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Once Removed

Stories

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There Must Be a Record: South African Art, Performance and Fiction as

Necessary Forms of Contemporary Arts Criticism

Reflective Essay

David Mann

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Once Removed

Stories

Resistance

“Closed on Mondays” reads the sign fixed to the tall, glass doors of the gallery looking out onto Jan Smuts Avenue. Below this, the opening times.

He presses the buzzer and an electronic bell chimes somewhere inside. No response. Cupping his hand against the glass and peering inside for a better view, he presses the buzzer again. Nothing. He takes out his phone and composes a message: *Hi, Khangi. It's Michael. I'm outside the gallery, as discussed. Where are you?*

“Closed today.” The voice comes from a man wearing a faded reflective jacket and a bright red beanie, standing behind him.

“I see that,” says Michael, looking at his phone again.

“If you come tomorrow, or any day in the rest of the week, they’ll be open. On Mondays they’re always closed. Sundays, also,” says the man in the reflective jacket, now pointing at the sign displaying the gallery’s opening times.

“It’s fine. I’m here to see someone.”

“You work here?”

“Yes,” says Michael, wanting to end the interaction as quickly as possible.

“You don’t maybe have a R5 for me? Just to buy bread. I work as a guard here. I watch the cars.”

“No,” says Michael. Then, after some time, “I don’t carry cash on me.”

The car guard walks past Michael and sets his bag down on the pavement. It’s shortly after 8am and Jan Smuts is filled with cars, bikes, taxis and busses, all transporting people to their places of work. Michael hates the commotion, the bodies, the seemingly endless roadworks that

cause little orange dust-storms on the pavements whenever cars go by. He can feel the exhaust fumes settling into his lungs. He coughs into the sleeve of his jacket and looks at his phone again. Still nothing.

“Is that your car, there?” asks the car guard.

Why did I even come here, Michael thinks? If I wanted to, I could easily have viewed the contents of the exhibition from the comfort of my home. Judging a work by its digital copy, however, is hardly a substitute for sizing up the piece in real life. He needs to have time with the works in person, alone. This is what he told the gallery, at least. Really, he doesn’t think it matters much either way. He simply enjoys the exclusivity and the ceremony of private viewings such as these – how important they make him feel, the urgency they place on his words. That is, when the gallery remembers to send someone through to open up for him on time.

“No,” says Michael, not looking at the car. “Listen, have you seen anyone come in here this morning?”

“No, sir. Nobody,” comes the reply. “Can I do a car wash? I can do body, windows, tyres and all in 20 minutes.”

“No.”

“Okay but I’m gonna keep an eye for you,” he replies. “Make sure everything’s okay.”

Michael has stopped listening. He peers into the gallery once more, wondering what to do. A voice comes from somewhere behind him.

“Hi! Are you here to meet Khangi? I’m so sorry!”

Michael watches the woman making her way towards him, a jumble of keys jangling in her left hand and a takeaway coffee cup in the other. Her flip flops smack against the pavement as she moves, drawing attention to her brightly coloured toenails.

“There was a slight mix up and he’s not able to make it this morning, but he sent me through to show you around. So sorry,” she says.

Her hair is loose and messy, and Michael guesses she’s been awake all of 10 minutes. He wants to express his frustration in some way. This is the kind of person they send to facilitate his viewings now? This mess of a 20-something? Eager to get off the street, however, he simply motions towards the doors of the gallery and says, “Can I have a look inside?”

“Of course,” she says, fumbling with the keys.

“Okay brother, I’m gonna keep an eye for you,” says the car guard, still standing beside his backpack near the entrance of the gallery.

“What? No, no. I can see my car just fine from inside.”

Michael follows the woman inside, away from the dry, smoggy heat and noise of Jan Smuts and into the cool respite of the gallery.

“Dani,” she says as she flicks a large switch on the left wall, causing a series of small circular lights to shine down and illuminate the exhibition. Save for the glass façade, the space has no windows and is unusually dark inside.

An air conditioning unit hums softly in the background. Seeing the lights go up like this reminds Michael of the high-end car dealerships he sees dotted along the highway, how they keep their lights on all through the night, spotlighting their most prized pieces for you to see as you drive by.

“Sorry?” he replies, not looking at her.

“I’m Dani,” she repeats. “I work with Khangi on a lot of the exhibitions. Actually, I’m more of his assistant, but I did get to help out a little with the curation of this show which was cool. I’m actually an artist myself.”

“Lovely,” says Michael. “Is this everything?” He gestures towards the length of the gallery.

It’s a rectangular room that stretches backwards towards a small, white prefabricated wall containing a white door that reads “Staff only” in black, vinyl lettering. Framed photographic prints and painted works populate the walls of the gallery. Sculptures, multi-media installations, and a series of screens resting on thin plinths take up most of the floor space. It’s a crowded show, which gives it the illusion of being a significant one, he thinks.

“Yes, this is it. All the artists here are from our stable, of course. And many of these works have never been seen before. Made specifically for this show,” Dani enthuses. “So, you’re, like, a critic, right? See anything you like?”

“I am, and it doesn’t really work like that,” says Michael, already making his way towards a large, smooth porcelain sculpture of a fist that’s been made to look as if it’s erupting through the floor of the gallery. “Listen, do you mind not talking? I was told I’d have an exclusive viewing of these works. In fact, even having you in the room –”

“Oh, sure!” Dani moves towards the door. “I actually need to pop down to the shops just down the road so I’ll just go do that and you can stay here, then?”

He nods and gives her a smile. “Perfect.”

She leaves in a hurry, closing the door behind her before opening it again and popping her head through the gap. “My number’s on the desk just through that room if you need me for anything,” she says, leaving the door to swing shut slowly and silently, cutting off the sound and activity of the outside world.

Michael runs his hand over a patch of thinning hair on the crown of his head and looks around once more. Silence. It is divine. He could spend the whole day here if he had the time. He puts down his satchel and sets up his laptop on an unoccupied chair in the corner of the room. He scans through the exhibition statement again and chuckles at some of it.

“South Africa is a country that’s history is rooted in struggle,” he recites under his breath. “Rather than turning a blind eye on the issues of the past, this exhibition seeks to isolate and pay homage to the various forms, languages, sites and interpretations of protest. This is the light, shadow, colour, material, texture, movement and muscle of struggle.” He scoffs at this last part. Why don’t they just hire him to write these things for them? Probably because they can’t afford him, he thinks. The last page contains a list of the exhibition’s sponsors – mostly banks and foreign NGOs, one of which is paying him to write about the contents of this exhibition. He closes his laptop and produces a notepad and a pen from his jacket pocket. It is time to get to work.

A series of three photographic works catches his attention first. They are well-lit and contained in neat, white frames. He is familiar with the artist – a press-photographer-turned-visual-artist who’s achieved a great deal of success abroad. The gallery is lucky to have him, Michael thinks as he studies the photographs. Each image depicts resistance of some kind. There is a Cape Town Metrorail train engulfed in flames, a burning bus in the Johannesburg CBD, and a student hostel set ablaze in Durban. All of them have been taken in the last few years, the earliest one dating back to 2012. He stares at the images a while before nodding and jotting down a thought in his notebook: “The ritual of fire.” He underlines the word ‘ritual’ and, content with his observations, moves on to the next set of images.

These he recognises immediately. They are the works of an emerging artist, signed to the gallery almost immediately after graduating. Michael studies them closely, biting the end of his pen as he does. There are two black and white photographic portraits of the artist, each screen-printed on a replication of a well-known landscape by South African artist J. H. Pierneef. The self-portraits show the artist staring back blankly at the viewer. Michael has always been a great admirer of Pierneef's work – excusing a few of his worldviews, of course – and even contributed an essay to a book on the artist some years back. He studies the works again – the bored, indifferent expression of the artist juxtaposed with the rich, rusted reds of the landscape, still and quiet, waiting only for the light afternoon rain. He reads the title of the work: 'Everyday resistance' and clucks his tongue. "Trite. Reactionary. Conceptually barren" are the notes he jots down before moving on.

He squeezes his way past the porcelain fist titled *1976*, steps over a small mountain of red sand and rocks titled *Rooikoppies* and heads for the television screens instead. The screens are all the same size and rest atop identical white plinths. A hook screwed into the base of each plinth holds a pair of headphones for the viewer to wear. Michael stands before the first screen, puts on the headphones and waits for the piece to begin.

The work's title appears first, *Songs and Chants*, before fading out and giving way to an old photograph of the Johannesburg CBD. The architecture and the models of the cars place the image somewhere in the 1980s, Michael imagines.

Through the headphones, a voice, followed by more voices. It is a call and response chant that grows louder as it grows longer. Something begins to disrupt the image on screen: A moving portrait of a dancing man. Or is he running? In any case, he remains fixed to a single point, and moves in slow motion. Michael watches the figure slowly turning more visible as the chanting

grows louder in his own ears. The figure keeps his fists close to his chest, allowing them to move only slightly with the rest of his body. He moves from leg to leg, his feet not moving too high off the ground, but high enough to make his knees bend, noticeably. Michael traces the slow arc of the leg, the rigidity of the back, the loosely held fists. He cannot look away. A flash of white takes over the screen and the words “Toyi-Toyi” appear in bright, blue letters. Ah, thinks Michael. Protest as performance. And vice versa. He jots these thoughts down in his notebook and moves to take the headphones off, but the song stops, abruptly. The image changes from the Johannesburg CBD to what looks like an aerial photograph of the Durban beachfront, also a few decades ago, although Michael can’t be sure when, exactly. He keeps the headphones on and continues to watch. The figure is re-emerging – slowly materialising through a muddle of pixels producing art-deco buildings, blue waters and stretches of shoreline. Michael has a sudden urge to be near the ocean. The gallery, for the first time since he’s been here, begins to feel somewhat confined.

The figure is toyi-toying again and the chant is back, although different this time. The artist has manipulated the audio so that certain words double up on themselves or are repeated in rapid succession. *Heita. ta, ta. Heita, tatatatata, ta.* Loud syncopated whistles tear their way through the headphones, moving from one ear to the next before circling back again. The voices are growing in number, and Michael becomes acutely aware of the way he is breathing, how his heart beats at his temples. His gaze remains fixed on the single toyi-toying man, still stomping his feet into the Durban beachfront in slow-motion, his lips moving ever so slightly, adding his own, soft chant to a chorus of digitally enhanced voices.

Michael feels something then, a hand on his shoulder that seems to be pulling him, slowly, but gently backwards. He whips around, yanking the headphone jack out of the TV and causing the chants to spill out of the screen's own speakers and into the gallery.

"Shit, sorry. Are you okay?" It's the assistant, Dani.

"Christ," says Michael as he pulls the headphones down to rest on his neck. He can feel the heat in his face – equal parts embarrassment and exhilaration. "What is it? I'm still busy here."

"Sorry, I knew you'd be busy, I was actually just at the café down the road, but I decided to come back –"

"What?" Michael can barely hear her over the noise, now reaching something of a fever pitch as it crackles through the small, tinny speakers in the gallery: *Heitaaaaa, taataa. Tatatatata, ta –*

Dani presses a button on the base of the screen and deadens the whole thing. "There are protests taking place up the road and they're coming towards the gallery," she says.

Michael notes her lack of breath now, and the slight redness in her own face. "Did you run here?" he asks. "And who is protesting? What are they protesting?"

"Service delivery, I think. It's been in the news all weekend. They've started to disrupt commercial districts in the city. There are quite a lot of people out there. What do you think we should do?"

Michael recalls the words of a newspaper placard fixed to the streetlights on his drive over here. Something about protest action carrying over into the new week. But even now the words hold little weight in his mind. Isn't there always another protest in this country?

Already, though, he can hear commotion coming from further up the road. The two of them move to the front of the gallery and peer out through the glass, trying to catch a glimpse.

"Have they taken over the whole of Smuts or something?" he asks.

“I think so. I didn’t see much, though, I just ran over here.”

“Well, where the hell are the police?”

“Do you think we need the police? Should I lock the doors?”

Michael pauses to look out at his car, parked across the road. All the other cars have gone.

The car guard has gone, too. Should he make a run for it?

“I’m locking the doors,” she says.

“Yes. Yes, we’ll go to the back,” he replies, trying to take charge of the situation. “Quickly, let’s go.”

Dani secures the door while Michael retrieves his laptop and satchel. The two of them make their way to the back of the gallery, slinking past the artworks as they go, careful not to topple any of them. Safely in the back room, they stand in silence. Michael looks up at the ceiling, straining his ears for any signs of approaching danger. Dani has her phone pressed to her ear.

“Khang’s not picking up. What should we do? Do you think they’ll try and come in?”

“What are you calling him for? Call the police for fuck’s sake. This is totally ridiculous.”

Michael’s concern is still with his car. Already, images of shattered glass and warped metal are plaguing his mind. It is too late, now. Does his insurance cover protest action or does that fall under the same obscure clause as hail damage and freak weather incidents? Why the fuck didn’t he just stay home?

“I’m hiding in the bathroom. I can’t stay here.” Dani turns around and heads for a door further towards the back of the office, leading to a small, single bathroom. “No room, sorry,” she says as she closes and locks the door from the inside. “You’ll be fine in the office.”

Michael starts to panic. The noise from outside is growing louder, still, and he can’t shake the images of fire and destruction from his mind. He rubs a sweaty hand over his head. Will they

wreck his car? Is it too late to call the police? What to do? He needs to place himself inside the mind of a protestor. But how? He's never protested in his life. Online, perhaps. With his writing, certainly, but never in the streets like this, never so destructively. He can hear shouting. What if they break in? The glass doors only need a single brick. Smash. That'll be it. What will they do once inside? They can take the art, sure – fuck the art – but what if they come for him? The lights! The lights are still on in the front of the gallery. If he turns them off, it'll look like nobody's in.

He leaves Dani, who's busy talking to someone on the phone, in the bathroom and approaches the office door, creaking it open. He can hear shouting, chanting, the stomping of hundreds of feet. It sounds as if they are just up the road. He must make a run for it now, he thinks. He can dash out to the front of the gallery, hit the lights, and run back into the office. Still gripping the door handle, Michael draws a deep breath, steadies himself and runs.

He is at the front of the gallery before he knows it, hand already hovering over the flat, white light switch. There is enough time for him to catch a glimpse of a crowd of people, all arms and hands and placards in the air. Sunlight cuts through the glass and into his eyes, turning the whole scene into a silhouette. He cannot see his car. Directly in front of him, he thinks he sees someone reaching out for the door. He slams his hand down on the switch, kills the lights and turns to run back to the office.

Smash. His limbs are twisted metal, his head turns to shattered glass. Light explodes in front of his eyes like fire.

“He fell. I said he *fell*. I don't know, he says it was dark and he tripped. He's fine, but like I said, some of the works are a total write-off. Okay. Okay, bye.” Dani emerges from the office. “So,

it's a logistical fucking nightmare for us, but we insured everything before we installed so Khangi says you won't be bankrupt if that makes you feel any better."

"It doesn't," says Michael.

He is still sitting in the middle of the hard, cement floor of the gallery, nursing a twisted ankle and surrounded by broken and displaced artworks, some shattered, others broken in two. Many were simply toppled from their plinths and are now lying about on the floor.

The protest, Khangi said earlier, was really more of a demonstration – an organised march through the city. A police escort ensured things ran smoothly. Outside, the traffic has returned to its usual pace. Those walking by don't even notice the mess inside the gallery.

Michael gathers his things and limps through the great, glass doors, out into the dry heat of the day. He makes his way across the road before climbing into his car and setting his satchel down on the passenger seat. He has just turned the key in the ignition when a figure appears at his window.

"Everything is okay here, brother," says the car guard. "I made sure no one touched your car."

Rain

Mariam parked in her usual spot in front of the martial arts studio, a short way down from her father's apartment block. There was secure visitors parking underground and away from the chaos of the main road, but she'd stopped using it some time ago. Waiting for her father to locate his cellphone, shuffle over to the front door where he kept his keys, and then figure out which button on the remote opened the gate to the parking garage was a process that very nearly drove her insane. Getting out again was much the same.

She'd been asking him to get the building's caretaker to program a spare remote for ages now but her father, stubborn man that he was, always came up with some excuse to not get it done. Parking on the main road it was.

Mariam stepped out of her car, shopping bags in hand, and into the wind. The weather was turning, and the sky was taking on the colour of a fresh bruise. Probably, there would be a late afternoon storm. She locked her car, giving the passenger side handle a tug to make sure. She'd yet to fall victim to one of those infamous remote jammers, but wasn't there always someone who had?

She readjusted her hold on the shopping bags and walked past the small stores that occupied the ground level of the apartment block: an upholsterers that also sold curtains and blinds, a second-hand clothing store, a locksmith, and other single-purpose outlets that had survived the test of time thanks to customers like her father.

He'd been living here for decades, having bought the apartment in the 90s, around the time his career took off and he fell into the kind of unexpected good fortune that allowed for a life of relatively little work. Mariam, who grew up with her late mother, had only started visiting him

here again in recent years. More so lately as his health started to decline. He'd forget things, simple things like doctor's appointments or the location of his cellphone charger. He put this down to a lack of interest in technology, and a lack of trust in younger doctors. He'd only seen one doctor his entire adult life, he argued. Following the doctor's retirement, finding another man who was up to scratch had proved an impossible task. Mariam knew better. He was in his 70s. The idea of building the kind of brittle, hard-won relationship that men fostered with their doctors this late in the game required a level of patience and trust she no longer believed he had. Mariam had, of course, considered the option of a retirement home for her father, but never raised this with him.

She walked on in the wind. Up ahead, standing outside the entrance of the apartment block, was a young man with a brass instrument. He was sharply dressed. Mariam noted his checkered suit, complete with a matching hat which he'd placed on the pavement in front of him. The hat had a few silver coins and the odd note inside, all held down by a large stone. His shoes mirrored the shine of his instrument, which she could now see was a saxophone, immaculately maintained. A busker, she thought. When last?

At the sight of her, the busker raised his instrument to his lips and began to tease out a few notes. As she got closer, he belted out a high, heady melody that held, brilliantly, before being chased away by the wind. Usually, Mariam had no patience for these kinds of street-side interactions – Johannesburg was overrun with people asking for handouts – but the novelty of a trained musician publicly peddling his craft was an experience she allowed herself to draw some pleasure from. She smiled at the man as she passed. He nodded his head in return, still busy with his instrument.

Mariam pressed “6” on the keypad at the gate and listened as a distorted dial tone played itself out from the small, metal box. Back when she’d arranged for the installation of fibre optic internet in her father’s apartment, she’d got them to do away with the outdated wall phone that connected to the building’s intercom, and had his cellphone connected instead. He still complained about this change, bitterly. The internet, Mariam suspected, was also wasted on him. The busker continued to play while she waited. It usually took about five rings before her father reached his phone. This time, he answered on three.

“Yello?”

“Hi, dad, it’s me.”

The intercom let out its electronic buzz and the gate clicked open. Mariam hurried inside and closed the gate behind her, happy to be out of the wind.

“That fellow still down there, huh?” her father was already making his way back down the hallway and into the lounge when she walked in. The two of them had done away with formalities a long time ago. He simply unlocked the door and security gate and left her to lock them behind her as she let herself in.

“*Hi*, dad. The musician, you mean?”

“Could hear him through the phone. Been playing that bloody thing all day. I bet he harassed you. Asked for money, didn’t he?”

“No. He’s a musician. He wasn’t begging, he was busking. There’s a difference. You should know.”

“He’s no musician, my girl. If he was, he’d be in the studio instead of on the streets. He’s a bum.”

Mariam's father, once a great supporter of South African jazz, now spent most of his days grumbling on about one thing or another – the sorry state of the arts being a recurring topic – entirely unprovoked. She could never completely understand the resentment he'd built up towards a world he once adored, but reasoned that it had something to do with his days of heavy drinking. Once he was forced to give up the booze, he found he had very little to occupy his time with, other than lingering on matters of the past.

Her father had moved up to Johannesburg in his 20s in search of work. With no more than a matric, he took on whatever jobs came his way, working in the gardens of wealthy whites, as a rubbish collector for a stretch, and even as a nightclub bouncer, before finding a position as a newsroom assistant at a weekly newspaper. It was the first time he handled a film camera, and he quickly talked his way into a position as a junior photographer. His experience with the city's nightlife led him to photograph the new wave of jazz musicians playing across Johannesburg's formal and informal nightclubs.

He published mostly through the paper and in a few local magazines. It was in the 90s, when the country opened itself up to the world again, that his photographic work really took off. He became known as the man who documented the sounds of South African resistance. It was around this time, Mariam suspects, that he began to prize booze above everything else.

His status subsequently declined in the 2000s, with work and publication opportunities drying up completely by the end of the decade. A few local galleries had included him in group shows since, and the media sometimes reached out when a well-known local musician passed away, but other than that, his career had never advanced beyond that specific moment in the country's

history. Her father, the accidental artist who let himself get left behind. What was she to do with him?

The apartment was dark, as usual. The hallway led straight into the open-plan area where a spacious living room and kitchen were separated by a marble-topped counter. This is where Mariam set down her handbag along with the groceries she'd picked up for her father. She placed her keys and phone down alongside the bags and caught her breath. Her father took a seat on one of the stools, resting his arms on the counter. This always had a way of bunching his shoulders up around his ears, giving him the posture and general appearance of a gargoyle. His mood did little to counter this.

The place was tidy. A lifetime of living alone had taught him the basics of looking after himself. These days, however, Mariam hired someone to come in and clean once a week. The nooks and crannies of the place were starting to prove too much for his old bones. She cast a critical gaze around the room – a quick sweep of the area to make sure her money was not going to waste.

The lounge was something of a time capsule. Framed prints covered the walls. Books and collectable cameras took up shelf space, untouched trinkets from a former life. Her father had kept the same furniture long enough for it to have gone both in and out of fashion a number of times. Right now, if the interior design publications were to be believed, it was very much back in style. Much of the furniture dwarfed her father, entirely. It was all smooth, hefty woodwork – beautiful, but too excessive, too cumbersome for an old man, she thought. Her own apartment was sparse and functional, the furniture purchased as a swiftly assembled set. She'd been urging her father to get rid of some of the larger items – to downsize, as she put it. He insisted that she would inherit it all when the time came. He considered this to be a great gift. "They don't make

things like this anymore, my girl. Not these days.” She looked at the furniture and only saw objects that would weigh her down, further rooting her to a single place.

“That woman from the university reached out again,” she said, reading from her phone. “Says she understands if you aren’t able to come and talk, but wants to know if her students could send you a few questions.”

Mariam had, in recent years, become something of an unofficial PR agent to her father. Mostly, this required fending off requests from academics and chasing up media outlets that refused to credit, let alone remunerate her father for the use of his images.

“There’s also this writer who says he’s interested in putting together a book of your photographs and his writing.”

“Has he got any money?”

“He says he’d like to meet with you to discuss the possibility of securing funding and –”

“Tell him to get lost. Tell them all to get lost unless they’re able to pay me what I’m worth. Do you know how many times I’ve been –”

“I know, dad, I know. Don’t get worked up,” Mariam half-pleaded. “I’ll let them know you’re not interested.”

He sniffed and adjusted his glasses, still looking down at the countertop. “Anything else?”

“Nothing,” said Mariam, taking some joy in the bluntness of her response. Then, catching herself, she added, “Well, besides the usual press requests, but I told them they’ll have to pay.”

“They’re all a bunch of crooks anyways,” he said, sitting up. “How’s the job? You told that boss of yours to get his act together yet?”

Mariam worked as an accounts manager at a small agency that handled publicity for some mid to high-level clients in the music industry. It was not where her passion lay, exactly, but it

paid well enough and she enjoyed working with a small team. Her boss was one of those entrepreneurial types – a “creative mind” – and relied largely on Mariam to keep things running.

“You wouldn’t believe what he asked me to do this week,” she began. “We get this request from –”

“The fellow’s still at it!” said her father, looking toward the balcony windows. “Can you believe it?”

A series of low, languid notes drifted up from the street below. Mariam noticed the lack of light in the sky. The busker should pack up soon, she thought. He’ll get caught in the downpour if he doesn’t.

“If he doesn’t stop that noise, I’m calling the ADT.”

“He’s just trying to earn a little cash, dad.”

“He’s a nuisance. Delusional sonofabitch, too. Nobody around here’s gonna give him anything.”

“You’re probably right about that,” said Mariam, moving over to the balcony door. “He’s not a bad musician, though. He’s got pretty good control, too. Really good, actually. He might be classically trained.”

“Don’t start with that nonsense again Marie, man, please.”

“Marie” was short for “Marie Biscuit”, an infuriatingly childish nickname that he’d used well into her early 20s. Although she’d convinced him to give up the “biscuit” in recent years, the “Marie” endured. The “nonsense” referred to Mariam’s desire to study music. Back then, she’d had plans of pursuing a career in music, ideally live performance. Her father had flat out refused and her mother, already ill at that stage, had had little to say about the matter.

“This creative stuff is too fickle,” he’d told her. “Finance. Accounting. That’s where the jobs are.”

She didn’t disagree, exactly. She knew how precarious a career in music would be, but then it was also her father’s own work that had sold her on a life spent making music in the first place. He may not have been the most devoted of fathers – especially during the height of his drinking when he all but forgot Mariam and her mother – but he was always around for the fun parts. It was this aspect of her father’s life that Mariam remembered best: the romance of his photographs, the shows he’d taken her to see on school nights (despite never being the one to take her to school), and the various “aunts” and “uncles” she’d grown up with, but who she never knew outside of those dark, smoky little nightclubs. No, a career in music would only lead to ruin, he said. Addiction, delusion, poverty – this was the stuff of a musician’s life. In the end, she settled for a degree in media, followed by a post-graduate course in business management. Her father funded her studies and for this she was grateful. It was, she reasoned, the right decision.

“Imagine,” he grumbled, “my daughter out on the streets, begging for five rands like that. Not that I’d let it get to that point, but where else does a career in music take you these days?”

Thunder rumbled in the distance. The first rain was beginning to fall in thick, heavy droplets on the roof and on the dry pavement below. Mariam enjoyed the theatrics of a Highveld summer storm. She opened the balcony door to let some of the cool air into the stuffy apartment. This also let in the sounds of the busker who seemed to be playing on despite the imminent downpour.

“You’re in a mood today, hey?” she said, still facing the street.

“Close the door, man! That fool’s doing my head in.”

“You need some air in here,” she said, walking back to the counter. “Your meds are all here. And I got you those litchis you like from the Parkview grocers. How are you doing for meals?”

“Fine, fine.”

“Have you called the plumber about the bathroom tap yet?”

“Ja.”

“And?”

“And what? They charge too much. I can fix the damned thing myself.”

“I’ll pay, dad, I told you I’ll pay. Just tell them to come through and fix it, it doesn’t matter what it costs.”

“This chap is still playing in the rain. What the hell does he think he’s doing?”

Exasperated, Mariam left her father grumbling in the lounge and made her way to the bathroom to inspect the tap. She closed the door behind her, savouring the relative stillness. Outside, the rain was coming down thick and fast. Through the small window above the basin she could hear it pounding down on roofs, spilling out of sobbing gutters, and cascading down the sides of buildings in heavy rivulets. She could not hear the busker. He’d probably called it quits.

She moved over to inspect the basin where the leaky cold-water tap wept feebly against the roaring rain. She gripped the tap and tried to shut off the dribble. No luck. These old apartments were always springing leaks. She’d read in one of the community newspapers a while back that it was the age of the pipes in the area, they were too brittle and worn. The problems came when the air got in. Whenever there was a water outage or a stretch of routine maintenance, air got into the pipes and wreaked havoc on the system’s pressure, causing leaks and bursts of all kinds. Just the other month her father’s next-door neighbour had her whole kitchen flooded.

Mariam gave the tap another try and came away with nothing but a sore wrist. Somewhere, amidst the smell of rain and dust, she caught a whiff of something foul. She checked the toilet

and saw that it was clean. Around the base, however, she found small pools of urine and a dampness in the slim, rectangular mat. She stood and considered the scene, not sure what to make of it. There was something simultaneously heartbreaking and infuriating about it. Her father, the lively, independent man she'd looked up to as a girl, was now too old to aim straight, and too proud to sit while he pissed.

She gathered up a few layers of toilet paper, crouched down, and began to mop up her father's mess, careful not to get any of it on her hands. The smell shocked her nostrils and made her stomach turn. Was this the first time he'd done this? Or was it just the first time she'd found the bathroom in this state before the cleaner took care of it? She tossed the soggy, yellowing paper into the toilet bowl and flushed. She soaped her hands under the hot-water tap, careful to rinse them off before the water turned scalding. Outside, the sky was all rain and the rumble of thunder.

In the living room she found her father standing at the closed balcony door and staring into the rain. The muted afternoon light streaming through the glass turned him into an angry little silhouette, frail and sharp at the edges. Constellations of dust danced in the light. He turned around and caught her staring at him.

"There you are," he said. "Can you believe it? He's still at it." He stared at Mariam, waiting for her to join him in his small display of exasperation.

"The busker? He must be drenched."

"He's down there! Still playing the bloody thing. He's taken refuge under the cover of the balconies like some animal."

Mariam joined her father at the windows and listened. He was down there, still crooning away with his instrument, pausing here and there, letting the sound of rain and scattered thunderclaps occupy the empty spaces he left when he paused for breath.

“Like a rat lurking in the storm drains,” barked her father.

One long, drawn out note, now, holding, holding, holding, and wavering ever so slightly before fading away.

“Yassis. This isn’t Sophiatown. And he’s completely out of time this chap.”

More sound from below. A series of high, sharp notes all evenly spaced out and culminating in a graceful flourish.

“God. Where’s his parents? Probably tossed him out on the streets. Couldn’t stand the racket, probably.”

The length of a full, melodic line sounded out, lingering on the lower notes before switching up and ascending the scale again.

“Oh Jesus. He’s showing off, this fellow. Just wait until –”

Mariam drew closer to the window, drowning out her father’s criticism and becoming an audience of one. She listened to the musician, trying to embrace the fullness of the music through the noise of the storm.

She was faintly aware of a kind of tension inside of her, but unable to locate it in the spectrum of her emotions. Was it a yearning, she thought, or simply the desire to disrupt the structure of an average day? She wanted to be outside, taking shelter in the lee of the building. She wanted to be the musician, maybe. Or be with him. To be serenaded. What a concept. Her job, her father – outside of these two constant demands she had little time for dating or companionship of any kind.

