We penetrate new markets to displace indigenous cultures. Where there's a penis, there's conflict; same thing with a nose. Anyway, What I wanted to say is that the nosy neighbour, who's often depicted in popular culture as a female figure, is not a woman at all. She's a man. And her raison is to discipline and imprison her neighbour, to keep her in check, to make her obey the rules of society; if need be, to destroy her. I don't know if I'm making any sense at all but I think that's exactly what David's show is about. The diffuse, invisible nature of power as it commands us to act in particular ways that seem spontaneous

and radical on the surface but are wholly premeditated by our deeply held conservative ideas about society.

It sounds depressing, Zan said.

Of course it is, Jean took a sip of his wine, having not lit the cigarette which he still held in his hand.

A waiter brought us chilli poppers and buffalo wings on a wooden tray. Jean had ordered himself a burrito with salsa and sour cream.

I got up from the table and rushed to the door for some air. The beers were finally taking effect.

In the consciousness of truth once perceived, man now sees everywhere only the terror of the absurdity of existence, came a raspy voice from a small, filthy man in a brown blazer.

I watched him from the bottom of the stairs, next to the Kloof Nek grocer.

He banged on the roof of the car with both hands after he said the words, inviting the attentions of the bouncer standing at the entrance of The Power & The Glory. I moved to the corner of the street and lit a cigarette, my eyes on the bouncer as he strode across the street. He grabbed the man by the crook of his arm and shoved him to the pavement. The man stumbled and fell on his face. There were people standing at the entrance of the bar. We all watched the scene casually, at a distance, as if it were happening somewhere else, say, on television.

Okay boss, listen, you don't have some coins for me or maybe some bread, I have a family, they're hungry, they need something to eat, the man said.

Fuck off, the bouncer pushed him further down Kloof Nek Road, away from us.

My cigarette had burnt down to the cheese and was beginning to toast my finger, so I threw it on the street and went back up the stairs

God, where have you been? Zan asked.

Watching the birth of tragedy, I said.

Evening grew and my face turned supple from the booze. At the other end of the table Lukhanyo was struggling to make his point about structural package design and its social implications. He was saying that with every product innovation we conceive we create a new world order that changes the fundamental wiring of our brains.

Modernity, he said, then trailed off…modernity…

We all laughed at what he wasn't able to say. In the fugue of smoke and booze, it all made sense.

Ida got up, saying, I must love and leave you, I have so much work to do.

We didn't pay her attention at first because Litha and Zan were having a heated exchange about film while we entertained ourselves with Lukhanyo.

Oh, god, the mythos of the struggling artist, Zan was saying to Litha.

Ida turned to Jean whose face was red from the wine and said, This was really cool, let's chat again tomorrow.

Yes, let's, Jean smiled.

He had the toothy smile of a salesman that made it impossible for me to tell whether he was sincere or just putting it on for appearances.

Are you not coming? Ida said to Zan.

I think I'll crash at Litha's tonight.

Don't forget to text your parents, Ida said, and left.

After Ida's departure we followed each other downstairs for a joint, with Jean in tow. I felt my skin breathe after a few tokes.

This is pretty good stuff, Jean said to no response.

We stayed silent for the remainder of the joint, then followed each other up the stairs again. Jean ordered a round of tequilas and another round of beers. The confluence of weed and booze made the room spin. I got up, losing a step.

Are you okay? Jean asked

He'll be alright, Zan answered.

I descended the stairs in clumsy abstract movements and nearly fell.

On the corner of the street I buttoned my coat, all the way to my chin. For a while I stood there, by the corner, dazed and smoking a cigarette, feeling sick, as if I was going to throw up. A car pulled up at the light, the driver looked over his shoulder; when he met my drunken gaze he accelerated up Kloof Nek without waiting for the traffic light to turn green.

I hobbled down the street. I needed to get home and crash. A shadow loomed out of thin air, suddenly illumined by the streetlamp. It made me jump with a shudder. I thought it was the man from The Power and The Glory, but it wasn't him. It was only a shadow, swaddled in blankets. The bronze bracelets around its wrists clanked. Trembling, it ambled towards me, the whites of its eyes as clear a child's.

I offered it a cigarette, careful not to touch its hands, which were gaunt, its fingernails black with soot. It bowed, its hands clasped together as though in prayer, then turned and sank into back into the evening.

I kept looking over my shoulder as I tumbled down the winding road. It felt as though the shadow was walking right behind me. My heart rattled with fear; my nerves tightened.

On the corner of Kloof Street, cars lined the road and the air became easier to breathe and then a black cat jumped on my leg and I shook it off cursing, *Voetsek! Voetsek!* but the cat sunk its claws into my leg and I winced with agony.

My grandmother owned six cats and they always climbed on you with their soft paws or sat on your lap with that contemptible conceit peculiar to the species. But there, on the corner of Kloof Nek and Kloof Street, the cat terrified me; it clung desperately to my leg as though fearful for its life. It sunk its claws in my leg and drew blood. It climbed up my coat and I howled like a madman. People walked past casually, as if nothing was happening; as if I was not even there.

Voetsek! I grabbed it by its tail. It slipped and slithered down my back. I struggled out of the trench coat; that when the cat leapt off my hip. I watched it disappear in the gutter.

When Lukhanyo, Zan and Litha found me, I was sitting outside the McDonald's on Upper Long Street, looking up at the ball and lantern on St Martin Church.

We were looking for you, Litha said. We even tried to call you.

My battery died, I thrust my hand into the cold evening air and Lukhanyo hoisted me to my feet.

We crossed over to the Turkish Baths, passed the Shell garage and the Jumu'a Mosque, with its white columns and arched windows. A boy sat coddling a bottle of glue outside on the steps. His head lolled and drool lengthened from his lips as if the earth was beckoning to him to rest his bones for all eternity on the concrete pavement.

Quietly, we turned into Queen Victoria street. At the Company Gardens a feverish breeze shook the trees and leaves crumpled like sheets of paper, wrinkling the evening around us.

I am afraid of dying, Zan said suddenly, her words ominous in the packed silence of the park.

None of us said a word in response.

I thought about what she said long after she'd said it and I found myself frightened by the thought although it seemed unlikely that we'd all die that night – or ever.

We slipped past the National Art gallery and came down Plein Street. When we got to the flat I threw myself on my bed and crashed.

2

In the morning Zan was already up when I emerged from my room, my head pounding. She was standing by the sliding door, looking out at the city below, a thick mass of grey clouds hung over the muted palette of Devil's Peak. She'd wrapped herself in a throw, her head tucked inside her orange knit cap. She shook slightly and rubbed her shoulders with both hands. She didn't look back when she asked, Did you sleep well?

So, so, I said.

I made us coffee on the stove. Litha's door was closed. Must have been the hangover or he could have been with someone in his room, I wasn't sure; last night had become a blur. I remembered walking through the park and Zan saying she's afraid of dying.

What happened to Lukhanyo? I said, pouring us two black cups.

He went back to his place after you and Litha passed out.

It's all a blur, I said.

Come see, reviews are coming in for David's work, Zan said.

On the couch, we went through the reviews. The show was received poorly by critics. A critic from the *Weekend Argus* called it a tired trope. Without the social spectacle of the opening night, the visitor who strolls in the morning after is likely to be confronted by nothing, another critic wrote.

Critics are wankers, Zan said.

I feel empty, I said.

Zan reached for her sling-bag on the floor. It was a small pouch made of soft leather, very elegant. She took out a tray of Brintellix then gave me two.

I took the pills with my coffee then lit a cigarette.

Sometimes when I turn my face a certain way or if I say something with a certain slant, I think of my aunt.

I don't know why I told her this. I think I wanted her to feel sorry for me.

From your dad or mom's side? She said.

Mom's.

Were you guys close?

Well, she was kind of my second mom.

Do you still speak?

She hung herself, I said.

Zan peeled open her arms and I clung to her a little nauseated, my sadness groping for the 20mg of vortioxetine hydrobromide circulating in my body.

Let's wake Litha up, I said. I'm starving.

There's never food in this house, Zan said.

That's what Litha's been saying all week.

You know what, we hang out a lot but we know so little about each other. I didn't even know you had an aunt. I know it's lame because we deplore autobiography but you need to tell me something about your aunt, anything: the colour of her eyes, what she loved to wear, what she enjoyed...

Well, she loved to drink, I said.

Zan let out a gentle laugh, Tell me something else.

Before I could answer, she said, Okay, I'll tell you something about me, but promise not to laugh.

I shrugged.

In high school, there was this group of girls – everyone called them the G-unit, I suppose to make fun of them, but it wasn't funny, at least not to me. So when I moved to Girls High in Wynberg to join Ida, the G-unit was already there. Two grades above me. At first they were sweet. I was Ida's kid sister and everyone respected that – respected Ida, that is. But that was her final year at the school. The following year I returned alone, beginning to show a little and feeling all self-conscious about it. My body felt awkward, and I felt awkward in it. Boobs are weird, you don't understand. Anyway, I kept to myself, kept to my studies, got decent grades. And then I heard a rumour that I was sleeping with Mr Foster, our English teacher. I tried to investigate who it was that was saying those things and it turned out it was one of the girls in the G-unit. I approached her during break, by the hockey fields. I said, I hear you're going around telling people I fucked Mr Foster. You should've seen her face. She recoiled with horror. I'd never do that to you, she said. Well, just stop it, I said and walked away.

I lit a cigarette and passed her one as well.

A few weeks later, it was another boy, some jock from our brother school. And then someone else. The boys I fucked seemed to multiple each week after I spoke to the girl, so I went back to confront her. They were standing by the black dumpsters, I think smoking a cigarette. I'm not sure. This time around I didn't ask who it was who'd been spreading the rumours. I knew it was her. So I got there and said, Please stop it, please! And turned to walk away, which turned out to be the biggest mistake of my life. The G-unit emptied a whole dumpster on me and called me whore.

And you did nothing? I asked.

I went home, had a good cry.

Did you not report them?

Nah, I just went home and had a good cry. The following morning when mom wanted to take me to school, I couldn't go. She asked me what had happened. I didn't say, couldn't say. It was too…humiliating. I couldn't even say in words what they had done. I couldn't verbalise their assault, not without humiliating myself, in front of my mother *nogal*. Sex, boys, Mr Foster our English teacher, whore! How could I begin telling my mother that. A week passed; I didn't go to school. Of course the principal was worried, including Mr Foster, who came by my house to check, in his small round glasses and his thin black tie, like a Beatle. When mom asked me to go downstairs to speak to him, I refused. After that week mom took me to see Dr Ziervogel and I've been seeing him ever since.

And school?

Oh, I went back finally, just to finish the term. Someone had got wind that I was seeing a therapist, so the G-unit started calling me Zan, after Xanax. The name

stuck. It was better than the other names: Scaredy-cat; Spaz, Sylvia Plath. Anyway, last night, at David's show, one of the girls was there.

I think I blinked at her.

You must have seen her, outside, those three girls who were staging a silent protest. She was the one in the middle, wearing a turban. Now it's your turn. Tell me something about your aunt.

I stuttered. Stopped.

I'm okay. Let's not make a meal of it, Zan said.

Okay, let me see, I began. Before her nervous breakdown she used to douse herself with perfume, like here, over her *vaj*. She would hike up her skirt and invite me to go under it, letting her dress fall like a parachute around me. She'd twirl with me like that, under her dress.

That sounds pretty, Zan said. Is that it?

I'm afraid so.

It's very pretty, she said.

I didn't know what else to say so I collected our mugs and took them to the sink.

After telling Zan the story I felt uneasy, as if I had lost control of some part of myself. Sharing bits of my life feels like having some parts of me hacked off and thrown away, however little those bits are. I'd rather speak about art, I said to myself in the kitchen. Music, film, anything but myself.

Distractedly, I barged into Litha's room without knocking. Luckily, he was alone. For a second, he didn't seem to recognise me. His face was as pale as a sheet of paper, as though he were seeing a ghost.

It's okay, it's just me, I said. We need to get breakfast. Zan is still here, she's starving.

Just give me a moment, he said.

I left his room and shut the door behind me.

Zan was taking a shower in my room, so I picked up Lol and started reading. Now she'd met John Bedford, a musician. They had left Town Beach and Lol's betrayal behind. It had been ten years and they had three children.

Litha emerged from his room still putting on his t-shirt.

Where's everyone?

Zan's taking a shower, I said. Lukhanyo went back to his place.

Good. I can't believe I actually bust his nose. I feel pretty shit about that, but we all need boundaries, you know.

I said nothing.

He dawdled to the fridge, opened it and closed it.

I watched him feel the coffee pot with the back of his hand.

Great, some fucking coffee, he said.

He poured himself a cup and came to sit on the couch, next to me. He sat terribly close and the bend of his elbow rubbed against my arm. I shifted slightly, but did so casually, as though giving him more space when in fact I was recoiling from his touch.

You're still reading that? He said.

Almost done, I said, without looking up from the page.

Zan stepped out of my room, my towel wrapped round her head. She was barefoot in her denim dungarees. She was wearing one of my t-shirts.

I hope you don't mind, she said.

Not at all.

Anyway, I'm afraid I have to skip breakfast. Ida needs me at her studio. I keep telling her she needs to find a full-time assistant but she won't hear it. She says her production costs are already through the roof.

She unwrapped the towel, her hair falling over her face. Absently, she tucked it behind her ears and put on her orange knit-cap. I enjoyed Zan's manners. She seemed aloof to her beauty, even her style, although she always matched colours and clothes perfectly, seemingly without even trying.

On Buitenkant Street we saw her off. She took a Maxi Taxi and sat in the backseat. She waved at us as the taxi pulled off. A spittle of rain began to fall from the sky.

We hurried down the street, Litha and I, past the police station, towards the taxi rank across City Hall, for a warm meal at KwaNobantu.

I ordered a plate of samp and beans with pumpkin and creamed spinach and Litha asked for a full head of sheep with pap and gravy. A group of men playing dominoes on a table next to us had their steaming plastic plates placed before them; they conversed loudly as they played.

After our food arrived Litha said, You know, the more I think about what I did to Lukhanyo the more I kind of hate him. I wish he'd retaliated.

Guilt? I asked.

Not only that. A silent shaming, of sorts. I wish he'd fought back. Instead he's come out more gracious from the whole thing although he's the one who insulted my mother.

It was hardly an insult, I said, digging into my plate.

I know but…argh, I need it to be an insult. A violation of some part of me. And now what's happening is in hating him I'm beginning to hate myself even more. I really wish he'd at least fought back. Where's his sense of self-preservation?

Maybe he has none, I said

Fuck him, he's an asshole. You know, he probably thinks he's much better than me. He's not better than me. In fact, I take back what I said earlier. He did insult my mother and that is that.

I said nothing and looked him in the eye as he spoke.

This made him uncomfortable so he changed the subject and said, I am going to take *On Grief and Reason* from The Lounge. I need you to check the coast.

Not today, I said, feeling coolly detached from him and his words, as if he was speaking at some distance from our table. It was the Brintellix doing its job, I thought.

I watched him chew and speak with the same mouth, trying to convince me to help him. I knew the schtick already: getting into trouble together strengthens the bond between men. But this didn't interest me anymore; I stole for artistic and intellectual reasons, not to take the edge off or to be crowned *The Man*. I didn't want to be *The Man* anymore; I was okay with being myself.

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I remembered that I used to steal from Ma'Gabela – one of our neighbours – with Thando and Zuko, the boys who lived with Granny in the main house. Granny was our landlord. The boys were her grandchildren – brothers. Both went to Khwezilokusa, a school for disabled children.

Zuko, the younger brother, appeared sane enough. With Thando, I couldn't tell. Neither of them bore any visible deformity although Thando tended to stare at the sun for long spans of time without speaking or blinking. When Granny shouted at him to stop he would run the full length of the yard laughing his head off, then run back still in stitches, without anyone chasing him. Anyway, it was his crazy idea to steal in the first place. He was the oldest between the three of us.

Our operation was simple. Zuko climbed up the tree because he was quick and nimble, his small sinewy trunk easily finding its way between branches without collapsing the tree. Thando stood by the fence with a Shoprite Checkers bag to catch the peaches Zuko threw from the top of the tree. I stood at the corner of the street ready to give a signal if I saw Ma'Gabela's car coming. Ma'Gabela, whom everyone called Ma' Gabs, had a peach tree which stood at the front of her house, shading the stoep.

We split the peaches amongst ourselves after the job. Thando always ended up having more; I would have enough; Zuko would always complain that he was ripped off. He never complained about my stash, but he could never accept Thando's portion. I would leave them bickering and go into me and ma's room. Hide the peaches in my school bag.

One day, after our operation, Ma'Gabs came knocking on our door on our door. She was furious. The woman who cleaned her house had ratted us out. We'd forgotten about her. In any case, she was the same woman who always complained to ma and Granny about the way Ma'Gabs treated her and about her wages. I never thought she'd sell us out. But she did. Now Ma'Gabs was asking ma for permission to have me join the other two boys in the main house for a hiding. She said Zuko and Thando had already confessed.

Ma said, My son would never steal.

I smiled to myself. I was on the bed, watching TV, and eavesdropping. They were talking just outside the door.

Ma'Gabs craned her neck to steal a peek into the room, her face a rictus of anger. I don't know who scared me more between them in that moment. I heard Ma'Gabs say Granny had thrown her hands up, had complained about arthritis and high-high; that she'd given her full carte blanche to discipline the boys. She said if ma was too tired to do anything about me, she was more than happy to take up the task.

Spare the rod and spoil the child, she said.

Ma listened without contradicting her.

I heard Bhut'Bushie, the music teacher who rented one of the backrooms, join them outside.

After listening to Ma'Gabs' story he told her that she had no right to discipline other people's children, but she wouldn't hear it.

You have no business sticking your nose into women's affairs, she said.

A tense exchange followed, then I heard Ma'Gabs leave.

I got off the bed and inched closer to the door. Bhut'Bushie was topless, in his Mthatha Bucks tracksuit bottoms. Tiny coils of hair, like tumbleweed, clustered loosely on his chest. His head was full of hair and narrow; and he kept stroking his goatee as he spoke to ma.

That woman is crazy, he said.

Those boys had it coming, ma said with a sigh. I hope she beats some sense into them.

When they were finished talking, and Bhut'Bushie was on his way back to his room, I tiptoed back to bed.

Surprisingly, when ma entered the room she appeared tired and resigned.

She said not to play with Zuko and Thando again.

Those boys are good-for-nothing, do you hear me?

I nodded.

They will get you into more trouble than you can imagine.

I nodded again, without a word.

She changed into the red and white uniform she wore to church and told me she was off to evening prayers.

I asked her if I should cook; she said no. I said I'd make myself a peanut butter sandwich.

But clean up when you're done.

I nodded again.

As soon as she left I stole out of the room and tiptoed to the main house, making sure that no one saw me. I stood under one of the windows to the living room, with my hand on the window pane, and my eyes penetrating the lace curtain which was parted slightly. I could see Zuko and Thando bent over the dining table, their legs spread apart. Ma'Gabs was rolling a clothes line round her hand, measuring the right length.

Evening gathered outside. Through the window the scene was framed in soft yellow light.

Has it begun? A voice whispered.

It was Bhut'Bushie.

I knew I could trust Bhut'Bushie not to tell on me. He often sent me to buy him beers at the tavern on 6th avenue, although he knew ma was against drinking and smoking.

Ja neh, Bhut'Bushie sighed. This life is not for the weak. Poor Zuko, he shook his head.

I said nothing.

Thando won't feel a thing, Bhut'Bushie continued. I swear that boy is dead inside. I've seen him impale his foot on a nail and laugh afterwards.

It was true, he did mangle his foot on a nail once, while trying to kick a soccer ball. We were playing two poles on the street. Even when you tackled Thando roughly and he fell, he laughed at you. When Granny pinched him for one thing or the other he laughed at her, too. Even as Ma'Gabs brought down the first strokes on their behinds Thando smiled, while Zuko shot up as though the clothes line was pinching his ass.

Just then Bhut'Anklina hobbled through the gate, drunk, singing a song that men sing in the bush. He had polio; his one leg shorter than the other. He lived in one of the rooms in the main house, with Granny.

Bhut'Anklina usually came home drunk at the end of the month, after cashing his disability grant in town. He got into trouble with Granny for this and we'd hear them scream at each other over money. Granny said Bhut'Anklina's disability money was meant for her because she took care of him and the two boys. Bhut'Anklina, for his part, never contradicted Granny, he merely hobbled to his room and passed out.

Shhh! Bhut'Bushie quietened him down.

What's this, cousin? Bhut'Anklina asked.

The boys are getting it, Bhut'Bushie said, and Bhut'Anklina laughed with his hand over his mouth.

The three of us watched with obscene glee as the boys took their punishment.

She hates booze. Hates music. Hates people. She thinks she's white, Bhut'Anklina said of Ma'Gabs.

After a while we lost interest in the beating, which took too long to end, like a murder trial. Bored, we followed Bhut'Bushie to his room. He pulled out a chair for Bhut'Anklina and I sat on the floor. Bhut'Anklina and Bhut'Bushie smoked a joint while we listened to a jazz record. Piles of cassettes were stacked on the desk, and on top of an electric keyboard. There were also TDK tapes labelled with stickers. Bhut'Bushie's trumpet leaned against the box containing his collection of vinyls.

I sat quietly, listening to the two of them talk about the women they'd slept with. All the women were from our neighbourhood.

Mtshana, have you been with a woman, yet? Bhut'Bushie asked.

No, I blushed, shaking my head shamefully.

Good for you, he said and they both laughed.

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When Litha and I were done eating we walked back to our flat. At the Grand Parade the stench of deep-fried chicken hung in the air outside KFC. Out-of-work men stretched out on the Town Hall steps. They seemed oblivious to the soft drizzle. They just sat there, staring at passing cars like cattle. We turned into Buitenkant Street and walked towards The Book Lounge.

On Barrack street, next to the police station, we passed a group of women calling out to their sons and lovers and brothers who were locked up in the holding cells on the top floor of the police station. Some of the women had scarves covering their heads, other's didn't.

A name would be thrown up at the cells. A response would be thrown back down. As more names were called up, a din grew inside the cells as if the men held up there had suddenly grown impatient with their condition.

I could hear pleas for bail and declarations of love and affection. Some of the women were young, around our age, and had small children with them. The calls and the call-backs continued as Litha and I crossed the street, intent on the bookshop, to steal the book, which Litha succeeded in doing. In the flat I took the book from the kitchen counter, where Litha had left it, and leafed through the pages without reading them, then set it down again.

3

By the time I attended first grade I could already write, thanks to ma's tutoring. That I could place words down on paper so early in my childhood had a terrible effect on my character. Writing made me reticent and reluctant to open my mouth. The other kids, those who struggled with their alphabet, were sociable and formed alliances easily in the classroom and on the playground, while the written word, it seemed, caused me to retreat into myself. This added to my isolation. If I needed to use the loo I'd whisper into the ear next to me in class and the kid would raise his hand confidently to ask the teacher if I might be excused to use the bathroom. I'll forever be grateful to that boy who spoke up for me, for without him I'd have burst my bladder a million times over.

From an early age my favourite colour was black. Black evoked for me the sensuality of lace because ma took to bed in an oily black nighty which slipped delicately over her folds when she moved, like the oiliness of star-studded evening. I found this same rich fluidity in the movement of black ink on paper.

I used to tell ma that sunflowers were sweet because the sun poured its citrus nectar into their open faces. Ma didn't disabuse me of this childish delusion. Then one day I bit into a sunflower and recoiled from its bitterness. I'd been wrong all along.

I have come to realise that I've been wrong about many things, have made a lot of assumptions, have lost myself in a labyrinth of self-delusions.

It was so long ago, the time she taught me to write my name, that the form of those early lessons floats hazily in my memory like something I hallucinated.

It is on that marbled floor of memory that I find our family album, the one which ma kept in her drawer, next to her bible.

In one of the photographs I am plump, with my hair knotted into horns, like a little devil, lying flat on the floor on my belly. In front of me is an open exercise book. I can see squiggles on the page but I can't find my name or any other word in those squiggles of black ink and crayon; only trembling letters and shapes, as if I had suffered a stroke.

The photograph is bleached orange as if bathed in sunlight and, stuffed in a pink onesie, I look like raised dough. My onesie is cut at the ankles because the garment has grown too short for my legs which push away from my waist. I seem serious and reflective in the photograph. I'm holding a crayon as if it were a Parker, my toes pointing toward the ceiling.

Ma sits on a white plastic chair above me. Behind her is a portrait of a mother holding a child in her arms. Ma has a perm and her brow is knitted into a rictus of concentration. Gold teardrop earrings dangle from her ears like soundless church bells. Her legs are crossed by the ankle and in her hand she holds a ruler.

You hated that ruler, she said to me once. We were going through the album together on her bed.

I'd make you fold your fingers like this – she made her fingers into a cone – every time you got your name wrong. Even though I didn't hit you hard you'd howl and blow on your fingers as if you were putting out a fire. I knew you were always going to be a dramatic child. This is why I fed you Shakespeare.

Ma was 19 when she had me. In one of the pictures she took before depositing me into this wound of existence her legs are lean, long, like a supermodel's. She is standing under a tree smiling shyly. Shards of sunlight break all over her face.

In the portrait with me on the floor that timid joy is replaced by an iron mask.

Under ma's hand and her sharp, unrelenting gaze I built myself tactics and strategies to resist her. I dove, head first, into my books, although I hated them. All I wanted to do was play outside with the other kids in my street, or to draw comic heroes in my exercise book.

Instead I found myself reading her favourite tragedies, which she brought back from school where she taught. I poured my energy into *Macbeth*, *Julius Caesar*, *Othello*. I read the plays repeatedly, struggling with Old English. I calculated that if I impressed her with her favourite Plays she would be lenient on me for the fact that I bore my father's resemblance, as she was wont to remind me every time I got into trouble with her.

So when she asked me, Why does Othello kill himself, I hesitated for a moment, sifting through my mind for the most impressive answer – shame, guilt, all were too easy to arrive at – then answered, with my chest puffed up, that Othello did not exactly kill himself, ma; he had intended the fatal blow for the Moor in him, the thing that signified his stupidity and gullibility. In this way one could say that his suicide was a brave act, for it was out of nobility and a deep sense of belonging to Venetian aristocracy that he had to erase the Moor in him, the Moor who'd proved to

be both ignorant and murderous at the same time. This is why Othello committed the act, ma, to restore his rank in Venetian society and amongst his military friends.

Good, ma said and went back to the book she was reading.

I had thought to bring up Othello at the table when Zan brought up the nosy neighbour but felt ashamed to bring up Shakespeare in such a hip crowd. The Bard seemed out of tune with the times, too classical, not radical or post-modern enough. However, I've always held Shakespeare's Iago to be the chief archetype of the nosy neighbour. The way he acts in the shadows, poisoning people's hearts, turning them against each other, all with that feigned innocence of a dog which feeds on people's pity. *When devils are about to commit their biggest sins, they put on their most heavenly faces*, Shakespeare writes. And how true the Bard's words are, even for today's society. Needlessly, I've always been skeptical of anyone who insists on being innocent, pure, a person who demands faith from others. I've never had faith, neither in God nor religion, nor human beings. I had little choice in the matter since ma was the opposite of a heavenly face and would remind me with that leather strap throughout my childhood.

4

From the counter, I picked up *On Grief and Reason* again, then sauntered to my room. Standing by the window I had a feeling that the rain would never let up.

Now it fell freely over the city in a loud whir. Sheets of liquid glass cleaved the mist made by the clouds hanging over buildings. It spattered and splashed and burst from the thick grey sky in pails and pails of dampness. It wailed as it fell, it clucked its tongue and it hissed. It trickled from the gutters like rapid gunfire. It twisted mid-air and dove down in sharp pins that pricked the windows and made a

racket. It spread its wings and swooped down like an eagle and swelled around in my room, hushing the silence with its whirr.

It would rain like this for weeks, for months, for all eternity, I thought. I saw puddles form in the potholes and gutters. A two litre bottle of Coca Cola bobbed on the puddles like a bloated corpse on a corrugated current. I shuddered, turned away from the window, and slipped under the covers. I opened the book and was suddenly overcome by fatigue. I fell into a deep sleep with the book still in my hands.

I was roused from sleep by pangs of hunger. I put on a hoodie and stuffed *Lol* in the breast pocket of my trench coat, slipped my tennis shoes on and prepared to go to the Pick n Pay in the Gardens Centre to buy groceries but changed my mind half way through the thought. I made my way to the bar, instead.

In the lift I wondered where Litha had gone. After stealing the book he'd banged it on the table and left. It was unlike him to leave without saying a word; he loved announcing himself. He told me once that it was his parents' teachings to always let people know where you were or where you were going and when you would be back. This, he said, was what women appreciated most in him. I found it weird this idea of having someone know your exact movements and location, but I understood that it conveyed the impression that one is reliable, can be trusted. And I knew I wasn't any of those things. I enjoyed the act of disappearing. Hiding in a studio on campus, in a bar for a lone drink, at the Labia to watch a film, or at the beach in the afternoon, by myself, to read and to think.

I could count in my two hands the number of times I phoned ma in the four years since leaving home for uni. Half the time it wasn't even intentional that I didn't contact her. It was only because of the immense pleasure I found in being alone in the

world, walking about the city during winter, with the collar of my coat turned up, scanning the shop windows for art materials or the bookshops for titles to steal.

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It was during these solitary wanderings that I bumped into Yolanda on Long Street. It was after midnight and I was puffing a cigarette, looking for cheap beer on the cosmopolitan strip.

The street was a cacophony of tourists and drunkards, and tourists who were drunkards, and drunkards who were looking for tourist to scam.

Die frauen sind jier einfach wahnsinnig hübsch, a man in shorts said as I walked past.

Wo kann man hier ein paar heiße votzen finden, another man who was standing with him replied. The second fellow was middle-aged in khaki shorts and hiking sneakers, a pair of spectacles with a holder tucked behind his ears. Both men wore striped golf jerseys.

Looking for business, those were the first words Yolanda uttered. She was sitting at a small table outside Mojito, her legs crossed into a 4, a cocktail in her hand.

Business, I muttered confusedly.

Yes, business, she repeated with a straight face.

The proposition finally clicked.

No, no business for me. I don't have cash, I said.

It's okay sweetie, she said. Say, how much you got.

Enough for a beer, I said shyly.

No problem. Where do you stay.

Perspectives, I said. On Roeland Street.

We can go there if you like.

She finished her drink, got up, and wrapped her arm around mine. We went to The Dubliner for a beer, then went to the flat.

On the way she told me that she was from eDutywa, in the E.C. That after finishing school, she'd moved to Cape Town for a job, which turned out to be sex work. That's what she'd been doing ever since.

Her skin was smooth and brown; she had a deep scar on her forehead. She wore a tight-fitting dress, which accentuated her hips and exhibited her legs. They were strong legs: two short brackets with masculine calves. She wore little make-up and tied her braids into a bun. She carry a small black purse with a gold chain. She was a beauty, in the classical sense, and carried our conversation like someone who'd grown up with many siblings. When she spoke she looked me straight in the eye. I escaped her gaze by pretending to be distracted by something else that had caught my attention across the street.

As she spoke I registered every detail of hers, from her physique, to the shoes she wore, to the rounded joints of her fingers, and the smile lines that cracked when she laughed. I like to think I was attentive because I wanted to paint her, but this would be a lie. I was searching in her being, and on her body, for some dark mark that would affirm my perverse assumptions about her. The scar on her forehead was

already noted. I was searching her body for more data that would increasingly reassure me that she was indeed a prostitute, but no detail could satisfy such an arbitrary designation. It would be the same if she had walked up to me and said, I am a writer. Or a painter. Or the president.

She asked about me and my work. I told her my name and said I was studying painting at the university.

I've never been with an artist before, she lied, for my benefit, no doubt. But I didn't care either way.

At the flat she borrowed one of my t-shirts, a plain grey one. I turned off the light and slid next to her and the moon shone brightly into the room.

No cuddling, she said sternly.

I inched my body away from her and tried to get some sleep.

Slowly, she reached across me and began to stroke my sex from behind. I turned and lay supinely, spreading my legs apart for convenience. She burrowed her head under the blanket. She held me with her right hand and took me in her mouth. Gently, she pressed her free hand against my waist and began sucking me.

Through my open window I could hear a lone sound of a car speeding past, as she sucked and tugged, slowly at first, and then harder and harder as I grew large inside her mouth. Her blowjob was sharp with teeth, but owing to her devotion to what she was doing, I kept my grievances to myself.

I ventured a hand inside her t-shirt – my t-shirt – and began massaging her breasts. She let out a soft moan as though life was escaping her. I watched her lift her

back and part her legs. She sunk her free hand between them and began fingering herself. Now she just had my sex in her mouth but was not doing much else. She seemed to have escaped inside her own body as she played with herself, forgetting that I was even there; but then she would begin sucking me again when I grew soft in her mouth. I sat back, willing myself to come but she finished first. When she was done she came up for air, kissed me on the forehead, and said, Good night.

When I woke up the next morning she was gone. She took the t-shirt and my watch for payment.

***

The lift opened and I hurried out. I passed the security desk with my head down to avoid the security guards who always felt entitled to a greeting. There were people in the foyer but I couldn't make out their faces; they all seemed bland, like faces in a TV commercial. In their movements I could detect a director's hand contriving all their poses and gestures; I was convinced they were all mannequins whose speech issued from a mechanical mouthpiece that ran on Duracell batteries attached to their spines.

