

***AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF BONE: AN ORIGINAL CYCLE OF  
DRAMATIC POEMS RESEARCHING THE  
PROBLEMATICS OF A RECONCEPTUALISATION OF  
THE FORMAL BOUNDARIES BETWEEN THE GENRES OF  
POETRY AND DRAMA***

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## DECLARATION

Submitted in fulfilment / partial fulfilment (*delete whichever is applicable*) of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the Graduate Programme in

English Studies, 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~~ / was not used (*delete whichever is applicable*) and that my Supervisor was informed of the identity and details of my editor. It is being submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy..... in the Faculty of Humanities, Development and Social Sciences, University of KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. None of the present work has been submitted previously for any degree or examination in any other University.

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\_\_\_\_\_  
Editor name & surname (*if applicable*)

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Note:

Earlier versions of the following poems have appeared in *Light and After* (deep south, 2010): “Without”, “Of Watching”, “Of Insomnia”, “Of Burning Ambition” and “The Room”.

I dedicate this work to my wife, Julia,  
and to the memory of my father.

SOLI DEO GLORIA

## **ABSTRACT**

*Autobiography of Bone* consists of a cycle of original dramatic poems and short poetic dramas which investigate the problematics of a reconceptualisation of the genre-based distinctions between poetry and drama. The work seeks to extend and then map the new territory revealed to me as a result of my experiments with form, and with the consequences that new forms have for content and meaning. The material in the cycle of poems presents and explores a multi-layered and wide-ranging, rather than unitary, response to issues of the body (specifically disability), memory and language. A concluding scholarly essay, “Orthopaedia” – Understanding the Writing Practice”, researches some of the theoretical and conceptual issues that informed the poems, including the influence of verse drama and the contemporary long poem, in an attempt to construct an archaeology of the writing process and the imagination of the writer.

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# **AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF BONE**

For who makes you different from anyone else?  
What do you have that you did not receive?  
And if you did receive it, why do you boast as though you did not?  
– 1 Corinthians 4:7



# ACT I

## DRAMATIS PERSONAE

I said so little.  
Days were short.

Short days.  
Short nights.  
Short years.

I said so little.  
I couldn't keep up.

– Czeslaw Milosz

## CHARACTER LIST

*Sitting.*

*Standing.*

*Staring off into the distance.*

*Staring out of the window of the car. Or of a seventh-floor hotel room.*

*Bending over to pick up something that has fallen out & smashed.*

MAN	:	Male / Singular / Present everywhere / Even When he is absent
WOMAN	:	Female / On her own / And only ever In one And the same place
WOMEN	:	Plural / Various / And always Wherever MAN appears
HE	:	The same as MAN <sup>1</sup>
SHE	:	Same too As WOMAN <sup>2</sup>
SHE (again)	:	Also the same

---

<sup>1</sup> But seen from the outside; from a distance; as in, 'He enters. He stands still. He looks around. He makes the sign of the Cross over the woman weeping in the corner.'

<sup>2</sup> But seen always through his eyes, though; as in, 'She is bored. She is thinking of someone else. She is no longer satisfied. She has released me from my vows.'

As WOMEN <sup>3</sup> /  
Alternating /  
With different  
Bust sizes

HIM : The one referred to /  
The one  
At the heart of it all

HER : Partner to HIM /  
Because  
She trusted

HER (again) : The other one /  
Implicated always /  
Any one  
Amongst the many  
Others

HUSBAND : Still <sup>4</sup>

WIFE : <sup>5</sup>

I : Singular /  
Replaced by HE /  
Absent /  
Yet everywhere  
Still implied

YOU : Afterwards /  
After it is all over /  
Fortunate  
Not to be casted.

---

<sup>3</sup> Some long, some short, some blonde, some brunette, some trimmed or totally shaved.

<sup>4</sup> But.

<sup>5</sup> No longer.

ETC.

*Other characters in the same room.*

*Who come in & go out.*

*Shaking their heads. Going 'rhubarbrhubarbrhubarb'.*

MR F. Has a wart on the side of his nose And a bald head Is rumoured to be having an affair with the lady of the house.

N. Bends in the wind all the time Double and sideways.

MR K. Wears soft slippers everywhere Because he has problems with his feet Brought about by drinking His skin is red Everywhere And flaking With every soft step.

MRS K. Wife of above Speaks quickly Wears old-fashioned 50s style glasses Constantly marks everything with a red pen Even the waning of the moon The direction of the wind.

J.E. Smells constantly of vomit And sour milk Her own.

THE B'S. Husband and wife He never says a word She speaks all the time Over everyone On his behalf.

J.O. Their son Postman by profession Although he only has one eye And cannot judge distances The distance between his hand And the edge of the sky.

V. Son number two Has done time for fraud Now only drinks and fishes Fishes and drinks Like a fish.

THE F'S. Husband and wife too He does not say much Nothing at all in fact She only wears very short crimplene skirts So that he can see her legs All the time And see what her legs are doing When they are not with him.

- MR B. (also called W.)  
Always wears a pair of oil-stained overalls Always appears in a shock of snow white hair Is always called upon to jump-start the brown Ford Cortina XLE (Big 6) On winter mornings.
- MR W.  
Only ever appears during school holidays The long ones The short ones are not worth it He carries a television set for rental Whenever he appears A Blaauwpunkt with 60cm screen The test pattern at one end The national anthem at the other.
- DR B.  
With a very big head And hands the size of a bunch of bananas Always wears a white safari suit With white shoes and long white socks That always stay up No matter what No matter what happens behind the small white door With rotating blade.
- X.  
Is not allowed inside the house Only appears in the outside scenes Only fetches and carries and digs and moves And says nothing Until his monologue just before the end.

PEDESTRIANS.

SHOPPERS.

PEOPLE IN THE QUEUE.

EVERYONE WAITING FOR THE SAME THING OR SOMETHING DIFFERENT THAT STILL ENDS UP BEING THE SAME AS EVERYONE ELSE, BUT IS NEVER THE THING THAT THEY REALLY EVER WANTED.

## WHAT HE WISHED FOR

*Motionless in a spotlight of black & white time.*

In the branches of the dead plum tree is a kite made of cardboard and striped plastic hazard tape.

On the way back he smelt something and he stopped and he looked down and he saw that there was smoke coming out from his shoes.

Underneath the old tyre swing the ground is hard and hollowed-out and bare.

It occurred to him then that the reason he always felt as if he were walking downhill was because he could not remember what a cloud looked like, that did not look like something else on the earth below it.

A bird with a long beak croaks.

So he took his hand out of his trouser pocket and a smell like creosote fell onto the road.

The wash-line has five wire strands strung between two metal poles painted with silver rust-proof paint. The poles are concreted into the ground.

He felt as if the eyes of everybody in the world were burning a hole through the silence of his thoughts.

The wind moves the dry leaves from the plane trees slowly across the cement driveway, until they reach the rusted gate.

And suddenly he wanted to break something.

The sun sinks slowly behind the smell of chocolate from the factory two streets away.

To smash it open. So that everything that was on the inside would be changed into the outside.

A cold afternoon. Late. Getting later. Inexorably. Colder.

Until there was nothing left that was underneath and behind and inside him. And he was inside-out. And shame-less. All to himself. For the very first time. When he knew that he was being looked at.

*& he closes his eyes.*

## A SHORT WALK

*With his head down, as usual, & his feet following on behind.*

i.

That night, the night in question, the dark of the undergrowth was deafening.

---

ii.

When he heard her voice the first time, he was struck by how much she sounded like someone he had never met.

---

iii.

The following morning, the mist did not lift until just before the moment when he closed his mouth and swallowed what she had given him.

---

iv.

He was forced to keep his bedroom light on all day, so that he could always tell where he was. So that he could tell when he was alone.

---

v.

Then, and only then, did he understand what it might feel like to have a hand of ice, a tongue of stone, a right foot of ash.

---

vi.

And that was when he felt like lying down and never standing up again. Not even to drink, or to cover his face. After it was all over.

---

vii.

But he had only ever owned one pair of boots his whole life. And they were black. And they followed him wherever he went.

---



viii.

And the light switch was on the far side of the room, where the ocean met the wall.

---

ix.

And he knew that God was expecting something of him.

---

x.

A hill was something he had always seen as the sign of a challenge.

---

xi.

It made him think of walking.

*Not very far. Just far enough.*

FIFTEEN THINGS HE CARRIED IN A SMALL TIN TIED UP WITH A RUBBER BAND IN HIS TOP POCKET

*Before they all fell out.*

- i) A small strip of magnet from the lining of a fridge door.
- ii) A dried-out helicopter seed.
- iii) The stub of a pencil only three inches long.
- iv) The rubber ring of a condom.
- v) A pink paper clip.
- vi) The sound of his father searching for breath.
- vii) A khaki button with four holes.
- viii) Never enough time.
- ix) A cracked white button with two holes.
- x) A very small silver safety pin.
- xi) For keeping his eyes in place.
- xii) One red wall plug for a two-inch drill.
- xiii) Two old keys.
- xiv) One for a back door to a house he had never lived in.
- xv) The other for a gate that could not lock.

REAL

He makes himself real by staring out of the cracked window.

He makes himself real with nothing inside him except the memory of her cracked shadow.

He makes himself real on his days off from the factory.

He makes himself real by dreaming with his eyes wide open and staring.

He makes himself real when there is nothing more real than dreaming to do.

He makes himself real and then stops and does it all over again for no reason at all.

He makes himself real by forgetting who he wanted to be when he still could remember what wanting was.

He makes himself real sitting in a wing-backed chair with his feet two inches off the ground.

He makes himself real when no-one is looking his way except her shadow.

He makes himself real when it is too cold for thought.

He makes himself real without help from anyone else.

He makes himself real although he does not really want to.

He makes himself real as a pure reflex, like closing his eyes when he sneezes, like blinking his eyes when he sleeps.

He makes himself real by not going anywhere that appears on a map.

He makes himself real with his shirt off.

He makes himself real with one safety boot off and the other one just undone and dangling.

He makes himself real.

And then he makes himself real all over again.

## WHEN

When everyone is a foreigner in their own sitting room.

When the sky is only interested in one thing.

When coming in and going out happen at the same time.

When sitting down is not the same as waiting.

When she walks in and does not see him and walks straight out again.

When he stands up as if he is about to say something. But then cannot find the words to match his feelings.

When he bends down and cannot straighten up again.

When she finds him in the same position she left him seven years before.

When it is all too much. But that still does not stop it never being enough.

When silence is his only answer.

When the wind runs out of steam.

When he cannot tell whether his shirt is on back-to-front or not.

When he wakes up in the middle of the night with only the punch-line of a joke remaining in his head.

When masturbation no longer works for him. Because he has forgotten the shape that her skin once took.

When only a scalpel is capable of making him feel something.

When forgetting is no longer an option for anyone that he knows.

When the wind lifts everything off the ground.

When the sky suddenly drops off the ledge of his window.

TRUE OR FALSE

*The Money or the Box.*

Men are men because of what grows inside their pants.

All foreigners are thieves.

Women are dirty four days out of every month.

The earth is overcrowded and it is time someone did something about it.

The neighbours are not like us.

Children should be beaten on a daily basis so that they stand up straight and respect their elders.

All foreigners are lazy and deserve what they get.

Young girls dress the way they do because they want to get it.

It is a biological fact that men cannot control what happens inside their pants.

Everyone not like us is different.

Poor people have no feelings.

The simple-minded are happy.

Some lives are more valuable than others.

Some people are more equal than others.

Sometimes (when the wind blows from the right direction) you can smell the end coming.

## SIXTEEN THINGS HE OWNED

*Or at least had permanent use of.*

A right hand with callused skin on its palm and the tips of its fingers.

A right shoulder that burned black as a cane-field in winter.

A left foot with bunched toes, especially the big one.

A right foot whose big toe kept sliding in underneath the others.

A pine desk with four drawers that had seen all of the houses he had ever lived in. Including the ones he only walked through.

A right knee that gave in at every step.

A habit of smelling his fingers after he had been to the bathroom.

A wandering right eye.

An immortal thirst.

A silicone tube in the top of his spine.

A fear that time was running out. Not just for him. But for everyone whose names he forgot.

A stick with a handle like a bird's beak.

More thirst.

And more. Immoral this time.

A sentimental weakness for the smell of jasmine in Spring, the warm wind in the evening in Autumn.

An overwhelming desire to see whether her pubic hair was also red.

TWELVE OTHER THINGS HE FORGOT HE USED TO CARRY AROUND WITH HIM

*Just for good luck.*

- i) A small amount of belly-button fluff.
- ii) Three teeth with flaking silver fillings.
- iii) A persistent ringing in his ears, muted usually, but overpowering when in the presence of pleasure.
- iv) The other wandering eye.
- v) Five litres of O+ blood.
- vi) An unknown amount of saliva, that sometimes felt as if he were carrying all of the seven seas about in his mouth.
- vii) The desire to run away, as far and as fast as his two short legs could carry him.
- viii) Far too much unspent semen.
- ix) The thought of what his father looked like with his one dead eye staring, and the other one fast asleep and dreaming.
- x) A twisted right tibia.
- xi) An inability to release all the urine that built up inside him.
- xii) Merciful, though unfortunately, only ever intermittent, forgetfulness.

## ONE VERSION OF THE ROAD

And the sun was behind his head

And it was much later than he thought

And he thought that he had nothing more to say

And he did not know whether he should

And he thought that he would anyway

And the sun was inside his eyes

And he tried to imagine where the day before that day had gone

And it smelled of turpentine

And it smelled of disinfectant

And he cut his finger on its edge

And he sucked it

And for a moment he tasted what was inside him

And then he closed his eyes

And he saw that he was wrong

And there was a shadow of a sky

And it lay across the brown field

And all the doors stood wide open

And the sound of water came out

And he understood that what was inside him would always make the sound of blood.



ANOTHER VERSION

*Of the same road.*

And it was raining

And they had stopped to help

But their infant was asleep in the back

And there was a silence over all

And then someone was calling

In-between the glass and the metal

And out of the early morning mist

And that was when their dread arrived

That was what made them get out

And though there was nothing they could do

And though they had no choice but to do it

Dazzled by so much blood and glass

And so forward across the oil and the fuel

And forward and away and toward their dread

When behind them around the corner

And around the corner at top speed

And looking behind them they could only

And only watch

And they watched and he watched

And they watched and she watched through wide-open hands

Approaching in slow-motion

And braking and sliding and then

And then they had watched it all

Then it was the past tense of everything

And she was a pillar of salt at the side of the road

And he was a stone feeling for the rest of what passed for time between them, what it felt like not to ever feel again.

*End.*

## WHAT HE DID

He was the one who

steadied the ladder /

passed the tools /

carried the brushes /

fetches the spare globe /

unrolled the extension cable /

held the end of the plank /

the end of the tape measure /

the end of the string /

sat in the back /

watched their bags /

kept the score /

opened the gate /

closed it again behind them /

waited for the rest to come back.

## WHAT SHE DID

*When she had finished doing everything he was meant to.*

She was the one who

burped the child /

passed the towel /

carried the dish /

fetches the hot-water bottle /

unrolled the bandage /

held the end of the skipping rope /

the end of the long elastic /

the end of the little pink string /

sat alongside /

watched from the sidelines /

kept her side up /

clean /

yeast free /

opened her legs /

closed them tight afterwards /

waited to be useful again.

