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BACK TO THE FRONT: TRACING REVERBERATIONS OF THE SOUTH WEST AFRICAN BORDER WARS OF THE 1970s AND 1980s.

Mandy Isobel Morris

A research report submitted to the Faculty of Humanities, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Art in Writing.

Johannesburg, 2006.

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ABSTRACT

This research report comprises two parts: a theoretical introduction and a creative component.

The theoretical introduction explores the extensive impact of militarism in South Africa during the South West African Border Wars of the 1970s and 1980s. It also reflects on some of the literary issues that were encountered during the research period.

The creative component consists of three short stories that examine some of the reverberations of living in a militarised state.

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DECLARATION

I declare that this research report is my own unaided work. It is submitted for the degree of Master of Art in Writing to the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg. It has not been submitted for any other degree or examination at any other university.

(Name of Candidate)

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DEDICATION

For Neville Grant Clack (29/05/1947 - 28/10/1977)

Return to the hut and search no more
You will not find him in reeds or tree
Kemo, Kemo, he is not there,
His campfire burns now among the stars.
(Ovambo funeral song)

Who will blow on the embers long buried,
under the cold of forgetfulness?
(Jean-Baptiste Mutabaruka)

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1. THEORETICAL INTRODUCTION

1.1 Introduction

The Border Wars[1] were a national trauma for South Africa and the reverberations of this trauma were varied and many. For most White male South Africans who approached adulthood in the 1970s and 1980s, the army was a rite of passage – the period during which a boy became a man. To those sectors of the population that were excluded from the compulsory military training that spanned nearly three decades, conscription may have had very little meaning in terms of active participation, but this lack of direct involvement in the army by other racial, gender and disabled groups does not mean that they were unaffected by the war-machine created by the South African Defence Force (SADF) and its conscripts.

Subsequent to the removal of troops from the operational area, the Border Wars became a topic *non grata*. The silences that surrounded this period of South African history inspired me to examine the literature pertaining to the Border Wars. Firstly, I sought to discover which voices had made themselves heard in response to the various effects of conscription and border duty. Secondly, I had to consider what platforms had been used to record these impacts, that is, what genres had been employed. Thirdly, I wished to investigate the correlation between the spaces occupied by conscripts: the border/army base, and the space their families occupied: the home-front, and to observe the dynamics between the two when they meet.

It is the intention of this theoretical introduction to capture the impacts and reverberations of individual stories against the background of the national event of the Border Wars.

1.2 A Historical Background of Conscription in South Africa

A brief historical background of conscription in South Africa is provided to inform the reader who may not be familiar with the history of conscription, and to locate the reader in the historical milieu. The background also seeks to provide pertinent information about the political landscape on the home-front and tactics

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used by the government to encourage unquestioned patriotism, which was a critical aspect in ensuring the progress of apartheid.

After the National Party (NP) came to power in South Africa in 1948 it attended to the creation of an apartheid state by ensuring that government institutions supported its regime. In accordance with NP strategy, the predominantly English-speaking Union Defence Force was converted into the SADF that was dominated by Afrikaners (Rauch in Cawthra, Kraak & O'Sullivan 1994)[2].

The apartheid policies of the NP did not go by unchallenged. During the 1950s the African National Congress (ANC), the Pan African Congress (PAC) and the South African Congress of Trade Unions (Sactu) used mass protests to voice their resistance to the NP government's racial policies; their angry resistance culminated in Sharpeville in 1960 when their demonstration was crushed by the South African Police (SAP) and the SADF. Persistent protests by Blacks[3] and the rise of English-speaking White anti-apartheid activists increased the resolve of the NP government to increase their protection force (Cock & Nathan 1989).

In addition to the unrest within South Africa's borders, the government was carefully monitoring events in sub-Saharan Africa where colonial domination was coming to an end. The government realised that in order to maintain White rule, it was essential that it defend South Africa's borders and assist the neighbouring states in any way possible to destabilise the liberation forces that threatened the stability of the region. To bolster the SADF, the government introduced universal compulsory conscription for White males in 1957. According to Section 3(1) (b) of the Defence Act "Every citizen between his 17th and 65th year, both included, shall be liable to render service in the South African Defence Force" (NUSAS 1982). Aware of the growing discontent in neighbouring countries and the increased threat to their own security, White citizens were largely accepting of the new law.

Political unrest in neighbouring Angola, Mozambique and Rhodesia was a major concern for the South African government. When Angola was granted independence by Portugal in 1975, South African forces invaded Angola to assist

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the Union for the Total Independence of Angola (Unita) in their efforts to prevent the Marxist Popular Movement for the Liberation of Angola (MPLA) from coming to power. The South African government realised that if they were to stave off liberating forces in their own country, they would have to support Unita against the MPLA. South African conscripts were deployed in large numbers to Angola where they were actively involved in combat. The SADF denied the activities of South African troops in Angola until fatalities and international media reports forced them to admit their presence in the country. Denial, censorship and withholding information of national civic importance were common tactics of the NP regime (Cawthra 1986).

The perceived political threat on South Africa's borders, the Soweto student uprising in June 1976 and anti-government protests across the country meant that the SAP and the SADF troops were thinly spread. In 1977 the period of conscription was extended to two years, after which a conscript was further committed to 30-day annual camps[4] for a period of eight years. In 1976 General Magnus Malan became the chief of the SADF. He said: "This war involves so many different fronts, unknown to the South African experience, that it has gained the telling, but horrifying name of **total war.** This different, all encompassing war has brought with it new methods and new techniques which in turn have to be met by **total countermeasures**" (NUSAS 1982). Malan was a military scholar who had studied at Fort Leavenworth in the USA and was attached to French forces in Algeria in the 1960s. He understood that war had divided French society, and it was from the French militarist General André Beaufré that he derived his **total strategy (**Leonard 1983).

In the latter half of the 1980s, the government bowed to increasing international pressure to withdraw from Angola and SWA, but the SADF was quickly deployed in South African townships to assist the SAP in quelling unrest and violence. The government granted the SADF and the SAP increased powers and announced a state of emergency in 1986, which allowed both military installations to operate virtually unchallenged in the interests of state security (CIIR 1989).

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In 1984 the End Conscription Campaign (ECC) was launched, a movement that was vital in drawing attention to the militarisation of the general populace and calling for the end of conscription. Conscripts and members of the public objected to military service and some conscripts served alternative jail sentences as 'criminals' rather than support the apartheid regime. After suffering a high rate of casualties during 1987 in Angola, the rate of objectors grew. Some objectors were not prepared to serve jail sentences and went into exile where they continued to add their voices to movements that protested against the apartheid regime (Cawthra, Kraak & O'Sullivan 1994).

In 1990 President FW De Klerk reduced the period of conscription to one year and objectors were formally recognised as political prisoners. In 1992 the government's amendments to the Defence Act allowed for objections to military service based on moral, ethical or religious reasons. The NP government did not address the issue of racial integration. In 1992 conscription was finally abandoned and the ANC announced that any army that protected South Africa would be made up of volunteers of all races (Cawthra, Kraak & O'Sullivan 1994).

2. THE BORDER WARS AS CHOICE FOR THE CREATIVE WORK

The poetry of the First and Second World Wars brought into my high school classroom the words of several men[5] - Louis MacNeice, Wilfred Owen, Siegfried Sassoon - and women - Vera Brittain, Rose Macauley, Juliette de Bairacli-Levy, Elizabeth Jennings - responding to the wars that occurred during their lifetimes.

Their poetic responses to the various impacts of the war recreated the emotional and physical landscape of war for me – the grief of my paternal great-grandparents who mourned a son who never returned from WWI, and the trenches in France in which my maternal grandfather was gassed. It was through the reading of these literary responses that I first became aware of the different reverberations of war, the impacts that wars had on the general population.

When my cousin Neville Clack, a parabat with the Recces[6], was killed during active border duty in 1977, our family was devastated by his death and struggled to come to terms with the fact that South Africa was in fact actively

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involved in combat in Angola. As a result of the press embargo there were few comprehensive references to the fighting in either the print media or on the South African Broadcasting Commission's (SABC) single government controlled television channel. I found no readily available literature, no volumes of war poetry to offer solace or to tender a frame of reference. Because of the unpopular and controversial nature of South Africa's presence in Angola, the media were effectively gagged from reporting on military activities in the area and the only information we had was an army official's assurance that Neville had died valiantly.

My brother has Nail-Patella Syndrome and a male cousin has severe epilepsy; both men were excluded from the army because of their physical disabilities. It was extremely difficult to witness the frustration they felt at being excluded. My brother wanted nothing more than to be considered normal; his exclusion enhanced his feelings of difference and manifested itself in a desire to be dominant in other ways. My cousin had lost his *paraat* brother Neville on the border. He and most of my male cousins then found themselves living in the shadow of someone who was regarded by the rest of the family to have paid the ultimate sacrifice – dying for one's country.

While the media were effectively gagged from printing articles that reflected the status quo of the military operations, South Africans were generally encouraged to support the Border Wars. There were safe pick-up areas for soldiers to wait for lifts. Special Welcome Packs were sent to soldiers who were doing border duty, these included letter-writing aids and basic necessities. Radio request programmes allowed families and friends to send their messages to their loved ones who were on the Border or stationed far away from home during their period of conscription. Advertising was unashamedly geared towards conscripts. Allied Building Society provided free Armed Forces Combo Kit Wallets to conscripts who opened accounts at their bank. Caress Jewellers pitched their adverts to young couples, the male was represented as a conscript and conscripts were offered a 15% discount on diamond engagement rings.

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Advertisements such as these ensured that the psyche of the consumers and indeed the general White population was encouraged to invest in a pro-conscription mentality (CIIR 1989).

During assembly at Assumption Convent, my *alma mater*, we were encouraged to foster a sense of national pride in the troops fighting on the Border and prayers for their safety were said every morning. As young White girls, many of us dreamed of having a boyfriend on the border and some teachers encouraged teenage girls to write to the 'boys on the border'[7] so that they would feel appreciated and supported.

Subsequent to South Africa withdrawing from the border territory, some of the ex-conscripts that I am acquainted with felt that the Border Wars suddenly became a taboo topic, especially as South Africa moved towards democracy. Many of these conscripts now feel that almost overnight it seemed as though South Africa had developed national amnesia about a period during which hundreds of young South Africans lost their lives and thousands more were emotionally scarred from their experiences. Conscripts such as writer Clive Holt weren't even always aware of the root of their emotional distress. Although several battle experiences were recorded in technical accounts that were written immediately after the Border Wars, none of them engaged with the emotional and corporeal experiences of conscripts.

