

University of KwaZulu-Natal

***Tenement*: a novel manuscript, plus a critical self-reflection on  
the process of writing**

by

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of

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## Abstract

This dissertation has two parts. Part one is a manuscript for a novel, entitled *Tenement*, and part two is a critical self-reflection on the processing of writing.

*Tenement* is a story about death, narrated from the perspective of a dead woman, and its themes are mortality, fragility, the urban environment, caring and social isolation. The narrator, who never discloses her own name, discovers her life may have ended, but not her awareness. Not immediately, anyway. For six days, she watches her own physical decomposition and the reactions of other people and creatures to this termination of life. The responses of the nonhumans who share her body and flat are intimate and oddly affirming, but those of her human neighbours less so. In the derelict tenement, full of invisible or forgotten people with nowhere else to go, there's a stony indifference to the narrator's death. But not to the empty apartment. In considering these reactions and the struggle for the vacant flat, the narrator reveals the world of which she was a part. Rising sea levels, illegal dumping and poverty are daily realities of life in the unnamed city in which *Tenement* is set. City officials may have sloughed off the areas most affected by the encroaching sea, declaring them abandoned and forcibly removing the slum dwellers, but others have returned to the area. Christened the flatlands, the zone is neither abandoned nor uninhabited. The struggle for survival is uncompromising, and the opportunities for fragility, creativity and care eroding as quickly as the land. Yet it is in death, and the new rituals that have emerged to deal with it, that the missed opportunities of individual and collective action are most evident. This, then, is part one of the dissertation.

In part two, a reflexive account of the process of writing is offered. Key elements of the novel are discussed, including the use of a Möbius strip for temporal representation, along with its implications for the treatment of narrated and narrating time. The choice of narrator and the conceptualisation of her voice are explained, and the question of genre highlighted, along with the merits of African gothic and its

contribution to postcolonial literature. Given that *Tenement* is a story set in a polluted, drowning city of the future, the challenges associated with focalising environment and the risks of using allegorical spaces in postcolonial novels are recognised. *Tenement* is juxtaposed with specific trends in contemporary South African fictional literature, and its differences and similarities considered. Finally, the contribution of empirical and desktop research to the creative writing process is highlighted, and the varied sources of influence and feedback acknowledged.

## Acknowledgements

“Editing is everything”, says Esther Freud. She also says, “Cut until you can cut no more.” Many people and situations have inspired me to write, but my supervisor, Sally-Ann Murray, has taught me that good writing needs great editing. With Professor Murray’s guidance, I’ve come to appreciate the merits of rereading, rewriting and deleting what isn’t working. It has made all the difference. I’m grateful to her for this, as well as for her keen ear for rhythm and beat, literary nous, and each and every occasion on which she, without complaint, corrected my shoddy punctuation and disciplined my erratic approach to grammatical tense.

Thanks must be given to Theo Nyembe and Trevor Clayton from Shanley’s Funeral Home in Durban, both of whom explained to me the processes involved in funereal work, burials and cremations, as well as the accompanying legislation and the dynamics of the wider industry of which they are a part. Kirstin Williams, a forensic entomologist from Durban’s Natural Science Museum, was generous with her time and expertise. The relationship between bacteria, insects and decomposition is a fascinating one, and if I have misrepresented this in anyway in my novel, the failing is mine alone. David Basckin has been supportive of my writing for years, and early in this project he identified several texts on rats, lice, sewers, cities and dirt that helped shape the fictional ecosystem I’ve created in *Tenement*.

On a personal note, my family in South Africa and Australia, and my friends, far and near, have read or listened to me speak about my novel, and have shared with me books, newspaper articles, photographs, maps, facts and opinions that have added to the fictional world of *Tenement*. Lara, Donna-Leigh, Aléta, Verity, Jim, Myriam and my parents have been unfailingly supportive. My thanks and love goes to every single one of them.

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## **Declaration**

Submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in Creative Writing, Howard College, University of KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa.

I declare that this dissertation is my own unaided work. All citations, references and borrowed ideas have been duly acknowledged. I confirm that an external editor was not used.

It is being submitted for the degree of Master of Arts in the Faculty of Humanities, Development and Social Science, University of KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. None of the present work has been submitted previously for any degree or examination in any other University.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'C. JACKSON', written over a horizontal dotted line.

Carey-Ann Jackson

24 September 2010

**Part 1: *Tenement*, a novel manuscript**

## **One**

Six days ago, I died. I'd imagined that this would be the end, but quiet greeted me instead. Dry and interminable quiet. I hadn't experienced anything like it before. There'd been no easy comforts or the ready chatter of intimates while alive. My voice had been feeble, and I'd spoken very little. Occasionally, a word burst its way out of me, shattering the silence, but rarely was I startled by these involuntary ruptures in the endless reserve of my life.

Death, though, has shown me this: that everything, crawling or slithering, pleading or preying, lives life in a din. I'd had no idea that it was so. Half a century in a derelict building, on the dissolving edge of a drowning city – I'd been incapable of looking beyond the obvious. Had ignored all but the solitariness of my one-room flat, where generations of cockroaches recognised my step.

The hush that follows death is not simply the absence of sound. It is the consequence of having no desire. Or need. Or want. Desire ceases abruptly when you're dead. All of the yearning, wishing, hoping, lusting, longing – the restlessness that tumbles around inside – it stops. A termination delivered as unexpectedly as an electrical shock. To me, that is.

My passing wasn't of real consequence to others. It was what I left behind that interested them. Still, it took my neighbours three days to discover my corpse. I'd never imagined that *three* whole days would go by before my absence was noticed. I'd assumed that the waiting list was too long, that my neighbours desired every vacant, habitable space too much to leave a tenement flat unoccupied for anything but the briefest time. Desire. Want. Covet. There it is again, that sticky quality of life.



When the smell of me threatened disorder, the police were called. A neighbour, the self-appointed caretaker of the tenement where I had lived, made a decision that brought, some time later, a young officer to my front door. The policeman took charge of getting my carcass, writhing and stinking, out of that apartment. Yet neither the caretaker nor the officer was the first to find my corpse. Long Woman's half-witted ward had plucked at me hours earlier, but she had been beaten there by another.

An insect. A cockroach, to be precise, arrived to caress my dead skin and lick my immobile shape. Didn't have the decency to wait very long before doing so, that roach. My death was still warm.

That was six mornings ago.

On that particular day, shortly after dawn, I crawled from my sleeping place beneath a table. Maybe I stood there for several moments looking around at what I had assembled over half a life time, then again, maybe I didn't. I cannot recall. As disappointing as it may be to the living, the events of my life did not flash through my brain in the final moments. A missed opportunity, yes, but nothing very important was on my mind at the time. I fell to the floor, my right leg twisting under the weight of my sinking body. The cartilage in my knee was strained to the point of snapping but I did not readjust it. I was dead. Once rigor mortis set in, the bones of my leg would have to be snapped so that my cadaver could be placed into a mortuary bag. That would follow later.

Not very much can be said of a small life, except that the smallness of it is amplified by death. Mere minutes after my demise – and I cannot be more precise because chronological accuracy is not a cultural strongpoint of the departed – a trickle of rot spluttered into the air. It came from me. Bacteria were dissolving my tissues, as is their

job, and this released rotten vapours. These weren't yet so pungent that they would be noticed by a human nose, although the odours were present all the same. An irresistible, stinking current, playful and silly, flirted with the air, curling the newsprint and magazine pages that I'd pasted to the walls.

It got noticed. A cockroach, bigger than its neighbour, jerked to attention; teased out of hiding beneath the tattered island of lino on the floor. More time passed or possibly it didn't. Time is not independent of the observer. The creature considered its options. It could rush ahead or it could wait. But it could not ignore the smell. Antennae quivered... for the trickle would soon be a stream, later a torrent.

Something substantial, that's what the molecules promised. If the roach waited too long, its neighbour, a competitor, would learn of the cache, arrive to scout out the edges, crawl across and taste-test the soft surface for the most pliant bits on which to feast. The roach lifted its body, extending its legs to full length. Yet it did not rush forward; it celebrated the delay and fondled the swollen gases with its feelers. The wings beneath its carapace rattled with anticipation.

A full body shiver and a dash across the floor.

Is that the way things unfolded? It is how I recount it. I have nothing else to do but shuffle around this arbitrary assemblage of thoughts and memories while waiting to be voided.

The void – a difficult concept to explain. Entirely different cultures, the dead and the living, each with its own set of constructs. Expect, then, that the true meaning of the word will be lost, along with its nuances, in my rendition. Like *sangue* or *umami* (I read that somewhere, many years ago), some essence vanishes in the translation.

Nothingness. The dead merge with it, disappear into emptiness at a pace beyond their control. Everything that was once living dies, and when dead will be voided. Gone. Nullified. An irreversible fact. A bit like gravity; a temporary escape is possible but never permanent. Same rules for the void. The dead may evade this nothingness briefly but they're not free of it forever.

Physical death is where it should end, except it doesn't. Not for everyone. Not for me. For some inconsequential minority, something lingers. Spirit. Pneumas. Call it – this post-mortem track of turbulence left behind by what has passed – anything that you like. Displaced, detached, it loiters; waiting to be voided.

There's no logic to who lingers and who doesn't. Vanity and need don't enter the equation, nor does the cause of death. It's an utterly random, quite meaningless selection. An anomaly of the system.

Which is where I find myself: an afterlife presence milling about near what's left of the body I once inhabited. Being dead offers a front seat view of the responses of the living, human and otherwise, to death. A death that just happens to be mine.

I've watched the progression of decomposition that unfolds in my body. It is not yet done despite the fact that things have moved from fresh to dry surprisingly quickly, with putrefaction as a transit point. Believe me, three days of uncensored decomposition and two days in a morgue will un-render any body.

And un-render me it has.

I am unrecognisable to myself. What I thought was mine, isn't any longer, and what I assumed I knew for certain has trickled away. Which may be why I address you with newfound confidence in the matter of my death. It is all I have left.

Six days on, the flat has been reoccupied and everything, except for the table under which I slept, burnt or thrown away. So, too, the fate of my body. Blennies, silver and quick, nibbled on some of my floating ashes. That was only moments ago. Time, however, darts away. It splinters in many directions. I grab at events, not all of them my own, to calibrate myself as I disintegrate before my own invisible eyes. A wasted effort.

Death has stripped me of attachment to my body, the mass that I had animated for five decades. Death ripped me from a life that I was too timid to leave. I'd never gone anywhere, never travelled further than the perimeter fences that divided the abandoned zone from the new city. I may have walked cast-off streets and unlit alleys, clambered over the rubble of its collapsed buildings, but until death gave me no other choice, I found my desolate comfort in a wasteland that is the abandoned zone.

Where I lived is a perilous place and has been that way for years. I remember how, periodically, traces of the tenants of long ago could be found among the ruins and the mud. A broken plastic basin here; a name, a composite of lyrical notes, scratched into concrete over there. Things that should have reminded us, those who arrived to claim these empty flats as our own, of the impermanence of this landscape. Instead, these dishes were snatched up and new names carved into the crumbling architecture. I'd covered over any markers with pages torn from the penny-press or books I'd found on the dump, in the street, or amid the bricks and concrete of some collapsed tenement unable to tolerate its own weight any longer.

Because we would not acknowledge how much we risked living there, the sea took responsibility. Waves dragged away huge pieces of land, tossing these into deep water, with the bodies of the dead. The city was drowning and had been for decades. The urban basin was now several feet below sea level. A simple geographical fact. A newspaper photograph, taken a few years before my birth, shows a half-hearted clean-up underway on a seafront promenade following one particularly catastrophic tropical storm. In the foreground, workers with machinery clear away the rubble. I could never tell their expressions. Fear? Bewilderment? The paper is old and the ink has faded.

I found that photograph inside a school exercise book, the pages filled with my mother's handwriting, and some of my childish doodles. A palimpsest from my past.

In one of her entries, dated at the start of 2021's wet season, my mother writes that she met a band of women near the dump. She recorded what the women said to her:

"In the morning, when we went to find our smallest children so that we could take them with us to the traffic lights of the new city for begging, our tents were still here. The tents had been given by the people with the shining, smiling faces, although some of the men's eyes gleamed when they looked at our daughters or our small, unclothed boys. The canvas tents had come many years ago, when our kind was chased out of the shacklands on the other side of the fence. Our young men are dead and our old men lack the will to fight, so our mothers and grandmothers have unstrung those shelters, taking care with the rusty support poles, packing these into woven plastic bags and carrying them on their heads each time we have to find another place to camp.

We've wandered all over the city, steering clear of the settlements full to bursting with tin and cardboard shacks.

In the north we found the only remaining piece of open, dry land. It bordered the golf courses, and there we might happily have camped but the bright green grass was patrolled by security guards, men with polished semi-automatic weapons and impatient fingers. Every hour they walked, looking.

In the west, we saw row after row of two-roomed houses, each with a satellite dish and a deranged nest of electrical wires in the roofs. Fowl roamed the streets, and thin boys with broken bottles and ugly mouths kept us at bay.

In the south, at the very edge, where the land squeezes up against the levees that hold back the wild water, we came upon this place. Even here we find ourselves pushed to the furthest edges and into the dump. The mosquitoes, rats and crabs are our nearest neighbours. This, finally, is where we've unpacked, put up our tents. There is nowhere else. In the east there is only the sea.

Now, like our young men, our tents are gone. Like the gulls, too. All the birds that fed on the rubbish dumped here have been eaten. The people of the dump told our sisters that, years ago, this place was a children's playground filled with tyre-swings and merry-go-rounds but those have long since disappeared, probably sold to the scrap dealers or burnt in cooking fires. A proper road ran next to the sea, one that could carry cars, but it was washed away. The waves take everything, they said.

In that seawater, we clean our clothes and our pots, our wash rags and our buckets because here there are no taps. There is no safe water anywhere; has not been any for years. We do not have far to walk as the ocean comes closer each day, sucking at the sands, spilling over the levees. The air here makes our noses bleed.

And so we are here but our tents are not. It is only us, with the waves at our feet, and the mouths of the rats and the mosquitoes always biting.”

Across that entry in childish scrawl: a bold 6, a capital C, and a set of Os or zeroes. Meaningless scribbles had obscured successfully what my mother had added beneath that day’s entry. If once I cared what was written there, I do not bother with such things any longer.

Walls and barriers defined the abandoned zone. Some we’d made ourselves. Levees kept back the sea. Wire fences separated the old from the new. One access point allowed vehicles passage between these two zones. Why would there be need for other border posts? No one lived there, not officially.

Yet some always found a way into the dripping shadows and onto the crumbling roads. Someone was always willing to pay a bribe, fuck a bored guard; do almost anything to make the crossing. People did what people always do: they found a way through. They’d drifted there, taking their chances in any buildings that remained standing, seeking asylum on the highest floors, away from the water that claimed the streets during the rainy season. Made their eyries high in the tenements, far from the impermanent ground.

My mother and I were part of the first return of those who arrived in the abandoned zone. She’d negotiated the fence that divided it from the new city, doing what she had to do to get us there, although she did not explain. I was her voluble, demanding companion on that crossing, but I cannot recall the method she used for negotiating the journey. I was a toddler at the time. The fence had gone up in 2020 and the city, like a creature sloughing off its dying parts, had moved away. A moulted skin. A vacant casing.

The flatlands. That was the name its new inhabitants chose for it.

Rats and dogs crossed back and forth between it and the new city far more easily than people; they were indifferent to these human borders. Pigs arrived, too, feasting on the swelling piles of illegal dumping and refuse thrown out by growing numbers of flatlands residents. Migrants in the second wave had brought the hogs, and together they scavenged and, ultimately, settled on the dump. No other option for them. No more space in the tenements.

Most abundant of all, though, were the cockroaches. Crawling, flying giants bigger than a person's palm. They lived closest to us, in our flats, our food containers, our water jars. And because plenty of roaches meant plenty of geckos, these oversized lizards hunted lazily, wastefully within the tenements, their palms patterning our walls.

Only a few hundred people live in the flatlands, but they are there all the same. There are fewer of them than before. Around them, with ever greater frequency, the area dies. It is a protracted process, which is true of any death by drowning. The ground trembles when lower storeys collapse under the strain of weakening joints, pulling down entire buildings. Smoke fills the air when unchecked fires, most often from exploding primus stoves, rout apartments. Termites dine on any wood that remains. Water in the streets and alleys hardly ever drains away. Some of it pools in sinkholes deep enough to overwhelm the careless. Maybe, some day soon, the flatlands will be a delta, those who live there forced to build on stilts or journey the waterways in canoes. By then, no doubt, the chirping geckos will have learnt to take to water. They will be leguaans in their element, or maybe they will sprint across the surface like Jesus lizards.



For a place so vast, yet with so few people, it is difficult to imagine a bustling past. It seems unlikely that it could ever have been a vibrant neighbourhood. But there must have been Before and During, not merely After. History has punctuation; pauses during which other possibilities present themselves before what happens, happens. This matter of time and sequence has occupied me insistently since the initial shock of my own afterlife receded.

On a seawall, one of several built to keep back the water that besieged the land during the wet season, was a hand painted message. I remember seeing it there but it, too, has faded away, along with the marks and signs left by gangs and spray-can artists who stood before the wall as I had done. "Death to all Ants". For years, I could not understand why anyone would single out those small creatures for destruction. Why not rats, or cockroaches?

One day, close to the inland fence, I watched a man hit a woman who sold herself near the guard's hut. One punch and then another because she'd refused, he said, to fuck an ant. The assault was interrupted by those who came to her rescue. They chased him away, flung names and tirades as he retreated to the other side of the fence. He was an Ant, a private security guard, hired as muscle by the city's authorities and private business. Death to the Ant.

The Ants must have evicted everyone – poor, migrant, petty criminal, mad, refugee – who lived in the area before it became what we claimed as ours. They must have cleared out the slums, chased away the vendors and shop owners, quelled the protestors, and put up the signs. "Access strictly forbidden"; "Extremely dangerous environment"; "Do not enter, by order of local authority."

Of the tiny shops, tattered brothels, taverns, mosques and charismatic churches that were here before, only a few facades remained. Mud and trash covered those that had fallen down. How frequently the old neighbourhood must have been flooded. With monotonous regularity. There is no escape from the editing water. The rainy season in the city is really a cyclonic one. It starts in September and abates in May. Surf breaks over shipping wrecks and submerged detritus, the seafront's infrastructure from long ago. No one bothers anymore to search for bodies sucked away by the waves. Nothing can hold back the sea. No one has found a way to undo the changes of a retreating coastline. Sometimes, inspectors arrived to examine the levees, bringing with them a team of workers, guarded by men with guns, to patch over the cracks in the concrete; ones that can only be seen with goggles the inspectors wear on their heads. From the new city, no one came into the flatlands except to buy drugs or rent bodies that couldn't be found in the district of red light.

In the new city, sex was exchanged for money. That happened mostly, but not exclusively, beneath an enormous hologram that hovered over the district of red light each evening. This semi-naked titan with outsized breasts reclined on her back, licking at a lollipop and kicking her lower legs at the clouds. Most nights, though, her image jerked and splintered because the projection quality was low, and the clouds even lower. It seemed to me, as I peered up at her from where I was in the muddy streets of the flatlands, many kilometres away, that some crazed, invisible spirit determinedly sliced her apart.

She was a beacon for those who negotiated the city's nightly traffic jams. A guide for those who searched out new routes into the district of red light. That precinct was large. There, the renting of bodies was regulated by authorities and monitored by other organisations. It had been that way for years. Hundreds of classified advertisements in the penny-press promised pleasurable fulfilment and a prompt tax

invoice for those who wanted such things. A useful change from before, it was reported.

In the flatlands, other ways were possible.

What was on offer in the abandoned zone pulled some of the metropolis's citizens across, enticing them to make the trip, bribe a guard, so that they could completely abandon themselves. On our side of the fence, cash or water coupons could be traded for any kind of demand.

Our streets were dark, a fact most noticeable at night time, but not entirely without light. Our jaundiced clouds cast back the reflected glow of millions of electric lights burning in their city. Our alleys are always black. Except for a few miserable pools of candlelight and sun jars used to guide buyers into side streets, or the beam of a car's headlights, those who worked there did so in a shroud of gloom.

Yet there was order in our darkness. It may not have seemed that way to someone from the other side.

At the wire fences were the gaudiest street walkers, the pushiest of the lot. Strongly territorial creatures, they'd taken control of the frontline sex trade. Theirs was a sizeable grouping of women and men, and shadows were their only covering. Altogether naked, their blank nudity was on uncensored, permanent display. A bare hip accentuated by a manicured hand. Eyelids adorned with glittery makeup. Height enhanced by stiletto heels or boots. You want it, you got it. The message was clear.

Scars of imaginative surgical modifications were hardly discernible in the darkness or else disguised skilfully behind the topiary of their pubic hair.

These brash toucans of the night shouted to each other constantly, and beyond them, even, there were others, birds of a different feather in the shady alleys of beyond who would find any client who stumbled there.

“Look, mister. Look. Cheap. Nice, this one. Special cheap price, mister, special for you. Very cheap.” A possibility to match your every salacious desire.

A woman? How naively simple. Two men? Easily done. A child? A beast? We had all of us heard of worse. Perhaps a dominator with vast strength or maybe a slave held in permanent restraints? What about a wizened man, perhaps, or someone who had been maimed? This cripple or that armless girl? A fresh corpse? Something more unusual than that? A centaur assembled just for you?

“What you like? What you want? We find it. No problem.”

During daylight hours, sex was bought and sold and the offerings were banal. Ordinary bodies to be rented – or purchased, if you had the money – and the profits slim. In the expansive night, when the fumes of seaweed and piss filled the air, less common beings surfaced and greater variety was available. A *métier* for those not easily panicked. I’m not ashamed to say I ran away from some of them. I will also not deny that I, too, on occasion stared, agog.

They came forth, golems and exotics, although I returned to spy, again and again, on the *zeru-zeru*: a man, a young woman and a child of about ten. Talk of their presence

had been carried across the flatlands on the currents of air. Chilling opinions on a hot, wet wind. Zeru-zeru, the unfamiliar sound of it zipped across the tongue, but the fear had been there for longer. Another addition to a wasteland's thrown away populace. A type unwanted in the new city because their kind was not the right kind. These ghost-ghost were as substantial as any one of us, despite the fact that they emerged only after dark. And while they were not ghouls, they held around themselves an eerie white shadow.

They had no need of nudity. They kept their clothes on, even if what they wore was little more than underwear. Their albinism was advertisement enough. No bare breasts or a prosthetic penis dangling near a knee. Just skin. Their kind of skin.

I'd only ever seen the three of them at night. (And I had made it a point to keep an eye out for the zeru-zeru on my daily rounds, yet had never seen them on the streets then.) They kept away from sunlight, which wasn't particularly difficult because clouds denied the sun most days. The tenements ate light. The sun's rays blistered their ghost-ghost skins, and played havoc with their pale, violet eyes moving this way and that. I had no idea if the rumour of their restless eyes was true. I hadn't ventured into their alley and studied them up close.

Waiting for a taker, the zeru ghosts stood near to each other in their allotted alley, without conversation. They looked like relatives posing politely for an art photographer, someone who'd create for them the facsimile print of a happy family.

The first time I'd seen them, I'd been on the streets, in the growing darkness, making my way across the flatlands, carrying my papers as I headed for my flat. Some of the dogs were about. At first, I thought I had imagined what I had seen – something I'd done often enough in the past – but the ashen forms of the zeru-zeru did indeed seep

out of the murk. I'd run away, frightened by the possibility that what was theirs, could become mine. A few nights later, I returned to the spot; my faith in the shielding air restored. Subsequent surveillance confirmed that the man had shaved off his hair while a fuzz of yellow covered the child's. Long, thick braids, the colour of ginger tea, adorned the young woman's skull. They reached to her waist.

I came back again and again but lost my nerve when the child saw me as I attempted, rather clumsily, to conceal myself in my customary hideaway, behind some rubble. An observant child with curious eyes capable of noticing small, inconsequential things. Like old women invisible to others. Like strange migrations unfolding in the shadows. A pair of flickering eyes that saw first what came out of the sewers. I would prefer to think that it was so. There is another account, however.

Someone else had sent out an alarm. A middle class youngster, on an outing with his mates, their first visit ever to the flatlands, made a call to the city's emergency response centre, incredulous about what he had just witnessed from his car window. His recorded message was reported in the newspapers:

"Bugs. Millions of them over here. They're every fucking where. Behind the fences, bugs!"

A computerised network, indifferent and stupid, had redirected his call to an upmarket restaurant called Bugsy, far beyond the perimeter fencing.

Beneath the zone's broken streets were sewers, forgotten and ignored except when an especially rancid stench rose into the air, or when rainwater created rivers that raged below street level, reminding us of an underground alive beneath our feet. It was from the depths of drains that the vanguard of crabs emerged. A claw, a leg, another leg,

and then another, reaching out, probing sideways before laying claim to the edges of the muddy ground.

Voiceless and earless, they shouldered their subterranean way, without stalling or lingering. Dozens of crabs, followed by hundreds more, emerged from the storm water pipes that night; a migration that continued well into the next morning. No stench accompanied them – not yet.

The largest crabs were like dinner plates; others, not quite as mature, the size of saucers. The smallest – the juveniles – would emerge much later. With the sun unable to break free of the fog, we would see canary yellow fringing on their pink carapaces. The joints of their legs were tinged chestnut, their chelae ruby red. The adults, although of monstrous dimension, had none of the youngsters' gaudy appeal. They were dull brown. Black orbs glared at the world from atop short eye stalks.

The multi-legged populace moved purposefully through the flatlands.

Tick. Clack. Click. Crack. Sounds soaked into the tenements' porous brickwork. The clatter brought residents onto the streets to observe this unusual exodus. By then, the smell had arrived, intensified, displaced all other stinks. In itself, it was quite a feat.

We watched, incredulous. To suppress gagging, we tied rags over our mouths and held our noses. When we realised an edible army was on the march, moving away from us, we broke free of the spell, scrambling to collect as many crabs as we could.

Carbon dioxide fumes, released in their scat, attracted more than just people. Pregnant mosquitoes bobbed above the marchers, eager for blood. It had to be

collected if they were to lay their eggs. The bloodsuckers turned on us, striking at our faces and shoulders. We were not deterred by their stings or their whines. We snatched up the crabs. Crab meat, any meat: a luxury. We imagined that we would gorge on this succulent flesh until we could stand the taste of it no more.

There was no impatience in the crabs' ranks. No shoving and barging, none of them breaking away to settle past scores or heading off in a solitary sulk. When a larger than usual specimen paused, as if to catch its breath or appreciate the scale of the unfolding event, others, nimbler or lighter, stepped around it politely, heading for the sea.

Reports came back to us as we plucked the foot soldiers from the road. The crabs had a destination. We did not care. We used buckets to gather more. Barrow boys grabbed armfuls, dumping these into their carts, while the rest of us laughed as a captured crustacean waved pincers in protest or fell back to the ground. Everyone was on the streets, collecting. All my neighbours. The dump-dwellers, too, although they kept a suitable distance. Regardless of how many crabs we grabbed, the greater the number that emerged from those underground drain pipes.

Elsewhere, the first of the crabs discovered that a levee blocked their way. A massive obstacle, but the creatures pressed on, driven to scale the seawall. They formed living columns and breathing bridges. Piled atop each other, they held their positions so that others could move over them. Many times, a clumsy mountaineer lost a footing and tumbled backwards, crashing on those below. Sometimes a faller would lash out with a flailing claw, clamping on to any limb available; the momentum sent both crabs tumbling down the brittle vine that snaked up that concrete face.

At the summit, the crabs hauled themselves into the churning surf on the other side.



We were giddy with delight at the unexpected bounty delivered up by the underground. We danced in the shit- and shell-ridden streets; we lit charcoal braziers, sucked meat from endless legs and carapaces. The street party went on for hours.

In the morning, many of us would be dead.

As unusual as that migration was to me then, so was the arrival of a policeman at Carillon, the tenement where I'd lived, three days after my demise. That was the name when I was a child. Carillon. Back then, the identifying letters on its front were there for all to see although it was a notable exception in an anonymous wasteland; visible signage had already faded or fallen from most of the buildings. My mother made a point of hunting for a block with its name intact, assuring me that this would be a good omen. It was she, a woman who dreamed of lost classrooms, who taught me my letters.

"You may sleep some nights on the street, my daughter, but words will always offer you a home."

A kilometre from the seawalls, Carillon was ten storeys high; one of the highest of any of the dozen blocks of flats still standing. Nothing but height and an intact name sign distinguished it. The building was bland and without Plexiglas in its public entrance door. That had long since been borne away. There were no glass panes in its windows. Looking east, Carillon's rectangular eyes stared at the sea; the waves like a gang of bullies taunting it night and day. Water, like a cancer, had established a stronghold in its core. A tumour of sewerage and brine grew in its basement parking lot, spreading out to the empty lift shaft where, once upon a time, a cabled box ferried people up or down.

The flat my mother selected, from those yet unclaimed and still habitable, was a single room with a toilet and hand basin set into a recess near the door. I had never cast off that flat. I hadn't been the one to run away. It was the only home I'd known. The apartment's lone window wasn't visible to anyone standing inside the room. Things important to me, collected over a lifetime, were stacked in front of the opening that I'd sealed with wood and plastic sheeting. Carillon did not have electricity, and the interiors were always dark. Life was a permanent gloom interrupted by nighttimes of imperfect darkness.

At first, my corpse, slumped against the wall, couldn't be seen. But the cop had smelt it from outside and was reluctant to enter, hesitating before he crossed from corridor into the dark, rancid rectangle. He had no torch. (I could not resist a spectral smile: obviously a novice to the flatlands.) Caretaker, who'd escorted him there, had gone off to retrieve a portable light from his larger flat a few floors above mine.

He stood there, without the comfort of instant light, unsettled by the caretaker of Carillon, unhappy with the call-out he'd landed, and repulsed by the smells unleashed by the opened door. A young man wearing a uniform of some negligible authority. He didn't like geckos, this man. A particularly large one had been watching him as he made his way along the unlit corridor that led to my flat. Anaemic granules dotted the length of the lizard's body and scattered down its tapering tail. The gecko's colour and texture sickened him, though he couldn't help staring back at it. If he'd paid less attention to the creature on the wall, however, he might have sensed that those wide, lidless eyes weren't the only pair observing him as he stood at the door of flat 504.

Gulping in a lungful of air, he moved into the room, crossing at exactly the same moment his two-way radio crackled out a bulletin: Central Command to all available units. He ignored it. Something scurried past his foot. He rocked back involuntarily,

catching himself before taking that second step in retreat. Roach, he surmised. He wasn't wrong.

I had nothing else to do at the time, so I made a study of him from the temporary vantage of the glitch that was my afterlife. The fat gecko on the corridor wall watched, too. As did the other observer, hidden in the murk of the stairwell, eyes trained on the open door and eager for the policeman to leave.

It took some time for the cop's eyes to adjust to the lightless apartment. Other, more dominant sensations accosted his brain: the throttling reek of death but another smell, too. Something else in the room; something familiar that taunted his nostrils. His forehead crinkled. It was an odour he'd smelt before; one from his childhood. He knew it but couldn't place it. Mundane, not exotic; a smell that nagged at his memory. And then his brain added the appropriate label to the perceived sensation: the distinctive stench of old newspapers. A clogging, musty reek. Unable to make out any of them just then, he could definitely smell they were there. Everywhere.

Seeing in the dark was something the policeman could do, but he was only human. In conditions of diminished light, a person's eyes assimilate in less than ten seconds; in total darkness it takes more than twenty. The cop was an outsider. He hadn't lived where light was scarce. Over time, our eyes had developed a special ability: when homes are always without electricity, vision adjusts. Like geckos, we sensed colour in the murk. Where the cop saw blackness, we appreciated muted greys and bruised purples.

Not being one of us, he had a partial impression of what was in my flat: across the floor were towers of newspapers, stacked from footfall to ceiling. His nose hadn't been wrong. Hundreds of newspapers, thousands of them, folded into halves with perfect

discipline to form neat towers that reached past head height. Others, whole pages or cuttings, had been pasted to the walls, a bricolage of text and image from other places, other times. I had read and re-read all of these. Millions of words filling up the place that was my home. Not a word had been thrown away.

There were other things, too, of varied shapes, wrapped in bags, handles knotted tightly together. Small mountains of objects everywhere, to take up space and loneliness. The policeman lifted a swollen bag for closer inspection. It was lighter than expected. He shouldn't have bothered. Untied, it contained nothing but plastic bags, and his disappointment quickly gave way to irritation. He grabbed at another parcel. Nothing but plastic bags squeezed together and tied up securely, protectively. Once more, the furrows in the forehead.

With his toe he kicked at a cardboard cube that I had placed behind the door. A hollow thud sent it collapsing into a neighbouring carton. Both were empty. He tried another. When it rattled, he opened the flaps: it just held smaller boxes. Crazy bitch, he said to himself as he faced the possibility that all the bags and boxes inside my home were filled with useless shit that should have been thrown away long ago.

