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Maps to Get Lost by
Kai Lossgott

UNIVERSITY OF CAPE TOWN
GRADUATE SCHOOL IN HUMANITIES

Maps to Get Lost by

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LSSKAI001

A minor dissertation submitted in *partial fulfilment* of the requirements for the award of the degree of MA Creative Writing

Faculty of the Humanities
University of Cape Town
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DECLARATION

This work has not been previously submitted in whole, or in part, for the award of any degree. It is my own work. Each significant contribution to, and quotation in, this dissertation from the work, or works, of other people has been attributed, and has been cited and referenced.

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UNIVERSITY OF CAPE TOWN

GRADUATE SCHOOL IN HUMANITIES

**DECLARATION BY CANDIDATE
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IN THE FACULTY OF HUMANITIES**

I, Kai Lossgott

of 8 Barry Road, Rosebank, Cape Town

do hereby declare that I empower the University of Cape Town to produce for the purpose of research either the whole or any portion of the contents of my dissertation entitled "Maps to Get Lost by"

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**Maps to Get Lost by
Kai Lossgott**

a novel in three parts

ABSTRACT

Late in 1998, Lincoln, a former journalist turned truck driver, picks up the ghost of a 17 year old white schoolgirl on a dark Joburg highway. She becomes his confessor, as he relates fragments of his life, hoping to seduce her. He is driving a shipment to Port Elizabeth, where he grew up, but does not want to return home with the news of being HIV positive. He would rather drive forever. Sooner or later Lincoln abandons the map completely, as he proceeds to wilfully get lost. He gets stuck in an indeterminate phantom time, struggling to stay awake, losing and finding himself on a journey through eerie nocturnal landscapes and memories he has forgotten.

Ean, the ghost's obsessive-compulsive best friend, wakes up after her funeral having tried to commit suicide. He is pursued by memories of Marga while she was alive, in particular her theories on AIDS and sexuality, and his secret love for her. A number of forces, real and imagined, are driving him towards overcoming his fear of leaving the house. Ean feels abused by his mother Helen's lifestyle. She is a con artist with a taste for reckless men, the latest of which is Derrick, who represents to Ean everything which is morally reprehensible about adulthood and growing up.

Ean's discoveries in the course of his spring clean of the house, and the stories Lincoln tells the ghost, uncover Helen's great secret. She survived apartheid by denying her coloured family and living as a white woman, rejecting the black father of her child early on for her dream of becoming a great white actress.

When Ean runs away from home with the intention to commit suicide, and Lincoln emerges into the dawn with firmer hopes of returning home, they meet without recognising one another as father and son, but unexpectedly give each other hope to carry on.

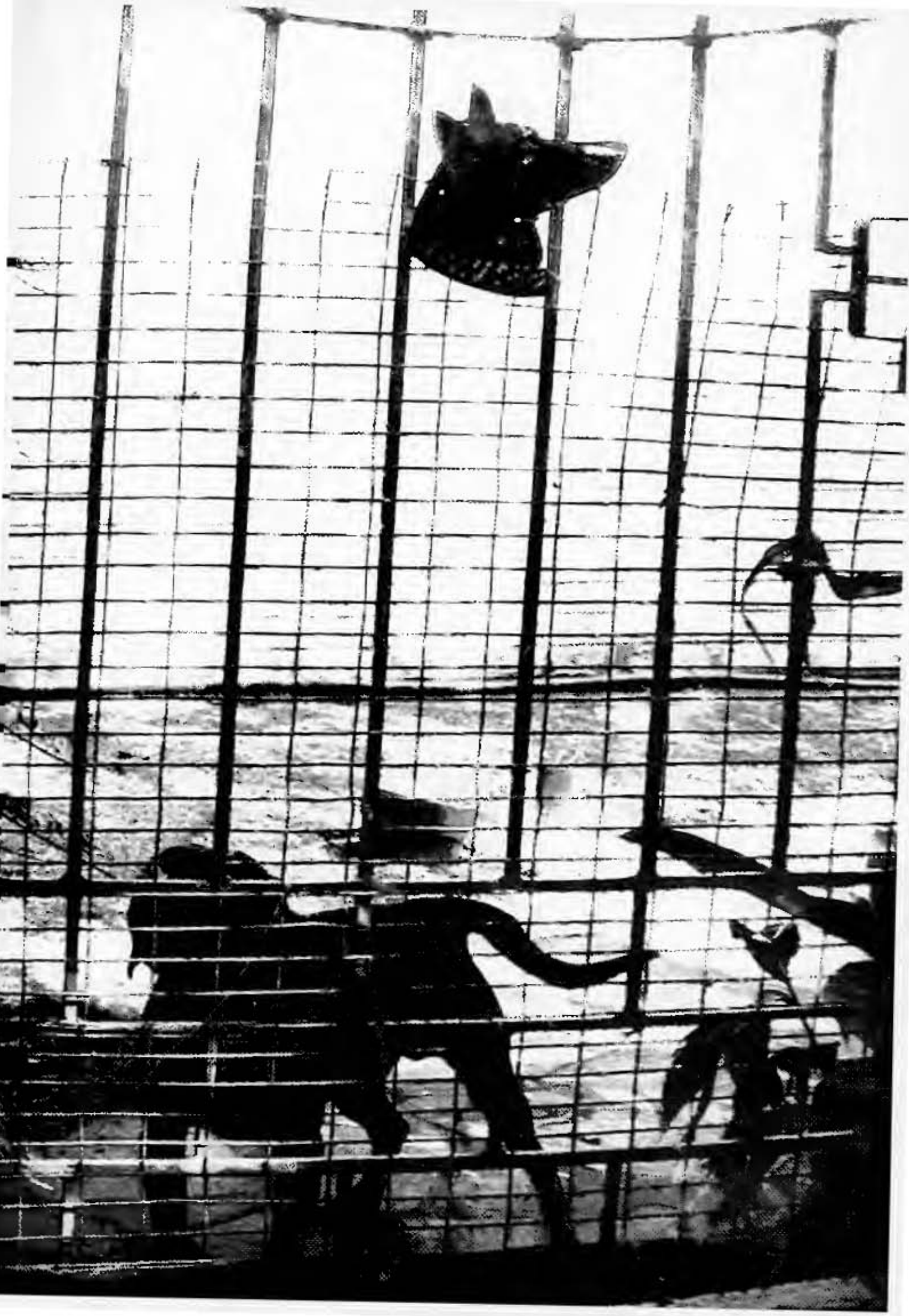
In a world the one does not believe in and the other has abandoned, a boy and a man resist and deny the unfolding of their stories. Central to their struggle are the themes of home, family and healing. For Ean, healing means leaving, for Lincoln it requires return. The memories which pursue them will force them into the discovery of who they are about to become.

Maps to Get Lost by

Kai Lossgott

for those who fed me

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PART ONE
dead ends

The past is never dead. It's not even past.
- William Faulkner, Requiem for a Nun (1951)

ONE
end of the road

The bark in the night, the bitch tracking far ahead in the moonlight through clumps of grass, her paws hard and fast, leaving the scrawny white girl in the dark with the rasping breath in her throat. On the edge of the suburb she yells the dog's name, scrambling through black bushes, scratching her arms, darting into a ditch.

And over a road.

Lights speed to her vision, one breath and a churning burst, all over.

In the stillness is the roar and the singing of the world.

Less and less of Marga, and then detached she lingers on the road, stunned by how they lie. On the tar is the blood, the dog, her body growing cold.

She is not alone in her vigil. Who they are, she somehow knows.

Later.

Wanting things to move at will, wanting forwards, backwards, something to hold on to, wanting to see herself in a mirror, wanting to visit.

They swatted their tails in the smokey blue at the grave, the dogs in love with this rare drizzly day out from the family kennels, where the ghost laid her hand on their heads, stepping through them, among flowers hazing, burnt by invisible fire, past ma and pa, her class from school, teachers, neighbours, relatives, tears.

And Ean.

He took in light and shadow both, but blinked sometimes, and seeing nothing, his breath paid witness to the passing time. The boy's legs gave in, he buckled, knees in soft soil. He pushed back onto his haunches, his shoes creaked.

It was over. He reached into his pocket, held it to his lips. Ean blew the whistle like a bomb.

All around him dogs ripped leashes, bound up frenzied, running every place one did not want a dog to be. The flowers shredded. The crowd scattered.

Trouncing voices. Dogs baulking. Like a bomb, again he blew. Ean quaked inside. Errant hounds, yells and laughter. Lapdogs leaping from embrace. Yaps, squeals and baying. Adults

frantic to stop the noise. He forced the measure of his angry breath into this seismic silence.

They had re-invented everything they knew, suspicious from the start. They had no backup-plan, just endless questions and keen noses. They had weathered dirt and damage, escaping the suburbs in their chases. This was their trap: he had been her reason, she had been his reason, reasons to live.

And done, he dropped the whistle down into its resting place.

There are blind dogs, Marga had said, deaf dogs, dogs who detect earthquakes and even epileptic seizures. There are search and rescue dogs. If you ever disappear, I will find you. I don't care what your mother does. I don't care who her friends are. Don't be scared. I will find you, Ean.

How will you find me?

Its a secret. Everywhere we go, we leave a trail of odours in the air. The heat of our bodies creates an unseen whirlwind high up all around us. And a dog, because of the special shape of it's nose, is able to follow that trail, for days. So you see, you can never get lost.

And if I were killed and thrown in a lake?

I would find you anyway. A trained dog will bark as the men row, following its turns until they reach a spot on the water where the dog stands still and points with its nose, and the divers go in, and bring up the body.

That's amazing! How does it do that?

Dog can smell the gas of rotting corpses, Marga had said. Then she had given him her ultrasonic whistle and told him not to worry.

Discarded futures. Moments missed. Mushrooming, darting, cut under wheels. This is the road, or what substance remains. The ghost is sucked in by all she has left, back on the tar where once there was blood, washed by the afternoon rain.

The wet road quickens. She falls into denseness. There are shoes on the yellow line. They stir. The ground holds her up. There's dim light, a man's head, an outline only. A terrified man. A man in death's shadow. Eyes hungry for stories. The ghost steps from the shades into his headlights.

"What's your name?"

She can't remember. "Jennifer," she says.

"Where you going?" He is tired, dull with sweat.

A long time she stares back like that. "Anywhere," she says, and she watches the corners of his mouth turn cynical. Now it's he who sizes her up, and his thumb ticks gently against the

humming glass, his elbow in the window. At the centre of that lack of movement rest his small grim eyes.

"You must be careful."

"I know." Take me, take me, she thinks, with a vengeance. Take me out of here.

His will is blunt with the years. She struggles against his vision, but lets go and shifts with mutinous silence. This is how he wants to see her. The living see as they want to see, and the dead are but their puppets. Miniskirt, makeup, laughing eyes. Only the black cardigan is like the one she used to own... And the little black dog collar round her neck. For luck. The one with the studs. For him she must have a shape, in this place of sun and moon, of day and night, where light illuminates shapes, where things appear. And so she appears. She brims with tears. He softens, and she snorts. He has a weak spot: chivalry. Let him play the hero, until she knows what happens next.

"I'm not so dangerous," he says. "Don't worry... You must be careful. Other people..."

"You'll take me?"

"Hey, wait, wait." He laughs, flashes his palm at her, and his eyes narrow. "I'm a very lonely man... Are you a girl who likes to have fun?"

She's not sure what he means, but he's smiling, and she thinks of the dogs, and that she's dead anyway. If he's into mating rituals, good luck with that. But she doesn't tell him.

"Ja, I like to jol..." she lies.

"Ah, that's good." It's sealed.

Moving across the headlights, she feels a door swing open. No longer can she bite her teeth or even scream.

TWO

detours

The door slams shut. It is as dark as it is cold. The exhaust grumbles into action, the pistons clatter in the engine. There is the rush of the wheels on the road.

"Crazy white bitch," he thinks. Don't know where she's going, don't know what for. And so he picks her up and absorbs her. He allows her to sit beside him, because he too doesn't know, because he too doesn't care.

The doors lock. The cabin glowers, shadowy-white.

"So, baby?" he says, clears his throat, and she turns with mocking laughter in her eyes, but she doesn't laugh. All she does is stare, turns her gaze to the window. He keeps his eye on her.

"So you like to jol?" She bites her teeth. He clicks on the radio, eases into his seat. His breath is regular, then he coughs. "We should get some beer and slap chips. Do you want anything?"

"No, thank you."

He is cooking in his skin, his throat is thick and scratchy. He should have stayed in bed this morning. He should have stayed in his crumpled sheets and stayed there and stayed there, except for the fact that it was probably a bad idea, although that alone could not have deterred him. He got up because the doorbell rang, but it was only a Jehovah's witness trying to save his soul. And so he took a taxi, and got to work late, but better late than never.

"Yes baby..." he sighs.

"Do I look like a baby?"

"You're so cute."

"Like a puppy."

"A foxy bitch."

She smirks sarcastically, then falls into frowning, staring into nowhere. So life wasn't over. She must stay near Ean. She'll get there somehow, if she waits. The outlines of her body move like memories from another mind. Unsettled, as if she were spilling, she finds herself strangely close to him. That makes her anxious, and she grips the armrest, where she discovers that the window is cool.

They drive past men in black coats gathered on the pavement, blankets all the way down to their skinny ankles, swaying ever so slowly where they stand grouped around punctured tins and the glow of coals. It is so still and clear here. She's almost afraid to break the silence. The silence of dirt and poverty.

"People always told me... The city was desolate at night. I never believed them."

"You've never been to the city at night?"

"I thought it was a wild place." You mustn't go too close, she knew, or you'll fall in. "But it seems abandoned."

Here, breathe deep. You can really cough the vaal air of Joburg. You can't stay here. The wicked wind cuts chill, the roads too wide, you can't survive. You'll wear your feet off trying to walk. Every place is far away. Just tar and glass and concrete, and litter whirling in the wind. Wander too deep here, and you'll vanish like exhaust fumes.

On the dashboard lies the clipboard, grease-brown, heat-bent. It clamps a goods return list, claim number 357042, from Shoprite Checkers, listing boerewors flavour chips in the back of the truck, bar codes, quantities, weight, unit cost, VAT amount.

He looks at the petrol meter. She has been fidgeting, has her hands clamped between her knees.

"I worked out the other day I've done 50 000 kilometres in this truck," he says, trying to impress her, but she stays turned to the window, scanning the roadside. "I used to think this was crazy. The night, the endless driving, everything. But, you get used to it."

"Yeah?"

"Yes. It comes naturally after a while. Do you live in this area?"

"It looks familiar."

"Where is your home?"

"Around here."

"Oh. Who do you live with?"

"They are gone. Somewhere far. To Australia. My family."

He nods. All she has is her body, he thinks. It's all they both have left to sell. That and lies. Captivating lies.

"You could have gone with them, maybe."

"Didn't want to. Had to come back here."

"In the new South Africa."

"Yes."

"So who is left?"

"Who knows, in the end."

He nods and sighs. He laughs grimly, expects to cough, but nothing comes. And she turns, with the slightest smile. Suddenly he is forced to really like her.

He's been on the road too long. When he's upset, he begins to talk. Once he thought only the people who read newspapers would listen. He was a journalist. Now Lincoln drives trucks. He'll tell you all about it.

Truth, he says, is a little like love. It's like reading the newspaper. Something's always missing. And it's probably you. That's life. You forget that you're lying, these days. The road is all that matters.

It is his uncle's truck. He had asked: can I drive it?

"So that's what your father sent you to college for, so you can drive trucks, nê?"

Lincoln had returned a laugh as the back of his throat imploded, and he'd felt small.

"Uncle Rex. I'm asking for a tiny job, that's all. I need the money. I know how. Remember how we went, back and forth. To see the big city, then back to PE, back to Ma. When I was small. To see the sea. You said I would make a good driver."

Rex had smiled. "I never let you drive. You don't have a license." That had been the end of it.

But it hadn't been the end. He had got the license, got the job, slipped into the regular roster. He'd made sure he'd stayed out of his uncle's way. He had needed time to sit and think. Time as long as thinking things can take you.

Lincoln talks and talks. His tongue consumes the hours. To see the sea, he says, is what he's dreaming of.

"So what do you do for fun?" he asks, and she frowns, as slowly answers come.

"I write."

"Let me guess... Erotica?"

"I write in my diary. I look after dogs. I go to school."

"And what else?"

"Nothing else."

"That's all you do for fun?"

"Yes."

"Do you go to the movies? Do you go clubbing?"

"I can't drive a car. How am I supposed to get there?"

"I can take a taxi. A black taxi, just for blacks. Don't your friends give you a lift?"

"I didn't have any friends."

"Or your brother?"

"I don't have a brother."

"Or your boyfriend?"

"No boyfriend. They're all on drugs anyway."

Lincoln suddenly slams on the brakes and grits his teeth as the truck skids to halt, just in time.

"Bloody brakes on this truck." A white minibus taxi careens past, packed with late night travellers, narrowly missing them, then putters away. The driver's hand signal fleets behind, an afterthought. "Did you see the bumper sticker?" Lincoln jeers. "'This taxi stops anywhere, anytime'." They laugh uncertainly, she wonders if it's true, and he glances over at her, a few times, in the dark, with the streetlights behind his head. His fingers stir slightly. She suspects he wants to put his hand on her knee. She pulls her legs close to the door. Shit, it makes the dress seem shorter. She'd like to hit him, and she can't. There's the sheen of nylon. There's new distance and new closeness. She'd like to scream, and she can't. She drops down her legs. All men are wolves, and she's just a phantom. But he isn't talking to her like some kind of bitch. He talks to her like Ean does, like she's really there, and she likes to believe that.

With every kilometre that curves into numbers, the girl's hands dig deeper and deeper into the holes in her loosely knit cardigan, her arms crossed, her lips tightly smiling, and she knows that he can see that. She sits astride infinity, straining against the urge to fade outside his vision. He sees a glimpse of that in her eyes, brown-flecked grey, thinking it seductive, but she soon confuses him. He doesn't bother to ask her where she is going, and the ghost is glad of that. She does not look him in the eye. He does not seem to like it. She does not let him touch her – not yet, anyway. The landscape rushes past.

Before long, thunder tears through the sky, hitting the distance and ebbing away, over city lights, crumbling sky like rock, tearing clouds. Drops break, the world wettens, soon thick and liquid, sloshing past the window in heavy gusts. He clicks on the windscreen wiper. It smears. It dies. He winds the window down and hangs out the side of the car to gauge the stretch ahead, but there is only blindness. A cough, he pulls back in, the wet under his eyes smeared with cold hands, shaking his head.

"You will get sick," she says.

"I will have to stop."

"You'll have to keep going."

"I can't."

"I can look if you want."

"Okay."

"Okay."

She stares at the window winder.

"What?"

"The winder. I... How do I work this thing?"

"You want me to believe you've never wound down a car window before?"

"Yes." He leans over, and angrily winds down the window. She shrinks from his body into the seat. The rain splutters in. He pulls himself back behind the wheel, and instantly regrets opening the bloody thing, but then she seems content to stick out her head, and he powers up to get out of the storm. Occasionally, she pops her head back in, and he tries to keep on talking.

"So you never go out, you don't have any friends, and no-one ever takes you anywhere."

"Pretty much."

"Doesn't sound like much of a life."

"It wasn't," she says.

"I would have become a... sex worker too."

She does not answer, looks out into the rain.

"Everything okay?" he shouts.

"Yes," she calls back. The truck grumbles, against the thunder. Two grey pools reveal themselves in the fall of the lights. The rest of the world is darkness, streaked with grey, incessant moving mashing grey and everything is still, except that the hush is roaring, and it is difficult to hear the other speak.

"Did your parents know what you were doing... After school..."

"What do you mean? Oh. That. No," she says, and plays along. "No, I always had to keep my, um, sex working secret."

"Then it is good they have gone to Australia."

"Yes. Very good," and she knows she should be sad, but the truth is that she can feel nothing, nothing at all. He does not seem to have a reply.

A late but steady stream of cars, passing on the right. Then there is a gap. Into the wrong lane, roaring, a car cuts past the truck, slows too close in front of Lincoln, and he has to brake, that huff and a screech, sliding in slick, winding down to 80 kilometres in the nick of time. It is not the last. From behind, when the line breaks, the odd crazy driver hoping to outrun the traffic dashes madly past. He keeps above a certain speed, in case someone comes too fast

from behind, and he keeps below a certain speed because the brakes have long been come-and-go. Rage drives him upright in his seat and he has to concentrate. On and on the rain drives against the windows. It leaks through the cracks, the rusty spots. The storm calms for a while, and it seems to him like someone rushing through a giant field, as if the thrashing drops of silver were stalks of some secret muti, and rocks were crashing in around them making sparks. Lightning tears into the sky, with the occasional sight of the bluff of a cloud bluster, and the consistent thrash of running water and the quickening of liquid, splattering in through the window as the highway lights fracture in drops.

He is drunk with the rage of his concentration. The storm has made him remember. He comes from a land of drizzle and fog. The thunder chases those years into him. Rolled into a blanket on a mat on the floor when he could not sleep, and listening for hours to the rattle of rain on the tin roof of the matyotyombe at night, when he could not hear his mother's breath for the storm but knew she would be there in the morning. It comes, the knowledge, and he can't. He cannot. Such shame, in this thunder. He does not want the stab it brings of abandoned things, echoing in his bones.

He longs for that time when everything was easy. He could look his mother in the face. He could step through the front door. He longs for what was senseless and at the same time made the most sense in the world. But those times are over, and all he has left is this night and this road and one more girl.

"Hey baby...." he says.

"Call me by my name."

"Jennifer?"

"Yes."

"Isn't that a name of a flower? Sweet Jennifer? Or the name of a song?"

"I don't care."

"Do you like to kiss and cuddle?"

"Try switch on the heater."

"It is on. Jen, you break my heart."

"Then it will have to be broken. Turn!"

"What?"

"To the right!" Too late he sees the sign, almost too late. He swerves around the sharp curve at the last minute, and skids down an incline, accelerating, almost toppling the truck, narrowly missing the roadside ditch and the blue Golf in front of him. Lincoln goes numb.

It is only a matter of time before he gets her.

On and on the rain drives as they rush through the landscape and into the night – there where it will be safe to answer the questions that stir Lincoln's soul. He is in two: that thing and him. Split down the middle like a lost man and his stray dog, snapping at his heels on every journey.

Slowly the downpour sifts away, an expanding humid field over a world gone grey. Nothing stirs. Everything is slowly drifting off to sleep and he must keep his vigil. They enter the city again, and she wonders why they don't stay on the highway. They could have been many kilometres from here by now. From the height of the truck, they can see into lit windows and balconies on the first floor of apartment buildings. They look down on people waiting in the dark for taxis to take them to the next stop on their long trek home to their shacks.

"Life will stay hard for them. You know them? You know those people for whom life stays hard?" he asks.

She is silent.

"I did not know about those people. I was one of them. You do not know who you are when you are in the middle of being that person. The rural areas are quiet. I was young. I lived with my grandmother outside Umtata. It never occurred to me to ask any questions. That is the way it is, I thought. I had it good, until high school came and I went to live with my mother in the city in Ebhayi, the Bay. Our parents – they were abused too much. They were working in the factories, in the mines in Egoli. I began to see things then, things that should not be spoken about. It became my dream to speak about everything that should never be spoken about, to speak about it every day."

Lincoln had lost count of the days the cough had burnt in his throat again, and he'd had to get out, quit that patchwork city of power pylons, smoke and obsession. The hurt was too much not to cover up, to cast off and cram into some less sensitive corner of his shivering flesh and bone.

On and off, these past four years, when he was well enough to work, he had packed some restless things into an old sports bag, bare essentials – toothbrush and some shirts, fresh underwear. The trip was short if your thoughts kept you busy, and he always got there on time. The delivery deadline never died on him. But more and more, and this time for certain, confidence was cold. He was tired. It was no longer that simple to get to the point. He wanted honesty, to work hard, to do his best – what once, long ago, had counted as answers, and now was only dust. He was in-between, and in this mean time the so-called power of thought still led, exactly, into darkness. Let me hold your hand – that was what counted here. Don't leave me alone. That was important. He could hardly think of which city would be next, but the highway knew the best way through it.

When his life became small, it brought a kind of freedom. A lack of obligation. A lack of expectation. But the endless starving hours of nothing, lying squash-faced and sprawled across the bed, drifting in and out of sleep, did not remove the hidden hunger, and it came with the hacking cough, which now at least had faded thanks to pills. He was still paralysed in the morning, heavy on his feet when he walked, drowsy and wanting a quick end. Sometimes he fell asleep in the taxi and they woke him. The other day, afterwards his wallet had been gone.

Somehow he had to lay it to rest.

Would it help to know that Doris Dollface Karabo was walking down Noord Street in central Johannesburg at that very moment in black stiletto boots and a fake fur coat? Her shoulders were hunched with the cold. Would it help to know that she carried the virus? Would it help to know that when Lincoln had searchingly entered her, she had not yet known? Would it help to know if there is something which impels us, like the stray dog to its master, to follow a certain course in life, arriving at the only possible end?

There was a time the road lay wide open, as open as it could for a black man limited by pass laws, the group areas act, and the millions of unspoken restrictions which clung to his skin. When he was younger, everything seemed so easy. He imagined himself as a boy, playing soccer near his grandmother's house in Ngangelizwe. The grass was dead, the clouds streaked high in the cold blue sky, and all there was was that ball and a way to get your foot near it. The rules were what mattered, and the ball mattered most, everything was a blur but for that ball, the single object of pursuit. One day, angry with Luzuko Ntontela for slamming him out of the way, angry that nobody seemed to have seen it or seemed to care, he went all out for that ball, chased it all the way across the field, clear from the others, and then he kicked it as far away as he could, turned and walked away ignoring all their calls. The last thing he saw was that ball high in the air, about to come down in someone's back yard. Two days later his mother came to fetch him to take him with her to live in Port Elizabeth, and most of those kids he never saw again.

It was girls soon his long legs went after, a series of odd jobs, and with the initiation, a sense of being a man. He knew he had to keep kicking. Even if he could not see what was in front of him, he kept tackling and kicking every thing that came into his way, and he was sure that the moment would come and all would be revealed. The ball would come flying round the corner and the game would keep going.

Except now that was not true anymore. The game had stopped. The ball had never come back. It had landed in the unknown yard and stayed there. He wanted to be a boy again. He had to hold his feet on the pedals as he drove, seized by an uncontrollable urge to run back year for year down the narrow alleyway of time and into the muddy streets, searching for the

vegetable garden where the object of his thirteen-year-old desire had landed in the red earth next to a pumpkin flower.

A moment can change your world. A moment can happen over and over again in your imagination, enter the world inside, where it takes root and becomes one of the small aches which can drive a lifetime. Sometimes these aches lead you to glory. Sometimes these aches take you astray. Sometimes they let you down. Sometimes everything inside you dies a sudden death trying to kill these aches.

Lincoln was stuck in the middle of nowhere in one ever-expanding point of shock. He could not get away from the recent past. He could not imagine the future. He had no desires other than surviving the next day, and wiping the grime from his eyes he smiled, but could no longer smile like he had smiled then.

They used to call him the entertainer, the man with the jazz guitar, his freestyle blues honed in long hours of sitting in his bedroom making beautiful noises, before he knew what freestyle was, though jazz he knew. At 19 he realised to his embarrassment he needed an amplifier if he was ever going to learn anything about the art, a thing he could not afford. But he found his teacher, found his groove, found his group, wrote short articles for the PE News, wishing the week away for Saturday nights at the community hall, the New Brighton Jazz Club, where he would stay until the early hours, charming the girls with the smoochy tunes of 1976.

Twelve years later, in Joburg, it was different. People were famous there. People were important. And you knew that you weren't. You couldn't just join somewhere and start playing if you were a stranger. "From Transkei?" they asked, looking him up and down, as if he were the decrepit homeland himself. As if they had not all, at some point, fled those decrepit homelands to the City of Gold – where you never saw gold, where newcomers gasped at the size of things, the distances, and hid out the lonely hours in smoky township shebeens.

Sometimes there were mixed gatherings at an underground club in Braamfontein, with white musicians. One night when he was drunk, he jumped up on stage and asked one of them if he could play his guitar at the end of the session. There must have been something about the way he looked at him that convinced the man, because Lincoln got his chance, all eyes watching him.

Beginning to play with a shaky hand, he rode on the riff, the tones stepped down two, as sharp plucks climbed, then stepped up two, the plucks again but with a twist, then strumming through a slow gospel baseline the earlier tones floated in with new surprises, building to lilting slides and a trickle of midtones, and every once in a while one of those hard low notes rumbling for the briefest of seconds in your gut. He played the notes off against each other as they fell in, gaining speed. The music was in him. It dislodged his insides. He shed all his

sadness. It all came to his fingers. His twiddling thumb strung a drumming dark beat, twisting into a broken blues melody, moody and lingering, serratingly sweet, winding tight up and down, cutting out for moments, and the low drone thrumming, then blended into the full body of the sound. Sometimes hitting the beat, then falling just beside it, he made the tones zing over each other in quick succession, speeding up and slowing down, swaying with the instrument against his hips. At the climax he abruptly cut out with a rip and a twang, and to the whispers of the crowd, walked out of the room as if in a trance. He never went back.

It was as if that sound had stayed there, stayed there under the bright lights, the last sound expanding, and he wondered where it had gone. It was years since he had played, and if he picked up the instrument now, he hardly thought he would know what to do with it. But sometimes still he heard a bleeping in his ear, like the feedback from a microphone, and he thought of those days, those days when they called him the entertainer.

Sometimes these aches lead you to glory. Sometimes these aches take you astray. Sometimes they let you down. Sometimes everything inside you dies a sudden death trying to kill these aches.

THREE
seventeen past nine

E an stopped in the quiet all around him, air settling on his skin as he hovered. Swooning, finding his balance, rising up, it was becoming clear. He was walking. His mouth was dry. He had swallowed pills. So much for trying. What time was it, what day? Marga was dead.

Blinding roads, pavements, highways, bridges and dead ends. In the centre of that vastness stood the house, shelter shutting in on him with its doors and curtains.

He opened the door. A failed hedge stood hard against the sky, holes and wide branches. Pressed cement fence, berry stains and bird shit. On the neat forced rectangle of the lawn, a white garden table and chairs. He crossed the wet lawn.