This post-Border War period was also a difficult time for families of deceased and wounded soldiers – many of us were mourning our family members,

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but we were forced to do so in silence to avoid being considered supportive of what had become an 'unpopular' war. Many bereaved families were hurt and outraged that the sacrifice of sons, husbands, lovers, boyfriends, brothers, cousins, uncles and friends was considered futile and politically incorrect. The impact of the hurt and outrage has not been recorded to any significant degree in South African literature.

The images in *We Fear Naught But God: The story of the South African Special Forces "The Recces"* portray a war that was more inclusive of all races than the official rhetoric of the time led us to believe.

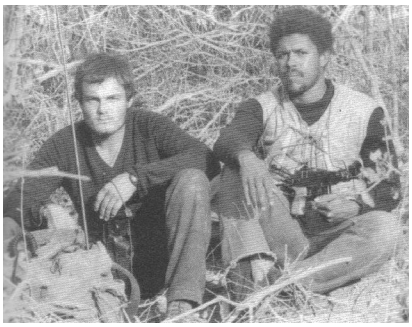


Figure 1.

Figure 1 depicts Jack Greef and Tony Vieira, soldiers who fought side by side for South Africa.



Figure 2

Figure 2 shows "Sgt Daniels congratulated by Capt. D Vorster for his successful deployment in *Operation Super"*.

Both Sergeant Daniels and Sergeant Vieira were Black men recruited from Angola to assist the SADF. This is ironic considering the exclusively White conscription and recruitment policies in South Africa at the time. It makes a

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mockery of the government marketing the war in Angola to South African civilians as a war against both the *swart gevaar* and the *rooi gevaar* – the Black Threat and the Communist Threat.

The South African government did not acknowledge the great commitment of the Angolan soldiers who gave their lives for South Africa at the time of their involvement, and even after the withdrawal of South Africa from Angola, the government granted the Angolan soldiers of the 32 Battalion 15 years tenure at an abandoned asbestos mine in Pomfret with minimal infrastructure, expecting them to exist on a nominal army pension with no access to transport or healthcare.

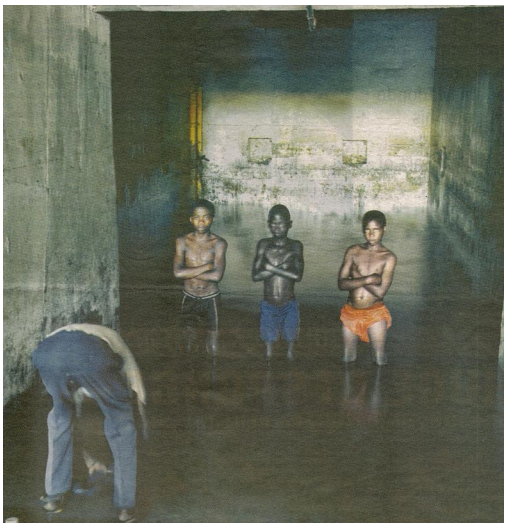


Figure 3. Photographer: David Goldblatt

"While Fernando Augusto Luta washes his clothes, Authosto Mokinda (13), Ze Jano (12) and Ze Ndala (10), pose for a photograph in an old mine-shaft at Pomfret Asbestos Mine. The water almost certainly contains blue asbestos fibres. The mine was opened in 1927 and closed on July 1, 1986. It was sold with its housing and hospital by its owners Gefco to the South African Defence Force in 1988, and was then used to house former Angolan soldiers who supported the South Africans in the Angolan war. Pomfret. North West Province, December 25, 2002."

It is against this background, the South African government's blatant failure to acknowledge the involvement of foreign Black soldiers, and their continued failure to afford the Angolan soldiers the respect they deserve, that I

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sought to examine the different impacts of the Border Wars, by being cognisant of all groups who were involved in the Border Wars. In the final creative work submitted here, I have chosen not to include a short story on the Angolan soldiers. That said, I felt it prudent to include my awareness of the issue here; failure to do so would have impacted on a consideration of my commitment to engage fully with the impacts of the Border Wars.

Many South Africans deem the Border Wars to be irrelevant, passé and offensively nostalgic in the 'new' South Africa. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) failed to deal with conscription. For a project that positioned itself as an instrument of national healing it is puzzling that the TRC ignored this period of history and its many reverberations. Former conscript and journalist Andrew Donaldson was irate that the TRC decided not to provide an audience for conscript experiences. "It's all very neat, but contemptible as well in the way it would enable so much of what happened to conscripts to be conveniently swept aside…. Through testimony on their roles in Namibia and later the townships, conscripts – and their families – would, I feel, come to terms with the past" (Donaldson 1998). Against this attitude of disregard it became important for me to examine the relevance of writing about the Border Wars at all.

In her review of JH Thompson's *An Unpopular War*, journalist Charlene Smith says, "It left me with the same question I had about the Border War at the time it was taking place – what is the point?" (Smith 2006). The point is that the South African border literature of the1980s was penned by exclusively White and exclusively male writers; there were few stories that have addressed conscription from either a Black or a female point of view, or in fact from any marginalised group who lived through the period.

Afrikaans playwright Saartjie Botha admits that the Border Wars continue to echo into our present. She says: "A lot has been written about the war. Now, almost 20 years later, many of the writers, readers and people involved in the wars have (hopefully) moved on. But there is something that remains in a person's psyche; life also offers new perspectives. We are saddled with a strong military past that hasn't been integrated, it hasn't reached boiling point yet, and it hasn't been addressed"[8] (Litnet 2006).

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Journalist Andie Miller suggested that the failure by the TRC to address all the stories would result in "nameless, faceless people who have suffered … will continue to remain invisible, and we run the risk of generating new forms of anger" (Miller 1995). Bishop Desmond Tutu agreed: "'Yes we can let bygones be bygones … but only once we have seriously dealt with the past. Because if we don't, it will come back to haunt us.'" (Miller, 1995).

Some critics of the resurgence of discussion about the Border Wars accuse those who want to remember their experiences of being nostalgic. Mieke Bal suggests that "Nostalgia is not necessarily false or inauthentic. Indeed, it can be empowering and productive if critically tempered and historically informed." (Baines 2006).

The stories I wrote are located within the period of the Border Wars and yet it is the silences and the impacts of the militarisation of the period which my stories engage with and seek to explore.

3. THE REPRESENTATION OF BORDER IN SOUTH AFRICAN LITERATURE

In 1988 *Forces' Favourites* was published by Taurus Publishers. It comprised a collection of English and Afrikaans short stories by South African writers in response to the Border Wars. Contributors include Andrew Donaldson, a then reporter at the *Cape Times* and founding contributor to *Vula* magazine, Michael du Plessis, a lecturer at Wits, Alexis Retief, a psychologist, actor and short story writer. Among those not mentioned here by name were many academics, theatre professionals and journalists. What *Forces' Favourites* brought together were writers united in their exploration of the emotions evoked by war, and they all sought to call attention to the futility of war. This collection of twenty stories is the singular volume that brings together a collective response to the Border Wars.

Exploring representations and expressions of militarisation and the Border Wars was the background to the creative project. The available literature was

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easily identified as falling into clear categories, namely academic, socio-political, historical and literary accounts.

The conventional military history about the South African Border Wars predominantly portrays detailed technical accounts of specific battles, the corps which fought them, and/or the strategies that were employed and the firepower used. Military writers such as Colonel Jan Breytenbach, Paul Els, Piet Nortje and Peter Stiff have written numerous books covering the many border battles. Their contributions are technically sophisticated but their accounts don't effectively contextualise the emotional, spiritual or social circumstances of the Border Wars. I was concerned that the lack of humanity in these accounts further perpetuated the war machine mentality and I found these accounts to be unengaging and devoid of humanity. They also maintain stereotypical representations of soldiers and battles.

Academic writers such as Gavin Cawthra, Jaclyn Cock, Laurie Nathan and Richard Leonard present a thorough socio-political background to this period of history. Their essays on the militarisation of a nation are an important informative communal record of the period. They engaged with conscripts and organisations in order to provide illustrating chronicles of the experiences, and were critical of the government's policies. This genre was both informative and engaging and provide a reader with an alternative to official rhetoric of the period.

Two decades of Border Wars saw the emergence of a literary genre that became known as *grensliteratuur* – border literature. In 1974 PJ Haasbroek's *Heupvuur* exposed the atrocities that he witnessed as a soldier, his war writings sought to expose rather than analyse the war. *Grensliteratuur* is the fictional writing of mainly Afrikaans intellectuals – the more well-known being Willem Steenkamp, Etienne van Heerden, Louis Kruger, Alexander Strachan and Koos Prinsloo. These writers addressed "violent political conflict with irony, rejection and horror" (Koornhof 1994). These stories were located in the genre of fiction, moving into a more emotional realm than either the technical or socio-political accounts. Although these accounts were still grounded in reality, they expressed experiences in a different way and allowed the human condition to be fully explored. The writers began to add their emotional voices to the war experience.

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In *Die Donner in Boetiefanie se Kop*, writer Eben Venter steps out of the strictly military zone, into the lives of conscripts and locates the issues of war – post traumatic stress disorder, racial violence and alcohol abuse in a domestic setting. In a stream of consciousness, Boetiefanie's mother as narrator relates her son's experience and it is though the depiction of her home, her mannerisms and her pain that Venter addresses the impact of militarization and violence on passive members of a militarised state. This fictional account is compelling for a reader because it depicts the emotional breadth of the canvas against which it was located, which neither of the preceding genres had managed to achieve.

Journalist Andrew Donaldson, former political activist Matthew Blatchford and playwright James Whyle are among the few English-speaking South Africans who also used fiction in which to situate their responses to the impact conscription had on their live. Because of the nature of the Border Wars, and the secrecy and misinformation that surrounded them, and what they came to represent as South Africa moved towards a democracy, these army stories became a taboo topic in the 1990s. In recording his disappointment in the TRC's failure to hear stories of conscription, Donaldson said: "I don't think I'm alone in wanting my story heard, such as it is" (1998).

The presence of conscripts in the townships mirrored the occupation of the troops on the borders. Black writers responding to the military occupation of their townships favoured poetry to mourn the deaths of their activists. These responses are from the perspective of the victim/enemy/oppressed and provide an alternative position to the soldier accounts that were available.

