Suggested wording for title page of a dissertation / thesis

[Title]

[this must be given in the latest form approved by the Faculty]

A GIFT OF STONES

[Forename / Surname / Student Number]

SÉAN W. O'TOOLE OTLSEA001

A [minor]dissertation submitted in *[partial] fullfilment* of the requirements for the award of the degree of **********

[e.g. Master of Social Science/Arts in Political Studies/Psychology]

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COMPULSORY 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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ABSTRACT

A collection of eleven short stories, grouped under the title *A Gift Stones*. The key thematic concern is the portrayal of dysfunctional individuals contemplating loss. The author offers a definition of his understanding of dysfunctional in the introduction, and further elaborates on the concept of documentary realism. The author proposes the expression "Boer humour" as shorthand for a stylistic drift in recent South African fiction. The deficiencies of journalism apropos prose fiction are discussed, and the author also considers the influence of photography on his prose fiction.

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INTRODUCTION: NOTES TOWARDS A LACONIC PROSE

Over the past three years, this collection of short stories was held together by the working title Driftwood. The mostly negative feedback I received from colleagues and friends prompted me to change it. So, *A Gift of Stones* it is, the title borrowed from a triptych of short stories grouped under the same designation. Not that Driftwood was my first mistake when it came to titling this collection. At the outset, when I initially applied for acceptance onto this writing programme, I had an entirely different working title in mind, Umlungu Umkhulu (which translates as The White Man is God). Why all this fuss about a title? After all, the stories are the thing, not the frame that decorates them.

I have opted to preface my introductory overview with this prosaic anecdote for a reason. Writing, I have come to learn, is about finding words, words that when grouped together, create an affect. This can manifest itself in numerous ways, in the simple description of the weight and measure of an individual, or the meditative presentation of a seemingly banal situation. In many ways, my search for an overarching title emblematises the lesson that words must have an affect. Moving through two rather obscure and

didactic titles, I finally managed to arrive on something altogether more resonant and allusive, I hope. The journey was by no means easy, the final title hardly a cinch. Were I to repeat the process, though, I would have it no other way.

In this introductory overview I will start by discussing the documentary undertow of my writing, paying special attention to the notion of documentary realism, a distinctive aim in my writing. Following this, I will briefly discuss my interest in Ivan Vladislavic's short fiction, as well as the influence of my journalistic practice on my fiction.

This contextual information will offer a useful counterpoint to my discussion of the difficulties I have experienced writing in my chosen mode. Referring to a failed defamation lawsuit that resulted from the publication of an early version of the story 'An African Grey', I will discuss how this event exposed some of the fault lines in my creative writing. This discussion will chiefly concentrate on how I have had to learn to imaginatively inhabit my stories, eschewing journalistic techniques, such as narrative non-fiction, in favour of fictional storytelling.

While each of the stories has its own peculiar history, I will nonetheless offer a brief overview of the central themes and narrative links that connect the various stories. This will be complemented by a short digression on my concurrent interest in recent South African photography, the idea or notion of the visual an important theme, or point of departure, in many of my stories. I will conclude with a short discussion on the subject of writing itself. Principally, I will refer to a review published in the magazine *Harper's*, one that focuses on JM Coetzee's novel *Elizabeth Costello*. As will be made clear, it is not so much Coetzee's book that is of interest but certain of the ideas and observations voiced in the review. Chiefly, these pertain to matters of economy, which, over the course of the past three years, has become a key ambition as I have strived to produce a laconic prose.

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Shortly before submitting this collection, I asked a colleague to read and comment on a few of my short stories. At one point during the nervous exchange that followed, he remarked on the "documentary" quality of my writing. His choice of the word documentary, over the more acceptable

literary designation realism, intrigued me. Possibly, this was because it touched on a parallel interest of mine: photography. In photographic practice, the noun documentary is often used interchangeably with the word realism, both expressions denoting a photography that is descriptive of found situations, not staged, a photography that is not overly self-conscious; lyrical but also gritty. (I have avoided the word magical for good reason.)

Admittedly, we are too deep into the self-reflexive era of postmodernism to rely on my flimsy evocation of what documentary realism is, or can be. My intention, however, is not to scrutinise the mechanics of this loosely defined version of realism, rather to simply assert that I am particularly intrigued by the idea of the realist sketch. By sketch, I mean a short, descriptive scene that is potentially, although not necessarily, humorous. I think here Edgar Allen Poe's short story 'The Business Man'; James Joyce's work as a journeyman, *Dubliners*; certainly some of Ernest Hemingway's writing; F Scott Fitzgerald's 'Babylon Revisited'; definitely Ahmed Essop's consummate fictionalisation of Fordsburg in his collection, *The Hajji and other stories.* And, of course, Ivan Vladislavic; after all, it was him who made the observation about my documentary tendencies.

Of his short pieces of writing, I consider Vladislavic's 'Propaganda by Monuments', 'The WHITES ONLY Bench', 'Courage' and 'Journal of a Wall' my favourites.[1] These particular short stories skilfully evoke the complexity of the South African condition, with remarkable precision, clarity and wit. I should probably substitute the noun wit, which has an almost Oscar Wilde-like flamboyance about it, and offer instead the expression "Boer humour".[2] I recently stumbled across this phrase in an essay by the novelist Paul West, his essay a haughty put down of JM Coetzee, the latter author casting West as a character in his novel *Elizabeth Costello*. Fine, so use it, but what exactly does Boer humour mean? Sadly, West did not elaborate in his essay, although he did snidely remark that South African fiction seemed indebted to the English literary tradition. Seemingly the best way then to explain what I believe West's imperious expression means is to simply explain what I felt when I first encountered its use. Rather than feel outrage, I laughed. In fact, I was delighted. That's it, I thought, that's it exactly. Here is

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[1] Ivan Vladislavic, *Propaganda by Monuments* (Cape Town: David Philip, 1996) and *Missing Persons* (David Philip, 1989)

[2] Paul West, 'The Novelist and the Hangman', *Harpers*, Vol.309, No.1850, July 2004, p.91

a précised expression that usefully describes the quintessentially laconic prose style of South Africa's better writers. It is a style stripped of embellishments, which might be why some have labelled it lean[3]; and it is funny too – in a dark and unashamedly bleak kind of way.

I'll be the first to admit that *A Gift of Stones* is not funny. Sure, it has its moments, but these tend to be few and far between. I myself am not funny, I sometimes strain to be, but I'm not. My prose reflects this. Nonetheless, reading Vladislavic's fiction has taught me the necessity of humour, or at least the humorous vantage. Confused[4] though this country might be as it negotiates a

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[3] Jennifer Szalai, 'Harvest of a Quiet Eye', *Harpers*, Vol. 309, No. 1850, July 2004, p.85

[4] I use this expression intentionally. Remarking on South Africa's paradoxical, almost bittersweet relationship with words, "the 'unspeakable' character of contemporary South Africa", the anthropologist Robert Thornton writes: "There are quite literally no names, no vocabulary, to discuss major aspects and parts of [South Africa's] political being". As Thornton points out, "there is no agreement on what are the boundaries of Black, of White, of Indian or Coloured". In the area of language, Thornton observes, "no one knows whether to refer to 'tribes', 'ethnic groups', 'language groups', 'peoples' or 'races'". Robert Thornton, 'The potentials of boundaries in South Africa: steps towards a theory

difficult transition, it is also a place of comic absurdity: existential absurdity, the stuff Albert Camus wrote about. I have tried to retrieve aspects of this absurdity and humour in stories such as 'The Marquis of Mooikloof', about Robert Mugabe moving to a gated complex in Pretoria; 'Incident Report', a dark comedy about racism, which is hardly ever funny; 'The Road to Rephile', a bittersweet ode to longing in which the author speaks to Nelson Mandela; and 'The Magic of Numbers', a farce about loss – and winning the lottery. Mostly, though, the stories are only obliquely funny, in a documentary sense

What do I mean by this? Fiction is an impecunious profession, particularly in South Africa, and therefore I have made my living working as a full-time journalist. This necessitates a short digression, which I will preface with a truncated resume of my journalistic pedigree: I have crossed the South African border illegally with Zimbabwean immigrants; reviewed art exhibitions in Johannesburg, Tokyo and New York; questioned elderly citizens what compels them to live in a gated compound in southern California; researched the architectural legacy of London's South Bank; investigated the tuberculosis wards of Malawi; spent nights

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of the social edge', *Postcolonial Identities in Africa* (London: Zed Books, 1996), pp.144-5

idly chatting with sex workers in Beaufort West and Oshoek; even written about Stilli Oppenheimer's indigenous garden at Little Brenthurst. Quite how the totality of these experiences have influenced my fiction is the subject of my digression.

"'Fun' is not the word," remarks the unnamed narrator of Haruki Murakami's novel *Dance Dance Dance*.[5] The 34-year-old freelance journalist is responding to a statement that his job "sounds like fun". "The writing itself is no big thing," he goes on to tell his feminine interlocutor. "I mean I like writing. It's even relaxing for me. But the content is a real zero. Pointless in fact." This might seem like a flip passage to quote given the weight of some of the subjects I have written about. I should probably clarify my position, or rather let Murakami's protagonist do it for me. "The way I see it, it's like shovelling snow," the disillusioned journalist continues. "You do it because somebody's got to, not because it's fun."
"Shovelling snow, huh?" she muses. "Well, you know, cultural snow."

When I first read this passage (at age 34, coincidentally), I was immediately struck by the measure of

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[5] Haruki Murakami, *Dance Dance Dance* (London: Vintage, 2003), p.49

the dialogue. Much like the character in Murakami's novel, I too fell into journalism in a haphazard manner, in my case after a mid-career change of direction. Like Murakami's character, I too have ended-up shovelling a lot of snow. At some point though, particularly as the shovelling got faster, more mechanical, I realised the limits of journalism as a form of creative expression. Something about its instantaneity and strict adherence to verifiable reality dulled its appeal. It is apt that the ennui I had begun to experience was assuaged by fiction.

Possibly a concrete example will illustrate what I am trying to say here. I still recall the frustration I felt one evening last year after attending a photographic exhibition in Cape Town. Looking at the photograph of a dying woman I had interviewed in the Malawian capital of Lilongwe, I sensed a stark divorce between the reality of the photograph and that of the gallery. Nothing new in this, I know. The problem was how to say it. Certainly, a review was not the appropriate form to use for the loose musing I wished to write. An essay? A long-winded piece of narrative non-fiction? No thanks, dull facts would have still gotten in the way. As it is, what I wanted to say went beyond mere facts, was indeed dangerously freewheeling and personal. In the end, fiction provided the only

rewarding outlet. 'Waiting for Mr President' is an entirely fictional story based on these experiences; it is also, however, a composite of many tiny fragments drawn from my career as a working journalist. It is a sort of documentary fiction, if you would.

Of course, there is nothing radical or even new about the outcome I stumbled upon, but that is not what I trying to underscore here. Like Paul Auster's character Stanley Fogg, from his novel *Moon Palace*, I too use my own experience as the "scaffolding" for what I write, "and even when the material pushed me into rather far-flung and abstracted territory, I did not feel that I was saying anything definitive on these subjects so much as writing a subterranean version of my own life story."[6] The outcome, I believe, is not some form of mutant gonzo journalism or biography, rather it is a fiction conceived from reality, but not a part of it.

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It is easy for a fledgling writer such as myself to overstate his abilities, to confuse auto/biography for

[6] Paul Auster, Moon Palace (London: Faber & Faber: 1989) p.233

documentary realism; I know I often did. Late in 2002, I won the *SL* magazine short story contest, judged by Ashraf Jamal. I was ecstatic – until I received a letter of demand from a lawyer in Sandton claiming defamation on behalf of her client. 'An African Grey', the story that won the competition, was based on a real incident, a story told to me many years ago by a refracted version of the main character, Pauline. Back in 2002, though, she wasn't even Pauline yet, wasn't even a refracted version of the real person. Stupidly – or better still, naively – I submitted a story that kept the real names of the individuals from the story I had been told.

While the letter of demand was easily rebutted (How do you defame someone by telling the truth?), less easy to confront was the rickety assertion that the story I had written, as it then appeared, was fiction. The expedient solution was, of course, to simply change the character's names; then it is fiction, right?

> *From: Prof. Joan Hambidge*
> *Sent: Thursday, January 06*
> *Sean, your work is very good, but I think you tend to rely too much on experience (vraisemblance). Let the story fly into madness, into unexpected endings.*

From: Sean O'Toole

Sent: Monday, January 10

Your observation about relying too much on experience is spot on. Just this weekend I was telling someone, the greatest problem I am having is moving from the husk of an idea, usually drawn from experience, and then fictionalising it, making it more dramatic, magical, weird, whichever.

More so than any other piece of correspondence, this simple exchange between student and supervisor describes the difficulties that have beset my fiction right until the end. While I might have often strived for a documentary realism in my fiction, mostly I ended up writing quaint biography. Otherwise put, I was too dependent on real-life events – rather than the imagination – for my inspiration. As the events around 'An African Grey' highlighted, I had a fundamental inability to imagine a story.

It wasn't just the threat of defamation litigation that made me realise this, although it certainly was the most forceful. "Is Adam Katz standing or kneeling in the hole?" a reader asked me after reading an early draft of 'Waiting for Mr President'. Well, was he or wasn't he? I wasn't sure. I had not sufficiently visualised his dilemma, being stuck in a hole. This is just one example. So how did

I manage to eventually tap into my creative imagination? On the one hand, I became more rigorous about the fictional realm I was shaping, spending time not only naming the characters but also mapping out their relationships with one another. The aim was to wrestle each story away from its original inspiration, to create an independent fictional realm for them to inhabit. In the end this meant letting go of the insubstantial event that was the husk of a piece of fiction.

If changing my habits meant becoming more rigorous, it also required the converse. I had to learn to loosen up, chill out, to enjoy myself. Why bother writing if one doesn't achieve these ends? Loosening up, as opposed to being more meticulous, proved equally difficult. I had to unlearn bad habits, like wearing my editor hat when writing out first drafts, those shambolic outpourings that allow one to creatively vent. Yes, I also had to learn to vent. Somehow I had forgotten that fiction does not come out pitch perfect the first time round, and that it is totally okay to dawdle and get lost in the woods. More pressingly, I also had to accept that switching off my computer was permissible, that pen and paper do not diminish the importance of what you want to say. Fundamentally, I had to learn to write again – not just type.

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"Part of being prudent is always to tell less rather than more," remarks JM Coetzee in his book *Boyhood*.[7] It suggests a lesson I will observe while explaining the central themes and narrative ties that connect the various stories in *A Gift of Stones*. In an email to my supervisor, I once stated that this collection, as a whole, was concerned with dysfunctional individuals contemplating loss. I don't think this simple statement needs any further elaboration; to reveal anything more would be imprudent. However, I do wish to offer an ameliorating qualification: I like imperfection. I think it is okay to be dysfunctional.

By dysfunctional I mean to be unable to function *normally* or *properly*, to be unable to deal *adequately* with normal social relations.[8] I think most of the characters I have crafted, as opposed to merely described, exhibit, in varying ways, the inabilities that come with being dysfunctional. Often this is revealed through interior monologues, rather than spoken words, characters repeatedly

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[7] JM Coetzee, *Boyhood* (New York: Viking, 1997)

[8] *South African Concise Oxford Dictionary*

saying to themselves: "I'm not sure", or "maybe". This leads me back to a point I mentioned earlier, about the deficiencies of journalism, its lack. Most journalism is purely concerned with reported speech, with what people say. Legally speaking, it is probably safer that way. Fiction, however, digs deeper, exploring the emotional and intellectual complexity of people through their thoughts. In this collection, I have worked equally hard on my characters' interior monologues and expressions of self-doubt as I have on their spoken dialogues, the two meant to work in concert to offer the reader an empathetic view of my dysfunctional beings.

Dialogue, which I tend to use a lot to pilot my stories, is not my only concern. Photography and photographers feature prominently in my stories. Why? Simplistically, I could say it is because I know and have worked with many photographers. In turn, this has vested a profound interest in photography, one that I continue to explore in a weekly column I write about South African photography.[9] I have also written more scholarly pieces on the subject, including an essay on the photographer Jo

[9] This column is titled 'Big Picture', and is published weekly in *The Sunday Times*, in the *Lifestyle* supplement

Ractliffe.[10] I have included this essay in my submission because I feel the writing showcases an attempt to use a narrative prose style to escape (rather than debunk) the conventions of critical writing. More fundamentally, it evidences a sense of photography that is more verbal than visual. This may sound illogical; after all, photography is visual.

In the manner of the Socratic way, I will respond by offering a series of questions. "What do you see? And if you see, how do you put it into words?" These questions are actually those of Stanley Fogg, the young narrator in Auster's *Moon Palace* who is required to describe the everyday world he encounters for his blind employer. Shortly after asking these questions, Fogg usefully answers them, saying: "The world enters us through our eyes, but we cannot make sense of it until it descends into our mouths."[11] This is a helpful insight, as it tends to suggest that words are necessary, which is different to saying that

[10] The essay is titled 'Saying Nothing' and is due to be published in a forthcoming book, tentatively titled *Johannesburg Circa Now* (further details unavailable at present). See also my essay 'This is not photography, this is just boring', in *Unsettled: Eight South African Photographers*, ed. Mads Damsbo (Copenhagen: National Museum of Photography, 2004)

[11] Paul Auster, *Moon Palace* (London: Faber & Faber, 1989) p.122

they are unavoidable. Looking at the stories 'Waiting for Mr President' and 'A Chance Meeting', for instance, both of which have a photographer as their lead protagonist, the stories come to a climax when my characters have to confront the limitations of a purely visual outlook. Mostly they choose not to speak but this does not lessen my point about the necessity of words.

As a writer, a person who works with words, this insight does pose an unforeseen dilemma. If words are necessary, but it is also prudent to tell less rather than more, how do I avoid saying too much? In a word, how do I craft a "lean prose", to borrow an expression used by Jennifer Szalai in her *Harper's* review of *Elizabeth Costello*? The reviewer was most helpful in answering my query, remarking of Coetzee's writing that it poses questions without answering them, that his novels withhold conclusions instead of readying them for consumption.[12] To my mind this passage speaks about a type of writing that consciously denies itself, a writing that intentionally chooses to say less, and through the resulting bareness offer more, a plenitude. An analogy to the classical Japanese art of flower arranging, or *ikebana*, is useful

[12] Jennifer Szalai, 'Harvest of a Quiet Eye', *Harpers*, Vol.309, No.1850, July 2004, p.86

here. Students of *ikebana* are taught to sculpt the emptiness, to amplify the resonance of negative space rather than deny it, which could easily be achieved by simply filling it up. In prose, this reverts back to Coetzee's notion of prudence, plenitude accomplished through restraint.

Achieving this, practically, is another thing. While editing my stories, I realised how often my writing became hyperbolic and florid, the excessive flourishes hardly typical of a laconic prose. Even as I write this, I realise the need to assert self-control, to be prudent. It is a formidable assignment, as the radio journalist Alistair Cooke once remarked. It is daunting because it demands a measured economy of style, or as Cooke pitches it: "…though a man might make sense of his travels in his own way for his own friends, broadcasting [read fiction] demands of him, if he respects the medium at all, that, as the old Greek had it, he 'think like a wise man and talk in the language of the people'."[13] Cooke was sceptical whether this had ever been achieved, except at various times by minstrels, the greatest religious teachers and comedians of genius. Genius aside, I would like to believe that this

[13] Alistair Cooke, *Letter from America: 1946 – 2004* (London: Allen Lane, 2004) p.xix

collection evidences a tenacious attempt to speak in this manner, to offer the reader a laconic prose peppered with hints of Boer humour.

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THE MARQUIS OF MOOIKLOOF

My neighbour introduced himself by way of a newspaper headline. DEPOSED DESPOT SETTLES IN PRETORIA read the news bill attached to a stop sign on my morning route to work. In all honesty, the printed words did not immediately stir much interest, even if the name Saddam Hussein did somewhere flicker in the darkness of my mind. Also, I am not in the habit of buying the morning edition of the *Pretoria News*. So, it was only later that morning, in the weekly production meeting I chair, that the headline became an actuality, its contents fleshed out, my new neighbour probed and dissected with instruments of perfect bluntness: words.

Not that I listened to what they were saying at first; their talk was simply adornment, wallpaper of an indistinct pattern. My attentions were focussed on the paperwork stacked at the head of the boardroom table where I sat. The imprecise mass of white paper described the extent of my life for the rest of the week. I took a sneak preview. There were eight complaints about our new steam-press iron from retailers. Looking through the hand-written complaints, my thoughts were focussed on discerning the unseen thread that would bind together all the disparate narratives of

discontent, all of them hand-written on our standardised complaints form.

"Did you see the size of his house?" Alet Bothma remarked with a gruff Benson and Hedges growl to Mpho Nthebe.

"Ja," Daan interjected, not allowing Mpho to respond.

Alet glowered at him. Since the last Christmas function, she always scowled at him. Daan pretended to review his notes. Sensing that she could enter the conversation, Mpho shyly asked a question.

"Where is it?"

"Wait, I'll get the paper," Alet replied, slipping from the wood-panelled boardroom, returning almost instantaneously clutching a copy of the morning edition.

"Look here it is," she said pointing with a crimson talon.

After a considered pause, Daan asked for the paper. In a haltingly voice he read excerpts of the story out loud.

"The sumptuous new residence is situated in the plush gated community of Mooikloof… Blah, blah, blah… According to Marge de Villiers, an estate agent with Remax Properties, the house has an estimated value of R12-million."

Daan whistled incredulously.

"Mooikloof, Mike, isn't that where you live?" he asked cautiously.

"Pardon?"

"They say here that Robert Mugabe bought a place in Mooikloof. Isn't that where you live?"

"What? Sorry Daan, I wasn't following."

Dragging himself from his seat, Daan waddled across the room, dropping the newspaper article in front of me. He pointed to a bright, sunny photograph of a house. It was the house next door; I immediately recognised the ostentatious Corinthian arches.

"Who did you say had moved in?" I asked.

"Robert Mugabe."

Suddenly it all made sense: the nervous sound of helicopter rotor blades cutting through the mid-morning air, the strange flotilla of vehicles (three moving vans, a dark Mercedes and some police vehicles too) coming up my drive. At the time, the convoluted ritual hadn't struck me as odd. A government minister maybe, moving in next door. Pretoria hadn't changed much, the only difference between now and back then was the way power was displayed, in Corinthian arches.

But this wasn't some petty public works minister promoted from a rural fiefdom. I had read the Sunday papers,

I knew who this man was. He was the one callers to radio phone-ins simply referred to as "Mugabe", sort of like the way they called him "Madiba", except this man was the murderer of Matabeleland, the butcher of Bulawayo. He was the pregnant promise they emblazoned across a thousand T-shirts. The deafeningly wet roar of Victoria Falls. An evolving idea that wouldn't name itself. The immaculately dressed lunacy of Chairman Mao. And here he was playing a new role, the marquis of Mooikloof.

The production meeting, if you'll excuse the wisecrack given my company's line of business, was a heated one. Immediately afterwards, I had Mpho call my estate agent. She assured me that her comparison of Mooikloof to London's Hampstead was entirely plausible.

"Exiled aristocracy tend to add prestige to an area," she argued with unconvincing gusto.

That evening, as I passed through the security boom, I decided to take a diversion. I wanted to see Mooikloof anew, marvel again at its discreetly private intimacy. I slowly manoeuvred my BMW through the near deserted suburban streets, past a series of flawless tributes to deceased architectural styles (English Tudor, Zuid Afrikaanse Republiek colonial, Cape Dutch, Tuscan and others less easily defined). A voice on the radio tabulated stock

figures. I passed a house with two elephant skulls flanking the entrance gate. The woman on the radio tried to convince me to change my cellular phone brand. Two women on horseback waved as they approached from the opposite direction. The talk show host returned, and purposefully set about cajoling a reluctant member of parliament. I drove in silence, drowning in this multitudinous splendour of voices.

As I finally pulled-up to my drive, I paused on the kerbside. I looked at the residence next door. It was then that I saw the private security guard sulkily doing nothing at the gates. Dressed in a jet-black uniform, the darkly tanned man – he was white with a thick moustache – carried a shotgun slung over his shoulder. I waved, hesitantly. He simply declined his head in vague acknowledgement of my gesture. I buzzed open my gate.