Rousing, persistent, the squall of the phone sent him shuddering. Ean bolted into the house. "Hello?" His breath caught the silence, its echo. The phone went dead, and his mind fired blanks. He sank into the edge of the couch.

Ahead of their conclusions, the moments seemed erased. He missed split-seconds. He lost explanations. His mother's late-night whispered phone-calls, locked in her room, the broken calls which forced themselves like still births into recent days, how he feared their silence, and her silence. More than Helen's silence, he feared her laughter. He feared for the little they shared together, the three of them.

The secrets of this house were secrets he kept even from himself. Most of all, he feared what she might answer, her lies, elaborate and too convincing. He feared she might turn suspiciously into the mother he always wished she could be.

Under the kitchen tap, Sunlight Liquid. Water, washing once. Twice, resisting the soothing scrape of the scrubber in the sink.

"Somebody is going to die," the old woman's voice patiently urged on Thursday, dry and tinny in the receiver. "We need to talk to Helen. This is not a joke." Helen raised her eyebrows when he questioned her. She went slack in the mouth, stroking her wrangled hair with her nails.

"Don't worry, I won't die," she finally said. She smiled hopefully, holding his gaze to force a smile out of him, stiffly, and he smoothed his forehead for her, ditching the room for the itch.

Spring-clean. It rang in his mind again and again, it made him want to scratch beneath the

skin. It was that jolt of long-familiar horror, drawing his hands out of hiding and into the drawers, horrible hands scratching in everything, packing everything, stacking everything, fitting corners into corners, folding what would not fit, finding little boxes and tubs to group things in – by colour, by shape, by size, as long as the drawer could be closed. Then they were labelled meticulously with a small white label and a black permanent marker. There were never enough labels, and Helen and his sister Billie did not stick to his system. They put things in the wrong places, leaving places between the places he had designated, and he would stand still for ages every time he discovered an empty place, feeling its insides.

He unpacked every kitchen cupboard onto the stoep. Hot water ran into the sink, steaming detergent. He had to touch everything in the house at least once a year.

Then he washed his hands, and he knew where everything in the house was. He had only to walk into a room and he knew who he was, where he lived, what happened there.

So in the lull of the afternoon, one on top of the other, he had put on every shirt he owned, had swallowed and gasped, had swallowed for the unaccounted space inside. His shoes had been polished from before the wake, but there was dust on them already. It clung to him, the house. It asked what he could not deliver. It had swallowed and expelled him ceaselessly like the sea as he had lain there flat on the bed and waited for the cold fever to ride out into darkness.

About twelve hours ago, he now surmised, boiling the kettle and pouring, slowly pressing his hands under the scalding foam for as long as he could stand it. Then he ran them under cold water, pushing them in again. That would kill the bacteria. And he bit his teeth.

As he cleaned he expelled from inside the cupboard and walls the plague, syphilis and gonorrhoea, hepatitis, salmonella, AIDS and tuberculosis, ebola, cholera and TB.

He expelled her soft hands which had never touched him, her intense stare he could not hold, her intense mind he could not follow. He pushed them away but she kept on coming back, and he had to harden his grip on the sponge and he hit his knuckles against the wall until he realised the paint was coming off in a white lather on his skin. Well, at least they were getting clean.

At school sometimes the girls stopped and giggled and watched her, and she gritted her teeth. It was meant to be a smile.

Well, what are you writing?

I'm writing about sex.

And what do you know about that?

That it is biology, a chemical imbalance in the brain, designed for replication, an addiction

we must get over in the face of AIDS.

Their hysterical laughter trailed behind them down the passage. He sat down next to her. Her gaze shocked him to the bone.

What are you writing, Marga?

About the mating ritual, about them panting and ooning, and how you never know, until the swelling, that the puppies are coming – if you don't take your pills. How they gather in the malls to kill time, until a second-hand buyer takes them from their father, to spawn a child, a consolation.

I see.

You do?

Yes.

Do you have a father?

No.

They were the next evolutionary step in a world in which love itself was now poison. Abstinence was the key to survival. Although survival was another story entirely. He hoped survival excluded the constrictions of the house – marriage, children and working from nine to five. The house was a dead-end prison. *"Somebody is going to die."* Somehow he knew it was him. Everything was changing. He had to get out, before they got here. It was only a matter of time.

He apologised when they slipped out through the back door into the yard.

This is not really my home.

Home is where the heart is.

They sniggered. Wherever their cynical hearts lived, it was far from here. They heard a train thunder past, and he held his hand on his knee, resting against the wall.

Have a look!

She jumped, he lifted her, and she held on to the top, pulling herself up. Far in the valley below, a wasteland in-between, the square cement platform shimmered, waiting for the train. There were tiny people stepping from foot to foot.

I can leave whenever I want to.

Can I come?

He smiled. She could smell lost destinations that lay on the wind.

Remembering this, he worked nervously, like an animal, from one cupboard to the next. He

had stupidly missed out on clearing the wall cabinet. Pasta, rice, popcorn, lentils, wheat, oats. A whole lot of Tupperware containers. The labels were faded and old. They were all wrong.

Grimly, he brought the bucket, steaming. He carefully peeled or tore off the labels, and set to work with a scalding Scotch Brite scrubber, baring the whites of his teeth, scrubbing, finishing off the glue with a cloth and some methylated spirits. He had no new labels to replace them, but smoothed his fingers over the plastic with dour satisfaction.

Then he set out to work inside the cupboard. His hands and knees were numb, the one with heat, the other with cold. Wiping away the gray slush, he dried everything with a dishcloth. He packed all the Tupperware back into the shelves. It was strange, but he could no longer remember the right places. It was the labels he had remembered, and not always what was inside the box. It might have said oats, and he would have known it was cornflakes, because it always stood in the same place.

Now there was no way of knowing anymore. He stood there for a moment swallowing his trepidation.

They took the bus sometimes in the afternoons to this house which was not his house and yet was everything about him. She understood that it offered no comfort, no safety, that all of that was gone now and perhaps was never there.

Maybe we could run away, he quipped, and she laughed, and it hit the back of her throat. She snorted.

Run? Tell me, how far would I have to run so I'd never be able to come back to that trap! It's where they breed the easy answers into us, she said, behind the petunias and security walls of the gilded cages we call home. It's where they teach us to swallow ourselves.

And she would start to tell him and stop.

But I don't know about that anymore, she would say. I don't remember.

Tell me.

I... I don't know anymore.

But it happened to you.

I can't remember.

Tell me.

I can't remember, okay? I can't remember.

FOUR
slipways

There's the cabin, and then there's the trailer of the truck. In the back of Lincoln's cabin there's a small niche, with a bed, you could even have a television there if you wanted to. Doom poison pads for insects lie there, old crumpled oil-stained chip packets, old Coca-Cola bottles, bottles of water to drink, the receipt book for customers, the log book where he fills in the truck number, departure time, place of departure, kilometre count, if he slept over, if he ate, place of arrival, arrival time. That's his proof for payment when he gets back to headquarters. (He can't really seem to bother with it much. He always loses the pen. Rex has shouted at him to fill in the forms more neatly, so they can read them.)

In the blue nylon kit bag he has two satin-smooth casual shirts, one covered with a tiny brown diamond pattern, the other with navy dotted zig-zags. Underneath is a white polo shirt. Shoes in a plastic bag, company shoes, a company cap, a spare pair of company overalls. A bag of toiletries. Deodorant. Razor and shaving cream, which he uses early in the morning, but often not.

"Where are we now?" she asks, scanning the black outside.

"I don't know. I haven't seen any signs."

"It's like..." She breaks off suddenly in speech, as if the words have failed her, covers her mouth with her hand and stares at him, caught waiting for the words to return. Then she startles at something else. A patch of light falls on her cheek, white and freckled, and wipes her nose.

And later... "We have a lot in common," he says. "We're born, we die, we love, if we're lucky..."

"And were you lucky?"

But he won't answer that. "How old are you?"

"Almost eighteen."

"Almost legal," he says. "Soon you'll be able to drink and drive." She will not warm up to his laughter, and he thinks about where they're going, and how earlier she had lamented, 'Who knows in the end?' He has no end in mind. The drive home will be just as long. Perhaps she'll stick around. "And when you get back to Joburg, where will you go?" he asks. Her grave smile cuts his talk. He says, "You won't go home."

"No," she says. "Never again."

Yes. He knows that too.

Silence stretches between them in the flicker of the national highway, N2. He has a habit of eyeing every car that drives past, seeking a glimpse of the driver in the dark. With the huff of an old truck braking, Lincoln clears his throat.

"I'm stopping for diesel in a minute or two. You'll be hungry, you should buy yourself something to eat. It's very far to the next stop after that."

"I think I'm fine. Thank you." She wondered if a ghost could eat. "You said you were a journalist before..."

"A professional liar. Well, I suppose I'm still one... That's why I quit. I'm trying to stop." He laughs.

"Why did you quit?"

He thinks for a while, turns off the radio.

"I got fired." Then he thinks again as she waits for him. "Want to hear the whole story?"

She fears the quiet around them.

"Tell me please. Though stories are always bits and pieces." She guffaws sadly, staring ahead.

He looks, and can see nothing but silence, her words open his throat, and he blinks, opens his eyes: "Perhaps you will understand."

about the woman in the green lime-washed house

Saturday afternoon, and we were working on the government cover-up of AIDS and how it was refusing free medication from drug companies, how they told us the West was enslaving us, and we were so confused. There were various stories linked to one, we were creating a series for publication, how people were dying in droves, how funeral parlours were opening across the nation, how there wasn't enough wood for all the coffins in some parts of the country. How people were hiring coffins to look respectable at the burial, and digging them up at night because they couldn't afford to pay for the dead. I felt shame as a man who was raised to respect those who had gone before us.

I felt shame because of the camera in Nadine's hand. It had never occurred to me how everything about my colleague was so white. She was young, naïve, her parents had money. It was something I was used to hearing. But that morning the light in Ngangelizwe, the township I grew up in outside Umtata, bounced off the shacks with a brighter ire than I could ignore. I should have left. I was dizzy,

consumed by what we were seeing, overwhelmed by the sharp stab of my people's eyes as we walked through there, the stench of dying all around. Was this why my mother came to the city? Was it always like this?

And the light made Nadine's skin glow. She wasn't a white, I told myself, not as white as others. We had spoken all about it. She too had suffered, she said. She was a liberal, she was trying. You know, the usual.

But did we have a right? Swooping in with our cameras, down into the dirt, and I, the tongue which would speak to these people, my people, and tease out their scars, for those, the whites, who could read about it over toast and coffee.

We found Nophucuko where we had left her, in the lime-washed one-room house, seven beds and more mattresses. Months before I had chanced upon her sitting in the doorway with her brother, when I had visited my grandmother in the area. She'd reminded me of my mother, my grandmother, and I smiled at her. She smiled back, and I was frozen. I saw myself, erased.

The world reflected in her small, dark pupils with the reckless glow that sometimes, rarely, emerges from those who have glimpsed the void and now cannot stop laughing, knowing what awaits.

Ten years ago her husband had returned from the city. He brought with him suspicion, but she forgave herself those feelings. Men, she knew, would come and go. She knew no other way but that of the smile and the gentle hand.

He brought with him money to the lime-washed one-room house. And with the money for her daughter Maria's schooling, and the desire to serve the man whose child she'd born, Nophucuko lay down once again on the bed for the stranger from the mines.

There is no Xhosa word for 'love'. There is 'like', which applies to everything. Life in the city. Alcohol. Betting on horses. The mines. Those were the things he liked. She wondered about the city women he never spoke about. She wondered what the priests would say who ruled over Ngangelizwe. She wondered if her husband cared. Time passed, and she got used to his surly, newly acquired ways.

But home bored him. He would watch her with the hoe and pitchfork which she had bought with the money he had sent from the city. Day in, day out, he would watch her. She watched him back, pretending not to notice his face brimming with mockery for her primitive ways. He was a man from the city now.

Nobody needed a miner, so he couldn't really find a job. He would have to leave again, he told her. She didn't object. He was a man. He had the right to an opinion. He had the right to want.

He wanted to leave. So he left.

Nophucuko had not been raised to want. She took what she was given, and

what she was allowed. She stayed behind and watched his letters dwindle. (She looked away from me when she told me, "He drowned in the deep city, see.")

She had begun to cough some months after he left, took pills, but didn't get better. She spent long nights awake in pain, sweating, blowing her nose on a handkerchief. She got too weak to get up on her own, the child in her belly swelling. When Busiswe was born, the hospital told her she had AIDS. Did she know what that meant?

Nophucuko had heard of God's punishment for those who led wicked lives. She had heard of the scourge for those who disobeyed the laws of the ancestors. She had heard of evil spirits possessing the bodies of witches. She was not that kind of woman, and she did not understand.

The doctors told her to eat properly, and to look after herself. She would be weak, from now on, to any little illness which came her way. She should take vitamin supplements if she could, and see a doctor as soon as she got more sick with any kind of pain. No, of course there wasn't a cure. It was one of those things.

One night her sisters got drunk and cursed her. They wanted to throw her onto the street. She was mad, they said, with the white man's sickness. She would be dead soon, they said.

Nophucuko proved them wrong. She was still alive seven years later, when I first met her. She had scars on her face from a botched exorcism, and had spent time in mental institutions because her family wouldn't care for her.

Two of her sisters died of AIDS. When she returned to the green lime-washed house, she nursed them until both met the red soil of the hills outside town. The last sister, and her brother, stayed with her, and they opened the house to dying strangers. It became a hospital of sorts for those who were sent home by the village hospital because there was nothing that could be done for them.

That was what I wanted to tell the white people. What they didn't know. What they still don't know now, and won't ever know, and what my people have long forgotten. That Nophucuko was more beautiful than any of them with their money and cars and credit cards could ever hope to be. And that this beauty was dying around us every day.

I wrote a thousand-word article. They cut it to two hundred. Nadine took fifty-seven pics. They only published one. And the most perverse thing was not that it had happened a million times before, to myself and to others. The perverse thing wasn't, in fact, that this was my job and that was the way things were supposed to happen. The thing was that I suddenly knew I could never go back to the newspaper, or to Ngangelizwe.

Because you see, before that last time I went to see her, two months before, I knew. That thing. I had it too.

FIVE
ten past eleven

***T**he crush of car tyres on the wet road. The creak of an old car coming to halt. Late in August, Ean turned on the pillow, then started awake, staggering out in the night. He unlocked and slipped through the gate. Where the hell had Helen been for so many days?*

Crouching behind the back wheel of her battered red Mazda in the driveway, he watched. She was laughing in the streetlight, her hair in her face, keys clanking, swaying, red heels in dark nylon stockings laddering at the ankle. She'd been drinking, tottering around, and a blond man with stiff lips held her under her shoulders and carried her into the house.

The gentle rain on his skin. Between Ean and the gate, on the other side of the road, stood an old silver Mercedes. The door to the house slammed. A cigarette fell into the street, sparking. The car pulled away into the night. Ean watched the glow go out in the rain.

Agitated, he shoved the kitchen table and chairs into a corner, changed his mind, and carried them out into the back yard. He poured hot water from the kettle into the bucket, dribbled in soap. A sniff from the bottle. He screwed back the lid. Scrubbs Cloudy Ammonia.

On his hands and knees, he began scrubbing the linoleum floor. Derrick had walked here. Marga had walked here. One to him was rage, the other endless longing, but memory was struggle, it had a single exit from his vexing body. The fluid was heady in the air, and he held his breath, buoyant, fascinated, fretting, in exorcism. Even the nastiest piece of dirt was purged by a dash of ammonia.

A draft dragged the smells and sounds of the back yard into the house when he opened the door. He plunged the mop into clear water and slathered the floor with it, wringing it out over and over until there was only damp left. Then he carried in the chairs and table, spreading a new table cloth.

Hunched over the top, sitting bones hard on the chair, digging his hands under his knees for warmth, touch came back into his hands, his joints pained, the damp skin numb. He rolled his shoulders, the stab crawling right up into his elbows, and, rubbing his kneecaps, was struck by the cloth's elaborate purple flowers and the yellow chains. This was where they had sat.

A week ago he woke again, the same brief grind of a car on the road halting in front of

their house. He unlocked the gate, but thought he heard the house door shut before he could see who it was. Ean hastened around the back to the glass kitchen door. Whoever it was, they had the key. Through the kitchen into the passage he saw the moving shapes of two men, one short and stocky, the other slightly taller, the blue of the night bleeding through the open door behind them, leaves blowing in over the threshold of the house as they made their way through the dark and stood right in front of him, where the night sky was high in the kitchen windows. One of them opened the fridge with a heavy shadow-hand. Ean shrunk from the faint light that it spread in the room. His feet and kneecaps were numbed by cold as he kneeled, one eye around the corner. The man was searching in the bottom shelf. Then he took out two sandwiches, and passed one to the other man, whose narrow spectacles reflected in the fridge light. In silence, they ate, sitting at the table.

They finished, rose, and disappeared into the lounge. Soon, a woman with wild hair followed them outside. Helen in her purple swaying nightgown.

The men balanced heavy crates against their bodies, silhouettes tramping down the passage into the lounge. Ean assumed they were destined for Helen's room. After the first two crates, he slipped back into the driveway to his hiding place behind the Mazda. Here he hoped to catch some kind of label in the moonlight as they unloaded the crates from their vehicle, but they were plain, wooden and unmarked.

The men entered the house with the third and fourth crate, while Helen guarded the open boot on the pavement, when an old silver Mercedes rolled down the road behind her leaving a glinting trail.

In the coming days he kept an electric vigil for the silver Mercedes. The road was quiet, and the cars were few and far between, but his hearing was good, and he knew when to rush to the window, sometimes only catching the tail of another car. The people inside were a blur. Sometimes they would stop and sit, just sit there waiting. He observed the cars through a crack in the curtain. Sometimes they were silver. Days passed like that. In between came the phone calls, small eruptions on a crackling line. "I can't hear you," he said. "Speak louder please." The distance dug into his mind. "Somebody is going to die," the woman on the phone had said on Thursday.

He got up and checked the lock on the door. Everything was changing. It was only a matter of time.

Now the men began to come and go on a regular basis, mostly at night and sometimes in the early evening. It was on one such occasion that they caught him in the front garden spying on

them through Helen's window. They must have noticed him and not let on, because they somehow sneaked through the house from the back and snared him by his arms, which the short man held tight behind Ean's back. In the falling dusk he could make out the sparse blond hair of the man who stood in front of him, combed over bald spots, a silver sports jacket smeared from carrying crates.

"What are you ddoing in my hhouse?" Ean stammered.

"I'm your mother's boyfriend Derrick." He spoke with the air of a 1980s news reader, in a monotonous voice, pig-eyes though black-rimmed spectacles, a bony nose.

"She doesn't hhave a bboyfriend Derrick."

The man sneered.

"Now listen to me nicely. The less you snoop, the less you get hurt. You understand?" Ean did not answer. "What we do here is private. Your mother knows about it and that is all you need to know. You hear me?"

"This isn't your house." Ean coughed.

"You aren't listening," Derrick hissed, close to his face, man staring boy down with pale grey eyes. Ean stared at his reflection in the man's pupils, stunned, his ears awash. And Derrick came closer, if that was even possible, too close with his caustic scent of cologne. Ean picked at the hairs on the back of his hand, looking down. He tried to stand his ground, thinking of Marga, what she was wearing on the day he met her, with the ants crawling up his leg through the grass but Derrick kept pressing in, forcing him against the garden wall as Ean evaded his face, Derrick slowly lifting his hand as if to clamp and strangle. The boy couldn't breathe anyway, but he bit his lip and would not cry. Derrick broke into a gnashing grin, forcing Ean's head between his hands. Their noses almost touched and Ean could feel the hot moisture of Derrick's breath huff against his upper lip and nostrils as he tried to yank away. Then Derrick let go, as Ean jerked his head sideways in disgust. "Respect your elders," Derrick snapped close into Ean's ear, then turned. "Okay, now lets get the stuff," he told the other man.

They made Ean walk ahead of them through the house into Helen's open room. "Now sit down. Shut up. This is what we do." They made him sit on the bed as he tore at the hair on his arm, breathing quickly through his nostrils. Watching them march out with three sealed crates from under her bed, he was faint with fear by the time they returned to lock the room. And Derrick came close, whispering in Ean's ear. "You're one of us now. Your mother would be proud. This is our private business. You're one of us. Remember that." They marked the house with their presence, the scent drifting behind them through the open door, and Ean, dizzy and hands charged with horror, ran to the door, slammed it shut. He shot the bolt in,

finding himself short of breath. He paused. His chest heaved and lurch-splattered vomit. The carpet, the table, the telephone wet. Before he could curse, another expulsion came, and he scrunched his eyes as he crawled on his hands and knees, then a third and a fourth, disgorging his innards like hell's portal.

Eventually he stood, exhausted and trembling, his hands on his knees with his back against the door, spitting out shreds of food. He ran to the kitchen, returned with the dishcloth, pummelled the cloth into the floor with his fists to soak up the curdled fluid, morning oats and Oros juice, running back to the kitchen, wringing it out under the rushing tap, careful not to drip, wiping the area – chair and table, floor and phonebook, table legs, telephone, receiver, cord and dialling pad until it was gone, but for the sour odour. He shakily peeled off his clothes to his underpants, threw on detergent, spilling the bottle, and with a bucket of water scrubbed up the carpet and rinsed until the soapy feel was gone from his hands and he grasped his clothes and headed for the shower, where he scoured his skin for half an hour until he could feel no more the walls of the house.

The kitchen windows called. Windowlene. Newspapers, under the sink. Spray and wipe, squiggle squiggle, spray and wipe. *"Respect your elders."* An adult. Who wanted to be an adult? The heroes maybe. The heroes in this life story in which he was just a sub-plot before some one else took over, like the swashbucklers of kids' TV – Michael Knight, MacGyver, He-man – always there in the nick of time to save the world before it (without doubt) exploded into smithereens at the hand of some sniggering asshole. He hated their know-it-all big plans, their taking-over, big-boy smart talk, and Marga would complain about their girlfriends and sidekicks with the big tits and wide-mouthed smiles. Like politicians. Like porn stars. People who existed just on paper, made up by their publicists and some good makeup.

People like us don't make it to Hollywood, Marga said. We have the sense not to want to.

The wet, crumpled newspapers in his hand proclaimed those expectations. Those were the role models, the heroes. Those were the people who ran the world. They went on noble journeys with swords or guns or motorbikes, shot a few people, screwed a few women, maybe married the prettiest one, and lived, he was sure, not happily ever after, but in conflict until they died – like every other human being. As long as they looked good, that was all that seemed to matter.

Wipe wipe, screech squiggle, wipe.

Fuck adulthood. They could keep it. Through Marga's eyes he had come to look back on his ancestors as a long line of barbarians and fools. Fools that had ejaculated a few times, and here he was, on a wrecked and over-populated planet run by faceless corporations, corrupt

politicians, the advertising industry and other people who did not give a damn.

It boggled the mind that so many people recommended that he fill the next fifty years of life which lay before him with these choices. How could so many people choose the same stupid things?

It's the adults, Marga said. They hold us on a short chain.

We'll break loose, he said, we'll go on hunger strike, we'll choke to death and leave them empty-handed.

He said we'll be safe, we'll stay in the house and we'll bite them if they try to enter.

He said the whole world can go to shit and we'll still have each other, we don't need them, we don't need the world and it doesn't need us. Nobody tells us what to do!

They were forced into life, forced into living, forced into school. They would not just be educated to be slaves in rich men's pockets, then forced out of school, forced into work, so their skills could be useful.

We are dogs being trained, said Marga, for a very special task: shutting up and getting on with the job.

But he wanted to know what the adults were doing. His hands were hungry. His hands were weak. His hands scratched and crawled and dug into things. He hated his hands. They took on the house, and the rest of his body followed. His hands were the cleanest thing about him. At least they could keep themselves clean. They got dry from all the soap, but he put on cream, but they got sweaty, and then he had to wash off all the cream and start over again. Sometimes he spent half the day doing that.

When you had scratchy hands like that, they came at you and they came into you, or maybe what was in you came out. What was all this itching and all this cleaning and all this ferreting when right down in his gut there was the vomit, he knew it was there, and he wanted it out, the damn vomit, for a clean stomach. Retch out the facts. You needed proof of these things. Perhaps there was nothing evil in Helen's room. But he knew the men would be back, the adults, like termites burrowing into the heart of the house. There would be more of them and more of Derrick. How could you get your hands that deep down your throat? It was different when Marga was there, and he wondered if every day coming would drive him as wild with the itch as it had since she was gone.

He shut all the curtains of the house, avoiding being seen from the outside. In the lounge,

the drill began – a manic siren that would not stop. On the other side of the wall, Ean crouched in a corner, clamping his hands on his ears.

"For fuck's sakes!" he screamed. Where the hell was Billie to answer the damn phone? Then it cut out, and he went into the passage to lift the receiver, which cooed like a dove. For a while he just stood there in the passage trembling, watching the dappled light on the little frosted window in the door.

In the kitchen he scrunched his eyes, running his fingers over his brows. He stuffed his face with ice-cream, it slid down his throat with a silent hiss. The fridge needed defrosting. He pulled out the plug and let it dangle.

Billie appeared in the doorway with pillow-creases on her cheek. He spun around.

"Where the fuck were you to answer the phone?"

"I'm not the fucking maid."

"Can I remind you that we don't have a fucking maid, unlike everyone else in this country?"

"You're the fucking maid, man."

"Fuck you."

"Fuck off!" His voice broke.

"Fuck off!" Laughing madly, she imitated his voice. "Fuck off!" Then she began to sing and shake her hips. "Fuck off. Fuck off, fuck off, fuck off..."

"Shut up! Shut up!"

"Keep it down in there, OK?" Helen's bare stiletto heels made dents in the floor wherever she walked. The kitchen was riddled with them. "What's going on? I can't leave you two alone for a minute!"

Billie laughed. Ean stared out of the window.

"Sorry, Helen," he said.

"And why isn't the fridge plugged in?" She walked over and pushed the plug into the socket, putting her keys down on the counter.

"I wanted to defrost it."

"Oh. Does it need defrosting?" She pulled the door open.

"See."

"OK. Ya. Thanks, my boy." Billie giggled. Helen closed her eyes and heaved a deep, dramatic sigh. "Billie, next time I hear you swear like that you're grounded for a week." Billie giggled even more.

SIX
wandering star

Shit! She still tried hard to uphold principles. If only she could have believed in them. Motherhood. She should have known back then, with Ean's birth, that this was reality, this was as good as it got. But reality had never really been her strong point. Helen was a firm believer in good intentions, and the fact that life isn't fair.

She pulled off the tight top and fell on the bed. The bra strap scratched her, so she took that off too and got up to close the door. Lying back on the bed, her head turned to the window, her dark hair thrown across the pillow, it dawned on her that sometimes she was just on the brink of bolting. The schemes had been getting bigger and bigger since they'd joined with Derrick's friends, the jobs more and more complicated, and she wasn't sure if that was bad or good.

Men couldn't be trusted. After all these years, she knew that only too well. There'd been an invisible skin around her since Colin left, skin beaten sore by much betrayal. She had learnt to take no-one's words for truth or fiction. All the world, she thought. Let them dance up on their fucking stage.

She could go back to acting. But everyone was casting black actresses, she thought anxiously. Pale was passé. She had passed for white so long, she didn't believe she could get a job. Now that was one big fat joke that didn't have the house roaring. What the hell was she going to do?

She'd left that rock-and-nothing township near King William's Town and kept her oath never to go back. In the big city, everyone assumed she was white. She was going to keep it that way. "A great white actress," she whispered. A dangerous game. All these years – she did not regret it. Freedom had come. And it suited her fine now not to be famous. She was a nobody with hundreds of faces, making more than any other actress she had ever worked with, a confidence trickster with numerous alter egos.

Years ago she had started as Ms Aviva Kretzman, an imposing Israeli trophy wife. Ms Kretzman had lost her credit card and desired a quick loan from an unsuspecting man at any random tourist trap. She gave him all her details, and later when she'd met the right people, even had a passport she could show. There had been variations on that theme, sometimes alone, later with others. At one point she had done it so often that there were photocopied

posters of her at the airport. She stopped, tried to live a normal life. As normal as she could.

It was in the corner café that day when the car wouldn't start, and the bill for the broken window came, and the kids were screaming because they knew they'd be teased when they got to school, and what the hell could she do to help them anyway?

It was the day a part of her almost went missing. Or maybe it did. What the hell did she know. She walked them to school, and stopped at the café on her way back, to get a pack of cigarettes - Texan lights - shaking ever so slightly as she counted out the coins on the counter.

As usual, Helen wanted to cry, suppressed it as usual, brushed back her hair - she knew someone was watching her. It was the café owner. She smiled at him. He smiled back. She smiled again, it made her feel so good, she couldn't help it. She dropped her shopping bag (by accident, of course). He rushed to help her, they both reached for it, somehow he touched her hand. She tried not to laugh out loud with joy.

When he looked at her this time, she knew she should have felt insulted. Yesterday, perhaps, she would have had the pride to turn away, walk out shaking her butt this way and that with a glint in her eye, but that was yesterday. Today, her breathless "Thank you," was followed by, "Carlos, do you have a light?"

He fucked her like a king, when she couldn't stop herself, invited him home, poured the drinks, grabbed him by the crotch. He was the beginning. That day she did what she knew she had to do to feel in control of her life again. But he was not the end; only the first of many more attempts at a solution. If someone had demanded she count them all over the years, she couldn't have. It was her way of coping, and often they would leave her enough money for a week's worth of groceries, but she never asked for it, and the kids never knew.

The director had asked her if she had a boyfriend. "Too many!" She giggled, but nobody else laughed. Maybe she should stop, she thought. She wasn't getting any younger. Auditions are abattoirs. I'll never be more than this. And then, that night, at the theatre bar, Derrick was introduced to her by a well-meaning friend.

He shifted out of a grey cloud by the ashtray on the counter, and for a moment, tall, in black, he seemed like something else - his blond hair smooth and flat against his skull, his pale eyes warily framed in square, black-rimmed glass.

He smiled like a frightened gap-toothed child, he entered her curiosity. Watching one another from across the bar, they stood like that for several minutes, and somehow one of them remembered how to speak.