His thoughts interested me, and I probed tentatively these new opportunities I was discovering in my afterlife. Like an ability to decentre, to look at the world from the perspective of some other being.

Given the chance, I regarded my home not from the familiar comfort of my own view but from the standpoint offered by the gecko cop, then and there. An interesting difference, and one I was prepared to indulge. The policeman noticed my corpse slumped against the newspapered wall. An involuntary tug at the corner of his lip. Was it the acute angle at which my knee jutted out from the rest of my body that pained

him? Maybe he was startled by the nylon shift that covered my body, the hem ridden high on my thighs. Aquamarine. A defiant splash of colour in a grey world. A detail too intimate for him? Or possibly the maggots writhing and wriggling across my bloated face? Perhaps that displeased him? Probably the maggots. The living are squeamish about such things.

He journeyed deeper into the room, reluctance weighing on his shoulders. He was nauseated at the state of my putrescence and revolted by what he considered the disorder of my home. He avoided looking at my corpse, focusing instead on the other objects in the flat. Two pathways emerged from the olid shadows: one headed left to the tiny washing area, the other veered towards where I sat. I noticed he glanced about for anything that resembled a bed or a sleeper couch. There was neither. Perplexed, he wondered where I'd slept. The discovery, when he made it, was not shocking. He simply did not understand.

A dull, pink, acrylic blanket and a sheet with tiny, faded flowers were spread out on the floor beneath a table. A single pillow that retained the weight and shape of my head, while the blanket and sheet were gathered into a shallow eddy. He imagined my body, clad in its ridiculously bright shift, moving this way, then that. It embarrassed him, that mental image, and he turned away from the sleeping space I had made. He'd seen pets with better arrangements than mine.

The longer he stood there, the greater his dismay. No light, no air, no liberty to sit; nothing. Not even a bed. Newspapers, magazines, some books, packets, boxes – that was all. He hadn't seen anything like it. A pile of rubbish that swallowed a home. How can someone live among all of this shit, he wondered? Unwilling to remain any longer in the flat, he retreated into the corridor, breathing deeply. His physical relief was short-lived.

Something at the edge of his vision, an unexpected catch, hooked his attention. It coaxed from him an unmanly gasp. Pale and fat, the gecko eyed him from its inverted position on the corridor wall. A shudder rippled through the policeman's colon. He hated those damn things. Composing himself, he reached for his radio, bringing it to his mouth. Asked Despatch to send a mortuary van.

"Yes," he snapped in response to the question that crackled back at him, "to the A-zone."

A request for mortuary officials to send someone to collect a corpse from deep within the abandoned zone was unusual. Not that it never happened. Intact corpses making the crossing from our side to the morgues of the new city weren't common. Unwanted, inconvenient stiffs from the other side had a habit of finding their way to our dump, though. Colleagues had told the policeman that. They'd spoken, too, of a pig woman, smirks at their mouths. Anyone who'd been on call-out to the A-zone knew about her, they'd said.

When I'd entertained notions of my corporeal disposal, something I had thought about often while still alive, I'd imagined that Pig Woman would be the one to oversee my body's disposal; not a stranger, some indifferent person from beyond the fence, and certainly not a policeman. Pig Woman lived on the dump, and if the dump was adjacent to the tenements, it was also a separate world. But Pig Woman, like many others, had lived for years among the trash there.

Should anyone want to find her, the stench could lead the way, or you could ask one of the barrow boys who toted garbage from the tenements to the mountain of refuse. Missing this heap was impossible. That's what the policeman's colleagues had told him.

Not even a drunk sailor could do that, they'd sniggered. They'd heard the story, too, it seemed. A legend from the flatlands.

One night, stumbling out of a bar near the new city's fences, an inebriated sailor took a wrong turn, crossed over into the flatlands, and wandered for hours in widening circles before finding himself at the edges of the dump, which back then wasn't nearly as big. There, disoriented, the sailor fell into a tent. It belonged to Pig Woman, the keeper of the largest sounder of pigs in the abandoned zone. Luckily for him, he lived, though he'd crossed the fabric curtain without invitation. Amused by the hapless, roving lush, the woman pulled the sailor inside, slapped his face a few times and thrust at him an enormous tin of homemade brew. Thus restored to good sense, her visitor began to talk. He told his hostess many things: he was from a distant island where the surrounding sea was greener and deeper than any he'd seen, and he should know because he'd sailed all the oceans of the world. All six of them, he said again, emphasising a point that had been swamped by sibilance and saliva. He also happened to mention that in his language a pig was buta and a keeper of animals was kau. Pig Woman was an attentive listener. She, in turn, showed him her most prized possession: an embalmed pig's head. Later still, dizzy on fumes and liquor, the sailor admitted that he loved her without limit and thought her beautiful beyond measure. By then they'd both drunk far too much and although she received his declarations graciously, she took them for saturated lies, ones that could be tipped out easily and harmlessly. His love was no claim on her affections.

The sailor and his hostess toasted each other, raising their tins to laughter and to lust, and the embalmed pig's head. As the brutish alcohol flowed, and their emotions and flirtations bobbed along in a bibulous current, the sailor taught the woman a child's rhyme about a keeper of pigs. It was a verse directly from his childhood, a time in an inner city neighbourhood in a far away country; a place of islands and a hungry sea. As

he reminisced, the memories of his brothers and sisters and the comforting flatulence of their sleeping bodies squeezed against his own brought tears to his eyes.

The woman would have none of it. With tickles, nibbles and a more than necessary application of nipping pinches, she coaxed out of the sailor once more the childish ditty about the keeper of pigs. Her laughter banished his resurgent longing for a childhood fondly imagined. They drank until they could drink no more.

In the early afternoon, when the woman awoke, hung-over, thirsty and eager to be rid of the night, she roused the sailor, threw his trousers at his head and chased away the bewildered lover with a broom. Sometime during that hazy afternoon, as she sat on an upturned crate, Pig Woman made an unexpectedly sentimental decision: she named the pig's head Buta Kau.

Or, at least that's what the cops said happened. And one of them had heard the story from a barrow boy. I knew of a similar account of Pig Woman and the sailor. I'd never asked her if it was true. Never, during any of my trips to the dump, had I found the courage to speak to her.

What I did know for certain was that the disembodied lump of Buta Kau was carried from the depths of Pig Woman's tent out into the open – the methane-rich and sticky sea air that clouded its dominion. I'd seen it there. Buta Kau's head demanded a substantial support; its weight and age were such that some mere post thrust into the ground would never bear its splendour. It was far too large for flimsy display. Only a piglet's head can be speared on a post, and there is nothing terrifying about an infant hog.



It seems improbable that Buta Kau could ever have been some helpless, weak babe. Alive, fully grown, he'd been a black boar of gargantuan proportions, at least three-hundred kilograms. His head alone had the substance of a well-fed child. In life, Buta Kau was nameless. As a pig, he had belonged to the keeper of swine, like the rest. But in the afterlife, Pig became uBhuti Kau-kau. A fitting transformation. His name, from the start, wrought horribly wrong by the worm-infested urchins of the dump.

Pig, despite his size, had been blessed with a surprisingly delicate snout, tipped and pert as if to savour the air. Below it was a wide mouth that resembled the smile a bottlenose dolphin, a creature I'd seen leaping into the air in an aquarium advertisement. Three rolls of flesh concertinaed beneath each of his bulky jowls. Pig looked amused, as if he'd just heard a really good joke. Dark, dirty hair covered most of his face. On either side of his pronounced unibrow – a thicket of bristles that started above the bridge of his snout and ran backwards towards an indiscernible neck – his ears stood to attention. His eyes were narrow slits in a mass of hirsute blubber.

Years after his death, Pig still looked amused by the strange world around him. He was in fairly good nick despite exposure daily to toxic air and ultraviolet radiation. And the passing of years. And hundreds of sticks and rocks thrown at him by children. And the rats' bite marks on his snout and right cheek. Don't forget, either, the missing triangle of flesh on the left ear, an excision caused by a feral dog that had tried to run off with what it soon discovered was not a marvellous windfall. The taste of embalming fluid was disgusting. A fitting compliment to the skill of the embalmer who'd done his profession proud. Embalming a pig's head scandalised the dump's community. Several dozen kilograms of edible meat, embalmed? Such extravagant waste of food. An act typical of Pig Woman's exhibitionistic and profligate ways, they said.

No one dared admit that to her face, though.

When one was a keeper of pigs – a breed of unpredictable beasts able to devour almost anything – very few within one’s social network were willing to speak frankly. Every child raised on the dump was taught that pigs escaped both feeble and sturdy enclosures. Vigilance always was essential. Adults living there swapped stories, too. In whispers, they told of late-night visitors who’d arrived at the pig keeper’s tent. Victims in tow, money notes and fresh water vouchers were exchanged, and the visitors left as quickly as they had arrived. All night long, or so the gossips suggested, squealing and grunting was heard – hideous sounds of unabashed feasting. Little wonder, then, that her good neighbours never dared disapprove of her.

Gossip about the pig keeper was aided in no small way by her deformity. A wide, moist furrow split her lower face. Hers was a startling visage. A cleft – formed before birth – had pulled Pig Woman’s mouth into a permanent, wet snarl. The eyes of the observer water. The hands tremor. The throat constricts.

Although Pig Woman was unable to smile, she had a proxy. Every morning Buta Kau was carried outside on a double-handled tray so he could grin his head off at the dogs and rats and roaches and flies and children and birds and mosquitoes and barrow boys that passed by. To my mind, they were a grinning king and his snarling queen.

As I’ve admitted already, the journey past Buta Kau’s beaming head was one I’d assumed my dead body would eventually make, toted there by a barrow boy. I knew what happened to unwanted dead bodies. I’d witnessed the fate of the old Dog Man. I’d seen his corpse, along with the dogs’ shattered frames, collected from the street outside Carillon. All of them dead, wheeled away to be disappeared.

It was the barrow boys who connected the tenements with the dump, although they were not actually boys, despite their collective name. They were men. Some were young, undeniably, though more than half were older. None were children, for there were other forms of livelihood for those with youth on their side. But such opportunistic sex work the barrow boys could not perform, for who, after all, would want their hands upon them?

A good many of these barrow boys were bright cobalt blue. Most were light grey, leached of their natural colour. Silver compounds leaking from old batteries had turned them these shades, along with discarded photographic equipment and films, electronic innards, disinfectants and cleaners, fertilisers and cloud seeding canisters – all manner of toxic things in the dump or washed up by the tide. Argyria did not kill them; it gave them a disconcerting appearance.

Their colouring was affected by something else, too. Everything that could bite or irritate a man's skin had claimed the barrow boys' bodies. Dermis turned petri dish; an incubator of infectious cultures. The blend of sewerage and rotting food, filth and noxious gases added pattern and texture to their skins. Up close, rings and mounds and sores, roseate, mauve, teal and mustard, covered their flesh. Before our eyes, they were Gaudi's statues brought to life. The disquieting designs of survival and suffering.

All day long, the barrow boys trotted in two parallel lines, shuttling between the dump and the tenements. The inbound line carried reeking, leaking garbage, thrown out by the residents; while the outbound line of wheelbarrows headed back to the flatlands in search of another shipment, another payment. If the boys had been lucky and sly in equal measure, something of value, like a glass bottle, was tucked under a shirt or disguised beneath innocuous looking plastic bags.

A glass bottle, unbroken was the equivalent of a week's wages. In the flatlands, such finds made the difference between hunger and feast, thirst and quench.

Fish bombers paid excellently well for these bottles, which were essential for their industry. Like the rest of the residents of the tenements, the fish bombers despised the dump-dwellers, looking down on them, screaming obscenities at any who dared cross the invisible barrier demarcating their space from ours. Yet they, like us, were not above using some valuable item retrieved from the dump; a bargain had value regardless of its source.

Properly packed, the glass bottles were homemade incendiaries much cheaper than dynamite. Stuffed with pebbles, topped with any flammable, plus a thickening agent – cement, animal blood (pig mostly), sugar, discarded foam – the weapons were dropped or thrown into the sea. It was dangerous work. A finger or a hand was lost easily enough. These missing digits and limbs were a proud uniform.

When a bottle bomb exploded underwater, shockwaves rippled through the sea, passing into the gas bladders of fish that happened to be finning there. Stunned or killed, a few floated to the surface, to be gathered by the fish bombers into their small boats. A dozen or so fish per bottle drop. Theirs was always a small catch. Most fish sank to the ocean floor. When a boat was in shallow water, an assistant with a snorkelling mask, eyes magnified like a fly's, dived down and retrieved a few more piscine bodies but locating the sunken catch was difficult: the sand too agitated; the visibility poor. Sometimes, a lethargic incendiary – dispatched on a previous outing – would recover its impetus, exploding unexpectedly. Then, a red spout shot out, a sound wave after. Moments later, a few more fish, a shattered diving mask, and a dead boy would float piecemeal to the surface.

The barrow boys did not go to sea. Hardly any of them could swim, yet all had waded through floodwaters. Chest high in filth and runoff, they were the first to venture outside after a squall. In the weeks that the flatlands were attacked by cyclones, a few of the men swapped wheelbarrows for rafts or makeshift canoes, earning income from ferrying people, the dead, and fresh water traded at the fences.

In the dry season, the boys returned to their customary work. From before first light and until the weak sun sank, they wheeled in their loads. If a resident of the flatlands could not afford to pay them – but who would dare not to? – shit and household waste had to be toted some other way. If you could not hire someone, you had to dispose of it yourself. As I did. In the tenements, the toilets did not work, and hadn't done so for decades. Waterborne sewerage was the privilege of those in the suburbs beyond the fences. On this side, flushing toilets were an urban myth. Who would waste water to flush away faeces when, just as easily, you could use a plastic bag and toss that into a collection bucket for the barrow boys?

Shit remained shit and anyone who could, hired the barrow boys. When it wasn't underwater, there was an access path to the dump. Three metres wide at most and a kilometre or so in length, the trail slipped behind the few remaining structure that hadn't collapsed yet. The surface was rough, the tar licked away by the tides. Discarded filth swelled into mounds, grew into hillocks, rose into foothills until, finally, the sandy track led to the steep slopes of garbage.

Polystyrene, foam, waterlogged cardboard, newsprint, paper, marine plants, bloated carcasses from land and sea, computer keyboards, television tubes, mobile telephones, tin cans, rusted drums... this made up the hills. I'd walked around these, tried to climb up some. I'd seen first-hand that there was plastic everywhere. Bags, strips, canisters, bottles, boxes, sheeting, containers big and small, toys, piping, netting. A galaxy of plastic and all of it degrading slowly.

Metal and glass, now those were uncommon finds. When recovered, they were reused or sold on to others. As for food, dead animals and insects, as well as plant matter – all of that which could be eaten – was eaten. By the rats, pigs, dogs, earthworms, lice, bacteria and people.

No one, not the regular scavengers with their sorting hooks, not even the colourful barrow boys, was ever perturbed by a woman who made her way to the dump to throw away her own waste and pick through the piles for newspapers and bags. Books, too, partial or otherwise – she'd snatch them up as if they were the most precious objects of all. Such items were not missed. The bags, or so the garbage-pickers assumed, she used for shit; the newsprint a satisfactory toilet paper. Books they could not read. The woman had been collecting these things from way back; a time when the dump was still just a dirty, littered space. Certainly before any of them had joined the ranks of those who mined the garbage mountain.

To some, I was nothing but a mild curiosity. I kept to myself and did not disturb them. What I chose to salvage was difficult work in its own way. Collecting paper in the rain eats up hours and energy. Limp and easily torn, soggy paper sticks to the hands and forearms, sucking like a jellyfish. Peel back one piece from one arm and it transfers its wet mouth to the fingers and palm of the other, busy hand. It is far easier to collect glass or metal or plastic wiring. If you dared. I didn't. I had no impact on the organisation and industry established at the dump. I kept it that way. I avoided them. They left me alone. Besides, they were focused on their own business. Like constantly digging for glass and metal. Like collecting drinkable water. Like staying dry in the mists of swampy effluent. Like keeping back the influx of newcomers who arrived just as soon as the previous band had been chased away. Like killing the dogs.

I have thought about the dogs of the flatlands many times since my death. Their yelps and abbreviated barks echo around me, mocking what should be the easy silence of my afterlife. Like the dump and the tenements, the cockroaches and the geckos, dogs were a defining marker of the abandoned zone. Almost everyone hated the dogs. Those who slept nights on the streets feared them most. Huddled together, sharing a blanket or a piece of plastic sheeting, they gathered together because, they said, they'd be mauled by a pack of these animals if they slept alone. Stories were exchanged about how the creatures preyed on the weak, dragging off someone to eat in a forgotten alleyway.

These open air sleepers, wrapped like mummies in plastic shrouds, were not the only ones who loathed the dogs. We all did. I did. In our dreams they became hyenas prowling for flesh, eager and able to snap up a large child in their powerful jaws. Divided by much, we who inhabited the flatlands were united in our hatred of the beasts. Some people hunted back, and when a group cornered one of the slower animals in a narrow alley, or a maimed one trapped inside the shell of an abandoned building, they'd douse it with paraffin and strike a match. I had witnessed one such extermination: a band of young men and women pulverised a dog's head, shattering its spine with the combined force of their stomping feet. Soon after, choking smoke rose from its burning carcass.

If the packs grew too large, their size and efficiency frightening everyone, the residents made enough fuss for the tenement committees and the dealers – whose junkie clients were too afraid to score – to call the hunters.

I've thought about Dog Man since my death. In his eyes, everyone was wrong about the dogs. Stray, yes; feral, most certainly. But they were not riddled with uncontrollable bestial passions and murderous intent. They were just dogs; their packed lives a mix of comedy, drama, tragedy, farce, all rolled into one. For him, it

seemed, a private carnival played out across the flatlands. The packs were a troop of performers, each player with a distinctive personality, executing a role, taking up a place in a secret canine theatre that none of us would see. Clowns, tumblers, heroes and supporting acts. Directors and stage hands. Mimes, leading ladies, choristers and critics. That's how he saw them.

At first, the dogs must have been wary of him, and why not, he was human. He smelled dangerous, moved like a threatening, upright other. He made noises from his throat like the rest. A few of the older ones may have been curious because he did not live, like his kind, inside the tall caves that dotted their territory. Some, though, probably could not overcome their hatred of his type and always hung back, growls on simmer, even after they recognised his smell, registering it as a permanent feature of their terrain.

I didn't need Dog Man to tell me that the dogs adapted far more swiftly than we did to the morphing landscape, moving across it with ease or paddling through the rising waters without panic. I know that they roamed in collectives of five or six; other times, it was a solitary affair. The dump was most attractive to them. Swampy and shrouded in hot miasmas, the place had plenty of rats and provided a good food source and many escape routes. There, the dogs couldn't be cornered. They were most active from dusk and across the night, although invisible internal clockwork ensured they left the streets as soon as day arrived.

The dogs never entered the tenements willingly.

What happened, therefore, was unavoidable.

\* \* \*



A cry lifted like a howl, spiralling onwards and upwards.

“Machine!”

The street’s chaotic, whirling business was disciplined by that cry. Everything slowed to a deliberate pace. Excruciatingly so. Like high-speed photography, each frame reluctant to make way for the next; and the next; and the next. A rapid blur of motion reduced, decelerated by that awful shout. In the second prior to the call, running legs; a shotgun swinging in a wild arc; hands clapping; cartridges exploding; bodies flipping in the air; broken appliances, hurled from the flats above, plummeting to the ground. And in the centre of it all, a man on his knees.

“Machine!” A cry from the Dog Man.

Another shot nearby.

The recoil unleashed a ripple in the rubber overcoat, bright orange, which the gunman wore. Where the butt of the weapon was held against his shoulder, a wave emerged, and rolled, perfectly and leisurely, over his bent arm and down his back. Eons later, a shell, birthed from the top of the gun, fell, twisting and twirling.

I remember, too, something else that drew my eye that day. Among the mosses on the edges of the pavement a bright ruby millipede reared up, a monster from the depths, for a reason entirely its own. Supported by its lower body, its curious head stretched upwards, upwards, ever upwards, and its limbs probed for traction on the air.

“Machine!”

A repeated cry. Human scale reinserted into the scene.

Embarrassed, some of the onlookers dropped their gazes. Angered, others stared, chins projected, jaws clenched. A few, simply confused, searched for meaning in the faces of companions. Why, they wondered, was he behaving like this? Foolish man. What was he shouting? Did anyone know what he was saying? Machine – what did he mean?

They wanted someone else to go to the collapsed man, raise him to his feet, take him away. Or shoot him in the head – anything – to stop his agonised cries. Those who could not bear it left, heading for their flats or the dump, anywhere away from this howling man. Fearful of what was to come, ashamed of their own cowardice, or stunned into reflective silence by the marked difference between the Dog Man’s reaction and their own. They had their reasons.

More stayed than left. I, too, aquiver with the thrill of standing so near to so many other people, some of them my neighbours. A contagion in my head. New arrivals left off tasks and other business, coming on to the street or positioning themselves at open windows, watching the hunt and incubating anger towards the man. It boiled up within them. It assembled old hatreds from the residues that lurked in the tendons at the backs of their knees. It collected fractious aches from the gums, the hollowed housing of loose molars. An anger that had to come out. Trouble would follow. Eruption was certain.

A young child, captive on a hip, squawked Put me down!, while across the road, from the corner of a dying mouth, blood streaked across wet fur before it dropped to the uneven surface beneath a dog's twisted neck.

With his assistant, the gunman turned towards an adjacent street, the weapons temporarily still over their crooked arms. Across each man's back, a sling with unused cartridge shells, obscured the lettering stamped on to their overalls. P - S T. It made no difference what it said; almost everyone was illiterate.

One of the blue barrow boys darted forward, pushing his empty cart towards a bloodied mass near Carillon's entrance. A colleague, skin rash aflame, followed after the briefest hesitation. A mad minute. A smear of colour. Working together, the men grabbed the dog's legs, lifted, flinging the carcass into the barrow. A score of dead animals still to be collected from this street alone; many more from the alleys.

A sobbing man keened in the middle of the street.

"Machine!"

A young man with a wide scar on his neck picked up a shattered stool that had been hurled, at some point, out of a tenement flat window. Breaking off the remaining leg, the youth swung his arm a few times, gauging the heft, and headed for the figure kneeling over the carcass of a small, grey dog. A powerful backswing; a smashed skull. Silence delivered with a single strike.

Though, the child still whinged on the hip, and the impromptu wooden weapon, dropped into the gutter, went thup, thup, thup. Then lay still. Just wood again. Nothing.

At my feet, the millipede escaped the dark green moss of its private universe. The executioner walked away, aiming for the fences. Onlookers dispersed, leaving two busy barrow boys to clean up. Someone, probably Caretaker, would hand over to them a few notes or coupons for their efforts.

But our exits were not untaxed. The Dog Man's cry would not be banished that easily. It echoed in the stairwells of the tenements. It thundered through the underground sewers. It bounced between the close walls of deserted alleys and dived into secret sinkholes.

"Ma chienne!"

When, at last, the Dog Man's body had been lifted into a barrow, a boy wheeled it towards the dump. Blood from a wound in Dog Man's head dropped onto the sandy path. In the near distance, the hogs waited.

## **Two**

Dog or human, when a corpse appeared in the abandoned zone, flies found it. Decay, the unmistakable, enticing stench of it, no fly could resist. And where there were flies, a maggot mass followed. Being dead has its strange pleasures – it has offered me the opportunity to observe what overtakes a dead body, and it is convenient that the transformation I have witnessed is my own. I've tracked it since that first moment, six days ago.

Not too long after the cockroach clambered onto me, a fly writing alphabets in the air was summoned by a bad odour that seeped from my dead mass. Then came a second fly. And a third.

In quick succession, these three fat brommers landed, their orange eyes taking in the scene with a bulbous glance. There was little time to survey the majesty of my dissolution. Gravid, they were understandably impatient to expel the additional load in their own bodies. They lumbered across my legs and arms where the initial pallor of death had set in. Soon enough, it would be replaced by mauves and plums. They were a sweet-toothed bunch, the flies, with a taste for food more sugared than the fare offered by new death. They were not there to feed.

Nor were they the first arrivals. Before the flies, before the roach, bacteria had made theirs what was mine. They were the earliest to turn up and last to leave. Some had lived within me all my life. The ones responsible for rigor mortis were incubated in the labyrinths of my bowels and lungs. Because I had nothing else to do I made myself a spectator to their activity, and soon understood them to be weavers with a puristic manner. They spun one death cloth from the unravelling threads of my body and, displeased with their work, unpicked it immediately, starting over again, reducing their own handiwork to a chain of invisible glucose links.

How tiny they were, these unsparing bacilli; how striking their impact. The contradiction between size and effect was marked; the comparison with my own life too obvious. Recrimination may have bubbled in the fumes of the flat but I was dead and did not care, did I? I concentrated on the autolysis and the advance preparations for a maggot feast.

Within four minutes of my death, guilds of bacterial weavers had decked me in pallor mortis. Waxy charcoals and anaemic creams, these were the default colours of that cloth of death. I cooled and blanched. My body's internal temperature dropped until it shared for a while the ambient heat of the air immediately around me.

After that, the weavers created from me a rusty tapestry. Heavy red blood cells sank and settled, turning my skin ruddy. My legs and backside were a mixture of bruised plums and liverish mauves. Soon enough impermanent stiffening would set in; my musculature made acidic.

The flatlands is always humid and hot. These conditions encourage speedy putrefaction. I was no exception. My cells released their saps and juices, all viscous lava and secret ichors. Slipping skin rode along in the surface rivers of my wasting body.

As the hours leaked by, viridity pooled and my tissues heated up. I had become a perfect environment for maggots.

Instars, in growing numbers, emerged from the egg cases deposited by the three female flies. A busy scene in a clammy room.

On my inert body, the instars were an agile lot. Some swayed in ammoniac currents. A few crawled along, quick pulses rippling up their conical bodies. Others burst clumsily out of fleshy caverns, falling on top of those below. Spiracles blinked on thick-set posteriors; mouths never tired. They were ingesting my flesh. Eating and eating. I was dispassionate about this change. Unsurprisingly.

One would expect such states – a corpse hosting a maggot mass – to unsettle the living but that wasn't the case for that brat! My unsubtle undoing bothered Long Woman's ward not a bit.

Hours before the policeman arrived at my front door, the child stood over my dissolving body. With my eyes partially open, it seemed as if I returned her stare. A half-wit and a dead husk sizing each other up. While alive, I'd harboured some sympathy for this child. After my death, any sentiment I'd felt evaporated; a change not entirely due to the fact of being dead.

The girl touched my cheek. Cool, she thought, but not cold. Nothing was ever cold in the steaming flatlands. She sat back, resting on her large rump, a puzzled expression on her face. Her eyelids fluttered. I wasn't even supposed to be inside the flat. The fact of my presence did not fit with her perceptions of my regular pattern. She'd assumed I'd gone out, as I always did, that I'd left on one of my early morning errands. But yet there I was. And unmoving. How strange, how new.

The child breathed quietly, waiting for me to wake. She was always patient. Eventually, when nothing happened, she took a risk. Reached out and fingered the nightdress. No response. No hand smacked stingingly at her knuckles. Nothing was thrown at her. No shoe hit her in the chest. This was good, she felt. The world was calm and at the centre

of it, there was blue. Blue. Calm. Good. A blue dress for a good, calm girl. She stroked the fabric lovingly. One word churned in her hollow mind: pretty.

Curiosity piqued by imagined treasures, and made brave by her morning's success, the girl looked around my apartment. A smug pout and proprietorial air characterised her. She was too familiar with the flat's illogic for this to be her first visit, and immediately I understood: she entered our flats when we, the occupants, were out. The cheeky little snoop. Quite obviously she'd come into my home before now. She must have discovered my key, retrieved it from a secret slot in a broken wall. A hiding place: she approved of that. She liked secrets. She liked this flat. So much to look at, touch, explore.

The girl clutched something, a captive whose limbs stuck out from the cackle of a clenched hand. The cockroach, agitated at its incarceration, kicked its legs and whipped its antennae. A futile rebellion against the fleshy prison of the child's palm and fingers. Tickle. Funny. The insect's protests upped the girl's delight. Her grip tightened with solid resolve. No tickle now. Play later.

The girl bent forward and sniffed the air. It seemed she'd figured out that the strong odour in the flat came from me. She inhaled deeply. Her watery eyes returned to my half open stare, watching for a reaction as her left hand travelled forward once more. Still nothing. Very good. And then she did the strangest of things. She patted my head. Again and again. Clumsy great thuds petted down on my scalp. Appropriation? Approval? Her reasons, I could only guess at then.

A crease formed in the smooth skin between her eyebrows. Had she stopped breathing? It seemed so. The nightdress had captured her mind. In a heartbeat, she was mesmerised; her attention snagged by mere nylon.



She looked from nightdress to her hands, possibly to remind herself of some thing or purpose. The right fist was still clenched but the fingers of her left hand had begun to fidget. These were volatile times for such a distractible mind. Too many sensations to process in her lightweight brain. Her tongue popped out of her lips. It was wet and pink. She squinted down. An ugly convergence locked itself into her eyes, confirming the belief that she was just a fool. Eventually, she righted her gaze and closed her mouth, exhaling forcefully through her flared nostrils. No play now; play later. How substantial her will, I thought.

The girl stood up then, looming over me, one word still echoing in her mind as she held the insect in its sweaty prison: pretty.

Her feet carried her quickly to the door where, with a final glance backward, she made a swift departure from my flat.

She returned later, but someone else had beaten her there: a stranger wearing a uniform. It was not yet ten o'clock. She watched and waited.

I, so attuned to my space, had noticed her, but the gecko cop, who'd just left my apartment, was unaware of her presence. She'd held herself deep in the shadows at the top of stairwell and listened. He said something into a talking box. A grin came to her face when she saw him close the door and walk away. When he paused at a neighbour's flat, entered that, she breathed steadily. Easy inhalations, smooth exhalations. There was no rush on her part.

He reappeared, the man, and came towards her. Shhh. Be still, she told her body. Don't run, don't run.

The shadows gave her cover. His shoes squeaked on the wet stairs. She waited there until she could hear his tread no more.

At last, all trace of him had gone. The corridor was deserted. It seemed as if her very breath had pushed him away, fulfilling her implicit wish. The weight of a key was in her pocket. She stepped forward. Treading carefully down the steps, the girl emerged at the far corridor, the furthestmost point away from the broken lift and its gaping shaft; a hollow core alive with cockroaches.

With the skill of a cat burglar, the child pushed her back against the brickwork, both palms flat against its surface. Sidling along the wall, one foot crossing slowly and carefully over the other, she lifted each in an exaggerated arch before placing the left, then right, on the floor so that they could carry her weight again. It thrilled her to creep along in this way. It was almost as pleasing as the fact that Long Woman wasn't there to throw shoes at her head.

The girl navigated my neighbour's door with exaggerated caution. To her, flat 505 was filled always with whispering sounds and smells that stung the back of her throat. It repelled her, as did the creature living within it. She was frightened, I sensed, by the sore-encrusted thing lurking in that flat. The child moved especially quietly, hoping that the ghoul would not fling open the door, grab at her arms and beg for something in words that crashed together in her ears.

She inched towards my flat. A small marker stencilled in paint identified her destination – 504 – but more distinctive still was the smell emanating from the

apartment. It did not bother her. She clicked her tongue against her top teeth; a reprimand or a greeting to the fat gecko that studied her progress from a spot above the door. Her hand slid along the wall, passing over a secret crevice. Its clandestine treasure, a key, she'd plundered already. Her fingers flowed towards the knob; found it; turned it. It was cool to her touch. The door opened inwards and she stepped inside.

Her vision wasn't greatly affected by the flat's darkness, as she'd spent almost all of her life indoors. She looked around to confirm that the man she'd seen earlier had not touched much. Only a cardboard carton near the door had been moved. She picked it up and put it back in its rightful place. Box, over there. Hers was a small, careful gesture and I would have held a more generous opinion of her had it not been the second time that morning she'd broken into my flat. I could only guess at how many unobserved break-ins there'd been during my lifetime.

Another quick glance at my body. The nasties and crawlies had claimed it as their own. There were more now than on her earlier visit. Squirming, white things wriggled around my ears and nose and mouth, caving in. Some wandered over my scalp, making my hair quiver.

The girl moved towards this writhing coat. I may have bristled at her boldness if I'd had the ability. There was something compelling about how determined she was in her purpose.

She gripped my shoulders, tipped my upper body forward with a steady pull. The things snacking on my head broke into frenzy, twisting and rebuffing the interruption. Indifferent to their protestations, she supported my chest with a hand, ignored the wriggles beneath her palm. With the other hand, she grabbed my nightdress, jerking the hem free from beneath my buttocks. A sizeable piece of skin sloughed off, enough

to invite a pause, I thought. But no. With a final tug, the shift was over my hair, the thin straps slipped off each shoulder and down my stiff arms. The garment was free at last. Happy, her face said. And, mine now. I think she may have wanted to linger, enjoy the pleasure of her victory, but there wasn't time. My corpse was restored to its original position. A gentle adjustment and I was propped against the wall.