Outside Perspectives, rain poured interminably. With its body squeezed into one of the storm drain's iron slits, a rat lay crushed to death. It was as if it had been attempting to escape the filth collecting beneath its body but had got stuck because of its size. A rosy splatter of blood was smeared around its narrow lips, which the rain couldn't wash away.

***

When my aunt was pulled down from the orchard tree where she'd hung herself the sky was clear and her lips were pale blue and daubed with blood like the rat's. The

blood had dried on her half-open lips and her eyes were open and grey with splotches of internal bleeding forming dark red rivulets on the greyish surface. They were as grey as the darkening cloud over the street, and their gaze fell on some middle point in the world, where no object existed, as if my aunt had seen the cleavage that separates space from time. If I were to paint them I'd leave them open without pupils, without colour.

When her body was found hanging from the tree our house quivered with grief. Grandma could not be consoled. My grandfather sat on his easy chair out on the veranda, smoking his pipe with red glass eyes.

I slipped out of the house and joined the men who were hoisting my aunt down from the tree. They tried to shoo me away, the men, but they, too, were busy with their grief to carry out the task with conviction. So I sat a metre or two away from them, on the grass, looking up at the lifeless body clad in a white translucent dress, blowing in the wind like a flag of surrender. I felt a strange emptiness as I gazed at her empty life, as if my entrails had been hollowed out. I could not transcend the feeling; although I blinked, my eyes were dry. They would remain dry even at her funeral, a week later. What struck me most about that day was how clean my aunt's feet were as the four men carried her to her hut. It was as if she'd never set foot on this earth. A blade of sunshine touched the tip of her big toe and made her appear incredibly light. A black ring from the bracelet that Gran used to chain her to the wall, to prevent her from harming herself after her nervous breakdown, was still visible around her ankle.

Once, when Ma was away on one of her church trips, my aunt stole me to a party. We drove in her car, a Honda Ballade. Aunt Lydia made me sit on her lap. We

were listening to Capital Radio and she was singing along to a song whose name I didn't know and I had my hand on the top of the steering wheel while she held it at the bottom, to give me the illusion that it was me who was in control. Like that we roared past Blakeway, Cumberland, past the golf course. I watched the town diminish behind us in the side mirror. I made engine noises with my mouth as we climbed the N2, past the old Transkei embassy. Our windows were rolled down and the Transkei flag writhed on a silver post by the entrance of the embassy as if trying to tear itself away.

We took towards the Transkei Defence Force military headquarters. It was summer and the fields were a shimmering bottle green and the wind lapped up our faces and hummed like seashells in my ears. If I had my easel then I would've set it on the side of the road and begun to paint. Dairy cows lay on each side of the road. They watched us with vacant stares as we flew past.

We dipped down a slope and a row of whitewashed houses suddenly appeared from behind the trees. These were families who had put their lives in the service of the Homeland, and here they were, in the middle of nowhere, buried behind a bush, all but forgotten.

All in all, the neighbourhood was not impressive. It had just one street. My aunt called it Vergenoeg.

The house we visited was number five. There were army trucks and Land Cruisers lining the street. There were children playing hopscotch on the road and a pack of dogs roamed freely about. When we parked the car the dogs pricked their ears but didn't bark, they just went about sniffing my aunt's car and one of them urinated on one of the hind wheels.

In the kitchen I held on to my aunt's skirt as she greeted the women there with kisses. Men shook hands but never kissed, which I've always found strange and alienating. I supposed that this was a show of strength, of fortitude, this coldness that exists between men, as though they had no other body part so to speak, only hands and feet and foreheads with which to clash.

Anyway, some of the women kissed me on the mouth and I recoiled from the taste of booze.

Aunt Lydia wore a floral viscose print, a hodgepodge of green and yellow leaves. She had doused the front of the dress with perfume.

In the lounge, men sat on couches, their voices rising and falling with laughter. Some were outside on the veranda, talking and smoking. The children were strewn on the floor like flotsam and I was too timid to join them so I held on to aunt Lydia's skirt.

Ah, Lydee, it's you all along, a man in high boots said.

He wore military fatigues tucked inside his immaculate military boots. His arms were muscular and his chest filled his black vest. His sharp, chiselled torso made me think of the sculptures on the cover of ma's *Julius Caesar.* I found myself wondering if he too, like those sculptures, had a small penis. Suddenly, I felt unchildlike, private, polluted. Just then the man arose from his couch and towered over us like a monument. A mountain of a man.

We were wondering about all that commotion in the kitchen, he said to my aunt. And who's this little soldier, he pinched my cheeks ,which might have looked crimson from the shame I felt because of my earlier thoughts.

My sister's son, my aunt replied coyly.

The man opened his arms and folded my aunt into his body while I stood holding her dress. He was handsome in a way a man can be said to be handsome: tall, clean shaved, with dimples that sank into his cheeks when he smiled.

After the embrace he kissed her on the mouth. A sweet, sexless kiss, which made her smile and giggle as though the kiss tickled some invisible part of her. Both men and women seemed to elicit this excitement in her and I never understood why.

You're in good shape, Speech, my aunt said, after they broke from their embrace.

Ah, what can I say, these times keep a man in great shape.

He was self-assured and unmoving like a slab of foundation on which a house is built. I could see why my aunt admired him. Most of her male friends were effeminate drunks who expected her to pay for their drinks. By contrast Bhut'Speech seemed like an island, a man who could stand on his own two feet. Even his laughter was manly. He didn't cackle like a hyena, like those other drunks. He laughed with his shoulders and his abdomen until his entire body quivered.

Aunt Lydia shooed me away, to join the other children who had their toys sprawled on the floor. They were playing with these cheap toy cars, dragging them along a circuit made of plastic clothes pegs in an array of colours that made me think of sweets. The circuit coiled centrifugally – a child's topographic image of a city.

The coloured pegs were the skirting of a freeway and some were arranged in clumsy squares and rectangles, denoting houses and buildings and other ideas that would spring up as we played.

I sat down among them and pretended to play. We pushed our little cars along the freeways solely for the excitement of bumping into each other and causing an accident. It was the thrill of danger, the likelihood of conflict, that aroused in us such

despicable pleasure, just as beer and whiskey flung the adults into convulsions of ecstasy.

We are days away from taking back our country, Bhut'Speech was saying.

My aunt laughed.

Another officer, whose voice was musky, said, It's no laughing matter Lydee, our elections are only a few months away.

You surely don't imagine that you will win this country back through a popular vote, do you, my aunt said, after folding her legs on her lap.

How else do you suggest we go about it then, Lydee, since you seem to know just about everything, the man with the musky voice said.

Countries are won with arms, Parliaments are won in the booth, she said.

This threw them into fits of laughter. No longer able to contain themselves, the men raised their glasses and the brown liquid lunged forward and touched the rims. Behind Bhut'Speech hung a still life of flowers in a vase.

Let me put on some music, Bhut'Speech got up.

Wait, aunt Lydia said, I have something for you in the car. Won't you be a man and fetch it for me, it's in a black bag in the backseat.

She handed him her keys.

After Bhut'Speech had left the room – forgetting to put on the music he'd promised – they continued to talk about politics and possibilities, the will of the people, the power of the majority.

It was the man they called Major who was doing all the talking while the others nodded their assent. Major wore a thick moustache and a big, round, clean shaved head that sank into his shoulders.

A state is scarcely the will of anything other than its own manifest power, aunt Lydia said, responding to Major. And the men you will depose at the polls will continue to rule in spite of you.

You are wrong my dear, the Major said. It's our turn to rule.

That's where you're wrong, it's your turn to be ruled with your consent, aunt Lydia drained her glass is a single gulp.

You must be mistaking me for a Matanzima lackey, Lydia, and my dear how wrong you are. Us, the men in this room, wrested power from Matanzima in order to build a united South Africa. We are no country boys; we've made sacrifices to see this new dawn.

My aunt let out a soft laugh followed by a sigh before saying, You sacrificed nothing, Major. Look at you, you look like something that's been fed a sacrifice, if you ask me.

You know nothing of the sacrifices we'd made to get to this point, Lydee, Major said. You know absolutely nothing!

Although he was visibly angry, the Major seemed to want to lean over and kiss my aunt but couldn't negotiate his weight off the couch and so he took her hand instead, and kissed it – my aunt let him – his eyes red with poison, desperate and crafty.

You are such a flirt, Major, aunt Lydia said, and delicately pulled her hand away.

Trust me, I know a lot more than you about sacrifice, she said vaguely.

So what have we been fighting for, my dear, if not to take this country back.

The question drew a silence that seemed to spread itself around the living room.

Major, my aunt said, since you've never had a country in the first place, what do you imagine you are taking back.

The Major blinked and his moist eyes suddenly turned dry. He took a sip of his whiskey but the liquid refused to go down. He shifted in his seat, refusing to sit still.

To tell you God's honest truth, I have grown tired of trying to explain to men their own motivations, my aunt said. Your head seems big enough to do the job itself. For some obstinate male reason you all seem to prefer lies to truth, as if the truth would kill you.

Hold on now, Lydee, Major bellowed from his couch. We might let you sit with us but you have no right to insult us.

It's you, on the other hand, Major, who is insulting us.

Damn you, Lydia, after all the children we've lost.

Children, yes. But you know what is most unfortunate, all those children died for nothing. One only has to look at the folds around your waist to realise the tragedy. And here you are with your yarns about sacrifice and taking this country back, as though you were a child. I am beginning to suspect you're sitting at the wrong table, I should have asked my nephew to join us, at least that child has some sense, and you could take your place on the floor with the other children.

At this last bit, which my aunt performed with a sweeping movement of her arm, the Major fumed and his face suddenly puffed and became somewhat radioactive, if you can imagine what radioactive could be on a human face. I pretended to play, although my ear was at the table, with the adults, while my hand pushed the black van, which was fashioned after the one driven by the A-team in the popular television series, on the brown carpet with cigarette burns.

Upon his return Aunt Lydia took Bhut'Speech by the arm and he followed her outside, to the veranda.

I rose from the floor, leaving the toy cars behind with the children, and joined them.

There was fire inside an upturned half-drum with a net cast over it, with its flames licking the rudiments of dusk. Two men stood around it, smoking and warming their hands. Bhut'Speech and my aunt whispered in the corner by one of the pillars. She had brought him a bottle of cologne and he seemed unhappy about it.

Just tell her you bought it yourself, Speech, come on, my aunt was saying. Be a man for once.

Bhut'Speech shrugged and slid the bottle inside his pockets. He squashed the bag and threw it in the flames, then pulled the cigarette from my aunt's mouth and took a deep drag, then also threw that away.

Kwedini, one of the men beckoned to me, How old are you.

Four years old, I said, in the new English I had acquired from ma.

Four years, the man said incredulously.

We will be taking you to the bush soon, his companion said and made a snipping gesture with his fingers as though they were a pair of scissors, and they both laughed.

I knew exactly what they meant by the gesture, so I ran inside the house and cosied up next to my aunt.

On our way home Aunt Lydia fastened my seatbelt and put on a sad sounding song as we drove in silence. The moon shone softly over the plastic darkness of the evening. She hummed to the melody of the song as she drove; with her window rolled to her shoulder, she tapped her cigarette out of the window and the ash flew in the

wind. That image of her smoking, tapping her fingers on the steering wing, humming to the song, is burned in my consciousness. That evening aunt Lydia didn't seem like someone who would take her own life.

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I crossed the street with the hood of my sweater over my glasses and my hands in my trench coat. I should've worn boots, I thought, for water seeped into my tennis shoes and made my feet clammy. I hurried to the Kimberly Hotel at the corner of the block, across the street from The Book Lounge. The only cars on the road were parked along the sides of the street; and glistened with rain. Softly, quietly, the street lamps came to life. I looked at my watch; it said 18:31.

Inside the Kimberly the air was warm and stale and the light dim. I ordered a beer and found a high chair by the window, looking out onto Roeland Street. The place was packed for a Saturday. Four scruffy looking men with salt-peppered hair sat around one of the upturned barrels rehashing stories of their youth. They spoke bitterly about lost time; their faces turned sour and their lips curled after every sip of the sweating beers that squatted before them on the barrel.

Youth is a cruel joke, one of them grumbled.

Along his arm he had a faded tattoo of a siren sitting on a boulder by the ocean, with waves crashing beneath; and beneath the waves I saw words that could've been a song or a poem. The hair along his liver spotted arm was gold. Grey tufts shot out of his large ears, which were pierced with black horns. He tugged the black horn with his massive left hand when he spoke. One of his friends wore a fedora and had a flat face like a pancake; another wore a peak cap, his spectacles perched on a long

pointy nose. There was an old timer with them, much older; he seemed almost listless as if he were going in and out of consciousness as the other men spoke. Inside the bar, which was packed with young-looking people, the men seemed out of place, like flies in a jug of milk.

Listening to them, I could tell that they had tasted the cherry of life those men and it had shrivelled and turned sour in their mouths. Age had introduced to their equation the humiliation of decay which they were unwilling to accept.

Buying sex is like paying for oxygen, the man with the faded tattoo shook his head.

Don't be so dramatic, the fedora said. You never complained before.

It was by choice, then; but not anymore, the man shook his head.

What is meant by a decent life is the number of choices available to you, the man with the spectacles said.

I couldn't agree with you more, said the man with the faded tattoo, then sighed, raising his hand for the barman to bring them another round.

The last man at the table, the old timer whose narrow features were focused on a black girl who wore a blue blouse with a low V-neck collar that exposed her heaving cleavage, swallowed something hard and indigestible as he watched the woman's bust. His Adam's apple bobbed and he didn't say a word back to his friends.

He looked like a dried prune with his beady black eyes that shook ever so slightly in their sockets as though they were arthritic, as he ogled the woman's chest.

I turned to look through the window, at the crowd gathered outside The Book Lounge and spotted Zan under an umbrella. She was fingering her phone.

A young, lanky character with fair skin like beach sand, wearing thick rimmed tortoiseshell glasses, was speaking and gesticulating wildly in the rain. His soundless

words fell out of an arched mouth held open by some invisible force. He didn't seem to stop talking. The confidence of youth, I thought. Around him a crowd listened eagerly, nodding agreeably under their umbrellas.

I watched as hunchbacked octogenarians squeezed through the crowd and trickled, one by one, into the bookshop for the event. They cast a sad, fading memory of a past intellectual life in the warm light of the bookshop. Soon they would retire to their expensive tombs in the Southern Suburbs having been scarcely noticed by the jostling limbs of the young, or transformed by the event they'd come to attend, I thought.

I took out my phone and sent Zan a text. I told her I was at the Kimberly. I watched her break away from the crowd. She crossed the street but stood in the island as a car flew past She looked over at the bar window, searching expectantly, hoping to find my face which I, at that moment, drew away from the window before she could spot me – I don't know why I did this although at the time it felt as necessary as relieving oneself.

She had on the same denim dungarees from last night and the orange knit cap. Her thin-framed Paul Smith glasses were perched on the tiny features of her face.

After she sat down we ordered two Blacks.

So where's the rest of the gang, she asked.

You're asking the wrong person, I said.

Anyway, they are cunts, she said.

Is this about yesterday, I asked.

No, not really. Sometimes I just think that you guys are cunts the were you carry on, that's all. It's like you're children sometimes and I wonder if I've made a mistake.

Zan, we are children and being a cunt is not the worst thing in the world, I said cheerfully. Also, I thought we were supposed to live dispassionately. Cunt is a very charged word. I'm disappointed, I shrugged pretentiously and took a sip of my beer.

I guess I'm tired. My sister kept me in her studio the whole day – sewing.

What's she working on, I asked.

Who knows, she said. She works me to the bone and won't even tell me what her show is about. But I love what she does. It makes me wish I had some kind of talent.

Math is a talent, I said.

I know, but it's not as cool as what my sister does or what you do. You should see the chaos, the sketches and the cut-outs and the paintings, the threads and books strewn all over the place. Every time I visit her studio it's as if I'm seeing it for the first time. She has a bed in there, too, plus a wireless radio. The radio's a bit kitsch, if you ask me, but she likes listening to the news while she works. It's as if she's waiting to hear something awful so she can finally leave this country. I mean she never incorporates anything overtly topical in her work to justify the news obsession. She just seems to be waiting, biding her time, but I could be mistaken.

Her studio sounds cool, I said. Not like the crap we get at uni. And your country has gone insane by the way and it's going to go crazier still.

What's happened now.

Haven't you been following the news, I said. They're hunting down African immigrants like wild game up in these streets.

Can't say I'm surprised. Nothing about this place surprises me anymore, Zan sighed and took out a cigarette.

She looked over her shoulder and caught the fedora staring; when her gaze met his, the fedora quickly made as though he had lost an item for which he was now desperately patting his pockets to find.

God, imagine, she said, sighing and lighting the cigarette.

Imagine what, I asked.

Dying in this pathetic country.

I'm sure that's nothing for you to worry about, where we die.

Well, I do. I'm very tired. Like super tired. Sometimes it feels like I'm performing all my tasks underwater and don't get enough air. I don't know if that makes any sense at all. And the Brintellix doesn't help. I've already gone through Lorien, Zoloft, Cipramil . Ziervogel suggested he switch me to Valium and I nearly barfed right there in his office.

So what are you going to do, I said. By the way, do you still have that Brintellix, it really helped.

She took out the tray from her satchel and passed me two pills, Knock yourself out.

I swallowed the tablets with my beer.

It's all a bit much. School. Parents. Friends. My sister's projects. You assholes. What I need is time away from life.

I kept quiet and tried to listen but I couldn't. Zan and I had agreed to be dispassionate about life, to be reasonably distant from each other, and to uphold a philosophical resentment for sentimentality.

D'you know who's not a cunt, she said. My sister. She knows life is unbearable, yet she keeps on ploughing, sowing, creating, without complaint. I kind of like that about her: her integrity and hard work.

She seems solid, your sister, I said.

Anyway, what are we doing here, Zan said.

The question clung to the thick foggy atmosphere of the bar, to the prickly air and the voices climbing on it as though it were the Tower of Babel; to the sounds made by tongues greedily slurping beer, to the sound of the jukebox jerking, to the wrinkled walls and the pink flushed faces gathered around barrels and leaning against the bar; to the filthy white sculpture standing on the corner by the exit to the men's, completely covered with soot and trembling with the vibration of the music; to the parts of the wall that chipped away and to the layers beneath.

We're here to know what it's like to die, I said.

It was the first thing that came to mind and I enjoyed its utter grimness. Zan gave a disinterested sigh, shook her head, and cast her eyes at the TV hanging over the doorway that led to the women's, where most of the patrons took lines of cocaine.

The four men who spoke bitterly about life were all preparing to leave. They downed their beers in large gulps that betrayed a yearning for the virility of earlier days. One of them went over to the bar to pay. Zan excused herself and went to the bathroom. I lit a cigarette, glancing up at another TV playing highlights of a soccer match.

From behind me a hand fell on my shoulder, I thought it was Zan, then a voice said, Mr Shape Shifter.

I brushed the hand off; it was Litha's. He went over and took Zan's chair. I could see that he had had a lot to drink. His eyes were red. He wobbled on the chair

before finding his balance. He fished a box of tobacco from deep inside his hoodie pocket and painstakingly began to roll a cigarette while nodding to himself.

There are times I feel like you are the only friend I have in this city, he began. But sometimes it feels like I don't know you at all.

He licked his cigarette and asked me for a lighter. He seemed ruminative and morbid. He turned and lifted his hand for a beer. The barman, Wellington, knew what each of us drank.

Your friendship appears calculated, Litha was saying. Curated to meet the appearance of friendship with none of its qualities whatsoever. Since this morning I can safely say, I don't trust you at all.

I listened to him without a response. What stirred inside me was a kind of disgust. I knew his sincerity was only a ploy.

Lass uns ein gutes bier trinken, a voice behind us was saying.

You're the only one here who gives a shit about that, I said.

The words seemed to slap him in the face and he brushed his cheek with a self-satisfied smile.

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His mood swings began after I'd told him that a journalist asked me for an interview early in the year. It was after a series of paintings of mine had been made part of group show in one of the commercial galleries.

The whole artist as entertainer thing, he'd said, rolling his eyes. What do journalists in this country know about art anyway?

A day later, after telling him I'd declined the interview, he took me out for drinks and we spent that evening trashing all the artists we'd known.

However, my refusal to speak to the journalist hadn't prevented her from writing about the work. Of the series – images of dresses – she wrote:

> *The elusiveness of this work tempts one to speak about it in abstract terms. At a distance, the paintings are merely images of dresses, floral, exquisite. However, when you look up closely, they transmute into something entirely other, something ghostly and unsettling. There is an almost immaterial presence to them; of being embodied by a nebulous form not quite accessible on the surface. This embodiment finds sharp relief in the careful play of light and shadow, which create what seems like wrinkles, as if the dresses were won by a figure/s the artist doesn't was us to see. Lacking a focal point from which to enter the image, you get a sense of irony and pointlessness, of being snubbed by the unyielding refrain from within the image itself, keeping you always at a distance.*

***

Yo, Litha said. From behind me Zan had just emerged from the bathroom, sniffling. It was either a cold or coke and I didn't care either way.

What did I miss? Zan said. By the way there's a bigger table over, she pointed to an empty table.

As we changed tables the man who sat behind us said to his friends, almost contemptuously, *Ich habe mein handy und geldbeutel erst vor kurzem verloren*.

Alle männer hier sind gauner, the table laughed.

Before we could ask for a new round, Wellington appeared with three drafts of beer held above his head and banged them on our table with that distinct sailor's attitude that barmen put on to seem both rowdy and approachable, smiled, showing a fine set of teeth, and disappeared to the bar.

To friendship, Zan raised her glass; we followed and clinked our glasses high up in the air, at the height of the stench that enveloped the bar.

Do you know what he calls me now? I said to Zan. A Shape Shifter.

That's not nice, Zan said, looking at Litha.

Ask him, he'll tell you, Litha said.

Because I didn't help him steal a stupid book.

One minute he's a thief, then it turns out he's a damn moralist, Litha said and chugged his beer.

I'm allowed to change my mind, am I not?

Anyway, it doesn't matter now, he continued, I have the book.

Lukhanyo walked in and spread out his arms as he approached our table. He had a plaster over his nose and was wearing a shirt and tie and carrying a backpack, a pair of gleaming leather lace ups on his feet.

Looking dope, Zan said. Litha and I agreed.

So how was it? She asked.

It was cool, I guess. Not too rough. We basically just sit there with headphones on and wait for people to call in.

Call in for what? Litha said.

To have their funeral claims processed, Lukhanyo replied.

Doing God's work, Litha said and for the first time since his arrival smiled earnestly.

Nah, cat, nothing of the sort, Lukhanyo said.

It was true, death was everywhere around us. It travelled with the lynch mobs which were stalking and killing African immigrants in the cities. People were set alight. Newspapers ran with a front page picture of a man slumped on his hands and feet, the flames eating his flesh. They called him The Flaming Man, as if he were a kind of daredevil at a circus. But this was a man of flesh and blood, who had a family back home in Moz, who was humiliated, killed, and burnt in broad daylight, while the South African Police Services and journalists watched the scene as if it were a game of soccer. Once the lynch mobs had quenched their thirst for justice, for that is how they framed the massacre, fifty-six men and women lay dead. It was like living inside *Guernica*, only it was in real time, and within our borders, the murders committed by close relatives, in our name. *They are taking our jobs*, the mobs chanted, gleefully outraged. It was all really shameful, no wonder we barely spoke about it, except in whispered conversation.

Wellington banged another beer on our table. No doubt he'd seen Lukhanyo arrive and had not waited for the call.

Oddly enough, at the office we're beginning to see more and more third party policies being taken on behalf of immigrants, Lukhanyo was saying. It's very bizarre but we can't do anything about it. Some people are set to make lots of cash from this what's happening. Our policies pay ten thousand for a funeral and you're looking at hundreds of policies being literally opened every day. Because the pay-outs are low, we don't even require an ID to sign up a third party for cover; we only need to see a death certificate after the fact. And we don't trace how that money is used. Apparently, it's nothing new. All over the country, the company has seen a similar

pattern. There are even syndicates involved. They're hustling immigrant families for death certificates, so they can claim with us.

Everyone's trying to make a quick buck, Litha said.

And trying to be on the news as well, Zan added. You'll be surprised what other people will do to be the centre of attention. These lynch mobs who claim to be victims. The absolute scum and underbelly of our celebrity culture.

It reminds me of this thing that ma said to me, I said to them, surprised at myself for speaking about ma.

I paused and reached for a cigarette, wondering how much to divulge and how much to conceal. I had wanted to say that ma told me that one of her female colleagues took up life cover on her husband and then later had him killed. But Zan would've been offended by the insinuation. So I re-framed the story and said: My mother was told me that blue-collar workers tend to take life policies on their spouses to have them assassinated afterward for the pay-out. The practice is called Cashing, as in drawing cash from an ATM but that ATM is an actual human being.

Zan gasped. Litha burst out laughing. Lukhanyo joined him. And I felt awkward. Had I made a joke? I thought I had been serious. Their laughter made what I'd said seem exotic. All my life I had been obsessed about the universality of my experience and now here, among friends, my experience seemed somewhat foreign, alien, shameful. Zan began to laugh as well.

I got up from the table and said I had to go.

I need to prepare for an early tut on Monday, I think that's what I said. I was too confused to note the words I uttered.

I hugged Zan and went out of the bar.

The rain was gentler now, almost drizzling. I crossed the street with their laughter trailing behind me. They weren't laughing at my story anymore, they were laughing at me, I thought.

I was always guarded around them, afraid to reveal too much, too much what exactly. A secret a child is given when he is too young, an event that must be tucked behind his consciousness for fear it might paralyse him. There, in the shadows, it festers and grows boils that burst just under his skin, boils meant for his eyes only.

There was also the matter of my father, whose posthumous presence – his money – cast a pall over my life, so much that the doors it held open turned my waking life at uni into something of a fraudulence – a constant source of internal shame and guilt. Zan, Litha, and Lukhanyo always struck me as being comfortable in their skin, maybe too comfortable, whereas I coiled and writhe in mine as if I were crawling inside myself, like the snakes inside my dreams.

I heard a screech very close to my face. A car had stopped right in front of me as I was crossing the street. I raised my hand apologetically. Behind the wheel a face that was dimly lit by the street lamp, was in contortions of rage as if it was I who had nearly endangered the car with my body.

I picked up my pace as I approached Perspectives but my head was hot like it would explode, so I stood outside, with the laughter still ringing in my ears.

Instead of going inside I walked up to Plein street, towards Parliament, then took a left towards the park, all the time playing the laughter back to myself over and over again.

I found a bench and sat without wiping the seat. A string of fairy lights lined the lamps that lit up Government Avenue, which runs from the top to the bottom of the Company Gardens. I heard laughter again but this time it came from somewhere

down the path. I followed the laughter with my eyes, then got up and walked towards it.

A group of homeless men who had lined the chairs on either side of the pathway with cardboard and refuse bags were sharing a bottle of wine. I approached them boldly, giving off no hint of fear. They had scarcely noticed me when I said, Can I join you?

Ja, why not, one of them said.

What brings you to our palace? Another asked.

Just need some air, I said.

Air? In this rain? the man replied.

Jy's mal, said another.

They all laughed but I didn't mind their laughter. It was warm and ironic; it made me relax.

I took out a cigarette and offered them one to share.

It's a beautiful evening, I said, looking up at the canopy of trees whose leaves trembled with drizzle and glistened with the light from the lamps.

Beautiful *se gaat*, said the one who was holding the bottle of wine by the neck.

Beauty is an illusion, I thought. This evening, this rain, these trees, they were what they were; it was I who sought beauty in them and thus made them beautiful to my own mind, even if this was not necessarily true.

You're right, I said. At least the trees are useful.

You can say that again, the man with the bottle said. And they laughed at my disillusionment and I welcomed their laughter with an open heart.

You're lucky to find us here, he said, passing me the bottle. I snatched it from his hand and drank it greedily.

Nee maan fok, don't be so fucking greedy.

I passed the bottle while apologising, then wiped my mouth.

If the police find us here, they take us. Just like that. The man snapped his fingers. Do you know why?

Why? I replied.

Because they're *fokking naaiers*, that's why.

No, really, the man said. When they need to meet their quotas up there at the station they come collect us. We're the declining crime stat of this city although, as you can see, there are *mos* no criminals here. They think they're slim those *ous* and if you were to tell them this they'd crush your skull.

He made an action like a tomahawk falling on a log with his hand and said, finish and *klaar*; *dood*.

I didn't know if any of what he'd said was true and my brain was too tired to probe the matter further, so I took another swig from the bottle and gave them two cigarettes, and bid them a farewell. They didn't make to hug me or anything, those men, and this I found strange although not surprising; they only smiled and showed me their dirty mouths. I was certain that among themselves they hugged and kissed and made love. Just as relationships between blacks and whites were forbidden by policy in the apartheid state, those men kept their intimacy strictly between themselves, as if it were written in law. It couldn't have been any single person responsible for creating and maintaining those boundaries, now that we were a free country, I thought. It could only be a system of things, a proliferation of new prejudices brought about by a collective class consciousness.

When I got home Litha hadn't yet returned. The fridge was still empty, so I made myself a cup of coffee and went to bed. I stripped down to my underwear and

climbed onto bed with Duras. I read a few pages and closed the book. I switched off the light, took off my underwear, and masturbated in the dark. Through the window I could see the yellow lights from the rooms of other buildings and wondered if there were other people out there doing exactly what I was doing that very moment. It comforted me the thought of millions of people masturbating across the length and breadth of the planet, a world unified not by its virtues but by small shameful acts that are exercised privately. I curled my toes and scrunched my eyes and shot a load on my naval. I used my underwear to wipe myself and turned to the wall to sleep.

***

Zuko and I learned to masturbate by watching Thando. We could not have been older than ten when he showed us how to do it. We were playing behind the row of backrooms in Granny's backyard and we could hear Bhut'Bushie practising with his trumpet in his room.

It was early evening and ma had gone to a church meeting.

The three of us huddled in a circle. The neighbour's dog swaggered towards us in his usual ill-temper and Thando took out his sex and said, Look. Zuko had a torch with him and presently he switched it on and its light fell on Thando's slender sex but he batted the torch with his hand, saying Zuko should focus on the magazine which he'd placed, with its pages wide open, in the middle of our circle, instead. The magazine was a Sales House and Cuthbert's newsletter which Granny received in the mailbox every month. It contained pictures of models in long flowy viscose dresses and perms.

That's all I need, Thando said excitedly. Turn the page!

While he yanked and stroked his sex, the dog sniffed about us and Bhut'Bushie played his horn.

Yes, that one, Thando pointed and I stopped paging the magazine.

It was a full spread of a woman in a patterned brown dress which stopped just above her ankles; she wore gold earrings and the sleeves of the dress were pulled up, exposing a thin pair of pale wrists.

Thando placed a hand on my shoulder so that I remained bent over the magazine. He sank his fingers into my collar bone as he worked himself into a fever. His sex was larger than ours, this we knew, and now it swelled up like a bullfrog and his foreskin pulled back and tightened around the base of the tip like a turtleneck.

Excepting Bhut'Bushie's horn all you heard was Thando panting like a dog on a hot day. Something other than what was before him seemed to grip him from somewhere inside his sinewy body, he battled with this force with his eyes pressed shut, he worked it with his hand in a tight grip, he sank his nails deep into my collar and it began to hurt, then he let out a muffled cry, something guttural and tense, and goo slithered out of his sex and dripped on the magazine and he told us to touch it and we did. It was wet and cloudy and sticky, like glue.

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The following morning I woke up with a headache. When I left my room Litha's door was closed. I walked to Pick n Pay in Gardens and bought a few things for the flat – bread, milk, cheese, Bovril, a six pack, and butter. The rain had stopped and through a silver band of clouds light fell in weak strands over the city. Buildings were

still damp but the walls showed some colour as if daubed with a pale coat of paint. There were few people in the street, and fewer cars on the road.

The cashier at the Pick n Pay had a strange growth at the back of her neck and her legs were bloated. The navy uniform she wore was washed out and faded. Behind her a young girl who looked no older than fourteen, who bore the cashier's striking resemblance, meekly packaged my groceries in a plastic bag. The way they looked, the two of them, they could have been mother and daughter.

Back at the flat I placed the groceries on the counter then made myself a toasted sandwich with cheese, butter and Bovril. I opened a beer and went back to my room to finish the book.

I spent the afternoon like that.

In evening Litha eventually came out of his room. He was in good spirits. He made us cheese toast and coffee for supper. He wanted to show me Goddard's *Breathless.* We ate and watched the film in his room. It was amusing and tragic, the film, that is. When it was finished I went back to my room. I switched off the light and thought about the last days of my aunt, the months after her illness took half of her mind, when she would stare listlessly out the window, as if searching for some unknown thing hidden inside the blueness of the sky, the lushness of the clouds, the wetness of rain, the intensity of the sun. I don't know if she ever found it. I, too, had been searching, in my own way, through my paintings. Existence is quiet for the most part. It seems only to exist inside ourselves, animated by our fears and longings, I thought, before I fell asleep.

Part III

1

On Monday I went down to the Cape Town station to buy a bus ticket home.

The rain had stopped; but a North Wester still blew coldly along the streets. It picked up paper and plastic along the drains and flung it at store windows and passers-by.

At the station a throng of people milled about aimlessly. Queues snaked their way to the entrance of the building and out onto the street. There was the usual din of hurried feet and the ding-dong of the PA system announcing train arrivals and departures.