In the 90s Jeanette Ferreira's *Sitate vir 'n rewolusie* and Lettie Viljoen's *Klaaglied vir Koos* added Afrikaans female voices to the genre and introduced issues of commitment, gender and activism to the traditional elements of war as social and political conflict.

The emergence of the Southern African military memoir since 1999 represents a different literary approach to the Border Wars; perhaps supporting Donaldson's sentiment that there were many conscripts who wanted to tell their stories. Chris Cocks' *Survival Course*, Clive Holt's *At Thy Call We Did Not Falter*, Rick Andrew's *Buried In The Sky* and JH Thompson's *An Unpopular War*

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are different memoir-styled narratives with obviously similar themes about the Border Wars. The conscript experiences appear to be attempts by conscripts to set the record straight or to justify their participation in the Border Wars. Considering the media suppression during the Border Wars and the subsequent rejection of any dialogue about this period, it is likely that these conscripts felt a need to add a human touch to the militarised accounts. Writer Strachan said that he sought to "give an account of a world that I know, a world that few people know about" (Koornhof 1994).

Gary Baines suggests that many of these personal accounts are told "with a blend of honesty and self-delusion, candour and scepticism, and self-deprecating humour" and what ultimately disappoints him about the narratives is that he believes they have "undoubtedly been informed by American representations of the Vietnam War." Without the cohesion of a population united in its response to the Border Wars was it possible to establish a uniquely South African literary canon? It would appear that in the absence of such a literary tradition we reached for that of another country, representative as it was of mainstream America's response to Vietnam.

Subsequent to these observations and in conjunction with the conversations I had with conscripts and their families, I felt that not all voices had been added to the genre, specifically those of women and marginalised groups such as people with disabilities[9]. I also wanted to engage with South African stories in a South African way instead of glancing over my shoulder at Vietnam-like representations of our own Border Wars.

4. LOCATING MY OWN WORK AGAINST THE LANDSCAPE OF BORDER LITERATURE

"Women who choose to write about wars they have lived are defying an age-old silencing code. Their speaking out now … allows us to read back into the gaps and silences of the War Story. Their stories threaten the privilege assumed proper to the right to tell the War Story. As the right to tell diffuses among all who may claim to have had a war experience, however unrecognizable as such by the

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standard conventions, the masculine contract between violence, sexuality, and glory comes undone" (Cooke 1996).

My own creative intention was definitely prompted by personal observations of the impacts and echoing reverberations of militarization and conscription during and since the Border Wars. During my engagement with this historical period it became evident that against the body of literature that existed, the South African border literature, there were still stories, experiences and moments in time that had not been captured.

As discussed in section 3 above the various responses to the impacts of the Border Wars prior to the establishment of democracy in South Africa have been representative of both the conscript's and the civilian's response to their military experiences or exposure to militarisation. The silence that existed in this genre for the best part of a decade – the late 80s to the late 90s – was during the period of political transformation in South Africa.

The TRC's failure to consider the impacts of the Border Wars has not silenced the voices that still needed to be heard as is evidenced in the subsequent publication of several personal memoirs – Rick Andrew's *Buried in the Sky* (2005), Clive Holt's *At Thy Call We Did Not Falter* (2005), and JH Thompson's *An Unpopular War* (2006).

So it is against the broader canvas of the Border Wars that I locate my own stories. Cock's politicised experience was not mine, neither was Holt's physical or emotional experience. What I did experience, and what I have continued to experience are the reverberations of the Border Wars within my family and my circle of friends. Cousins who continue to hero-worship a man who has been dead for thirty years and a friend who is still so invested in the army that his email address is *troepie@** .co.za.* It is these impacts that I wish to record in order to register other experiences within the genre.

The Border Wars are by no means the 'forgotten war' that some choose to call it. It is an event that was overlooked by the TRC, and it may not be included in official South African history books, but in the hearts and minds of many people who lived during this time, it is remembered and in some cases it impacts heavily on their daily lives.

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Mohanty, cited in Cooke suggests “the point is not just 'to record' one's history of struggle, or consciousness, but how they are recorded; the way we read, receive, and disseminate such imaginative records is immensely significant. It is the very question of reading, theorizing, and locating these writings . . . the practice of remembering and rewriting leads to the formation of politicized consciousness and self-identity. Writing often becomes the context through which new political identities are forged. It becomes a space for struggle and contestation about reality itself” (Cooke 1996).

Border literature depicts and records diverse reverberations of experience and I wish to locate my own work within this genre, not to address what hasn’t been said or the silences that exist, but to add other reverberations to the genre.

5. THE BORDER AS PLACE

Although I only located one of my short stories on the physical border, the border as ‘space’ appealed to me because it is an ambiguous area that provides a versatile setting for a writer. As Moody suggests, “the action is liminal (from Latin *limen*, threshold), performed on a margin or threshold which is a home of the indeterminate. This is a place where the characters are nameless, or improperly identified … or acting outside their proper function and role… Elements become confused, paradoxes interact” (Moody 1997). As such the border provided an exciting challenge because it was an invitation to investigate the creative possibilities that ‘border’ suggests.

The presence of a border implies a state of being between worlds in an undefined place that is neither one thing nor another - the known and the unknown, familiar and unfamiliar territory that may be physical, spiritual, moral, social, political or geographical. The creative potential for writers is exciting and extensive. Using border as a trope in literature seeks to emphasise the threshold and allows for exploration of territory both spatially and personally.

The border suggests a site of contest, a place where boundaries have to be transcended and penetrated, where danger will be encountered. In this milieu, people, and by extension, characters, can confront their own boundaries. Because of its spatial orientation – no man’s land – norms, values and personal codes can

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be suspended, allowing characters to explore issues without the restraints of convention. In the *grensliteratuur* and border literature of the 1980s and 90s "hardly ever is the border named, or the geography explained, other than in terms of 'hostile territory'" (Koornhof 1994). In much of this literature the border as physical place seems to be reflected by the characters inability to locate themselves temporally or spatially.

Conscripts and their families were separated geographically, effectively creating two groups in two different places – soldiers on the front and civilians on the home-front. The geographical distance was obviously extended into social, cultural, and emotional spaces. Many of the conscripts that I spoke to reminded me time and again how they felt as though they were in a different world when they were on the border. Several attested to having to suspend their norms and their values in order to survive the demands that were made of them and to get through their daily routines.

Many conscripts admit to a feeling of 'otherness' while away from home. Julia Kristeva says "Tearing oneself away from family, language, and country… is a daring action accompanied by sexual frenzy: no more prohibition, everything is possible… Exile always involves a shattering of the former body"(Kristeva 1991). This may account for the feelings of 'separateness' that many conscripts felt and may explain why they committed "scandalous excesses in the host country" (Kristeva 1991), over and above the call of duty.

The border provided an inspiring dynamic of tension between various notions of 'the front', whether these concepts were real or imagined, internal or external, spatial or psychological. The ability, or inability, to transcend these borders provided stimulating creative opportunities for my writing.

What I found particularly exciting was the opportunity to explore the border in a technical way and to present these techniques in my stories in original ways. In *I've Gotta Get A Message To You* the border located the narrator in a place, but I also explored the borders within his psyche. I located him on the geographical border and gave him the opportunity to cross the psychological and emotional borders that prevented him from being candid about his emotions.

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The border as site of contest is the theme of *The Outsider*. Here I wanted to explore the traditionally non-militarised zones that become sites of struggle. The roads that conscripts travelled on between the army base/border and their home provided an appropriately testing environment that evolved into a site of struggle.

In this no-man's land I was able to delve into non-military issues of power and dominance and the exciting result was the interaction between these issues and the ultimate subversion of them.

The Colours of War allowed me to consider border on physical and social levels. The main characters are both challenged by the limitations of their bodies. Their disabilities alienate them and contain them in a social no-go zone. Conscription forces them to confront their own borders, to come to a realisation about their social and physical limitations.

Examining border and exploring it from these angles stretched the creative possibilities of border as theme and location. It also helped me to broaden the development of characterisation and to present the border actively instead of as a merely static location.

6. REPRESENTATION OF GENDER

The telling of the Border Wars has been primarily the jurisdiction of the men who fought in them, or responses from academics and journalists. The voices of women have been noticeably silent. Men fought to protect our borders, and women stayed at home; men were the protectors, women were the protected. In South African border literature the border and the home-front have not been considered as gendered spaces by the writers. Cooke proposes that traditionally the "War Story proclaims that this sex segregation is justified for biological reasons: the men are strong, therefore they must protect the women who are weak. It is written in their genes that men shall be active and women passive" (Cooke 1996).

We Fear Naught But God: The story of the South African Special Forces "The Recces" is representative of many of the volumes that reflect on military operations and in particular battles fought during the Border Wars. It is during one

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of these battles, Operation Kropduif, that my cousin was killed. In the photographs that appear on the cover of the book, the images portray a war that depict men as strong, capable of great physical endurance and disciplined in the skills of war and therefore the protector of the weak at home.

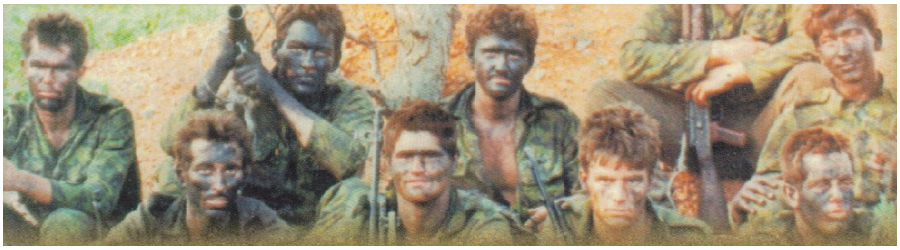


Figure 4.

In Figure 4 the soldiers are presented as a force to be reckoned with, a group of soldiers who are in full battle dress and war-paint and armed for the fight. Their grim or deadpan expressions might suggest that they take their duty as protectors to heart.

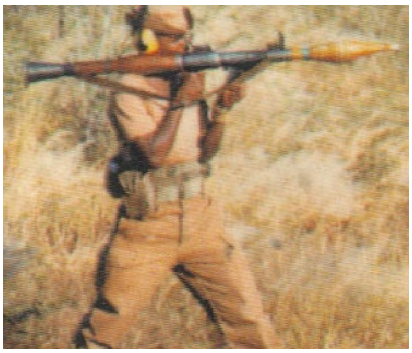


Figure 5.