And that was why Helen stayed that night at the Backstage Bar, and drank vodka with lime

until his smirk stopped being disgusting. And after he predictably sent her lips into their characteristic crimson curl (the bartender brought her a strawberry daiquiri with a shot of apple sours), she chose to mesmerise the glass with a sullen stare, then suddenly, him.

"Thanks." Her head snapped back to the bar.

"That was quite a show."

She turned to smile, and measure with her eyes.

"It wasn't a bad night. Seen better. Who knows who'll get the part."

"I'm Derrick."

"Hi." She gently parted her lips again in the tried and tested way, twisting her hair with a long finger. "I'm..."

"I know, I know. Greatly admire your work, I do."

"Thanks, that's very kind." She had not performed in years. But she soon learnt that was not the kind of work he had meant.

"Not at all, not at all. It's such an honour."

She'd heard them all before, and all so many times. The same sort of men even used the same sort of lines. Like lines in a play... Helen loved plays.

What was her motivation? She hardly knew. But the men that visited the theatre bar always seemed to know, and she seemed to understand them better than she understood herself. Most of them wanted sex, some needed a mother, someone, something, for a night or for pretend-forever.

Of all types of men, she preferred the first to all others, the type that wanted only sex. She would watch him play from behind her makeup, on his stage set, bravado, testosterone. She would thrill as he advanced from under glowered brows. Then she'd pretend she had not noticed, and watch him launch his next attempt. These were the 'real' men, the stubborn ones, the ones she knew by trial and error to choose, and the best, the most amusing.

Helen had forgotten names, times, places, but she'd never forget a body, hers for an hour or two of rapture. When she slung her soft arm around a big man, gripping his biceps, her aching belly on fire, she forgot herself, and owning this could make her feel alive.

This was not a big one, but he was elegant, those were rather rare. And he wanted her, she thought, amused, scanning the crowd unashamedly. Nobody else around. She imagined him on the white embroidered sheets, too much like her mother's, and conjured the victory of awaking with a stranger at dawn. A nameless man warming her night, untouched by her coldness at day.

"I have to leave." She glanced at her watch, hearing car keys clanker.

"Would you... Do you... Do you want a lift?" He watched her raise an eyebrow.

"Hmmm... I just don't know! Do you have one?"

"Always."

Helen giggled for the first time in weeks. Her voice returned to normal. "A lift sounds just damn perfect, Derrick."

God, she felt nauseous, god... Vaguely Helen registered her thoughts. She had begun to shiver ever so slightly, her fingers trembled and her soul was bile, smoke, alcohol, bile. A mosquito squawked past her ear, and she numbly wiped her hand against her cheek, although it was long gone.

Her mind was immobile, swamped in nausea, her head dizzy like her lurching guts. Weakly, she groped for the bedside lamp - 4 : 30 AM, the luminous block on the digital watch answered question one. The second was more difficult.

She could vaguely remember who the man was she had awoken next to on this morning after that disastrous audition. But more she did not know. He looked like Colin in the low beam of the streetlamp through the window, or perhaps it was the moon. But his hair was blond, and his long face seemed smug, yet... equally pathetic. She turned in disgust to stare at the lightening sky outside.

When he awoke, he began to feel her, his spindly hands smearing all over her body. She wanted to get out, needed to, fast! And yet he was holding her, and yet caressing her, but she felt like a bloody thin-worn blanket in his arms.

She lay there, him caressing her skin with long, slender fingers all over her body, groping her thighs, awkwardly cupping her breasts, bruising her nipples as if he could milk a response from her. She felt like a lump of clay, she, the actress, who could feel anything by just pretending. And the usual euphoria of the sexual conquest was lost at this morning of hung-over horror.

She tried to close her eyes and sleep, but the morning was there, unequivocal morning, and the previous night meandered its way into her thoughts again and again.

It had really begun, after vodka and daiquiris, with too much champagne in the car after they left the Backstage Bar, and it had ended with a car full of petrol and a few hundred rands. Derrick was quite a name in the furtive circles she once moved in. Or rather, he had many names, some of which she guessed she knew. It had frightened her. He knew exactly what it was she did. An old acquaintance had told him where to find her, a girl with talents to swindle the pocket. She had always said she wasn't going to do it again, she'd said she was getting out of the business, that way of life. Her kids were almost grown up now. Men tired her. Life tired her. The whole lot. But he knew his way around all that. He had gotten his way. She

had given in despite all she had said, and her old life was back in a single night. Because after all the running, she'd had enough – but she hadn't really, her body had tired but out of her gut came a yearning for more, more of the same, of being someone else's emotions. She craved the darkness, the mirror held up to her soul in those moments of fainting after climax - a reminder of the game she played.

With every man that came her way, she felt nauseated, ill with revenge, disgust and the fumes of betrayal, but she knew no other battle now but the one against herself.

It had started some time after Billie's father had to leave the country – the need to stay in charge, to carry on regardless, to keep playing that old raunchy game where nothing ever had been won, except maybe the first man she loved, until that day she dropped her shopping bag in the cafe.

Derrick was one more small victory – she forced herself to continue what she had begun, couldn't stop now; if she stopped, it would mean her certain death. Not physical only, but death of her heart; she couldn't start feeling now, needed the numbness, needed the need to be who she was not, needed to pretend, because it hurt less in the long run.

She weighed the night up against the morning and decided life was worth it. She tried to lighten it all, got up. "Breakfast?" she ventured. "Are you hungry?" She brushed her hair. He nodded vaguely, stared at the ceiling. "What do you want? Bacon and eggs? Green eggs and ham? Cereal? Coffee?"

"Come lie here next to me."

"I can't. I have to go to the theatre at nine to help with makeup."

"Just for a while. Just let me hold you." Helen felt ill at the thought, yet strangely attracted by it. He got up and stood behind her. "What are you working on?" Derrick put his arms round her hips and rubbed her stomach.

"You know what I'm working on."

"Yes, but tell me more about it."

"I'm working on getting a fucking job."

"Yes." He moved closer. "Say your name for me."

"You can't remember my name."

"Of course I remember it..."

"Helen. Helen Ansley."

"I just wanted to hear you say it."

"Whatever. I asked you if you were hungry."

In the kitchen she lit up a cigarette and began to wash the dishes.

And so, in June when Derrick got wind of her and sought her out, she became Sophia White, a clean-cut lawyer. Derrick went around to businesses declaring their money counterfeit and confiscating it. His official letters referred them to the office of Ms White at the National Mint, with a phone line which Helen answered, explaining all the official details, to allow Derrick to make a smooth and safe getaway. When they had done it too often, they travelled for two months to Durban and Cape Town. Most of the time they lazed on the beach, and some days she was Bella Di Malvo, modelling agent from Milan, with a white pants suit and American drawl. For a handsome fee she enrolled young girls for a pricey modelling course, promising them costly modelling portfolios containing very expensive photographs Derrick took without even any film in the camera. Back in Joburg she played small parts in various schemes with Derrick's friends, often merely as courier or driver. He told her that the less she knew, the safer it was for everyone. Derrick soon realised that she was gun shy, and asked her to stay out of his next big deal. All she knew was that it involved smuggling weapons into the country, and that they needed a place to keep them. She worried sometimes about the kids finding out, but they were big enough to make their own decisions.

Helen wondered if they had not always been that way.

SEVEN
small hours

Signs appear in the night, rectangular, things from another planet, posters advertising everything that can go wrong. Chevron reflectors tell you which way not to turn, their arrows bending away from the skidding curve. Signs read eighty, one hundred, one hundred twenty, pulling you, trying to restrain you from speeding. Signs tell you of dead ends, where you can burst through and smash yourself into newer horizons.

Now it tells him to stop. Now it tells him to go. The lights try to give him the name of things, but he does not want things named. And they give him names, and he escapes them. And the moon, always the moon. Even the bridge above him has a rail to protect those who would fling themselves from the top. It must protect those who cannot drive in a straight line, who can no longer think in a straight line. Everything has an exit and every place needs an escape route, for him who needs an escape from every destination before he's even made it there.

The sky is brown and purple, later again on the highway, and on the distant horizon are rows of alarming yellow lights. The road is slashed down the centre. Blink and slash, slash and blink. Reflectors guide him along, away from the broken bleached-out grass. Signs tell him: soon.

Soon there would be a turn-off snaking away, and he would turn off the highway, leave on another path, go on a different broken trip.

Blue signs with white letters tell him this road has a name. Not that he cares much for names, and black bushes between the lanes, and the roadside Engen One Stop where the light is so bright he dare not go. All he sees in front of him is the long column of cars, glowering red tail lights, and behind him more cars coming, with white in their glaring eyes, determined to hit the horizon and leave him far behind, in the dark with the stupid girl who ignores him, and he tells himself he does not care.

He adds them up by the hour, the signs every once in a while, compounding his sense that they do not wish him well. He does not trust the sign's instructions, he does not trust straight lines. He hates maps. He is trying to break through, break into another country entirely, where such things do not exist, but if only he could see the things that did.

It was easy to see the conspiracy of signs by night. By day it seems as if these things have

nothing to do with each other. By night it seems as if the space between the signs is dark and thick as clay. Yes, every sign sniggers with every other sign. The signs have come together to undo him, for they will lead him to his destination, which is the place he fears the most.

And still they pull him into the visible world, towards the specks of light on the horizon. And when he finally turns, exhausted behind the green lights, and he's made it just in time before the lights go yellow and then red, he wonders again: what is the name of this time? He wonders whether one can name time, and whether that would be a way to stop it.

about diagnosis

During the day, the coughing was fine, but at night, when the man slept, he just coughed and coughed and coughed up mucus. He looked pale. His skin was baby-soft, revealing the pores on the back of his hands. His eyes were very white, his hair soft and very curly. He said if he ran for just a while he would feel like he could not breathe, choking as if something was holding his breath. He needed to eat all the time, because he would shake and he was so weak he could not even lift a pen to write. The man looked thin, tired and wanted to sleep. After a few minutes' conversation, he was exhausted, panting.

The man was dying of TB. I was lying next to him because I had it too. I just wanted to sleep all day. Terrified, I asked the sister: do I look like that? She shook her head and smiled.

"No, you are still strong."

Then came the time.

I was lying in the ward, and they called me to the office. There was a huge table with two chairs. Behind it sat the sister in charge.

"Do you know anything about AIDS?"

"Yes," I said. "I'm a journalist."

"We have found that you have AIDS."

I screamed that they were lying, packed my bags and staggered into the taxi home. I did not understand. After everything I had seen in this country of mine, after knowing the peace of Nophucuko, still, I did not understand.

That was a time without a name, at Reuben Court on the fifth floor, those six chaotic bloodless weeks in that bed with barely a word. The headache of death, the blinds down, and scarcely knowledge of night or day. Except that during the night, the coughing came, that would not stop when I tried to sleep.

The side effects of the TB medication were horrible, an itching inside the skin, something that was eating from the inside. My friends always said don't go to the doctor, the medication only makes you more sick, and they were right. I took

the purple dose in those months leading up to the elections in ninety-four. Then I stopped. At the end of last year, ninety-seven, I got sick again. They made me take the same pills. I am still taking the light orange tablet. They told me it would take me eight months to get better. This year I stopped smoking and drinking and living off pap and tomato sauce. Sometimes I need a cigarette, it keeps me going. I can feel it. My lungs are healing.

It was my girlfriend Zanele who saved my life. She nursed me for a month when I first got sick back then, until I could go back to work. Although she knew I placed no faith in such things, she always prayed. She made me drink some healing water she got from a magogo at the taxi rank. It tasted slightly salty, like tears, or the sea. Even though it made me angry to have to lie there, and I was rude and uncomfortable with her because I could not do things for myself the way I was used to, she brought me food, she made me tea. She told me I'd get over it.

And all that time I lay there with my TB under the brown blanket splattered with cheetahs, watching the damp spots on the ceiling and the light falling through the gauze curtain and I wanted to die and I wanted to tell her the rest, but I had to wonder about how I got it, and I knew she would blame me for my other girlfriends, and for ruining her life.

While I lay there, I thought about my future, in pieces. She would give me my tablets, cook for me and go shopping. Sometimes she would get angry and tell me to eat, so I could get strong, and I would chase her away. But no-one else came to visit. She was the only one there.

That's when a man realises how much he needs a woman. That's when a man starts thinking: maybe this is the one. Her love hurt my heart. It was too big. Until then, she too had been just another woman. I was terrified of losing her, terrified that she would hate me, that I would never see her again. She was the only one I had left.

Now I was waiting to see what would happen. Nothing happened. The country was too busy staging its quiet revolution. Whatever happened, I couldn't see it. Dreams were for another time, and I wouldn't live that long.

In a time when everybody should have been happy, here I was, discovering in the vast football field of an undisturbed future the unspoken: small grains of red earth brought up from below by ants, like a burp.

I should have been like every other mad-happy person on the street. I should still be. My mother talked about the promised houses and jobs. My mother knew euphoria I was too exhausted for. When I could take care of myself again, I travelled home to Port Elizabeth. I read out the most important parts of the New Constitution to her. We went to vote together, for the first time. It was exciting. I am like my mother's people. I am like my grandmother's people, like

Nophucuko, I think. I too can be brave like her, I too could live at least seven years without developing AIDS.

But the only way I can help myself is by thinking, and I think too much. So I try to imagine what is happening, what is important, because I am not important, I am only here – one of the most common of bad mistakes I think - an infection, an HIV positive man, soon to be everywhere, and my thinking only brings me images of people graciously stepping into new offices for the first time, moving photocopy machines, getting new office chairs, hanging up posters of Nelson Mandela and changing the flag.

I am not alone, time is running out with every day, and nobody is doing anything. My hope has turned into greater grief because of what I have lost: a measure of the time ahead. This sense of mysterious death in the City of Gold... Decay around every corner... I can see no beauty. I have red sand in my eyes.

The only thing that isn't changing around here is me sulking, like an old wife's teat. I had a job then. I was not one of the millions who were unemployed. Even then, times were good for me. Not great for the people down there, living the life I did not know as a child I was living, but at least they had the promise of a new country.

There were many hours I wondered what the people down there would do, so many homes and places they hoped to stay in and bring their hard-earned cash to, from jobs they didn't yet have – but then, what do people down there ever know about those high up in power, what will happen, what won't happen, my grandmother's people, my childhood's people.

My grandmother never learnt to read, but making sure I went to school was a heavenly commandment. She made sure I went to church with her on a Sunday, but she sent me to the initiation. Between the strict dignity of the new world and the old, my grandmother's people walked the straight and narrow path. The rules seemed so simple for a good life.

But there came things that seemed better than what I once thought good, and I learnt that enjoyment itself had many other names. There were all-night parties brave with booze, beautiful women that you could pay to do the thing, you did not even have to be nice to them. And they led me on, these things, and how could anybody tell you that was wrong?

They were poor, my grandmother's people on the far edges of that rural township, not as poor as their cousins who lived in huts scattered throughout the green Transkei hills, but poor enough. They hardly spoke English. They never complained. They took the hardship of the years, the evils of apartheid, and lived with them, and made them good. In my life I wanted to be a voice for those who could not speak.

I had studied so that I could bring attention to these people, speak on their behalf. They are the people I love with my life, and who don't need me.

Life goes on regardless, as they say, and there are some choices I have made that I am proud of, and some which many of my closest friends, from my time at the newspaper, cannot understand.

But what did the people down there think? That everything would happen tomorrow? That life would instantly transform, like a big stew in a pot, into that better life which politicians never fail to promise us and which there is never enough to eat from? It will take years. I will be dead before it happens. If only I could see their faces when life changes forever into that miraculous pot which is always full.

We must keep quiet and be nice boys and girls, eat our pap and shut up. But there's blood in my pap, and if I spat it at you you would dart away faster than a stray dog.

Lincoln seems tired of talk. He takes the back roads, and she realises that wherever he is going, he has no desire to get there soon. He is visible in the darkness as a silhouette against the window. His forehead is smooth and polished by sweat. Later, he breaks the silence.

"I was sick. It was when I first found out, in ninety-four, after my last visit to Nophucuko. I didn't want to go to work. I didn't. So I stayed home and unplugged the telephone. I lay in bed while Zanele came and went. I didn't want to get up, never mind drive around town asking white people stupid questions, and then trying to figure out what they meant by their answers. I just don't get why people buy newspapers? I mean, they must be stupid or what? It's all lies anyway.

"But I begged for my job at the paper when I finally went crawling back. I don't know why. I don't feel I have long left. I'm not as strong as that woman Nophucuko. But what else can I do? How else can I make money? I was good for them, I know I was good. Radebe didn't want to lose me. I said, I'll go on extended leave, thinking at the back of my head maybe I should get into freelancing, just don't tell them the truth, for god's sake. Then Radebe says 'You're fired, Lincoln. Sorry. Where the hell have you been? You know I have to set an example.' I had to think quickly. I threatened him with the union. He said he did not understand. I told him to think about it for a while, and suggested that I go on extended leave in the meantime. 'What this newspaper needs is a weekly investigative feature series,' I said, 'and I'm just the man to write it for you.'

Radebe looked at me over the rim of his glasses and by saying nothing told me everything he thought. I explained that we could do a great and topical follow-up on the AIDS story. I asked him if he had read it. He hadn't, but it hardly mattered. 'You're an arts journalist, for god's sake,' he said. 'You know a bit about jazz. You've just started doing short features.

Now you want to write long features!’

‘Investigative features,’ I said. ‘This is going to be good stuff!’

He told me I was wasting his time, that I should go to see the accountant, Beth, to get my last paycheque ready. He asked me to leave. He was seeing someone for lunch. He apologised, said he couldn't be late, and then he left.

Our research had uncovered that truck drivers spread AIDS all over Southern Africa, them and the military. I thought of my Uncle Rex, who owns a share in a trucking company. And I thought... Call me crazy, and I thought, I want to drive a truck. To see the life I might have lead.”

There is silence for a while as Lincoln thinks. “What am I saying! I won't sell it to them! I'll sell it to the Sun. Then Radebe can really have something to complain about.” Suddenly he seems to notice her again. “What about you? What are you doing? You're on some kind of mission, right?”

“I have to stay here to meet somebody.”

“Where?”

“I don't know yet. I told you already.”

“How do you think you'll find him?”

“I know I will.” Her calm briefly raises an eyebrow, but he remains quiet, his gaze on the horizon.

“You're very certain for someone your age.”

“Oh?”

“Life is dangerous.”

She thinks about that for a while.

“I can take care of myself.”

“You better do. Seems to me you want to take care of everyone else.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean leave the world to save itself.”

And run away, like you, she thinks, but she keeps quiet.

“It's not about the world, this. It's about a friend.”

“Maybe.”

“What do you mean, maybe?”

“Maybe it's about your friend. Maybe it's about you.”

No use talking to this man. She gives up. She sighs. If he knew how little of her was left... The radio hisses, but no music comes. She decides to stay silent. He adjusts the knob, and for eternity, the only thing they do is strain their ears against the wind for music, any music.

He is the kind of man who could have... Been a doctor? A traveller? A salesman? She can not quite imagine. He is not the gardener, knee-deep black in the mud at the bottom of the garden, for sure, nor does he seem like Nelson Mandela with that astounding smile, strutting and waving his heroic fist to the masses on tv. She can't quite tell where to fit him: an ordinary man asking for things she can't quite understand.

But if it calms him, if it keeps him driving, if it keeps him hoping that she is holding out and will sooner or later give in, that is good. As long as he never manages to touch her she will be safe, and everything will go on as it always has, except that nothing is as before.

She likes to keep the window just a little open, for the cold. It creeps into her; makes her strong on this seat to hold her own, while she drinks of his warmth. The trees crowd in like ghouls, a long avenue of pines with urban wasteland left and right. Mine dumps, factories and open veld. The cat's eyes on the road hit back at the car, the line rushing day-glow by the wheel as she looks down, and the tread of the truck lulls her into safety.

"There was a woman in my block who had TB," he says. "She died suddenly, in the early stages. I was there when they carried her out. You don't have to die of TB. TB is a curable disease. There is medicine you can take.

"Late in 1995, my cousin, who was working in a lab, he made his own medicine. Within five minutes he was dead. That story I heard from a close friend he was working with, a Muslim lady. But his wife was accused of killing him. Later everyone knew his wife was HIV positive. So we thought later that he was HIV positive, and that's why he did it.

"I met an old man on one of my interviews in Kwa-Zulu Natal. He said his son had done it years ago. The family no longer spoke of it. He lifted his half-blind eyes to my face. 'Now I know why he went the way he went.' Because suddenly the end is all you think of, and there are quicker ways out.

"I spoke to someone who told me of her brother. He refused to have himself tested, but the family, you know, they could see the symptoms. He was strong, he kept on working. The men last longer than the women. He would drink himself silly every weekend. Then his liver would give in, and he'd spend weeks going to church and being religious. When he felt well again, he hit the bottle. His girlfriend was HIV. He used to batter her when he was drunk. He drank himself to death to beat the virus.

"There are many ways to die of AIDS."

There are times one of them stops, the conversation breaks down, and they can't think of anything to say. With the forced intimacy of strangers, they are slipping ever into each other's

barren silences. He hardly notices, past his words, how she creeps into the shadows when they drive under bright lights, how she too hides her face. Even when there is little to see but lights, cars, bushes and lines on the road, he will not divert his gaze from the invisible line dividing earth and sky, where the tar rises up, because what he is trying to see in the dark is not outside of him.

When other people talk, he discovers the things he really means. It's a thing with journalists. It's always a bit of an interview, although she'll never know it. You make a living surviving on the words of other people. When you don't know something, you make it up. Or better yet, you get someone else to make it up for you.

Mr Something from the Something says, well, something.

According to so and so.

Confessions of the alleged whatzisname.

She tells him she grew up on a farm, a dog farm, with a large farm house built in 1910 with wide, dark passages and kennels with Maltese poodles, Yorkshire terriers, Staffies, and chickens scurrying in the back yard.

"I never had a dog," he says. "Maybe I should get one for the truck." Feeling awkward, he looks at the road ahead.

"Like one of those little plastic ones on the dashboard ducking their heads in and out," she says, but she doesn't smile, or hear him chuckle. "Or something to hang from the rear-view mirror." He weighs his head from side to side, wondering.

"Did you have your own dog?"

"Many."

"A favourite dog?" He could have sworn on the smell of wet fur suddenly filling the car.

"A black dog with sharp ears, a pointy nose, and a tail fast like nothing else."

"Did it have a name?"

"No. It comes when people are very sad, and I hold it to my chest. I hold it very hard."

"My girlfriend has a cat."

"Oh."

"Had... a cat."

"Oh."

He laughs desperately, sunk back into his mood. "We... I"

"Yes?"

"You know, cats are very sexy animals. They walk all uppity, dainty, like ladies."

"Oh. Yes."

"Yeah. You're quite the lady yourself. But I shouldn't be telling you that."

"Do you miss her a lot?" she asks blatantly.

Lincoln guffaws. "The girlfriend or the cat?"

Through her blank expressions, he comes to wish the night itself would answer his jokes.

"I miss her." His laugh is helpless.

"Why did you... You know."

"She hates me." Then he says, "You'll hate me too, soon." But it is he who hates her suddenly, in the silence: for the life she has left. Apartheid's child with her clever chitchat, too thin, too young, too bored, the privileges of a white girl her age, he hates her for her aimless plans, but remembers too soon and miserably that he has no plans himself. And he is forced to like her, because of the road, because she could be a signal he cannot turn back on, because the night is yet young.

No light spills into the sky to capture the flight of horizon from land, to show them where the dark might end, except for this tongue of tar they must trust ahead, the one in the dimming headlights. The promise that bound her to this journey, this journey she must make with a man she does not know, who confides in her, and whose words she does not trust, has become almost a grievance. The ghost is pierced by some deep breakage, but whatever longing exactly is, it is not in the realm of ghosts. All she understands is that she must find Ean, but her expectation of what lies ahead is bleak.

"Where are we?" she mutters, wiping her nose with a bony wrist. She hangs her head forward, staring at the salt and pepper packets, a broken plastic fork, chip packets, a sodden piece of cardboard for a carpet, and she taps at the dirt with her toe. He looks troubled, but smiles at her, hunched in the seat.

"I don't know."

"Don't you have a map or something?"

"I don't need a map. I follow the signs."

"But you haven't seen any! When did we pass the last one?"

"I don't know. Get a little closer. We don't have to sit like this," he says. Her face is towards the glass.

"I'm not cold."

"Are you sure? I've been thinking."

"Oh."

"I'd like to get to know you better," he says.

"There isn't much to know." There is so little she knows about herself, in her dimmest sentience, in the remainder, and she asks him to tell more stories.

He tells her about his first kiss. He tells her about almost getting married. He tells her he suspected an ex- girlfriend of cheating on him and he fucked her so hard that she cried. He tells her about sexually transmitted diseases. He tells her about kinky sex, and getting whipped until you bleed, and that's how rich white men like it, at least that's what the whores say.

The regular sound of his voice, almost a rush, brings her sudden relief in that jet and pitch, that world in which everything now is a tremble, a drone and a whisper. Keep him talking. The pages ahead are empty for her. That is the limitation of a ghost story. It depends on smoke and mirrors. She has come to know it only too well. Where words should be, she breaks off in mid-sentence, like walking into sudden walls, all her articulations lost. Where the rollercoaster rides, it does so purely on the premise of habit.

Ean. Death. These are the things she can remember. She has to hold on to these - and the heat of Lincoln's breath, and his eyes on the wheel and his foot on the accelerator, and all night she will sit there, trying to remember what it was like once, to hear and see, instead of dimly sensing, as if trapped in an echo.

Not a star crosses the horizon – nothing but the hum of the truck, the headlights, army of buttons and controls. Things can happen in the dark like this. It is as if they have gradually entered a massive tunnel, far larger than anything he has ever seen, which has covered up the sky and cast the whole land into blank. It is like anaesthesia, falling in the dark and knowing you will never land, so it does not matter anymore. Falling, not flying, for gravity is their very nature.

Staring like that into the empty distance, Lincoln closes his eyes for a moment, driving slowly.

"I won't forget this night."

She lifts the lightest strands of her hair and tucks them behind her ears. The underside of her slender, bony wrists, and the thin freckled skin of her neck and jaw reveals a sheen of veins under tender skin like pale tissue paper tinged with purple. He smiles at her.

"You said you liked to jol."

"Yes."

She does not want to talk about this. She does not want to endure this. She does not want to helplessly watch him inching closer and closer in the dark which is growing and growing. But all of that is futile. It does not matter what she does not want. It matters what he wants. It's the difference between girls and ghosts. Ghosts can't run that far.

What is left to her is to stare him in the eye, in a way that unnerved people all her life – but

not him. It makes him look sly-happy, and he yawns, and it arouses her angriest suspicions.

"Tell me when you're tired," he says. "There are some nice hotels on this stretch." With turmoil she observes him. It is all too human to yawn. She is weightless, ageless, even deathless, surely never again to be caught by sleep.

"Just keep talking," she mutters in her seat.

"Yes, but sooner or later, when we get tired..." he counters.

"Go on. One more."

"One more?"

"Kilometre, story, hour. Just don't stop."

He could hardly imagine life beginning all over again. He can hardly imagine this, being here. Some people said that sleeping with a virgin, or a young white girl, could cure you. It could take it all away. How long has he wished that it was all a mistake, a dream, a thing you could wake up from. A man's mind wanders on these wide roads with the chill so close to his soul. It is getting darker and darker, as if their pupils are narrowing and letting in less light. He can barely see the road ahead, and he switches his lights to brights. A car comes from behind and overtakes him. Dim stars define the horizon, but even they seem long stripped from the sky, like the mealie lands right and left. He is grateful for this journey. The corners of his mouth creep ever upward, despite the cold, despite the darkness, or maybe just because of it. He notices she looks unhappy.

"Why do you make that face?"

"Which face?"

"That face," he says. "The sad face."

"I'm not sad."

"But you look sad," he says. "Why are you sad?"

"The night. My friend. I might never see him again."

"Sometimes the night feels like that. I know."

"Yes."

"But you know... If I drive fast enough..." He hesitates.

"You think? You really think?"

"You know, I do. It's possible."

"We could get there by morning?"

"By morning? Yes. I think we could." For a man who wants to believe in nothing, it is a new sensation, dreaming for her.

"Say it again. Promise me we will be there by morning."

He laughs uncomfortably. She has not even said where she was going. "Well, you know..."

"No, promise me."

"Okay, I promise," he says. "You know, if you made it worth my while..."

"How do you mean?" He wants to hold her, he wants her to come to him. He wants her to smile, and he is sure she knows what he means. He needs her to stay so she will hear his story to the end, and maybe even longer if he can find the right approach.

Lincoln has desires, but no dreams for himself. He is prone to lying to make a girl feel better, if that is what it takes. He knows its only a matter of time until he gets under her skin.

She hopes it is only a matter of time until she gets to Ean.

EIGHT
eleven forty-two

The walls were incandescent in the blazing heat. The air was dry, and through the window rose the smell of fresh-cut grass baking in the sun. Ean adjusted the taps so that the jets met in lukewarm flood, squirting in shampoo. Then he stood in the bath, scrubbing at the hidden ring of filth. He scrubbed and he scrubbed, hoping to scrape the skin beneath the skin of things.

Here, past and future met. You never knew where the water had been. You never knew what had been in the water. It was one of those facts of life. Water came from somewhere, it was going somewhere. It rose above you in the shower, it swamped below you into the sewers. It was full of tiny specks of living dirt. He used to watch the plumber when he was a child, and learnt that water was dirty with other people's destinies. It took the mysteries of bleach and ammonia to initiate him into total privacy.

Sponging up and down in broad strokes, his hands swallowed the world and he was swallowed by his hands, breathing deep the clean scent of bleach, powering in between the joins of the tiles and into the corners with the small niggling pressure of a single finger.

He ran the bath half full of water, adding bubble bath and Dettol. Then he washed himself.

When the sun opened into the sky, and the walls were defiant, white-gleaming, as the more subtle shades were gone and you saw more plainly the surface whites, and strong shadows fell and crept under the eye, blueprint of the house, an after-image on the retina. He felt himself aloft on a row of roof beams like the ribcage of a ship built upside down, a driftwood ship on an almost flawless ocean, light flooding in at every possible crack, an ocean breaking through millions of houses with the bare ground stirring in the wind, in each house they stirred, breathing the same air, millions, billions, people of dust.