There was the night spent drinking cocktails and listening to a blind date – a friend of her colleague – talk about himself. He was a contrarian, he stated, and was fundamentally against whatever everyone else was for. Pop music, wellness trends, commercial film, current fashion – he had little interest in these things. They made people lazy and stupid, he said. Mariam nodded a lot and told him how this made sense, how she’d never really thought about it like that. Later that week, she surprised herself by feeling hurt when he declined her suggestion of a second date.

Her father had his own ideas about who she should end up with. Someone with a sensible career. Someone older, who’d had his days of drinking and dancing and chasing after women and was ready to leave all of that behind. Someone who would respect her willingness to work hard, but who would also care for her and allow her to leave her job and get on with the business of building a life together. Really, there would never be anyone good enough.

Heavy sheets of water crashed down in front of her. She moved away from the window and saw that her father was on the phone.

“A disturbance. A *disturbance*. Ja. Just outside. Been going on all afternoon. A bloody nuisance.”

Mariam grabbed the phone from his hand and cancelled the call.

“What on earth are you doing, dad?”

“What’d you do that for? I was sorting the situation out.”

“Jesus, dad, you’re obsessed. Just leave the guy alone. Honestly, there was a time when you would have been requesting songs from the balcony and singing along. When did you become such a bitter old man?”

“I don’t have time for idealistic fools, Marie. Neither should you. You’re lucky I steered you straight when you were young,”

“So I could grow up and look after you,” said Mariam. “I spend all my free time in this dark little apartment, listening to you rattle on about how miserable everything is. You’re the miserable one.”

“Then leave,” said her father.

She knew this sulking game of his. She watched him turn from the window and head to the bathroom, pulling the door shut behind him. He did not come out for some time. In the kitchen, she unpacked the groceries.

Hanging on the wall beside her was a framed, large-format photograph of a trombonist at work, eyes screwed shut and head tilted back in a state of revelry. Like so many of her father’s images, the musician in this one was long gone, although his spirit endured, lingering on the walls of this quiet apartment. In the bottom, right-hand corner of the photograph was the musician’s signature, along with a note to her father: “To the man who witnessed it all.”

When her father emerged from the bathroom, he shuffled over to the kitchen sink for a drink of water. Mariam noticed his hands shaking, and how he struggled to take hold of the small, glass cup he kept beside the sink. His grip was weak, all knuckles and thin, papery skin. He seemed so small. She felt the urge to hug him, then, to rub his old hands and draw out some of the tenderness that might still be there.

Outside, the rain slowed to a gentler pace. She helped him pack away the rest of his groceries and sat with him while he watched his programmes, joining in every now and then as he griped and threw out insults at the people on screen. This was a kind of bonding between them, and she was careful not to disrupt it with questions or conversation.

She was aware that the musician had stopped playing, but she was not sure when, exactly. She made them tea and peeled litchis for them to share. Through the open window, she listened to the sound of traffic; cars moving up and down the street creating small waves with their tyres as they went along, a taxi door being pulled open and closed again, and the long, impatient hooting from a car just behind it. Barely audible amongst it all, the slow, insistent whisper of the leaking bathroom tap.

Common Ground

There are nine of us, and we are gathered at Khumo's place – a dusty student digs in Observatory. The house is hardly big enough for a gathering of this size, but we make it work.

We've occupied the living room for our meeting and have moved all of the furniture to the edge of the room. We are seated in a circle on the scuffed-up parquet floor. Bags and shoes are strewn about the place, plenty of smoke and booze is circulating. On the walls, various prints and paintings, one of them by someone in this room, all of them badly framed. We've been here since 11 this morning. The intention is clear, or rather it was clear – the establishment of a radical, experimental and interdisciplinary art collective. It's 4pm now, and little has been accomplished. Now, we're just trying to do *something*.

Things started off well enough. The day was set to be a productive one. Successful even. How could it not be? We are all accomplished artists in our own right. Among us, there are theatre-makers, painters and writers. Individually, we go by these titles. Together, and as of this morning, we are a collective. A group of "cultural workers", as Thembinkosi put it earlier, working to carve out a more equitable and less exclusionary space in the arts scene. We've won about twelve accolades between us, which we all agree is an impressive number, more so when you consider that many of us are still considered "emerging artists". We debate this term, too, deciding that it's a thinly veiled attempt by the galleries and the theatre houses to keep capitalising on our labour while underpaying us.

Not all of us are emerging. Percy's been around for a while now, having worked as a curator, researcher and archivist, and we're grateful to have him here today. He's been through it all already, and is able to warn us against certain places, certain ways of working. Also, certain

people. He's done this a lot today. The more he drinks the more he warns us against people, always with a pertinent anecdote or bit of information about the person that shows us just how much we need to stay away from them. We're shocked that these kinds of things aren't public knowledge.

There is a "culture writer" here, a university student who hasn't said much. It's likely that he was only invited to provide early media coverage for the collective.

"It's important to own the narrative from the jump," Khumo ventured earlier. "Being in control of how we're written about in the media, even how we're perceived by the public, is crucial." All of us nodded, thoughtfully, when she said this.

Exactly who prompted us all to gather here today, we really can't be sure. A message was put out, times were arranged. Khumo was happy to host the meeting, and now here we all are. Many of us are meeting for the first time today, although all of us knew *of* each other before. Probably, it's these tentative assumptions about one another's practice that caused some of the early fractures in the foundations we were trying to lay this morning.

"We just take to the streets," says Joe. "That's the only way we'll make sure what we're doing is reaching the public. We stay away from the galleries and we do our work in public spaces."

Joe's a street artist, although he hates the term, preferring to be referred to as a "graffiti writer" or "public artist". He paints and wheatpastes fragments of text on the billboards along highways and on electric boxes in and around the Cape Town CBD. He calls them urban aphorisms. Bontle, the poet, is eager to collaborate with him on a project combining their practices, but Joe doesn't seem too interested. They studied together in the same small university town. Maybe they have a history?

Thembi stubs out a cigarette and leans into the conversation. “Just because your work’s in the public realm doesn’t mean it’s reaching people, you get me? It’s the medium that we need to rethink. How do we make sure what we’re doing is speaking to the guy who’s picking rubbish? The lady selling amagwinya at the rank?”

Although Thembi hasn’t lived in Johannesburg for more than five years now, he still likes to draw attention to his history with the city, often when he’s talking about how much is wrong with Cape Town. Nobody is sure what it is that he does exactly, but we all know of him. He calls himself a cultural producer.

The trouble with Cape Town, he says, is that it’s still run like a colony. “There’s no porousness here, they like to keep the poor out of sight so that we can’t come together.” We’re aware of the kinds of spatial tactics he’s making reference to, but, reluctant to endure another of his monologues, we do not entertain him, and press on.

Bontle has her say. “I guess my thing is just that, at some point, we’re going to have to interface with these institutions, right? Like, whether it’s them offering us a space or asking us to be on a panel or something, we’ll have to figure out what we’re going to say and how we’ll say it as a collective. I’m not saying that they’re not shady or anything, but they’re a necessary evil, I think.”

At this, everyone shakes their heads and begins to speak. The room is full of dissatisfied chatter. Perhaps we should have appointed someone to chair the meeting? Although we decided early on that anything remotely hierarchical would not be beneficial to the collective. We needed to decentralise conventional forms of leadership.

At the edge of the room, Sonia is laughing under her breath. She picks up two quarts of Lion Lager and uses one to pop the cap off the other. Sonia is a dancer and she is the only one here

today who's not smoking. She is also one of the few who hasn't been sharing her alcohol, drinking whole quarts by herself since she arrived. She takes a few long gulps from the freshly open bottle before venturing into the circle.

"This big thinking won't get you anywhere," she says to the group. "You sit and think, think, think about something, and you never end up doing it. With my practice, it's all physical, intuitive. You get up, you move, you get things done."

Everyone falls quiet. Alice, who hasn't been drinking at all today, but has been watching both Sonia and Percy grow steadily more drunk, intervenes.

"I don't think it's productive for us to be talking so divisively," she says. She speaks softly and sweetly, and everybody listens. "We're here to collaborate, not push our practices and ways of seeing onto each other."

Joe, Thembi and Percy nod as she says this. Alice goes on to explain that this is the reason she can never work with other photographers, that too much of the same thing can only make for bad art. Embracing the unfamiliar, she says, is the path toward better ideas. Sonia cuts her off and begins to accuse her of taking photographs of poor people and profiting from their condition. This gets the circle going again and soon everyone has broken off into little constellations.

Outside of the circle, Percy is sitting with his head in his hands, fingers buried in his hair. Joe and Thembi are resting on their sides and listening to Alice defend herself. Sonia is occupying herself with a drink. Bontle, who's grown quiet, is busy writing something in her journal. Khumo looks unsure what to do with all of us, and has gone into the kitchen to pour glasses of water for everyone. The whole place is filled with smoke and the sour smell of beer and feet. The pieces of dyed fabric that serve as curtains haven't been moved by a breeze all day. The room has grown much darker.

“Does anyone want some tea?” Khumo calls from the kitchen. Nobody answers. “I’ve got Rooibos and Five Roses.”

“Fetch my other one in the cooler box there please man Khumo,” Sonia calls back.

“I think they’re all finished,” comes the response.

“No, man, I’ve got at least one more there otherwise these people are drinking my alcohol,” says Sonia, stumbling to her feet.

Thembi cracks a joke about her being too drunk to count, and this makes everyone else chuckle. It also sets Sonia off again, and she turns to face him. As the argument gains momentum, Percy gets up and makes a show of putting on his boots. This makes everyone stop what they are doing.

“Bra Percy, don’t mind these guys,” says Thembi. “Let me just roll us another one.”

“You lot are carrying on like clowns, hey?” says Percy. “I can’t sit here and listen to you all talking nonsense to each other, I have other things to do.”

“It’s not *all* of us,” Alice says under her breath, but loud enough for Sonia to hear.

“You’ve been going on like spoiled children the whole time,” says Percy. “The only one who’s not making noise is this other guy.”

Everyone turns to look at the young writer who has been sitting just outside of the circle, leaning against a worn, red couch, and listening. Throughout the day, his presence in the room has gone largely unnoticed. Now, people begin asking him questions.

“Which publication did you say you were from?”

“What’s your agenda, hey?”

They do not allow him to answer.

“Who invited this guy anyway? Has he contributed anything?” asks Joe.

“Do we even know who he is? I’ve been watching him,” says Thembi. “He’s been recording our discussions this whole time.”

The room falls quiet. Keeping the meeting phone-free was one of the first things we agreed upon today. It’s not clear why. Thembi had said something about the possibility of our phones being tapped. Percy considered them to be sources of distraction. None of us took issue with this. We simply switched them off and left them in our bags. The writer, it seems, chose to keep his phone on.

Everyone is looking at the writer now. He tries to explain himself but cannot find the words. His eyes scan the room for a kind face, an ally. No one is willing to claim any kind of relationship with him. He is nobody’s friend, or anyone’s acquaintance. Thembi and Joe walk over and ask him for his phone, Sonia tells him they need to search his bag. He does not object to any of this. They search through everything, finding nothing. Percy, who has been standing and watching the whole scene play out, tells them to give the writer back his things.

“I think you’d better leave, my friend,” he says.

As soon as the door closes behind him, we begin talking excitedly about what has just taken place. None of us invited the stranger, we agree, we all assumed he arrived with someone else. Thembi recounts his experiences in student movements, telling us how there was always someone working to derail their plans from the inside. Bontle and Joe nod, vigorously. Khumo tells Alice how unnerving it is to have a total stranger in her home and wonders whether she should call the police. Alice is happy to stay a while and keep her company. Percy removes his boots again and sits on the couch, listening to everyone. We all agree that the stranger must have been sent here by someone and that he probably wasn’t even a writer at all. We conclude that we

did the right thing by kicking him out and that, going forward, we should be more careful and deliberate about our gatherings. There is a lightness to the room, now. Smoke and chatter.

Sonia appears at the kitchen door, which is still blocked by pieces of furniture, and climbs over a small table, a fresh quart of Lion Lager in each hand. She opens both and passes them around the room.

The Burning Museum

When she pulls up, she is greeted by two guards who want to know who she is and what she wants. They are wearing matching black berets, red jackets, and black pants and boots. It is the uniform of one of those private security companies she always spots around the suburbs, she thinks, although she sees no logo on their jackets. They are standing in front of an open gate and a lowered red and white boom. Guard number one is crouching down and leaning into the driver's side window, looking at the contents of her car rather than at her. Guard number two is walking around the car, as if he is conducting an inspection of the vehicle. In front of her, a rusted sign fixed to a wooden pole reads "Tswaing Meteorite Crater Centre".

"My name is Maya. I'm here to see Amo," she says.

"Amo," the guard repeats, still looking into her car, his eyes settling on her tote bag on the passenger seat with some of its contents – pens, crumpled up receipts – spilling from it. "Where are you coming from?"

"From Joburg," she responds, eyes now in her rearview mirror where she spots guard number two tilting his head and checking out her bumper.

"Johannesburg." He draws the word out as if it's foreign to him. "Amo didn't tell us anyone would be coming today."

Maya is irritated by this back and forth. She'd been asked to send all of her details through – name, license plate number, make of car – a week before. They were expecting her. Others, too – film crews, government representatives, staff from the museum, all organised by Amo. Still, from behind the gate she can see into the parking lot, which is nothing more than a patch of dry

land and a few trees, and finds that there are no cars. She begins to doubt herself. Did she get the day wrong?

“I’m a journalist,” she says, although this is only partly true. It’s been years since she was a practicing journalist. These days, she makes better money writing puff pieces and churning out glorified press releases for government types like Amo. “I’m here to interview Amo for the launch that’s happening today.”

“You are here for a job interview?”

“No, I’m —” her phone goes off. It’s Amo. “Hi Amo, I’m outside. I’m actually trying to get —”

“Maya, hi,” her voice is loud, and Maya puts some distance between the phone and her ear. “Listen, I’ll be there in about 15 minutes, okay? We’re finishing some things up at the office. You can go in so long. I’ll meet you out front.”

The call is dropped before she can respond. When she pockets her phone, she sees that the second guard has already made his way back to the entrance and is standing with one boot on the heavy concrete block of boom, granting her passage into the Centre.

“You can park just there,” says guard number one, pointing to a lone tree outside the building.

Maya jerks her car into first, rolls through the gates, veers off to the right, and parks beneath the tree. Without the dull drone of the aircon, the place is quiet. It’s just after 9am and it is already impossibly hot. The drive from Johannesburg, up through Pretoria, and into Soshanguve ended up being about half an hour longer than the hour and fifteen minutes Google Maps had promised it would be. It was on the long, potholed Soutpan Road that she picked up the extra 30 minutes, she suspects.

But she is here, at least, and somehow still early. Save for the two guards, who are now joking with one another and sharing a cigarette, she seems to be the first to have arrived. No matter.

She'll use the time to do some prep work, go over her notes. She grabs her tote bag and retrieves a few loose pages, printed out the day before. She finds the one titled "client brief" and gives it another read through.

CLIENT: Department of Sport, Art & Culture / Tswaing Meteorite Crater Museum

Contact: Amohelang Mabaso

Writer: Sumaya Reddy

KEY POINTS:

- The Department of Sport, Art & Culture (DSAC), along with The Tswaing Meteorite Crater Centre is firmly invested in celebrating and supporting South Africa's artistic and cultural history.
- The Tswaing Meteorite Crater is of vital importance to the people and the history of South Africa.
- The recent discovery of a poem by traditional poet and folk musician Mary Dladla serves to further illustrate the significance of this site.
- The DSAC and Tswaing Meteorite Crater Centre are cementing their support for South Africa's artistic and cultural history by unveiling a new plaque bearing the poem and dedicating a viewing point to the late Ms Dladla that overlooks the crater.
- The unveiling of the plaque and the naming of the viewing point will also serve as the official announcement of the Mary Dladla Cultural Centre which will be funded by the DSAC and is due for completion in November.

KEY REPRESENTATIVES:

- Mr Johan Vermeulen, Director, Tswaing Meteorite Crater Centre
- Mrs Rosemary Mabaso, CEO, Department of Sport, Art & Culture

- Ms Prudence Dladla, daughter of Mary Dladla

The other two pages are filled with copy pulled straight from the Tswaing Meteorite Crater Centre website. It's riddled with typos, but it'll give her most of what she needs to lay the foundations of the article. Her questions, jotted down in her notebook the day before, will serve to extract a few short quotes from the relevant sources – the director, the daughter, the CEO – and get her to her word-count.

Maya shoves the pages back into her bag and steps out of the car, into heat. The air is uncomfortably warm and dry and the Centre itself is smaller than she expected. The structure is low and rotund, a cream-coloured building (or is it off-white?) topped with a thatch roof. The entrance of the building is flanked by two cream walls. Walking through them, she feels as if she is being drawn into a pair of stocky arms, an unavoidable hug. It's dark through the windows, but she tries the door regardless, giving it a rattle. Locked.

She makes her way around the side of the building, where old flower beds hold nothing but the odd weed, and discovers another structure entirely. She moves closer and sees that the place is abandoned – a burned out shell of a building. When she'd researched the Centre, she had come across an article describing a 2009 fire that gutted the original museum building. No solid information on who or what started the fire, though. At the time, the crater was being considered as a possible world heritage site. It's been labelled as a "tentative site" ever since. Tearing down this old structure couldn't hurt, she thinks.

Is it safe to walk through? She looks over her shoulder and sees that the two guards are now both busy with their phones. She steps into the structure, a husk of high walls, blackened bricks, and frayed chicken wire sticking out of the tops of the supporting columns like uncombed hair.

They removed the roof, at least. Or perhaps they simply let it cave in. The floor, overgrown with weeds and small leafy thorn bushes, is littered with chunks of charred wood and rubbish – cooldrink cans, chip packets and empty beer bottles.

There's a sadness about the building. She walks further in, stepping over tangles of rusted wire as she goes. Towards the back of the space, a few steps beyond what looks like an old firepit (did it house *the* fire?), she spots a splash of colour. Painted along a curved stretch of wall is a mural depicting what seems to be the meteorite impact site. The paint, exposed to the elements for over a decade, is faded and cracked. She moves past the firepit and takes in the mural. The hillside (a direct result of the meteorite's impact, she'd read) is painted in a reddish brown and rests beneath a sea-blue sky. Rogue weeds growing over parts of the mural add a much-needed touch of green.

To the bottom right she spots a group of sunblasted and frenzied figures standing at the foot of the hill, looking up at something. She follows their gaze until she sees it too – a series of small, brown (the same brown as the hill) objects falling down to the earth in a uniformly diagonal trajectory. Are they meteorites? They look like chicken nuggets. She also notes the clouds, now, which cling to the top of the wall and sag down in a series of small, neat clumps – the kind you'd see in a child's drawing. No smiling sun peeking out of the corner, though.

She spots something else, hidden behind a particularly proud thorn bush. It's *the* meteorite. The one that crashed into the earth a few kilometres away and some 220 000 years ago, leaving behind nothing but a sizeable depression in the earth and a whole lot of salt.

It's been painted in a greyish white that makes it look more like a giant snowball with a frosty tail than the fiery chunk of rock she'd read about. But then what are these brown things? She is about to move in for an even closer look when she hears a group of cars pulling into the

premises. The others have arrived. She takes out her phone, snaps a grainy picture of the Nugget Storm, and turns to go and meet them.

“I was hoping you wouldn’t see that.” Amo greets her as she steps out of the car, a loud, red Hilux. “Only good news in the article, huh? Nothing about burning museums!”

She says this last part with a booming laugh that exposes the small gap between her two front teeth. Usually, Maya finds this physical feature endearing. Her grandmother had a gap, it always showed when she smiled. On Amo, though, it makes her think of a chipmunk. Is it the Chappies chipmunk? Yes, Amo does look a bit like him. Puffy cheeks and all. She also comes armed with trivia.

“Late 2000s that place burned down,” she says. “It was before I was in charge here. Otherwise, you can believe it would still be standing. Just before the World Cup, even. Gone! They couldn’t get a single tourist through the gates. Anyways, you haven’t been waiting long?”

“Not too long.”

“Good!” says Amo. “We are late this morning. I’d show you around the Centre, but we’ve got to get to the crater. The camera guys need to set up and do their thing, you know? You can do interviews there, huh?”

Maya wants to say that she was hoping for some sit-down interviews, but Amo is already talking with someone else, a tall, worn man who arrived with her. Standing at the other cars, Maya sees a group of men all wearing sunglasses and caps that are turned backwards. They have black, rectangular bags slung over their shoulders – the kind that hold expensive equipment. Camera bros. She remembers the type from her newspaper days – young, ambivalent, chain-smokers and heavy drinkers. Always a little too trigger happy in the more rural parts like

Soshanguve. Where are the others? Vermeulen, Mabaso, Mary Dladla's daughter? The sooner she can get her interviews, the sooner she can leave.

"Uh, Amo," she says. "Do you know how long we'll be today? I just need to be back –"

"You're bored already, Maya! Don't worry, we're going to the crater now, I must just check with this other guy to see if he's opened the gates. It's a bit of a drive to get there, but it's beautiful. Have you ever seen the crater? You will see it. Just wait, we'll go there now."

Maya yields, grows silent. She won't have trouble getting quotes from Amo at least. At the gates, another car pulls up, a white Nissan Almera. The driver doesn't look like Vermeulen or Mabaso, but there's a woman sitting in the back of the car. Dladla's daughter? The guards wave them in without asking any questions and the car pulls up behind Amo's Hilux.

"Ah!" says Amo to nobody. Then, to Maya, "Here is Mary's daughter. We had to hire a driver to bring her through, shame, man, she's quite old and she doesn't drive either. I nearly asked you to pick her up on the way, she stays outside Pretoria, near Atteridgeville, you know it? Anyways, you can speak with her today, ask her all about her mother, get some nice quotes for the article."

The woman, Prudence, remains seated in the back of the vehicle. Only the driver gets out to speak with Amo – something to do with payment. Maya studies the figure in the back of the car. She is slim, frail, her shoulders bunched up in a way that makes her seem either defensive or in some kind of pain. The interview should go brilliantly.

"Okay come let's go," Amo announces to everyone. Then to Maya: "Just follow, neh?"

"Amo," Maya tries again, "about the interviews, I was thinking I could get as many of them done as possible before you start filming."

“Okay, I tell you what. You ride with me. We can do some of the interview on the way. That small car of yours is not gonna survive the dongas anyway!” Another bout of booming laughter as she gets into the driver’s seat of the car.

The drive to the crater site reveals some of the natural landscape – the khaki-coloured veld interrupted every now and then by tufts of pistachio-green grass. Eland stand around, grazing. A few zebras, too, which scatter off along disparate paths as the convoy passes through their turf. The car rattles over a concrete bridge. A dried-up riverbed on either side of them is filled with bits of plastic and polystyrene. Amo hasn’t stopped talking the whole way.

“You must make me sound smart in this thing, hey? I hate doing interviews, I can’t stand it, I don’t even know why you want to talk to me. The others will have much better things to say. Me, I will just talk nonsense.”

“You’ll do great. You’re a brilliant speaker.”

“You think so?” Amo seems flattered. “I don’t sound like you. You’ve got that laanie accent! You talk nice though. But I think with all these speeches they make me do, I have gotten quite good.”

Maya sees a gap, goes for it. “You don’t mind if I record do you? For notetaking purposes?” She has her phone ready and presses record. “So, the Dladla project. How long has it been in the works? Since the poem was discovered?”

“Oh gosh,” says Amo as she navigates the car around a cluster of potholes. “Now you’re *really* asking me a question, hey. I must double check for you, but I think maybe since 2018 now. 2017 is when they found the poem along with some of her other belongings, but it took a year to be able to see it. You know these academics, they don’t like to share!” More laughter.

“And before the poem, was there any knowledge that Dladla had ever visited these parts?”

They pass a short, tarred stretch of road that leads to a shaded area dotted with rondavels and a communal braai area. Amo swerves off to the side of the road and calls out to a lone security guard sitting at the entrance to the area.

“Hold on, I must just speak to this guy quickly,” she says to Maya. Then, leaning out of the window, she begins talking loudly with the guard, firing off questions. The guard responds with single-syllable answers that seem to irritate Amo. She rolls up her window and pulls off again, cursing the man under her breath.

“These guys. I told them last week already and again yesterday that they must have the place ready. Look now, they say nobody told them. Nevermind, I must just open the gates myself, ruin my outfit and look a mess for the cameras. And they get salaries to sit around like that, hey? Imagine.”

Maya is eager to steer the conversation back to the subject at hand, but Amo is already on her phone. She tells the person on the other end to have the gates opened by the time they arrive. They argue a while and she drops her phone back into her lap with a huff.

“So,” begins Maya, “did the museum have any knowledge of Dladla’s visit to the crater before the poem or –”

“I can tell you one thing for free. If she came here when these useless men were on duty she wouldn’t have even gotten into this place, let alone write a poem about it!”

They slow and pull up behind the other cars, all parked on a small, grassy patch next to a sign reading ‘Viewing Point: Meteorite Crater Impact Site 1kms’.

“Okay let’s go. We can’t drive any further otherwise you and me and the car are gonna end up inside the crater. You’re fine to walk, hey? It’s not far, just there where those guys are going.”

Amo closes the door and starts calling after the others. Maya pockets her phone, gets out of the car, and follows.

She'd seen images online, knew it was more a lake than an empty depression in the landscape, but this is something else entirely. She notes how wide the crater is, how the water takes on the surroundings, reflecting the pale blues of the sky and the brittle greens of the landscape. For a moment, Maya is glad that she took on this job, made this trip out to the middle of nowhere.

The moment does not hold. Behind her, the camera bros have also caught a glimpse of the view and are now gesticulating wildly and echoing each other's dull sentiments.

"Yoh!"

"That's mad, come check this out, okes."

"No ways, this must have been the one that killed the dinosaurs, hey."

They crowd around her, move past her, and stand on the outermost rocks, extracting their cameras and joking with one another about tumbling down the sheer drop. Maya surrenders the view and turns away.

"Absolutely stunning, isn't it? You get a good view?" asks Amo, whose make-up is slightly smudged from the heat. "It's going to be a tough job putting that view into words!"

Maya humours her, laughing and nodding. The truth is that she won't have to put any new words to work. She'll repurpose what's on the website ("remarkable act of nature", "unique wetland ecosystem") and lean on pre-existing data for the rest ("220 000 years old", "a meteorite the size of half a football field"). What she does need is to get these interviews done.

"Listen, Amo," she says as warmly as possible, "do you mind if we wrap that interview up? And do you know when the others are getting here?"

“Don’t worry. That’s what I’m trying to find out now. Go, enjoy the view in the meantime. No need to rush. I’m just going to call these other people now and find out what’s happening.”

When she turns away, it’s not to find out where anyone is, but rather to instruct the camera crew on where to set up their tripods, which angles provide the best view of the crater. Above them, the sun glares down uninterrupted. Maya can hear that high, whiny drone she’s come to associate with the highveld. Crickets? No. Cicadas? She turns to look at the cars and sees that they’ve managed to lose Prudence and her driver along the way. She walks up to Amo and tells her this.

“Ja shame, she needed a drink of water. She’s not used to travelling. Very frail. They’ll come and meet us once she’s ready. Won’t be long now. Even me, I’m excited to see the look on her face once she sees her mother’s poem unveiled. She might even cry! Have you seen it yet?”

Maya realises now that she hasn’t seen the plaque. She makes a show of looking around for it.

“It’s just up there. There where that man is standing.”

Amo is pointing at the worn man from earlier. He’s standing by himself, off to the side of the viewing point, staring down into the crater. Beside him, Maya sees the hot shimmer of the bronze plaque in the sunlight. A neat metal sheet on a small concrete plinth. Hardly as grand as they made it out to be. She walks up to read it.

“Sorry, sorry,” says the man, stepping off to the side.

“No, that’s okay. I’m just here to read the poem,” says Maya. Then, staring out into the crater, she says, “It’s beautiful, isn’t it?”

“The poem?”

“Uh, no the view I mean, but I’m sure the poem is beautiful, too. Have you read it?”

“No.”

Maya scans the plaque. “In remembrance of the indigenous poet and craftswoman Mary Dladla whose visit to this site as a young girl had a profound impact on her life and work.” DSAC and Tswaing logos occupy the bottom section of the thin sheet of metal. The poem, Maya discovers, is only six lines long. It describes the landscape in front of her without too much detail. She has the feeling that the poem could overlook any natural landscape in the country and fit in well enough. Mostly, it is about people’s relationship with nature, although perhaps there is more to it. She takes out her phone and photographs the plaque.

The man is still standing and looking out at the crater, saying nothing. Next to them, the cameras have been set up. Amo is enjoying her moment in the spotlight, her voice echoing out around them. Unsure of what to do with herself, Maya walks over to the group, decides she’ll watch and take her own notes while Amo speaks.

“There you are,” says Amo as Maya approaches. “The others are not gonna get here today I don’t think. It’s a whole other thing actually, they asked to reschedule, but I said to them we’ve got media here, the cameras are here, Prudence is here, everything! They said they’re gonna try come later, but it doesn’t look like they’ll make it.”

Maya digests this information, weighs up the possible outcomes. Will she have to make another trip out to this sad place? Make the full commute only to stand around and take minutes for these government types who don’t even seem to know what it is they’re supposed to be doing? Certainly not. If that’s the case, she will refuse. To hell with the whole thing, she’d rather go without the money.

“So, what now?” she asks.

“Okay so what I’m thinking – sorry guys just a moment – so what I’m thinking is that you go back to the Centre to speak with Prudence, get your interview. She is not feeling well, poor

thing, she is going to go home, I think. You get your interview with her and then I'll keep you updated on what's happening with the others."

"Amo, I can't spend the whole day here," Maya says. "I can interview Prudence, but maybe we can do the remaining interviews telephonically?"

Amo pauses, frowns, considers the idea.

"Okay," she says. "I can see we are boring you today, so you must go. I will put you in touch, send through their contact details. You can also call me and we can do our interview over the phone then, finish the whole conversation, okay? At least you have gotten to see the place, hey? And you've seen the plaque? Good. I can get them to send you photographs as well. Okay come let's get these cameras rolling."