I waited patiently with the others. Noting the way they spent their time while waiting to be helped. Most people were on their phones. Others shared intimate conversations, while others talked jovially and laughed. A young boy in a Nike beanie and a backpack played music loudly from his phone, as if for the pleasure of everyone in the queues. But no one danced, nor seemed to notice the music at all. Perhaps, they were used to it, numbed to its effects. I tried to listen to the song, to decipher its genre, but I came out with nothing. It was just loud, rickety, as if it emanated from a hollow tin. Perhaps, it was a new sound, for which South Africans are amply capable of creating with their vast imaginations.

I spent an hour or so in the queue, before I could be assisted.

Back in my room I packed clothes and some books in my backpack. I told Litha I was leaving for home later that afternoon. We were in his room. He seemed

preoccupied and only wished me a safe trip. On my way out I took the book I had refused to help him steal from the kitchen counter and wedged it under my arm as I made my way out of the flat.

At 15:08 the Greyhound couch pulled away from Cape Town Station. After we passed Sir Lowry's Pass I began reading the first essay.

Next to me sat a student, my age more or less. She wore a black knit cap and a green scarf wrapped round the collar of her coat which had a black and brown tweed pattern. She'd buttoned up her coat and underneath it she wore a denim dress which came to her knees, a pair of neon pink leg warmers and a pair of black Nikes.

What do you have there? I asked her once we were clear out of Cape Town.

Celan and Bachmann's letters, she said.

Any good?

Stunning. And you, what do you have there?

Essays, I said, showing her the cover of the book.

Interesting.

After maybe 3 seconds she asked, So where're you headed?

Home.

And where's that?

Uta; you? I said

PE, she said, then added, almost absently, Migrating.

It was true, all of us in that bus were like seasonal drifters, taking the same route, which would later, after the holidays, take us back to the city, as if we lived without a fixed address.

***

They leave us brimming with youth and it takes only this many years for the dust in the earth to fill up their lungs then carry them to their graves, Grandpa said the day our neighbour's son, Luxolo, went to Joburg to work in the mines.

We had helped prepare his going away feast. Since my aunt was no longer with us, ma took the duties of brewing *isqo* for the young man. Gran helped with the cooking; she also fanned the fire to keep the pots warm *eziko*. Gran, whose personality was that of a graceful deity around the house, was now almost without speech after the passing of Aunt Lydia.

When Luxolo took his Xhosa initiation rites, I had been his errand boy, *inqalathi*. This is why he'd wanted me there next to him as he prepared for the journey that would take him to the belly of the earth.

Ebuhlanti, among the other elder men who'd come to see one of their own off, Grandpa spoke of his own peers who had exhausted their youth in the gold mines of Johannesburg. At least those who came to the harbour in Cape Town could always be counted on to return home with their health, unless they abandoned themselves to the vineyards on the farms.

Return to us in one piece, Grandpa said to Luxolo, who sat up straight when the words were uttered, as if the words were fixing his spine.

Luxolo had been his right hand man after dropping out of primary school. He'd looked after our sheep and cattle. He had ploughed our fields and slaughtered at our ceremonies and had sat next to Grandpa stuffing his own pipe with tobacco on lazy afternoons when all the work had been done and dusted around our homestead.

By the time these chaps returned home, Grandpa picked up the line again about his peers, the only thing we could do for them was to collect money in the

church and prepare their graves because by the time they arrived it was too late, they just wasted away.

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Can I ask you something, the girl said.

Sure.

About the E.C.

What about it? I said.

Say, in Uta. Do you get the feeling sometimes that guys there get like an obscene pleasure out of sending their friends to get them ice from the shops?

What? I said, perplexed.

I mean like the made-men, the guys with huge government contracts and political connections, guys who don't do this migratory shit, guys who stay home, make some real dosh, who're like show-offy in this sort of brash South African way, do you think that they get like a twisted pleasure when they send the little guy who was drinking with them to get more ice at the shops or garage or whatever? That's what I'm asking.

Before I could answer, she interrupted, I mean, do you guys like have these types of dudes that side, in Uta?

Sure enough we did, everyone did, I wanted to say, but instead I said, I'm sure Uta has dudes like that.

Why is that you think?

Power? Schadenfreude? I shrugged.

Servants, she said, I think it has to do with having servants.

Well, I said, closing the book, I do see the link.

Are servant's quarters like our thing, you think?

Like, a Uta thing?

A South African thing.

I doubt it, I said.

My English lecturer would agree with you. She says it's a ridiculous supposition. Points me to *The remains of the day*, *Driving miss daisy*, the Second International and all that but I don't know. I've always felt like having a servant was a very South Africa thing. I still do.

Where are you going with this? I asked, perhaps a little too impatiently.

I'm just saying, she said, then went back to her book.

We travelled like that for a while, scarcely exchanging a word.

Near Swellendam, she turned again and said, Say, what do you think of Coetzee?

Coetzee? I said.

John Maxwell.

He's okay I guess.

Pity he left.

Wasn't one of his books banned? I asked.

Censured.

O, I said, was he the first to have his work…

And the last, she said. Can you imagine that, censured in a free country, by some old dudes in some weird dimly lit boardroom with like these huge velvety curtains drawn shut. This heavily annotated novel open before the president and like getting a really close Marxist-Charterist treatment, with the president sort of puffing

away at his pipe and turning the pages slowly, his face growing more and more disgusted with each page, and or maybe coughing like from time to time and the room dead quiet, these poufy whiskey faces all-round the table, nodding, trying to look serious about the whole thing as he like reads and puffs and prunes right there on his big party chair, this silly book turning his hair grey and making him feel like another glass of whiskey or something stronger, and maybe like from time to time he peels these little Post It notes stuck to the pages, like a list of taboos that his advisors or whatever had identified in the story, because you know, he sent the book around in order not to appear undemocratic or whatever, no signs of like a centralisation of power and what-have-you, and so there're like these comments on different sections of the book from like the Ministry of Arts & Culture, Social Development, Intelligence Services, the guys over at Sport and Recreation and of course the party secretary with like a long-winded-stream-of-consciousness-commie-type comment. So basically all these people, like really old people, who'd rather be elsewhere drinking and fondling underage girls, are now gathered round this huge mahogany table at the party headquarters because nothing will move neither in the state nor inside the party until something is done about Maxwell's stupid book, whose fictional world has kind of offended the entire Republic since the party members are also public representatives. And the more the president reads the damn thing the more livid he gets, but in like a very calm, psychotic way that flies under the raider of mainstream media but which has never escaped his colleagues because they've seen dude lose his shit at like the closed-sessions of party conferences or whatever and that's why there's like a tray of good scotch on the table, just in case dude blows his gasket.

How dare he? The dude nearly loses it at like the second half of the book, his lips quivering.

One of his colleagues, say, a DDG of some weird department pours him another glassful of his favourite stuff to calm him down.

How dare he? He bangs on the table after taking another measured sip and his colleagues who are basically beginning to nod off are kind of startled to wakefulness and don't know what's really going on, I mean it's not like they themselves read the damn thing but paid someone else to do the reading for them, even now some of them are wiping drool from the edges of their mouths.

How dare he? Three words against an entire book filled with them. Fuck your sticks and stones. It takes those three words to send the entire thing into overdrive. A strongly worded letter is quickly typed in like this super secure State sponsored IBM laptop with like a gazillion firewalls; it's agreed that the president can't be seen to be involved in any of this because he's like busy trying to fix Africa for fucks sake and so the party writes a statement to the media and the strongly worded letter is sent to the Human Rights Commission or whatever. Right then the party secretary, feeling confident of the work they've accomplished, loosens up a bit and tries to sneak a fart, what he thought would be a silent one, unfortunately the thing drums on the stiff, leather chair and makes a noise like a 50cc motorbike and there's like this steely silence that makes everyone in the room suddenly feel super self-conscious as if they're being watched. The president lets the fart linger in the air for a few more seconds, without saying a word. Being In Control of The Room, an idea he'd highlighted in one of his Leadership & the Economy books in his study at home, next to Yeats. And then like ten seconds later he says, Meeting adjourned, with a straight face, and now no one really knows what to do with the elephant in the room; the party

secretary is mortified and wants to apologise but he figures that maybe it's better not to bring up the past now that it's been already like fifteen maybe twenty seconds, and he's now kind of like trying to convince himself that maybe the president didn't hear anything at all, because you know, he's known for being aloof, but he's not certain and in any case even the people at the other end of the table heard it by the way they sort of arranged their faces in a kind of confused, are-you-kidding-me-type rictus which he, the secretary, couldn't have missed or mistook for anything but what it was, because it's his duty to make sure that nothing in the party goes unnoticed by him, specifically, because he's tasked to basically ensure that not even the slightest infraction of party codes escapes the attentions of his office, otherwise why is he even the party secretary, do you see what I mean?

I think I do, I nodded.

So like on his way out he offers to fetch the president another bottle from his personal stash that he keeps in his office but the president sort of politely declines and that's when he knows that his boss heard him all right and right then he realises that not only is his boss maybe passive aggressive and should perhaps speak to a professional, but that a fart is maybe the most powerful subversive tool and has no place whatsoever in a one party state, that's all I'm saying.

I see, I said.

And that's exactly the point I was trying to make earlier about servants. That there seems always to be this quivering character implied by our class structure. This lackey who must always be there when we need to amuse ourselves.

We pressed on steadily past Heidelberg as the sun began to set.

Somewhere between Knysna and Plett I fell asleep.

When I woke up the girl's head laid on my shoulder. Her breath was warm on my neck; she'd also taken her knit cap off and her locks fell over her face and on my chest.

I unbuttoned my coat. It had grown stuffy inside the bus and the unmistakable stench of feet filled the warm fetid air. The girl stirred when I peeled my coat open but didn't wake up It was nice having her on my shoulder. And I felt her hand climb over my crotch. The gesture was slow, carried with a languidness of someone fending off ghosts in a dream. I became excited easily and this sudden arousal, by a hand that was clearly fast asleep, made me disgusted with myself.

And then I heard her whisper, Are you still up?

Yes, I said, guiltily.

Wanna make out?

The question struck me dumb and before I could utter a word, she felt my face with her hand, with her long, thin, bony fingers. She kissed my neck, my nose, my mouth, then pulled off my glasses and kissed my eyes. She placed her leg on my lap and undid her belt, then her zipper, all the time kissing me hotly with her tongue. She took my hand and guided me into her body. The hair on her vagina was warm and soft; her panties were wet. I rubbed her clit and parted her lips and slipped a finger into her. She didn't moan; only gasped with her mouth turned into an O, almost comically. I reached inside her coat and massaged her breast tenderly. Squeezing her nipples made her bite my lip. I looked around to see if anyone could see us, but it was quiet, people were snoring. Our window was foggy and the night grew darker still. When she was done she asked if I, too, wanted to finish.

I'm okay, I said.

She made her scarf into a pillow and turned to the window to sleep.

Good night, she said

***

My first surrender to a woman was Sis'Noluthando, Luxolo's aunt, who was by custom my aunt as well, when I was six years old. She found me in bed. I had suffered one of my illness, wrapped tightly with a blanket, my head covered as well, afraid that snakes were gathered beneath the mattress, scared to get off the bed or to look. That's when the door creaked open and I drew my head out of the covers, expecting to find ma. But it wasn't her. It was Sis'Noluthando.

Your mother tells me you're sick, she said.

I nodded but said nothing.

She rounded the bed and sat by the candlelight.

Can I be your mother tonight? She felt my forehead with the back of her hand the way ma did, then said, you're burning. A whiff of alcohol swam in her warm words.

So you don't want me to be your mother, heh, she said and climbed into the covers.

Her hand brushed against my legs and my body collected itself into a knot. She kept saying, almost with a hiss, So you don't want me to be your mother, heh? This teasing appeared to egg her on and she began to fondle my sex beneath the blankets. Sneakily, timidly, I tried to withdraw my pelvis from her hand but as I pulled away my waist she reached and squeezed my testicles gently with her knobby

fingers. Her eyes were red, smarting, and she smiled as she massaged me under the blankets. On the bedside table, the candle quivered in the dark.

I remained quiet and prayed that no one walked in and find us. Ma would kill us both, I thought.

She tried to kiss me on the mouth but I turned my head away.

Ah, so you don't want me to be your mother, she teased.

She kissed my forehead, my eyes, then tried to kiss me on the mouth again, again I turned my head, not violently, not with an attitude. I turned my head firmly yet respectfully. After all she was still my aunt in the greater scheme of things. I didn't want to appear disrespectful to her, to make her think that I was acting spoilt because I stayed in town with ma.

She opened my PJs, kissed my torso, kissed my arms, puts my fingers in her mouth and rolled her tongue around them.

I stared at the candle, my body stiff yet open enough for her to satisfy herself.

By refusing her kiss on my mouth I was protecting both of us. I prayed that she didn't regard it as me being a fussy child. I was merely trying to make sure that we could both still function within the same relational framework as before, with her as my aunt and me as her nephew.

She didn't try to kiss me again, instead I felt a warm wetness on my sex and wondered what it was she was doing.

She licked and sucked and yanked me between two fingers and I couldn't make sense of any of what she's doing. I didn't know then what it meant for someone to take your sex into her mouth. The only thing I felt was a paralysing shame, a shame so big I thought it would kill me. But I didn't die.

When she was done she got up and adjusted her clothes. She placed a finger on her lips as she closed the door, then said: remember, I am your mother.

I never told ma, of course, or anyone else.

For days I lay in my bed pretending to be sick for fear of meeting Sis'Noluthando again in broad daylight.

I asked ma if she would lock the door when she was out. I told her I was afraid the snakes would somehow find their way in. She acquiesced to my requests, without much protest. Anyway, I would remain safely locked away, which couldn't have been inconvenient for her, since ma always preferred to have me in the house, away from the other kids, who were likely to pollute me with their earthly corruptions.

When she was away, I'd stay in the room reading stories from her books; I'd relieve myself in the enamel potty under the bed, which she changed when she got back.

When Gran sent me to Luxolo's house to deliver a letter or to fetch a pot and Sis'Noluthando was alone, she'd lift me up and lay me down on the bed which sat on hollow bricks. She'd pull my pants down and play with me.

Always playful, she'd sometimes sing me a song; other times she didn't; sometimes she'd be drinking – this was often when Gran sent me in the evening; but other times she'd be sober and the sun would be hot outside, the curtains drawn, the cow-dung-polished floor cool on my feet.

2

In P.E. the girl got off and we said our goodbyes. She wished me a safe journey and hoped I'd make it home in one piece. As the bus pulled away I realised I'd forgotten to ask her name, neither had she asked me mine.

I fell asleep and didn't see much of the road after that until we reached the Ultra City where ma saw me off in my first year of uni.

I bought a pack a smokes at the Select store and made my way home on foot.

The sun was coming up and the sky was a blue purplish shade along the horizon. The women who sold sex to the truckdrivers who took rooms at the Whistle Stop behind the service station were making their way home as well. They stood at the corner of the main road, trying to catch taxis.

I crossed the road and made my way down a trail that snaked towards the unused railway track. The railway had been defunct for some time. Even when me and ma moved here there were no goods-trains passing by. I crossed the track and lit a cigarette and made my way through the bush. I remembered, in high school, that some boy had been mugged on this path. The muggers had stripped him of his clothes and cut off his dreadlocks and his underwear, which they then gave back to him to take to his parents.

I passed the skeletons of trucks and tractors strewn along the path leading to the old industrial factories, now auto-mechanics' workshops.

When did all this machinery fall apart, I thought. When I left home everything seemed to work, except the railway of course, and now, along this trail, with its tall grass behind which hid the skeletons of a past that was too near to be called a past, everything seemed to gather rust . Too many skeletons for me to count, too much death and decay.

It was only through the sheer luck of my father's death that ma and I found this new house to which this deserted landscape was delivering me. After my father died ma had received a phone call from his estate stating that she was a beneficiary of a substantial sum of money, which she refused to accept at first and then, thankfully, surrendering to the vengeful impulse born from the sense of betrayal she'd felt her entire adult life, she told the executor to deposit everything into her bank account and not a penny less; that, moreover, with this sum of money from a corpse I'd never met, I was able to change schools. And with the new school, a new neighbourhood, came cricket.

During ODI season in the summer months, I'd join the other boys from my street for a game of cricket. We still played on the street, sending balls over fences thick with hedges. But our equipment was decent: wooden stumps, tennis balls, cricket bats. I was still reticent but the new neighbourhood boys, with whom I went to school, would always come around my house, asking for me.

Sometimes I'd ask ma to tell them I wasn't around or I was busy, even if I wasn't doing anything.

I enjoyed spending quiet afternoons in my room, reading or drawing, or watching X-men on TV after school.

How do you know these boys? Ma would ask suspiciously.

They're from school, ma, I'd say.

O, I see, she'd say.

I didn't know whether she believed me or not but it didn't matter because I knew she was getting old and growing tired of always asking question about my whereabouts. Lines were beginning to appear on her face, especially around the

mouth. I couldn't tell whether it was age or money that made her gentler but whatever it was I welcomed it with open arms.

She still forced me to read the classics, but without the ruler. She said everything that was there to learn about the human soul was covered by Shakespeare. She refused to get a maid even with our new status, and so we continued to share house chores. After school, I'd wash my shirt and do my homework and make sure that the house was tidy. When she got home from work she'd cook and I'd do the dishes afterward.

In life you must be an ant, for as soon as you show your feathers, the world will try to steal them, and harm you in the process, she'd tell me as I washed our dishes.

It was typical of her during those years to always give a lesson on humility. The leather strap and the ruler had been replaced by prayer, humility, and gratitude.

It was weird seeing her like that and sometimes I'd miss old ma, crazy ma, I'll-throw-you-with-this-plate-if-you-don't-come-in-and-clean-up-this-mess ma.

Her new gentility didn't prevent me from dreaming of leaving home and her behind, of meeting the world that I found in her books. So I poured myself into my studies, hoping that I'd to go to university one day.

Ma's house emerged at the bottom of the street. It had been given a new lick of paint – a pale peach colour. I climbed over our fence and went up to ma's window and knocked. There was no answer. The neighbour's dogs barked. I knocked again and the lights came on.

Who is it?

It's me, ma.

Go around, she said.

Mfazi, bakwenze ntoni? Woman, what have they done to you? You're so thin. Come in, come in. Let me make you something. Niyavinjwa na kwelaKapa. They starving you in Cape Town.

She fried eggs and made tinned fish stew with lots of onion. She served the food with two thin slicing of toast and a cup of coffee. We watched Benny Hinn of TBN while I ate and she drank her tea.

Every single object in the house appeared perfectly placed, as if arranged by a great cosmic force. The TV and brass ornaments, the coffee table made of glass with a vase of wild lilies, the gold-rimmed painting of a still life, the chandelier and gold-framed mirror at the end of the passage, the six-piece dark wood dining room suite, the pressed glass dinnerware behind lock and key. All of it appeared as impressions of this invisible force as ma, my mother.

I sensed other invisible forces lurking behind the appearance of the objects that floated around us, forces that gave the scene a morbid tawdriness. It didn't help much that our social situation had been improved because of another family's loss.

Mfazi, she said, remember Thando from kwaGranny in Norwood?

Yes, him, I said.

Well, he hacked Granny to death.

Ma began calling me *woman* in my teenage years. I noticed that whenever she needed to share gossip with me, she wouldn't use my name. She'd say, *Mfazi!*

When? I asked

Just after you left for school in Jan.

I didn't know you were still in touch with Granny, I said.

Of course, that was my friend, she said.

And Thando, where is he now?

Wellington Correctional.

Have you been to see him?

Can't bring myself to.

And Zuko?

That one fled to Joburg, ma sipped her tea.

On television Benny Hinn was telling a woman next to him on stage to call her family to join her. They were about to get the Benny Hinn treatment: a hand placed on the forehead, followed by falling or a sudden speaking in tongues.

Get'em 'ere and lin'em up! Get'em 'ere and lin'em up! The charismatic preacher was calling out on his mic.

Briskly crossing the stage he then yelled, *Sum'buddy shout'allelujah!*

And his followers lost all sense of self-restraint.

The family members of the woman on stage with the preacher, hand in hand, were herded down to the stage by men in suits; they could have passed for the Secret Service in a John McTiernan film.

Why? I turned to ma.

Why *ntoni*? Why what? she asked.

Why did he do it?

Because Granny refused to give him his disability grant, ma sighed. These children!

Ma was still in her pyjamas, a teacher's cardigan thrown around her shoulders. All the time she was talking her hands were holding her teacup and saucer.

O, but her funeral was so pretty, she said. At least her people were with her in the end. That's all we pray for, that you will be with us in the end.

After I finished eating I told ma I needed to lie down.

O, yes, my poor baby. Look at you. What have they done to you?

I disappeared into my room.

***

Ma and the man who would become my father met at Independence Stadium in Umthatha following K.D. Matanzima's inauguration as President of Independent Transkei. This was three years after the region had abandoned The Struggle to become a de facto protectorate of the Apartheid government.

It was an unremarkable day, except for the military presence on the grounds of the stadium.

Artists sang and danced for the jubilant masses while army men moved about the crowd with steely faces, carrying R5 rifles on their shoulders, their 9mm parabellums tucked inside black leather holsters.

It was at this celebration that aunt Lydia met Bhut'Speech. He was one of the officers patrolling the grounds. Later, he would defect and join The General's Coup to unseat the Matanzima brothers.

They were seated at the stands when my father approached. He wore a suit and carried a leather briefcase. He introduced himself as a Salesman.

After their meeting he would send ma letters at Clarkebury Girl's Boarding School, where she and aunt Lydia received their education.

The letters were long-winded and clunky. He told her about his work and his life and asked if he could see her and ma, reluctantly, agreed.

By the time I was born they were not seeing eye to eye, and before I turned one they had already parted ways. It was aunt Lydia who told me the story.

***

In my room I undressed and slipped under the covers. I was tired but couldn't sleep. I thought about Zuko and Thando and what had happened with Granny.

The last day I'd seen them was the day ma and I moved to this new house. How sad they had looked as they helped us load the furniture on the back of the movers' *bakkie*.

Earlier that day the three of us – Zuko, Thando, and myself – had gone down to Umthatha river, under the iron bridge, with our makeshift rods made from branches of *Umgwenya*. Bhut'Bushie made them for us. The sun had been a burning sore in the sky and you couldn't look up at it without hurting your eyes.

Sometimes, when we went down to the river, Thando would break an entire arm of *Umnga* and drag it to the river with him. He said the sweet thorn would catch fish more easily.

However, we never did catch any fish with that branch, neither did our hooks whose dangling worms we dug out of the red soil along the banks. Ma said the soil in the EC was red from the blood shed during the 100 Years War between the Xhosa's and the British Settlers.

We always found fat earth worms after rain, when the soil was soft and rich.

When we failed to catch fish that moving day, we settled on the river bank and moulded tiny cows with the soft clay. We were bored, so we made kraals with sticks and dry grass. We fashioned the clay into huts and put dry grass on top, then placed them in the sun to dry.

Thando, scratching his crotch and fidgeting on the ground, suggested that we hunt pigeons.

He had asked Bhut'Bushie to make him a slingshot.

We stalked the woods for the cooing of pigeons, stopping from time to time to coo ourselves, then listened intently for a response from the woods. When it came, not too far from where we were standing, we crouched and followed the sounds along the river bank like hunters of a time lost in the wind.

The nest we found was high up *Umthombe* – the wild fig tree.

Thando took out the catapult and fired a shot. It missed and struck the bark of the tree, before being swallowed by the glare of the sun.

The second shot barely touched the leaves. As he fixed the catapult for a third try a pigeon hen flopped on the branch, then cooed angrily at us.

Thando laughed, then struck the hen right in the middle of her breast – a first time even for him.

The hen flapped her wings as if to fly but then dropped to the ground with a thud and her feathers followed slowly behind her, whooshing lightly from left to right, as if adhering to the motion of an invisible pendulum inside the forest; even the river current sounded as if it were swinging backward and forward, slowly stagnating.

We found the hen badly hurt but still alive. One of her wings had spots of blood. The wing jerked, its movements not dissimilar to the way Bhut'Anklina's face twitched when he was drunk, how his stutter became more pronounced and his jaw locked, and so he ground his teeth, trying to dislodge the words. When they finally came you could hardly make any sense of them for they were a string of vowels without consonants, like the sound of air.

Thando grabbed the struggling hen with his one hand and broke the neck with the other. The neck made a cracking sound when it broke.

We should cook it, Zuko said.

We must investigate first, Thando said.

How? I asked and Thando drew from his back pocket an *Okapi* with a wooden handle.

With this, he brandished the knife.

Before slicing the bird he sent Zuko up the tree, pointing at the nest with the blade whose pointy edge flashed against the sun. Zuko climbed. One egg had hatched but the other two were still intact. They were speckled with a redness, the eggs, like the freckles on my face at the time.

Thando threw the eggs and the newly hatched chick in the river. The chick was still alive. It tried to flap its tiny wings as it got swept away by the current.

That is our gift to *uMamlambo*, Thando said. The river snake. I had not been surprised by his words, although I'd found them absurd. Thando had always used African mythos to justify his violence, and to conceal his insanity. This was the same boy who told us there was a girl in his class who kept a snake in her womb; that to become rich you had to be gifted a snake by *ixhwele*, a shaman; that in Mount Ayliff, where his father was buried, hid a giant snake that shifted the earth's core when it writhed. And that it was from this snake that he, Thando, had drawn his powers of looking at the sun without going blind.

Sitting on the ground, in a circle, we watched Thando pluck the bird before slicing it open. Because the body was still warm the feathers came off easily. Thando, however, still applied brutal force in the process.

Sombrely, he said, after plucking the hen, Boys, this is all there is to us Beneath all these feathers, we are all just flesh and bone like this stupid bird.

He spoke looking up at the sun, his mind elsewhere. He carved open the bird's belly and broke its chest with the force of the blade. He turned his head towards the sky again and stared at the sun interminably while his hand seesawed mechanically.

Too bad you're leaving us today, he said. A man should fear nothing, he pulled the entrails out and threw them to the river.

Next to the dismembered bird Thando drew a bicycle on the ground with the knife and told me to mount it and paddle.

I laughed, thinking he was joking.

Ride it, he raised his voice.

But there's nothing to ride, I said.

But there is, isn't there.

Zuko, now standing behind me, wrenched me from the ground by the neck, then threw me back to the dirt.

Ride, Thando growled and began to go around in circles like a madman, the same meaningless circles he used to make when Granny chased him with a broom around the yard because he'd masticated his food and spat it back on his plate, and laughed.

I clutched the handlebars of the bicycle and only managed to bring up dirt. I put a foot on the pedal but slid and bumped my knee. When I shook my head Thando rammed into me and knocked me backwards, all the time screaming, Ride the damn bicycle!

Tears wet my face. I wasn't crying, the tears just fell of their own accord, adhering to some internal process I had no control over. In that instant I knew that

there was something deeply and fundamentally out of place with us, with Thando, with everything in the world.

Bring him here, Thando ordered.

Zuko grabbed me by the crook of my arm and dragged me to the shade of the sweet thorn tree where Thando was busy undoing his pants. Zuko shoved me against the sharp spikes of the tree and I fell right on its prickly shadow. The thorns drove into my palms and pierced my back. Thando hosed me down with pee while Zuko laughed.

So you don't forget us, Thando said, with a grim chuckle.

Wet with pee and bloody with bruises the two brothers took me to the river and cleaned my wounds with the brown murky water. I kneeled on the river bank and splashed water on my face with the full knowledge that what had happened was meant to stay between us, just as with Sis'Noluthando, and any other shameful incident that has marked my life.

We are giving you *iintlanga*, Thando said, so that we always know where you are.

Later, when I asked ma what *iintlanga* were, she said they were like a signal to those who performed the dark arts that told them that you weren't protected. Ma's seriousness, when she told me this, amused me. I must've been 12 and the only dark force I knew was Darth Vader or Malebolgia, the evil lord who tricks Spawn into selling him his soul.

When ma said, *Iintlanga sisimnyama*, *iintlanga* are like a dark shadow over your life, I thought of Darth Vader in Episode IV, when he strangles one of his henchman with *The Force*. I thought of his words, *I find your lack of faith disturbing*, and I responded to my mother with a dumb smile of my face.

After they washed me, Thando put the pigeon in his pocket, then we walked back home to find the *bakkie* almost packed with our things.

Where have you been, ma asked, while Thando and Zuko went inside the house to help carry the last few items.

And what in the heavens happened to you?

I fell off a bicycle, I said, Zuko and Thando helped clean my wounds.

I don't have time for this, ma turned on her heels and made for our room to fetch her handbag and some groceries in a yellow Checkers plastic bag. Zuko came out with my suitcase.

Because I was filthy, ma made me climb on the back of the *bakkie*. With the faint stench of urine still clinging to my clothes, I waved at the commune for the last time as we pulled away. Thando and Zuko waved back with sadness on their faces. Granny was there, too, and so was Bhut'Bushie. Since it was the end of the month, Bhut'Anklina had not yet made his way home from his night of bingeing.

Before I was devoured I remembered the bakkie pulling away and everyone me and ma knew until then, gradually diminishing in the distance, as if we were zooming out of Norwood entirely. In some ways, we were.

3

I woke up after midday.

Ma had made me lunch but was not in the house. I took my lunch to the lounge and ate in front of the television. Cape Town seemed a distant memory. I thought of texting Zan or Litha or Lukhanyo to ask how things were but changed my mind. It was comforting being home. I thought I'd visit a few friends from high

school but this plan, too, I discarded. I knew everyone was back from varsity but I didn't care to see any of them, except the boy who was shamed in class because his shade of black was a little too dark than anyone else's, which is why he was called Mamba, as a slur.

He was a reticent boy who sat somewhere in the middle of our class in Standard 8. Randomly, one of the popular boys would jump onto his desk and shout Mamba! And run out of the class.

Confused, our Biology teacher would plead for calm, while the rest of the class jostled past him and onto the school lawn with hyena-like cackles.

I followed behind them at normal pace, with my exercise book and pencil.

Mamba always remained in class, fixed to his desk, when this happened, because he understood the joke and its terms.

It didn't help him any that he spoke broken English.

I sometimes thought of staying behind with him but I, too, was an easy pick for the jocks, so I played it safe and followed behind them mirthlessly.

Thinking about that story made me certain that I didn't want to see any of my former school mates, so I stayed home and read some of Brodsky's essays.

Ma came back with groceries. With her was a man I'd never met. He was tall and light in complexion. His eyes brightened when he saw me emerge from my room.

This is Vusumzi, ma said. He helps me around the house. Since you left I've had no one to tend to the garden and to mend the fence.

I greeted the man with a languid wrist while he held my hand firmly with his awesome, manly hands.

Your mother has told me so much about you. She says you're a painter.

She's exaggerating, I said. Only a student.

I turned to her and said, ma, I think I'm going to stay in my room for the remainder of the holidays. May I ask that I am not disturbed. I have work to do before the semester begins.

In my room I heard him say, excitedly, He's a smart boy, your son.

The days that followed were unseasonably warm and serene, with ma making me food and sharing news she thought I'd find useful. Bhut'Bushie had also passed away. The booze had finally caught up with his liver and jazz couldn't save him.

We are burying people every day these days, ma said. If it's not the accidents, it's drugs and alcohol. Over Easter some of your peers came back for good; couldn't handle the demands of university. They just loiter around now, drinking, wasting away, or they get into government schemes to bankrupt whole municipalities. They even ate into our department of Education like the rats they are. Promise me, you won't end up in this God forsaken place. Whatever happened to the pride we used to hold in hard work and being educated.

It's okay, ma, I said. Uni is not for everyone.

Don't tell me that. We've broken our backs to put the lot of you through school. Don't tell me that. Soon this government will run out of money; what then? No skills. No education. What then?

Ma, people will always find a way, I said.

I couldn't remember her ever being this political. To me, it seemed all she cared about was Shakespeare.

The weekend before I was to go back to Cape Town ma bought me a flight from East London. She said there were too many deaths on the road.

It's all over the *Daily Dispatch*, she said.

And then Bhut'Vusumzi offered to take us to the beach.

For a winter day the weather was nice and warm. Bhut'Vusumzi came in a blue Nissan 1 Tonner with a canopy, the same *bakkie* I saw him use to help ma over the holidays.

Ma made a picnic basket of *umleqwa* with dumplings. The night before, she'd baked scones with a drop of vanilla extract, the way she used to make them for funerals. She packed a packet of oranges and a two litre Coke for her and Bhut'Vusumzi, while I had a litre of Pinenut to myself because it was my favourite soda growing up. I was surprised ma had remembered.

Bhut'Vusumzi drove a little too recklessly for my liking, especially on the stretch between Umthatha and Port St Johns, where we were headed.

Ma refused to call Umthatha Mthatha as the new government directed.

Umthatha is a river, she said, that's how you call it, Umthatha. Mthatha is nothing, a nowhere place. You'd think the river was called Mthatha, which would be stupid, of course, and not even Xhosa. It's Umthatha. Even when we were little we said, we are going to Umthatha, not eMthatha.

I'd admitted to her that it was all news to me. I'd always thought…

I don't blame you. These people have turned everything upside down. They say they are fixing things but they are making them worse. Can you imagine looking for an ancestor eMthatha when he is in Umthatha. It would be a spiritual disaster.

I sensed in ma aunt Lydia's political verve; her feistiness. When she was still alive ma never bothered to comment on politics. It appeared to me now that maybe she had done so because took Aunt Lydia's opinions to be that of her own. But now that she was gone, ma had to speak for herself. I listened attentively, storing some of her words for my return to Cape Town.