The girl stood up. Blue cloth in hand, she shook it vigorously to shed the maggots, and they fell to the floor like soft, cooked rice. She grinned, an expanse of pink gums crowding out small teeth. Delighted with the blue nightdress, she gave a satisfied grunt and closed my front door.

Except for underpants, my corpse was naked to the unabated feasting.

That near nakedness rattled the policeman who returned, an hour or so later, escorting two mortuary workers. It was not yet midday but the apartment was still dark. Borrowed torch in hand, a beam of light was directed at my head, shoulders. The policeman hesitated. He could have sworn the stiff wasn't unclothed before. A shaft of brightness cut across the room and back again. Nothing else had been moved; the body was where it had been but its clothing had been removed. He shook his head, set aside the mystery, and encouraged the morticians to concentrate on getting me out of the flat. What was the point of pursuing the perpetrator of this odd disrobing? The body was dead, no more or less about it. So, who cared? Far more important things to worry about, like remembering to breathe through his mouth. Futile, really, because he knew that he'd taste the sickening brew of rotting flesh and wet newspapers for days afterwards.

Why, he asked himself, hadn't the body been tossed on the dump? (Why, indeed; I'd asked myself the same question.) These flatlanders did that often enough, or so he'd

been told; a much easier and quicker alternative to police involvement. The caretaker, who'd made the call, obviously had his reasons. The image of the caretaker filled his mind. Something about the man's manner, size, a quality in his eyes, unsettled the cop. When the policeman had mentioned he would need to talk to the neighbours, the caretaker had hovered too near for comfort and then asked why. Routine, the cop had explained. Conveniently, too conveniently in his opinion, the wide-eyed superintendent had given him a key that opened 505. He'd sent the caretaker away, told him to find a torch, because he couldn't tolerate him one moment more.

Something else bothered him about the man but he couldn't concentrate because, oh god, the stench. Jesus! He'd never get accustomed to it. Could not fathom how anyone living in the block could have missed it, this unmistakable stink of decay. Damn. It made no sense to him why the authorities hadn't ordered that these squatters be cleared out of the fucking hovel once and for all. Knock the bloody place down. Flatten it. People couldn't live like this, he fumed.

While the mortuary workers did what they had to, the policeman, feeling wretched, kept out of their way. Defeated by the morning's events and vigilant for falling geckoes, he retreated into the unlit corridor to review his unlucky call-out.

He'd tried to find out if anyone, a neighbour, a visitor, had seen anything. In these cases, no one ever did. 503 was unliveable because it had been gutted by fire some time back. He'd even peered into 505, continuing his feeble attempt at an investigation. The flat was identical to 504: a single room without electricity or running water. Nothing but a soiled mattress and a glowing primus stove. Sweet, organic aromas, like burnt fields after summer rain showers, competed with the stronger gassy vapour of the cooker. The undertone was a mixture of cannabis and sangoma's or diviner's sage. He knew it well, this hallucinogenic of last resort among the collapsed vein junkies. There'd been only one occupant in 505. She, he – the policeman couldn't

determine – writhed about on the filthy mattress with an invisible partner. He thought he heard several enormous moths flying noisily around the room. Couldn't be sure and couldn't be bothered to find out. He'd known, with a cop's intuition, that there was no way to get any sensible information out of the junkie. Fuck it. Investigation abandoned. He'd closed the door, ready to escape the building's oppressiveness. He wanted to get far away from this slum. He would rather wait on the street for the mortuary van's arrival. Stinking, fucking flatlanders, he muttered to himself.

Inside 504, the morticians had set up a portable spotlight to illuminate the apartment. I'd never seen my home brightened that way. It was an unforgiving light.

The two men inside the flat did not stop talking, particularly the short, stocky one with the sour body odour. It was a burst of talk such as my home had never experienced in my lifetime. Stocky breathed from a different atmosphere. He was impervious to the smell, and indifferent to the awkward angle of my limb. The maggots he seemed not to notice.

Waiting just beyond the doorway, the cop kept an eye on the external walls, alert for lizards. Every so often he glanced at the men as they cleared a workable space. It took some time for them to do this. While they pushed aside boxes and newspapers, the policeman drew a box of matches. A yellow and blue flame flared into the dark in the corridor. He extinguished the burning match just as abruptly in one forceful breath. Holding the smouldering tip to his nostrils, he inhaled the sulphurous fumes. A feeble counter to the smell of rot. It did not help – it never did – but the ritual was a comfort. All the while, Stocky went on and on to his colleague about smart career choices and opportunities for diversification and expansion and wealth creation and personal growth.

Bored, the cop took out a packet of beedies, selected one and lit it with a second hissing match. To smoke so publicly was a rebellious gesture he'd never dare make anywhere but in the tenements. Dried mango and strong tobacco claimed the air briefly. Inhaling deeply, the policeman drifted in the morticians' prattle. Theirs was an inane conversation that spanned everything and anything from union membership to some historical uprising, before settling on the Nandians. Instantly suspicious, the policeman paid closer attention to Stocky's monologue. His body stiffened. Stocky was too familiar with the facts of the Nandians' history and a bit too eager to share his unexpectedly vast knowledge with his new colleague. Could not be coincidence, he thought; no innocent topic of conversation, this.

Another fucking Nandian, the policeman mused to himself, shifting his weight from one leg to the other. Goddamn everywhere, that lot, even popping up among his colleagues at the station. All of them, talking shit all day long about tsunamis and that creepy prophet of theirs.

Bennie ka Nandi, that's who he meant. The man hadn't been seen in public for years. And the prophet's real name wasn't ka Nandi. No one, not even ka Nandi, knew what it was. Still, he was the adored spiritual leader of one of the fastest growing religious sects, called the Glorious Ministry of the Eternal Redeemer's Beneficence, on the continent. The members referred to themselves as the Glories; every one else called them the Nandians.

The cop drew again on his beedie. Thousands followed Baba Nandi in the new city, plenty enough in the old. Ka Nandi was barely out of his twenties when he created the Ministry. He'd called it a church, not a business, though everybody who was not a member agreed that it was a cash-raking cult.

The Nandians believed that God would send an enormous wave to destroy the earth. The wave, ka Nandi claimed, would emerge from the bed of the Pacific Ocean. It would split in two; the eastern half washing away Asia and Europe, the western one annihilating the Americas. Conveniently, Africa would be spared – at least those parts of the continent where Nandians seemed to congregate – and God would return to earth, save all the survivors, usher them towards an eternal life. None of this seemed particularly attractive to the cop.

The cop begrudgingly admitted that ka Nandi was a most astute businessman. Gossip and regular publicity confirmed this, plus the investigative journalism, snooping of the kind that ka Nandi attracted most and desired least. The Nandians weren't strangers in the flatlands either, as they handed out bottled water and blankets after the storms. Bennie may have been one of the unschooled kids of an illiterate prostitute but he was not an idiot. He was someone with Big Plans. He said he knew always that he was going to Be Somebody.

A loud crack – the morticians breaking my stiff leg – snapped the policeman from his reverie. The cop flicked the beedie to the wet floor. Ssssk. Snuffed out, a thin plume twisted in the air. Stocky was still talking but at least my body and its straightened leg had now been placed in the body bag. The sack was zipped shut and settled on a board, ready to be carried to the van parked in the street below.

The waters were low that day, not even half way up the van's tyres. My corpse would have stayed where it was if lingering storm water had remained at the heights common in the rainy season. Some of our recent storms had been noteworthy, not least because of the red crabs that preceded one of them, but I did not want to think about that event, the bizarre migration that had escaped from the forgotten sewers, just then.



Instead, I focused on Stocky and his colleague carrying my bagged body into the corridor, towards the stairwell. They moved quickly enough then stopped, brought to a halt by someone already there. In the stairwell, a woman with a flat face made her way slowly up the steps, one painful stair at a time. The men waited; they had no option. Once they'd let her pass, an old nothing in a loose, dull smock, they moved easily and confidently. My body weighed very little, after all, and they were adept at such business. All the while, as the three of them descended – the policeman holding a portable spotlight, the morticians gripping the bag at the corners – Stocky never shut up. Talk, talk, talk; so many words tumbling out of one man's mouth. I wondered what he would have done or said had he known that the old woman he'd just moved by was Bennie ka Nandi's mother.

The woman had been a neighbour, one of two dozen or so who lived in Carillon. Like me, she'd been there a very long time. In a slum, there's little privacy. The fact that she was Bennie's mother made absolutely no difference to my situation. It made no difference to hers either, because, according to the official account of Bennie's life (a biography available in a variety of media formats), his mother was dead.

The woman Bennie hired to model as his mother in the photographs illustrating his biography was a bland, diminutive facsimile of him. Beneath her head scarf she had the kind of face that deflected enquiries; a useful quality since the biography made it clear that ka Nandi's mother had died at peace, ensconced by her son in considerable luxury, after she'd been reunited with him soon after making his fortune.

Wealth he certainly had. He was a very rich man and entirely self-made. Being the son of a prostitute lent cachet, enhancing not only what he had become but the story of how he'd gotten there. Bennie would have it no other way.

Did it matter that the name of the woman climbing those steps wasn't Nandi; that the epithet was Bennie's choice? He'd been inspired by history and the story of a king who'd transformed a puny tribe into fearsome warriors of myth. The romance of it all. A boy born out of wedlock to an outcast girl. A son with an unshakeable dedication to his mother. The boy may have become supreme ruler but it was his mother, Nandi, whom he loved most. And one day she died. When they brought him the news of her demise, his grief could not be contained. Executions were ordered. Hundreds of servants were killed, proof of the colossal loss he'd suffered. Ka Nandi admired the general's preternatural gesture.

Back in the stairwell meanwhile, the mortuary men made good progress down the tricky steps. Above them, ka Nandi's mother climbed at her own pace. Did she turn her neck, a double take, to look at the bagged body that had passed so near? Did the proximity of death, rearing unexpectedly in that stairwell that day, disconcert her? Did that chance encounter with a corpse invite her to ponder her own mortality? Was she curious about who lay in the plastic body bag? Which neighbour was it, or more importantly, from which flat?

But why should a death have concerned her, mine or any other person's? She had worries of her own: how to earn the money to pay Long Woman for the repairs to her only pair of shoes? To fix them, she must have money. The cobbler would not mend her shoes for free. Money meant going out again, finding another client. Back, front; it didn't matter, or a breathy bout of fellatio. The old woman did not care. She was resolved to taking her chances with whoever had a few notes. First, though, she must call at Long Woman's flat. She must find out how much she needed. The shoes were broken. They had to be fixed.

Nothing but sex had presented itself to her as a way to survive. She knew herself simply as a body, whole or in part, to be used in exchange for money or water coupons. At age eight, she'd been traded by her mother's boyfriend for a crate of bottled beers and some Mexican cigarettes. A novelty, that brand, although the pack had been half empty and the tobacco sodden. At eleven, she'd birthed the first child of many; a full-term baby that emerged painfully and protractedly from between her girl's legs. Twelve more children followed over the years, most of them boys, the youngest batch born in Carillon. Among them there had been a boy with cunning eyes. Abortions, spontaneous and intentional, kept in check the rest. When it came to Bennie, the child with sly eyes, he was one among so many that she'd no time to notice, what with cutting umbilical cords with blunt knives, breastfeeding another screaming child, and assuring her pimping boyfriend that she'd return to the streets by the end of the day... Bennie was just one more empty stomach and a gaping mouth.

When my neighbour's thoughts considered death it was a beating or an assault that forced them in that direction. Her mind was flimsy. Everything floated in her drowning world, including her dreams. Some people are distinguished by oddly shaped toes, others by disfiguring birthmarks; terrifying dreams were her peculiarity. Things and deeds too horrible to describe gutted her sleeping hours.

Nightmares had plagued her since childhood. These night terrors had also kept her from her adult's bed. Defeated, she'd separate from her hollow self, carry her short, thick body from the mattress to the chamber pot and squat until her bladder was empty. After, she'd pick up a damp rag, dip it into a plastic basin filled with soapy water, and wipe her face and hands, then her armpits and groin, before returning the cloth to the suds. She'd take her smock from a hanger hooked on a nail in the crumbling wall, and place it slowly over her head, feeding her arms through the wide openings of the sleeves. And pants? She did not bother with underpants; she'd have to remove them anyway as her clients were the kind who lacked delicacy and had no

regard for other people's property, including something as insignificant as a pair of cheap, soiled drawers. There was no formality when it came to the sex in which she participated. Her opportunities had grown very scarce. Truckloads and containers stuffed with firmer bodies – youthful women, girls, boys – contributed to this turn, for the city beyond the fence had a voracious appetite. To feed it, the young were stolen out of fallow fields or purchased, for a couple of notes, from their gaunt families. They arrived daily. Sex was the city's lymph.

Bennie's mother had to make do with the worst of the johns. Truckers who'd blown too much money on methamphetamines, alcohol and silly soccer bets. Old neighbours with coins and a single note. Drug addicts believing, in their hallucinations, that she was the Queen of Sheba. Bored fence guards. Blue barrow boys. The physical tax never lessened. Every muscle ached from the battery, and over time, chronic pain had meshed with the fibres and joints of her body. It was now inseparable from her being.

When she could spare a few notes, which wasn't very often, she visited the herbal practitioners who traded near the fences. She bought buchu leaves or a paste concocted from devil's claw, dagga and petroleum jelly. The paste eased broken tissue; soothed sores that took too long to heal. I, too, had had reason to visit the herbalists. The buchu, steeped in a bucket of boiling water, reduced vaginal inflammation, and as long as her aching thighs could manage, she'd squat over the brew. It helped with cystitis, while the antiseptic properties controlled mild infections transmitted by unwashed foreskins and filthy fingernails. The buchu induced spontaneous abortions; a useful side effect. The herbalists knew their products. They'd borrowed the remedy, they said to anyone who cared to ask, from the Khoikhoi who'd learnt it from Tsui'goab, the health guardian and god of the sky. It sounded good but the packaging told me another story.

Expiry dates and mind boggling side-effects were recorded there. So, too, unpronounceable ingredients that promised prevention or cure. It helped that, many years ago, Bennie's mother had received a jab of vaccine at a police station; an elixir to keep the human immunodeficiency virus at bay.

That morning, while a few of my neighbours hung from their windows or gathered at the parked vehicles, watching the mortuary workers push my body into the back of a van, the old prostitute lumbered onwards towards Long Woman's flat to resolve the matter of the shoes. On her way, she noticed a crouched figure depositing a small parcel at the door of flat 701.

### ***Three***

The giving of gifts, what strange behaviour it is. The habit is confined exclusively to the living. The dead don't exchange tokens, although, occasionally, we do find ourselves the recipient of a trinket slipped into the folds of a shroud or the beneficiary of a handful of petals thrown upon a casket.

That small parcel at the door of flat 701 was a gesture of something – a connection in all likelihood, though I cannot say for sure. It wasn't the only gift given and received in that tenement in the days following my demise. Being dead, you notice things you hadn't considered possible before. Death has its advantages; bestows its own gifts.

In the eyes of Carillon's lesser matriarchs who'd gathered on the street to watch a bagged body being shunted from flat to refrigerated mortuary van, the reports of my unexpected end was tremendous news. A vacant flat. Small, yes, but on a higher, drier floor. It was altogether a better prospect than any on the lower levels, and was less likely to be flooded in the cyclone season. Not a perfect location, not like Long Woman's flat, but it was good enough all the same.

A vacant flat: an unexpected gift. Who would be the recipient? Trouble was inevitable at Carillon.

The permutations were complex. Such matters were of particular importance to two women who met in the street, for they lived on a lower floor. They eyed one another warily, watching to see who'd make the first move.

The van's engine idled. Some kids crawled under the chassis while a teenager begged the cop for a lift.

Such commotion diverted their attention not one bit. Both moved forward at the same time, pushing through the loose knot of people who hovered near the van.

“Greetings, Sister.”

“Yes, greetings to you, too, my sister.”

“You are well today?”

“I am well today, yes. Thank you for asking. And may I be permitted to ask if you are well today, also?”

“I am well also, my sister.”

“Sister of mine, your family is well this day?”

“They are, indeed, sister, and your family?”

“They are well. Thank you.”

“And it is a good day for you, Sister?”

“It is mostly a good day for me, my sister.”

“Ah, mostly. My heart is saddened to learn that it is not wholly a good day for you.”

“Indeed, Sister, I am comforted greatly by your support.”

“And what is the reason it is not wholly a good day for you, Sister?”

“These difficult and challenging days. I have learnt, you see, that life is not wholly good to us. Sometimes we must accept the trials and tribulations that are sent to us by God, praise be His.”

“Mmm, Sister. God’s ways. They are a mystery to us but it is wise and right that we accept Him, praise be, into our hearts, without question.”

“You are a wise and God-fearing woman, my sister.”

“I try to be, Sister. Faith is very important to me.”

"And me, also."

"My sister, if I may ask: why is today of all God's day a trial and a tribulation?"

"God, praise be His, has indeed chosen this day. Well, I do not complain. Please do not think I do. As you say, God's plan is not for us to question. We must learn to accept such things in our lives."

"And what is your trouble, my sister, which you must accept?"

"May I speak honestly, my dear?"

"There is no other way."

"That bitch in 504 died two mornings before today and I think Caretaker has already rented out the flat to some *foreigner*."

"He did what?"

"Without even discussing it with me. Nor anyone on the residents' committee. He just went and rented that flat to the first paying hands he could find. Her body is barely out of the flat and now some filthy foreigners will arrive, with their striped bags and plentiful germs. I imagine they're ready to move straight in."

"Caretaker did that?"

"He did, indeed."

"How could he! He promised me that flat. He said he would tell me, *before* anyone else, if one of these flats became vacant."

"He promised you that? Ey ey. Truly, sister, the man is a snake. He swore it to me. The very same thing. The flat is rightfully mine. I have been waiting months."

"Excuse me, my sister, but you are wrong. That flat, rightfully, is mine. I have been waiting years for it to become vacant."

"You have not."

"I have, too."

"Where is it written that 504 is yours to rent?"



“Nowhere, Sister, but it was clearly spoken in my agreement with Caretaker. And signed in the one hundred notes I paid him to jump to the top of the waiting list that he has pinned to the back of his door.”

“One hundred notes? Sister, I did not take you for one so cheap. Me, I paid Caretaker *two hundred* to put my name first.”

“You, you should be careful who you call cheap. Very careful.”

“And why is that?”

“We all know you. Too ready to spread your legs for the first man with a fat wallet and a booklet of water coupons who crosses your path.”

“Why, if I was not such a God-fearing woman, I would slap you. Wife of an impotent, uncircumcised boy.”

“And me? If I was not a woman of faith, I would rip that weave out of your skull, you witch.”

“Bitch.”

“Liar.”

“Whore’s daughter.”

“Dog’s mange.”

“I will not stand on this street and allow you to speak to me in this way. Good day, you heathen thief.”

“And good day to you, too, deceiver and manipulator of words.”

Perhaps it is wise, given such quarrels, that the dead maintain their distance from the practice of giving gifts. The rest of my neighbours were disdainful of the practice, too, or so I’d assumed. I was wrong. They hadn’t been keeping to themselves. Maybe I had been the only one that they’d shunned. Or, equally likely, the one doing the shunning.

Long Woman had overheard the argument between the women. She scorned them and had no truck with gifts. The cobbler rebuffed all overtures, and was openly dismissive of those who gave anything to others. Her views on gift giving added flavour to her feelings for Carillon's self-appointed caretaker. She hated the man.

I'd overheard, a few days before I died, their latest run-in.

\* \* \*

Someone tapped softly on her front door.

"Caretaker."

He'd been startled to find her home.

"I was... Good morning. I did not..."

"Yes?"

"I, I, I..."

"You have come for the shoes."

"The shoes. Yes."

"The shoes that belong to your friend."

"Yes."

"You have the money?"

"Yes."

"Show me."

"I have the money."

Carefully, he counted it.

"Fifty. Like you said."

Long Woman held out her hand, but his fingers were reticent. She snorted, and took the cash.

"Wait here. I will bring the shoes to you."

"I will. Yes, and I have something ... "

She'd slammed the door then, but not before catching the last part of his phrase.

"...for the child."

High-heeled pumps were shoved at him from the partially opened door.

"Take your shoes, your friend's shoes."

"Thank you."

"What else do you want, standing at my door? Are you dissatisfied?"

"No, no. The shoes are done beautifully. Almost as if new." He hadn't even looked at them.

Again, Long Woman glared at him. A conspicuous pause developed between them.

"My friend will be very happy."

"Then what do you want?"

"These..."

He pushed three small boxes towards her.

"For the child. My... *friend* has so many... The colours... The child might like the colours."

"What is this?"

"Acrylic nails. A few spare boxes. And some glitter and a few other things. They will not break. The child might want to play ... Little girls like such things. I think." His large face wobbled with distress as he saw her suspicion.

He forced a smile; tried again.

"Please, I meant no offence. I imagined the child might like the different colours and the glass gems and the sticky transfers... Maybe?"

"You have brought a gift of acrylic nails for a child? For this particular child?"

With a flick of her head Long Woman gestured at the girl who'd kept sensibly out of sight throughout the exchange.

"Yes, I thought that she..."

"A gift."

"Not really. I had spare boxes. From my friend. It is nothing, really."

"It is a gift."

"Well, something for the child."

"And what do you want for these things?"

"Nothing."

"Nothing?"

He was hurt, again, to see the implication in her eyes. How she looked through him.

"I will give the child your *gift*," she said, and shut the door. More firmly than was necessary.

Geckos bolted for cover. Grouting chipped to the floor. The slammed door reverberated through the stairwell.

\* \* \*

In the vertical village that was Carillon, Long Woman was the fiercest villager, dreaded by the rest of us. A colossus, she towered over everyone except Caretaker. They did

not get along. Theirs was a slow, simmering war. At stake was reputation: who really was the leader of our waning tribe.

Long Woman had a singular ability among the flatland community, a real skill that provided a steady enough income and supplied to all of us a necessary service. In a decayed environment where lacerated toes and punctured soles were common place, she was a cobbler. Shoes were protection. Always.

Long Woman's flat was a hospital for injured shoes. I'd been in there a few times. The dilapidated and the moribund displayed a full range of damage: unravelled seams, broken heels, snapped soles, deep tears, painful cracks in vinyl vamps, missing buckles, frayed straps, desiccated insteps, multiple puncture wounds plus stains of every sort. Some cobbler's tools were laid out on a workbench beneath an open window. A trio of awls, for stitching and making holes; two side cutters each with thick, worn wooden grips; a tack hammer; a drift punch; a round brush and a short haired polisher were all the tools she needed for her craft. These, as well as four lasts, suspended on nylon and tied to a window frame, had once belonged to a man with whom, years earlier, she'd conceived two children, both stillborn. He'd been the cordwainer, not she, but living with him and observing his repair work, she'd learnt a thing or three. Simple repairs, stitching and gluing, the cordwainer had delegated partly, and then wholly, to Long Woman. It was cobbling that generated an income, not shoemaking. Even back then, there'd been minimal demand for his custom-made shoes barring an occasional order: a wealthy customer from the new city whose mangled feet called for a pair of modified boots; or another with fetishes: a half dozen pairs of silk and suede slippers for a lover – each contorted foot an anthurium, each middle toe emerging like a spadix from a spathe. It was the kind of footwear that couldn't be found at the shopping malls that lay beyond the perimeter fence.

But demand for shoemaking dried up entirely, hastening the morose cordwainer's drinking habits. The cobbler took control. Some clients, particularly those who'd damaged a shoe beyond any fixing, had tried, but failed, to accuse the young woman of ineptitude. She'd tolerated none of it.

It was not the pleasure of a well executed patch up nor the creativity involved in finding a solution to an impossibly difficult case of shoe damage that attracted Long Woman to cobbling. It wasn't the craft that drew her, but the intimate history held in a shoe. Every secret and weakness, every ache, pain and vanity was captured, and Long Woman took pride in her ability to read in the folds and bucklings all manner of things about the wearer.

For Long Woman, footwear was a generous communicator, admitting truths with the unselfconscious disclosure common to babes. And oh, the lies conjured up whenever a damaged shoe was brought to her. People were incapable of being honest, even about such ordinary things as shoes.

She knew long before the wearer, however, that death was imminent. Through depressions on the sole she could discern deceptions and deeds of self-inflicted emotional harm. Hammertoe was common: a weakening of muscles, curling bones and tightening tendons. Over time, they left deep impressions in the insoles. Every step, eventually, was agony.

Watery suppurations from ulcerated toenails, bloodied stains from the insteps or beneath the big toes, she saw in these things diabetes. Secret secretions from unhealed scratches on numbed heels confirmed this. Soon enough, the foot would be amputated to stem the spread of gangrene. In each shoe, death lived.

Large warts and protective calluses made indentations. Some shoes were unwilling to comply with such demands to flex and bulge; they bit back. Long Woman approved.

When force of pressure and friction reigned, corns grew across and between the toes, on the outer edges of the ball of the foot, and at the heels. Corns reminded Long Woman of the possibility of an ideal world. To her, corns were deserving punishments for the terminally vain, and she felt joy when she found evidence of their presence in the insoles of her neighbours' footwear.

Discovering the secret language of shoes had come as a great relief to the young woman she was before she'd become Long Woman. Until then, she'd been disappointed, deeply so, with the vanity and greed all around her. Other people couldn't be relied upon to reprimand or discipline those who were proud or greedy in this life, so shoes were one means to that end. With a small hammer and a tiny tack, she'd perfected her method: pounding into the centre of a glued rubber sole a hidden reminder of the dangers of vanity, pride and greed, a dab of black putty erasing all obvious trace of the punitive deposit. It was her contribution to moral rectitude.

The cordwainer never suspected a thing. Long Woman polished a bright shine onto her antipathy for him. He was a stupid old drunk, seldom home because he was unable to keep his prick in his pants. He'd impregnated some girl from the tents and, months later, returned to the apartment with an infant in his arms. It was a creature with runny eyes and a slack mouth. True to his nature, he'd then dropped dead, leaving her responsible for the child. It wasn't even hers yet she had to look after it. She hated the brat. Thirteen years on and the girl was still too uncoordinated to cook and clean. She was of no use at all. None.

Back on the street, the van and the policeman's car pulled away, heading for the crossing that would carry me to the new city. A few of the residents milled about; others returned to their flats.

Long Woman looked up at the clouds. Ominous weather had gathered overhead. She went indoors.

\* \* \*

In the cobbler's flat, high above the ground, the girl played with her ghastly toys.

Tingles and prickles formed in her belly, even more filled her head. Against her ear drums, she heard a thousand wings fluttered. Such happiness was this.

Whitey was her favourite and that said a great deal because she had many in her collection. Yet even the girl's personal tally couldn't compare to the vast number of roaches roaming in the tenement, living in the lift shaft. Some called at Long Woman's flat. Happily, for the girl, the free roaches were not shy. They came to visit. They ran across the floor, most often at night; crawled into her hair or crept onto the foam mattress in the corner where she slept, all wanting to say hello.

"Hello girl."

"Hello."

The girl ignored most, caught some, closing these inside a bright pink plastic lunch box. On the lid was a cracked and peeling sticker: a girl with big eyes, a thin waist and long, yellow hair. The lunch box girl waved and smiled; a name ballooned in the air right next to her oversized head.



Inside the box were the chosen roaches: brown, black and dark red. They made noises. Their wings fluttered, crackled. A few, the naughty ones, had tried to run away when the girl lifted the lid but she'd caught them just in time. Using a secret clicking language, she reprimanded them.

"Go back. Get inside. Naughty. Shut the lid."

And she sealed the plastic lid with authority.

Kept separate from the rest, in his own special place, was Whitey. His home was a carton. The smell of cigarettes lingered faintly. Blue and red writing covered the outer surface of the box. These were words she couldn't read.

Whitey was big, nearly the length of her palm. He was the only good one: he had not tried to run away; he stayed where she put him. In the secret box. She kept it in yet another special place. So many secrets. She liked secrets.

Long Woman must not find her things, the girl thought to herself. Long Woman must not discover the special hiding places. No, she mustn't.

Humming, the child opened the cigarette pack, removed the cockroach and placed him on her upturned palm, bringing it right up to her eyes.

Things were blurry when she held them this close.

He was magnificent, Whitey. Except for two dark eyes, everything about him was fair – the same colour as the pale girl on the lunch box. His legs were the faintest pink, the

bristles the colour of toenail clippings. He had delicate antennae that reminded her of strands of hair plucked from a girl's blonde head. His abdomen was ivory, his upper body the shade of old cream. His insides, grey and unfamiliar, were almost visible through that soft, sallow covering. Whitey: the favourite one; the chosen one. He'd wear the special coat that would be made. It had to be completed soon. This fifth one would be her best yet. There was no other way. Waiting any longer would mean that Whitey – like all other Whiteys that had come before him – would darken; his colouring passing, as it always did, through the stages of ginger, caramel, bronze and mahogany before turning back into his natural ebony.

Whitey would be reborn as a very special gift. The child shivered her delight.

Noises outside the closed door caught her attention. They were the sounds of heavy footfalls

It was Long Woman. Oh no.

\* \* \*

Gift giving – even imbeciles partake in it. But not the dead. Never the dead. Sex, food, water, drugs, money – the tenement's inhabitants offered everything to one another and more. Proffered gifts, but to what end? And what if the gift was rejected? This fact seemed no deterrent to any of them.

One who was in the business of exchanging gifts crawled out of a cranny in a wall at exactly the same moment as Long Woman opened her front door. The particular fissure from which the cockroach had emerged was in the shaft that ran the length of

the tenement. The lift's cab had been ripped out. The sheave, gears and electric motor, once housed in the machine room on the rooftop, had been stolen, too. Anything movable had been taken; cut away by scrap scavengers with acetylene torches. At the bottom of the well was an enormous shock absorber – a piston in a cylinder without any oil – dozing like a terrapin.

The cockroach turned sharply, coming to rest for the moment with her head capsule pointed at the piston. Hairs on her legs combed the air: it was saturated with pheromones. The chemicals summoned her to commune.

Compound eyes saw little but two flagella, thin and whip like, rotated in their sockets. This way, that way, the bug mapped out the heated wakes of those who passed nearby. She tasted on the air currents their communications: they called out to new lovers or familiar mates. They tapped the updraft and made graceful glides across the empty lift shaft.

Vibrations rippled along the cockroach's abdomen. Spiracles along her sides drew in damp air. A magnificent creature in the prime of her life.

Thousands like her, in every possible shade of brown, grazed or courted nearby. She moved into the thick, fragrant night, ready for the task of calling. From an opening in her posterior came a glorious scent. She pumped her wings to accelerate its diffusion and scanned for response with her feelers.

Antennae met flagella as several males located her. She ignored those heaving with urea. One particularly sweet smelling roach pushed his body against the wall, and lifted his wings, allowing her to climb atop his back, intensifying, as she did, his leaking ooze.

Balanced on his back, she licked at his juices, feeding vigorously and fast. Before he could hook at her with a piece of his genital ammunition she dismounted.

Another male took his place. Twisting his abdomen, he, too, revealed his seeping tergal glands. His juices were sweeter. Pleased with this gift, she mounted him. A curved genital spine extending from the rear of his body pierced her internal tissue. Her grazing continued. But he was not a tergal cow. He had greater ambitions.

Hooked securely, the female roach pivoted one-hundred-and-eighty degrees. While she licked leftover secretions from her head and mouthparts, he manoeuvred to align spermal sacs with her spermathecal openings. Success wasn't guaranteed. She, like all female cockroaches, directed the outcome of a courtship.

Relying on rationales mysterious to the males, she chose not to mate just then. Her inner tissues stopped pulsating; her openings contracted in rejection. With powerful hind legs, she pummelled his abdomen and thorax. Again and again, she kicked him. He resisted initially, but the blows and scratches increased until his spine withdrew.

She felt it retract. Another powerful strike. She broke free.

Her acceleration caught the rival males unawares. All of them, including the rejected suitor, tapped the air with their antennae as they struggled to find her. She was metres ahead of them already. Assured that she hadn't been pursued, she slowed to a confident, high-stepping strut.

\* \* \*

In Long Woman's flat, the strange child was still smarting from a shoe that had just then been thrown at her head. She'd avoided a beating, though. Long Woman had been surprised that the girl was in the flat, seated so silently in the corner. Gave her a rapid rebuke but no thrashing. For the child, then, it was a good day. Added to that the surprise of a feast of her own... Across her lap lay the paraphernalia of D-I-Y nail art. A gift from the tall, fat man.

The child chatted to herself:

Pretties, so many pretty ones: shining stars and little half moons; sparkling dots; tiny flowers; and glitter. Glitter. Yellow and red and green and blue glitter; and glitter the colour of the moon, each in its own little bottle; each with its own little cap. So nice and pretty.

Look, a piece trapped between the glass and the cap. Oh. Be careful. Too much excitement and the restless wings inside the head will flutter.

Look away. Look at the other things. See how many, many things catch the candlelight and send out bright shards that hurt the insides of the eyes. Oh, oh, oh. The light is there even when the eyelids are closed. So much; so, so very much. Too much looking the eyes cannot bear. They want to roll back.