Maya falls silent. She feels like a schoolchild who's just been caught daydreaming and has been scolded by the teacher in front of the whole class. When she calls out to Amo again, her voice is smaller.

"Uh, Amo? How do I get back?"

"Huh? Oh god you didn't drive up here. You see now, this is a problem – sorry guys, can we hit pause there? I must just fix this quickly – okay, I tell you what, you will drive back with Matthews, he will take you in my car."

The camera crew fidget and groan, an impatient display that Amo tends to – "Sorry hey, I know you're on a tight schedule." As if he has been listening the whole time, the tall silent man (who Maya now knows to be Matthews) walks over to them, exchanges a few quiet words with Amo, and retrieves the keys.

"Ready?" he asks.

They climb into Amo's car and make the trip back to the museum, neither of them saying a word the whole way.

Prudence is sitting in the shade of the trees when they arrive, her back resting against the hard, dry bark and her legs stretched out in the sand in front of her. The heat is almost unbearable now and even Matthews has something to say about it, albeit under his breath. While he and Prudence talk, Maya heads over to her car and pretends to look for something in the boot, a way of busying herself. When she closes it again, Matthews is approaching her.

"She is not feeling well at all," he says. "She wants to go home to rest."

"Now?"

Matthews nods. "Amo says you could give her a lift home, do your interview on the way." It sounds more like an instruction than a suggestion.

"Me? Take Prudence home?"

Another silent nod.

"Where is the driver from earlier?"

"He had to go somewhere else."

"I don't know where she stays. I'm not even sure if it's on the way."

"She says it is on the way. She can give you directions. Otherwise she will have to stay here until Amo is done filming."

"And you can't take her?"

"It is not my car. Amo won't be happy if I take the car."

Maya looks over at Prudence, who is starting to climb to her feet with some difficulty. What if I refuse the old woman? Will they leave her here? Surely not. But can I say no? Can I get my

interview, get her to speak about her late mother, only to leave her here in the heat? This is not my burden, she thinks. I cannot be made to feel responsible for a person Amo is supposed to be taking care of.

Before she can say anything, Prudence has already made her way over to the car, opened the back door, and started settling into the back seat. Maya gets into the driver's seat, starts the car, and begins the long drive home.

She is scrolling idly when she sees the headline: *DSAC under scrutiny over missing millions*. She opens the article, vaguely interested at first, then slightly panicked when she sees the sub-heading: “*We were never consulted*” says Dladla family. She puts her phone down, sits at her desk and locates the article on her desktop browser.

It's been around three months since she went out to the crater and wrote the puff piece. She's seen it online here and there, syndicated across all of the usual publications. Amo had thanked her, paid her promptly. It was the last time they spoke.

Maya scrolls through the article and reads that the money for the proposed Mary Dladla Cultural Centre has gone “missing”. Prudence Dladla is quoted throughout the article. Not only has she received no “financial support” from the DSAC or Tswaing, she also hadn't been informed that there would be a centre named after her mother in the first place.

A flash of panic in her stomach. She continues scrolling and sees an image of the burned-out Tswaing crater museum taken in 2009. In it, she can make out the mural more clearly. The brown objects falling from the sky are outlined in black paint and are in fact smaller meteorites. The sunblasted figures also hold more definition and she sees now that they're not people at all, but clusters of trees, some with birds flying above them. The photograph's caption states that the

mural was commissioned by the museum shortly after its construction and painted by a team of local craftspeople as part of an employment stimulation project in the area. The article goes on to explain that the project was the first of many that were carried out without proper procedure.

The panic spreads and enters her chest. She closes her browser and locates the article she wrote for Amo. She opens it and reads, stopping a few paragraphs in.

For Prudence Dladla, the project is a welcome tribute to her mother. She explains how having her mother's legacy honoured through the unveiling of the poem at the Tswaing Meteorite Crater will ensure that her work will be remembered for generations to come. "I am thrilled," says Dladla. "The plaque is so beautiful and I know my mother would have loved to see it there, overlooking the valley. She was always talking about the need for spaces for the arts in the rural areas so the new arts centre that is being built is something that I know she would be so happy about."

A pang of guilt (or is it more panic?). These are my words, not hers, she thinks. I made them up, neat little quotes designed to fit the brief.

In truth, Maya and Prudence hadn't spoken much at all. They spent the whole drive to Atteridgeville in silence, save for Prudence giving out the occasional direction. She tried to make conversation, sure, but the woman practically refused to speak. She thinks back to the trip. Prudence's home wasn't in Atteridgeville, exactly, more on the outskirts in an area that seemed to have little access to basic services. The street that Prudence lived on was a mess. Potholes ate into the road and rubbish bags piled up on the pavement. The house itself was unpainted and cracks ran up the concrete walls. Two of the windows were boarded up. On the opposite side of the road, a group of men stood around a car, drinking and listening to music. Maya could feel

them staring at her as she drove past. Before Prudence had reached her front door, Maya was already pulling away.

And now this. This false set of quotes, this small manipulation of the truth, committed to print and syndicated across the national news amidst looming trouble about corruption and missing funds. If Prudence had said anything about the Tswaing project, it would hardly have been positive. Could she even afford to live? Were they making any efforts to support her? Unlikely. But then, it was even less likely that Prudence would have been the one to take any action. Had someone reached out to her?

Maya gets up, paces. I haven't done anything wrong, she reasons, this is their problem.

She has written in support of them, though, manufactured consent from an old woman who is now saying the opposite. What to do? Should she call Amo? How much trouble could she be in, exactly?

On her desk, her phone lights up and begins to vibrate.

The Park

“Clash of Sounds!” declares the flyer in bold, flaming letters. Beneath this, the words “Rock ‘n Roll” and “Hip Hop” face each other with an aggressive slant, poised to fight. A chrome microphone stands between them, housing the “vs” and keeping the two musical genres at bay, until this Saturday at least. A list of musical acts runs down both sides of the flyer, framed by bright, blue lightning.

“I don’t know any of these bands. Oh, except this one,” says Robyn, pointing to one side of the flyer. “The bassist is a chick, I think.”

“This group’s made up of *three* chicks,” says Riyaad, pointing to a name on the opposite side. “Never heard of them?”

“Nope. What are they, like, rap?”

“They’re a group of emcees.”

The two of them are waiting to start their first shift of the day and are posted at the entrance of The Diamond Devil Run, a roller coaster that hurtles its passengers through the twists and turns of a burned-out mineshaft. It’s early, and the sun is already beating down on the theme park. Around them, the sounds of running water and the hiss of hydraulics as the rides lurch into life.

It’s Robyn’s third day on the job and, being December in Cape Town, it’s also the park’s peak season. Riyaad’s worked at the park for just over a year now and is considered a senior employee although his salary reflects none of this seniority. Mostly, he’s the guy who trains the new employees. He has been paired with Robyn for this reason.

“‘Attendant’ is just a shorter way of saying ‘Minimum wage workhorse’,” he told her on her first day. “You’ve gotta be ready to do a bit of everything. You’ll learn on the job.”

To Riyaad's surprise, she took well to the job for someone clearly used to a life of leisure. He's never worked alongside someone like Robyn and he knows little about her, although small talk reveals the basics. She's a year younger than him and still in high school. She lives with her parents in Rondebosch, a leafy neighbourhood in Cape Town's southern suburbs. Why she chose to take up a job like this, she didn't say, and he didn't ask. Why does anyone work here? Isn't money always the reason? People have bills to pay. So why is she here?

"Ah, it's on Christmas eve, though," says Robyn, handing the flyer back to him.

"Ja?"

"My family always does something. Like, last year we all went over to my grandparents' house and had this huge dinner. This year we're supposed to host it at ours, I think. But there's no way I could go to a concert," says Robyn. "Won't you be with your family?"

"We're not big on Christmas eve, hey. Most of the focus is on the day itself. Church in the morning, family lunch. That whole thing."

"Oh, ja we do lunch, too. Do you go to a lot of concerts?"

"Not at this place," he says, putting the flyer back on top of the pile they'd be handing out this morning. "I'm working the bar at this one, though. Sizwe hooked it up for me. I figured I could use the extra cash, you know?"

"Totally."

Riyaad's two-way radio crackles into life. A missive from the park's front gates. *Five minutes until we open up. Looks like it'll be another busy day.*

Attendants are placed on a rotating schedule of rides and facilities, Riyaad explains, to ensure a fuller experience of the place, for guests and employees alike. Robyn quite likes the idea, figures

that it's a good way to get to know the place in a short space of time. "It's kind of like a safari," she says.

At midday, the two are stationed at a large, pendulum-style ride called The Congo Queen. The ride is one of the park's central attractions, along with The Cobra, a writhing, yellow roller coaster that moves at break-neck speeds, and The Monkey Falls, a water ride that merges a trip down the lazy river with an 18.5m plunge. The Congo Queen is a large boat decorated in fake wooden carvings. African masks with gaping mouths are fixed at both sides of the vessel, and the ship's mast resembles a totem. The park's general theme is something like this, too. Guests can visit a caricature of Africa for a day – dense jungle, wild animals and daring adventures, all within 20 minutes of the Cape Town CBD.

When Riyaad started working at the park, staff members were required to wear pith helmets and khaki outfits, but after the dress code drummed up some controversy, the park swapped its imperial uniforms for the universally accepted branded T-shirt and cargo shorts. Riyaad wears his T-shirt loose and baggy. Robyn chooses to tie the T-shirt into a front knot that shows off a section of her stomach. Riyaad notices that she has a belly ring, but doesn't say anything about it. Unconsciously, he brings his thumb and forefinger to his earlobe that, prior to this job, contained a diamanté stud.

The two do not talk much during this shift. Robyn directs park-goers onto the ride, while Riyaad handles the mechanics. The ride lasts about seven minutes in total, six of these spent filing people on and off, and ensuring that all safety measures are in place, leaving 60 seconds of shrill screams and laughter. As queues form, Robyn keeps those up front engaged by recommending rides they should try out next. She does this as if she's been working here for months.

“Been to the bumper cars? The little ones will love it.” Her advice is well received. Riyaad, who rarely talks to any of the guests, sticks to his silence. Later, on the walk across the park towards their next post, he tries to puzzle her out a little more.

“Don’t take this the wrong way,” he ventures, “but you don’t look like you need this job for the money, you know? So, what’s the story?”

“I’m saving for a car,” she says after some time.

“A car?” he laughs. “You know how much this job pays, right?”

“Well, I’ve got a deal with my parents. I get this job, earn a little on my own, and they’ll cover the rest. It’s my dad’s idea. He wants me to get some work experience before I finish school. My brother did the same when he was my age and –”

“Really?”

“Yup. He worked as an attendant and then as a manager here when the park first opened, actually. He’s over in the UK now.”

“No, I mean the whole car ‘deal’. That’s for real?”

“Oh, ja. I mean it’s a pretty good deal, I guess.”

“I’ll say.”

They walk the rest of the way in a silence that’s neither awkward nor entirely comfortable. Riyaad nods at a few of his colleagues working at the food stands dotted throughout the park. They nod back. Robyn waves, but only a few of them smile back. She has not been introduced to them yet, she reasons.

The two continue their journey through the winding walkways of the artificial jungle. The park has filled up now, and the crowds are everywhere. The smell of boerewors and candy-floss

hangs in the air. Riyaad suggests they avoid the artificial stone walkways and cut through the Walled City with its constellations of arcade games and fast-food counters instead.

They arrive a few minutes later and the place is already filling up with the lunch crowd. Tired parents queue for food or sit and drink wine and beer from plastic cups, irritable children in tow. The venue is designed like a colosseum, ringed by a food-court, general seating area, and a few gift shops. Garish columns are situated at the main entrances, each fitted with a pair of fake elephant tusks. In the centre, a stage and entertainment area, also containing a few tables and chairs. The whole place smells of salt and vinegar, and an upbeat soundtrack is being churned out of cheap, tinny speakers hidden throughout the venue. Riyaad leads them down the clay-red steps of the food-court and toward the stage where the ‘Clash of Sounds’ is set to take place in a few days.

“Up here,” he says, climbing onto the stage and making his way to a door marked “staff only”. “We’ll take the tunnel. It cuts through the rapids.”

Robyn follows, reluctantly, climbing onto the stage and through the door into a cold service tunnel. The tunnel is poorly lit, and the air is stale. It’s a way for staff to move quickly and effectively through the park and a place to sweep all the detritus of fun – cooldrink cans, chocolate wrappers, plastic cups, and cigarette butts. For Robyn, the act of moving out of the stylised realm of the theme park and into its lesser-seen recesses is jarring at first, but the experience of moving between worlds like this excites her. None of her friends have ever done anything like this, she thinks.

She is vaguely aware of a distant churning sound and as they venture further in, the rank smell of ammonia fills the tunnel, so strong in the small space that the chemical sting begins to work at her eyes. Riyaad stops and turns to face her.

“You good? You looking a little paler than usual.”

“Fine,” she responds. “What’s that noise?”

“The rapids,” he says. “I told you, this tunnel goes right under them. It’s a good shortcut to know.”

They climb a set of stairs and exit through another service door, emerging in a different section of the park. They stand for a while, squinting in the sun. Robyn thinks she sees Riyaad hiding a smile. She’s seen him like this once or twice before. He takes a certain pride in knowing how to navigate the less exotic reaches of the park, probably. But was he trying to impress her, she wonders, or simply helping her move through the place as efficiently as he does? Either way, she’s glad to see him express a kind of cheerfulness. He’s always so bitter, otherwise.

Their third post of the day sees Riyaad and Robyn stationed at the exit of the Crocodile Gorge, a water ride that sends guests travelling along a series of machine-generated rapids in a giant rubber tube, four at a time. It’s a good place to be at this time of day, nice and cool. There’s not much to do either, besides helping the occasional guest climb out of the tube and onto the deck at the end of the ride. Tired, Riyaad spends most of his time reading a surf magazine left behind by another attendant. He has no interest in the sport, but flicking through the pages is a way of passing the time. Robyn is engaging the park-goers again.

“Did you see any crocodiles?” she asks the younger ones in an animated tone. “You’re lucky they didn’t get you. They haven’t been fed today.”

Riyaad rolls his eyes at her.

“It’s just a bit of fun,” she says in response. “But you heard about the real crocodiles they used to keep here, right? My brother started working here just after that guest got pulled under. He said they had to cut the crocodile open to get the body.”

“You can’t believe the stories about this place.”

“Okay, I mean the crocodile story did seem a little far-fetched at first, but my brother —”

“Not just that nonsense, I mean all of it.”

“All of what?”

“All the stories they dreamed up about this park. The wild animals, the hidden riches — all that stuff they tell the guests so that people feel like they’re leaving their own lives for a few hours.”

“Obviously I don’t believe that stuff.”

“No, but you buy into the *idea* of this place and you carry on with this adventure island kak with the guests. This place is a lie, man. Best to just get on with the job.”

Robyn, at a loss for words, is relieved to see an old, overweight guest struggling to make it out of her tube, and rushes to help. She spends the rest of her shift sulking. Riyaad does, too.

The next morning the two of them stop off at Jerome’s coffee cart before their first shift. Riyaad bumps fists with the old man and the two exchange words of greeting. Robyn waves enthusiastically and says good morning.

“Any spare coffees this morning?” asks Riyaad.

“Ja, ja,” says Jerome. “Three sugars, neh? And for you, missy? What’ll it be?”

“Oh, I don’t have my purse on me,” says Robyn.

“He’s got us covered,” says Riyaad.

“Hey, I might as well,” says Jerome. “This place could be gone any day now.”

“What do you mean?” asks Robyn.

“You didn’t hear? The park’s being torn down, just after the holiday rush is over. Whole plot is being turned into a lifestyle centre or something like that.”

“Don’t lie, man,” says Riyaad. “The park just got bought up by some businessman, that’s all.”

“Oh, my dad told me about him,” Robyn chimes in. “Some mega-rich entrepreneur.”

“That’s the one. And how did he make his riches?” Jerome asks with one hand operating the coffee machine, the other wagging a finger in Riyaad’s face. “By buying up dying properties and turning them into more commercially viable businesses.”

“This place isn’t dying, is it?”

“It’s been dying since they first opened the gates, my girl! Three times too big. That’s what they said. This place was built three times too big for the amount of people that comes here. They dreamed too big. The place is a money pit!”

Riyaad is shaking his head. “And where are you getting these facts from, uncle?”

“The *Business Day*, my boy. See what happens when you don’t read the news. Your own place of work is about to go under and you still drinking cappuccinos like you Sol Kerzner.”

“Ja, well, good thing I’m not paying for them.” Riyaad takes the two drinks and hands one to Robyn.

“Thanks for the coffee!” she says to Jerome as they walk away. “I’m Robyn by the way.”

Jerome gives her a nod.

They walk for a while, squinting through the sun. “You don’t remember Jerome?” Riyaad asks as they round a corner.

“Who?”

“The uncle who just gave us the coffee. You met him the other day.”

“Oh. Sorry. I’m pretty bad with faces.”

Late afternoon and a group of French-speaking teenagers are taking photographs of each other posing with one of the park’s many lion statues. One boy places his head inside the gaping jaws of the statue and screws his eyes shut in mock pain as the others giggle and snap away. Another boy, hoping to best his friend, throws a leg over the lion’s back. He has just managed to wrap his legs around the statue’s midriff, both hands grasping at its unyielding mane, when Riyaad intervenes.

“Sorry, sir. No climbing on the statues.”

The boy only looks at him, smiling.

“Sir, you’ll need to climb down, please,” Riyaad repeats.

The rest of the group are speaking to each other in French, laughing as if at some private joke. The boy makes a show of climbing off the lion in slow motion. This makes them laugh even more. Riyaad waits for him to climb down. The boy saunters past him, maintaining eye contact all the while, before shaping his hands into claws, roaring hysterically, and lunging at Riyaad, stopping just short of a collision. The group collapses into a fit of laughter. One of them has been filming the whole thing on a digital camera. The boy chuckles, tucks a lock of shoulder-length hair behind his ear and says something to Riyaad in French before turning to join the group. They walk away, giggling.

“What a bunch of arseholes,” Robyn says as they make their way back to the changing rooms later that evening. “I thought you were going to punch that one kid.”

Riyaad laughs through his nose. “Stuff like that happens all the time. You get used to it.”

“Well, I don’t think it’s right.”

She says this in a way that makes Riyaad feel as if he is being reprimanded. Perhaps it's how she raises her eyebrows, he thinks. Or the way she tilts her chin slightly towards the sky.

"I'm not saying it's right. I'm saying it's what happens around here," he says. "It's what I was telling you the other day. People don't come here to be nice to some attendant they'll never see again. They come here to have an experience. I'm just here to make sure that experience runs smoothly so I can get paid at the end of the week."

They walk on together in silence for a while longer. With most of the guests already gone, the park is relatively still. The sun is almost out of the sky, and small, evenly spaced ground lights cast a soft, yellow glow on the path ahead. Robyn notices, for the first time that week, how the myriad sounds of the park – the looped music, the flow of water, the electronic warbling of the children's rides and arcade games – linger in the air, ricocheting off the fibreglass rockery and doubling up on themselves as they echo through the walkways. It's a low, distant cacophony that makes her feel distinctly out of place, disconnected from the world somehow. Even the trees, the only natural things in the park, were probably brought here from some plantation, she thinks. They pass a large, artificial lake filled with lily pads and cattails that make her think of the kitsch English paintings placed around her grandparents' home. A collection of paddleboats is docked at the water's edge, tethered by a single, heavy chain and softly jostling up against one another.

"You ever go out on one of those things?"

Riyaad looks at the boats and shakes his head. "I haven't been on any of the rides in this place."

Robyn shoots back a pair of wide eyes.

"Well, I went on the teacups once," he says. "I'm not much of an adrenalin junkie."

Some time passes before Robyn asks Riyaad a question. "What do you want to do after this?"

“After what?”

“This. The park,” she says. “What will you do?”

He is quiet a while. “I dunno.”

“I’m going to study art. Do you know Michaelis?”

“Nope.”

“It’s one of the best art schools in the country,” she says. “Maybe the best actually.”

“So, you want to be an artist?”

“Yes. Well, I’m already an artist, I think, but I want to study art. Get better at it. Maybe study overseas after that.”

“You know I’m an artist, too,” Riyaad says.

“Really?” she looks at him. “What kind?”

“You know, music and that. I also write lyrics.”

“Oh. Well, that’s not – I mean I guess it’s a kind of art.”

Riyaad shrugs, grows quiet.

The two of them say goodbye at the changing rooms, and Robyn walks the rest of the way alone. By the time she reaches the front gates, the sun has dipped below the horizon and in the parking lot she can already see the lights of her mother’s idling car.

Riyaad runs his backpack through the metal detector and submits to a pat down before entering the park. It’s a daily routine they adopted earlier this year, following a spate of bomb threats around Cape Town. Back in June, the whole park was evacuated after a suspicious-looking blue Karrimor backpack was left on a carousel. A pair of old jeans and a packet of cigarettes was all

they found. Riyaad joked that it was the longest smoke break they'd ever get. Naturally, no one came forward to claim the bag.

On his way to the changing rooms, he turns down a lift on one of the park's Jungle Jeeps, preferring to walk. The things are just stylised golf carts, really, designed to ferry guests from here to there, to extend the fantasy.

While he walks, he reflects on his own daily journey to the park: Langa to Ysterplaat station down the central line (or a bus to Maitland if the trains are on strike), followed by a taxi ride into Century City and a short walk to the park. He hitches his bag up higher and walks on. How weird, he thinks, to move through so many different worlds in a day, without really going anywhere at all.

Saturday. Robyn's last day. According to today's schedule, she'll be on shift with Riyaad this morning, and posted at the reptile show this afternoon, by herself. She's walked past the reptile show many times, but never really paid attention to it. Are there real snakes? Is she expected to help handle the creatures? She makes her way to her first post. Riyaad will be able to clarify the situation, she thinks. He arrives a few minutes later, looking upbeat.

"Wow, in and out, huh?" he says in response to her news.

"Well, we're going away over New Years and my dad said it wouldn't make much sense to stop working and then start up again next year. I mean, I'd totally come back next year, but –"

"Nah, I wouldn't come back if I didn't have to. Well, now you can say you've got your work experience, right? When do you get the new wheels?"

“Oh, I don’t even know, I mean, I haven’t even thought about that, actually.” Robyn touches the back of her neck as she speaks. “I just wanted to say thanks for showing me the ropes these last few days. I wish I got to know everyone else a little better, too.”

“Come to the concert tonight. It’s free for staff, so most of us are going. You can say goodbye to everyone there.”

“Oh my word, I totally forgot that was tonight,” she lies. “My mom’s already coming to fetch me after work, though, I don’t think I’ll be able to make it.”

“So tell her you’re gonna stay a while. Farewell party, you know? I’m helping setup all afternoon, but I’ll be working the bar tonight so we can toast to a week’s hard work.”

“Okay, I’ll call her on my break and see,” she says after some pause. “Hey, have you ever been posted at the reptile show?”

“That’s where they’ve got you this afternoon? Good luck. Snake Man’s a dick.”

Shortly after 2pm, Robyn makes her way down to the place she knows only as “The Waterfront”. The attendants gave it this nickname because it attracts large groups of camera-clad tourists (the South Africans only ever come for the rides) who fill up the sloped seating and watch the various concerts and shows that take place on the barge-shaped stage below. When she arrives, many of these seats are already filled. She spots the Snake Man, referred to on the poster as “Murphy the Explorer”. Hunched over a cluster of boxes, he seems to her to be in his 50s. Leathery skin and grey hair, he is an older and less-enthusiastic version of the man on the poster. He’s wearing an elaborate costume: a khaki safari-suit, knee-high socks, brown leather boots and a repurposed utility belt that carries a drinking canteen and a bush knife.

“Hi, Murphy?” she says, standing at the edge of the stage. “I think I’m supposed to be helping you with your show today.”

The show’s set is a colonial bush camp in miniature. A white fabric gazebo is on one side of the stage and a table littered with maps, globes, and various navigational instruments on the other. In the centre is a collection of cages and glass boxes filled with lizards, spiders, and snakes. The Snake Man stands and looks Robyn up and down.

“Jassis. I told them to stop sending females,” he says. “I need someone who can help me move all of this. You squeamish?”

Robyn only looks at him, and then at the animal cages, not knowing what to say.

“You’re also late,” he continues, grabbing a stack of flyers and forcing them into her hands. “Go and hand these out to everyone in the audience and then come and see me after the show’s done. You can help me pack some of the lighter stuff.”

The show is 45 minutes long. For the first 30 minutes the Snake Man presents a string of tired facts about the reptiles, insects and birds of Africa, amplified through a cheap headset microphone. He dedicates the last 15 to the snakes and this is the section that everyone sticks around for. The Snake Man has three snakes in total, and makes a show of letting them wrap themselves around his arms and rest around his neck like a collection of exotic scarves. Squeals and cries from the audience. Camera flashes are fired off in rapid succession and Robyn finds herself entertaining the terrifying thought of having to pry one of these muscular creatures off the Snake Man should something go wrong. What would she do? If Riyaad were here, he’d probably radio in for help, she thinks. How far is Jerome’s coffee cart? Could she call him for help? At the thought of Jerome, she feels a pang of guilt in her stomach, followed by a familiar redness creeping into her face. The old man probably hates her. What did Riyaad think of her that day?

What does he think of her at all? She feels that they've grown close over this past week. He probably considers her a friend. Most people who know her, do. She thinks about how little she knows about her colleague. What is his life like outside of the park?

Applause rouses her from her thoughts. She looks down at the barge to see the Snake Man depositing a large, yellow python into its glass box before bowing, clasping his hands together in thanks, and retiring to his gazebo.

She has a few minutes before the next show is scheduled to take place – a troupe of dancers and gymnasts advertised as “The African Warriors”. A few seats have already started to fill up, so she takes a seat at the back. The dancers will be performing with the same set as the Snake Man. It must be a permanent set-up, she thinks.

Behind the barge, she can see the sun starting its descent. The day has taken on that slow, sluggish rhythm, as people go on a few last rides or begin the trip back to their cars. Back to the outside world. She thinks of the service tunnels – whole worlds playing out beneath her – that, until a few days ago, she had no knowledge of.

She closes her eyes, hoping to escape the harsh sunlight. She is met with an excess of sound, streaming in from all corners of the park: screams of joy, shrill laughter, shrieking metal, roaring water. Other sounds, too, from somewhere outside of the park. The sound of traffic, of the wind, crumbling mountains and slow, heaving oceans all vying for room inside her head. The world feels too full of noise and activity – places she has never been and people she has never met – all barreling around inside of her head.

She opens her eyes and is back in her seat. The dancers have arrived. The drummer beats out a high, rapid line on a djembe and the troupe leaps into action. Next to her, a child shrieks and

hides in her mother's arms. The parents chuckle and say something in Dutch. A series of camera flashes fire off. Robyn feels faint. She leaves before the show is through.

At the Walled City, Riyaad finishes taking stock at the bar just as the last few stragglers are leaving the park. He turns to look at the stage. Scaffolding has been erected to house multicoloured lights and tangles of cable. A large vinyl banner is strung across the stage announcing the Clash of Sounds, now with the added incitement: "Who will come out on top?"

One of the evening's acts has arrived early and is busy running through a sound check. Many of Riyaad's colleagues have stayed for the show and are now sitting around in groups and getting drunk. They brought their own booze, which was wise, considering the park's prices. A few early concertgoers are beginning to enter the venue. They have peroxided hair and wallet chains hanging from their belt loops. These are the kinds of people he imagines go to school with Robyn. Happy, self-assured, at ease with their lives, and content with what lies ahead.

More kids filter in. These ones have studded leather bracelets on and colourful streaks in their hair. He watches these new faces gather around the available tables and stare, cautiously, at the attendants – many of whom are still in their park uniforms – enjoying themselves. It probably is a strange sight, he thinks. Like seeing a salesperson in a clothing store trying on the clothes instead of directing you to the changing rooms.

Riyaad checks his watch and scans the venue once more before turning to the fridges behind him and taking out two bottles of beer, which he discreetly places in his backpack beneath the bar. They can share them later tonight, he thinks, during one of the intervals. They can toast to a week well-spent, and to the faint buzz of memories made in the park, already so long ago.

Provenance

This artwork will change your life. Look at it. Do you see the striking use of colour, the bold gestures? What about the muscular form, the vertical presence, the extraordinary patina it's taken on? Note how it charges the space, the way it honours the abstract and the incidental.

This artwork was created in response to truly remarkable moments in human history. It was painted just after the coup, produced during the massacre. The moulds were cast during a time of great uncertainty. It was first shown last week, last year, last century in the midst of much upheaval and subsequent joy. This artwork was made just before the artist* lost their life. Read it a little more closely and you'll even understand how it happened.

It arrived aboard the *Dromedaris*. It travelled from the North via steam-train. It was smuggled here in a shipping container full of fabric and spice, like some strange cargo, fleeing places like Germany, Belgian Congo, Syria. It lay silent and untouched for nearly 130 years in a forgotten bunker, along with some of the artist's personal effects. It was banned, blacklisted, underappreciated, forgotten and discarded. It is here today only because of the dedication of collectors and archivists, tireless caretakers of culture, history and provenance.

Certainly, this artwork will change your life. See how it mines the depths of human emotion, holds such complex notions of life, death, and impermanence. It is an artwork that will help you to better make sense of the world, and your place in it. Viewed at length, it will help you feel less alone, more content. It will serve to stir that great ambition and purpose you've been holding inside of you.

The acquisition of this artwork will bolster your status amongst your peers, it will help others gain a better understanding of the kind of person you are. This artwork is an investment. It will

appreciate, become a valuable asset, raise the value of your estate. In acquiring this artwork, you will be supporting the arts, contributing to the market. You will be donating much-needed funds to an organisation, a centre, a community in need, and in such troubled times.

In response to unprecedented moments in the history of the country, this artwork functions as an archive of struggle, pain, adversity, triumph and lament. It has outlived empires, governments, movements and traditions. It is a monument to the times we find ourselves living through. This artwork was looted, repatriated, housed in a reinforced, temperature-controlled, airtight facility. This artwork has been restored by specialists over the course of 367 hours. It has been exhibited in museums, galleries and universities the world over. It is one of the most forged and reproduced artworks in the world today.