## MAP OF HOME

*Unfolded. Spread out in front of him.  
Impossible to close.*

In the photograph, her right knee is raised  
and folded

Her costume is black

Two thin arms hold out the sun  
from her eyes

There is a mountain on one side of her

A river on the other

She stops waving, in the photograph, and puts down  
her white hands

She puts them into the river

The mountain has a name; and the name is written  
on her back

He turns the photograph over

Only to find out that she is blank.

*Hold just like that.*

## ACT II

### ANATOMY OF A SCENE

What matters in Tripp's still lifes is not that the painter applies his skill and mastery to a more or less fortuitous assemblage of objects, but the autonomous existence of things to which, like blindly furious working animals, we stand in a subordinate and dependent relationship. Because (in principle) things outlast us, they know more about us than we know about them: they carry the experiences they have had with us inside them and are – in fact – the book of our history opened before us.

– W. G. Sebald

## ESTABLISHING SHOT

*Back garden. Rusted iron gate. Long grass. Fig tree. With sticky white sap. That makes*

*him embarrassed. Around his sister. Dripping tap. Mint. Patch of brown grass where.*

*He and his brother run. On the other side. Precise rows of beans. The same*

*of potatoes. Tall mealies. Sand clods. For war games.*

*Plum tree*

*with rough branches. Transparent exo-skeletons of beetles.*

*Lemon tree. With pile of bricks and rusted poles*

*underneath. The threat of spiders.*

*Theme*

*tune of Afrikaans radio serial.*

*Chopin*

*piano etude. And Berg*

*wind.*

*And stopping.*

*And*

*standing.*

*And remembering it all.*



## LIST OF ANTAGONISTS<sup>6</sup>

*In no particular order.*

- SHE : The pretty blonde soap opera star.  
Who liked his shoulders.
- SHE : The red-haired one.  
Who would not go away.  
The same as the one.  
He could not get away from.
- SHE : The ichthyologist.  
With the flat chest.  
Who liked his hands.
- SHE : The one half his age.  
With breasts that looked away from each other.  
Who walked all the way from here to there.  
Just to see him.
- SHE : Who did it all for a chicken special.  
And Coke.  
In the child's bedroom.  
On the child's unmade bed.
- SHE : Who was wetter than all the others.  
Who brought him strawberries when he was ill.  
Who bathed his foot in Savlon and in salt.
- SHE : Who got away to another country.  
Before anything could happen.  
Before she even knew.  
That something could have happened.

---

<sup>6</sup> Antagonist: Someone who smells like someone else.  
Someone whom he thought could help him solve his longing.  
Someone he used as an excuse. For not looking away. Not moving to another stool.

SHE : Who did not exist.  
Who only existed in his veins.  
Who helped him to urinate.  
By swelling his veins with blood.

PLUS ALL THE OTHERS WHO WALKED PAST.

WHO LOOKED UP.

WHO DID NOT LOOK AWAY.

WHO SAW PAST WHAT THEY SAW.

## LIST OF PROPS

*In order of appearance.*

1. Cold formica table with aluminium legs.
2. Two kitchen chairs with grey plastic seats.  
For herself  
and for the other one.
3. Old office swivel chair back-less with  
knitted cushion. For him to sit on.  
And issue orders from.
4. Four cups and saucers mismatched.  
Three used (though never at the same  
time). And one  
for a guest who does not appear.
5. Cracked soup plate (his favourite).  
For his morning porridge. Made  
every day by her.  
With sugar and butter.
6. Transistor radio that plays the Market Report,  
“Consider Your Verdict”. And “The  
Money or the Box”.
7. Linoleum floor worn where the old office swivel  
chair has been dragged across.  
Repeatedly. In his efforts to plough  
the other one’s field.
8. The smell of milk that has boiled over on the  
stove and burned.  
Far too many times.

- |     |                     |  |
|-----|---------------------|--|
| 9.  | Dictionary          | Afrikaans / English.<br>To translate the words ‘unfulfilment’<br>and ‘in vehement denial’. |
| 10. | Tap that drips      | from the opening curtain<br>right through to the end.                                      |
| 11. | HB Pencil           | blunt. For practising<br>the spelling of his condition.                                    |
| 12. | Short-handled knife | in case of obtuseness.<br>Hers. Maybe.<br>In case she does not listen.                     |
| 13. | Front door key      | that tastes of his aftershave.   |
| 14. | Cracked stick       | that belongs to someone who does<br>not appear until long after the end.                   |
| 15. | Grass broom         | for removing all evidence<br>of infection.   |
| 16. | Sash window         | that chooses not to see a single thing.  |
| 17. | Nothing else        | because everything else is imaginary.  |

*Check.  
Cross-check list.  
Store away for next night.*

## PROPPED UP

Against

the moon

Because

he keeps slipping  
over  
when he opens his mouth.

On a ledge

overlooking the sky

Because

after the glass  
there is nothing else  
left inside.

## LIST OF SHOTS (I)

*Wide angle.*

#1.

Broad daylight.  
Back yard with timber  
and spider webs.

#2.

She walks from  
left to right and  
exits behind a pile of car tyres.

#3.

Hold. Five seconds.

#4.

Her shadow  
on the white winter grass  
unpinning her long hair.

#5.

Then same but  
with a three-legged dog  
sniffing her crutch.

#6.

He with a spade

#7.

digging a hole  
in the black earth.

#8.

Her shadow watches.  
Drinks straight from the bottle.

#9.  
He from behind  
in the hole  
up to his knees.

#10.  
He from behind  
up to his waist.

#11.  
She fetches something

#12.  
wrapped in newspaper

#13.  
from a place  
in the shape of a doll.

#14.  
He with the hole  
now over his head.

#15.  
She says something  
to him  
but there is no sound.

#16.  
She pulls  
him out.

#17.  
He tosses the spade in.

#18.  
She drops something

#19.  
wrapped in old newspaper

#20.  
into the hole  
shaped like a doll.

#21.  
His shadow  
kicks the three-legged dog  
away.

#22.  
Her shadow  
does not know what to do  
next.

#23.  
Their hands scratch  
the inside-out earth  
back to where it came from.

#24.  
Continue

#25.  
as darkness falls  
heavily about their shoulders.

#26.  
Night.

#27.  
Black heap  
where the hole was.



#28.  
She

#29.  
with a bucket of water

#30.  
from the bottom of the ocean  
where the light  
only has blackness in it.

*Cut.*

## LIST OF SHOTS (II)

*Close-up. (Version 1: Tracking.)*

#i.

Subtitled: *The start.*

At the base of the spine.  
Snake-like. No other description.  
After 40 years  
it is still sensitive to touch.

#ii.

Right leg, below the knee,  
vertical, 10cms with  
6 cross-stitches. To keep him  
on the straight and narrow.

#iii.

Right foot, outside ankle,  
crescent-moon, approximately 12cms,  
faded stitches, impossible to count.  
In order to stop him  
going over.

#iv.

Subtitled: *The practice.*

Right wrist, circular, jagged,  
4cms with no stitches.  
Windows are actually meant  
for looking through.

#v.

Left foot, outside ankle,  
crescent-moon, approximately 12cms,  
with 8 cross-stitches.  
Because this one was going  
the same way as the other.

#vi.

Same foot, top of ankle,  
vertical, 10cms with  
6 cross-stitches. Because  
he had to be pulled back  
with force.

#vii.

Same again, inside ankle,  
1.5cms, no stitches. Just  
a nick from an electric saw with  
rotating blade used to remove  
old plaster cast.

#viii.

Subtitled: *The scare.*

Back of the neck, from  
just below the shoulders to  
the top of the spine, straight  
as a ruler, 15cms with 10 cross-stitches.  
In order to insert a silicone shunt.  
In order to prevent him losing  
the rest of his feelings.

#ix.

Right hand, palm and  
fingers, calluses  
and corns, various,

#x.

due largely  
to walking

#xi.

on uneven air.

#xii.

Everything else  
comes and goes.

## LIST OF SHOTS (III)

*Close-up. (Version 2: Still.)*

#1.

The fine down  
of sleep  
above her top lip.

#2.

The quiet space  
where his head  
fits

#3.

in-between her breasts.

#4.

Her belly stretched  
across a miracle.

#5.

The round stillness

#6.

where all of his hunger  
used to be.

#7.

Hope  
and more of it  
in handfuls.

*Fade extra slowly.*

## LIST OF SOUND EFFECTS

i.

Bare feet

walking across his past, when he stands still to listen.

ii.

The moon

emptying a bowl of ashes into the back garden, behind the lemon tree.

iii.

A grass broom

sweeping up the pieces of a calamity from off the kitchen floor.

iv.

Rusted wire

squeaking on the old spring of his heel, as he follows far behind her.

v.

Yellowed pages

flapping in the wind from a dream about a wind with a broken wing.

vi.

The sun

sliding behind the line of plane trees that stand all along the long avenue of his childhood.

vii.

A small animal

running all night on a wheel in the dead of night when all else is still as a grave.

viii.

The grave

of his long-dead father slowly growing over with grass and weeds

in the Mountain Rise Cemetery that is filled to capacity.

## SITTING

*With his eyes closed & his hands folded in his lap*

on a plastic chair at a wake for his friend stabbed to death by an off-duty policeman.

*With his eyes open & his arms hanging by his side*

on a small wooden bench made by his grandfather from a World War 2 packing crate.

*With his eyes squinting & his hands on top of his head*

on a five hundred million-year-old block of black dolomite in a landscape of sand and stone.

*With his eyes unseeing & his hands between his legs*

on a patch of cold sand in the early morning while the mist hangs over the waves like a gauze dressing.

*With his eyes staring wide & his hands folded across his chest*

on the low lime-washed wall of a shaded stoep in a small Karoo town.

*With his eyes looking into the distance & his hands upon his knees*

on a log in the late afternoon when the memory of her long white legs suddenly returned.

*With his eyes behind dark glasses & his hands twitching inside his pockets*

on the cardboard box of books from his study in the house he no longer calls home.

*With his eyes pinched tight & his balled fingers digging deep into his palms*

on a green plastic sheet across a high metal table while the surgeon with big hands removed his cast with large steel pliers and an electric saw with rotating blade.

## SITTING AND WAITING AND WATCHING

*From an early age.*

Rocks Plastic chairs Bar stools

Wooden logs Stumps of trees

Grassy banks Cold concrete steps

Bricks Boxes Wobbly benches

Narrow steel railings Table tops

Cold tile floors Dusty carpets

Hospital beds Tyre swings Sandy

Beaches Bus stops The edge

Of the bath Paint tins Backseats

Of cars Front seats The bonnets

Of cars White-washed stoep walls

The edge of the escarpment End

Of the pavement Corner of a desk

Old office swivel chair without

Any back Windowsill overlooking

The vanishing point of the past.

STANDING

*Also with his eyes closed.*

*But with his hands raised in front of him. Like a mantis.*

S: All lined up in a row.  
During assembly in.  
The hall with his eyes.  
Closed murmuring the.  
Lord's Prayer losing his.  
Balance swaying like the.  
Mast in the film Moon-  
Fleet about smugglers in.  
Sailing ships during a.  
Storm while he is afraid.  
To open his eyes because.  
It is the Lord's Prayer and.  
He feels he is going to.  
Fall and the headmaster is.  
Watching and maybe but.  
He is not sure he did fall.  
Over once into the row in.  
Front and he was taken to  
The sick bay as usual where.  
He hid the whole day  
Because maybe the next.  
Day everyone will have.  
Forgotten so he clenched.  
Every muscle and nerve.  
In his body to stop himself.  
Snapping like a mast.



## STAGE DIRECTIONS

HE

Sits staring for a long time through his study window at nothing at all.

SHE

Folds and re-folds and folds again a map of the world until it is as small as an old love letter.

HE

Sits staring for a long time through his window at a man in the road beating a wriggling rat with a stick.

SHE

Adjusts the twisted shoulder-strap of her bra, and feels how cold and clammy her skin is, as if she has a fever.

HE

Sits in the deep wing-backed chair in the corner of his study and reads the address on the back of a grey envelope.

SHE

Gets up from her bed slowly, and sways, and stares slowly from the white wardrobe to the white dressing table and back again.

HE

Sits in the deep wing-backed chair in the corner of his study and stares at the boxes of books piled up in the centre of the room.

SHE

Closes her eyes and makes a fist, and feels again the way he used to lift her hand slowly and place it upon his penis, while he thought she was sleeping. Although she was not.

HE

Buries his face inside the grey envelope.

SHE

Goes outside, where the wind blows and the trees bend, and she washes the red mud from a pair of black gumboots, then stands them upside down to dry.

HE

Slides onto the floor of his study, on the old carpet, and sits with his legs straight out in front of him and bends over slowly and puts his head on his knees and sits like that, for a very, very long time.

SHE

Looks up at the hovering grey hills and the watery sky, and knows that it is the end, and that he will never think of her in the same way again.

HE

Stands up slowly in the following manner: first he rolls over onto his side, with his hands flat together on the floor and his elbows straight, then he folds his legs behind him and pushes himself up off the floor so that he ends up on his hands and knees, like a child pretending to be a dog. After that he takes hold of the corner of his desk and pulls himself up. It is like this every time.

SHE

Is racked by such sobbing as she has never felt before for anyone in her life. Except her father whom she loved not as a daughter but as a woman, and who died in her arms while her mother stood there swaying slowly and staring.

HE

Feels only emptiness as he stands there in the centre of his small study, swaying slowly, staring about him. Like a video camera.

*Repeat.*

## CLOSING SHOT

*Bare stage. Beach. Bright sunlight. Pointed wind. High tide.*

*Nothing else.*

*Perhaps. Long-horned cow. Perhaps crow. Pecking  
soiled sack.*

*Log downstage. Worn smooth. By rhythmic  
waves. Rolling.*

*Pause. Smell of salt. Smell of wet sand.*

*Smell of*

*thoughtlessness. Solitariness.*

*Long pause.*

*Nothing else. Just. Wind.*

*Sunlight.*

*Heavy waves. Bare*

*stage. Log*

*slowly. Drying*

*out.*

ACT III

THE SAME ROOM

**Characters:**

S – Speaker. Woman. Age indeterminate.

W – Woman. In her late thirties.

M – Man. In his seventies.

N – Nurse. Woman.