No, no. Catch them quickly before they disappear. The eyes. Stop them rolling back. No, no, no. So exciting; such big sized excitement. Now the breath has escaped. Swallow the air. Slow down. Swallow. The. Air. Too fast; too quickly and it will run away forever.

The child blinks. Reminds herself to look at the pretty things. They are here. Blink and they are still here. Blink. Blink again. She is here.

But now the lights and the colours are hurting, the legs are going. Falling more, going quickly. Legs are gone. The sickness is in the eyes again. And the darkness is coming in from the sides of the head; it wants to eat up all the light.

She fights against a horrible, familiar feeling.

No. No. Don't want to sleep the special sleep now. No. Don't want to. The tired sea has found me once more. It is all around. It comes through the ears and the mouth and the eyes. Closing eyes, closing mouth; all closing, closing, closing.

\* \* \*

From what I'd seen, the tall, fat man who'd given the child the trinkets seemed to be in the habit of handing out gifts, although his motivations for doing so were unclear. Removed from my body, detached from the convoluted concerns of my own small life, I was neutral, able to observe his comings and goings in a new light. The caretaker of Carillon spent quite a bit of time fussing about in the flat adjacent to mine. A busy-body, perhaps, although I did not judge him harshly; in fact, I held no opinion of him at all now. He had spared my body from Pig Woman's hogs. Another gift of sorts.

Caretaker, the caretaker. It was difficult to know what he was about. On his rope belt there was a large ring of keys, though the bunch was entirely symbolic, a habit utterly affected. Most of the flats in the tenement did not require keys, their frames and doors so warped and swollen with water, age and rot that a single, forceful shove was

enough to open almost any of them. Caretaker had been impressed by a still image from an old film – a picture of a vampire in a long, dark cloak holding an enormous, crescent shaped key ring with dozens of dangling keys. He'd discovered the poster, many years back, as he sheltered one homeless night in the doorway of a video rental shop. It was before he'd made the crossing from the new city into the flatlands. He'd studied the figure intensely. This, he had fancied, his thoughts locked on that key ring, was what caretakers were supposed to carry. He'd carried it for years. When we'd chanced to meet eventually, how shy had been his enquiry: had I, the gatherer of paper, come across this image before? Was it perhaps among the thousands in my collection? No. My papers couldn't help him. Piled and uncatalogued or stuck to a wall. Their randomness a heavy, printed connotation. There was nothing I could do for him.

Caretaker. Only Caretaker. No other name or title. He liked the sound of that word. It titillated him, hinting at intimate and mysterious dynamics, something tactile afoot between two people: the one doing the caretaking and the one being taken care of. Supervisor? Now that was too brusque. The mental image one of a remote controller sitting high above a factory floor, behind a bank of monitors in an office surrounded by protective glass. Below were huge robotic arms with red and orange and purple hydraulic tubing veining their powerful metallic joints and coiling across their oiled surfaces. There, on the assembly floor, cold precision machines made trucks and cars with nonhuman efficiency and speed.

So, Caretaker he was; no supervisor was he. He took care. Did everything carefully.

This particular day was unexpectedly busy, leaving little time for Caretaker's mind to turn upon its familiar thoughts, the habit of returning again and again to his preferred mental configurations: worry beads hardened and smoothed by repeated rubbings. The day was a big one. A well-dressed man was scheduled to arrive at his door. In the late afternoon, before sunset. He grinned to himself, descending the wet stairs with

care, heading for the fifth floor. He moved carefully. He'd slipped on these steps more times than he cared to remember.

The moment he came to the fifth floor corridor, Caretaker smelt the stench. A dead body. Rotting somewhere close by. He walked forward, his breathing shallow. Which flat?

As he moved by 503, a completely derelict, unoccupied shell, the stink from 504 hit him. Its intensity distracted him only briefly. He was not particularly interested in what or why, or even who. He merely recognised the familiar rot.

He stopped a second or two outside 504, shone a flashlight at the door. Knocked twice, heard nothing, flicked a hand at a bug-eyed gecko. It ignored him. Nothing else moved. He made a mental note to call the police. He had no respect for officialdom, but these were still necessary protocols. From experience he knew it was important to avoid agitating the uncertainties and rage of the residents when it came to the possibility of a vacant flat. No time to risk some mini riot; not on the day when the well-dressed man was scheduled to appear.

Caretaker moved to 505.

There, he didn't bother to knock; he had a key. Though his wasn't unshakeable confidence. In fact, a mild unease crept through him as he chose a key from his massive key ring and inserted it into a slot and rotated. The door swung inwards on stiff hinges.



Bright torchlight spliced the room, cutting through the soupy humidity and smoke. Light haloes formed as he scanned, though he hadn't yet stepped inside. Beads of water ran down the walls. Saturated molecules turned pale blue in the beam, swirling and scudding gently. The opened door had unsettled currents of air; less dense pockets formed in the spaces left by heavier, sinking clusters. The floor was wet.

Stooping, he crossed into the room and at once experienced another sensory dissonance: his eyes refused to confirm what his nose and his ears were telling him. A response that happened every time he entered the apartment, even though he prepared himself before.

Except for an old mattress there was no furnishing. A toilet without a seat, a primus stove with an unlit attachment, an old billycan and a plastic bucket... these were the only other objects. A bare, uninviting place.

Motionless on the mattress was a young woman.

Caretaker's ears relayed three things to his brain: one, she was breathing, the customary rattle in her lungs; two, water was dripping steadily in some corner of the room; and three, many things with wings were taking to the air. This always happened. What he heard suggested a swarm of flying insects all around him, a susurrus before the drumming. Wings. Striking the air at nearly one hundred beats per second. He controlled the instinct to duck his head and raise his arms protectively over his face and ears. Yet nothing flew at him. His pulse raced and a tide of adrenalin surged from his gut into his blood. He blinked a few times, reminding himself to calm down. The involuntary gush, a trick of his own body.

His retinas had adjusted to the gloom but his eyes still would not confirm what his nose and throat had sensed. Mouldy damp inside a flat wasn't unusual; it seeped everywhere in Carillon. Yet 505 emitted a distinctive odour. Mosses and fungi and decaying, leafy plants. He closed his eyes, invited his brain to generate a mental picture, free of visual litter.

The smell wasn't unpleasant. Air was fragranced with the sap of thick, fleshy leaves, the organic sugary seepage of new nodes nudging from stems. He sensed huge, ancient plants with waxy, overlapping scales clinging to every surface. Fronds in sword, fan and oval shapes; engorged flowers, open and glistening; sticky tendrils contorting here and there. Smooth mushroom caps pushing through soil thick with decaying bark and petals. Other fungi, protuberant demons, grew around or on other plants. Right inside them. Flowers that resembled starfish and vulva and overgrown wasps crowded out all remaining space.

Eyes still closed, the caretaker could smell growth taking place. Underneath it all, a whiff of bad eggs. His nostrils confirmed he was deep in a primordial rainforest; a living organism wiser and more resilient than he would ever be. A rainforest. Though this was an instinctual recognition, for Caretaker had never been in such a place.

He corrected himself. This was no rainforest. It was a slum flat, damp and hot, and the tenant lay unconscious on a mattress on the floor.

By now, the stench from my corpse, slumped on the opposite side of the adjoining wall, had claimed its presence. Forcibly. Caretaker kicked the door closed with the back of his foot and stepped further into the apartment. The ravaged body of the girl hovered, as always, on the border between life and death. Old track marks and contusions covered her papery skin. Open sores seeped along her mouth and bubbled near her

nostrils. How she wasn't dead from all the drugs was a mystery, though he had little time to think about that.

Caretaker lifted her limp body so that it came to rest across his knees. A very strong man, as well as one appreciative of the appearance of things. He imagined that they looked like an inverted Pieta: she, partially clothed and unconscious, across his lap, her arm hanging away from her sinewy body; his right hand under her arm pit – its soft down against his palm – while his left hand cupped her knobbly knee. His head turned to one side, he watched her breathing.

Caretaker reached for the thin syringe in his right pocket, raised it to his mouth and bit off the cap. With a delicacy and skill surprising in someone so large, he inserted the needle a few centimetres down from her pelvic bone. The sharp point broke through her flesh. Depressing the plunger, he eased the adrenaline into her immobile body.

The roar of the insects' wings grew louder; it always did. On previous occasions when he had stroked her thighs and cupped her small breasts, out of nowhere a dozen moths had assaulted him, repeatedly banging their enormous bodies against his face and skull. Microscopic scales shed by their wings left a powder across his features and hands. The girl's exposed torso had shimmered in his torchlight.

Caretaker held her only until her breathing eased, a weak pulse visible at the base of her throat. After, he returned her to the mattress. He had other things to do that morning. Uncurling his massive bulk, he straightened up to retrieve a piece of cloth hooked over a tap jutting out of the wall nearest to the door. Exposed plastic piping oozed something. The liquid, green and thick, had little resemblance to water. Fortunately, the rag was damp from a recent trip he'd made to the flat, and he relied on that to wipe the young woman's face and body. Back at the mattress, he knelt

down, lifting and adjusting her so that the pathetic weight of her body rested against his left arm. With gentle circular motions, he wiped her mouth first, then her head and neck, her arms and thin legs before returning her stirring body to the foam bed. It was filthy with stains. Done, he turned away, putting the cloth back in its place.

The young woman moaned in her sleep. In dreams, she talked to someone. A few words mumbled in a language which even he didn't understand.

She was alive. He had done what he'd agreed to, to keep her that way. For her, yes. He cared for her. But also for himself, a subtle bond of give and take. As long as she lived, Caretaker received monthly payments and water ration cards from the well-dressed man. A relative likely – it certainly wasn't a pimp or the girl would have been dead already. Any personal questions he'd attempted had been deflected by the well-dressed man, so the caretaker really had no idea, and he'd not pressed the matter. He, too, respected discretion. Without her, for him, there'd be no trickle of regular money and water coupons. No point risking that.

Caretaker left then, billycan in hand, to fetch drinking water. He wasn't gone long.

The insects' agitated whirring swelled once more when he re-entered the room. Wings thumped. Soft bodies brushed the air. He carried the billycan to the primus stove. Struck a match and turned the nozzle; fuel met flame. It spluttered to life.

Water boiling, he added finely chopped, dried leaves and stalks from the bag in his pocket.

The hot brew, sweet and tart, gave off a blended aroma of sangoma's sage and cannabis. The fragrance teased the girl's dulled consciousness back into the here and now. As the tea cooled and her brain retraced its way to minimal waking, the caretaker busied himself. He balanced the stove on the toilet outflow pipe, away from the girl, and readjusted the cloth; rearranged the bucket, and emptied the chamber pot. He looked around for something more to clear. Nothing else to do except listen to the moths. Thought he heard something else just then. Someone walking around in the flat next door. Couldn't be sure.

The stench from 504 had become intolerable. Caretaker reminded himself again to call the police. They'd have to be alerted even though it would be easier for the barrow boys to take the body. A stink like that – he was damn sure there was a dead one in that flat. The boys could take it to the dump. A gift for the Pig Woman; a guaranteed disposal. Yet that would be a regrettable decision, a strategic error, so the police it had to be. With a sigh he underscored the fact that he had to be the one to call them. No one else would touch the stiff. If he didn't have it removed soon, there'd be additional fuss in the residents' usual rumblings. Not today. Not this day. He would do something about the decomposing body before the residents' anger broke apart the order he'd massaged into the community of Carillon. They probably hadn't even noticed yet. He would have to act straight away because the tenement's aching skeleton would not withstand another riotous assault. He was the caretaker. As caretaker, he would have to take care of things

The girl was mostly conscious. Caretaker helped her into a seated position, his hand on her shoulder to hold her upright, tilted the can to her mouth. Carefully, he kept it away from the sores on her lips, tipping it so that she could swallow. Her eyes were closed as she drank the unstrained tea. Drinking was not a simple task because her throat was raw with lesions. Her gut, constricted by a state of near starvation, struggled to keep the warm liquid down.

There was a familiarity to this cleansing and drinking ritual which the man came to perform. Two or three times a week.

Exhausted and weak, the girl could not recall what unfolded during the next stage of this ceremony overseen by the huge man. She could manage very little. Even as the hallucinogenic entered her system, the flow of it was too slow and the strength too weak for her addled body's insatiable need. To think ate energy, so leaving off logic she surrendered to the comfort of moths. Moths, lots and lots of moths, invisible to everyone but her. Wings beating in unison, they soothed her aching body.

Caretaker waited while the girl disappeared into her hallucinations, reassuring himself that she wasn't about to convulse. Placed a small package of peanut butter on the floor next to her mattress, neatly wrapped in wax proof paper, sealed with a hair band. When the girl was hungry enough, she'd discover the greasy gift.

A slow, careful scouring as he inspected the room once more, alert to anything that would prevent him from receiving his payment from the well-dressed man later that day.

The thrashing of wings had stopped, settling into a quieter yet still anxious susurrations. Some of the misty vapours in the room had been burnt away by the little flame of the paraffin lamp. Gradually, a thicker fog would settle in, and once he left, the sounds of dripping water and the fungal, mossy smells of the rainforest would gather again.

Caretaker locked the door behind him. Habit? Caution?

In the corridor, the stench. He tried not to inhale. Once more, he thought he heard someone moving around apartment 504. Probably nothing. The torchlight bounced over the walls and floor as he made his way towards the stairs. He went cautiously; pools of grey, filmy water lay in wait to send his weight crashing down. In the beam of light he saw a gecko above the door of 504. Fat and smug. Clamped in its jaws, a frantic moth struggled to get free.

The hawk moth, the colour of wood ash, held in a vice. Scales fell in an iridescent shower. To the moth, the recent pirouettes it had made in the warm air were its right, the cool wall the freedom of a place to rest. But now this: snared. It flailed in outrage.

The insect shouldn't have bothered. Why all that fuss? It would be dead soon enough.

\* \* \*

Death was busy in Carillon that day. A moth crunched above a door; bacteria within the tissues of a ravaged body. The anaesthetised junkie sensed its presence. Death seeped into a phantasmagoria of mortalities and moths.

Long ago, not too long after her fifth birthday, she decided to die. Accordingly, she did precisely that.

And then, after a while, she was reborn as a boy. That proved difficult, too, so he, similarly, opted to die. He quit the world completely, forever, never to come back.

It was very quiet among the dead; too quiet. And never is a long time. The junkie's hallucinations made no sense to me.

Plus, what happened, happened long ago. As time passed and quietness settled, it was possible to care just that little bit less about remembering. Furthermore, the spirit world was a very dull place. There was talk of returning, with some ambivalence at first, but later, with growing enthusiasm. Returning would be a challenge – experience had taught that; it was mulled over a bit more, and finally, agreement: go back. Elation.

That birth – their third – was an extraordinary event, and they could not have asked for better. Their new body was beautiful: a hairless hybrid of him and her. After consulting with each other, he and she, and with the moth that had been their midwife, they chose the name Orchidacae, the rise and fall a thick, sweet nectar that moistened the palate. Orchidacae. Whenever they said it to themselves, their uvula tickled.

They trusted him completely, Moth; he'd been with them from a time way before they were to be born again. He'd helped them to find the right mother. Moth said that *Disa sagittalis* was his favourite, so they agreed, choosing that pretty orchid for their birthing. Moth knew much more than they did. Supported by air currents, he had travelled to far-away places, his powerful wings lifting his thick, finely bristled body high up into the sky and away from those who could do him harm. They envied him that freedom.

In fact, Moth told them many, many things – some known to no other of their kind. Moth had even taught them how to see like he did, without relying on white light, using their shadow eyes. This way, they could detect, among the ultraviolet and infrared bands, the secret patterns and fluorescence that layered even the ugliest of worlds.



During the day, Moth would return from his adventures and take rest – especially on those days when Caretaker was there. Watching and listening, Moth settled his hairy thorax, four magnificent wings spread against the wall. Orchidacae shivered to his tales of the previous night's adventures. Moth's voice was sibilant and gruff, like sandpaper moving back and forth over wood, yet hypnotic, too. He was always patient, never rough, and very, very wise.

Moth had taught them the recipe for reliving their extraordinary birth. He had given them power over time, the ability to make then now, and now then.

Before there was Time, said Moth, beginning his story, and before the time when the first humans flew down from the spirit world, seated on the backs of moths, a sacrifice was made by the winged ones. Once the humans had chosen their earliest medicine woman, Moth had spoken quietly to her about what was going to happen next: the medicine dance that would allow the new, earth humans to commune with their sisters and brothers who remained in the spirit world, while also strengthening the bonds between all of them, Moth guided the medicine woman to the place of the silken cocoons, incubating their precious pupae, and told her to pick two before drawing her away. The place of cocoons was sacred. He led the diviner to a bush of healer's holy sage, told her to pick some leaves, allow them to dry in the sun, and then crush those with the pupae to form a powder. Mixing the granules with water, explained Moth, would form a tea that let her commune with her human siblings still in the spirit world. The partially formed wings of the larvae combined with the powerful visions induced by the sage bush would give flight to the spirit, Moth said, though warning her to teach the earth humans to pay their respects to the moths with flowers and sweetened liquids, and sometimes with hair clippings, and allow his children to rest peacefully on the walls of the humans' dwellings during the day. Forget such simple things as ritual and respect, Moth warned, and earth humans would

experience mortality and moths would come in advance of the deaths for the spirits of those dying.

The medicine woman agreed, eager to try the psychotropic tea. She reminded herself, as she prepared the powder, to set aside a bowl of water so that Moth could suck it up through his long proboscis. It had to be flavoured with flowers or honey or fruit, as he'd said. Later that day, drinking the special tea, the medicine woman visited the spirit world where she was welcomed back enthusiastically. She repeated these visits often, journeying to the cocoons to retrieve yet more pupae, and to the sage bushes, to collect more leaves. But soon she took for granted the gift, and didn't bother to set aside a small container of sweetened water for Moth. A forgotten moth.

The first omission was unforgivable, but he forgave. Even the second. Then she did it again, and this third time Moth was enraged. He vented his vengeance at once: from that moment forward, earth humans became mortal, and moths would appear on the walls of the dying as a reminder of the broken promise.

\* \* \*

This numen self that I'd become tried to understand what Orchidacae meant but I found little that was sensible in her hallucinations. It seemed to me she knew even less about death than I did, and I'd only been dead a few days when I'd eavesdropped on her rambling story. There is no moth administering the afterlife. No lovely wings and otherworldly advice. It will disappoint her, I have no doubt, but once she is voided, and she will be, she won't care a bit.

\* \* \*

Outside, the mortuary van had driven off into the coming storm. Bagged inside, my remains were soon to make the momentous crossing: enter the new city. Alive, I'd never left the flatlands. Yet now, to the shudder of thunder, I was soon to enter the new city. Clouds growled their disapproval.

With my departure, flat 504 was vacant for the first time in nearly half a century. Contrary to the claims of my neighbours, the matriarchs of the lower floor, no one had moved in. Someone would: too many people, too little space. For a brief moment, the flat was without human inhabitants, and I wondered if the room I'd thought of as my home had been holding its breath. Without my living presence, it was able to exhale. And it did.

Newspaper cuttings that I had pasted in layers sloughed off the walls. Tight knots I'd used to seal bags of plastic relaxed their grips. Roaches that had spent generations vigilant for my footfalls crawled out from between cracks, behind boxes, and among the towers of newspaper. There was no place for me in 504 anymore. The flat was expelling me. Ejecting me. Even as I, a half-presence in some afterlife, dissipated slowly, the apartment wanted all traces of me gone. Underscoring this desire, a tall tower of newsprint toppled to the floor. Go away. Go away.

An opportunity to feel injured but I was dead and almost gone. There is little point in elaborating. How could you appreciate the gift of my patient elaboration? You. Always in a hurry to find out where things are going, what they mean.

\* \* \*

At exactly that same moment, another resident of the tenement stood motionless outside his flat, looking down at something at the base of his door. A small package wrapped in fabric had been left there for him.

Mute was his name. A convenient label since he could not speak. A thick, ugly scar across the front of his neck invited a thousand and one plotlines, and his injury was a favourite topic of speculation in Carillon. People conjectured endlessly about the origins of the wound. A fight. A jealous lover. A punishment. A mugging. A failed honour killing. No one could tell. Mute, unable to say anything, stayed silent. He could neither refute, nor confirm.

I remember when he arrived at Carillon, a not quite lifeless body carried into the derelict lobby and dumped at Caretaker's feet by a stranger who left just as swiftly as he'd come by. A smartly dressed someone from the new city delivering the unconscious life of a young man.

"He's dying," someone said.

So Caretaker accepted the responsibility. He'd had no other choice; the gauze and cotton wool dressings covering the neck wound were bloody. Caretaker could not turn away.

Part of the boy's larynx, as Caretaker let it be known later, had been removed. Why, he didn't know. And because the boy was mute, Caretaker was unable to hear the story.

"Get him to write it down," said Long Woman, to the nodded approval from the assembled residents.

"No," said Caretaker, "this is his silence."

Long Woman was offended. No one ever contradicted her, so Caretaker's was a dangerous course.

"And Why not?"

"It will bring trouble here." An indecipherable expression on Caretaker's face.

"What trouble?" asked the others, uneasy.

"From people in the new city," said Caretaker. "It is dangerous when stories cross over. Best to leave this matter alone."

And we did, taking our opinions and our selves indoors. But we never left him alone. Not Caretaker, who advised that the young man be allowed to keep the secret of his suffering, and not the young man himself, since his beauty, his silence, his job, they all provoked response in others. People gave things to Mute, hoping for exchange. Often, the offerings left outside flat 701 were utterly useless or silly trinkets. A chipped seashell. Some cuttings from old newspapers. A silver pendant without its necklace. A tiny snow globe. Some expectations were overt, predictable, pathetic. Others were subtly invidious. The objects may have had the appearance of gifts, imagined as such by the givers, but they were never offerings free of expectation and reciprocal demand.

Nor was I immune. I, too, had given him small things. Hoping. Cuttings from old newspapers meant something to me; they meant nothing to him at all.

And how swiftly flowed people's disapproval. The mockery and laughter of my neighbours when they found out about my overtures. Old women should not desire those half their ages; desire was the right of the young and of men. How strange, then, that the living assume that the dead are filled with yearning. In us they believe there is

a pining to return; a lust so powerful that it unseats natural laws. What folly. The dead have no desire. Old women do. Being merely old, not dead.

\* \* \*

I followed him once – it doesn't matter when – towards a ruin not far from the wire fences.

The ruin had no southern or eastern walls; they'd been obliterated by storms. Its northern face, red brickwork exposed, was mostly intact. There'd been two storeys at one time; arcaded windows along the upper level. Scored into decorative plaster on the facade was a date and a declaration that it was a customs bonded store built two centuries earlier. I knew what that meant. Seized goods were held within its vaults. I saw in my mind's eye sacks of goods sorted, valued, and ready to be shipped to Portsmouth or Cochin or to some other harbour at the distant edges of a dying imperium. Such vestiges aside, the building had not survived the changes that came from the sea. It was nothing but an Edwardian husk slowly digested by the rain.

Mute crouched in a damp, smelly corner, his torso bare, legs swathed in pants of strong cloth. His head rested against the crumbled wall. Something weighed heavily on his mind. I hid behind the northern wall, peeping at him from around a receiving hatch. He had not moved at all. Forever the voyeur, I remained where I was.

He unfurled at last from the fleshy cowry he'd made with his limbs; stood looking around him before exploding into movement. Quick, defiant actions.

Small leaps, spins, changes of direction. A promenade in reverse across the pitted floor followed by a series of impossibly high jumps, each with perfect elongation in the arms and fingers. On and on he danced; his trousers a dhow sail slapping the stiffening breeze. Jetés and double rotations. No gesture awkward or hesitant. How unlike my own.

I gripped the edge of the open hatch, unable to look away. How long he danced for, I cannot say, nor where he went to after he left. One moment he was there; then he wasn't. A whirl swept through my thoughts. His departure was my ache.

"Mute," I said. A silly old woman caught in her own timidity.

I sank to the floor. It took a few moments but I composed myself, heaving my body up and seeing, as my eyes drew level again with the hatch, that there was someone else inside the old warehouse. Anger chased surprise as I looked at the trespasser.

A woman, barely visible in the gloom. She walked with difficulty, each step controlled by an inept puppeteer. Made her way very deliberately to where Mute's body had swirled and leapt. Did she also see numinous echoes shimmering in the wet air? The woman raised her hand, a movement as awkward as her gait, and stroked the space of his absence with her fingers. It was an uncertain, uneasy gesture. Embarrassed by her own actions, she dropped her arm. With a sigh, she withdrew, returning to the shadows.

Shaken by these events, I headed for my flat. A sanctuary in which to hide. My agitated thoughts, though, followed me home. One in particular scratched away all hard-won calm. Mute had known I was there.

Now, being dead, denuded of desire, I see Mute as a voiceless young man besieged by the possessive petitions of others, mine included. He had known how much others wanted from him with their persistent demands and floods of gifts. Yet he'd been unable to speak against it. Unable, I have learnt, is a very different from unwilling.

\* \* \*

The gift at Mute's front door, an object wrapped in fabric, was not the first of its kind. There'd been three others offered to him, although they had no wrapping and were far more perplexing than anything he'd received from a client or stranger who mistook what he did for love. Or attachment.

Hoodoo, Mute had thought after he found the first gift; a wobble in his gut. He'd set the idea aside and mulled over other possibilities of purpose, wondering whether these things were meant to signal something other than malevolence. Adding to his unease was the fact that the objects were truly abnormalities, freakish aberrations of nature. He'd received nothing like them before.

He'd found that first object inside his flat. Could scarcely believe it when he did so. He'd noticed it after unlocking the complex bolts and system of locks he'd attached to his front door. In fact, he'd almost stepped on the thing. How it got there was a mystery as there was no letter slot on the door, no window gaping open at the corridor of night. No way to get in. With the sole exception of the reinforced front door, the product of his labour, all openings had been bricked up. Mute had made certain of that.



Two days later, a second gift. No note again. No obvious clue to the giver's identity. Also without wrapping. A grim addition to his door sill. Bonded to the insect was a long, synthetic, poorly painted acrylic nail. In this miniature chimera of nylon prosthetic and cockroach, the fingernail particularly had bothered him. He'd choked on the stinging juices in his throat. Fingernail clippings and hair cuttings, as everyone knew, were collected by covetous lovers, made into potions by opportunistic practitioners for the purpose of enchantment or entrapment. A shibboleth passed down from the first tribes.

The third creation was far more elaborate than the others, although equally poorly made. Again, there were no clues to determine why or who.

That the things could be understood as part of a sequence had only dawned on him after the third arrived. At the same time, he realised how the first object had come to be in his flat. The creature hadn't been dead at the moment of delivery. Struggling for its life, it must have slipped under the door; a doomed escape. Some relief. He'd worried needlessly about how someone could move through the solid barrier he maintained between himself and the rest of the tenement.

A fourth parcel. Squatting, Mute considered it. He shuddered, a mole burrowing the length of his spine. A thong secured the cheap textile; he tugged, releasing the binding; gingerly tipped the contents onto the floor. He had no desire to touch it.

What lay there was a cockroach. Hours before its demise, the dead bug had moulted. It must have been a monster while alive; a creature far bigger than the norm, larger than any in the tenement. Had it still retained its feelers, thrown forward, these would have made it the length of a woman's foot.

The sightless mole burrowed deeper.

In lieu of the absent antennae, two standard sewing pins, their pinheads protruding from the front of the insect's head. The metallic projections stripped the cockroach of any earthly, sentient presence. It was transformed. A robotic arthropod capable of detecting electromagnetic waves.

Other body parts were missing. Where the cockroach's eyes should have been, two gouges had been filled with tiny traces of a clumsy, ossified application, followed by green diamantes; cheap glass adornments from a fingernail artistry kit. Shining eyes that regarded the world and him. They dominated the small, oval head, bestowing a fantastical, terrifying intelligence.

The natural anatomical partition between the roach's humped head and its upper thorax was accentuated by a thin piece of metallic adhesive tape. Even in the murk of the corridor, the gold tape gleamed and glistened.

The wings were gone, too. The pallid thorax and abdomen were intentionally visible. Both were excessively adorned. A garish mosaic of tiny sequins, glitter powder, diamante studs, and pearl balls fought for space on the roach's upper body, alongside sticker decals in the shapes of moon crescents, flowers and seashells. Colours clashed and collided: moonstones of grey; purple amethyst; rosé quartz; orange ambers; lapis lazuli blue; pomegranate rubies. Someone had dotted red fingernail paint on the tip of each leg, the enamel dabs like polka dots on a ribbon tied around a birthday gift for a child. Against the pale underside of the mutilated insect, these spots were incongruously festive.

Using a key, Mute flipped the creature on its back. Some glitter scattered across the floor. Upended, the insect reverted to the familiar: a dying cockroach about to thrash its legs, seemingly willing itself out of the sinkhole of death.

Mute was disgusted. With two fingers, he picked up the bejewelled mutant and dropped it into its swathe. I watched as he walked towards the hollow lift shaft, the package balanced on his palm. Without hesitation, he tossed it away and wiped his palm against his pants.

The decorated corpse plummeted quickly but the blue fabric floated on an updraft, a brief defiance, then tumbled and twisted towards the trapped water.

#### ***Four***

Out of the flatlands and into the new city. Rain splattered on the windscreen. We spent an eternity in traffic. An autopilot system guided, in reverse, the mortuary van into a parking lot. Doors were thrown open, my body retrieved and carried quickly into a metallic-tasting building. I was dumped on a gurney in a corridor. I noted signs on the walls: reminders to the staff to wear protective clothing at all times.

The facility where I now was was one of the city's all-purpose morgues. It was the complete package: waiting mortuary, medical examiner's office, crematorium, funeral home and sundry post-mortem services, all of it on fourteen-thousand square metres of floor space. The size of two soccer pitches. As in a nest of ants, activity happened on the inside and out. But it was a noisy place. Only the departed could appreciate the irony of such racket in a lay-by for the dead. Machines were responsible for most of that clamour. One generator kept the ambient temperature chilly, a lot of the time anyway, and a second powered the crematory and other wings.

Current owner of the morgue was a man without teeth. He was the grandson of a successful politician, a family patriarch, who had made millions from government tenders. The morgue was an investment, many, many years before. A private death house wasn't unusual as all governmental mortuaries had been privatised back when. Far odder were the young owner's dentures: a gleaming set studded with diamonds. A man known for his smile, cars, women, parties; everything on display in the society pages of local broadsheets. He'd even featured on the walls of flat 504.

Somewhere beneath the wallpaper of news and magazines, hundreds of prints of strangers' faces I'd cut out and pasted up, was the grinning morgue owner. A man with stones as artificial teeth, a death's head in two dimensions, just like everyone else's.

The mortuary which received me was known throughout the new city and beyond. Those in the flatlands were aware of it, too, and some had travelled there, but not for its size. And, no, not for funerary reasons either. Why waste money on costly transportation, fence bribes and expensive death rituals when Pig Woman could take care of a corpse cheaply and efficiently? Hogs for those without money; scorching pit burials for those whose relatives could pay. Sentiment be damned. We, flatlanders, were hardwired pragmatists.

The morgue's notoriety depended less on the army of corpses it handled, and more on its famous neighbour. Every day, on the smaller, adjacent lot, there was a salaula. There, every day, a mountain of apparel emerged.

Metres high in the morning, the berg was eroded to waist height by late afternoon. At night, it rose again. Trucks arrived and their contents were thrown to the resurgent monster before the freighters departed to retrieve more goods. Most drivers hoped to complete at least two roundtrips before the morning's legal shift began. A few chose other distractions. On offer were vendor's stalls or a bit of card gambling; perhaps more private pleasures.

\* \* \*

Eyes trained on the Lilliputian figures copulating on the dash of a parked truck – a pornographic live feed courtesy of his portable hologram device – a driver, seated behind an enormous steering wheel, pumped his wrist like a piston. At the front windscreen, a moth tapped its annoyance against the prophylactic glass blocking its flight towards the unexpected, miniature moon. And in the blackness of a sealed container, two dozen huddled figures saw nothing; heard only muffled calls and revved engines.

\* \* \*

Salaula, the word may be unfamiliar, so let me explain. It is a Bemba term, and it means to scour purposefully through a pile of objects. Which is why, from across the city, people came in hordes to the open lot next to the morgue. They came to delve and sort and pick through a pile for what they desired. They liked the sound of the word – sah-la-ooh-la – though they did not give another thought to how it had arrived with the second-hand clothes traders from the north, adding it to the city’s expanding lexicon. Human traffickers also used it. Their grisly task, at the culmination of their journeys, involved picking through a lifeless pile to find survivors.

Whatever, so what – the shoppers cared little that these traffickers commandeered the word. Salaula, salaula. They were bargain hunters, and salaula hinted at something colourful and frivolous, something more lyrical than the frenzied tug of war that broke out between rivals when demand outstripped supply.

The creator of the salaula rumble was formidably fat, a gargantuan man. It had been hard work building his empire. New suppliers were located and annoying competitors crushed as he grew a successful business from modest and informal of origins. Who but he knew how it began? Something as humble as a suitcase of stolen clothes, maybe? Now he was the salaula king. And also a senior diener at the morgue, a supervisor of the handlers who received and prepared the corpses. Within the mortality value chain wrapped around the city, he was the salaula king, and he had worked to extract everything that he could, and the mountain was his retail outlet.