Before us the road sloped gently. Villages emerged and disappeared in the rolling distance. Sometimes Bhut'Vusumzi would apply his breaks abruptly and send me flying in the back of the bakkie to let cattle and sheep cross the road.

We passed a few hitchhikers along the way without offering them a lift. I enjoyed being alone, my back against the window, watching all that was behind us diminish in the distance.

It took us about an hour to get to Port St Johns.

Bhut'Vusumzi stopped at a quiet lagoon in the middle of a dense forest, where cows surfed on the beach, and monkeys hopped playfully on the trees.

Ma threw a checked throw on the warm sand while I helped carry our picnic basket, with Bhut'Vusumzi trailing behind me with a packet of fruit and a red cooler bag with a six pack of Amstels. For an old man he seemed eager to help or to please ma and this made her smile a lot.

I took off my glasses and put on a pair of cheap sunglasses I'd bought from the Grand Parade in Cape Town before taking the bus. I laid next to them, listening to the ocean whir.

So what do you paint? Bhut'Vusumzi asked.

Time, I said. I try to make sense of time and place.

That's sounds very interesting, and this is your final year your mother tells me. Any plans for the future?

Maybe I'll teach.

Like your mother?

Yes, like ma.

It was enough small talk for me so I got up, sensing also that they were guarded around me; their gestures timid, clumsy, like school children. I don't know

when we become parents to our parents but that day on the beach I felt like I was my mother's father, supervising her visit with a boy. So I left and made my way towards the sea.

Nguni cows with long horns slouched on the sand, watching swirls crash along the coast. I tottered on the edge of the water with the wind in my face. Spumes of seafoam rolled out of the ocean and died at my feet. I teased the foamy water, dipping a toe and pulling back before it retreated back to the sea. There was in this action a tinge of innocence, which I knew didn't exist in me. It was the trick of nature that had this effect on my senses. Nature, painting, poetry.

Don't drown! Ma yelled.

Her voice was carried by the wind to my ears, before it got drowned by the sound of waves. I looked up at the birds twisting in the sky. There was, in the general effect of the scene, an unmistakeable serenity, a calm I'd longed for for months without knowing. I asked myself if it was worth going back to Cape Town, but shook the thought off my mind as nothing more than a silly rush of nostalgia inspired by the idyllic surroundings. It can be mesmerising, Transkei, with its soft ruralness, its fields of grass, the smell of wood smoke, the abounding nature that so horrified Conrad, the clean crisp air.

Presently I couldn't see ma and Bhut'Vusumzi. Their silhouettes having sunk into the thick dark canvas of the forest behind them. All that remained was sand and sun and sea and cattle. And the birds.

I drifted further and further away, my mind empty of thoughts, my body automatic in its movements, arms swinging gently by my sides like pendulums, my pelvis thrusting forward awkwardly, with my legs, one after the other, pulling in a general forward direction, and my feet leaving prints on the sand.

I reached the end of the beach where a huge boulder stood in the way. To get across I had to swim around it. I took off my t-shirt and tied it around my head, then held my flip flops in one hand and carefully stepped into the ocean.

The water was warm and choppy. With my sunglasses on I patted the boulder with the flip flops, looking to find a way around it but the ocean picked me up and folded me into its bosom .

In a panic I let go of the shoes and paddled towards the boulder but the water wouldn't let up. I paddled without making any advances whatsoever. I stopped paddling and allowed the water to carry me in its enormous arms. I lay on my back and watched the clear blue sky, the sea filling up my ears with its hum. It happens sometime in life that an unforeseeable event creeps up on you and takes you into its arms and no matter how much you struggle to free yourself it just doesn't let go. I surrendered my will to the sea and let it do as it pleased. I bided my time and preserved my strength.

A swirl grew beneath me, so I turned upright, paddling slowly under the skin of water to keep afloat. When the swirl moved I kicked and freestyled towards the shore. In deft, calculated strokes I rode the wave. Once my toes could touch the floor of the ocean I stood up, dragging my feet to dry land.

It had taken me maybe 2 minutes to rescue myself but it felt like a lifetime. Lying supinely on the sand to catch my breath I realised that my t-shirt, which I'd wrapped around my head, was lost at sea forever. And so were my cheap sunglasses.

I got up and continued walking in the opposite direction to Bhut'Vusumzi and ma until I reached two red Nguni cows resting on the sand, opposite each other, about a hundred metres apart. They just sat there quietly, watching the ocean as if contemplating their lives or some impenetrable grief. I was still too human, then,

blind, that is, to the mysteries of existence. I knew that to become a great painter I'd have to see farther than the human eye.

In the middle distance between the Nguni cows, towards the encroaching forest, a body lay on the sand, unmoving. Asleep. It looked tiny, like a child, so I walked towards it. As I approached, it didn't stir, then I saw that it was not a child at all, it was an old man, with his pants by his ankle, his face buried in the sand. Long dead.

His body was so small you could fit him in a baby's cot. There were no signs of violence on his body. His eyes were closed shut; along the slit of the eye gathered grains of sand. The sand was also in his hair and on his face. I thought he must have suffered a stroke or a heart attack as he prepared to go for a swim. He was peaceful, the man, in his sleep. His black skin now pale, as if he were sculpted in clay.

I sat next to him and watched the cows and the sea, feeling an emptiness sink inside my heart. So this was life, we all turn to clay in the end.

My aunt, clay. I, clay. Ma, clay. My father, also turned to clay.

I took a path into the dense forest. A squeak from a monkey swinging on the branches failed to startle me. I was calm, forgetting even my fear of snakes, as I made my way back to ma.

Ma laid her head on Bhut'Vusumzi's lap and he was twirling her locks around one finger.

We were wondering where you where, ma said lazily.

I went for a swim, ma.

Good. Good. But don't swim too far into the ocean, I'm not ready to bury you. Don't tempt fate.

We opened the picnic basket and began to eat.

I broke off a leg of *umleqwa* and placed it on a paper plate with a dumpling. With a straw I sucked on my Pinenut while watching the sea somersault into itself. Ma and Bhut'Vusumzi were talking about friends and acquaintances whose names I didn't recognise. It seemed that a lot of them had died.

I asked Ma about Sis'Noluthando and she told me that she'd just had her third child, a healthy baby boy that you couldn't pry from her arms because she was so guarded, and so proud.

Ma and Bhut'Vusumzi had grown comfortable around each other now and they laced their fingers together and joked easily around me. I ate quietly, from time to time searching the horizon for any sign of rain for I was now accustomed to the weather in Cape Town and felt much more at home beneath sombre skies.

The following day, after having packed my backpack with all my clothes and was ready to leave, ma sat me down in the lounge. This would be our last conversation. But I didn't know that then.

You are almost a man now and you need to take better care of yourself. My work, by all accounts, is done. I've sent you to school, I've circumcised you. There's nothing more I can do for you because there is nothing that can be done.

She paused, her shoulders hunched over, and sobbed.

My poor baby, now you are on your own. So please, take care of yourself.

I will, ma, I said.

Bhut'Vusumzi drove me to the Ultra City in his bakkie. I hitched a ride to East London with a truck driver, a friendly fat man who'd been all over the continent. He said he used to hide insurgents, during the Last War, in the hull of his truck. He said he spent some time in Wellington Correctional Facility as well, although he didn't say why.

In East London I got off in Quigney and caught a metred taxi to the airport.

On the flight, I marvelled at the smallness of the earth.

At three thousand feet our precious existence seems hallucinatory. Towns and cities become mere abstractions. To think that in these hubs that signify nothing the human drama continues to unravel every single day.

I ordered a gin and tonic then sat back on my seat, stirring the plastic cup.

At this height human suffering seemed odd, unnecessary, I thought. Even our daily struggles are robbed of all meaning.

I sighed and took a sip from my cup. A vision of our airplane catching fire flickered in my mind.

I took another sip of gin and stretched my legs to relax.

Part three

1

The flat was empty when I arrived. I switched the lights on and put my backpack on the couch. It was past eleven at night and the building was quiet except for the electronic clamour of metal coming from down the corridor, in Jo's apartment, the actress who lived at #1601, down the passage.

I was glad to be alone at the flat. My mind still clung to ma and Bhut'Vusumzi, to my room and the meals ma made, her lamb stew with *umngqusho*, her dumplings with *umleqwa*. I also remembered the dead man by the sea whose face was so calm it seemed to have surrendered to his fate without struggle.

In the artificial light of the burning lightbulb and the silence, which was scratched by the ever fading screech of metal, the flat appeared new, washed, ventilated. The sink was clean and the dishes were packed neatly inside the tray; where light struck along the curve of the white plates, they gleamed as if showing a smile; the forks and knives stood upright with their legs entwined and also shiny, the fridge whirred with a mild electronic sound – the only object that gave any sign of active life, it and the microwave that blinked the wrong hour on its digital screen – it said the time was 16:52. Everything, then, seemed to run out of time, or rather, on this microwaved time.

Through the window the evening was supple and oily. Stars winked cheerfully like small children at a fair and the wind was calm, it made me think of a child blowing a birthday candle.

I picked up my backpack and went into my room. It, too, had been scrubbed down, even the usual film of dirt on my windowsill was no longer there, and a few items had been moved. For example, my study desk, which usually sat facing the window was now pressed against the wall with the window to its right. If I were to sit on my chair my back would be to the living room and kitchen, and from here I could make out the horn of Devil's Peak. On the table fell a soft, shimmering moonlight; it cleaved the table into two slanted halves with the shadow of the iron frame dividing my window into two.

I took off all my clothes and dumped them on the floor, then climbed into bed but suddenly, inexplicably, felt guilty. Something had changed; my forever comforting mess looked out of place on the clean, shiny floor, which appeared as though that very morning it had been buffed. I thought of getting out of bed and packing everything into my cupboard.

The metal from Jo's flat wouldn't stop gnawing the silence. I got dressed, then went to Litha's room. I switched on his desktop and went through his film folder. Finding nothing that interested me, I began searching through his work folder. I went through the screenplays he was working on: I opened *Aleen.*

Aleen: a film short

By Litha Mpendulo

INT. THE MAN'S APARTMENT – NIGHT

ON VIDEO: The man lies in bed, topless. He is looking up at the ceiling, an incandescent light bulb swings to and from. He's 22, with intense, dark eyes.

THE MAN (V. O.)

Mine has not been what you would call a life.

Look at me, 18, empty, and drained of hope.

I read a few more lines then closed the script. I knew how the story went and how it ended. I had been, after all, Litha's first reader.

I browsed again, glancing over the titles, some interesting, some clichéd, like *No Love Lost*.

I closed his browser and went out to Jo's flat.

The door drew open on my third knock. They were flung on the couches, Jo's friends, while she opened the door. The music was now turned low and I could hear a gaslighter struggling to catch fire in the kitchen, behind the door.

You frightened me, Jo said as she opened.

Come in, come in, she beckoned with a limp, tattooed wrist.

In the air clung a whiff of sulphur and burnt metal. Behind the kitchen counter stood one of Jo's friends who never introduced himself – none of them did, although I recognised one of the other faces flopped on the couch. I always suspected that she and Jo were lovers although I'd never seen them kiss or anything.

A sinewy character with long unkempt hair, a clean white t-shirt, emerged from behind the kitchen counter, sauntering into the living room, taking a prominent place in the space in front of the couch.

So, man, what brings you around? Jo asked with a weak smile.

Can't sleep, I said. Was hoping you had a j.

Before Jo could utter the next word the sinewy character began firing up the small glass tube he held in his hand. Smoke seeped into the bloated node of the pipe and rolled into a cloud right where he held the glass tube between his forefinger and his thumb. A swirl of smoke filled the tube. The man sucked the swelling cloud into his lungs and held it there with visible strain – in an instant his face grew red and his neck was suddenly marked by sinuous veins – before passing the pipe to Jo, who made a motion to pass it to me, but I refused it with a weak hand gesture. To be sure, I had been keen on a joint, not so much on the pipe.

A hand passed a sheet of foil with a mountain of brittle yellow crystals while the man held his breath; he now closed his eyes. With a tiny spoon, also made of foil, Jo scooped up a mound of the yellow crystals and poured them delicately onto the head of the pipe, making sure that the powder sat securely on the wire gauze lodged in there, across the neck.

She sparked the pipe with a gaslighter; all the time the man who'd swallowed the first smoke held his chest out, refusing to let the smoke and the fumes escape his body. It was only after a crackling sound emanated from the wire gauze as Jo pulled a

drag that the man exhaled with great relief and fell to his back like a building being demolished, his eyes tightly shut.

Upon hitting the floor his face grew calm and I could trace in his sharp features a measure of a smile. Had he abandoned himself fully to the moment at hand, his timid smile could've broken into that wide grin that Robert De Niro flashes at the end of *Once Upon A Time In America* and his ecstasy would've been complete. He didn't do this, however, for as soon as the smile showed itself his face quickly swallowed it back, his eyelids began to twitch, a restive calm fell on his sharp facial features and his arms slumped on the floor like dead logs on each side of his pale body.

The pipe followed a seamless rotation round the room not unlike an ouroboros – with each smoker holding the smoke in her lungs and only releasing it when the next smoker dragged on the glass tube – until the circle was complete. And everyone lay languidly after taking a hit.

The curtain, which was drawn shut, quivered. A gust swept into the room, knocking a small blue lamp on the bookshelf to its side. The lamp held the only light illuminating Jo's living room and didn't go out. The sparse objects that decorated the furniture transformed into silhouettes that floated along the walls. They made me think of Yuyio Kusama's *Infinity Rooms* or if you can imagine, the negative form stars would take if the heavens were a bright white wall and the stars were solid black spheres.

Jo raised her eyelids lazily – they flickered with a small flame before going out. She closed them then drifted back to that nowhere place from which her fire had momentarily flared up.

I got up and picked my way between the half-conscious bodies sprawled on the floor as if I were crossing a minefield. I stepped over the sinewy man's sharp face, over Jo's firm round breasts, and leaped across Jo's girlfriend's arms, which were crossed on her chest. Jo's other friend rested her head and her legs on the arms of the couch, looking up at the ceiling with her eyes closed.

I switched off the cordless JBL speakers on the bookshelf and heard, for the first time, torrents of rain rise with the wind. I peeled the curtain open and closed shut the sliding door. Soft pins of water struck the glass and slid down. The city skyline was yellow from the light inside buildings which were now abandoned by the workforce.

Are you sure you don't want some? Jo insisted in a haze.

No, thank you, I said, running my gaze along the titles of the bookcase. Jo and her friends were, at that very moment, yanking themselves back to life.

Shit, man, you wanted a joint, Jo said.

The sinewy man dragged himself to the kitchen. He warmed a plate in the microwave, then switched it off after a minute and cut lines of powder on the counter with a Minora – long thin convex lines. He bent over and took two lines before re-entering the living room to pass the plate, and a short straw, to Jo, who dipped her head and flicked her hair with a sniffle, then passed it to her girlfriend, who dipped her head and rubbed her gums, who then passed it to the other woman, who did the same, and passed it to me. Doubtfully, I declined.

I'd rather try the pipe, instead, I said.

Jo flashed a wan smile in my general direction and prepared the glass tube with the deftness of a drunk trying to walk a straight line. Her hand trembled and spilled some of the crystals on the floor. This sent the entire room into an incredulous

uproar. This was the first time they'd shown any awareness at all to what was going on between them.

Shit, Jo, said the one friend on the couch. You nearly gave me a heart attack.

They all laughed lazily, their teeth yellow.

Absently, Jo held the foil mid-air and with the spoon I scooped up the crystal and began to feed the pipe. Her friends were now gathered round the kitchen counter taking more lines. I placed the spoon back and Jo put it on the low table. With a green gaslighter she lit me up.

I held the smoke in my lungs and felt the crystal seep into my bloodstream as if I'd been injected with a tranquilizer. Warm air slipped out of my pores and my head felt light on the floor

This sun, in the empty room, is night, I thought, recalling one of Yves Bonnefoy's verses.

I lay on the floor, listening to my breathing, my head cool, my mind clear, and then saw my aunt blowing gently in the wind, the steel chain and iron bracelets clasped on her ankle.

These were days following her illness, days my aunt spent in her hut at my Grandpa's house. Even when you entered the room she never moved her eyes from the window which looked out to the vast grassy field that led to iSithebe river along whose banks boys herded sheep and goats. Sometimes her face would be tilted towards the heavens, the light illuminating her dark moods. Gran said my aunt was not to be disturbed because she was convening with God – *Uqamata*, *Umvelingqangi*, our great ancestor. In the living room we would sing her favourite hymn – *Masibulele KuYesu* – and pray for her.

At supper I would bring her food and sit down at the edge of her bed to eat. She had a calm, distant look; and in this manner she receded into her grave.

There were six men in total, each standing one before the other on either side of the coffin. Each man holding a gold-plated handle. When they hoisted the coffin into the earth, I could see, as I stood next to ma in front of the hole into which my aunt was to be laid to rest, that Bhut'Fikile's left foot was going to give in. If it did the coffin would crash into the hole and Bhut'Fikile would follow. It would be a scandal. Luckily someone came up from behind him and took the last bit of rope into his hands. Like this then, with the two men at the one end of the coffin and our heads bowed, she was buried for ever.

Jo crawled on all fours searching for the small crystals that might have spilled on the carpet, to prepare another smoke. I got up and rolled a joint on the couch and listened to the wind whirr outside.

It was a hole above my tummy that made me take long, desperate pulls of the joint – the aftereffects of the pipe. It lingered there, the emptiness, until an unsettling desire to prepare myself another pipe took hold. It spread out to the furthest parts of my body, it circled round my fingertips, toes, and the topmost jewel of my crown, making me itch. An empty desire, desire for desire's sake. I glimpsed in that state of tingling anxiety the rudiments of my own annihilation. Had I always been that way, I thought, had I always been self-annihilating.

***

My aunt said I stopped breastfeeding after four months. For some arbitrary reason, ma would pinch me, subtly, on the soft inner parts of my arms and legs while I latched onto her. It was only after Gran found me with welts when she was giving me a bath

that my mother's secret became known. After the revelation, ma promised Gran that she would never pinch me again. It was a mere compulsion, she explained, that her fingers found their way to my flesh when I was breastfeeding. Of course, she never intended any ill upon me, on the contrary, ma would drop everything to look after me when I fell sick. Yet, none of this seems to explain to me, how or why I started to contemplate taking my own life. For every suicide there's a unique, irrefutable reason, I believe, and yet I can't seem to find mine except for the fact that I grew tired of life very early in my childhood and I could have surrendered willingly to that final silence if only I had been not such a coward.

I remember the days when the sky was clear and the ladder stood against the wall because ma was making renovations to our new house – a man was repainting the tiles on the roof. I remember climbing up that ladder and looking over the roofs of houses, I remember seeing swimming pools and carefully manicured lawns, I remember jumping off the roof and landing softly on our back lawn and rolling over the grass with glee. I remember doing that same action over and over until one day I couldn't jump off the roof, and then I couldn't step on the ladder, and slowly it grew on me this inexplicable fear of death, then one day I thought of taking my own life. Perhaps it is this fear of death, which once triggered, leads inevitably to suicide – as a way of triumphing over the fear itself.

***

Here, have some, Jo said, passing me the pipe again.

I took a single pull and the pipe was finished. I hung my head on the armrest of the couch, again that empty feeling re-visited my body. I didn't hold the smoke for

too long in my lungs, I wanted to get out. I exhaled and scrunched my eyes, seeing the pink and purple worms dance behind my eyelids.

We must call Dan for a full moon, I heard someone say.

A full moon or a half moon? Jo asked.

Full, said the sinewy man's voice from the kitchen.

I got up, slowly piecing together the room which just a second ago felt as scattered as my thoughts.

I have to go, I said.

You're not going to stay over for the full moon? Jo asked.

I'm smoked out, I said.

Jo smiled, got up, and let me out.

2

I woke up with nausea and a splitting headache.

My innards were constantly convulsing and at the same time felt as though they were not even there.

Outside, it rained heavily.

I heard the front door close shut. Then Litha's bedroom door as well. I took four Panados, then went back to sleep.

When I woke up again the rain had stopped. I was greeted by a pink sky when I pulled down the sheet covering my window. Where The Mountain usually stood there was only thick fog and clouds.

I made two cups of coffee and brought Litha his to his room. He was planted in front of his computer in his underwear when I walked in.

You have to see this, he said, not raising his face from the screen.

It was a notice for a meeting for a group called The Martyrs. The meeting was to be held in Brooklyn the following Saturday, under the subject: *What To Do With Our Wound.*

There was an address, a number, and a vector design of a blue eye floating above the text.

So, what do you think?

I sipped my coffee, listening to my headache throb gently.

Sounds interesting, I said.

That was my feeling, too, when they approached me, he said.

They approached you? I said.

Yes, while you were away. I've been meeting them regularly.

Who are they?

Students, academics, artists, journalists, he said. That's why they approached me. They want me to do a film for the organisation. A political film.

About what, exactly?

Suffering. Redemption. Revolution.

The Second Coming, I said, jokingly.

It's not a joke. But yes, a Second Coming of sorts. They want to bring an end to all suffering. You should come.

I'll think about it, I said, I have so much on my plate as is.

I was thinking of the work I had to finish for my final thesis and graduate show. There was, of course, the option of getting an extension and submitting in the following semester, but I found the prospect depressing. Already, I had doubts about

the project. To plod through the work I needed Pizarnik's poems and the more poetry I read from her, the more I grew lethargic and depressed.

Presently, I was looking at Litha's computer screen, with a wallpaper of a black and white vinyl cover of a Max Roach record showing three black men sitting on high chairs at what looked like an American diner. Two of them twisted their bodies to face the camera. The third looked past the camera at a point outside the frame of the picture. Behind the counter a white man in a white waiter's uniform looked straight at the camera. In a large font were the words, We insist!

Have you had breakfast? He said.

Not yet.

I'll make some, he said, and disappeared to the kitchen.

After we ate I went back to my room for a nap. The last thing I remember was the sun angling into my room before I sank into a dream.

***

I am standing on a platform at Cape Town Station waiting to board a train. It is morning. The sun shines weakly beyond the arched orifices through which the carriages push out of the platforms – headed to destinations flung far out along the rims of the city.

I'm standing in front of a blue sign that has the number 9 on it. There are 34 platforms in total. Each railway exit is clogged with fog. In the thick white fog black phantoms shine brightly before they are swallowed up by all the white smoke around them.

Carriage doors open and bodies pour out with anxious, impatient faces. A murmur, a shuffling of feet, a whistle rings in the misty morning air and the train just emptied is gone. On its tracks is a litter of plastic packs of Spookies Chips and boxes of Courtleighs and Stuyves and cans of beer and fragments of broken soda bottles and cigarette stumps.

The square-shaped head of the Metro Plus thrusts into platform 11 through the milky fog. I can hear the pistons as the angry phallic beast heaves to a halt. Doors open and more people pour out onto the deserted platform, their eyes a smoky milky white without the black in them.

***

I was awakened by the sound of my phone ringing.

It was Zan.

She wanted to meet at her sister's studio on Albert Road in Woodstock.

What time is it? I asked.

Past four, she said.

I had slept the day away and my headache had finally dissolved.

See you soon, I said.

The sky was clear, with just a smidgen of clouds drifting above The Mountain.

I went down Buitenkant Street and crossed over to The Universal Church after the police station. Although it was warm I felt a shudder of cold slip down my spine. In front of the church a madman was hurling profanities at God. He seemed sober and out of his mind and the church bouncers by the big glass doors were anxiously trying to shoo him away with profanities of their own.

I stood on the corner of Christiaan Barnard Street and Sir Lowry Road waiting for a taxi. For about three minutes I waited and scratched my leg.

Mowbray! Wynberg! the *gaatjie* yelled through the window of an approaching taxi and I put up my hand.

The *gaatjie* jumped out and I got in. There were two men at the back talking loudly.

I sat two rows behind the *gaatjie*, trembling from the Crystal Meth hangover. The upholstery on the sliding door was torn open and I could see the metallic entrails of the taxi sneering back at me. *I Like Your Perm But Not On My Window* read a sticker on the sliding door frame above the head of the gaatjie who held the door with his left hand and collected money with the other. His nails were black with soot and his skin was course as sand and he wore a beanie decorated with a heart, facing backwards. The door wouldn't close properly and kept unhooking from its hinge so the *gaatjie* held it in place. Like that we teetered up Sir Lowry Road with the two men at the back laughing and slapping their thighs and the stench of stale booze misting up the windows.

A slender woman wearing a black jersey tight around her shoulders, who sat in the seat in front of me, beneath another sticker with the words *When Days Are Dark Friends Are Few*, was on her phone. Her hair was smooth and dark and tied in a ponytail with elastic band. She was pretty in a muted sort of way that made you think of softer ages. She raised her head and turned over her shoulder, her face a steel canvas, then turned her gaze back to her lap again.

Nearly half the taxi was bent over their laps, looking at their phones. I took out my own phone and texted Zan to tell her I was in a taxi on my way to Ida's studio.

In the eerie silence that was punctuated by the spurting sound of the engine and the clanging of the door that refused to stay shut I sank into my seat and ran my fingers over my leg where the black cat had dug its claws in that long time ago and began to feel, for the first time, pain. I scrunched my eyes and clenched my jaw.

The driver had the radio on; his eyes were fixed on the road. I could see them clearly in the rear-view mirror, from where I was sitting. When he caught me looking at him I looked away. We were now hurtling towards Church Street, in Woodstock, where I would get off.

Through the window, shop fronts with their displays of clothes and mannequins and pots and toys and food stuff and the faces of people in front of them flew past us in a blur. We picked up a man in a purple suit and a cane. He tipped his hat as he sat down in front of me. He turned and flashed me a gold smile and I saw that instead of the blacks of his eyes there was a smoky milky whiteness there, and his eyeballs bulged with grey veins. At first I thought he was blind, then I saw him take out his wallet and count the taxi fare before handing it to the *gaatjie* who now sat on the engine compartment, facing the back of the taxi.

After robot, I shouted, and the taxi came to a stop.

I was on Walmer Street, a good two blocks short of my intended stop.

I hurried passed a patchwork of semi-derelict homes with children dodging cars while trying to keep up a soccer match on the street. A car horn went off and was followed by a screech in one of the cross streets. A man had nearly run over a dog. I buttoned up my trench coat then lit a cigarette as the sky turned a dusty orange over the houses.

Ida was sitting by a window, on a wooden stool, with a hot iron in her hands when I walked in. The sun lit up her face. It was pale like a sheet of paper, her face.

On the table before her were different coloured fabrics that she was using to create collages. Zan was on her phone on the couch, smoking a cigarette. When she saw me she threw her phone next to her and said, Hey stranger.

Isn't it warm for that trench? Ida said, pressing the fabric with the iron.

I unbuttoned the coat and threw it over the back of a blue chair that was standing there, in the middle of the room. I wasn't sure whether it was a decorative or a functional piece of furniture.

I slouched on the couch next to Zan.

So, how was home?

Weird, I said. I think ma has a new dude in her life. She seems happy though and I'm kind of happy for her. Isn't that strange?

Why should it be? Ida said.

Because…

Zan and Ida laughed.

Of course it's not strange, our mothers get laid, dude, Zan said.

I think I blushed; I was feeling rather foolish for having brought up ma's love-life.

Boys, Ida shook her head. I'm sure if it had been your father, you wouldn't have been so apprehensive.

Your mom's getting nailed nicely, Zan said.

The sisters laughed; I did, too, feeling silly.

I made a mistake, Ida said suddenly pushing her chair away from the table.

She had spilled water on her work. Zan fled to the kitchen to fetch a towel.

I'm sorry, I said.

It happens all the time, Ida said.

Zan came back with a red-and-white checked cloth.

Ida daubed the fabric gently as if she were drying the forehead of sick man. She held up a pastel pink leg of fabric and passed it to Zan. Then she passed me a blue hand. Zan picked up a yellow leg; Ida had blue arms and a pink head. She passed me and a yellow arm.

Over there, she pointed us to a clothing line pitched across one of the windows. She clipped the head and the arm with wooden pegs, then one by one she took each dismembered part of the body and hung it on the line until we had no parts left to hang, then she beckoned us back to the table to get more.

We hung ears and spines of fabric, breasts, buttocks, and fingers, and genitals and toes, hands, legs, and triangles and squares and circles. Zan passed me a penis-shaped fabric. It was purple. I handed it to Ida who clipped it to the end of the line.

We hung a set of letter across another window.

I don't think I can go on, we've been here all weekend, Ida said.

She locked up her studio and we all walked to her car.

The clouds were pink with a dirty lining of smoky silver as we drove down the N2 towards town. Sitting at the back of Ida's car, I watched the cranes that stood tall like giraffes at the harbour.

It was an old egg-white Mercedes, Ida's car, with brown leather seats and dark wood interiors. I sat quietly at the back, hoping that one of them would say something to break the solid silence packed between us.

Perhaps our restraint had to do with the time of day or the limbs we had hung on the line or the cackle we had left on the window.

Of all the arts I think it is painting that is the master, Zan said, out of the blue.

Why do you say that? Ida wanted to know.

It just seems more resolved to me that's all. Completely self-contained. The same way you can say an apple or an orange is complete.

Ida nodded without saying a word.

We drove to the 7-Eleven on Main Road in Seapoint and picked up a bottle of red wine – a screw top – and I bought a pack of cigarettes and then we drove to the beach. The street lamps were just then coming to life as we mounted Main Road. Once Seapoint was behind us Zan rolled her window down. The breeze was warm and salty and smelled of the sea.

Can I smoke in your car?

Ja, sure, Ida said.

I lit a cigarette and watched the water shimmer as we snaked up Victoria Road towards Clifton. Ida played *L'assissinat de Carala* while the wind lapped our faces. Zan and Ida wore oversized sunglasses and outside there were joggers in glistening golden bodies with their headphones on and colourful jogging tights, jogging back to Seapoint. The sun was a tumid blister over the sea, its rays bobbing like a shoal of snoek on the gently undulating waves.

We parked on the side of the road and climbed down the stairs to Clifton 1. People were coming up as we descended, their bodies haggard and dry.

Only a handful of people were at the beach, some were sunning, others walking their dogs. I took of my shoes and felt the cool grains of sand between my toes. My trench coat, I'd left in the car.

Ida laid a piece of blue fabric she'd brought with her on the sand.

I watched the two sisters put sunscreen on their bodies.

It was Ida who ran first into the water. She had on just her t-shirt and underwear. The bra she took off underneath the shirt, no doubt because of my

presence. As she took it off I made as if I was watching the waves licking the sand along the beach before retreating to the womb of the ocean.

I sometimes wonder where the city ends and something else begins, Zan said while we watched her sister play in the water.

Something like what? I said.

At home, for example, I get to hear everything that goes on outside on the street, as if I was both inside and outside. Or say, if I'm with a dude and we're kind of getting into it, I often get the feeling that the experience isn't self-contained, that it sort of extends outside of our pact. Like there aren't just two people in the room, but countless bodies packed one on top of the other pressing against me until I can feel my limbs give way under all that pressure. Until I'm convinced that I'm not just with this one person but rather, I'm negotiation my space with this insidious something else , this multitude that pushes into and out of me, then everything becomes a complete fucking abstraction, and I just want whatever it is to stop whatever it is it is doing.

I nodded and said, I know exactly what you mean.

How would you know. Liar! She pinched me on my arm.

Okay, you got me, I was actually thinking about the government when you said that. Like, what are the boundaries between the state and us?

Are you saying I'm being fucked by the state?

Aren't we all.

We both laughed.

Come, let's go for a swim, she said.

I took off my pants and t-shirt and followed her to the water in my underwear. Like her sister, she was in her t-shirt and underwear.

The water was so cold it pricked my skin. I waded in nonetheless, swimming in long strokes away from the shore. I swam out a little further, to deeper waters, then turned over and floated on my back. With the water clogging my ears, I watched the purplish blue sky give birth to stars. One by one, they shone meekly. There are only a handful of times in my life that I've felt the serenity I felt that evening on the beach with Ida and Zan. It seemed as though the earth itself had stopped moving, my nerves were cool and wet like the water itself. From one moment to the next the sea lifted me up and carried me gently towards the shore. I dipped my head and paddled to the bottom of the ocean, feeling the weight peel off my shoulders. When I emerged on the surface of the sea again, like the stars, I, too, felt, as though I'd just been born.

We dried ourselves and listened to the waves crash on the beach while passing the bottle of wine between us.

We watched the ocean for some time, until the wind picked up. And then we gathered our things and left.

One of the backseat windows of Ida's car was smashed with a brick. My trench coat was gone. Ida was furious and kept cursing under her breath. We drove to Camps Bay police station to report the incident.

After we gave our statement they drove me home with the pieces of glass pricking the soft skin under my thighs. Although we had brushed the shattered pieces of glass off the seat, splinters still remained, like fragments of a painful memory that never goes away.

3

Uni opened but I didn't go to class.