This artwork was shown in the basement of the 1820 Settlers Monument. It was installed as a work of site-specific land art on the centenary of the Natives Land Act. First shown in Europe, it was initially dismissed by the public and labelled by critics as derivative and clichéd. American scholars, by contrast, have since praised the work's romantic individualism in a time of widespread socio-political turmoil.

Selected by an international committee of specialists, it commemorated the 2010 FIFA World Cup Ceremony, was exhibited in the South African pavilion at the Venice Biennale. It was burned, dismembered and toppled during the 2015 Fees Must Fall protests before being removed, restored and deposited in a high-security storage facility. It will be included in an intercontinental group show on provocative monuments, featured in the forthcoming publication *Contemporary Art Now: The Global Future Present*, livestreamed to the world at 20:30 Eastern Standard Time.

Previously on loan to the Rijksmuseum by a private collector, the artwork will return to the deceased's estate for a final appraisal before its inclusion in the Global South auction later this year.

**About the artist, little is known, only that they are a Baroque, Neoclassical, Romantic, Abstract Expressionist, Dadaist, Futurist, Cubist, Constructivist, Contemporary, Interdisciplinary Artist. They are thought to have been active from the late 1600s to the early 2000s.*

Burden

for here there is no place

that does not see you. You must change your life.

– Rainer Maria Rilke

It was a flea-market find, a chance encounter that led me to the postcard. I was struck by the man pictured on it, even if I couldn't make much sense of him at first.

I say "man", but what the postcard really showed was a sculpture of a man's head and torso. He had thick curls for hair, a strong, prominent jaw, and small depressions for eyes. His skin was made of marble and impossibly smooth. His face, turned to the side, held a permanent gaze that landed somewhere beyond the frame. I carried the postcard home and put it on my desk.

Shortly afterwards, I started to refer to the person represented on the card as "The Upright Man". The Upright Man's arms were improbably positioned – one arm extended in the direction of his gaze, fist clenched tight, and the other arm pulled back across his chest as if grasping some unyielding thing. Probably, the complete figure had been holding a bow and arrow. To me, the real power of his figure, however, was in his posture and this could not be attributed to any single part of his physique. It was the sum-total of a number of magnificent things: a pair of broad, evenly spaced shoulders, chiseled out of a perfectly symmetrical upper body – muscular chest, a lean, flat midsection, and wide, level hips that seemed to anchor his body to the earth.

In the first few days that the postcard was on my desk I tried, unsuccessfully, to find out who The Upright Man was, or at least who sculpted him. 'Unknown artist' it said on the back of the card. People in online forums dedicated to such matters suggested that the sculpture was done in

the tradition of Myron, although they couldn't be sure of the period in which it was made. Most agreed that the man was somebody whom the sculptor greatly admired.

I gave up the search soon enough, realising that I didn't care so much who the sculpture depicted, but only that I enjoyed looking at it. The figure's posture was immaculate, so unlike my own. I could tell by the way he held himself that he was an honest man, in body and mind alike, unconcerned with matters of pride. He wasn't posing. Rather, he was placing his body on display for those, like me, who cared enough to appreciate the unique artistry of the human body. Strong, upright, and honest – a body that was capable of shrugging off whatever heavy load life placed upon its shoulders. A body that was free of burden.

I kept the image of The Upright Man on my desk. Two cups filled with pens, pencils and other small items held it down. In this way, I made sure that he lost none of his immaculate form. Having the postcard flat on my desk also meant that I could see The Upright Man while I worked.

I did not sit while I worked, preferring to stand at all times. I worked as a layout artist for a small company that dealt primarily with the publishing of booklets and pamphlets. It was my job to gather the contents of these publications – the words, images, infographics and other disparate, malleable things – and ensure that they were packaged and presented in a proper and orderly fashion. I did this work from home, and this is how I preferred it.

I had not always worked like this. It was shortly after I found The Upright Man that I abandoned my rickety, pleather desk chair, elevated my desktop computer by way of a few bulky graphic design books, and began spending most of my days on my own two feet. This was the first of many small, but vital changes in my life. The image of The Upright Man had shifted

something in me. In this anonymous rendering of perfect posture, I saw a version of a body, and a life, that I might one day have if I only applied myself.

My own posture was less than perfect and, on most days, was the source of a low, persistent ache that originated in the lower parts of my torso and right hip. Often, the pain would travel up my spine, grab hold of my bunched-up shoulders, and take root in the uppermost vertebrae of my neck. There was no accident that made me this way. It was something I was born with, and something I grew into – an unnatural curvature of the spine that pushed my hip out and caused me to adopt a near permanent shrug. Specialists were consulted, exercises were recommended, but there was not much that could be done.

In the years that followed, I continued to go about my days as an ordinary human being, my warped spine only ever announcing itself when I considered my naked body in front of a mirror, or when the pain in my back flared up more than usual. I stayed away from sports, avoided doing any heavy lifting. Mostly, I accepted the condition as an inevitability, something I would always have to live with. Until a few months ago, that is, when I came across the image of The Upright Man.

When I brought The Upright Man into my home, my life began to change. The longer I stared at the sculpture, the more I began to catch glimpses of myself in its form. The picture became a vision of my own perfect posture, a roadmap to a better life. In his image, I saw goodness, righteousness and a strong, moral example.

Standing, instead of sitting all day, was not the only physical change I made. I started eating better, exercising. I swam at the local pool. The buoyancy, I'd read, would do wonders for the back and the exercise was sure to work some strength into my long-hunched shoulders and

shapeless arms. I took to this new sport with an almost obsessive rigour. I would swim, daily, and commit myself to long, grueling spells in the water until my body burned and my arms turned limp. But I could feel myself growing stronger. On some days, I could almost see myself growing taller, too. The world, previously at a shamefully immediate level, now existed someplace beneath me. From these new heights, I felt as if parts of the world that had been previously inaccessible to me were now freely available, inviting me to take full advantage of them.

It wasn't just my body that I was working to improve. The ideals of The Upright Man were finding resonance in all parts of my life. Upright. In my free time, I began to analyse the word itself, jotting down its various meanings and associations. Vertical. Erect. Truthful. Sincere. These were all words that stirred in me an urgent desire for personal betterment.

I began to live better. I gave up smoking and stayed away from alcohol and sugary drinks. On weekends, I volunteered at the local animal shelter. I did not brag or even speak of any of these virtues to anyone. They were matters of personal pride that were kept between me and The Upright Man. My financial life, in arrears for the past few years, began to take on some structure. I drew up budgets for all of my expenses, invested my money. I kept my hair neatly trimmed and ditched my usual T-shirt and jeans combination for button-down shirts and dress pants. Since I was growing taller, I also had to have a number of these items tailored. I bought new shoes that made a distant, satisfying clacking sound when I walked.

Frequently, I found myself engaging in debates with ignorant people on the internet in an attempt at expanding their world views. I no longer hid behind carefully worded email exchanges with clients and colleagues when I was being underappreciated or underpaid, choosing instead to raise issues directly and in a way that commanded respect. I applied this penchant for self-

improvement to my apartment, making the most of the limited space by doing away with all of the chairs and replacing them with leafy, green houseplants that grew taller by the day. I raised the paintings and pictures on the wall by a full 30cms each to encourage myself to look up, always, and to hold a certain standard of beauty in my newfound field of vision.

In public, I carried myself differently, too. Having previously employed a steady inclination towards the ground, I began to hold my head high, allowing my chin to lead me and my shoulders to broaden and follow. All of this was working, too. People seemed to respect me more. Women noticed me and men moved out of my way. Occasionally, when I would see someone walking with a hunch or with the stooped gait I used to employ, I'd stop and inform them of the benefits of a life lived upright. I was no longer that lowly, crooked version of myself. I was refusing a life lived too close to the ground, stooped over and miserable. I was righting my spine, straightening my neck, and levelling my hip. I was becoming an upright man.

The days disappeared into routine. Wake, eat, exercise, swim, work, exercise, sleep. There was little room for anything else. I allowed for no kind of deviation. When some of my work dried up, rather than dwelling on the fact, I used the free time to swim and do home exercises, strengthening my spine, always.

At some point during my journey towards an upright life, I noticed a pain in my hip and lower back. This was not the dull ache I was used to. It was a hot, stabbing pain that tore through my entire right side. The sensation started to crawl up my spine, and on some mornings, I found it almost impossible to climb out of bed. It was as if the petrified remains of a large tree had filled the space where my spine used to be, scraping up against my muscles and ligaments whenever I moved. My first movements in the morning were agony, but I had anticipated pain.

There was also the matter of my bad bed. It had too much give. It allowed for a degree of flexibility that was doing me no favours. There were specialised beds built for the kind of lumbar support I needed, but I knew I couldn't afford one and, frankly, I no longer believed in that kind of thing. Beds were unreliable. I needed an unyielding surface, something that would give the rogue arc of my spine absolutely no respite. So, with the allowance of a thin blanket to keep my skin from the chill of the bare tiles, I started sleeping on the floor. This sent tendrils of white-hot pain through my limbs when I rose each morning, but I suffered through it diligently. My mobility was becoming limited. I had difficulty turning my head, and my legs moved slowly as if plunged into pools of wet cement. Still, like the Upright Man, I maintained my posture and my new way of life. I continued to swim during the week and volunteer on weekends. I stood, each day, at my desk while I worked, and only ever broke from this rigid, vertical position when I needed the toilet, or when I retired to the hard, tiled floor each night. The pain did not dissipate.

A few days ago, on a weekend morning, I woke up and found that I couldn't move at all. I had a sense of my arms and legs beside me, but when I willed them into action, nothing happened. I attempted simpler movements – the wiggling of a toe, or the clenching of a fist. Nothing. A frantic weight on my chest, now. Had my body failed me completely? I thrashed, wildly, against my own stillness and found that while this elicited no movement, it did stir some sensation in the small of my back. It was not much – a warm, muffled itch – but it was good news. I had not lost all sensation in my body.

I tried to stir a similar response in other parts of my body. Soon, I felt my neck loosen, allowing me to turn my head ever so slightly. I heard the soft crunch of cartilage rubbing up against itself. This was progress. Slowly, deliberately, I started turning my head from side to

side, wincing through the pain. After a few minutes of this, I managed to press my left cheek to the floor. The pain was almost unbearable, but I held the pose, nonetheless. I was sweating, now, and the tile was cool on my face.

From this compromised position on the floor of my apartment, I had a direct line of sight to the neglected space beneath my unused bed. I could see clumps of dust and hair, old socks, tissues, crusty bits of junk-food, and cigarette butts. The scene infuriated me. These were the shameful remnants of my former life – the awful, lowly habits of a person too feeble to withstand the basic weight of the world. I felt hot tears forming in my eyes and blinked them away. I was no longer that person, I reminded myself. I had become a better man. I had changed my life.

I turned my gaze back towards the ceiling and called to mind the image of The Upright Man. How many days had I spent studying that magnificent form? The image was as familiar too me as my own face, my own body. I closed my eyes to better focus on the details, recalled the slight curve of the breast, the rolling shoulders, the unbreakable column that ran through the torso. All the while, I thrashed internally, trying to harness what little power I could from my core, and spread it to the rest of my body. If only I could awaken this stubborn, ill-formed spine, I would be able to move again, stand tall again.

The warmth returned to my lower back, and spread. Hot needles through my spine. Some life returned to my right leg, a small sensation, barely present. I focused in on the leg and put my efforts into pulling the sensation out from under the mass of muscle and bone that weighed the limb down. I could draw out enough life from the leg to jerk it, crudely and momentarily, off the ground before it came crashing down again, landing with a heavy, dull thud as my heel met the tiles. My spine began to bristle, sleepily, stubbornly. I realised that if I could swing my leg over my body and create enough action to stir the spine, I could jerk it into action.

I paused to gather my strength. The nerves in my lower back were throbbing, almost weeping. The surrounding muscles felt heavy and cramped, as if some large stone had lodged itself inside of me, weighing down on my spinal column and refusing to move. I pressed my cheek to the floor once more and drew a deep breath. Then I swung my leg over my torso, and twisted.

The Real Deal

I

He spots it while he drinks his morning coffee. Nestled in a field of text on the third page of the *Kormorant* is an image of an artwork he picked up only a few weeks earlier. **VALUABLE SOUTH AFRICAN ARTWORK GOES MISSING.** Lourens takes another sip of his coffee, straightens out the pages of the newspaper and begins to read.

The article explains how, after a North West government official vacated his office to assume a higher-paying role in a neighbouring province, a valuable drawing by a prominent South African landscape artist has disappeared. The drawing, which belongs to the provincial government, was mistakenly placed among the official's personal belongings when his office was cleared out and has since gone missing. No foul play is suspected. The drawing, says the article, is estimated to be worth between R2 million and R3 million. A reward is being offered for any information about the missing artwork.

"Jissie," says Lourens under his breath.

He lights a cigarette, scratches the stubble on his cheek, and studies the image again. The caption tells him that the artwork is a charcoal on paper drawing and is more than 40 years old. It's the very same one, he is sure of it.

"Jissie," he repeats, exhaling a thin stream of smoke into the morning light. He takes out his phone and composes an SMS. Then he stubs out his cigarette, folds up the paper and heads outside to his bakkie.

Following a 20-year career in construction, Lourens recently sold his business and opened the Lingalonga African Lodge, a homely Bed & Breakfast on the banks of the Hartebeespoort dam. He'd inherited the vacant plot from his father and, while he always had the intention of building his own holiday home, he decided to open the lodge instead. This was his first foray into hospitality. It was the more sensible thing to do with the land, he reasoned. It would, he told Linda, be their ticket to an early retirement.

He and Linda have been married for close to 30 years. They're good together. She supported him in the years it took to get his construction company off the ground, running a hair salon out of the garage of their first home. He was always supportive of her cottage industry ventures.

The lodge was something of a joint project. The name was his idea, something light-hearted to go with the African-themed establishment. Filling the rooms with curios was Linda's initiative. It would provide a touch of authenticity, she said. African masks, landscape paintings of grasslands filled with wild animals and golden sunsets, and a collection of wooden sculptures of the Big 5 was what she came up with.

A week ago, driving back to Hartebeespoort after some business in Johannesburg, Lourens pulled over at a road-side market in search of more of these African knick-knacks. The drawing caught his eye. Framed behind a dusty pane of glass and propped up against the leg of a fold-out table filled with beaded earrings and necklaces, the picture glinted in the high afternoon sun. It was an old landscape drawing, charcoal on yellowing paper.

This is it, he thought, this is the finishing touch. He'd give it pride of place, hang it right above the bed in the Master suite. Or maybe above the desk in the reception area. He didn't think to ask where the artwork came from. One of these vendors had made it, he assumed. R150 later,

the artwork was on the passenger seat of his bakkie, wrapped in newspaper and on its way to its new home at the Lingalonga African Lodge.

“So, what you reckon?” he asks.

Seated in a corner booth at O’Hagan’s, Lourens has just finished detailing this recent chain of events to Tony. Tony’s still in the construction game, but he has business smarts and an eye for good deals. The two have been friends as well as business partners for many years, and Tony has long been Lourens’s go-to guy for any big decisions. Tony had warned him against leaving the company and starting up the B&B, but Lourens was determined to prove him wrong, to make something of himself through his own resourcefulness.

The pub is where they always meet. It’s late afternoon now, and save for a few figures hunched over the bar, they’re the only ones there. Perfect, thinks Lourens, for a meeting as urgent and undercover as this one.

Tony takes a sip of his beer, eyeing the newspaper article over the rim of his glass. “Ag, I dunno, bru. Have you got the drawing here?”

“No ways. It’s back at the lodge,” says Lourens, both hands gripping his own drink on the table in front of him. “But it’s the same one, Tone, I’m telling you.”

Tony makes a show of narrowing his eyes and considers the image again. “Classic, bru. They probably tried to steal it and ended up losing the thing. So what, you’re wanting to hand it in? Get the reward?”

“It can’t hurt,” says Lourens. “Read there. They reckon it’s worth a few million. I’m betting the reward will be a pretty decent sum and I can’t say I don’t need the money.”

“The lodge?”

“Ja. I mean it’s early days and business will pick up soon enough, I reckon, but even then, it’ll be at least a year or two before we start turning a profit. The money could help speed things up.”

Tony sets the paper down and sniffs. He leans back in the booth and folds his arms across his chest. “You want my advice? Sell the thing. You said it yourself. It’s worth a couple mil, man. That’s quick bucks.”

“Sell it? To who? I don’t know anything about this art stuff.”

“Grant, bru. That mate of mine in Brits.”

“You reckon he’d be able to sell it?”

“Guaranteed. That’s his bread and butter. All under the table you know, but he’s been at it a while. He’ll have no trouble taking that piece off your hands.”

Lourens mimics his friend, leaning back into the booth and folding his arms before abandoning the gesture and resting his elbows on the table again. When he speaks, it’s in a hushed tone. “I dunno, bru. Grant’s into some hectic stuff, hey.”

Lourens knows little about Grant other than the fact that he’s an old friend of Tony’s and that he turns a good profit selling off the kinds of collectibles that are generally thought to be lost to history – SADF uniforms, old South African flags, AWB insignia, that sort of thing. Apparently, he moved down from the UK in the 80s and was involved in all sorts of covert activities – smuggling, weapons trade, drugs – but Lourens thinks that’s probably just a rumour.

“Your choice, Lorrie,” Tony holds his hands up and raises his eyebrows. He does this in a way that makes Lourens feel as if he’s making the wrong decision. The use of “Lorrie” is probably intentional, too, thinks Lourens, an old nickname from the days when he was about 20kgs heavier.

“I know for a fact he’ll be able to put money in your pocket,” Tony continues. “It’s not just that apartheid kak he sells. Furniture, art, sporting memorabilia, you name it, he can find a buyer.”

Tony takes a sip of his beer. Lourens does the same.

“But if you’re not feeling hundreds about the situation then it’s okay, Lorrie, all I’m saying is —”

“Could you put me in touch?” says Lourens.

Tony leans into the table, now, his voice no softer than before. “I can definitely put you in touch, bru. I’ll even handle all the nitty-gritty. You won’t have to do a thing besides handing the artwork over to me and accepting an envelope full of cash a few days later.”

“For real?”

“Why not? I mean Grant takes his cut, of course. And I’d need something for my time, too —”

“Of course, Tone, of course.”

“Here’s the thing though,” Tony sits up straight in his seat and rolls the cricks from his neck. “Grant doesn’t like having his time wasted. He’ll only work with an item if he knows it’s the real deal. Get proof that the drawing is the same one they’re talking about in the paper and we’ll be in business.”

Lourens stares at his friend.

Tony shakes his head. “Lorrie, man. The little market you got this thing from, right? Go back there and talk to these okes you bought it from. All we need to know is that they didn’t make the drawing themselves. Even if you get them to tell you it fell off the back of a truck, we’ll be sorted, bru. Hundreds.”

Lourens is encouraged by his old friend's enthusiasm. He is starting to feel as if he is the main character in a movie. An old Western maybe. He takes another sip of his drink, gulps it down, and exhales. The pub is starting to fill up with the usual after-work crowd. Around them, other big men with gruff voices and puffy faces laugh and greet, slapping each other on the back. The two of them finish their drinks and go their separate ways.

That night, Lourens waits for Linda to fall asleep before creeping into the lounge and extracting the drawing. He places it on the coffee table in front of him and, by the pale light of his cellphone screen, begins to study its details once more.

The drawing shows an open landscape, a classic Highveld scene, thinks Lourens. There are no people in the landscape, not even animals, and it's filled mostly with ridges, some of them flat at the top, others sloping off to the right. Lourens thinks that they could also be mine dumps. There is tall grass in the foreground, alongside shallow grooves in the earth that look like they once held water. The scene reminds him of the landscapes of an early Johannesburg he'd glimpse through the windows of his father's car when they used to make trips into the city on weekends. This makes Lourens nostalgic for the days when an open stretch of land meant something more to him than a potential business opportunity.

The charcoal marks in the drawing have a way of making the landscape seem as if it's never entirely still, and this also reminds him of his childhood – of trips through the veld, watching the browns and yellows and small patches of green being moved by the wind.

Lourens unfolds the newspaper and places it on the coffee table next to the drawing. With a keen eye, he begins to compare the two, hunting for stray markings or small deviations in the scenes. In the image, he thinks he sees something new – a collection of lines representing a

person standing in the distance and just off to the left. Or is it a signature? He consults the drawing and finds a similar figure, although it is so badly faded, he can't be sure. Lourens leans back into the couch and rubs his eyes. It's late and he is tired. He decides to ignore the potential human in both of the images, concluding once and for all that the drawing before him is the original. Tomorrow, it will simply be a matter of confirming the fact.

II

It's shortly after 11:30am when Lourens approaches the same dry stretch of road he pulled over at a few weeks ago. The sun is beating down on the road and in the passenger seat beside him is Katlego, a member of the lodge's ground staff. Katlego's worked for Lourens for years now and is someone who Lourens considers to be both trustworthy and hardworking. It's why he brought Katlego on board when he opened the lodge. It's also the reason he's brought him along today, to help facilitate the necessary interactions.

Where Lourens expects to find the stalls, he finds nothing but empty patches of sand. Was this not the spot? He drives a while longer, keeping the vehicle at a steady 60 kays on the yellow line, allowing other vehicles to pass them. A few minutes later he pulls the bakkie over on the side of the road.

"Where the hell are these guys?" he says to no one in particular. Katlego looks around, but says nothing.

"You think they're still setting up or something?" asks Lourens.

Katlego shrugs. "These guys, they never stay in one place. Sometimes they are here, sometimes not."

Lourens looks at the artwork wrapped up in an old dog blanket and nestled in the small space between them. He drums his fingers on the steering wheel and puts the car back into first gear before making a U-turn and driving back the way they came.

“There was a guy back there,” he says. “We’ll ask him if he knows where they are.”

The old man acknowledges the bakkie pulling up next to him, but does not move from his seat on the side of the road. Beside him is a pile of firewood stacked up neatly and fitted with a cardboard sign reading ‘Firewood R10’. Lourens has instructed Katlego to ask the old man about the whereabouts of the vendors. He stays in the car and watches the scene play out in the rectangular frame of his rear-view mirror.

Katlego approaches the old man and they exchange words. Lourens cannot hear what they are saying, but he notes their gestures – a show of pointing and waving that he struggles to make sense of. When Katlego climbs back into the car he is sweating from the heat. Lourens is looking at him, expectantly. Katlego wipes his brow and begins.

“The police came this morning and chased them away.”

Lourens flinches, glances at the drawing once more, and consults his rear-view mirror. “The police? Why were the police here? Did he say what they wanted?”

“They said it’s illegal to sell here on the side of the road.”

“Shit,” says Lourens. “So where did they go? The oke from the market.”

“Some of the guys live there in a place a few kilometres away. He says if you are looking for them, you must go there.”

“Like a township?” asks Lourens.

“Ja,” says Katlego after some time. “But not as big.”

“Is it dangerous?”

Katlego does not say anything. He only looks out of the window, and shrugs.

It's past 12pm when the two of them make their way down the dirt road leading to the informal settlement. Even Lourens's bakkie has a difficult time navigating the deep ruts in the road.

Beside him, Katlego has the artwork in his lap and is holding onto the seat with his free hand as the vehicle rises and falls with the road. In all his years here, Lourens has yet to drive out this way. The trip makes him uneasy, but he works hard to maintain a tough exterior, allowing himself the occasional glance in the rear-view mirror which reveals only the bumpy track.

“We just want to know where they got it from,” says Lourens after some time. “That's all you need to ask.”

Katlego nods. Lourens senses some resentment from him, but resolves not to address it.

Katlego's still getting paid for a full day's work, he thinks. What is there to complain about?

They drive on a while longer in silence. The two of them are sweating in the midday sun and despite the open windows, they feel the heat rising from each other's bodies. Lourens lights a cigarette and offers the pack to Katlego, who takes a cigarette and tucks it behind his ear.

Lourens sneaks another glance at the rear-view mirror. Still nothing. He puffs his cigarette while his drives, ashing out of the open window. Where the hell are they, he wonders? He realises he is unsure of how much time has passed since they've been out here. He steals another glance, this time in his side mirror. Beside him, Katlego leans his head back and stares out of the window.

In the silence, scenarios that Lourens has been holding at bay begin to play out in his imagination. He pictures mobs of strangers gathered just over the next rise in the road. The glint of a gun as it's whipped out of a waistband and thrust into the open window. Gruesome headlines

scroll through his mind. He drags his cigarette to the filter and flicks it out into the passing browns and yellows of the landscape. He tries to focus on better things – the drawing, the money he'll get once Grant sells it. He'll put it straight into the lodge, he thinks, pay the whole thing off and then it's nothing but profit. He thinks of Tony. What would he do in a situation like this? He imagines his friend at the wheel, focussed, determined, and tries his best to reflect this in his own posture. They drive on.

Come to think of it, he wonders, has Tone ever driven out this way before? Fat chance, he reckons. Lourens lets his arm hang out of the window and imagines the look of surprise on his friend's face when he tells him this story, how they'll laugh and raise their beers. The image emboldens Lourens. He feels like a cowboy, now, cruising through frontier country with his rare bounty, and Katlego as his trusted guide.

"Slow down here," says Katlego.

"Huh?"

"The place is just up there."

They roll past a structure that Lourens recognises as a spaza shop, and he straightens up in his seat. It's a shell of a building, the front door bricked up with the windows functioning as the service counter. A man leans out from behind the counter and stares at them as they drive by. They pass a group of children and immediately draw more attention to themselves. This makes Lourens nervous, but he drives on, trying his best to ignore the children laughing and pointing at the vehicle. I am out of my depth, he thinks.

"Where should I park?" he asks Katlego.

"Maybe just up there," Katlego responds, motioning to a cluster of scrap metal structures in the distance. "Someone there might talk to us."

Up ahead, Lourens sees a group of young men sitting in the sun. He pulls up to them and stops the bakkie in the middle of the road. He's aware of the many eyes on them and is eager to get the interaction over with. He can feel his heart beating in his neck.

"Here," he says to Katlego, handing him a clipping from the paper. He'd initially planned on showing them the drawing itself, but assessing the situation now, he is glad he brought along the clipping, too. He takes the drawing from Katlego's lap and places it in his own. "Just ask them where they got it from. If they're being difficult, tell them I can pay."

Katlego takes the small piece of paper and gets out of the bakkie. Lourens waits for him to close the door before engaging the automatic locks. The sound is louder than he anticipates. A few of the young men approach Katlego, and Lourens watches them as they begin to talk. Should he have asked Katlego to get written confirmation? He leans over to the passenger side of the car and scrounges through the glove box: map book, lighter, bottle opener, Linda's vanilla-scented hand cream. There should be a pen in here somewhere, he thinks. Behind him, he hears a noise – the familiar sound of tyres crunching over dry earth. He consults his rear-view mirror and sees a vehicle approaching in the distance.

At first, he is relieved to see the distinctive white, blue and yellow of the South African Police Services. Then, remembering the artwork wrapped in its blanket on his lap, panic flares up in his chest. Have they been behind him the whole time? Stalking him from a distance? His bakkie is still parked in the middle of the road and he realises that he is in their way. What the hell are they doing out here anyways? Something Tony says comes to mind – *The cops are corrupt as hell. They're all in cahoots with the criminals.* Lourens places the artwork on the passenger seat and turns the key in the ignition. He jerks the gear stick into reverse and swings the vehicle around in one swift arc before shifting into first and easing off to the side of the road. Behind him, Katlego

and the young men are watching the scene. The police van approaches him at a lazy pace. He still has both hands on the wheel. His very presence feels criminal. The van stops a few metres before him, and two officers emerge. Lourens wipes the wetness from his face and rolls his window down all the way. The two officers say something to the group of men that Lourens doesn't understand. Then they approach his bakkie.

"Afternoon sir. Everything okay here?"

"Ja, ja, everything is alright, thanks," he responds gruffly.

"And what are you doing out here today?" The younger officer is smiling. Lourens feels as if some terrible joke is being played on him. He shoots another look in the mirror and his eyes land on Katlego.

"Just dropping off my friend back there. He works for me. There in Hartebeespoort, you know. He looks after the garden and that."

The older officer is holding the kind of trained gaze that lets no emotion through. Lourens can feel his eyes searching the interior of his bakkie, his face, his mind. Do they know about the artwork? Did they speak to the old man on the side of the road, too? The officer shouts something to Katlego. Lourens looks back and sees Katlego shaking his head in response.

"You are coming from Hartebeespoort?" the younger one asks.

"That's right," Lourens responds. "What brings you gentlemen out this way?" His voice is shaking now. He feels as if he is about to cry. He cannot go to jail, he thinks. That's a bind not even Tony could get him out of.

The two officers stare at Lourens, saying nothing. The younger one has his hand on his radio. Was it always there? Lourens is aware of the artwork bristling beside him. His stomach is in knots. He feels sick, flushed, feverish. How did he end up here, he wonders, his whole life

thrown off course by a fucking drawing? He looks up at the two men, shifts uncomfortably in his seat and lets out a short, self-conscious laugh.

“Sir. Are you sure everything is okay?”

With a level of speed and precision that surprises even him, Lourens turns the key in the ignition, drops the handbrake and pulls off.

III

From the corner booth at O’Hagan’s, Tony and Lourens watch as Grant’s Hyundai pulls out of the parking lot, turns onto the main road and disappears, the drawing safely deposited in the boot of the car. Tony drains his glass and signals for the waiter to bring them another round.

“Sorted, bru. You can relax now.”

“Shit, Tone. I can’t thank you enough. If you hadn’t picked up...”

“No worries. But Lorrie, next time just play it cool, man, jasis.”

Tony laughs and shakes his head as he says this. The two of them sit and grin like boys. The waiter arrives and brings them their fresh beers. They drink in silence for a while.

“Ja, shit, hey,” says Lourens. “I don’t know what I was thinking, Tone, I just knew I had to get out of there. You reckon Grant will have no hassles either, hey?”

“Ja, Grant knows what he’s doing. And you’re sure they didn’t get your plates or anything?”

“Pretty sure, ja. It’s just that guy of mine. Katlego. He’s probably still there. I don’t even think the oke carries a phone with him. And I’m not going back there, you can forget it. I just hope he hasn’t ratted me out or anything, Tone.”