He crouched there in the bath, man of the house, with his hands hanging by his sides like rudders, desperately waiting for the next small crisis to sting his eyes. He crouched there for years it seemed, in the same place, as time passed around him. The house cracked. The gutters rusted and fell, the windows broke and everything, fastened down or not, was stolen, for other people's building needs. The roof was collapsing from the rain, and the fence was just some broken wire. The weeds stood high, growing in some rooms. The paint had eroded to a smear in the plaster. A settler house. Nothing more. One settler one bullet. He felt a tremble, and rising, with the wind in his shirt and his bare feet soft in the sand, he was

suddenly overcome with grief, and he felt the sky could suck him up like a giant vacuum cleaner.

He sank down in the soap. He dreamed of better lives. The century he was born into had never won his respect. Indeed, he dreamed of being alive at all. He looked at the white insides of his hands, and he wondered what the colour of this skin would mean for him. But he sniffed his hands and sniffed his hands and said it did not matter.

Its something in your body that comes out, she said, not sweat, though sweat too. Food, masked by soap, shampoo, deodorant, perfume. It is the truth in you, she said. It is truth without the words. Unspeakable. On smell alone you will be known. I saw the tracker dogs trained to sniff from a hat the right guy in a line-up, leaping up and standing with their paws on his shoulders. These are the dogs who are destined for search and rescue, or narcotics. You and me, we are those dogs. Each person smells different. And as sure as each person has a smell, so surely do they have a destiny. The wind can blow the spoor away, heat can evaporate it, but a dog can be trained to follow this trail, sometimes over two or three days. We must be like that. Trackers of the truth. We must follow that smell, our individual smell, evidence of the unsensed pattern of how we have lived and will come to live. Down roads and byways, its connected through their nostrils - the invisible evidence that we have lived at all.

She used to cry when the puppies left, she had wanted to keep them always, but lately she said that she was old enough to let them go. She stayed nights in the breeding kennels on the farm with the bitches as they were giving birth, she said, and knew that this was her body, the same body, built to be exploited for the same purpose, for things that she could not tell him. And she had known she had to be different.

His hands were puffy and he was irritated, he was half-asleep in the soap. He hated dogs. They stank from the mouth and from their pelts, left hair, drips of urine and saliva all over the place, bit things to pieces, licked and smelt other dogs urine, urinated on top of other dogs' urine, defecated anywhere they wanted to, even ate other dogs' shit at times. He knew this because of the stories she told him. He told her he did not want to go, that he would never go there, and she accepted that. Her family actually kept dogs inside the house, to lie on the couch, and on the bed! Dogs should be outside in the open air where they belonged.

He was scared to touch her for that reason, despite his desperation, knowing there was nothing more flawless than her, but when she had left and he wiped up the tea-stains he found himself wiping the seat too, not sure if he wanted to capture her essence or if he wanted to

destroy it. He would stand there, staring, wondering. She was the fresh air he craved, locked in the house, locked in his mother's car, locked into his routines.

I'm only a dog, a dog who'll soon be eighteen, she said. I hate the future because their future is a lie. And when the sun's going down and the snakes are in the grass and the only map you have is the one in your head, the one you hate said Marga, only your dog will stand by you until the bitter end.

And in that way he suspected you could tell a dog your deepest darkest secrets, but it had none to share. In that same way the world left you standing, waiting for answers.

There was a terrible plastic tray between the bath and the shower, stacked with shampoo bottles, conditioner, perfume, deodorants, a lady shaver, half-burnt candles, and the occasional lipstick. In a frame between these things was a photo of the three of them: Helen, Billie, Ean, with Kelly the Clown when the circus had come to town. It had been there so long he had not looked at it in years. But then he realised it was not the photo, but the frame which made him wonder. It had gone yellow with age. He could scrub it right here in the bath.

With tender fingers he scratched at the back of the frame and slid away the clips. The back was stuck, and he had to press the glass to push the whole thing out. Suddenly there were two. Behind one photo was another - bleached all red and blurry from years in the sun in a time unremembered. Colin Milambo. His father. There was no colour in the photo. Tanned and dark-haired, thin and bony, with a long sallow face and the kind of lips you'd want to kiss, Helen would describe him. An Italian singer, drowned while swimming, a repetition that was unquestionable to Ean by now. The man's arm was awkwardly dangling from a guitar. He gazed into the distance at you, a man so utterly alone, who had never really belonged, a man so smooth that nobody, not even himself, ever glimpsed how well he played his game. Everybody needed an entertainer, that's what your father used to say, she said. You have his name, she told him, Ean Rivers Ansley, for the great rivers of your father's home, and the great rivers which run inside us. Milambo is Italian for rivers, she told him. Then, one day the photo had disappeared. Helen said she must have lost it. But she had only slid another one over it.

He had forgotten his father. He couldn't even remember the funeral, and he didn't quite believe her.

He yanked open the tap and dug at the metal ring on the plug with his thumb nail, finally loosening it. The water drummed into the bucket he held, a slash of Handy Andy and bleach,

and the foam built up to a mountain, rustling and popping.

Anxiously he mopped the bathroom floor, cold in the slippage of his wet feet, soaking, drying. Naked, on his knees, he finished off with a towel. He stared at the photo of Colin Milambo.

Again he felt the tingle in his hands, and tried to resist it. He wanted big hands like shovels to broaden the day. Hands that could hold things down. He wanted hands to build houses with, but his palms were soft and his grip unsteady, over-run with the itch that made him want to finish every thing, an entire universe.

What else could lie before him? How did a boy become a man? What journey would be his? He realised that millions of men and women in office cubicles all around the world had once wondered the same thing. Hard workers like him, with big dreams like Marga. But after the parents came the bosses. They were the ones who made life boring and small, the ones who controlled the planet, like teachers at school who did not need to tell you to shut up because you knew already it was for your own good. They were the men in power, and one thing was for sure. They would keep on working. Tears rushed to his eyes. They would find him useful. He breathed deeply. He closed up the frame and put aside his father's photo.

Marga said humans are animals who have learnt to walk on their hind legs and lie. There is small difference between humans and dogs. They seem a little more backwards, a little more basic - and that is why you think I'm being far-fetched.

We don't have to be like other humans, he said. We can be mutants.

Yes, she said. Yes.

In his life the pages were empty. He managed to erase himself again and again, unsure who he should be. Ean was almost invisible some days, olive skin so pale. So young, he was like thin paper, or a white shirt on the clothesline, fluttering in the wind, and smelling new as the day.

And sooner or later the days of judgement. Somewhere, somehow, there had to be a narrow lane between living the life he knew would kill him, and killing himself by not being alive.

Marga. There was Marga. She understood. She did not need to be told. Life like the adults wanted it. He felt them stare through him sometimes, and he wanted to say I'm here I'm here damn it, look at me and treat me like a person! Talk to me like a real person, not some child, or some pet, or someone you can hide the world from. Do not hide it from me for I see it in your eyes, the death of every moment in this goddamned city! And then he realised that maybe they were hiding it from themselves.

But then who was he to say? If they did not know themselves what was going on - how could he? How did he know what was in his mother's half-formed facial expressions, her split-seconds before she recognised herself, and the assuaging gestures of her hands. Who was he to say that he did not trust her, that he was scared, and alone, and afraid, and he better run, but there was nowhere to run to.

"Somebody is going to die," the voice had said. It was only a matter of time. Everything was changing. But first he had to clean the house. It did not matter whether he was like the others or not. They all dreamed of walking on the world as if it were the moon, but he, he had always had these hands, the hands that picked at his own skin, the hands that ferreted everything out, the instinct to clean, to work it away, to get to the bottom. Because he wanted to do more than polish the surface. He wanted to get under the skin. And that was the danger with cleaning. Once you started you could never stop.

He was sure, somewhere, somehow, that he would find something, some kind of clue, and then he would know for certain, all about what really happened in the house he lived in. He opened the cabinet under the basin and slid on Helen's yellow rubber hair-dye gloves. He cleaned the toilet, nauseous at the thought of Derrick, and returned the gloves to their place.

One thing was for sure: it was unacceptable to stay a child under these circumstances. It was unacceptable to become an adult.

We will stay like this forever. You and me. We don't need their rules, she said. We will not do their bidding. We will not be made by the rules of the adults. We will make the rules!

Look at them living past themselves, he said, next to themselves.

We are a new generation. We will not lie to each other! We will not lie to anyone.

But now Marga was dead. There was no reason he could not stay here forever. Every two weeks he would mow the lawn. He would wash and vacuum Helen's car. In the winter he would bring out the blankets and make everyone's beds. He could empty the gutters after all the leaves had fallen. He would do what his father would have done. He would stick paper over the air vents to stop the cold air. In the spring he would battle through the whole house from top to bottom. Every surface would be swept out and dusted. He would polish the floors and wash the windows, shampoo and vacuum the carpets, bleach and wash the linen.

Later, in the summer, he would paint the house. Two coats. White outside and inside, like getting up in the morning and scrubbing every inch and orifice of your body. Every second year he would re-paint the stoep and the roof in black, checking for leaks where the plates were nailed to the rafters.

Why was nothing ever finished? As soon as you waited a little bit, the dirt crept back into the corners, the slovenly places where Billie and Helen did not wipe the kitchen counter. It was like fingernails growing - the next time you looked, they were long.

He checked his fingernails, and as he checked them, he thought of how dead people's fingernails grew even after they had died, and he thought again: when you're dead it's over. The last thing he would see was the toaster or the hair-drier, before he dropped it, standing in the bath. Or maybe his soul would stay to comfort Helen in her lonely hours, after another breakup, let down, check-out, when a little boy's ear was her only companion, and his little red hands dried tears, made coffee, while his lips whispered hosannas that tomorrow everything would be alright. But everything was changing.

Reeling with the thought, he felt his body still and finished, the search beneath the skin desisting.

And then the phone rang. Naked, he was not sure if he should answer. Come on, Billie. Answer it! Was she even home? Someone had to answer it. He wanted to know, for gods sakes, that this was not another silent call, distance expanding to break in your ear, alarms in your head. He wanted to be sure that the phone was not working and it was all a mistake and the old woman, or whoever it was that kept on calling, had the wrong number. He open the door and ran, hitting his head against the oven and knocking his knee as he slipped on the kitchen floor, screaming "Billie, you fucking cow!"

His hands were almost still now, but inside, unasked questions wanted ways out. With a towel around his waist, he was raiding the fridge to answer the fuss in his stomach, when someone knocked on the door. Reluctantly he pulled on his dirty clothes and went to unlock it. It was a man in sunglasses, who handed him a parcel tightly wrapped in brown paper.

"I'm sorry I'm so late, man. It's just been such a mission to get here."

"Oh."

"So pass it on, okay?"

"Okay."

"Okay. Bye then."

"Bye."

In his room he opened the cupboard and between his shirts slid in the photo of Colin Milambo. Then he unwrapped the parcel. The brown paper came apart to reveal a vacuum-packed stack of what he calculated were 100 small square boxes. .32 automatic, the stamp read. 7.65 mm. Carefully, he slit open one of the bottom corners of the plastic with the edge of his scissors. He slipped out one of the boxes. It was heavy. He unfolded the latch. Twenty golden bullets lined up in a plastic holder.

NINE
passenger

Growing up on celebrity lunches, complimentary snacks and product launches, they would run to the table, grab a fist of peanuts and retreat to the dim red wall as usual, spotting their mother far away through a clearing in the crowd. Ean would have specially ironed his shirt, still feeling the warmth. Head madly clattering, he would stand beside his sister. The walls would be caving in, whispering agendas would be pressing at the floor and the ceiling, and he would wonder if everyone else could hear it. Billie couldn't. He knew that, but he also knew how people could pretend.

That woman in the tv commercials and dramas when he was young was never his mother. He would never believe that the creatures of passion, so tortured, so pleased, so vile, so angelic could ever come close to the mother he knew. Helen, whom he often now did not see for days...

Through his childhood, when they were younger, she had been there, often weeks on end. It would be different when she was rehearsing for a show - she'd stay out late, wake up early, always at the theatre. Then it would be opening night, and he would watch her. She wasn't always important. Sometimes she would be the maid, sometimes she would be someone's mistress or a crazy aunt who would laugh too much. The real performance would be when the curtain sank and she would get to wear her low-cut dress for the party, the red one Mrs Rotuvitz next door had helped her make from the magazine pattern from overseas, just like the dress in the window at Rosso's.

They were to grow up as little fighters. They would be kamikaze moths to the flame, because it would be as if Helen cared for the whole world but for the two of them, as she would flutter around the bright lights. She'd smile and wave at them pinching snacks, or point adoringly, indulgently chattering to (no doubt) someone important, who would be slinging a glass of champagne. When the money ran out, she had learnt, and so would they, to grow up fast, and to go out there working the room.

A thousand stories would run through his head. He'd try to think of something else, but so many probabilities, and all at once... "Mingle!" his mother would say driving there, lying dangerously back in the seat. "Mingle!" She'd wave her hands with the golden bangles jangling. It would take him a while to figure out that she meant they should be talking to

strangers. That was what she took them along for. So they could learn to act like *them*. He didn't understand.

If Billie was Helen's secret pleasure, Ean was her secret pain. In later years, when he would have enough of pretentious artsy people, when he would sit with a book on his knee in a corner away from the eyes of the world, concentrating on one thought, Billie at twelve or fourteen would aggressively seek out those strangers with cocktail glasses, and conquer them with her charm. She would always seem vengeful when he looked up from his reading, her mocking girlish laughter above the crowd. Her mother began to ignore her, but would seem secretly pleased that her daughter was getting on with it.

He, instead, would be careful that they should not see him. "I don't know what to do anymore with you," his mother would chant her mantra, and he would fill her expectant pause not with an answer but with a patient smile, admitting no defeat. Instead, he would iron his clothes and starch his school shirts. Education was one thing to live for, although sometimes he would think about leaving it all behind forever, sometimes that would make more sense, one mad dash for the exit.

As a child, his mother would send him to the children's theatre. He would return saying it was boring and stupid. The people there wanted to sing and dance. He would see nothing to sing and dance about. He would feel attacked by the brutally bright-eyed children and their stiff bodies, pointing their toes and pointing their voices.

One girl in particular he would not be able to forget. He woke up in cold sweat, years after, when she would stalk him in his dreams. Kerren, the squealer. Proud mothers would grin and smile at her voices, her funny histrionic contortions - like a tortoise wrenched from its shell, tap-dancing and singing to its heart's content. Her mother would sit in the audience, immobile except for her dark Egyptian eyes, following the fat little girl on the stage, and afterwards, if the performance was good, reward her with sweets or a book. That would always impress him, that books could be gained so easily.

Constantly forcing life upon herself, forcing herself upon others, life seemed to be fading from Kerren in one un-ending shriek for attention. He had noticed alright - and he knew to stay away.

They were the kind who would cut themselves to pieces. Always playing a part. He couldn't describe how, but none of them were whole. They were pieces, parts of things once seen and desired. But they were badly remembered and worse performed in life and on stage. They were like his mother.

He instead would like to put things together. He does it with his shirts, putting the sleeves

together, putting everything in its classified order like a butterfly stomach behind glass, like any flat thing in a museum of which there are many. He makes neat little piles now, folding his boxer shorts three times over.

Things which are the same he puts together, knowing somehow what belongs to what. The boy has it in him to build an entire city, skyscrapers of washing piled on clean washing. And one does this over and over, stacking clean plates where there had been dirty ones, stacking clean shirts where they had lain crumpled on the floor. One replaces gradually what one takes. One takes and puts back the things one has taken out and pushed into the world, where they are seen, where they are used, and then must be prepared to be used again, one thing after another coming clean.

There must be soap and hot water, and a certain determination, or an eye for crumbs and dust. It means that things will be the same when you return. Even if you do not return. Cleaning grasps from its beginnings that a place, a shirt, will be lived in. What remains is the habit to leave. To live. He had to know those things. They were the cornerstones of life, he would be needing them, some day.

middle of nowhere

He slowly raises his hand towards her and she flinches. He lets it drop. The air is thick and full in his face, and the heat from the air conditioner brushes his arm. Shock smears over her head, the sober smear of an empty hand, expression wiped away. It is the kind of thing not fully grasped until the moment has eaten itself, seeping and spreading.

In the big dark wandering of his eye in her direction he catches a small dark glance. But they look forward. Their heads assimilate the road. He keeps trying to face her, he keeps drawing in his breath, as if to say something, hoping a glance will say it all, except that it does not. If he can stretch a fingertip, he will have her, but he does not do it, for she does not move closer, just that little bit closer, and he tells her awkward children's jokes instead, the only jokes he can remember. The soft skin around her collarbones and the slope of her small breasts shift as she giggles, but her neck remains stiff. He watches her with a certain fascination. There is something about the way she moves – like she is calculating every moment. She seems to hold on to every muscle, stretched around the life in her.

Then, slowly, while he is talking, his arm takes on a life of its own, his fingers again some airborne spider, inching towards her.

"What are you trying to do?" she asks. "Stop it. I don't want that."

"Really?"

"Yes, really," she says. "I don't like this anymore." The truck skids to a slow halt.

"That makes two of us."

"And now?"

"Get out," he says.

"Just here?"

"Anywhere. Didn't you say you were going there? Anywhere?"

"This isn't anywhere. This is nowhere." He tries to grab her now, with a grin, as she snaps back her arm. He tries again and again, but she's too quick. He lets the game go.

"Come on, let me tickle you all the way to heaven."

"No."

"So where in Australia did your parents go?"

"I don't know," she says, then "What happened to Zanele?"

"Zanele?" He says hoarsely, "I don't know." The white of his eye is nervous and

glowering.

“Really?”

“Yes, really. She disappeared years ago.”

He seems to be nodding his chin with the rhythm of the road. He says this, he says that. She will not answer. He tries again. She pulls away.

“Why won't you let me touch you?” He lunges for her with his left hand, forcing her right into the corner. Again, she is a fingertip away, when he snaps back to the wheel, the brakes screech, the truck skids and veers to the side.

He slows down and stops. She stares at him.

“A black dog,” he says, and gets out to see if he hit it. When he comes back, he finds the smell of wet fur.

Within a few minutes he is lost in thought. Then something on the road catches his eye. The smile drops off his face.

“What?”

“The dog.” He laughs nervously. “It was running next to the truck. But that's not possible.”

“No.” They drive a while, and all is still.

“There! Again!”

“Don't be silly, Lincoln.” He hits the accelerator.

“There is something running in front of us, just outside the range of the lights, something black with four legs and a whipping tail!”

“It was probably an impala or something.” All the while, he is driving faster. He drives faster and faster, insisting that there is something ahead. He keeps on spying the tip of its tail, or a flank, and because it is black, you can hardly see it.

“It can't be running this fast!”

“You're seeing things, Lincoln.”

“I'm going to kill that bloody dog!” He hits the accelerator again, and the truck lurches, as the engine's sound speeds up to a fine hum. “There is something. Did you see that?”

“No. Slow down.”

“I'll drive as fast as I like.”

“Stop it!”

“I'll kill it if I catch it!”

“Lincoln, stop it! The only person you'll kill is yourself.”

“But first I've got to get that dog flat on the road.”

“Don't drive so fast! You're going to get hurt!”

“Don't tell me what to do.”

“You’re crazy!”

“I’m crazy.”

“You’re crazy!” He slows down. He stops the vehicle, pulls out a tin of tobacco and rolls a cigarette. When he turns to talk to her, she is gone.

ELEVEN

outlines of the body

"Ean," Derrick said, punching him in the shoulder. "Let's go on a trip, just us boys."

"I can't. I have to do my homework."

"You can do it later," Helen said. "Now why don't you go."

"Maybe tomorrow."

"Derrick wants to go now. Go put on your jersey, Ean, and swallow some of your tranquilisers and get in the car."

"Helen!"

"I said get in the car."

She waved as they drove off.

Ean could swear every now and again on the highway he caught sight of a silver Mercedes travelling four or five cars behind them, as if someone was watching him. Next thing he knew he was at the back of the mine dumps, behind an enormous corrugated iron warehouse, somewhere off the edge of the highway. There was no Mercedes. Derrick unlocked and slid open the gate.

"Come in."

Dazed from the medication, Ean followed him upstairs into a dimly lit office that smelt of grease.

"Do you work here?"

"No," Derrick said. "A friend of mine does." He opened a safe and pulled a pistol from a holster at his hip. From the safe he took a box of bullets. Ean broke into an instant sweat. Derrick lowered the gun. "This is the safety latch." Derrick clicked a small latch with a red mark. "This is how you load it." Derrick clicked open and slid out the magazine. He rapidly flipped out the bullets with his thumb. Then he pressed them back. "Your turn."

The boy was trembling, thinking the small golden missiles might explode as they hit the table.

"I'm not sure I want to."

Derrick brought his face close to Ean's.

"You will do as I say," he said in a low voice. Ean could smell the mint on his foul breath. He pressed the magazine into Ean's clammy hand. The boy could smell the grease, and soon

he felt it on his fingers as he fumbled with the bullets. He sensed their small explosions waiting under his fingertips. They were slippery and packed hard into the slot. He snapped them out one by one. You had to let them cut into your thumb to slide them back. Derrick made him do it over and over.

"That's a good boy," he whispered, grabbing the weapon. Derrick pulled him by the arm and made him walk in front of him into the half-light of the warehouse. Ean only felt his back. The rest of him was numb and trembling.

Lesson two was how to stand half crooked with your legs slightly apart in the half-shade of the warehouse as if you were pissing. Derrick demonstrated. You had to grip the gun with both hands and not let go, line up the pin at the tip with the gap just behind the hammer. Lesson three was: fire! There was a cut-out human shape on one of the walls which served as a bloodless target. It was riddled with holes.

"Fire! Derrick screamed into Ean's ear, because his finger hesitated, as everything in him rebelled against the act itself. "Fire!"

Later he smoothed Ean's hair. "A job well done," he said.

"Why did you teach me that?" Ean asked, still in a daze when Derrick pulled up outside the house.

"Because you're one of us now. Don't forget that. I've got plans for you."

Ean boiled hot water and poured it over his hands as he worked his palms and fingers raw for forty-five minutes with Sunlight Liquid and a nail brush to remove the smell of grease and metal.

Today the house was bright and open. He stepped into his old room, at the front of the house, looking out on to the street. It was a storeroom now. Ean opened the curtains. Dirt was everywhere in this late afternoon sun. Every grain of sand cast a shadow. There was no sign of the silver Mercedes. Maybe there never had been one. Everything was about to change.

He walked through the house - dust, dust everywhere, dramatically cast in light, mostly concealed by shadow. He couldn't explain it. How did that dry cloud get into your throat the minute you walked into a room, tiny hairs and flakes of skin, down from blankets and duvets, sand particles, rotting organic material, invisible mites, a whole nation of space invaders, fibres from clothes?

Dry air and dust, entire mountains suspended in the air. Washed downland by rivers, washed up on banks, taken by wind and deposited, on and in you. You could not help inhaling it. It passed through your blood, decomposing minerals, the country settled in your hair and on

your eyelids, on your lips and shoulders, and he was constantly wiping away these things, fluff, some unknown animal hair, flakes of foreign skin, everything seemed to enter Ean, and all he wanted was four white walls of his own, and a door that never opened.

He tied a scarf around his face and started the vacuum cleaner like a bandit, a grim gargle and howl that haunted right back to the first machine and its expulsion of raw inhuman power. He planed the floor with the electric broom, small brushes at regular intervals clotting the hairs and fibres, trapping what remained in the vacuum, swallowed to settle in the bin on wheels which tottered on his path back and forth inside the room.

He scanned and sucked it all, life's deceitful brush-off. Then he stopped the machine and they both wound down. He stared for a time at Helen's door. Once he had labelled the entire contents of her make-up drawer, and the room was permanently locked after that. She had taken him to a specialist, who said he would outgrow the problem, and a homeopath, who'd made him swallow small sugar pills, two after every meal, and five under the tongue if he felt the itch in his hands. He took them obsessively, but to no avail. Then Helen had brought along the prescription for the tranquilisers, or whatever they were, and that seemed to work.

Ean put the machine away. He wanted to knock at Billie's door, and wanted to rip off all the magazine cutouts, beads and pink feathers which she had stuck on to it with Prestik. Rage knotted him up. Rage made him weak in the knees, and he knocked but time passed in front of the door and he kept knocking and knew by her silence she was listening to the wheedling teenage music he hated. He entered anyway, standing in the strange terrain with the hi-fi and ethnic chic rug. Copying tapes, she snapped off her headphones.

"What is it?" He opened his mouth to say something, then turned.

"Sorry, never mind." He left the room.

If only he had a gun.

He crossed the back yard and entered the garage, his place of sleep and work. He had moved there when he was twelve, when Frankie the locksmith, one of Helen's boyfriends, had been kicked out by his wife. He had moved into Helen's bedroom, driving her mad. Ean got out, as far as was possible at twelve. Frankie got the spare room.

The garage was also the laundry. He found himself in love with the ever-so-slight scrape of the cloth in the machine, and what it revealed. He loved anything clean and simple.

That first week, he had furiously mined the garage walls for cracks and pock-marks, patched them with Polyfilla. It had amazed him that even paint is not smooth, that even here were tiny rivulets and pock-marks. He had ruthlessly hunted every corner and the surface of every wall in the house until they gleamed with purity.

It was a strange time to be alive - the nineties. The hip thing was to mix and match your clothes and accessories from everyone and everywhere, until you looked like you came from nowhere - eutopia, he had read in a magazine. No-place. Not utopia, paradise, or dystopia, hell. Just no-place. And it was true. No-one seemed to know what they wanted to do, or where they were going. He had no heroes. There was nothing left to do, nothing left to say. Sometimes he thought that. Nothing new. But then he remembered there was AIDS and cloning and computers taking over the world. These were challenges for his generation.

Marga had made him believe in something to live for. Their generation would have to learn to control the animal need for sex, one of the last hurdles in advancing civilisation. When this was finally achieved, differences between men and women would begin to fade. She had it all worked out.

Don't you understand, she had implored. It is sex which holds us back! How much time and energy is wasted on sex that could be invested in constructive things? As we learn to control our collective sex addiction, we will learn that neither do we need sex to be happy, nor do we all need to have children. Our species has outgrown these biological imperatives. That is what AIDS has come to tell us.

She would not be fooled by her body. It was her body, and she wanted to command it. The brain was a slave to survival mechanisms for which their civilisation had long outgrown the need. And now, at this crucial point, love itself had become a danger. They would overcome the mating ritual and its magic pull.

They would be the generation to achieve love and peace. It was up to them to save the planet.

Sex, sex - at school it was always sex that everyone was talking about. Nikki and Sherri were exploring the joys of girl on girl sex, Vanessa let a friend of her brother's fuck her up the bum so she could stay a virgin, and Sheila really did not care anyway, as long as the money was good, or so the rumours went that they told each other about the mating ritual. Some of the guys had such crazy stories of what they had done that no-one believed them, not even the other guys.

Perhaps a message comes to the bitches and bastards in spring, when they go on heat, like a summons, she said darkly. We are all just bitches and bastards in the cage and puppies at the trough, coming and going.

And she took it all down in meticulous notes, what had to be done to change the world, so they would never be dead adults that called themselves survivors.

If she hated him for his emotional failings, he would have wanted her to hate him, because it would have been her wish and her wish was everything to him.

They should love one another like brethren, she said, but not indecently going around drooling like rabid dogs.

But he welled in milk descending, half-mouthing words he did not know. Maimed at the throat and craving. Every thing called her name, and he was giddy with its ringing. Over and over it made him green, laid bare and open all his nerves, organs, arteries unravelled, suspended tenderly in air. This made the colours brighter, intensified the sounds. Her eye close, dun, glinting mutiny, her lip, soft and sullen. For that you had to close your eyes. Your hands were not enough. Only the cheek, or the inside of the mouth could know the kind of softness. He would never know it now. Even then it had been close as sunlight, complex, far as planets.

Theirs was a pioneer's battle. Their bodies would withstand emotion. They needed no-one, not even each other. They had to focus the mind. Look at the adults. Look what their sloppy minds make them do. Everything begins in the mind.

And he, the traitor, felt it as she said one would: the chemical imbalance, the way your body flushed and broke into sweat, set his heart racing and his sight gyrating, fixed on the single image of her. Marga in her school uniform, waiting for him in the mornings. The mind all a muddle. It said that what he wanted, she wanted, and what she wanted, he wanted, that what they wanted was all one extended arresting certain longing in this devastating danger. He should have said - but what could be said? How to choose between all or nothing? He would never know.

Sometimes, breathing was hard, the kind of hard so dim that it was hardly there, but it was there. That was the kind of pain he had to pay attention to, if he wanted answers - the one he tended to brush away. The pain was asking for something in particular. The breath went right down, deep down, and he had to stay with it, address that pain, not magnify and agonise, but stay with it the way he might stay with a friend in need.

He brushed away so much of life. He brushed expressions right off his face, knots right into the pit of his stomach, and when it pained he wiped the heart and told it to be silent.

The body called. The body called out to him and wanted to be answered. He had to give himself to these calls of the body. He had to hear its questions. For what it asked was not a favour. What it asked was evident, if he could listen: it asked him to begin his life.

The neon light tubes flickered. The room was still. He smeared the clothes flat under the scalding metal. A hoarse sigh left the iron, and he wistfully caught the edges and points under

the tip, squashing cloth to his will. On wayward Sunday afternoons like this, sometimes Marga would pass him the limp vests and shirts, sky outside blinding drizzle and grey.

He had imagined them curled up under his green blanket, and the thought had eaten at him for hours, but he knew that if she tried to hug or touch him it would have overwhelmed him and he wouldn't have been able to breathe, like someone stabbed him in the heart. But he took the chance. He did it anyway. He took her hand and he could hardly breathe and they went down the driveway and down the road. The Jacaranda branches shivered like black snakes in the sky, small leaves like green ferns, and deep in the trees somewhere the springtime purple showers which would burst forth, soon, a brown mush when you stepped on them on the pavement on your way to school.