Death returned such a sizeable profit that, at his age, the king should have been in retirement; enjoying some land he’d grabbed in the north, lounging in a house with

too much granite and too little lawn, or spending mornings practising his golf swing. Unfortunately, the king had large debts. Soccer wagers stripped him of his takings. Worst of all, he owed escalating sums to the Benguelans, a syndicate that ran gambling in the city. Paranoid, and forced into safe houses, the king had taken overnight refuge in tenements in the flatlands, even inside the huts of the peasants in the far, dry west, on those occasions when he needed more time to gather money.

My undressed corpse, naked except for stained underpants, goaded the king as it was clothes, not cadavers, that were *his* economic lifeblood. And now another unclothed stiff had been delivered to the morgue! There'd been ten that day already. He swore; the word's vaporised shape floated in the cold air before thawing to nothingness.

Young dieners who'd unzipped the mortuary bag and tugged my body free, dropped me into a shallow container. With a shove, the oblong coffer was propelled on to a carousel where I joined others.

A conveyor belt dominated the medical examiner's office. Less than half a metre apart, aluminium caskets, each with a transparent lid, gave the technicians and examiners a clear view of the contents, all while the containers circulated at the pace of a lazy stroll. Some did multiple laps during their solemn sojourn. Dishes of sashimi winding around a sushi bar track. (Outdated travel guides, featuring pictures of restaurants and other people's food customs, are common among books dumped in an illegal waste site.) Most bodies were already naked; only the burn victims retained their clothing as it was bonded permanently to their flesh.

Again and again, my container circulated around that room. Frigid air blasting from vents slowed down the dissolution that had begun in my flat three days earlier. It had, up until that point, progressed without interruption. And I'll confess one other thing

without a trace of self pity or vanity. To recognise my corporeal self among those inhabiting that naked neighbourhood was no easy thing. My afterlife gravitas was definitely beginning to wane.

Where I had disappointed the king, others did not. Most of the bodies arrived at the morgue clothed. Garments were stripped at terrific speed, thrown into large bins behind the processing slabs. Jeans, skirts, shirts and blouses; doeks, bras, socks and undershorts. Everything was removed, regardless of how much blood or urine it was dirtied with, how much pus and faeces and insect life. It was a surprising detail. I'd assumed that in a metropolis noted for fences, it was we, the flatlanders, who'd been awarded a disproportionately larger share of stains, germs and infections. Evidently not, based on what I saw that day in the pile of looted clothes. Holes from bullet wounds or the sharp stabbing punctures of poverty were no deterrent either. Shoes and jewellery had long been claimed by the mortuary van drivers, with a share of the spoils tithed to the corpulent hand of the senior diener. The king watched it all very closely, checking that no one pocketed a pair of passable boxers or slipped a colourful shirt inside plastic overalls.

Women with swollen faces and wide hips intermittently crossed the king's gaze. Plastic bins, brimming with plundered clothing, balanced on their heads as they moved towards an exit. They were a cheerful bunch; their happiness that looked effortless to me. Flirtatious banter and spirited calls swirled around as they stopped to tease the younger dieners who stripped the bodies, tossed the clothing into bins, and shoved the empty baskets onto the conveyor belt. The deniers yanked telescopic hoses from the wall above the sorting slabs, and faucets with activation sensors released jets of water that rinsed off the worst of the filth, blood and external scavengers. Clues to homicides were sluiced away. No need to preserve crime scene indicants. The mortuary had its own quota to meet. (An assistant kept count.) Targets were set in advance for each major category of recorded cause of death. Infectious and parasitic diseases and road



accidents fatalities had to be higher than murders and manslaughters. Life held in the balance. And don't enquire about domestic violence, robberies, knifings. These could not be recorded too frequently. The new city was safer. Or, rather, was supposed to be safer. Careers, of politicians and administrators, had been staked on that claim, and so it came to be laundered.

The bin women wore white rubber safety boots and bottle green overalls. Their footwear turned a deeper shade of pink on each return to the sorting slabs; the effect of mist from the bloody spray of the hoses. Yet this dampened none of their enthusiasm for teasing the young diners.

"Your hands cold yet, Young One? Come. I've got just the thing to warm them."

As long as the pace of work did not let up, the king ignored them. I wasn't as dismissive of their presence. The fact that I, a disrobed corpse, had been brought to a morgue where the dead were robbed of their clothes had an irony of which I was not unappreciative.

Bundles of stained clothing were taken from the main hall to a courtyard. Every suit and kanga wrap, every blouse and jumper was disciplined with detergent, water, needles and thread in that open air laundry. Dozens of plastic basins were laid out on the wet floor. Some held filthy water and rusty suds; others were freshly ready for the task of rinsing. Metres of drying line had been strung up, and pegged garments dripped, flapped or floated on the breeze.

The air was thick with sound. I heard women's voices and the high-pitched whine of mosquitoes. I also heard the slap and slosh of manual laundering. Most of all, though, I heard the sounds of the generators.

Loads were upended on to the floor so that women, some bending, a few seated on the ground with their legs straight out in front, could sort the clothing into three piles. A precise logic: whites; colours; wax prints and oil cloths, the ceremonial and religious clothing originally from West Africa but now widespread.

Laundry collectors, with supple backs, hauled armfuls from these piles, bringing their yields to the inspectors; adjudicators who sat on sagging chairs. Each article was examined; the fabric rubbed between fingers. Puncture holes were assessed and seams sniffed at, all before an item was marked with a nub of blue chalk and added to the piles behind them.

Underwear was in one stack. Synthetic articles made the largest heap on the floor. Items soiled with body fluids, particularly dried blood, were set to one side: they'd need the longest soaking. These, the soak mistress would assess.

A woman with respectful fingers handled ceremonial wear and wax prints. Many were nearly new, having been worn only on special occasions. Hardly had these items suffered any indignity. At worst, they bore the musty smells of cupboards or the tang of dried sweat. The handler was careful with these things because they fetched the highest prices at the salaula.

The oldest woman of the backyard, deeply wrinkled, was easily in her seventies and moved around the yard supported by a cane. She was the soak mistress. Despite her age, her eyes were bright and missed no detail of the laundering process. A magician, said the king. A witch, said the younger women. With a mixture of soap shavings, water at the precise temperature, a few twigs of a secret herb, plus just the right amount of time, the soak mistress coaxed from the soiled fabrics all traces of former

lives, and deaths. Without her, the king's mountain would collapse, and for her skill at disguising the origins of the clothes, he appreciated her, and would not intervene when she used her stick to thrash a clumsy laundress or a light fingered one.

The senior diener also respected the soak mistress because she'd known Bennie ka Nandi before he'd become the revered Baba Nandi. The soak mistress had been an acquaintance – spoke of herself as a friend – from a time when Bennie had been simply ordinary.

She said (much like the official biographer) that Bennie had left home at the age of ten in search of work, abandoning the flatlands to earn money to support his mother and siblings. That was a lie.

In the first months after the zone was sealed off, the authorities were vigilant. If they declared the area uninhabitable, as they had, then that meant people with families could not live there. And so it was, as per their instructions. If some homeless drifter wanted to sleep in a broken down old building, the officials weren't going to stop him. If some addict wanted to kill himself in one of the old warehouses, or if a hooker occasionally used a flat as a fuck den, then they'd look the other way. Most played along. But kids in the abandoned zone? No, no, no. The press would have a field day snapping photographs of feral faces behind wire fences. Welfare officers arrived to scoop up the children and drop them in shelters in the new city. But many children hid. Those the officers hadn't found and taken away stayed on, in the streets or in the tenements. They took care of themselves. Like me. Like Bennie.

Young Bennie wasn't some self-sacrificing family breadwinner. Utterly untamed and totally resourceful, Bennie was an experienced street urchin. Unfortunately, he wasn't an attractive one, and trawling paedophiles, drawn by a short stature that made him

seem younger than he was, were repulsed by the look of him up close. His eyes and mouth always appeared wet: the glistening moisture of a dangerous internal sea, one about to break through his fleshy framework. Yet what he lacked in looks, young Bennie, he made up for in charm, determination and an infallible instinct for self-preservation. He'd done it all, that boy: petty thief, grand thief, drug courier, car guard, extortionist, arsonist, busker, murderer, unofficial tour guide, informer and street performer. Occasionally, he'd turned a few tricks.

The soak mistress and biographer agreed: Bennie got his break at sixteen, when he charmed and amused a powerful man. That man, now deceased, was the father of the diamond-toothed owner of the morgue in which I'd spent the last few days. Bennie had been guarding cars outside a five star hotel somewhere in the new city. A worthy and necessary service, yet one of the burly bodyguards protecting the superstar entrepreneur had grabbed Bennie by the arm. The wily street child knew when not to struggle. The bodyguard's employer, standing on the steps of the hotel, had wanted an amusing distraction while he waited for his custom-made, armour-plated 4x4 to arrive. His order was that the young street child be brought to him. He wanted just a chat to pass the minutes. Nothing sinister. The man and the boy spoke to each other; the exact nature of the conversation was lost in time and myth. Bennie had sung for the man. The boy's performance surprised everyone. His song was mournful and sweet, gentle and clear. The man was stunned. Even the bodyguard's brawny grip on Bennie's arm relaxed. Onlookers fell silent as a magic, fragile and new, settled over the small crowd. It tasted blue, sounded like stars. It was déjà vu and revelation rolled into one. A single pulse of light and the moment was gone.

Or so suggested the only record of this exchange – ka Nandi's word and an interview with the daughter of the now deceased bodyguard. Her father had told her the story. She'd been six at the time. The embellishments were donated by Bennie's biographer.

For his lovely singing, Bennie secured a fair tip and a big promise of a job at the mortuary if he arrived promptly the next day.

Which he did, because he was as willing to make a steady living from the city's death industry as from the erratic opportunities of the streets.

The soak mistress explained how Bennie had hunkered down at the adjacent plot the entire night, his sleep plagued by mosquitoes and roaches all the way through to the soggy dawn. She described how the entrepreneur had kept his word, too, not just talk, and ka Nandi had secured his first formal job as a mortuary cleaner.

This was his initial transformation. The role of prophet came later. To engineer a change from an impoverished, wily street child from the flatlands into a man of wealth and power, this was a significant feat, one celebrated by the soak mistress's tale. What neither she nor the biographer said was that Bennie's conversion was brewed by mental forces so powerful, so unrelenting and embedded, that madness was their shadow.

This, no one dared admit. Bennie was mad because he couldn't see that he was mad. And he was mad because he spoke aloud his unspeakable thoughts, and made and remade himself as he spoke, and would not be anything other than what he was, which was not what he had been moments ago. Bennie ka Nandi was a florid lunatic.

Bennie heard a voice (a magnificent voice inside his head) and knew (I knew, my brother!) that it was the voice of a puissant, inspiring presence. God's voice. (Hallelujah!) And His holy emissary. (Ride on for Jesus, father!) And an angel, with a crooning baritone voice, who assured him of his destiny. (Amen.)

A lot of time can pass with amen this and amen that, and so it was for Bennie.

God washed the floors of the morgue alongside him. God was with him when he picked up fragments of pelvis and maggoty scalps. God joined in as he sang while rinsing out the bloody buckets and mops of his trade.

Not too many years later, after working his way up to a supervisory position, Bennie secured a tender to provide cleaning services to half a dozen medical and health facilities in the new city. Success was swift; he was barely out of his teens.

Back when it was just another morgue, the other cleaners were mostly women, decades older than their young supervisor, but the wet, shining look in his eyes, his beautiful singing voice and the oddly impassioned conversations – peppered with godly references that authenticated his goodness – kept them from lodging any complaints with their union representatives about his appointment. He was unusual for a youngster: he seemed, for the most part, to treat them with respect. Called them Mothers, not Old Meat, and was eager to hear their stories, which flattered them more than they cared to admit. They were old school, or so they believed, and it comforted them to believe he, too, respected his elders, including the women, and saw value in their lives. Sensibly, though, they did not completely trust him.

The soak mistress was one of Bennie's biggest fans. She and her colleagues of yore had noticed that he was lucky for reasons that could not be explained, and believing as they did that luck was a benevolent infection, hoped his condition would rub off on them.

Bennie was uncharacteristically fortunate. He seemed capable of avoiding disaster and failure at every turn. There was no need for him to seek out the miraculous touch of the city's famous, barefoot preacher, a man who wore a long yellow cloak, its hood trimmed in leopard fur. Bennie was blessed by a higher force. Proof of that was evident when hundreds of the healer's supporters assembled in an eroded valley of a thousand hills and a hundred small dams. Seeking the barefoot blessing, multitudes of sick, diseased, desperate, thirsty people, tickling coughs turning into rattles, stood or sat in perpetual drizzle. They waited patiently. And waited. Water fell from the sky in great volumes that day, while acolytes moved through the camp collecting money. Two fistfuls of notes were exchanged for a tub of petroleum jelly and a litre of equally opaque water – the elixir of life and wealth.

How fortuitous that ka Nandi had declined the invitation of a colleague who wanted him to travel with her to one such gathering held over that long weekend shortly after the beginning of October. Stripped of vegetation and ground cover, and drenched by incessant acidic rains, a hill of exposed sand and excitable rock turned into a cataract of mud and collapsed on the followers camped hundreds of feet below, ka Nandi's colleague included. Afterwards, the newspapers quoted a church spokeswoman saying that the healer had been martyred because the affected encampment, drowned by red mud, had sheltered spies and non-believers.

Many more such instances of splendid good fortune featured in Bennie's early life. Like the occasion when an emaciated dog, tied to a post with a piece of nylon rope, all fur rubbed off its neck, stopped barking at nothing and stared at Bennie as he walked by. The dog sat back on its hind legs and, in a surprisingly friendly and accent free voice, warned ka Nandi that he should not remain in the area because it was about to be swept out to sea. Recognising sensible advice when he received it, and not disconcerted that the messenger was a talking brak, Bennie turned on his heels and left.

The dog hadn't exaggerated. Later that day, a section of land holding shacks and people, vehicles and a fake tree, detached itself effortlessly from the city and tipped into the ocean.

Lifting its nose into the air, the chunk of ground disappeared below the waves.

Bennie, said the soak mistress, her voice thick with approval, because he was Bennie had made Bennie rich and powerful long before he became Baba Nandi, spiritual leader of the Glorious Ministry of the Eternal Redeemer's Beneficence, seer of the new world. The timeline was important (to her) but not the complexities of tsunamis and waterborne diseases that followed. Bennie promised that God would send a huge wave and only those who obeyed his teachings would be saved. That was all anyone needed to know, declared Bennie's friend.

Many agreed. Young converts, eager to show commitment to church and leader, volunteered a night and a day each month to watch the sea for the arrival of a cataclysmic wave that they believed would come. Most of the watchers had only a few years of formal schooling; none could recall precisely the location of the Pacific Ocean. Yet all accepted Baba Nandi's teaching that a wall of water would sweep away the ungodly, the unbelieving, the slums, the crime, and the scarred, eroding soil. Those left behind would be the truest, most authentic Glories. They'd inherit a rejuvenated earth. Amen.

Bennie's followers plastered coloured posters of their leader throughout the new city as well as on the levees and in the few remaining tenements of the flatlands. I'd taken one and glued it to a wall in my apartment. His was a familiar face to talk to, even if I hadn't seen Bennie in decades. (I had no photograph of my mother, and I could not –



still cannot – remember her face well.) The poster on my wall showed ka Nandi as a colossus, his feet walking upon the bodies of the drowned. They had seaweed in their hair or wrapped around their throats. Behind the prophet, dry and smiling, stood his army of converts. Bennie's left hand was outstretched towards me, his palm turned upwards. Within it he held captive a wave of water capped with an ominous, foamy crest. Ah, Bennie, he liked grand gestures.

To be fair, Bennie also made smaller down-to-earth overtures. The Nandians ("We're Glories, please; peace be upon you") recruited with water ration cards while making fantastical promises to those of us who lived in the flooded flatlands. Bennie's church members dispatched blankets and food and water and purification tablets whenever storms deluged our tenements, drowning many of the homeless and the forsaken. What more tangible evidence could there be of Baba Nandi's goodness, and his mission?

\* \* \*

Bennie had enjoyed greatly his time in the mortuary, said the soak mistress. That was true, although for reasons other than she'd imagined. Far more significant than collegial bonhomie was the fact that the dead don't touch the living and they certainly did not touch him. He disliked touch. Any corpses that he handled were, in his eyes, not worthy of attachment or deserving of moral philosophical consideration. Like heavy sandbags, absent of value and without intrinsic purpose, the carcasses had only to be moved from here to over there; leaking spillages mopped up and everything else tossed into a disposal bucket. In this he was unlike some of his male colleagues, who, he'd heard, sometimes held the dead secretly close, animating them with terrible longings.

Bennie wasn't entirely averse to sex. It was just not very important to him. He favoured selective proclivity, a taste exceptional among the city's charismatic preachers. There were many of them in the new city. (Classified advertisements for the independent churches ran on for three or four pages in most newspapers.) Their appetites for sex and big buildings were insatiable.

Managing the process of Baba Nandi's ritual fornication was reportedly an unusual and precise undertaking, and members of his expanding congregation all aspired to such service, although few matched the preferred partnership profile. Forms were included in the church's monthly newsletter and in each box congregants indicated, with a tick, what services, they wished to volunteer. Baba Nandi being short, height was a critically important variable. Agendas were drawn up, photographic and medical records submitted, and years in advance, a parent or caregiver would add a growing child's name to the waiting list. If a child grew into an elongated teenager, her body (or his, as it was occasionally) well beyond the specified five feet and two inches, then the family members of devotees turned on each other in their disappointment.

None but a select few knew what took place during Bennie's infrequent fornications. Caretaker seemed to know something. He'd come to the flatlands from the new city and, faced with little resistance from the rest of us, taken charge of Carillon. He'd claimed the ninth floor and remade himself into a caretaker taking care. Long Woman may not have liked the new arrangement but she wasn't prepared to do the job. For whatever reason, well-dressed strangers from beyond the fences paid Caretaker to nurse broken bodies back to life or maintain these in a constant state of drugged incapacitation. That was the case with Mute and Orchidaceae. There'd been another girl, once, but she hadn't survived. Pig Woman had been paid to dispose of the carcass.

The soak mistress's tales of Bennie ka Nandi's mortuary career entertained most of the young diners, inspired some. The hungriest among them assumed that they, too,

could make it after a stint at the facility, assuming it was a benevolent incubator of future greatness.

Secretly, the great salaula king, who'd heard these stories many times before, knew that he'd never manage to achieve a hundredth of Bennie's success. He didn't have the man's luck. Or charm. And he was unable to stop squandering money on soccer bets. Yet the lure of a wager was irresistible, his craving for the rush of it was immense. It snaked through his loins and squeezed the air from his lungs, especially when outcomes that seemed certain at the start of each match always turned sour.

Something else besides the threat of the Benguelan's vengeance nibbled at the king's sang-froid that day. One particular dead body (mine) brought in earlier. The king, an occasional visitor to the tenement, had not consciously recognised me but there are others way of remembering which have little to do with the waking brain. I never expected that he would remember me. Autolysis is a good disguise. There was another reason, too, why the king shouldn't know the woman he'd seen earlier. It wasn't my custom to greet or chat, particularly those who holed up in tenements for a night but were able to return to their comforts on the other side of the fences. Invisibility was my life, not a temporary survival strategy.

Someone pulled the shallow container with my body from the conveyor belt onto a metal slab. Someone else directed a powerful water hose at my head and orifices. Dislodged maggots swept onto my chest or rode eddies and rapids created by a landscape of water and protruding bone. In death, the emaciation of my former self had become more noticeable beneath the discoloured and distended skin.

Decomposition doesn't stop just because the host ends up in a morgue. Cold temperatures and embalming fluids brought hiatus, yes, but only for as long as it takes

funerary workers to get a body through the viewing, a solemn ritual which was still popular. Seeing the dead all trussed up and clean was expected to stem the ache of fresh absence. Or muster relief or accelerate vengeance or bring about whatever the living wished to feel at such moments. Look. Feel. An odd coupling. I'd never assembled their combination correctly.

I'd skipped the preservatives and the viewing because paupers weren't embalmed, nor Persons of Unknown Identity. It wasn't cost effective to do so. I thought about the label PUI. It was a sterile acronym, even for a decomposing corpse, and this opinion was formed not simply because the particular corpse bearing it was mine. The death industry's regulators favoured PUI, arguing that Jane Doe and John, her partner, were imported affectations. Therefore, I was PUI14; something which the markings on my temporary casket and my left thigh confirmed. This meant that I was the fourteenth unidentified, unclaimed cadaver. More numbers were to follow. I was also number eleven on the king's daily accounting. And the thirty-third, as assigned by quota, to die of natural causes that day. A muddle of numbers. A wrapped conclusion. There'd be no more attention given to me. On the schedule created for me, there would be an overnight stopover in a stacking freezer, while the coming morning, day four since my death, would be the dawn of my cremation.

A realisation had been forming over these past days that much could be learnt about people from how they handled their dead, and in a new city morgue, my knowledge base expanded even further. I'd be inside the morgue for more time yet, as I was not to be buried. Who buried anyone except us? A small minority did.

The city's super-rich and the peasants of the sterile hinterland, in a macabre symmetry, interred their dead. Everyone else was cremated. The innovations of environmentalists – earth and water burial taxes – made the practice of burial prohibitively expensive. Burials had stopped a generation ago. Death industrialists, though, found a loophole,

and offered simulated burials to those who wouldn't relinquish the practice entirely. Moments after the mourners dispersed, the coffin was dug up, its occupant dispatched to a crematorium, and the container recycled. A temporary burial plus rapid exhumation: lower levies.

There wasn't any alternative. Available space had been used up. God knows, the city's funerary entrepreneurs had searched for more. Rains that pounded the land in the monsoon season unearthed old and forgotten graveyards. Caskets and headstones shouldered out of the soggy ground. Old bones surfaced like history. There was nothing lovely about that. These eruptions reminded the new city of things it would rather forget. Like the earlier pandemic that had changed many things.

That pandemic had been decades long. Haitch. Eye. Vee. In those years, people died faster of the immunodeficiency virus than graves could be dug. Hand digging, that of course took too long, and the unending demand for plots broke the backs of the grave diggers, stripping the meat from their hands. Pickaxes and spades and chisels had had to make way for other methods. Moving diggers were better but still not fast enough. They gouged oblongs from the red soil all day.

And still people died. Large numbers of deaths were recorded. A vaccine hocked the spread, eventually, but the virus didn't disappear completely. There were too many who were unvaccinated. It was kept alive somewhere. On the margins. In the hinterlands.

Human transience is a resilient industry. I saw the evidence of it in a collection of framed photographs in The Hall of Eternal Rest, a wing of suites in the morgue that offered funeral and other post-mortem services.

Three, in particular, caught my spectral eye. They were from a larger series featuring funeral services for the rich or those with the requisite insurance. This was a catalogue of the finest products. A plaque displayed the date and surname of the bereft family. The event had taken place two years earlier. The deceased: the son of Mr —. What it didn't mention, but what everyone one knew anyway, was that Mr — was a general in the Benguelan Syndicate.

Three glossy photographs and a trinity of inscribed plates; a glimpse into a foreign world. I could not look away.

Mourners' umbrellas were the background to the first image. In the foreground, a pared family, outnumbered by bodyguards, walked behind a cortege. Ahead of the horses, nothing on the pavements. No forgotten tricycle, no indigent, no dog shit visible anywhere. In the sky, grey pigeons twisted in flight. Over the retinue, a faint puff of gunfire hung in the air. A premature farewell salute? Black Friesians with splendid manes and tails combed free of knots were harnessed coach style as a double team. The crack from the barrel must have frightened them, as they shied to one side. Dismounted postilions walked next to the lead pair. Whispered conversations into flattened ears; pats of reassurance on glossy hides. The fearful bolting averted. In top hat and tails, a coachman on a dickey box perched at the front of a carriage. That was a cocktail of dark glass panels and black lacquered surfaces. Inlays and silver fretwork mocked the solemn air.

A moat and mausoleum was the subject of the second photograph. In the water, three Japanese koi swam near the surface, their opened mouths shouting an unheard order. A crypt, with steeply pitched roof and arched doorway, stood on an island at the centre of the moat. A small bridge – painted charcoal and strung with black ribbons and roses (handmade silk, so said the plaque) – had been erected for the event.

A close-up of the casket was the subject matter of photograph number three. The coffin was a box of rare Pink Ivory wood (price on request). Within it, unseen, the embalmed remains of a young man. He lay on a bed of silk and birds' down. Such dulcet choices for a gang novice who had been buried permanently, without exhumation. It had been an expensive choice. No one else decomposed alongside him; a preserved and perfumed stiff left to putrefy unhurriedly. In the lower corner, not quite hidden by the gilt frame, two dots marred this off-key composition. Hunchbacked coffin flies, enticed away from the horse shit on the road, had settled at the foot of the boy's bier. Even in this death, the profane omnipresence of flies.

In the flatlands, things were simpler and the flies more abundant. Our dead were disposed of either by means of pigs or pit fires smouldering constantly at the dump in the drier season. There, though, challenges remained. Dry ground was difficult to find. Pigs could not eat as quickly as the dead arrived. When storms struck, people died in great numbers. Streets transformed into raging rivers brought floaters to our open second storey windows. The barrow boys, too, weren't always willing to tote bodies to the dump. Sometimes, no payment would be enough. Handling filth as part the day's regular duty does not mean that one has no fear of defilement. The barrow boys still had room for terrors and dreads. Just like us, they would not go near the camp of the nasuri.

Pig Woman organised the pit burials and paid a few notes or handed over a container of drinking water to the nasuri women who took on the task that all others refused.

The nasuri excavated shallow cavities using spoons, plastic lids, broken crockery. Bare hands, if that was all they had. Sometimes unearthed by the excavation, salmon pink rat pups squirmed in a burrow while startled does nipped at the women's fingers.

Once the hole was dug, the women lined it with stones, old board and paper, anything that burned. They added charcoal, lit it and left it to smoulder. The corpse went in next, wrapped in a shroud sewn from rags or still wearing its own clothes, if it had them. No one rushed forward to rip off these tattered garments; most had intractable smells and stains, anyway. Superstitions, too, left the dead dressed in their attire. Stones and half bricks were packed around the body in a mournful embrace, tight and tighter, until even the face was gone. The pit was covered with sand. The flesh cooked slowly into disintegration.

There is a camp of the nasuri near the dump, at the edges of its furthest border. For a short time at least, discarded women rested there among their kind. The camp site is barren. A dozen or so stick huts on stilts, and a perimeter barrier of rocks, plastic drums and broken poles marked out a small clearing from the rest of the dump. No fabric, paper or cardboard, no thatching for the roof or matting for the floor, as they trapped the stench within.

It was not a place anyone went to voluntarily. Taboo was still taboo, even in the abandoned zone. The barrow boys, already poisoned, would not risk direct contact with the nasuri. These women were cursed, contagious; everyone believed that. How could a girl, a woman escape that suffocating, isolating shroud of odour? She couldn't. Not there. Her putrid waters and rotting smells a curse placed upon her by a cuckolded husband or cheated lover. Lust. Fistula. A man's humiliation repaid. The child that had taken days to emerge from her battered uterus was snatched away, handed on; if dead, it was disposed of without fuss. Birth. Fistula. Outcast.

It may seem the nasuri have only now arrived in this tale of my death. That is not true. One of them had been in the old warehouse, caressing the air that Mute's leaping, twisting body had unsettled. Her identity, more than her unexpected presence in the far corner, had been my biggest shock. Nasuri did not leave their camp. They only



entered it. And because of the taboo, no one else did. Pig Woman had some contact, but just enough to negotiate the logistics of a pit burial.

The young nasuri I'd met hadn't left the camp, as I would discover. She'd yet to find it. She'd crossed from the new city, and this journey, with everything else that had gone before, had taxed her mind greatly. A dancer in a warehouse in a drowning city seemed a hallucination. Her mind, was that broken, too? Despairing, she dropped to the ground.

"Leave me," she had said. "Release my hand. This life hurts my eyes. Do not wipe my sweating forehead. I do not want a sip of water. The flies can settle at the corners of my mouth, if they wish. Let me fall into my death.

A pit. A pitfall in the ground. The sand. A woman. I've thought this a thousand times, probably more. Before something is a pit, it must start off as a hole. The hole inside has undone me. Who would ever have imagined that? A hole would undo me: draw me, wring me thus, turn my insides out, render me raw. Pitted, yes, I am. Pitied? That is not for me to decide.

Where is my death? Oh god, that I must wait so long? Why does it stumble, losing the way or dallying so that I can be tortured? Come. Find me. I have done all I can in this slue of a world. Is nothing to be easily made of this life?

I am not your guide, your storyteller. Find another. Choose someone else. There are so many like me; so many others to show you. Release me. Please? I have not even a pittance to give.

Still my death dawdles. It is not in the rush that I am. To wait is agony. To wait and to carry shame as I do is cruelty. It is more than can be expected of a woman. This camp where I am to die, where is it? I am phuka, broken. I am nasuri. Life leaks out of me quickly. Where is it, the camp of broken women?"

I tried to read her mind. She was a broken woman; I was an invisible one, or was it the other way around? I cannot recall. Ah, the pathos of an improbable meeting.

But it didn't happen. I did not rush forward when the woman collapsed. I didn't hold her head, brush the flies away from her face, and discover easy sorority in her grateful eyes. I did not call out for help. I left her there to die. I headed for my flat with its bricolage walls. I did not turn back. A taboo was a taboo. And I was a tenement resident.

## ***Five***

In the flatlands, water is our death; it is also our life, so it has power over us. It drowns, poisons, floods, eludes us. We fear it more than fire. Which makes sense, I suppose, because combustibility has never been a notable feature of the human body. It is difficult to burn someone when all you have is a spluttering match. The freshly dead are just too wet to incinerate. Open air fires do not generate enough heat; they damage rather than destroy a corpse. As for the dry ones, their residues as flimsy as old paper, why bother to set fire to these when what little is there can be rubbed away between fingers and thumb. To do it properly, to achieve the vaporisation that turns wet human tissue into gas, there has to be fantastical hotness; nearly one thousand degrees of it.

If you cannot make that sort of heat, if you lack the specialist equipment, as we did in the flatlands, then you have to bury the corpse. Or corpses, if they are numerous.

There were always many bodies in the flatlands after a big storm. We tried to inter those that we could but when we were swamped by the dead, we ferried them on rafts to the fences, bringing them to the wire divider separating us from the new city. The bodies – of our neighbours, friends, enemies – we wrapped in large plastic sheets, and over these we tied bindings at the ankles and necks. Dressed that way, the shapes of the lifeless adults looked like the swaddled babes of titans. Or gigantic larvae. But the children were what they were: unmistakably small corpses. Our lost children. We piled our plastic mummies at the crossing in the fence. Someone came and fetched them, these swollen gifts, disposing of them elsewhere.

The dump, our customary cemetery, faltered in the storms. In the worst onslaughts, it simply vanished. Nothing secured it to the sand beneath. When the waters raged, the garbage glacier fractured, huge chunks, like ice floes, breaking off and floating away in

a current that streamed swiftly through the streets. Turned to ooze and clot, the splintered mass was everywhere; the neat distinction we'd made and remade between the trash and the tenements dissolved in the sludge.

But that was rain. After the rain, came fire. Before me was a bonfire in a furnace meant to destroy my remains. I watched it, appreciative of the incongruity.

At first, a corrugated cardboard box with my body, chilled and newly retrieved from a refrigerator, rested on a gurney, ready for its two-stage journey. A transfer to an automated loader followed and, secure in the flammable packaging, I slipped smoothly into the belly of the cremator. The machine's primary chamber was made of refractory bricks, and within this gut propane and natural gas were lit by a spark. A roar of approval from this harnessed sun deflagrating with delight.

The papery sarcophagus vanished at once. Skin scorched and hair singed before they, too, disappeared. A rupture split my abdomen and a contraction of my muscles preceded the calcination of my soft tissues. Heart, liver, brain, bowels, the hidden clockwork of my animation, gone; followed by a glow that prompted, unexpectedly, a memory of a forgotten childhood rhyme:

"Yellow, brown, silver, white; in the fire, bones alight."

Bones are luminescent in a furnace. It seemed as if I offered a brief resistance to the bouncing flames before the bonds of me splintered.

It was over so quickly, an hour, no more. On day four, my fifty-odd kilograms had been edited to fume and fleck. Part of a hip, a small section of shin was left. Nothing else of any identifiable form remained in the pile of what had been created by fire. A new experience, this. In the flatlands, the dead did not disappear as easily. It was slow work. They swelled and festered but we knew always what they had been despite their

deathly disguises. On our side of the fence, drowned victims bobbed along in rising floodwaters or got stuck on some outcropping. They twisted around walls and washed into buildings, delivered there by a tentacle of the inbound sea. They arrived to bump against our stairwells, our doors. They puffed up and stretched beyond their dermal limits: their bellies tautened, their necks twisted at odd angles. Most took on the colours of Tiger's Eye; a dress rehearsal before their skins tore and their bowels leaked from these fissures.