Lourens grows nervous again. He gulps his beer down and lights a cigarette.

“Ag, you said it yourself. He’s a loyal oke. He’ll know better than to go blabbing to the cops. Just give him a little something extra in his pay packet this month and he’ll forget all about it.”

“Ja, you’re right.”

Lourens’s phone buzzes in his pocket. He takes it out and looks at the name that appears on the screen. “Shit, Linda. I didn’t even tell her what I was up to today.”

“Good, bru. Keep it that way. She doesn’t have to know a thing about any of this.”

Lourens cancels the call and types out a message to his wife: *Grabbing a quick one with Tone. Back home in 30 or so.* He presses send.

The two friends continue to smoke and drink in silence. The beer is working. Lourens feels his shoulders start to relax, the heat and the mania of the day leaving his body. Tony is staring up at the screen, watching highlights of a recent rugby match. They drain their glasses.

“Another one? I’m buying,” Lourens says to his friend.

“Sure, Lorrie. One more.”

Lourens signals to the waiter. He lights another cigarette and leans back into the booth. The two friends look at one another and begin to laugh. Tony is shaking his head again and Lourens sees what he thinks is admiration in his eyes.

“Jasis, Lorrie. You’re one a kind, my bru.”

Lourens laughs, drags on his cigarette and blows the smoke up to the ceiling. His phone buzzes in his pocket. When he takes it out, he sees that he’s missed two more calls from Linda. A message, too.

Come home now. Katlego’s just been dropped off by the police. And there are some other men here who need to talk to you. What’s going on?

Lourens closes the message, puts his phone down on the table, and looks up at his friend. The waiter arrives and places two fresh beers down in front of them. Lourens' stomach turns, then heaves.

The Assistant

It is still dark when they leave Bloemfontein, the roads blanketed with fog. There is the only car on the road. Nicholas was meant to take the morning shift, but he is tired and groggy and so Ayanda finds himself behind the wheel. They make a brief stop at an Engen garage on the outskirts of the town to top up on petrol, snacks, and bad coffee before taking the onramp onto the N1 and continuing their journey into the Eastern Cape, towards Kenton-on-Sea.

“What are we listening to?” asks Ayanda.

Nicholas shrugs. He is gripping his coffee cup with both hands, slumped against the passenger side window and staring out into the passing darkness.

“Wake up, please. If you’re making me drive, then you at least have to talk to me. I’m as tired as you are.”

“Anything. Just put on anything. I don’t care.”

“Anything?”

“Anything good. Not that awful stuff you had on yesterday.”

“It’s a pop-culture podcast, Nicholas. It’s not meant to be anything hugely sophisticated.”

“It’s mindless.”

“Well, I like it. It’s helping me build my list of movies to watch once we get there.”

“No, no. I’m not watching any of that. I’ve got reading to catch up on.”

“I don’t think I’ve seen you read a book in the last ten years.”

“Exactly. Now I’ll have the time. Look, just put something on, it’s too early for chatter.”

Ayanda opts for silence. He drives on, hunched forward in the seat to better see the unlit road ahead. It will be a while before Nicholas is out of his mood, he thinks. Might as well let it pass.

The drive from Johannesburg yesterday was in higher spirits. They were both excited to be on the road, out of the city, finally making the trip down to their new home. It's a move they've been planning for a while. Ayanda has wanted out of Joburg for years. Nicholas has always been less keen on the idea. There is always some new project, a new exhibition to work towards, another installation to tend to. Such is life when you're in a relationship with one of the country's art darlings, thinks Ayanda. Someone always wants a piece of Nicholas and he is always happy to oblige.

It took Ayanda declaring that he was leaving on his own, flying down to set things up in the new house by himself, to force Nicholas into action.

"I suppose now's as good a time as any," he'd said.

In reality, Nicholas could afford to pack up and go anytime he wanted. Probably, he didn't trust Ayanda to handle the move on his own.

Outside, only the soft, red lights of long-haul trucks are visible through the mist ahead of them. Ayanda yawns, stretches, readjusts his grip on the wheel. He embraces the silence, presses on, drives as fast as the road allows.

Nicholas sets down his coffee, still too hot to drink.

"Wake me up before we get to Gariep," he says, pulling his jacket up to his chin and turning away from Ayanda.

The rough gravel road rattles Nicholas awake as the car makes the climb up the track overlooking the Gariep Dam. It's still early, but the sun is out and they can see the vast, shimmering body of water below. Ayanda is tired. He drove through the dark in silence, letting Nicholas sleep. They take the tarred road that leads down to the bridge arching across the dam.

Nicholas sits up. “Pull over at the parking lot, there,” he says, gesturing to an unpaved patch of land with a cluster of worn cement picnic tables.

“Can’t we just pull over at the viewing point on the bridge? No one’s around, anyway,” says Ayanda, slowing nonetheless.

“I want to walk,” says Nicholas.

“It’s cold.”

“It’s not that cold. Isn’t this the whole reason we’re driving down anyway? To see the country? Take it slow, make stops when we want? Just up here’s good, pull over here.”

Ayanda brings the car to a stop and they climb out into the icy morning. They make their way to the viewing point, jackets zipped up and hands stuffed into their pockets. They walk in silence until they get there. From where they’re standing, they get a view of the whole bridge, the hills beyond it, and the sky holding its pale pink hue. Below, uniform concrete pillars plunge downwards, supporting the length of road that stretches across the dam.

“It’s off,” says Ayanda, chin still tucked into his jacket.

“Huh?”

“The water’s not running.”

“Hmm. Well, if it was, I doubt we’d be able to have a conversation. You should hear it when it’s in full swing. Like thunder.”

Nicholas walks over to another small lookout point that provides a view into the dry ravine below. Ayanda follows. The two of them take in the surroundings. Ayanda takes out his phone and points it at Nicholas.

“Look here.”

“No, no.”

“Come on, just one. I can see you’re all sentimental being here. It’s sweet. Come on, just stand there.”

“No. I’m still waking up, I look awful.”

Ayanda pockets the phone. Moves closer to Nicholas. “Is it good to be back?”

“Mm. Different.”

“Want to walk over the bridge?”

“No. Better get going.”

They walk back to the car. Nicholas gets into the driver’s side and adjusts the seat, giving himself more legroom. They pull off and make their way over the bridge, looking out at the water and the hills as they go.

Twenty minutes outside of Steynsburg, they begin to talk. The day is growing hot and the sun has lifted their spirits. They talk as two people who’ve shared a life together for more than two decades do – speaking alongside one another, independently of each other’s conversations, each pursuing their own line of thought without responding to the other’s.

For a while, they talk about the accommodation from the night before, the small towns and farmstalls they passed on the way there. Ayanda jokes about the presence of satanic cults in the area. Nicholas talks about the drives he used to take through the area for research. Anecdotes about getting lost, running out of petrol, spending the night sleeping in the car in the middle of nowhere. Ayanda has heard them all before. Some time passes. They fall into a familiar silence.

“I took my first photograph there.”

“Hmm?”

“At the dam. I took my first ever photograph there.”

“Oh.”

“They were still finishing some of the lower foundations. We went there –”

“On a family trip. You used your uncle’s camera. It was the last photo on the spool.”

“Have I told you this before?”

“No. You’ve told other people, though. I remember reading about it in an interview.”

“Before we met?”

“No.”

“Oh. Well, sorry to bore you with my stories.”

They stop talking. Nicholas capitalises on the their stubborn silence and changes the music. Ayanda looks out the window, watches the gradation of the passing landscape – brittle greens and yellows, empty blue sky. He is upset, but he does not make a show of it. That sort of thing never works with Nicholas, only hardens his resolve. Nicholas can go hours without talking, just to prove a point. More often than not, the point being that he hasn’t done or said anything wrong. Time will pass, Ayanda will apologise. They’ll move on.

The two met in Cape Town, at a bar in Observatory. Ayanda was 20, then, an art school dropout – a lack of funds more than a lack of ambition. Nicholas was in his mid-30s although only just starting to enjoy his new-found fame, out celebrating the opening of a solo in town. Ayanda had gone out with friends because he had nothing better to do.

They met through an acquaintance, began to talk. Ayanda already knew who Nicholas was by then. Nicholas had no idea who Ayanda was, but he enjoyed the attention. Ayanda spent the night sitting across from Nicholas in a corner booth of the bar that stank of piss and beer, listening to him talk about himself, about making art in post-apartheid South Africa, about the

international markets opening up again. The opportunities were pouring in, he said, he was busier than ever. He was even looking for a new assistant to join him in his Johannesburg studio.

Certainly, Nicholas had no idea that Ayanda would show up at his studio a month later, ready to work. They maintained a non-committal fling for a few months while Nicholas saw other people. Ayanda worked in his studio, picked up some of the admin, screen-printed, reproduced endless amounts of landscapes and railway lines and electricity pylons in ink and charcoal – drawings to be cut up and reworked into whatever Nicholas wanted them to be. Ayanda was useful, eager to work and to learn, and so Nicholas kept him around. They became exclusive around the time he started managing the studio, handling Nicholas's admin, travel, his exhibitions, forthcoming publications.

He moved in. The years passed. They travelled, bought and sold homes, discussed the idea of marriage without ever taking it further. A gesture towards long-term commitment came in the form of Ayanda's eventual title of Director of the Nicholas Trist Foundation.

"Who else could I trust to manage it all?" Nicholas had said. Ayanda was happy, he reasoned. What else would he have done with his life? And life with Nicholas had been good, if a little lonely.

"I'm taking us through Cradock. I'd like to stop at the old Schreiner house if we have time," says Nicholas.

"What about Alice? Didn't we say we'd stop over and see Athi?"

"What?" Nicholas turns the volume down. "What's in Alice?"

"Athi's there. I told you. He moved back there a few months ago. I wanted to go and visit."

"Oh god. I didn't think you were serious about that."

“Why would I not have been serious about it?”

“You know what I mean. We didn’t plan for it, is what I’m saying. You should have let me know earlier.”

“We can still go,’ Ayanda insists, ‘the turn off isn’t until another hour at least.”

“We can’t just stop off there unannounced. Where does he even stay? How will we know where to go?”

“I have his address. He’s told us to come and visit. He’s dying to see us. He’s been busy setting up that Pan-African Library.”

“Oh, that little project. I do remember that. Look, he can come and visit us once we’re settled, I’ve already planned to see the Schreiner house.”

“What for?”

“Just to see it. I’m thinking of doing something around it. Might want to photograph it as part of a series.”

“Please! Do you even have a camera on you? You haven’t done any of your own work in years.”

Nicholas’s mood shifts. He speaks with a sharp, clipped tone. “Not this crap again, Ayanda. This is why I was reluctant to take this drive with you. These little tantrums you throw. And for what? Because you’re bored? Because you want to cause some scene to pass the time? I’m not doing this.”

Ayanda falls back, does not respond. Up ahead, roadworks slow them down. The heat and the trucks give them something to attach their anger to. They pass a large hole in the earth, deep and vast. They move past it slowly, both taking it in. For all the depth and scale of the hole, the

amount of earth that has been removed in order to create it, there should surely be a mountain beside it, a pile of sand and stone, but there is nothing.

The roadworks come to an end and they leave the hole behind them, dedicatedly overtaking long-haul trucks and bakkies with trailers carrying livestock. When they eventually reach the turn off to Alice, Nicholas drives on towards Cradock. Ayanda does not protest.

The stop in Cradock proves to be a salve for their moods. They agree to take the tour through Schreiner House together. Ayanda has little interest in Schreiner, but he lingers and reads the many yellowing, laminated posters detailing her early life, the influence the site had on her writing, the influence her work has had on others. He reads a copy of a letter she wrote to a friend, describing the joy she took in climbing to the top of a koppie one morning and stripping naked, feeling the elements on her skin. He takes a photograph of the passage and texts it to a friend with the caption 'Listen, Olive was wild'.

Outside, Nicholas chats idly with the curator who explains that he lives in a room at the back of the house, that they hardly get visitors these days, no support from the government. They buy a few books – local authors and anthologies of poetry about the Eastern Cape. Nicholas leaves a small donation. They discuss the idea of making the trip up the koppie to visit Schreiner's grave, but decide against it. It is something they'll do once they're more settled. There will be time to do that sort of thing then, they agree. For now, they are happy to press on.

Back on the road, they are in better spirits, talking, listening to podcasts about architecture and literature and stopping at various points to admire the landscape, taking postcard-style photographs on their phones as they do. They pass Bedford, Glen Ambrose, and stop for a late

lunch at a pub in Makhanda, where they're served by a listless student waiter who is animated only once Nicholas introduces himself in full.

After lunch they amble around, remark on how quiet the place is in the absence of artists and performers and the endless production posters that colour the small student town for a week or so during the National Arts Festival. They consider a visit to the Camera Obscura, where Nicholas says he spent a formative afternoon on a school trip many years ago, but decide against this, too. It's already late afternoon, they reason. They do not want to arrive after dark.

Past Salem, they see quarries and rocky hills, remnants of sustained blasts for shale and limestone. Ayanda drives and Nicholas thumbs through his phone. Potholes and slow-moving trucks keep them from anything faster than 80 kilometres

It is the last stretch. They are both eager to be off the road, although Ayanda is not ready for the trip to be over. What then, he thinks? He agonises over the approaching finality. What to do or speak about once they finally arrive? They will unpack, sure. Spend the week orientating themselves, settling in. And after that? After the unboxing and the pleasant drudgery of sorting out their new home – what Nicholas says will be their forever home – will they take those trips they've been planning on the way over? Doubtful. How long before Nicholas grows bored, restless, finds a new project or production to busy himself with?

Around them, the landscape grows greener, the air feels cooler. Ayanda anticipates the ocean, the sand, the rocky shores of places like Kasouga, Port Alfred, and other seaside towns dotted along the Sunshine Coast. The road opens up, he drives on, leaves the trucks behind, races to beat the fading daylight.

"It's called a borrow pit," says Nicholas, not looking up from his phone.

“What?” Ayanda turns the music down.

“That big hole we saw earlier. It’s called a borrow pit. Well, that’s what the Americans call it, anyway. I’m on some website about roadworks in the States and they say it’s called a borrow pit.”

“What’s it for?”

“It’s just the extraction of sand. They’ll be busy with a new section of road or building a bridge or something like that and they’ll use some of the earth from nearby. It leaves one of those big holes behind.”

“And what happens to it?”

“What do you mean?”

“The pit. Does it get filled back in?”

Nicholas considers the question, scrolls through the text on his screen. “I don’t know. Doesn’t say.”

“So, they just take out all of that sand and leave a giant pit behind? They never fill it up?”

“Well, I imagine they’d need more sand to fill it up. Which would mean they’d need to dig another hole. Either that or a series of small holes, taking sand from each of them, but I mean who’s got the time to do that? It probably just fills back in over time.”

“Probably.”

It’s dark by the time they arrive in Kenton. Ayanda yawns, grips the wheel with both hands as the car moves down the empty, suburban streets.

“It’s there, just up there,” says Nicholas, sitting up in his seat. It is the most animated Ayanda has seen him since they started the trip.

They reach a boom gate and stop. A guard emerges from a security booth off to the left and exchanges words with Nicholas. The boom rises and they enter. They travel along the same road for a while longer, passing other people's homes in the dark. Empty, thinks Ayanda. A neighbourhood full of holiday homes. They turn right onto a gravel road lined with trees. They drive slowly, trying to take in their new surroundings through the lights of the car.

They arrive at the house and get out. Nicholas takes the keys from his pocket and walks towards the front door. Ayanda stays at the car, watching Nicholas fumble with the keys for the security gate, the front door. He watches the lights go on in the entrance hall, hears Nicholas calling out for him to come and take a look. Cold, white light spills out from the house and onto the driveway. Nicholas goes upstairs, his footsteps noisy on the wooden floors, the lights come on in one room and then another. He calls out again. Ayanda gets his bag from the boot. Tomorrow, he thinks, the vans will arrive with all of their things. Maybe then it will start to feel a little more permanent, a little more like home.

Nothing to be Done

The two interns are standing on a hot, dry stretch of pavement outside a storage facility on Woodstock's Albert Road, and waiting. They've been waiting here since 8am, which is when they first met. To pass the time, they watch the morning traffic go by. Cherise, who works at the gallery in Cape Town, is wearing black loafers, black dress pants and a white blouse. Daniel works for the Johannesburg gallery, but flew down yesterday. He is dressed in sneakers, black jeans and a white, button-up shirt. Both of them are working at this year's art fair on behalf of the gallery, the first time either is taking part in such an event from the inside.

"He's late," says Daniel. "What should we do?"

"We wait. What else can we do?" replies Cherise.

The art fair, which opens to the public later that day, has announced YANNICK, the gallery's top-seller and by far its best-known artist, as this year's Featured Artist and has dedicated an entire booth to his work. The two interns have been sent to meet the artist at his storage unit to help transport the work to the fair and assist with its installation.

Much of the fair's publicity this year has focused on YANNICK's show. He is the headline artist. Even outside of the fairs and the biennales, his installation-based works regularly make local and international news, sometimes for good reasons, sometimes for bad ones. Cherise and Daniel, unlike their colleagues higher up in the gallery, have yet to meet him in person. In this way, they are like most of the art-viewing public who know YANNICK only as the "dark horse" depicted by the media.

"It's kind of his *thing*, right? He's like Banksy," Cherise had said to Daniel earlier that morning.

Daniel thought Banksy was decidedly lowbrow and gimmicky, but he nodded in agreement nonetheless.

When the two interns arrived, they were both excited about meeting YANNICK, although neither of them has admitted this to the other. Now the excitement is fading a little more with each minute they are made to wait for him on this uncomfortably hot morning.

“What do you think it is?” asks Daniel, trying to make conversation.

“Think what is?”

“YANNICK’s installation.”

“Oh, I heard there’s only one crate so it can’t be anything big,” says Cherise.

“Is there a van or a flatbed or something we’re loading everything onto? Do you think we’ll be using his car?”

“I don’t know. I took an Uber.”

“Maybe we should call someone.”

“You mean, like, another Uber? Look, I know as much as you do. Let’s just wait for YANNICK to rock up and take it from there.”

“He should’ve been here already.”

Cherise thumbs around on her phone. Beside her, Daniel flits about, anxiously, and looks up and down the street. Cars pull up and park next to the pavement, but none of them contain YANNICK. Trucks, bakkies, and taxis rattle past constantly. Already the sun is starting to bear down on the pavement, where empty cigarette boxes and polystyrene containers are being carried away by the wind into the passing traffic. Painted bicycle lanes run up both sides of the street, but illegally parked cars block them at regular intervals.

Daniel senses that the ocean somewhere nearby. He knows the mountain is behind him, so the ocean should be in front of him, just past all of these buildings. Or was it behind the mountain? Cherise would probably know. Should he ask her? Cherise, uneager to make small talk with Daniel, or pander to his constant fretting, has spent most of the morning on her phone.

“Have they said anything?” asks Daniel, craning his head to look at her screen.

“Who?” she says, pulling her phone toward her.

“The gallery. Aren’t you calling them?”

“What are you talking about? I’m on Instagram. You call them if you’re so worried.”

“My phone’s dead. I thought it was charging last night, but –”

Cherise pockets her phone and looks at Daniel. “How long have you been interning?”

“A month and a bit,” he responds. “I’m usually just at the front desk, though.”

“Makes sense. Look, waiting’s pretty much 80% of the job. Hurry up and wait, you know? You’ll get used to it. Just relax, someone’ll show up sooner or later.”

“And if they don’t? The fair opens in a few hours. We’ll be screwed if the installation isn’t ready. I just really need this job, okay.”

“Ja, so do I. Just chill.”

Two men in blue overalls walk past and stare at them, but say nothing. Cherise stares back. Daniel nods at them, before turning back to Cherise.

“How long have *you* been interning?” he asks.

Cherise sighs, looks up at nothing in particular and makes a show of considering the question. “About a year. I started after I graduated so, ja, that’s a year and a few months. I mean I’m technically a junior project manager at this stage, but ‘intern’ is the official title, you know? I’m working on my own practice, too. Got a studio space in Obs for now, and I’m waiting to hear

back about a residency next month. You know how it is, you've gotta have your own stuff on the side."

"For sure. Well, I mean, I'm just doing this internship at the moment," he says. "I don't really have the time for anything else."

"None of us do. Isn't a day job and, like, two side gigs the norm in Joburg? You sure you're cut out for this job?"

"Look, don't you just want to call the gallery?"

"God, fine. Let me finish posting this."

Cherise takes her phone out again and Daniel continues to scan the street, hoping to find YANNICK amongst the commuters, stuck in traffic or on the phone with the gallery, maybe, telling them that he is running late, that something came up, but that he's meeting with the two interns now and everything will be fine. In the brief moments when the wind dies down, Daniel can feel the sun on the back of his neck and smell the exhaust fumes from the passing cars. Also, the smell of baking bread, somewhere nearby. He takes a step back towards the building and tries to find a sliver of shade, careful not to press his shirt to the grimy wall. He cannot escape the sun. He takes his phone out of his pocket and tries to turn it on despite its dead battery. Has the gallery been trying to reach him? Is YANNICK trying to reach him? Probably not. Taxis drive by, slowing as they pass the two interns and announcing destinations from open doors.

Cherise holds her phone to her ear for a few seconds before lowering it, selecting another number and holding it to her ear again. She can see Daniel watching her, expectantly, and turns the other way. After a few unanswered rings, she turns back to face him.

“Nothing. No one’s at the gallery and I can’t get hold of any of the guys at the fair either. They’re probably busy setting up.” She pockets her phone. “I’m going to get something at the shop. Want anything?”

Daniel shakes his head and watches her walk away. How can she care so little about her job, he thinks? Doesn’t she know how many people would leap at the opportunity to work with a gallery like this? He resigns himself to his current situation, leans gingerly against the brick wall of the warehouse and returns his attention to the traffic.

Things like this never happen in Joburg, he thinks. Not to him, at least. Punctuality, dependability and an indefatigable work ethic – these are the things he prides himself on. His morning commute to the gallery, for instance, is an exercise in precision and planning, and always allows for an extra 15 minutes in case of any accidents or mishaps along the way. It also means he arrives earlier than everyone else which, though he’s yet to receive any praise for the fact, gives him a quiet satisfaction regardless. Now, stranded on the pavement of this gentrified bit of industria where everything seems to move at a half-pace, he has no choice but to wait, every passing minute making him later, more restless and less prepared for the art fair.

Watching the commuters on Albert Road does little to improve his mood. All of these people seem so at ease with their lives and their work, their places in the world. And maybe this is fine, he thinks, but what are the consequences? They don’t seem to be waiting on anyone or anything, for example. Probably, he thinks, they are the ones being waited on – causing some small, but ultimately disruptive delays in the working lives of who knows how many others. Is one of them the reason that YANNICK has yet to appear? Is it that woman he saw staring at him blankly from inside her car or the men in overalls sauntering along the opposite pavement? Do they know how much they’re affecting his own day? Beside him, Cherise reappears, holding a Red

Bull under her arm and still busy with her phone, smiling to herself as she taps away at the screen. He turns to say something to her, but a beat-up VW Golf speeds past them, revving as it goes, only to come to a neat stop at a set of red robots further up the road.

At 10:45, two hours before the fair is set to open to the public, a white Mercedes pulls up at the pavement in front of Daniel and Cherise with its hazards on. The back window rolls down and a woman with a neat, blonde bob and thick-rimmed glasses looks out at them.

“Hi?” she calls. “Hello? Is this YANNICK’s warehouse?”

Daniel steps toward the open window, eagerly. “Hi. Are you here to help move the work?”

“Sorry?” she responds. “I’m here for a private viewing with YANNICK, the artist.”

She draws out this last word in a way that makes it seem like she is talking to a pair of toddlers – “Ah-tist”.

“Where do we park?” she asks them.

Daniel looks over at Cherise for guidance.

“Are you with his studio?” asks Cherise.

“I’m here for a *viewing*. A view-ing with YAH-NNICK.”

Cherise stares at her, blankly. The woman rolls up her window without saying anything more, and out of the driver’s side steps a short, haggard-looking man with thin, wire-frame glasses and a black button-up shirt. He approaches them and clears his throat. Cherise thinks he looks a little like a character from the comics she used to read in the Sunday paper when she was younger – one of those sad but humorous little men who were always in trouble with their wives or their bosses because of some unavoidable mishap. Daniel only looks at the man, expectantly, hoping for a bit of good news. The man begins to speak.

“Ms Michaels has booked a private viewing with YANNICK at his Woodstock warehouse and studio. Is this that place? Who do we speak to in order to be let onto the premises?”

“Ms who?” asks Cherise. “We’re also waiting for YANNICK. Been waiting since 8am. Tell her to join the queue.”

The short man returns to the car and speaks into the sliver of open window. Daniel looks at Cherise, who is still looking at the Mercedes and frowning, stubbornly. The short man returns and begins to speak again.

“Ms Michaels has requested that you contact YANNICK directly so that she can be let in. She has a busy day and cannot afford to spend time waiting for her viewing.”

Daniel, anticipating a scene from Cherise, steps in front of her to address the man. “Look, we’re with his gallery, but we haven’t been able to contact him or anyone from the gallery either. We’re supposed to be taking his work to the art fair today, but he hasn’t shown up. Who have you been speaking to? Perhaps you could call them?”

Without responding, the short man hurries back to the car and speaks into the window once more. Daniel and Cherise watch him relay this new information in an anxious show of gesticulation, although they cannot hear exactly what he is saying. Eventually, the car door opens and Ms Michaels steps out to join them on the pavement. Viewing her now, standing in the full, late-morning sun, the two interns notice that she is quite a bit older than the short man. A collector of some kind, thinks Daniel. A rich divorcée, thinks Cherise. Ms Michaels squints at the closed warehouse doors and replaces her glasses with a pair of dark sunglasses.

“For months he’s been avoiding me,” she says to neither of them. “Months. He’s like a child. A total disregard for the time and responsibilities of others.”

She turns to her companion. “You can park the car. We’re not leaving until he gets here.”

The short man does as he's told and Ms Michaels turns to address Daniel and Cherise, giving each of them a quick once-over from behind her dark frames. "So, you two work for YANNICK? What are you? Assistants? Has he left you in the lurch, too? Probably does this all the time, doesn't he?"

"We're with his gallery," says Cherise. "Who are you?"

"I'm someone who's spent a lot of money on an artwork that's yet to materialise," she responds, looking at the doors of the warehouse again. "I'll wait with the two of you then."

Daniel wants to ask her why she didn't inquire through the gallery if she wanted an artwork by YANNICK. Doesn't she know that such processes are streamlined by the gallery staff, often by himself? Instead, he defers to Cherise who's busy opening her Red Bull.

"If you want," she says after taking a gulp. "Who's the short guy?"

Ms Michaels looks over at the white Mercedes that's being slowly and precisely parked in front of them. "Him? That's Rodney, my assistant."

"You have an assistant? What did you say you do again?" asks Cherise.

"Well, assistant's a narrow term. He drives me around, handles my appointments, you know that sort of thing. He's not very sociable. Used to be a researcher of some kind. Or was he busy with a PhD? Something to do with art history, I can't remember. I needed an advisor, someone to guide my investments and here we are, a few years later."

The three of them stand and watch the car come to a stop. Rodney steps out carrying a tote bag and hurries back to his employer. He speaks softly. "Should I try call his studio again?"

"No, no. We'll wait here with our new friends. He won't stand me up again."

Rodney nods and, unsure of what to do with himself, turns to face the car. A silence falls between the four of them. The morning traffic has died down, somewhat, but the foot traffic has

increased and now, standing with this group of strangers and waiting for an artist he works for, but has yet to meet, Daniel feels painfully out of place. He looks over at Cherise, who is once again involved with her phone, as is Ms Michaels. Rodney, he notices, is simply looking down at his feet.

“So, Rodney,” says Daniel. “You’re also in the arts?”

“Oh yes,” Ms Michaels replies. “Rodney can tell you all you want to know – artist, movement, medium, whatever – off the top of his head. When we first started working together, he wouldn’t shut up, actually. Isn’t that right, Rodney?”

Rodney nods.

“It’s like there’s a computer inside that head of his. He can look at an image of an artwork and tell you exactly who made it, how they made it, when they made it, what it’s worth, all of it. Really, he’s quite knowledgeable when he chooses to be.”

Cherise pockets her phone and turns to consider Rodney. “What can you tell us about YANNICK, Rodney?”

“Isn’t *that* the million dollar question?” says Ms Michaels. “He’s so hell-bent on being this creative enigma and what for, really? I couldn’t care less what he says or does or how he chooses to present himself to the world, I just want a genuine YANNICK for my collection, is that so difficult?”

Cherise ignores her and tries to address Rodney again. He’s the most interesting one here, she thinks. But is he capable of saying or doing something that’s not exclusively related to this nauseating woman?

“Rodney,” she says loudly. “Is it true that YANNICK went all cloak and dagger because of some dodgy sex stuff he was involved in? That’s what everyone at the gallery says.”

“I’ve never heard that,” Daniel chimes in.

“And that he’s the nephew of some super wealthy business tycoon?” Cherise continues.

“Oh, I’ve heard that one,” says Daniel. “Some relation to Sol Kerzner on his mother’s side. But that’s a myth, I think.”

“What’s the story, Rodney?” asks Cherise.

Rodney starts to shake his head in a series of short, sharp jerks and shrug his shoulders. Still, he says nothing. Daniel feels terrible, thinks that there must be something wrong with the man, socially, and it would be better to leave him alone. Ms Michaels, who’s been passively watching the scene play out, addresses Rodney.

“Go on, Rodney. Tell them something. Tell them anything for god’s sake. Where have your words gone? Speak!”

At this instruction, Rodney turns towards them, head still down and facing the pavement, and begins to talk, slowly at first, and then gaining some momentum.