I spent the week in my underwear and only went outside once, to look for Walter Battiss' *Battiss 75*. And potentially, to steal it. I suppose I was fascinated by the man's work, especially his *Fook Island*. It seemed to me that only a serious artist could conjure up such a place – the island that is inside all of us, I think he called it. The *island of the imagination.*

Downstairs, where the book was kept, there was just one guy working. He was in his early twenties with a thin moustache that looked pencilled in. His long unkempt hair fell over his narrow shoulders which were pinched tightly because he was reading a magazine on his lap He didn't look up when I came down the stairs. He didn't notice me or the book in my hand as I made my way to the bathroom. I studied the scrapbook mosaic of past book launches, books, quotes and anecdotes, emblazoned on the wall, as I relieved myself . I let out a deep sigh when I finished then shook my dick dry. I stuffed the title in my waist, then pulled my t-shirt over it, then walk out. The assistant, still glued to his magazine, shot me a disinterested look with the corner of his eye, and returned to his reading. I climbed back up the stairs and strolled to the entrance. The door buzzed to let me out.

At home I opened the book, flipping through the pages, thinking that seeing Walter's work would give me the push I needed to get on with my project. Instead, I ended up composing a text for ma, which I left in the drafts folder on my cellphone, unsent.

Ma,

I have grown awfully tired of life. I'm contemptuous of everything, including my studies here at university. To make matters worse, I see no end to this

contempt, only an endless disdainful sadness. Each day I smile a little less. Something's short circuited inside my brain. I am malfunctioning at a level that's impossible to put down in words. My sadness is complete.

Litha was hardly around. I suspected that he was meeting with The Martyrs. His absence made the flat eerie. For the first two nights I enjoyed being alone but by Wednesday dread had begun to grow inside my gut like mould on a damp tile that never sees light; so I went out to Clarkes to try steal another book.

An unseasonable shower had begun Monday morning and by Wednesday hadn't let up. On the street I couldn't shake off the feeling that I was being watched. It was as if my thoughts and movements were being read by an omnipresent being. The thought made me terribly self-conscious. I walked with my hands in my pockets and the collar of my trench coat up. A frosty breeze blew into my face. I passed cars and people, my eyes on the ground, noting every step I took.

Upstairs, at Clarkes, I found an old copy of *Mine Boy* by Peter Abrahams, in one of the forgotten shelves, which I took, without thinking, and stuffed it in my pants, closing the trench coat over it. *Put it back*, a voice said. Startled, I turned to look, but there was no one there. The voice had been that of an old man, a coloured man, or black man who'd grown up in the Cape. It could've been my father's, I thought, castigating me for the first time in his life. An opportunity he never had when he was still alive. This made me sad, so I put the book back and left the shop.

Long street was abuzz with people. The bars were just then coming to life. I quickened my steps past Keerom Street. In the Company Gardens young emancipated men who weren't icky about showing affection to their kids played with their offspring in the rain.

I reached Perspectives and discovered that I couldn't go up to the flat. So I traced my way back to the park, through the Company Gardens, and onto Queen Victoria Street. I needed a drink, so I followed the cacophony leading me back to the bars on Long Street.

At the small Somalian shop next to Mojito I bought a loose draw, lighting it inside the shop, before making my way up to The Labia, to see what films were showing that evening. At the traffic light on top of Long Street I watched a boy in the passengers' seat of his mom's ride, a phone in his hand. The cellphone screen lit up his face. I watched the silence between them, a silence made more sharply by the boy's gadget and the funky neon dials in the dashboard of the car. I watched the queue at the Mc Donald's, the happy faces of people who were waiting to be fed stale buns with dubious meat and diluted soda.

How long had I been watching the world these past days? Watched the sun sink behind Lion's Head. Stood at my window and watched rain fall, the clouds a plume of grey smoke. Watched until things revealed themselves and their true potential, thinking, A balustrade is a good enough place to tie a rope and hang oneself. An approaching bus an opportunity to slip under and out of existence, a penthouse suite a good height from which to jump.

Kaufman's *Synecdoche New York* was screening at The Labia. I bought a beer and popcorn and found a seat at the back of the cinema. My mind was racing before the film began. The voice I had heard at Clarkes, where had it come from. Was it my own or that of something else. The ghost of a man who had worked at the bookshop and died upstairs among his wares. Or was it the omnipresence I felt peering into my thoughts since the beginning of the week, or a voice spat out of Hell, like Spawn. Or The Word, like the one that announced God to ma.

The film began. It lasted more than two hours. And was brilliant. It was Kaufman, after all. My favourite screenwriter. What else did I expect.

Walking home, the night steely, like a house made out of zinc, a shadow of man stretched out on a bench in the Company gardens, covered in cardboard and dirty rags. He didn't stir as I passed.

I hunched my shoulders and sunk my head into my collar. The wind whistled in my ears, the yellow light pouring out of the fairy lights lining Government Avenue were brilliant to my eyes. I took off my glasses and wiped them on the sleeve of my coat. It was eerily quiet in the park. A stray dog, a mongrel in a brown coat dappled with black spots, trotted towards me. He regarded me without alarm, his droopy eyes tenderly searching my face. For what. Affection. A hand to stroke its back. A master to feed and care for him. I stopped and watched him extend his snout and sniff. He sniffed my legs, then my crotch; came around my back and nuzzled his nose into my ass. He went around me in circles, jovially sniffing, his tail pointed upward in a perfect arch, as if it had been drawn using a protractor. For a second I had a good sense to stroke his back, pull his ears, rub my nose on the side of his face. But I didn't; couldn't. He was a vile creature, filthy, in need of a bath. So I continued home, and he went about his own way. When I passed the weary statue of Jan Smut's in front of the National Art Gallery, I heard the dog wail, like the lost soul he was.

4

On Saturday I took the train to Brooklyn to meet up with Litha and The Martyrs.

I got off at Koeberg Station. It was after midday, when I got off the train.

The house was in a quiet street. The entrance – a tiny white door – was wedged between two garages.

It took about two minutes for someone to open. The man wore a bright pair of pants and a low V-neck t-shirt that could easily have fitted a 13-year-old. He was all smiles as he extended his hand.

Khaya, he said.

I shook his hand and followed him inside.

In the kitchen he said, Help yourself, his hand sweeping over prettily made canapés.

I took two pieces, poured myself a glass of wine, and searched around the room for a place to sit. A guy in a red turtle neck was taking a picture of his food with his cellphone.

There was hardly any room for movement in the living room, it was so packed. On the stereo played a Blue Notes record which was both sentimental and camp.

Jean was sitting on the couch with his legs crossed, bobbing his head to the music. I squeezed through the crowd and sat next to him.

I haven't seen you in a while, Jean said. Where've you been?

Around, I said.

I heard about the car.

Terrible, I said. Where've *you* been?

Claro Clinic, he shrugged.

What for?

Booze, what else? He raised an eyebrow.

How was it, the clinic?

Still have the shakes, he said.

How did you find out about this?

Oh, this, it's been going on for a while. *Seriously*, where've you been?

Home. The E.C.

God, I love the Eastern Cape. Been there a few times. Absolutely stunning.

Good people, Khaya's voice rose over the murmur. I am deeply honoured to have you here today. For those who don't know, the question we seek to answer is simple: *What To Do With Our Wound.*

There was loud clapping. I took a sip from my glass. I was beginning to perspire.

Are you okay? Jean said.

I'm alright.

Is it the flu?

Can't say.

The question, given the many challenges we face in this country, requires our urgency, Khaya said.

Another applause.

Our artist, whom we've always trusted to lead us in this chorus has used *Our Wound* for his own self-interest, to advance his own career. Our politicians use it to canvass for votes every five years. What about the rest of us? Should we not profit from it, just like the artist and the politician – who have, in any case, come to bear a striking resemblance to each other? Or should we democratise it for the benefit of all?

The words were greeted with a loud cheer.

Today, I say, the time has come for us to create a new world with this *Wound*. And the only way we can do this is by destroying the Old World by crushing its heroes, by tearing down its monuments, by setting fire to its institutions!

Those who had held glasses, clinked them. Others shook the air in front of them with clenched fists. There was loud drumming on the kitchen counter that made the walls of the house vibrate.

Our gathering today is to find ways to start the fires. What we expect from all of you, from here on, is absolute commitment to this historical duty. Mobilise your communities! Tell them that the End of The World is well on its way!

He paused. Looked around at the expectant faces, then said: It is only from the ash heap of all that stands today, that we can truly begin to heal!

A resounding applause followed, but this time it stayed much longer in the air and made the room even hotter.

Khaya smiled benevolently.

What shall we eat? Came a voice from a small man who held his cap in his hand like a respectful drunk. He was tiny, this man, wearing a faded brown jacket that looked as though it had seen too many days.

Who said that? Khaya searched the room.

It is I, the man said.

Who are you?

Me, the man responded.

And what's your question? Khaya looked annoyed.

What shall we eat when the world has been destroyed.

We shall eat its ashes, Khaya said.

And where shall we stay? The man probed.

Under God's blue sky.

But there is no God, the man said.

Then we shall create him.

Hasn't that project already failed?

Our Martyrs shall not fail!

Who are these Martyrs? The man asked.

The room was growing impatient with the exchange and some voices at the back, clearly agitated, were yelling at the man to get to his point.

What's your point? They howled.

My point is, who will make the sacrifice, the man said.

We shall make it collectively.

But that isn't how the world works, the man shook his head.

Then we shall make it work that way, Khaya fired back.

Have you learned nothing from history? The man asked pleadingly.

O, but we have, Khaya said. The Martyrs shall become the New Man. They will save this country from itself!

The New Man will be A Starving Man, the man said resignedly.

Old timer, Khaya said, if we all starve it is all the better for everyone. Then we would've achieved our historical duty, wouldn't you say? Are you not starving already while others eat?

The man nodded sheepishly.

Give this man some hors d'oeuvres, Khaya said. Let him have his Last Supper, before we commence to create the world of equals in suffering, just as in death!

Khaya instructed someone by the kitchen to prepare the man a small takeaway from the canapés on the table. The man doffed his hat and put it on his head. The room parted, creating for him a slim path to the kitchen.

As he made his way past Jean and I his face looked familiar, as if I'd seen it before, but couldn't place it. After he passed, it struck me: he was the same man who was cursed outside The Power and the Glory by the bouncer.

Come now, we need to wrap up, Khaya said, as the man stuffed the food, which was wrapped in a green Spar bag, in the pockets of his jacket. At the door, the man stopped as if he were thinking or had forgotten something. He turned and directed his words at Khaya: *Beware, my son, words that carry the loudnesses of blind desire also carry the slime of illusion*.

I knew these words. They were taught to me by ma. In her lessons about humility and hard work, she would recite whole paragraphs from The Exiled Poet's works. It warmed my heart that the man had picked from such fine prose. I was growing fond of his tastes, I began to fantasize about his world. Could it be that all my life, I was meant to leave among the exiled, the homeless, the philosophers?

Can we have a word? Litha pulled me by the elbow and led me outside.

We jostled our way through clumps of people and exited through the kitchen door. Outside the air was cool, as if a cosmic AC had been set on a low dial.

So what do you think? He said.

I don't know what to make of it, I said

I'm glad you came all the same. Finally, our art will speak.

Yes, it will, I lied, in order to avoid the confrontation.

Let's talk again after the meeting, he said, and went back inside the house.

I stood outside, puffing away, pondering whether these people with their smart phones, taking pictures of their food, fingering the delicate stems of their wine glasses, had any real grasp of what it meant to truly and inexorably suffer.

My head began to throb.

In any case, I had my own chaos, playing itself in the silent interstices of my heart, this desperate anxiety to turn away from everything and set on my own path to where I didn't know.

5

Jean and I left sometime late in the evening.

He offered to drop me off at the flat. Litha chose to stay behind.

The work is only just beginning, he said in the car.

I got off at the Kimberly Hotel and bought myself a cheap wine, which I took home. After polishing the bottle I dozed off on the couch.

***

I dream of The Martyrs. This time around the house is no bigger than a one bedroom in Devil's Peak. There are about 48.7 million of us crammed in there. The only window, which is right at the back, is bolted shut. The room stinks of sweat. The Martyrs are gathered in a circles, dissecting a carcass of a dog laid in front of them. I don't know whether it's the size of the room or the dead dog, or the effect produced by everyone packed so tightly together like a tin of sardines, but I'm unable to breathe, let alone think. I jostle my way towards the exit while the national anthem

booms in the exalted air. The back of my throat is dry as though stuffed with cotton and I can't sing the national anthem for the life of me. I push my way towards the door, but it's too late. I cough up the cotton, convulsing and choking as I do and spit it on the floor where it forms the shape of South Africa. Then there's a scream. The room falls silent. Heads turn. My heart rattles inside my chest like a bird trapped for too long in its cage.

He is a sick man! Someone shouts and throws a finger at me as I make my way to the door. It seems that for the first time in a long time I have surfaced to the appearance of things and immediately I want to recoil back to obscurity, to nothingness, to the silence of still lifes.

I run out onto the sunlit street. My breath short and thinning. A bright light hits me between the eyes and I fall on my knees and cough up blood, then spit it on the ground. I see in the blood all of the nine provinces. The Martyrs pour out of the house and descend on me, while I'm bent over, wiping sweat from my brow; they are murmuring, pointing at me with disgust, before they charge.

A boot that feels as though it is all the feet of that massive umbrage squeezed into a single shoe lands on my face. It knocks the air out of my lungs. It's then that I surrender myself fully to what is to come. When the fists land I can see the sun – small, squinting – shooting arrows of light across the vast blue sky. Someone pulls out my shoes, another rips the neckline of my t-shirt and another grabs and squeezes my genitals. I scream but the sound is stuck in my throat. I want to cry but my tears refuse to fall. I want to cry. I want to be seen as crying, to be perceived as crying, to become something that cries, that breaks, that feels pain but my body refuses me this small sympathy. It betrays me. Someone dislodges a concrete block from the pavement. He brings it down onto my head.

***

Before the concrete block crushed my skull, I woke up. I had a temperature, my face was wet and numb, and my genitals glowed with pain. Early strands of morning light settled themselves on my legs. My heart was racing; I scanned the room. But no one was there.

Through the window morning greeted me shyly; its liquid warmth pouring steadily into the living room. The microwave blinked its artificial time.

The glow around my genitals dissipated. I got off the couch and made myself a cheese toast with a spread of Bovril, then went to my room.

In bed I ate the toast and tried to look at Battiss' work again. I couldn't. So, I picked up Genet's *Miracle of the rose*. When I felt my eyelids heavy, I kicked my pants off and surrendered entirely to sleep. I dreamt of a vast black space, with neither form nor contrast, and without stars. Just an endless, shapeless black sphere, with me in the middle, scanning it for signs of life. Nothing. No landscapes, no shapes, no forms. I marvelled at the vast silence that surrounded it.

I was woken up by voices in the living room. I could tell that one of them was Litha's. The other man's voice I couldn't distinguish readily. But the more I listened it made it became clear that Litha was with Khaya.

Brother, Khaya whispered, don't forsake us now.

I'm not pulling out, Litha said. No, I'm not. It's only that our message seems misdirected, when you start speaking about profiting from the work we've set ourselves to accomplish.

How so? Khaya said.

We were meant to burn down every institution, not to prop them by selling our work in them.

We will, we shall, all in good time.

Litha said something in a low voice, which I couldn't catch.

Think of it this way, a third voice said, a woman's voice. We will destroy the institutions from inside, like termites.

I thought we were Martyrs; not Termites.

But we are, Khaya said. We are both. It's very simple. In order to be Martyrs proper we need money. This is, after all, a capitalist society. And once we have the money, we shall become Termites and destroy the very institutions who publish and exhibit our work. We will collapse the entire edifice from inside, in order to free the masses of this country from greed and tyranny.

But why can't we be martyrs like the martyrs of old? Why don't we declare war against this government, against evil capital? Why don't we take up arms, and go to the bush or gather in the town square until our demands are met? Why must we sell ourselves to make the point?

Don't let's get confused now, Khaya said. We live in a concrete jungle. Our bush is in the galleries, the cinemas, the bookshops, the universities.

When you invited me over to your house, Litha said, you told me you wanted to start a revolution, not a marketing campaign.

Look at it this way, the woman said. Money will give us all the power we need to start a revolution. Think of The Man who is now climbing to the highest office in this country. He is a true revolutionary. His meteoric rise signals a new direction for all revolutionaries. His victimhood mirrors our own. It is immaculate. We don't need guns, we need pity. It gets the job done just as good. That's the new revolution, Litha.

But how do we become martyrs, then?

We are martyrs…in the metaphorical sense, Khaya said. We don't need to die, dying is too clumsy. Let's fight to live in the new society that pities us enough to build shrines to our suffering. Come now, let's go grab something to eat. All this talk about pity and power is making me hungry.

I heard the door slam shut and I was alone again. I picked up Genet, and began reading from where I'd left.

6

My temperature remained high the entire week.

I took lots of MedLemon and made myself tea with ginger and honey. At night I woke up with cold sweats, my throat dry and sore, as if I'd been screaming in my sleep. I had a terrifying certainty that there was a snake in my room. It slept under my bed. I could feel it crawl inside my covers at night. A big snake, a python, an anaconda. It was there. When I felt it crawl on my leg I jumped up with a terrible start and switched on my light. Carefully, slowly, I peeked underneath my bed but nothing was there.

On Friday Lukhanyo came to visit. He made me a cup of hot water with ginger, into which he dropped two Aspirins.

Sitting at the edge of my bed he told me about another syndicate that was stealing corpses and holding them to ransom.

He said: We spend entire afternoons calling hospitals and clinics and mortuaries and police stations and Home Affairs offices to verify deaths and there are many deaths, hundreds and thousands of them almost every day, and the poor families

desperate to bury their loved ones are crying on our phones, we have to make them understand that there's been a crisis, a corruption in our systems, that they must wait. I've heard of people stealing money, now they are stealing corpses.

I tried to listen to him but I kept thinking about the snake while drifting into and out of consciousness.

We must see a doctor, he said, midway through his story.

This could be nothing. I've always been sickly. Don't worry too much about me, it makes me uncomfortable.

After Lukhanyo left my apartment I went back to sleep and found my snake waiting with her emerald eyes in my dreams.

***

I've been working on a paper in the campus library for years and years. My the nails are long and filthy. I don't know how long it's been. When I touch my face all I can feel are grains of sand as if for the last hundred years I'd buried my head in a dune. Political slogans emblazon the entrances of buildings and hallways. I see them flailing violently on the branches of trees. They cling to the clammy oiliness of night. A general, diffuse panic unsettles the already hot library with a nervous stillness. I'm perspiring profusely. Perspectives is on fire and the smoke billows into my room and chokes me. I run down the passage. The lift opens to a dense forest. Time seems to move slowly and I'm startled by a snake falling off a banana leaf with a thud. I watch it slither lazily into the crowding vegetation. I go down a small patch, fearful of snakes and other crawling things that can be found in the bush; I walk until I see a river. Everything's so green along the path that I become sickened by the abounding

nature, the trees and the wet grass and the wind and the sun which is right above my head. I skirt the riverbank and light a cigarette at the back of an old Toyota bakkie. The driver has a cleft chin and a bloated sack hanging from it, like a toad. He croaks when he laughs, a laugh which exposes yellowing teeth. The bakkie stinks of manure. I feel filthy just sitting there. I suppose he's a farmer or something but I never ask him. We drive out through the gate and I watch the world disappear behind a cloud of dust. Every time a branch brushes against my head I shiver with fear and disgust. In the front seat is a girl child with her legs wrapped on her lap and the driver rests his paws on the gear lever next to her puny legs; every time he changes gears he reaches for the little girl's knees. I don't know what it is they are talking about but they are laughing. Deep inside the forest, a loud, erratic chirping of crickets accompanies us up a short walk until it's infiltrated by a babble of drunk voices, which grow louder and louder as I trudge towards a gate that leads to a mud hut. I open the door and in that darkness I meet a pair of emerald eyes, it's the snake that fell from the banana tree. I freeze, the snake slithers into the light, its scales black and shimmering like the sea under moonlight. It lifts its head slightly from the ground while contemplating me with its emerald eyes and then it strikes.

***

I woke up drenched in sweat.

The noon gun went off. I heard it echo across the city. The flat was empty. I was shaking like a leaf in a storm. I texted Lukhanyo to take me to hospital after his afternoon class. When he arrived he had Camus' *Resistance, Rebellion and Death* in his cardigan.

I see you haven't gotten over your French phase, I said.

He smiled pitifully and said, You should've called me sooner.

I thought I could overcome by myself.

Even the existentialists needed each other, he said. If you ask me, Camus was killed by loneliness and isolation way before the accident eventually took him away.

But still, I said, *The Fall* is his best work. And look at what solidarity did to Sartre's mind.

Let's not get started on that, get dressed, he said.

While I go dressed he sat at the edge of my bed, the book in his hand now, flicking the pages like a card player.

I said, That day…with Litha...what…

Let's not start on that, cat, he said.

Why didn't you fight back, he was being an asshole?

I'm kinda used to cats like that. Cats who get off on that. But, see, when we were little we used to play arcades at Skollies in Southernwood. A corner shop run by a Portuguese man and his wife. And in that shop, you always found these older cats, the *Pacman* types. Sometimes these cats would bet on us to fuck each other up on *Street Fighter*, which was our game, the young boys' game. And cats really went at each other…for nothing. Just to be crowned *the man.* Friendships were ruined; the older cats laughed if a boy ran home crying. Cats would start off soft, then someone would sneak in a combo, or do something fancy, like a Bison headbutt and all Hell would break loose.

And that's why you refused to fight Litha?

Not just that. In the shop there was another dude, a quiet sort of cat, older, much older. He would buy a Stuyve and watch us play. Then one day we heard that

he'd followed one of the boys who ran out crying and raped him somewhere along the street. And that wasn't the end of it. Cats began saying that this dude started betting on the kids as well, hoping someone would run off so he could pick them up on their home or whatever. But I never saw this happen myself. Whenever I was there it was always the usual cats betting on us. And then one day, while we were playing, I saw this dude, this rapey cat, jacking off to us. He was standing outside but I could clearly see his reflection on the door of the shop. That's what killed all fighting for me. For as long as we were fighting and tearing each other down there was always that cat jacking off to the entire thing. If he didn't pick off the losers from the fights for something much worse.

That's pretty messed up, I said.

Yeah, it was, he said.

7

We took a cab in Barack street. The driver, a Congolese man who seemed out of sorts, was telling us how he'd lost his brother in the carnage – when the lynch mobs were killing African immigrants. He was telling us, me and Lukhanyo, how he'd found his brother on the side of the road. He'd been stabbed, cold, stiff, no one had called an ambulance. His wife and child had been evacuated by a neighbour before the mob swooped down on his house. We listened without responding because truth be told the mobs were acting in our name, they were protecting our interests. They were asserting their South Africanness, that unfortunate privilege we were now too ashamed to claim inside the man's taxi.

He dropped us off at Somerset Hospital, all the while saying he would pray for me, saying that I should trust in God.

God is dead, I wanted to say to him, with the same trepidation felt by Nietzsche, but I didn't say this, instead I thanked him for his trouble.

No, thank *you*, the man said.

I was admitted and taken to a ward where I was given a strong sedative intravenously. It knocked me out. When I came to it was a day later and Lukhanyo wasn't there. A nurse with a brown clipboard was presently checking the IV drip and making some notes on my file. She had on starch-white pants and a matching shirt. Her shoulder badges were navy with mauve straps running across them. Her tummy, which was round and tight, stuck out like a beachball in front of her. I wanted to ask her how far along she was but chose not to. There was about her a general aura of care and indifference that reminded me of ma.

How are you feeling today? She asked.

I can't say, I said.

The doctor should be in around ten.

Will he send me home?

I don't know. He will do some tests. They're not painful but you must co-operate. Who knows, maybe he'll send you home.

She took a sample of blood with that same dispassionate affection and left.

I lay on my bed and watched TV. I felt terribly alone and tears welled up in my eyes but I held them back. The ward carried a stench of wounds and the patients exhibited a grotesque physicality that I realised is often hidden in everyday life.

Then the doctor arrived. He checked the brown clipboard and asked a few questions about my health, my occupation, my family, and made a few innocent jokes

to cheer me up. He quipped about the country and corruption. He was nice enough and carried out his duties with a cheerful air. He asked about my history, my life, and I found myself oddly telling him everything. I told him about ma, my aunt, the snake that hid under my bed, but left out that I often thought of taking my life. The chat lasted close to an hour. When it was done, I didn't get the relief I sought. Instead, it made me feel even worse.

You'll feel better soon enough, he said, before going out of the room. Another thing, you might want to consider seeing someone. I can recommend a psychiatrist for you, to just look into things.

Later that evening I texted Zan and told her that the doctor said I should see someone, but Zan didn't respond.

Two days later I was discharged with a prescription for pain relief.

I left the hospital at six in the evening. The sun was beginning to sink into the Atlantic, the sky a serene purple over Seapoint.

I hailed down a taxi on Main Road and sat at the back. It was stuffy, the air moist with exhaustion, and the commuters, mostly sturdy middle-aged women with purses on their laps and hands folded over them, kept to themselves. The *gaatjie*, his head poking through the sliding door window, kept shouting: Cape Town! Cape Town! to passers-by who only shook their heads as they made to cross the street. I read EVEN IF YOU KNOW ME YOU MUST STILL PAY on the driver's sun visor, before resting my head on the rim of the seat and closing my eyes.

The engine hummed and lulled me to sleep.

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I am sitting next to aunt Lydia in my Grandpa's house. She is still chained to the bed still, and is trying to show me something she's trapped in her closed fist. The room is as I had always known it: dull yellow paint with a gloss finish. She beckons me with one hand, with her eyes she directs me to the thing she has clasped in her hand. She smiles her timid smile, showing a fine set of strong white teeth. Her blue checked blanket sits heavily round her shoulders, so much so that her back is slightly bent. Her face is sallow and her eyes – those big hazel eyes of hers – are small and as red as Transkei clay. In her countenance there is a quality of waste and decay, except for her smile, her smile thrusts out of her withered face boldly.

Woyika ntoni? She whispers. What are you afraid of?

Of you, I want to say, but the words don't come.

Although I am standing, I am drifting to her or she is drifting towards me, slowly, as if we're both being carried by a current under water.

Abruptly, she grabs my hand with the hand that held the thing she wanted me to see. A puff of ash bursts out of her hand. With the other hand she yanks the chain and I scream. The chain comes loose and writhes on the floor no longer a chain but a snake. I close my eyes and empty my lungs, screaming.

***

The woman sitting next to me woke me up.

When I opened my eyes, she was still shaking me by the shoulder.

You were talking and talking and laughing in your sleep, she said. It's time to get off. *Ubhatele phofu*? Have you paid?

I hadn't, so I fished ten bucks from my wallet and gave it to the *gaatjie* on my way out. He passed me an incredulous look and didn't bother to give me change.

I was on Strand Street, at the busy intersection close to KwaNobantu. Evening was beginning to crowd around the city and street lamps were burning orange with electricity.

Quickly I made my way through the dense mass of bodies and taxis and the cars trying to reach the freeway. I realised, I didn't know which day it was. In the air there was again the unmistakable stench of KFC. When I rounded the corner on Darling street, the stench of fried chicken mingled with the vinegary scent of fried Snoek. I hurried up Plein Street in a dizzying rush. Sweat collected on my forehead and my armpits gave off a stink that was undoubtedly my own. I remembered the packets of Paracetamol and Gen-Payne I had received from the hospital dispensary.

Best thing for period pains, the dispensary nurse had said.

The sun had climbed over Lion's Head; from behind the mountain it glowed sharply and rounded the peak like a Halo.

Eita, one of the security greeted as I pressed through the turnstile in my building. But I didn't answer him, pretending not to have heard him at all.

In the lift I was alone for some time, thinking of the ash in my aunt's hand and the snake that had chained her to the wall, and wondering what could've have happened had I let it strike.

A group of people entered the lift on the 8th floor. They seemed like friends.

You should've been there last night, one of them said. A girl in turquois swimming trunks and a white vest, with her hair tied into a bun.

It was awful of him, though, no, another replied.

On the 16th floor I got off the lift.

It was nice and quiet. I went into my room, took off my clothes, took a long shit, then took a shower. The water was nice and warm and pricked my body a little. I brushed my teeth in the shower and scrubbed diligently under my arms and between my legs. I sank the soap between my butt cheeks, then spread them for a good rinse. Getting out of the shower I felt new. I put on a clean t-shirt, my PJs, took two pills of each prescription, then went to the kitchen for a glass of water.

Muffled voices emanated from Litha's room. Barefoot, I tiptoed to his door with the pills still in my hand and listened. I couldn't make out what was said, so I bent over and peeked through the keyhole.

The way Litha's room was set up was that his bed sat in the middle, facing the door. On the left side of his bed was his window, looking out on to Harrington Street, the N2, the Southern Suburbs, and the winelands to the West. Next to the window was his computer stand, which presently flickered fluorescently. On the East was his shower and toilet, facing parliament, St Mary's Cathedral, and Plein Street.

The curtains were wide open and late afternoon light landed on a tangle of legs on the bed.

The bodies faced the window, although their faces where out of view from the framing of the keyhole.

A leg climbed over Litha's and there was a giggle. Then Litha got up and came straight toward the door. I tip-toed back. When he came out I made as if I was looking for the jug of water in the fridge.

Where've you been? He asked.

On campus, mostly, I said.

Good. Painting going well?

Not so much. You? *Aleen*? I said.

No, I'm with someone.

The film, I meant.

Oh, yes, uhm, that…he's no longer alone. He's with others. He's found a community, so I might have to re-write some of it. But the crucial scenes are still in there, the really moving scenes. Seen Lukhanyo, lately?

No, not at all. I'm sure he's tied up at school and with work, I lied.

Say, tonight, there's a little poetry session at Tagores, if you're interested.

Sure, I nodded and drank the pills.

He reached for two glasses of wine and went back into his room.

You have wine, I said, excitedly, before he closed the door.

I'm with someone, he said. Only a comrade, he turned and carelessly swatted the door shut behind him.

When I got to Tagores the poetry session was already finished. People milled outside the joint, smoking j's and conversing intimately. The night was warm, almost blue in complexion. I found Litha in a rooms upstairs. The room was packed; I could identify numerous faces from The Martyrs meeting.

Ey! Litha got up to embrace me.

I shook hands with his friends then sat next to Litha. There was someone there with him; he introduced her as Anga.

I missed the poetry, unfortunately, I said.

It was incredible, Litha said. Absolutely incredible.

What was the poem about?

Pain.

Was it painful to watch? I said.

Too painful, he said and shook his head.

He was being earnest while I, on the other hand, was merely being sarcastic. Making a joke of a crucial moment. It made me feel superior, smarter, to see such earnestness in him, to watch him drown in faith. The thought that crossed my mind then was that Litha was stupid. Talented, but soft in the head. No doubt, the consequence of his relationship with his mother.

To the mother land! Someone raised a beer bottle.

The room joined him with passionate thrusts of fists in the air.

I'm still here, you know, Anga said. Litha and I had been talking for close to an hour now about art.

He was saying, The only artist is Tarkovsky! Everyone else is a gimmick!

I thought your man was Godard, I said cheerfully.

The j that was making rounds finally reached us. I took two tokes and passed it to him.

He still is, Litha said, while coughing, the joint held out to Anga, who was presently saying to someone else, I can't take de Beauvoir seriously, as a woman!

And Marcel? I said.

Who? Proust? Litha replied.

No. *The Sorrow and the Pity*, I said.

Ahm, yes, him, he's incredible.

Everyone is incredible to you tonight, I said.

It is a good night, with good people. I can sense the future.

Like how? I said.

In everything. In this place, with these people, in this evening…everything (he looked at me pityingly), even in you! Can you imagine that, I sense the future in you! I must be drunk, he laughed.

Or high, I said.

Or both, his chest whizzed.

This exchange amused us greatly and it was true. I had no future and it was only Litha who knew this, intuitively. He sensed it the first time we met that I was bound for failure. He even said so. After registering for our graduate year, we both went down to Pigs for beers. He was meeting some friends there. After our third beer he looked at me, the way he was looking at me now, and said, You look sad, like someone crushed by the weight of his own life. I can see you finishing this year, getting your varsity papers, but I don't see you anywhere in the future. Your sadness is that of someone who has already been forgotten by his past, and who is being rejected by the future. Anyway, that's what I think.

And now here we were in a moment that collected into itself all the human resources and data to shape the future. And already, I felt outside of it, as if I were looking in through the window, watching Litha and The Martyrs play house inside a cardboard box.

The j closed another loop. Litha and Anga got up.

Are you coming? He said.

I followed behind them, all the way down the stairs, and through the exit. People were still milling outside, smoking and talking.

We crossed over Lower Main Road and made our way towards Victoria Road, then turned into a street with only two burning lamps. Cars lined the street and we turned again until we met a house with green fencing. A jacaranda bush nosed its way between the bars of the fence. This was Anga's digs. She told us to wait by the door, then went inside the house.

She's something, isn't she? Litha said.

I lit a cigarette.

She's cool, I nodded absently.

The house was as quiet as the street. There was a steeliness to the silence, as if it had been cast in iron. Anga came out with a bottle of Olive oil in her hand and a tea cup.

I must cleanse you before you come into my house, she said, and made us to kneel on the WELCOME mat by the door.

This won't do. Come, follow me.

We rounded the house and stood underneath a jacaranda bush. She made us take off our shoes and kneel again. Which we did without protest. She poured the oil in the tea cup, then made an incantation whose words were foreign to any language I knew. She did so looking up at the steely black sky, her Levi's denim jacket opening up like butterfly wings over our heads, showing a thin leather strap fastened round her waist. She wore a loose fitting brown dress underneath. Long and flowy, it fell down on a pair of lilac leather pumps. She massaged the oil into the crowns of our heads and made us drink the rest. Litha went first, and I followed after him, taking small sips which swam round my tongue like a smooth stone, then swallowed. The oil clung to my throat and I tried to clear it with a cough.