What was left of me, though, was bone scrap, the shade and shape of fractured shells; a singular reminder of the only intact seashell I'd found, long ago, on the pathway to the dump. My body hadn't become ashes yet. (I'd be crushed the next day.) I was still rubble, and barely a kilogram of it according to the automated scale and printout that a vigilant computer generated the moment the buzzer announced the end of stage one.

Cooling, reducing, I was a pile of cinder in a retort. A technician, wire brush in hand, swept these scant remains into an imprecisely named ash collector.

It was the first transformation, one involving fire. My leftovers, warm and silent, were tipped from collector into PU14, a shallow tray, which the technician then slotted into a stackable trolley. Above and below were the similarly reduced remains of other people, each architected in the neat confines of individually labelled containers. A mobile home for the partially incinerated, I thought.

The trolley was guided into a hushed side room where a man with a long face and a clean lab coat sat at a workbench. In the tray before him was reef detritus, or so it seemed. It was actually deconstructed bone and tooth; the uncrushed burnings of a stranger's life. In a gloved hand, this bone sifter held a small rake; in the other, oversized tweezers.

None of the cremains in that morgue travelled immediately from retort to cremulator. The bone sifter sieved through the retort's burnt offerings first, searching. Iron, aluminium, gold, steel, copper, silver, titanium, mercury amalgam – located and removed. People, I noticed, were awash with metal. This was in addition to their rings, studs, bangles; their baubles and adornments that could be, and were, removed.

The bone sifter wasn't interested in trinkets. He sought a secret stockpile: those shiny solids that were not relinquished voluntarily but had to be coaxed forth by fire. And, oh, when released, why, it was metal, metal everywhere. Artificial joints, surgery clamps, scalpels, cranial shunts, connecting plates and bolts, all manner of tool from hospital operating wards. More still: dental veneers and teeth fillings, forgotten hair clips, the silent clockwork of pacemakers; lost probes and facial prosthetics; all the engineering that kept a body going, as well as the bullets, splintered knives and broken intravenous needles that made it stop. From out of the human stomach, a cornucopia of coins, keys, safety pins, paper clips and cutlery. The concealed morsels and shiny desires of pica feasts, unveiled in the temple of fire.

A machine could find these things with great accuracy. It had to, as the cremulator was vulnerable to metal, and the pulverisations uneven when the solid was present. No one wanted to deal with the consequences of that muddle. Not the technicians, not the owner, no one. Especially not the mourners. Who among them would wish to handle a piece of bone recognisable as the jaw or spinal column of a loved one?

Machine maintenance and ritual politesse weren't the reasons for the bone sifter's inspections. A pause was added to the two-stage process of converting a skeleton into gravel because a mining operation had been set up over the burnt bodies of the dead.

Body. Mine. A mined body. A riddle for the afterlife.

As I watched the bone sifter's activity in that side room, I learnt that the actual work was delegated to him but at the end of the week the extracted materials were handed to someone else. This someone was a metal monger capable of turning these pieces into ingots, base and ferrous, precious and noble.

"Next lot for you to grub," a cremulator technician had said, delivering a trolley of warm cremains to the bone sifter.

"Take the other lot with you on the way out. I've sifted them."

In the reply, I heard and understood the subtle inflection, even if his colleague didn't. The sifter did not like the man's term. Grubbing. Grubby work. The work of grubs. The word was too evocative of larvae gorging on rotten food and wet leaves. Sifting, that was better. The bone sifter longed for a more precise descriptor of the exact craft of removing foreign solids from the charred crumbs of the deceased. A far more careful, and humane choice.

Order characterised the bone sifter's expressions as well as his excavations. Across the surface of his worktop, sorting trays held small artefacts of various shades and shapes. Nothing was out of place. He was an attentive man, this bone sifter, and a knowledgeable one. Titanium was placed in one dish. Dental amalgams were in another. Gold, silver, copper, steel; each was allocated to its respective salver. Every extraction was weighed, and the measurements and origins recorded in a ring bound notebook. An inventory of objects, some ingested, that had outlasted their hosts.

In such settings, morning soon gave way to afternoon, and occasionally the pincer found a shiny catch, pulling it free of the colourless breccia.

Soon it was my turn. Five decades of life that had become a febrile reduction in a shallow container. How compelling it would be for this tale if there was something else there; some shiny precious core. A few raked strokes and a nub of essential metal exposed at last. I could, then, talk of the mystery, admit how I had no idea how this thing came to be in me. I could say that I thought I knew everything, had no secrets from my self, and that this toughed, hardened piece of earth rock, which only death allowed me to see, revealed the error of that view.

But I had nothing in life, and I had nothing of value within me at the end. There was not a thing but bones, and weak ones at that. The bone sifter had to look elsewhere, continuing his sifting with swift, certain action in some other tray. Without thought to its origins, he plucked something from a nest in the coral of someone else's reduced bones, incurious about the personal histories of whoever it was. Just another item to add to the collection. No time to waste. Other cremains to sift, and the daily quota to check, and a tally to compile, and the metal monger to appease. All before the shift's end.

Rake. Pluck. Scrape. Scratch. Sweep. Swish.

The workday was over at last.

Two trolleys of uncrushed tissue would be left to wait for the morning. A technician would add them, a container a time, to the cremulator. A job for the break of a new day. Now it was time to leave. Time for the bone sifter to go. And the fat king. And the seamstresses. And the young dieners. Only a handful of cleaners, assigned to the



nightshift, would stay behind, pushing their wide mops before them, zig-zagging sweeps of grit mopped this way and that, clearing away the day.

As the void approached, it was more difficult to recall what went before. My memories unravelled. When I stopped concentrating I remembered very little except for water. And a wall. I focused on that. Something knocked against it. I looked for a thread to connect the surfacing impressions that assailed me that night – they were all around – but I couldn't seem to find a cord to string them together.

The night dragged on. The cleaners' mops invisibly inscribed the tiled floor. From outside, the sounds of rain, trucks and generators broke up the night.

Impressions bumped together as I unwound in my afterlife.

Somewhere, walls wept. A recurring thought. That night, I could not shake it. I recognised some uprights from the tenement, and then remembered more specifically that they were part of the flat in which I had lived. (How had I forgotten that?)

The walls there had always leaked. I'd watched them drip and ooze since the day, one from my middle childhood, that my mother had walked away and never come home. When I could take it no more, I had pasted newspaper to absorb the suppurations, but it was a doomed effort. A wall should not cry that much. Adding words did not help, though I did not know it then, and cut out more slogans and headlines from any printed thing that I could find. Cutting and pasting. The water merely wrinkled my work. Even more heads and faces from magazines and newspapers were glued on top of those initially chosen. Over the pictures and the words, the secretions continued. The tearful faces could not make the seepage more tolerable.

An image badgered what remained of my mind. Tiny sea snails, dragging their conical shells, crawled up a wall, fleeing in exaggerated slow motion the incoming tide. Something was headed that way.

Another image – a memory? a dream? – appeared. It was a fragment from the dump that arrived to chase away the snails. A deep boom filled the air; something pounded repeatedly against a solid surface. Yes, it was a wall near the garbage mountain that grew beside the levee. I recognised Buta Kau, grinning knowingly, while at the edge of a hill of trash was an old armchair, badly ripped, stuffing exposed. Rats inspected the carcass, leapt back and forth across the splayed armrests. They were slick and wild, those rats, and their noses twitched in the funk of their hormonal urine. They'd saturated the upholstery with pee, the wet excitement of their play.

The pounding went on. It reminded me of the rhythm of waves striking at a seawall. I told myself it had to be waves I heard that night. Yet the spectral rats – kabas – seemed to know otherwise. They disappeared quickly into the dump's miasmas. Yama, the red-skinned god of death, stalked the earth, looking for his wandering water buffalo. His footfalls beat the ground as he searched for the itinerant beast. He was angry and the rats were wary. It was Yama who restored Karni Mata's stepson to life, bestowing on him the shape of a rat. In appreciation, Karni Mata built a temple and filled it with kabas. The red god, though, may change his mind. And when he does, he will banish all to his underworld.

Concentrate on something else, I said to myself. So I did. I focused on a wall in the crematorium against which rested a broom. I heard another noise. I was grateful for it. Someone tried the door of the bone sifter's workroom. It was locked. A cleaner, a woman with clear eyes, turned her back to it as she regarded the trolleys left there by

a technician. She pulled one of the drawers towards her, rattling the frame. (Is that what I'd ignored as the source of the knocking?) She was unbothered by the noise. Her colleagues were out of earshot; they'd moved on, towing their swabs in their wake. They had other floors to mop and carpets to vacuum. After that, there'd be sweetened chai to sip in the canteen and a feast of soap opera episodes, from the previous week, to watch on a hologram player.

A lipped tray glided smoothly along its groove. I noticed a cupped palm of crumbled bones, the coarse remains gentled in a woman's naked hand. I was surprised. This was uncensored touch. Of all those I'd watched handling the deceased in this mortuary, the woman was the only one who risked contact without the protective layer of a glove. Hardly anyone else would touch us as we were. When they did, it was never tenderly done. Signage on the walls invited protection and vigilance, yet nothing came between this woman's hand and what she'd scooped from one of the shallow containers. Not a trace of coyness in the presence of decay. She tipped what she'd taken into the bag she had in her coverall pocket. Resealed, it went back into her uniform. The tray was replaced. The disturbed trolley was realigned.

Broom in hand, the woman went in search of her team mates and the promise of warm, spicy tea. There was no easy stillness that night. None for me. The noise in the morgue was of terrible generators, while on the roof I heard a downpour of swollen clouds.

## ***Six***

Blennies snack on a watery meal. They are persistent little fish, these silver nibblers, giving chase as they follow this serving of almost nothing through a dirty waterway. To their slimy skins, the polluted river is a harsh astringent. Yet they swim on, sacrificing flesh for food, following an illusion of a tasty suspension as it is drawn out of the river channel and into an estuary. The current will not leave them there; it is destined for open water and the sea, and once there, the chasing fish will be at the mercy of stronger forces. Tides moving up and down the coastline will catch them, swirl their bodies about before handing them over to breakers that will hurl all they have at the levees, and their little lives.

Everything about death – from the choice made by Caretaker to the shimmering cortege of fish that snacks at this precise moment on my water borne vestiges – challenges my imagination. Even the actions of the cobbler's ward I understand better now. I'm not disappointed by what has happened. Nor am I satisfied. I can be neither of these things because only the living splash about in the mud of emotion. To experience disappointment or satisfaction you need to have desire, and we, the dead, cannot even acknowledge that as lack or luck.

Minutes earlier, a man had poured into the city's grubby river the mixture he'd made from milk and a handful of my burnt bones stolen from a crematorium. His dreams of the post-mortem world must be quite magnificent. What other reason was there for the ceremony he'd just performed, all for a stranger.

He did not know me. He had never known me. Nor would he have contact with the rest of me which, freshly crushed by a cremulator, was being loaded automatically into a large urn. I had been transformed into gravel that, at last, could be called ashes.

But a tiny, uncrushed palmful of my cinders had ended up in a stranger's possession because the morgue cleaner had delivered them to a crooked bungalow on a rectangle of sloping land, five days after my death. It was an interesting place and an odd house. The foundations were weak, tipping the bungalow on to one side and coaxing cracks out of its sinking walls. It was a common affliction. In this neighbourhood near the grey river, light industry and houses squashed up next to each another. A home that was like a cube held within an enclosing box. There was not much in the way of furniture but there were many ornaments: an unchecked ceramic zoo of arms, tentacles and teeth. And almost as many containers.

Pots, basins and buckets were everywhere across the floor. The rainy season had abated weeks earlier but it drizzled outside even then. These vessels must have been permanently left there to catch droplets that would surely have grown into waterfalls during heavier rain. In the cyclone season it must have been nearly impossible to keep the bungalow's roof on and the rain out.

It always rains in this city. It seems to rain without end. The difference between the rainfall of one day and another is merely its intensity. Sometimes it's a drizzle, soft and calm, that brings a mist to dampen sound. When that happens, the flatlands is especially quiet. Figures stumble around in the fog, bewildered. On other days, when the raindrops are like pebbles hurled at your head, everyone runs through the streets. When the cyclones come, the ground simply disappears. Land becomes water. For weeks, as the storms rage, it is almost impossible to breathe.

The man moved among his familiar containers without conscious effort. It appeared as if they were eternal fixtures of his lopsided landscape. He seemed not to notice. He cared only that the cleaner had supplied to him, as he'd requested, a packet of cremated bones from a pauper, an anonymous no one. It had to be that way, he'd said.

The unknown. And satisfied with her reply, he'd given over some notes as payment and offered her a glass of water. She, though, wanted something else from him.

He'd checked his agitation when she'd lingered over a cup of tea – she preferred warmed milk, she said – her small talk making the kitchen table the centre of that tiny home. The woman was indifferent to his desire; he wanted her to go. He wanted her gone, now! An important task was on his day's agenda, and he needed it completed before his wife returned from work.

A plastic dustsheet covered the tabletop at which they sat. In the middle of it was a package with some of my cremains. The dustsheet gave no protection in the invisible struggle he waged with the cleaner. Go. Stay. Go. Control rolled back and forth across its surface. Eventually, the man gave in, unwilling to risk the arrangement. The cleaner never doubted otherwise. Luxurious slurping punctuated the woman's chatter. Access, what he needed, she could provide. If he wanted the ashes, he would have to pay her for them. How could a cup of tea every now and again, along with some money, harm the transaction?

Once the cleaner left, the man retrieved her cup, washed and dried it thoroughly, wiping its inner and outer surfaces repeatedly, before returning it to the kitchen's only cupboard. All signs of her presence were wiped away.

But when he dropped into the empty chair, heat from the woman's legs and backside echoed still. He shifted uncomfortably.

For the first time that morning he considered what he'd purchased, staring at the package for many minutes. Something proprietary crept into his eyes. Fortunately, he

closed them and it struck me that he was praying. There were enough statues of deities in that bungalow to suggest that prayer was nothing unusual in his house.

The calmness was broken by a trill. A holographic telephone switched on automatically, projecting into a space near the fridge a woman's ghostly face.

The man leapt to his feet.

"What are you doing?" asked the caller.

Before he had a chance to respond, the spectral woman threw the question at him again, her tone accusing, her hollow face contorted with disapproval.

"What are you doing?"

Again, he gave no reply. He braced himself for what was to come.

"Sitting around all the time, Pa-tee. I know you. Lazing around all day doing nothing. You shameful, shameless husband."

\* \* \*

"What are you doing?"

This question pulled me from the bungalow and out of his domestic moment. It was an enquiry that drew me into another time, months earlier, and took me back to Carillon.

“What are you doing?”

I was in the corridor near my flat. I was the one asking the question.

My voice lacked authority, so I told myself to speak louder. I was not very good at that. It was a failing for which I'd been mocked, even beaten by those who paid me to read for them but complained that they could not hear (they meant accept) what I said. What use was renting reading eyes, as they called them, if the reader's speaking voice was barely louder than a whisper? Much easier to attack me, the purveyor of reading eyes, than face what I'd read out in a family letter, a denied request or a confusing report of turbulent events unfolding in lands from which they'd run.

“What are you doing?”

My question was meant for a prone figure at the far end of the passageway. The person there, belly to the floor, reached into the lift shaft, trying to grab something in that darkness. I was reluctant to get involved any more than was needed to confirm that she was unhurt. If she'd been lying on the ground on any floor except the fifth, I would not have bothered myself with her at all. I kept out of my neighbours' business; the way we all preferred it. Although, on that day, things were different. Something was amiss and I was curious, yes. I stepped forward. My purpose, I told myself as I drew nearer to the prone figure, was motivated by concern for her safety. I wanted to prevent her falling. I'd grown tired of death.

In the preceding days, there had been far too many fatalities. Crabs had migrated in advance of a cyclone's arrival but we, insensibly, hadn't recognised that as a natural warning of what was to come. Dozens had been killed by the storm. The weather respected none of our divisions. Residents of nearby tenements were killed when a



supporting wall collapsed; mostly, though, the dead were tent dwellers or people who'd scavenged on the dump. Diarrhoea and falling brickwork, fever and chills killed more in the days that followed. The storm had been especially violent, sweeping over the levees, flooding everything, devastating the dump. Afterwards, every block of flats left standing stood two storeys under floodwater. It took weeks before the water receded.

"What are you doing?" I asked again, louder this time.

The girl's head jerked. It was the cobbler's ward, I saw, and she was startled by my presence. Or maybe she was surprised by the fact that it was the first time I'd spoken to her. The girl remained sprawled on the floor. I took another step forward. A few metres separated us. Her eyes held mine, doing so for a long time before, at last, she stood up. I moved no closer, telling myself that I was unwilling to risk scaring her or causing her to lose her footing. That's not quite the reason, though.

She wasn't afraid. Nor was she unsteady on her feet. She reached her full height and turned her unnerving attention on me. I imagined wild assaults against which I was completely defenceless.

Something was terribly threatening in that lightless passageway. I felt I'd been seduced into a standoff with a teenager stronger and more powerful than me. I really wanted no part of that, and looked around for the quickest escape route back to my home. How nearby the sanctuary of words I had made in my flat, but I was unable to move. Nausea and fear swelled inside of me. I told myself to stay calm. Hoped, that if I explained myself to her, talking softly and evenly, I could right the situation. Confirm the balance: I, the good adult; she, the compliant child.

“Come away from there, Girl. Yes, like that. You mustn’t play near the open shaft. You could fall in and never get out. That would be a bad thing. It would make Long Woman very sad. It would make everyone sad.”

She stared at me, unmoving. I had uttered lies. I knew them to be so even before I spoke the words aloud. Was I genuinely concerned that she’d fall into the empty shaft there? Or was I simply playing a role? And would she believe me?

I beckoned to her anyway, talking, encouraging her away.

The child proved strangely biddable. She did what I asked, moving from the lift and coming nearer. I surprised myself with my success. I stepped backwards, talking to her all the while, inching towards the stairwell.

We made it at last. To Long Woman’s flat. Three flights of stairs and forever in the unlit darkness. Our progress was slow. The steps were treacherous, slippery from sewerage and littered with dead crabs carried in by wind and feet. The sounds of seawater slapping against the walls in the lower stairwell added to my unease.

The child was stolidly passive, but my hands trembled when I knocked on the door.

The cobbler did not invite me inside. She received without comment my tongue-tied explanation; she asked no questions about why I stood at her door, her ward at my side. I avoided eye contact with her. I looked instead at the room beyond, just visible through the opened door. So many shoes. I heard the wooden lasts bumping against each other with an unpleasant percussion. I saw her workbench with her various hand tools. My clumsy account sounded overwrought even to my ears, and, when it ended,

Long Woman gripped the child by the wrist and yanked her inside. The cobbler's ward went without a fight.

I had no desire to remain, no wish to overhear the child's punishment. I walked away, a coward in retreat, heading for the fifth floor.

There is no haven for the timid. My unease intensified the closer I got to my flat. Despite the fact that the corridor was empty, something was definitely wrong. Every cell in my body prickled its disquiet. The exposed lift shaft, at that moment, was more compelling to me than it had ever been. There wasn't a single gecko on any of the walls. I couldn't fathom my reaction, couldn't understand why my mind was drawn back towards that precarious well. My legs, fortunately, defied the betrayer that was my mind and carried me into my flat.

For hours I hid there, in what should have been my comforting chaos. I unfolded and refolded old newspapers, tried to read anything I could, wasting valuable candlelight in an effort to resist the magnetism of the vertical hollow at the corridor's end. Unable to dismiss the events of the morning, I thought if I surrendered to them, went over what I had seen, said, done, I would find peace. I did this repeatedly until one particular fact, the child's outstretched arms, anchored my thoughts.

"What are you doing?", I had asked of a simple-minded child, foolishly expecting an answer from one who only grunted and giggled. I'd also posed the wrong question. Why, then what. And in that moment, I understood what it was that could not be so easily dismissed.

The girl had been trying to retrieve something and I had interrupted that effort. That answered why, but there was still the matter of what. What was there in Carillon's

disused lift well except cockroaches? Were these what the child wanted to reach? Or the crabs, washed in by the floodwater? The dead crabs were the bodies of stragglers that had wandered off from the main group as it migrated to the sea.

The desire to know what the child looked for sent a crazed fever to my head. Possibly the fever was there all along and I hadn't noticed it until just then. My tongue was swollen, the inside of my mouth sticky. More than anything, more than satisfying my curiosity, I wanted drinking water, lots of it, but I knew the little I had would have to be rationed. Who knew how long before the floodwaters would recede enough for me to move outside the tenement again. Only then would I be able to buy drinking water from the vendors or join those who gathered when the Nandians arrived, collecting the emergency relief packages they handed out and bottled water with Bennie's face on the labels.

I sipped carefully from my meagre supply. The liquid soothed my tongue but my brain remained fixated on the earlier encounter I'd had at the shaft. When the worst of my nausea subsided, I opened the door.

\* \* \*

On the kitchen floor in the lopsided bungalow was a plastic barrel. Standing over it was the bungalow man, a wooden stirring stick in both hands. The stick was almost as long as he was tall. He muttered as he stirred.

From these musings, I learnt that his efforts of trial and error had shown him that even motion was required if he wanted to avoid a coagulated paste clotting at the bottom of the drum. That fat-free UHT milk was best for dissolving human ashes; much better than the creamy, fresh stuff that his wife insisted on purchasing exclusively for her

own tea from her rich cousin's dairy just beyond the northern boundary of the city. "Wealthy," said the stirrer, "but what an uneducated fool."

A few self-rebukes kept his concentration on the contents of the barrel and off the failings of his in-laws. He coaxed from the barrel the assurance that he knew what he knew and why he knew what he did. Tingles spread through his body, thrilling him with the truth of this fact: he had been a bright boy, one so smart that he had taken chemistry as a subject, and had succeeded in becoming someone who had completed his schooling. All of it. He was the brightest there was, they'd said. Everyone had told him so. He was spoken of, back then, as a young man with the whole future ahead of him.

Near his ear, a fly buzzed drunkenly, as he chatted to himself, a form of amiable comfort, and allowed his thoughts to drift back to the days of senior secondary. He described to himself schoolboys in striped ties, girls in white cotton dresses worn over long-pants, multi-coloured bows in their shining, black hair. He recalled summer's steaming afternoons when he'd watched his science teacher at the head of the class: Mr K.K.N. (BSc), the qualification a permanent bracket fixing his identity.

He spoke aloud his description of his teacher's customary outfit: burgundy trousers, burgundy collared shirt, maroon tie, white socks and brown loafers. He remembered how perspiration flowed down the teacher's back as he guided his students, in sing-song, through the elements of the periodic table: "hydrogen; helium; lithium and beryllium". Oh, how ruthlessly Mr K.K.N. had drilled that series into them, giggling girls included. How wonderful that he had been Mr K.K.N.'s star pupil. Such honour. The memory brought a wide smile to his mouth. The fly bobbed around his forehead.

He valued learning, the stirrer said to his audience of ornamental figurines, no matter what had happened to produce his shrunken life. He could still appreciate the knowledge that there were spaces between molecules. He knew about suspensions and liquids. He was not an ignorant man – not like his wife's cousin, and not like his neighbour, that rubbish who lived in a house where unwashed curtains were stiff from incense and cigarette dust.

The fly tried to settle on the stirrer's shoulder. He flicked it away and returned to his task. He was unhurried. His approach was gentle.

It pleased him to think that molecules were part of the pauper's cremains that he'd added to the barrel earlier. He liked that they would slip into new, intimate patterns with the dissolved solutes in that milk. He studied the grey whirlpool in the container. The milk was absorbing well with this one. The effect of porous bones, most likely. A quick self-reprimand brought an end to his speculation. He preferred not to know the details of the person whose life this body once had been part of. It had to be a pauper or an unclaimed someone if he were to be their loved one, their substitute mourner; their guide.

He exhaled slowly. A few burnt remains were all he needed and no one ever noticed that these had been taken. He'd learnt from past mistakes. The cleaner was paid well enough to ensure that only a handful of scorched skeleton was removed. After he'd been fired, which meant that he could no longer select what he wanted for himself, he'd had to secure other sources of supply. His neighbour's wife, a cleaner, was his link to the city's largest morgue. There were other sources and mortuaries, too. He smiled.

A subtle change entered the liquid. His breathing quickened. The suspension was approaching a state of readiness, and he knew what would come next since he'd

experienced it many, many times before. Through previous experiments he'd perfected the method and the ingredients.

How many times had he, a discrete distance away, observed what others had done? He knew precisely how many. He'd made notes about every one of them. Family members clotted together on the muddy rise; a few of the closest relatives, barefoot, trousers rolled up, stood in the shallows. The eldest son or a wife, although sometimes he'd seen a parent or a senior relative also, would step forward and tip the urn that contained some or other loved one's earthly remains. They'd paid their respects earlier, these mourners; offered their prayers; behaved well which, in the face of death, was very important. And then they always spoilt it with a hateful, vulgar moment that erased all respect and made a mockery of their efforts. Out of the pot, as ungracious as a falling turd, the dregs at the bottom of the urn plopped into the water.

He wanted it another way. He yearned for a smooth transition from this life into the next. He desired a liquid, silent ending. This was his challenge. He'd accepted it. Experimentation had delivered, finally, a kinder transfer of deceased from urn to water, importantly with an aesthetically pleasing sound.

He loved what he'd created: a long, milky ribbon of dissolved ashes unwinding in the length of the city's dark river, and rhythm spiritually matched.

He liked that he was man of such diligent method. He looked again at the contents of his barrel. Banished completely was his wife's earlier call. A moment of contentment breathed in through the nostrils.

The suspension was ready for decanting. In the morning, holding a small jar, he would walk to the river. That was the final leg of the journey.

At last, the fly settled; a dark spot on the arm of a ceramic deity.

\* \* \*

A body floated among the rubbish, dead crabs and seawater that filled the lower reaches of the lift shaft. At first I hadn't noticed it there amid all of that dross. When I caught sight of the shape of her, bobbing beneath the garbage, she looked like an enormous starfish. It took a few moments for me to realise that what I was looking at was actually a young woman, face down. Her limbs and long hair spread out.

From the fifth floor opening, we could not reach her, Caretaker and me.

Too weak and afraid to attempt anything on my own, I'd asked him to help me get her body out of Carillon's inner well. I'd no option. He was my only choice.

Following Caretaker to a lower floor, I stood by uselessly, unable to do anything other than watch how he, after some effort, snagged her leg with a rope and pulled her up. A dead weight. Very few residents joined us. Most of them, like Bennie's mother and Long Woman, who lived on higher floors, stayed away. They were shaken badly by the violence of the storm and occupied with their own tragedies or the jobs of mopping up. The truth of it, though, was that the corpse they saw pulled from that well belonged to a zero-zero; her albinism an imagined contagion. They dispersed quickly, leaving Caretaker to take care of this recovery. He was the caretaker after all.

The starfish woman hadn't been in the water for long. Beneath her clothing, I saw no bloating or skin loss. Nor were there obvious signs of fractured bones or open wounds.



Some wrinkles on her feet and hands. So she'd been in the water a few hours at most. Her fixed stare – irises clouded dull pink – was all that marred her appearance. Possibly twenty years old, but who really knew for sure. The ginger braids were mostly intact and attached to her curly roots. Time spent facedown in the water and the pallor of death had made her zero skin even lighter than it was when she'd been alive.

A lifeless albino washed into a tenement by floodwater. Who knew how she died? Just one more dead sex worker who'd traded her body for her life in the alleys. But she wasn't merely that.

To look beyond that blanched appearance was something my neighbours could not do. Or wouldn't. I, alone, had remained as Caretaker dragged her body onto the floor. I said nothing. I did nothing. I wanted no more part of it. In these events, I was too conspicuous for my own liking.

I had given little thought to what would happen after he'd fished her from the filthy water. She was dead. If there was caring to be done, Caretaker was the one to do it. How easily I was caught in a momentum that wasn't mine, following, like an obedient child, as Caretaker carried the pale, limp girl to the door of my flat; waited for me to catch up.

Once inside, he placed her on an island of uncluttered floor space he'd created with his feet.

"Wash the body," he said, "do it straight away, if you can."

An order? A request? I wasn't sure who he was speaking to even though we were inside of my flat.

He was distracted by what he saw. The newspaper towers. The papered walls. The thin sleeping mat on the floor. He said nothing for a long while. I heard him breathing. At last, he spoke.

"I'll bring some water for you to clean her with. Some sheeting to wrap her in and some cream. You must rub it into her skin. Then I will help you, when the floodwaters draw back, to carry her downstairs. The barrow boys will take her to the fences but you must pay them. She is a ghost woman, so the payment for their effort will be high."

I must pay them? I thought, with what?

I hadn't moved.

"You must do it," Caretaker said.

I trembled.

"Listen," he said, "find a rag and a comb while I get you what you will need to prepare her body."

"Pig Woman, maybe she —."

Caretaker doubled in size.

"No. Not Pig Woman. You. You do this."

He spun around but turned back once more, looking directly at me for the first time.

“Pig Woman is busy with her own problems. Too much of the world is under water or lost in the floods. It changes everything. You must take care of this one. It is important that we should care for the dead, even her kind. She will go to the fence. We can’t bury her or give her to Pig Woman now. Someone from the other side will collect her; get rid of her. You must prepare her body. Start now. I’ll be back soon.”

He came back ten, maybe fifteen minutes later, bringing a bucket of cleaning water, camphor cream and some plastic to wrap around the body. He repeated his instructions and left. I was alone with the zero woman.

A dead zero woman.

Before me was a corpse that was mine to prepare.

I can, if it will make any difference, describe that I found the courage to move. I closed her eyelids and picked a crab’s claw and some debris from her hair. I can explain how carefully I scraped dirt from beneath her nails – toes and fingers – and washed all traces of filthy residue from her nakedness. How fastidiously I dried her face and hands, making sure to dab water from the base of her neck and from the skin behind her knees. Camphor cream, which I rubbed on her body with the pads of my fingers at first, then used the full spread of my hands, is a cheap embalming gel. It keeps insects away and cools the body, slowing decomposition. I can tell you this, and more. How, as I grew braver, I spoke a few words, stuttering and stumbling at first, then finding the audacity to speak to her of things I had not said to anyone else. Ever. I surprised myself at how willingly I permitted myself to speak to her. A night full of words, more than I’d ever spoken to anyone other than the faces I’d pasted on my walls.

I told her of my own experience of the storm, and took care to reassure her (and myself) about what would happen to her next: the plastic shroud; the barrow boy; the fence guards. I apologised for not knowing more about the official zone; the unknown new city which lay beyond the flatlands. I talked about the cobbler's ward, too. Explained how, if it wasn't for that child, we'd not have found her body in the shaft until it was too late. I tried to portray to her the grief that I imagined the child and the bald man, her ghostly companions from the alley, would feel at the news of her death. I reassured her that they would grieve, even though I made no offer to tell them.

Grief and death: it seems the living cannot imagine one without the other. Grief is a woman who dabs at her eyes with a crumpled tissue. Undertakers' double page advertisements, spread lavishly across the city's local newspapers, tell us it is so.

All of these things I can describe, along with Caretaker's return the following morning, as well as the price of payment that he negotiated on my behalf. I can say more about a barrow boy who punted a raft with me and the dead woman, cloaked in camphor, towards the fence. Why should I bother with more elaborate descriptions? Why more effort for a dead albino, nothing for a dying nasuri? Or for Dog Man who had greeted me kindly whenever I came across him in the street? Was it not enough that I had walked behind his body as it was wheeled to the dump? Caretaker had asked more of me that day than I had ever asked of myself.

A shoal of blennies, silver and fast, swims through these waters. I cannot catch even one.

\* \* \*

I cannot hold on, either, to the tail of that which should be mine. It slips and slithers away from me, this creature that is my death.

Just like a pretty-pretty thing that slipped out of the grasp of the girl who, spread out on the filthy ground, reached her hands into the open shaft. Cockroaches, annoyed at an invader in their private world, flew around her head. Ancestors of those agitated roaches had done the same when, decades before, I'd been the one peering into that well, searching there for any trace of my missing mother. I'd found none. Only sewerage and bugs, just as it always was when a floating ghost and Long Woman's ward disturbed the harmony of that inner world.

The flimsiest of things are capable of changing everything.

When I cleaned the zeru's corpse, I snatched from her the only thing she had left. I coveted her cheap synthetic negligee, luridly blue. I'd owned nothing of its kind before. I took it from her, took it off her, and hid it quickly among my own things.

I did that because I could. I did that because I wanted to. A fever gripped my brain, and I substituted that longing for a thing. Perhaps, foolishly, I'd hoped it would bring forth a bright, blue contentment. Or a connection that could not be taken away from me, even if it was with a ghost-ghost corpse.

I am dead and recognise now that there is a connection and it is with a simple-minded child who mocks me.

The girl, whom I thought a fool, reclaimed a pretty-pretty thing, stealing it away from me, the person who'd cheated her out of it originally.