Figure 5 depicts a soldier in combat mode. His missile launcher is poised for attack and his position supports his aggressive military stance – he means business. The presence and the positioning of the weapon by the photographer allude to the phallic symbolism of the weapon. This is a common feature of photographs that appear throughout the genre of war photography and it is a feature that claims the gender space of the front or the Border – it is a man's domain.

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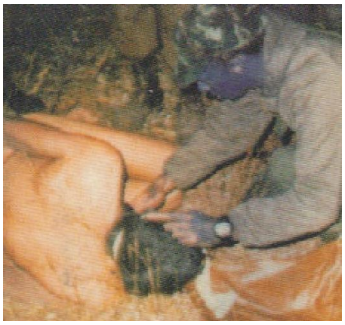


Figure 6.

Figure 6 further reserves the Border as masculine as even the nurturing roles traditionally provided by women (nursing), have been taken by men. The medic is attentive to the wounded soldier. The nakedness of the soldier evokes vulnerability (a trait archetypically associated with women), and the attentiveness of the medic suggests that in this safe space of masculinity it is okay to be vulnerable. As Cooke posits, in "this space of men and victory, men can with impunity love each other both emotionally and physically." The border has therefore become a specifically gendered space – only men allowed.

Many of the women who remained at home were expected to fulfil a remote supportive function. From the home they were expected to write letters to their loved ones on the border, to knit socks for them, to send messages of love to them via the radio and to make up care packages that would assure the soldiers that they were loved and remembered. Some women became actively involved in the ECC when it became apparent that the war was a reality even if the media, as dictated to by the government, downplayed it.

The women who were employed by the SADF, such as those stationed at Katima Mulilo, were employed as teachers and in other non-combatant roles and they were not expected to venture outside of the safe zone of the military camps.

Cooke proposes that "It is by putting women into the war stories that we can begin to recognise the strangeness of the unchanging meta-narrative that the War Story has always been.… Feminist praxis gives individuals the courage to be active witnesses whose words may serve to subvert dominant paradigms. These witnesses are elaborating survival strategies that include the forging of alternative visions and stories. They are voicing dissension from the status quo, they are

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making visible the linguistic strategies of patriotism and patriarchy, they are examining the role of consciousness and constructing a memory that is responsible to the future" (1996).

The absence of women in the border literature, other than as passive participants or as political activists, is an absence that I felt compelled to address in my short stories if I was to make a contribution to the genre. The stories of women in the ECC have been told – *The Home-front: A White Woman Against Apartheid and Conscription*. Women who wrote memoirs of their lives at army bases have also been expressed, such as *A Childhood at Katima Mulilo*. What hasn't been addressed to any length are the stories of women who interacted with soldiers as wives, daughters, lovers and friends. I wanted to avoid just telling a woman's story for the sake of it. What I aimed to do in *The Outsider* was to find a way of developing a female character who was going to stand in her own power as a woman. The women in *The Colours Of War* are background or impact characters, that is their function. To make them primary characters would have been to put them into a contest with the real primary characters and this would have changed the intention of this particular story. In *I've Gotta Get A Message To You*, the female characters are strong individuals with definite personalities and the narrator's description and inclusion of them define their roles in the story. Finally there is my own voice being added to the short stories. It is my intention to say that as a writer and as a South African I lived during the Border Wars, I lost a precious cousin, I was an army 'widow' for the second and third year of my marriage, I am aware of the political sensitivity regarding these wars, but still, I believe there are stories that need to be heard if we are to accept a history of our country that is all-embracing instead of exclusive.

7. A REFLECTION OF THEMES IN THE CREATIVE COMPONENT

Colours of War addresses the issue of militarisation in the schools and the exclusion of a section of the population from conscription. *I've Got to Get a Message to You* reflects on a conscript's vulnerability when faced with his own mortality, family relationships and the coping mechanism afforded through letter-

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writing. *The Outsider* seeks to examine the theme of assimilation of conscripts and civilians and themes of power and language.

7.1 Choosing Short Story As Genre

The stories that I have chosen to write capture the reverberations, impacts and moments in time of the period of the Border Wars. I felt that the short story was the appropriate genre with which to record them because by their nature, short stories are able to take individual stories, brief experiences and subtle reverberations of an event and capture them in a contained format.

7.2 Short Story 1 – *I've Got to Get a Message to You*

A popular radio programme called *Forces' Favourites* was broadcast by the English Service of the South African Broadcasting Corporation to the young men doing their National Service, their families and girlfriends. The title of this short story is taken from one of the most popular songs requested – *Gotta Get A Message to You* by the Bee Gees.

Letter writing was an important aspect of conscript life, the conscripts relied on letters to receive news of the 'outside world'. President PW Botha's wife and members of the *Vroue Federasie* packed Welcome Packs for conscripts who were sent to the border and a stationery pack was one of the most important items included. As Morris and Fair suggest, "the best thing about putting your thoughts, hopes and feelings for others in concrete form is this: Something about the experience of creating a personal message seems to connect you more deeply with the people" (Morris, Fair 2000). Faced with his own mortality the narrator writes a letter to his ex-wife to express the things he never could when they were together.

As a place the border suggests separateness and the narrator is physically separated from his family and his ex-wife. The undefined space also represents the unclaimed area of the narrator's life - his emotional territory. This internal state is further enhanced by his spatial location – the Caprivi Strip, the actual border between Namibia and Angola. He has to physically move through this area to engage with the enemy, but he also has to confront himself. He has to traverse

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his uncomfortable emotional terrain by acknowledging aspects of his relationship with his ex-wife.

Border as a site of restlessness is also conveyed by the conscripts who spend days sitting and waiting for something to happen. The 'hurry up and wait' mentality was of great frustration for many soldiers who were forced to spend days and weeks doing nothing and talking nonsense. In this short story Fanie represents this experience.

Border representing the edge or being on the edge corresponds with the nature of the narrator who is clearly perceived by his family to be unstable.

7.3 Short Story 2 – *The Outsider*

The early 1970s saw a great wave of immigrants into South Africa, mainly skilled workers from Europe and refugees from African countries who were obtaining or demanding independence from the countries that had colonised them. The children of these immigrants were not catered for in the mainstream education system and were forced to sit in libraries for the Immigrant Class or at the back of the classrooms. This resulted in these learners being caught in a no-man's land – almost a border between their birth-land and the country they cannot be admitted to. However, many of these children were naturalised and, as such, were forced to do their army duty. The character Yves Fouchard has grown up with a sense of alienation because of this ignorance and prejudice.

The Border is a site of dispute and Lorinda and Yves engage in a contest as soon as he gets into the car. She dictates that he will drive and accept the dominant role and then she goes about seducing him, using her sexuality to conquer him. But he refuses to acquiesce to her wiles and uses her own language and sexuality against her. He refuses to truly know her by refusing to hear her name. It is on his terms that their relationship will take root, only once she (the aggressor) has been conquered and brought to heel.

In this short story, I wanted to subvert the traditional roles of soldier/civilian. Lorinda represents a true character of the frontier; she is at home between the two worlds that the border represents. On the border, the road between her home (values, routine) and the army barracks (unknown, excitement) she feels liberated enough to expunge the restrictions of her life (language,

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family) and embrace the freedom of her adulthood (sexuality, friendship). When she meets Yves she is subjugated by him, forced out of her halfway world of naughty Boeremeisie. She is compelled to yield completely.

Passing through the border between the army base and home, Yves realises that the former place bears no connection to the latter, that they are worlds apart. He is used to being in this state of alienation. Lorinda's easy use of Afrikaans and English – her ability to vacillate between her two worlds – highlights his feeling of inadequacy and he seeks to suppress her confidence by dominating her sexually, linguistically and emotionally.

7.4 Short Story 3 – *The Colours of War*

A border suggests a boundary between two worlds. This is the space that disabled friends David Fisher and Simon Danforth have always found himself to be, suspended in the unenviable place between normality and abnormality. About to leave school and embark into the outside world, they find themselves in a place in which elements of border exist – "journey, motion and change"(Moody 1997).

Because of their disabilities they suffer extreme alienation and there are borders that these boys cannot penetrate, transcend or even confront. Against the backdrop of conscription they are thwarted in their quests and forced to confront the boundaries of their personal realities and accept that which cannot be transcended.

The conscripts who fought on the border were considered to be heroes by patriotic White South Africans. David Fisher and Simon Danforth long to be such heroes, instead they come to know conscription as knowing their boundaries and accepting that they cannot transcend their borders, their physical and intellectual limitations.

Across all three stories, the theme of relationships is examined and developed. In *I've Gotta Get A Message To You*, the narrator's relationship with his ex-wife is an enormous site of conflict for the narrator who struggles to express his emotions with honesty and clarity. The story also alludes to the inter-family relationships.

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The Outsider examines communal relationships and transient relationships that Lorinda has. It explores the nature of a relationship against the event of conscription.

Friendship, family relationships, social contact and political relationships are considered in *The Colours of War*.

8. CONCLUSION

It has been satisfying for me to engage with the Border Wars from both a cathartic point of view and from a research perspective. Connecting with this period has allowed me to consider the huge impact that the Border Wars had on the lives of many South Africans, including my own family, and how that impact is carried over into their current lives. I have been encouraged by many people to tell these stories.

The Border Wars provided me with a canvas against which I could study the interaction of social and political shifts and the impacts that these had on the people living in South Africa at the time. The writing I have done about this period explores not so much the war, as the impact that it had on the citizens of South Africa. My writing is not informed by my own combat experience during the Border Wars but rather the social and emotional conflict that I experienced while living in a militarised state when friction was prevalent on the Border and on the home-front.

Except for the volume of short stories *Forces' Favourites*, very little English writing about the Border Wars has taken place. I have written stories about people who lived during this period because I wanted to tell the stories about people, the stories that have not been told. I wanted to give a voice to some of the voices that had not been heard, and I hope that through careful choice of genre and the choice and location of characters I have achieved this.