S:           A room  
  
              Late afternoon light  
  
              She sits at the bedside  
  
              The strangely absent smell of disinfectant  
  
                  [*Beat*]  
  
              A room  
  
              She sits at the bedside  
  
              A silent television mounted in the ceiling above the bed  
  
              Bicycles going round and round a black track  
  
                  [*Beat*]  
  
              A room  
  
              She sits at the bedside  
  
              She looks at him  
  
              He is sleeping  
  
              She almost does not recognise who he has become  
  
              But then she recognises his hands  
  
              Then she remembers  
  
                  [*Beat*]  
  
              He is sleeping his eyes are closed  
  
              He is afraid to sleep in this place to close his eyes

[*Beat*]

She sits at his bedside

And listens to his breathing

Shallow rough snagging on something that cannot be seen

Beneath the surface of the white blankets

Beneath the thin lids of his closed eyes

[*Beat*]

The same room

He almost does not recognise her

M: My God

You is it is it really you

W: Yes it's me

M: I almost didn't recognise you

S: She wants to reply but does not

She wants to say

W: (*thinks*) You've become so frail so dishevelled and frail I almost didn't recognise you too then you opened your small hands and I smelled you

S: But she does not

M: What the hell do you want here

[*Beat*]

S:           The same room  
  
              He stares at the woman she has become  
  
              Wonders if her skin still carries the same scars the same birthmarks and  
              moles  
  
              Wonders if her skin still smells of talcum powder and Vicks

M:           You will regret this believe me you will regret this

W:           I am already

                  [*Beat*]

S:           The same room  
  
              She sits at the bedside  
  
              The long silence balanced between them like a see-saw  
  
              Like a rusted see-saw in a neglected playground

                  [*Beat*]

              She sits she stands up she stretches

              She bends over his bed

W:           Are you thirsty you really should drink something when last did you  
              have something to drink you should drink at least six glasses a day it's  
              not difficult once you get used to it I start off first thing in the morning  
              with a glass of warm water it's good for

S:           He shakes his head

M:           It makes me nauseous



S: She does not know what to say next

Then

W: Are you at least managing to sleep

S: He shakes his head

W: Too much noise too much light

S: He shakes his head

M: No I can't sleep on my back

W: Me too remember

M: Remember what

W: When I had my appendix out when I had my tonsils out and they gave me ice-cream and jelly and blood came out of my mouth and you gave me a glass of water to rinse my mouth but I couldn't spit properly because my mouth was still numb from the anaesthetic and it all went down the front of my pyjamas.

M: Yes I remember but it was in the dentist's chair and you were screaming blue bloody murder

[*Beat*]

S: The room

She sits at the bedside

Silence

He stares past her out of the window

All he can see is another wing of the building

Concrete and glass and lights shining in all of the windows

M: How long has it been

S: He asks

But makes sure he does not look at her

W: Since

M: You know damn well don't make me say it

W: To the exact day and hour

M: Yes exact day and hour

W: So long I can't remember

[*Beat*]

M: I put my name down for porridge jungle oats for breakfast but when it came this morning I suddenly couldn't face it I had the spoon already in the air it was full but my hand just froze

S: She puts her hand on his thin arm

W: It's alright it doesn't matter

S: He stares past her out of the window

M: Easy for you to say you weren't there

[*Beat*]

S: She sits at the bedside

She waits for him to come back from the bathroom

She stares at the silent television

Cars going round and round a black track

She stares at the impression of his body left upon the sheet

A body older than she imagined his would ever become

[*Beat*]

Again the room

He holds his pyjama trousers up with one hand and with the other he clutches the cold metal end of the bed

W: Are you sure you don't want me to help you

M: I'm not a cripple I may be old but I can still walk by myself

S: She wants to apologise but does not

His pyjama pants are stained his shirt is buttoned skew

M: Don't look at me

S: She looks away she looks down

He shuffles slowly holding his trousers up with one hand

She pretends to look for something in her handbag while he eases himself slowly back onto the bed

He is panting heavily but she pretends not to notice

She pretends not to notice the sour smell of urine that hangs around him

W: I'll come again tomorrow morning

M: Why

S: She ignores him

W: Don't you want me to bring you something

S: Silence

W: A magazine some fruit or cordial you should try and read use the time while you're lying here or a newspaper I know you've never liked to read a book

M: Takes too long

W: I know but I can still bring you something a girly magazine you always

M: I left my reading glasses at home

W: Fine then good-bye

[*Beat*]

S: The upholstery of her hired car smells of air freshener country fragrance or jasmine

Outside her hotel she notices the headlines of a newspaper billboard  
'Thieves steal dead dog'

[*Beat*]

The room again

He watches the open door

He lies alone in the dark room

He watches the staff cross to and fro across the open door

He watches them standing holding carrying pushing pulling counting  
writing measuring talking smiling frowning yawning bending sauntering  
running

He watches the open door

He thinks back to when he saw her last

When she was still a child

When she wore her hair short like a boy

When she played on the beach with her bucket and spade

[*Beat*]

That night she dreams that she wakes up in the middle of the night as she  
used to and hears him go out the front door as he used to not even bothering  
to be quiet and close it and lock it behind him and drive off with the key in  
his pocket

As he always used to

[*Beat*]

The room again

She stands in the doorway

His back is to her and she watches the shallow rise and fall of his  
shoulders

She looks at the tubes travelling in and out of the bed

She looks at the fluids running in and out of the tubes running in and out  
of the bed red fluids yellow fluids clear as air

She does not look at him

She thinks

W: (*thinks*) I don't know how much more of this I can take I don't know what I'm doing here why the hell did I come back I should've left things just as they were heard about it all months later from some long-lost relative who suddenly remembered me

S: She thinks

W: (*thinks*) I really really don't want to be here God help me help me get out of here

M: How long have you been here

W: Only a few minutes I didn't want to wake you

M: I wasn't asleep I was just resting I'm not used to waking up so bloody early

W: I didn't want to wake you

M: I wasn't asleep I was just thinking just lying here with my eyes closed and thinking

W: What about

S: Pause

M: I don't know how much more of this I can take

S: Pause

W: You'll be out of here soon

M: No I won't and you bloody-well know it

[*Beat*]

S: Same room

Silence between them

The sour smell of his body between them and of his breath and his fears

[*Beat*]

Same room

Silence between them

He closes his eyes

In the corridor outside someone drops a metal object

And for a moment he almost remembers something

It flashes like a fish surfacing for a second from the black water of a deep lake

It flashes like a hint of perfume

And is gone

W: We have to talk you know that we have to straighten things out between us I've only got a few days then I have to go back don't know when I'll be able to come back it's expensive and I have a big commission I need to finish before the end of the month

[*Beat*]

W: I know it's hard for both of us but we have to at least try I don't want anything to happen and I didn't

M: What

W: You know

M: Get a chance to pour out all your hatred onto me

W: Yes yes that what else

[*Beat*]

S: The room again

Again the same

He hears a train rolling he opens his eyes

He sees the sea

On the silent television the sea rolls

Black waves and white waves

Black waves and white

He opens his eyes

[*Beat*]

*She* is there he sees *her*

On the beach running

On the beach holding her broad sun hat on with one hand

Calling to him with the other

Calling to him to follow her

Into the black train of the waves the rolling waves

The black water



[*Beat*]

M: I dreamed last night that I was swimming in a public pool alone the water was so cold I couldn't breathe I couldn't wake up

W: That happens to me often

M: I woke up gasping the staff thought it was the end they heard me and came running I saw the disappointment in their eyes

[*Beat*]

S: *She* is there he sees *her*

Standing in a forest in the mist her back to him

Standing in a forest in the mist with the child in her arms turning slowly to look at him and he sees

He sees it in her eyes

[*Beat*]

Round and round on the black track the cars still race

Silently

[*Beat*]

He closes his eyes

He does not want to

But he sees nevertheless

And he remembers it all

[*Beat*]

Suddenly for an inexplicable reason she remembers the red letters of a newspaper billboard

'Man saws off dog's head'

[*Beat*]

The room

She is not sitting she is not sitting at his bedside

She stands at the window her back to him

She stands at the window and watches the hadedas in a dry yellow field  
outside three hadedas and a single white egret

M: What did she say when you told her what did she say when you told her  
you were coming to see me did she did she say anything did she give you  
a message for me did she did she swear at me did she cry what was she  
wearing does she still cut her hair short does she still wear black all the  
time

S: Three hadedas and a single white egret

W: Yes

M: Yes what

S: But she does not turn

M: What

W: Yes she gave me a message to give to you

S: But she does not want him to see her face she does not want to see his face

W: She said she said 'get better soon'

[*Beat*]

S: He stands at the window and looks out

An uncertain hour in his memory

A dry yellow yard thin grass three slack strands of washing line strung  
between old poles a plastic dish in a pool of mud beneath a dripping tap a  
dog on three legs up and down the fence barking barking

He thinks

He thinks

M: (*thinks*) I can't do it

S: He remembers thinking then

That there was simply no way on earth that he could do it no way on earth  
he could go on that there was nothing left to go on for that he had burned  
and broken every living thing he could lay his small soft hands upon and  
that he would do it all over again every savage bit of it if only if only to  
avoid standing there the order from the court in his hand his old suitcase  
and a cardboard box tied up with string on the floor at his feet the room as  
empty and cold as his chest

[*Beat*]

He stands at the window

He holds onto the cold windowsill and looks out

All he can see is another wing of the building

Concrete and glass

A woman crossing a courtyard below looks up suddenly

A small mouth half-open as if holding something fragile

Eyes he cannot make out at this distance

[*Beat*]

The room

Silence

The curtains drawn light dim as if under water as if under a dream

She sits at the bedside

Long past visiting hours

She sits at his bedside

No-one comes to ask her to leave

[*Beat*]

She remembers

The fragrance of the yesterday today and tomorrow bush that stood at the side of the house where the dog would always go to relieve itself

A swing made out of an old car tyre that left a deep impression like a game of noughts and crosses on the underside of her legs

How to spell the word separate

That she swore never to wash her hand after Duncan Fauré from the rock band Rabbit wrote his name on it at a concert at the Odd Fellows Hall

That she was the first girl in her class to get a bra

That he always used to call it a ze-bra

Climbing the big plum tree that stood in the back of the garden and imagining that she was in the rigging of an old sailing ship in the middle of a storm in the middle of a chase to the death between herself and a band of bloodthirsty pirates who would shave off all her hair if they ever caught her and make her wear a patch over her one eye and urinate standing up like the rest of them

The tune of Greensleaves being played on a cracked plastic recorder

The cardboard box of plastic recorders that stood in the corner of the classroom and that she was afraid to touch because the recorders were always full of other children's spit and sticky from their hands

That the line "In Flores in the Azores Sir Richard Grenville lay" was the first bit of a poem she ever committed to memory

That forever after long after he had left the house keys still smelled of him of his small soft hands and his aftershave

[*Beat*]

She remembers the smell of *her* hands

floor polish and Lifebuoy soap and raw minced meat

[Beat]

She wants to say

W: (*thinks*) I won't leave you I must go now I have no choice it is late I am tired I will be here until the end I promise I won't let you go alone I will sit here and hold you and hold you so tight that you will not be able to leave and I will scream and kick if they come to take me away because you must not go before I have said everything before I have told you how much I do not love you how much I have not been able to get you out of my head all these long years wherever I went no matter how far how much I cannot cannot not still love you

S: She wants to tell him

The truth

But the truth has no sound

[Beat]

The room

She sits at the bedside

This is her chance

She wants to wants to wants to wants

She does not want to live the rest of her life in regret

W: I'll bring you clean clothes in the morning I'll take your old clothes and get them washed and bring you clean clothes in the morning she says

M: Why are you doing this after everything I did

S: Silence.

M: Why why

W: I don't know I don't I wish I knew

S: Then he is alone again

In the room that is growing colder by the day

And a woman on the television with long black hair and red red lips tries to persuade him to buy

'goodandcleanandfreshtralalaextraspecialdiscountbonuspackwithfreegiftsa mpleextralonglastingsoftandsmoothwashingpowederforfrontendloadersbu yonegetonefreespecialofferwhilestockslastonly'

[*Beat*]

That evening she goes to the supermarket and she buys  
1 pack of regular tampons because she had noticed a trace of blood in the toilet bowl that afternoon and perhaps that was why she had lost her temper and sworn at the female security guard who had asked her to open the boot of her rented car when she left him

1 tube of toothpaste with added teeth whitener because she had not been able to stop smoking (as she had promised herself before she came because for some childish reason she did not want him to know that she smoked, like *her*), and she certainly was not going to be able to stop now

1 packet of Courtleigh

and a cheap-shit lighter because she had thrown her old one away when she had promised to give up

1 pack of Gillette razor blades because just because

1 packet of Romany Cream biscuits (original flavour) for him because she remembered he liked them because she remembered him sitting in his green Lay-Z-Boy chair and eating them straight out of the packet just like that all gone and not even offering her one

1 bottle of orange squash with no extra sugar (also for him)

and a half-tub of rum-and-raisin ice-cream that she will eat all on her own sitting in her hotel room staring at the pale pink walls and then hate herself and hate him and hate *her* whom she had thought she had always and would always love and then stick her finger down into her throat deep deep down like she always used to and vomit up the whole stinking brown mess of her sticky life

[*Beat*]

They bring him a shiny aluminium dish covered with a lid

And they set it in front of him on his shiny aluminium-topped trolley that fits neatly over his bed and moves backwards and forwards on small squeaking wheels

And they lift up the back of his bed

And they prop him up with pillows behind his back

And they say

M & W: There there how's that feeling better now eat up before it gets cold

S: And then they leave

But he is unable to lift off the lid

Starving though he is to the point of frenzy he cannot take off the lid of the aluminium dish no matter how hard he tries

[*Beat*]

In her dreams that night she sees the room

She sees him with his sunken face and his staring eyes

She sees his shrivelled skin blue with blotches and thin as tracing paper

In her dreams that night she is unable to sleep because she is afraid that her mobile phone will ring as soon as she drifts off

That her phone will ring and a woman's voice she does not know will tell her that it is all over

That she has lost the one opportunity still remaining to her to get back at him

For *her*

[*Beat*]

In her dreams she wakes up as soon as she falls asleep

Over and over again

[*Beat*]

He wishes he could stop remembering the taste of her dry skin

He wishes he could stop remembering her stained hands

He asks for something to help him

But they bring him a sleeping tablet instead

M: No no no no no no

S: But they cannot hear him

M: No it isn't sleep that I want no

It is amnesia

S: But they seem unable to hear him

They stand a long way off and reach their long arms across the distance  
between them in order to place the tablet under his mouth

They hold a glass of water up to his lips and force him to drink

He tries to spit out the tablet but he does not seem to be able to control his  
tongue

[*Beat*]

Darkness

A wind lifts the yellow moon off the horizon and holds it up high for all  
the world to see

[*Beat*]

A pale pink room

Now she resorts to a slim razor blade across the instep of her foot

Where no one will see



[*Beat*]

A terrible fear more terrible than his fear of death takes hold of him and he wants to cry

Like an abandoned child

He tells himself that he will wake up in the morning and it will all it will all it will all be alright

[*Beat*]

But when morning comes there is a tube in his nose to help him breathe

And a machine in the corner next to the bed that flashes

And a creeping cold in his limbs creeping higher

[*Beat*]

When morning comes she is shaking so much that she is unable to zip up her jeans

She lies slumped for a long time over the toilet dry-retching

A fear more terrible than her fear of his death takes hold of her and she wants to scream

Again it is the razor blade that comes to her aid

[*Beat*]

The room

When she enters there is a green curtain around his bed and three pairs of legs in stockings and soft shoes that hurry behind it

W: (*thinks*) God God God

I am too late

S: But a smiling face pulls aside the curtain in one swift motion and she sees

busy hands putting his covers right

and busy hands brushing his teeth  
and more hands tidying a small trolley with a plastic basin of water  
and a face-cloth and a pale pink towel

And that is the moment when she knows beyond any doubt beyond any  
hope she might ever have hoped to have had or dreaded to have because  
what then when she knows that he will never and never ever get up again  
and leave his iron bed

[*Beat*]