My house is a vacant emotion, a mouth with no teeth. I am divorced. Two years ago. I suppose it just happened, the way Coke goes flat in the fridge. You wish it didn't, but it just happens – and then you have to throw it away. Susan now lives in London. We occasionally email one another; her correspondence is always rushed. She has remarried. Susan once sent me a jpeg image of her husband. He had bleached features, an unfamiliar whiteness. She recently mentioned that she was pregnant. I haven't yet responded to this bit

of news, complemented her on the small, swelling ambition in her belly. The complaints against our new iron are growing.

I switched on the television, listlessly flicked through the satellite channels. I eventually settled on the repeat broadcast of a recent golf tournament. There is something comforting about knowing the outcome of things. I watched Tiger's approach shot, knowing full well that it was the necessary prelude to a glorious birdie. Despite the pleasure of watching his elegant swing, I found that I was unable to concentrate on the action. I was thinking about him, the man next door.

Why South Africa, I wondered to myself? And for that matter, why Pretoria? Why Mooikloof Estate? What about that palatial villa overlooking the solitude of the Atlantic seaboard, in Cape Town? The newspapers had been full of it. Far from resolving things, each question simply elicited another. How did *he* find out about Mooikloof? Surely *he* hadn't been alerted to the development by a neatly dressed tout handing out flyers at a busy intersection on a Saturday morning? I stared at the eutrophic sadness of the watery golf trap on his television screen. I switched off the television.

The view from my balcony overlooks a grassy nothingness, veld surrounded by walls, walls encompassed by

more walls, like stratified rock. I leant dangerously over the railing, craning my neck. I felt myself unavoidably drawn to the Mugabe residence. The lights of the house were on. He was in.

I tried to imagine a gaunt and aging figure seated at the dinner table, quietly conversing with his wife, Grace. He was describing his longing for all that had been lost, not simply in terms of assets but emotions, sunsets at Lake Manyame. Grace had a tear in her eye. Or maybe he was simply watching DSTV, glad to be rid of the unending gaze of the camera. Maybe he too was marvelling at Tiger's stoic brilliance, had cheered as the young golfer effortlessly collected his match play birdie. Then again he would probably disapprove of golf, the wasted opportunity vast tracts of fertile land presented to his inordinately stern socialist conscience.

More than likely he was watching the news, flicking between CNN, BBC, Sky and SABC Africa, searching for something approximating the truth of his recent demise, something other than the waning graph of his political fortunes. Or maybe he wasn't as timorous as all this, maybe he was engaged in a one-way shouting match, with Larry King, or the BBC's Tim Sebastian, spittle and exasperation running down the flatness of his television screen. Maybe.

Then again it was possible that Grace had commandeered the controls: they were both watching Fashion TV.

I pulled up a chair, the dusky evening silence a warm and incomplete embrace. I wondered what the house looked like inside. Could three vans really contain the totality of a life? Where was the booty? I vaguely recalled seeing the news on television, his 48-hour ultimatum, leave or face prosecution. I wondered how many of her Ferragamo shoes Grace had left behind; Susan had once jokingly mentioned that Grace wore Ferragamo before asking me to get her a pair on my business trip to Italy. Back then.

And that jet, bought from Hugh Hefner. Where was it parked? At Waterkloof airbase? And rather more importantly, had they met with the silk-robed porn king, laughed and shared a joke as Bunny girls refilled fluted glasses. Facts. Imagination. Multiplicity. I was intrigued. I resolved to invite the couple for a braai.

I shared my thoughts with Mpho and Alet the next morning. It was a rare accident of history, I explained, a privilege even, I added, that I could have Herr Hitler and Eva Braun over to dinner. Mpho simply took notes as I spoke. Alet, however, intermittently coughed up bits of phlegm and incomprehension. I asked Mpho to get quotes for the production of a hand-made invitation. My instructions to her

were meticulous and detailed: ornate lettering hand-written on a thick grade of white linen paper with the company logo discretely embossed on it. Our logo is an antique iron.

Pushing aside the complaints, which had increased by three, I spent the entire morning crafting an invitation message, something appropriate to the stature of my potential guest, and his wife. It wasn't easy. There was the problem of my surname – Smith – but that could not be undone. At least I wasn't an Ian. Another problem related to the correct title of my guest. Was I to refer to them as His and Her Excellency, or simply Mr and Mrs? After much wrangling and inconclusive web trawling, I resolved to simply go with the latter. It seemed more neighbourly, to be casual, less of a spectator.

And then it was finally done.

Dear Mr and Mrs Robert Mugabe,

Mike Smith would like to welcome you to Mooikloof and requests the pleasure of your company for an informal Sunday luncheon at his private residence. In the interim, should you require any assistance and advice related to your move to Mooikloof, please feel free to call him at any time.

Yours sincerely,

Michael R. Smith

PS: Please do not hesitate to alert your host should you have special needs or dietary requirements.

The invitation also specified a date, set at one month in advance, as well as my address (with the words Next Door in parentheses). Finally, I further included my home and work telephone numbers, an email address as well as my company's website, www.newafricaelectronics.com. I was undecided on this latter point, worried that it would come across as crude. Daan, however, suggested that it subtly alerted the reader to my credentials; Mugabe, or his secretary presumably, could peruse my biography from the website.

The invitation took three days to complete. I ordered three copies, two just in case I slipped up when I signed the invitation in my own hand. Finally satisfied that the invitation fulfilled all that I would expect were I to receive a similar request, I resolved to drop it off at the Mugabe residence.

"Can I help you sir," the guard asked in a flat Afrikaans accent as I got from my car. I had pulled up on a thin sliver of grass between the road and the elevated walls obscuring the Mugabe home.

Looking over his shoulder at the mute white walls he guarded, I explained that I was dropping-off an invitation.

"There is no visitor's allowed sir, unless by appointment."

I told him I had none.

"You will have to leave the delivery with me then."

Disappointed, I nonetheless left the invitation at the front gate. Unsure of the guard's qualities, I requested proof of my delivery. The guard disappeared into the hut, returning with an estate agent's card bearing his name on the rear. Gerrie Viljoen, the untidy scribble read. I thanked him, shook his hand. I had bridged the divide.

A week passed during which I could think of nothing but the pending braai. Even though I had not yet heard any word, I nonetheless threw caution to the wind and called my favourite butcher. I ordered handsomely: A-grade beef from the Waterberg region, specially filleted Karoo ostrich sosaties, a piquant Vrystaat boerewors as well as two free-range chickens marinated in peri-peri. I would complement the meat with a basic serving of mielie pap, maybe a selection of veggies. Even though I hated it, milk tart would serve as the exit cue to my intentionally unpretentious Pretoria welcome. If the meal went well, I

I switched on the cabin light, inserted my car's key into a small crevice in the sealed envelope and neatly tore it open. The response was typed on a white card, discreetly marked 'From the desk of His Excellency Robert Gabriel Mugabe' in flowing cursive script that was elegant yet understated. He had learnt much from his exile in London.

Dear Mr Smith,

Mr and Mrs Mugabe thankfully acknowledge the receipt of your invitation. They apologise for the delay in responding and further take this opportunity to respond to your invitation in the affirmative.

Yours sincerely,

Jabulani Mkandua

Secretary

PS: Please be advised that Mr Mugabe is a vegetarian of long standing.

It was a violent sound, subtle but nonetheless violent. Familiar too. Mauve jacaranda blooms being crushed by the hundreds. Spring buds exploding purple on the tar. Pauline listened intently to the melancholy sound as Johan's dilapidated Jetta made its way through the suburb of Proclamation Hill, a neighbourhood built on a gentle rise overlooking a vast industrial sprawl. The rush of air coming through the passenger window soothed her unsettled thoughts. A pair of concrete cooling towers dominated the skyline outside her window. She had never known spring to be this miserable.

Johan switched the radio on. She felt distant from the laughter it introduced, continued to stare at the washed-out pallor of spring that surrounded her. Like rot, she thought, a spreading fungus, her glance taking in the familiar and discoloured koppie where the Iscor factory was located. The smokestacks ruined everything – even the failed radiance of the jacaranda trees. It was no wonder Sunette had been so desperate to get out.

Pauline tried not to think of her daughter, she would see her in less than an hour. The car picked up speed. Pauline rolled up her window. Charley, Johan's parrot, made

a squawking sound then resumed nibbling on his treat in the back seat. Why did Johan have to bring the bird with? Charley was the cause of all of this shit in the first place. Looking at the Voortrekker Monument on her left, its sandstone form resolute if nothing else, the feeling sneaked upon her again; she had never known spring to be this miserable.

A Foreign Spring. She thought the headline on page three of today's *Pretoria News* summed up things pretty well. The article, in the weekend focus section, told how the city's government – blacks – had ordered that no new Jacaranda trees be planted. The decree was aimed to fall in line with new environmental legislation aiming to stop the spread of alien plant species in South Africa.

"Jacarandas are not a local tree species," the article read. "They were first imported from Argentina by Mr J.A. Cilliers in 1888." Maybe that's where that old street name came from, Cilliers Street, she had thought. She was also unsure of he point of the photograph illustrating the story. It depicted a heavyset old jacaranda. Tacked onto the stem was a plastic advertising board with a telephone number, and the words, Need to Loose Weight? According to the caption, the tree was in Walker Street, Brooklyn. It said nothing about the spelling error.

Johan fiddled with the tuner, erasing the young black voice that started reading the news. The parrot issued a garbled squawk at the loud static. Johan settled for a music station.

"What time did they say she say they would be there?" Johan asked. He was in a dark mood.

"At one."

"Shit, we'll have to move it."

Sunette had suggested they meet at BJ's, a chain restaurant perched over the N1 highway in Midrand. Neutral territory. Since the blow-up Marten had sworn never to visit his in-laws in Pretoria again, had even gone so far as to forbid both of them from visiting their daughter's marriage home in Johannesburg.

Sunette had met Marten in France, in the transit area at Charles De Gaulle. The twenty-one-year-old had been on her way home from Rotterdam after a two-year stint as a nanny, the shyly confident economics doctorate on his way to a conference in New York. After trading polite conversation in a queue at the duty-free, Marten had suggested a cappuccino. Three months later, after a flood of email traffic, he visited Pretoria.

He wasn't much to look at, Pauline decided when they collected him from the airport. He had bad teeth and his

lanky frame was in need of a tan. His fashion sense was peculiar too: a brown corduroy jacket with jeans and pale yellow moccasins. No, she didn't think much of him at all as Johan's car pulled into the drive of their redbrick Iscor house in Proclamation Hill.

Johan helped with the baggage. The visitor would stay in the spare room, the one where Johan's mother had spent her last years, prone on her back, waiting for the muslin gloom to seize her. Finally, it did. As they showed the visitor into the room, Pauline saw that Florence had taken a gilt-framed photograph of Sunette in her matric dance from the lounge and placed it on the bedside table. She would have to speak to the bent old domestic. First the milk and sugar, now this.

Dinner that evening did not go well. Marten said he didn't eat red meat, which posed a problem. Florence had taken chops out the deep freeze. When Johan offered to shoot down the road and get something from Kentucky, Marten had politely refused, said he would be happy with salad. All through dinner, which they ate on trays in the lounge, Pauline had watched the young man's wandering eye, the details it took in: Johan's long service certificate next to the family photographs on the wall; the indoor ferns; the sandstone head of an old-timer and bronzed kudu

statuette, both from the Kruger Park; Charley's cage, the worn carpet surrounding it covered with newspaper. But this had been long before the blooms, or the blow-up, even before the strange visitor from abroad asked Johan if he could marry his stepdaughter.

The Jetta was sluggish and the other cars seemed to fly by in the faster lanes. Pauline looked at the animals feeding at a green trough in the grounds of the new mint alongside the highway. It was a bizarre mix: a gaggle of white ducks and a lone blesbok, some ostriches and springbuck too. A stern electric was all that kept them from wandering onto the busy highway. It all seemed so contrived, awkward, a fact shown up by the muddy brown water gushing out of an artificial fountain near where the animals foraged. It had recently stormed, the first rains of the season.

The radio continued to fill the silence in the car. Even the parrot was uncharacteristically quiet. Charley, a male Congo African Grey, was a gift from a retrenched co-worker of Johan's. The iron-works had cut back on staff, Johan included. While Pauline was at work everyday, and Florence sat out on the frostbitten lawn talking with neighbouring domestics, Johan had patiently made friends with the bedraggled bird, teaching it new words.

He started out with simple greetings, but when the bird unexpectedly imitated a regular expression – "Florence, answer the fucking telephone!" – Johan started experimenting. "Hello, I'm Vuyo Mbuli" and "Tshwane *se moer*" always generated a laugh from visitors. The parrot, which had been practically bald when he was given to Johan, also stopped plucking at his plumage. As winter passed, and a mauve epiphany swept across the city, the parrot began to sprout a fresh new growth of feathers in a distinctive blend of smoky white and cigarette-ash grey. All through the seasonal summer rains, Johan searched for work, although mostly he sat on the couch at home. At length the autumnal jacaranda trees shed new gifts: mussel shaped seedpods. In parliament, a bill regarding invasive alien plant forms was passed. Johan still had not found work.

How little things had changed, Pauline thought. Johan remained unemployable, and the Jacaranda trees were on autopilot, blooming fresh purple again.

"No, not this one," she said. Johan had indicated to turn off at the Shell Ultra-City. "It's at the next one, Caltex." Johan veered back onto the highway, the car behind hooting angrily.

It seemed stupid that things had been reduced to this. If it hadn't been for the damned parrot things would have

been different, Pauline told herself, ordinary. Ordinary was nice. She blamed the blasted parrot for everything, and Johan.

After the wedding, the newlyweds would visit the Proclamation Hill house every Sunday, from Johannesburg. Admittedly these meetings had been hard for Marten, Johan disregarding the recently employed investment banker in favour of television while mother and daughter chatted. Once, she had even apologised for Johan's manner, even managing a nostalgic laugh about her former life in Piet Retief, before Johan, with Sunette's father. And then the parrot spoiled everything.

It all happened on a rather unexceptional Sunday shortly after new year. Sunette was excitedly describing the house they had just made an offer on in Parkhurst. Sensing that he was not a part of the animated conversation, Charley cocked his flat, broad head and announced himself.

"*Mandela is 'n houtkop. Mandela is 'n houtkop.*"

Johan simply chuckled.

"*Mandela is 'n houtkop.*"

"Is that really necessary?" Marten asked.

Johan released a low, throaty rumble. Sensing the start of something, Sunette asked Marten to show her mother his new company car, a silver Mercedes.

"*Mandela is 'n houtkop,*" Charley continued. The awkward, tongue-tied parcel of speech pitched itself squarely into the late morning silence.

"Are you proud of your latest accomplishment?" Marten evenly stated. "Pardon me if I have missed the humour in it though."

Pauline laughed confusedly. She hadn't heard this latest one.

"*Mandela is 'n houtkop.*"

"Come on, shut him up Johan," Sunette pleaded sternly.

"Don't bother, we're leaving." Marten stood up from his seat. "Your stepfather's a lunatic."

"What?"

"You heard me."

"Well at least I don't come from a country that was fucked up by the Germans in two days."

"*Net so,*" Pauline interjected.

"What the hell do you mean by that?"

"We checked in the encyclopaedia. Hitler fucked your country up in just two days. Two days!"

"*Heil Hitler! Heil Hitler!*"

"You tell him Charley, you tell him," Johan roared.

"Jesus," Marten exclaimed. "Your pettiness has reached new levels of stupidity Johan. Do you really understand what you are teaching that bird? Can your small mind even begin to understand what Hitler did?"

"Yes, yes. Just because you're a doctor who drives a fancy car, what the hell makes you so grand? Hitler fucked your country up in two days man."

Pauline recalled Johan wiping tears of laughter from his eyes as he delivered these words.

"It's time to go, Sunette." Looking angrily at the pugnacious man seated in the couch, Johan slipped in an unconscious afterthought. "… back to civilisation."

"What?" Johan blurted, jerking himself upright in his chair.

"Yes, you heard me, back to civilisation." He was more certain about his statement the second time. "This fucking house is caught in a time warp. You people live in the past. Wake up!"

"Marten, leave it," Sunette had chided him softly.

"*Heil Hitler!*"

"*Se vir hom Charley*," Johan stated, flashing a conceited smile.

"Fine. If that's how you feel about things, but let me just tell you one thing." Marten trembled, “God is a fuck-up! A fuck-up!” He stammered the words. “Why else would he create the likes of you?"

With unexpected alacrity Johan had leapt from his chair, grabbing Marten by the throat.

"Come on, say that again, I dare you."

Pauline still remembered the eerie morning silence and freeze-framed details of that day. The parrot’s excited chant. Sunette’s smile, a timeless smile, one that could never be erased from a school photograph. Florence had returned the photograph back to the mantelpiece. Outside a Sunday church bell rang out above the fading burgundy tin roofs of the houses on Proclamation Hill, and the engine of a passing car spluttered and backfired. Inside Sunette's womb, a month-old secret kicked.

Johan steered the car into a parking place. A sunburnt man with a green security bib waved them in. He had a dejected look. Pauline saw an old tog bag concealed under a bench nearby. Probably his. Johan waved him off gruffly. It had taken a week of nightly arguing to get her husband to agree to come to Midrand, to finally get to the entrance to BJ’s.

WAITING FOR MR PRESIDENT

"What are those white poles?" Adam Katz asked.

The battered Land Rover hit another pothole. Grey Kangulu, however, simply continued reading.

"Grey?"

He closed the book, an east African travel adventure lent to him by Adam two days into their month-long tour of hospitals and clinics in the Lilongwe region. Although well written its insights were rather flimsy, he thought.

"What are those white poles?" The white poles lined both sides of the dismal road leading into the Malawian capital.

"To be sure I can't say," Grey stated definitively.

The district hospital inspector dropped his head and continued reading. Adam looked intently at the man seated in front of him, the revealing wisps of grey on his head. Adam estimated him to be in his late forties, at least a decade older than he. He was also darker than most of the Malawians he had spent his days looking at through his camera's viewfinder. Taller too. Yet his defining feature was not physical. It was his abrupt manner, the polite firmness he used to keep Adam at a distance, their conversations between hospitals limited to things

explicitly journalistic. Tuberculosis statistics, not whitewashed poles.

The poles had seemingly appeared overnight and out of nowhere, although not without warning Adam realised. The day before, on his afternoon stroll to Lilongwe's city centre from his guesthouse on the eastern outskirts of town, he had stopped to look at a series of shallow holes alongside the main road. Dark mounds of soil lay heaped next to these knee-deep holes. Healthy soil. Passers-by merely shook their heads when Adam asked what their purpose was.

The driver slowed to avoid another watery pothole. Adam stuck his head out of the rear passenger window, his eyes squinting against the afternoon sun. The rush of air against his face was a relief. It was mid-summer, the rainy season. The thunderstorms that came drifting in off the green plains every evening had created deep furrows on the verge of the road. On his strolls to and from town every afternoon, a route that took him past barricaded private residences and a golf course, Adam would marvel at the crab-like manoeuvring of the busses as they engaged the gradual incline out of town. Despite his anticipation the busses always seemed to miss colliding with the oncoming traffic, or steering off the tarred edge into the channels.

He tried once, unsuccessfully, to photograph the black diesel fumes as they drifted over a residential wall lined with jagged bits of glass. It was an impossible composition, whimsical, he grumbled afterwards. He eventually settled on a picture of one the holes dug into the earth - just for the hell of it.

Adam spotted the grassy traffic circle in the distance. He pulled his head into the cabin. The driver negotiated the rutted kerbside and brought the Land Rover to a halt.

"Can I buy you a beer or something?" The primly dressed health official was helping Adam to off-load his equipment. Grey was slow to answer.

"Thank you," he replied finally replied. "Yes."

Grey spoke a few words to the driver, who nodded his head, smiled, nodded his head again and then steered the vehicle with its balding tyres back onto the road. For a moment they both stood staring at the Land Roger as it made its way down the gentle hill into town.

It was a short walk along a muddy path from the traffic circle to the guesthouse, the entrance of which was situated down a quiet tributary road. Although positioned right next to the main road, the guesthouse itself was shielded from view by an imposing brick wall buttressed by

huge palm leaves stuck vertically into the ground. They might have lent the guesthouse a local authenticity but, as Adam noticed, they also served to heighten the wall. A shirtless young man in his early twenties greeted the pair as they arrived at the corrugated-iron gate leading into the guesthouse.

"What are all those white poles in the ground for?" Adam asked the gateman.

"It means the president is coming." The gate scrapped against the ground as it was closed behind them.

"The poles?" Adam repeated, purposefully reducing his question to its barest and sustainable minimum.

The young man, who wore an earring in his left ear, picked up a pair of rusted garden clippers leaning against the wall. He smiled at Adam, looked to Grey, then shot-off a rapid-fire explanation.

"They're flagpoles," Grey translated.

"Yes, that's it. It means the president is arriving." The young man beamed at Adam.

"When?" Adam queried.

"Soon, soon."

"Today?"

"Yes, soon."

Grey said nothing.

Adam led his companion to the guesthouse. An overland travel group had arrived that afternoon and the garden surrounding the small colonial style homestead was dotted with colourful tents in various stages of construction. An elderly couple dressed in swimming costumes smiled at them.

"They'll all be gone by tomorrow morning," explained Adam. He pointed Grey to a chair on the stoep.

"I never knew this place even existed," said Grey as he sat himself down and looked in wonder at the tented camp. "Everyday I pass this place on the bus. I would never have guessed so many foreigners were sleeping here, out in the open."

"It is very pleasant here."

"And full."

"I don't think there are many options for travellers. It's the hotel or here."

For a while the two sat watching the overnight visitors busy themselves with their evening chores. They could hear a gas burner hissing. The smell of coffee languidly drifted in on the breeze. A weariness settled over Adam. He was glad to be finishing with the damn job. He had seen enough of the country's tuberculosis wards, was numb to the helpless plight of people he met, the tight chests and agitated coughs.

"A beer?"

"A cold drink is fine," replied Grey. "I don't drink alcohol."

Adam returned with bottled orange juice and a plastic tumbler filled with gin and tonic for himself. They drank silently, in the morose way of familiar strangers. After draining the last of his lukewarm drink, Grey spoke.

"What music do you listen to?"

The question surprised Adam, largely because it was entirely out of character.

"I don't really listen to music."

Grey replaced the empty bottle on the table.

"But surely you must listen to music? Everyone listens to music."

"I suppose. In certain respects it's unavoidable but I don't really make an effort to listen, not for enjoyment if that's what you mean. I don't buy CDs or attend shows."

"You must at least own a radio?"

"Yes, but mostly its tuned to talk shows?"

Grey nodded his head slowly as if to register comprehension. He formed a confused question on his lips but then decided against pursuing its answer. He lapsed into a thoughtful silence.

"I am sorry I didn't know about the poles," Grey remarked as he approached the gate. He had firmly declined Adam's dinner invitation. "I only recently transferred here from Blantyre. I am still learning about some of the peculiarities of our capital."

"Well at least we both know now what the poles mean."

"The president will be arriving soon," Grey smiled.

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Adam had seen another, larger hole too. On his slow walk from town the day before he spotted a deep hole near the main road, just a short distance from the traffic circle. It too had been recently dug and burrowed vertically into the ground, just like a mineshaft. There were no chevron tape to warn pedestrians of its existence, just a heaped mound of earth nearby that was rapidly being washed away by the rain. Inquisitive as to its purpose, he had peered down into it, finding only a waterlogged mess cast in shadow. It was easily three metres deep he reckoned and looked like a drainage device of sorts. He had dropped a stone into the hole and listened for a childhood memory as it broke the meniscus of the water with a splash. He would have repeated the action had he not noticed a throng of teenagers staring

at him from a nearby bus stop. Nonchalant as only an embarrassed person can be Adam returned to the guesthouse.

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"Do you think I've missed the president's arrival?"

The question was just a subterfuge. The Land Rover was making slow progress from the Catholic mission hospital and Adam was impatient to get back. He wanted to shower. The hospital's distinctive smell, of burnt porridge and wood, still lingered in his nostrils.

"I don't know," responded Grey. "I'll ask the driver."

The driver's answer was short and did not need translation.

"When do you think he'll pass by then?"

"Soon, maybe tomorrow even."

"Can't you be more precise?"

"I can but then I would be lying just to make you happy."

Grey's cryptic response angered Adam, particularly the laconic ease with which he was able to rebuff his questions. Despite their brief exchange the night before, their conversation today had been guarded and circumspect. The road ahead looked familiar, they were nearing the

guesthouse. Adam repeated his dinner offer of the night before. He knew Grey would decline, leaving him free to spend his last evening cataloguing all the rolls of film he had shot.