Don't, Anga said. It's not meant to go down easily.

Litha was oddly obsequious, following her instructions like a little boy trying to impress his mother with his immaculate manners.

I can't, I said, then spat out what little oil still lingered in my mouth on the lawn.

You almost spoiled it, Anga gave me a sharp look.

We followed her into the house. The walls were white, the ceilings pressed, and the floors made of dark wood, polished to a slight gleam. There were two couches with colourful shawls on them, a television, and a fire place. In an ashtray on top of the mantlepiece burned *Imphepho*. The smoke rose up in curlicues, past a poster of Nina Simone hanging in a dark wood frame on the wall.

Anga's room was clumsy – a student's room. With a pile of clothes on an overflowing basket by the wardrobe, which was left open, with shoes and underwear strewn on the floor. On a small bedside table, her iPod was plugged into a black JBL speaker.

You can sit anywhere you like, she said, then shuffled out of the room.

An odd silence fell between Litha and I, as if we both wanted to say something to each but held our tongues. Anga returned with three tumblers and a wine. She poured for all three of us, put on some music, then settled herself at the head of the bed. She took out a *bankie* from the table on which the iPad sat and began rolling a joint.

Cool digs, I said, trying to appear nonchalant.

Thanks. Most people's first comment is the mess.

He missed the entire poetry session, Litha came to life.

Oh, did you, Anga said in surprise. Damn, man, it was really cool. You really missed out. Hold here (she gave the j to Litha) I must read you something. She went out and came back with a book in her hand, a collection of Nikki Giovanni's which looked old and in bad shape.

Okay, get this, this reminds me so much of mom. Listen: *the last time I was home to see my mother we kissed, exchanged pleasantries, and unpleasantries, pulled a warm, comforting silence around us and read books.*

That's how she read the lines, then closed the book.

I feel like right now, in this present moment, we're being comforted by this silence we know deep down belongs to the realm of the mother…the womb, if you know what I mean.

Litha nodded, passing her the joint.

Like the silence of water when you swim deep in the ocean, she took the joint from Litha's outstretched hand and lit it.

Skyf. She stretched out the hand holding the joint.

I took slow drags, thinking about the Olive oil, the incantation, the taking off of shoes. I passed the joint to Litha and asked for the bathroom.

Down the passage, second door to your left, she said.

The rooms down the passage where all closed. I imagined its inhabitants quietly asleep, sunk in the world of dreams, all foetal like embryos. How innocent we all are in our sleep. Maybe, the original sin is self-consciousness: the terrifying knowledge that you exist. And because you exist, you are going to die.

I emptied my bladder in the bathroom. I looked through the bottles of meds in the small square mirror above the sink for an anti-depressant. I found 220mg of Ibuprofen, swallowed four pills, then found myself in front of the bookshelf in the lounge, running my eyes over the titles, hoping to find something I could borrow – or steal. I'd never stolen a book from a personal library and the thought excited me a little but I brushed it away, placing the book I had picked up back into its place.

When I opened Anga's door I found them making out on the bed. I pulled it gently shut.

No, come, come here, Anga said, with a hand held out, beckoning me to join them.

Litha was already topless, his eyes smarting with lust, a smile tracing itself on the edges of his mouth. I climbed onto the bed and laid next to them, still clothed. They proceeded to fondle each other as if I wasn't there. I wished I had brought a book. As I lay supinely, tracing the patterns on the pressed ceiling, zooming in on the dust gathered inside the lamp cover, listening to their stimulated physicality, Anga took my hand and placed it on her breast; then she turned to kiss me and I kissed her back.

Litha was undressing her now. Peeling the denim Levi's jacket, taking off her dress, digging into her back and unfastening her bra, sucking on her breasts and slobbering on my hand, which I left where Anga had put it.

Anga turned and kissed me again, then undid my belt. She went back to Litha, and undid his belt, too.

They went on kissing and nibbling and fondling each other; Anga made childlike giggles when Litha bit her nipples.

With her dress off, her legs wide open – I was holding one with my right hand – he entered her. I let go of her leg, took off my t-shirt and pants, and readied myself to do the same. A Nina Simone record drifted softly from the iPod. With each of Litha's thrusts, Anga swung her head from left to right. She was beautiful, wounded in way, wounded by Litha's action, by her beauty, by lust. I knew it would be my turn to enter her, to thrust and to moan, to forget myself inside her, and I couldn't tell whether this excited me or filled me with dread. With her legs spread wide open like that, her body writhing with pleasure, her eyes shut, her moans and muffled screams, glistening with sweat, I felt myself going soft, losing steam, growing self-conscious.

Litha grabbed her by the throat, thrust deeply, repeatedly, as if he was bludgeoning her with his lust, his desperation, and I suspected right then that this

scene, this intrusion and this volunteered vulnerability, could only lead to a deep seated resentment.

It takes a tremendous self-negation to enjoy sex, because one must forget oneself, one's timidity, one's anxieties about one's body and one's future, and one's forlornness about the past. Sexual intercourse, the kind that was laid bare before me, is the only present that makes any sense at all. It is the only present into which all existence dies and is reborn at the same time. Litha cried out as if someone had torn his spine from his body. Anga dug her fingernails into his back. He was done, and by all appearance, so was she.

We slept in the same bed, the three of us – with Anga's leg over my legs, her face on my chest. As Litha snored, Anga whispered to me, What do you think of the *Eternal Return*?

I don't think it's impossible, I said, softly.

I'm beginning to think life occurs in fragments. Complete fragments which are independent of the continuum of time and space, although obedient to the principle of a unifying arch, like the seasons, you know. Each season is its own time. As such, each fragment must be sustained by its own events, its own history. The past is its own future, the present its own past, and the future its own present. And time doesn't project outward, it doesn't go anywhere, but instead points inwardly, towards its own timelessness, its infinite interior present. In these infinite pockets of time and space the same history plays out within its own eternity, the same realities occurring over and over again. I am born the year I am born in and when I die I am reborn in the same year, within the same constraints, to face the same reality which I always face, to grapple with the same history, the same shape and form that my time and space

always takes. This goes for all of us, in each fragment, wherever that fragment may lie on the continuum of the fragmentary whole.

This makes me think that the universe died the moment it was born, like a thought that flickers and dies a Nano-second later. And within that second is implied the entire evolutionary process, the billions of years of the material development of the universe, the coding of the DNA of the world, natural history, human history, the birth of language, the World Wars, all the technology and all the possibilities. But it's only a Nano-second. And there are those who live in the fragments that spark the combustion of the thought and those who experience its decline back to nothingness, all within that Nano-second.

When you return, do you think you carry some of the dust from the previous trip? I asked.

It's possible, she said. Seeing your ancestor in your dreams could be you, your older self looking back at your earlier self, warning it of impending danger, in the guise of a mythical African elder. But I don't think that that's meant to happen. The coding of Time and Space is meant to erase all the data from all former selves. We're supposed to build a fresh new start so the experience surprises us with the force of its reality, its inevitability, as if it were happening for the first time.

So you're saying that this has already happened?

A million times over. I sensed it when you spat out my oils; it felt as though you had done it before. And I suspected that in another cycle, you didn't even drink, but went home instead. But do you see why I needed you here. It wasn't just to fuck you and your friend, although that was good. I sensed that you always end up alone, somehow, deserted, forgotten. And I wanted to remember you and make you remember yourself, to remember your time.

I see, I said.

This is why I became a Martyr, because I knew that my time was always that of suffering, and that this never changes every time I return. So, instead, I'd rather make it worthwhile, but making everyone pay the price of my eternal suffering. I don't know why others joined, but this is my reason. It is not about correcting history. It is because I know futility, for all my existences have been nothing but futile. Look at our time. Would you say we're at the beginning or at the end of the spark? Anyway, I'm tired now. I must sleep. We will talk about this again tomorrow morning, although something tells me we won't. That this is the last time I am ever going to see you. Anyway, good night.

In the morning I was the first to wake up. I was careful not to wake them, they slept so beautifully together.

On my way out I bumped into one of her dig's mates and greeted.

She let me out.

Instead of going home I walked to Ida's studio. The sky was clear, a cool breeze blew gently on my face. I walked at an even, meditative pace, working my thoughts into the walk. Even when a film of sweat broke above my brow, I continued forward in an even stride, never stopping to catch my breath.

I found Ida in a floral dress, her workman boots splattered with paint.

The long walk had worn me out. She offered me a beer and invited me to lie down on her couch while she painted.

We'll grab something to eat afterwards, she said.

It was a piece of abstraction that she was working on. I watched her brush sweep across the canvas, she with her headphones on, until I fell asleep.

I must have slept for an hour or so before she woke me up.

I heard you were sick, she said, on our way to town.

I'm a lot better now.

You don't seem like it.

I promise you, I am.

What did the doctors say?

That I needed to get some rest, that's all.

Well, you need to see someone. Someone who can help you.

I don't need help.

That's what everyone says, she said, smiling to herself.

I see your window is fixed.

Oh ja, fucking *skollies*. Just take my advice.

What I need to do is work. Work always sets me straight.

Art is not worth it. Zan says you've been cutting class.

I stopped going.

See, exactly that.

Exactly what?

Just take my advice. By the way, Zan had another nervous breakdown. She spent 3 weeks at Alexandra. They've put her on Lithium salts, which she hates.

I thought she was being treated already, I said.

She was, she is, but she won't take anti-depressants anymore. She says they make her feel weird.

So where is she now?

She's with my parents. In the Southern Suburbs.

We parked on Darling Street, not far from Mullers Optometrist, where we were headed. We climbed up to the first floor of the shop, where the old slit lamps, the callipers and the old frames were kept.

When did you know you were going blind? She asked while we browsed around the room.

I can't remember, I think it was when I put on my mother's glasses that I saw there was something not quite right with my vision.

It is very old this place. It could belong in a book.

A museum, I said.

It would be redundant in a museum.

Do you think they treated slaves here? I asked.

It only opened in 1890, were there slaves then? She said.

Who knows? I said.

Where the old Cape gallows used to be, there's a rehab centre for young people who want to get out of the gangs and the drugs and and and.

Makes sense, I said. Then added, Isn't the Voortrekker Monument protected as some kind of *tangible expression of minority identities and other marginalised groups*?

Well, that makes no fucking sense, Ida said. But then again, everyone seems marginalised in this country.

We left the car and looked for a café on Long Market Street.

Zan thinks you want to leave the country.

Ida laughed, Well, I've thought about it but I can't see myself doing it.

Why not? Many artists leave, that's all I'm saying.

Well, I suppose it's their prerogative. I'd rather die here with everyone else.

To die with everyone else, I thought. There it was, the essential lie. And I wanted to say this to Ida but I didn't, couldn't. The sentiment seemed comforting to her, rooting her to a place, justifying her being here. But did I believe it? Did I think that it was possible to die with your people or any people for that matter? To die with a country? I had left ma for uni, and with that departure I had home and everything I'd grown with behind me. I had stopped going to uni for what? I didn't know, except perhaps that painting no longer held the place in my heart that it used to. How else could I explain to myself this inability to pick up a brush? Everything I touched lost its lustre in my hands. Even my body had grown too uncomfortable to be in. I would die alone, unloved, in my own island.

This last thought was unsettling, but it felt true. And it seemed to me that the only way back into the mould of *everyone else* was to leave everything and everyone else behind. After all we die alone, I thought.

We finished our coffees and she took me to Perspective. After she'd turned the corner on Buitenkant Street, by The Book Lounge, I couldn't go up to the flat, to my bed, underneath which the snake lay waiting. Controlled by some imperceptible inner impulse I wondered off to the park and just sat there until the sun went down, then went back to collect my things.

Litha wasn't home. I took a few items of clothing and my poster of Eastman and stuffed them in my backpack. I didn't think about what I was doing, succumbing to the inner force which had taken over me. I walked to the homeless shelter under the bridge on Lower Sir Lowry Road to spend the night. It was the safest place to lay one's head and I knew, without knowing, that there were no snakes there.

It wasn't at all unpleasant, except for the bedbugs, the weak coffee, and the stench of human decay.

The entire night I kept to myself.

Sometime during the night I knew I wouldn't go back to the way things were.

I pictured myself graduating, with the fanfare all around me, me walking people around some gallery, talking about my work, me at the Kimberly having another beer, at some panel talking about this country, all of it made me depressed and nauseous.

I thought of going back home to my mother but I couldn't see my way back there. Anyway ma would ask too many questions, questions I wouldn't be able to answer. Rather let her enjoy the last years of her life, I thought.

In the morning I made my way to the station. I bought a loose and continued up Strand Street until it turned to High Road. I followed my feet past Greenpoint, past Seapoint, around the curve on Victoria Road, until I was in Clifton.

My life and everything in it is now behind me, I thought, as I made my way down towards Camps Bay. The noon gun went off in the distance behind me and scattered my brains on the pavement. I doubled over and threw up. Thinking how absurd it is that the black powered naval guns have been going off over the city since 1806 seemingly without complaint. The sheer noise of it all. Just thinking of the bang! made me shudder.

Quiet! I heard myself say, out loud. Good grief, I pleaded, Please keep it down, I can't think.

I passed Rastas hawking African masks on the side of the road. I had worked up a good sweat. I let it wash freely over my face, wetting my glasses. My limbs were now attuned to the rhythm of the road. They moved easily, without restraint.

Passing the Twelve Apostle Hotel, a runner in orange tights and a pair of Oakley's threw me a disgusted look over his shoulder and jogged away. His tan as orange as his shorts.

The sun was right above my head and sweat fell over my eyes.

I took the winding road down Llandudno to the beach. My clothes soggy with sweat and salt crystalized in the small grooves of my neck.

The street was quiet and empty in the suburb, except for the odd man in blue overalls mowing what seemed an already manicured lawn. A Beagle raced to one of the steel gates, barking; then a Terrier, a Retriever, some other breed of such confusing lineage I stopped trying to figure out what its name was. Now the street was a cacophony of barking. Each step I took seemed to trigger this barking as burgling would trigger an alarm. The man in overalls looked up, finding that it was only me causing all the farce, lowered his eyes and went back to his mowing.

This, I could paint, I thought: the double-story house I was now passing; manicured lawns with a black man in blue overalls working his lawn mower over the perfect landscape. Then another black man in a blue overall, pushing his own lawnmower, then another, until there was a black men to match each lawn. I would give the sky a teal finish, with just a sliver of cloud, with light falling immaculately on the houses. No cars on driveways just as there weren't any cars as I walked past. Just men in blue overalls trimming what was already trimmed, making perfect what was already perfect. Certainly, that's what I would've painted had I had my tools.

This is what I was thinking as I followed the street signs to Sandy Bay. On the beach I found a spot a few paces from a 30something couple fondling each other on the sand. I took off my sneakers and my clothes and made them into a pillow, then laid my head.

I closed my eyes, the sun on my face.

I thought of the man who'd died on the beach in Port St Johns and how gentle his face had been, as if sculpted. I remembered the cows that had held his wake.

Not far from where I laid a stout man in sunglasses masturbated freely in the wind.

Knock yourself out, it's a free country, I thought, then closed my eyes, the heat pressing against my face. I must've fallen asleep because when I opened my eyes there were more people on the beach, languidly sunning themselves, a young woman with a paperback in her hands. A shadow fell on my face so I lifted my hand to cover my eyes so as to get a better look; two figures towered above me. A man and a woman. They looked above middle age, smiling.

Do you mind? The man said.

Not at all, I replied.

They threw a picnic blanket on the sand and flopped onto it.

Charl, the man said, extending his hand to greet. And this is my wife, Liza.

I dispensed with the usual pleasantries.

Come sit with us, Charl offered, patting the picnic blanket.

Thanks, but I'm aright, I said.

So what brings you here? He asked.

Same reason as you.

We've never seen you here before, Liza, his wife, said.

It's my first time.

Oh, how lovely. We come here all the time, isn't that so? She gestured to her husband.

Indeed. We are a small community, as it were. It's good to meet a new member.

I'm not a member of anything, I wanted to say.

Do you live around these parts? Liza asked.

Nope.

There was an awkward silence. I let it linger there for a while.

So what do you do?

Nothing. I'm a student. I used to be a student.

Till when? Charl asked.

Till a few weeks ago.

Well, that's fascinating, our daughter is a student, training, that is, to become a painter, Liza remarked. She's in the U.S. on a scholarship. It's been two years now since she left.

Is she any good? I asked.

She is, isn't she, Charl?

Oh yes, she's a phenomenal painter, you should see her work.

I'm sure she is, I said, and rested my head on my pillow again.

Look, you could come by our house, our garage still holds some of her things, you can tell me then what you really think.

I'd love to but I'm afraid I can't.

Why not? Liza said rather lively.

Time.

Are you headed somewhere?

I wanted to lie, at first, but why lie to strangers, I thought.

No, not really. I'm kind of trying to sort myself out. I left my life behind me this morning. I can't tell you why, it just seemed necessary. Now I'm here. Tomorrow I might be anywhere.

Then you have all the time, Charl laughed.

They put me in their daughter's room, in the garden, at the back of the house.

In the garage were her easel and some works set against the wall and covered in different colour sheets.

They were scenes of men and women from the fishing communities around the area – Hout Bay Heights, Harbour Heights, Imizamo Yethu.

There's one with an old woman wearing a black doek, sitting on a wooden chair, looking straight ahead, her expression grave and impenetrable, a young girl sleeping in her arms; then there's a topless man with scars and prison tattoos visible on his body, both hands over his mouth, his head tilted to the heavens, a thin gold chain falling on his chest, painted in a squatting position; there's a boy standing in the middle of the street, his feet firmly apart, at the end of one arm a German Shepherd on a leash. All the figures were without eyes, even the girl on the woman's chest. Only the German shepherd could see.

So, what do you think? Charl said.

They were both dressed now, Liza in a simple blue pastel frock with flowers and Charl in shorts and a t-shirt.

They're lovely, I said, they remind me of another artist but I can't seem to recall his name.

But they're very disturbing, Charl said. From a purely professional perspective, that is.

Charl, please, Liza said, not everyone is crazy.

I didn't say that, Charl replied.

He thinks we all suffer from repressed trauma of some form or other, Liza apprised me. These are just portraits of our neighbours, that's all. They are a true expression of their lives. And Dana had the eye to see that.

In the lounge area a dark-wooden bookshelf rose from the ground and reached the ceiling. The top shelves were stuffed with Encyclopaedia Britannica's. Nearly every piece of furniture was heavy dark wood. Exotic curios from around the continent and other eastern-southern parts of the world were thrown around the living room.

After they showed me the painting, I went back to Dana's room and slept. Liza came to the room to tell me that they had prepared supper.

I'll be there, shortly, I said. Let me freshen up a little.

Don't take too long, Liza said.

Charl had made pea soup.

We ate. They asked me question about the life I had left behind. They asked me about future plans.

None, I said.

Surely, you must have a plan, Charl insisted.

Charl, please, Liza said.

I don't mind at all, but thank you, Liza.

I learned that they were both academics – retired. Liza was a Doctor of Philosophy in Philosophy and Charl had taught a class in Psychoanalysis and had a number of PhD's in the field.

After we ate, Liza sat at the Steinway and played one of Chopin's *Nocturnes*. Outside the moon bobbed on the swimming pool.

Can I smoke in here? I asked.

Knock yourself out, Charl said.

The fire was going in the fireplace.

Liza and Charl were talking about a colleague who had lost his position at the university under a cloud of confusion. I don't know who they were talking about. I dug into my bowl while they talked away.

Liza kept bringing up Roth's *Human Stain* and Charl would reply that not everything is art. To which Liza would say, But it is and you know it.

After his dismissal the lights seemed to go out of him, Charl was saying. To be cast out of one's community is a rare luxury.

Don't be so cynical, Liza replied. That man gave his life to the university and he was cast out like a criminal.

Who cares, what matters is that he stood his ground, held on to his principles. Now we're all expected to speak in one voice, move in a single file like an infantry.

Look, I don't mean to say it wasn't brave of him to stand his ground, but we must all move with the times.

Nonsense, Charl said, tides change but academic principle must never waver. It's not called a liberal arts education for nothing you know.

When we'd had coffee after dinner I excused myself.

I spent the night writing in one of Dana's journals.

For weeks, after dinner, I'd leave them watching TV or playing cards or Liza fingering away at the piano to write in Dana's journal. I discovered that I couldn't paint around Dana's paintings, instead, I wrote. I wrote mindless things that have no import whatsoever in the greater scheme of things. I wrote to kill time and to make up for it. I wrote so I wouldn't have to think about my state of mind or anything else

before going to sleep. Had I been hasty to drop everything or had it been perhaps a spell of madness. What was I running away from, if I were running at all. I didn't spend time searching for the answers, instead I wrote. I wrote about the ways in which new media are re-wiring personalities. I wrote about Roger Ballen's work. I wrote a letter to the artist Alfredo Jaar. I tried to make sense of the Voortrekker Monument. I filled about four of Dana's journals with my writing.

Charl invited me on a short walk to the beach. He remarked on what he termed *my ascetic absence from the main house*. For a second I thought this was the day they would kick me out. Time had flown quickly. I couldn't say I'd grown to love them, or even to like them, to be honest. If anything, I was digging a tunnel for myself, a hole through which I could escape everything and everyone else.

It was a sunny day. Strands of clouds were knitting themselves together along the edges of the blue canvas over Hout Bay; a family of dassies hopped between the rocks and climbed on the boulders that slept on the slope like hibernating titans. A small dassie hid behind the pink, orange, and red heads of the Fynbos, occasionally poking its head out and sniffing the sea-salted air. Black birds shot across the bright blue sky. My feet kept sinking and slipping on the pale warm sand as we neared the beach.

In a country like ours a suicide is a sacrifice for the good of many, Charl was saying. There's simply not enough cake or samp to go around for everyone, if you catch my drift.

I listened absently.

Look, I'm not speaking about what the bereaved might feel about a suicide in the family. No, not that at all. That's a personal matter. Although some families have been known to breathe easier if, say, a child who'd killed himself had proved to be

too much trouble for the parents and his community. Always the damned community. Anyway, what I'm trying to give you is an objective analysis.

He paused for a moment, threw his eyes at the sky, and seemed to contemplate them for a moment before he spoke again.

Say, When last have you read about a prison suicide in the newspapers, for example?

I admitted I hadn't, that I had never read of one single case, in fact.

See, now, the conspiracy theorists will tell you that government is keeping mum about all of that, but this is only half the truth. It is us, society, who don't care what happens to condemned men. In fact, we wish that the worst could happen to them, as if prison was not punishment enough. Now you hear murmurs about bringing back the death penalty. That is not outside the imagination of the world we live in, a world that thrives on humiliation, torture, revenge. This is what justice means today. Bring back the guillotine, off with their heads, put them on spikes for all to see justice at work. And in some ways, this impulse is understandable. There's always an element of revenge in justice. Always.

The beach was now only a few meters away and the sand clung between my toes. A thick band of clouds drifted over the sea to the West.

There are then two ways to read the statistics on suicide, continued Charl, you can either be emotional about them or read them coldly, professionally. I'm inclined to agree that *judging whether life is or is not worth living amounts to answering the fundamental question of philosophy*. The fundamental question of human life, if you ask me. Not an easy question but one worth pondering. Don't look at me like that, I'm not talking shit, I'm certain the question has crossed your mind as well.

I said nothing.

Look, he said finally, we're almost there.

The beach was deserted. Beams of sunlight pierced through the middle of a cloud in straight lines that fell over the blue waters.

We sat close to the soft neckline of the coast and watched the waves crash and retreat.

Don't take this the wrong way, but if you ever thought about taking your life, I could assist you. You needn't ask. I can cook up a potassium solution for you, like this.

He snapped his fingers.

Ultimately, not Christ, not Marx, not Freud, despite the pretensions of each, has the final word on the fact of being human, Vidal was right, Charl said, looking straight ahead, the ocean at our feet.

We stayed on the beach, saying very little to each other, watching the sun burn into ash, watching evening grow closer and closer, and then quietly, we made our back to the house.

I took one of Dana's sleeping pills and woke up the following evening.

Liza and Charl were naked, playing cards on the dinner table. A bottle of red wine stood in middle.

I tapped on the sliding door and Charl opened.

We were wondering where you were, he said.

I've kept food for you, it's in the microwave, Liza said, fingering the cards lying face down on the table.

I ate my dinner on the kitchen counter while they played.

My only recollection of a naked aging body was that of my Grandpa when he was being helped out of his wash-basin by Grandma, and as soon as I caught a glance

of his nakedness I averted my eyes and felt shameful for having seen what I thought I wasn't supposed to see.

Presently, I felt no shame whatsoever and if there was any shame I was indifferent to it. I simply sat there and finished my food.

I must get some sleep, I said, getting up.

So soon? Charl said.

I'm afraid so, I said, and left.

In the room I composed another essay, an impression of Grandpa rolling his tobacco on the veranda, watching his cows come home after a day in the fields. I remembered that it was his tobacco that killed him.

I spent my time in Dana's room filling up journal after journal with essays, remarks, and impressions.

Liza and Charl checked on me from time to time. Liza brought me tea and sat down for small talk about her own youth, she said nothing of her daughter, except that she was exceptionally talented. She offered me food every time she came to visit. I picked up some weight. All the time I was with Charl and Liza I don't remember once thinking of Litha, or Lukhanyo, or Zan. It was as if the distance had erased their data completely from memory. I felt less anxious and somewhat at peace.

8

It was maybe eight weeks after I had moved into Dana's backroom, just after midnight, when started packing my things. I didn't tell my hosts that I was leaving. I suppose I didn't want them to plead with me to stay. It was enough that they'd offered me a place for so long. In any case, I felt that it was time to move on. I thought I

could settle at one of the fishing communities, maybe paint there, where no one knew who I was. This would be a fresh start. I'd write ma once I'd settled, I thought, picking up the journals with my essays, and stuffing them in my backpack.

It was evening, the gate was locked, so I climbed over it. I hurried down the street. It had just begun to drizzle and the road was wet. At the end of the street I was caught by the blue lights of a police van. Two stout policemen got out of the vehicle, shining their torches on my face.

And where do you think you're going, Mister? One of them asked.

I couldn't see their faces because of the torch light.

Home, I said.

And where's that? The second one asked.

I couldn't answer the question. I thought of saying Imizamo Yethu but thought that would certainly get me into trouble.

That's none of your business, I said.

Ah, a *slim* one, the one who'd asked, retorted.

Turn around, your hands behind your hand, said the first.

I did nothing wrong, I said.

You don't have to tell us that, the second one replied. You can tell it to the magistrate.

I haven't done nothing wrong, I was a guest over there, at that house, I pointed.

Where? There, where you jumped the gate?

Yes, I said, I was a guest there, we can go back, they'll tell you what I'm saying is true.

Ha ha, the second one laughed.

Rain was falling steadily and I was taken to Hout Bay Police Station on Mandela and Main Road.

House robbery, the second policeman said as he shoved me through the first iron gate, my hands cuffed behind my back.

Where's the Captain? The first one asked. We have a house break-in here.

I didn't do it, I protested.

The two officers took the iron cuffs off and sat me down on a grey plastic chair.

We caught this *laaitie* jumping the fence.

The Captain, a very short, very fat, man, with his blue cap concealing his eyes, wobbled into the room.

So what where you doing there? He asked.

I was a guest, I said.

You are not doing yourself a favour by lying, he pulled his cap way back on his head as if he was not at all on duty.

If you don't tell us the truth, we will be forced to note down that you refused to co-operate and instead lied to us, this will count against you. Tell us, what did you do, what happened.

Nothing happened. I was a guest and I chose to leave today.

By jumping the fence? One of the arresting officers said. Nice guest you are.

Let's have it on record that the suspect refuses to co-operate, the Captain said to another officer standing by the complaints desk. The man jotted something down on a sheet of paper.

This is a very serious matter, the Captain said.

Another officer by the desk asked me for my particulars. He said it like that: *Your particulars*.

There's nothing particular about me, I wanted to say but kept my mouth shut.

Do you need more time? He said.

When I didn't respond, he clucked his tongue. Well, this was a waste of time. Now you see what we have to deal with. Why should we put up with this?

Book him! One of my arresting officers chimed in merrily.

By some miracle, some pure force of ignorance and bravado, I jumped from my seat and swung at the officer. My fist sailed past his face and missed him by a hair.

Two officers tackled me to the ground and put me in handcuffs. They were cold and heavy, the handcuffs on my wrist. The next minute I was hot with delirium and banging my head against the floor. The floor was soft, as if made of cotton, although it was all linoleum.

My wrists burned. The cuffs were squeezed tightly, chewing into my skin.

A female officer came into the room and asked what I was being arrested for.

House robbery, the officer I had tried to sock in the nose said.

Is this true? She squatted next to me, peering into my face.

I'm not criminal, I said.

Found anything on him? She shouted back at her colleagues.

One of the arresting officers was going through my backpack.

Books, he said, just books and his diaries.

What do you do, sir? The female officer said.

I'm a student, I said.

Do you have any family in Cape Town?

No, ma'am, I said.

Part IV

1

IN GOD WE TRUST BUT DI WE MUST is etched on the wall just above my head, with the *E* missing. The stench of decaying human flesh lingers in the dyspeptic air. There are other people in the cell, mostly with their eyes cast on their laps, others buried beneath the threadbare prison blankets from which emanate the dank, musty smell of wet concrete and human feet. The silence between us buzzes with drowsiness and fatigue and, from to time, is disturbed by the jangling of keys when yet another soul is being locked up in one of the cells down the passage, or by the squelching of shoe rubber when one of the officers on night duty walks past.

Scanning round the room I notice that there are no visible injuries, no bleeding, no bandages, only a head here and there drooping on a pair of narrow shoulders, looking as though it will detach any moment, and the rising snores from the bodies stretched out on the dank blankets.

Wie is jy? The man next to me asks.

I pretend I don't hear him.

Wie is jy? He says forcefully. Who are you.

Again, I say nothing.

You a *ndoda*? He does something quick with his fingers.

I'm nobody, I say.

The man gets up and goes around the cell, waking everyone up.

He speaks rapid, slangy Afrikaans, and I hardly catch a word of what he's saying. He is sinewy, tough, like wrought iron. He wears a tattered cap over his ugly mug, a crumpled old t-shirt, and sagging jogging pants, but his shoes – a pair of Nikes – seem new.

Young boys, hardly fifteen, answer him back in his prison language, and so do some older cellmates, who were, just a second ago, drooling with fatigue.

He divides our cell into two.

Us, nobodies, are pushed to the back of the cell, by the steel toilet stinking of shit.

The *ndodas* – men who carry the prison number – share a cigarette in a semi-circle by the gate.

I watch them.

They are deep in their language, almost whispering, a few bursts of rhetorical violence explode in the semi-circle.

When they're done talking the sinewy man shuffles over to us and asks us for our prison slips.

Each man who's been booked in carries a prison slip that shows his charge – what he is in for – as well as another receipt for the stuff that the officers confiscated when he was booked.

I tell him I wasn't given a slip.

Tsek! He swears and begins to frisk me.

He pulls one arm of the trench coat and I help him take it off. He holds the coat in his hand admiringly and throws it over his one arm.

What size are you? I said what size are you *jou poes*?

Nine.

He makes a quick movement with his hand that makes me understand that I must take off my shoes.

I do as told.

The other *ndodas* are busy with the other inmates, frisking, slapping, and taking their shit.

The man's feet are absurdly small, I think, looking down at his feet as he tries on my sneakers.

Don't be funny, he bends over to tie the laces.

He tells us to sleep after the *ndodas'* operation.

Doubtfully, we cover ourselves with our blankets. I suspect nobody really falls asleep.

The *ndodas* speak and laugh by themselves, squatting on the floor, like one of Dana's portraits.

I am startled to wakefulness by the loud clamour made by the gate as another inmate is shoved in. I don't know when or how I managed to sleep. It is cold inside the cell, so cold in fact that I am thankful for the smelly, clammy blankets. The man presently shoved in is tall, dark, in office attire – a shirt and grey cotton pants. He doesn't sit down but keeps pacing up and down the cell, as if in deep thought. When the *ndodas* ask who he is he doesn't pay them any mind. Up and down, up and down, the man paces round the room, turning and turning until I can feel the actual proportions of the space closing in around us. There's a loud bang and the entire cell is pitch black. In that impenetrable darkness I am convinced that we are all locked up inside a coffin. One of the *ndodas* yells something in his rapid Afrikaans but I can hear a slight uncertainty in his voice – is it fear I note in his voice.

I sit up and sharpen my eyes hoping to trace the silhouettes of the other inmates, but nothing materialises. In that single violent action we are dropped deep into oblivion.

It took me a long time to realise I'd fallen off the stage, a voice says. D'you hear what I'm telling you? A voice emanates from the darkness.

I do not answer. Slowly I turn towards the point from which the voice emanates.

Ah, so you do hear.

I'm surprised you haven't heard but yes, I fell off the stage. Well, I fell through it, to be precise. The damn thing was so very fickle, I tell you. Made of cheap wood. For lightweights, if you ask me. After I bumped my head against its concrete foundations I was never okay again, you know. That happens when you bump your head into things, won't you say.

I press my ear against the darkness, and listen.

I'm not really quick on my feet, you know. I know this might surprise you since I have such long skinny legs, much like yours, when you think about it.

I begin to feel a tiny ball of fear grow from the depths of my stomach.