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9. ENDNOTES

1. Border Wars. It should be noted that the term Border Wars used in this theoretical introduction refers only to the South West African Border Wars of the 1970s and 1980s fought by conscripts of the SADF. I have chosen to capitalise Border Wars throughout the theoretical introduction in order that it is considered to be the weighty historical event that it was.
2. The Oxford University Press recommended Harvard Author-Date referencing system has been used throughout this theoretical introduction.
3. Blacks. The term Black/Blacks as it appears in this theoretical introduction should be considered to refer to Black, Indian and Coloured population groups, namely population groups that were disenfranchised by the apartheid regime.
4. Camps. The word camp/camps as it appears in this theoretical introduction and in the creative works, refers to the additional annual 30- to 90-day periods of service that the conscripts were obliged to complete over and above the initial mandatory military service they rendered.
5. It has been an intentional choice to separate the male and female poets in order to draw the reader's attention to the fact that both male and female voices were heard in response to the First and Second World Wars.
6. Recces. The term Recces refers to a South African Defence Force Special Forces operator (Reconnaissance soldier).
7. Boys on the Border. This was a phrase that referred to the troops engaged in border warfare. Many young men under the age of consent (21) were conscripts and therefore technically 'boys'.
8. This quotation is my own translation of her original Afrikaans comment.
9. Disabilities. The phrases 'people with disabilities' or 'disabled people' will appear in this theoretical introduction and should be considered to refer to people with special needs, that is people with mental and/or physical disabilities. The reason that I chose to refer to them as disabled people is because the term 'special needs' is a term that is relatively new and was not applicable at the time of the Border Wars.

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12. CREATIVE COMPONENT

12.1 Short Story 1

I've Got To Get A Message To You

I am trying to dislodge a piece of food from my back tooth with a thorn when the lieutenant hands each of us a couple of sheets of notepaper and says, "Get writing, *manne*." He doesn't make eye contact. He thrusts the pages into our hands. Fanie tugs at his dog tags and asks what we should write. The lieutenant says, "Asshole, write the fucking alphabet if that's all you're capable of!" Fanie ducks into his foxhole in the ground next to me and he stares into the waves of buzzing heat.

I settle into my own foxhole. What else is there to do but wait? We have been given orders to move out tonight so that we are ready to attack at dawn. I crumple the sheets of notepaper into a ball and toss them in the air. When I tire of the game I unfurl the ball and flatten out the pages; creased and veined with fine sand, they seem less intimidating.

I've got the shakes, so I suppose that means I'm scared. I don't want to waste what might be my last opportunity to say things, so I write: *24 February 1988*. I want to add *Katima Mulilo* at the top of the letter, but the army censors will blank out any locating details that we're *dof* enough to give. The date won't tell you that it is 38ºC under the cross-hatched shade of the thorn trees, or, that the *miggies* are popping in the quivering heat. *February* doesn't describe the powdery dust that gets into your mouth or the bone-white thorns on the grey skeleton trees. It is ten days after Valentine's Day and five days before leap year – the month and year for lovers.

…Dear, darling, sweetheart, my precious love, M…. How will I address this letter to you, Miranda? You have always been the anchor in my life, but without you I feel adrift. *Darling Miranda*. My throat tightens as the pen scratches the letters of your name across the paper. I wonder where I will find the words to tell you why I am finally writing this letter to you.

I block my ears against the distraction of Fanie trying to tune into Pat Kerr's *Forces Favourites*, I don't want to hear *Soldier Boy* distorted by a flat PM9

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battery. I close my eyes, hopeful that my mind will find a picture of you. I wait with eyes squeezed shut, aware of my breath, ignoring the salty sweat that runs down my face and burns my sun-split lip.

My patience is rewarded and I see you, your hands are slick from the yellow-green juice of the half-time oranges you cut for one of the many impromptu Saturday afternoon rugby matches I played in the park. You would gag at the kaffir oranges that the locals bring to barter for cigarettes; the fruit is grey, and instead of waxy peels, the segments are covered in a hard shell - but they taste good.

I imagine that I can taste you, the summer-sweat taste trapped in the curls at the base of your neck. Imagining you in this way only makes me feel further away from you. The distance between us drives me crazy. My fingers ache from my grip on the pen, but I promise I will write the truth, babe.

It is so bloody difficult to write this letter, to put my muddled thoughts on the page. Because of the silence during the last year of our marriage, you will wonder why I'm writing now. I could repeat what the *okes* say about you. Fanie reckons you've got *lekker* legs and Byron always said you had the best arse, but if I said any one of those things you would be disappointed in me. I want to tell you that you were an amazing lover and that I feel privileged to have been the father of our son Josh. But even if I got down on my knees and admitted these things, you won't believe me because I didn't tell you before, when it mattered.

I know I've got to come clean and own up to my feelings because otherwise I will never have owned them. If I'm going to get my head blown off tomorrow, then now is no time to leave you in any doubt about how I feel. Dammit, I suppose I want you to know that I appreciated you.

There are so many problems between us that we never resolved, but I find it difficult to confess my guilt outside of the confessional. During these last few hours I have prayed for the ability to express myself clearly.

When we went to Byron's beach house after Josh's funeral, things didn't go well for us, but the thing I admire most about you is that even though we had experienced the worst possible loss, you stood by my side. You tried to love me

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even when I said unlovable things, and you forgave me even though I allowed you to blame yourself.

On the day that we lowered Josh's little coffin into the ground you whispered, "I wish it was me," and stiff with grief, I said, "I wish it was too." I wanted to die, but in that unforgiving moment I allowed you to believe that I wished you were dead instead of Josh. Forgive me.

Fanie keeps asking me if I am writing a will or a letter. Most of the *okes* here are making long lists sharing out their personal possessions between their friends and family. Fanie taps his own list and says, "I'm leaving my *tollie* to science and my sense of humour to you, *soutpiel*!" I remind him that we all wrote our last will and testaments on the second day of basic training, but he takes no notice of my reminders. Here, in no-man's land, waiting for another Mig attack, it is easier to deal with practical shit; it helps you to avoid all the emotional *kak* that fucks with your mind when you've got too much time on your hands.

All those possessions that the *okes* are dishing out – the proceeds from a life insurance policy, money in the bank, grandpa's cufflinks, a shitty draylon lounge suite – are worth fuck-all when you have lost everything you love. I want to give you something that will mean more than our crappy microwave with the faulty reheat button.

I want to remember something that we shared so that you will know that I truly felt the connection between us. It has been a long time since I have done anything to make you feel valued.

On your first Mother's Day, I got up early to cook a surprise breakfast. I fetched Josh out of his cot and while he made gurgly noises in that funny carry contraption on my back, I tried to cook. The eggs were cold and the bacon was burned. Josh *kotched* down my back and you tried to hide your laughter behind a sleepy yawn. It was Saturday and our surprise was a day early. You gave me breakfast in bed the following morning – steaming scrambled eggs and Eskort sausages. While we ate, Josh lay between us, engrossed in the discovery of his own pink toes.

We used to be able to communicate without saying a word, but we lost that connection. We aren't friends anymore, far less husband and wife. How then

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can I possibly explain how devastated I feel to have lost both Josh and you? Tears burn the crap out of my lip. “You okay?” Fanie asks. “Get fucked you *poes*!” I shout. Miranda, I am so sorry for everything.

I fold the letter and put it into the army brown envelope. I try to blink away the fucking tears so that I can see enough to join the letters of your name. I wonder if you still use my surname, or, if the lawyer who refused to tell me where you are encouraged you to change it. I wasn’t ready to let go Miranda, but I didn’t know how to keep you.

Mrs Miranda Gibson

C/o Mrs Betty Gibson

15 Ash Road

Howick

My mother will be surprised when she receives the letter. When the army chaplain leaves, she will put on her worn, green apron and stare at the letter while her hands tie the apron strings behind her back. She will slip the letter into her apron pocket and in the mid-morning silence she will line up her baking ingredients and preheat the oven. Once the sponge cake is on the middle shelf of the oven, my mother will wash her hands and pat them on the thin lap of her apron. Her hands will brush against the envelope and she will sink down at the table next to the kitchen window and stare into the garden with wet, round brown eyes. She will hold onto the letter, keeping it in her apron pocket for a quiet hour before she picks up the heavy black phone in the hallway. She will think of you, Miranda, she may even look at our wedding photo on the mantelpiece and touch your face with her liver-spotted hand. But she’ll swallow a sob and she’ll dial my sister Carol’s number instead.

Ten or so minutes after she receives the call, Carol will puff all the way up my mother’s pathway in her faded blue housecoat and her towelling slippers. She will hold my mother for a brief moment, and then she’ll say, “Let me see the letter mom.” But my mother will clutch the envelope in her pocket and she will shake her head, her tired white curls will slump against her pink scalp.

“We should read the letter.” Carol will insist. She will cross her arms against breasts swollen with impatience and annoyance. “*Ma* nothing should

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surprise us after everything that happened – going *bossies* in the army, little Josh's accident and Miranda finally walking out on him". She will stuff four of my mother's freshly-baked lamingtons into her mouth. She will try to rationalise my reason for addressing this final letter to you when things ended so badly between us. My mother will wave her moist handkerchief at my sister, she will look out of the window across the valley towards Karkloof where she used to take us for picnics on the Sundays that my father didn't arrive to fetch us.

Eventually, when the Tupperware container of lamingtons is finished, Carol will stop sulking about the letter, "Okay, we'll take the letter to Miranda." My mother will stand at the doorway, unmoving. "*Okay*, we'll take it to the cemetery, to Josh." My mother will remove her thin lemon scarf from the drawer in the hallstand. She will wrap it around her curls and tie it under her chin, leaving the two ends dangling. She will cross her arms against her soft stomach and say "Take me to the kloof."

She will ignore Carol's moans about her '81 Toyota being too low-slung for the rocky road. When they park the car and walk to the windy lookout at the top of the kloof my mother will take no notice of Carol's hysterical warning about the mist and the slippery rocks. My mother will stand at the iron safety railing and lean slightly forward into the wind. Very slowly she will stretch her hand out in front of her. The wind will take the letter, it will flutter and fall into the deep ravine and finally settle on the rocks at the bottom of the waterfall, where the sound of happiness echoes.

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12.2 Short Story 2

The Outsider

In the half-light of the bathroom Lorinda smeared the last blob of Coral Shimmer onto her lips and squeezed them together to distribute the lipstick evenly. She tiptoed down the narrow passage so that the clickety-clack of her high heels didn't alert Pa. But when she entered the kitchen Pa was already sitting in his wheelchair next to the fire facing her, the Raceform folded next to him.

"*Baie fancy vir 'n girlie wat net vinnig TAB toe ry*," he said. Lorinda ignored him and picked up a piece of cold toast. She picked off the crusts and spiralled honey onto the middle and handed it to Pa. She leaned over and kissed him on the forehead, recoiling slightly from the suffocating odour of his unwashed hair.