She sits at his bedside

And listens to his breathing

Shallow and rough snagging on something that cannot be seen

Beneath the surface of the clean white blankets

Beneath the thin lids of his sunken closed eyes

S: He opens his pale blue eyes slowly

W: Hello hello hello and how are we this morning feeling better mmm how  
did we sleep

S: She leans up close to him smells the soap on his skin floral-scented she  
puts her hand on his bare arm

His skin is cold and clammy

W: And how are we this morning feeling better mmm how did we sleep

S: His mouth moves

W: I brought you some biscuits your favourite romany creams remember  
how

S: His mouth opens and closes like a small beached fish

But no sound comes

Just like a fish

W: No no no never mind it will all it will all it will all be alright just rest build up your strength then we can go fishing again together

S: He smiles slowly

W: What was the name of that dam you always took me to come on

S: His mouth moves

But he makes no sound

W: Come on it began with an M I think I can't remember I must've been eight nine ten I just remember a lot of black mud squelching up between my toes I liked that that soft squishy feeling maybe that's where my love of clay comes from hey maybe I have you to blame for it all

[*Beat*]

Don't you remember come on you must it began with a D I think I can't remember you always took me out with you every Friday just after work just as the sun began to set and we'd stay out late at the edge of the dam always in the same spot our Lucky Spot you called it and eventually I'd fall asleep in the back of the car that old brown Cortina you had I think or was it after that the blue Ford I can't remember and when we came home you'd unlock the house and you'd carry me inside over your shoulder like a sack of potatoes and put me down on my bed and *she* would tuck me in

S: He winces

It is the first time she has mentioned the word

She puts her hand over his

Her strong hand with its thick blue veins a potter's hands

W: You must remember I know you do I was maybe nine ten

S: His hand is shrivelled his skin is cold and clammy

W: I had my little rod that you'd bought me for my birthday one of them can't remember which and you taught me how to put on the little hook and how to bait it I think we used porridge that you'd made the day before and left out to go hard you showed me how to roll the little white balls of porridge in the palm of my hand all sticky and then to fold them carefully over the hook not too thickly or the fish never reach the hook not too little or it comes off when you cast or when it hits the water just right and then to wait

S: She stops

She struggles to make up enough breath to go on

His one hand trembles scratching at the white surface of the blankets as if it were trying to find something

W: And to wait and to wait in silence just the two of us sitting in our fold-up canvas chairs you remember

S: His hand scratches

W: *Put the little fish back*  
*Put the little fish back*  
*Put the little fish back*

Do you remember that song we'd sing it together when nothing was biting

S: His mouth opens and closes

M: *(thinks)* *Put the little fish back*  
*Put the little fish back*

[Beat]

S:

The room

She sits

A long time passes that way

Then she notices that something is happening to his face

Something she had not expected she would ever see happen

And she gets up suddenly and she runs out of the room

[*Beat*]

In the cubicle she sits on the closed toilet seat and fumbles in her handbag

But it is not there

It is too much all too much

She needs to feel a different pain

But the razor blade is not with her

She slaps her face hard

Once twice three times instead

Again and again and again

Until tears she can accept come to her eyes

[*Beat*]

The room

He lets the tears flow freely down his face

She is not there

She is not there

She will make a loud noise before she enters

She will cough loudly and stamp her feet before she enters

And he will be able to turn his head away and pinch his eyes tight and pretend to be asleep

[*Beat*]

A small courtyard with garden furniture and green umbrellas

She smokes rapidly

She does not want to sit here like a coward

She does not want to return to his bedside either

But she knows that she does not have a choice

It is why she came back in the first place

All the way

Across the thousands of kilometres she had put between herself and that time

Across the twenty years since they saw each other last

[*Beat*]

She remembers

A kitchen with the smell of milk that has boiled over

A kitchen with a radio playing – the five pips before the news broadcast

A kitchen with a cold formica table and three unmatched chairs

A kitchen with a fridge that hummed and groaned loudly

A kitchen with old biscuit tins and chipped mugs and a battered tin teapot and a scuffed linoleum floor and a hot water tap that dripped

and place mats made of masonite and a narrow broom cupboard that smelled of feather dusters and floor polish and a door onto the

back veranda where an old clothes wringer stood unused and where he had a large band saw that looked like the saw in the

butchery in Victoria Road and sounded like it too

High-pitched and hungry cutting through cold flesh white sinews muscles empty blood vessels and bone

The bone of her heart

She remembers

Window-shopping in Church Street on a warm evening during the Christmas holidays with her mother and him walking on either side

of her holding her hand like a proper family  
Him packing the car for their annual holiday at the beach  
everything carefully packed and folded up stowed carefully in  
the boot so that nothing slid around or rattled and it was easy to  
see where everything was

She thinks

He had always been a neat man  
She used to polish his white shoes every Sunday afternoon for two  
rand  
He never went a day without shaving he always wore aftershave  
His hair was carefully wet and combed flat across his balding scalp  
He always wore a white suit and a red handkerchief that stuck out  
of the top pocket of his jacket

A bit of a ladies' man really

[*Beat*]

Every second weekend he would be away on business.

Selling vacuum cleaners and tumble driers and automatic washing  
machines twin tub or front loaders

And he would take all the keys with him

[*Beat*]

When she returns to the room his lunch is sitting on the aluminium trolley  
at the foot of his bed unopened

She lifts off the lid

She cuts up the chicken into small pieces

She props him up with pillows behind his back and feeds him

It is easier to use the spoon

Each mouthful is made up of a bit of rice with gravy a piece of chicken  
and some peas

W: Chew slowly there there there's no rush open wide for the engine

S: His hand trembles scratching at the blankets as if it were trying to uncover something

W: Have you had enough just one more one more for me

S: But he turns his head away

On impulse she almost takes hold of his jaw and turns his face back to her

But then she stops herself

She stops herself feeling

W: How are you going to get strong if you don't eat please you must eat for me you must get strong so that you can go back home

W: (*thinks*) Home I don't even know where his home is

A small room in a boarding house somewhere with a single bed and a shared bathroom at the end of the passageway with a light that never works

A hotel room with pale pink walls and matching duvet and pillows on the bed

S: His hand scratches again

W: What do you want tell me I don't know what you want tell me do you want to go to the bathroom do you want a bedpan do you want a drink do you want to say something

S: He nods his head

W: Do you want to say something

S: He nods again



W: What do you want to say dammit I don't know what to do to help you help me

S: His mouth moves  
His mouth opens and closes but no sound comes out  
Only a thin stream of spit  
Then she realises

W: Do you want to write something

S: He nods

[*Beat*]

She uses the clipboard that hangs at the foot of his bed.

She uses the back of one of the sheets of paper covered with obscure graphs and charts

The map of his decline

She finds a black pen in her handbag

She holds his hand

It is slow

His letters are large and shaky and the spelling is bad even the simplest words almost as though he were an old machine that was slowly running down

But she can make out what he says

M: (*thinks*) You never wanted to put the little ones back

You always wanted to eat everything you caught

S: After that it is as if she has opened the floodgates

And all the stinking muddy water that he had held back for years comes rushing out

M: (*thinks*) It wasn't you it wasn't her it was me

I'm lazy

Faced with a problem I'd rather cut my losses and run find something else rather than stay and work it out

[*Beat*]

I get bored easily I get bored with myself

That's what really happened

[*Beat*]

I've never felt deeply about anything

[*Beat*]

I'm missing the most important part about being human

I don't know how to feel

[*Beat*]

It's like there's a cold hole where my heart should be

It's like my heart was somewhere else in another room

[*Beat*]

When I was a teenager I used to cut myself with a razor blade just to feel something

But it was never sore enough to convince me I was really alive

I stopped when I knew that only bleeding to death would make me feel alive and I was too much of a coward for that

[*Beat*]

Years ago before I met her your mother I used to have a dream the same dream over and over I was walking into the sea and then the sea changed suddenly into a big old house with lots of rooms and they were all joined and I was walking from one room into the next going deeper and deeper into the house until I came to a small door old and rusty like it had never been opened and I opened it and went in and it was dark and musty inside and I knew there were no more rooms after that that this was the heart of the house at first I thought the room was empty but then I noticed a pile of rubbish in the corner and I went closer to have a look and as I bent over the rubbish it moved suddenly there was somebody hiding underneath and it was an old dirty man like a hobo and he was ugly frightening and he was angry that I'd woken him I turned and ran but he came after me I couldn't run fast enough I ran from one room into the next locking the doors behind me but he just opened them like that and he was catching up to me he was close behind getting closer and and then I woke up

[*Beat*]

I can't lie I want to but I can't

I don't feel sorry

I want to but I just I just don't

S: Her hand is tired from holding him

Her back is sore from bending over for so long

But he wants to go on he has to

M: (*thinks*) I want to carry on lying but I can't anymore

There's something important I must tell you

S: He waits

M: (*thinks*) You you you

S: He tries again.

M: (*thinks*) You were two years old when I first met you  
I'm not your father  
Your mother asked me and I agreed I agreed to pretend

S: He waits for a reaction  
He can do nothing to help her so he waits

W: I know she told me the day you left we rushed out she took me to a steakhouse for lunch Spur Kiddie's Special and a 500 gram steak for her you know how much she likes her meat rare in the middle of my burger she told me you had gone and you were never coming back just like that I pretended to cry a few tears on my cold chips but I'd known for a long time kids do I could see the boredom in your eyes when you smiled at her that's when she told me to make me feel better I suppose that's when she told me you were not my father so I shouldn't feel upset that you were gone but that's when I really cried nothing had prepared me for that

S: He turns and looks out of the window  
Grey sky a slight drizzle

W: I know she showed me the papers some years later she'd gone into hospital for a scan routine nothing serious but then the doctors discovered a lump in her breast and they wanted to run some tests

S: She stops she looks out of the window past him  
A grey day low hanging clouds almost on top of the roof of the building opposite

W: She was afraid she'd die without telling me but all the tests came back negative false alarm I think she half regretted doing it of being frightened into telling me she would've preferred it being more how shall I put it voluntary I don't hold it against her though I think I would've done the same

S: He looks up at the blank screen of the television

Looks at the silence

W: I know I met him some years ago he's still here in Cape Town an  
underwater explorer or something like that we wrote to each other for a bit a  
few calls then he invited us over she and I paid for our air tickets the lot he's  
got a beautiful house overlooking the ocean that he shares with his male  
partner large glass windows and open decks we had a wonderful time he  
didn't seem like a father at all more like an older friend someone who  
understood me someone I could pour my heart out to and I knew he  
wouldn't judge me no matter what I'd done

S: He turns and looks out of the window

Three hadedas and a white egret

Three hadedas and a white egret in a dry yellow field

[*Beat*]

A train calls long and thin in the distance

He gestures toward the clipboard

She holds it steady for him while he writes

M: (*thinks*) I was always afraid of him that he'd come back and take her away from  
me

S: She drops his hand

M: (*thinks*) I couldn't lose her

S: He continues on his own

M: (*thinks*) That's why I always locked her up when I went to work and took the  
keys with me whenever I went out

S: Large beaks cry black out across the sky

W: And made me stay at school the whole day until you came to fetch me  
sitting all by myself in the library touching myself under the table under  
my skirt just to know I was still real

S: A cry as big as a knife  
  
With long sharp wings

W: Because none of the boys would touch me because I never had a single  
friend all that time because I couldn't ever let anyone visit me at home  
because she was so crazy because she ate all that raw meat all the time  
because she was locked up in her own house all the time like a fucking  
prisoner because of you

S: The light is draining from the day  
  
He turns away from her closes his eyes silence

M: (*thinks*) Yes

S: She snatches the clipboard away from him  
  
She tears off the pages he has written and crumples them up and throws  
them into the plastic waste basket beside his bed  
  
A crow flies past the window  
  
Black frock white butcher's apron  
  
[*Beat*]  
  
The same  
  
He leans back  
  
He leans back slowly against the pillows  
  
His eyes close

She is there on the beach he sees her

[*Beat*]

Laughing running along the fringe of the tide

In her pink costume with little white dots

Her pink costume with the little skirt around the bottom

And her little red-rimmed sunglasses

[*Beat*]

M: (*thinks*) Go go go now while you still hate me once I'm dead you'll be forced to change

S: She shivers

The room is growing colder by the minute

[*Beat*]

He sees *her* she is there on the beach

[*Beat*]

She does not know he sees her

Forcing the raw fish into her mouth

She does not know he is awake

Forcing her fingers into her mouth

Until she throws up the oily black mess

Onto the low rocks at the water's edge

[*Beat*]

She shivers

She sits at his bedside and watches him

He is sleeping his eyes are closed

He is afraid to sleep now to close his eyes

Yet something in her knows she'll never see the colour of his watery eyes  
again

W: *(softly)*     *Put the little fish back*  
*Put the little fish back*  
*Put the little fish back.*

S:                In the corridor outside someone drops a metal object

And suddenly he remembers something

It flashes for a second like a fish surfacing from the black waters of a deep  
lake

A hint of her perfume

And he wants to tell her

    About that time

    When he was young her age the age when he left her

    When he went to a party and everyone danced to "Yellow  
    Submarine" in the lounge

    And he stood on the side and watched them because he did not  
    have anyone to dance with

    When they all played spin-the-bottle on the veranda

    And when the bottle ended up pointing at him the girl who had  
    spun it whose name he would remember forever Judith Judith who  
    sat in front of him in class and had short mousey hair and a long  
    white neck Judith who lived around the corner from him in Oxford  
    Lane whose breasts he had seen one day through a gap between the  
    buttons on the front of her dress Judith who had a boyfriend so she  
    said who was a jockey she took him around the side of the house  
    where it was dark and his heart was beating so fast because she  
    was going to kiss him but she said no she didn't want to because he  
    was such a sissy and she laughed and she made him promise to  
    pretend instead to everyone that she had kissed him and when they  
    came back all the girls were giggling

He wants to tell her



But he forgets

M: *(thinks)* *Put the little fish back*  
*Put the little fish back*  
*Put the little fish*

S: The room

She sits at the bedside

And listens to his breathing

Rough snagging on something so dark and so deep she cannot ever  
imagine it

Because it is not her turn

[*Beat*]

She stands up

She picks up her handbag

The room waits for her to say something to him

After all that is why she came all the way in the first place

For this moment this moment at his bedside

Before his closed eyes and his long drawn-out breathing

W: Daddy daddy

S: But she is ashamed of the word and she stops

W: Wait wait I'm not ready wait there's still something else I must tell you

S: But she knows he can hear her

So she leaves instead

She stands up

She picks up her handbag and she leaves

[*Beat*]

Jaundiced night

Derelect wind

With the cry of sirens in its arms

Derelect wind

With the blur of lights in its eyes

Along deserted streets

[*Beat*]

At the traffic lights a luxury car pulls up beside her

The driver looks hard at her and she stares straight back at him

He opens his mouth and slowly moves his tongue about inside thick and red inside

She does not look away

She understands men like him

He is like the blade that lies beside the bath in her hotel room

He is infinitely merciful

[*Beat*]

She follows him to a dimly-lit hotel in the lower end of town

When she takes his penis into her mouth it smells of dead fish

He comes almost immediately filling her mouth so that she has difficulty swallowing

In the bathroom she vomits up the sticky burning mess of her messed-up life

He laughs like a vacuum cleaner

When he wants more the full works she says she is having her period and leaves

Just like that

[*Beat*]