“It’s been said that he is the kind of artist who, well, most seem to think of him as a kind of – there is a certain school who’d argue that his work, no, let me begin again: At the turn of the century, the new school of contemporary artists were largely preoccupied with the pursuit of language and meaning, although I suppose that might be something of a generalisation, but certain individuals like YANNICK were engaging in a Dadaist mode of working that saw a total, well, a mostly sort of intentional breakaway from the contemporary way of seeing that many of the global schools and institutions were still quite concerned with, even though there were those outliers who did allow room for a kind of post-expressionism, but then YANNICK could never really be fully placed in the stable of the Dadaists either – possibly in his early career, certainly with his first works at the JAG – but many, O’Toole, Dodd, Pieterse, have highlighted that these

were also a response to the more commercial work of the time, that said, we also have Blackman, Jamal and Williamson who penned essays essentially claiming that, well – I mean even if you look at the fairs at the time – and of course he was embraced by a number of influential collectors and critics abroad relatively soon after his debut show and, naturally, the works for the South African pavilion at the Messe Basel did a great deal to introduce his work to a European audience, which is also why so many have made the claims of a modern-day Rodin...”

The man is beginning to run short of breath. Each pause for air is filled with more words. Neither Daniel nor Cherise is sure what to make of it all. Ms Michaels only stands and watches.

“Perhaps it’s also true that... and yes, I think it can be said that for an artist whose work was really only recognised locally following a particular veneration from the international markets, it’s possible that there would be an urge to renounce the local institutions, which is why, given the nature of the early monographs it’s maybe clear to see those doubts as a natural progression from an unresolved project, or perhaps the results of a particular condition of labour, or, or, or perhaps...”

He begins to shake his head gently as he speaks, still struggling for air as he searches for better words. The two interns turn to his employer.

“Is he okay?” asks Daniel. “I think he’s having a panic attack.”

“How do we stop him?” asks Cherise.

“Rodney,” says Ms Michaels. “Rodney! That’s enough.”

The words have no effect. His breath is sharp and shallow.

“Of course, the controversy surrounding much of his career can be...can be attributed to...and in particular, his study of the skulls, the skulls...the skulls in Cradock, of which it can be said...it can be said...”

Daniel turns to Rodney and takes him by the shoulders. Rodney stops talking and gasps for air, his eyes growing wide. The silence is somehow more frightening to Cherise who grabs Ms Michaels by the arm.

“He’s having an attack or something, what do we do?”

“His pump, his asthma pump! It’s in his bag,” she responds, still keeping her distance.

Daniel grabs Rodney’s tote bag and empties its contents onto the pavement. A power bank, a wallet, a glasses case, a black notebook, and a set of keys spill out. No pump. Cherise drops to the ground and sifts through the collection of items.

“What the fuck does an asthma pump look like?”

“It’s blue, I think. Dark blue,” says Ms Michaels.

Daniel joins Cherise on the pavement, pushing till slips and exhibition pamphlets away from the more substantial items. The wind picks up again and blows the papers into the street. Neither of them can find the asthma pump. Cherise takes out her phone.

“Call an ambulance!” says Daniel.

“That’s what I’m trying to do!”

“He’s fine,” says Ms Michaels from above them. “He’s fine, he’s got his pump. Rodney, you’re fine.”

Rodney, standing at the edge of the pavement and breathing thinly into his green, plastic asthma pump, nods at her, silently. Daniel stands up. Cherise lowers her phone and sits down on the kerb.

“Jesus, Rodney. I mean, *Jesus*. Don’t work yourself up like that, you nearly gave us all heart attacks,” says Ms Michaels, adjusting her blouse in short, sharp tugs as she speaks. “He works himself into a fit sometimes.”

Daniel and Cherise ignore her, keeping their eyes on Rodney who seems to be relaxing with each slow inhalation. Through the chaos of it all, none of them has noticed the man in blue overalls standing off to the side, waiting to address them.

“Hello?” says Ms Michaels.

“Hello. Are you here for YANNICK?” the man asks them.

“Yes!” says Daniel, walking over to him. “Are you here to open up for us?”

Cherise climbs to her feet and dusts herself off. Ms Michaels eyes the man suspiciously. Around them, Albert Road continues to move.

“YANNICK has asked me to tell you that he won’t be installing the work today. There are a few last-minute changes he still needs to make before it’s ready. You can all go home.”

He turns to leave, but Ms Michaels calls him back. “Wait, wait! What about my appointment? I’m supposed to be meeting with him about an artwork. We had an appointment.”

The man looks at them and shrugs. “YANNICK is very busy ahead of the fair. You’re welcome to come back and wait for him again tomorrow.”

No one speaks. They watch the man walk up Albert Road, turn into a narrow, one-way street and disappear.

Once Removed

It was a Friday afternoon, and I was sitting in line at the Randburg Licensing Department and thinking. I was thinking about ambition and about inertia. How humans, like sharks and water and old, rickety cars, need to keep moving for risk of stagnating or expiring. But then don't they also say that without a kind of rootedness in a place –

“You can move,” came a voice, disgruntled.

The queue had inched forward again, leaving an urgent space between myself and the person ahead of me in the long, snaking row of seats. Here, such a space had to be filled immediately.

I said sorry to the person beside me and moved from one hard, plastic chair to the next, watching the rippling effect this had on those further down the line. Once settled, I took out my phone and saw to a message that had come through a few minutes earlier, but which I had chosen to ignore.

How's it going there?

I said that things were going fine, and that I was still waiting.

A response came back, almost immediately. *Something I'll never miss about SA. The queues! But thanks so much for doing this man.*

The messages were from an old friend who had moved to Hong Kong a while back to teach English through an American-based company. A few weeks ago, he had messaged to tell me, rather unceremoniously, that things in Hong Kong were going so well that he intended to stay there, permanently. The first step toward his emigration involved selling off his old car, which he had left with me on this side of the world.

The car was old, unused, and gathering dust in a parking bay in my building. He had asked me to renew its registration before having it serviced, photographed, and put up for sale online. Perhaps he felt that, once untethered from this object – this reminder of home – he would find it easier to leave for good. Perhaps he just needed the money.

I shifted in my new seat, still warm from the person ahead of me, and messaged my old friend back saying that it was no problem, really, and that he could thank me when he was next in the country by buying me a drink.

Actually, came the response, I'm going to be down in June to sort some stuff. Won't have much time, though. Headed to Kruger with some of the other expats before we head to Cape Town. But let's grab a drink at the airport? Will message you the dates.

'Expats.' Had the word always seemed so permanent? I typed out a response, read it over, deleted it, and went with a yellow thumbs-up emoji instead. Several wild animals and a South African flag emoji were sent back. The queue slumped forward again, and the person ahead of me stood up and moved into the next seat, leaving another open space between us. I made sure to waste no time in filling the gap.

The building I work in is something of a grand sham. It was built two decades ago, but is modelled on some of Johannesburg's old Edwardian structures – squared-block masonry, thin columns and arches, all decorative. The inside of the building echoes none of its exterior architecture and is contemporary in a way that is almost disappointing – an all chrome and white lobby leads to open-plan offices split up with bulky planters housing thin ferns, giving the illusion of privacy between employees. The ceilings, though, reach up to a level that feels almost two storeys high on each floor. In this way, there is sometimes too much room for thought, and

whenever I am anywhere else indoors – at home, at the shops, and in restaurants – I begin to feel constrained.

A number of small companies rent space on each floor of the building. I work on the fourth floor as the media officer for a small, but successful travel company. We provide moderately priced tourist packages that take mostly upper-middle-class tourists through the many wonders of Southern Africa: cable car rides up Table Mountain, canopy tours in the Tsitsikamma National Park, and extensive stays and game tours through the Kruger National Park. It's my job to manage the company's newsletter, generate content for its website, and oversee its social media platforms, ensuring that our digital footprint extends far beyond the borders of South Africa and into the targeted corners of the rest of the world, which is, generally speaking, most of the global North.

I've never found my job to be particularly demanding. At most, it can be a little repetitive.

"South Africa practically sells itself," my boss is fond of saying. "Who doesn't want to take a trip to the Motherland for a couple of dollars?"

A few times a year we'll receive a large booking from a high-level organisation of one kind or another – mostly French, German, or Dutch – who are in the country to fund an arts and culture initiative, or check in on some pre-existing investment that usually takes the form of a school, a clinic, or a library in an impoverished area of their choosing. They'll fly into Joburg, tend to business and then begin their holiday (usually in Cape Town, Durban, or – you guessed it – the Kruger National Park). On these occasions, my boss sends me and my colleague, Mduduzi, to personally collect them from the airport and bring them to their hotels. Something about "South African hospitality".

Mdu's a self-described "easy-going guy" who grew up in Hammanskraal – "the most boring place in the world," he says – and moved to Johannesburg for work. He has no siblings, but he makes a point of visiting his parents every few months. In December, he'll usually take a trip to Cape Town or Durban with a few of his friends and spend all of his time as close to the sea as possible. He's invited me to join them a few times. I never have, and I suspect he never really expects me to say yes.

Whenever Mdu and I are tasked with chauffeuring wealthy foreigners around, we make sure to grab a drink – after we've sent our clients on their way – at the hotel bar. When we did this most recently, I asked Mdu what he thought about the fact that so many young white people were leaving South Africa without any intention of returning.

"Because if you're asking me," I said, "I'd say that what we're seeing here is really some kind of modern-day white flight, neatly wrapped up under the guise of travelling whilst young. It's like the 90s all over again."

"You take things too seriously," said Mdu, sipping his beer. "There's plenty of your people here, young ones, too. Just go to Melville on a Friday night. And what do you care about the 90s? Weren't you, like, eight back then?"

Mdu then told me that he also intended to cross international borders someday soon. Not permanently, he enthused, but only for a few years, only because he wanted to experience something new for a change. Didn't I?

I told him I'd never really thought about it.

"That's your problem," he said. "You're too settled. You need to get out of the city. Out of the country. Otherwise in a few years' time you'll still be drinking overpriced beer at this hotel bar while I'll be on a beach somewhere sipping on a cocktail made in a coconut."

“But you can do that in South Africa,” I said.

Mdu laughed, slapped me on the back, and called for the bill.

Every Wednesday evening, I attend classes for a short course on fine-art photography I began earlier this year. The course is somewhat loose in its structure, which is what drew me to it in the first place, and as a result it’s attracted everyone from high school students and recent graduates, to stay-at-home parents and retirees who now find themselves with empty nests and too much time on their hands.

“Now *this* is the real South Africa,” our teacher said at the start of our first class. “Black, white, young and old, all together in the same room working towards the same goal – to document this beautiful country.”

He’s a charismatic American, a photojournalist sent down to cover the general election in ’94. Apparently, he was only supposed to be on assignment for about two weeks but here he is, decades later. I guess he’s quite fond of the place.

One of my fellow students is a man called Frank who’s taken a liking to me since our first class together. He’s a nice enough guy who, after retiring five years ago, lost his wife only two years after that and now spends most of his weekends travelling out to the Magaliesberg to practise his landscape photography. He told me all of this the first time we met. Frank’s only daughter recently graduated from the Institute of the Culinary Arts, he told me, and shortly after that moved to New Zealand, where she soon found work as a stewardess on a luxurious superyacht called *The Spirit of Adventure*. “Excellent opportunities for youngsters over there,” Frank said. “Not so much over here, I’m afraid.”

Recently, after class, Frank invited me out for dinner at one of the local pubs. “I used to come here after work with my buddies back in the day. They still serve the best steak, egg and chips in the whole damn city,” he said.

Frank’s an easy guy to be around. He’s the type of person my father would’ve described as having no “airs and graces”. That night, a few beers in, Frank began to tell me his thoughts on my photographic work. “I just don’t think I get it, you know? It’s not quite – how can I put it? – *moving* me.”

I explained that the things I photographed were supposed to be remarkably ordinary. That I was aiming for a certain degree of “melancholic realism” in my work – a term I had come across a few nights earlier – and that the objects and spaces I used to achieve that were very simple things: a stalled construction site; a bed, half-made or – one of my favourite images – a discarded CD lying face-up on the pavement with the words “Christmas Day 2002” scrawled across its shiny surface in permanent marker.

“Maybe that’s the issue,” said Frank. “You’re too caught up in your own thoughts. You’re young, you know? You need to get out there and see the world. You need to travel and meet new people outside of these classes. I enjoy our chats, my boy, but what are you even doing sitting in a grimy old pub with the likes of me? You know, my daughter, she’s over there on the cruise ships meeting new people every single day of her life. She’s travelling the world and it’s helping her grow. You need to get out of this place and travel before it’s too late.”

I disagreed with Frank and I told him so. I said: “Look, Frank, there’s a whole world out there for all of us to explore, but I just don’t see the point in doing any of that until you’ve gotten to really know the place you started out in. It’s a kind of duty to a country. In South Africa I think that takes a little longer to do because –”

Frank was no longer listening. The rugby was on.

A few months ago, I went to a group exhibition at a small gallery not too far from where I stay. In the exhibition, there were photographs of people covered in luminous body paint standing in the middle of open fields, and there were pencil drawings of cityscapes that grew out of everyday objects like couches, tabletops, and pot plants. There was also a watercolour painting of a very populated beach.

A woman standing next to me wearing a colourful beret and a pair of long earrings said that the painting was crude, but brilliantly incisive. I didn't know what it was, other than a painting of a very populated beach, so I moved on.

Another work caught my attention: a monochromatic oil painting showing a blurred figure moving through a crisp, white foyer. The foyer had two leafy plants in it and a set of sliding doors that the figure was moving towards. The painting held my attention for some time. When I looked at it, I felt detached from the people around me, but simultaneously overwhelmed by the things they were saying and the way they were moving about the space, a collection of wispy voices and long, thin arms holding up smartphones and glasses of wine. By contrast, the foyer in the painting was cool and still. It was a scene I found myself wanting to step into.

I took out my phone and tried to photograph the work, but the lighting was harsh and the image came out blurry and overexposed. I put my phone away and looked at the painting again. Below it, the title read: *Once Removed*.

"It's stranger than fiction! Can you imagine?" said my boss.

"This is all because of that racist president of theirs," said Mdu.

We were, all three of us, huddled around Mdu's desk watching a grainy video of a well-known South African musician who had been detained by US immigration officials and was now being forced to sing for them.

The story, as it was being told that day across every local news outlet, was that the vocalist Lindo Ngobeni had gone over to the States as part of an international tour she had embarked on and, upon arrival, had been held at the airport and questioned as to her presence in the country. When she told them that she was, in fact, an internationally renowned musician who was there to perform, they asked her to sing for them, right then and there, to prove that she hadn't just made the whole thing up.

One of her back-up vocalists had recorded the incident, put it online and now, all the way on the other side of the world, we were watching as she stood and sang shakily, but resolutely to a group of seated security officials in a foreign airport.

"Ja, now you see when they send their pop-stars and rappers over here, people give their yearly salaries to go and see them, but when one of our own goes that side they don't even let them onto the stage. It's disrespectful man," said my boss to no one in particular.

"This is wrong," said Mdu. "She must just get back on the plane and come perform here at home. They won't even understand what she's singing about over there."

My phone began to buzz and I left the two of them to their independent commentary. Back at my desk, I checked my messages.

Hey. I've got a guy who's interested in the car. Wants to come check it out sometime this week. Can I tell him you'll be around?

Also, dates for Kruger are confirmed. 20-26th. Gonna book my flight now so I'll message you the details. Gonna be such a kak flight, but I'm looking forward to grabbing a cold one with you. Can't wait to be home, bru!

At a set of robots near my apartment there used to be a man who showed up every day at 6am and began to shout. He would shout about the police and about poverty, mostly. Sometimes, he would shout about a specific South African politician. From my bed, I could hear him shouting these things and in this way the man was a disruptive, but consistent presence in my life.

The other week, I spoke to the security guard outside a new apartment block just down the road from me and very near to where The Shouting Man took his own post. I asked him: "What's the story with that man who shouts all the time? Does he stay at the shelter around here?"

"That crazy one?" replied the guard. "He's not from here. I think he's from Nigeria or something, but all he ever does is stand there and carry on, just making noise. He even threatened a lady here from this building with a stick the other day. The police must take him away."

A few days ago, the man disappeared. The shouting stopped and he was nowhere to be seen. According to my next-door neighbour, he was arrested for throwing a brick at a passing car. "It's probably for the best," said my neighbour as he unlocked his front gate, grocery bags in hand. "I don't think he had anywhere to go, and he certainly wasn't well."

An email from my sister that I'd been putting off reading was slowly being buried in my inbox. About a year ago, she'd moved over to the UK to look for work. The plan, she said, was to save up for a few years, come back, buy property, and settle down. I didn't really expect her to come back. At home, I sat down at my laptop and dug out the email.

Hey boet!

How are you? Still working hard? It's starting to snow here so it's freezing, obviously. I'm starting a new job in a few weeks. I'll only have to take one bus and a 5 minute walk every day which might sound hectic, but it's actually so safe to walk here, you wouldn't believe it. I'm sure you've been following the news about this whole Brexit deal. A few of my mates are worried about what will happen, but apparently ancestral visas won't be affected. Anyways, when are you coming to visit? I'll take you down to this South African pub I discovered (all the expats go there!) where they play music from SA, serve stuff like Black Label and biltong and all that. I've attached a video for you to see. And when are you going to warm up to the idea of video chatting? It's starting to get too cold to even type!

Miss you lots.

The video showed a small pub with dark wooden fixtures where a group of drunk, white South African men and women were holding onto each other and shouting unintelligibly into the camera. Draped above the bar was a South African flag as well as a bright, green and gold banner with a Springbok leaping across its surface. In the background, global radio hits played out through distorted speakers.

The day's traffic was at its peak when it happened. I caught a glimpse of him in the side mirror, T-shirt already lifted to expose both his smooth stomach and the tarnished metal of the gun. Seconds later, he was at my window. Inside of the car, jazz music was playing – a local artist recommended to me by way of the algorithm. I had the volume up loud, and when I pulled out the aux cable to hand over the phone, the dashboard speakers fired off an electric crackle that was enough to make me jump. He left as soon as I handed over the phone. Without the music,

the sounds of commuters leaning on their hooters poured through the half-open window. I put the car into first gear and pulled off. Back home, I spent the rest of the evening cancelling my bank cards and trying to figure out whether it was me or the man with the gun who was being hooted at.

I was put in touch with the potential buyer for the car the day before he showed up. Over text, he'd said his name was "Sanusi", but when we greeted and shook hands that morning, he introduced himself as "Sakhile". I had all the relevant answers and pieces of information ready, but Sakhile had no questions. He simply gave the car a quick once-over, poked around under the hood, and asked for a reduced cash price. I told him that I wasn't the one to make that call, that I was merely facilitating the sale for a friend.

"So it's not your car?" he asked. "I thought it was your car. You mustn't confuse people like that. It could make people think that maybe you're a criminal, you know. This other guy I know, he bought a car like that, the next day he was driving into the airport and the police took him in. The car was stolen the week before! Anyway, let's ask your friend now about the price. I'm sure he will say yes to the offer. It's a high price he's asking for this car, actually, you must see what's happening in the engine there, it's gonna cost me a lot to fix."

I wanted to tell him that the car had just been serviced, but I could see that he was already thumbing around in his phone.

"I think he's probably asleep right now," I said. "The time-zones are —"

"He's sleeping still? What's he sleeping during the day for? There's money to be made, doesn't he want to make money?"

I lacked both the voice and the conviction to take back the conversation. Sakhile likely knew this, too. I considered calling, but I knew I wouldn't get an answer. Should I just accept the cash offer and get the whole interaction over with? I wanted to be rid of the car, badly. It would be the third weekend afternoon I'd spent with a prospective buyer that would amount to nothing. I made the call regardless. As I stood waiting for an answer from the other side of the world, Sakhile's own phone started to ring. He answered as "Sanusi" and said that he would be on his way shortly. He pocketed his phone and turned back to me.

"It's okay my brother, I won't take the car. I'm looking for something with more power anyway. You've gotta be fast here, you know? I can make this car fast, but it will cost too much, I think. Maybe when your friend wakes up, he'll have a better deal, huh? For now you can tell him I say 'no thanks', okay?"

I once read something about airports that went: "A busy airport is the sign of a country that is thriving, economically and culturally."

Or something along those lines.

Sitting in Arrivals at the OR Tambo International Airport, I realised that the problem with a busy airport is that you can't really tell who's coming and who's going. Or for how long the latter plan on being gone. The flickering display board behind me had stated that the flight would be delayed by an hour – too short a time for me to leave and return – and then later updated to reflect a two-and-a-half-hour delay. I watched people enter through the sliding doors and guessed where they were coming from and what they were here to do. It was something Mdu and I would do whenever we picked up clients, although his assumptions were always far more amusing than mine. Most flights carried groups of enthusiastic tourists who would rush to pose in front of the

Oliver Tambo statue for photographs. I caught one group debating whether or not it was a statue of Nelson Mandela.

The couple next to me had been waiting for about as long as I had, most likely for the same flight to arrive. Probably, they were waiting on a son or a daughter, maybe also teaching English abroad. Each time the display board reflected another delay, they would engage in small, private displays of exasperation, hissing words like “ridiculous” and “unbelievable” to no one in particular. More time passed, more people came and went. My phone buzzed intermittently, mostly work emails and spam texts offering life insurance. With at least another hour to kill, I made my way to the airport’s cluster of restaurants and coffee shops. He could meet me at the bar, I thought. I might as well get a head start.

I ordered a draught of my regular and drank it at the bar alone, feeling far older than I was, and truthfully, a little sorry for myself. Should I have brought a book? What was worse to do at an airport bar: drink alone or read alone? I settled for my phone, skimming news headlines and refreshing the International Arrivals page. Forty-five minutes until his flight was due to land. I read a breaking news article about a national lottery scandal and an ad about off-season vacation rates flashed just below the second paragraph. Three days in Mauritius for R10k, flights included. Sponsored ads masquerading as news articles at the bottom of the page carried headlines like: “Durban man works from home and makes \$20k a day. You’ll never guess what he does!” and “The US is giving green cards to South Africans with these skills”. Time passed slowly.

Halfway through my third draught, a message came through.

Hey man, you still waiting? Only landed now.

I messaged back to say that I was already at the bar. That I’d order him a drink so long.

Ah man, we've actually got to hop straight into the cab. The driver's been waiting this whole time and it's his last trip out for the day. Maybe we can meet at arrivals quickly before I head out?

Bastard. I paid up and made my way back to Arrivals, feeling the full effects of the beer now that I was on my feet. It occurred to me that I didn't want to see my old friend at all, didn't want to welcome him back to the country so much as tell him that his time abroad had turned him into another arrogant and unbearable tourist. I rehearsed, in my head, what I was going to say to him as I made my way through the crowds.

Arrivals was packed, full of people craning their necks and searching, luggage, and laptop bags, and smartphones in their hands. A separate crowd, all dressed in green sports jerseys and carrying flags and brightly coloured banners, had occupied the front of the waiting area, eagerly awaiting the arrival of their team. I pushed my way to the front of the crowd and trained my eyes on the automatic sliding doors, opening and closing as people began to filter through. Around me, people began to break away from the crowd and find one another, laughing and hugging and shaking hands as they did. My head was starting to ache. I could taste the bitter effects of beer in the back of my throat. The sports crowd was already chanting, one woman carrying out her own call of: "Here come our boys!" Their bodies were brushing up against mine, pushing and shoving.

The doors slid open and the sports team spilled out, raising a chorus of high, whiny cheer from everyone around me. I tried to keep my eyes trained on the bodies on the other side of the doors. There, the room seemed full of activity and purpose, people either returning home or arriving somewhere new, all of them with someone waiting for them, or with something to attend to. What was I doing? Witnessing. Waiting. Stagnating?

In the frenzy of the crowd, the noise and relentless sentiment, I could barely make out a single face.

A Record

The theatre

He is seated in the third row from the stage, in the centre-most seat, where he always sits. From here, he has a vantage point for his quiet analysis that is neither too removed nor too implicated in the activity of the performance. His legs are crossed, and his notebook is resting on his lap. The theatre is emptier than usual. It has been like this for some weeks now.

On the stage, two figures are swimming in a cold, blue light and taking turns hoisting one another up by the hips, mimicking the act of rising to the surface of a body of water. They've been at it for nearly an hour now and he suspects at least one of them is never going to make it out alive. The light changes and the performers take their marks beside one another. Though their feet remain firmly planted on the stage, the performers manage to leap, dive, descend, and float. It is a sequence that is at once beautiful and catastrophic, airless and overwhelming. It is enormous and full of hope. He turns over a page in his notebook and writes all of this down. He finishes his sentence just as the lights go up and the performers take a bow.

He arrives home and sits at his desk. Turning the desk-lamp on, he consults his notes, drafted in shorthand in the darkness of the theatre just 30 minutes earlier. What does he have to say? His memory is not what is used to be, and so he makes a point of transcribing his notes into his word processor as quickly as he can. He does this swiftly, expanding on the initial impressions, retaining as much of the immediate thought as possible, rendering it more coherent, holding as much of its original shape before it withers away and escapes him entirely.

He's been doing this sort of thing long enough to have developed a formula – a way of grouping his notes and thoughts into the rudimentary paragraphs that will ultimately form the greater structure of the review. He no longer writes for the papers (they turned their backs on the

theatre years ago), but he still likes to hold onto the rigour of the craft. View, write, edit, and file for print that evening.

Once he has typed out his review, he switches on the printer, waits for it to gurgle and groan into life, and prints out the text on foolscap paper. Then he gathers up the pages, swivels his chair around and tosses them into the pit in the centre of his study.

He has been working on the pit, deliberately at least, for the past few years. Each week, he'll pour his words and thoughts into it, only to have them pile up and overflow, covering the floor of his study and bunching up around his ankles so that he has to wade through a sea of sentiment each time he leaves his desk.

Whenever his words grow to this extent, he makes a point of gathering up his pages, scooping them out from the depths of the pit, and setting them all to one side of the room. Then he rolls up his sleeves, places his glasses in his shirt pocket, climbs down into the pit, and digs. He digs into the layers of inky mulch and papier-mâché, and through the softly decomposing former thoughts, pausing only to wrestle with a stubborn opinion, lodging itself in the earth. He digs until he is tired, or until he has excavated enough room for new words. Lately, this can take him a full week to do, not because he is writing more, but because he finds himself growing more tired more frequently. He understands the pit to be a bloody-minded, but practical solution to the storing of his work, although some have accused him of holding onto his knowledge, his research, and refusing to share it with those outside of his cohort.

Once he has dug far enough, he climbs out of the pit (these days he must make use of a ladder) and piles the words – old and new – back into it, turning them in with a spade. At night, as he lies in bed and waits to fall asleep, he listens to the bristling pages as they crumple and fold, turning to papyrus, papier-mâché, a cold, pulpy mixture of fact and opinion.

Occasionally, a researcher or university student will ask to view the contents of the pit for some paper or course or research essay he'll never see. In these instances, he allows them to work through the pit while he is in the room. Very rarely does he make conversation with any of them.

The conference

She is glad to have caught the tail-end of the conference, a series of performance lectures on live art and the post-colonial condition, as she hopes to supplement her current research project with some of the findings of the day. In between her own writing, teaching, and research, she's lucky to have found the time.

The lecture she is seated in now is by a visiting European academic who is looking at notions of mortality and late-stage capitalism through the writings of Franz Kafka and the character of the ape, Red Peter. The nationality of the presenting researcher and the location of his research here in South Africa should not avoid scrutiny, but she resolves not to enter into such habitual modes of engagement and tries her best to receive the knowledge he is sharing with the room. She sits towards the back of the auditorium, messy hair peeking out from behind her laptop, which is placed on the thin desk in front of her. Tabs from the night before sit open and unread in her browser, and a new word document holds her notes for the day. She opens more tabs as she listens, one for each new author, theory, or skein of thought being referenced in the lecture. She lifts her head only once the lecturer has concluded his presentation, and the performance segment begins.

Two men – theatre students from the local university – take to the stage on their haunches and begin to mimic one another's actions. She watches their low, stooping gaits and listens to them

delivering their reports to the academy. It is a performance about otherness and animality, she decides, a metaphorical view on society through the eyes of the evolving ape. She notes all of this down in her word document as she watches.

On the way home, she stops by her office to print out her notes for the day, as well as the most recent chapters of a book she is completing as part of her PhD. She uses the university printer which is old and slow, and jams frequently, but she spends the time reading through some of the neglected tabs in her browser, and collecting a few books she plans to read at home over the weekend. In the background, the printer whirrs and hums. The pages are still warm when she punches and binds them, neat little booklets organised into their relevant schools of thought.

At home she works from her couch with the television on. A newsreader says something about increased restrictions in the coming weeks. The booklets, some with smudged ink, are spread out on the coffee table in front of her, a widening arc of black and white. From her bag she produces a new stack of brightly coloured sticky notes. She makes quick work of the sticky notes, tearing them from their stumps and marking them with a thin, black fine liner – Modernity (blue), Diaspora (yellow), Migration (green), Performativity (purple). Once she has exhausted the sticky notes, she considers the pages on the coffee table. Fanned out like this, a rainbow of text and colour, they remind her of the plumage of some exotic bird, and while the contents of these pages feel no less unwieldy with their new notes, they do give her a certain pride when she looks at them. Satisfied, she stacks them up, gathers them under her arms, and steps through the sliding doors into her back garden.

The neighbours are having a braai. Drunken laughter and conversation mingle with smoke and drift over the wall. She sniffs at the smell of meat and beer as she works. At the centre of her garden is a growing labyrinth of words. The words, all neatly housed in her sticky-noted

booklets, are organised by year and by project, and deviate into myriad passages and pathways throughout the labyrinth. At least twice a year, she invites a group of fellow writers, researchers, and academics over to view the progress she has made. When she did this most recently, she battled to fit everyone into the garden, and had to ask people to take turns. She'll have the same problem this year. The book project alone has introduced five new pathways over the past two months. She'll have to cut some of them, clip away at the thoughts or methodologies that did not hold, or which proved to be at odds with the existing pages. That kind of work will take a whole day or two, but it is Friday and she is tired. For now, she takes up her trowel and digs a series of A4-sized depressions in the earth, starting at Modernity and spanning the perimeter of the labyrinth, ending just outside of a recent chapter on Material Performance in South African community theatre.

Worried that these additions might not take root, she extracts from her satchel a series of books by other writers, researchers and academics to supplement these new words. This is an expensive precaution – she will have to replace the books – but it should yield positive results. She detaches the pages slowly and precisely from the spines, careful not to tear through from the margins and into the rich formula of the text. She folds each page into a smaller version of itself, concentrated notes and pockets of information, and presses them into the earth below each new booklet.