While Pa sucked at the sticky toast, Lorinda examined the betting forms he had filled in. "*Rolling Thunder, hmm, hy's 'n* outsider *maar ek hou ook van hom, Pa. Ek het 'n goeie gevoel oor sy kanse*." She placed her father's bets in her handbag. Then she knelt down on the cold stone floor and withdrew a bottle of *Klipdrift* from the bottom shelf of the kitchen dresser. Pa eyed the half-jack of brandy and patted her arm. "*Jy's orrait vir 'n girlie weet jy*?" He said.

The slow rolling clouds promised a spectacular storm. Lorinda patted the little fox terrier and filled her bowl with fresh water from the tap at the back door. "*Hey Bella, jy moet mooi na Pa kyk*," She said as she broke into a run towards Pa's bakkie, ignoring the animal's doleful expression.

The hectares of fields on either side of the highway were a monotonous khaki carpet overhung with gravid clouds. Lorinda drove at a cautious fifteen kilometres lower than the speed limit until she reached a picnic area on the opposite side of the road. She always parked facing oncoming traffic, that way nobody could surprise her from behind. She opened the small doors at the back of the bakkie and unrolled the mattress, then she spread out the clean bedding and closed the flimsy yellow curtains she'd made at sewing classes in Bethlehem last year, courtesy of one of Pa's gambling windfalls. When she was satisfied with the cosy bedroom she had created, she took a small bottle of *Panache* and sprayed one squirt into the air then quickly closed the doors.

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The TAB was busy. Punters filled out last minute place-accumulators and trifectas in a drunken queue that meandered around the block. Lorinda parked in a side-street and pulled on her raincoat. She flicked the umbrella open even though it wasn't necessary; the pavement was covered by an awning but the umbrella kept a circle of space around her. She nodded vaguely at people she recognised from church and the *Vroue Federasie.*

Mr Kletz held both his hands out when Lorinda reached the counter. She handed the bets over to him and watched as he fed them into the machine. He kept his left hand outstretched, but Lorinda waited until the machine had finished grinding and spat the printed tickets out, then she handed over the money.

"Pretty Tart," he said.

"*Ekskuus*?" Lorinda asked; her armpits prickled.

"*Daai Rolling Thunder is 'n outsider;* a safer bet would have been Pretty Tart." Mr Kletz said looking past Lorinda at the next punter.

Back on the open road, Lorinda accelerated, freeing herself from the town with its narrow streets and inquiring eyes. Lightning brightened the overcast sky and Lorinda wondered how many army guys were likely to be hitching a ride. She parked on the ridge on blind widow Verster's farm and waited there. Through Pa's binoculars she could see the main road for miles and the *Ry Veilig / Ride Safe* sign and any army guys who arrived there hoping to get a ride to the station. Popcorn white lambs gambolled in the fields even though it was drizzling. From the windy outcrop Lorinda watched as a corpulent Bedford stopped on the main road, then made a wide circle and proceeded back up the road towards the army base.

He was tall, so tall that she had almost driven past him because she couldn't imagine his long legs finding a comfortable position in the confinement of the cab. Instead she slowed onto the newly tarred shoulder of the road and stopped. The *Ride Safe* sign cast a long shadow across the bonnet. He bent down and smiled at her through the window, a cautious smile. She flipped the lock.

The *okes* had teased him all night about the toothless farmers who liked to pick up army guys and give them blowjobs. He had considered walking all the way to Bethlehem, but soon changed his mind when the Bedford dropped him off on the tarred road and he saw nothing but a basketweave of farmlands stretching into the horizon. She was no farmer; she had a tight white smile and a short skirt.

"*Waarna toe gaan jy*?" She asked as he squeezed himself into the bakkie.

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"To Joburg."

"*Jy's Engels.* How long?"

"Three days, I've got to be back on Tuesday."

"*Gaan jy hitch of 'n trein vat*?"

"Haven't thought that far just wanted to get the fuck out of that shithole – sorry – for swearing."

She couldn't decide if he was handsome in an ugly way, or ugly in a handsome way; it was difficult to gauge the level of attractiveness in these bald army *okes*. Well, attractive or not, he had nice individual features, bluish lips and a skein of scars. She'd bet money that his nipples were brown not pink.

"Do you want to drive?" She asked him. If she spoke in simple sentences, she would manage the English.

He hadn't been behind the wheel of a car for ages, but before he could respond she reached her left hand across his lap and lifted herself over him, making sure that her bottom grazed his crotch. He could smell the apple scent of her shampoo, felt the honey heaviness of her hair against his cheek. The steering wheel was warm where she had held it. She sat with her back against the door and tucked her right leg under her bottom so that a small triangular window created by her open thighs and skirt gave him a seductive view of her crotch. He started the bakkie and pulled onto the road without even looking in the mirror. It had been a long time since he had driven a car; it was even longer since he'd had a screw.

As they drove in silence, the only sound was wind whipping over the bakkie. Platoons of poplars, match-skinny, stood to attention on the roadside.

"Are you married?"

He shook his head.

" –*verloofd*, um, engaged?"

Another head shake.

" – gay?"

He laughed, so she did too.

She waited for him to ask her something. She wanted to tell him about herself. The other *okes* always asked. – where she lived, who she lived with, why she wasn't married - a looker like her. But he wasn't going to ask her any of that, she could just tell. His composure gave her the same cheated feeling she got when she bought *Herzog* cookies that had been made with margarine instead of butter.

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"I don't care if you are married or a *moffie* you know– *dit maak nie eintlik saak nie*."
He kept his eyes on the road. Farmhouses peeped shyly between tree-breaks or turned their backs to the winds of the open plains.
"*Is jy honger*?"
He glanced at her as she opened the cubby hole, shrugged his shoulders.
"Pepper steak pie *of sout en asyn* Simba?" She asked.
"The pie, I'll have the pie thanks."
She slid the pie halfway out and then twisted the bottom of the packet so that he could eat it without a crumb-fallout in his lap. Pa said a girl had to be clever no matter what, but it was Ma who said a way to a man's heart was through his stomach.

He kept his hands on the wheel, his eyes on the road. The distance marker said Bethlehem was 7km away. She leaned over and read his name: YFOUCHARD. No space between the initials and his surname, but she seemed to have no difficulty identifying which was which.
"Yakob? Yitzhak? Yonatan? - *Yissie, is jy 'n Jood*?"
He shook his head and made the sign of the cross. There was only one thing Pa hated more than Jews and that was Catholics.
"Yvan! That's it, hey? *Jy's Russies of 'n Pool of so iets, nê*?" She bounced up and down on the narrow seat and clapped her hands. She looked like a delighted child. He wasn't going to tell her his name was Yves. He was so tired of the ignorance about his French name.

She pouted. "*Jy's nie baie nice vir my nie, vir 'n lady wat jou 'n lift gegee het, is jy'*" She lifted her left leg onto the dashboard. He turned and watched her. Maybe he didn't have a lot to say, but there was something in his eyes, an unreadable expression that unsettled Lorinda.
"You didn't just happen to be on the road back there, did you?" He said, slowing the car down.
"What were you doing back there, hanging around in the middle of nowhere?" He insisted.

In the early days of her chauffeuring service she prepared excuses like folded love-letters tucked into her mind and ready to go, but army *okes* didn't seem to care, they were just grateful for the lift. She could pretend not to understand his question. Instead she leaned forward, so that she could see the black stubble on his chin, still blue under his skin.

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"I pick up army *okes* and I fuck them. *Sê asseblief y jy's nou net van die Caprivi afkomstig. Asseblief! Asseblief! Asseblief! Ek het nog nie een van hulle gevok nie*."

He ignored her irritating bouncing on the seat, her shining eyes. He pretended not to understand her desperation for a *troepie* who'd been to the border.

One by one she removed his left hand fingers from the steering wheel and slid them into the soft place beneath her panties. He looked at her face but she had closed her eyes, dropped her head back so that all he could see was the throb caught in the vein that crossed the hollow of her throat.

"You can stop about two kilometres before town. *Daar's 'n klomp blougomme en 'n pad wat nêrens gaan nie.*" She said.

He didn't have to move his fingers, she manipulated her pelvis so that he could feel her contractions. It was difficult to steer and change gears with his right hand and he eventually screeched up the muddy road in first gear. It was she who leaned over and cut the engine, twisting his fingers inside her as she did so. Then she lifted herself, disconnecting them. She slid open the small window hatch at the back of the cab. He watched her long pale legs disappear. He sat in the front for a long time before he opened the door and went around to the back of the bakkie. As soon as he opened the squeaky doors he smelled the fresh linen. He sat on the flipped down tail-gate and unlaced his muddy boots.

She knew that if she wanted more than a wham-bam-thank-you-mam quickie she'd better get him into the mood to play for a little bit longer. Instead of stripping down completely she wore a white lace bra and panties. Boetie Gawie's *Scope* said that apricot or pink underwear wasn't as big a turn on for men as women believed it to be. Black was provocative and so was red, but white was the colour that really got men's engines running. It was virginal, pure, and every man wanted to think he was the first, even if he knew he wasn't. She had a drawer full of white underwear in her wardrobe. He gave the crisp white lingerie an appreciative look.

"*My naam is –*" she said, but he clamped his hand over her smile.

"It's just a fuck." He said.

She was used to teasing open the khaki buttons with her teeth, letting her tongue run across broad chests, but he was on top of her. She'd never fucked anyone whose name she didn't know. Her nipples tightened. His feet were freezing. She touched herself and drew her hand up to his lips but he turned away. She felt herself blush.

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When he was finished, he used his feet to find his pants. He lit a Chesterfield in the back of the bakkie, blowing smoke rings so perfect she couldn't resist stabbing her finger into them. He offered her a drag but she shook her head even though she smoked. Her face was against his shoulder; she was right, his nipples were brown with the smallest curls of dark hair around them. She could have leaned across him right then and bitten one, but instead she closed her eyes to stop the tears. When she was sure that she wasn't going to cry, she sat up and opened one of the small curtains. They were surrounded by wheat fields that whispered a sigh of sameness that resonated so deeply within her that she knew she could not go home.

"Kom saam met my na die Kaasfees." She said. He kept his eyes on the ceiling, they didn't even flicker in acknowledgement of her act of speech.

"Do you like it here?" She asked.

He shrugged, looked at her.

"Hoe lank al is jy op die basis?"