"Thank you, I accept. Let's visit the international hotel. It serves an excellent buffet." Grey also preferred to be seated on the terrace overlooking the hotel's manicured lawn.

Their dialogue was ritually polite. In between taking very small sips of his soft drink, Grey fielded answers to the various questions posed by Adam, questions that skirted any personal engagement. At one point the two found themselves in disagreement over the name of a health assistant at one of the hospitals. Convinced he was correct Adam removed his journal from a travel bag and leafed through it.

"What are those?" Grey asked, pointing to a collection of photograph pasted into the book.
"Polaroids. I use them as visual references for all the interview subjects – so I don't get mixed up with who said what when I'm back home."

Grey reached across the table and seized the journal. Adam was too disbelieving to protest. Reaching into his shirt pocket, Grey removed a pair of gold-rimmed glasses.

They gave him the appearance of a stern, middle-aged schoolmaster. Quietly, patiently, very deliberately, he viewed each picture. He repeated the viewing process twice.

"I do not like this picture," he asserted, handing Adam his journal.

The book lay open on a page with a single image. It showed a naked woman, her limp breasts mere appendages to a wrinkled and emaciated body. An elderly woman wearing a pink dress with purple flowers on it sat behind her, in effect propping up the dying woman. Both of them stared blankly at the camera, their faces expressionless.

"I do not like it at all," Grey repeated, his tone registering no change in pitch. He was as collected as ever.

"I am not sure what you mean. Do you mean the picture itself or what it shows?"

"Both, everything," Grey replied, taking another measured sip of his drink.

"I can't always help what I photograph or describe, Grey."

Grey removed his glasses, methodically wiped them with a hanky and replaced them in his shirt pocket. He then wiped his face.

"What do you know about this woman?" he asked Adam.

"What do you mean?"

"Exactly what I am asking."

"Um, hang on, I keep notes for all the pictures… Here, here we go. Olivia Chitope, 30, with her guardian Chipila Muyare, 54, Bottom Hospital, Lilongwe, Malawi."

"The science of saying nothing."

The gin, the heat, the cumulative effects of the countless visual assaults over the past four weeks, everything seemed to suddenly weigh heavily on Adam. He emptied the last bits of ice in the glass tumbler into his mouth, savouring the bitter taste of the local ice. He was too weary to pursue the argument he was being drawn into. He simply shrugged off the taunt.

"I don't want to argue with you Grey."

"That's not what I am proposing. All I want to know is what do you know about this woman?"

He looked own at his journal. Literally speaking, the answer to Grey's question was there in front of him, written in an untidy hand. That was if his dinner guest was being literal. He couldn't ever be sure quite where Grey was coming from. He looked at his notes, then at the man seated opposite him, then back at the words. Without prompting Adam began reading the text out loud.

"Olivia is a farmer. She was admitted to the Mithundu district hospital with TB and later referred to Lilongwe. Chipila is her aunt. Olivia's husband left her after discovering she had TB. He has subsequently remarried. Olivia has three children, and also mentioned a stillborn child. Although she claims that there is no history of TB in the family, further questioning revealed that her mother, Chipila's sister, died from TB – 'a long time ago'. Despite the physical discomfort she continually speaks about, Olivia says she is mentally okay. Asked what her chances of pulling through are, a duty nurse replied, 'not so good'."

Adam closed his journal.

"So it is settled then, you know something about her," Grey remarked. He finished the tiny remainder of his drink. "Now you can tell your magazine readers something instead of nothing about this country." He then promptly stood up and marched off in the direction of the buffet table.

They ate in silence. Adam ordered another double gin, Grey a soft drink. There were moments Adam almost wanted to speak with Grey, ask him ordinary questions. How long had he been married? How old were his children? Instead, he opted to say nothing. Grey was too intractable. Had he

lived abroad before? It seemed possible. Grey knew far more than he sometimes let on.

Adam ordered another gin; it was his last night in Lilongwe. On the stairs outside the hotel, he moved to shake hands with the tall health official. Instead of offering his own hand back, Grey insisted that he accompany him to the guesthouse.

"Prowlers," he stated concisely. "It is also late, you might get lost in the dark. People are not as friendly to strangers when it's dark."

The main road to the guesthouse was empty. Water had gathered in the road's pitted surface and reflected fragments of moonlight. Adam drunkenly thought about photographing the scene, but finally resolved to leave it.

"You must at least know Brenda Fassie," Grey stated.

"I've heard her name before but I can't say I know what her music is like."

"That's a great pity I would think, although as for me I do not really like South African music."

"What music do you listen to then?"

It happened in an instant. The ground abruptly gave way. Adam fell, just like the stone he had dropped in the hole two days earlier, only heavier and faster. The water was cold, and had a muddy taste as he tried to stand

himself upright in it. He felt his feet sag into the mud and desperately clawed at the sides of the hole. Something clung to his neck. As he tried to desperately grab at it he fell backwards and was submerged again. It was just a discarded plastic bag.

He tried to stand upright again on the muddy bottom. The water was cold and took him up to just below his chest. Its depth had effectively cushioned his fall. He felt his limbs. Nothing seemed broken. He wasn't in pain. All of a sudden it dawned on him.

"My cameras!" he screamed. Submerging himself under the muddy water, his hands searched frantically through the silted muck. All he could feel were large stones, but no camera bag. He repeated this three or four times before he heard Grey shouting down at him.

"Mr Katz, are you okay?"

Something about the formality of Grey's address made him pause and look up at the silhouette above him.

"My cameras, I can't find my fucking cameras."

He thought he heard Grey chuckle.

"Fuck you man! There's nothing fucking funny about me loosing my cameras."

"No there isn't Mr Katz."

Grey held out Adam's camera bag over the top of the hole.

"Maybe you forget that I was carrying your camera bag."

"Oh Jesus, thank god."

"Yes, thank him although I don't mind if you thank me too. Your equipment is really very heavy."

They both laughed. Adam's laughter, however, polite at first, grew incrementally louder and more uncontrollable. It grew to a mad frenzy of anger as he thrashed about the water. Grey silently watched.

"I'm sorry," Adam eventually offered.

"I think it's been a difficult few weeks for you," Grey responded.

"I don't know what I feel about the past few weeks."

"I'm sure you'll have plenty of time to think about that once we get you out this hole."

Following Grey's advice, Adam tried to pull himself up the side of the hole. His wet body made it impossible to secure a grip and he just fell back into the water each time as he tried to hoist himself out.

"You're going to have to get a ladder or a rope at the guesthouse," Adam panted.

Grey's footsteps quickly retreated into the night. Adam stood motionless in the centre of the hole, looking up, his eyes fixed intently on the moonlit sky overhead. But for a thin smudge of white cloud cover it was a perfect night. Stars everywhere. Even if he were pressed hard, though, he couldn't name one of them. Just then Grey returned and peered in over the hole. The guesthouse was a short distance away.

"The guard won't let me in," he declared.

"What?"

"He says he won't let me in."

"But for fuck's sake, he knows who you are?"

"It's not the same young man from yesterday."

"But can't you explain to him what happened?"

"I did."

"And what did he say?"

"He refused."

"Didn't you ask him to call the owners of the guesthouse?"

"I did."

"And he refused?"

"Yes."

"Fuck!"

"Exactly."

Adam smashed a fist into the water.

"At least Olivia is safe up here with me."

"Thank god for that," Adam responded, leaning himself against the side of the hole. The earth felt cold. A large stone dug into the arch of his back. He shifted his position.

"You seem to thank God for lots of things," Grey observed.

"In a manner of speaking."

Adam asked the question he had suppressed at dinner.

"Grey, have you ever lived in another country, I mean outside Africa?"

"Why do you ask?"

"It just the way you express yourself on certain things."

"Manchester, England. I completed a postgraduate diploma in tropical medicines there."

"How was it?"

"Unfamiliar."

"Is that all?"

"I am using one word to say a lot of things."

"But how was it unfamiliar?"

Grey paced around the circumference of the hole. Finally he stopped.

"Let me be candid with you and say that the music over there was quite strange."

He did not know how to respond and simply declined his head. Things were silent for a short moment.

"Do you dislike me, Grey?"

"Why would I dislike you?"

"You keep calling me Mr Katz."

"It is your name is it not?"

"Yes, I suppose it is."

Grey paced the border of the hole then returned to squatting on his haunches.

"I just find it strange that you don't like music, that's all. Maybe that is why your wife left you."

The remark came unexpected. It wrapped itself around him like a stray bluebottle washed up on a beach, and stung. Not that it hurt; a bluebottle's sting merely itches, a throbbing itch.

"But that is your personal business," Grey continued. "I think the question now really is how to get you out of this hole. I have a friend from the health department who lives nearby. I am sure he will be able to help us with a rope."

Grey disappeared into the night, for much longer this time. Every so often Adam heard a car pass. It started with

an oncoming rush of sound that quickly built to a climax then disappeared. It was the same with the pedestrians: the approach of voices, the unfamiliar words, the laughter, the silence. Leaning against the side of the hole, a slight tremor running through his body, he listened to the imperfect silence. Insects chirped. Occasionally, in the far distance, he heard a dog bark, possibly even the sound of a child crying somewhere, but nothing to suggest the return of Grey.

He wondered if Grey had simply decided to leave him there for the night, a punishment of sorts. He had behaved badly by getting drunk at dinner. But it was his last night in this unpleasant place; he was simply celebrating this fact, that's all. And now, here he was, six feet under. How long would that take before he was rescued? He remembered the stern warnings of teachers at school, not to play in the storm water drains and building excavations. Like most of his classmates at the time, he lived in a half-formulated suburb where the rain-filled foundations of a new house had a special kind of wonder. The falling stone he had dropped into the hole a few days back had unearthed that memory. He hated nostalgia. He would call out to the next passer-by.

As the silence gathered, Grey's absence became more noticeable. Adam found himself drawn back to their conversation at dinner, particularly Grey's dislike of the photo of the naked woman, Olivia. And then there was his thing about music. Why was Grey so persistent about the subject? He thought again about his last comment, just before he left. Kirsten had left him because he had no interest in music. Hah, what did Grey know?

He still remembered the lyrics of the song they had met by, the one they played at their wedding; everyone had danced to it.

"How does it feel to treat me like you do? When you've laid your hands upon me, and told me who you are."

The words were delivered in a sombre deadpan over an almost staccato dance beat: a happy sad song, almost like their relationship. Happy then sad.

He thought he heard a sound, the approaching of feet.

"Grey? Grey!"

Nothing, just a stiff neck and nameless stars. And also the insects.

"Tell me how does it feel when your heart grows cold?"

He remembered those closing lines from the song too. Thinking about the words now, here, three or more metres underground, far from Johannesburg, the lyrics struck him

as odd. They had requested in at their wedding. Everyone had danced.

There was no definitive date, but at some point he had stopped dancing. The song of his life had gone from happy to sad. His heart grew cold. Even now, five years after their divorce, Kirsten could not forgive him for walking out on her, for aimlessly wandering off with cameras in search of objective pictures describing his own ruin.

The sound crept in through the silence of his thoughts. It was muffled at first, distant but nonetheless clear. It was a siren, which was pointedly odd. The ambulances at the various hospitals he had visited were barely functioning hand-me-downs. Perhaps Grey had simply gone straight to the nearest police station. All the while the sound grew louder. A blue light started flashing dimly overhead. The sound of the siren also grew until it seemed to fill the entire cavity in the earth where he was trapped, and the world above him.

Adam waited for the unequivocal sound of screeching tyres, for the commotion of voices it would herald – it never happened. The siren passed, and with it an unseen entourage of cars, each of their white lights beaming momentarily overhead as they negotiated the nearby traffic circle. And then it was quiet again. Imperfectly. A dog

barked. Insects trilled in the night. Stars burnt with the intensity of suns, just far off. He remembered the familiar sound the stone had made as it hit the water's surface, the nostalgic thoughts it had unlocked, thoughts that he had buried deeply for so long. Trapped in the cold embrace of these thoughts, Adam silently waited on Grey's return.

A GIFT OF STONES (1)

The taxi turned and sped off along the embankment towards the city. I looked down to the group of protestors congregated near the river's edge. They were laughing, their anti-dam placards lazily resting against iceboxes and picnic baskets. Children played in groups. Smoke drifted off the barbecue. I made my way down a slip road to a gravel parking lot. It was filled with station wagons and family sedans. I searched the crowd. It didn't take long to spot her; she was only other Westerner in the crowd.

"Hi, Richard Cope. You must be Catherine Orton." I thrust my hand forward.

"Oh hello, I've been expecting you," she shouted above the youthful racket that surrounded her.

"Sorry, the ferry from Osaka was delayed. It was also a bit of an effort explaining to the taxi driver where I wanted to go. My Japanese isn't all that good."

"All in a day's work," Catherine tittered, her hand resting on the head of a young boy wearing a baseball cap.

"Can I offer you a drink? Tea, juice, a beer?"

"Coke please, I'm not much of a fan of the local iced tea. It's rather bitter."

"Me neither. Anyhow, follow me."

Dressed in a sleeveless dress, Catherine's shoulder length crop of hair waved freely in the midday breeze. Something about the colour of her dress held my attention. A new editor on the paper in London, an American, had complained about the "restricted use of vivid prose" in my news features. As a useful bit of practice, he had suggested I work on my description things, colours, for instance. It proved to be uncannily difficult. Gun-mettle grey or ashen-silver? I couldn't decide which of the two best described her fashionable dress.

Sitting in the back seat of the black taxi earlier, I had experienced a similar defeat. Following a route that started at the mouth of the Yoshino River, the taxi had wound its way through a dull monotony of prefabricated housing alongside the river. I tried to contain what I saw by writing a haphazard list of words and colours into my notebook: linear, temporary, grey asbestos, humid, olive, forest green, lime. My mood had lifted as we made our way further out of the glum port city of Tokushima, on the southwestern edge of Shikoku Island. The strange rural landscape impressed me with its generosity of colours, the taxi depositing me on an embankment overlooking its local celebrants.

She led me to a table where a group of women wearing floral sunhats had congregated. They bowed excitedly after she introduced me: Richard from London.

"So why the interest in covering this little meeting here today," she asked, handing me a polystyrene cup.

"A colleague took sick at the Tokyo office and I was seconded here from London for three months. One of my pet topics is dams."

"Dear me, that sounds a bit dull, if you'll pardon my honesty."

"Not at all, I suppose it does sound rather dull. I should probably explain myself better, though. I studied economics and journalism; my specialisation is public works projects and rural development. Admittedly, it's not quite *News of the World* stuff but some of us have to earn a living."

"Where did you study?" she asked.

"Westminster Uni. You?"

"Norwich."

"Oh, Norfolk. It's nice up there."

"I suppose, although I thought it was remarkably crap."

"Why?"

"Hmm, I think maybe you should ask another question, Mr Journalist."

"Is it okay to ask what you studied?"

"Law."

"And when did you finish?"

"Three years ago?"

She must have been about twenty-four. Six years younger than me. I took of sip on the Coke. It left a sticky aftertaste in my mouth.

"Well, aren't we a pair: a soon-to-be lawyer and a journalist who writes about developmental economics. I couldn't imagine anything more dull."

"Speak for yourself Jack!"

Just then I felt someone tugging at my leg. It was the young boy in the baseball cap. With a smile he wrapped one hand around my leg, holding up a stone to me with his other.

"What's he saying?"

"He wants you to take it."

I extended an open hand. The boy carefully placed the smooth, oval stone into it, offering a garbled selection of words along with it. He turned and disappeared into a thicket of adult legs.

"What did he say?"

"Nothing really, he just wanted you to have the stone."

"A stone?" I smirked. "Not much of a gift is it."

"Actually, they're quite famous around here, not worth much but nonetheless famous."

"Do they have a name?"

"*Awa no ao-ishii*."

"You're going to have to repeat that."

She repeated the name of the stone, her lips pursing as she formed each of its component elements with her mouth. Just like a teacher, he thought, rapt.

"*Ao* means blue, *ao-ishii* meaning blue stone."

"They look more green than blue to me."

"Well, smart alec, the Chinese character for blue can also mean green. For what it's worth I personally think they look sort of slate grey."

She spoke these last words almost mockingly, her glance sideways hiding a cheeky smile. She seemed to be flirting back, if that was the right word to describe what we were doing. I dabbed my tongue at the stone's surface. It was tasteless, and even with my spittle darkening a part of its surface it still looked green to me.

"So why are they important?" I asked.

"Now you're asking a question. You'll have to ask Mr Himeno to explain."

I took out my notebook.

"How do you spell that name again?"

She patiently spelt out the words, laughing after when I tried to pronounce it.

"Can you write the Chinese character?" I asked. "I mean into my notebook, please."

She held out her hands. I watched as she practiced the ideogram's strokes above the blank page before inscribing it with an unhindered flourish.

"That's quite impressive," I said.

"Don't be fooled, it's one of the first kanji you learn when you study Japanese."

"That doesn't make it any less impressive."

"I'll take that as a complement, thank you. I've been wondering though. Where's your accent from? It's not quite your standard home county version."

"Cape Town."

"Oh really," she remarked, her voice lilting. "I've been reading a lot about it lately. Sounds like a top place."

"I suppose, although I am not the best judge of that anymore. I left there when I finished school."

"With your parents?"

"No, they still live there. I go visit them once a year."

"Jammy sod."

"Where are you from then?"

"Redcar."

"Where?"

"Exactly," she smiled, gathering her hair into a ponytail. Her vest pulled tightly across the contour of her breasts, and she caught me looking at the crease in her fabric as it traced the outlines of her nipples. She simply smiled, knowingly I embarrassedly thought.

"I take it you're not a fan of English horse racing then."

"Sorry, now I'm totally lost."

"Oh never mind, you'll get it one day," she laughed. "It's near Middlesbrough. Anyway, enough of that, let's go meet Mr Himeno."

Tsuyoshi Himeno, the leader of the anti-dam campaign, was a stout man with a neat, symmetrical crop of grey hair. He looked nothing like the beleaguered men in suits I ritually shared a train ride with to Shinjuku station, in Tokyo. Instead, he had the appearance of a self-made man, of someone who regularly played golf. I put this

observation down to his neat dress, a yellow Lacoste shirt primly tucked into stylish flannels.

"It's nice to meet you," he said, confidently taking my hand. He wore an expensive watch, and his handshake was firm. His broad smile seemed to reveal his only flaw, a ropey dental job. Mr Himeno motioned me towards the barbecue, his hand pushing into the small of my back.

"Let's share some food together. Ms Catherine, please get Mr Richard Cope a beer."

As we made our way towards the barbecue, I thought about the protesters I had recently interviewed in Uganda. Somehow, I had expected Mr Himeno to look different, more impoverished, maybe not quite like the villagers at the early beginnings of The Nile, but then also not like this, like that that famous Japanese golfer his father had mentioned when he said he was spending a few months in Japan. What was his name, Jumbo Ozaki or something?

As it turned out, Mr Himeno's English was also impeccable. This disappointed me. Our initial introduction had been facilitated by a professor of public works theory at Hosei University, in Tokyo, the actual appointment handled by a secretary in my Tokyo office. According to her I was simply to arrive at the scheduled location and look out for an expatriate English teacher, from the local high

school. She would smooth the progress of the rest, which, in the end, simply meant replacing my Coke with a cold beer.

"Did you fly to Tokushima, Mr Cope?" I was looking towards the river when Mr Himeno asked his question; she was standing there.

"Um, no, and please call me Richard. I took the Shinkansen to Osaka, yesterday. I came over with the ferry this morning."

"Wow," Mr Himeno blurted, his accent marked by a distinctive American twang. "Such a long journey, you must be very exhausted."

"No, no, I'm fine thank you. Just a little hot."

"Well, please, have a relaxing time with us. We can discuss the *daijuzeki* later."

"I beg your pardon?"

Mr Himeno laughed.

"Your Japanese is not so good, hey. The *daijuzeki* is the reason you are here today. It is the name of that old dam wall you see over there."

He pointed in the direction of a craggy outcrop of cement that spanned the width of the river. Groups of picnickers and protesters – it was hard to distinguish them from one another - played in the shallows beneath it,

children skipping past bits of plastic junk and debris as they chased after tiny fish with their nets. Clever, I thought, looking at the cement barrier, a very simple double-step design.

"It was built 250 years ago," Mr Himeno remarked. "When it was first built, it was just a collection of stones, almost exactly like the one you have in your hand, except much bigger, of course."

I had forgotten about the stone. Holding it up between my fingers, all I saw was a confusing ideogram. Was it blue or green? How the hell could one word describe two colours? I put the stone in my shirt pocket.

"So is this where they want to build the new dam?" I asked.

"Sadly yes." His answer was earnest, almost heartfelt. "It is a wonderful place. My father taught me how to fish here. Do you fish Mr Richard?"

"Um, no, not any more. I used too when I was younger, when I lived in Cape Town."

"Cape Town? In Souse Africa?"

"Yes, I grew up there."

"Incredible. What was your target fish?"

"I'm sorry, I don't think I quite understand what you mean by target fish?"

He looked at me perplexed.

"*Eto ne*, how would I translate that? What was your hobby fish?"

I think I got a sense of what he meant.

"Steenbras."

"*He?* One more time, please."

"Steenbras," I repeated, trying to think of its other names. He shook his head.

"What about you, Mr Himeno, what is your, um, target fish?"

"It is not a river fish," he sheepishly grinned. "Do you know *ishi-dai*?" I shook my head, just as he had. We both laughed.

"Have you ever met Mandela-*san*?"

I laughed again, hoping that Mr Himeno had intended it as a joke. He gave me a quizzical look, then waved at a passer-by, a man of similar age. I could not understand anything of their conversation, just my name, which was always prefixed by that of my paper. As their exchange drew to a close, Mr Himeno looked at his watch. He grabbed at my hand.

"*Domo, domo*," he said, shaking my hand and using an expression I knew to be one of thanks. He headed off in the

direction of the marquee, erected on a gravel baseball pitch. She was still standing near the river.

"What made you choose this backwater," I asked her.

"I didn't. When they replied to my application to come teach here, it was the first time I had ever heard of Tokushima. I had to check the internet to find out where it was."

"And will you be staying another three years?"

"No, my contract expires soon, then it's back to Blighty again."

"To Redcar?"

"No, London, if I can find a job."

"Have you applied to many law firms?"

"Do you always ask so many questions?" she responded. "This feels more like an interrogation than a conversation."

"I'm sorry, I'm just curious. I mean personally."

"Don't they warn you about getting too interested in your subjects in journalism school?"

I laughed. She had brown eyes, nothing complicated in that.

"Is it safe to walk across that thing," I said, pointing to the concrete barrier that extended across the river.

"As houses."

"Can I walk across to the other side?"

"No, but we can walk halfway, if you want to."

A torrent of water divided the barrier at its midpoint. I suggested that we sit on the ledge. She took her sandals off and dipped her feet into the water. Her toenails were red, I noticed, indisputably red.

"Don't you ever get lonely being out here, alone?"

"I don't know what you missed driving here this morning, Mr Dafoe, but I think it is obvious I'm not alone on this island."

"You know what I mean."

"No, I don't."

"I mean, isn't it difficult being a foreigner here?"

"I'm sure it is no different from when you first moved to London."

I savoured the coolness of her retort, the verbal slap she had just given me. Somehow, I had forgotten what it was like to be challenged, to have my own brazenness chucked back at me. I was intrigued.

"Okay, peace offer." I stood up, removed the stone from my pocket. "Let's see how far you can throw this stone."

"Bit macho, don't you think."

"Come one." I held the stone out to her.

She took the stone and looked out across the river towards the mountains framing it in the distance. Her hands were small, I saw, delicately shaped and without any jewellery. She placed the stone in her right hand and threw it. It made a plop sound as it hit the water.

"I'll reserve judgement on that attempt," I teased.

"You do that." Her smile creased the skin across the bridge of her nose.

"I like your dress by the way. When I first saw you I couldn't make up my mind what colour it was."

"And what options did you come up with then?"

"I'll have to check in my notebook?" I hoped the flattery would help my cause.

Even though I hadn't written anything about her, I pretended to look through my pocket notebook. Gun-mettle grey or ashen-silver, I recalled from memory. I repeated these descriptions to her.

"Bit poncy, don't you think?"

"I try my best."

"What else did you write about in there?" she unexpectedly asked.

"About you? Oh, a few things."

"Such as?"

With her hand held up against the sun, she looked me squarely in the eye. I suddenly and unexpectedly felt awkward, the shyness I had long since learnt to mask shining through. I flicked through my notebook, eventually pausing on a page with some preparatory scribbles from the ferry ride earlier.