Driving back through the centre of town to her hotel she sees  
A boy pushing a legless man in a wheelchair with a suitcase across his lap  
A man pushing an old supermarket trolley with a rusted fridge inside  
A woman standing on an island in a traffic circle holding up a cardboard sign  
    “Money 2 get home 2 Jo’burg plse”  
    At her feet a little girl crouches over a colouring-in book  
    Red and green and yellow and blue crayons beside her  
A dog dragged dead into the gutter at the side of the road a smear of blood and guts dry behind it

W: (*thinks*) What black fish now is turning its white belly sunward in the cold and dark water where he took me fishing as a little girl

S: She thinks

W: (*thinks*) What black wheel now is slowly turning its rusted red teeth to face the wind

S: She feels

But does not comprehend what it means

[*Beat*]

In the hotel room she sits on the edge of her bed and stares at the painting in a gilt frame on the wall, covered in clear plastic  
Venice a gondola in a canal  
A man in a white suit steering the boat  
A woman in a black dress with a black mask over the top of her face

Red lips like strawberries

*She* used to grow strawberries in the back garden and lettuce and rocket and basil for making pesto and there was always a mint bush growing under the tap where it dripped and he would let her out on the weekends that he was home and they would all be together in the sunshine like a proper family *she* with her wide hat to protect her from the sun because she was slowly growing unaccustomed to it she with her own small plastic spade and bucket and her favourite red-rimmed sunglasses he with his smile and his small hands and his white suit wiping the dirt off his white shoes with his handkerchief

[*Beat*]

She does not sleep

She sits on the edge of the bed and stares at her watch all night

Expecting knowing willing

At some point when she can no longer focus on the small silver hands she drifts off and dreams

[*Beat*]

The room

The same room where he lies

He sees himself in the distance a young boy in a safari suit again

Everyone is out in the street a life-sized model of a blue whale is slowly being trundled through town on the back of a flatbed trailer the tractor pulling the whale stops outside the library and a wooden ramp is fitted to the open mouth of the whale and all the children are invited to walk inside someone is dragging him by the hand toward the wide open mouth of the whale he thinks it is his mother but he is not sure he cannot see her face there is something over her eyes he does not want to go inside the whale he is screaming

[*Beat*]

At some point when she can no longer focus on the small silver hands she drifts off and dreams

Of the room the same room an open coffin on the bed instead it is full of fine grey ash and she reaches in and slowly begins to model

his head out of the ash and as she works she sees the rest of his body  
slowly taking form beneath the ash as if under a thin grey sheet

[*Beat*]

Her phone rings

It is them

Yes it is she

Her heart is like a cracked stone within her

Her breath like a wire snare

If she hurries she might still make it they say

But she washes her face instead

And she brushes her teeth

And she checks her hair in the small mirror

Her eyes are bloodshot and raw

She moves as if under slow water under thick dark water

[*Beat*]

An owl flashes low across the road in front of her car flashes low to  
snatch something from the side of the road

It is so quick she does not even have time to think of braking so quick

A flash of dark wings outstretched

Dark wings against the darker light of the night

The darker light without end without name

Fathomless night

[*Beat*]

Two men are changing newspaper billboards as she drives past

Two shadows fumbling in the night

[*Beat*]

The hospital is quiet and deserted

She runs down the long quiet corridors

It is so far

Her one shoe comes off

She leaves it

Kicks the other shoe off too and runs barefoot down the long blue carpet  
toward the doors at the end of the corridor

She runs

Towards the doors at the end of the corridor

With strange sharp tears slicing suddenly through her heart

[*Beat*]

The room

Suddenly

[*Beat*]

The room is empty

The room is dark

No there is someone standing over the bed someone bent over the bed

A woman dressed in a dark blue uniform with a stethoscope in her hand

The woman looks up as she enters

They hesitate

The woman nods slightly

N: He is at peace now after life's storm and stress he can finally rest  
I'll leave you alone take your time sit say goodbye there's no hurry

[*Beat*]

He went quietly in his sleep God is merciful God is good God is infinite in his love

If I can just ask you to clear out his locker when you go

[*Beat*]

S: The room

She sits at the bedside

She is alone with him in the room

His eyes are shut his mouth has fallen open blue lips black mouth

His skin still warm

Still warm in the dark in the closing dark of the room

The covenant of dark

[*Beat*]

She sits at the bedside

W: I wanted to say

S: But she can't find the right words

W: I wanted to say sorry I'm sorry she's dead she's dead she's dead not long after you left six seven months at the most I was at school she'd locked herself in force of habit I suppose and

S: She stops looks down at her bare feet

W: And and

S: She stops

W: The band saw

S: Such small bare feet on the blue carpet

W: Your band saw

S: Such fine feet

W: I've never never never

[*Beat*]

Seen so much so much

[*Beat*]

Blood

[*Beat*]

He brought me up in his house overlooking the ocean overlooking the bay  
paid for me to leave set me up in my studio it was also he who told me  
you were here paid for me to come back

S: She waits such tiny drops of blood on the carpet

W: I couldn't tell you before I wanted to but I couldn't I knew it would kill  
you I wanted to I wanted to kill you but I couldn't I'm telling you now so  
that we're all safe

S: A kind of love

[*Beat*]



She sits at the bedside

She is alone with him

In the darker light of the night

The two of them

In the womb of the room

Beyond all harm

W: *Put the little fish back*  
*Put the little fish back*  
*Put the little fish back*

S: In the small locker beside the bed she finds  
a striped bag with his toiletries an old pair of reading glasses his  
wristwatch and a wallet

The wallet is empty no money no bank cards

Only a small plastic tag with two old keys that smell of his small hands  
and his aftershave

W: *Put the little fish back*  
*Put the little fish*

S: The room

The strangely absent smell of disinfectant

Motorcycles going round and round a black track

A young boy in bed asleep dreaming of becoming a deep sea fisherman

A fisherman of the black deep

Tugging at the black waves

When he grows up.

## ACT IV

## TABLEAUX

How beautiful you are now that you are here no more.

– P. J. Jowe

STRIPTEASE

*Slowly.*

He says: Unbutton your sleeves  
Roll them up  
above your shoulders : He says

He says: Hook them onto  
the picture-rail of your eyes  
Grease the exposed pistons  
that push in and out  
of your empty sleeves : He says

He says: The sound they make  
has the texture of a freeway :He says

He says: Show me.  
I want to feel.  
Let me believe again.

*Faster.*

/ Short black hair . . .

S/HE SAID: Field Notes

*On her hands & knees scrabbling.*

*On his back staring up at the clouds changing shape.*

1. I don't like those plants, she said.  
They grow on banks and sand dunes.
2. Here are my hands. See. Here are my shoulders. Feel, he said.  
This is my back that bends and twists and straightens  
for you.
3. Take them out. Dig them up. Throw them away, she said.  
They remind me of holidays and old suitcases and  
one-piece costumes with scratchy gauze between the  
legs.
4. Kiss me. I want to kiss you. I don't love you, he said.  
I only want to feel again what it is like to be  
consumed.
5. Take this one rather. And this one. And this, she said.  
And bury them over there behind the long and the  
sharp ones.
6. Touch me. Touch me. Quickly. Here. Now, he said.  
I have a feeling that nothing of this will last beyond  
the moment.
7. The sun is too hot here, she said.  
Everything is melting. Everything is running.
8. Can you hear me? I am melting, he said.  
When the sun comes out, I want to scream. Because  
I can feel my bones running.
9. Deeper. Make it deeper. Put your back into it, can't you? she said.

I want to put everything in. All my thoughts. All my memories. All my flesh. And still have space for the rest of the ruins.

10. Yes. Yes. Yes. Yes. Yes. Yes, he said.

It will be up to here. It will be up to the top. It will be over my eyes.

11. Good. Well done, she said.

Now hurry up and wash your hands. Before everything gets cold.

*& faster.*

. . . a full mouth . . .

## OUTLINE OF AN APOLOGY #1.

The veld was dry and dusty.

It smelled of cooking.

A feather of smoke behind the hill.

The morning after.

Far away.

As he came round the corner the whole valley.

Burning cane.

Lay black before him

The grass all white. Brittle. Brittle as glass.

It smelled of burned milk.

And she thought.

Milk that had boiled over on the stove.

Something about the whole scene made her think.

And burned.

That he had come home.

Which she had to scrape off.

That he was back.

All black and sticky from around his eyes.

Again. And she did not.

No, no, no, no.

Have a bed for him.

Don't go away.

She did not.

Stay.

Have a toothbrush. Towel. Extra cup. Plate. Knife. And fork.

We can share.

Pillow for his head.

You can share with me.

No, no, no, no.

It's no trouble.

I'll be fine. He said. I don't need much.

There is enough air in my dreams.

Just a rock to shelter behind.

Enough for both of us.

Just a stone to lay my head upon.

Besides.

The night is my companion.

There is always a draught in the night.

We have always been good to each other.

There are always the voices of everyone who ever walked past.

And all the time she thought to herself: Yes, yes, yes. This is where. This is where I want my ashes to be buried one day. When it all finally stops.

. . . green eyes . . .

HE DOES NOT

*Pause.*

He does not.

He does not allow himself. To think of her.

He says: I must not. Think of her.

He says: I must not. Think of what did not happen.

He says: I think of what did not happen. And I wish that it did.

He says: I wish. I wish. I wish. That it did not happen. That. That did not happen.

*Pause.*

But if he does.

If he does. Allow himself. To think of her.

Then it might be as follows:

Him swallowing her eyes.

Him licking her eyes off the corners of his mouth.

Him tasting her eyes with his eyes.

*Pause.*

But he does not.

He does not allow himself.



THE MAN WHO COULD NOT COME

Stayed.

. . . that went squint when . . .

THE MAN WHO COULD NOT PISS

Drowned in it.

THE MAN WHO COULD NOT LET GO

Went along.

. . . he went inside her . . .

OUTLINE OF AN APOLOGY #2.

*He moves his head from side to side to get a better view.*

*She looks the other way.*

- HE: Remembers waking up early that morning. Before the light.
- SHE: Remembers pretending to be asleep that morning when she woke up early. And just lay there pretending. As she had become accustomed to doing.
- HE: Remembers that it was June. The middle of winter.
- SHE: Remembers that it was still dark outside. And that even though she had stockings and socks and long winter pyjamas on, her feet were indescribably cold.
- HE: Remembers staring up at the black ceiling for a long, unbearably long time. Before what was happening finally sank in.
- SHE: Remembers his shallow, slow breathing, like a sick child's. Like someone on the edge of leaving a routine. Or a job that they had held for forty-five years.
- HE: Remembers the light arriving slowly at the edge of the curtains. Slowly lining the black edges with a thin, very thin yellow blade.
- SHE: Remembers hearing the shrill crow of the rooster in the yard next door. Once. Twice. Three times. Before it finally sank in what was going on.
- HE: Remembers the cobwebs on the lampshade swaying silently above them, and thinking to himself that he should tell her to do something about it. Before realising that it didn't matter anymore.
- SHE: Remembers feeling an unfathomable pity for him. That welled up hot and sore inside her. Like something involuntarily sexual. That she had to suppress.
- HE: Remembers the stale smell of her breathing, the metallic taste of her skin, the oily texture of her hair. As he bent over and placed his lips upon her cheek that one last time.
- SHE: Remembers the rough stubble on his unshaved cheek, and thinking to herself that she should tell him to do something about it. Before she remembered that she really didn't care anymore.

HE: Remembers knowing that she was wide awake and thinking about him and feeling nothing, behind her locked eyes. And her ingrained pretending.

SHE: Remembers knowing that he knew she was thinking about him. But pretending that she did not know. That she was sufficiently removed to be safe.

HE: Remembers that he really didn't care anymore.

SHE: Remembers that it didn't matter.

HE: Remembers nothing else.

SHE: Has almost forgotten.

*He looks the other way.*

*She moves her head from side to side. Like a speechless animal.*

. . . so deep . . .

A LONG ONE

Tall ghosts that are also trees.

Trees that are also tall ghosts.

---

The face of water with the moon tattooed across it.

The face of water with the moon tattooed across it.

---

Red earth and brown earth and stone the colour of midnight.

Brown earth and red earth and stone the colour of midnight.

---

A wind without fingers or feet.

Feet or fingers without a wind.

---

Dry skin. Old leaves.

Dry leaves. Old skin.

---

Fire on the side of the road that changes shape constantly.

Fire on the side of the road that changes shape constantly.

---

And thick smoke too.

Thick smoke.

---

Like inconstancy.

## SALT

He bit his hands

He tasted salt.

He bit his hands

He tasted the salt of her cum.

He bit his hands

He tasted the salt of her cum from her cunt.

He bit his hands

He tasted the salt of her cum from her cunt when she came.

He bit his hands

He tasted salt

He tasted the salt of her cum from her cunt when she came over and over  
all over his hands  
the whole of that weekend.

He bit his hands

He tasted salt

He tasted the salt of her cum for years afterwards.

Whenever he ate with his hands.

. . . when she went . . .

## WITHOUT

And a tree without light

And a sky with no bones

And a wind that rises and falls

And a book without eyes

And a chair with no legs

And a window that opens and shuts

And a hand without feeling

And a foot with no nerves

And a mouth that swallows and spits.



BEHIND THE SCENES

*Offstage.  
Something that sounds like expectation.  
Like something burning  
that does not ever  
burn out.*

\*\*\*\*\*

*(Bite #1)*

Driving three hundred kilometres  
into her arms  
he could not help looking in the rear-view mirror  
now and again  
to see whether God had noticed.

\*\*\*\*\*

*(Bite #2)*

It was not love  
he wanted, quiet  
and faithful  
as an old blind dog –  
but fire, fire  
in his fingertips,  
fire in his eyes.

\*\*\*\*\*

. . . so wet that . . .

*(Bite #3)*

The fire of the sea.  
The fire of the night.

And yet he had always thought  
that as he got older  
he would want to burn less.

*Over  
& out.*

HIS EXPLANATION: Spoken Aside

*In which the stones of the earth fail to make a sound.*

He said:

She wants to go to the cemetery again  
to visit his grave. And I (who have a car) will take her.

He said:

We won't spend long  
because it isn't safe in the cemetery anymore.

He said:

She'll carry water in a plastic milk bottle  
and a packet with kitchen scissors and a bunch of white carnations.

He said:

We won't spend long  
because what else is there to do  
  
after she's changed the flowers and  
cleared the white stones of weeds and encroaching grass?

He said:

She'll stand a moment  
bent over in silence holding on to the headstone.

He said:

Of course, she'll weep.  
But that's all.

And then we'll go,  
keeping the doors locked and looking around us all the time.

He said:

There really isn't much to it.  
I don't know why the others aren't willing to come.

. . . he drowned.

## ACT V

### DRAME BOURGEOIS

As usual she enjoyed the sense of work, of having worked.  
Other fears would soon return.

– Anne Carson

## OPENING SPECIALS

*Free Head & Shoulders.*

Nail Treatments	
Acrylic Clear Tips	R150.00
French Tips	R120.00
Gold Tips	R350.00
Nail Art	R20.00
Manicure	R90.00
Pedicure	R120.00
Acrylic Pearl Tips	R150.00

Waxing	
Eyebrow Shaping	R20.00
Chin	R15.00
Lip	R15.00
Full Face Wax	R60.00
Legs	R90.00
Bikini	R95.00
Underarm	R40.00
Chest	R50.00

Skin Treatments	
Innoxa Deep Cleansing	R150.00
Gatsby Natural Treatment	R180.00
Papaya Facial Treatment	R180.00
Fair and Ageless for 30yrs and Above	R250.00

*2<sup>nd</sup> visit - 25% discount.*  
*3<sup>rd</sup> visit - Couple special (Pay for 1 only).*

## WEIGHED AND WANTING

*In four standard sizes.*

S.