I imagine what happened that day of her epiphany; the moments after she ventured into my flat and discovered what had been snatched from her. She must have scurried back to Long Woman's flat, nightdress in hand, cut a piece of fabric from this precious garment, and used it to wrap the gift for her beloved. What I know, and she doesn't, is Mute tossed into the lift shaft every creation she had made for him. All of them discarded. How futile these efforts and how unwanted her gifts.

It floats there now. A small scrap of nylon cloth drifting in the filthy water that fills the hollow core of Carillon; a dumpster to hold what we cannot or will not bear.

As for me, most of what was my body is now inside an unmarked urn, and a smaller part of what I had become absorbs into the sea. Breakers crash against a levee, again and again. They bring me back to the flatlands. I am unable to escape.

## **Part 2: A critical self-reflection on the process of writing**

## **Foreword**

A student registered for a Master of Arts (Creative Writing) degree at the University of KwaZulu-Natal must produce two outputs: an original piece of creative writing and an essay showing evidence of critical reflection about that work.

Part two of this thesis is an attempt to reflect critically on my novel and the processes involved in producing it. Preparing an academic paper, intended for presentation at a literary conference, was one option available to me. I saw that as limiting the scope of what I could say about the experience of writing my novel. My supervisor suggested an alternative: a hypothetical interview with a reviewer. I accepted her suggestion because it allowed me to interrogate my own work, revealing the motivations, choices and positions involved in creating *Tenement*.

Although the purpose of the reflection is serious, I've created a written transcript of a putative recorded interview between a reviewer from a (fictitious) literary journal, *First Words*, and me, the author of *Tenement*. The questions in the interview range across concerns common in popular journalistic interviews with authors, such as "Describe yourself in one sentence", to more scholarly ones, such debates about whether environmental consciousness limits literary experimentation.

To help keep the interview plausible and entertaining, I've imagined that it takes place not in some austere academic space, but in a coffee shop, with the conversation captured on a Dictaphone. Ambient noises in the background are also audible. Patrons' clinking coffee cups are reminders that trade is underway. This is an apposite choice because getting published involves entering into, and becoming part of, a profit-driven, global industry, one not that different, perhaps, from the commodified selling of coffee.



### ***Interview transcript***

[The sounds of a Dictaphone being switched on are heard, as are noises from crockery and samovars, and the chatter of patrons in a coffee shop.]

Reviewer:     Testing, testing, one, two, three. Test. Test. Test. Thursday, 4 February 2010. Interview with the author of *Tenement*. A novel published by Liquid Ink Publishers.

[Some further clunky noises are audible. The sound of a spoon striking a cup.]

                  Seems to be working just fine. Good. Let's begin. By the way, is it Kerry-Ann or just Kerry?

CAJ:            Carey-Ann, as in "carry".

Reviewer:     Carey-Ann, describe yourself in one sentence.

CAJ:            "The human equivalent of a lava lamp."

[An abbreviated laugh.]

                  You look bemused. I do a lot of things, enjoy many activities, so, it depends on what's floated up to the top on any particular day. Like blobs in a lava lamp. One day it might be runner. Next, psychologist. Then, sun-lover. Swimmer. TdF fanatic. That sort of thing.

Reviewer:     TdF?

CAJ:            Tour de France.

Reviewer:     You are a cyclist?

CAJ:            No, a runner. Or, at least I try to be.

Reviewer:     Have you run a marathon?

CAJ:            Not yet, but I've read the short story about long-distance running by Alan Sillitoe.

[Laughs.]

Reviewer: I notice that you didn't include the term "writer" in your self-description. Why not?

CAJ: I am someone who writes, rather than a writer. I don't even own a black polo neck shirt – the uniform sported by anyone who fancies herself as a writer. Alison Kennedy joked about that. Writing is what makes writers, she said, not their choice of shirts or altered states, and certainly not the ability to be obnoxious in public. That polo neck shirt is worthy of mockery. I watched Elizabeth Gilbert's speech on nurturing creativity on *TED.com*, and couldn't help noticing that she wore a black polo neck shirt. An inspired choice! Seriously, though, writing is one of many things that I do with my life. I try to pack into it a lot of things, like running, practicing yoga, lecturing research methods, consulting to different organisations, reading, travelling, being a friend, contributing positively to my family. Writing is not the only thing I do with my life. It is important to me, yes, but it is not an exclusive ability or passion.

Reviewer: You sound reluctant to label yourself as a writer.

CAJ: I wouldn't say reluctant; cautious, maybe.

Reviewer: Why?

CAJ: To define myself solely as a writer limits what I can be and do. Writing is an isolated activity. Yes, I know that people collaborate on screenplays, books and things like that, but the kind of writing I do involves solitary work. For hours and hours, days and days, I can sit in front of my laptop and, during that time, hardly ever interact with another human being. I'm absorbed. I keep odd hours. I eat too much popcorn, drink too much coffee. I don't have to get dressed smartly or take responsibility for anything or anyone except myself during that time. I enjoy these periods of dedicated writing, and getting lost inside of a creative project but, as a psychologist, I'm also aware that extended periods of social isolation – which is what writing requires – can carry negative

consequences for anyone's mental health, including mine. Not to mention my levels of physical fitness.

Reviewer: Are you saying that writing can make you sick?

CAJ: It depends on what you're writing and how you manage how you write, I suppose. Plus, what you bring to the table already. Remember, of course, the list of writers with mental disorders is very long.

Reviewer: Such as?

CAJ: Woolf. Plath. Kate Millet. George Elliot. All of them with depression and bipolar disorders. Don't think for a moment that it is only women writers who suffer from mental disorders. That's unfair. The men are well represented in the sample. Let's start with Franz Kafka, as just one example. Kafka was most certainly a hysteric who couldn't or wouldn't eat. He starved to death before he was 42; wouldn't swallow a thing. Classic hysterical symptom. You don't have to be a psychologist to see that. Then there's Hunter S Thompson, a notorious addict, worshipped by first year university students everywhere. He turned his drug induced hallucinations into text. There's also Joyce, Faulkner, Hemingway. They were alcoholics, serious binge drinkers who drank themselves to death or committed suicide. Writers are not poster children for mental health.

Reviewer: You make writing sound very grim. Dangerous, even.

CAJ: When you consider the list of writers who have suffered from mental disorders, then, yes, it does seem bleak. But that's too one-dimensional. The point I was trying to make is that physical and mental health is as important to me as is writing. That makes me different from them. I'm not sacrificing fitness and sanity for a work of fiction. Not permanently, anyway.

Reviewer: Let's talk about your novel. The title is *Tenement* and it's your first novel, right?

[A cup is lifted from, and replaced on, a saucer.]

CAJ: Actually, no. *Gorgon* was my first. Unpublished, but not entirely unnoticed.

Reviewer: Oh, what was *Gorgon* about? Fill us in briefly.

CAJ: It was a story about the aftermath of the Rwandan Genocide, specifically one Rwandese family who come to South Africa to reinvent themselves here. I submitted the manuscript to the European Union Literary Award Competition (EULAC) a few years back. It was short-listed but went no further than that.

Reviewer: You didn't attempt to have it published?

CAJ: No, I didn't. I needed to learn more about writing. I wasn't prepared to push *Gorgon* towards publication without taking the time to learn from the experience. I went back to formal postgraduate studies in English literature at UNISA, then creative writing at UKZN. I know it was the right decision when I see that Hazel Frankel, one of the other runners-up in 2006, had her novel, *Counting Sleeping Beauties*, published by Jacana. Nice that it's out, but she's come in for criticism that could have been avoided. A reviewer in the *Sunday Independent*, Karina Szczurek, I think it was she, claimed, among other things, that Hazel's book was littered with typesetting, proofreading and editing mistakes, as well as the sorts of pitfalls that could have been avoided with the help of a professional editor. Something similar was said about *Til We Can Keep an Animal* by Megan Voysey-Craig. Megan won the competition in 2008. Miné Venter wrote in *The Mantle* that the frequent occurrence of grammar and spelling mistakes in Voysey-Craig's novel were inexcusable, and indicative of extremely careless editing throughout the book. Ow! Not what a first-time author wants to hear. *Gorgon*, I fear, would have received the same criticism if I'd pushed for its publication. Maybe not the grammar, but looking back, I see faults in

characterisation, plot, dialogue... things that I couldn't see back then. Sometimes one's first work of fiction shouldn't be published regardless of how desperately the ego wants that to happen.

Reviewer: But now there's *Tenement*: it is the first published work for you?

CAJ: Well, yes, if we're talking fiction. *Tenement* is the first *fictional* work I've had published. I'm delighted with that fact. And I must thank Liquid Ink for publishing my book.

Reviewer: Tell me about it, beginning with the time in which the story is set.

CAJ: The story is set in the future, in the year 2070, and the reason for that is I wanted to get away from a trend that I see in South African literature. There are very few novels about the future, certainly not that I've stumbled across. They're outliers. The past dominates South African novels and I didn't want to fit that pattern. I wanted to think about a society, a developing one, a few decades from now. I wanted it to be a city in a developing country. It is not correct automatically to assume that the country is South Africa. I wanted to think about whether a miraculous economic transformation, a la China, say, would have taken place. Would equality be achieved? Would poverty have been eradicated? Environmental science helped me a great deal to imagine a city in 2070. There's no doubt that environmental factors will reshape African cities, what they are, who lives there, where these cities are located. Lagos, for example, will be completely different in 2070 from the city it is today. The sea is encroaching on the land, and it's ushering in major social, economic and political changes in Lagos. Take a look at episode one of *Hot Cities*, a BBC documentary series about the impact of environmental change on various world cities. It captures that really well. These forces are a major reason why I chose to look to the future.

Reviewer: So, you're working from an uncertain present to an equally precarious future... Time is definitely a theme in your novel. Tell us about that.

CAJ: Time is relative; how we perceive it depends on where we are located. That's a butchered summary of how quantum mechanics views time. That conceptualisation strips away any notion of the future being better. It isn't better, kinder, fairer; it is just different. I also did not want linearity in *Tenement*. I wanted something else to happen, for time to bend back on itself. A Möbius strip was the best metaphor. You know that form? The Escher drawings? A Möbius strip is a two-dimensional phenomenon that can only exist in three-dimensional space. It turns back on itself, and is a useful way to visualise what I have done: I've allowed my narrator's attention to do just that, to turn back on itself and become entangled in certain events that she thought she'd left behind her in, what she hoped was, a linear past. Yet time isn't linear, nor is the human experience of it. Time (and life) arrives to unsettle the narrator and churn her about in much the same way that the waves do at the end of the novel. There's something else about a Möbius strip, too, and it has important implications for human connectedness across time. When you cut a Möbius strip, fashioned from paper, along its central line, two new strips appear, each with *two* of their own twists. These are permanently interlinked. You can't separate them. I applied that to my narrator's life and attempted to tell a story where her life could not be separated from the world around her, from other characters' lives, particularly her mother's life. She's caught in a loop. Caught in this connectedness. And it sticks. Intractable intergenerational poverty is like that.

Reviewer: It sounds rather complicated.

CAJ: Not really. Not when you visualise the idea. And I'm not the first to use this construct in fiction. Science-fiction writers, like Arthur C Clark, have played with a Möbius strip in their stories. Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner*, too, is premised on time as a Möbius strip. Of course, he borrowed the idea from Phillip K Dick, who wrote *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*

But there's no space hopping in my novel, and it isn't science fiction. Still, I think even readers of more realistic fiction can cope with non-linear notions of time, if they choose.

Reviewer: Novels, typically, span quite a lot of time, sometimes generations, with obvious exceptions to that rule, of course. *Tenement*, though, seems to turn against the default expansiveness embraced by the tradition of the novel. How have you treated narrating and narrated time?

CAJ: From the moment that the narrator begins "speaking" on page one, through to the last page, a matter of hours has elapsed.

Reviewer: Hours? That's an unusually short period of time.

CAJ: Yes, it is. And it is plausible. It does not take a river current, near the coast, very long to travel to the sea. Not very much time passes in the narrating time I've used in *Tenement*. A man throws some burnt bones into a river, a few kilometres upstream from open water, and these cremains travel along until they are picked up, by the sea's breakers, and hurled back at the land. Or, in this particular case, against a levee. I play with this time event, expanding it and inserting into it seventy plus years of the city's history – the city's been around much longer than that, and I acknowledge that, too – and selected events from the five decades of the narrator's life. I also refer to the period of six days which is the time from the narrator's death to the moment when part of her body ends up in the river. Time keeps folding back on itself. Hours blend into decades; days blend into years. The reader is meant to feel discombobulated by this!

Reviewer: Let's consider what the story is specifically about. How would you describe *Tenement*?

CAJ: I was talking to a friend, a few months ago, and said to her that *Tenement* is about missed opportunities. I quite like that, "missed opportunities". Other people, those who read the novel, might not see

it that way. I suspect it will be a challenge for some readers to look beyond the obvious elements of the story I've created, some of the scenes I've included. Death is definitely a big part of the what-happens-to-whom in *Tenement*. The narrator is dead and, from page one, she tells you about her own demise. For starters, a dead narrator is likely to throw some readers off, though the device is not unheard of in fiction. Again, one only has to pick up *The Poisonwood Bible* to meet a narrator, one of four, who is dead or *Til We Can Keep an Animal* where a murdered woman speaks. There are plenty of other examples but I think I've made the point.

Reviewer: A dead narrator. Isn't that a risky choice? Isn't it passé to have a character talking to the reader from the grave?

CAJ: Look, my narrator isn't in the grave. Part of her cremated body is in the sea, being eaten by little fish, and the other part of her is in an urn. I will concede, as I have just said, that dead narrators have appeared in a few novels, recently. *The Lovely Bones* is another example that comes immediately to mind, and Death narrates *The Book Thief*. But passé? That's harsh. That's like imposing a statute of limitations on literary convention, or some arbitrary rule which declares that characters can only be legitimate narrators if they're living beings. What comes next? Narrators with specific body shapes? Particular eye colours? What's so fantastic about living narrators anyway? Is realism the only measure of what makes a good narrator?

Reviewer: Would you not concede that dead narrators may be overdone?

CAJ: No. Every era has its fashions, and if dead narrators appear occasionally – but not universally – in contemporary literature written near to the millennium's start, then the more valid question is why. Why do novelists, at that point in time, shun the living as narrators and let the dead speak? Could it be, as in my case, that a dead character can



represent a particular position and experience better than a living one can? Maybe it has something to do with crossing from one millennium into another. The anxieties and hopes which are attendant upon change.

Reviewer: How is your dead narrator different from others?

CAJ: She describes her own decomposition, observes it at close quarters but remains detached. I've used metaphor, whenever appropriate, to represent the natural process of human decomposition. One might be distracted by the corporeality, the messiness of that process, but I do not want to put people off by shocking them. I have tried intentionally to stay away from writing "death porn." I'm not emulating Dean Koontz. I'm not imitating Patricia Cornwall. No bloody autopsies. No protracted scenes of murder. And no one gets shot in the vagina after being raped. I'm definitely not reproducing Voysey-Craig's violent scenes in *Til We Can Keep an Animal*.

Reviewer: So, in a sense, you deliberately forgo certain narrative opportunities. But I'm still wondering: in what way do "missed opportunities" fit with a novel about death?

CAJ: Well, the narrator is clearly human, and, like all people, she has experienced missed opportunities. For example, she —

Reviewer: Let me interrupt you briefly. Your narrator doesn't have a name, does she?

CAJ: No, she doesn't.

Reviewer: Won't that make it difficult for readers to identify with her?

CAJ: If readers want to give her a name, they can. I won't stop them doing so. I can't! I wanted to work with characters that lacked names. I've read stories where characters have elaborate names and epithets, yet I still didn't give a toss about what happened to any of them. So, no, having a name and a surname doesn't make a character more or less compelling.

Anonymity and invisibility, which my narrator has in bucketfuls, this is something I tried to emphasise. Not giving her a name, not calling her “Lucy” or “Thandeka” or “Susaan” helped with that. Her namelessness is meant to evoke disquiet in the reader. My narrator is not personable. She’s not psychologically uncomplicated. She isn’t everywoman, or easy to identify with. Not very many of us, if you’re thinking of readers, sleep under a table, crowd our homes with empty boxes, and paste newspapers on our walls.

Reviewer: Why would you choose her, rather than, say, Pig Woman, to be the reader’s guide into *Tenement’s* ruined world?

[The sound of water poured into a glass is heard, followed by a few seconds of silence, and the soft thud of a tumbler being placed carefully on a table surface.]

CAJ: The world I’ve written about in *Tenement* is not an easy place to live. It is an ecosystem, an environmentally degraded one, which is the result of missed opportunity. We’ve missed the opportunity, people have, of showing respect to Earth and everything that lives in and on it. My characters of the future live in a degraded environment for which we now must take responsibility. Pig Woman is a survivor. She seems able to master the little patch of land on the dump over which she has dominion. My narrator is not as strong on that, not as full of the skills of survival as Pig Woman is. And that’s the point. Why do we always want to tell stories from the perspective of perfect victims and / or perfect survivors? Or from the perspectives of heroes? What about people, like my narrator, who slip through the cracks? Who better to show up the missed opportunities than them?

Reviewer: So, the missed opportunity refers to the environment, and to economic poverty?

CAJ: Not only that. There are missed opportunities involving people, which is what I was trying to say earlier. Things on an interpersonal level. For

example, one of the more poignant losses, for me, involves the old Dog Man. He regards the stray dogs that run around the streets in a generous way. Everyone else thinks they're savage predators imbued with a human motivation to kill for pleasure. Eventually, he is killed. I describe his death – is it a murder? Is it an act of compassion? – and that scene is about missed opportunities because when he dies, something tolerant, magical, enormously creative is lost on those streets. Pig Woman, as we know, disposes of his body, but there is something pathetic in the fact that the narrator walks behind the man's corpse as it is wheeled to the dump. Friendship and companionship, that is what could have been, along with the opportunity to step forward, lead the old man away before he is hit over the head and killed – all of these are lost chances. My narrator doesn't spell it out, but it has to be obvious to the reader, if not to her, such lacks arise because of fear, cowardice, self-involvement...

Reviewer: You emphasise that the novel is set in an environmentally degraded world. Tell us a bit about that world and why you chose to make *Tenement* a statement about the environment?

CAJ: All novels are statements about the environment, in one way or another. If a writer ignores environment, she's still making a statement about how it isn't really worthy of her creative attention. If she overdoes it, only talks about trees and ants and stuff like that, eliminates the people, that's a statement, too. *Tenement* is absolutely an environmental statement. Hopefully, a deliberately critical and sensible one. Lawrence Buell argues that there is a strong link between the treatment of environment and a text's ethical accountability. I like that. I also like what he has to say about how human interests are not the only legitimate interests in an environment, in an ecosystem. He points out, rightly, that characters do not have to be human to capture our imagination. I've made the environment explicit in my story. I've made

non-human life-forms biting, buzzing, present there. Of course, I'm not the only person writing about the environment. A few authors seem to be doing exactly the same thing, as can be seen in any list of environmental novels that have been published recently.

Reviewer: Such as?

CAJ: Ian McEwan's *Solar* about the Arctic Circle and global warming, and Dave Egger's *Zeitoun* about Hurricane Katrina and a Syrian family, the Zeitouns, who help save their neighbours in New Orleans. Of course, in typical US style, Mr Zeitoun is arrested on suspicion of being a terrorist. Fiction for children and teenagers seems even more willing to embrace environmental issues. *My Father, the Enemy*, by Michael Pellowski, tells the story of Veronica's struggle against her father, a developer, and her attempt to save a forest on which he wants to build a mall. And *The Side-Effects Kid*, by Janell Hanson, is about Sneezy, a girl with allergies, hired to help solve the mystery of who is dumping toxic waste illegally in her community. These "youth" writers seem less uptight about acknowledging the impact of humans on the environment to their readers.

Reviewer: Talk a bit about the specifics of your fictional city and its environment.

CAJ: The story I tell is set in the future, sixty years from now, in a city which is dealing less and less successfully with the impact of accrued environmental damage and climate change. The city, like my narrator, is nameless. It could be any coastal metropolis confronting rising seas, growing landfills, illegal dumping, water shortages, and cyclones. There are some cues that the city is an African one. I based the fictional landscape loosely on Durban and on Lagos, but I took inspiration from around the world: Mombassa, New Orleans, even the deltas in Bangladesh and Myanmar. Sixty years into the future and we'll see that we missed the opportunity to minimise our impact on Earth's ecosystem.

That's what I wanted to represent in my novel. It's not apocalyptic but it is immensely cautionary. The seas have swamped the land, and part of the city – the inner city area where the poor live in tenements – ends up flooded for several weeks during the annual cyclone season. This sort of thing is happening right now.

Reviewer: A topical issue given that we've witnessed, at the end of 2009, the failure to secure a global deal in Copenhagen.

CAJ: Yes, a very topical issue. Copenhagen has come to symbolise a missed opportunity. We will pay a price for that.

Reviewer: You said the novel was loosely set in Durban and Lagos... You've spoken about Lagos. And Durban? Is Durban confronting climate change today? Is that what inspired you most of all?

CAJ: The novel is not about Durban. It is also not set in Durban. Initially, I wanted to focus on Durban, but I changed my mind. I did not want to restrict it to one specific place. To walk away from representing the fictional city as Durban 2070 gives the novel wider appeal to a potential reading audience. Many cities and towns and villages across the world are confronting environmental disasters. To answer your other question, as of yet, Durban hasn't seen the full impact of climate change. I'm not a climate change sceptic; I believe that the city will be affected. Quite severely so. Still, there are limits to my knowledge. I'm a psychologist, not a climatologist. There are limitations to what I've envisaged and described in my novel. Research-wise, I did attempt to find out about the likely impact of rising sea levels on the city I live in, and on other similar cities. A significant amount of the urban basin in Durban is below sea level. If you download any electronic map from EtheKwini's website, you can see that. It's a fact. If the sea encroaches, and it will, much of the land, development, people... that's all going to be under water.

Reviewer: A sobering thought. In your novel, the city's authorities have built a levee to hold back the encroaching sea. It seems like someone tried to do something about that?

CAJ: Yes, but the plan didn't work. Like many belated, last-ditch efforts. And that's the point: geological and climatic forces on this planet are far stronger than a few thousand tonnes of cement. In *Tenement*, the authorities eventually come to realise this. They take action, not a very caring one, but they do act. Their decision is to abandon the inner city, slough it off, and move inland. They clear out the flooded area. Remove money, supplies, the people and infrastructure. They erect fences and signs, and have patrols at the border so that the abandoned will not manage incursions into the protected, still-functioning section of the metropolis. Ironically, today, Durban is "shifting". More and more development is happening away from the city centre. Look at the development in the north, in areas such as Ballito and Umhlali. Look at how far inland we've encroached. In time, Durban and Pietermaritzburg will surely become one major metropolis. Some parts, especially Durban's city centre, are getting left behind. And abandoning a city or a town or parts of it, is actually not as extraordinary as you might think. It has happened in the Ukraine. In the United States. In China. In Australia. There are some stunning photographs of abandoned cities, suburbs, precincts across the world. Utterly chilling. Truly disquieting and unsettling stuff. On *Flickr.com*, you can trawl through photographs, by amateurs and professionals, of derelict buildings and abandoned places

Reviewer: This is an aspect of city culture that has not really been addressed in the scholarship on African literature and cities. Does your novel draw attention to such omission?

CAJ: Yes, it does by implication. Although, again, I'm not the originator of these ideas. Mbembe and Nuttall wrote about representations of Africa in a special issue of *Public Culture*, saying that Africa is not one space,

but has its own heres and elsewhere, its own emplacements and displacements, and attachments to somewhere else. Mbembe and Nuttall argue that cities leak, people move into and out of these porous places, and different migration paths cut across these spaces. And Africans use city spaces creatively. They'd have to, wouldn't they, and here's why: The United Nations reports that right now 200 million people are living inside of slums in 34 African countries. That's a lot of people. The UN also projects that nearly one billion people will be living in urban slums worldwide by 2020. I can't but be startled by such figures. The future will be full of slums. My fictional city is replete with them, but I was also trying to give the city a dynamism and leakiness even though, officially, parts of it are abandoned.

Reviewer: You say it isn't Durban or Lagos. Nowhere specific. But does the city have a name?

CAJ: No, it doesn't.

Reviewer: Isn't that likely to alienate a reader? Like the anonymous narrator?

CAJ: Surely not! Some great novels tell stories set in landscapes without names.

Reviewer: I'm not very fam—...

CAJ: Look, Coetzee's *Waiting for the Barbarians*. Or Ian McEwan in *The Comfort of Strangers*. José Saramago, who wrote *The History of the Siege of Lisbon*, one of my favourite novels, also set *Blindness* in an unnamed city.

Reviewer: But what's the point? Isn't that just a vague universalism that actually undercuts the specific consequences and effects of climate change?

CAJ: It strikes me, from this question, and your earlier one about dead narrators, that you want the institution of realism as the superordinate marker of the novel. I'm not documenting Durban's demise in *Tenement*.

Nor am I representing therein Lagos's degradation. Or Bangalore's. If I was doing that, why wouldn't I just do it? Why wouldn't I just roll out the facts, tick off the list of environmental problems besetting each of these cities, and get on with it? Why must I, because by accident of birth I'm born in South Africa, now make fiction only about South African spaces? Consider it another way. The island nation of Kiribati is practically underwater; we've all read factual news reports about that often enough, yet no one but I-Kiribati and a few environmental activists care. Kiribati has a name yet what good has that done the country? The same logic applies here. Why would giving a name to a fictional city struggling with environmental degradation make a reader care more about it than before?

Reviewer: Okay. Let's move on.

[A pen is struck rather impatiently four times against a hard surface.]

CAJ: Before we do, I want to say something else about the issue of place and name in novels.

Reviewer: Is it relevant?

CAJ: Yes, it is. That's why I want to raise it. Johan Jacobs' paper about allegorical spaces and actual places in postcolonial novels has, I think, implications for what I've tried to do. He looks at four novels, by Shiva Naipul, Chinua Achebe, Timothy Mo and Yasmine Gooneratne, all of which are set in fictional countries: Cuyama, Kangan, Danu and the Democratic Republic of Amnesia. They are, as he points out, based on real places: Guyana, Nigeria, East Timor, Sri Lanka. Yet the novels are allegorical. And there are risks associated with space as allegory: essentialising "Third World" experience, for example, and homogenising countries' histories. These are serious problems. It hints at there being fault lines in these novels, and in the postcolonial novel, generally – the novel being fundamentally a western means of representation – and



with well-intentioned but uncritical efforts to write back. I'm not a literary scholar but even I get it that how I represent space and place is going to matter. I tried to be attentive to this in *Tenement*, showing that there are multiple spaces, physical and psychological, official and unofficial, in my fictional city. How the citizens inside the official zone live is very different from the way the tenement residents do. Even within the flatlands, there isn't one experience. Where and how the dump-dwellers live is different from the flat dwellers, the street sleepers, the nasuri in their camp, and so on. I tried not to tell a one dimensional story about A space and A place. I've tried not to essentialise people.

Reviewer: The action in your story occurs in the city's abandoned zone, though?

CAJ: Yes, a lot of it does. There are a few hundred people, not very many at all, living in the rundown tenements and on the garbage dump that's grown inside the abandoned zone. I'm fascinated by inhabited dumps, and there are famous ones, like Gramacho and Lixão in Brazil, Payatas in Manila, Stung Meanchey in Phnom Penh, that inspired me. In the Harold Road dump in the Bahamas, it's illegal Haitians who are the garbage-pickers. I'm astounded by how these people survive in such places, as well as who they are and where they come from. Most of the action in *Tenement*, if you can call it that, takes place in the derelict tenements and on an inhabited dump. Many of my characters – certainly all of those in the abandoned areas – are people on the margins. Some are forgotten. Most are poor. Some have fled xenophobia and persecution and, sadly, ended up sheltering in a place which is under attack from the sea and the weather. They have nowhere else to go.

Reviewer: Some readers may find your story depressing stuff. More so even than the recent tendency towards bleakness and melancholy among white South African writers.

CAJ: Probably, yes. I'm not Jodi Picoult. *Tenement* is never going to make it on to Oprah's book club list. No matter how many feel-good novels you read or write, you aren't going to escape the fact that humans have messed up the planet. I'm not hiding that from my readers. Escapism, and I believe in its merits, doesn't have to be premised on denial.

Reviewer: Who do you think would want to read *Tenement*? Describe your ideal reader.

CAJ: At the municipal library where I go to borrow books, there is a little display stand – it is quite small – with a sign that says "Discerning Reads". Usually, there are about a dozen books there, seldom more. I imagine that the person who feels comfortable with the books on that stand would be interested in reading *Tenement*. Readers who like eclectic, challenging, unusual novels will appreciate my book.

Reviewer: Can you name a few examples of those types of novels?

CAJ: Meek's *The People's Act of Love*. Crace's *Being Dead*. Jeanette Winterson's *Oranges are not the Only Fruit*. Kingsolver's *The Poisonwood Bible*. Kourouma's *Waiting for the Wild Beasts to Vote*. Amma Darko's *Beyond the Horizon*. Marlene van Niekerk's *Triomf*. I could list lots more. Really, these aren't novels that can easily be lumped together; but they're by writers who are not afraid to tackle difficult subjects, like cannibalism, racism, incest, sexism, sexuality, power, poverty. They do fit into the category of literary fiction, which is where I'm aiming *Tenement*.

Reviewer: From that list, your reader would need a strong stomach.

CAJ: A fair comment. And why not? Any novel that deals with death and dying up close, as *Tenement* does, is going to be challenging to read. Sigmund Freud, years ago, told us that exactly. The narcissistic psyche struggles to confront its own mortality yet, ironically, has an innate death drive, Thanatos, which compels it towards self-destruction.

Directly or indirectly. Two powerful, opposing forces at work. No wonder textual representations of death evoke a sense of the uncanny.

[A third voice is heard, that of a waiter, asking if a coffee refill is required. It is. A regular filter coffee with warm milk for the reviewer; an espresso for the author.]

Reviewer: So, what actually inspired you to write *Tenement*?

CAJ: Obviously, it wasn't just one thing. Some of these ideas have been sitting inside my head for years. Abandoned cities; hijacked buildings; the dumps in Brazil, Kenya, the Caribbean islands, and the people who live there; laundry; the death industry. Other ideas were more recent additions. A lot of different sources of inspiration, and I felt compelled to write about them. The idea of the derelict flat, covered with newspaper clippings and packed full of old boxes containing nothing valuable, was triggered by a documentary about obsessive compulsive hoarding. The narrator of *Tenement* is a hoarder, although she never describes herself as such.

Reviewer: Do you think she knows that she is a hoarder?

CAJ: Yes, I do. But she doesn't speak about herself in terms or jargon that professional psychologists use. In one part, she explains how difficult it is to collect newspapers in the rain. She appreciates that her actions are compulsive and, well, inexplicable. What she does isn't easy. She's aware of that yet she persists. She understands she is driven even if she doesn't use the artificial language of my profession. There were other events and issues that inspired me, too. Not just the hoarding. I read about the murders and human rights violations of albinos in Tanzania. Absolutely horrific! Dozens of people with albinism were killed in January 2009 for muti, and hundreds more were chased away, taking refuge on an island in the middle of a lake. It is intolerance that ought to have no place on this continent. I wanted to say something about it, too, and show how, sixty years into the future, unless we challenge these

taboos now, today, then they will still be in place and likely to have calcified even more, making albinos even more marginal. Hatred doesn't seem to be diminishing. As Martha Nussbaum points out, we must challenge public discourse and social action based on the notion of contagion. I really like the way Nussbaum thinks about public policy and the imagination of disease and contagion. I think the fear of germs and infection lies behind the dread of albinism, for instance, and fistulated women. But if these are some bad things that inspired me, there were good things, too. I've spent time in quite a few African countries. Memories of those trips live with me; they echo in *Tenement*. The attention to shoes, laundry and second hand clothing in the novel is based on research work I did in Ghana, Kenya, Malawi, Rwanda, and Tanzania. Empirical research conducted for marketing companies and youth development agencies has enriched my imagination, too. For me, research and writing enhance each other. It isn't just my research but the work of other researchers, like Karen Hanson's book on salaula, that hooks itself into my flesh, metaphorically speaking. Feminist research articles and NGO reports on the United Nations' Millennium Development Goals, recording progress on women's health care in Africa, have their echoes in *Tenement*. We're not doing enough to stop women dying in pregnancy. We are not doing enough to stop girls and women being trafficked. We are not doing enough to stop rape. The amazing work of Dr Mukwege at the Panzi Hospital in Bukavu, in the Democratic Republic of Congo couldn't be ignored. Dr Mukwege performs corrective surgery on girls and women with fistula. What happens, though, to those who Dr Mukwege can't reach? They die. They're thrown away. They're chased away. So, where do they go? Like the albinos sheltering on a lake, they go somewhere.

[The waiter's voice is heard again. Crockery and cutlery rattle and clink together as the coffee is prepared.]

Reviewer: So, is *Tenement* a political, feminist novel, then?