They walked to the edge of the suburb, looked down on the highway - there it was, evidence of the cramped, revolting speed-driven life they had in store for them. Life mangled by common sense. Eighteen was creeping up on them. The jackpot. When you got your license to drink, fuck and drive a car. Welcome to the bright pursuits of adulthood.

They were deceived that day by the weather. Soon they were back in the house, dazed and rubbing their hands. He switched on a heater in his room and they sat in front of it, staring at the glowing bar until its shape was burnt into their eyes, they were sweating and their noses were dry, and he had that endless longing about him again, for the hollow of her shape.

You know, he murmured, I read somewhere that a dog's short-term memory only lasts up to five minutes. Sometimes I wonder if people are like that.

I won't forget you, Ean.

Not?

No, never.

I won't forget you either.

It couldn't be just a mating ritual, there had to be more to it. It was in the way he had wanted to hold her in the waist, the way the hollows of their bodies could have fit together, the way one mouth seemed irrevocably made for another mouth, and man fits into woman like a lock. He wasn't after her cunt, he was after something else, an air about her, something she was not aware of. She had been more fragile than she seemed to know, and he had felt he needed to guard her always, so she would save him from the whimsical thought that he was all alone in the world, so she would tell him the things that hurt her, the things at home her memory skipped over.

He looked at his hands as he was ironing, at the hairs that had begun appearing when he was eleven and which he had plucked out until Helen stopped him. He looked at the way these hairs grew and spread down to his arms and under his cuffs, and under his belt. They would forever draw the eye like blood to what they should conceal. They were like ants that crawled all over you and covered you like syrup at a picnic, until you were overwhelmed by parts of yourself you did not know you had.

He tried to remember what he knew about this body, this new body, and all he could see were the sketches from biology, the dissection of the penis, a foetus, a woman giving birth, and he wondered still if Marga was right, if that was all there was to it in the end. His body had stretched, he had needed new clothes over the years, and sooner or later he would be needing new names, new names for everything. Could he practise abstinence his entire life? He was terrified of falling in this war.

He did his best at all times to know absolutely everything, to be prepared for all situations, but all at once he realised you cannot run from a thing and know a thing at the same time. All he knew was what he had gathered over the years from carefully watching adult life, and it looked horrendous, but he realised he did not know. And how can a man rebel against something he knows nothing about?

Adulthood was his irrevocable fate, but he would never understand it. He hoped against hope that there was something called destiny, and that it meant that you could affect the outcome.

Hunger drew him into the house, but something made Ean look up at the glass door. And there she was, his sarcastic kid sister, in the kitchen, standing hot and close to Derrick Dalton. Ean hovered at the handle. The lights buzzed in the garage, and in the kitchen the sun was afire. She faced Derrick, arms hanging neatly by her hips and her breasts close to his face where he sat.

The man stared at her as if in shock. Ean could not see his sister's face. She was waiting for something to happen, and he realised some time had passed because she started tapping her finger on the table and scratching the hair in the back of her neck.

Then she stroked Derrick's arms and ran her hands through his hair. She took off his glasses, and tentatively slipped her fingers under his belt, as he sat there dead pale and trembling.

He spoke some words, and awkwardly edged the chair closer, she opened her legs and sat down on his lap, hesitating and blushing.

Her moves were almost automatic now, as if she knew what to do. Derrick seemed absent, patient, almost gloating, sitting back. He opened his mouth in short spurts like a carp. Whenever he did this, Billie shrugged with one shoulder, her hands exploring and stroking his body, sliding her hands along his pants, starting to undo his fly.

He exclaimed, and then she stopped. She stood up, holding the back of the green plastic chair. Again, Derrick asked a question, and she shrugged, giving him a mouthful of words, the kind of mouthful Ean was all too used to. Ean noticed her fingers as they balled into fists, and how she relaxed them and took deep breaths, but the dread was ripe in Derrick's eyes, and after a quick snap of his mouth she handed him his glasses. And then Derrick left.

Unseen, Ean fled back to his room. The neon light tubes flickered, and he stood there, man of the house, taking a mental ride on the iron, swiftly and savagely determining soft and hard folds, ensuring every crease fell from his mind. And in these eradications he saw inside them all, through the outlines of the body, seams, stitches and skin, and the layers of the days that passed through the house, along the walls. Billie's Indian girly cotton blouses, her snappy cotton panties and her three bras, which he placed next to Helen's lacy black and red underwear with a frown. His black socks and underwear. His dark grey pants. A boy uniform. Preparing him for the uniform of a man.

His naked body beneath was neither, no longer one, not yet the other. Why had he always dressed in his school uniform, before school, after school, refusing to take it off? He realised he had always been an adult. He had never been a child. He realised he had been pressing the iron on the back of his hand. He examined it, slow and numb with shock. His body was racing. It was the sort of thing you put ice on. In dread fascination he explored the ticklish scars with the tip.

Everything was changing.

In the kitchen, he pressed his hand against ice in the freezer. But back in his room the lure of the gun-grey metal was irresistible. His fingertips paused short of the heat. He ran to the front of the house and checked for the elusive silver Mercedes. He looked for food in the fridge. He wiped the kitchen counters. All along he had been secretly waiting for something to happen, and then the phone calls had come, and he had known he had to get going and it would be too late to cry. He ate an apple. Ean bit back tears.

He returned to the fridge and the caress of the ice. He could not keep on doing this. He could not keep folding up every problem and putting it away. Had he really never had a childhood? Did that mean he was an adult? And how would you know that? And who would tell you? If he was going to stop he had to find out how he began, or if this was always in him,

and maybe he would never be able to stop, and maybe he would never know...

Marga said the dogs won't protect you when you're sad, but the dogs can save your life sometimes, like the St Bernard dogs, or Jock of the Bushveld, or Lassie even.

And he knew: the dogs can guard you and the dogs can kill you. And the dogs can trap you in your heart, and you might stay in the darkness behind the shutters all your life, looking for love, for it was clean there in the dark where you can't see the dirt.



PART TWO

detours

and should you set fire to my brain,

I still can carry you with my blood.

- Rainer Maria Rilke, "Das Stundenbuch"

(The Book of Hours) (1899-1903)

ONE
blind spots

His old answers are dead. The road has been taken from him. He doesn't know. He went there. It was a place to go. He can't remember. He rubs his eyes and turns to find her behind him, with her knees hunched up to her chin and her hair in her face, in a corner of the niche which is his single bed, wrenching her legs away to hide her underwear.

Places mean nothing to him. They could be driving on the same road, over and over again. They would still be in the dark. Still getting nowhere. He's like a hamster on a wheel.

The cold keeps coming in. He keeps on switching on the heater. The cold keeps coming in, creeping into his knee-joints and under the second skin of his clothes, to settle there and gradually numb all feeling. He feels like a dead man. Dead to himself, dead to the world.

He remembers the cold in Ngangelizwe, the smell of the coal stove and the camphor odour of ZamBuk ointment. He wants to speak for his mother's people. He wants to say they will not survive the times to come. Now is the time they must all turn into people who will survive, the way men from the city do. But his pride sours when he thinks what men from the city are to his mother's people, what he has become to himself.

The life which once was his is no longer. The friends which were once his are gone. He wants nothing. He wants nothing at all. He wants to be empty. He wants to be free, free of all of this. Because he can never again go back home and tell the truth.

The fields are dry in El Niño. Its a Spanish word meaning African death. Sometimes, during the day, he sees the children selling tin windmills in the rust-coloured dust, but does not stop to buy them. Windmills are for pumping water. He prefers to wait for rain.

And though the government promises change, all he can do now is laugh. He watches his comrades stuff their pockets. They kick men like him down, kick them in the face, he watches them trample on their dreams, and they come up again, worshipping the feet that kicked them.

Those like him down there in the dust worshipped those up there in power, over these past five years, they had given them all they had. Before that they had fought – well, some more than others. And now they have the bitter laugh that still shakes their souls. For now they oppress each other. Brothers become enemies when one of them goes into government.

Life in ninety-eight was a rainbow of shit, a political poster in shining colours, the dust of the street which the rain could never wash. No - rain, when it came to mingle with the shit, to

soak and tear their politicians' faces, to turn the dust to mud and send the streetchildren scrambling under the highway where there once were trees, the rain when it comes (at last, say the boere), it does not change a thing.

He is black. He is beautiful. He is strong, he wants to believe. They'll come up from the mud shining, they'll spit on AIDS and piss it from their nightmares, they'll watch their comrades in shiny black cars riding to the ancestors, he thinks, and shakes his head. Do they cringe at their aimless pride?

She curls up in a corner of the bed with the dog, which she has hidden under a blanket. Out of sight, out of mind. The black jackal bitch always knew the way home. She needed no map, but she knew which street to turn down, which lamp post to sniff, to dash left or right. Dogs were under Marga's control, when Marga was still Marga, and she trusted them with her life. The dog seems to be sleeping. She thinks: taming takes a while. Only now is she getting used to Lincoln. It makes sense now that she must follow him. Before morning, she will be there, wherever that is. She knows that it will be soon enough. It has to be.

A while later, cautiously back at the window, leaving the dog nestled sleeping under the blanket, she watches the oncoming headlights reflecting on the tar. The cars look drunk, they are so light. It is so easy to knock someone off. Too easy. Like extinguishing suns in the sky, a row of spots racing past, reflections, and tufts of soft grass under amber. The high streetlights like barren trees awning over the road. Later, the whole world seems to be bathed in orange light thrown back at them into the sky.

A cold white light rises over the horizon, and everywhere eyes, the tired eyes of cars. In his eyes the lights have long gone blurry. He fears in that speckled floating world that the future cannot outrun the past, no matter how fast he drives. The nightmare is happening over and over. On the sudden glow of chevron reflectors, he slams the brakes and skids. A triangle. Signs: men at work.

And because he fears the future, he is certain to obstruct it, but reflectors nervously guide him round the corners when he wants to go straight, highways guide him away from the turnoffs when he wants diversion. This seems to oppose his desires, and so, flippantly, to compensate, he takes a left when his gut says right, and a right when his gut says left, and so on and on until his errant logic becomes automatic, and it does not matter anymore what the signs say. As long as no-one tells him what to do.

"I don't like this place," she says.

"Some kind of industrial area." A black road flanking the highway, blocks of warehouses to

the left.

"What are we doing here?"

"A shortcut..."

"A shortcut. Are you sure?"

"You're stressing too much. We'll get there."

"That's what you told me," she says.

"It's cold, you know. Do you want a blanket?"

"I'm fine."

"Are you hungry? Are you thirsty?"

"No." For a while, they listen to the gush of the highway.

"The stars are beautiful tonight," Lincoln says.

"Show me the dog star."

"Sirius. The brightest star." They stop and get out of the truck. The cold comforts her. They stare, but it all blurs from his face, and he shakes his head.

"I'm sorry. You'll have to find it yourself." He gets in and slams the door, clips opens the door on her side.

"What's wrong?" He is wiping his eyes.

"Too long since I last looked up there." She raises his hand, she raises the bar, for a man who expects so little.

On the long dusty road where you can hardly see the line, and the edges of the road are frayed, spilt over by sands and broken bottles, and shadows of suburban gates, and reflectors and fences, a car behind them hoots and overtakes, because he is dreaming and driving too slow. All this drifts past, while bumps in the road make the truck shudder, make the cars behind them dip and startle.

"Where are you going?" she wants to know.

"We'll get there."

"Where are you going?"

"I told you we'd get there, you know. When I asked you, you said 'anywhere'."

"Can you tell me where you are going?"

"No. No, I can't."

And she knows that a dog has running bred into it, like a stray dog runs – tar streaking beneath its feet and blood in its ears singing the sought-after song of the master's voice. Even later, it forgets to listen to the song. It has lost the way home. It is always running, running away from the last disappointment. Without home or master there is short survival.

To her anger and shame she has trusted Lincoln to be her guide. Nothing else had occurred to her. She has been stupefied by the rushing heat that comes into her whenever she makes him laugh, or when he looks at her with dreamy eyes. Although she does not like it, she feels she might be bound to him by laws she does not know. And disregarding all of this - has she not promised Ean she will track him down, no matter what or where? This is reason enough to keep going.

They have left the towns behind for good and are moving into long stretches of open fields. If she could breathe a sigh of relief, she would, the ghost, at rest in the shadows. There are no lights save pinpricks in the endless distance and the passing cars. They drive for what seems like ages, the sound of the wheels and the engine their rest.

In the night, from a distance, two red lights by the roadside.

Lincoln hits the brakes. He puts his lights on brights, a dusky red car approaching his view as he slows down. A white woman steps into the road, on long strong legs, in a grey summer dress. She stoops slightly, shifts from foot to foot, inclining her face, which, like her limpid ash-blond hair, is washed-out by the lights. Next to her stands a little boy in khaki shorts. The scene seems staged and stilted. Before he knows it, they are gone in the dark.

"Why didn't you stop?"

"I don't know."

"I would have stopped."

"I would have stopped too."

"Then why didn't you stop?"

He shrugs. He shakes his head with a shudder and turns on the radio. A kilometre down the road he is light in the head from difficulty breathing. He turns off the radio. Lincoln expands his chest and draws in air. The distance seems relentless. He can't get the scene out of his head, the woman's hair, a grown-out style from times gone by, the way her head inclined, resigned, the way she stooped, the boy's face held up high. He shakes his head again. A few kilometres pass.

"I'm going back."

"Back? For the woman and the boy?"

"Yes."

One kilometre. Two. Three, four. He is doggedly determined. A cluster of trees marks his memory, a farm gate passing, an uphill slope which makes the truck grumble as he changes gears. He blames himself bitterly, it makes no sense. It seems to take forever to get there. Soon he thinks he must have passed the spot, but he drives on, hoping to find them. He drives on against his better judgement, a feeling hardly unfamiliar, but after 10 kilometres he turns

back where he came from. Later he turns back again, scanning the roadside with his lights on bright. The car and the woman and the boy cannot be found, as much as he drives back and forth on that stretch shaking and shaking his head. Everything has a reasonable explanation, or at least he once was sure of that, and obsessively he tracks that course, every time he passes the spot, cursing himself for not stopping. He is tired when she finally speaks, and she knows they will not speak of this again.

"We have to go on. You promised."

"I just don't understand it," he says, and she narrows her eyes knowingly, obscuring herself in the dimness that comes with being somewhere near nowhere.

But the city leaves behind its broken signals everywhere, and after a long time, whirled up in the dust of another truck ahead, a triangular sign glares, indicating a turn. Dip 22 m ahead, it warns, and they drop through the dip. Mealie lands right and left, and another triangular sign warns with a fat cow and a droll gait of domestic wildlife crossing the road.

Soon, cars swerve ahead, indicating to the left and veering in front of him, staring back with blind red eyes. And a lone comet zips through the sky, except he soon realises it is a car on a bridge over the highway. Perhaps a wandering star, perhaps a thing of meaning, if anything meant anything at all.

Then later, a crooked chain of lights as far as the eye can see leads over dimpled pools at midnight, light reflecting the smooth sheen of paint on the road, and only then does he spy the arrows pointing towards where he needs to be. If he knew where he needed to be. Arrow heads to the left, to the right, and numbers, in yellow, and in white the name of places neither of them is ever likely to visit.

"Are you sick of prostitutes?" asks the white girl, trying to cheer him up. He had almost forgotten about her.

"I am... a bit obsessed."

"I didn't say that," she chirps, trying to be funny.

"You did." That shuts her up for a while.

"Would you ever be a woman?" He thinks about it, and while he does, the ghost, entranced by the road, tries to cool her face on the glass.

"No," he says.

"I wouldn't even be a human, never mind a man."

He smiles at her, long enough to cause an accident.

"What are you looking at?"

"Nothing. I was just thinking..."

“What?”

“Manhood. Perhaps a man is only something that you convince yourself you must have become, sooner or later. You fuck your way up the ladder. I need women to get there. It’s true, you know. I get edgy when I don’t have a woman.”

“I think you start talking more.”

“Do I?”

“I suspect.” She laughs. “So tell me another story. About a woman. Tell me... Tell me about the strangest woman.”

And he laughs. “You make me laugh. Where did I pick you up?”

“I can’t remember,” she says.

“Are you sure?”

“Yes.”

“I can’t remember either.”

“It’s strange...”

“Strange, yes...”

“The woman. I’ve never told anyone about that.”

“Was she a prostitute?”

He frowns, he scrunches up his mouth, weighing his head from side to side.

“Forget it.”

“Who am I going to tell?”

“I’ve never. No.”

She laughs at him. He smiles again, but it is a sad smile. “What the hell.” And his voice smoothes into the hazy tone of the past. He becomes again the man who tells stories.

what he likes to forget

It was the new times that brought us together, us old-time lovers and nursers of wounds. I would never have walked into that bar if a white colleague from those days at the newspaper had not spotted me dashing into a corner cafe to grab *The Star*.

“Lincoln!” I turned around and there was this man, you know, my former editor, whom I had not seen for years. “So how are ya?” He was having a dop with some mates at The Old Bar Room, and he asked me to join him. Things had long gone ‘grey’ in Braamfontein, that’s what the government called it. Too much black and white together. We often had drinks together after work. It was a year or two before the elections. The whole country was going grey.

And then later at the bar, when I got another beer, there she was. The bitch. It is still hard to say her name. She was still the same, a little exaggerated, talking like some jolly hockysticks Brit, one of the lads, tough lady, but fragile, always on guard. What a flirt.

You had to watch her mouth to see, so I knew what it meant when it happened, that thrilled little curl of her mouth, and that flutter all within me. Part of me wanted to say *voetsek*, you white man's whore, and part of me wanted to say after all these years, I'm still waiting for someone else like you.

I watched her mouth and wondered at the odds. I bought her a drink, and we sat chatting for a while, dancing around the important things, like do you still hate me for being black? Am I still a shade too dark for you? And do you know how much you hurt me?

She said she liked the tot glasses, and she said buy me some more Tequila. Then she started dropping the glasses in her handbag, just like that, racing through a few short details of her life. Thirteen years later. She had a boyfriend she said, kind of serious. They worked together, insurance salesman or something. They did a lot of the new government service contracts, something like that.

She must have realised she was talking too much, and she stopped - staring, as if out of breath. Staring, yes, I held her cold hand against my heart so she could feel the beat.

We had few words, but we had drinks, a hotel room, a bed with white covers, covers to cover it up. It had to be done. Then it had to be forgotten. We sat on opposite ends of the bed, getting dressed, a little stunned, ready to leave before we got there.

She put her hand on my lips when I dared to break the evening, to speak of my guilt, to fracture her silence, but she said it was okay. He's okay. And why should I think she would want me back, when she had been the one to leave, for brighter lights, a bigger city, and a whiter skin, taking our two-year old son, swearing to never see me again?

I gave her my phone number, but she did not give me hers. I could not ask her for it. Not now. Too much time had passed. Maybe we could be together in this new country people were talking about, I thought. Now it would be ok. But I had left it too late, too long. That dark hour was her gift to me in some ways, I think it was meant as a final goodbye.

TWO
fifteen forty-six

They were closed, and so the windows held the house together. The sun splintered into the rooms, yellow-bathing Helen's cheap kitchen bric-à-brac, the drapes and imitation marble effect she had tried to paint on her bedroom walls, and her faded red Mazda standing on the cement driveway. The house with its shadows grew ominous and persistent like a muddy labyrinth.

When they came home drunk and laughing, Helen dressed in some funny outfit Ean had never seen before, Derrick headed straight for the bedroom, when Billie stuck her head out into the passage.

"Hey ma! You know how he never remembers anything you say?"

Helen stopped dead in her tracks, irritated by her daughter's attitude.

"What are you talking about?"

"You know what I'm talking about. You said I couldn't get a man. You see, I don't need one. You're the one that does. Ask him if he remembers that he is wearing blue striped boxer shorts, and ask him why they're soaked in cum. Goodnight, sleep tight. I hope I never see him again." She slammed the door and locked it.

Helen began screaming. "How dare you talk such rubbish. Billie, open this door!"

But inside her own bedroom when the pants came off, Helen began to softly cry. And Derrick stared.

"What's wrong?" he asked. "Why are you crying? Don't you want me?"

She grabbed him by the collar, and the strangest thing was he didn't say a word. He looked at her as if to ask 'Where am I,' and she began to cry again.

"Put on your pants."

"What?"

"I said put on your pants and get out of here."

He did. He turned once to look at her, sitting in the bed with the palms of her hands wedged together between her legs, staring straight ahead. They didn't say goodbye. Then he came back.

"I need the keys." She unlocked for him, resisted the urge to beat him up, and ran back to her room to stand at the window and pule. Then she fell asleep.

She did not hear the wailing telephone two rooms away, but Ean did. *Somebody is going to die.* Ean answered.

"Hello? Hello?" The line had an echo, as if there were miles and miles between them. It was her.

"I must speak to Helen. Its very urgent."

"Helen can't come to the phone right now," he said.

"Tell her its about Annie De Bruin! Do you know Annie?"

"No. Sorry."

He wandered about the house, bored and dull in the head. His pants had grown short over the years and his ankles were chill. In the lounge, no silver Mercedes waited for him on the darkening street. Perhaps it never had. The lambent sun fell onto his chest. He closed his eyes and breathed. He stayed there for what seemed like ages, then roughly pulled his shirt from where it was tucked into his trousers, stomping into the kitchen.

Feeling ill, his feet bitter cold, he ran the sink half-way full of soap water, clambered up onto the wet metal counter, almost slipped, but caught himself on a window handle, and pulling his pants up to his knees, stepped into the field of bubbles. His feet throbbed. There was a pain in his neck, and his fingers were rubbing the thin-worn cloth at the tail of his shirt.

He watched the bubbles pop. His arm dropped by his side. He could feel the dishwashing soap between his softening toes. His hairy toes. The hair that first marked his fear of this half-grown up form that claimed one day to set you free.

The bubbles popped slowly, his head was aching, hanging down so low. He began to see his feet through the dim water where the bubbles parted. What was missing? It seemed that the lives of those in history and legend had some vital ingredient which he had searched for his entire life, but never found. What had the adults done with it? He had cleaned and cleaned and tried to keep everything tidy for the thing that would come, the next thing, the holy thing, but nothing came, nothing special, nothing sacred, just more and more of the same, and he wondered why he could not stop cleaning anyway. There was nothing at the bottom, nothing at all, and yet he kept on scratching, the itch would not let go of him, the itch was in his feet now that he thought of it, he should stop thinking, stop to think entirely.

The last of the sun retreated from the windows, the bubbles popped, leaving only dim liquid to stare through, goose-pimples on his arms and legs, and dark about the house. The corners re-claimed themselves, those dirty corners he could never get into, the grime in the grooves where the lino blocks joined, the places where the floor slid under the skirting - black with dirt.

There were things that haunted the house, gaps between places where people walked, voices

that trailed into absence. It was most often at night that he felt like a stranger in the house and garden, that he was happy to be away from it, locked away from the ominous windows and the clap of foreign tongues in the trees.

He did not know how he felt about Billie's stunt. He was sick of picking up the pieces of his mother's life. And it dawned that he would spend his whole life looking, like Helen did, for something he could not catch, the damned unknown.

He remembered Marga and her words.

All our lives we are trapped, she said, and it begins here, trapped in the lies we find convenient. Locked up, being made to wait for those who would be our masters.

And he knew it could be different, and he knew something read somewhere in a book: you're never an adult until you forgive your parents for what they did to you.

He put some things in an old sports bag, as a kind of game: what if? He took a pencil, some paper, some money and the tiny blue tranquiliser pills that he needed sometimes when he went outside. Then he stood back and examined it as the itch overwhelmed his hands. He had to find out how to do that. He had to leave the house.

THREE

departure

And behind the house the power pylons humming, reaching into the sky, going somewhere, somewhere great, long lines into space and firm legs in the dust, sent the life of the house, the static that passed through it, out into the night.

Helen only got up after she had dozed off for a while and woken from a nightmare which she instantly forgot. She ignored brushing her teeth, but swallowed down two small white pills with a half-empty can of Coke standing on the windowsill. Switching off the light, she undressed and climbed under the blanket, glancing at the space between the wall and the bed with a sigh. Her last thought before falling asleep was for those bottles sticking out there, there were too many, she thought, the kids would start to notice she was losing her grip...

She woke with a start in the dark, then rolled over, digging her head into the pillow. Bloody Derrick Dalton had given her no money. Said the cash from the last job hadn't been divided up yet. She liked that serious smirk of his, the teamwork, the challenge, the danger. But sometimes, lately, she had almost run. And now it was all over. God. What the hell was she going to do?

The phone rang. Shameless. She should have known. He had some money. He was sorry. She had to come now. She rose from the bed shaking, to look for a jacket.

It was the feel of edgy desperation in her muddled steps about the house that woke him, and led him to put on his jeans and a jersey, slipping into his tackies on his edgy and suspicious way out. He followed her entirely out of a sense of obligation, biting his teeth and short of breath.

Ean caught up with Helen as she walked briskly past Sharon's Cafe, where they sold 'bread like your mother tried to make', and turned the corner around a fence of concrete slats into a parking lot. There was only one car in the lot with the lights turned on, and glancing through the gap between the fence and the wall, he knew that was her destination. In it sat Derrick, eyes the colour of cement. Quickly, Ean ran home.

He saw the blind beggar sleeping in his cardboard box, saw the people shut in cars trundling down Main Road. Wide streets like small town America, like in the movies. On the corner Norma Jean's Pizza, roadhouse diners and burger joints and hot dog stores and tragic teenagers with pimples and tracksuits, and middle-class cars and wide streets and empty shop windows

and china shops and pawn shops and factory outlets with special offers in neon and chalkboards with prices. Everything was for sale here. A few blocks down the dogs started barking at the sound of your footsteps near the fences and security walls, wakeful even at this hour, and he knew he was closer to home. He saw the tiny, bony Italian woman in the yellow lamplight take down her forgotten washing with sleepy eyes and curlers in her hair when he turned into their street. The women here still had the same hairstyles from twenty years ago, like chickens on their heads, short-cropped and dyed grape purple or dark orange red. He felt hurt and tenderness well up in him, he felt hope for the planet and lost all for himself. He held his breath as he ran, trying to get closer to home, assailed by the fine mist of the mine dumps which still doused the place in dust. He was begging for a bath.

"You have your own washing machine?" Marga had laughed when she walked into his room for the first time.

"Stop it!" he told himself. "You don't need anyone!" And with that the moment's weakness was gone, and the silent phonecalls, and the dim trouble he sensed ahead. "It's your life," he reiterated, "It's your life and you call the shots!"

Almost by accident, it occurred to him. "And you're a man!" It seemed the most important thing, all of a sudden.

He felt bad, locking the front door behind him. Billie poked her head out of her room, hair hung in strands over her puffy eyes, brushed back by a careless hand.

"Where'd she go?" Her voice was creaking.

"I don't know. She got in a taxi."

"Oh." She seemed puzzled. "How far did you go?"

"I lost her at the video store, past N J Hardware."

"Oh. I never asked... How was the funeral yesterday?"

"Okay."

"Was everyone crying?"

"Yes."

"Isn't that typical." She paused a moment, glancing at the floor, then went back inside.

Helen's nails dug into the seat as she swallowed her tears, more and more, while Derrick talked, and he talked so much that she calmed down, could even hold a nasty smile.

"No. Absolutely not," she said. "Do it on your own." And his voice took on that tender tone.

"Helen, baby." Her nails cut into the seat.

"I said do it on your own!"

"I can't do it on my own! I need you. For this, for all of this. Helen. Come on. Come here."

"No."

"I just want to talk to you."

"No." Then he mentioned money. And she was so tired. A lot of money. He kept on mentioning money. And she said "No," but he knew when she stopped talking that her mind had started working. She never said no in the end.

"Let's chat tomorrow, The Old Bar Room, around 12?"

"I'll think about it," said Helen, and he gave her the cash he owed, and she got out and ran.

Breathing relief at the front door she let down her guard, but found Ean waiting in the kitchen.

"Helen, remember that woman who said somebody was going to die? She called again. She said it was about Annie De Bruin. Do we know her?"

She answered him with two shallow breaths, and time came undone. Raw with the evening's ruptures, sitting closed-eyed and snotty-nosed by the table practising her actor's deep-breathing technique, hunched forward in exhaustion, she gazed at the floor and the dents her shoes had made in it, putting two and two together, wiping her eyes, and keeping her mouth bog full of the bitter coffee he made her, getting lost in the black of the mug, lest she say something she was not ready for, the things that had been buried in the very foundations of the house for all these years. She wanted to shake her head. She wanted to nod it. She wanted to tell him about the days before she began to round and point her voice as it was now, following her shadow on dirty country roads, how she observed them from afar, what they wore, what they ate, how they moved, whom they married, how they left - she would be just like that. In these moments, then like now, she was her body's witness, as she'd been all along - of what was said, what wasn't, where it led, and where not, still being unhappy, but she could no longer say she was living a lie. Time had exchanged lie for truth. *'n Regte ingelse witmens*, without roots, without culture, without answers.

He watched her sipping, plucking at the hairs on the back of his hand.

"I'm going to sleep."

"Goodnight, my boy." Too old and too important now for even a good night's kiss, she thought, he traipsed off to his room.

Ken jy my gesig, my kind? A voice in the dark of the house. A voice that made her bite blind fury and the guilt of decades.

Without turning on the lights, she sat in the chair by the phone in the passage and dialed the old number. There it lay before her, Witnekspruit. The white town and the coloured town.

The roads for whites would be tarred now. The silver spires, the roofs of the houses, the main road with the liquor store and the corner cafe and the farm supplies and the hotel, and these days, she was sure, a big department store or two. In her mind she walked into the village, past thrift furniture and clothes shops, past gardens filled with fruit trees not pruned for years, growing low, dark and knobbly, turning left up the rocky dust road to the coloured township. A long time she'd been gone, but in a flash she knew it, and she knew the way.

She knew the twists and turns, the third left, second right. Memory was a flood all at once. Her heart beat with the image of number sixteen, dappled light of lace curtains behind the stoep, and it smelt of polish in the kitchen and steamed fruit in the pantry. The gate was small, and she could have easily imagined herself at the front door, let herself in, but the air was hot and dry, the front yard barren, and she had been gone so long.

An old woman answered the phone in a croaky whisper.

"Hallo?"

"Hallo... Hallo, sorry to bother you so late. Can you tell me... Is Annie there?"