Don't be afraid, the voice says. It's just me and you and these sorry bastards here. You see, my legs are meant for planting into the ground, not for dancing or fleeing. This is why I wrote the way I did. But that stage nearly damn snapped them like a twig. Ah, well, I can tell you haven't read any of my writing, guess what, you missed out on the finest essayist you'll ever meet. My head is in bad shape, must be the fall. You know, you're the only person you can reliably rely on. That's the truth they do not tell you. It was dark, too, inside there, once I'd broken through the integuments of that stage. Too much darkness and my head was in bad shape. Then I

almost got run over by a truck, all in a matter of seconds. Fall. Concrete. Truck. It was coming straight for me, the truck. Its headlights on. No hooting. Just a heavy chap with a big cynical grin writ across his large swarthy face. What a sadist, I thought, as I rolled inside that dark stage of my life while he sped past me. Poked his head out the window, saw that he'd missed, turned the entire thing around, and started after me again. I knew then, what I've come to theorise about life now, that you must hang on to it, however precariously. So when he came for me again I stepped aside then caught his side mirror. He carried on driving with me by his side like that that poor bastard, my face in his face. When he looked at the mirror, I turned and looked at the mirror, too, and there was nothing there, just a deep impenetrable nothingness. For a while I could not see anything of myself, then slowly, a face began to fizzle into a picture like a bad 80s movie but I had trouble recognising myself. The thing that looked back at me was this suppurating wound as if my face had been blown open with a hollow-point bullet. And he, the driver, on the other hand, was smiling a toothy smile, like the damn maniac he was. That's when the bastard began snaking down the road, no doubt looking for a surface against which to crush me but there was nothing there but him and I. I saw now that we were no longer on the road and dirt was spattering on my face and I had to scrunch my eyes. When I opened them again he was no longer smiling. Mirrors can do that, you smile for too long in one and you begin to feel silly or worse, demented. Also, he had to keep his eyes on the road while trying to kill me off at the same time. That's the thing about trying to destroy someone, you must have sufficient time to do the job right, otherwise you merely leave a flesh wound and nothing more. Flesh wounds are sore, believe me, but they're not fatal. Had he succeeded in killing me he would've been happy that bastard, no doubt about it. But now that I survived, even as narrowly as I did, this made him

panic. Panic that the truth would come out one day that he'd been the fraudulent prick who tried to take my life, that I'd ID him easily in a crowd. Just then, a tiny voice called out for me in that dense darkness. I looked around but there was no one there. I was alone, terribly alone, and thinking out the wazoo, then the voice said, a small girlish voice, Tata, let's go home. Can you imagine a thing like that? In the middle of my struggles with that murderous rogue, hanging by his filthy mirror, fighting for my life, Tata, let's go home? No doubt it was my daughter, the daughter I've never had, calling me from the place where children are made, not in the loins, no, the place beyond them, so I let go of the mirror. I braced myself to be crushed under his truck, but instead I plunged into a sea of water, cool and gentle on my skin. When I came up to its surface, there they were, my love, my daughter, playing in the shallow water, the life I'd left behind to become a writer. The sun was brilliant on their skin, she in a two-piece peach bikini and my daughter in a white tutu – the sun in her eyes. I swam towards them manically, as if they were the very air I needed to survive. I could hear my love call out my name against the whirring echo of waves. I ran towards her like madness, splashing water all over the sea as I did, then I stretched my hand to hers. The hand dragging me up was the stupid programme director. He was apologising profusely for what had happened, saying the stage was frail, that someone should've warned me. Anyway I haven't written a word ever since.

The darkness around me begins to stir and just as soon as my senses pick up the movement, someone strikes me in the face. He strikes me again, a fist so powerful it could only be that of the madman who struck out the light. A knee sinks into my ribs and I double over, then another fist catches me under my left eye and bursts inside my head a galaxy of stars so bright I see all around me a mesmerising white light. I shield my face until he stops and moves away.

In the morning my face is as soft as a blister and the room is peaceful, as if I had dreamt what had happened the night before. My glasses lie broken on the floor.

An officer comes to serve us lunch. He doesn't even look twice at my face as he passes us brown toast with peanut butter and tea in metal tea cups. I give my share to one of the *ndodas* and sit down by the entrance until our cell is opened.

Inmates from all the holding cells, including ours, are organised in two lines along the passage. I am stuffed in the back of a police van with my backpack full of clothes and my journals.

In the van I keep to myself. One of the other inmates demands to see what I have in my bag, before I can answer he snatches it from my hands. He fishes out the books and the journals and gives them to me. He takes a pair of jeans and a sweater, then passes other items to the others, all the time speaking that rapid Afrikaans that I can't hear. When he is done he passes me my backpack. Before I can put my journals and books back, another one snatches it, so that I drive to court with the books and journals in my hands.

We are offloaded and put in another cell at the magistrates court. In the court cells I notice that the man I had suspected has no blood on his hands, his knuckles are clean, almost white. Those can't be the hands that bruised me to within an inch of my life, I think.

All the time I keep to myself and the other inmates who are delivered from the nearby districts have only to pass a look at me to know that I am done for.

They respectfully leave me alone.

I speak to only one man in the magistrate cells, a man from Imizamo Yethu, who stole a tray of bones from the local Checkers. He is maybe middle-age, scrawny,

tired-looking. He tells me he isn't a criminal, he was only starving when he took the meat without paying.

Ndikhonkxelwe amathambo enja, nyana, he says solemnly. I'm in here for stealing meat that was meant for dogs, my son.

I am in so much pain that I can't grieve his misfortune. Instead I nod as he tells me his story.

My name isn't called, not until 16:00, when the court is almost done with its business.

I stand in front of the judge hardly able to support myself. I lean on the wooden balustrade; my ribs have a sharp pain that shoots up in intervals and spreads throughout my body for no apparent reason at all, as if a deeply judgemental and jealous God is playing with it, poking it with a long dirty nail.

Because the docket failed to materialise in court, the judge recommends that I be released.

But, your worship, the people's prosecutor says. Breaking the law is breaking the law. The absence of evidence is not the evidence of absence. The prosecution intends to stay the case.

Be that as it may, Counsel, this young man cannot be sent to prison without a charge.

Your worship, the prosecutor says. If I may.

He bends over his desk to consult his colleague who is seated next to him. A young, slim woman in a black gown and glasses that extend outward of her face, like wings of a Boeing.

If it pleases the court, your worship, The People would like for the accused to be taken to The Centre to receive immediate medical attention your worship, as it is

clear to the court that the accused needs it. However, our only condition your worship is that the accused be kept at The Centre until such a time as the prosecution has found the docket to prosecute the case your worship.

I'll allow it, The judge nods.

A date is put down for my next appearance. The bailiff escorts me back to the cells. Along the passage I pass Yolanda and four other women being led by a female bailiff to the courtroom. She doesn't notice me when we pass each other. She has fresh bruises on her face and so do the other women trailing behind her in a straight line.

Yolanda, I call out. But she walks past as if Yolanda isn't her name.

Sometime after 17:00 I am bundled into a police van and hauled away.

2

The Centre is gravely understaffed. There is only one doctor attending to new patients. He is a tall, lanky man with glasses perched precariously on his face, giving him a studious look. In his medical scrubs, a white lab coat, and a stethoscope bouncing around on his chest, he moves in and out of The Waiting Room with purpose. He never sits down and doesn't smile.

A voice behind the glass counter calls my name. It is shrill, the voice, and oddly indifferent, as if the person saying the words would rather be doing something else with her time.

Separated by plexiglass the woman asks me for my address, ID number, contact details, the usual procedural questions. Afterward, she points me back to my seat.

Someone else has already taken my place, so I lean against one of the columns with one hand pressing against the sore area under my rib.

A muted 54cm television set, perched in the corner, streams CNN images of war in some brown part of the world. I feel a deep exhaustion while standing there, the kind of exhaustion that makes your body feel as though it belongs to someone else, although I am painfully present. Exceptionally and irrefutably there.

Looking around I sense that this is no place to heal. I bend over my knees and catch my face in the gleaming tiles; it is nothing more than a dark stain on the floor.

Have you ever been processed before? An elderly man in a cardigan asks.

No, not really, I say.

Well, then, don't look so resentful, he says.

I watch him hobble down a narrow passage which leads to the wards.

From that moment onwards my wait begins. I wait for my name to be called, I wait to be allocated a bed, I wait to be given an x-ray, to be stitched together, to be given medicine for the pain, while the silent TV transmits images of slaughter and despair; images which are interjected by adverts of washing powder and SUVs and hair colour and nail polish.

At last my name is called and I am escorted by a cheerful nurse down the same corridor in which the limping man disappeared. We pass Site A, a big ward that is distinguished by its infant population.

Children as young as 6 years old loiter about in the narrow passage in tea-coloured gowns. As I follow the nurse a boy screws up his face and inside big bulging eyes is a terrible emptiness which resembles more a cow's stare than a child's inquisitiveness. He is chewing his thumb and swinging his puny legs on the bench along the passage.

The nurse pushes a door open and we stop at another reception where I give my personal information again. A man in threadbare hospital fatigues drags his IV drip into one of the rooms in the ward. There is in the air the same fatigue I felt in the Waiting Room and in Site A. But this is Site B.

The nurse who is pencilling my life into a file asks why I hadn't been given a wheelchair and my escort replies that there were none available.

That makes her shake her head.

The room I am given already has 7 other inhabitants and I am to be the 8th. Two of them have their cream-coloured curtains drawn. From the moment I walk in the air is compacted by a deep wheezing as if the breaths of the men in there are filled with slimy water. After midnight one of them screams so sharply it is as though some small part inside of him tore during his sleep. I turn my back to him. Facing the door, I hold back tears as I pull the sheets over my head.

I wake up to a trembling tea cup and saucer being placed on the small table next to my bed. The smell of tea and peanut butter toast makes me want to vomit. It reminds me too much of what I had been served in after I was arrested.

Other beds have already been served, even the two men who had their curtains drawn the night before are now sitting up, sipping tea loudly. One of them chews his food with small cautious movements as if he were chewing his nails. His forehead is a good ten centimetres away from his face. His eyes wet and vacant as curlicues of steam rise from his tea cup.

I shiver in front of my tea and watch morning light trickle through the window. The toast I've long pushed aside. I get up and search through my things for a cigarette. There are NO SMOKING signs in the different parts of The Centre and

along its narrow passages. I make my way outside to light a *stompie* that I found in my match box.

On the veranda I bump into the man who'd said something about my resentment. He nods when he sees me. I expect him to say something, instead he goes back to his breakfast – a runny egg and toast served on a dull enamel plate.

A fly buzzes above his plate and lands on his toast. I watch it intently, growing disgusted as it rubs its legs and tip-toes on the brown slice. He whooshes the fly away, dips the toast in the soggy egg, and takes a bite.

I stand at the edge of the veranda where I can see the harbour below, with its boats moored to the shore. Tiny people populate the pier, ignorant of the stranger watching them from behind an electric fence which ticks with a sharp electric sound, like a man clicking his tongue. The neurotic snap of gives me a migraine, so I step away.

You strike me as someone whose light has gone out completely, the man says from behind me. Someone who has surrendered himself completely to despair, no?

At first I don't answer, then say, Not at all.

Well, you strike me as such. You think too much; thinking is the enemy of life. It conjures up its own demons; it cultivates fears that aren't really there.

So what do you suppose one should do about it? I ask.

Not one, but rather what do *you* intend to do about it?

There's nothing to be done about anything.

You're missing the point, I'm not talking about a general *you,* about general things. I'm asking you and your very specific condition! Unless the man who stands before me is merely a shadow, in that case then we're not speaking at all.

I don't intend doing anything about it, I say, a little annoyed.

What's your name, *nyana*?

Does it even matter? I say.

Well, mine is Sam. He gets up from the floor and ambles towards me, I clean the corpses here. I've seen many young men like yourself come into this hole and leave through my office. You see, medicine alone will not cure you here, no no no. You must press your body, your entire spirit, towards the direction of healing. You must come see me some time, he smiles and vanishes into the building.

3

When the doctor enters our ward, his cheeks are rosy and his skin dry. Flaked skin peels from his nose.

Let's look at you, he says, holding my file in his hand. There is a nurse with him, a demure, tired-looking creature of small stature. She lives, it seems, perpetually in his shadow. She doesn't say a word although she makes a lot of movement.

He needs an X-ray, the doctor says. What happened here? Check if this is not an infection.

The nurse jots down on her pad.

I am taken to the X-ray room and made to lie down on a flatbed while the machinery does its job. There are many stories on the sheet on which I lie, stories sketched with the faded ink of blood. There is nowhere else to look but up at the contraption, which whizzes and coughs out the innards of my life. I think of Aunt Lydia in Gran's wedding dress, her face smeared with shoe polish. I remember her dressing me up in one of her dresses, slipping my feet into her high heels which were too big to fill. I see her blackened hands draw my face with the polish she had on her

face. I remember her saying, There was this boy Sikholongo who refused to walk on the earth, so every morning we watched him jump from one patch of grass to another like a grasshopper. He was tall, like your father, but without the charm and good looks. Each day our principal would ask, But why do you do that to yourself Sikholongo, why do you torture yourself with these patches of grass when there's the entire earth on which to walk. But Sikholongo never satisfied our principal with a response, he kept on hopping from one patch of green grass to the next until one day he lost his mind, and now he spends his life making small talk with flies. And there was a woman who collected wood in the dead of night, can you hear her hacking the limb of *Umnga* and the oak tree with that blunt ox. She had no name, no face, no home, just an axe and the evening covering her tracks.

After my X-rays are taken I follow the doctor to his office. He makes me wait on a plastic chair outside his door. There are many offices along the passage, the doors all shut.

A small pink ball flies past my legs. A child, simple in his medical gown, runs after it like a madman. Upon seeing me he stops and screws up his eyes.

You look like death, he says. Come, he beckons me with a small hand.

Sorry can't do, I tilt my head in the direction of the door to indicate the reason.

Oh come on, the doctor can wait. It's not like he can do anything for you now.

I follow him down the narrow corridor, limping behind him while he races after his ball.

You're going to die, mister.

And so will you, I say.

We are all the way down the passage, where the steps that take you to Side B begin.

With the ball in his hand he sings, *Yuyu alama doodoo*.

I know the melody well, it is the melody of chaos. I, too, have sung this very same song as a child when Thando was in trouble.

The boy runs back down the corridor from whence we've come. With great difficulty I follow him back. By the time I get back to my seat the boy has already disappeared into another ward. So I sit down until I'm called in.

How do you feel? The doctor asks.

Not good, I say.

We're going to put you on a Morphine drip. It's the least we can do. If that doesn't alleviate the pain, we might have to take desperate measures.

Am I going to go home soon? I ask.

We'll have to wait for the recommendation of the court, he says. In any case, you've been badly hurt.

For weeks, time doesn't move. Each morning feels the same as the one before. At dusk the day unremarkably folds itself into evening. Not even the looming splendour of stars arouses any deep sentiment in me.

In Site B I can hear the waves as they wash over the shore at night while screams from down the passage pierce the evening silence.

Mostly I stay in bed, only getting up to shower, to eat, to relieve myself. It is peculiar, the room I am in, for none of the other patients really say much by way of conversation. In their languid movements and empty stares the men appear resigned to their fate. In these men I observe the absolute breakdown of society itself. Anti-

social, in unimaginable pain, wallowing in total isolation. We sit like that, the men and I, in absolute silence.

In the morning I have breakfast in the dining hall. After lunch I spend time in the library – a stuffy hole with low ceilings and a single window that receives little light, in the middle of the passage that leads you to Site C.

To the West of Site B, foregrounding a mass of tall trees through which one can make out a sharply curved hill in the distance, we have a fountain where water trickles from the moderately sized sexual organs of statues fashioned after small children. The fountain is meant to put us at ease.

After the results of my X-rays I am moved to Site C – a mapless terrain that sits right at the edge of the building, close to the cliff. As I pass the many closed doors to my room, I imagine the doors opening to any place of one's imagination – a refugee camp, a prison, or the department of Home Affairs or to Battiss' *Fook Island*. But the windows, the windows open to the sea as if to the soul and the corridors are lined with weak fluorescent tubes that blink nervously as you walk down towards the doctors' rooms, the dining hall, or the small library which opens to the mountain and the hills. They are but pieces of the puzzles strewn on the floor, the rooms, never leading anywhere but inside themselves in movements much deeper and more labyrinthine than the byways of consciousness.

If you stand on top of Imizamo Yethu and search far to the south, you can see The Centre – a soft white form with a red line running across it. If you were to extend your hand you could touch us with the tip of your finger, the way one might inspect the surface of an oil painting yet to dry. Our walls are whitewashed and dull, our roof is made entirely of red tile. A cemetery sits at the foot of the property, near the entrance.

We are the echo in the void, the voiceless screams, the unspeakable dirt that the world sweeps away into prisons and mental asylums. Healing holds no meaning for us, for what beckons us is far greater than all the pleasures and the pains and the fleeting joys of living. We are called upon to the final hour of certainty, for that is what re-assures us, that death will take us out of this limbo of life and place us in its bosom of nothingness, where our suffering will lose all its force.

4

I buy cigarettes from Sis'Noluntu; she always tries to convert me into a member of her church. She is one of the nurses that look after us.

In the evenings I smoke along the fence, taking in the scenery which has grown stale to the eye, and listen to the snapping of the electric fence. Even the pinkness of the sky has lost its lustre for me. Can my isolation be considered complete the same way, say, an apple, is complete, like Zan said. I remember the complete silence that embalmed my youth, when I scrubbed the pots with steel wool and mopped the floors with Handy Andy and got on my knees to reach inside the toilet for those stains that clung stubbornly to the walls. The silence when I diced onions, which brought tears to my eyes, when I poured them over fried cuts of beef, while the potatoes whistled in the next pot, the sound of crickets sharpening the silence when I got on my knees to knead dough before I went to sleep, dough which I'd wake up very early in the morning to bake. Even during my initiation into manhood, whose numbing snip I received when I was sixteen years old, the year before going to uni, I maintained my immaculate silence. A man's strength lies inside his stoic silence I was taught. It made ma proud the way I carried this silence about me. Sometimes, if the

heavens had raptured and found her with the leather strap or a shoe in one hand and my head in the other, to purchase my silence she would let me watch cartoons or buy me comic books from CNA in town.

In Grandpa's house, on each side of each couch, I remember there were pink porcelain dogs with white undersides. They stood erect like sentinels, the dogs, guarding the living room with their ears pricked and their eyes focused on a single point in front of them, always this middle point no matter which way you turned them. They more or less resembled the German Shepherd in Dana's painting.

Grandpa knocked one of them over when his smoking finally caught up with him and felled him to his grave.

Ma was right, The act of remembering is a violent act.

It takes nearly a month for the pain on my ribs to subside. I move about the building with a noted impatience to leave. And I begin to speak to the other patients.

Bhut'Luvo, one of the patients in Site C, a former Sports Broadcaster with a knack for theory, says to me during breakfast (we're in the dining hall, eating, and watching TV):

Television could be perhaps the single most defining feature of this country. No longer the so-called indigenous traditions and customs. Take for instance, your Apartheid. Definitely Nazi in philosophy, form, aesthetics, right down to its architecture. Not by scope, however. We should always restrain ourselves from exaggeration, which is the form a televisually-affected person might see his environment. All drama. Understandably, the Boers had to rid themselves of the British stink, considering what went down in the Anglo-Boer war. You could even say, the Boers aren't white. They are something, but that something isn't white. At least not in the European sense. But why did they not revert back to Dutch

sensibilities, when they won the vote in '48? Well, not only were they no longer Dutch in any substantial way, Dutch culture, as a televisual spectacle in 40s, had little to offer. But Nazi Germany…well, that was something else altogether. Innocence. Purity. A legitimate grievance against history as we know it. The same can be said of The Struggle and the college students who were protesting the Vietnam War. *The world is watching* and all of that. But that sense of being watched on television and in turn performing for television didn't just end there, it permeated our newly born country. Lacking a coherent identity, more and more, South Africa turned to television to define itself for television. *Alive with possibilities. Simunye, We are one*. You know, I had friends who never failed to notice that on this or that TV show the actor had mangled the French kiss. And their only true standard of the French kiss, of course, was based solely on what they saw on television. Another friend, even saw his life as a kind of movie, a show he put on for others. I didn't take this stuff seriously, but I saw that he did. He was moved to work, to strive, in service of producing a televisual sensation for us, his peers. Funny chap. It would be one thing if television was consumed as entertainment, á la Wallace. But here, it is taken for the real thing, the real McCoy. Can you imagine an entire nation taking its television literally. Reproducing it in its daily life, making it concrete. Well, that's what you have going on in this country. This is not revelatory by any means. This is one reason The Struggle was so appealing in form and content; it lived up to the standards of a really good BBC documentary. Our TRC beats any of these syndicated Reality TV shows. In this way, you could say our fight for freedom was performative, gestural, not quite real in the concrete sense of the term. Not at all Algerian or Cuban, for that matter. With TV, of course, came the stuff that's on TV: soaps, news, advertising. Adverts showing groups of people with perfect smiles in throws of absolute delight at being

together, performing freedom, actualising their TV selves. Yoked in global brand associations. Announcing: This is what freedom is – a pack of Stuyves, with my beautiful friends on a boat, by the beach. Inviting you to join them but subtly showing you the impossibility of fulfilling this invite unless you did something radical about you, your life, your entire being. Get a new wardrobe, go to gym, get a toned body, whiten your teeth, flash a smile, acquire long wavy hair and a Wonderbra if possible. I read them, the images, with a morbid intrigue.

He stops, seeming a little lost in his thoughts.

What was I saying. Yes, television. To understand the mythological status of television here you simply have to drive down the N2 and look at all those satellite dishes sticking out of shacks. No one is silly enough to think that households that poor can afford such luxury. But you see, it's not the actual that matters, but the gestural. The gestural is transcendental. To have an unconnected dish attached to your house makes you, literally, part of something larger than you and your limitations. It is beyond status, because my god, you're still in a zinc structure. A satellite dish gives you Meaning.

These aren't trifling matters. Scientific studies are dedicated to such phenomena. To give you an example, I read a paper just the other day on The Lawn: what it is, where it comes from, what it demands from us. How it demands our time, attention and eventually how it gives meaning to the self, with a capital S. You see a chap in shorts, on a Saturday afternoon, trimming his lawn, even though to you his lawn appears perfect, not needing a trim. And so why, you ask yourself, is this chap doing it? Is it merely out of boredom? Or is there some transcendent meaning for him in being out there, under the mid-day sun, perspiring? And which politics of

gardening are involved and so on. *Who clipped the Hollyhocks* and all of that. And this paper gave a good account of why you need to be suspicious of your own lawn.

Anyway, what I'm trying to say is that this country is a television Audience proper, people who suspend all belief in what they're seeing on television in order to belief it entirely. The same way a reader does in order to enjoy a novel. But this is not a novel, it's television. Audio-visual, generally pleasing, democratic. And the contract between the medium and the Audience is that reality is relative and television is, in fact, the only reality that matters, because it's the only interiority that exists for the Audience. The Americans were right about the dangers of television in high doses but what of a people that no longer just watch television, but assume television as a national identity. When each individual acts as though the cameras are on them in their life. To contradict Sartre, in such a place, Hell is no longer other people. Hell is other Actors. And how do we deal with this tension, I mean in the most simple, democratic way? We assume that everyone doing the watching and being watched is basically carrying out the terms of the contract, the terms of the television. And now we get to my earlier point. To become television is to reproduce it in all its forms: its beauty myths, its 24 hour news cycle, the canned laughter and the mock-shock of sitcoms, basically to exaggerate the self so as to load it with meaning, televised meaning…to live in-and-as a TV sitcom. And so people interact as if they are channel hopping. Don't be boring. Stay interesting if you need to keep an Audience. Create drama about yourself to keep your Audience glued to their screens.

You know, it reminds me of something Lennon said during his Peace moment (I thought he'd said Lenin), that we must sell peace until the housewife is left with only two decisions: to buy soap or to buy peace. I think this is the logic governing the

modern world: Buy me! Buy me! Don't buy the other guy, the other brand, the other channel!

He stops, watching the TV in the corner of the room with tremulous hands.

Maybe what you regard as television Being is merely a way of coping with grief, I say.

Listen, I know it's too big an idea to put down in a few sentences but I think get my point. You're a smart chap. I've seen you taking out bucket loads of books from the library.

Boredom-induced reading, I say.

You must study an actual TV to get what's happening in this country. The millions of cells containing Neon and Xenon gases. The electricity that passes through the gases, animating the atoms that form the picture. You must study the mechanical processes that make pictures possible, words, action. Not a sophisticated system. Once you know how a TV works, you'll see why it's so easy to turn people into voting cattle. It's easy to re-wire people's neurotransmitters, to change their synaptic connection. All you have to do is to expose them for long hours to a television show that's so compelling, they can't even get up to shit, let alone feed themselves.

Are you saying that's what the government is doing? I say.

You've not been listening. That's what everyone is doing. There are no longer lies nor truths, only compelling storylines, narratives. There are only appearances and the suspension of belief. Fiction is Being. We are the totality of the anxieties about our appearance. This is, after all, the post-brand-me age, the media corporatisation of the human self and all human affairs. The question can no longer be posed, What would a reasonable person do? But rather, How should this television show react? What's the PR angle? What's the storyline? How does one salvage his image so that

his Audience may continue to watch his channel? This then is the world we live in, our shared reality. It's verily way more democratic than those old romantic notions of nobility, dignity, grace. We can only sell ourselves to our TV Audiences, that is, to everyone else.

While Bhut'Luvo speaks I imagine a nation of television sets standing face-to-face, pictures flickering on millions of screens, volumes set on loud.

A friend said something interesting to me once, Bhut'Luvo says. He said this country has no view. No view at all. Just land, people, and the sea. That to enjoy a view here is to import a decidedly foreign concept. A televisual construct, if you may. He gave an example of how where he grew up in the Eastern Cape, he was surrounded by the most stunning hills, rivers, land; and that as a herd boy he never once considered that what was around him could be termed *a view*. It was just his life. Nothing special or worth noting. Just life. Where we were, when he was telling me this, was my apartment in Bo Kaap, where I used to stay. It had the most stunning views of the City Bowl and the mountain. In fact, we were on the balcony, drinking beers, watching evening set in. But this is undeniably one of the best views, I said to him, and do you know what he said? He said, Luvo, what you think is a view is only a schema!

He laughs until he coughs, steadying his hands on his knees.

***

The first time I met Bhut'Luvo it was in the library. We sat opposite each other in one of the small wooden desks and he had a book on his lap. We didn't say a word to each other. The second time I saw him by the cemetery, smoking. It was me who walked

up to him and asked to use his lighter. It was almost evening and the edge of the sky was lined with orange dust. He passed me the lighter and after a long silence he introduced himself. I told him my name and then we shook hands awkwardly. We did not say a word to each other afterward. We just stood there, smoking, watching evening deepen until the last amber of day diminished and Bhut'Luvo said, Alrighty then, and turned toward our section.

The third time we were in the TV room in Site B, watching The Matrix Revolutions late one Sunday, on Mnet.

Towards the end of the movie, when Neo meets The Source and is plugged back into the system to defeat Agent Smith, after which all the knowledge he'd accumulated as part of The Rebellion would be integrated back into The System to improve The Matrix, Bhut'Luvo had jumped on his seat and said, Hegel was right! We're fucked!

No one said a word. I, for one, had never read Hegel and couldn't make the link between the film and the philosopher.

No one is coming to save us here! Bhut'Luvo shouted.

Godot will! A voice shouted from the back of the room. Now sit down!

Shaking his head, Bhut'Luvo sank back into his seat.

After the movie he came knocking on my door for a cigarette.

The fourth time it was during one of the announcements when we'd gathered in the dining hall and were told that we were running low on medicine. We were asked to be patient and to wait. The facility assured us that it was doing everything in its power to provide us with the best medical care and that it was not so much their

fault but the fault of the department which was responsible for these things. It appeared that someone in the department had flouted some procurement process in favour of a company that was connected to his wife or something like that. We knew these things happened and, in any case, we had no strength left to mount a protest. We simply went to our rooms after the meeting ended. That evening Bhut'Luvo and I shared a cigarette by the vegetable patch.

The fifth time he was being rushed down the corridor in iron braces in a stretcher and I was returning from the showers and when I looked at his face he was a goner and the light in his eyes was dim; his mind was swimming somewhere between here and empty space, and two nurses standing next to the X-Ray room watched him go past and I was certain that I would never see him again.

The sixth time I passed him at his usual desk in the library and he looked sullen and empty and there was no book in front of him and so he just sat there in heavy silence.

The seventh time it was in his room. We were getting high on pain killers and talking about the absurdity of sports.

Who could've thought a ball could unite a nation, he'd laughed lazily.

The eighth time I told him about a little Optometrist Museum in town that I'd visited one time and how I found medical objects absolutely fascinating. He told me that he'd always wanted to be a music journalist but just did not possess the language to write about music.

The ninth time we agreed to share lunch and we sat in silence opposite each other in the dining area and we both held books in one hand and our coffees, which I'd offered to make, were steaming between our silences and Bhut'Luvo kept looking up at me and I back at him and we were both silent as we picked at our food and

Bhut'Luvo got up and made us another cup of coffee and we both sat there like that, reading, and then after lunch we walked down to the cemetery and shared a cigarette. That's when he told me his story and how he ended up in Site C. He said it was while standing in the queue at the office cafeteria at his old job that it became clear to him that in all his daily struggles what he felt most acutely was that he was merely waiting to die.

The queue lumbered forward and then I waited some more, he'd said. A fly buzzed over the blonde and bald heads of my colleagues in the queue and I watched it with fatigued concentration as it drew circles in the air-conditioned air. Next thing I was being dragged out of the building in flexi-cuffs and brought here. I had been screaming and kicking and crying.

5

From time to time I ask the doctor about the date of my release.

We must wait for court to release you before we can discharge you, the doctor says. Be patient, your *matter* has my full attention.

I kill time by borrowing books from the library or taking long walks around the property or writing in my room. I try to draw sometimes but words come more easily than images, so I write.

Bhut'Luvo finds me by the fence, looking down at the harbour.

Great view, *neh*?

I'm growing sick of it, I say.

He laughs and says, you know, there's been an idea that's been haunting me for weeks now.

What's that? I say.

Is it me or do all civilisations seem incapable of going beyond a certain point, he says. I mean, it appears that all societies simply reach a point where they just refuse to grow up and it is precisely because of this that they die so miserably. Right now, in this country, we've just hit the apotheosis of youth and it's going to be an ugly downslope from here. I hope I won't be around to witness the degradation.

I listened.

I was watching a show the other day and I couldn't stomach our obsession with youth. Everyone wants to be young. If someone finds a tiny grey hair, they must immediately cover it with dye. No one wants to age anymore. I just wonder what that does to a civilisation, when all its energies revolve around satisfying its erratic teenage anxieties. The fear of being alone, the fear of being unknown, of being irrelevant, the angst of being left out. I mean, in all of that, where do you get the courage to even love another person, when you're struggling to accept even yourself.

I think it's natural for people to refuse aging, Bhut'Luvo. Aging is too close to death.

I hear you, but death and love are husband and wife. Let me tell you a story: I loved a man once. I met him at a local library back home. I was fourteen, then, already in high school, when we met. He said his name meant *strength*, like steel.