She says: I am losing my way in my own back garden. She says: I walk out of the house, down the back stairs. And suddenly I don't know which way to turn to get back.

M.

She says: Most days I have to sit on my hands to stop them flying off in all directions. She says: Most days I have to hold on to my head to stop it running off with the stray cats that howl under my window. She says: Most days I have to drink my own spit that drips from my mouth like a rabid dog's. To stop it dripping from my mouth like a rabid dog's.

L.

She says: Something is eating me inside my head. She says: I don't know what to do with my hands. When they start to make the action of a vacuum cleaner. Across my head. She says: There is something that sounds like a leaf blower. That keeps starting up in my head. She says: In the green water of the public pool. I see three heads reflected on my shoulders. She says: The first one is mine. The second belongs to the lifeguard. And the third one is my dead father's. Whom I never knew.

XL.

She says: Comfort me with stones. She says: Comfort me with sand and ash. She says: The wind is grey now. And the sky is cold. And everything is far too big for me to fit into.

## DAILY DUTY

*Her head covered.*

*Slowly.*

*With reverence.*

SHE says: I am blinded by  
the glare of the white washing – the white sheets and the white  
pillow cases, the white bedspread and my white underwear, my  
camisole and my petticoat – on the line in the morning when I  
hang it out.

Sometimes

you can see me in my straw hat and my dark Ray-ban glasses, in  
my long-sleeved top, my arms uplifted in the air, my face upturned  
to the sun.

SHE says: I am pierced by  
the sharp, the long, the hard bristles of the grass broom, the long-  
handled grass broom that I bought from the street seller, the broom  
that descends upon the wooden floor, that comes down out of the  
blue onto the stoep, the stone steps into the garden, like a wolf  
upon the fold.

Sometimes

you might find me backed into a small corner of a room, or  
crouched at the bottom of a steep flight of stairs, fending off the  
fierce bristles of the broom with my bare skin, with my little brittle  
bones.

SHE says: I am broken by  
the old bodies, the dry and the hard bodies of the dead geckos and  
lizards that lie, crushed and dry, flat and dry as cardboard, crushed  
by an accidental door, a window, door-jamb or lock.

Sometimes

you might come upon me on my hands and knees checking the  
underneath of the front door, the inside jamb of the big bedroom  
window before I close them and lock them with my padlock and  
my big key.

SHE says: I am scalded by

the steam from the iron that fills the kitchen every night after dinner, after homework, after story-time and prayers, hissing like an engine, like Thomas the Train, spitting in my eyes like his fat red snake.

Sometimes

you may think that these are tears, these sharp drops that pack my eyes, that I am unhappy, but actually it is just smoke, just steam from the fire he makes with his hands.

SHE says:

I am drowned by

the grey aquarium of the kitchen sink, with its long narrow knives, the spoons with one eye on top of their heads, the bulbous soup bowls and flat plates, a school of brightly-coloured cups that swarm all over my fingers and up my arms like greasy little tadpoles.

Sometimes

but only if you are lucky, you will find me on my back, with my goggles and my flippers and my plastic gloves, breathing through the hole between my legs.

SHE says:

I am choked by

the dust that clogs up the vacuum cleaner, that blocks the suction pipe and the filter with fluff and dog hair and flakes of human skin that slough off continually, renewing our shape until one day we are unrecognisable and different.

Sometimes

you may happen to walk past and assume it is me because I look the same as the person you talk to on the telephone, but oh, on the inside, on the inside it's all stuffed pipes and tied tubes and pressure building up, and if you were to suddenly unstop me, why, like a pink balloon I'd fart my way around the room, and then psshhht go flat.

SHE says:

Plug me in.

There. Fill me up. Switch me on. Here. And I'll purr for you like an over-locker.

See how I run.



## GUIDE TO STAYING YOUNG (I) \*

A few words of advice:

Always remember:

- 1) Wash your hands and dry them well before crochet work begins.
- 2) Keep your fingers, hands and wrists quite relaxed, never stiff.
- 3) Reverse the instructions if you are LEFT HANDED. That is, where the directions say RIGHT hand, use your LEFT, and where they say LEFT, use your RIGHT. If you prop up this book and place a small mirror opposite each picture the difference will be easier to follow.
- 4) Keep the hooked-end facing you as you work. Never twiddle the hook around as you make a stitch.
- 5) Form the habit of counting the stitches in every row. It is so easy to miss one, especially the last stitch.
- 6) Learn the shortened terms in crochet, called *abbreviations*, as you work through these pages. You will find a list of them on the inside back cover. Later on in the book, they are shown in brackets ( . . . ) against the full word.

\* *Learning to Crochet* by Wynne Broughton with illustrations by Eric Winter.  
Published by Ladybird Books Ltd. Loughborough, 1975.

## GUIDE TO STAYING YOUNG (II) \*

### Abbreviations:

In crochet, the names of the stitches and some other movements are shortened, to save space. These short forms are called abbreviations.

It is a good idea to learn these during practice, and at the same time to get to know the look of each stitch as you make it. Then, when you come to read patterns, you will be quite used to the abbreviations.

The abbreviations used in this book are:

<i>Full Words</i>	<i>Abbreviations</i>
chain	ch.
double crochet	d.c.
centimetre(s)	cm.
treble	tr
half treble	hlf. tr.
slip stitch	sl. st.
stitch(es)	st(s).
yarn over hook	y.o.h.
repeat	rep.
space	sp.

The following signs are often used to make pattern reading easier:

\* This is a star, or asterisk. When you see this, you keep going back to the star the number of times stated. If the pattern says, 'rep. from \* 5 times', it means returning to the star five times, making six times in all.

(. . .) These are brackets and when they are used it means work everything inside the brackets the number of times stated. If it says (2 tr., 3 ch., 2 tr., miss 1 st., 1 ch.) 5 times, it means work all inside the brackets five times only.

\* *Learning to Crochet* by Wynne Broughton with illustrations by Eric Winter.  
Published by Ladybird Books Ltd. Loughborough, 1975.

## IN BED WITH

How deeply she had come to hate the hat that she always wore to bed when the sky turned thin and the trees lost their leaves how deeply very very deeply she had come to hate the socks that she put on before getting into bed the socks that she did not take off until the sun had reached the top of her chimney how deeply oh so so very very deeply she had come to hate the gloves the woollen jumper with the high neck the underwater goggles the snorkel the oxygen tank that took up so much room in the bed and prevented her from sleeping on her back with her face upturned to the calm white ceiling-boards how deeply deeply she hated the soundtrack of ants nibbling away at the inside of her head.

## CHILDREN'S BIRTHDAY PARTY

*With an excess of tartrazine & sugar.*

At the end of the street.  
Is China, a dusky wide.  
River, lights and bill-boards.  
Gigantic video screens just.  
Past the children's.  
Party with cars in the shape.  
Of Eeyore and Pooh Bear.  
The smoke begins.  
The cramped sun slowly sets.  
Smarties and Nik-Naks.  
Fill the drain the rubber.  
Man stretches until he is.  
Long as the Great Wall.  
The backing singers sing:  
"If you go down.  
To the wood's today you'd.  
Better go in disguise if you.  
Go down to the woods.  
Today you're in for a big.  
Surprise."

## IN BED WITHOUT

So most nights.

So every other night.

So every other night when not with.

So when usual and without surprise.

So together and far apart and beyond all at the same.

So at night time when leaving and standing, watching go away.

So more or less, this way and that.

So opening, closing, in, out, attached and loose as a nozzle.

So switched on.

So off.

So when the sky rolls over and on top and big is too full and the wind is grey as cotton, hand-washed, hanging up, dripping over the bath, and the plug is breathless and blocked up with his hair that does not stop, that does not stop falling, out.

That does not.

‘IF ONLY I COULD MAKE UP MY MIND’

Pale Straw	or	Desert Sand
Peach Silk	or	Plum Whisper
Secret Place	or	Rocking Mountain
Peak Season	or	Fool’s Paradise
Tiny Bubbles	or	Fortune’s Prize
Phantom Moss	or	Filtered Forest
California Dreaming	or	Green Mamba
Greek Island	or	Love Bird
Periwinkle Palace	or	Eyes of Iris
Sapphire	or	Dutch Crocus
Galaxy Blue	or	Granada Bay
Sunset Rouge	or	Child’s Smile
Slightly Coral	or	Pleasing Pink
Impatient Heart	or	Mystic Tulip
Bright Blush	or	Turkey Dimple
Peony Blooms	or	Dahlia Delight.

*With acknowledgements to Plascon, Dulux & Dekade.*

## IN BED WITH SOMEONE ELSE

*In the following way, & in the following order, too, she opens the memory of her old brass bed to something unseen.*

*Something felt along the hairs of her forearm.*

- One) With one hand clapping against the skin of the fuggy air;
- Two) With two feet flat and spread far apart, as far as her thoughts will allow;
- Three) With three fingers on her one hand making the sign of a dying dog against the mindless wall;
- Four) With four toes on her one foot clenched tight as the knot in her stomach;
- Five) With five fingers on the other hand imitating the sound of a wriggling beetle upon its back;
- Six) Without regard for how her breath smelled in the morning, afterwards;
- Seven) With a long list of household chores she kept counting off on her fingers and toes, all the while, throughout;
- Eight) With space for anything else running out, as she got to the end, as she felt the fuggy air forcing its way inside;
- Nine) With just the smallest crack in the doorway left for everything outside;
- Ten) With ten fingers and ten toes and nothing else. Nothing. Then counting backwards from zero to numbness.

## WHAT THE JONES'S SAW

### *Mabula*

Elegance meets its master.

Classic in design to catch your eye with crafted  
perfection to stir your deepest desire.

Comfort in motion, the secret to your luxury.

### *Boston*

The comfort zone of your dreams.

Full leather sleigh bed with  
the superior status of the

elegance you deserve.

### *Monarch*

Rich autumn bovine leather with leather piping detail on  
full rounded arms and solid wood turned legs makes the

Monarch a classical lover's passion for stability come true.

Luxury in leather texture and rich in touch.

### *Dallas*

A unique modern style bed with straight  
contemporary lines and stitching to add jaw-dropping detail.

Young and ambitious in a variety of lovely  
leather choices to fit your dreams.

### *Cooper*

A young, fresh and cool suite in contemporary style,  
loaded with cushion comfort and straight lined armrests.

Available in a variety of lovely leather choices to  
compliment your style.

### *Montana*

Discover functional comfort with the  
seductive Montana bed.

Detailed luxury design  
with a padded headboard.

**\*\* Revive Luxury Living \*\***

*With acknowledgements to Rochester Home Décor.*



## CURIOSITY

She cannot understand what the two hanging things are at the ends of her arms.

She flaps them. And they are heavy. She bites them. And they are hard.

They taste of salt. And flour and dishwashing liquid.

When she presses them against her nose she smells all the big and the small things that filled them over the years.

And fell through. And smashed.

She wonders what would happen if she were to take the electronic meat slicer and cut them off.

Would they flap their short wings and disappear into the sky? Like a parrot escaping from its cage.

Would they bury themselves instantly into the ground like moles?

It occurs to her that apart from removing them violently from her body, there is only one other way to find out.

She must cover them in bright red sealing wax. And set fire to the blunt end.

Then wait until they run.

In their sticky calligraphy she will be able to decipher their secret.

## SICK-LIST

*Keeping her fingers crossed (& her toes).*

- 1 x scalpel blade, small
- 1 x tube iodine ointment (Podine is the cheapest)
- Sugar (white or brown) x 3/4 teaspoons
- 1 x 250ml bottle Savlon
- 1 x tube anti-fungal cream
- 1 x plastic plunger (invariably pink)
- 1 x pack dressings (30mm x 30mm)
- Bandages (x 6 to begin with), 30mm x 1m
- 1 x plastic basin (on special at Moosa's discount store)
- 2L x hot water (not boiling)
- 1 x 100g packet salt (table or coarse), dissolve 2 x tablespoons in above
- 1 x 25ml Organo: 10 drops under tongue every hr
- Xylophad x 10, only in extreme circumstances: finish the course
- Bed-rest x 3-5 days
- Keep elevated for drainage
- Absolutely no pressure: supply window for occasional release.

*NB:*

*Remember this is how it all started. On her pine bed in the front room with the crack in the wall that opened & closed depending on the weather. Everything was so far away then. Participation. Activity. As if she were hearing it all from the bottom of the ocean. Through fathomless empty rooms.*

## ACT VI

### INTERMEZZO

(In-between this and that)

the smell of burned grass

## ABBREVIATIONS

### **Of Things Otherwise in the Air**

There was a low roof over the ridge of his eyes. So that he was forced to look down always. Rather than up. And although it was up that he wanted to look. And to see. (He was perfectly aware of the difference). He got used to things on the bottom of his world. The things that could not float. Things like his own crooked feet. Like leaves. And stones. That insisted always on coming down.

### **Of Being in Two Minds**

Two forces raged within him constantly. The one had the voice of a bird. And only wanted him to fly. The other sounded like a crocodile. And wanted him to drown. The real danger. He discovered after much heartache. Lay not in him succumbing to the sweet voice of the crocodile. But in his confidence in being able to swim.

### **Of Hiding and Seeking**

In the photograph of the famous dead seaman. Dug up. Uncovered and opened. After eighty years beneath stone and cement. The man's clothes are one hundred percent intact. Brown suede suit. Linen shirt. Black tie and leather shoes. Only his face shows signs of death. Has grown green mould. White fungus behind his ears. And someone is leaning in close. (In the photograph). A workman perhaps. Or auditor. Are they listening for a heartbeat? After all this time. Are they whispering something into the dead man's still ear? You can come out now, they say. Come out now. We have found you.

## **Of Predictability**

Staring across the paddock. He discerned two figures. Coming on slowly through the long pale grass. They were too far off. For him to identify. But part of him hoped that they were strangers. With a stranger's news of another life. Another climate. But the other part of him longed for them to be as familiar as his parents. And as predictable.

## **Of the Time for Different Things**

Orange. And green. White. And black. All around him the trees were dropping their coloured fruit. Small fruit. Small round fruit that rotted after a day on the ground. That rotted after only a day. And smelled. And smelled like the strange nameless thing that a colour leaves behind. After it has gone. After it has gone completely into its smell.

## **Of Watching**

Something cracks close behind him. And he whips around. But there is no one there. Has he imagined the sound? There is only the wind. And the thin sunlight on all sides of him. The shrieking of beetles. He turns back. And resumes writing in his cheap school notebook. Writing about a man interrupted in his writing by the sound of something snapping close behind him. It is the middle of the morning. Ants are carrying away the earth beneath his feet. The cicadas are on fire. A crow in a coroner's apron lands on a wooden fence. And watches him. Behind him the bushes crack their long fingers again. He does not dare to move. The shadows of the trees. And the shadows of the bushes. Take on the shape of an intangible sky.

the smell of burned rubber

## **Of Insomnia**

Once again it is not possible for him to sleep. While he lies in bed with his eyes closed. And the blood pooling in his belly. Once again sleep eludes him. Like light through his fingers. Once again he gets up. Puts on his feet. Pours out his eyes into the dark lake of the window instead. The window draws silence tightly around him like a shawl. The silence has the colour of night. The colour of sleepless remembering.