"No," said the woman. "No, not any more." A deep breath. "At four fifteen this afternoon."

"Oh."

"Ja," said the woman. "Did you know her?"

"Long ago. Not well enough."

"Ja," the woman sighed, and Helen hung up. The last time she saw Annie, she was drunk, hanging on a boyfriend's shoulder, a white plastic suitcase in her hand. Anna De Bruin, widow, corner café cashier and most notorious money-lender, Annie, her dead mother.

FOUR
crossing

“**S**ee? The world passing by the window,” she says. And still it has no name.”
“I see.”

“Can you name time?”

“No. But I can measure it.”

“It’s what you do with it that counts.”

“Well, I’m doing something. I’m here, I’m driving, I’m talking to you.”

“You’re not hiding in the shadows.”

“No. Maybe. I don’t know. This is a time without a name.”

“And if it never has a name?”

“I don’t know.” He thinks for a while. Maybe he will change to the day shift.

Lincoln looks at his watch. “It’s almost eleven.”

“What will we do when the morning comes? When it gets light and the sun rises.”

“We will find a place to sleep.”

“A dark place?”

“Maybe under a bridge or something.”

“Maybe,” she says, fearing the sunlight and the truth. The truck hums so loud, he can hardly hear her. “Where are we going again?”

“It’s dark. I don’t know.”

“Are we there yet?”

“I told you it was dark.”

“The darkness...” she says. She asks again. “What will we do when the morning comes.”

“I’ve forgotten what I wanted to say.”

“It will come back to you. “

If he were to make too big a thing of it, he could fall badly. Yet if he made too small a thing? All wrapped up in thrills and goose pimples, his freaking desire would be the death of him.

I will lick your tongue, he wants to say, I will lick your neck and lick your tongue and bite your little pink earlobe. I will tease you and please you and smell your hair and slip off your

clothes one by one. I will take off your underwear, until you are breathing naked, with the dark fuzz waiting in the tip of your belly. I will enter. I will move inside you like a giant fish, I will go all the way and you will scream and ask for more, and we will groove slowly together, you and I, we will take our time kicking and swimming until the morning comes, and you will be exhausted and snore on my chest.

He remembers ambling at dark through the city, streetlights on the road, when long black legs in suspenders, a woman in underwear stepped from the night. She walks in beauty, like a fright, he remembers thinking, her tired eyes smeared with blue. Since that first one, there have always been whores as many as there are stars in the sky, always at least one ruction closer to hope and forgetting.

She will not look at him as he speaks. Perhaps she listens, perhaps later she laughs, perhaps she strokes his chest with slender nails and smooths his hair. He is lost and the clock says 3 am. He thinks of his mother, his long-lost ex-girlfriend, he thinks of this girl who keeps him sane on the long road of dust and boredom, frustration, this girl who came out of nowhere.

"I'm searching for the road," he tells her, "The proper road. The one I turned away from. Somewhere, I guess, the road that forked off into a different destiny through a comfortable bed in some sleep-locked city. Where everything changed forever. I have to get back to that junction, to travel everywhere, until I find it, find the direction I have to go in." But the more he has begun to hope for change, the more everything seems to stay the same. He cannot get away from himself without a woman.

Sometimes it is a relief to get into the rural areas, where people are more conservative. It reminds him of his childhood, and there are times the comparison does not hurt too much. But he knows how he feels when he goes back home, what eyes the old ones look at him with, and he knows they know where he has been and he thinks they know what he has done, this story that is is dawning on him in entirely unexpected ways.

about the woman who hid her hurt

Whenever we went to see Nophucuko, we brought them blankets, parafin, clothes and food. Old jerseys were especially popular, for those cold Transkei nights, and sacks of samp, mealie meal, bunches of carrots and many big heads of cabbage. That night she would cook stywe pap, samp and umfino o gutyelweyo - wild spinach with mealie meal. Once, I took along a few cartons of amasi. Everyone was very happy. You had to keep your spirits up, in that place where they ate with AIDS, slept with it, they joked about it too.

There were those who stayed there in their final months, in the seven beds which now filled the main room of the small house, mostly adults, though some had their children with them. Among the seven, those who could still walk, helped to bath and feed the others. There were also those who came to visit during the day, to share their pain, to talk to those who could still talk. Some had been sent home by the hospital. Some had families who did not care. Some walked long roads there, when the pain of being with their families at such a time was greater than the pain of suffering with strangers. Others were carried in, and pushed there on wheelchairs. The legend drew too many who had to be turned back.

There were always people there - waiting to be helped, waiting to be comforted, people with nowhere to go, people who did not trust doctors, and those who did not trust the witchdoctors in turn, people who had been sent by relatives who were tired of their denials, mothers of sons, wives and daughters who suspected their husbands were infected and wanted to talk. In that time I did many interviews.

I remember Naledi, a placid teacher, with a high forehead and a hard-set mouth, who was married to the son of the headmaster of her school. When her husband died of AIDS, her in-laws accused her of murdering him, though it was he who had infected her. After his funeral, she came back to an empty house. Her in-laws had taken clothes, furniture, and her three-year old son. They said that she would infect him and it was their duty to protect the child. She was fired from work, told she should no longer touch children. In the months after she fell into a deep depression.

When I met her, sitting in Nophucuko's room, stolidly watching the bed-ridden breathe, she was living with her sister, who had been raising her two daughters, but she had still not had her son returned. Instead, Social Services had become involved in the case, and found she could not support the boy, whose memories of her were dim by then.

"Can't you move somewhere else, get a job as a teacher there?"

"My family is here. Everything is here."

"But they could move too."

"Maybe it was meant to be."

"Meant to be?" I asked. "How can you say that?"

"Sometimes god puts things in our way to make us stronger."

"Do you really believe that?"

"Yes," she said. "I really believe that. Maybe it is better for the child to grow up with them. In the long term it is better, because at least that way he will have parents, when I am no longer there." And I realised it ruled her waking moments. "When I get sick, anything, the flu, I can't stop thinking about what might happen to my daughters. At least he is taken care of." She looked past me

when I tried to meet her eyes. "I don't want them to think about it all the time. I want their memories to be the beautiful ones." And she smiled. "Are your parents still alive?"

"I have a mother, but we do not speak," I said.

"You must speak to her. Are you married?"

"No. But I have a son." A son I have not seen in sixteen years.

"So you will understand," she says. "You know... When it gets that far, I will send them away to my cousin, in Rhini. What will you do?"

"I don't know."

"Yes, it is difficult. One day they will learn to speak about it, but now is not the time yet. I want to see them grow up, my children, my grandchildren, but if God wants me, I must follow his way."

"If god wants you?"

"Yes."

"Do you believe in destiny?"

"I don't know. These things, they happen. I did not ask for this. But God wanted me to walk this rocky road, and he gave me good shoes."

"You do not blame your husband?"

"What use is there?" We sat in the silence of the cool house, with its sea-green walls. We listened to the others breathing.

"How do you explain what will come?"

She thinks for a long time. She nods very slowly.

"It is asking for a new time," she says, carefully. "It beats the breath out of you, it boils you in fever and freezes and shakes you with cold sweat. It is like winter, like summer, at any time of life. It is a thing which asks to be survived, no matter how."

"You don't believe it is an accident."

"Of course it is an accident."

"But it is the will of god."

"Ewe, bhuti. It is. It is a thing which must be lived." Again, I wait for her to speak, but she says nothing more.

"How can your entire life build up to that moment, mama, when your future death slips into your veins?" She looks at me, restful, with her hands folded on her stomach.

"I don't know. But God, he knows."

I got up, seeking the fresh air. The room was ripe with the sweet smell of decaying flesh, the hills outside almost black against the sky. I was reeling, wanting to laugh, wanting to cry, prevented by the custom of respect. I walked through the village, past the goats in their pens, the mud houses and sticks, the last children goggling at the long-legged stranger before their mothers called them to stand in the plastic tubs to be scrubbed down before bedtime. I would

sleep, soon, in one of these friendly houses, in a clean bed on bricks. I closed my eyes in the middle of the road. Whole villages were dying. Whole villages would be wiped out just like that. It was already happening all around me. There was nothing I could do to stop it. My voice would be too small. My life would be too short. I had read in an overseas magazine that satellite photos of areas with high infection rates in central Africa showed the vegetation rapidly claiming back the land. Where people were, and then.... Nothing. Here it was rocks and grass, valleys and bare windy hilltops. It would take longer. But I imagined the jungle encroaching, coming closer with its missing paths and myriad unspoken threats, creeping over sky and stars, covering everyone who lived here, until they were gone as if none of their courage mattered. The jungle was tarred, and concrete broke into the limbs of people sleeping on the streets, litter spinning in the wind - things came from the city, no matter how hard you stuck to the traditions, and nobody was safe.

Here he was in the darkness, leaving the last moment behind, and yet nearly unable to begin the next. He was sinking into his chair like the living dead, she was the dead come to life on the edge of her seat. He was exhausted by so many years on the road to this very moment, not knowing how he got there and unable to remember what had happened two seconds ago, but he was slowly learning that looking forward was the only way to get out of there. It was always a mistake to return to the past.

He did not quite know what to look forward to yet. He felt so heavy in his seat, and he thought of the ocean, where worries fled into blue. He smiled. He wanted her because at times it seemed to him there was nothing else to want. In these moments, his heart sprung open like a camera eye, and he could see them driving like this forever. He longed to reach out and touch some part of her, to stroke her arm, to claim these moments for himself.

On her urge to remember rode vague certainties of how she once had lived, and it seemed to make sense to no longer be there. But the end had not been the end. Why had she come back, only to endure the dulllest journey? And still she knew she had to stay there. In her exhaustion now it was good that his will and the heat of his blood irrevocably bound her from giving in to the end's dull flutters.

He had other flickers and moments of darkness - lips, hips and stomachs, a voice ground thin as husk, a small hand on his shoulder, a head of hair gentle against his chest, squelching voluptuous thighs, and giving it to them, each one of them, hard, hunched in the dark, almost always in the dark, stumbling and arching into acrid sweat, perfume and cosmetics, that woman smell arising with its hint of hope.

Days had come after darkness, he thought, and darkness after days, but the time remained, whatever time it was – you held it somewhere in your pulse, that feeling that said you were the same person who fell on your head when you were four, the same person who kissed the headmaster’s daughter in the toilets after school, the same person who wore a hat in the rain and low hard shoes to work, before now. You that sat on that cold nurse’s chair, the same person falling never to rise again, that same person – legless, footless into the streets, with the days and months you were trying out death like a new coat and seeking to make it a uniform in your desperation, you who were no longer you, because there was something else inside you.

All his life he had kept running, tightening his step, extending his leap, and in that tension clearing anything that opposed him, men and women. He had slicked their mouths shut, tickled their tongues, their mouth’s edges and eased even the hot breath of their nostrils. With hunger he went straight for the heart, or the next-best thing. He had a stomach for a heart, and now it was a stomach which had swallowed another, and he had split. He tried at every chance, and they were rare these days, for the hands of a woman, the only hope.

“Hey! Are you falling asleep?”

“No. No, I’m fine.”

“Are you sure?”

“I’m sure.”

“Where are we now?”

But he had no answers - where they had been, where they would be. If there was a past. If there would be a future. If a time after this could be imagined. He had a habit of bleeding right through the boundaries, in these days. He was in no mood to talk in what seemed like hours of driving, hunched then with sullen eyes ahead, then eyes drooping. There was no time after this. No. There were only these roads, these words, these places to hide. The road was always ahead. Grinding gears, years gathering speed to climb the hill, from the top he let the truck roll down the other side, into the dip, without braking.

There was always another stretch of road. And another. And after that... Hell. He was waiting for them to grow smaller and smaller, the distances shorter and shorter. He was waiting. Life was a hollow now. It all fit inside his cabin.

“How do you know we’re not lost?” He ignored her. He saw himself drowned in the deep dark city – like Nophucuko’s husband. Months or maybe years before, he had lingered until morning in smoke and the shebeen buzz, beer on his lips, in his mouth. There was no refuge from the illness, and from those who would know. Some would return to the mountains or into the grassy hills, to die slowly of TB in the arms of the ancestors. He noted that he instead was

a man of electricity and running water. But now he wondered – he had little to lose. Maybe he could still in the last of his days, become as modest, when the day came, as skin and bone to the red earth of his father's father's fathers. Something of the old death... And he had made his life small in the mercy of work, eat, sleep, thinking of the end, but here he was, still waiting. There was an honour in that long gone life, the life he had lived as a child.

“Where are we?”

“Does it matter?” On a blunt and determined whim, he turned off the highway, trundling over the bridge, hitting a road with potholes - small knocks to the truck's vibration as it forged ahead into the night.

“Where are you going?”

He did not know. He would never be one of his people. The people of his childhood. He was too far gone for that. “Where are you going?” He took the first dirt road left off the tar. He did not know.

“Anywhere,” he said. “Does that sound familiar?”

And as so often, the ghost dug her non-existent nails into the non-existent palms of her non-existent hands. Lincoln's eyes were falling. The next moment he started awake. She was peevishly bemused.

“You need sleep and a map.” Hard and fast his laugh, he kept driving into the silver light, showing up stones and dust in the sand with a kind of glee. “I said you need sleep and a map,” and he wheeled the truck around and narrowly missed a gate in the glare and dust, then reversed into the ruins of what she assumed was a rickety farm stall breaking into splinters. Gnarled branches screeched against the side of the truck, but sooner or later he got it scrambling onto the dirt road again, trundling ahead.

“We're lost,” she said. She felt weak in the head, as if something were pulling her, pulling her away.

“It's not that bad really.”

“What?”

“Being lost.”

“You're crazy.”

“Alright. Maybe I should find a farmhouse and ask where we are.”

She shook her head quickly.

“No. No. No other people. Just me and you.” In that swiftest second, she lifted her hand and gestured as if to stroke his arm.

A small jolt went through him. He flinched. The hair rose up on the back of his arm.

Only in time did he recover his breath as relief came crashing and washing and all feeling faded in his head. His body gave way. The truck jerked still and dust rose up in the headlights. He was slumped over on the steering wheel, a faint chortling sound coming from his open mouth as he snored. If he could just put the pieces of the puzzle together, order might point him in the right direction, but it seemed he would do anything to obstruct order. Lincoln did not believe in directions. In his sleep he began to cough and spit. He woke up screaming.

"I will never go back to those assholes!"

"Lincoln?"

"I was in my mother's matyotyombe in Port Elizabeth. My hands were pinned to the plastic table cloth with forks, as many hands fed me pap with liver. I swallowed liver like water. Raw liver. I dreamt... That I lived through the stories of people I took from the roadside. I felt more for those stories than I felt for my entire existence. I sucked all life from them, but there was a cost. Their stories replaced mine. I could no longer remember my own."

Early days in Hillbrow filtered into his thoughts. Interviews with all kinds of people. Even whites still in those days lived in the city. Running errands. Noting down things on his reporter's writing pad, the one with two columns, so you could write faster. Posing with his reporter's pad, smiling and cajoling. Everywhere on the streets, people shopping. Everyone came into the city to shop. Soweto had no shops. Blacks were not allowed to own shops. That was different now. Yes, now... The weeks in which he did not eat, pinned to the bed with the urge to vomit. Ashamed to leave the building by day, despite the hunger pangs. The other day, before dawn. The drug search. Police rapping on doors with pistols, kicking down doors. He woke up, opened the door. They searched his flat, found nothing, kicked down the door opposite him. The girl broke into a shrill wail. They threw around the few things she owned, and moved on. Faltering onto the bed below a big poster of Whitney Houston she wept, for the broken down apartment building, for families of ten sleeping in one room, for lost love, for Monday morning, for life in Hillbrow on a knife's edge, and somehow a musical card had fallen from the mantelpiece, flipped open, bleeping the tune to 'Happy Birthday' while he stood there with his uncombed hair in the doorway watching.

"Aren't you tired?" he asked. She ignored him. Sleep was in his mouth, and as he spoke he leaned over, twiddling the radio, scratching the dark with low melodies on a slow beat until he found the sound of strings. Onto the smooth, slow scrape of sand, he ran the truck under a bridge by the roadside and stopped. All of her was locked in a forward gaze of fear. "Put your hand here, please, just for a moment," he said, holding his large hand on his chest. Together

they waited as if listening for something, his head turned to the window, the whole of his body quivering in her direction, but there was nothing she could do for him, without fingers left for even the briefest touch, although in his mind she was dragged spread-eagled onto his lap with her hand under his shirt, her cool hand, but his doubt was the stronger compulsion, and she aligned herself with his broken will.

It had been her dream all her life not to feel. Now, as she sat watching him, she knew there were situations that called for nothing else.

And so, reclaiming Ean before sunrise seemed beyond hope.

How do you begin, a ghost at the end of a sentence when your ink has run out and your voice is the figment of another's imagination, another who wants you to be another, charades for the blind, and you feel so faint in the freezing cold, so inexplicably freezing cold... It came to her that she had been slowly breaking apart, all along losing pieces of herself, holding on to the one thing she had left to prove – that she would do anything, anything now to undo this searing speechless knowing which had slammed shut so fast upon her life and that boy's, the knowledge that they had lived for each other, that he was her addiction. She would do anything now, when the grim urgency of tears rocked her in front of the chasm of failure.

A dog chase all; swallowing wind, her teeth clamped down on some dead rag or sausage, and spurning common sense, to tear it all to shreds. So cold, so cold, and now she called and called. The black dog came, it sat there watching her in her abjection.

FIVE
intersection

Hidden is the heart of a boy who grew a man too fast. Rage swallowed and stilled to absolute zero will never call for mettling. But then, later, the heart grows hollow as a cave. Known errors beat against it like bats. Somehow sky cracks through earth, and it comes apart, neither coming a moment too soon, nor does the dawn.

Lincoln's head drops, gives off little accidental snorts, his eyes close involuntarily. Everything wants to swing. How much is he holding up? Waking in spurts, his voice strays, between the hours coming unravelled in the darkness.

It was a chill of sleep, a blind horror and some kind of game, the secret panic which rose up in him. He had needed a quick way to play into his nightmares, and now he needed a quicker way out, hoping for success. The briefest of interrogations, with a smirk on his face. That was how he was prying himself open bit by bit.

And it comes to him that Helen is what he has been looking for all these years, Helen the actress. And he can't decide if he wants her in the freshness of her youth, or if a woman becomes more mysterious with every year she earns. Helen whom he never knew - searching for her, searching skin on skin for years. How many women did it take? And when he found her she was none of that. It was over so soon.

Over like that blues hum held in the air the last time he played the guitar. Over like that football hovering, kicked with all his might into the distance. Things suspended, missed, larger than life, that stay with him, to return unbidden.

A moment can change your world. A moment can happen over and over again in your imagination, enter the world inside, where it takes root and becomes one of the small aches which can drive a lifetime. Sometimes these aches lead you to glory. Sometimes these aches take you astray. Sometimes they let you down. Sometimes everything inside you dies a sudden death trying to kill these aches.

"Can't you tell me some exciting stories?" he asks. Her brown hair is a silent wave down her forbidding back. He giggles nervously. He has to keep on talking. "Prostitutes tell the best."

"Why?" Her voice almost startles, but calms him too somehow. She never turns to look at him.

"I don't know." But he does... Almost. "You want them. Maybe they want you. If you knew what you wanted. So you listen. And they tell you stories. And you stop caring what is true and what isn't." And she turns. Smiling. Suddenly he likes her even more.

"I don't know any true stories." She asks: "Do you want me to lie to you?"

"Truth hurts, isn't that what they say?" Suddenly he has discovered the little thing he has been trying to put into words for weeks. He's after truth though, now. He laughs despite his discomfort. Then he is still. "We could turn back onto the N3," he says later, breaking the long silence, "and go to Durban. Durban is not like PE. The water is actually warm. A black man and a white woman, we can swim there now. We could get you a sexy bikini, or just something normal if you like. There are palm trees on the main beach. I've seen it on postcards. We could go to Cape Town. It's further, but it's nicer than PE. We will take a holiday. See the country. Have you seen Table Mountain? We could go up the cable car. I want to visit Robben Island. It's not a prison anymore. You can see Mandela's cell. We can go to Namibia. It's even further. You have never seen so much sand in your life. And they sell rocks by the side of the road, what do they call them, semi-precious stones? Rose quartz and amethyst. I think you'd like them. Do you like that kind of thing? "

"No," she says. "We have to stay on this road."

Although nothing she had ever read while alive can explain why this is so, she knows the road she must take is the one she is on, and she must travel with him. Words enter her mind, words which say how stupid she is to worry about his survival, how stupid to listen to him. But she knows it does not matter where she begins, as long as she stays on this road.

How is it now that horror is hope? Wavering reason suggests that he might put his finger on the poison, and then, like a flutter, horror might desist, and sweat grow cold.

Sleep, a soft bed, a blanket, these are intimate truths, the way food is in the mouth and stomach. And the ultimate anaesthetic from the angry world, falling next to not-existing. Except of course the world isn't angry. He is angry, but he doesn't know at all how to say it.

To be is to be. He must hold on to anything which the shadows cast into the light. Once he has that – being - he won't look back. He has remembered more and more. For one is not at all to be deceived by such a lot of pain. Pain holds itself to terror like a snake bite to poison, like fever to nightmares. We must suck from such a wound, and spit into the bush, all that is the vile intention of delirium.

He leans forward and twiddles the dials, until he finds a rippy little tune on the radio. To her surprise he begins to hum along, smiles and coughs. Then he turns it off. He stares into the

silence. He clears his throat.

"You know... You must understand. If I had cancer, I would tell people. They would rush to me in pity. AIDS will hurt – later. I know what awaits me. I have seen it. Dying itself is painful. And then there is death – the great annulment – the frightening black space where all movement freezes and the void enters from the core, undoing every boundary between nothing and eternity, undoing you, because you are the boundary between these things." Talk contains him on this long dark road. But in the silence he thinks of the things she says, and he thinks of the places he's been, places where he was a different man.

"It leaves us naked, the shame, more naked than being born. In my culture, we are taught to respect the dead. This is like going back to before you were a man, before the initiation, before everything, and you'll never be an elder or an ancestor once you die. It is a slow process of being stripped of your dignity. It is my secret and deep pain. I cannot be part of daily life. I refuse.

"It was more important to find some grace waiting for sickness and death in a reasonable job, to be able for this last stretch to disappear, to leave the lies behind. It was either that or stay in bed and rot. I still don't know why I'm not rotting, but I'm here somehow. So although I feel I'm losing every day a little of my dignity, I have this much to hold on to, and I am an honest man, and that means more in the world to me than anything else, at least I think it does. But one thing I know. I'll never go back. I don't want people to know. I'll never go back home."

The dust articulates itself in billows. It comes in through the holes. The sharp inhalation, lungs draining of air, dust and land and land and land in the singeing song in his breast, then the staccato heartbeat in his throat as he coughs. He longs for the country inside. The country of his childhood, playing soccer, Ngangelizwe, dry grass in winter, not this sharp-lipped girl with wet strands hanging in her face.

about Helen Ansley

It was the time of those cold winter Port Elizabeth nights in New Brighton, in the community hall at the Jazz. And eventually, that first night of risk, when we hid out in the dark hall at our table, she on my lap, huddling close, watching the saxophone players croon in the spotlight, sipping beer, acting like she didn't care, and I held her hard. She was always there, without fail, in that late night liberal crowd, and everybody knew her, oh yes. But I would know her best of all. Oh, how I would know her too well.

"And who are you?" she had asked the day I met her, mouth plush with

mischievous. "I'm Colin," I said. Colin Mlambo was my stage name in those days. Colin was a nickname given to me by an Irish priest football coach. Mlambo is my mother's surname, it is Xhosa for rivers, like the great rivers of the Eastern Cape, the Great Fish, and the Great Kei.

I said my name, and I laughed, and she laughed. I took in that neat blouse with the frills at the sleeves and her hot ass and those tight corduroys she loved to wear. My eyes wandered to her cleavage, and I pretended to look away, but her eyes wandered in my direction. Reaching behind her neck, head slightly tilted, a tangle of hair on her shoulder, one earring glinting, a single burning star in each eye... Later she told me she could turn from schoolgirl to princess in five seconds flat, and she proved it right then and there. I really thought she was a white girl, but that night she told me her secret, that she had not started out that way. Despite her birth her pass now said 'European female'. She found the danger exciting, and it scared me.

I took her in, and she would look at me, and I knew I was her entire world, and she was clutching for support in that city. One day she was pregnant. One day our son was born. I was so proud. Three years. Three years with plans for the rest of our lives, and promises, but with her still trying for white all the time, and no-one had the heart to tell her that, you know, we all knew.

And when the rosy days were over, she was obsessing about how everything would be better again if she were a white woman, and how our boy had such light skin. It was the first time I had known physical revulsion in my body, the urge to vomit that came from the heart and not the gut. I left her, but I couldn't. And then there were the fights, and the day she spat into my face. And then there was the day she was gone.

SIX
arrival

“Are we there yet?”
“Not for a long time.”

“You haven’t even asked me again where I’m going,” she says.

“Well, where are you going?”

“Port Elizabeth.”

“You don’t really know where you’re going, do you?”

“Don’t you want to take me to the beach?”

“Fuck.”

He shakes his head. They have found the highway again. It is the nature of sitting in a truck that everyone thinks they’re faster than you. Every few kilometres, a lone car overtakes them. Some flick their lights to say thank you, and Lincoln flicks back, glad for the bit of human contact, because you get left behind with your thoughts in a truck, and there’s nowhere to go. Although it isn’t easy, it’s what he wants, time, and after time, some clarity. He feels confused, but confusion is not an emotion. That he feels nothing is closer to the truth. They seem to be taking forever to get to the next small town, and he remembers he is supposed to be on a deadline.

Then, later, “So you know anyone in PE?” he asks

“Nope.” He raises his eyebrows. She says: “I’m looking for a friend.”

“But you said he was lost. Do you know where he is?”

“Maybe. Almost like Australia. Almost that far away.”

“Then how do you think you will manage to find him?”

“Just leave that to me.”

“You do know who you’re looking for, at least?”

She nods.

“Oh yes... Sometimes you meet someone... That stays with you. No matter what.” She watches him breathe deeply. “I have to tell you something.”

“What?”

“I cannot find him. You will.”

“What do you mean?”

“What I said. You’ll find him.”

"How do you know that?"

"I just know."

"You just know."

"Yes." As he raises his eyebrows, a stillness comes over them. She knows that he knows. He frowns.

"Silver Beach. Isn't that right? We're going to Silver Beach," he asks. And for once he is quiet. Almost. There is remembrance in his voice, and no surprise: "I've been there, once. Early in the morning."

It doesn't matter that the sea is at the edge of this vast night, this land somewhere, like an outline. It is of no concern that there his journey has a natural end. He will drive along the edge then, for a while, until it is time to turn back, until he has answers to take back to the place called home, because he does not know where home is anymore. The last of the dry land cannot stop him. He would drive right into the sea if he had to go there to find it.

The window is slightly open, and the smell of the earth sour. The night time horizon runs for miles, flat like an open book. There is no rain, but the world is wet. Wind flutters along the sides of the cabin like tough paper which won't tear. It holds them snug, the wind. In the headlights she catches flickers of green grass, and the barbed-wire fences of fields, land claimed and spoken for, anonymous in the dark of their questions.

The clock in the truck says 3 AM, though it has read 3 AM for kilometres. A green sign for a picnic spot blinks up in the headlights. He stops and they get out, a little dazed and sleepy.

The dust he has whirled up gets in his throat. Lincoln coughs. He steps awkwardly around the place to stretch his legs. A concrete dustbin. Some sweet rappers, chicken bones and Coca Cola tins. Concrete tables and chair. He offers her the company jacket, but she refuses. He follows her to the damp, stone-cold table. She carefully sits, crosses her legs, gravel and red earth at her feet. For families during the day. Or for truckers and strange girls at three in the morning in the murderous cold when you can't see a thing.

They are hidden from the highway by the bulk of the truck, and it provides some shelter from the wind. He has left on the radio so they can have music, but even the crickets seem louder to Lincoln, and the only thing they have to eat are two packets of barbeque Simba chips which he has been saving since they left Joburg. He thinks about how hungry he is, that the whole back of the truck is full of chips he mustn't eat.

He opens the packet for her and pushes it to the edge of the table. She wonders how she is going to pretend to eat, but a scrawny shadow slips from behind the bin and tripples under the table right past Lincoln's feet. It's the black jackal bitch, nuzzling the ghost's hand. Lincoln

yawns, and as he rubs his eyes, the dog paws up into the ghost's lap and gingerly takes a chip between its teeth from the edge of the packet. The packet shuffles about. Lincoln probably thinks it's the breeze, and sometimes it is. More than once, he pushes it back at the ghost when the wind almost blows it over the edge, and in the dark she can just make out a frown.

"I'm sorry," she lies. "I'm so tired."

"It's okay," he sighs. "Me too."

"Do you think we'll still get there?"

"Yes," he says. He has no idea where they are. They are probably lost. He remembers dinners like this with women, telling them nice things to keep the peace. In the seventies, he used to cook for Helen. She was the only one he ever cooked for, and he knew he was not very good. She was the one who used to tell him the nice things. These days it is hard to find someone to tell you anything, these days people turn away from him. He wants to talk about what is real.

"I'm sure we'll find the right road," he says.

"Do you know where it is?"

"I thought I knew."

"Is it the N10?"

He looks away. The dog snaps and crunches a chip from the packet.

"I can't remember..."

"Are you okay?"

"Yes."

"You were coughing just now."

"Yes." He thinks about it. "Sometimes," he begins, "sometimes I wish I had a name for it."

"A different name?"

"A real name," he says.

"A name for..."

"To describe this poison. Yes... It's sex. It's death. It's sensation." He sighs. "You read it on page two or three. And you hear the gossip. 'It was TB. Pneumonia. Anaemia.' They say: 'She died of a broken heart.' It's like 'She fell from the thirty-second floor.' 'She slipped on a bar of soap.' But what is it? It is a thing I can't take out of me. It's a few words spoken by a doctor. And then it's the wait. Priests have prayed for me, sangomas have thrown the bones and seen many things. But they have not seen what it is: this inside which isn't inside. This hunger which cooks a man in his bones like stew, this hunger which brings forth the strength of a man out of his house and opens the doors to demons. You know there are names to tame those things. The gawulayo. It means the thing that cuts you, chop, chop, chop, you

fall down like a tree. Like ubhubane. It means the killer. Mashayabuque, the destroyer. That thing of KZN they call it, the thing from Kwa-Zulu Natal. Ingulaza, the virus."