"Um, let's see. Redcar. Horse races. English teacher. Single. Self-assured despite…" I paused.

"Despite what?" she queried.

"… her circumstances."

"Are you sure that's me you're pretending to describe?" Her contempt was palpable. With a graceful swoop she lifted up her sandals and started walking back towards the riverbank. I stumbled after her.

"I'm sorry, I was only joking. I haven't written anything into my notebook."

She paused, turned and confronted me squarely. "So you lied to me too. If I were a judge, I would tell you that you are making a terrible job of your defence, even if your choice of words are, well, perceptive." She smiled, gathering the loosened bits of hair into a bunch again.

We walked in silence to the tarpaulin shading where the press conference was due to be held. I took a seat at the rear, Catherine next to me. She whispered updates of

the proceedings at uneven intervals. The softness of her voice, the momentary pleasure of her cupped hand bumping against my ear; I made no notes. In fact, I completely forgot why I had journeyed down here from Tokyo.

Mr Himeno promptly reminded me. Shortly after the press conference was over, he approached me with a colleague.

"This is Mr Saito," he stated, beaming. I shook his companion's hand. "He is an expert on the *daijuzeki*. Come, he will teach us exactly how it works."

I walked out along the craggy cement barrier again, only less interested in the conversation this time. My blissful interlude was over. Mr Saito spoke like a scientist. He coldly tabulated the impact the proposed dam wall would have on the river's ecology. I jotted down some of his statistics, even made up for my earlier lapse with a series of earnest enquiries. Mr Himeno was impressed.

While waiting as he translated one of my questions, I saw Catherine climb into a minivan. After negotiating the slip road it followed the same meandering route as the taxi back to the city. Quite abruptly, it disappeared from view. I concentrated on the slow, unfamiliar drawl of Mr Saito. I couldn't understand a word he was saying. Patiently, I waited for Mr Himeno to translate.

Arriving at the ferry terminal an hour or so later, with Mr Himeno (he had insisted on giving me a lift), I felt a peculiarly blank sadness. It was a rather formless emotion, something that had unexpectedly been prompted by the clipped possibilities of my encounter at the river's edge. I told myself to leave it, I was getting carried away with imagined possibilities, not anything real.

"Please, a gift from Tokushima."

Mr Himeno held out a shopping bag to me. I thanked him, insisted – a bit too forcefully, I thought afterwards on the ferry - that he not wait until I boarded. I waved him off, entered the terminal building. I sat down on a peculiar, vinyl-covered chair made to look like faux marble. It was surprisingly soft, comfortable even. I peered into the bag, removing the larger gift first. It was a selection of local delicacies. I would pass them on my colleagues at work.

The smaller package was a makeshift thing, a Burberry-pattern handkerchief neatly tied with string. It opened easily, its contents fitting into the palm of my hand: two stones, each no bigger than quail's eggs. Accompanying them was a folded note.

A prize pair of misfits indeed, one blue, the other green. – C.

"He says it looks like Soweto."

Martin Orton was speaking to his wife, Alison.

"Ooh, it can't be as bad as that?" she chuckled.

"That's what you said, yeah!" Martin shouted to Richard from the kitchen.

"What's that?"

"I was telling Alison about what you said when we passed through Skinningrove on our walk yesterday, that it looked like Soweto."

"Do you mean that dodgy village where those men were coiling the copper wire?"

"That's the one."

"I think so, I can't actually remember."

"You said it looked like Soweto," Martin repeated. Richard heard Alison laugh.

He had forgotten about the wisecrack. He might have said something like that, although he wasn't sure. He remembered that shortly after reaching the apex of Hunt Cliff, on their hike yesterday, they had passed through a desperate looking village: Skinningrove. The local stream was a mess of rust coloured water. Iron oxides, Martin had explained, from the old ironstone works. At some point

round about then, Richard had mistakenly confused the local's pigeon coops for shacks, even asked Martin whether people lived in them or not. Maybe he had said something about Soweto then? Hut he wasn't sure.

"One or two sugars, Richard?" he heard Alison ask.

"Two, please."

She emerged from the kitchen bearing a tray with readymade tea on it. Richard sat up from the newspaper he had been reading on the floor.

"Thanks," he said, sneaking a determined peak at Alison. Catherine had inherited her mother's looks, he thought, the smile, the slight bump on her nose, maybe one day the hips too.

"I'll just take one up to Cathy."

Richard slumped back down onto his stomach, his attention drawn again to *The Guardian*'s Saturday supplement. He reached over and placed the magazine squarely in front of him. The cover showed a photograph of a plane about to collide into one of the Twin Towers in New York, probably the second. It was an image taken at the very cusp of something traumatic. He heard Catherine laugh upstairs. flopped down on the couch. He switched on the television. They were discussing the afternoon's football

fixtures, their conversation interspersed with highlights from the midweek games.

"You alright there, mate?"

"No complaints, Martin, I might even go for a walk with Cathy on the beach if her ladyship ever decides to come down."

"I heard that!" Catherine descended the stairs. She wore a simple white T-shirt and jeans with a red cardigan slung over her shoulders. Ever since getting the job with that Japanese fashion distribution company in Farringdon, Richard noticed how her fashion sense had become looser, casual in a fastidious way. The sweater was from Harvey Nichols.

She disappeared into the kitchen. Richard heard the fridge open. Outside, autumn was whispering. Winter fashions were already on display in the store windows in Middlesbrough. Nearer Redcar, on the road to the neighbouring coastal village of Saltburn, where they had set off on their hike the previous day, the fields were neatly cropped. The football league was also just getting started. Despite Bobby Robson's presence, Middlesbrough had gotten off to another faltering start. Martin groaned.

"What time's your train back tomorrow?" he asked.

"At five," Catherine shouted from the kitchen.

"That means we'll have to leave here at four to get to Darlington."

Richard opened the magazine and searched for the photo credit.

"When do you leave for China then?" Martin asked.

China, he hadn't forgotten about his pending trip so much it as put it out of his mind for their visit to Catherine's parents. He wanted to approach it with a clear head next week. Unlike his previous features, which had been fitted in around his normal quota of work, his editor had specifically commissioned him to write a piece on the Three Gorges Dam, on the Yangtze River. If all went well, the story could be his big break.

"Next Thursday."

"That soon," Martin responded. "Hey Cath, you should take Rich down to the barriers by the Tees. Maybe he can find something interesting to write about that mess down there for his paper."

Richard heard Catherine laugh.

"When do you want to go walking?" Catherine seated herself on the floor next to him, her hand resting on his back.

"We can go now if you want."

"I'll go get a sweater for you."

"We aren't going to be out that long, are we?"

"I thought we could to Wetherspoons, for lunch."

"Well in that case, can you bring my wallet down."

"Please?"

"Please!"

The path, leading from where Catherine had grown up on an estate of neat, similar looking bungalows, cut beneath the railway, then passed through an older neighbourhood before leading to the concrete promenade, which overlooked the beach. It was low tide, the North Sea glassy. A man dressed in a grey suit was walking his collie. The pair gingerly made their way across the pebbles and stones to the sandy stretch of beach exposed by the low tide.

It was the only part of Redcar he really liked. More so than London, which managed to perpetually reinvent itself, to stave off the legacy of the bronze men on their plinths, the landscape here was utterly exhausted. The old bridges surrounding Middlesbrough, which they had visited early yesterday morning, were museum curiosities. The harbour, he knew from subbing on the paper some years back, was largely redundant. Most of the factories were now foreign owned too. Even the areas mythologies, if that's what he could call them, had been stolen. The illuminated night scenes, of factories lit up in electric glow, their

chimneys topped with radiant blue flames, were, according to Catherine at least, the inspiration for the film *Bladerunner*. She had a thing about movies.

When Richard unexpectedly bumped into her at Oxford Circus a few months after their encounter in Japan, he suggested they meet for a drink; a movie, she countered, Akira Kurosawa's *Drunken Angel*. The film was an odd choice for a first date, a desperate and rather vicious portrait of Japan after the war. Then again, it was also the type of movie one often ended up watching in London. She had stayed over at his place in Shepherd's Bush after that first night.

"Have you ever thought how important water is in our relationship?" she asked. They were walking hand-in-hand along the beach towards town.

Richard was cautious in his reply. Early into their relationship, he had told Catherine that she had a capricious imagination. She didn't speak to him for a week afterwards, and he subsequently learnt to better negotiate her musings.

"I'm not sure what you mean."

"Well, think about it. When we first met, it was next to the Yoshino River, and then the same again in London."

"But we met at Oxford Circus. That's quite stroll from the Thames."

"Yes, but remember our first date, that movie at the NFT. That's next to the Thames. And what about that nasty river outside the doctor's house in the movie, more water."

"I think you're stretching things a bit there."

"Do you always have to be such a dreary sod?" Catherine sighed.

She freed her hand, walked a short distance to the side and stopped. They both looked out towards the sea. The low tide had exposed a treacherous reef close to the shore. Further out, the horizon was filled with the outlines of white boats, many of them large container ships, most of them headed elsewhere. They resumed walking, each silent about their thoughts. Their route eventually led them to the town centre, an unimpressive collection of gaming parlours, low-end franchises and charity shops. They walked to the pub, found a seat on the wooden deck outside.

"You should try listening to what he sings about sometime?" she said, nodding her head at the speaker. Robbie Williams was playing.

"It's hardly Sylvia Plath, is it?"

"Oh, sod off."

Richard headed for the bar counter. Their fall-outs were becoming more routine, commonplace almost. He ordered: vodka lime for her, Guinness for him. He had probably been a bit malicious with his remark, he thought. The American poet was her childhood muse, a kindred soul whose words had reshaped the drab world outside her bedroom window, suggesting possibilities beyond the ordinariness of garden sheds and trim wooden fencing. She had even quoted the poet to him once: "I cannot run, I am rooted," she said. It had been a Sunday, they were still been in bed; she was explaining why she had decided to return to England from Japan.

"Ta." He placed the drink in front of her.

"Look, I'm sorry. It's just stress, you have to understand that. You know how important this feature could be for me."

"I know." She sipped wordlessly on her drink.

"Let's try to have some fun while we're here. God knows, we could even go to Sharky's disco tonight."

Catherine spluttered on her drink, smiled. After lunch they wandered back to the promenade. Richard bought them lemon tops, a sweet sorbet ice cream, which they ate as they walked along the route they had followed earlier. At one point, nearing the path that cut through the suburbs to

her parent's home, they both laughed outrageously at a tall man in a Mackintosh after Catherine remarked how much he looked like his wirehaired fox terriers.

"Remember that song we were listening to the other night?" Catherine asked as their laughter subdued.

"Which one?"

"The one you said reminded you of school."

"Oh, Soft Cell. What about it?"

"What's the name of that song when he sings that love is a dirty word?"

"I don't remember it."

"Oh come on, of course you do."

"No I don't."

"Well, anyway, that's not what I'm asking."

"What are you asking then?"

"Do you think love is a dirty word?"

"I've never really thought about it. I'd probably say he being a bit cynical, don't you think?"

Catherine stopped. She kneeled down, picked through a clump of stones. Taking Richard's hand, she placed one in his palm, closing it, holding her hand over his balled fist.

"Did you know that I was born just up the way from here, in Saltburn?"

"Over there, right?" Richard threw the stone in the direction of a village in the near distance.

"No, a bit further on, nearer the cliffs you walked along yesterday."

"Why are you telling me this, Catherine?"

"I don't know, maybe it has something to do with the name. You have to admit that there is something appealing about it, the ring of those two words together: salt and burn. I like to believe that it says something about me."

Turning, she faced Richard, paused indecisively then embraced him. It was a tight embrace.

"I wouldn't call it a dirty word either," she whispered, "just a difficult word. When you tell someone you love them it has implications, because that person has a hold on you. At some point it is bound to be painful."

She started sobbing, secretly almost, then openly, loud gasping breaths of wet.

"Hey you, what's wrong?"

"Nothing," she sniffed. "Nothing, I'm just being silly. I think my period must be coming on."

It was only a short walk to the house, which was quiet when they finally arrived. Martin was sitting in the kitchen, alone, drinking tea. Alison was out visiting her sister, he said, adding that Middlesbrough had drawn with

Newcastle. The Saturday papers had been neatly stacked in a pile near his feet, next to the dustbin. Somewhere in all of that is the photograph of that plane, Richard thought.

"I'm off, I'll see you lot in the morning." Martin was working the night shift.

As her father's car pulled out the drive, and Richard sat downstairs watching television, Catherine dozed on her bed. Maybe they could walk to Saltburn in the morning. She would take Richard to the hospital where she was born. Looking at the familiar geometries of the ceiling above her bed, she decided not; it was a stupid idea. She would rather tell him in London, possibly after he got back from China. After all, it's still only a pip, nothing more, just an uncertain visitor. Catherine tentatively rested her hand on her stomach. A little pip, she repeated, falling asleep.

A GIFT OF STONES (3)

"Day of mist: day of tarnish" – Sylvia Plath

The laughter from earlier had stopped, the thud of bass too. The last of the party-goers hanging around the seaside disco had finally gone home. A brooding silence cloaked the Alexander Bay Hotel. Seated on a white plastic chair, Richard stared into the mist that had rolled in off the Atlantic. Nothing, he couldn't see a damn thing. He listened to the gentle lull of the ocean. Its constancy soothed his thoughts. He looked back at Catherine, sleeping in the hotel bed. She would have a hangover tomorrow. He poured the remainder of the whiskey into the teacup, gulped it down. It was a feeble given all that had been said earlier.

Their decision to come to Alexander Bay was the result of pure whim. They had just spent a week camping in Namibia when they pulled up next to a large green signboard at an intersection on the N7. Cape Town south, Upington east, Alexander Bay west. Richard had suggested they stop in Springbok, then push through to Cape Town the next morning. Standing beneath the sign, she asked which of the three

places he had never been before. His answer had settled it: Alexander Bay.

They turned right, skirting the village of Steinkopf. The Anenous Pass was unremarkable, the road thereafter straight as an arrow. It took less than an hour to shoot across the barren scrubland to Alexander Bay, at the end of R382. Their hotel room looked directly out onto the beach, which wasn't much of an attraction. Despite the fact that it was December, mid summer, it was too cold to swim and a rasping wind occasionally blew off the ocean. Catherine had immediately jumped into the bath, leaving Richard free to stroll through the town. The familiar strangeness of platteland towns still surprised him, their dull Old Mutual architecture and elevated church spires. By the time he got back, she was watching television, waiting.

They opted for a window seat, although they could have sat anywhere; they were the only people in the restaurant. Giovanni's Seafood Restaurant.

"Not much of a menu is it?" Richard grumbled, thinking how the place's name should have been enough warning.

"Oh, chill out."

"But just look at it, we're on the West Coast and the menu looks like the bloody Spur."

The waitress shyly approached their table and introduced herself.

"Hello, my name's Shaunelle. I'll be your waitress for the evening." She couldn't have been older than twenty. With a flawless smile, she deposited the menus and returned to the till.

"What kind of name is that?" whispered Catherine

"Maybe it's a contraction of Shaun and Chantal." He spelt out the latter name in his mind. "No can't be. Oh hell, I haven't a clue."

Catherine studied the wine list at the back of the menu. "What's that wine your grandmother likes again?"

"Graca."

"Oh, here it is, let's get a bottle of it." She waved in the direction of Shaunelle.

They had already finished their first bottle by the time their meal arrived, a Giovanni's surf 'n turf special, for two. As they prepared to eat Catherine's phone beeped. It was Zoë. All through the week, she had been sending text messages from London.

"No use keeping us in suspense. Don't you want to see if she's decided to leave him or not yet?"

Catherine checked her message.

If its so horrible, just end it. ill be here when you get back. BE BRAVE. xxx

"What does she say?"

"Not much. It might snow."

"There's a change for you." Richard bit into a piece of pork rib.

"What do you mean?"

"The weather."

"Oh, of course."

"Did she say anything about her man?"

"No, she is still undecided."

"I hope that means she'll stop texting you for a bit." Catherine fidgeted with her phone.

"Aren't you going to eat anything? I thought you were starving," he asked.

Will let you know in the morning. x

Throughout the meal Richard discussed another small and unexpected detail regarding his recent appointment. He had been offered a promotion, a position running the Southern Africa bureau. It was a small office, admittedly, but the opportunity nonetheless constituted a move up. He

was due to start in February. Not that the new job was the panacea he had hoped for; their relationship had spiralled into a mess of tiny fault lines and unspoken resentments. Shaunelle removed their plates.

"How was it, sir?"

"Oh darling, you don't have to be so formal, there's no-one around," Catherine interjected. The young waitress smiled, clearly taken by Catherine's fashionable affectations.

She asked about the silk Liberty scarf Catherine wore as a bandana. Catherine reciprocated, drawing her out on life in Alexander Bay. She was eighteen, had just finished school. After the holidays were over she hoped to study tourism in Springbok, if her father allowed. He was part owner of the restaurant and also a councillor with the district municipality. She said her mother was in the kitchen, that she liked Robbie Williams too.

"Do you sell cigarettes here?"

No, she replied, but she could slip off to the café. Catherine settled for Benson & Hedges.

"I thought you quit."

"I have, although one every so often won't hurt."

"Please yourself."

"Oh stop it will you, you're like a sterile viper sometimes."

She delivered the cigarettes on a side plate. Catherine's fringe fell across her face as she dropped her head to light a cigarette. She inhaled, coughed, took another, deeper draw.

"This isn't going to work is it?" she said, looking down at the table.

"I don't know why you keep saying that. You called me a jammy sod when I first told you I was from Cape Town."

"That was five years ago Richard. Things are not as simple anymore, you know that."

"So you keep telling me."

Catherine waved at Shaunelle.

"The bill?"

"Oh don't be silly, darling. Bring us another bottle of wine."

"We still have a long drive to Cape Town tomorrow."

"You'll manage."

He pushed over his half-full glass of wine and asked for a new one. They drank in silence after she returned with two new glasses and the wine.

For the first time in days, Catherine looked intently at the man seated opposite her. His week old stubble was

dotted with hints of grey. She had always liked to tease him about it but even that had stopped now. He wasn't wearing his glasses for a change. She preferred him like that, even if she had chosen the frames. He looked unsettled, his eyes continually darting all over the place, usually out of the restaurant's large window.

"When we get to Cape Town, can we go to the Mount Nelson, babes? *Vogue* says it's an absolute must."

"Sure. Any other destinations on your list, Ms Wintour?" She smiled.

"Just the Mount Nelson, thank you."

Maybe she should end it in Cape Town, she thought, after his parents.

"Do you like the shirt I gave you for Christmas? I bought it at the Paul Smith shop in Ladbroke Grove," she asked, thinking how it felt like Redcar all over again.

"Yes, it's lovely."

"A bit of blue and bit of green."

They both chuckled nostalgically. He looked at his watch. It was nearing eleven.

"Whatever happened to those two stones I gave you?"

"Oh, they're somewhere in a drawer in my study."

"Close to your heart, I see."

"In a manner of speaking."

He wasn't sure how long the two boys had been staring at them through the restaurant's window. The shorter of the two wore a frayed brown school jersey, the other a grubby T-shirt with a faded image of the Ninja Turtles. They stared fixedly at the couple. After making a series of comical facial gestures, the taller one pointed at his stomach, then, with his fingers gathered, motioned at his mouth. They wanted food.

"God, they look starved," Catherine remarked. She reached for her bag.

"Don't give them anything, you'll just create a nuisance for the restaurant."

"It's not the Kruger Park, Richard. They're not baboons. A little charity won't go amiss."

"I realise that, but just remember that charity can be another word for expediency."

"Oh for god's sake, this isn't an opinion column. They're young boys." Catherine drunkenly rummaged through her purse.

Shaunelle resolved their frustrated standoff. She had slipped through the front door and shooed the two boys away with an irritated gesture of her hand. Standing outside, she waved. Catherine waved back.

"Do you ever think how things would have been different if we had kept it?" Richard continued to stare out the window.

"You mean her," Catherine corrected him.

"What do you mean, her?"

"It was a girl." She grimaced, then reached for her cigarettes.

"You never told me."

"You never asked."

It had all been such a rush before he left for Hubei province in China, a sudden change in photographer requiring a new letter of passage from the Chinese Embassy. Over and above this, his editor had requested a re-briefing; The New York Times had trumped them on their angle on the story. He had treated the announcement of her pregnancy – told to him on the platform at Darlington station – like any another item on his pre-China checklist. Passport. Traveller's cheques. Rewritable discs. Draw money, pay for abortion. He had been that coldly methodical about it, leaving her a sum of money and a blank cheque on their dresser. When he arrived back from China the envelope had still been there. Asked how it went, she flatly refused to speak about it, simply telling him that the stain had been removed.

"Do you still think about it a lot?"

"Not it; her."

"You know what I mean."

"Occasionally, I suppose." There was a remarkable deadness about her voice as she said this. She refilled her glass, drank pensively.

"It was like Africa down there, you know," she said, speaking into her glass.

"What are you talking about?"

"Tooting."

"What about Tooting? I have no idea what you're on about."

"It's where they did the procedure."

"What the hell were you doing in south London?" Six months after their meeting in Oxford Circus she had moved into his Shepherd's Bush flat.

"I don't know, somehow I just ended up down there. I think it was a friend at work who recommended the hospital, I can't remember anymore." She was luring as she spoke.

"Or maybe I just wanted to see where the Northern Line would take me if I went south."

"Jesus Catherine, you never told me this."

"You never asked."

"Of course I did."

"Maybe not hard enough."

"So you had the abortion in Tooting?" He ran his hands through his tumble of hair, scratched angrily at his stubble.

"You know, I'm not lying Richard when I'm saying that it was like some third world hospital down there, almost like the ones you see on television. I was one of the only white faces there. I remember this big women next to me, she had flower-patterned dress on. She even ended up speaking to me, counselling me even. I think I was crying."

"I can't believe you never told me any of this."

"You never asked, Rich. You were too busy with your god forsaken dams in China."

He dropped his head, tried to remember where Tooting was on the Northern Line. Sorry seemed like a flimsy word. They were silent again. Shaunelle slipped the bill between them with a hesitant smile. It was noisy outside the restaurant, the cool Atlantic air filled with the sound thudding bass. The disco was just next to the hotel. Cars were parked two and three deep. He put his arm around Catherine after she drunkenly stumbled. Sorry was a flimsy word, he repeated. She fell asleep almost immediately after she lay down.

The hotel's bare garden was almost visible now from his position on the balcony. Morning was here. What would they have named her? It was a new, slightly haunting thought: her, not it. What would she have looked like? The women in his family had always been slightly overweight. He suddenly found himself thinking about his mother, his female cousins, Alison, Saltburn. He tried imagine the salt sting between Catherine's legs as their child, only notionally now, was sucked from her womb.

He shut the hotel door gently so as not to wake her. Maybe a stroll along the beach would clear his head. He stumbled down the stairs drunkenly, nodded his head at the lone security guard as he walked into the early morning quiet. Walking across the beach to the water's edge, Richard regretted not wearing a jacket. Midsummer or not, it was cold. His father was suddenly speaking to him.

"What do you want to take up there for? It's a kak up there, only good for fishing and being alone."

Tired and still vague, he sat himself down on the beach. He trawled his fingers through the soft sand, gathering all the flotsam that stuck between it. He neatly stacked them in a pile in front of him. After a while he stopped, looked down at his mound of junk. Just cigarette

stubs, bits of fishing net and dried kelp. Not even a gift of stones.

THE MAGIC OF NUMBERS

Winning, it struck Beryl Vincent, her white-gloved hands fastened to the steering wheel in a perfect ten-to-two pose, her eyes fixed on the undulations of the relentlessly straight road ahead – winning was just a sound. It was not, she realised, an emotion. It was just a dull, metallic din, the clamour of perfectly like coins pouring from beneath a slot machine, a predictable mechanical hum. It was also a sound that had somehow filled the quiet emptiness of her life since Frank's death.

"Well, let's hope we have better luck today in Witbank," Beryl said, the spry ambition of her words belying the nagging fatigue she had felt incapable of shaking in recent months. Beryl was 68.

"Fool," she mumbled. A sleek Mercedes zoomed past at high speed. Her white Toyota Corolla momentarily veered left across the yellow line into the emergency lane. Daniel flinched but said nothing. He looked resolutely at the road ahead, his hands neatly cupped in his lap.