He looked away again, drew on his cigarette.

"Gee my 'n drag asseblief," she held out her fingers but he inhaled deeply and closed his eyes as he exhaled.

"Come with me to the Cheese Festival." She said, keeping her eyes on her panties as she untwisted them and pulled them up her calves. They caught slightly at the damp part between her thighs.

He stood next to the bakkie in his undies and ground out his cigarette butt next to the rear wheel. He glanced at his watch – quarter to twelve. Saturday. His mother and father would be standing in *Sandro's Deli*, arguing over whether to buy the Ementhaler or the Edam. They would grimly hand over the money for their purchase because they didn't like Sandro, the Italian owner, but where else were discerning French ex-pats supposed to buy quality food? Grandpére Fouchard would be in the family's pale blue Renault tapping his knees and watching the parking meter. When *maman* and *papa* finished their cheese shopping they would drive him to Alliance Française where he played *boules* every Saturday afternoon with other old men who smelled of unwashed wool and onions.

"Where would we stay?"

His question surprised her. She was lost in her hopes that pa's bets on *Random Excuse* were going to pay off. She watched him pull on his khaki fatigues. She waved her hand around the bakkie, "*Ag, ons kan - "* He glanced at her sharply.

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"We'll book into a caravan park. It's cheap." She hurried then, snapping her lacy bra behind her, pulling on the tube of skirt and a soft white T-shirt. She didn't want to give him the opportunity to change his mind.

He took a slash against the bluegum. His brother Gregoire, or Greg as his friends called him, would be watching the 1st XI, and in between changeovers and innings, he'd tell everyone how his brother from the border was coming home for the weekend. Yves pulled up his zip with a violent yank. Surrounded by his team-mates Greg would promise them a story on Monday – a war story, a hero's story. A story that Yves couldn't produce.

She leaned forward closer to the dashboard so that she could hear the commentator. "And it's *Leaping Star* and *Pretty Tart*. *Rolling Thunder*'s coming up on the inside, with 200m to go it's anyone's race. Habib's encouraging *Leaping Star* but it's *Rolling Thunder* making the home straight his own. Pretty Tart's not prepared to let *Rolling Thunder* take the race, she's holding the pace. With 50m to go, it's *Pretty Tart*, and *Rolling Thunder*. *Leaping Star* will have to be content with a third. There's nothing between *Pretty Tart* and the outsider *Rolling Thunder* but as they cross the finish line
it's-. "

He leaned across her and turned down the volume. She turned to face him, her face twisted with frustration.
"Ag – okay, it doesn't matter."
He smiled.
"What's your name?" He asked as he reversed the bakkie back towards the main road.

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12.3 Short Story 3

The Colours of War

Mrs Brand was an angel – not an angel with wings and a halo – but the kind that Father Gideon said you were likely to come across when you least expected to.

He said that angels were ordinary people doing the work of God, because it was impossible for Him to be everywhere He was needed.

Mrs Brand was the last person David Fisher would have considered because she was his Youth Preparedness teacher. Most days found her fighting a losing battle to keep the class quiet while she pointed to posters of landmines and hand-grenades, or instructed the class to be aware of anything that might be out of the ordinary – an unattended school bag or a person that didn't belong in the school grounds.

Mrs Brand wasn't like the softly-spoken Mrs Southey who actually looked like an angel with her shiny blonde hair. It was she who taught him to find a colour for his feelings when he wasn't able to express himself.

He tried to visualise the colour that he was feeling at the moment. Simon's sister Benita made him feel empty-black, while his sister Alison made him feel tummy-full orange. Dad and mom were usually soft greens. School was sometimes grey, sometimes blank white. But today had been lightning stabs of brightness that were too elusive for David to grab and attach to his emotions. He had an idea that the colour of his current insecurity was purple-black, but it could change.

David lay down on his bedroom carpet next to the stain where his blue Koki pen had leaked. His mother moaned about the stain whenever she vacuumed his room, but he needed its presence; it was the misshapen door to the hazy blue mind-place where he could go to think about things. He tucked his pillow under his head and stared hard at the stain. Since Mr and Mrs Danforth's anniversary last Tuesday he'd been unable to penetrate the stain. Whenever he tried to will himself through it, he heard Benita and Alison's voices wrenching him back into the cold whiteness of his bedroom. He clapped his hands over his ears but all he

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could hear was Benita's voice, shrill as a bee trapped against a closed window. "Alison, aren't you afraid of having the burden of David when your parents die?"

In David's mind the pitch of Benita's voice was sharpened by the long silence that followed her question. During his sister's silence, waves of nauseating maroon heat flooded David's mind. Eventually he heard Alison say, "I haven't ever really thought about it." But, in her response he heard the light disappear from her sunny voice, and when he heard her enormous sigh of realisation, he wished that he had closed the bathroom door properly while he peed.

He had to look up 'burden' in the dictionary because he wasn't exactly sure what the word meant even though it gave him a leaden feeling. The only words in the definition that made sense were 'load' and 'sorrow', and if he added them together to make sense of 'burden', then it meant that the reason his sister looked at him with heavy shoulders was because he was indeed a sorrowful load on her and their parents. His dad often said that he had made plans for David's future, but David couldn't remember his father telling him exactly what those plans were.

Lying less than a foot away from him in his scarred leather satchel were the forms that might alter his life. That's what Mrs Brand said when she handed him the thick brown envelope with the forms. "In your hands you hold the opportunity of a lifetime. If you boys show what you're made of, you could change the course of your lives."

On Wednesday afternoons Simon and David met at the bus terminus outside the OK Bazaars. From there they headed for the Central News Agency where Simon spent the afternoon sitting on the white melamine shelves reading the real-life articles in *Scope*. David clenched his tattered satchel between his ankles and chuckled his way through the *Archie* and *Jughead* comics, unless they contained too much of Veronica. He did not like Veronica, there was something about the black-haired comic character that reminded him of Benita, but he didn't concern himself trying to work out what it was. David liked Archie, and he secretly imagined that he and Simon were Archie and Jughead, that they were entertaining and funny and that people always wanted to be around them. He imagined that being the centre of attraction must be a gumdrop yellow feeling.

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But this afternoon Simon wasn't at the bus-terminus climbing down the high stairs of his school bus as he should have been. David felt as if his day had fallen out of shape. His sense of loss was so profound that he retched into the gutter. A lady from The Pillbox Pharmacy came out and touched his crusty blazer sleeve.

"Would you like a glass of water, son?" She asked.

She handed him a green pill and a greasy glass of water when he nodded. The fingerprints smudged around the glass made David feel queasy and he vomited again. The lady withdrew as the mustard liquid splattered on the pavement.

"Drink up like a good boy, I haven't got all day you know." Another Veronica. Another Benita.

When he had finished drinking the water, David thanked the lady and ambled down to Meyer Street where he caught the three-twenty bus home, unaware that passengers avoided sitting next to him because of the overwhelming stench of vomit emanating from him. He was constantly aware that Simon wasn't sitting next to him. He tried unsuccessfully to fist away the tears that kept coming, but eventually he stopped beating his eyes. The regular rhythm of oaks flashing past the window lulled him into a state of relaxation. He gave the bell-pull a sharp yank and stood up so that he wouldn't miss the stop, but he turned his back when the bus passed Simon's house. Mrs Fisher didn't bat an eyelid when her son pushed past her in the kitchen without saying hello, she simply placed a netting food cover over his rice-cakes and returned the glass of soya milk to the fridge.

It was dark by the time Simon Danforth opened David's bedroom door and yellow light from the passage pushed past him, illuminating the small room.

"You weren't at the bus-stop. We aren't friends anymore." David said.

Simon switched on the light even though he preferred muted light; it made his eyes less watery. He ignored David's crossed arms and the sulky reference to their friendship being over. He dropped a pile of comics next to David, covering the stain.

"I'm sorry I wasn't at the bus-stop today, David. I had detention." Simon said. The bedsprings rasped as Simon sank onto the mattress. David pushed the comics off the stain and stared at it. He nodded. You couldn't help detention. No

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matter how hard you tried to explain a mistake to a teacher, they just wouldn't listen to you.

"You know how people think we can't do anything; that we're too useless to even say hello to?" David said. "Well I've found a future for us. We have to join the army. Mrs Brand gave me the forms. Every single *oke* in South Africa has to register to join the army – it's compulsory. I don't know why our parents never told us about it before, but it's a have-to thing. We can be soldiers Simon, not just bang-bang-you-shot-me-down ones like when we were kids, - but *real* soldiers, in uniforms, with guns even."

David slid his eyes sideways away from the stain, the mention of guns made him feel moth-silver. He had found his father's gun under a heap of old jerseys on the top shelf in his father's cupboard. It felt a lot heavier in his hands than the cast-metal guns that he and Simon played with as children. Simon used to count the brown cap marks to see who had fired the most shots. In the fantasy of the moment of discovery, the real gun accorded him a heroic normality, he felt invincible. He recalled putting the gun to his head and pulling the trigger, but it clicked just like the toy gun of his childhood

"Guns are heavy." He told Simon.

Simon ignored him, but he sat up and leaned forward.

"When did you get your forms?" Simon asked.

"Today. Mrs Brand says everyone gets them on or around their sixteenth birthday. They're a little bit early, but she said that doesn't matter. I have to go in January next year."

Simon fell back onto the bed.

"You can do all sorts of jobs in the army, there's a job for everyone. You can be a doctor, a chef, a welder, a drummer in the army band, Mrs Brand said so." David said.

"Your hands shake, you can't do any of those jobs David." Simon snorted.

"I helped my dad paint the front wall, remember? The army needs painters."

David pushed himself onto an elbow and peered up at Simon.

"They have to find a job for us, it's their problem not ours. We just have to register. We have to Simon, it's the law. So we do what we're told and then we

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get good jobs with the army. It's a job for life if we want it to be, we can join the permanent force. I think that would be a good solution for us. What do you think?" David asked. He wanted to hear what Simon had to say but his left eye was jumping towards the stain so he snapped a hand over his face. When Simon didn't answer, he jumped up onto his sore feet and said, "It's too much. We should think. You should go now."