Back inside, she pours herself a glass of wine and punctures the plastic of a ready-made meal before watching it spin in the warm light of the microwave. She sets her glass down and searches for her notebook. She has just thought of two new authors that she must seek out tomorrow.

The auction house

She has had to request a private viewing, get a temperature reading, and fill out a questionnaire before entering, but she has the space to herself, and this is how she prefers it – more room for thought, more time to run the numbers, figure out the buyers. As she considers the acquisitions around her – post-war paintings, sculptures, and large-format photographs – she switches between the camera and the notes app of her smartphone, taking notes with both. For her more immediate thoughts, she turns to her social media suite and combines the two – text and image – firing them off as neat little missives to an eager audience. She has become known for this sort of thing, reporting on the sales and celebrities of the secondary market. She crunches the numbers, figures out the buyers, posts it to her growing online audience. Already, people will be waiting for the full report from this morning's auction.

Once satisfied with her assessments, she pockets her phone and revisits the highest-selling artworks. She does this with her hands behind her back, or with one hand up at her face, not resting on her chin, but preoccupied with her hair. Or, if her hair is tucked up beneath a hat or bundled up on top of her head, she plays with a dangling earring as she looks. Often, after an afternoon spent inside the auction house, she finds that she will become more preoccupied with the act of looking at art – its gestures, its implications, its heavy histories – than with the value of the art itself. This is also a sign that she has had enough, that no more productive thought will take place inside the auction house. She exits, her footsteps doubling up and bouncing off the walls as she goes.

At home, she sits on her bed, opens her laptop, and begins to make sense of what she has seen. Collating all of this material – notes, snapshots, videos and texts – is not something that she

enjoys, but she knows the value of such a process. There must be a record, a pursuit of certainty. She rubs her eyes, blinks wearily into the cold glow of her laptop screen and begins.

Once she has transcribed all of the notes, formatted all of the images and extracted all of the video stills, she prints them out on sheets of white paper. The text she leaves in black ink, the images and video stills in full colour. Once printed, she gathers the pages and takes them up to the roof of her building, along with a sealed container of homemade glue – a simple mixture of flour, water and a pinch of sugar – and a paintbrush. She lives on the fourth floor of the building and must climb a further three, papers and glue in hand, to reach the roof. While many have told her that this is an unnecessary step in the greater project of art market reporting (there are other people who can do this sort of work, could she not at least use the elevator?), she enjoys feeling the weight of her work.

In the middle of the roof is her tower, a growing collection of new writing and reporting made entirely out of words and images on paper. In this way, she is able to showcase her work to as many people as possible. Certainly, she has attracted a great deal of readers since embarking on the project, mostly specialists and budding collectors, but also a few who are interested in her opinions. Often, people will come and watch her from the street below, fascinated by her process. Some bring binoculars and cameras with telescopic lenses, others simply strain their eyes. Most recently, she filmed a live stream of her process of building up the tower. People from as far away as Vienna tuned in.

She approaches the tower, opens her container, and brushes thick swathes of cold glue onto the sloping surface of the structure. She extracts a few pages from her pile and fixes them to the tower, applying a fresh coat of glue to each of them as she goes. At the highest points of the tower, she uses a stepladder, balancing precariously on the top-most step to paste up the final

pages. She does all of this in the middle of the day, making the most of the heat and the direct sunlight. As she works her way up and around the tower, she admires the drying pages, which shrivel and harden as the glue works its way through their inks and fibres, rendering them more permanent and bonding them with the growing mass of words.

Before she leaves, she turns to photograph the day's progress. She is alarmed to find that the tower is leaning slightly to one side. Is it submitting to its own weight? Has she not been calculating, writing, building in an adaptive-enough fashion? Perhaps the foundations are outdated. Certainly, she knows so much more, now, than when she started. Tomorrow, she thinks, she will revisit the history, the numbers, reinforce the base of the structure. For now, she will let the words settle.

The panel

The theatres, lecture halls, galleries, and auction houses have all been shuttered. It is as if whole libraries and museums have been burned down. Everyone is out of work. The archives are inactive, turning brittle. There is a great deal of anxiety about what to do next.

The panel takes place on the internet and is moderated by a charismatic character, a former critic-turned-television actor-turned – well, nobody really knows what he does these days, or how he makes ends meet, but here he is. Certainly, he seems happy to be here, moderating this panel with three of the key figures in contemporary arts criticism, research, reportage.

The screen is divided into four neat squares. The researcher is there, backed by her endless collection of books, the shelves almost buckling beneath their weight. The reporter is there, too. She's connected via her phone and shows up in a narrow, vertical screen, a collection of leafy plants and framed prints filling up the background. The critic is only a black box – he is having

connectivity issues – and it takes him a moment to locate the button that activates his webcam. When he does appear, he is seated in the low, yellow glow of his study. Tatty paperbacks and hefty items such as old cameras and typewriters – no longer functioning – line the shelves behind him. The fourth square is occupied by the moderator. Animating his background is a large, framed movie poster and what looks to be his bed.

An international audience of strangers are concentrated on these four scenes, waiting. Where to begin? The moderator breaks the silence by thanking everyone in attendance and proceeds to recite lengthy introductions on each of the panellists. Each of these introductions features a short video of their work – the urgent and exciting processes of building and contributing to a growing archive of information. Following this, he begins his questions, which are open-ended, but all tend to circle around the same topic.

“What does the closure of these institutions mean for the arts, for your own practices?” and “How does one go about the act of documentation, of archival work, in such uncertain times?”

The term “new normal” is bandied about. As is “contemporary modes of engagement”.

Everyone on the panel is reserved, if not slightly on edge. There is not much discussion between them. Rather, they answer neatly, and in isolation, speaking from their own personal experiences and encounters within their respective fields of expertise. The attendance numbers rise and fall, as indicated by the audience counter on screen. A chat box dedicated to a post-panel Q&A remains relatively unused, save for the odd comment – “Yes!” or “So true.”

There is nothing to be done, says the critic, other than to go on as usual. To weather the storm.

The reporter disagrees. It is a time of great upheaval, she says. To carry on with business as usual is a willfully ignorant approach to the current moment. We must seek out new ways of working.

The problem with criticism, and with reportage, says the researcher, is that they were in a state of crisis prior to this global moment. It is a deep rot that they are only now being forced to address. “But it’s too late. Artists have the access, the tools and the influence to document and circulate their own work. They don’t need critics,” she says.

To this, the reporter says that it’s all too easy to comment on the state of contemporary arts writing when one is ensconced in the Ivory Tower, out of practice and out of touch with the “real world”. The moderator grows uneasy, attempts to take back control of the conversation, and poses another question to the panellists:

“What made you all pursue this line of work? Was it something you always knew you wanted to do?”

They do not respond. Silence falls. Pixels blink and distort. The critic leans into the camera and squints, his shoulders bunched up around his ears. The researcher sips at her coffee. The reporter mutes her mic and coughs dramatically into the silence. The inactivity is awful, at once theatrical and banal. The audience counter has dwindled to single digits. There are still 20 long minutes on the clock. What to do?

The moderator fiddles with some pages on his desk. Deviating from his list of prepared questions, he begins to speak about how he has been following, with interest, each panellist’s attempt at storing their growing bodies of work. To his mind, he says, these projects might be distinct in form and perhaps even subject matter, but they find resonance in a common goal – creating a record. Might there be room for collaboration?

The critic scoffs, makes some disparaging remarks about the others under his breath, either unaware or unbothered that his mic is still activated. The researcher is incensed. She says that if

she had known she would be sharing a panel with such disingenuous and intellectually bankrupt individuals, she would have declined the invitation to speak. Perhaps she should leave?

“Yes,” says the reporter, “perhaps you should. Retreat to the academy, back to your desk.”

The critic is not sure who this remark is being addressed to but says that he will also be taking his leave. That he has little time for churlishness.

Many voices at once, now, all talking over one another. The moderator tries to return to a place of decorum but fails. Unsure what to do, he navigates to the toolbar at the bottom of his screen and mutes all of the panellists. They carry on bickering and gesticulating noiselessly, livid little figures in glass boxes. The silence is electric.

A message appears in the chat box. The moderator seizes the opportunity and declares that the remaining time will be allocated to a brief question and answer session before he delivers his closing remarks. The panellists nod, grudgingly. He unmutes them, opens the chat box and reads:

Greetings from the UK! I've only just tuned in so have missed most of the talk. Apologies. Has it been recorded?

Silence endures. The panellists say nothing and look to the moderator who mutters to himself while his eyes dart about. He stops once he finds the button, marked “record”, sitting grey and inactive in the toolbar at the bottom of his screen.

***There Must Be a Record: South African Art, Performance and Fiction as Necessary Forms
of Contemporary Arts Criticism***

Reflective Essay

As someone whose day-to-day job involves writing about the worlds of South African visual art and performance, I care a great deal for the state of contemporary arts criticism in the country. I am also interested in the power of works of fiction, performance and visual art to provide critique, reflection and conversation on the very industries in which they are produced.

In South Africa, where most of what is written on art and performance is closer to public relations material than it is to journalism or criticism, I find myself frequently looking to art and artists themselves for this form of reflection. I argue that, through a close reading of novels, short stories, works of visual art, theatre and dance, it is possible to gain some insight into the systems of power in the South African art industry. More specifically, while much art criticism focuses on the form and function of individual artworks and performances, a broader critique of how the realities of identity, labour, access and power function in the realms of The White Cube and The Black Box can be achieved through artworks themselves.

Art Criticism in South Africa

What is the function of the art critic? There is an age-old rift between artists and critics that has led to a rather bland understanding of what it is an art critic does. For many, it goes like this: artists create work, critics evaluate this work and either laud the artist for their achievement, or produce a scathing review that damns the artist's career. Another common position is that nobody really needs art critics (who are just failed artists themselves), and that it is the critics who need artists in order to make a living. Both of these positions are outdated and unhelpful. Artists will always need reliable reflections on and records of their work, and critics, more than simply passing judgement on a performance or a work of art, are valuable for the ways in which they disseminate information and opinions about artistic work.

Outside of conventional criticism such as reviews, essays or artist profiles, critics and arts journalists should ideally be writing about the commercial art industry, too – galleries, theatres, government-owned or -funded arts institutions – in order to contextualise, demystify and hold to account the practices that take place in this industry.

Still, South African journalism is in a bad state, and in a time of rapidly shrinking newsrooms, the arts are always the first to go. At the time of writing, the major national newspaper the *Mail & Guardian* has no full-time arts journalists on its staff, while the *Sunday Times* arts desk has been reduced to a vague ‘lifestyle’ section that provides coverage on mostly local fashion, food, travel, gardening and the occasional bit of visual art and performance news. One of the country’s best-known art publications *Art Africa* (formerly *Art South Africa*), which used to publish criticism, reviews and features by a range of local and international critics and academics, is currently operating on a skeleton staff and mainly republishes press releases and exhibition statements with little to no editorial intervention. Others, such as *Business Day*, have resorted to producing art supplements that, rather than housing arts journalism or criticism, amount to a few slim pages filled with sponsored advertorials for local art auctioneers and corporate art sponsorships. Overall, writing on South African art exists on the fringes, with most dedicated arts criticism taking place in publications such as *ArtThrob* or *The Critter*, niche blogs or websites that rely on reader donations or partnerships with organisations and events such as the National Arts Festival or bank-sponsored art fairs to remain afloat financially, and who work with a small pool of arts writers across the country.

So, who is providing the record on South African art and performance? Who is disseminating information, opinions and reflections about artistic work and its role in society? And where can a

reliable form of critique on the state of South African art – its artists, markets and organisations – be found?

In embarking on this two-year Master's in Creative Writing programme, I had two central interests. The first was figuring out the potential role or function of a work of visual art or performance in a work of short fiction as a potential plot point, narrative device, or even a character itself. The second was to test the notion of a work of art, whether a performance piece or visual art object, or the use of either of these in a work of fiction, to provide a [adequate] form of critique or speculation on the South African art world. It is this second point that I explore and expand upon in this essay: in the absence of a dependable system of arts criticism in the South African media, it is the work of South African artists, performers and fiction writers that can provide us with a form of reflection.

The Black Box

'I think that ... most of the time, I just trust fiction more than I do non-fiction.'

– *Jemma Kahn*.¹

There is a rich history of theatre and performance in South Africa, and a number of noteworthy theatre houses and performing arts platforms. From Cape Town's Baxter Theatre and Johannesburg's Market Theatre, popularly known as South Africa's 'theatre of the struggle', to festivals such as Dance Umbrella and the National Arts Festival, the country is known for its extraordinary performing artists and productions. But the state of contemporary South African theatre is dire. The Market Theatre struggles to draw a crowd, Dance Umbrella is now defunct,

¹ Author's interview with Kahn, 30 August 2021.

and the National Arts Festival sees crowds dwindling each year. And all of this prior to the global Covid-19 pandemic.

As for South African theatre critics, while I can count them all on one hand, they are a dedicated bunch. Still, the fact remains that there is little to no sustained criticism and reportage on theatre, dance and other kinds of performing arts in the country and it's arguably where we need it most. For years now, institutions such as the Naledi Theatre Awards and the Fleur du Cap Theatre Awards have been accused of actively excluding young, black artists. The South African State Theatre is routinely under fire for exploiting and failing to pay its artists, and even The Market Theatre is struggling to bounce back following issues of financial mismanagement in 2018. Save for the latter, which did receive substantial coverage from the investigative arts journalist Charl Blignaut during his time at *City Press*,² it is most often performing artists themselves who call these institutions to account, be it for their dodgy dealings with money, their failure to provide adequate opportunities and resources for artists, or the skewed power dynamics between artists and organisations.

In thinking about performers who have used their work to speak back to these relationships of power in 'The Black Box', the work of playwright Jemma Kahn has been something of a touchstone for me.

In November 2017, Kahn received the news that she was the recipient of the 2018 Standard Bank Young Artist Award (SBYAA) for Theatre. The award, given annually to five or six South African artists under the age of 35 across the fields of theatre, visual art, jazz, dance and occasionally performance art, is considered to be one of the highest honours in the South African art world. It is a marker of success, and a vote of confidence – a sign that the winner will go on

² <https://www.news24.com/citypress/News/sa-theatre-rocked-by-allegations-of-financial-misconduct-against-chair-20180422>

to do great things in their field. Winners receive a cash prize and are commissioned to produce a work or body of work that will be performed or exhibited at the National Arts Festival the following year. For many, the SBYAA is an opportunity to showcase work that speaks to their ideas and interests, as well as to the South African art world in general.

In December that same year, a month after receiving the news, Kahn and her father embarked on a road trip from Johannesburg to Cape Town. At this stage, Kahn had a vague idea of what she was interested in pursuing for her SBYAA performance. She wanted to make ‘an art play’ that looked closely at the life and work of significant figurative painters such as Lucian Freud and Francis Bacon. At some point on the drive, Kahn noticed a large hole on the side of the highway. Her father, she says, described the hole as a ‘borrow pit’, an excavation remaining after the extraction of sand for roadworks or other forms of highway construction. The experience stayed with her, and later informed both the title and the conceptual basis for her 2018 SBYAA performance, *The Borrow Pit*.

In *The Borrow Pit*, Kahn zeroes in on the lives of influential painters, philosophers, philanthropists and psychoanalysts from a bygone but enduringly influential era to posit that the artist-muse trope has less to do with artistic tradition than with relationships of extraction and abuse. Performed using a combination of stage acting, live narration, sock-puppetry, and the Japanese street theatre techniques of *kamishibai*, the play draws on historical facts and events from the lives of these prominent painters and intellectuals, before harnessing fiction as a way forward.

The play begins in Paris, in the dark, smoky recesses of a gentlemen’s club where a group of important men stand around talking about important things, and where we meet the likes of Friedrich Nietzsche, Sigmund Freud and Pablo Picasso (a striped black and white sock-puppet

animated by Kahn). It is also here that the painters Francis Bacon (Tony Miyambo) and Lucian Freud (David Viviers) are introduced, two of the play's central figures. There is a great deal of clandestine activity that the audience is not privy to in this first act; all we know is that the lives and careers of the two painters will soon improve immeasurably. Bacon lands consignment deals with the MOMA, falls into untold fortune, and sells more paintings than he can produce. Freud finds similar good fortune, though to a lesser extent than his contemporary. Both artists have their muses – Freud's wife Lady Caroline Blackwood (also played by Kahn), and Bacon's bumbling thief-turned-lover George Dyer (played by Wilhelm van der Welt).

Through the secret events at the gentlemen's club and the presence of the respective muses, Kahn puts forward a sinister theory behind the long history of male-dominated arts and culture in the Global North, and the powerful and successful figures it produces. In Kahn's narrative, Picasso, Freud and Bacon achieve global fame and fortune through literal and metaphoric vampirism – they lure and prey upon a string of muses, drinking their blood and using them as the subjects of their paintings, the source of their power. Ultimately, the play is an allegory about powerful and hideous men.

When I saw *The Borrow Pit* in 2018, I was struck by Kahn's ability to harness fiction and performance as tools for criticism of the industry in which she operates. Premiered at the country's longest running and best-known arts festival, it provided a means of reflecting on and assessing, from inside The Black Box, the social, economic and political structures of this industry without any of the conventional language and form of arts criticism, or the bland and factual discourse of research reports. Importantly, it was a work of art that, despite its European setting, spoke back to and called into question the very industry that it was created in.

Throughout the course of my Master's in Creative Writing, the play has served as a point of reference for my interest in the South African art world as an industry that is being held to account by its own practitioners. It is an industry that, through its various artworks, performances and players, is constantly in conversation with itself, always questioning and reviewing through its many parts, its own function and role in the world.

Beyond drawing on the skewed relationship between artist and muse, *The Borrow Pit* also draws on instances of sexual assault, all reflecting real life experience. There is the toxic relationship between Bacon and his muse Dyer, who ultimately ends his life as a result of this relationship, and there is a quietly devastating scene in which Picasso preys on Freud's wife, Lady Caroline Blackwood. As Kahn explains, expanding on fact through fiction was all too easy.

The metaphor of vampirism is so blatant. But it works in the context of the play and is really a response to some of the realities I discovered through my research for the play. Bacon and Freud had this body count around them which is real. They were very attracted to certain types of people I think, and so I just ran with the fact that they were poisonous and that they were taking from people, and so in some ways it's not a metaphor. Because I think they did do that, they still do that. Having a relationship with Freud must have been awful. There are stories of models who would sit for him, and they'd sit for a couple of sessions before he'd start taking his clothes off and they'd say, 'What are you doing?' and he'd say, 'Well this is part of it.' If they refused, he'd threaten to destroy the painting. He believed that part of the act of painting someone was to have them.³

³ Author's interview with Kahn, 30 August 2021.

It is also worth mentioning that *The Borrow Pit* debuted a year after the emergence of widespread sexual-abuse allegations against the now-convicted American film producer Harvey Weinstein in 2017, which subsequently led to the global #MeToo movement and generated discussion around the nature of sexual abuse and assault in the arts, media and entertainment industries the world over. While *The Borrow Pit* makes no attempt to reference these realities as they appear in the South African art world, the performances of the play in South Africa, and its premiere at the 2018 National Arts Festival can be viewed as commentary on the enduring nature of these systems of power, and on institutional abuse and extraction in the country.

Kahn is not the only artist to have used their craft as a form of critique. Dancer and choreographer Lulu Mlangeni's 2021 work *KGANYA*⁴ posits that performing artists are too often reduced to caged birds; performance artist Gavin Krastin has a long history of using performance to say, quite simply, 'fuck theatre';⁵ and dancer and performance artist Nelisiwe Xaba's 2017 performance *Bang Bang Wo*⁶ is a brilliant take on the politics of 'help' and 'support' from arts organisations and institutions.

Then there is the 2018 performance *Black Privilege* by the dancer, choreographer and performance artist Mamela Nyamza, who also happened to be the Featured Artist at that year's National Arts Festival. In a similar vein to Kahn's *The Borrow Pit*, Nyamza's *Black Privilege* is a wry and discomfiting work that calls into question the structures and functions of artistic (and academic) institutions, with specific reference to how identity, labour and restitution are dealt with in performing arts spaces.

Like *The Borrow Pit*, it is rich in metaphor. Nyamza, covered in gold body paint, wears only a belt of gold chains and coins as she plays the part of the gilded artist, the golden goose, the

⁴ <https://thecritter.co.za/?p=4449>

⁵ <https://thecritter.co.za/?p=678>

⁶ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n4wGqdLOw6Y>

prized possession who sits atop an equally golden ladder, muted in her movements, but hyper visible, nonetheless. Choreographer and dancer Sello Pesa plays the part of the manager, the academic, the judge and the auctioneer in an equally reserved manner, although always present, always exerting a quiet power and influence. Roped barriers encircling the performance area are not unlike those that keep viewers and consumers away from celebrities on red carpets or from artworks and artifacts on museum walls. The black and white checkerboard floor suggests a game of chess, or perhaps snakes and ladders, where Nyamza is always one move away from sliding down to the jaws of the serpent. The use of the popular dance song ‘Memeza’ lends an irony to the work – a song of protest dressed up and watered down with a club-like beat.

While there is no text to speak of, Nyamza’s physical performance contains the narrative. Situated atop the ladder for most of the performance, she is precariously perched on a vibrating exercise machine. In my reading of this work, the central critique is in response to the parading of South African artists – and black women artists in particular – by artistic and academic institutions which applaud the work of these artists while failing to provide adequate remuneration or resources in order for them to create this work in the first place. In *Black Privilege*, Nyamza has made it to the top of these institutions, and she has the medals and the platform to prove it, but how is it possible that one can be simultaneously celebrated and constrained by the same institution, she asks? How long can she be shaken around and paraded about before she falls? Similarly, what does the celebration of her success and her work inside of these institutions mean when most performing artists must work without access to these same spaces? As contemporary dance artist and scholar Rainy Demerson states in her article ‘Black Privilege in the Black Box: Mamela Nyamza’s Choreographic Resistance’:

Nyamza's performance at the National Arts Festival in particular speaks to a need for Black South Africans, like herself, to remember and acknowledge Blackness as a complex set of relations in a country that sometimes eschews dialogue on race and gender in favor of promoting the ideals of the 'rainbow nation,' rather than addressing the realities of social inequity that live on through the twenty-first century.⁷

Nyamza's performance is also a pointed reflection on the South African performing arts industry, its failing methods of management and governance, and its treatment of artists. *Black Privilege*, as it turns out, was somewhat prophetic. Later that year, Nyamza was appointed as the deputy artistic director of the South African State Theatre, a position which also saw her curating and programming the 2019 Dance Umbrella Festival. In November 2019, though, she was dismissed from her position following a speech she made at the opening of Dance Umbrella in which she criticised one of the festival's main sponsors, Artscape Theatre, for failing to pay its artists.⁸

Again, Nyamza turned to performance as a vehicle for protest and critique. *Pest Control*, a work she debuted at the 2020 Virtual National Arts Festival, included the audio of the 2019 speech that led to her dismissal, and sought to highlight the extractive nature and the longstanding inequities of the South African art industry. For the performance, Nyamza uses a boardroom table enclosed with steel bars to make her point. 'With *Pest Control*, Mamela Nyamza is hell-bent on exposing the sordid underbelly and bureaucratic cronyism of the arts and culture institutions in South Africa,' reads the text for the online trailer.⁹

⁷ <https://www.critical-stages.org/23/black-privilege-in-the-black-box-mamela-nyamzas-choreographic-resistance/>

⁸ <https://twitter.com/mymamela/status/1207735386136612865>

⁹ <https://youtu.be/e82zZYVGSFA>

Currently, I can find little to no reporting, and no sustained written criticism or commentary about Nyamza's experience with the South African State Theatre. A basic online search reveals mostly republished press statements by the State Theatre. *Pest Control*, then, serves as one of the primary records and accounts of her experience, and serves as a performed critique of South African performing arts institutions such as the South African State Theatre, as well as the experience of artists who have worked inside similar institutions.

The White Cube

I thought it was kind of funny because no matter how much effort I exerted I'd never quite enter the gallery, I'd be perpetually stuck just outside the gallery trying to get in.

– Mitchell Gilbert Messina¹⁰

Where criticism on the performing arts in South Africa has all but disappeared, there is still a fair and consistent amount of writing being done on the visual arts. As mentioned earlier, however, 'puff pieces' – adjective-laden texts full of praise and rote description of an artwork or body of work with little to no sustained critique on the work or the industry it exists in – make up most of this writing. As such, most writing being produced on South African art feels directed by, or in service of, the institutions themselves, resulting in reworked press releases, and general coverage of only those artists who have access to and are able to show in major galleries. When it comes to critiquing and calling into question the 'shady tactics'¹¹ employed by galleries and gallerists,

¹⁰ <https://10and5.com/2015/06/22/young-south-africa-mitchell-gilbert-messina-the-art-of-humour/>

¹¹ In May 2018, Cape Town's smac gallery hosted a group exhibition titled *shady tactics*. All of the artworks on exhibition spoke, in ways both subtle and overt, to the appropriative strategies of individuals and institutions in the South African art world. <https://www.smacgallery.com/exhibitions-archive-3/shady-tactics>

and the value systems at play in the world of visual art, it's often only the artists themselves¹² who are up to the task.

I keep a postcard pinned to the corkboard above my desk. It is a photograph of a small sculpture, a pair of legs with no torso, exhibited in a gallery space. The sculpture is by the visual artist Rhett Martyn. It is not a remarkable image, and the artwork is not one that I find particularly interesting or moving, but I like to keep it around to remind me, always, to be wary of the origins of a story.

In July 2018, I attended an exhibition walkabout¹³ led by Martyn for his exhibition, *1:10 Modernist Plunder: The New Constructivists*, the result of an eight-month-long research project in residence at Johannesburg's David Krut Gallery. Martyn had produced a series of maquettes for the exhibition – small paper sculptures made to look like rusted metal that sat in a replica model of the David Krut gallery space. They were curious things, impeccable imitations that were found to be nothing but paper when you picked them up and felt their weightlessness in your hands. After inviting us to play with the works, Martyn began telling us how the exhibition came about and how his research project had taken shape, before launching into the story that inspired the body of work, the story of João Mangual.

The story goes like this: João Mangual was a prominent Mozambican businessman, architect and art patron who was involved in the Mozambique Liberation Front (FRELIMO) in the 1960s and 70s. He was invested in the South African anti-apartheid struggle, too, and was a strong supporter of Umkhonto we Sizwe (MK), the armed wing of the African National Congress

¹² Artist and academic Sharlene Khan's essay, *Doing it for Daddy*, is something of an iconic text in the South African art world. Amongst other things, the essay argues that colonial systems of power are still largely in place in art communities, although now with white women enforcing these systems of power, as opposed to white men. <http://www.artsouthafrica.com/?article=402>

¹³ The full walkabout by Rhett Martyn is available on Spotify courtesy of the David Krut gallery: <https://open.spotify.com/episode/2u8GRyITFECPeYDeONyMwA?si=rjWJ5NNaQ1eU0vx0TFShnw>

(ANC). An eloquent speaker and a man of many languages, Mangual frequently liaised with FRELIMO members as well as Russian dignitaries, which saw him making several trips to Russia. Being both an architect and an art-lover, he had a particular interest in Modernist sculpture and began building up a collection of pieces from artists working in the style of Russian Constructivism. In 1978, after shipping a number of these works back to Mozambique, Mangual decided he wanted to showcase his collection in a public exhibition. Johannesburg, being an artistic and cultural hub at the time, was a good place to do so. Arriving in the city, he made contact with a prominent art dealer and organised an exhibition. He also made contact with a few MK operatives and hatched a plan to smuggle weapons, with the help of FRELIMO, from Mozambique to South Africa by concealing them inside the sculptures that would be exhibited. It's alleged that a spy from the National Party was at this meeting between Mangual and MK and a few days later, not far from where the meeting took place, Mangual was found dead in the Jukskei river.

As Martyn relayed the tragic story of Mangual, the architect, art-lover and struggle hero, the audience listened intently. We couldn't believe that we'd never heard of Mangual before this. We were in awe of his plan to use art as a tool for resistance in this way, and we were outraged at the apartheid government for assassinating him. Also, we were thankful for artists like Martyn who, through their work, were able to examine and highlight these stories that are so vital to the history of our country, our continent. Martyn's works, a reconstruction in miniature of Mangual's lost exhibition, became all the more profound.

Martyn wrapped up. 'Right,' he said. 'That's the story. I've fabricated the entire story.'

We'd been tricked! A few of us in the crowd laughed, many of us waited for Martyn to explain himself.

One of my studio mates commented on my works in progress one day, he said, 'Well, you've made a bunch of Modernist sculptures. I'm seeing Richard Serra in here, I'm seeing Anselm Kiefer, I'm seeing Edoardo Villa, I'm seeing all of these prominent Modernist sculptors, but how is this different from the 60s and how is this different from what happened before?' So the narrative developed out of that.¹⁴

While Martyn may have developed the fictional story of João Mangual as a response to his studio mate's suggestion that he was becoming too caught up in the process of creating works in line with a particular tradition, the resultant narrative around which his exhibition is built says a great deal about South African contemporary art and its compulsion to reference and draw on a particular narrative and set of ideas from the country's history in order to ground itself.

Martyn's tale could even be seen as drawing on real-life figures such as the former Constitutional Court judge Albie Sachs who, during his exile years in Mozambique, began to build up a collection of African art while also befriending South African struggle artists such as Dumile Feni. Other real-life tales that resonate with Martyn's fabricated one include figures such as the musician Hugh Masekela and the Medu Art Ensemble's Thami Mnyele, both of whom used their art to rally against the apartheid regime while in exile.

The story of Mangual, though, is essentially an attempt at rationalising and validating a set of material works. It is a narrative tactic to generate interest and perhaps, given the location of the

¹⁴ From the exhibition walkabout with Martyn, July 2018
<https://open.spotify.com/episode/2u8GRyITFECPeYDeONyMwA?si=rjWJ5NNaQ1eU0vx0TFShnw>

exhibition in a commercial gallery space, a sales point for the work. Commercial galleries may have good intentions when working with artists – growing their careers, providing a platform for their work – but all artwork has a price, and sales are at the centre of a gallery’s business model. Given the subjective nature of visual art, it is clear that the artist’s intention, the context in which the work was made and its provenance all factor into its value. People like to know the story behind the artwork they’re viewing or buying. There are few collectors who would walk into a gallery and purchase an artwork that has no history to it, rather than one that is rooted in a particular narrative or period. Why else do we have artist statements, or bother reading interviews with artists about the inspiration or ideas behind their work?