The two had not exchanged a word since Beryl's hatchback had passed through the gradually tapering hills near Donkerhoek, on the far eastern outskirts of Pretoria. That was 80 kilometres ago. Beryl was used to the silences,

the spare exchange that passed as a conversation. After so many luckless journeys to the townships of Gauteng, she had grown quite accustomed to his restraint, the way he proffered subtle gestures instead of speech. To the unobservant outsider it would have appeared like an unforgivably mute exchange. Not for Beryl. Despite his usual, taciturn manner, she recorded their conversations in the way he declined his slowly greying head of hair, or gently pursed his lips to form the vague outline of a smile or laugh.

A thin man in his late fifties, Daniel was Beryl's garden help. For the past five years he had lived in the small creosote-coloured hut behind Beryl's garage. Before that, when she was still in Brooklyn, he had occupied an unpainted room adjoining the hothouse. It was the same house where Frank had quietly passed away, his slippers neatly tucked beneath the bed.

"If we don't win today, this'll be the last time," Beryl ventured. A sign flashed by. Still another 20 kilometres to Witbank.

"Maybe we will be lucky today, Madam."

"Maybe," Beryl replied. He had a grey smell about him. Stale cigarette smoke. She loathed the musty odour. It reminded her of Frank, of the lung cancer that had stolen

him away. Looking from her rear-view mirror, Beryl slipped a sideways glance at Daniel. What was he watching? The road ahead offered little more than a blank monotony.

Even before they reached the outskirts of Witbank, the town made its presence felt. An acrid smell filtered into the car. Its source: a series of smokestacks that towered over the misshapen black wattles on her right. The sign indicated ten kilometres.

What was the point of all of this? The thought came out of the blue, like the smell. Surely there was no point to all of this stupidity? Why was she wasting her Saturday afternoons like this? Beryl tried to counter the doubts by concentrating on another, singular thought: winning. It was a sound, she reminded herself, winning was definitively a sound. It was also a township. Winning was the jubilant eruption of sound heard only in a township. It had been Mrs Landsman who had first told about this little known fact.

"It's obscene," Mrs Landsman had declared. "R30-million!"

Beryl knew precisely what her friend was referring to. She had also read the newspaper article about an elderly black artisan from Johannesburg. The man had won the Lottery, his life irrevocably changed after a series of six

numbers delivered a seismic windfall. Beryl quietly sipped her tea from a porcelain cup.

An acquaintance from the days when Beryl had owned a dry-cleaning business in a small shopping centre in Brooklyn, Mrs Landsman had in recent years become a close friend. A defiantly blond mother of two, grandmother of three and widow, she also shared a curious interest in the magic of numbers. On more than one occasion she had accompanied Beryl to some or other far-flung casino. Places like Meropa Casino in Polokwane and Swaziland's Ezulwini Sun, the latter a three-day adventure marred by a blow-out on a forested road between Ermelo and Oshoek, on the Swaziland border.

"I'm convinced it's just a waste of money," Beryl stated, delicately replacing her cup in its saucer.

"Not if you're black," retorted Mrs Landsman.

"What do you mean?"

"Well, I heard that you have a better chance of winning the lottery if you buy your ticket in a township," explained Mrs Landsman with a privileged tone of voice. "Remember Dorothy? Her son is an accountant with SARS now. He told her that they *engineer* the wins to benefit people from poor areas."

"Do you mean to say that if I buy a ticket in Mamelodi I have a better chance of winning than getting one from Carlos up the road?"

"That's what the young man seems to think."

"Really," Beryl responded, more curiously than disbelievingly.

"Yes, but you won't catch me buying a lottery ticket in Mamelodi, even if the jackpot is R30-million."

"Yes, quite."

Beryl initially shrugged off Mrs Landsman's declaration. Too improbable, she had reasoned, lying in bed alone. "It's just another racist conspiracy theory," her son had laughed over the phone from Southampton. Despite this, she nonetheless found herself constantly coming back to Mrs Landsman's assertion. Surely it was impossible to engineer chance to benefit some and exclude others, she had reasoned. Although with computers... The narrative also became stickier and ever more probable each time she saw a newspaper headline.

The first one appeared a few weeks after her tea engagement with Mrs Landsman. BLACK PENSIONER WINS R15-MILLION. The bold simplicity of the statement rattled her. A month or so later she spotted another: HOMELESS PERSON WINS LOTTERY. Something improbable had unexpectedly become

plausible. As she lay down to sleep that night, a fantastical idea unexpectedly cohered in Beryl's mind. After breakfast the next morning, Beryl confronted her garden help.

"Do you play the lottery, Daniel?"

Daniel was busy preparing a bed of soil near her bedroom window in anticipation of spring.

"Sometimes," he answered. He went on turning over the soil with a little spade.

"Where do you buy your tickets?"

Daniel dug the spade into a patch of earth, turned and looked up quizzically.

"At the café."

"You mean from Carlos?"

"Mostly."

"Do you ever play the lottery when you go home?"

"To the Winterveld you mean, Madam?"

"Yes."

"Sometimes, but that lottery, it is just a waste of money." He turned and resumed his work.

Beryl looked at the man's grizzled hands. In spring they would remove a flowering petunia from its plastic seedling punnet and carefully place it in a small hole in the earth. Rain would do the rest.

"Is that all Madam?" Daniel asked. He straightened himself upright. He looked down at her.

"Um, not really," Beryl responded.

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It had been four months since Beryl presented her awkward proposal to Daniel. Every Saturday, Daniel was to accompany her to a remote petrol station or corner cafe – preferably in a township, or at least adjacent. She called it a freelance security job. In exchange for accompanying her on these hopeful ramblings, she promised him a twenty per cent stake in whatever winnings she made. An empowerment deal, she joked with her conscience.

"Here?" Beryl asked as they approached a cluttered settlement. The signboard read Kromdraai/Clewer 1km.

"I'm not sure."

"No it can't be," Beryl said, looking at the government housing project that had sprouted up in a veld. But for a few tentative extensions and additions made to some of the homesteads, they all looked the same, were geometric duplicates of one another. A vague thought nested itself in her mind: Democracy was not the cheerful collision of colours on the national flag, it was this -

the even-hued monotone of these homesteads. The car swooped past the Kromdraai/Clewer off-ramp. They would take the next off-ramp. The car passed over the Brug River.

"Unless we get lucky today, this will definitely be the last time we do this," Beryl repeated. "There's nothing out at these places."

She tabulated the list of new and unfamiliar places she had visited over the past few months: Mamelodi, Garankuwa, Tembisa, Soshanguve, Eesterus and Atteridgeville. She didn't think much of these sprawling communes, these denials dragged from the past into the present. While many of these places had been familiar by name, most of them were alien as an actuality. But even this strangeness passed. As her daytrips involved ever more distant and unfamiliar locations, so the anticipation and vigour with which she had initially approached the enterprise were slowly eclipsed, replaced by routine. Not even Tweefontein, in Bronkhorstspruit, where Happy Sindane lived, had offered anything. Hope was now simply a predictable thing, the routine of travelling somewhere new only to discover that it looked like somewhere else. Poor. Dusty. Congested. Maybe Witbank would be different.

The sign read Schoongezicht/Kwaguqa/Ferrobank 1km, and was followed immediately after by another sign. HI-JACKING

HOTSPOT. The triangular red sign featured a prominent exclamation mark. They used the same mark to warn about pedestrians and potholes.

A taxi abruptly pushed in front of her. She braked hard. Daniel reached for the handrail

"Damn fool!" Beryl shouted out.

She followed the metallic blue Kombi down the off-ramp. *If you would like to know about life after death ask the taxi driver*, read a vinyl-cut sticker on the rear window. Above it, a pair of hands held in prayer. Something about the image grabbed her. They slowed to a crawl. The taxi turned right towards Schoongezicht and Kwaguqa. Mindful of the earlier exclamation mark, Beryl slipped past the stop sign without stopping. She turned left, to Ferrobank.

She pulled onto a dusty verge a short way from the T-junction, next to a dry and winter-black vlei. A veld fire had recently devastated it, leaving only fire-ruined stalks poking from the ground. She hated these bitter winter landscapes, so brutal, so full of litter, so evidently inhabited. The confusion of shacks looking over the vlei was framed by geometric mounds of soil, quite similar to the ones she had seen in Boksburg, where Frank had been born. There only difference was their colour. These ones

were black, like the colour of the small stain on Frank's lung that had eventually taken him away. She looked at the tall lights towering over the more distant, formal extensions of the township. Frank had liked to joke about those, said they had been designed that way to be out of reach of stones and petrol bombs.

"I thought we could go double or nothing today." Beryl placed a pair of reading glasses on the edge of her button nose and peered into her handbag.

Daniel said nothing. He knew the ritual. She passed him the envelope. It would contain a crisp R20 note. Eight chances, delineated from A to H, six numbers listed lengthways in each row.

"And here, take this one too." Beryl held out another envelope. "It's for helping out the past few months. I know you would rather be watching soccer. It's not much but maybe you can put it towards your daughter's schooling or something."

Daniel took the envelope. He lifted the unsealed flap and curiously peered inside. It contained two blue bank notes.

"Thank you, Madam."

"Don't spend it on the lottery, hey. You've seen what a waste it is."

Daniel smiled. He had a single front tooth. "Maybe it is not a waste," he offered. "It is important to believe in something, Madam."

"You could be right."

Looking out her window at the desolate winter landscape, an unresolved thought from earlier came to her again. She inhaled deeply. What is the purpose of this? Near the marshes, industrial piping jutted aimlessly from the ground, the exposed length serving as a makeshift footbridge connecting two adjacent communities of shacks. What does it mean to win, to hold something more than the disappointment of a fistful of coins in a paper cup?

Watching a young woman negotiating the piped pathway, she allowed the answer to declare itself: Buying a lottery ticket in a township was no guarantee of winning. Nothing did not automatically beget something; well, not quite in the way Mrs Landsman had promised.

"How many rooms does your house have?" Beryl asked Daniel as she steered her car back onto the tarmac.

"Three."

"And does it have a garden?"

"Yes, but not such a good one. The dogs are always digging things up."

"Stray dogs?"

"Pardon?"

"Um, other people's dogs, runaways, um, wild dogs."

"Ah no," Daniel laughed. "My dogs."

"You have pets?"

"Yes, two dogs." He flashed another embarrassed smile.

"Two, good heavens, I didn't know. What are their names?"

"Sheba and Dickie."

"Dickie! You mean like the Dickie I had when you first came to work for me?"

"Yes madam," Daniel replied, his hand muffling a shy giggle. "He looked like your Dickie when my daughter brought him home so I decided to call him by the same name."

The telltale sign came into view abruptly and Beryl quickly slowed down, steering her car into the crowded lot of the BP. Finding a lottery vendor in a township was always a cinch: you just had to look for a long queue snaking from a garage or spaza. She dropped Daniel close to the line and looked for a spot to park. By now the curious stares and occasional derisive comment meant nothing and she simply listened to the radio.

Today though she fixed her eyes on Daniel, watched as the line slowly drew him closer to the front. He was still

wearing his blue overall and earnestly looked ahead as the line shuffled and snaked. Dickie. The cheeky Jack Russell had been a gift from Frank. In the end, the little terror had outlived him by two years, the ignominy of the dog's worn-out joints and ground-down teeth recently ended by a veterinarian's needle. To think that the dog had somehow found a second life out in the Winterveld, a barren wilderness she knew only as a stretch of land flanking the road to the Carousel casino.

The movement of the line swallowed Daniel into the interior of the garage shop. She would have to tell her son about it – then again possibly not. It was too quaintly disconcerting and unsettling, the sudden calm that was unexpectedly derived from Daniel's revelation. Beryl snorted out loud. To think that peace of mind could be had here in a township in the middle of nowhere. Her mind was running away with things.

She turned up the radio to drown out the discord of her thoughts. The Blue Bulls had lost. Officials in a rural Indian province were cajoling tax evaders into paying by employing drummers to beat their instruments outside their homes. It would be cloudless but cold tomorrow. Suddenly, it came to her. Maybe the magic of numbers did exist, just not in Pretoria. Quite possibly the prize was closer to

Johannesburg. It was not an unreasonable proposition. Maybe all they needed to do was change direction, head further south. As Daniel came loping towards the car, Beryl resolved that she would speak to him on Monday. Tomorrow was his day off.

A CHANCE MEETING

I found the dictionary in the veld, a rain-scarred book of words laid open and stiff on a koppie in South Hills. It was partially obscured by tufts of late summer grass and lay open on page 110, taut and unbending in the breeze, just like a corpse. I still remember the page number, partly because of the strangeness of the first two words that greeted me as I stooped to pick it up. *Benzol*. I had never come across the word before, nor the second, *benzoline*. I suppose it was the peculiarity of this detail that distracted my attention from the silver water tower hovering over the veld. It was the not knowing what those words meant.

The dictionary's sun-dried pages were home to a small colony of ants. They looked like little black commas as they scurried to and fro across the open page, agitated punctuation marks that revealed an interest in exploring my arm. I shook off the dictionary and closed it. It was a 1959 copy of the *Concise Oxford Dictionary of Current English*, the fourth edition, its cloth cover still faintly blue. I turned it over to look at the alphabetical list on page 110 again. *Bequeath*. It was the third word and means something about leaving, or to quote the posh old dictionary, to

transmit to posterity, which I presume was the effect of leaving the dictionary in a veld overlooking City Deep and Johannesburg's buff-coloured mine dumps.

It took some effort to force the dictionary to close, less of a struggle to pry the cover from its flyleaf. It was then that the book's owner announced himself: Sylvesta. His name was neatly printed in angular blue letters on the inside of the dictionary's hardbound cover, the thick ink line suggesting a very deliberate gesture, proud too. A sequence of two numbers followed, one on top of the other. The first was a seven-digit number (Johannesburg maybe?), below it a cell number.

The last telephone number impressed an obvious fact on me: the dictionary hadn't been lying in the veld since 1959; Cell C had only started operating in 2002. And then there was that name, Sylvesta. Not Sylvester, as in Stallone, just Sylvesta. Neither Silvester, which I later discovered was the name of two popes, a name with Roman origins, from the Latin word *silva* meaning of the forest, just Sylvesta.

Not that the particularity of these details held my attention for long. I hadn't come to South Hills to learn new words; I was here for the silver water tower. I tossed the old dictionary back on the ground and returned to my camera, which was propped on a tripod and aimed at the

tower. Of course, I don't admit to the idea of photographing water towers being particularly original, even though the bulbous hunk of round metal resting on a thin pipette-like stem was certainly unique, by local standards at least. Most of the towers dotted across Johannesburg's semi-arid landscapes are concrete, not metal, like the graffiti-coloured one on Northcliff Hill, a rather common example of their form too.

The idea of photographing the city's water towers came to me one Saturday morning in the basement of Collectors Treasury, on Commissioner Street. While sniffling and sneezing my way through the store's overcrowded rows of books, I found a copy of Bernd and Hilla Becher's *Wasserturme* ("R850/US$115 – 1st Edition, Scarce," stated the writing pencilled onto flyleaf). Something about the banality of the German couple's decade-long project intrigued me, the meditative glance it offered of obscure European and American industrial architecture. Paging through the book in the basement, my nose dribbling, I had an idea; like an apprentice I would copy their style, the only difference being that my focus would be limited to the 33 water towers scattered across Johannesburg.

Standing next to my camera I took another light reading. I had arrived too early and the sun was still far

too bright for a photograph. Hands cupped over my eyes, I looked at the arc it still had to travel before it would meet with the horizon line. There was nothing I could do but perfect the composition. I looked into the viewfinder again, focussing my lens on the upside down water tower held fixed in the dark beneath the cloth draped over my head. The upside down tower looked almost like the one the Becher's had photographed in Brookville, Pennsylvania in 1974, a futuristic industrial object set amidst a pastoral landscape. Uncanny.

Absolutely certain that my composition was now perfect, I returned to trampling bored, roving arcs around my camera. I saw the dictionary again, still open on page 110, then an empty beer bottle, its label long washed from its surface, an old tyre, its tread worn smooth, a briefcase.

I bent down to look at the piece of luggage. It didn't strike me as being an expensive briefcase, just a pretend thing, something to look self-important with in the big city. The briefcase had been brutalised, its innards torn out like those of a gutted animal. Amongst the scattered mess: a series of English exercise sheets; officious-looking documents bleached of all personalised inscriptions; a pen (a yellow Bic); a photograph of a car (a red Cressida); lining (from the briefcase); a used-up cellphone voucher

(Cell-C, R30). It was simply a tedious mess, no blood, just useless junk.

Maybe its owner had been mugged, I reasoned. Who the hell walks along a path cutting through the bush from South Rand Road towards Regents Park and Roseacre with a briefcase? Or a camera for that matter? I looked over my shoulder. Sylvesta? Intrigued at the possibility this bit of knowledge suggested, I paced back to the dictionary, counting the steps. Ten. Suddenly I found myself trying to visualise the crime: a knife (probably a metal blade with a duct tape handle) held against the tremor of Sylvesta's throat. I tried to imagine his characterless terror as his assailants issued their blunt demand, for his wallet, his cellphone, his briefcase, his dictionary. And then their reaction when they discovered he was a foreigner, a man who spoke in faltering English, who begged for clemency in a strange tongue.

Then again, maybe they (a group of youths no doubt) had simply stolen the briefcase from Sylvesta's home, while he was out at the corner café buying cigarettes, or a pay-as-you-go voucher for his cellphone. The possibilities were limitless.

Returning to my camera I found myself increasingly uninterested by the water tower, my reason for journeying to

this obscure piece of veld in the first place. The name written on the flyleaf of the dictionary, the briefcase lying spilt open in the veld behind me; I was all of a sudden involved. What did this Sylvesta look like? Doubtlessly he was black, a recent immigrant, possibly from Mozambique or Angola, which would account for the Latinised name. He wasn't a man of Portuguese extraction resident in Kenilworth or La Rochelle, I decided. Somehow my mind was determined to believe in the first possibility, that he looked just like one of those men shown in profile on barbershop signs, the ones they sold in curio stores in Rosebank.

Of course, I could simply telephone him to verify my freewheeling logic. I had my cellphone with me. It crossed my mind more than a few times as I circled my camera, listlessly kicking at rubbish and sand clods in the veld. Something in me resisted the urge; possibly it was the oddness of how it would all come out.

"Hullo."

"Um, yes, hello… My name is Andy… Um, I …"

"Hullo, who's dis?" (Sylvesta no doubt has a deep sonorous voice, a richly flavoured accent.)

"Hello, yes sorry… Andy, my name is Andy Hughes. I found your dictionary, I mean your briefcase lying in the veld… just off South Rand Road… in Moffat Park."

"Who dis? How you get dis number?"

"I'm sorry… is that Sylvesta?"

"Maybe."

Oh hell, you know how it is, you can't just phone a stranger and tell him you found his missing briefcase in the veld while on a ramble taking photographs of water towers. Still, I did think about calling his number.

Looking west again, I saw that the sun was intent on lingering in the late Saturday afternoon sky. I checked my light meter again. Still a short wait more. Much to my irritation, I saw that an elderly security guard had appeared inside the water tower's fenced-off grounds. He was seated on a red plastic chair (a Coke crate actually), positioned directly in front of the silver structure I was aiming to photograph. I would have to ask him to move, I thought.

Walking through the straw-coloured grass I found myself again contemplating the evidence, thinking about what it suggested about the little drama that had unfolded in the veld. Looked at objectively, it appeared as if the briefcase had been stolen elsewhere, possibly a taxi. There was a

makeshift taxi stop situated across the road from the veld, right next to the water tower. Maybe the guard had seen something from behind his concrete slatted barricade, or heard a muffle of voices late one night. Walking past a burnt heap of magazines, I pondered the odd relationship of the dictionary to the briefcase, the distance travelled by the one from the other.

Maybe they were unrelated, it dawned on me. Couldn't be, I countered. Too much to suggest that the dictionary belonged to the gutted briefcase. Possibly the robbers had briefly considered keeping it, then chucked it, leaving the 1549 page book (enclosed by a hardbound cover) a short distance from the briefcase. Beset (the last word on page 110) by this thought, I greeted the elderly man.

"Hello."

He had an insubstantial grey beard and wore brown army surplus boots that seemed mismatched with the black uniform. He simply nodded his head.

"I'm taking a photograph of the water tower. I was hoping you might be able to move out of the picture for a second."

"Why do you want to photograph this building?" he queried from his seat, his tone unexpectedly authoritative.

"Sorry, my name is Andy," I offered apologetically. "I am a photographer. I am taking photos of all the water towers in Johannesburg, for a private project. I came here specially to take a photo of this one… from Bryanston."

I hoped the lie would impress him; I lived in Braamfontein.

"No photos here."

"But I haven't had any problems before, even this morning when I went to Dobsonville."

Another lie. While I did drive past the concrete water towers in Dobsonville, five times this morning, I was too afraid to stop. The eerily domestic landscape in the vicinity of the tower confounded my expectations of Soweto.

"No photos," he repeated.

The man's abrupt conversational manner suggested that he wouldn't be drawn out on the subject. I thanked him and returned to my camera. A quick glance at my light meter showed the sun to be just right. I quickly took my shot. It would be the first to include a human presence, useful maybe for indicating scale, I reasoned. I packed up. The security guard was still seated on his portable throne, purposefully watching my every move as I walked towards my Golf. I waved again as I drove past, a taunt. I had furtively tucked the dictionary into my camera bag.

The old man's rebuff wasn't the first time I had encountered frustrations with my photography. Before my current preoccupation with water towers I had worked on another project, something I had hoped would gain me shelf space on a display rack at Exclusive Books. Quite which shelf I remain uncertain of, travel guides possibly. My idea: a series of guidebooks containing interesting walks in and around Johannesburg: historical walks, architectural rambles, naturalist hikes, artistic saunters, environmental marches, each illustrated with my photographs of course.

Working as a photographic printer at a professional laboratory near Sandton City, I got to see a lot of what was being photographed in Johannesburg. Mostly it was package shots of cosmetics and cereal boxes, or fashion photographs from the Maldives, the interiors of smart private homes, postcard views of Johannesburg from Yeoville ridge and, particularly of late, sweetly sentimental photographs of shanty settlements. I rarely encountered anything concerned with the denuded texture of Johannesburg, its crumbling Art Deco architecture and half-excavated mine dumps, nothing at all on its forgotten rivers and strip mall architecture. There was a strange will towards amnesia in the commercial dealings and imaginings of Johannesburg.

Experience, however, soon proved me to be an arrogant apprentice. There was already a definitive book on old Johannesburg's architecture, historical walks aplenty, even the odd precocious artistic saunter or two. No one cared about the rivers. Of Johannesburg's two major watercourses, the Jukskei and Klip rivers, the former was a mess of fenced-off public space and plastic bottles curdled along its banks, the latter an apocalyptic no-mans land near its source, at New Canada and Riverlea. For six months I took no pictures, my adopted city, Johannesburg, an elusive subject. Then I came across *Wasserturme*. I would be a copyist, I resolved. Through this basest form of flattery I world re-look the city anew, and possibly even learn something about myself.

Once home I deposited the dictionary in a Pick 'n Pay packet and stored it beneath the sink, next to the insect repellent. It didn't stay there long. After watching a roundup of the day's sport, I fetched the book and placed it on my coffee table, on top of the unread *Saturday Star*. It was a bestial (from page 111) object, a dirty mass rather than a book of discrete pages conjoined by a binding. More pliant now after my initial encounter with it, the book closed quite easily. I opened it to its flyleaf and dialled the cellphone number. A standardised pre-recorded voice,

best described as droll, repeated the number 0-8-4-6-6-1-3-1-1-3 and then summarily stated that it did not exist. I tried the number again. The female voice repeated what she had told me earlier. The number didn't exist despite the angular blue statement of fact written into the dictionary. I tried the landline number.

"Nest Inn." The speed with which the voice answered the phone startled me.

"Um, can I please speak to Sylvesta please?"

"Who?" Her manner was casual.

"Sylvesta!"

"He's not here." Indifferent too.

"Is there any way I could get in touch with him? I have something of his and I can't seem to get hold of him on him."

"What do you want to give to him?"

"A book."

"A book?"

"A dictionary."

She paused briefly on this. I heard chewing gum sounds crackle through the receiver.

"He's not here."

"You said so," I tartly reminded her.

Silence.

"Hello?"

"He's not here but his wife is here, do you want to speak to her?"

I was mildly stunned. I had never bargained on this, on my lonely Park Station immigrant enjoying the comfort of a wife.

"Hello? Do you want to speak to her?"

"No, no that's okay. Let me take down the address, I'll drop off the book sometime tomorrow."

I slept fitfully.