"Ingu..."

"Ingulaza."

"Ingulaza."

"Yes, Ingulaza. That is what they call the things you can't know by looking at me. They are names for the things you would edit me out of your world for if you knew, and I don't want that. I want my own secret name, a name for this thing. But until then I will not be cast aside."

"Are you not editing yourself out of your world?"

"No. I am who I am, whether you know it or not. We might be living on lies, beautiful lies. But we must know who we are, or we are lost. That is a word I can name, at least: the last word. I know what my destiny is, and it is only one thing."

"You are alive. You are more than death. And you can affect how soon you get there."

"I don't know how to do that. It is not in my language."

"You are alive. You have the special human ability to track down your fears." The dog takes another chip. She strokes it under the table, and it licks her hand.

"Are you going to finish that?"

"I don't think so."

"Can I have it?"

"Please take it." He leans over and takes the packet, sticking his whole hand in it.

"You cannot live the crazy way you have been living," she says. "That would be enough to kill anyone."

He sighs, sitting on his hands for the cold, staring into the distance.

"One day there will be medicine for this. More than just some pills for TB, a little this, a little that. There will be real medicine for HIV. And they will give it to us."

She has no answer. The dog is gone. On the concrete, fallen through her lap, is a little heap of crisps being blown away by the wind.

He finds her in the truck when he gets in, even though the door is high and she could never have opened it on her own. Later she is on the bed, and he does not remark on it either, although if he had thought about it, she had never moved there. His memory leaves gaps, as he jumps anxiously from one thought to the next. It is one way, listening to him, that she knows that they must be getting closer to his home town.

Far from the blink-and-miss-it, far, on the routes escaping the broad certain roads, he drives, and he drives like the trickle of water under his scalp, the rock roads, the byways, staining the

crinkled map made by settlers and colonial marksmen.

He wants streetlight pools that growl back at you, as if this is the substance of memory, instead of the hardened river of tar lurking, daring him to go out looking for danger. Muddy sleep-locked forgotten towns, the passing façades of hotels, and he, a guest of all things small and strange, caught up in the headlights.

It's like that when you don't know where you're going. The past is hungry at cul-de-sacs. The road cuts quickly, and you have to turn, so you catch a detour through the suburbs. There is the moon and then the streetlights, sleeping one eye open in the dark, and trees like tea leaves, broken black and honey stirred the wrong way up into your head. Each leaf counted, each light, each tree, and the magical number of trees would pile up for you to discover the secret hatch to this hellhole of dead end suburban mazes.

His truck would cause mayhem by daylight, children coming to stare, but here the moon alone runs onto the street, the moon, on garden balcony box geraniums, pelargoniums, lawns and swimming pools, chilling every paralysing decision on the road to a breakdown zero.

There is no destination he cares for, and none he does not think of in that night. He just keeps on driving. Slim mouth and lockjaw, he keeps rising in front of the road, a pathetic dead end desperado begging to be hit down. One man needing a mission.

Past the needle-thin church, the cemetery and the town hall, they reach the main road, which is probably where, sooner or later, they will find the onramp to the highway. But once on the highway, it is not where he stays. He seeks out the mad tracks, like a termite burrowing where there are no lights, but they dig up a township and flee under floodlights like the spattered end of a drowned-out day.

Then he is driving in circles. Old tin roof iron, plastic sheets and cardboard close around them. It seems small when you get there, but the township pulls you in, deceives you with dust and whispers, corners where chickens sleep and mongrels lie in wait under weeds and low barbed wire, and people, but he no longer cares much for people.

Slowly at first, the police van slinks behind him, sticky like a woman's hands in a slowdance round the corners. He turns off the motor. The blue light wipes his face, a tall, thin man shines a torch right into the darkest black of Lincoln's eyes.

"Good evening sir. Could you please show us an identity document or valid driver's license?"

Evening has long since dropped from the sky as he pulls the scuffed and dog-eared booklet from his wallet and into the man's face. A barcode, a photograph taken years before, he feels his sell-by date long gone. What do they want?

"...here at three in the morning?"

"Sorry, could you repeat that?"

"What do you want, here at three in the morning?" Good question. The cop is drained in his white-blond short-shave hair, as if he has been baptised blue as his suit in bullshit explanations, false alibis and stories spun from the pure cold air they share by breathing.

"I got lost somehow." The torch is in his eyes again.

"Are you fatigued?"

"I sleep by day. It's what I do. Less cars, and a truck drives slowly. The night passes more quickly."

"Are you feeling tired?"

"I know where I have to go. I'll be sleeping soon."

They come from the left side of the cabin, the white man and his moonshine-eyes black sidekick, digging in the cubby hole. She must have got out by the other door somehow, slipping in the coarse sand in her thin shoes. She does not seem to be under the blanket, or hiding behind the seat from them. How on earth did she do that?

"What is this?" they want to know, finding his medication.

"Sleeping pills, vitamins, TB medication. Doctor's orders."

"OK, you can go."

"Just show me the way out."

Sure, say the cops, and he follows them, and the girl is back in her seat. He is too pre-occupied with getting away from the boys in blue to even think about her. Back on the highway he swings over the bridge and turns back in the direction he has come from. They could go anywhere, into the rails or hit a pole if they wanted to. The truck huffs and gathers itself in his hands. It still means moving, moving between forward and the vast distance reaching back. Maybe what he wants is for all of this to stop.

The road is dark, flanked by small trees with blossoms and dark leaves. It is off the edge of fencing and grassland. He almost swerves off at times, into that endless dark field. The heater in the cabin seems dead. His body is sinking into invisible hills and grooves.

His head is stoppered up with sleep, and he stares, stares at the road, at the things small and strange, caught up in the headlights. Where the hell is he?

He has driven here so often. He recognises the road like something from his day to day existence, but where is he? If someone held a gun to his head now and asked: tell me the place you are driving through and what is the name of the road, Lincoln wouldn't have known. His eyes keep on flickering, licking at sleep...

He remembers that nobody had asked him about the girl and where she came from, or what she was doing at three in the morning. How could it be that they had decided to forget about

her?

"I know this road," he tells her. "I feel as if I'm half-asleep. I don't recognise a single landmark." Signs flash back at them, glaring, as they have on the road they have come from, the same road, but the opposite direction. They pass places she has never heard of. It depends on where you turn for the ground to hit you. Slopes, sand drifts, brush and scrub, animal tracks and rivers - waiting.

Then the alley stops abruptly, but Lincoln goes on. What had seemed like a road to a farm becomes a vast grassland eating into the road with its roots, with tracks of windswept veld in the headlights which look like roads, but he gets scared. He spins the truck around, reversing into a ditch where the wheels begin to spin, but he gets it back onto dry ground. Then it stops. He turns it off. The engine coughs. The truck sends a high-pitched flag of sound up into the dark. No grumbling, rumination.

He klunks open the door and slides into the cold air and mud, where his neat, clean shoes land, and he almost slips. He scratches behind his ear, wipes his frowning mouth and chin in the palm of his hands.

He circles the truck and for a minute he is looking for her on the other side. He opens the hatch, stares at the engine, touches all the parts. They are still hot in his hands, full of grease and he wipes his fingers and palms on his jeans. Then he looks at the tools, his eyes fall from the spanner to the starter wrench, jumper leads, a jack. But this isn't a wheel change. He goes into the back of the truck and takes out the canister. He dangles it in his hand, and he holds open the handle to the door again.

"It's empty." He trails his hand in the dust and stripes the painted metal. "Do you have a mobile phone?"

"No way."

"There's no more diesel, and I forgot to fill the spare."

"Don't you have a phone?"

"No."

"Shit."

"Yes."

"Try starting it again." But it doesn't work. Every minute he fiddles, heat leaves his body, and the cold creeps closer under his skin. It is the way she looks at him, the white forbidden girl, asking questions of a grown man.

He can think of no more. He blows his fingers and rubs them together, never noticing that she does not feel the frost which like a cool spoon under his upper lip, on his chin, blocks the bite of his teeth and craving in his lungs for heat.

He is getting deeper, deeper and deeper, colder.

"It's not that cold," he murmurs, trudging away, to keep moving. But it will get that cold soon, soon he knows, if the truck stands where he can no longer see, neither behind him, nor ahead. If he stops moving, his shoes in the mud and his clammy jeans and the zip so tight on his chest with the silent line of indecision.

"Go where you have to," the white girl had said. She isn't dressed for the cold. He goes back and finds the truck. He takes an old blanket, throws it at her, and slams the door. The light in the cabin is off. Let her stay there in the dark. He marches off again, not a word to her.

Somewhere there is a town, ahead on this dirt track which has narrowed into water, mud and muddier by moonlight where clouds pass and wipe out the light.

In total darkness again, the truck is a vague shape ahead or behind, depending on which way he turns. It does not matter really. How far can he walk in the dark before his legs give up? He is so sure there is light in the distance. Small, strange headlights. So far. If he keeps on walking he will get to that place with fast food and whores.

Each step closer, the water is leaking into his shoes, and he pushes his hands down into his pockets, tearing a hole in one of them. He is sure he has never before been in a place with so little light. He hardly knows what he is doing. His toes are numb with the cold, and his breath withers before him.

Where he is going, there will be clean linen. They will fetch the girl and lay her in the space beside him. They will sing. Lincoln blinks at the light which suddenly goes on, revealing a gable, and yellow light coming from the windows of the house. A dog barks at the gate, and he rings the bell, watches the bars slide silently open. The dog is at his pants with its long dirty paws sniffing and licking his hands, which have never been so stiff and cold.

He opens the door to the cabin with difficulty.

"Are you coming?" he asks. The headlights are on, and she stands in the yard. The dog dances around her, a black thing crossing its splinter legs, and falling as it rises again with its nose cold as ice entranced in a blurry ring.

"We're here."

"Yes," he says, expecting her to move, but the dog keeps circling and she stands with fingers and lips smooth like marble, her dress rippled by the wind.

And then somehow, she is shaking him. His body shakes across itself and her hand is bitter cold and numb, pressing on his forehead. She has gripped the hood of his sweater and a piece of his hair, jerking his neck and tearing at the roots, but he hardly feels it.

"Stop it! Wake up!"

He pulls his head to the side, into the seat. "Leave me. We've come far enough." Enough and no step further.

"I won't let you do this," she hisses.

"I'll sleep forever, dreaming every dream. I'll come back and tell you about it."

She spits right into his ear. "What use are dreams to a dead man?"

That jerks his mind and wakes him slowly. He unlocks the door of the truck, drops outside again, trampling from foot to foot. Suddenly the girl is standing beside him. She gives a snort and a cackle. He feels the cold in his neck.

"Do you want to die? Do you want to die?"

He doesn't know what to say to that, but there is a softness rushing around his ears and a vague pain in his heart that makes his skin crawl, from the nape of his neck to his toes. Her eyes grow dark, flat, and her skin smiles.

"Hey moonshine."

"Hey stranger."

He shakes his head. He rubs his face, and the air seems like crumbs, like sand in his eyes from long ago. It is wrong, the voice of a girl, unexpected, and he tosses his head like a horse, his hands trying to wake his cheeks to life.

"Lincoln." She shakes him again. "Lincoln, don't fall asleep!" His head is half there, half somewhere else. He grudgingly slides his shoulders up into the seat, and turns his neck.

"Where are we going?" he asks her, refusing to open his eyes, tucking his nose into the warm space in the seat, smelling of hair at the back of his head. He pulls the hood down to his chin, as if it is not dark enough and the cold keeps coming closer.

"Don't die, silly," she says, her freezing hand pressing his lips, and straight up against his nose, choking the air from his nostrils. He fights against the sleep, the paralysis, the feeling that she is drawing the warmth from his body and pinning him down. His hands creak into motion. He tears open his eyes, his lungs pumping and gasping, and turns the key in the ignition without thinking. The engine stutters. The wheels begin to speak to the road.

"Turn on the heater," he says. He holds on tight to all four wheels.

"It's been on all this time."

Even in his sleep it surprises him how easily he finds the highway intersection and a pump to fill up on fuel. Just like that, the lights are speeding past, the cat-eyes on the road smooth beneath his wheels, and he wonders if the light might burn his skin and prove that this time really he was awake, biting back the tears, maybe, but probably only the cold.

SEVEN
monday

The violence he'd seen seldom hurt like the hell a man hid inside when he held himself down. And so, when Ean found himself back in his room the night after Marga sank six feet under, unable to sit down, lie down, he wanted to load the washer again. He sought the familiar fault in the blurred edges of dusty shirts, trying to straighten them, putting them back the way they should be.

He felt pathetic as he put on three shirts, one over another, as he had yesterday when he got home, before he swallowed the pills, then managed to fit another on top. He had always believed he would be safe if he kept the house in order. But trying to be clean imprisoned him, and he breathed deeply to stop his eyes from burning. He had nowhere else to go. Because there were people in the world who could break your heart.

He had apologised when they slipped out through the back door into the yard.

This is not really my home.

Home is where the heart is.

They sniggered. Wherever their cynical hearts lived, it was far from here. They heard a train thunder past, and he had held his hand on his knee, resting against the wall.

Have a look!

She had jumped, he had lifted her, and she'd held on to the top, pulling herself up. Far in the valley below, a wasteland in-between, the square cement platform had shimmered, waiting for the train. There had been tiny people stepping from foot to foot.

We will stay like this forever, she had said. You and me. We don't need their rules.

I can leave whenever I want to, he had said. She had smiled.

Can I come?

Home is where they breed the easy answers into us, she had said, behind petunias and security walls. It's where they teach us to swallow ourselves. All our lives we are trapped, she had said, and it begins here, trapped in the lies we find convenient. Locked up, being made to

wait for those who would be our masters. I'm only a dog, a dog who'll soon be eighteen. I hate the future because their future is a lie. And when the sun's going down and the snakes are in the grass and the only map you have is the one in your head, the one that you hate, she had grimaced, only your dog will stand by you until the bitter end.

Why wait for the years that lay in lurk, and even then, not knowing?

We will stay like this forever.

Why should it not be logical? If growing up could not be stopped, then why should one stop death? And he remembered: *Somebody is going to die.* It was quick and easy, and a man was taken from this world. He pulled the photo from between his shirts, where he had hidden it. That look, that faraway look of a man apart - a narrow, withholding look, despite the winning grin, the head tilted back, as if to cajole, it was the look of a man who was old enough to know that he would never belong. Helen had hoped he would forget that look, but those eyes squared up in his mind, photo and son, as he drifted into troubled sleep until morning.

The drone began in his ear and became a ringing, and instantly he woke and ran outside to watch the whistling train. Minutes after the sound died down, he wavered in the early morning light, a zap silver line in his mind. To pierce the horizon like that.

The steel gleamed up north, split like a river running east, branches and branches headed south, then somewhere miles and miles away the tracks ran away down to the sea. He had seen it on maps.

"I can leave whenever I want to," he had said to Marga. What a liar he was. The fence was still there. Never been jumped. It called him too loudly, the house called. It gripped in his mind like long silver wire, wrapping itself firmly into the deepest debris of guilt and frustration. Brick by brick it was fixing itself on top of him this morning like a new foundation.

The itch was in his hands like a drill, and quick in his footsteps as he unlocked the kitchen and rushed into the house. He needed a list. A shopping list for Helen. He realised it had been dry toast and marmite for breakfast the past few days. More food. Popcorn. Frozen veg. Ice cream. Pasta. Viennas for hot dogs. Cereal. He would buy the whole fucking supermarket and stash it if he could. Never to go shopping again. Never to run out of anything. He started rubbing his sleeve.

Instead of taking the bus to school like every Monday morning, he waited for the phone to ring, to tell him to die, but nothing happened. He checked the road, but had lost hope of spying the silver Mercedes. He wiped his fuzzy lip on his sleeve and realised he hadn't let go of it. He was still rubbing the damn thing between his thumb and forefinger, like he was testing the

quality of the cloth.

There was a button that was broken on one of his shirts. That had to be fixed.

He came across Helen's door. Unexpectedly, it gaped open, revealing the space beyond, a hazy indeterminate space, scattered. He wanted to charge in. After so many years, she had forgotten to lock it. Two steps closer, his eyes adjusted to the white fake fur rug bristling in patches under her clothes messed all over the floor, the barren brick fireplace like a braai stained with fat, a secret relic from a chamber of horrors. The white drapes knotted and twisted on the pelmet. It made him shy, all at once, her private space, and he turned away, but a tingle startled in his fingers.

He jumpily wandered around the house looking for Helen, to give her the shopping list. Then he realised he could spring-clean her room, but he could not go in. Instead, he went into the kitchen and dumped her brass owl thermometer in the dustbin. He had always hated it. Someone had to throw some of her junk away, make room for things to come.

He thought about going around the house and starting to throw away all Helen's personal belongings, as if she'd never been there in the first place. She never was there anyway. She left little notes on the fridge in the kitchen. "My darlings", or "Sweetness", or even "My dear boy" they read, like her over-affectionate hand rubbing them down from head to shoulders, glazed eyes thinking instead of something far away. He itched to discard Helen.

It would start with shoes. She had way too many shoes. It would start with shoes and pantyhose and end with eyebrow tweezers and hair pins. But he could not erase her from his head. It would be useless. Helen would come back here, to this, her home; she would come back like she came into his memories: the earlier memories of playing backstage at the theatre, disastrous meals she tried to cook, time spent in the car going on a trip to the Magaliesberg with one of her boyfriends at the time, how she got all hyper and terribly excited and how he'd complained about the smoke, how she'd giggled and blown it out of the window like an embarrassed teenager in front of her boyfriend. Helen, though often missing from his life when he needed her, was still his mother, for all these little things.

He entered the room and began to scratch in her belongings. Maybe it was the bottles behind the bed, which he took to the kitchen and put under the sink, or the way some of her clothes fled from her cupboard into clumps and gangles on the floor, which he folded and packed away neatly where they belonged. He wanted to fix it, something, anything. He was desperate to keep on fixing. That's how he found the photo album, and opened it.

The ocean was blue.

He was a boy.

His father held his hand.

He had to look at it again, and again, but it was there, even though he couldn't remember: that boy was him. Where was this place?

Then there was something else. A note. And then it was empty.

Gone to America.

Be good.

Love, Colin.

The kind of note stuck on the fridge. The handwriting was painfully neat and plain. How dark his father was, with the sunlight behind them. There was no-one else on the beach. It was early morning. What time was it in America now? All at once Ean knew, thick and fully it hit him. If he'd gone to America, he couldn't be dead! He was sure of it now. His father was alive. The years broke through his skin. His mother had lied! The photos, that note... He felt himself imploding. He ran to his room and sank into the blankets, trying not to cry, and failing, not understanding and angering himself with tears. Humble yourself, he kept on saying. He felt like shit. But he couldn't forgive his mother. It was a sudden certainty he clung to. His father lived. Had lived. Was still alive. He had dimly believed it for so long, without knowing he believed it. Now it was true. The crying stopped when his head began to get too sore. But the sense of helplessness and failure clung, stinging as he yearned to follow Marga, wherever she had gone.

There are blind dogs, she said, deaf dogs, dogs who detect earthquakes and even epileptic seizures. There are search and rescue dogs. If you ever disappear, I will find you. I don't care what your mother does. I don't care who her friends are. Don't be scared. I will find you.

How will you find me?

Everywhere we go, we leave a trail of odours in the air. The heat of our bodies creates an unseen whirlwind high up all around us. And a dog, because of the special shape of its nose, is able to follow that trail, for days. So you see, you can never get lost.

And if I were killed and thrown in a lake?

I would find you anyway. I once saw a dog in a boat, looking for a body in the water. It barked as the men rowed, and where it turned, they followed, until they had reached a spot on the lake where the dog stood still and pointed with its nose straight at the water, and the divers went in, and brought up the corpse.

That's amazing! How did it do that?

They can smell the gas of decomposition, Marga said, taking something from her pocket.

What is that?

Guess.

A whistle.

A dog whistle.

Ultrasonic!

Yes.

Wow.

If you blow it then I will hear you and I will know where you are. Now stop being scared. You're just being paranoid. Your family can't be as crazy as mine.

Again, he swelled with an inexplicable sense of knowing. Kneeling, he pulled one of the crates out from under Helen's bed with great effort. He broke the seal on the lock and opened it. He removed the top polystyrene layer. Six pistols, dark and shiny in the moulded shapes like expensive chocolates. Below it another layer. Six pistols. And another layer. Three times six. Fucking Helen and her fucking life of lies, he's fucking sick of her and he'll find the fucking truth. Where the fuck do you get a ticket... With a blunt pencil he carved a brief goodbye into the cardboard under the photos and dropped the album on her bed.

Thanks for life. Thanks for lying. It sucks. Goodbye. Ean.

He took a pistol into his hand and carried it to his room. There he swallowed four of the small blue tranquiliser pills, and soon after fell into a gentle spell, in which one foot followed the other and his hands only tingled ever so slightly. Soon he was swimming in sweat, but it didn't matter. His white button shirt glowed and the grey slacks of his school uniform, even now, hung dead in the absent wind. His razor-short hair was neatly combed. He realised another train had arrived. He jumped the fence, landed in the long blanched grass beside the bag and slung it onto his back. The day was moving.

The day was moving! A whole man's life lay open. A boy had to know these things. It was a moment the thought of which had repelled and compelled Helen since his birth. He could stand on his own two feet.

Never did he look back at the lines of the concrete wall behind the house, trudging the path down to the gravel of the tracks. How he went he did not know. But he was going. The birds were glad to follow him. They chirped to him along the way, they held his hand as he fell, foot for footfall along the rocks. For the first time, he had jumped the fence, slipping down to the station. He wiped his hand over his scalp. He was wetter and wetter with sweat. Ten endless minutes. Then the first of his tickets. Then onto the train. Even in the carriage he was drenched, and the seat stuck to his back and to his bum and to his thighs, and his fingers to the window.

He was constantly getting up to adjust his clothing, and his fingers constantly wandered to the edge of his sleeve. He could hardly breathe for the speed of the land that would not stop flying, and his heart was racing. He was a shirt on a clothesline, buttoned up at the throat. It took the whole wide world to hold him down.

You have his name, Helen had told him, Ean Rivers Ansley, for the great rivers of your father's home, and the great rivers which run inside us. Milambo is Italian for rivers.

Sometimes the train swayed from side to side. Sometimes it ground in irresistible shudders.

We will stay like this forever. You and me. We don't need their rules.

We'll break loose he had said, we'll go on hunger strike, we'll choke to death and leave them empty-handed.

Inside his bag was a pencil, some paper, some money, some bullets in a small box and the tiny blue tranquiliser pills. In his pocket, cold against his thigh, the heavy weight of the pistol.

Tell me how far I'd have to run so I could never go back, she had said.

Perhaps he could run right back to the start.

EIGHT
through-ways

“So what will you do when you get home?” she asks.
“I’m not going home. Just like you.”

“And what are your plans for next year?”

“I won’t be around next year.”

“But the disease won’t kill you. Not soon.” He takes a breath.

"I come into my room," he says. "I look at all the things. The heap of things that is my life. Some curtains. A mat. Some knives and forks. A map of the New South Africa. I come into my room, and I think: I'm going to be thin. I look down at my waist. It is sleek against my hand. I am still fine. But as time goes on they will start eating, the opportunistic infections. And people are going to realise that I've got AIDS. They will gossip about me when I walk in the street. Every day I think they know: he's got it! And they make that hand signal, put their thumb and index finger together, three fingers up, for three silent words: H I V. He's got it.

“On the one hand, you think: nobody even knows what it is yet. Doctors in the rural areas know nothing. And on the other hand you think: those who know it, hate it. Are terrified - for their bodies, their jobs, their girlfriends, wives and children, their parents. The ingculaza. The virus. It is coming. We are going.

“I will not tell my family to hold me when I'm dying. I never want to see them again. The poison wells up in me, it makes me sick. I had to tell Zanele. She's probably still crying to this day. I thought: maybe she has it already, why should I tell her? But then I had to. There is nothing the doctors can do for me. All I can do is sit and wait for the day. Those who know are terrified of what it will mean, ultimately, for everybody. And so they keep it secret. But they know. You can feel that they know it." He pauses.

"What do you imagine it being like, if you're dead?"

"I think that it might be cold there."

"Yes.."

"And... Lonely."

"Yes, I think." He pauses to think. "So... It won't be any different."

"No, maybe not," she admits.

There are so many ways.

He could throw himself in front of an oncoming car, without guarantee.

He could slowly gas himself to sleep on exhaust fumes, but he would have needed a long pipe, and sleeping tablets, enough for an overdose.

He once heard that you could stick two sharp pencils up your nostrils, and if you pushed them hard enough it would pierce into your brain and kill you.

He should hang himself from a tree by the roadside. But he has no rope. He could always try the jumper cables.

He could try to break the windscreen and eat broken glass until it ruptured his intestines and he bled to death.

He could set himself alight with the spare canister of diesel.

He could try to suffocate himself with his pillow.

He did not have razors, but he could try to chafe his wrists with his shaver. No - the cuts would never be deep enough.

These are wayward, but definite possibilities. Tonight the road is reaching an end. He likes the mystery of leaving without a note.

It is shameful, in the bible, to do it. His father will come to grief. He will never become one of the ancestors. It is a blight on the family's reputation. But it is better than dying out there like a victim of famine in a foreign country, as if he were watching himself on tv.

"You must get out of this darkness, looking for monsters with your torch."

He laughs. "Why?"

"Because of friends who love you. Because you can't predict tomorrow. Because of honesty. Because of everything that is simple and easy and uncomplicated. Because feeling something is better than not feeling at all."

Lincoln laughs again.

"You come from the leafy suburbs," he says. "I can smell it on you. You come with your stories of hope and patience and these things that can change your life. You don't know how hurt arrives. It comes like a man close when I sleep. It comes in a place without a name."

"I'm sorry."

"That's all you can say. I was alive once. I was a living man. I had a schedule. I had a diary. I had people calling me round the clock. Now I don't care. Nothing matters anymore. I have become the enemy I carry inside, poison blood brother. Brother I can't name."

"It's him you're trying to kill, Lincoln. Not yourself! Don't you understand?"

"It doesn't matter if I die."

"But your dogs will die without you."

"What do you mean?"

"Your dogs need you like you need yourself. You must be strong with a dog, lay down the rules from day one. It takes on the personality of the handler, his bad habits, his slackness, his alertness, his quickness to command, or lack of zest. That's why dogs look like their owners. Because everything the dog owns comes from you. It did not ask to be here. We put it here. You must look after your dogs. Your dogs will die without you."

"I don't have any dogs."

"Maybe you must live so you can tell your stories."

"I'm lost, Jennifer."

"Maybe the stories are the way home."

"I don't understand you. I'm just looking for the right road."

"This is the right road."

"Are you sure?"

She only smiles.

Leaden in his ankles and thrumming in his chest, squeezing, as if millions of ice-cold silver shreds pierce his skin, from the very centre of the man sweat squeezing, running down his armpits and into his shoes, and with a wild queasiness in his stomach, he drives.

She looks at his face in the spare light. His shirt reminds her of Ean's. He seems drawn to the grim purpose of the gravel, and all he wants is a way out. She wishes she could lay her hand on his shoulder. She no longer cramps her body into the corner, and he has long given up on touching her. He is ignoring her now.

She has brief spurts, and then seems sunken away, until again, a spark, and she hovers. His fever is no longer enough to sustain her. She realises that even if life had been longer for her, if she had grown into a woman, she would probably never have found this. She would have been locked into her life. She was so sure of herself then. Now she knows more.

And she knows, if only she could slide to the heat of his body, sink into it, she would be safe in his embrace from the tugging and plucking, and the absolute inertia into which she fades. She inches closer, brushes her hair behind her shoulder, as if she could forget it.

He can see her clearly out of the corner of his eye. When he turns to look, some kind of fog comes over his vision, like the urge to weep. He tries to look at her closely, but finds he can't do that. She has changed clothes somewhere along the journey, and he hadn't seen her do that, and he wonders where her suitcase is. He is scared and he wants her gone.

"Where can I drop you?"

"You want to drop me?"

"Where can I drop you?" He glances, but feels forced to look away from her. His eyes are

teary.

"I told you I'm not sure yet. You can leave me at the end of your trip."

He has to look away again. "Enough bullshit. Get out."

"You're talking bullshit now."

"Get out! Get out of my car!"

"You're mad, Lincoln."

"I'll show you who's mad!" He tries to grab her wrist, and of course he fails. As his fingers fade through her, terror dances in his eyes. He tries again. "You're a witch!" he whispers.

"No. I'm... I am a... Ghost." But he won't listen. "Calm down." His foot jams on the accelerator.

"Go away. In the name of whatever god there might be, go away!" But there are lights ahead.

"Turn the truck! Turn it left!" Lincoln can't move. At the last moment, he careens to the left and out of the way. He slows down the truck and pulls off the road. He closes his eyes, swallows, and fumbles in his shirt pocket.

"You look like her. But you're not her." With smooth brown fingers, he pinches some tobacco from a tin, fills the paper strip, rolls it, licks the edge, then fumbles for a lighter. A deep drag of smoke passes through his lungs. Although it is freezing cold, he winds down the window. In the black night outside, at the foot of the mountain, is one little dot of light on the plain.

"Have you come to haunt me?"

"No. I haunt myself."

He sits for a long time staring at the little light, inhaling, exhaling the smoke. The cigarette is almost burnt down when he again looks in her direction, and his hands are shaking, but his gaze is steel.

"I need you to help me," she says.

"I want to speak to the ancestors."

"I don't know how. Lincoln, I need you to do something for me."

"Don't tell me what to do. You're not even human."

"Wait and see what happens."

"I can't wait and see. I'm dying. Not today. Not tomorrow. But soon, I won't be any more. I thought we'd have some fun together."

"What do you mean you won't be anymore?"

"I won't exist, I..."

"Yes, you will."

"You mean..."

"Well look at me."

Doubtful, he looks at her. "I'm looking. I invented you."

"I invented myself. Do you think you're the only person with that power?"

"You're inventing me?"

"Of course I am."