He ran a construction business and had traveled 2484 kilometers, left his family in Malawi, to find the means to support them here, in this country. He had a wife and two daughters. We were at the back of the library, in the smoking section, when he told me his story. I had a loose draw of Courtleighs. I was trying to teach myself to smoke, to rid myself of the smell of innocence about me, which I suspected was the reason why no girls in high school looked my way. When I choked from the

cigarette he laughed. He himself didn't smoke but enjoyed an occasional whisky. He said in his flat he had bottles and bottles of whiskey, which he'd smuggled across the border. Whether this story was true or not, didn't matter. The misdemeanor impressed me. I, too, had been a thief. I had stolen and pawned my mother's ring. And this, too, added to a mutual feeling of commonality between him and I. There was something comic about so serious a man, in a crisp white shirt and pinstriped pants, struggling to get bottles of whiskey across the border. He said if I ever wanted to have a drink I should go up to his place. He gave me his address and his number and said it was nice to meet me. We shook hands like businessmen and he left. I had almost forgotten about our meeting when on a random Saturday, alone at home, I recalled the man with stolen booze in his house; a man, moreover, who appeared to have more in common with me than any of my peers, including the boys with whom I played soccer, those days. So, I got dressed and took a taxi to town. It was hot, the middle of summer, and I had on a pair of blue shorts, a white t-shirt and a blue cap. I wore a pair of flip-flops that my mother had bought me for Christmas. I got off two blocks from where his flat was. Along the way the strap of the right flip-flop kept coming off. I'd bend over and squeeze the strap in place and become annoyed that I hadn't worn a pair of sneakers instead. Town was teeming with cars and traffic snaked down the street in the boiling heat. A confusion of hooting and howls followed me all the way to the flat. It seemed to me that only yesterday there'd been just a handful of people who had the means to buy a car and now, all of a sudden, everyone was driving. This was the late '90s. I walked up to the entrance of the flat and searched for his number on the intercom. I realized then that my feet had gathered dirt. I grew instantly self-conscious. I paused for a moment, before ringing the bell, and thought of turning back. I'd come too far. In any case why had I been so self-conscious. I was merely meeting a man for a

drink. Feeling silly and filthy for having made a dirty assumption I rang the bell; his voice answered and told me to come up. In the opaque reflection in the glass my arms appeared thin, my chest small, and my head too big for my shoulders. It was a short flight of stairs. His flat was on the second floor. He opened the door in a white shirt with the top button loose, as though he had just come out of a meeting. His flat was sparsely furnished – a couch, a table, a Technics Hi-fi stereo, some CDs on the floor, and a fridge. I went over to the couch and sat and he poured me a glass of beer. He poured himself a glass as well and came to sit next to me on the couch. I had noticed that his movements were languid and deliberate around his flat. He played a vaguely familiar jazz record and I wanted to ask him what it was but had stopped myself at the last second. I had too many questions but the time didn't seem appropriate to ask them. In any case my present preoccupation was the dirt gathered on my feet, which I attempted to hide under the couch but failed. I remember well that I was so self-conscious under his gaze that I'd collected and compacted myself into a slimness that resembled a needle. You seem quieter today than the last time, he said. Is everything okay. Everything is fine, I told him, the walk was too long that's all and the heat is unbearable. You should come with me to Malawi, he said and laughed. You wouldn't survive a day. I didn't speak for a while as he regaled me with his stories about growing up in Malawi, going to university there to become a doctor, how he'd dropped out because his family could no longer afford the fees. It was his uncle who pulled him into the construction business. He had taught him to lay the foundation, to plaster the walls, to install the tubing for electricity and finally to lay the roof. He poured us another beer and said he wanted to show me how tubing worked. We got up and went to the light-switch by his front door. He spoke about spout boxes and couplings, he explained the use of bends and elbows and tees, he tried to show me

how an adaptor worked, how to fasten saddles to the wall, and how to space conduit boxes. I've always been fascinated by how things work. All the time we were drinking and it had not occurred to me that he was spinning me inside his world. However, I had all but lost interest in what we were doing, and the beer had started to take its effect on me, when I felt his arm on my waist. He placed it there casually, as if it were the most natural thing. When we got back to the couch I noticed that he had pitched a tent in his pants. It was a familiar bulge, like yours and mine and I had had many but they were never as impressive. For as long as I can remember I have always been impressed by form. He saw me staring and asked if I wanted to touch it. He had a big smile on his face, as if any second he would break into a ceaseless laughter that would flash his strong white teeth. I hesitated at first but extended my arm to touch. I began to stroke it gently. He ran his hand along my arm but kept up the conversation. He was explaining to me the nature of the construction business, about who took what bribe in the municipality; the municipal manager, I understood, was more inclined to take a percentage of the job but also welcomed young girls, preferably from high school, and a box of expensive whiskey. I listened while he undid his zipper. It felt warm in my hands his sex but somehow foreign, as if I didn't have one myself. It felt like an appendage of silk. He offered me another beer and I nodded my assent. Before getting up he kicked off his laced up black leather shoes and pulled down his pants. He asked me if I didn't want to take off my t-shirt, which I did, without his help. I watched him saunter to the kitchen with a healthy, bouncy erection. I found him very attractive. I was young and attractive myself. When he began to kiss me the short-shaved follicles on his moustache pricked me around the mouth. This is what it was like to kiss a man, I thought. When he slipped his tongue inside my mouth I was still trying to figure out what it was exactly that I'd come to this flat to do. When I got

on my knees and took him in my mouth it became clear: I had come to do precisely what I was doing. He tried to push himself inside me but I was too small and it hurt, so I asked him to stop, and he did. I told him that if he wanted to he could come in my mouth; that I didn't mind, just as long as he didn't pee in it. This last comment made him laugh and I noticed how taut his belly and his arms were, and saw the healed scars on his legs by the knees. I had similar marks on my legs, collected during the arduous job of growing up, from falling off bicycles and home-made karts, from making sliding tackles on the soccer pitch at school and the raisins that grew black from all the skin rashes of youth. As I sucked him he looked up at his ceiling and murmured as though he were praying. He had both his hands on my head and was now thrusting himself deeper and deeper inside my mouth. I gagged. My jaw was sore. Saliva dripped down my chin. He stopped and asked if everything was okay. I hated that he'd stopped, his care broke the trance we were in, and so I got up, wiping my chin, and told him that my jaw was sore, that we'd have to do it another day. We sat on his couch and talked very little while he played me his music. He'd bought me a pack of Courtleighs and said I could smoke in his flat. I was lying on his bare chest, playing with his chest hair and his cock when, for the first time, I realized that his curtains were wide open and jumped up in absolute terror. He gave a start as well, his eyes incredulous and confused. What's wrong? he asked. The window, I said, and buried my face in my palms, trying to hide myself. If, when I walked in, I had tried to twist myself into a needle, now I wanted to fold myself into a pea. He got up immediately and rushed over to close the curtains. Light trickled through a tiny slit in the middle of the curtains and fell on our clothes, which we left tousled on the floor. I told him I needed to go. We got dressed in a hurry as if those eyes I had imagined looking in on us were roving around the house searching for our scandal, which had,

by now, been sealed inside our bodies. Before we walked out of his flat he kissed me one last time. We got in his car and he drove me home. I asked him not to stop in front of my parents' house but down the street, by the corner. I told him I couldn't kiss him in public and he said, Of course, otherwise they'd kill us both. And he was right. They still do. Walking down the street to my house I made sure I hid the shame inside my body, where no one would find it, and walked with my back straight like some of the boys I knew at soccer. I don't know where he put his for he seemed unbothered about what the neighbours would say, this in spite of him being married. The next time I saw him I stayed long enough for him to come. After he finished I sucked the juice off his cock and swallowed it while looking straight into his eyes. I wanted to look at him so that I love him. And to this day, I can tell you now, I still love him. I held his sex in my hand, stroking it gently, as it spat its last condiments. His sperm tasted dry and shapeless and clung to my throat. During our rendezvous, I would end up crying to him, an ugly cry that would dampen his chest. He never asked me why I cried so much, he only stroked my head those times and told me that everything would be okay, that I would grow up, that I would leave this place and the entire world would receive me warmly. God, if he only knew how wrong he was. In December that year, when I turned fifteen, he told me he had to go back to see his family. I never heard from him again. So there, that's my story of love. When you love someone, you surrender yourself to him. All of your baggage, your shame, and your anxieties are dissolved in the love you share. From that giving away, you begin to grow. This country will not grow because it won't love. And that is what it teaches everyone else. Only love yourself and no one else, and for me this love is not love. And if it is love, then it's an empty love, the love that only an incorrigible narcissist could find tolerable.

6

The day is tinged with that distinct late afternoon purple along the edges. I don't know how long it's been now since I was moved to Site C. I don't know how many months I've spent in this place. A bank of clouds travels languidly across the sky. I am by the fountain, reading notes from my journal. Voices of two men increase in the background as I write. Over my shoulder I catch a glance of them; their words grow more clearer the more I note their presence. They share a cigarette.

One of them says, Human irrationality evidences itself this way: if a set of new data contradicts a human being's core belief or hypothesis about whatever idea he holds dear, a typical human would sooner disqualify the new data for not adding up to his initial hypothesis than allow it to lead him to a new conclusion or have him scrap his initial hypothesis altogether. This is what I think: that if the data changes, if the conditions change, the conclusion must also change. But I, too, am not immune to this irrationality. For example: While crossing the Company Gardens in town I was approached by three men who asked me for change. Of course I had change but it was late in the evening and I was carrying my school laptop in my backpack. At first the three men let me go without so much as begging but when I'm about a hundred meters away from them, they turn around and follow me. Night shields the men's faces in that foreboding emptiness of the park. I picked up my pace after realising that the men were indeed following me. And they begin to walk a little faster. And that's when I took off. But it was too late. One of them grabbed me by my backpack, like this, and spun me around. Before I could plead for my life, the man planted a hot slap across my face and sent the evening spinning around me. The slap flashed like

lightning behind my eyes and made me feel small and lonely in the universe. This solitary feeling, which passed as quickly as the slap itself, had had the opposite effect to what my assailants had intended. Instead of trembling with fear, I grew bold. If I truly was alone in the universe, then so were these men; this incident, too, was in some way a testament to our shared loneliness. And if this loneliness was real, then each man was truly by himself. And no man has a right to impose his grotesque loneliness onto others. And so I struggled with the men inside the shadows of the park. They tried to pry the backpack from my hands but I fought back. Just then, I saw a glitter, like a needle stitching the black sky above us. Quickly, without thinking, I raised my left arm and that's when the *bottlekop* split my left hand open, here (he shows his interlocutor). The three men, maybe out of fright or shock, took off and left me bleeding on the ground. I was lucky to be picked up by a cab and taken to hospital. Now, after all of that I couldn't bring myself to hate those men. I felt pity for them, instead. I felt pity for myself for what had happened but mostly, I felt it for them. I wished that their lives were made better, that they were not forced to do what they did to me. That they had nice jobs and even nicer families. In spite of everything pointing in the other direction, I chose compassion for them. More compassion than I felt for myself since I thought, had I not clung to my things, my laptop, I'd have remedied the situation way earlier. Do you see now what I mean by irrationality.

Compassion is the highest form of rationality, I'd say, the other man replies. You know, the day I discovered that I would never be happy I should've committed suicide, because nothing about my life…no new data…has convinced me otherwise. Why I hadn't done this when I was 9 years old illustrates a terrible slowness of mind or rather, a delusion led by another irrationality…that things get better. Only now I know that things don't get better, on the contrary...

But that goes for everyone else, says his listener.

The man continues, My irrationality constitutes itself around the fact that I continue to live, to speak to people, to put food in my mouth, to masturbate, despite the fact that all of this only brings me numbness and despair. And yet it takes tremendous courage to take one's own life, not to mention the inconvenience of it all. Often I ask myself if it would be fair to the person assigned to clean my ablutions after I commit the act. This, at last, leaves me despondent. After all, it will be some poor sod who will be tasked with cleaning up after me, when I'm gone.

You must have patience, the other says.

You can't have patience, you can only practice it, the man says.

After the finish the cigarette, they go back inside the building, using the entrance to the dining hall.

7

Months lumber by while I wait for the court to summon me.

For Christmas we receive a visit from the health minister with a coterie of journalists in tow. We are given instructions to wash and be in our Sunday best.

It is a standard official visit. The minister tours the facility, choosing wards and rooms that have great optics – the children's wards, the wards for the elderly. There he thrust his hand in the face of the oldest patient in the centre, an old timer from Mitchells Plain, whose family hasn't paid him a visit in 6 years. As he shakes the minister's hand the minister turns to the cameras and smiles. The journalists snap away. The following day's headlines read: Health Min. A Dream Come True. With a picture of the smiling minister and the bewildered look of the man who was, in all fairness, caught by surprise by the flashing cameras.

For us the minister's Dream presents itself in the hall. A mobile podium is dragged to the far end of the room and set in front of the wall. Government banners bearing the republic's coat of arms stand on either side of the podium. The minister has on a white medical mask and so do the journalists. We sit round the tables in plastic chairs, some of us still attached to our drips and in hospital fatigues. I am in my pyjamas.

It is a warm day, a summer's day. The minister in a neat, if oversized suit, goes up to the podium. He is accompanied by diffuse applause from the staff. Our General Manager stands stoically next to the government banners with his hands behind his back.

The minister clears his throat. Ladies and gentlemen, boy and girls, it is my duty today to wish all of you a Merry Christmas and a Prosperous New Year.

The staff claps.

It is always a stab to the heart when I, your minister, must come visit you in this wretched condition, bearing no gifts except a kind word (he raises a hand that is clutching a bible, then proceeds to read a paragraph that he's bookmarked). *He rescues the poor at the first sign of need, the destitute who have run out of luck. He opens a place in his heart for the down-and-out, he restores the wretched of the earth. He frees them from tyranny and torture – when they bleed, he bleeds; when they die, he dies.*

As he speaks, his words remind me of Litha and The Martyrs. For a moment I wonder what they are up to, while I am detained in this place.

The minister closes the book and sets it on the podium.

It is with this kind word that I, as a representative of your government, a prince of truth, come to you today.

He pauses to adjust the strings of his medical mask. It is thanks to the mic that we can hear him at all.

It would be a terrible shame if I didn't take this moment to thank the wonderful Dr Ndebele (he gestures to our GM), the steward of the tired, the poor, the huddled masses, for inviting me today to give you this message of hope from your elected government.

The wonderful doctor has indeed brought to our attention the deficit in the medical supplies at your disposal in this glorious centre. We understand, as your government, that these medicines are imperative to the work that you must carry out here, that is, the work of healing these poor wretched souls, so that they, too, may find their own place in the sun one day, among their loved ones, especially in this so festive season. But the truth is, your humble minister has tried and tried again to get the machinations of government to work steadily in your favour, to bring you that which you need, but alas, as you all know, the government is a complex and complicated beast, which, even if I were given an entire year to extrapolate on the intricate mechanisms that must come into play for the simple procurement of something as little as an Aspirin, I would still fail to illuminate the nature of those complex processes that take effect as soon as such a request is put through our procurement department. That said, however, don't lose heart, remember that *He rescues the poor at the first sign of need, the destitute who have run out of luck*. Those who were here in the year last will attest to the wonderful celebrations we hosted, Sister Nomzamo over there will surely remember the cake. But this year is a different year for the reasons I've already stipulated.

The minister stops to wipe his brow with the little silk handkerchief that peeked out of his breast pocket.

It is difficult indeed to get anything out of our government these days, now imagine trying to procure a cake for you tired and poor souls. It is simply impossible. But do not be disheartened by this news for the lord teaches us in his wisdom that one day, *The first shall be last and the last shall be first.*

A round of applause follows the minister's words.

Thank you, thank you, thank you, he nods and waves as he descends the podium to give our GM his chance to speak.

I live by a simple adage, as anyone will tell you: first, do no harm, the GM says. As such, it is my earnest duty as both the principal doctor of this centre and the citizen of this country, to minimise the harm that may follow from the challenges we are facing. Of primary concern to me is how we can contain the crisis so spelt out by the honourable minister. The first step that this centre has taken is to improve our security to ensure that you who carry these dreaded diseases that have proven themselves fatal to society at large, must be prevented from contaminating that society. It isn't you that we're quarantining but the diseases you carry. I hope that I'm clear. Our work is such that we will only allow you to go home only once you've left your disease behind, for we know what to do with it. Secondly, as the minister has eloquently articulated, we are not getting cake today. And if we can't get cake then we must all be content with pap. As such, from here on, the budgets allocated to the catering services shall be re-distributed to medical supplies. Those who can do without food from time to time will be commended for doing so. The challenges that we now face require from us that generous spirit of martyrdom that our heroes have long exemplified for us. If there are any of you who would like to speak to me further about the news we've received today, it is enough to say to you, my office is open. Thank you. You are all dismissed.

8

It isn't long after this meeting that I begin coughing up blood. The night sweats return and I stay in my bed, trembling in my hospital dress, even at midday when the sun shines most vehemently in the heavens.

I am given more tests.

It's an anomaly, the doctor says, I could've sworn…

He puts me on another medication and says let's see what happens in a week's time. A month passes without a second check-up. And then one day I'm called into his office.

I believe the new medication has made me more sick, I say. Please take me off it or put me on something else.

The doctor nods.

He is sitting behind his desk, a pinched brow on his forehead, What you're asking for, my dear friend, is assisted suicide, given your condition. Give the medicine some time to settle into your system.

I continue to visit the library, be it less frequently, and in a state of such degradation even our librarian, Sis'Lusanda, has a hard time making physical contact with me when I take out books. It isn't disgust that I detect in her reluctance, but rather, fear. Fear and superstition about disease in spite of her scientific training. To Sis'Lusanda although what I have, scientifically speaking, cannot be transmitted through touch, it is precisely the concept of touch that makes her withdraw her hand suddenly, as soon as she's stamped the book I'm taking out.

What keeps me from utter despair in the months following my admission into The Centre is *The Tunnel* by William Gass.

And then Bhut'Luvo jumps out of his window to meet his death. After the incident, the windows in our section are sealed off with bricks, expect for tiny square no larger than an A4 page that permit a little light. The morning after Bhut'Luvo's suicide I take out one of Dana's journals and write: *Bhut'Luvo's death followed a visit by David. David was a conceptual artist doing research on a new body of work. He was introduced to us by the GM. A meeting was called in the dining hall and our GM said, This is David Goldberg, a renowned artist. He is here to do some research, so please be co-operative. He will need all the help he can get.*

David said his primary interest was the stone used to build The Centre; to see if the stone was the same used in the neoclassical Houses of Parliament and some of the older buildings in town. He said his work had led him to consider even the modernist blocks found in the city, which were built during the height of Apartheid. He said his project would be an excavation of truths based solely on the built environment. And to orientate us to his work, he read an essay in one of the little books he carried with him. The essay was called Entanglements. Something to do with innocence, because he kept saying the word, almost with contempt. In it he tried to draw on the history of South Africa and proposed that a better understanding of this place would only be possible if we confronted its entanglements and contradictions rather than chasing the nostalgic fantasy. He called it the virgin fantasy. Earlier in his paper he said something along the lines of, The centuries of exchange between different social groups in a country alters the fundamental character of all groups. Things overlap, comingle, and that for each of these groups there remains no essential, virgin identity to go back to. And this is what had to be confronted by

everyone. He ended his paper on a note that went something like, Those who seek their innocence simply refuse to attend to the complexity of contemporary life in South Africa. He said the desire for cultural and ethnic purity is a puzzling desperation. And then he finished off with, I am not interested in my own innocence; I have no use for it. Life is a messy affair and I have accepted my place in it as such.

The room grew quiet after his last statement and I could see people shaking their heads, not quite objecting but not happy with it either.

After his short keynote, he grabbed a chair and sat at the head of the room for a Q&A.

Before taking question he made one last remark along the lines of: Society is sick, it is unfortunate that you lot have to be the ones to carry the face of that sickness.

Bhut'Luvo, who was sitting right up front, shook his head. Is it not a little convenient for someone is your position to insert yourself into our nightmare without having the inconvenience of actually living with it? He asked.

These words seemed to amuse David for a smile played along the edges of his mouth without breaking into a full grin. Well, theoretically, I suppose, I do share your ailments.

By who's theory? Bhut'Luvo asked with evident amusement.

Mine, David said.

I don't see it that way at all, Bhut'Luvo remarked.

David, who had crossed his legs on his lap, let out a little laughter and leaned against the backrest of his chair.

Come out with it, came a small voice from a patient who sat somewhere in the middle of our group. Are you saying we are not who we think we are?

That's not what I'm saying at all, David said, I'm saying that you, along with everyone here has been authored into existence. And so have I.

But isn't that what all life is? Bhut'Luvo asked, Being inserted into the middle of this god-awful merry-go-round without your say so?

Well, that's my point of view, David said.

From my point of view, Bhut'Luvo said, all of your theorising is futile. Here we have people who haven't seen their loved ones in years, people whose deaths are easily forgotten, except maybe as a statistic.

That's unfortunate, David said and untangled his legs.

I felt tired, so while the exchange continued I sneaked out and went to my room.

9

Bhut'Luvo is dead and I'm alone again.

I spend time recalling the fragments of my life, putting them on paper, not to recall them, but as a way to forget. I have become impatient again and nag the doctor to discharge me.

We haven't received word from the court, yet, he says, when I corner him in one of the corridors.

I go to Site A to look for Sis'Noluntu. I find her at the reception and ask to speak to her privately. We follow each other out of the building.

I tell her I need to leave The Centre, that it's been a year now, and I must go back to school. Although I am lying, I put on a good act. People want compelling storylines, Bhut'Luvo had said.

Sis'Noluntu takes me to see Our Last officer, Bhut'Sam. His office is in my section, right at the end, next to the morgue.

When she introduces me to him, I realise that he is the man who had spoken to me on my first day at The Centre. I had seen him around but he mostly kept to him and I never found reason to speak to him, except for a nod when I passed him in the corridors. Sis'Noluntu leave us to speak.

Bhut'Sam's originally from Willowvale, he tells me inside his office. He says he ran away from home to become a dock worker at the harbour.

His real name is Thamsanqa, he says, but his bosses at the harbour, struggling with the click in the last syllable, called him Sam and the name stuck. He says he understand my trouble and will figure out a way to help.

As he speaks, he moistens his lips and presses a grey handkerchief on his forehead to clear his sweat. His office has no window and for a morgue it is pretty warm.

I was homeless for a while and lived in the docks where I worked, he says. After receiving my wages I found myself a room in Langa. There, I met my wife. We married in a simple ceremony in the old Wesleyan Methodist Church on Lerotholi Avenue. Everyone came out with their brooms to celebrate our union. Reverend McCarthy conducted the ceremony and read out our vows to which we both submitted.

I try to sit still while Bhut'Sam speaks, although I would rather be in my room than listen to the story of his long life.

After we were married, we were blessed with two children, a boy and girl. But I lost in a bus accident, over Easter weekend; the accident also took my wife. The company I worked for at the harbour gave me only a weekend to grieve them. In spite

of this, on Monday, I returned to my duties. I worked that entire month of my grieving until a crate crushed my left foot and I lost. This is why I walk with a limp. I took piece jobs to get by, until a friend found me work here, with The Centre, and I've been washing corpses ever since.

While Bhut'Sam tells me his life's story I remain silent.

When he is done talking, he tells me he will think of a way to help me with my trouble, but advises me to be patient.

I'll try see what I can do. For now, you must get ready, they are about to serve supper.

The corridor is quiet and all the doors lining the hallway are shut as I make my way back to my room. An inscrutable darkness seals them, like a veil covering a widow's face.

Before dinner, we are all expected to shower. It is for our own good and to minimise the risk of contaminating others' food at the table.

In the communal showers I am alone, since everyone must already be in the dining hall.

The water is warm on my body and cascades down the grout holding the white tiles in place, picking up mould and traveling with it uneasily over the cracks, to the smooth grey floor of the shower where it collects into the single hole in the middle and disappears into the ground beneath. The water tickles me when it hits my back. I brush my teeth then close the taps and dry myself quickly. In my room I lather myself with Vaseline and put on a pair of clean underwear and pyjama bottoms – the elastic band along the waist has lost all elasticity so I hold them in place with one of my shoe laces. In my locker I find a plain t-shirt and make my way to the dining hall for dinner.

I stand in the queue with my iron tray to be served the same food we get served at this time of day every day. Crawling forward with little enthusiasm I can feel my skin struggling to hold my skeleton tightly together, I feel the fibrous tissues twitch nervously, I slide my iron tray over the iron counter and receive an iron ladle of soggy mash, peas, carrots, and a cut of meat. It looks like beef but it could be anything, if I'm honest. We boil our food to the point that it becomes chewy, like rubber, and that goes for everything including cabbage. Even spinach has the texture of an elastic band. We might as well be fed shit, the food is so horrible. I suspect it could be just as toxic, but we must eat, that's what they tell us. The dish steams in the sickly air as I make my way to an empty table.

The room is exceptionally quiet except for the sound of metal and chewing. Our TV, perched up in the one corner, streams eNCA. We always watch eNCA when we eat. The volume is turned down completely. The moving images of other-world calamities put us at ease, especially bird flu. Negative affirmation does have its positive effects. Mother of Storms Hits Cape Town rolls beneath the pasty smile of the news anchor in a blazer and a neat blouse. His face is locked away behind a thick layer of make-up. The picture changes to a footage of Litha outside the public library on Darling Street. *The Martyrs threaten to torch Public Library* a banner rolls across the screen. Litha is perspiring under the sun and I can tell that he's picked up a lot of weight. If there is one freedom we are allowed at The Centre, it's the freedom to watch TV.

I chew slowly, watching the silent TV. And there Litha is, sweltering in the sun, shouting at the camera. The activist as entertainer, I think. When I'm done eating I deposit the tray in the tray station and ask for a glass of water. Sis'Bathabile, who's the head of the kitchen staff, throws me a look that says I should help myself and so I

take a clean glass and shuffle towards the clear jug standing at the edge of the iron counter and pour the water into the glass.

As I drink the water I watch the rows of patients bent over their tables, chewing slowly, with the parsimony of the sick. Eyes stare blankly at the silent news on TV. A din of forks and spoons and knives striking enamel plates rises from the tables and settles above our heads, in the humid sickly air, like an umbrella with its arms spread out. I see the doctor searching the room pensively. When he sees me he raises his eyebrows and comes over to my table.

As he negotiates his tall gangly frame round the tables silenced by the morsels of food in their mouths I grow anxious, then exit the dining area. Outside, huge curmudgeonly clouds rush towards The Centre from the sea.

I have good news for you, the doctor says when he finds me by the fence. The court has dropped its case. This is a letter recommending your immediate release.

Thank you, doctor, I say. Does this mean I can leave right now?

Well, not quite, we still need to treat you, unless of course, you'd prefer to brave out your illness, but I wouldn't advise it. What you can do, is speak to the GM and see if we can't treat you as an outpatient.

I thank the doctor again.

On my way to Dr Ndebele's office I pass a group of the cleaning staff in the corridor. The women are gossiping about a land lord. One of them is saying: *Sana*, all I need is one point five then I can build my pozzie. *Yhu*, she's unbearable, that woman. As soon as I have a roof I can leave her house for good.

You don't even need a roof, *mfazi*, another chimes in.

She's stout with short dark hair, the second one, and a slight paunch pushing in front of her. The first woman is short with think braids under the cleaner's cap. Her skin is rich and brown and velvety.

You just need a bed, and you can just lie there beneath the stars. I've done it, trust me, it's the most wonderful feeling in the world, a third woman says.

Doctor Ndebele's door is a gentle blue. The brightness inside his office is almost blinding as I enter, a constant stream of whiteness. The whiteness of an art gallery.

Soft yellows could dramatically alter the effect the room has on the senses, I think. In the middle of his table is a vase of Fynbos and delicate Lilies plucked from the surrounding vegetation. Through the large open window behind him starlings hop on branches like tightrope walkers in dark tailcoats.

Now let's see, he says, studying my file, after we both sit down.

His fingers are long and lean. He keeps adjusting his glasses and making nasal sounds as he reads. There's a cluster of papers on his desk and a desktop computer, a black IBM, nothing fancy; picture frames of small children – a boy and a girl, which I assume to be his – sit to his left.

How may I be of service? He says, tapping his fingers on his desk.

His hands are massive, pudgy, I notice.

A year or so ago I was admitted to your facility, Sir, I say, feigning an air of humility. I was referred here by the courts but it seems now that I don't have to stay here any longer, at least this is what this letter says.

I pass him the letter and he studies it closely.

I see, he says.

Today I wish to go home.

Wonderful, the doctors says. But what does that have to do with me?

I was advised to come speak to you, I say.

I see, the doctor says. Who did you say advised you, again?

I forget his name, he's the doctor who looks after us in Site C.

Well, we are not holding you against your will, we're merely trying to help you on your road to full recovery.

I can go then? I say.

You are free to leave, but I'm afraid you can't go. Not without a full medical discharge, I'm afraid.

And how do I go about getting one? I ask.

Only when we're satisfied that you are not a risk to society at large, he says. Then dismisses me from his office.

I don't go back to my room, instead I pay Bhu'Sam a visit but he's not in his office. I find him by the fence, looking down at the harbour.

Bhut'Sam? I say.

I'm listening, he says.

Have you made any progress about that matter we spoke about?

Well, let's see. The guy from city morgue will arrive very early in the morning to collect the packages I've prepared for them. I could try get you into one of the bags that will be sent to the city. Don't worry, they won't open them here but upon arriving in town they certainly will, when they pack them in their fridges.

It sounds like a good plan, I say to him.

But you can't mention to anyone my involvement in all of this.

I swear on my dead aunt, I say.

Standing next to each other we watch the small fishing boats return from a day at sea. A brilliant golden light falls on them like liquid lava. The men are small and quick in their movements as they unload their catch onto the pier.

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In my room I get into the covers fully dressed but sleep doesn't arrive.

I get out of bed and take out one of Dana's journals and begin to write a letter to ma, a long letter about everything that's happened to me. I tell her every single thing I've kept hidden from her. I write feverishly without really thinking about the words. I turn the page and begin to write again but I hear a click at my door and get up. It's too early for what me and Bhut'Sam have agreed upon, but I go towards the door anyway. I press my ear against it and hear Bhut'Sam's faint footsteps, hobbling down the passage. I reach for the handle and try to pull the door but the door is locked from the outside. I call out for Bhut'Sam but he doesn't reply. I bang on the door and call out his name. Still, nothing. In the weeks that follow I try to make sense of what might've happened, why Bhut'Sam did what he did. And so I write:

Bhut'Sam

They come to me these boys, sick, filled with shame, and full of fear. I try my best to put their minds at ease, to make them forget the reasons they're here, to forget the reason I am here. Their reasons and my reasons are like this, joined at the hip, intertwined. They are my way in and I'm their way out, however way you look at it.

I never saw myself as a messenger of death, not before, not now, not ever. I am merely a servant; I wash corpses for a living. I'm an old man, death is the only job I am qualified to perform.

When my wife and children were taken from me there must've been a man like myself at the end of that horrible accident, an accident I dare not think about even today. A man who tried, just as I do, to put the last things in order; who cleaned the wounds and folded the arms and stitched the eyelids into neat little slits, like eyes of a new-born child.

There is in the eyes of the dead a sublime quality, as though the soul had been struck by a final awe, abstract, unintelligible, breath-taking. I sometimes wish I could develop the negatives left on the eyes of these children, to capture the last thing that so dazzled them as to make them appear in awe of god knows what. Perhaps life's last punctuation mark.

When I locked up this boy (for professional and ethical reasons, of course) it was primarily because I sensed that life was wasted in him. His eyes looked as if he'd already seen enough. What an arrogant chap, I thought, when he came to me for help. A cold boy who turns his eyes inward. A vain creature. An unmanly man.

He was heavier than his build suggested. Thin-skinned but heavy boned. His eyes made him appear like a bag of concrete: heavy, lifeless. The nurses said he was nice enough, kept to himself, read his books. His damn books. I hate the nurses here; they hate me also; they call me that useless old dog. For my part I brush their words aside the way you might a caterpillar on your sleeve.

For my part, I found nothing particularly interesting about him, if I may be true to you. What I found of interest were his notes, these notebooks, about five of them, written in a compressed cluttered hand, as if he were struggling to breathe. It

was my name that caught my eye in one of them, when I had come into his room searching for reasons for his heaviness, his sadness. You can never know about these young people; a lot of them are useless drug addicts, tik-heads.

But then again, there was the small matter of my name in his notebooks. Nothing gets our attention like the sound of our names. Nothing gives us meaning like recognition, being recognised, being seen. And yet, I never learned his name, it seems that no one did. Everyone called him, That poor boy. But there was nothing poor about him, except, maybe, his spirit. If I had known his name, maybe things would've turned out different for him. But he was no more than a ghost stalking the corridors, carrying books, smoking cigarettes, polluting his already sickly body, living as if he was already dead!

I have often asked myself if I would have saved him, had I stuck to our plan, to his plan, which would've put my job at risk.

I was only doing my job. It was my job to report him to the authorities. I don't make the rules; I only abide by them. Isn't this what is required of us all.

I do think of him sometimes, as I do all the boys who pass through these hands. Yet, I'm not haunted by him, but what I did. He was not the first, nor was he the last, to ask for my help. Only those who meet our criteria, those who have been cleansed, clean pure souls, are allowed to leave. This is the way things are, the way things should be, in order to ensure public safety.

That's why I locked him up. Why criminals are locked up; madmen, too. To rid the world of anxiety, so that we may sleep peacefully at night.

I know my children would've slept peacefully knowing that I'd done my job.

Twice a day a nurse brings me food and medication and escorts me to the bathroom for a shit and a shower, then walks me back to my room. A numbing

lethargy has seeped into my marrow and made my joints stiff. Slowly, I deteriorate in my isolation. In the wee hours, swaddled in blankets, I hear a scream tear through the corridor, it takes the precise shape of the anguish I feel, as though it were the natural language of mankind. I sit up, propping myself with the heels of my palms, which sink into the soft depression of the bed, making the mattress let out a symphony of squeals as though it were filled with rats. Morning finds me like that, with Dana's Journal on my lap, having had not a wink of sleep.

With my left foot I fish for one of the hospital slippers on the floor. Although dressed in a t-shirt and pyjamas I catch myself trembling. The length of my long arms a colony of gold hair and goose flesh. The back of my t-shirt wet, my forehead wet, a noose of sweat hanging around my neck, its string running down my back.

Through the window the sky is exceptionally blue, my thoughts lost in its vast blueness, looking for that perfect point in the centre of things that had eluded my aunt for months before she took her life.

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I spent my days looking out of that tiny window until The Centre shut down due to bankruptcy or mismanagement or both, and all of us were let out onto the streets of Hout Bay. Although most of us found ourselves in Cape Town in the end.

I saw Litha one last time on the news. It was during our last lunch at The Centre. He was being shoved into a police van by five burly policemen. The scene looked desolate. There were rocks strewn on the street, a bus was torched.

Before the police closed the door, Litha raised his fist and mouthed a defiant word, which I couldn't make out since the TV was still silent.

He would be *the* martyr, now, I thought.

On the day of our departure, we climbed down the long winding road to the gate of the institution and I had just the clothes on my back and Dana's journals with all my essays and notes and musings in a plastic bag. Some people carried less. The sun was already up as we made our way to the entrance and out into the world. Bodies dragged themselves quietly down the slope. Others stood listlessly in the middle of the road, not knowing which way to go. A starling shot past, just above my head, and I ducked, watching it flap its wings towards the heavens, a single black grain against the thick grey clouds that promised rain.