Looking at myself in the rear-view mirror before setting out to return the dictionary to its owner, I saw that I had burnt in the sun yesterday. My forehead was sweetly pink. I drove around the block twice, the dictionary now wrapped up in a Woolworth's packet and rested on the passenger seat. The residential hotel was on Smit Street, very close to Park Station, close to the old Hillbrow Hospital too, a freewheel bicycle ride down from the Constitutional Court. The display board read Nest In, which I suppose is correct in a sense, the preposition implying much the same meaning as the noun, a welcoming call to enter. It took me a while to do that. On my third loop past the Civic and rundown YMCA, I saw a car pull out from a parking space near the hotel. I parked.

For some time I just sat there, pretending in an off-hand manner to be waiting while reading the *Sunday Times*. It was mid-morning. Judging by the get-up worn by most of the passers-by, a religious spirit had descended over Hillbrow. Christian Zionist men in khaki uniforms and conductor caps flanked women dressed in blue and white robes. A man in a dark suit who had just left the hotel opened the passenger door to a dilapidated white Mazda. A woman primly dressed in a multi-coloured dress, her hair a profusion of neat curls, stepped into the car. After the nine o'clock news on SAfm, I stepped out of my car and entered the hotel.

The reception area was neatly kept, and in truth little more than an elevator lobby. The former residential block had never been designed to function as a hotel. I approached the young man seated behind a desk that had been plonked in an alcove in the corner.

"Hello. Is Sylvesta here? I have a book that belongs to him."

The young man smiled.

"Yes, Mr Shiabe."

"No, Sylvesta," I corrected him.

"Yes, that's Mr Shiabe. Let me call up and see if he's in."

"No, no, that's okay," I protested as he turned to press a button on the intercom behind him. I wasn't prepared for this, all of this.

"Just give him the book, tell him I found it in…"

"Hullo Mr Shiabe, there is a man to see you."

"No look it's fine," I said placing the book on the counter, back pedalling. "Just tell him I found it on a koppie in South Hills."

I ran.

I don't know why I did, or what the young man in the reception made of my lurching move to get away as he spoke with Sylvesta. I couldn't stay; I couldn't face the awkward moment Sylvesta exited the lift, his slight moustache and frowning grin offset by his black-framed reading glasses. All the neatly constructed fictions in my head would have been detonated by the moment his hand, warm and fleshy, bigger than mine, reached out to me. The possibility of these very particular and physical details scared me, just like the specifics of how he negotiated his new life without his dictionary. And then there was the curious way he spelt his name, Sylvesta, not Sylvester or Silvester, and why he had only ever written Sylvesta, not Sylvesta Shiabe on the flyleaf. Not to mention the story how his briefcase ended up on a koppie in South Hills. And, of course, his nameless

wife. What was her name? Instead I ran, to my car, to the familiarity of street names, suburbs, buildings, rivers, objects. People scared me.

Not that my encounter with Sylvesta was entirely without reward. While seated in the car waiting to enter the hotel, I had been intrigued by the bold modernist typeface announcing the building across the road, Waverly Mansions (248 Smit Street). Unlike the hand-painted signage for Nest In, Waverly Mansions declared its existence with a lean Helvetica font. It was beautiful in its simplicity, unencumbered by serifs, totally distinct in form from the Art Nouveau typeface that proclaimed Ursula Mansions, on Klein Street. Speeding away from my near encounter with the owner of the battered dictionary, I suddenly got an idea for another project.

"Hey, Papa Crocs, how long have you been driving trucks?"

"It's been twenty-seven years now."

"Ha, about the time Mandela was in jail."

The greying man seated opposite Moses Skweyiya in the bar smiled, wanly. The truth of the comparison stung. Twenty-seven years.

"I suppose, I've never thought about it that way," he said, speaking in a slow, determined voice. "Just like Mandela."

Sam 'Papa Crocs' Ngwenya drained the last of the beer into a clear plastic cup. He had been drinking slowly; his beer tasted warm and flat.

"Let's drink to Mandela." Moses raised his cup. "To Mandela!""

"To Mandela." The beer tasted awful. Sam excused himself for the toilet.

He threaded his way past four youths standing around a battered pool table. Despite their buckling legs and drunken shouting they were alert and looked at Sam with open hostility. He made sure not to bump anything. Papa Crocs, he hadn't heard the nickname used in years. It was only Moses who called him by the stupid name. What was

it, twelve years now since Germiston Transport went under?

His bladder wasn't good with beer; he would probably be up and down the whole night because of it. Sam slipped past a curtain into the toilet. Moses, he hadn't expected to bump into him. He still remembered him as a youth fresh off the farm via Park Station when he arrived at the company, all wide-eyed and full of jokes. For two years he had been his loader, the stupid nickname dreamt up on one of the lonely routes they had driven together. Papa Crocs, it was harmless enough, Ngwenya meaning crocodile, just a bit of respectful tomfoolery really. He had always liked the boy.

The toilet was clean enough but like the restaurant it was bare, finished, not what he remembered. He made his way back past the young pool players, saw two girls, not many years older than his daughter, sitting near the bar, their attentions fixed on the television propped above it. Things had definitely changed since his last visit five years ago. He still remembered the old Wimpy franchise. All the Yebo Yes Tavern offered by way of a menu was a messy scribble of words written on the rear of a beer carton. Obviously the new toll road had been very bad for Mr Frank.

Driving down the alternate route earlier this afternoon, Sam had looked forward to seeing the

cantankerous old proprietor of Frölich Motors, Mr Frank. He had always enjoyed the big man's nostalgic recollections of life in Stuttgart and Windhoek, his larger than life story of his arrival in South Africa on the back of a freight train, loaded with nothing more than a rucksack and youthful ambition. When Rephile was still a bed full of smiles and blankets, he often told her about "the strange German man from the north". He was one of an ensemble of fantastic characters from the road he would use to lull his only daughter to sleep. How things had changed. Rephile didn't need bed stories anymore; the TV he had bought two years ago told her all the stories she wanted to know now.

"How's your wife?" Moses asked as Sam seated himself down.

"Fine,"

"And your daughter… what's her name?"

"Rephile, she's fine too. She's twelve now."

"Twelve! I didn't realise it's been so long since the company closed."

"May, 1993."

"Eish, you have a good memory Papa Crocs. Some things never change."

"What about you, are you married?"

"Me, never. I don't need to get married."

"Why?"

"I want to live my own life. Anyway, I have a woman in every town. I don't need a wife, not now."

"How old are you now, Moses?"

"I'll be thirty next October."

"So you will need a wife soon."

"Soon maybe, but not now. For now I'm not restricted, I'm unlimited."

Sam thought about the meaning of his friend's choice of words, the determined sense of confidence with which he spoke. Unrestricted. Unlimited. He had never spoken like that when he was young. He married Zandi when he was twenty-two, started driving trucks three years after. Moses stood up, sweeping the two empty beer bottles from the table.

"I'm getting another, do you want one?"

Sam nodded his head in agreement and then immediately regretted it as Moses walked off. The low, insistent thud of the kwaito music had given him a headache. He rarely drank beer, just on special occasions, if he could call this encounter with an old contact that. He should go sleep, he thought, looking at the television where the young women were seated. They nodded their heads in sync with the beat. I'm out of place here, too old. This music is strange. He immediately checked himself: Rephile likes this music too.

Moses returned with two cold beers.

"Which company are you working for now Papa Crocs?"

"It's a small one in Roodepoort. The pay is not so good but it is nearer Soweto. You know my wife has asked me to make a plan. She says I must get a job where I can knock-off in the evenings, and come back home. This was the best I could find."

"And you? How is your company?" He looked at his companion's faded overall. Even with the company patch removed from the pocket, he immediately recognised it. Moses must have taken it with him when he received his retrenchment package.

"*Eish*, times are tough now. I think it's better that I pack up this job, Papa Crocs, just drink. I don't make any money doing this job. Like now, for example, I'm on a one-way trip to Durban. It's just a piece job. They gave me train fare to come back, third class. It's better if I find my own transport back."

"I'm sorry, I'm only going to Newcastle. If I was going to Durban you could come back with me."

"Thanks Papa Crocs, you are a good man… just like Mandela." A cheeky smile came across his face. He toasted Sam, repeated the comparison loud enough for the group of youths to stop their game and look up. He gulped down a mouthful of beer. The game of pool resumed. Moses stood up.

"I'm going to talk to my new wife over there," he said, nodding his head in the direction of the bar.

Sam watched his former loader stroll across the room. His stride was confidant; he knew what he wanted. He stopped next to a woman standing alone at the counter. She was wearing an Orlando Pirates T-shirt. It was way too big for her and looked like a dress. He saw that she wore a pair of jeans beneath it. Maybe that was the fashion these days? He did not recall seeing her earlier when he walked from the toilet. She also didn't seem to be part of noisy pageant of youths grouped around the pool table. She obviously must have slipped in while they were talking. Maybe this was his cue to exit. He would leave his beer for Moses to drink; he had a healthy enough appetite for the stuff, it seemed. He motioned to get up.

"It's still early Papa Crocs, where are you going?" Moses had his arm hitched over the shoulder of the woman. He pulled up another chair for her.

"Meet Neo." Her smile was like a grimace.

What kind of name is that? It sounds like something off the TV, something that one of the gyrating presenters on SABC 1 late at night called themselves. Neo? He pushed his beer over to Moses.

"What, no more Papa Crocs?"

"No, I think I must go sleep soon. I must be in Newcastle early tomorrow morning."

"Hey, you must be getting old…"

"…just like Mandela." He managed to beat his compatriot to it this time.

She had hard, sunken eyes, Sam noticed, her scrawny face not totally unattractive. She wore a large scar above her left eye. A cruel night with a drunken man, he imagined.

"So what happened to that truck Mr Rooks promised you at Germiston?"

"The lawyers took that truck. They auctioned it off. You know, sometimes I still see that truck of mine, fleet number 2701. That was my truck. Somebody has a truck in his name that is actually mine. Even now, it makes my heart bitter."

Moses was not really listening. His hand was playfully cupped around one of Neo's breasts. She rarely spoke, merely poured beer for the two of them whenever the cups were empty.

"And you, what happened to you after the company closed, Moses?"

"I learnt to enjoy *kwasa kwasa*."

"What?"

"*Kwasa kwasa*! Hey you know nothing Papa Crocs. It is music, from Zambia."

"I see. So how did you end up working in Zambia?"

Moses laughed. "No, no, I was with a company that did long haul – into Africa."

"Africa." The word had a warm, unfamiliar taste in Sam's mouth, like the taste of cinnamon and mango and chilli all mixed up. He had never been further than Polokwane with his truck.

"So why did things turn out bad for you?"

Neo squirmed and slapped at Moses' hand. He had just pinched her nipple.

"That long haul company, they were just crooks. They asked me to sign one of those owner-driver contracts when I started. I was very excited. It was a chance to be unlimited for real. But *daai ding is vokol, net* rubbish." He spat the words out. "They cheated me, didn't even register that truck in my name. When I came back from a trip to Zimbabwe, they fired me. They said there were too many of us drivers, not enough work. That empowerment story, I'm telling you, its just words."

Moses downed another mouthful of beer, wiping the back of hand across his mouth afterwards. He was smiling again. Something about the outburst lingered, though. Sam had been thinking about these things too. A thought that he had only vaguely begun to formulate in his mind asserted itself.

"You know, this government say they want to empower us but who is monitoring it?" The words felt awkward as they came out. He nonetheless pressed on.

"You know Moses, I'm not political, I don't like politics whatsoever but, you see, in this transport job of ours, there are pilots: they are well remembered. And then there are train drivers: they are well remembered. There are also captains of ships: they are well remembered. But us truck drivers…" He lost his train of thought. It was the beer; it made his thoughts fuzzy, less concentrated.

"Ai, this old man, he is too serious. Go buy some more beers." It was Neo.

Sam looked at her with interest. She met his gaze blankly. There was no hostility between, just an immeasurable nothingness. He looked at Moses. His eyes were bloodshot, his fingers playfully concerned with teasing at the ripened nipple silhouetted against her football jersey. He had spoken his words into a void. Sam dropped his head miserably.

How had he lost his train of thought like that? It had been so clear in his mind this morning when he was driving. He had been listening to Tim Modise on 702. Tim was discussing empowerment. His studio guest was a BEE expert. Sometimes, especially when they referred to a certain act of parliament, the talk went over his head

but Tim always seemed to steer it back into his reach, making the educated man clarify his comments. It was why he liked Tim, why he had followed the radio journalist from his slot on SAfm to the static infested medium wave channel.

Thinking about the radio reminded him of his bed in the back of the truck. It was time to go sleep. This place wasn't for him anymore.

"Tell Moses I say goodbye."

He felt guilty for slipping away like this, while Moses was in the toilet. His former loader was now his own man, stupid, yes, but still cheerful; he would have to live by his own choices now, make his good of his new inheritance. They were no longer a team.

A thick mist had settled over the truck stop outside. Sam struggled through the haze, searching for his truck. He felt disappointed. He had hoped to see Mr Frank, laugh at his inconsequential jokes. Instead, he got caught in a beery conversation with someone he hadn't seen in years. Getting into the truck, he thought momentarily about Neo. She was springboard to other, more pressing thoughts. How long would Rephile still be comfortable nestling under the protective wing of her aging parents? He didn't like thoughts such as this.

Sam lay down on his bunk bed, looked up at the photos he had stuck above his head with Prestick. It was

not much but it was something, he thought, studying the photograph of his grey-bricked house in Chiawelo. How many times had he looked at this photo of his house on the southwestern reaches of Soweto? Rephile stood in the foreground, smiling, and just over her shoulder the house's number: 2841. It was painted in white freehand next to the front door. He looked to the photo of Rephile on her first day of school; he had been in Durban that day. And Zandi, she had a lonely smile. Twenty-seven years of loneliness. Just like Mandela, he joked to himself. Had he built a similar shrine to his loneliness? Don't all men in prison?

He laughed off the thought, reached for *The Sowetan* newspaper he had brought with him. Nights were not the same without John Qwelane. After the bosses at 702 pulled him off the air his evenings were not quite the same. The newspaper was a poor substitute; he missed Qwelane's purposefully slow and rambling dialogue, the lack of urgency in his voice as he nonchalantly put down annoying callers, especially those from Cape Town. What had happened to Qwelane? Was this de-empowerment? He turned to the sports section, studied the photograph of the Pirates player. Rephile said she likes this Vilikazi fellow. Rephile. Her questions about where he had been and what he had seen were becoming less and less lately.

She was becoming like Zandi, distant. Rephile: they had waited so long for her.

"Right, we're back. You're listening to the Tim Modise Network on talk radio 702. As you know, today we have a special guest in our studio, former president Nelson Mandela. This is a rare opportunity for you to talk with Madiba. Call us now; the lines are open. Are you ready for the next caller Mr Mandela?

"Yes, Tim, I'm ready."

"Great. Okay, I see we have Sam Ngwenya on the line. Hello Sam, you're live on air. What is your question for Mr Mandela?"

"Yes… hello Tim, this is Sam. How are you Tim?"

"I'm fine Sam, what is it you want to ask Mr Mandela?"

"Tate Mandela, this is Sam. I am very excited to be speaking with you."

"Thank you, Sam."

"Okay Sam, so what's your question? Remember, we have lots of callers waiting so make it quick and simple, please."

"Tate Mandela, you know I am a truck driver. Sometimes, well often, I am on the road. Recently, I read your book, Long Walk to Freedom. In it you say, 'A man is not a man until he has a house of his own'. I agree. But,

in fact, I want to ask you about when you were in jail. Did you ever think about your first house in Orlando West during those years?"

"Now you are asking me a question Sam. I don't know if I can remember that far back."

"Am I right in saying that was when you were married to your first wife, Evelyn, Mr Mandela?"

"Yes Tim. I was still married to Evelyn. I had already moved from that house before I went to Robben Island, I was living with Winnie. But you know, Sam, I still remember that house, the pictures of Roosevelt, Churchill and Gandhi on my wall…"

Sam sat up, the newspaper falling from his chest. The cabin's light was still on. He didn't recall switching the radio on when he climbed in, he thought, looking to the console where the radio was installed. It was off. Had he been dreaming all that nonsense? His bladder was full.

Climbing from his truck he could barely make out the garage and restaurant in the near distance. It was quiet. Lonely too. He peed a few paces from his truck. Once back inside, he checked the radio again. It was definitely off. Wrapping a blanket around himself, he looked at the photographs again: the house, Zandi, Rephile. The

darkness was absolute and silent when he switched the light off.

"Hello Sam, are you there? Sam?"

"Yes Tim, I'm here. Sorry, you know this medium wave station of yours can be funny sometimes, especially if there is lighting. I think it must be storming somewhere; I couldn't hear you or tate Mandela."

"Well, you must be lucky today Sam. My producer has just told me that our switchboard cut off all the other callers who were waiting. Is there anything else you would like to ask Mr Mandela? But just before you do, Sam, I just want to tell the listeners to call now with their questions for Nelson Mandela; the lines are open. Okay Sam, go fit it."

"Thank you Tim. Actually, tate Mandela, my question to you is a simple one. I want to ask you about your children. You know tate, I only have one child, Rephile. Despite your hardships, you have been lucky, Makgatho, Makaziwe, Thembi, Zindziswa, so many children. I want to ask you a difficult question…"

"Go ahead Sam, and please make it quick, I can see our lines flashing again here in the studio."

"Okay Tim, tate, how can a father be a father when he is far away all the time, in prison maybe? Was it not difficult for you to earn the respect of your children?"

It was still misty when he woke. The darkness, however, had retreated. Some drivers had already switched their engines on. He needed to pee again. His mouth was dry too. Climbing from the truck, he thought about his conversation with Mandela. It had seemed so real, the difficult stammering out of his question. What had he asked again? The clarity of the dream was quickly retreating, suggesting only feint outlines. He passed a truck that looked like the one Moses had described to him last night. Its curtains were still drawn, the windows steamed over with vapour.

Sam greeted a man stooped over the washbasin basin as he entered the bathroom area. He looked at himself in the mirror, at the company logo he wore on his chest. I'm old… just like Mandela. He splashed his face, briskly wiping it with a small cloth afterwards. Looking at himself as he brushed his teeth, he decided to eat further along the road. There was nothing left for him here.

The vast, open tract of gravel where he had parked his truck was a mess. Discarded mielie cobs, empty nips of brandy, old cellular phone cards, the sun-bleached core of what looked like a mango pip, even cow dung littered the ground. He stepped over a tyre impression pressed into the earth by a truck. It had hardened in the sun, leaving a permanent spoor on the land. He was lucky

he hadn't tripped over one of them last night, he thought; they were everywhere, he noticed. He saw Neo approaching.

"Good morning." He tried to sound upbeat.

She walked towards him with a defiant look in her eyes. It was as if the early morning light had rendered him entirely invisible.

"Good morning," he repeated. She stopped, almost smiled.

"Hello, Papa Crocs." Her mouth blossomed with a wistful smile. She continued walking.

The gears of his truck grated as he shifted into it into second. It was as if his truck, which lurched momentarily, was also waking up. Moses, however, was still sleeping. No urgency, just a piece-meal job, he had said. Who could blame him? He accelerated, swivelling the steering wheel manically to make the wide, arcing turn. He thought he saw Neo smoking on the stoep by the Yebo Yes sign. As he steered the truck out of the yard, he looked into his mirror. All he saw was the outline of someone, a woman wearing a massively oversized football shirt.

He fidgeted with his radio. What was it he had read in Mandela's book, that thing about the challenge that confronts every prisoner? He couldn't remember. In any case, it was too early for such thoughts. Looking at his

clock, Sam calculated that he would reach Newcastle early this afternoon: home, though, was still impossibly far off.

"Not the books."

"But it will look stupid, Liezel."

"It doesn't matter, I don't want to move the books."

"But I hardly think someone who lives in a shack would have a collection of computer programming books on their shelf."

"It doesn't matter, Ronel."

"Ag, come on Liezel. It's going to spoil the first impression when people arrive at the party. We can move the bookcase to your room, just for tonight."

"I'm not going to argue about this, okay. The books stay!"

"Suit yourself then, but just so that you know, I think it looks stupid."

Liezel and Ronel van Vuuren stepped back and looked at the lounge. But for the bookshelf, all the contents of the lounge had been removed to the stoep. It had taken most of the morning, but they were nearly done. The walls were now completely covered over with newspapers and promotional pullouts. Even the curtains had been changed, the mismatched drapes blackened in the oven, for effect.

"What do you think?"

"I still think the bookcase should go."

"I said no."

"It's not like you're going to offend Jaco or anything. It's been five years now."

"Just leave it."

Liezel walked off. She sat down on a barstool in the open-plan kitchen. The appearance was close enough, she thought, looking at the book lying open on the countertop.

"Go call Mig."

"He's still sleeping," answered Ronel.

"Well, I think it's time he chips in a bit. I can't move those big couches back inside, I still have to go to Pick 'n Pay."

"When are you going?"

"Now."

"Can you get me some Grandpas when you go?" Ronel asked, sitting down opposite her older sister. She looked at the upside-down photograph in the book, an interior of a shack dwelling, a kitchen.

"Where were you last night?" Liezel asked. She closed the book. *Shack Style*.

"News Café."

"With Mig?"

"Ja."

She shifted the book to one side.

"Look, I know it's none of my business but just don't let Andries find out, not tonight at least."

"He won't."

As her sister's car reversed out of the garage, Ronel knocked on the bedroom door.

"Wake up sleepy," she said, sticking her head through the door.

Miguel Fernandez rubbed his eyes, sat himself upright in the small bed. It was a single bed in a children's room, with a large Disney puzzle (500 pieces) suspended above it.

"Shit, what time is it?"

"Almost lunch time." She sat herself on the edge of the bed.

"What time did you get here?"

"Oh, early. I had to help Liezel with the decorations for the party. It will totally freak you out when you see what we've done."

"Why?"

"It totally looks like the inside of a shack." Her hand playfully touched his foot, which poked out from under the duvet.

"Come lie next to me," he said, moving up against the wall. He was shirtless.

"I can't."

He tickled at her side with his big toe. She crawled in next to him. His embrace was warm.

"I must go."

"Why?"

"I have to pick Andries up at the airport."

"I thought he was coming back next week."

"Change of plan. Apparently they're ahead of schedule, for some or other reason. They can't do anything on site until one of the subcontractors finishes, so he decided to come back."

Miguel touched the nape of her neck, ran his fingers through her loose length of hair.

"I can't, I'm already late." She stood up. Miguel hastily shifted his posture in the bed to hide his erection. Ignoring it, she looked at the illustrated characters in the framed scene. She could name almost all of them. Somehow, this annoyed her.

"Do you something to drink?"

"Coffee, please."

"I'll put the kettle on for you as I leave."

By the time he had finished showering she had already left. The water in the kettle was only lukewarm. He switched the kettle on again. Liezel had left him a note on

top of a hardcover book. It asked if he could move the couches back into the lounge. As he waited for the kettle to boil, he flicked through the book. He paused on a photograph of a woman standing in her garden.

Her name was Patience Manyisa, 38. *I love my garden. I like to grow spinach and other vegetables. My favourite flower is a geranium.* That's all it said. The kettle came to a boil. He closed the book, turned it over to look for the price. What did people pay for crap like this?

Coffee in hand, Miguel strolled into the lounge. Maids and garden boys, Liezel had told him at dinner a few weeks back. No one had ever come up with that idea for a fancy dress party before. He had simply laughed, thought she was joking.

Why hadn't they shifted the bookshelf? It looked stupid with all those books stuck slap bang in the middle of the lounge. Maybe they had left it for him to move, although she hadn't written anything in the note? Nor had Ronel said anything. He walked and stood in front of the tall, pine bookcase. The books were alphabetically ordered: BETA, C++, COBOL, Delphi, Fortran, Java, Linux, Objective-C, Pascal, Unix. It was just like Jaco to order things like that.

Looking at the newsprint covering the lounge wall, he calculated how long had it been since Jaco died in that accident on the highway. It was the year he was in Dubai, wasn't it. 1998. He couldn't remember. Ignoring the column of black smoke rising above the city of Baghdad, he briefly concentrated on the photograph of a young Menlo Park Hoer pupil. She was headed for Europe with her mountain bike. Pretty. Pick 'n Pay had recently had a special on tuna. Patrice Motsepe was at loggerheads with the management of Sundowns. A photograph of a balaclava-clad man dressed in prison orange made him stop.