## **Of Dedication to a Greater Good**

At the bottom of the ocean he. (By this stage a famous underwater explorer). Found an old wooden chest with 27 543 documents in it. Some were mere scraps. Others a few pages. The bulk though. Were comprised of more than a hundred sheets. All handwritten. All in blue ink. The lost works of an unknown. Overlooked writer. And he realised their value immediately. The world had to be made aware of this vast treasure. This justification of a silent. Obscure life. Seizing the papers he began his ascent. But as he rose. Through the dim world of the deep into the light. He noticed that the ink was flowing from the paper. Spiralling off slowly in thin threads as he floated upward. And he realised that by the time he reached the surface. Hardly any of the precious words would be left. He had no alternative. Solemnly he returned to the bottom of the ocean. Making himself comfortable on the black salt. He began the long process of memorizing all 27 543 works.

## **Of Sinking Still**

Even if. As needs be. He must screw his eyes tight. And stand in one spot. And ball his fists. And stay standing where he is. And black out his memory. And stop his ears. And still stand still where he is. And slam his mouth shut. And never open it again. (Not even to swallow). And still despite it all. And because of it all. Still stay standing where he is in the one spot. Still even if needs be he must stand in that spot. And only there. Then. Then he can at least sink his feet into the earth. Deep. And deeper than if he were to be running over its surface.



### **Of Insatiable Thirst**

After that weekend. When she covered every inch of his body. With her salt. He could not sleep. His wife moaned. That he tossed and turned. All night. Beside her. That she could not sleep. Because he kept licking himself. Like the cattle she had once seen. On the beach. Licking the black rocks. For something that was missing. From their diet.

### **Of the Creeping Cold**

But there is something about his right hand too. Something about his right hand. That terrifies him. He can no longer click his fingers. He can no longer put his hand. Flat on the table. Without there being a space under his palm. He can no longer feel. When he cuts or bruises or burns himself. Frequently it is only the sight of blood. On his clothes or blood on the bedspread. That alerts him to an injury. He wonders how much longer. He will still be able to hold himself upright against the sky.

### **Of Strangers on Holiday**

He stands by the photo machine. Waiting for his pictures. Holiday snaps. His wife in the bath. With her hand over her face. His two children on the beach. With plastic buckets and spades. The sun setting into the sea. A close-up of his foot. Under the sand. But what comes out is the picture of a complete stranger instead. A woman with short black hair and a slight squint. Her squint grows as his finger moves across. And into her small mouth.

the smell of burned hair

### **Of Burning Ambition**

Yesterday he could easily still believe. That getting to the top really amounted to something. That if he had a goal. He would ultimately reach it. Today he woke up. And saw himself in the small mirror behind the bathroom door. And saw the cuts under his eyes. The holes in his hands. And at that moment he knew. That the body is not flesh. It does not feel. (Despite what the experts say.) That it is made of sand instead. And it runs out.

### **Of Airlessness**

The walls are four in number. And they are on all sides of him. They reach from the ground. To just above his head. They are closed by a wooden lid. With a small bare light bulb. Swinging from it. He swings his head against the walls. Day in. Day out. Despite the pain. To smash a hole. Through for air.

### **Of Neighbourliness**

It reminded him of the story he had heard recently. Of the man who had complained to the authorities. That his neighbours were always cheerful. That they waved to him in the mornings.

### **Of Disappearance**

He picked slowly at the dry skin in the palm of his hand. And pulled off long strips. And ate them. Like a magician performing a vanishing act. In painstaking stages.

IN NO PARTICULAR ORDER

**Eight Critical Questions**

Ask her.

Ask her if the smoke stings ?

Ask her if the flames change colour as they burn through the seven layers of her skin ?

Ask her if she knows when the smell starts ?

Ask her at what point burned skin stops feeling anything and just blackens ?

Ask her if she knows the price of any of the following:

- . half a litre of 98 octane
- . a box of Lion matches
- . an old car tyre
- . 10 bricks, broken into halves for throwing ?

Ask her if she knows how bone is turned into powder in an incinerator ?

Ask her how long it takes teeth to break down ?

Ask her if heads can grow back, like lizards' tails ?

Ask her.

Ask her if she felt anything else that day.

the smell of burned milk

## **He Pleaded Ignorance**

*Falsetto.*

He did not know what the sky was made of.

He did not know what fire tasted like.

He did not know how far away from the earth the truth was.

He did not know how long a man could survive without any covering over his body. Such as skin.

He did not know the current market value of love.

He did not know the lengths a man would go to in order to find deception.

He did not know where it all came from.

Then he came up out of the water.

Then he found that he could still breathe. Even though it was air.

## **A Study in Closeness**

He studied the opposite house.

He studied the opposite house all day.

He studied the opposite house all day through his binoculars.

He studied the opposite house all day through his binoculars for movement in the windows.

He studied the opposite house all day through his binoculars for movement in the windows and amongst the bushes.

He studied the opposite house all day through his binoculars for movement in the windows and amongst the bushes under the windows.

He studied the opposite house all day through his binoculars for movement in the windows and amongst the bushes under the windows made by the woman with the pram.

He studied the opposite house all day through his binoculars for movement in the windows and amongst the bushes under the windows made by the woman with the pram, without himself being seen.

He studied the opposite house.

He studied the opposite house all day.

At nightfall he swam across the dark road to leave large gesticulating shadows on the soft opposing shore.

the smell of burned skin



## **From an Early Age**

*Sotto voce.*

From an early age: He knew that his purpose in life was to visit as many public toilets as he could, and to turn off all the taps that had been left running.

From an early age: He smelled everything that he could, wherever and whenever he could, including – plastic toy soldiers; dry leaves; brand new books, especially those with full-colour illustrations; the sweat on his forearms or on the inside of his elbows; felt-tip pens; newly-sharpened pencils; his own toenail clippings; news-print; plastic seat covers; his own ejaculate when he masturbated; his fingers after he had been to the bathroom.

From an early age: He made up all kinds of stories in his head to help him fall asleep at night – stories about friends he didn't have, and the things they would do together; stories about getting even with the friends he did have, who weren't really friends at all; stories about terrible things that happened to his parents, like car accidents or explosions in supermarkets that ripped their bodies apart; stories that did not help him fall asleep at all; stories about women.

From an early age: He fantasised about the weight of a woman's breasts upon her chest; what it might felt like to cross his arms across something that was stuck onto his chest, and that stuck out; what it might feel like to have someone feel them.

From an early age: He was forced to wait on the school bench; on the backseat of the car; on a cracked swing in the playground; on a high stool outside the changing room; on an old plastic chair in the waiting room; on a sharp rock at the beach; on a low wooden fence at the side of the road; on the edge of the escarpment, while everyone else went on ahead and did their thing.

- From an early age: He was afraid of cockroaches; crickets; flying ants; locusts; praying mantises; large moths; flying beetles; the sound of them cracking and squashing under his shoe; the feel of powdery or brittle wings beating against his face; the feel of long and thin and sharp legs scratching against his skin; the exaggerated nightmare of feelers and claws and jaws that go bite.
- From an early age: He picked at the scars and the scabs, the calluses and the blisters that formed on his hands, his elbows, his knees or his forearms; from tripping or overbalancing; from grazing or burning or cutting without feeling it; from walking on his hands.
- From an early age: He learned how to fall properly; how to drop like a sack of potatoes; like someone hypnotized; how not to put out his hands to stop himself; how to roll like a parachutist.
- From an early age: He was embarrassed by old people opening packets in public; fumbling with the glue; trying to find the loose end of the wrapping with their old stiff fingers.
- From an early age: He made the sign of the cross, although he was not Catholic, over cattle or sheep or goats on their way to the abattoir in long trucks; over ambulances or fire engines that sped past him on the freeway; over the dirty plastic flowers or wreaths on the side of the road that marked the scene of a tragedy; over water that was gushing wildly from a fire hydrant or drain in the road; over water that was gushing from a tap he could not reach to turn off.
- From an early age: He believed that life was a race, and that only the fastest and the strongest, the cleverest and the bravest, ever won.
- From an early age: He hated himself for believing that life was a race, and for always coming last.

the smell of burned water

## The Room

He lies

in a small room with the curtains closed.

in a small room with the curtains closed in the middle of the day and the sun outside swinging a broad blade.

He lies

in a small room on a narrow metal bed.

in a small room on a narrow metal bed, wearing his long grey trousers and a white sleeveless vest, with his black shoes under the bed, on the left, and his feet, in long grey socks, pointing up and slightly away from each other.

He lies

in a small room in the dim underwater light.

in a small room in the dim underwater light with arms folded and his damp white chest moving slowly up and down.

He lies

in a small room with his eyes closed and he dreams of the cloudless sky striking the stone church outside.

in a small room with his eyes closed and he dreams of a sky without any wind or moisture or wings or mobility or colour or bottom.

A sky

that echoes like a room after all the contents have been removed, and only the dust-lines along the wall remain to indicate where old habits once stood.

that echoes like a man on a narrow bed in a small room with his eyes closed, and the whole world erupting inside his head.

## **He Entered Stage Left**

He came into the house.

And the house was not empty.

But there was nothing to be seen.

He knew that it was not empty.

He could smell the sour milk of the shadows in the corners.

But he could not see anything.

He came into the house.

And the house was not empty.

There was the smell of old breath in the corners.

There was the taste of stale fat in the air.

But still there was nothing to be seen.

And the house was not empty.

He came into the house.

And there was nothing to be seen.

He could see the thin light that had been left behind.

He could see the grey light that could not leave.

But he could not see anything.

And still the house was not empty.

the smell of burned stone

## ACT VII

### BRIEF HISTORY OF ROOMS

Scenes from Suburban Life in Four Parts

plus a Postscript

Memory is a darkroom for the development of fictions.

– Michael Hamburger

Even if I have the help only of yellowing snapshots, a handful of eyewitness accounts and a few paltry documents to prop up my implausible memories, I have no alternative but to conjure up what for too many years I called the irrevocable: the things that were, the things that stopped, the things that were closed off – things that surely were and today are no longer, but things that also were so that I may still be.

– Georges Perec



**room** /roohm/ room/ **noun** **1** an extent of space occupied by/ or sufficient or available for/ something: *There's room for another person on the bed.* **2a** a partitioned part of the inside of a building. **b** (*also in pl*) a set of rooms used as a separate lodging. **3** (+ for) suitable or fit occasion for (something); opportunity for (something): *Your work is good, but there's room for improvement.* >> **roomful** (*pl roomfuls*) **noun**. [Old English *rūm*]

**room verb intrans** *NAmer* (*often + with*) to occupy a room or rooms/ often paying rent; to share lodgings: *Heather rooms with her friend Rachel.*

## **PART ONE**

**Who ?**

## Scene I: The Room of Maybe

*Black & white light.*

*Dog-eared.*

*He.*

-----

At the

back of a house in Greyling Street there is a room that comes in and out of focus as he slowly moves his

head There is another room before this one even – of this he is certain – but it is so indistinct that only

a small wooden bed with low sides remains embedded in his memory Together with the smell of the brown

shoe polish (always Nugget) that his English mother smears onto an old *lappie* and pins inside his little vest

at night to stop him coughing And the underwater sound of his own small voice calling up to her from out

of the drowned end of a dark passageway The room (the back one) is a junk room, work room, sewing room

before it becomes his bedroom and much later that of his younger brother Because they squabble all the time

and cannot share anything between them The room is rectangular and on its longest sides directly opposite each other

there are two doors One door leads into the lounge where he plays on the carpet with his plastic soldiers and

his wooden blocks and his large Buddy-L trucks (a cool-drink delivery truck, a flat-bed truck for carting

sand or wooden blocks, a cement mixer and a panel van with sliding doors) The other door secured with a bolt

and padlock and with a black security gate on the outside, leads straight into the back garden

In the back garden there is a wash-line with five wire strands, a swing with a cracked wooden seat

an old hibiscus tree, and further back a large open area where his *oupa* has a vegetable patch with potatoes and mealies and beans, and his father has three stunted orange trees, a large pile of second-hand bricks encrusted with green mould, and a stack of rusted metal poles ('Cause you never know when you might need them

his father always says) that attract fat spiders There is also a third door in his bedroom On the same side as the one into the back garden But in the opposite corner This door is never opened

Across this door is an old mahogany bed that his mother bought in 1947 in Johannesburg He is terrified of all the small things that crawl under this door at night and scuttle about beneath his bed The bed is very high and when he kneels at the side at night to pray (Our Father who art in Heaven forgive us our Trespasses) he presses down with his forearms onto the mattress and lifts his knees high off the ground so that the small crawling things with feelers and claws cannot reach him There is a plastic under-sheet to protect the mattress from the dreams that crawl up his trouser leg every night and soak into his sleep, long after he should have outgrown the weakness

There are two large windows that look alternatively onto the wash-line at the back (concreted into the ground by his father to prevent rust 'Cause you got to look after what you got he always says)

and onto the *blinkblaar* hedge that runs all along the side of the house (and is said to ward off lightning)

and at Easter has small fleshy pink fruit that tastes like absolutely nothing There is nothing he can do except

sink, and sink deeper, and drown, when he wakes up at the back of the house in the dead of night with long

wet feelers crawling over his face and rough claws around his throat pulling him down down into the airless pit beneath his dreams.

-----

*Stop.*

*Lights fade slowly.*

*Hold.*

*Then cut to.*

## Scene II: The Room of Green

*Fluorescent lights.*

*Whine of small electric saw.*

-----

There are bookshelves  
with thick manuals in editions of green and red and dark blue all the way around the room  
There are large windows  
that cover two complete walls from the ceiling to just above the bookshelves, with a view  
over the leafy part  
of the city and the uMsunduzi River in the background There are old motor horns, shining  
wooden steering wheels  
long-handled hand-brakes, head lamps with intricate metalwork, and side and rear-view  
mirrors displayed on  
the walls, together with framed certificates confirming participation in long-distance  
vintage car rallies  
There is a heavy imbuia desk with a bevelled glass top and a black high-backed leather  
chair on wheels  
behind it There is a man with a very big head and hands the size of a bunch of bananas and  
a voice so soft  
that neither the boy nor his parents ever really understand what he is saying The man  
always wears  
a white safari suit with long white socks and white shoes Behind the man's desk there is a  
small partitioned-off area  
with a high narrow examination bed covered in brown plastic with a white sheet over the  
lower half  
which the boy is afraid to put his dirty boots upon in case his father disapproves The  
partition doubles as a  
display case with opaque glass on the outside, facing into the surgery, and clear on the  
inside It contains

over a hundred toy cars of all makes and models From small cement mixers and break-down trucks to Willys MB  
US Army Jeeps and Model-T Fords (sedan or roadster) His favourite, though, is the red and white Chevrolet El Camino  
convertible with fins Because it looks as if it could swim underwater like a great white shark Because then  
all the bigger boys at school (with names like Tasso and Vickus and Ferdie) would leave him alone Just like that  
But sometimes when he visits with his father and his mother he has to go through the small white door at the back  
of the surgery into the kitchen where all the messy work is done Like changing his bandages, cleaning his dressings  
removing his stitches, cutting off his old plaster casts with a small electric circular saw or a large pair of silver cast  
scissors, and putting on a new one, all tight and wet and hot, and hardening clean and white in minutes On these  
occasions a green plastic sheet is spread across the sink and his father lifts him up and puts him down on top  
There is a window next to the sink and he looks out into a small courtyard with a garden and a pond  
with stagnant green water while the man with the big head and big hands puts on a long green plastic apron and tells him to sit still Very still Still as a stone holding its breath.