Later when David got into bed, his bath-damp toes wiggling comfortably against the cotton sheets, he tried to imagine what it might be like to always feel bath-time fresh and pain-free. He attended a school for children with special needs because a task as simple as buttoning his shirt challenged his dexterity. Simon, on the other hand, had a leaking body that bore no correlation to the solid intelligence he possessed. Although the boys didn't attend the same school they individually and jointly tolerated the barbs of heartlessness that the cruel young are so adept at - *Freak! Worm boy! Lizard!*

David felt that his friendship with Simon had been fated in some way. The discomfort of their frail bodies was not the only unifying link between the boys. Destiny had nudged their parents to choose houses directly next door to each other; they each had normal, pretty sisters, and both boys were allergic to milk and wheat. Their lunch-box contents, pre-formed rice cakes and plastic flasks of thin soya milk, held no appeal to the candy-coated palates of their classmates, who presumed that David and Simon actually chose to eat their tasteless and unvaried diet. David's mouth watered at the thought of the golden crust of a toasted sandwich, and Simon allowed himself to be hospitalised once a year after a binge of all the forbiddens – Chelsea buns, *Chockita* bars, laden with nuts and chocolate, and red *Koolaid*. Simon said that the delicious redness in his mouth from the cold-drink powder made the pain of the cortisone drip seem more bearable.

David had accepted Simon's detention explanation, but he couldn't shake an uneasy feeling. When the sounds of the house had settled into the hum of the night and David felt sure that everyone was asleep, he crept outside and stood on the porch ringing his hands and trying to locate a stain on the front of the Danforth's house until he heard the dripping tap in his own front garden. The

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sound soon pacified him. When he saw the light come on in Simon's bedroom, he snapped out of his self-imposed trance and darted along the short pavement between their front gates. He knocked on Simon's window; he didn't want Benita spying on them.

"Come in at the front, everyone is sleeping." Simon said and David could hear the swollen blue sadness in his friend's voice.

"I'm not going." Simon said, pouring a heaped spoon of *Koolaid* powder into the jug of water; David watched the swirling water turn red as the pink powder dispersed.

"Where are we supposed to be going?" David asked without taking his eyes off the whirling drink.

Simon lifted the jug and slammed it down on the table with such force that David could feel the coldness of white freeze his throat.

"To the army, you *idiot*."

Idiot. Moron. Looney tunes. Nutter. Halfwit.

Simon had never said any of the words. David had heard Benita say them; other kids on the bus from other schools screamed them daily, but not Simon. Never Simon.

"I am going. Maybe not to be a soldier, but I am definitely going to the army." David said quietly for fear of waking the Danforths.

Simon slugged back the glass mug of *Koolaid* and forced a handful of orange NikNaks into his mouth, leaving a moustache of bright orange crumbs.

"Waywe wu ah." Simon said sending wet orange bits splodging onto the table.

"Not just me, we both are Simon, we have to." David said in a voice that he hoped sounded convincing to his friend.

Simon coughed and used his tongue to dislodge strands of orange from between his teeth. David looked away.

"Ja, I should be going with you David, but my parents and Doctor Reynolds fucked it up. They wrote back to the army and said I was too sick – too sick for fuck's sake."

"Stop swearing. I don't like it. It makes my head go purple."

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"Ja, well right now my whole life's gone fucking purple. It's no use. There's no fighting against them." Simon said and poured the jug of *Koolaid* down his throat, not stopping until he'd finished the lot, even the white silt that hadn't been stirred in properly.

"We're going to join the army Simon. We *klaar* in at 06h00 on the 8 January. We will be given khaki uniforms. Six weeks basic training and then the chance to prove ourselves as men. Then when that's over, we're going to be given – *assigned* – our jobs - together. I've been thinking all night and that's the plan, and we're going to stick with it." David said. He reached over and gently removed an unopened packet of Kool-Aid that Simon was trying to pry open. He put it into his pocket and the powder spilled down his grey school trousers. He shouldn't have worn them, shorts were for wearing at home. Lately he wasn't doing everything he was told to do and he enjoyed the sparkling sensation of colours he felt when he exercised his independence.

"You're going with me. I'm not going by myself, that's for sure."

David looked at Simon, noted how his friend's pale brown hair was flat against his head and his school shirt, damp with sweat, was sucked pink against his heaving chest.

"We can help to kill the terrs. Mrs Brand said after basic training we can try for the border and kill the terrs. Who are the terrs exactly Simon, I've forgotten?" David pushed his fingertips against his temples, he used his shaky legs to find the stool and sat down.

"The terrs are communists - people who stop you from having freedom. If they have the power then you won't have any power. Those are the terrs David."

"So anyone who takes your freedom is a terrorist…" David asked.

Simon nodded.

"Give me that other packet of Kool-Aid will you?" He said.

David withdrew the half packet and slid it across the table to Simon.

Simon dropped his head backward and poured the fine powder into his mouth. He started sneezing and spluttering and drawing in his cheeks at the sourness of the powder, then he slumped into a kitchen chair and brought his fist down on the table.

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"My one fucking chance David, and now it's gone. Remember when we used to play soldiers in the park, covering for each other. It's not going to happen, we won't be watching each other's backs. That's the thing about the army, it makes a fucking man out of you but my parents don't want me to be a man, they want their sickly little Simon to mollycoddle. They like having a snivelling little motherfucker that grants them a week's compassionate leave a year. Jesus, David, it's the only chance I had, and they took it away without even asking. Here, feel!" He said, grabbing David's hand and forcing it to wrap around his upper arm. David felt a tightening of the muscle through Simon's papery white skin.
"Did you feel that? It's muscle, pure bloody muscle. I hung an exercise bar up in the garage rafters and I've been pulling myself up every day for 72 days now, but I should have hung myself up instead."

The only sound for the next ten minutes was the sound of insects dive-bombing the back porch light.
"Can I do anything for you?" David asked Simon when he could no longer keep his eyes open. Simon shook his head and wiped his eyes.
"No. Good luck, buddy."

Buddy was a good word for friends. Buddy was one of those words that said more than itself. David wanted to say something as nice as Buddy to Simon, but Simon had used the best word and David knew he could not match it. When he got home, he took off his grey trousers and got back into bed. By the time the birds in the acacia outside his window started signing, his eyes were sore, but he had not slept at all.
"I am not going to school and you cannot make me." David said when his parents folded their arms and stood behind him in the small bathroom trying to intimidate him. "Today, I'm helping Simon get over the disappointment of parents and perfect sisters." He switched on the cold tap that shuddered and made conversation impossible.

Later that morning he caught two buses to visit Simon in hospital. The crook of Simon's arm was bruised where the drip was leaking into it. His mouth and eyes were swollen. Mrs Danforth sat knitting socks with her knees tight and her lips squeezed together. David waited a long time for Simon to open his eyes,

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but when the rectangle of sun had moved across the linoleum floor and Simon still hadn't stirred, he left the hospital. They saw each other a week after Simon was discharged from the hospital, but it seemed that Simon had nothing much to say.

Mr and Mrs Fisher signed David's army forms. He gave them to Mrs Brand and he was taken aback by the look of surprise on her face. "Did you get the medical section filled out by your doctor?" She asked, tapping the bulky envelope against her chest. David nodded and walked away quickly in case she thought it was in her power to take the army away from him, like Mr and Mrs Danforth had taken it away from Simon.

On the morning of his departure, David felt the bright orange drone of the heat even though the sun wasn't in the middle of the sky yet. It was agreed that Alison would take him to the show-grounds because it was next to where she studied at Wits University. His father shook his hand through the car window and his mother cried and had to lean on the wall between their house and Simon's house. The Danforths weren't back from their Christmas holiday, even though it was the third week in January. During the few occasions that Simon and David had spent together, David wanted to ask Simon to accompany him to the parade grounds, but Simon's eyes didn't meet his anymore, and so David never asked. As Alison reversed out of the driveway David tried not to look at Simon's house.

"You don't have to do this you know Davy? Why don't you just let mom and dad get you a discharge?" Alison said. David still couldn't find the sunshine in her voice, but he did detect love mixed with sadness. "God I hope they won't send you to the border."

"Of course I'd go to the border; when I am called upon to protect South Africa I'm going to do what any South African man would do."

Alison started crying then, she made David get out of the car and direct her into the narrow parking space she'd managed to find in one of the narrow streets near the show-grounds. Together they lifted the small tog-bag that held David's belongings. She reached up and touched his hair, turning her fingers into the soft curls that had grown over his ears during the December holidays.

The *klaar-in* place was where the annual Rand Easter Show was held, on the show-grounds. There were thousands of people. David felt the sun creep under

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his collar and begin to prick him there. Girls like Alison were crying and some were being dragged away by fathers and mothers. Their wailing reminded David of Benita and he dropped the tog-bag and covered his ears. Alison picked up the bag and led him to a brown tent that had a flapping paper sign with A-D scribbled on it. She joined the back of the queue and motioned for him to drop his arms.

"*Jissie*, we gonna *kak-af*, hey?" A lanky blonde teenager turned and spoke to them. David looked at Alison. She smiled at the teenager even though tears were shining against her cheeks. The boy appeared not to have noticed and continued, "I hear the six week basics are hell, fucking *mal*! No letters, no telephone calls, no sleep, no bloody *fok-all*, and then off to the border – straight my China, the terrs are waiting for us!" He said and sniffed loudly before turning around to put his arm around his mother who was weeping softly. David looked at Alison, but she was trying to find a dry spot on her hanky.

David's eyes darted around trying to find something on which to focus, but in the chaos of swaying people and loud announcements coming over the public address system, he battled to concentrate. He tried to rid himself of the empty grey feeling that he was experiencing. He tried to imagine where he would sit down and eat lunch that afternoon, but he couldn't visualise a calm place in the chaos and that made his ears feel swishy.

He turned to Alison but she was holding her chin up and her tears had stopped so he turned away from her and slapped his hand against his mouth. He looked at Alison's soft creamy hands and suddenly he could not imagine being apart from her or his parents. He imagined his little black Schipperke Nero running up and down the white front wall that he had painted. Who would know the way his mother leaned his two rice cakes on his plate? When would he feel the prickle of his father's ginger moustache? As more people streamed into the narrow spaces around him, he windmilled around the parade ground, his hands flailing. Everybody stared at the boy who was pale and looked as though he was choking.

Much later that afternoon David lay next to the swimming pool, scratching his leg where Nero's fur had made him itchy. A dark shadow fell across the redness behind his closed eyes. He heard the soft thuds of someone lying down

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next to him. “Let’s go down to the Rialto to see *The Towering Inferno* tonight.” Alison said, her voice was as warm as the puddle of pool water trapped between his back and the hot slasto.