CAJ: Yes. It is in the same way that Ammo Darko's *Beyond the Horizon* is political and feminist. It is a feminist novel, for example, because it has women characters at the centre of its universe. Strong women, weak women; cruel ones and unkind ones. Take Long Woman. She's a character who is independent, resilient, cruel and abusive. I wouldn't want to mess with her. I hope that mild dread is conveyed well enough in the novel.

Reviewer: Are you like any of your characters in *Tenement*?

CAJ: [Laughs] I hate geckos. I absolutely detest the things. I freak out when I find them inside my house. I'm very happy that they stay on the walls outside, eating the flying ants and all of that, but I don't want one crawling on a wall above my head! I share the policeman's aversion to geckos. That is about all I can see as a similarity between the characters in my novel and me.

Reviewer: I want to ask you about one particularly notable omission. You do not refer to anyone, except the albino characters, by the colour of their skins. Obviously, a deliberate gesture. Why have you done that?

CAJ: Frankly, I find the treatment of skin colour, a proxy for race, in many South African novels boring, repetitive and so overwhelming that it sweeps aside every other issue. Blinded by colour rather than colour-blind, I would say. I had other things to think about. Like sexism and specism and the violence of poverty and environmental degradation. I wanted to represent diversity – and my characters have diverse backgrounds – through dress, language, choices, psychologies. By choosing not to emphasise skin colour, I know I demand more from South African readers than perhaps is customary. Race is shorthand in South African fiction; we don't question it enough. I expect a reader to look at a character and like or dislike her for what she has done, not

because of her skin colour. South Africa is still polarised about race. It is too easy for the person on the street to classify this racial group as all good and another as all bad. I find stories that do that, which merely repeat the dichotomy, and never challenge it, dull.

Reviewer: There is a risk, though. The accusation that, because you have not referred to race and racial characteristics, such as skin colour, you are reluctant to confront racism. How would you defend yourself against that charge?

CAJ: I have not written to formula. I hope I never will. If a reader wants a racialised formula, then, unfortunately, I'm going to disappoint her. *Tenement* will disappoint her. Racism is utterly unacceptable, I will never deny that, but racism is not the only form of oppression on this planet. Nor is it the only stimulus for writing a novel in South Africa. As a feminist, I cannot ignore the fact that exploitation and the abuse of women and girls occur in the name of culture. I also cannot ignore the fact that, as a species, human beings – regardless of their skin colours – are specist. Everything is expected to be sacrificed *for* human beings; the trees, sky, sea, animals, everything. I think there is another way for us to be on Earth. We can be gentler, less exploitative. To each other. To other life forms. *Tenement*, I hope, reminds a reader that we are on this planet along with billions of other life forms. When we forget that, these other beings may literally bite and sting us back into awareness. Unfortunately, we've caused the extinction of far too many of them. In *Tenement*, the characters are surrounded by other living creatures. They live with them; they die with them. They're bitten by mosquitoes. Rats and dogs share the streets with them. Cockroaches crawl on their heads while they sleep at night and over their corpses when they're dead. It is a world bursting with vital life. Bacteria reduce their corpses to nothingness. Overwhelmingly, it is not humans who dominate this

world or adapt best. The abandoned zone may be a dying human space, but that is not the case for the other life forms living there.

Reviewer: It still sounds to me as if your novel doesn't confront racism directly.

CAJ: You are completely right. I did not set out to write a novel about racism. Or about the past. In South Africa, where literature has been profoundly racialised, I wanted to buck the trend. I'm glad I did. I hope I have bucked it completely. I write about far more than skin colour. When the sea rises and drowns us, it doesn't care about skin colour. It doesn't care if we are human or dog, female or male. The sea rises. We drown. There are far bigger forces on this planet than mere human agency. It is time for South African novelists to step out of their own parochialism. Part of that parochialism is their racialised view of the social world.

Reviewer: Okay! I can see you feel very strongly about this issue. There is something else I noticed about *Tenement*: there are very few mothers in it. Was that deliberate?

CAJ: I'm pleased that you noticed that. And yes, there are very few mothers in *Tenement*. Long Woman is a reluctant step-mother. My narrator is childless. The old prostitute, who had thirteen kids, was not a very motherly mother. I wanted to write a novel where motherhood wasn't the central issue confronting the female characters. I wanted to separate caring about others from motherhood. Caretaker, one of my favourite characters, attempts to act with care, even if he doesn't always get it right. So do other men in the novel. Consider, for example, the man in the lopsided house. I believe he cares. Of course he has an agenda, but let's concede that he cares about something, certainly enough to do something about it. He tries, in a warped way, to show care for the dead and respect for ritual. The narrator tries, too. I'm incredibly proud of her for doing what she did. It took enormous courage to set aside fear, anxiety and take care of that dead sex worker.

I don't want to give too much away, but my narrator's deed is an act of caring in its own way. Yes, I know there is a sting in the tail / tale; there always is. For these reasons, I would say that *Tenement* is a feminist novel. It was challenging, creatively and conceptually, to think about women without thinking about motherhood as the primary signifier of their lives. I'm glad I tried. I'm pleased that I attempted to look at caring by men and by women. When everyone takes responsibility for caring, maybe how we treat the earth will change.

Reviewer: Do you think that the label "feminist" might put some readers off?

CAJ: Sure, it might. Especially if reviewers fixate on the category.

[The speaker clears her throat.]

It may attract those who otherwise wouldn't consider reading the novel. Let me say this again: I have not written to any formula or pattern. Nor have I included artificial, and frankly unwieldy, conversations between characters about feminism. Like the kind that you'd find in Sara Maitland's *Ancestral Truths*. Frankly, some of the conversations about feminism and women's groups that occur between characters in Maitland's book are dire. They're so forced that reading them is like hearing nails scraping on a chalkboard. I definitely did not want to make that mistake. I like to believe it is possible to be a feminist and a good storyteller. Sometimes Jeanette Winterson gets that right; sometimes she doesn't. No one has to sit in a circle or shove a mirror near her labia to show the world that she's a feminist, or affected by issues that are of concern to women. Hopefully, I have told an interesting story in *Tenement*, and done so in a way which acknowledges feminist concerns. Importantly, I have tried to challenge some of what I see as formulaic in fiction written by women and about women. Particularly in South Africa.

Reviewer: What do you mean by that?



CAJ: Oh, I think some fiction by women can be pretty predictable. The entire romantic genre is predicated on a formula. Girl meets boy, then what follows is a whole long stretch of misery and misunderstanding preceding girl and boy getting married, and living happily ever after. That's the most obvious one. There are other clichés, too, in more serious literature. Incest and rape are especially common themes. Violence, too. Elaine Showalter has pointed out how incest is widespread in novels by women. Her argument is that it is so common that it is now normative. It shouldn't be. I think it was Joyce Carol Oates who was criticised for having incest as a common theme in several of her novels.

Reviewer: And rape?

CAJ: I want to talk about two South African novels that use this common but dreadful event in their stories: Coetzee's *Disgrace* and Megan Voysey-Braig's *Til We Can Keep an Animal*. Rape is central to both. Coetzee has been criticised for how he treats rape in his story. Fair criticism, I think. I've never been comfortable with his treatment of rape in *Disgrace*.

Reviewer: Why not? Isn't it reflective of South African reality?

CAJ: I get that Coetzee is drawing parallels between the seduction of one female character and the gang rape of another, but, as a psychologist, I can never accept that what motivates an individual act of rape can be equated with the motives of a group of men who rape someone at the same time. There are different dynamics at work, and any half-way decent social psychology textbook could have made that clear to Coetzee. But I want to get back to the point about the treatment of rape in Voysey-Craig's book. Her decision to have her narrator raped, and shot in the vagina with a gun, hasn't been criticised at all as far as I know. That's staggering to me. I wanted to puke when I read that scene. It's the stuff of snuff films. My question is: why do we accept that

women's novels will uncritically repeat what men's do? The rape scene in *Til We Can Keep an Animal* is far more disturbing to me than those in *Disgrace*. Why must a novel written by an award-winning woman author refer to rape or include rape scenes that go on for pages? The Rape Scene – I want it to have capital letters – has become a form of gratuitous violence and a convention in women's novels, and women writers here are not thinking critically enough about the representation of this gender-based violence. Every day, millions and millions of women are raped, I am not in denial about that, but my question remains: is the representation of rape in fiction challenging the status quo? Is it bringing to an end this pandemic in society? No. Overwhelmingly not. The Rape Scene in Voysey-Braig's novel does not challenge how we see rape and fight against it. (*Disgrace* doesn't challenge the pandemic either, despite what sympathetic or apologist critics suggest!) It is just another example of a Rape Scene. And that's the problem. Lurid. Almost cinematic representation that turns rape into literary entertainment, and makes a profit on the back of it.

Reviewer: You mention rape in *Tenement*. Isn't that contradicting what you are saying now?

CAJ: Absolutely not. The old prostitute has been raped, many times. So has one of the male characters, Mute. But I did not spend three or four pages describing each rape or the rapist's glee and ejaculation, nor did I invest thousands of words in detailing the bruises and tears to the victims' bodies. Rape happens in the world of *Tenement*. It happens frequently but, as the storyteller, how I choose to tell you about rape is also important, if not more important than just adding it as another scene or event. Mute has no voice box, literally. The old prostitute lives in social institutions – the incestuous family and prostitution – where rape is endemic. When we learn that she was sold for a packet of Mexican cigarettes and a crate of bottled beers, I'm offering an analysis:

rape is linked to an economy of power, and the practices that maintain it are also within our patriarchal families. That is more important than describing the semen dripping from a rapist's flaccid penis or a gun blast inside a vagina. What I'm getting to here is a common enough debate. It affects film as much as the novel. It is fundamentally about representation and intent. Jodi Foster, in *The Accused*, had to deal with this. In that film, there is a brutal gang rape scene. What she and Jonathan Kaplan, the director, intended as a critical comment on rape and sexual consent came very close – uncomfortably so – to a voyeuristic prurience celebrating rape. Representational challenges aren't particular to rape. A single word may be at stake. Marlene van Niekerk faced similar criticism about her characters' frequent use of "kaffir". Some readers believed that she showed authentically the full vulgarity of the Benades' racism in *Triomf*. Others accused her of racism for that verisimilitude. Phillip John even said that she may have discouraged people from finishing the book. He's not wrong. My aunt abandoned *Triomf* before the end of the first chapter.

Reviewer: What about other forms of violence in *Tenement*?

CAJ: I read a collection of critical essays edited by Sue Kossew. Here, she compares South African and Australian women's fiction, and suggests that violence is by far the most common theme in South African women's novels. Violence everywhere. We can't escape it, even in our fiction. We are enslaved to the dominant paradigm. I hate that. The idealist in me hopes that women's fiction can show other possible worlds and ways of being. I'm not asking that women forgo writing about violence. But there have to be other possibilities present, too. Take Ursula le Guin, a science fiction writer, who tried to imagine another world and other ways of being in *Left Hand of Darkness*. That's the sort of creative bravery I'm talking about. It's not without risk. And I know Le Guin's novel isn't perfect. Gethen, after all, is a world mediated

through Genly Ai's human, male perspective but, nevertheless, there's something compelling about Le Guin's androgynes, particularly Estraven, because they challenge our assumptions about sex and gender. Today, we know that hermaphrodites do exist, they're as real as Caster Semenya, but hermaphroditism still confounds sexual dualism. That's what I mean. Surely some South African woman writer can imagine a completely different world for all of us, one not premised as violent, and can show that to us through her novels?

Reviewer: Do you think that woman is you?

CAJ: Oh god, no! Though, I may give it a more determined try at some point.

Reviewer: I'd like to ask you now about your literary influences.

CAJ: Big question. Generally? Or specifically?

Reviewer: Specifically, as in those writers who influenced *Tenement*.

[Water is poured into a glass.]

CAJ: Specific to *Tenement*, I would say Jim Crace's *Being Dead*. All those bugs crawling on the biologists' dead bodies on the dune, and written in that clinical style – oh, what fantastic stuff! Zakes Mda's *Ways of Dying* was an influence, too, but not a positive one. The scene in *Tenement* involving the sparring matriarchs fighting over a vacant flat was written as a way to mock the formulaic formality Mda uses in his dialogue. Very to and fro. A creaky staginess. Another influence: Sophocles' *Antigone*. Sounds terribly pretentious, doesn't it, but *Antigone*, the story of the woman who defies the king's order not to bury her brother, is one of the oldest stories we have about death and dying rituals. You can't write about women and death and not have Antigone's ghost somewhere in the background. A haunting, if you will... *Antigone* filters into *Tenement*.

Reviewer: Any others?

CAJ: Yes, I'd add Kingsolver's *The Poisonwood Bible* and Darko's *Beyond the Horizon*. Both were influential. The idea of a *dead* narrator, when I was grappling to find one, came from Kingsolver's novel, although my narrator is much older than the dead child who relates some of the story in Kingsolver's narrative. And Darko's Ghanaian prostitute, Mara. She had a major influence on how I represented sex work in *Tenement*. Prostitution is brutal work, and the people who keep it going, like Mara's husband, are sometimes members of our own families. Darko's novel captures that very well.

Reviewer: Okay, but if I could backtrack a bit... I'm still wondering why you chose the particular narrator you have for *Tenement*?

CAJ: The idea of a narrating consciousness wasn't originally mine. My supervisor suggested that it would be easier for readers to engage with than the detached, third-person style I adopted initially. She found that consciousness too remote, I think, and verging on annoying omniscience. I could have made a gecko the narrator but that's been done by Jose Agualusa in *The Book of Chameleons*. Hypocritical specist that I am, I stuck to humans. When thinking about the point of view and the focaliser, I had a lot of human characters – Pig Woman, Caretaker, Bennie, the gecko cop, the dead woman in 504, among others – to choose from, and of all of them, the character who was the most compelling to me, the most psychologically complex, was the dead woman. And that's why she's the narrator.

Reviewer: Describe her.

CAJ: She's fifty years old, a "nobody" living in a dangerous, inhospitable environment. She's lived there since she was a young child. After crossing from the new city into the old, she and her mother take refuge in a small flat in one of the derelict buildings. The reason why that crossing happened is not made explicit, but there are enough clues to

show the reader that the mother wasn't doing so out of choice. We know she was a teacher. She dreamt of classrooms she left behind. She was literate. There is a journal. I try to create a sense that her decision was one of desperation. Civil war is one cause for why educated people, such as teachers, leave their home countries against their will. Xenophobia is what keeps them on the move. I'm aware of that, especially since there are plenty of refugees in Durban. I know someone, from the DRC, who is an engineer – a bright, beautiful man – who works as a coffee shop host. I've met car guards who tell me that they are teachers, academics, electricians, nurses. They are people with skills but, until their papers are sorted out, they must work in unskilled jobs, live in dreadful, inner city apartments. That's probably what happened in the case of my character's mother. She and her daughter end up in the flatlands, taking refuge there from people-made problems, but it is soon clear that the mother disappears. The narrator does not explain what happens to her mother, or when – which is the point: mourning is very painful for her, so painful that she cannot and will not describe it.

[A brief pause as the speaker takes a drink of water. A tumbler is replaced on the table.]

Mourning interests me, it always has. Eva Hoffman writes brilliantly about it. *After Such Knowledge*, which deals with the psychological impact of being a child of survivors of the Holocaust, explores how silence and grief become central to the experience of family and home. But I digress. My narrator hints that she, like other children who grew up in the flatlands, takes care of herself from some point, mostly likely in puberty. She says she's old, which she isn't – fifty is not old. She is alone. She holds on to the flat, papering herself in, boxing herself inside. There is something different about her: she's not like the others in the tenements, is unlike the other kids on the streets. Bennie, who grows up there, and escapes, is a counterfoil for her. He fulfils the myth of the self-made man. She, instead, hides beneath a table, papering over walls

with newspapers. Another fundamental difference between her and everyone else is that she's been taught to read. She's literate, thanks to her mother. But still, it was important to me that she not be a writer. And something else that...

Reviewer: Let me interrupt once more. Why was that important?

CAJ: Do you have any idea how boring it is to read about writers? Writers might find it fascinating to read about characters who are writers struggling with writer's block, but I doubt anyone else does. That, plus to write is to find a voice. Not everyone in this world, politically and psychologically, has that opportunity. Consequently, I wanted my narrator to be a reader, someone who grabs anything she can and reads it. To write demands effort and time, as Trinh Minh-ha has pointed out. For writing women from the developing world, writing time cuts into collecting water from rivers, cleaning clothes in basins, growing food in the fields, teaching kids. Minh-ha is not just alluding to a room of one's own, but to an entire economic and social order which keeps impoverished women away from writing. I can't ignore that. I can't simply make a poor woman character, living in a slum, a writer and hope for the best. The narrator's actions – collecting newspapers, earning money by reading to those who can't read, pasting images and pages on the walls of her flat – these may seem odd to others, but they are also homage to her mother, too. In a quiet way, it is an important detail about her motivations. An absent mother for whom she mourns in her own, atypical way. As she says at one point, advertisements tell her that grief is a woman dabbing at her eyes with a tissue. That's not her experience of grief. But does that make her version of it inadequate, inappropriate? Health professionals, like Elisabeth Kübler-Ross, essentialise grief, telling us what we should feel, and when. We forget that these models of grief are abstractions, not reality.

Reviewer: What makes her someone a reader would care about?

CAJ: She's fragile. She's reserved. She's afraid but also resilient. You'd have to be to live in the environment she does. She's not comfortable interacting with other people. Her neighbours' motivations confound her. She doesn't understand what they do and why they do these things. She isn't a hero. There's something poignant, too, about her affection for Mute, the young sex worker who lives in the same tenement building. It is an unrequited affection. Her cuttings from newspapers, these small gifts given to him, they are pathetic, flawed gestures. These pages mean so much to her, but it is unclear whether he can read. Probably not. He throws her gifts away. Or else, uses them as toilet paper. Beyond that, she misses other opportunities to interact with others, such as the old Dog Man. It dawns on her, only after she dies, that he may have been trying to be friendly to her, greeting her on the streets of the flatlands. While alive, she ignored him, adhering to some arbitrary division imposed between street sleepers and residents. These barriers bring loneliness and isolation. She watches his death, too, but does not react with compassion, doesn't try to lead him away, thereby saving his life. That says something about both of them. He values other people and stray dogs, and risks interacting with them even if he is only a street person. She doesn't always remember that sociability and care are important. Her reactions to the dying woman in the warehouse, as well as to the death of the Dog Man, suggest she has lost something. Her fear stops her showing compassion for a dying woman. It stops her taking the risk of being someone's friend. That's what I meant about missed opportunities on an interpersonal level. She missed the opportunity to be friendly with the old Dog Man. She missed the opportunity to show compassion to someone who was dying. Sometimes she does kindly things, unexpectedly so, and in the process surprises herself. Other times, she exhibits callous detachment towards



suffering, and hides behind social taboos to justify that. She's psychologically interesting. That's what brings her to life for me.

Reviewer: At the level of plot, not very much happens in *Tenement*. Isn't there a risk that readers might be put off by what is possibly a non-story?

CAJ: My supervisor has said something similar, describing *Tenement* as a character-driven novel. I agree with that in part. I also disagree. The world described in *Tenement* has been through major changes: the climate has changed; an entire city has moved away, leaving behind a wasteland; a vibrant community has been evicted. It is inaccurate to say that nothing at all happens in *Tenement*. Someone, with a small life, stops living. Sure, no queen has died, no comets have crossed the sky; that much I concede. *Tenement* is a novel about small, invisible people. It is about women with fistulas. Sex workers. Forgotten people. Indigents. Cowards. The context in *Tenement* cannot be ignored. It is epic. *Triomf* does something similar: the Bernades carry on with their insular lives while around them massive changes are underway in their society: South Africa was about to have its first democratic election. Van Niekerk juxtaposed the Bernades with the wider world. No one has accused *Triomf* of having no momentum. Why would the flatlands not be permitted to be a legitimate presence, for a moment at least, in a world where massive, global changes are underway?

Reviewer: You wrote *Tenement* as part of a postgraduate degree in Creative Writing at UKZN. Tell us about the programme there.

CAJ: I wasn't part of a programme; I worked independently, submitting content to my supervisor for her comments every few months. It wasn't a coursework Masters. I had little contact with other students and lecturers in either the department of English or the larger School.

Reviewer: It sounds as if you were fairly isolated from other students and writers in the School.

CAJ: I have no idea how other Creative Writing students experienced the degree, but the independence and minimal contact worked for me. I did not attend creative writing workshops or retreats with other students.

Reviewer: What did the UKZN association offer that you couldn't get from writing on your own?

CAJ: Supervision. I received detailed editorial feedback from my supervisor, and some creative direction, not all of which I agreed to. My motivation to enrol for the degree followed on from the feedback I received about *Gorgon*. Frankly, the EULAC judges' comments were useless. The best feedback I received was from Denis Beckett and David Basckin. David suggested I work under formal supervision, and Denis provided the most sensible commentary on the rights and wrongs of *Gorgon*. I had a lot to learn, and both of them weren't afraid to tell me that. Working with a supervisor from UKZN has shown me lots of things. Prepositions are my undoing, for instance. I've also been made aware that I am a hyphen-addict – probably a consequence of having a hyphenated name and spending years in the development sector where every adjective is a hyphenated compound. I've learnt that I get tenses mixed up horribly: I begin in the past tense and end up, a few words later, with future imperfect tense. Also, I write sentences running on for paragraphs. I'm fairly convinced that I have a creative gland somewhere inside of me but I strangle it with bad writing. My UKZN supervisor helped me become more self-aware of the technical dimensions of writing. That can only be a good thing.

Reviewer: What is the most important lesson that you learnt during this process?

CAJ: Simply written sentences are better to read, more difficult to write.

Reviewer: Meaning?

CAJ: My tendency is to load sentences with complex ideas, flashy vocabulary and far too many semi-colons. When I do that, I undermine my words. It

is the fine craft of refining words and sentences, which demands patience and a willingness to throw out what isn't working, that I must continue to develop. I've also been coaxed, through supervision, to think carefully about how to embody characters, and to link this to focalisation.

Reviewer: Speaking of characters, which of the characters is your favourite? And which character do you like least of all?

CAJ: It is easier for me to identify the character I like the least than the ones I like most. Long Woman's ward is not a favourite. I do feel sorry for her, but I don't like her very much. She's creepy. I pity her because she's physically abused by Long Woman, and dismissed by the other residents in the tenement as "just an idiot". But she's not. She has an intelligence that isn't of the usual sort. It's rather rodent-like, actually. She's manipulative; quite underhanded. Not someone I'd like to spend time with. An unpleasant character. Her home-made toys are enough to terrify anyone.

Reviewer: And your favourite character?

CAJ: As I said, that's more difficult for me. I like Bennie ka Nandi's determination and madness. I like Caretaker because he is the connecting glue between so many of the characters in the story, and between the old city and the new. But I would have to say Pig Woman is my favourite. She's the queen of the dump; larger than life, mythical, mysterious and eccentric. She owns an embalmed pig's head, oversees a recycling "empire", and earns money by feeding corpses to her hogs and arranging pit burials for the dead. She provides a lifeline to the nasuri, banished women who have fistulas. She gives them somewhere to stay before they die. Pig Woman is a fascinating character, and the least likely to fit the mould of victim. I have a sense that she creates her own destiny, and chooses the flatlands as first (not last) resort. A bit like

Al Swearengen in HBO's *Deadwood*. From your expression, I see you aren't familiar with *Deadwood* or Swearengen. Oh, you must watch it! The series is a superb, critical representation of America's Wild West. And Al Swearengen, played by Ian McShane, is the compelling, mean, foul-mouthed brothel owner who, essentially, rules that South Dakota town.

Reviewer: If you were to identify *Tenement* with a genre, which would it be?

CAJ: I've thought about that quite a bit. I was very disappointed with the EULAC judges' assessment that *Gorgon* was detective fiction. That is how it was introduced to the audience at the award ceremony in Johannesburg. I've never heard anything so far off the mark. God only knows why they thought it was a detective novel. I can speculate. Maybe they mistook the main character's obsession with the Rwandese family as the behaviour of an amateur detective. Quite inexplicable. In their world, characters aren't allowed to be curious and stalk other people unless they're detectives. As a result, I am more uptight about assigning *Tenement* to a genre than I should be.

Reviewer: Which genre would you prefer to be assigned to *Tenement*?

CAJ: African gothic, I suppose. The novel is set on the African continent. It isn't afraid of accepting that there is a Diaspora. People in my unnamed city arrive from across the continent, bringing with them their languages and cultures. Terms such as *salaula* and *zeru-zeru* and *nasuri* are important parts of the story I've told. So, too, are ceremonial dress and exotic textiles.

Reviewer: Why gothic, though?

CAJ: Most obviously because gothic is associated with the grotesque, gloom and the underworld. And, of course, gothic is linked to oppressive architecture that blows human scale out of the water. I like the edginess and bizarre lurking in certain African cities. I like the sense that certain

architecture, such as tenements, can be frightening, and people can disappear into these and never return. Who, for example, can enter Ponte Towers in Hillbrow, Johannesburg, and not feel unnerved? The same effect occurs when you enter Elwyn Court in the Point area in Durban. Elwyn Court is a massive place, nowhere near as high as Ponte, but it is a squat, wide building with more than a dozen flats on a single level. Addington Hospital, too, is nothing if it isn't industrialised gothic. Something to do with a medical institutional complex, a kind of threatening governmentality disguised as benign caring space.

Reviewer: Would you say that an African gothic is linked to the affirmations of a postcolonial "writing back" from the margins to the assumed centre?

CAJ: Others have made that point already. Gerald Gaylard, for example, has written about gothic in southern African novels, pointing out that when one hears mention of the word, Euro-centric connotations of bats, goblins, haunted castles are conjured up. There's also, as he points out, a rich tradition of southern gothic in America, associated with William Faulkner, Cormac McCarthy and Poe, that counters that Euro-centricity. Importantly, however, Gaylard has said that there is a gothic presence in southern African literature, reflective of thanatophilia. Big word, yes, but it comes from Thanatos which, as I mentioned before, is Freud's borrowed term for the death instinct. Gaylard means more than the customary association of thanatophilia as the fetishisation of the macabre and grotesque. He implies that gothic novels play with time and timelessness in order to reveal that human consciousness is relative. Gaylard argues that the southern African gothic genre, although underdeveloped, does embrace a transhistorical imagination. In short, the gothic genre lends itself well to a critical postcolonial imagination. What possibly could be wrong about that?

Reviewer: Are there elements of other genres in your novel?

CAJ: Well, of course, yes. Given what I've already said concerning my unease with simplistic genre categorisation. Certain characters seem to fit better with specific genres. If you consider Bennie ka Nandi and Orchidaceae, even Pig Woman, they could be associated with magical realism. Bennie, for example, has a conversation with a talking dog. The junkie in flat 505 communes with moths. And a quasi-scientific discourse is at work in the novel. You cannot describe cockroach sex, as I have done, and not sound like David Attenborough.

Reviewer: You wouldn't, though, describe your novel as wholly magical realist?

CAJ: No, definitely not. Defining magical realism is such a contested activity; I don't want to get into that debate. There are plenty of those who defend it and many who slate it, too. As part of my UNISA degree, I read Zakes Mda's *Heart of Redness* and had a protracted argument with David Lloyd, who marked my essay, about Mda's use of magical realism, myth – and to my mind – sexist representation of the Xhosa cattle killings and Nomqawuse. I relied on Helen Bradshaw's superb historical account to back up my claim that Mda misrepresents that young woman. And, further, that he ignores completely the fact that it wasn't loss of meat that lead to starvation, but the destruction of maize plants, the core ingredient of the Xhosa diet. Women were responsible for producing those crops. The food chain was gendered, that's Bradshaw's point. That tragedy wasn't only about dead cattle. But maize isn't sexy, nor is it as full of the visceral machismo of killing bulls, not so?

[Snorts.]

I wish I had come across Wole Ogundele's paper back then. It would have helped my argument. He pointed out that magical realism in African novels seems to be on a slippery slope, where historical imagination has been replaced with myth, and while such books may be

entertaining reads, history sneaks out the back door. Useful in Big Man politics, I think.

Reviewer: You're not a fan of Mda?

[A chair's legs are scraped briefly against the floor.]

Reviewer: Oh, oh... Let's move on... Your representation of the afterlife – it is not a religious one. Yet you have a religious character, Bennie, in your novel. Where do you stand on the afterlife and religion?

CAJ: I'm an atheist. There is no scientific evidence to support the idea that life or consciousness, in any form, continues after death. When you die, you die. You decompose in gory detail. Jim Crace has done a fantastic job, in *Being Dead*, showing decomposition in detached terms in a novel. I was inspired by that but I didn't want to repeat it. My novel is also not intended as an atheistic treatise on death. I'm not trying to be Richard Dawkins. On the other end of the spectrum, I'm also not trying to be Consuelo Roland nor making any attempt to rewrite her novel, *The Good Cemetery Guide*. *Tenement* is not grief therapy.

Reviewer: Let's consider something about who you are as a reader. Tell us about your reading habits. What books do you have on your nightstand right now?

CAJ: Camus' *The Stranger*, which I've just finished rereading. *Imagined Cities* by Robert Alter. That's a serious, academic, literary book about how cities are represented in the novel. Barbara Kingsolver's *Animal Dreams*. *Open Secrets* by Alice Munro. And something else, which I've forgotten. A pop psychology book, I think.

Reviewer: That's a big pile.

CAJ: Yes. Always.

Reviewer: Which of these are you actually reading?

CAJ: All of them. I read books simultaneously, unless, of course, I'm completely bowled over by one, and then end up reading it through the night.

Reviewer: Which book bowled you over recently?

CAJ: Meek's *The People's Act of Love*. I read it in one night and was sleep deprived the next day.

Reviewer: And what about writing? Describe how you write, and where you write.

CAJ: How I write?

Reviewer: Any aidez-memoire while you were writing?

CAJ: Of course, yes. I have a scrapbook full of cuttings from newspapers, postcards, images, photographs and sketches that I consider relevant stimuli. It is my *Tenement* scrapbook. In it, I have notes from interviews I conducted with undertakers and forensic entomologists. There are images from Catherine Chalmer's *American Cockroach* exhibition and reviews of her work. Plus references and page numbers from different books. Most of them are non-fiction works; quotes about engineering seawalls, cadavers, cockroach mating, crab anatomy. That sort of thing.

Reviewer: You mentioned relying on research studies you'd conducted years earlier. And you've just spoken about interviews that you did specifically for your novel. How important is research to your fiction?

CAJ: Critically important. I have not written about myself in my novel. At least not consciously so. There are no white, middle-class, over-qualified, underemployed women characters in *Tenement*. My characters have jobs that I've never had: undertaking, prostitution, cobbling, property management, scavenging. I had to learn about these things. I had to understand the basics of decomposition and climate change. I learnt about shoe repairs and shoemaking. I read dozens of studies, watched a half-dozen documentary films on dump-dwellers and informal recycling



activities. At the risk of sounding like Tom Wolfe and one of those New Journalism advocates, research is very important. It helps that I'm a research psychologist. Field work, desk top research, statistical analysis (thankfully not included in *Tenement*), all of it comes fairly easily to me.

Reviewer: In addition to feedback from your supervisor, did you receive feedback from other readers?

CAJ: Yes, I did. My sister-in-law and my sister read extracts. I sent the first chapter to a friend who works as a textbook publisher in the UK.

Reviewer: What feedback did they offer?

CAJ: Lara and Donna gave me a sense of how readers of popular fiction would respond. They were horrified by the bits that I hoped would be horrifying. They were moved by the scenes that I hoped would be moving.

Reviewer: Did you ever think of quitting?

CAJ: Yes. There was a period, of about two months in early 2009, when I despaired that anyone would "get" what I was trying to do. I thought my creative ambition had surpassed my skill and willpower.

[A clutch pencil is clicked several times.]

Reviewer: How did you motivate yourself to keep going?

CAJ: I'm stubborn. I would not let myself drop out of university. I wanted my MA in English, and I was not going to allow that to be knocked. That kept me going; it provided a timeframe within which to get this novel written. And, of course, I had encouragement from friends and family.

Reviewer: Two final questions now. Why should anyone buy your book?

CAJ: Because it is not a typical story about an African city. Because it is replete with unusual characters and full of strange behaviours, all of which occur in a context of massive, global change. It is set in an African

world that is recognisable and yet completely different from what we know. I hope people will want to read it, and reread it, because it challenges them to think about issues that we'd rather not consider: death, loneliness, abandonment, missed opportunities, the environment. That sort of thing.

Reviewer: What do you hope for now that you've had a book published?

CAJ: I'd lie if I said I did not wish for good sales figures, here and abroad. I hope, too, that *Tenement* receives some critical attention. I want it to signal that I have something interesting to say about my society, and that I do so in an entertaining, challenging, creative way. And, of course, I hope that it will make getting my next novel published easier.

[A small laugh.]

Reviewer: Thank you for your time and best of luck with the book sales.

CAJ: Thank you.

[Some papers are shuffled, some metallic clunks are heard. The recording stops.]

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