"No, you're dead. I hate to break this to you, Jennifer, but you're very much dead." He passes his hand through her in grim fascination. But he looks at her, at the road, deeply into his mind, and he is entering a vast new unknown space. And she fades somewhere into those words, because she is lying too, because the Power belongs to the living, because she is even beyond a hint of that by now.

"Look, Lincoln. There's a reason I'm here. I don't know what it is, but there must be a reason."

"What do you want?"

"Keep driving. Keep talking. We need to find out what is going to happen."

"But you're not real!"

"Just carry on! Something important is almost happening."

"You are scaring me to death."

"Then you might as well die now!"

"You know that I'm even more scared of that!"

"Just make it up. And when you're not concentrating on clutching onto reality, find that boy so that he too does not fade into memory."

"And if he doesn't want to be found?"

"You'll find him anyway."

"What if he hides?"

"What if... What if..."

But the cord between them was torn from the moment he passed his hand through her shape, grasping the invisible. Throbbing now and shaking, the outlines of her body like onion skin or blown glass shatter slower than the eye perceives. He does not notice how she gulps for breath, the breath which is not hers, and heat wafts like smoke from her as she knows herself to be splintering, knows that it is time, whispering "I have to go," trying to creep closer into the mirage coming off him in cheerful ripples.

"Why don't you stay until the next time." But the answer is stuck, her eyes wide, and everything wants attention. "Don't you want to see the sea?" She stares into the sky, light in

the head.

"Yes," she says quietly, "I want to see the sea." Fingering the dog collar around her neck, she finds that it is gone. He is beginning to miss out on the details.

"So when I'm fine again, maybe not on this drive, but on another drive we'll take soon..."

"What then?"

He falls silent. "I don't know anymore." He laughs. "I forgot what I was going to say. Have I told you how much I like your hair? You don't believe me? It's so fine. I like it."

"You like everything about women," she groans.

"Everything, baby. I'm your man."

She is torn. She holds on, gritting her teeth.

"What if she's a bitch. Made to fuck and spit puppies. What if it's all just advertising space, waiting for the next man," she hisses. "What if that's the meaning of life?"

"I didn't ask you about the meaning of life. I said: you don't have to be alone."

"Why does everything you're saying sound like a pop song?" But the force has gone from her.

"It doesn't. I really mean that." At that moment he looks at her. She is pale and shaking, trying to smile.

"Jennifer?"

"Nowhere you can follow."

"You're dying?"

She laughs. "I'm dead already, silly."

"I forgot."

"You can't believe that I'm human anymore. So, I have to leave."

He thinks a while.

"What if I keep believing in you? We can turn around and go back. Back and forth. Only at night. We'll sleep in tunnels, in the dark." She wipes a tired eye, and he insists: "We can drive like this forever."

"Yes," she says, "Maybe," dropping all expression from her face as she closes her eyes, and her pale round head is like the peace of the moon. "But we don't have to."

All ways always above, below, within, but forward always lie all ways, and wide around her, a network of paths or uncut channels through the rock, of bridges, roadblocks, poorts and dongas, dangerous mountain passes and highways straight into the half-light.

If she stays, she will become a video tape played over and over again like static electricity through the cabin, her purpose lost, only the most brittle shell, a memory, an obsession. Yet if she goes, she will never return. How can she leave him, Lincoln, hurting, as every human

does, on these wide and wandering roads alone? And Ean? Still, she doesn't know.

They move, and in the early light of morning, drained, low in the seat, her arm in her hand, a cold fever ploughing and marking her forehead. Past the horizon beyond the slate mountains lies land low in smoke and dew, grooved narrow with passages, smoke waiting to be chased by the first rays of sun. She must choose one of those roads. They are walking into the world, and she knows they're just in time for her. No more horizons, twists in the byways. No more heaviness and grasping on. No more Lincoln, no more stories.

They have erred into a corner of existence where everything is bare. No life is here, except for them, caught in the truck housing as close as campfire, holding their breath like embers that soon will cease their glimmering; one can hardly see them moving now. The moments hardly split anymore between now and then in the remaining light, and they are left - only two dark stains on the dirty white plastic leather.

One can pronounce the world, but it makes so little sense that sound alone has to be enough - without words. How far could one push such a game, without sooner or later sinking into the wordless.

He begins quietly to sing, lining up the songs of his childhood, forgotten words like water droplets and fragments flowing together on the windscreen. She seems absent to him in her resting, and he feels quite duped, having perceived in her a greed for his speech.

Thula thula baba, thula seni, thula thula baba.

Sibabonile Abafana. Abafana. Abana. Sibabonile abafana. Hai ai ai ai. We have seen men. We have seen men.

Bawo. Bawo Thixo Somandla. We go heavy-laden on this earth, great God, we here in Africa walk heavy, oh why in Africa.

And then, Nkosi.

Nkosi, sikelele' iAfrika; Malupakam'upondo lwayo....

God. God bless Africa.

After the gravity of these sounds, she has nothing to add. She knows zero of these things, and all of a sudden she longs for knowledge that has escaped her all her life, knowledge not kept from her on purpose even, but knowledge of things that never seemed to matter before.

Die Stem. It tells of fields and mountains, beautiful, yes, a hymn. But nothing of the life between people. She only knows pop songs and nursery rhymes. She smudges her mouth with her fist and stares at the dashboard.

He has begun to make it up. Lincoln stares at the gravel ahead, sullen and dry, sulking, but then he begins to giggle, deep in his throat, so loud it rummages the cabin and she shudders, right down into her bowels, on the brink of a sense of relief.

And when he sighs, it is her sigh, the one she could hope for but will never expire.

"How will I know it's him?" Lincoln asks.

"You will know when you see the mountain. I can't see it clearly, but there's a house in the dunes, the trees are tall and silver-white. On your way you'll find him, the boy with the gun. But only if you know how to live can you stop him."

"I began driving this truck. To think, you know. I told you. As long as it takes to figure out. I've cheated myself out of a life. There's so much more I want."

"You're not going to die anytime soon."

"Is that a promise?"

"Do you want it to be?" She gives him a look, as if to say: wait until you get there. She is almost imperceptible to the eye now, and he hears her voice like a breeze at the back of his mind.

"If you stand in front of that vast endless expanse like an open slate, when you wish to mark your future: realise that you have already done so. You did it long ago. Life is a journey towards remembrance. Soon you will emerge from your travels and realise that you are nothing but your very own. And you will realise despite the waves that the ocean is nothing but water."

He isn't sure if he likes that, or if he even believes these things she has been saying. It is important that he tries. Even if he has to lie to himself every morning when he gets up, he knows from now on that he will have the power to fabricate hope.

Long forgotten years unshriveled inside him, indeed, potential lifts its head, that one might come unstuck from the past.

He looks at her long and hard, and it is clear she is not of his world, but then she had never been, and still he wants her to stay.

"I thought you said we can affect how soon we die?" he says, and she wipes the hair out of her passing face with white hands.

"You can if you are still alive."



PART THREE
final mile

***Your soul ... is a dark forest. But the trees are of a
particular species, they are genealogical trees.***
- Marcel Proust "Fragments From Italian Comedy" (1896)

ONE

lifelong

She locked herself in her room. She was tired of crying. It gave her cramps. When she lifted her head to look for tissues, she noticed her private photo album lying open on her bed. Who put it there? She picked it up and smiled through tears at the pictures. Her little boy with his father at the beach. She had written: Silver Beach. He had written underneath it in thick pencil.

Thanks for life. Thanks for lying. It sucks. Goodbye. Ean.

Helen read it again.

Ean.

She had to read it three or four times before she understood what it meant. Then blind anger overtook her. Men! Children! Cowards! This goddamned life.

She ran into the yard, pushing his door open. It was unlocked. He always locked his room. Even when he was in it.

"Ean?" She had not been inside for months. She was lost, confused, stepped into the dark, paused for a while, looking for the switch, found the switch, squinted.

Against the wall white clothing, hers, Billie's, things she had thought disappeared were folded up here or hanging from the wall. Everything was white. The smell of soap and fabric softener was almost nauseating.

How did he understand that the neat soap with which he stood forever washed before her, was not the smell of her perfume, but its absence? She had never gotten as far as doing these things. Mrs Rotuvitz, the neighbour, would come for tea and end up clearing the mess in the kitchen, vacuum the passage and bedrooms, scrub the walls in the bathroom, for the sake of the kids, and the kids jumped to help in this novel pursuit. Ean was five, Billie had been a year out of her nappies.

She stood forever gazing at the heaps of clothing. In the cupboard were four neatly ironed shirts. Starched. He starched his shirts? Where the hell did he learn that? She began to cry.

The entire room seemed to be softly inhaling, exhaling, patiently waiting, aquiver, as if it had always waited for her, and it calmed her down. So much more she could have taught

them. But everything she knew about life were things she'd learnt by herself, long after she had left her mother.

The future eluded her, flitting with certain hopes which seemed so tiny now. The past receded like land and sky. Wind and mist slashed with white and with rain, cold on a grey spring morning. She had to go away; she had to escape this horrible place.

The house was empty. Then she noticed the crates under her bed were not lined up. She pulled out the odd one. The seal was broken. A pistol was missing. A chill ran down her spine. She phoned the school. No, Ean was not there. That dog-breeder's girl was dead. He had no other friends. Liesbeth Rotuvitz was in the old-age home. Billie, the little bitch, was nowhere to be found.

She could call the police. She would have to tell them about the pistol and the bullets, and they might start to snoop in the house, they might find the store under her bed. She might go to prison. Derrick would drop her instantly, disappear and change his name. Welfare would come and take Billie away. And Ean? What would happen to Ean? Starched shirts. Her strange, strange child.

She poured herself a whiskey on the rocks, and went to sit on her bed, where she noticed the Dormicam on the bedside table. Without thought, already drowsy, she swallowed four of the sleeping pills, quitting her senses for a deep, deep sleep, rattled by a recurring dream. She was baking a giant birthday cake for little Ean, who had his face stuck in the corner where the carpet met the wall, and all the kids she had invited surrounded the two of them and he was silently and stubbornly defying all her attempts to move him, no matter what she said and how she tore at his arms and legs and how she cried, and the cake was finished and the kids had eaten it all and gone home and she had to clean up the mess and then he came out with a knife, scraping and licking the plates, saying thank you for saving the last piece for me, and gave her a big hug before he washed the dishes, sticking his head under water in the sink, at which point she began to bake the cake again, tasting everything by licking it off her fingers while she kneaded the dough, and the kids swarmed into the kitchen, and he lodged his head in the sink and she cried again and they left again and he came with the knife and licked the plate, and stuck his head in the oven, and she began to bake, the kids came in balancing their plates and stuffing their gullets with sponge cake and on and on and on.

two

pass

The sun rises. The road is eaten like quiet thunder, shredded tyres littering the tar, the remnants of an accident, wind and sand and fog and sun – it's all the same here, especially in winter, but now it is spring, and the land lies open, inviting no conflict. Sometimes the grassy hills are cropped short, other times resting with broken bushes. Their gentle slopes are pockmarked with erosion, bewildered farmland, crooked fences rambling across the hillsides as patches lie in shadow beneath the clouds, patched like the road with its potholes and frayed edges.

A row of white grass trimmed against the green, the farmland expanding vast behind the fence posts, up to the low-dipped mountains and the basking clouds beyond. Here his ancestors were driven to hack the thick wilderness of 1820 into these pleasant English pastures, while those who were not enslaved were driven by the English back and back behind the frontier lines. Soil bought with blood, scattered, and you could run red and naked into the road, or leave ancestral memory to do the trick, while you wipe the past from your eyes.

For you, driver, rambling on one of the long arms of an unknown town or city, rust-free aluminium poles left and right, between red and white chevron reflectors, cast-concrete kilometre signs - stay in the dotted line, the yellow line, the line of the edge of the road, the grass line, the metal barrier by the rivers, between ditches, the small, dense bushland rows, the bushes high as a passenger car, under the telephone line on its black tarred posts. Water drains striping the side of the road, and the horizon line. The occasional lone brushy pine stands high against the sky, and sometimes a solitary fence pulls its marks across a hilltop.

No high trees for kilometres – only telephone wires and poles, carrying the long wire on each shoulder. Suddenly looking down on the gleaming ribbon of a river. Eroded hilltops, powdery red-brown, and patches of bare beach sand between the scrub, holiday homes, corrugated roofing and small fencing in the low brushland with its shrubs and here and there the tip of an aloe raising its head. Some of the tall grass is mowed near these small villages near the port. Halfway between two small towns, they pass three small children offering yellow oranges out to the cars from behind a low tin drum, wrinkling their faces half into beggardly smiles and half shutting them against the earliest morning sun.

And you, yes you, driver, must be well, abandon what can be abandoned. Breathe in. Like the hard impact of some dead animal under the wheels, the road keeps on surprising him with

new stretches. Recognition of the land resists his memory, and since everything seems new, each moment places a little more distance between himself and Ebhayi, the bay.

Now she is gone, words come to him like frost on that adolescent football field slippery in the mornings.

“Time of the poison body,” he murmurs. It is almost over. Not the body, not the fight for it. But the fight against it, the rage, exhaustion. The poison is in the tongue, and he must live with this tongue doomed to speak so ill of itself. For this second body, this new thing in his body, is not his brother. It is a stranger he must make his friend.

He yawns without wanting to. He has to go back. Where else can he go? One could go to the ocean, the furthest edge of the country, but it sent you back home, not knowing. The space between remains, and how it hovers!

What is it that awaits 'there' where there is no 'there'? The other side of what? Of fear? Of living? All things must pass. When it comes upon him, yes, he contemplates which way he'll run from life, from death. The other side of what, and where does it begin or end, after inertia? And who can tell, when you'd been trafficking with spirits.

He drives like a man possessed in fever, towards forever the endless horizon, to the only end. The past interrogates him, can not drown his ears in silence, he seeks the ocean, unattainable horizon which swallows all. There is him asking questions, a boy of eight, imprisoned deep inside his skull. There is him, the man who watches this boy and tells him to be still. And the years between expand like water - frothing, subsiding, but without meaning. He will ever remember himself as he first saw the ocean like silk spread before him. His toes gripped the sand clenched in excitement, but he could not make the next step.

So it was with innocence. So it was with youth. Which living was supposed to overcome.

And in the morning there is nothing - no suitcase, no girl, just a flat horizon. He sees the sun wash over the fog and shimmering dew, hazing on the frozen dunes in the distance. The car smells stale, like cigarettes. And he knows that he is alive. And he wonders whether she had ever lived, or if he invented her on his journeys to narrate him away from insanity.

And he waves at her in his mind, and he sees her, running far behind him, into a house at the foot of the dunes. The white girl. Tall trees, quiet corrugated roof - but she never gets there. She vanishes somewhere past the vlei, and his hand is weightless, wet, speckled with the memory of blood red sand smooth between his thumb and forefinger. Caressing his fingertips, he crouches gently in the mud and rot, immovable and gently breathing silence, his ears taut to the bullet.

THREE

cartography

Splinters of sunlight, the loudspeakers blared - hooting out the name of the place. Under the iron bridges, past stairs down to the concrete platform, in rode the train, past the flickering fence, and high above it, a massive block of concrete without windows.

Port Elizabeth. It creaked in under the thin white pillars that held up the roof to the station, arch by arch, girder by girder, seasoned with broekie lace. And everybody wanted to be first as they wriggled through the turnstiles. Ean hovered, was the last to leave. Bright round paintings displayed the city's assets. A sharp surfing board. A bright white settler house. A long white ship, with sails like blades. Harbour cargo ships and chimneys, smother crawling from the funnels of steamers.

On the benches, people lay in the pocket of human heat and feter, slept, read, licked their hands. Children yanked at the shirts of mothers, young men, bewildered, smoothed their hands across their faces and yawned. He scuffled over the grey-flecked marble with long paces, kicking up the smell of carbolic, aware with growing excitement that every germ had been bleached and polished out of this floor, maybe as recently as an hour ago.

But outside, the blaring cars, haze of dim sun and cement, the massive highway. Nervous for shade, he ran beneath its raw hard belly of broad cast-concrete blocks, like gutted swimming pools turned inside out, soiled, black almost in places from the dirt of the cars and the gas and oil and piss and the running acid rain and pigeon shit.

The streets were empty this early in the day, except for people in coats moving around stiffly, as he did, against the wind. Cars shot by. Taxis hooted like gulls and drivers scanned the side of the road for single passengers at irregular distances. His ears sprouted with the rush. The undercurrent tugged at his terror. He'd trust no taxi. He'd trust his feet, and the shade.

A lone man with a pickaxe passed him, chin high, clamping it with the back of his head, and Ean wondered what his dull stare wanted. Since dawn, builders in luminous vests had been hacking at the tar, to penetrate the city. Across the underway, a boy climbed from a minibus taxi, crammed to the max with passengers on their way to work, his face smeared red with ochre from some tribal ritual, hand shading his brow with a tug to his black busker cap. Ean's eyes darted back into the pale sun on the pavement behind him. He got caught in the spidery

cracks, the faded lines, and the ones painted over. Cars parked on the tar. A hoot behind him. Ean spun around, ambling all the way up the curve to the dock gates, then turned back, wavering, then stepping ahead.

The little red muscleman on the robot nailed his foot to the floor, and fear-under-breath, between stopping and starting, heartbeat and the thud of his feet coalescing, he hurried over the zebra crossing. He marched along next to the road, by the grinding curb, by the edge of the tar, next to the yellow line under the highway. A car could hit him at any moment. Trucks roared past him, trailing the tin taste of diesel fumes. A sign high up under the concrete bed said "Summerstrand", by the open fences with weeds, the outskirts of the harbour, in the odour of piss on the road. Shaking on the sidewalk in the sun, he knew "strand" was Afrikaans for "beach". So far, so good.

The small city centre was behind him, and to his right, banana trees. The harbour was a massive, disappointing obstruction between him and the ocean, with sheds and storage cylinders as far as the eye could see beyond the rise of the hill, where he finally reached a bubblegum-green minaret.

He couldn't even see the ocean. His shirt fluttered in the wind. He marched on, past all these obstructions. He had to find his place of rest.

Then, under a bridge, past a giant rusted anchor on a traffic island, into a small ghost city of vacation apartments on top of each other, rented out to those seeking sun, or a way out of the heat of life. Suddenly a silver Mercedes arrived, slowly keeping pace with him. Numb with shock, he let it pass, and it stopped. A bald skinny man in navy beach shorts stepped into the road, locking the car, awkwardly wandering on slip slops over the concrete. He was not watching Ean. He was not even looking his way. Ean knew he was alone. It was just another Mercedes. The man stopped to brush a sharp stone from under his foot. He stood up, caught Ean staring, shrugged, and Ean, looking away, suddenly turned towards the rush.

A thin strip of blue, faded, misty strip of blue, broken by cranes and lamp poles.

He walked out onto the beach.

They passed the beers. He wondered what it meant. And he knew it wouldn't be long now. He watched them across the sand, and the bulging of white flesh which signified, god knew why, youth, sexuality, strength. He did not understand.

His collar was stiff. The men and women knew the minute he walked onto the sand, by his thin little body in that big man's shirt, that he was not one of them. He had heard their hatred in the waves, and they sang of the years it had taken to subjugate his fear beneath the level of his skin.

Disappearance was the inevitable answer. His father was a wise man. Marga always knew

what she was doing. Sometimes she had spoken of leaving forever, and now she had.

If I ever kill myself, Marga had said, it will be to conquer the greatest human fear, the fear of dying.

He took off his shoes. How small the world seemed when he was so far away from it, and how big the pistol seemed in his fingers. Inside his pocket, in the palm of his hot hand, it was cold to the touch. It was good.

And as he gently put it against his head it surprised him that this would be it. Not yet, he thought, but someone was screaming, then another and another, and to stop the noise, to have some peace, he would pull that little bit harder, pull it further than before.

He had known that his blood would splatter the sand, and the legs of the woman who looked like an advert, blood on bronze; he'd wanted himself slapped on the paper-white bulging flesh of these people, who somewhere, somehow once, had something to do with Life.

But then he aimed the gun into the sky, fired, and ran towards the water. Bodies and squeals fled in all directions, the hum of a thousand whispers and rumbling, and suddenly, his feet in the waves, blue blast like a mirror, then reeling low down by the foam, and he straightened and although he held his hands in his face against the sun - where was he? Where was he?

The boy tried to run into the sea, dropping his body in grief when it would not part, and his shirt got all wet, the water in his shoes, and the cold seeped right into his underpants where he sat on his knees in the slick. He roared though the snot in his nose and got up, convulsing with tears and falling again, and the waters seemed to subside. He was gagged with cold, standing skinny-legged and flinging the gun into the waters, where it was gone, just like that, when he wanted it to soar and hit the water leaving a scar of white foam, he was gagged and instead of tears it came to him to run in shame along the beach, until he was well out of sight.

He grew tired quickly. The sand soaked up his steps; easier to run on the rocks, but the rocks kept cutting his feet. He walked far like that on his own, the shock of what he had just done with him every step. It would take many, many steps to get away from it, but the thrill of the unexpected bubbled under his skin, as the pain and confusion abated so slightly, and he had a feeling it would last him for a lifetime.

He did not stop because he wanted to. He stopped because his feet were so numb he couldn't feel them anymore. He sat down in the warm dunes, rubbed them and fell asleep without knowing. When he woke up he kept walking. It was always possible he was being followed by some do-gooder. He found a gravel road turning inland. Who knew what possibilities lay hidden in the world when you suddenly stopped making plans?

FOUR
yield

And there he was, the boy. He recognised him instantly. He had a bag, and a long-sleeve shirt. A pair of shorts. The sweat clung under his armpits, and his mouth was thick and gruesome. He had the look of that girl about him, Lincoln thought, that nervous look. The boy rubbed his sleeves with his fingers. He stood by the side of the road not knowing how to cross it. He could hardly stand on his feet.

He arrived and passed away in the windscreen. Lincoln left a dust cloud, killed the engine just beyond the horizon and walked back all the way. The cicadas sang. The heat sucked the water out of him. It ran from his face.

"Hey! You need a lift?"

"No-one's come by here in hours." The boy stared at him a long time, pupil to pupil. Lincoln felt him sparring, questioning his motives, examining the way he talked, what he was wearing. "You don't look like a truck driver."

"It's not my job of choice." The boy smiled grudgingly, and he asked, "What are you doing so far from the main beach?"

"I ran."

Lincoln was beginning to find this familiar. "You could die out here and no-one would know," he said. "I have some water in the truck. Can you walk?"

He nodded, but he didn't move.

"I'll bring it to you."

Back there, he realised the boy needed to wash his feet.

"Any deep cuts?"

"No."

"Want to tell me where you came from?"

"No."

"Want to go home?"

"No way in hell."

"Catch a lift with me to the nearest town. I'm warning you. I don't go back. I'm on a schedule."

They drove and the boy's body was stiff. He kept on glancing at Lincoln. He looked like he

was melting in the heat, scared to touch anything, as if it was electric. Lincoln wanted to laugh, but pity overtook him.

"Behind your seat, there's a gym bag. You can choose a clean t-shirt."

"I don't wear t-shirts." The man reached across and unzipped the bag.

"You might like the white one." The boy hesitated, then reached into the coolness and pulled out the fresh white material. He lifted it to his nose, inhaling. He pulled up his shirt, then froze, his eye caught above the top button, staring at Lincoln, who looked out the other window and patiently tapped out the slow rhythm of a song in his head on the rim of the steering wheel.

"Thanks."

"You're welcome." There was a road. An ocean. A truck. The boy breathed the sea air, its oxygen. The window was open. The sign said "Silver Beach." Lincoln stopped the truck. Ean clutched the bag by his side.

They had needed a place of their own to go to.

Ean had broken through walls, and toed his way along the seaside, in search of his own opinion. For the first time in his life, it seemed, he was doing things he'd never done before.

It was how Lincoln felt at that moment.

The eucalyptus trees towered above them, and the ground rose up with the smell of earth.

The boy liked being outside. He liked the wind in his hair and the water on his feet and the bubbles becoming foam on his ankles. He sat down on a rock and gazed at the sea, while Lincoln waded in deep where the sand became liquid. He put down his bag.

It took luck to be alive.

"Want to hear a story?"

"What story?"

"About a man who drove trucks..."

Ean stood oddly, not talking, a little awed, a little confused, a little grim and lost for purpose. Light bled into their eyes. It was nine thirty in the morning. Tracks dug into the seaside. The smell of salt washed though their noses. Water came in clear tongues over Lincoln's feet and the shadows of gulls glided over them, slippery slick lapping lipping nipping the ripple and flow, and a black bird just over the still behind the breakers, its wings almost touching the surface, scanning for fish. On the rocks, a long line packed with rounded stones and mortar, the walls of a ruin running into the dunes, engulfed by the bulk of the sand. Ean stared at this house in the dust, smooth and broken where the sea came in.

"It's a settler house," said Lincoln. "One of the very first." They watched the waves break in, break out.

"It is so clean here. The sea washes everything."

"Even the memories of who once lived here."

"Who would build a house so close to the ocean?"

"Only a man and woman who did not know the power of the waves."

The boy stood with his arms in the open air, the hot wind batting his shirt.

He could no longer remember anything that she had said.

"Do you think they ever came back here?"

"I don't know." Lincoln asked again: "What are you doing so far from the main beach?"

The boy sank on his haunches, quaking inside, holding his eyes to the vanishing point. He took in light and shadow both, but blinked sometimes, and seeing nothing, his breath paid witness to the passing time.

"Sometimes people hurt you." They both stared at the horizon.

"Sometimes you are hurting anyway. They only open you up."

"To let more hurt in." He dug a broken piece of wood into the sand.

"To let more blood into a body which has lost all feeling," Lincoln said. "A body which was broken by fear and must fight its way back. A body which has lost everything and yet must eat and walk and talk."

Foam drew and glipped over their feet, the electric shimmer of light breaking through water, like the startled cry of the gulls on the rocks, sunrays that locked the irrevocable imprint of that moment like a vast explosion onto the mind - filling the body to the brim, and they had to blink and shield their eyes, as if they would sneeze, and the light seemed to tickle, ever-arriving, shards of sunlight swimming, and Ean lowered his eyes, wiping his lids, hazy with sweat and grease, light in the head and light in the stomach.

A moment can change your world. A moment can happen over and over again in your imagination, enter the world inside, where it takes root and becomes one of the small aches which can drive a lifetime.

Days had come after darkness, Lincoln thought, and darkness after days, but the time remained, whatever time it was – you held it somewhere in your pulse, that feeling that said you were the same man who loved Helen Ansley, the same man who despised her, the same man who travelled 1000 kilometres with a ghost that came out of nowhere, you who walked on

a beach with a strange white boy who asked for words you suddenly spoke - you who could only be yourself because, yes, there was time in this time of the ingculaza.

He had a stomach for a heart, and now it was a stomach that wanted his mother's cooking. The guitar strain hovered high in his ears and was lost with the wind. Sometimes these aches lead you to glory. Sometimes these aches take you astray. Sometimes they let you down. Sometimes everything inside you died a sudden death trying to kill these aches. But the only way to bring it to rest was in that matyotyombe looking like any other but the one place where they knew him, to lay it flat on the table over phutu and beer. The game went on. The ball was flying. He saw it coming and he kicked. He would be there when it landed.

about the woman in bed

She was on her last legs, the woman we went to visit. She was coughing, and she could hardly talk. She said "Why have you come here now? What do you want from me?"

"We have come to visit you, ma." We had come to do the last rites. They wanted to sing for her and pray for her, and make her way safe in to heaven, they said. There was a priest waiting in the dining room to read her the last rites and close her eyelids for her.

"It is nice of you to come to visit. Come, sit here, Lincoln."

"Here is a cake we have brought, and Zanele is in the kitchen making tea."

"Thank you my lovie." Then she started coughing, and we thought she would cry, but she started laughing. "It is good you are here. Very good."

And so we sat in stillness, each of us scared of what we saw: the fallen-in skin of her face, how grey she had gone, and blotchy with lesions that would never heal. Her arms were thin like a 14-year-old fashion model, her fingers slender as bone. Someone had come to put on false nails and varnish them, and she was dressed in her best sweater.

They began to sing of the love of Jesus, of the great chariot of fire in which we ride to heaven, of the secret place that God shares with us in our hearts. And she, she was singing loudest of them all, and coughing, and singing. Her lungs were wide like a ship full in sail, she sat up in bed and her head was high, her neck stiff and her eyes wild with the passion of anger and love and exhaustion. Her hair was blazing, long black extensions that shook and shone in the early evening light, her gold earrings glinting to their best advantage.

And we are leaving, they sang, we are leaving, we will join the wise ones in heaven, the earth is a sphere below us, the earth is a circle below us. Njalo, all

the time, Njalo, all the time, Njalo, all the time we are praying, we are offering, we worship.

And when they stopped, she put her lips together proudly, looked each of us in the eye like a friend.

"Now let's eat cake! Let's feast." Her daughter Zanele entered the room shyly with the tea.

"Mama," she said. "Mama, Umfundisi is here to see you."

"What does he want?"

"Ma, he wants to pray for you."

"But we are praying here already."

"He has come specially for you."

"Well, he will have to wait," and she stuck her hands out to her sides, open palms towards us all. Then she began to pray loudly.

"Dear God, please take the priest home to heaven, because he wants to pray for me and I am not going anywhere tonight." We were shocked, and stood around. The tea tasted bitter. I bit my lip. "He is so eager to do good deeds that he wants to take me off to heaven right away!" We giggled. Some glanced anxiously around the room, others laughing nervously. What if the priest had heard her? What a scandal! "Dear God," and she laughed out loud as she raised her voice exultantly, "I want the priest to die for being so wicked to come here today. May the priest die for his sins," and we were so horrified we could not hold back the tears anymore and we laughed and cried in embarrassment, "and I will come to him and close his eyes and pray and sing so sweetly the angels in heaven will escort him on his way."

I had visions of the priest running down the street, Umfundisi in his coat like a chicken running from a dog. I had to hold on to the chair I was laughing so much. They began to sing again, even as we were laughing and dancing. God is in heaven. God is in heaven. God is waiting in heaven.

She seemed dressed and ready to go, but for one last good party, but for one more joke. Some of us began to cry as she lay down spent in the bed that late night, but she was singing all the way.