WHO IS MZEKEZEKE? He stumbled on the pronunciation of the name, swallowed a mouthful of coffee then read the small caption accompanying the photograph. *Some say he comes from Mnonjaneng section in Thembisa, on the East Rand, but insiders from the music industry are now saying that the masked pop star is actually Yfm's DJ S'bu Leopeng and a resident of Dainfern.* Dainfern? Wasn't that that expensive place in Jo'burg, near Fourways? He wasn't sure. Even after two months back in the country he still felt totally out of touch. It didn't help that Liezel lived in cluster village on the far edge of Pretoria.

The bookshelf was heavy. He tried pushing it; it wouldn't budge, he would have to unpack the shelf and move

everything separately. The books were surprisingly heavy and plentiful. It took a number of trips up and down the passage before he had transferred all of them into the study, where he piled them on the floor, next to some unopened boxes and a basket filled with ironing. The bookshelf went onto the stoep. Returning to the bare lounge, he looked at the rectangular section of wall. They had plastered the newsprint around the shelving.

The newspapers were stored under the kitchen sink, and he set about covering the exposed section of wall; it was easy enough to do. He was almost done when he paused on a half-completed crossword puzzle. It was Liezel's handwriting. Eight down was still incomplete. He looked at the clue. Obscure (9 letters). What kind of clue was that? The word obviously started with the letter r though, six across having the word construct neatly penned into the blocks. What is another word for obscure? He had no idea, stood up; Liezel had just pulled-up in her car.

***

"Jusus, it's only been two hours and already you're acting like a kaffir," said Andries. Ronel had just dropped a glass. Everyone laughed.

Andries was dressed in a blue overall. Having never met him before, Miguel couldn't be sure how different he looked from normal – his face was completely covered in black. Miguel scratched his leg. It itched in the cheap pair of trousers he had borrowed. He also wore a white button shirt, black waste coat and Savoy Dobbs hat: the gardener-going-home-look, he had told Liezel just before the first guests arrived. She had spent much of the afternoon crying.

Ronel returned with a broom and dustpan.

"Look at her. She knows how to play the part, doesn't she?" It was Andries.

"Shut up!"

"And cheeky too, just like all of them nowadays."

The partygoers, who numbered about twenty, excluding Liezel's daughter and three other children, laughed. As she sullenly swept the floor, the disparate conversations resumed. Not knowing many of the visitors, Miguel found himself silently listening, a spectator to the festivities rather than a participant. He excused himself.

Sitting on the toilet he leafed through a magazine, *Cosmopolitan*. He had tried most of the naughty office positions, as the sex feature described them. Not with South African women though, although he had done the

Boardroom Twist with Ronel on Liezel's dining room table a few afternoons back. She bored him. Everything about her bored him, her drunken monologues, the uninspired groping and moaning during sex. Liezel was a much better option, although after the way she had screamed at him when she got home; he would have to play it easy with her if he wanted to keep his room. He needed something that was rent-free while he sorted his life out. He flushed the toilet.

The get-up was absurd, he thought, looking at the black face paint and dabbing at a thickened patch on his cheekbone. He tilted his hat more off centre, opened the door.

"I was wondering where you'd disappeared to." It was Ronel. She giggled as she pushed Miguel back, shutting the door quickly then locking it.

"It's almost like you've been avoiding me." She was drunk again.

"Don't be stupid, your husband's here."

"You heard how he treats me."

"What if he catches you?"

"You mean us." She tapped at the tip of his nose.

When she had arrived at the party earlier, with Andries, he had not recognised her at first. Only after Liezel's daughter cried out Auntie Ronel did he realise it

was her. She had gone to a lot of effort for the party, wrapping a headscarf over an Afro. The wig looked silly but he had nonetheless laughed.

"I didn't realise he was *such* an arsehole," Miguel whispered. She moved closer. There was nowhere left to retreat.

"I don't feel like talking about him. Just hold me."

He ran his hand across the contours of her back as she nestled in his embrace. The pink dress she wore, a domestic's outfit, was made from a cheap acrylic fabric. He thought of the woman with her flowers he had seen in the book earlier, tried to dismiss it by concentrating the unspoken gestures of her body as she pushed it up against him. He kissed her. Her mouth tasted of red wine as their tongues met. She wasn't wearing any panties underneath her outfit.

They fucked, silently, with restraint, Ronel sitting on top.

"Oh fuck, look at my face," she said, fixing her outfit in the mirror.

Parts of her neck and face were showing her true skin colour: white. He had kissed her there, almost biting her at his climax.

"I look a mess."

So did he. Looking at his reflection, he saw that his face had exposed bits of white showing where the sweat had run from his forehead. He watched Ronel massage away the blotches with a circular motion of her hand. She was black again. He motioned to kiss her shoulder but eventually resisted.

"What are you doing?"

"I feel stupid like this," he replied, washing his face.

"No more stupid than any of us."

A high-pitched sound suddenly filled air. It was the alarm. They heard giggles outside the door followed by hasty footsteps.

"It must be those fucking kids."

"Do you think they heard us," she asked, panicked.

"I dunno, but you better slip out quickly." He bundled her out the door.

The alarm drew some of the party guests into the house and he heard Andries shouting over the noise of the alarm. And then, as abruptly as it had started, the sound of the alarm disappeared.

He heard footsteps coming down the passage.

"It wasn't me, *baas*," Miguel said, responding to the knock on the door. Someone laughed. Andries? He waited a

while longer. He heard the telephone ring. It was the security company.

It took two more attempts before he got most of the stuff off his face. Walking down the passage, he licked his thumb and rubbed at the small blemishes he had seen still marking face as he exited the bathroom.

"Look at this one, he got such a fright that he turned white." It was Andries.

Soon, the excitement tapered off and everyone returned outside. The newspapers had been a waste. Someone had taken his seat and he sat on a concrete ledge. He listened as one of the guests complained how his neighbour's alarm always went off in the dead of night, waking up the whole neighbourhood. Someone, Jaco's sister, asked how much Liezel was paying for her security. This sparked a vibrant exchange. Things were back to normal. The delicate shell of their lie was still intact.

"Mig, can you get it?" Liezel ordered after the doorbell rang. She was still brusque with him.

The security guard was dressed in a khaki uniform, a small badge affixed to his chest. S. Motswane. He introduced himself by the name of his company.

"It was just a false alarm. We're having a bit of a party and the kids were mucking about."

"Unfortunately I have to inspect the premises." He was polite but firm.

"Sure, come in."

He showed him into the lounge. There was no use trying to explain the décor, or the food heaped in mismatching plastic containers. Not even the newspapers.

"I must also check outside," he asked after returning down the passage.

Miguel led him onto the stoep.

"You're a bit late for the party, *boeta*." It was Andries, again.

S. Motswane edged his way past the guests into the garden. His torch momentarily paused on a section of the wall where the razor wire was weighted down by a granadilla creeper. He briefly disappeared around the corner, a crackle of static from his walkie-talkie the only indication that he hadn't slipped over a wall and left. He reappeared, switching off his torch as he approached the stoep. Ronel, almost guiltily he thought, thanked him for coming. It sparked a chorus of drunken thanks and greetings.

"I'm sorry if we wasted your time," Miguel offered as he ushered him through the front door. The man simply nodded his head, returned to his bakkie.

The patrol vehicle was double-parked behind some of the visitors' cars. Miguel waited to wave him off. Apparently, he was in no hurry to leave. He switched on his cabin light, leaned over and reached for the cubbyhole. Miguel sauntered across to where the bakkie was parked.

"What's that you're filling out?"

"An incident report."

"Do you have to write one out even if nothing happens?"

He looked up from the yellow gloom of the interior.

"Yes."

"And what will you say?"

Miguel watched as he awkwardly rested the logbook on the steering wheel and started completing the incident report. He had a neat blue script. First, he completed the date, then the time, followed by the residential address. He paused on the last column, a somewhat substantial blank space where the incident would be described.

"What will you write in here?" he asked, squinting to see what the previous reports had been.

S. Motswane completed his summary. It was terse.

Walking back to the house, Miguel noticed the muck that had accumulated on the underside of his fingernails.

It was black face paint. For rest of the party he scratched at it.

"Marie tried to kill herself," said Danny, sitting himself upright in the small A-frame tent. I slipped into the tent next him. He had a thick layer of white cream covering his sunburnt nose and his red curls were greasy and unkempt. He wasn't designed for the sun or December holidays camping by the beach. Closing the comic book he had been reading, he laconically continued with his explanation of the vomit trail that led from the two-lane dirt track to the Walker campsite.

"She drank all Uncle Kenny's booze."

"Why'd she do that?" I asked.

"I dunno, she's crazy."

I chuckled, describing in detail the large black ants I had seen probing at the edges of the sticky mess. I told him how I had poked at it with a long piece of grass.

"Sick man!" he laughed, turning over onto his stomach again and opening his comic book. I tucked in next to him.

I first met Danny three years ago, a few months after my dad's panel beating shop signed a deal with the company his father worked for. Since then, every December, we would meet at Sodwana Bay, on the Northern KwaZulu Natal coast. It was a strange paradise, the campsites wedged between

crocodile infested mangrove swamps and conservation land that once been used as a missile testing range. The two of us struck up an uncomplicated friendship, largely because we were the same age, and from Pretoria, although he lived in the north, near Sinoville. I went to school in Lyttleton, in the south. The only other time we ever saw each other during the year was at the annual inter-schools athletic meet, but we hardly spoke then, keeping to our school friends.

My younger brother thought he was a nerd and sometimes teased him about his freckles. I was not as outgoing as my younger brother, who always made friends amongst the children playing in the brackish lagoon near the beach. Danny was also easy enough to get along with. Often we would spend time under his mother's sun umbrella talking, his older sister, Belinda, making sulky comments. Sometimes, though, we would walk along the beach, usually in the late afternoon, studying the tracks. Danny was a pro and could identify most of the competing tyre manufacturers by their distinctive treads: Yokohama Super Diggers, Good Year Wranglers, BF Goodrich All Terrains, even the really expensive Pirelli Scorpion Zeroes. I was always amazed.

"My dad said I can't go fishing with him tomorrow," Danny mumbled. He was pulling at a loose piece of skin on his nose while reading his comic.

"Why?"

"Because of Uncle Kenny."

"But I thought your dad said he would allow you to go fishing with him this year."

"Well, that's what he said in Pretoria just before we came, but now he says he's worried that I'll get sick if I'm in the sun the whole day."

"Maybe he's right."

"No, he just wants me off the boat so that Uncle Kenny's friend can go fishing."

"Too bad."

"I hate him." I nodded my head and continued reading.

I first met Uncle Kenny, or Kenny Andrews, at a big braai when we first came to Sodwana. Uncle Kenny was nearly 40, although he looked much older. Unlike Marie, his young girlfriend, Uncle Kenny had dark, malevolent eyes, their colour not dissimilar the brackish water that trickled from the swamp into the sea. He owned a fleet of tow trucks, which Danny's father managed. KT Services. The name was painted all over both his and Danny's dad's bakkies.

"Kenny's Towing Services?" I had asked Danny at the braai.

"No, King Thick," he had whispered with an evil smile. It was then that I decided I would befriend him. It didn't matter that he was a bit geeky.

"Why did Marie try to kill herself?" I asked, turning the page of the comic I was reading, *Tintin in Tibet*.

"She was depressed, or something."

"Why was she depressed?"

"I don't know. I heard my mom say it's because she is so much younger than him. They can't relate, or something like that."

"Sounds weird."

"Ja, they're messed-up."

I laughed at Danny's quip and resumed with the comic book. Suddenly a wafer of skin landed on Snowy. It was the piece he had been pulling at on the tip of his nose.

"Grim!" I screeched. Danny simply laughed. I flicked it out the door of the tent. "You're sick, you know that."

We continued reading in silence.

"Belinda saw it happen," Danny remarked, sitting upright.

"Saw what?"

"Uncle Kenny beating up Marie."

"Really," I said, intrigued. "What happened?"

"She won't tell me but I heard her telling her friends about it. I think he tied her up to a tree and punched her a few times."

"*That's* messed-up," I declared.

"What is?"

"Uncle Kenny and Marie."

"I suppose. In any case, he's a dick."

Closing the book on Captain Haddock, I looked at Danny. He was sitting, quietly staring through the entrance at the wild bushes and undergrowth outside the tent.

"What are you looking at?"

"Nothing," he replied, his sunburn luminescent in the late afternoon light.

***

"I bet Uncle Kenny's sailfish is bigger than that shark." Danny pointed to the large Mako shark strung from the wooden trusses used to weigh game fish landed at the bay. The angler, a squat man with a perfectly round belly, beamed at the crowd gathered around his catch.

"No ways," I countered. It was obvious that the shark was bigger.

"Yes ways." Danny pushed me a little too intently. In turn, I flicked his floppy white hat off his head.

"Not funny!" Reaching for his hat, he quickly covered his sweaty, red curls.

"You look like you've got radiation sickness," my young brother laughed, running off to the lagoon.

"Ha, ha, very funny," he shouted after him, pulling his hat low over his face, which was smothered with sun block.

"Don't mind him, he's always a pain."

Danny sullenly made his way to the front of the assembled crowd to get a closer view of the shark being lowered onto an open top bakkie. I scanned the crowd. I had not seen Belinda since the night I left Danny's tent. She wasn't here. I pushed forward.

"Look."

It was Uncle Kenny's silver-blue Sailfish. They were lifting it by its tail, its long, spear-like snout pointed to the ground. It was certainly longer than the shark but also much thinner.

"Marie, did you remember to bring the camera from the campsite?" It was Uncle Kenny. Marie stood expressionless to one side of the crowd, near his bakkie. Wearing a flowing caftan and dark glasses, she was expressionless.

"Marie! Did you remember the camera?"

She stared intently at the fish. Even from where I stood I could see a hint of discolouration peeking beneath the left lens of her glasses, a bruise.

"No," she finally answered before turning and walking off towards the beach.

"What's up with her?" I asked Danny.

"I dunno."

I looked up at the suspended fish. A slow trickle of blood dripped from its mouth. It formed a crimson stain on the beach sand beneath it.

***

Uncle Kenny had to ask my dad to take a photo of his fish. He was mad after that and raced off to the cleaning area with his catch alone. Danny and I had to walk up to it. When we arrived at the makeshift cleaning spot, a concrete foundation with a few taps and one basin, Uncle Kenny was speaking a man dressed in a khaki safari outfit, a family man, not a fisherman.

"It looks like a female," he authoritatively told the man.

"Can you eat it?" He had a foreign accent.

"No, jusus, this meat's kak. I'm just going to cut off its head. The Parks Board kaffirs will eat the meat. They mos eat anything." The man looked at Uncle Johnny in an uncertain way, then retreated.

The dead fish still had the green, glitter-streaked lure that had enticed it hooked in the corner of its mouth.

"She was a tough bitch," Uncle Johnny stated, looking at me. He had never spoken directly to me before. I smiled nervously. "Look here."

He held out his hand to me, showing me his palm. It had a huge blood blister. I looked at his other hand. He wore two gold rings on that one. Bending over, he rummaged through his tackle box. He removed a rusty knife with a long blade. After scarping it against the cement, a horrible sound, he offered it to me.

"Here, I'll give you the honours. You can cut her belly open."

"No, that's okay." I recoiled.

"Suit yourself." He stuck the knife it the soft underbelly and hacked the fish open. Its contents spilt out over the wet concrete surface. Seagulls dipped and dived and squawked overhead. The sky was fall of them.

I wandered off to look at the other, smaller fish caught that day. I stopped to look at the spindle-shaped

body of a tuna. It had a dark metallic blue sheen and lay stiffly on the cement. Neatly laid out next to it were two Pickhandle barracuda, both roughly the same size. I hunched down to view the pair. Their large black eyes were intently focussed on the sky above.

"Bet you won't touch its eye." It was Belinda's voice. I knew it even before I looked up to see her standing over me.

"Oh yes I will." I gingerly ran my finger across the slippery meniscus of the barracuda's eye.

"Sis! What does it feel like?"

"It's nothing. Try it."

She knelt down next to me. I felt a sudden tremor in my body. Belinda was two years older than me. She always had a charming smell about her: coconut oil. But she was also dangerous, a vicious gossip. Whenever we went to braai at the Walker's campsite, Belinda would tell fanciful stories to all the children. Her stories intrigued me, largely because she was the singular highlight of my holidays in Sodwana.

She tentatively directed her finger at the fish.

"Hey, get away from those fish," an angry fisherman shouted from his 4x4.

Giggling, we retreated from the dead fish.

"They're so damn precious about their fish," Belinda said as she gingerly made her way through a mess of entrails, fish gills and flies. We were headed towards Uncle Johnny. He was trying, with some difficulty it seemed, to cut off the fish's head. We stopped and silently watched.

"I saw what he did to Marie," Belinda whispered in my ear. Her breath smelt of Coke, heavenly. I glanced up at her, at the lone freckle on the tip of her nose. She smiled. "I was there."

"You mean you saw him punch her?"

"Amongst other things."

"Like what?"

"Wouldn't you like to know."

"Ag, come on. Don't be like that."

She walked off in the direction of the basin and peered into it. She wrinkled her nose.

"Oh come on, tell me."

"Only if you say please." She was enjoying me begging."

"Please!"

"And only if you put your hand inside this mush." She pointed to the leftovers of a fish with her slender, big toe. The blood-streaked muck was covered in flies.

"Okay," I said and promptly stuck my finger into it. It was cold.

"Gross," she squealed. "That was obviously too easy."

"No ways, I did what you asked and now you must tell."

"And what if I don't."

"Then I'll chuck this on you." I motioned to pick up the mess of guts I had just stuck my finger into.

"No sick, don't," she giggled.

"Well then tell me what you saw."

"Okay, okay."

She walked in the direction of the headless sailfish. He had finished. Uncle Kenny had got his trophy.

"Okay, I'll tell you but only if you, hmmm… put the fishes heart in your mouth."

"No stuff that. This isn't Fear Factor, you know."

"So then we're quits then?" she declared sulkily. "I don't have to tell you anything."

I kneeled down in front of the wasted fish.

"I don't even know what a fishes heart looks like."

"So you'll do it?" Her voice was sceptical.

"Yes."

"Cool! We studied anatomy this year. We even did a dissection of a rat."

It took quite a while before we found a discarded ice-cream stick – and Danny. The three of us returned to the fish. With her sun-bleached length of hair tied up behind her head, Belinda tentatively sifted through the guts of the fish with the ice-cream stick.

"Here it is!" She pointed to a purple bit of meat. It looked bigger than I had expected. A bitter taste formed in my mouth.

"Yuck, I can't put all of that in my mouth."

"Chicken," Danny lashed out viciously.

"Stuff you!" I poked my finger at the fish's organ. I remembered my fete earlier and dug my hand deeper into the sodden mess. I tried to lift it. The whole of the spilt mess seemed to move with it.

"I'll get a knife," Danny said, running off.

"You better tell me what you saw after I do this," I demanded sternly, looking at Belinda. My eyes momentarily dropped down.

"Stop staring!"

"I wasn't," I stated defensively, blushing. I had been caught out. She glowered at me, then tucked her left hand into her right armpit, in effect shielding her small breasts from view. I had ruined the effort of my previous efforts; I would have to put the fish's heart in my mouth.

Danny returned with the rusty knife Uncle Kenny had used to open the fish. It was very blunt but I eventually managed to hack a small parcel of flesh from the heart, if it was a heart and Belinda was telling the truth. I held it out in the palm of my hand. Belinda and Danny curiously touched it, almost as if it were still living. It definitely felt dead.

"Okay, so repeat the deal." I had never really noticed how much taller Belinda was than me.

"If you put that in your mouth, I'll tell you what I saw Uncle Kenny do to Marie."

"And maybe she'll even give you a kiss," Danny added sarcastically. "We all know that's all you really want."

"Ag!"

"Is it a deal?" Belinda asked.

"Deal," I said, offering her my left hand. We shook on it. It was the first time I had ever touched her in such a dedicated way. It felt exciting.

"Now do it."

I stuck my tongue out, delicately placing the piece of flesh onto my tongue.

"I said inside your mouth," Belinda ordered. "You have to close your mouth on it."

I shook my head vigorously but knew the hopelessness of trying to negotiate now as she stood there staring at me wide-eyed. I closed my eyes and slowly, carefully drew my tongue in. I shouldn't have closed my eyes.

Belinda jumped forward. With a carefully aimed blow she slammed my jaw shut. I bit into the thing in my mouth. It tasted bloody.

"You fucked-up bitch," I yelled after spitting the mass of flesh out. I had never used the f-word so coldly before.

No matter how much I spat, wretched, or gargled at a tap, I could not get rid of the dark taste in my mouth. The sight of fly-encrusted innards nearby made me vomit. A short distance behind me, I heard Belinda laughing, Danny too. I could feel the tears welling, and quickly stuck my head under the tap. I soaked my whole upper body.

"What are you doing?" It was Danny.

"Nothing, just mess off."

"It was only a joke." Belinda had also come closer.

"You're messed-up! Both of you."

"You said you wanted to know what happened so I thought I'd show you." Belinda laughed cruelly.

"You're sick!"

"Not as a sick as Uncle Kenny. He used his boat rope to tie her to the tree before he hit her. He kept calling her a drunk and a whore."

The story didn't seem to matter any more. It had never been about the stupid, sick story, anyway. I wiped at a tear running down my cheek.

"She did that too," remarked Belinda coldly.

It just happened automatically, a reflex action. I dug my hand into a pile of fish innards and flung them at Belinda. It splattered all over her belly and legs, even staining parts of her yellow bikini bottom.

"You pig!" She burst into tears and ran off.

"My dad's gonna get you," Danny said vengefully.

"Get lost, radiation freak!" He ran off along the dirt track leading to their campsite.

For a while I loitered around the cleaning area, watching as the gulls fought over bits of fish. Sometimes they even fought in the sky above me, elaborate pirouetting arcs as they squabbled over the leftover flesh. Eventually, two men in Parks Board overalls and gumboots arrived on a tractor. They loaded Uncle Kenny's fish onto their trailer, then hosed down the cleaning area.

***

It was the night before we were due to go back to Pretoria. New years' eve. A big braai. Red meat and loud talk. My mom and dad were there, so too my younger brother. Also the Walkers – all of them. And Uncle Kenny, with Marie, although the two weren't talking. There were others as well, mostly Uncle Kenny's friends, rough men who soldiered through the beer with stories of big fish and unpredictable seas. It almost sounded heroic as I listened in on them.

Just before the kid's dinner, cutlets and boerewors, I was hauled in front of an impromptu jury: Mrs Walker, my mom and Marie. What had happened the other day? Why weren't we speaking to one another? I told my version, Belinda and Danny theirs. None of us mentioned Uncle Kenny or Marie. "Is!" "Isn't." We argued ourselves into a corner, unable to get past the impossible impasse; we were lying just to avoid shaming Marie. Finally, Danny broke down. A slender version of the truth came out, something about the vomit near the tent. Marie winced. The women were all embarrassed.

"You should mind your own business, young man," my mother said, pinching my side hard. It hurt, but I gulped down the pain. I would have a bruise the next day.

As I sulkily walked with my dinner plate looking for somewhere to sit near the fire, I saw Belinda crying over her food. I knew she was crying, he shoulders were trembling. Her mother had slapped her in the face, right in front of all of us. I didn't know what to say and walked past. I sat near Danny.

"I'm sorry for calling you that name."

"It's okay," he replied, picking at his food.

We ate in silence. After dinner he showed me a new comic book he got for Christmas, which had come glumly the day after the flare-up at the fish cleaning area. We didn't say anything about it, and as the excitement of midnight drew closer it was almost as if nothing had happened between the two of us.

It was my younger brother who whispered into our ears, telling us to come look; he even invited Belinda. It was Marie. She had passed out in her chair in front of the fire, her head leaning to one side. On the ground next to her lay an empty glass. We sat in a huddle near her, pretending to be looking at something in the ground. The light of the fire glowed through the underside of her chair, which was exactly why my brother had chosen this spot. He pointed at the base of the fold-up chair.

"What is it?" Belinda asked.

"Pee," my brother whispered. It dripped slowly from underneath the chair. There was something sad about it, I thought, trying not to think of the blood dripping out the sailfish's mouth.

"Ah, no man, sis!" Danny hissed.

We sat in silence, taking turns looking at Marie's humiliation. Mostly we said nothing; we had all learnt to not involve adults in our world. Once, my brother threw a round seedpod at her. It hit Marie on the head, but she remained motionless. We all giggled.

"Do you know what?" Belinda said hesitantly. I looked raptly at her, the broken firelight dancing on her face.

"What?" I asked when no-one else did.