For Martyn, the simple act of making, of paying tribute to those sculptors who came before him, was enough. He knew he needed a story, though, a neat and compelling fable that would lend his artworks more standing in a gallery full of art-lovers and collectors. The choice to fabricate one, and to come clean about this fabrication, is smart and bold. Ultimately, Martyn’s body of work exists as a small, but useful commentary on how the value of art is understood and navigated in the South African art economy.

Then there are the more pointed jabs at the South African art industry, specifically the gallery structure. In 2015, the Cape Town-based visual artist Mitchell Gilbert Messina was invited to create a body of work for the Stevenson Gallery’s RAMP Project, an opportunity for artists to make use of the physical ramp space outside the gallery’s entrance. Messina works mostly with video to produce short narrative works that are often sardonic and ironic conversations with the art world. He also dabbles in performance, although with an equal amount of irony.

At the time of the RAMP Project, although the #FeesMustFall protests had yet to reach their climax, pockets of student protest action were taking place on campuses across the country in line with the University of Cape Town's student-led #RhodesMustFall movement, and the ways in which academic and artistic institutions such as major galleries and art schools wielded their power were being called into question by those who studied at or exhibited through such institutions. While not the focus of his performances, Messina tapped into this moment for Stevenson's RAMP Project by creating a series of short video works utilising the ramp at the entrance to the gallery as a metaphor for the lack of access to the institution.

Four short videos on the artist's YouTube,¹⁵ titled *Dribbling*, *Getting Down*, *Slipping* and *Sneaking* all play with, and poke fun at, the notion of gaining entry, both literally and figuratively, to the gallery, and draw attention to the labour required of the artist in order to do so. Performed on the physical ramp space that leads into the gallery, the works highlight the architecture and the infrastructure of the gallery space to reinforce this metaphor. In *Dribbling*, Messina is filmed leaving his studio in Paarden Eiland and heading to the Stevenson Gallery in Woodstock, dribbling a basketball all the way there. He enters and exits elevators, travels along busy main roads, crosses pedestrian bridges, and dashes across intersections with his basketball. It is a simple but clever reflection on the theoretical distance between artist and institution, and a playfully blunt statement on the distance one must travel in order to gain access to a gallery space. The whole performance builds up to a single moment, the artist taking his shot, which he ultimately misses, the ball bouncing anti-climactically off the rim of the hoop just outside the gallery.

¹⁵ All of the performances from Messina's RAMP project (2015), as well as the *Big Old Drawings* (2017) can be found on the artist's YouTube:

https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCSG_r8ApAxdvYyKIn78w90w/videos

Similarly, in *Slipping*, Messina attempts to make his way up the ramp, which is covered in wet plastic sheeting, and into the gallery. The 70-second video shows the artist slipping and falling, clumsily and comically, as he fails again and again to enter the space. The other two video works are in a similar vein. Speaking about the conceptual process behind the RAMP works, Messina said in a 2015 interview with *Between 10and5*, ‘I thought it was kind of funny because no matter how much effort I exerted I’d never quite enter the gallery, I’d be perpetually stuck just outside the gallery trying to get in.’¹⁶

Two years later, Messina produced a series of crudely drawn cartoons which he compiled in a video work titled *Big Old Drawings*. In many of the drawings, an artist character interacts with a gallery director character and comes out the worse for it. While the artist is short and glum, the gallery director is large and imposing, so much so that we never see their face, only a pair of legs that reach out of the frame, and the occasional hand that reaches down to give the downtrodden artist a pat on the head.

In one cartoon, a pair of disembodied hands (the gallerist’s) emerge from the gallery space. The artist waves back at them. ‘Nice [of you] to pop by’ reads the caption in frame one. ‘We put your name up outside,’ the gallerist continues in frame two, ‘so you can see it without coming in.’

Again, Messina provides his short, punchy commentary on the relationships of power between artist and gallerist, or artist and institution.

Since the RAMP Project works, Messina has gone on to do well for himself, frequently participating in local and international residencies, and showing work in a number of group and solo exhibitions. For many artists, though, access remains an issue, and they would be lucky to even receive an invitation to create work *outside* of the gallery space.

¹⁶ <https://10and5.com/2015/06/22/young-south-africa-mitchell-gilbert-messina-the-art-of-humour/>

Three years after the RAMP series, Messina was included in a group exhibition at Cape Town's smac gallery titled *shady tactics*. The work he had on exhibition was a video piece titled *A Brief History of the Institute*. Using images sourced from the internet as well as sound and text, Messina created a fictional narrative that was rooted in the reality of South African contemporary art. The piece tells the tale of an art institute with a questionable history and an agenda of rampant cultural extraction. There are many galleries, museums and institutions that one could reasonably have placed at the centre of Messina's narrative, the Norval or A4 Art Foundations to name only two, although one specific institution did spring to mind: the Zeitz Museum of Contemporary African Art (MOCAA).

At the time, the Zeitz MOCAA had been open for less than a year. Situated in Cape Town's V&A Waterfront and constructed out of repurposed grain silos, the museum had already generated a fair amount of conversation in local and international art circles, with widely read publications such as the *Guardian* providing coverage of the opening.¹⁷ But the origins of the building and the collection it housed were questionable. The grain silos themselves had been built upon former coal sheds, both structures part of an architectural and industrial history of colonial-era Cape Town, and the construction was partly backed by Growthpoint Properties, which raised questions about land ownership, privatisation of the arts, and the role of capital in the continent's arts and culture. The art housed by the museum was also all drawn from the private collection of its patron, Jochen Zeitz, former CEO of Puma. Then there was Zeitz MOCAA's executive director and chief curator, Mark Coetzee who, following allegations of his

¹⁷ <https://www.theguardian.com/travel/2017/sep/21/cape-town-zeitz-mocaa-art-museum-africa-open-september-2017>

abuse of power and inappropriate conduct with junior staff at the institution, resigned less than a year after the museum opened.¹⁸

Messina's film was both prophetic and timely, with Coetzee's resignation making news in the same month as the opening of *shady tactics*. As the exhibition statement puts it, *A Brief History of the Institute* is a work 'alluding to consumerist desire and the "cultural mining" tendency of the neoliberal art world, which reproduces new trends but spews the same power-relationships,' and showcases 'Messina's sharp commentary on the skewed politics of the South African contemporary art scene.'¹⁹

The controversy surrounding Zeitz MOCAA after its opening is hardly unique. It might even be predictable at this point, and where journalism has succeeded in this instance in providing a record of events, it is the kind of playful but pointed fiction by artists such as Messina that provides us with another point of entry and another way of making sense of it all.

The Page

I was interested in this compulsion and also in the repetitive technical processes of printmaking that would have dominated the life of such a person. I thought that by getting inside the head of the character March I would solve some of the riddles of his life.

– Bronwyn Law-Viljoen²⁰

¹⁸ <https://news.artnet.com/art-world/mark-coetzee-resigns-zeitz-mocaa-1288847>

¹⁹ As written by curator of the exhibition, Thuli Gamedze, in the exhibition statement: <https://www.smacgallery.com/exhibitions-archive-3/shady-tactics>

²⁰ <http://bookslive.co.za/blog/2017/06/05/the-barry-ronge-fiction-shortlist-bronwyn-law-viljoen-talks-about-the-origins-of-her-novel-the-printmaker/>

Throughout the course of my MA, I have sought out various South African novels and short stories that make use of art, artists and artistic institutions as characters, narrative devices or plot points. As with visual art and performance, I wanted to find out how effective works of fiction were when it comes to reflection and criticism on the arts.

Prior to starting work on my manuscript, I was already interested in the work of the writer Richard Rive who, through short stories such as ‘Drive-in’, is able to establish time, place, or tone through the simple inclusion of an artwork or artist. In the case of the below, it is the reference to the work of South African artist Cecil Skotnes.

The discussion had taken place at Mervyn’s flat, where he had been once before. Cheap wine, potato crisps and lots of smoke. Crude African mats on the floor with Skotnes prints on the wall. Rows and rows of untidy paperbacks. The discussion had continued interminably. The establishment of a multi-racial writers’ group. Or was it non-racial?²¹

Referencing both the crude African mats and the Skotnes prints, here, allows the reader to gain a better understanding of the kind of people gathered in this flat – in the case of ‘Drive-in’, a collection of self-important white liberal types in 1980s South Africa. The writer and art critic Sean O’Toole has also noted Rive’s use of the South African painter Irma Stern’s work in ‘a story appearing in his collection *African Songs* (1963), albeit only as cultivated décor’.²² J.M. Coetzee refers to an artistic movement in a similar way in his novella *Youth* (2003). There we see the narrator, a student in 1950s South Africa who leaves for London to experience the world and pursue his writing and art, musing on the Surrealists in relation to his own writing, which consists of ‘pseudo-poems made up of phrases generated by a machine.’²³ In addition to

²¹ Rive, R., 1983. *Advance, Retreat*. Cape Town: David Philip. p. 50.

²² O’Toole, S., 2020. *Irma Stern: African in Europe, European in Africa*. Munich: Prestel. pp. 84-85.

²³ Coetzee, J.M., 2003. *Youth*. London: Vintage. p. 121.

providing a point of reference for the kind of writing the narrator produces, the mention of Surrealism also helps to frame the narrator's almost unconscious way of moving through the world, and how he goes about managing his disillusionment with his work, his writing and his love life.

In all of these examples, though, art plays a small role in the overall narrative. I needed novels and works of short fiction where art or artists were the backbone or the predominant feature of the story. The work of writer and art critic Ashraf Jamal has been central to my thinking around my own writing, as well as the themes of this essay. While Jamal is known for his work as an art critic, he has also published two novels and a collection of short stories. His fiction, is a valuable record of art-making during the early years of South Africa's transition to democracy and is filled with rich speculation about a country of artists who were entering an increasingly globalised art market.

In his introduction to *Art in South Africa: The Future Present*, the 1996 book of essays on post-apartheid South African art co-authored by himself and Sue Williamson, Jamal suggests that South African art of the time occupied an anxious state between the country's past and present. Eager to leap into the future, it was compelled to remember and reflect upon a very recent history of atrocity: 'Dogged by history, South African art is in the throes of re-imagining and re-imaging itself. A faultline persists, a will to reappraise – to invent anew. To do so, the past must be harnessed to the present.'²⁴

Speculation, imagination and invention are primary functions of art, the world over. In South Africa, though, as Jamal points out, post-apartheid art was affected by a very particular history

²⁴ Jamal, A. & Williamson, S., 1996. *Art in South Africa the Future Present*. 1st ed. Cape Town: David Philip. p. 13.

that influenced the ways it presented itself, located itself and the subject matter it concerned itself with. Jamal's second novel, *Love Themes for the Wilderness*, was published in the same year as *Art in South Africa: The Future Present* and can be read as a work of fiction that muses on the state of South Africa's art industry and the global attention it attracted, post-apartheid.

Set in Cape Town in the early 1990s, the novel features a painter protagonist named Stoker. He and his friends, a group of artists and musicians in their twenties, are all trying to make sense of the newly democratic country during a time when everything seems possible, and foreign interest in the country's new wave of artists is increasingly drastically. For Jamal, the novel is a reflection of his own experience navigating art, music and culture in Cape Town during the '90s. It can also be seen as a vessel for some of his observations on the South African art world at the time. In my 2021 interview with Jamal, he explains that the novel is set in a time of great possibility.

[*Love Themes*] is set in what I call the Bermuda Triangle – this magical moment where everything is possible – between 1990 and 1993. Just after the unbanning of the ANC and the release of Mandela and just before the first democratic election... This moment when certain things are open and possible, is the moment when we become aware of our potential in an international domain, how that's going to happen, how we're going to make it possible, but back then the galleries were not yet in place.²⁵

Love Themes for the Wilderness is not strictly about art or the art industry, but I found much of the characters' musings on the industry, and their relation to it, to be a valuable reflection on the social function of South African art at the time. The novel begins with a gallery opening on a

²⁵ Author's interview with Jamal, 13 October 2021.

drizzly night. ‘Free wine. Lots of broke artists. Some suits,’ as Stoker describes it.²⁶ There he meets a foreigner, an Italian art dealer and curator named Bianca, who buys some of his paintings and later pushes him to show his work abroad, starting with her gallery in Palermo. Throughout the novel, whenever the two meet, they discuss and occasionally argue about the trajectory of South African art, and the new-found opportunities for South African artists to finally break into the international market. The novel also subtly explores the notion that South African art has a kind of rootedness to place, and that artists have a certain duty or compulsion to create and exhibit art in the country.

‘You think I am a neocolonialist. Is that it? A European who has come to steal the best and take it home to her native land?’ Bianca asks Stoker over coffee. Stoker’s response is given later: “‘I wish to have an exhibition here, in my country,” Stoker said. He had never spoken with such a keen sense of place before. He had never valued South Africa with such earnestness. He wondered why.’²⁷

Further reflections on the state of the South African art industry in relation to the rest of the world occur in the conversations between Stoker and his artist friend Joan, who has recently returned from New York, and takes a somewhat cynical approach to the gallery circuit in Cape Town.

Joan paused, then resumed the conversation. ‘In New York art is so technological. There are TV screens everywhere. Photographic exhibitions. We’re such a poor, small country in comparison...[Your] paintings are great,’ Joan said.

²⁶ Jamal, A., 1996. *Love Themes for the Wilderness*. 1st ed. Cape Town: Kwela Books. p. 4.

²⁷ Ibid p. 210.

‘Bianca wishes to buy them for some gallery in Italy. What do you think?’

‘They’ve got to be seen. And you need the money. You know that only foreigners are buying these days? All our major galleries are closing down. Soon we’re not going to have much space to show and sell.’

‘That’s Putter’s point,’ Stoker said.

‘Well, he’s right. All our best work is leaving the country. We’re going global.’²⁸

Another character who comes and goes throughout the novel is Putter. For the entirety of the novel, Putter is working on securing a space, a crowd, and a source of funding for what he calls The Locker Room Project. The art exhibition, he laments, is dead. The art *party* is the new thing. Unlike Stoker, who is entirely fictional, Putter is based on the Cape Town artist and educator Andrew Putter, co-founder of The Mother City Queer Project which, in the late 1990s and early 2000s, hosted a number of art parties and, as in the novel, aimed to use art projects and events as tools for rethinking identity, place and sexuality among other things, in a newly democratic South Africa.

‘Putter explored the event as an art-form, attempting to use the aesthetic realm of art projects as an arena for micro-political change,’ writes Sue Williamson in a 2008 *ArtThrob* bio²⁹ on the artist. In *Love Themes for the Wilderness*, Putter is also a character who functions as a necessary agitator – a conflicting point of view alongside Stoker’s stubborn idealism – and embodies the alternative and underground forces of change that were emerging alongside South Africa’s mainstream art industry and its increasing shift into a more globalised market.

²⁸ Ibid. pp. 276-277.

²⁹ <https://artthrob.co.za/08feb/artbio.html>

Considering *Love Themes for the Wilderness* and *Art in South Africa: The Future Present* were both published in 1996, it's reasonable to assume that Jamal's essays for *Art in South Africa* informed some of the observations he was making in *Love Themes*. 'They're linked,' explains Jamal, 'because it was when I learned about the art world more and more.'³⁰ For Jamal, the contemporary artists featured in *Art in South Africa* were on the cusp of 'going global' and his and Williamson's framing of South African contemporary art ultimately played a considerable role in grabbing the attention of the rest of the world.

Save for institutions such as Johannesburg's Goodman or Everard Read galleries, there were not many spaces to exhibit in if you were a contemporary artist working in the 1990s. The second wave of South African art was entering the international market (the first being South African resistance art of the 1970s) and was both urgent and exciting to international buyers, curators and art-lovers. Characters like Bianca in *Love Themes* then, 'would be an example of that kind of interest. It was a period when foreign dealers and curators became hugely interested in the work of South African artists, and South African artists themselves became increasingly interested in showing their work internationally.'³¹

For all the skewed relationships of power in the South African art world, there are also those artists who play the game, who use their practices and positions in the world to make a profit by any means necessary. In Ivan Vladislavić's novel *The Exploded View*, the stories of four men are subtly intertwined and interlinked to provide a view of early 2000s Johannesburg that is in a state of flux. It is a novel about social, political and architectural restructurings, and the tensions and slippages that emerge when the city's physical and social spaces are reshaped.

³⁰ Author's interview with Jamal, 13 October 2021.

³¹ Ibid.

One of these characters, the protagonist of the chapter titled *Curiouser*, is Simeon Majara, a successful artist whose work is concerned with events of genocide throughout history. Majara, in line with the novel's overarching themes, is an artist who works with methods of deconstruction and repurposing. His material is often found, and his practice is concerned with the remaking and reframing of material objects including masks, bandages and bullet-riddled walls.

Misappropriation, or the idea that visual artists profit from the tragedies and lived realities of others, is a recurring debate in contemporary art circles. The performance artist Steven Cohen and the photographer Roger Ballen are two South African artists who have had their practices called into question in this regard. For Cohen, it was his 2001 *Chandelier* performance, which took place amidst a forced removal in Johannesburg. The removal saw homeless people being evicted from their temporary dwellings, their belongings strewn about the place as Cohen performed in and amongst the detritus. Cohen has said of the performance that 'By my moving in a chandelier-tutu through a squatter camp being demolished, and filming it, I'm creating a digital painting of a social reality, half beautifully imagined, half horribly real.'³² For Ballen, it has been his early photographic works that have drawn criticism, specifically his 1994 book of photographs *Platteland* which features a number of stark and blunt portraits of impoverished white South Africans, 'strangled by poverty and preconception, rejected and downgraded.'³³

There are two common arguments in this regard, the first being that these artists are indeed profiting (literally, through the inclusion and sale of their works in galleries and publications) off of the dreadful conditions of others. The other is that, by producing these works, the artists are drawing attention to the conditions of poverty and inequality, and by doing so might enact some

³² From the artist's website: <https://steven-cohen.com/en/events/chandelier-brest-2/>

³³ From the artist's website: <https://www.rogerballen.com/platteland/>

kind of change or redress.³⁴ In *Curiouser*, the narrator takes no firm stance on Majara's practice and its ethical or moral implications, although a constant return to the positionality of the artist and his intentions is made, through both the artist himself and those around him.

From the onset of *Curiouser*, the narrator is wry, constantly poking fun at the 'serious business of making art'.³⁵ The story takes place in Greenside, at the artist's home where he and his friends – gallery workers and fellow artists – are having an exhibition 'closing'. 'It was the new thing, more fun than an opening, they said.'³⁶ Embedded in this story is another story told by Majara. It is the tale of how he came to acquire an inordinate number of wooden masks, some of which formed the basis for a recent exhibition. The masks are tourist curios, the kind of carved African ornaments peddled by hawkers on street corners and at robots throughout the city.

As Majara's story goes, he met a Malawian curio-seller named Roger in Bruma and enquired about buying some of his masks in bulk for an upcoming interior decorating gig. Roger ushers him into a nearby coffee shop and tells him that he's got crates and crates of masks, that they all belonged to another curio-seller, Victor, who was shot dead some weeks back. Majara ends up buying the supply of masks from Roger, and ultimately repurposing them, chopping and sawing them to be included in his exhibition. The exhibition is a success, too. 'Even people who were habitually sarcastic about his work thought he had achieved something remarkable, liberating the curio from its stifling form, cutting down to the core of its meaning, that sort of thing.'³⁷

³⁴ This remains a largely utopian idea. Forced removals still continue, and many of the country's people still live in abject poverty.

³⁵ Vladislavic, I., 2017. *The Exploded View*. Cape Town: Umuzi. p. 87.

³⁶ Vladislavic, I., 2017. *The Exploded View*. Cape Town: Umuzi. p. 87.

³⁷ Vladislavic, I., 2017. *The Exploded View*. Cape Town: Umuzi. p. 88.

The story of how Majara came to acquire these curios becomes the basis for a number of criticisms by his friends and art-world acquaintances, the central question being how an artist can justify using the work of other craftspeople and artisans to turn a sizeable profit. ‘It’s unfair, isn’t it?’ asks one of Majara’s party guests. ‘You carve up a cheap curio and put it in a gallery, and suddenly it’s worth a packet.’

‘If you move an object from one system into another, by the sweat of your brow, you change its purpose and therefore its value’ is Majara’s rebuttal.³⁸

As the story progresses, though, the reader becomes privy to Majara’s own thoughts, his doubts and neuroses about the work he produces and the ethical implications of this work. In this way, Vladislavić muses on the value systems at work in South African contemporary art markets, from the perspectives of the artist and those who work with him and alongside him.

Through *Curiouser*, fiction is harnessed to provide not so much a criticism of the form and function of art and artists in the world, but a series of subtle speculations towards conversations on art and appropriation, through the binaries of working-class artisans and commercial artists, or street-corner curio stands and blue-chip galleries. Specific to a migratory and fragmented city such as Johannesburg, it’s also a story that speculates on the symbolic and economic value of art the world over.

What happens when an artist has talent, drive, and original work, but no formal representation? What drives those artists who can never quite break into the gallery circuits, or are never able to realise an exhibition of their work, to keep on creating? And where does their work go?

For every successful artist represented by a gallery, of course, there are hundreds of artists who we never come to know of, largely due to their lack of representation. In short, if an artist is

³⁸ Vladislavić, I., 2017. *The Exploded View*. Cape Town: Umuzi. pp. 120-121.

not actively and consistently exhibiting work in solo or group exhibitions with established (or at least well-known) galleries, there's a slim chance that art-loving and art-buying audiences will ever come to know of their work.

In Bronwyn Law-Viljoen's *The Printmaker*, a reclusive yet prolific artist lives and dies with little to no recognition in commercial art markets, and no formal gallery representation. As a result, his extensive body of work, almost all of it unexhibited, languishes in storage at his home. Following his death, a close friend ends up with the artist's work and seeks out the help of a curator to catalogue and exhibit it all.

The artist in *The Printmaker*, March Halberg, is based in part on the South African artist Marcus Glaser who, despite his prolific output, was little known in commercial art circles, and gets only a few brief mentions in a handful of publications on South African art history. Similarly, Law-Viljoen herself came into possession of a significant amount of Glaser's work following the artist's death in 2007. 'This unlikely "inheritance" simmered in boxes in my house for a long time – perhaps five years – before I embarked on my more formal engagement with it,' explains Law-Viljoen in an essay on Glaser.³⁹ *The Printmaker* is one outcome of this engagement. It's a novel that looks at 'the possibility of understanding... some part of the process of making art. More specifically, I was curious about the making of art in a particular moment in South African history.'⁴⁰

The story of *The Printmaker* is told from the perspectives of a number of characters, all of whose lives overlap or interact. Through the perspective of Halberg, there is a rich attention to detail when it comes to the process, as well as the compulsion, of printmaking. Law-Viljoen was

³⁹ Law-Viljoen, B., 2018. The caretaker of wounds: pictures of the deposition of Christ in the work of Marcus Glaser. *Image & Text: A Journal for Design*, 31(1). p. 89.

⁴⁰ <http://bookslive.co.za/blog/2017/06/05/the-barry-ronge-fiction-shortlist-bronwyn-law-viljoen-talks-about-the-origins-of-her-novel-the-printmaker/>

interested in this compulsion, and also in the ‘repetitive technical processes of printmaking that would have dominated the life of such a person. I thought that by getting inside the head of the character March I would solve some of the riddles of his life.’⁴¹

In the opening section of the novel, Halberg himself comments:

I keep printing, making ten or more of an image that I like, to give myself the feeling that I’m doing something ... I print now to give myself the illusion that I’m making images, that something comes out of my hands, that there’s a root of a picture somewhere in my brain that I’ve managed to bring to the paper. I’m comforted by these appearances of what I have drawn. By my ability, through the rolling of ink, the wiping and the printing of the plate, to keep the picture returning.⁴²

Process is everything for Halberg. It is repetitive and technical, and in this way, for a character who is as isolated and compulsive as he is, it is also something of a salve. Arguably, all forms of art can only be fully realised when they are engaged with by an audience – a reader, a listener, a viewer. So, while representation in commercial art realms is financially beneficial to artists, it is also encouraging, validating, an acknowledgement of one’s work both existing in and contributing to the world in some small way. For Halberg, who has no audience to speak of, the act of relentlessly creating work is his way of responding to this lack of representation. What emerges through his reflections on his craft is an essential question about the validity of an artwork, an idea, a single image produced in isolation: What is the worth, or the function of an artwork outside of these conventional systems of value? And what is the purpose of the artist in this regard?

⁴¹ <http://bookslive.co.za/blog/2017/06/05/the-barry-ronge-fiction-shortlist-bronwyn-law-viljoen-talks-about-the-origins-of-her-novel-the-printmaker/>

⁴² Law-Viljoen, B., 2016. *The Printmaker*. Cape Town: Umuzi. p. 10-12.

These are not questions that are directly addressed or neatly resolved through the novel. Rather, they tend towards a rich speculation on an artist who is never afforded the opportunity to showcase his work. Halberg never does find formal representation in his lifetime, and this particular anxiety of pointlessness⁴³ endures up until his death.

The Printmaker is a novel that provides insight into the life and work of a South African artist who operated in the margins, away from the centre, from outside of the commercial gallery circuit. It is not a novel about a ‘successful artist’, nor is it about a ‘failed artist’. It is a work that embraces the practice of artmaking in South Africa outside of these binaries. As a result, it provides necessary perspectives on the artmaking practice as well as the commercial art scene that are rarely seen in South African art criticism.

Once Removed

Throughout the course of the MA, I have used all of the works explored in this essay as necessary guides and points of reference for my own writing. Through my manuscript, *Once Removed*, I’ve produced a collection of short stories, all set in South Africa and all making use of art and performance as characters, narrative devices or plot points in order to better grapple with many of the above-mentioned issues of power, access and value.

In pursuing the MA, I also hoped to take a necessary break from writing about art in the way of conventional criticism. I had become despondent and disillusioned with the state of arts criticism in the country and I saw the task of producing a collection of short stories about South African art and artists as an opportunity to explore the value of criticism through fiction. The

⁴³ During a 2021 seminar, Law-Viljoen commented in response to my short story submission ‘A Record’ that the characters were grappling with ‘an anxiety of pointlessness’. I’ve come to view this as a theme that runs through many of the stories in my manuscript, and one that I recognise in the character of March Halberg, too.

manuscript became a means of abstracting my own writing on art and performance, to pursue an alternative way of making sense of contemporary arts criticism.

In some ways, the short story ‘A Record’ became something of a key to the collection, and holds many of the concerns of this essay in fictional form. ‘A Record’ is constructed out of a series of semi-surrealist texts that explore the function, the futility, and the ‘anxiety of pointlessness’ of contemporary arts writers and critics. While the story is specific to the context of a global pandemic, I believe these themes have been relevant to the fields of arts writing, research and reportage for some years now.

A surprising, but welcome result of the MA project is my renewed faith in the possibility of contemporary arts criticism. In writing these stories and thinking on the capacity of visual art, performance and fiction to provide a record of the arts, I have been reminded of the continuing function of the art critic in society, and the ability of arts criticism to perform certain roles that cannot be replicated.

Importantly, there is the issue of immediacy – the ability of a critic to provide a reflection, a mediation, and a conversation between artist and audience, and to do so in a manner that is timely and direct. I touch on this briefly through the characters in ‘A Record’, all of whom work in relative isolation, but always in the service of a greater audience. It is the character of The Critic, however, who is perhaps most bound to the relationship between audience and writer. ‘He no longer writes for the papers (they turned their backs on the theatre years ago), but he still likes to hold onto the rigour of the craft. View, write, edit, and file for print that evening.’⁴⁴

Then there is the issue of specificity, which is only achievable up to a point with works of art. While works of art and performance might borrow elements from the world, it is a pursuit of certainty, and an obligation towards truth that serve as the foundations for the art critic. This

⁴⁴ From ‘A Record’, a short story included in my MA manuscript *Once Removed*.

became apparent through the writing of ‘The Real Deal’, a story in *Once Removed* that plays on corrupt government officials as well as the value systems at work in the secondary market. It is a story in which a bumbling character attempts to sell off an artwork he picked up at a flea market, the artwork itself being based on the J.H. Pierneef landscape that went ‘missing’ from former Free State premier Ace Magashule’s Bloemfontein office. While the story [itself] makes use of this true event, it is only to provide the basis for a plot. It has been the work of investigative journalists at the *Daily Maverick* that performed the necessary function of bringing to light the story of the stolen artwork.⁴⁵

Finally, while art embraces abstraction or speculation as a means of making sense of or conveying its message, much of art criticism involves the act of translation and interlocution. Often, it is through the act of writing alongside or in service of a work of art, rather than in direct response to it, that arts criticism becomes most necessary. This language of abstraction is something I grappled with in ‘Provenance’ a story that uses the language of press releases, auction houses and exhibition statements to reflect on the relationship between a work of art and what makes it valuable in the art market – a relationship that nearly always excludes the artist.

This artwork will change your life. Look at it. Do you see the striking use of colour, the bold gestures? What about the muscular form, the vertical presence, the extraordinary patina it’s taken on? Note how it charges the space, the way it honours the abstract and the incidental.⁴⁶

The process of writing the stories in *Once Removed* was done with all of the aforementioned

⁴⁵ <https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2018-10-22-the-great-art-heist-anc-secretary-general-ace-magashule-in-stolen-pierneef-painting-debacle/>

⁴⁶ The opening paragraph of ‘Provenance’, a short story included in *Once Removed*.

artists, artworks, writers and performances in mind. They were sources of inspiration and guidance, all working to support my central interest, that of fiction as an entry point to the art world that's not always possible through conventional criticism.

But the process also revealed to me that, while the industries and institutions housing art criticism may be in a bad state, the function of the art critic in the world is still a vital one. Works of visual art, performance and fiction then, may not be able to adequately replicate or replace the role of the art critic, but they can borrow from the tools of the art critic to offer up new modes of engaging with and critiquing the arts, and to provide an account of the South African contemporary art scene and the forces that drive and sustain it.

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