"Remember that fish Uncle Kenny caught? The sailfish." We all nodded our heads. "Apparently he had to chuck the head away, this morning."

"Why?" my brother asked.

"It had rotted in his deep freeze."

"But how's that possible?" I asked. Belinda smiled, a mixture of malice and quiet understanding.

"I heard my dad telling my mom that Marie switched his deep-freeze off, to spite him or something. My dad says Uncle Kenny only found out about it today, when he went to

the place where they keep all the deep freezers. Everything was *vrot* by then."

"Where did he leave the head?" I asked.

"I don't know. Why don't you go ask him?"

Things were returning to normal. Shortly afterwards, my brother and Danny started arguing. I asked Belinda if she wanted to go look for the fish's head. No, she said, brushing past in a scented huff. Midnight came soon afterwards, a joyous noise of firecrackers, car hooters and laughter. Marie slept through it all.

SAYING NOTHING

All discourse about photography takes on the artificial air of an exercise in rhetoric.

Pierre Bourdieu – *The Social Definition of Photography*

In search of nothing

So this is where I first met Jo Ractliffe, I think, looking at the green M7 road sign fastened to the street lamp. In the background, the asphalt kinks left beneath a railway bridge, the road disappearing into Fordsburg. It is a Saturday afternoon, quiet but for the occasional car. Even Pageview, with its rows of terraced houses, is silent. I walk slowly in the direction of the tawny coloured wall that demarcates the western perimeter of the Braamfontein railway yard, hopeful, despite the simple truth that confronts me. The billboard is gone, all of it, including the steel frame structure itself.

It was a non-descript autumn day in 2001 when I first encountered Jo's cinematic strip photographs, a series of images mounted onto inner city billboards. I was on a lethargic ramble, lazily killing time while on a holiday from abroad. Headed west along Smit Street, from

Braamfontein, I turned left into De la Rey Street. It was there that I came across a billboard displaying a mercurial, almost dreamlike image of Johannesburg's sulphurous yellow mine dumps. The image intrigued me, largely because it featured no explanatory wording or branding, and thus offered no immediate interpretation. I doubled back, pulled my car onto the pavement, and paused on the apparently purposeless image, memorable even now for its expansive blue skies and alluring tranquillity.

I stopped three times that day, unaware that each time I did so I was unwittingly participating in an outdoor art project curated by Stephen Hobbs, titled *Tour Guides of the Inner City*. On each occasion I took a photograph, mostly to record the strangeness of the photographs, images that presented themselves - without any comment or context - as distant and fragile renderings of an ineffable city, Johannesburg.

Ineffable, the word has a compelling ring, even though its use here is somewhat fraught. As an adjective, ineffable is a word used to describe an experience too great or extreme to be expressed in words, something too sacred to be uttered. It is tempting to interpolate here and say that my stop and start journey of discovery in 2001 placed me in front of some unutterable immensity, but that

would simply be a lie. After all, the billboard was simply a physical structure, something capable of being described or, easier still, photographed. Photography, in the hands of an amateur, often tends to operate as lazy shorthand; and, for a writer, words are unavoidable, which is why I have returned to the western border of the Braamfontein rail yard, hoping to find the white-framed billboards that once displayed Jo's images.

They are gone. Something about this blunt fact perturbs me, perhaps even strikes me as apt. Unable to pin the sentiment, I loiter on the pavement, briefly taking in the surrounding scenery. The large steel gate is still there, I note, although I do not recall the Metrorail iconography, a diagonal yellow line that bleeds from one half of the gate to the other. I notice a circular piece of graffiti on the rail yard wall. After an inquisitive squint, I discern that the secret scribble is actually a tangled noun. It spells out the word LSD, which makes me smile. Someone once described Jo's *Nadir* works as depicting "hallucinatory landscapes".

I do not pause long however; there is nothing to see. The geography surrounding the approximate location of the missing billboard is so ordinary, so unremarkable as to be completely banal, which is an insight true of most of

Johannesburg, a city whose brutal dullness requires a particular type of observational gift, or endurance rather. Disappointed, I return to my car. In lieu of a protracted conversation, I send an sms.

> *Thought it apt. Went to investigate your billboard. Gone, including the frame itself.*
> *Sender: Sean O'Toole Sent: 15:15:36 27-07-2004*

The words possess an almost perfunctory quality when I read them again. Too late, they've been sent. Further down De la Rey Street, I stop where it meets Carr Street, at the entrance to Braamfontein Station. It was here that I saw the second billboard. Again there is nothing to see; the entire billboard has simply vanished. I decide against looking for the third one.

A newly painted fence, speckled patches of silver paint marking the ground beneath it, follows the forward trajectory of my car. Curiously engaged by this nothing detail, it suddenly occurs to me that this is how many of the images in *Johannesburg Inner City Works 2000 – 2004* present themselves. They are remote observations on a reality somehow made even more distant and fleeting by Jo's vantage, often from inside a slow moving car. The result is

a remarkably proscribed view of Johannesburg, one that is equally tentative as it is transitory and imprecise. And yet the images repeatedly confront you with a tactile ordinariness, with traffic intersections and smouldering fires and vacant tracts of land.

As I speed up, the rail yard fence tries to keep a straight line but tends to kink and weave according to the sympathy of the men who erected it. At one point, the fence even veers around a gnarled old tree. It seems like a wistful bit of philanthropy given the ruined condition of the lone branch protruding street side. Further down Carr Street, Johannesburg's new optimism suddenly becomes palpable, and finds its apotheosis in the new Nelson Mandela Bridge. This structure is pictured in one of Jo's strips, and includes a peculiar series of images containing the detail of another photograph within it. A tightly framed shot of a young boy holding a cupped hand against his mouth, the boy's image is printed onto a commercial hoarding and is draped over a derelict building.

"That boy is screaming but not from pain," I remember inner city resident Dan Malete telling me of Ruth Matau's image. "It's a cry of happiness. I like it a lot."

Crossing the new bridge I see that Matau's image has been removed from the empty building it adorned for over a year. Strange coincidence, I think. My phone beeps.

I know, but then we both have photographs…

Sender: Jo Ractliffe Sent: 15:29:18 27-07-2004

The imperfect view

"The city is no more than a mnemonic," writes Ivan Vladislavic in an observational narrative included in the book *Blank_____ Architecture, apartheid and after*. Shortly before offering this view, the Johannesburg-based writer also remarks how "getting lost is not always a bad thing". Having gotten interminably lost on my ambitious journey to find something that wasn't there – an idea more than a thing, a memory rather than a literal billboard – I have found strange comfort in Vladislavic's statement. But what does it mean to say that the city is no more than a mnemonic?

According to one dictionary definition, the noun mnemonic refers to a device, for example a pattern of letters or ideas, which aids the memory. Understood in

relation to Jo's City images (my chosen abbreviation for *Johannesburg Inner City Works 2000 – 2004*), the words pattern, idea and memory strike me as being especially pertinent. Their relevance takes on added depth when read in conjunction with a comment authored by the photographer, and originally presented at the Johannesburg exhibition of these works.

"I started photographing Johannesburg a few years ago," writes Jo. "At that time I think it was the sublime I was searching for. What I found was a city of slippages. Johannesburg is not a place you can apprehend in any fixed way; it reveals itself as a continually shifting phenomenon."

Which is not to mean that her subject (Johannesburg) is beyond representation. Despite the almost transient nature of the city, as Jo describes it, she has approached her subject drawing on familiar photographic tropes, particularly those of landscape, architecture and street photography. This is consistent with her earlier practice, and helps lend a strange familiarity to an apparently fractured mode of presentation. Photographs that might seem unyielding at first thus also deliver richly textured details, including descriptions of an abandoned Yeoville landscape, residential flat blocks in Hillbrow, and street

scenes in Fordsburg. The end result of this relentless "botanising on the asphalt", to borrow a phrase from Walter Benjamin, is the unavoidable fixing of Johannesburg's restless mobility onto the immutability of a fixed plane, the tumult of change reduced into a mere artefact thereof. A photograph. A mnemonic.

To be fair, this insight came to me rather circuitously and was first suggested after a conversation I had with Jo about the photographer David Goldblatt. "I think he's a great 'non' photographer," remarked Jo. "His pictures often skirt around their subject, with things so understated as to be almost not there." Intrigued by her remark, I went to Goldblatt's book *South Africa: The Structure of Things Then*, itself a quizzical albeit highly formalist study of change. A quote by Ozzie Docrat appears on the title page. Even though I had read it before I paused on Docrat's quote, reread it. I closed the book without having viewed a picture.

A brief digression is required here. In 1976, David Goldblatt visited Fietas to document the community's imminent destruction. In terms of the Group Areas Act, the Docrats' were disqualified from living in this neighbourhood, currently signposted as Pageview on De la Rey Street. Along with numerous other notionally Indian

residents, they were soon to be relocated to Lenasia, an Indian township 40km south of Johannesburg. Goldblatt's images of the Docrat home, photographs that plainly describes the intimate minutiae of a family home, derive much of their power from the blunt testimony they offer, of an absence where once there was a modest abundance. Goldblatt has himself foregrounded the importance of these images in his own canon by prefacing *Structures* with a simple quote by Ozzie Docrat.

"I feel as though my teeth are being pulled out one by one. I run my tongue over the spaces and I try to remember the shape of what was there."

While undoubtedly a profound outpouring of personal sentiment, Docrat's statement points the reader to the deficiency latent in all photographic images. It is a point that Roland Barthes assiduously argued in his final book *Camera Lucida*, a brooding treatise that the Barthes scholar Nancy Shawcross has described as "a meditation on the absence inherent in photography".

The word "absence" is an important noun in the Ractliffe lexicon (the idea of wordplay around Jo's images something I will address more fully later). What interests me here though is how the word "absence" expresses an idea that is central to Jo's photographic production, both

generally, and specifically in the context of her City images. What it implies, simply put, is that at the very moment a photograph claims to fix a situation - be it a bed in house, or the image of a young boy jubilantly crying out from a building adjacent Nelson Mandela Bridge - it fails. While reality corrodes and mutates the image remains fixed. This disjuncture, which is central to Jo's practice, describes the mercurial essence and draw of the photographic image, its ability to describe with such veracity that which no longer necessarily is, but surely was. In a country deeply traumatised by its recent past, this understanding is anything but prosaic or inconsequential.

Describing nothing

Throughout the 1990s, an undeniably epochal period in South Africa's history, Jo often used toy cameras to make images. Susan Sontag long ago offered a charming send-up of this form of practice, rendering as caricature the "shutterbug with a Brownie who takes snapshots as souvenirs of daily life". Depending upon your point of view, this description can function as accolade or indictment. The latter view is premised on the understanding that toy

cameras supposedly can't take serious images; they trivialise the act of looking, make comical our voyeuristic desire to view history - South African history - in clear focus. It is a point underscored by the mixed critical reception of Jo's earlier toy camera work. When Jo exhibited *reShooting Diana*, an installation of photographs shot with a "toy" Diana camera, her work was ambiguously characterised as "incomplete and disturbing", even "indeterminate". The word "furtive" also suddenly became a part of the Ractliffe lexicon.

Viewed specifically in the context of a localised history of image production, one that, to quote Okwui Enwezor and Octavio Zaya, has over the decades sought to document "the varieties and contradictions of African reality", Jo's images are admittedly difficult to locate. Visually and philosophically they are more closely aligned to the later works of Robert Frank than they are to any of South Africa's great social documenters. Jo's *Diana* portfolio, for instance, also shares much of the arresting immediacy and immanence of the Japanese photographer Daido Moriyama's work, which John Szarkowski, MOMA's illustrious curator of photography, once described as evidencing an "occult taste for the dark and frightening". In strikingly

similar language Jo's output has been described as steeped in a "metaphysical mood of horror".

Concentrating on the present images, particularly those located in the verticality of the inner city, one is also reminded of Harry Callahan's multiple exposure photography. Common throughout these City images is a sensibility that strives to offer "no perfection, no consummation, nothing finished", attributes DH Lawrence once argued to be the key attributes of a poetry located in the present, a poetry that rejected completeness or formal exquisiteness. Espousing a practice that favours neither perfection nor consummation, Jo's images reject immutability. In effect, this has resulted in her being demoted by some critics to a formless, lower rung avant-garde in which assumed difficulty is the only criterion of entry. Of course, it is tempting (but ultimately fickle) to argue that Jo's work inhabits some indeterminate and underappreciated place outside of the mainstream of South African photographic practice. Patently it does not.

A comment once made by David Goldblatt is instructive. In his introductory essay to *Structures*, he writes: "I felt no driving need to record those situations and moments of extremity that were the stuff of the media. It was to the quiet and commonplace where nothing 'happened' and yet all

was contained and immanent that I was most drawn". Read in conjunction with Jo's own statement regarding the fallibility of "the sublime", Goldblatt's statement serves to suggest a curious commonality between these two distinctive practitioners. Making explicit the connection in a conversation once, Jo admitted to a peculiar indebtedness to Goldblatt, stating: "How can anyone in this country not owe a huge debt to him?"

Oddly enough, this aspect of Jo's practice is rarely acknowledged, most objections to (and defences of) her photographs couched in strict formalist terms. Commentators have thus repeatedly commented on the "absence of an available language" and "defiance of explicit gratification" in her photographs. Such comments are understandable if you view them as emblematic of a particular expectation burdening South African photography. Over the course of the last five decades, particularly, local photographic practice has been concentrated on representing history in all its ugliness and distortions. Jo's general refusal to address history in a direct manner (her work *Vlakplaas: 2 June 1999 (drive-by shooting)* a tenuous exception), indeed, the apparent evidentiary lack of her photographs generally, has occasioned something of a small frisson in local photography, in effect challenging

the certainty of old orthodoxies. Critical discourse is still playing catch up.

In researching this writing I have repeatedly been struck by the complex language that adheres itself to Jo's photographic practice. To understand her work, or even speak about it, one has to be inclined towards a complex form of verbal gymnastics that often runs the risk of becoming self-serving or, worse yet, unrelated to the images themselves. I can only venture that this sort of literary production, to paraphrase Tom Wolfe, derives from a perceived lack of content in her images. A simple tabulation of the words used to describe Jo's photographs tends to underscore my point. The words "nothing" and "absence" are often invoked, Jo's images remarked upon for their "defiant non-deliverance" and "resistance to narrative sequencing". Over the years, Jo's work has also variously been described as "alienating" and "apocalyptic", "bland" and "blurred", "relentless" and "unstable", these adjectives (more often than not) used to affirm rather than dismiss her practice.

I would like to suggest that it is possible to restate these adjectival descriptions using a single word, one that neatly encapsulates the core of the foregoing line of reasoning. That word is "ineffability". Almost

unsurprisingly, it is a word that squarely confronts the reader with the fallibility of language in commenting on photographic imagery. It is a point poignantly deliberated upon, at some length, by Barthes, in his essay 'The Photographic Message'. To describe a photograph, conjectures Barthes, "is thus not simply to be imprecise or incomplete, it is to change structures, to signify something different from what is shown".

For the French theorist Pierre Bourdieu, this insight necessarily means that "all discourse about photography takes on the artificial air of an exercise in rhetoric," which is remarkably true of the task of modern critical commentary – but also more than a little unforgiving. As it is, Bourdieu offers a thoughtful comment that I believe might help concentrate the viewer's eye on more than just the form of Jo's ostensibly "oblique" and "obscure" images. In his essay 'The Social Definition of Photography', Bourdieu discusses the codification of photographic practices. "Rather than using all the possibilities of photography to invert the conventional order of the visible," writes Bourdieu, "… ordinary practice subordinates photographic choice to the categories and canons of the traditional vision of the world," which in

South African photography have crystallised into a social or documentary worldview.

This is an important observation. In eschewing strict formalist categories and canons both familiar to, and resonant of South Africa's photographic tradition, Jo has successfully achieved what Bourdieu speaks of, the use of all the possibilities of photography to invert the conventional order of the visible. This she achieves in a body of work whose format seems perfectly applied to its subject matter: the brutal ugliness and paradoxical charm of Johannesburg's manufactured urban environments, its poignant non-spaces and peripheries, its sites of worship and transaction, its geographies of event and non-event.

In describing these places Jo's camera lingers on particularities. Top Star drive-inn. Smit Street adjacent the Ponte Tower. Chief Albert Lithuli House, headquarters of the ANC-led government. Corner House, at the intersection of Commissioner and Simmonds streets, a historic building designed by the Edwardian architectural firm of Leck & Emley that is currently being retrofitted as expensive loft apartments. Jumbo Liquor Store, also on Commissioner Street, its pink elephant signage photographed as an explicit homage to *The Restless Supermarket*, Ivan

Vladislavic's nostalgic paean to change in the inner city. Seeing these things is merely a matter of looking.

The second greatest city after Paris

"Johannesburg is seldom a beautiful city," David Goldblatt once remarked in a conversation. It is interesting how this random aside segues with Jo's own observation that she was most drawn to Goldblatt's "almost anti-aesthetic… his quite blunt and bland approach to his material". As with her previous remarks on Goldblatt, this observation is as pointedly revealing about Jo's own practice, which is not singular in having discerned a dark poetry in Johannesburg's somewhat bleak urban environments.

Of these many unwelcoming places, I am still most drawn to Jo's images of the mine dumps, those iconic and scattered reminders of Johannesburg's early reason for being. "Those mine dumps compensate the city for the lack of any great architecture," the celebrated English travel writer H.V. Morton blithely points out in his travelogue *In Search of South Africa*, published in 1948. Morton further declares of Johannesburg's "golden pyramids shining in the sunlight" that they are "unavoidable and compelling".

Compelling is a word I would certainly use in describing Jo's photographs of the mine dumps, images that anchor the viewer in a territory "so much part of the fabric of the city," to quote Jo.

Having repeatedly been confronted by Jo's mine dump images, first on a street corner, then again in the Johannesburg Art Gallery, I still find myself most drawn to their matter-of-fact declaratory nature, the peculiarly literal rendering Jo offers of a terrain steeped in the imagination. This is Johannesburg her images tell me. This is where countless fictions have been described, including mine clerk turned journalist Rolfes (R.R.R.) Dhlomo's short story 'Murder on the Mine Dumps'. This is where Irvine Welsh discerned a "diminishing backdrop" for his bleak novel *Marabou Stork Nightmares*, and where Nadine Gordimer, in her novel *The Conservationist*, encountered a "stretch of waste ground that no longer serves its original purpose and for which a new one has not yet been decided". This, also, is where William Kentridge, after wandering through the dusty dumps south west of Johannesburg, remarked on a landscape filled with "industrial detritus" and "failed civil engineering projects".

Of course, I could be accused of inserting invisible detail here, of adding unnecessary context, which in a

discourse about photography highlights a perennial difficulty. It is the problem of describing what is visible and through description "to change structures, to signify something different from what is shown". Mindful of Barthes' cautionary remark, I nonetheless stand by what I have written. I feel it offers a useful counter to the assertion that Jo's work "operates in a challenging terrain that refuses the possibility of inherent meaning in the landscape". In the context of her City image, there is a palpable sense of meaning in her landscapes. As interrupted and agitated as her City images might appear, they nonetheless situate the viewer in a very particular cultural and historical narrative, the continuum of which is both framework and subject of her photographs.

Defining home

In his celebrated treatise on Charles Baudelaire, the German cultural critic Walter Benjamin argues that Baudelaire reached beyond "the condition of the observer". In support of his argument, Benjamin quotes an unlikely passage from a biography on Charles Dickens, authored by the novelist GK Chesterton. "Whenever [Dickens] had done drudging," writes Chesterton, "he had no other resources

but drifting, and he drifted over half London… He walked in darkness under the lamps of Holborn, and was crucified at Charing Cross… He did not go in for 'observation', a priggish habit; he did not look at Charing Cross to improve his mind, or count the lampposts in Holborn to practise his arithmetic… Dickens did not stamp these places on his mind; he stamped his mind on these places".

Jo's photographic images of Johannesburg reveal a similar strategy. Her images chart a drift, one that moves along a familiar route, across a city that is at once obvious in its photographic exegesis, yet fugitive in delivering an obvious, easily encapsulated sense of meaning. In a conference paper delivered some years ago, Penny Siopis remarked upon this attribute in Jo's work, stating: "Through a set of formal and conceptual manoeuvres, she forces the viewer to make a choice, to stay with the images for a while and project meaning onto them, or to decline and leave, feeling a little lost." It is easy to opt for the latter mode of engagement, to decline the protean reality pictured, to leave feeling more than a little disappointed. After all, Jo's City images portray "a landscape cluttered with irrelevant detail; with dead ends and false turns on every side," to quote Ivan Vladislavic's on his adopted city, Johannesburg.

More often than not figurative cul-de-sacs and detours have beset critics and commentators of Jo's photography. In an off-hand moment I once heard Jo's cinematic strip works dismissed as lesser examples of Eadweard Muybridge's photographic studies of human locomotion because of their film-like quality. It might seem tempting to go there but this is simply lazy criticism. The same could hardly be said of those genuine examples of commentary that seem to falter when it comes to identifying a "decodable meaning". Jo is partly to blame here, her work intrigued with ascribing a visual identity to something intangible. How do you photograph a "continually shifting phenomenon"?

Partly, maybe even totally, you resolve yourself with what is, the physical world, which is what Jo has done. It took me a lot longer to arrive at the same point, an uneventful car journey included. This necessitates an admission. Initially, when I accepted this offer to write about Jo's City images, I was still somewhat sceptical of their merit. Despite my admiration of her mine dumps strips, I found it difficult to linger on the totality of her photographs with much determination. Rote phrases habitually asserted themselves: absent, uneventful and so forth. In many senses this text is a description of my own

personal passage from doubt, to reconciliation, to 'something else'.

So how do I characterise my engagement with these images without resorting to grandstanding, a particularly disingenuous attribute of certain strands of modern art criticism? What, to be concise, is that 'something else' I so ineloquently propose? It is a complex and contradictory appreciation of a body of work that is still largely tentative in nature. Very often it has to do with how they dialogue with contemporary Johannesburg. Travelling from the Johannesburg Art Gallery after having viewed them on public display, it was very much apparent that these images presented a mirror of the reality I was driving through. However, they are not perfect in their mirroring. Ruth Matau's image is gone, replaced by a Johnny Walker hoarding. The Constitutional Court is no longer under construction. More rubble has accumulated outside Corner House. It is in these and numerous other tiny disparities between fact and photograph, between evolution and fixity, that these photographs gain their momentum, begin to ripen, achieve what all photographs inevitably do, speak about what was, not what is.

It is not only their archival quality that appeals though. It is the manner in which the archive is recorded.

It is the atypical eccentricities and longings of the photographer to be a part of what she describes. Very often locating Jo in these photographs is more a matter of skill than it is purpose. Otherwise put, it is all about looking. If you look carefully, you'll see that Jo fleetingly described in an image taken on the Yeoville ridge, easy enough to discern from the half-built apartment visible in the background. It shows the photographer's hand held up against the intensity of the sun's light. Elsewhere, Jo asserts herself as a shadowy outline inscribed on a Fordsburg pavement, arms hunched against side in the standard photographic posture. It is an image that recalls a similar self-portrait from 1985, also a photograph of shadow on a pavement, and according to Jo is "a quirky little habit of mine" (that is repeated in *Vlakplaas* and *Port of Entry)*.

There are other examples of the archivist self-reflexively registering her presence. At times they are slightly more cryptic, but are no less pronounced in declaring the photographer's "need to stamp myself on my subject". My personal favourite is an image photographed near Joubert Park. It shows a tree with the words "SHOOTING RANGE" tacked onto it. It is a cheeky visual device, one that boldly declares: "Look! I'm here, behind the lens."

The words propose a quiet invitation to participate in a prosaic world of pink elephants and advertising signs, CCTV cameras and roadside commerce, to engage with a city at a very particular moment in its passage from tenuous capital of white commerce to that of "a world-class African city". It is an invitation to participate in images that exist not merely as topographical records but as minutely personal biographical documents, records of being, our collective being. The invitation has been made. Look.

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UNIVERSITY OF CAPE TOWN

GRADUATE SCHOOL IN HUMANITIES

DECLARATION BY CANDIDATE FOR THE DEGREE OF MASTER IN THE FACULTY OF HUMANITIES

I, (*name of candidate*)

SÉAN WILLIAM O'TOOLE

of (address of candidate)

1815 RENNIE HOUSE, 18 HOOFD STREET,

BRAAMFONTEIN, 2001

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

A GIFT OF STONES

in any manner whatsoever.

Signed by candidate

CANDIDATE'S SIGNATURE

29/3/2005

DATE

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