-----

*Freeze.*

*No sound.*

*Only his two eyes move.*

### Scene III: The Room of Growing

*Bleached light.*

*He with swelling hands.*

-----

There are two doors  
that lead, one outside onto the front stoep with its shiny red polish, the other into his  
sister's bedroom  
directly behind him There is a long black crack in the wall that opens and closes  
depending on the weather  
There is a wide window with long green blinds made of something that snaps sharply like  
bubble-wrap  
if he bends one of them The window faces straight onto Greyling Street, which runs left to  
right and back again  
all day and all night Even on Sundays Even when he is not there When he is at church In  
his little blue safari  
suit staring up into nowhere, or at school sitting behind his scratched desk with his eyes  
squeezed tight in case  
the teacher asks him to read out loud from their comprehension book about Carol and Roy  
who go to the corner cafe  
for their mother, like good children, and buy milk in glass bottles with shiny aluminium  
tops and un-sliced Oxenham's  
white bread in a brown paper packet Through the wide window he watches his father drive  
off every Friday night  
in his brown Ford Cortina XLE (Big 6) with blinds in the back window And he wonders  
where his father goes  
And why his mother does not go with And why he sometimes wishes that his father did  
not ever come back  
There is a wooden floor with a hole in the middle through which he tries to push his soft  
penis one night



in imitation of something he knows not what There is a high ceiling made of long boards like the floor but slotted into each other in the tongue-and-groove fashion The ceiling is painted white and it is flaking in parts and in other parts there are brown stains from the leaking corrugated iron roof There is a heavy old wardrobe in dark imbuia that used to belong to his *oupa* In fact long before the room was the boy's it belonged to his *oupa* before he passed away in the old Grey's Hospital with his empty blue eyes staring up into nowhere

The wardrobe has a long narrow mirror in the door in the centre and deep pockets of camphor-scented darkness on the inside The mirror is flanked by a simple S-shape carved in light relief into the wavy grain

There are two identical second-hand pine beds One for himself And the other for his much younger brother

Before he moved to the back room Because they squabble all the time and cannot share anything There are two patchwork duvets made by their mother from scraps of barefoot shame and old shirts dresses, curtains and pillow slips

There is a pine desk under the window that he has no choice but to share with his brother although he prefers doing his schoolwork on his bed with his back against the cracked wall and his cold feet sticking out over the other side

(In this position he writes a long poem, which his mother copies out in her best handwriting and frames about a race of people with eyes all over their body instead of skin, and plastic flippers where their feet should be)

There is a small short-wave transistor radio that plays his favourite programmes like *Jet Jungle*, *High Adventure* and

*Squad Cars* ‘They prowl the empty streets at night, waiting in fast cars, on foot, living with crime and violence’

There is also a bookshelf made by his father from off-cuts scrounged from the factory workshop and attached

to the wall above the head of his bed, for his growing collection of *The Hardy Boys* and Willard Price Later

it will include Louis L’Amour and *Edge* and Sven Hassel and the poems of Rod McKuen (with black and white photographs

of couples wearing bell-bottoms walking hand in hand on the beach while a big white sun sets behind them)

There is a small tin that he hides amongst the spare batteries, the brylcreem and hankies, the cans of deodorant and nebuliser

masks, the dirty bandages and tubes of Betadine ointment, in the top two drawers of the desk *His* drawers

unlike the bottom ones which belong to his brother and are always empty Except for the one occasion when

they were full of Crunchies and Chocolate Logs and packets of Simba chips (Cheese & Onion and Plain)

which his brother stole from Van’s Hoek Kafee (at his instigation, though) and for which his gullible brother

was thrashed with a strap by their father in the garage over and over While he (because he has a hole in his heart

as his mother screamed when it came to his turn, when his father went to fetch him from where he was hiding

under the green bench in the lounge) got off (as he always did) with just a warning (and a smile) from his mother

The tin in his top drawer is a flat rectangular Strepsils tin with a lid held in place by a broad elastic band

and it holds all the luck he needs to stay upright in assembly with his eyes squeezed tight during the Our Father

Forgive us our Trespasses In case he should fall over or wet himself It goes everywhere

with him Like his hands  
Like his concave chest Like his memories of blonde six-year-old Bunty who lived just  
across the road  
before the special branch policeman moved in with his wife and her short crimplene skirts  
There is the sound  
of traffic all day up and down, and people on the pavement outside his window, and black  
delivery boys on bicycles  
And then a siren goes off somewhere and his father comes home from the factory for lunch  
smelling of cocoa  
beans And afterwards his father has ten minutes in his high wing-backed chair in the  
lounge, and suddenly  
everything in the house is still and dark, and the boy is underwater again Under the water  
where he can  
hold his breath longer than his brother (who has no talents to speak of, except being  
exceptionally impressionable)  
Longer than anyone else in the whole world in fact And he hears the sound of guttural  
voices knocking against  
the low step into his room from the polished front stoep And unknown things that happen  
in rustles and squeaks  
behind the locked door into his sister's lilac room The door that locks from her side only  
Things he spies  
through the keyhole of the bathroom door Holding his breath so that she does not hear him  
Until everything begins to  
swim around him And inside him And inside him someone shouts and shouts sharply  
And he turns and he runs  
and he runs out into the back garden Past the garage Far away into the night that smells of  
orange blossom  
and the mint under the leaking tap and the yesterday-today-and-tomorrow bush and rotting  
figs that have fallen to the ground.

-----

*Stop.*

*Lights fade. Pause.*

*Time stretches so slowly.*

*His hands seem to stand still.*

#### Scene IV: The Room of Family Holidays

*Bright sunlight.*

*With the fat smell of frying.*

-----

There is a

long window with thick metal burglar bars painted white. The window runs the entire length of the room

and looks out across the deep blue Indian ocean on the south coast of Natal. It is a long room with three beds.

One bed is perpendicular to the room, in the middle, with its head against the back wall facing the ocean.

(This one is reserved for his sister.) A second bed is directly underneath the window, and horizontal to it.

at the far end of the room. The third bed is in the same position but up against the back wall. The second bed

is a source of continual dispute between himself and his brother. Because both boys always want to sleep

right by the window, so they can be the first to see the ocean and to see the sun come up.

This dispute

is finally solved by their father (with the help of his strap) who decides that they must take turns to be

at the window on their annual Christmas holidays. Although this still does not prevent them arguing over

who slept there last and whose turn it is this time. About to go into his final year at high school he feels

that such squabbles are below him, and he magnanimously allows his brother access to the bed by the window

without any arguments, and with only a superior smile. He feels that he is on the brink of something very significant.

in his life, something almost adult And though he will perhaps feel this same overwhelming power again

For example when he buys his first car, a 1982 white VW Jetta Mk1, or when he publishes his first – and only – piece of writing, a rhyming poem on Mother’s Day in a consumer tabloid distributed free from local Spar supermarkets It will never be with the same absolute confidence in his ability to achieve what he wants

And what he wants now is to find a way to talk to the long-legged blonde girl who stays in the big cottage at the top of the road, with its own private access to the beach via a long flight of steps made from old railway sleepers So he doubles up on the arm and chest and leg exercises he does with his expander springs (the thick ones with the blue handles, not the red ones which are too easy) Even though his mother warns him not to strain himself And he swims in the surf directly in front of her house even at high tide (when his mother warns him not to because of his weak legs and the strong undertow) And he tans himself at low tide on the flat black rocks in full view of her pathway So she has no choice but to notice him And when she smiles at him on the third day and says hello and how are you on the fourth, he knows with a certainty as firm as the black rocks that he is chosen And that he will always achieve what he wants Just by willing it And on the fifth day she invites him to her house and into her small bedroom (with a big blue teddy bear on the bed) and together they listen to a stretched tape of the Beatles’ *Sergeant Pepper’s Lonely Heart’s Club Band* (I’d love to turn you on)

And on New Year's Eve they walk hand in hand as the white sun sets behind them, along the beach to a party on the wet sand where he drinks *Spook en Diesel* (like his father's policemen friends) out of a polystyrene cup and the blonde girl is asked to dance by an older boy, a university student he assumes, because of his long hair who comes to the party in a red beach buggy with a surf board tied on top, and who makes the girl laugh by whispering something in her ear

And he (the boy with a hole in his heart, at the heart of his story) feels everything crumble and slide away beneath his small feet in their differently-sized orthopaedic boots And he leaves without saying anything to her

And he stumbles home along the cold moonless beach He knows that if he goes home now his mother will want to know What's wrong? What happened? Are you alright? And she will want to kiss it all better (As she always does)

But he is much too old for all that stuff now So he hunches behind a dune smelling of damp vegetation and rotten fish-bait and dog turds, and he sniffs his right hand repeatedly, the hand that held onto hers (and smells of coconut oil and Simba Puffs) and he licks it and puts it inside his trousers and he waits until it is midnight and the fire-crackers have died down and he can open their back door and creep into the sleeping house

And in the morning his mother spoils their whole family by frying bacon and eggs for breakfast (sunny-side up)

This is a special treat Just for holidays she says Because, apart from his father who eats *mielie pap* every morning for breakfast, everyone else always has Pronutro, regular or chocolate flavoured, with milk and no sugar

And that is that Finish *en klaar* And that is the morning when he learns how much easier it always is to pretend than to admit a painful truth.

-----

*Hold.*

*Ten seconds.*

*Then just as he is about to burst.*

*Cross fade to.*



## Scene V: The Room of Rural Teaching

*Hot glare. Cicadas.*

*He with more of the same habit.*

*Using only two hands.*

-----

There is nowhere  
to hide anything inside a room without any corners, where everything happens in a  
language without him anywhere  
in it There is a worn stable door painted green on the outside but left bare on the interior  
There are two small  
windows in wooden frames directly opposite each other that cannot open There is a floor  
made of blood  
and dung, and polished black so that it shines and is perilously slippery There is a dusty  
thatched roof that hides  
spiders and beetles, and who knows what other feverish things that whisper and breed and  
multiply in the dark  
the way dependency on others does There is a vertiginous mix of emotions inside him  
Excitement  
that he is finally out of his parent's home and can do what he wants for the very first time  
in his life  
Pride that he is helping those less fortunate than himself And fear that they will murder  
him in his sleep  
There is a second-hand pine wardrobe with a broken lock that still holds the sweet  
sandalwood smell  
of the discount shop in Indian town where his father bought it Before all the injections and  
tablets and ointments  
When he still drove and would haggle for everything The wardrobe has three drawers  
One for socks

one for stained underpants, and the third one for something else, like the habit he keeps in a 1-litre plastic ice cream container together with a packet of Rizla papers and some mix (Stuyvesant Blue) and a jumbo box of Lion safety matches containing a minimum of 235 standard size matchsticks. When he leaves the wardrobe remains behind as part of some fumbling kind of expiation for failed promises. There is a nest made by hornets in the dry wall opposite the stable door, which he destroys as soon as he moves in, and adds to his long list of things to feel guilty about for the rest of his life (Like Bunty and his compliant little brother and the big bruises on his mother's arms from his rough boots when she carried him about like a baby, long after he was not). But nothing and none of that matters anymore. Not at all. Because he will always find something or somebody else to take the blame. Because just like holding his breath, it is the only thing he excels at. There is an overgrown patch of spinach and pumpkins outside the stable door, on the other side of the dirt yard. And beyond that there are acacia trees with thorns as long as his fingers, and aloes and further off a valley with steep rocky sides. There are pitch-black nights without the hint of a moon, when for the first time in his life he feels what it is like to be truly alone (those countless long moments on his own in the cold prep room before going in to theatre do not count because he had only been part conscious), with only his two rough hands to console him and the sound of goats rubbing themselves against the rough outside wall of his room. There are horribly thin dogs that howl on the rocky hillside.

behind him in the middle of the night and haunt his animal dreams with their wet longing  
There is an enamel potty  
with rust on the handle that he keeps under his bed and empties early in the morning in the  
veld before anyone else is up,  
when the mist still lies like cobwebs upon the bushes The bed is the same pine bed he slept  
on as a child, except now  
it has a new foam mattress (courtesy of his father who argued it into the deal over the  
second-hand wardrobe  
with the small Indian salesman) There is no bookshelf, but a large copy of *Die Tweetalige  
Woordeboek \ Bilingual Dictionary*  
and *Afrikaans for Standard 7* lies on top of his pine desk The desk, like the old bed, he  
knows from other  
earlier circumstances Although he doesn't have to share it with anyone else now The desk  
sits under one  
of the small windows, the window on the right (facing the stable door) From there he  
watches terrified  
as the clouds climb up over the edge of the horizon and swell and change colour until the  
entire sky is  
hard and heavy with their disapproval There is nowhere to hide then or run away to, as he  
could when he was a  
child, and the only way he survives is to pray to God (Forgive us our Trespasses) that the  
lightning finds someone  
more deserving of punishment than himself He does not deserve the kindness of his hosts  
who carry in to his room  
every night an old metal bath (which they prop up with bricks) and five litres of lukewarm  
water in a rusted oil  
drum that they heated over an open fire He does not take account of how far the youngest  
daughter walks every day  
with her squeaking wheelbarrow and her plastic drum to fetch water for him from the  
Ngwenya river Because  
there are no taps in her home Or that she is only twelve when she bends over the old bath

in her black school gymslip  
revealing a dirty pair of pink panties, to scoop out his dirty water (Which her whole family  
would have used for a day)  
He takes for granted everything that he sees, that he feels or tastes Even the ability of his  
hands and his legs  
to think and to move on their own So much so in fact that when one day inside him  
something speaks sharply  
in the voice of his father and says he will lose it all one day, everything, even his ability to  
speak and to move  
on his own, if he does it again . . . if his hands carry on . . . he does nothing Does what he  
always does Nothing  
except turn and run (he who always comes last running) into the moonless night, breathless  
and heaving, hands stained  
and sticky with hallucinations, his eyes swimming, straining, straining like hungry dogs  
against the hot rope of their longing.

-----

*Stop. Stop.*

*He does not want to go on.*

*Does not want to go off. Goes off.*

*Empty.*

## Scene VI: The Room of What He Excels at

*Everything*

*is spinning all around him.*

---

There is a smoky room  
with a stuffed buffalo head on the wall outside the entrance to the men's toilet, stinking of  
urine and stomach gases  
where dirty water lies on the floor and crude pictures of penises are scrawled behind the  
cubicle door  
There are blacked-out windows, a pool table with heavy legs, and a television set in the  
corner without sound  
playing soft porn with Swedish subtitles There are a hundred excuses, explanations,  
justifications and mitigations  
that he makes for failing to meet everyone's expectations In the spinning room with  
signatures and photos  
on the sticky walls of South African musicians like Lance James and Nick Taylor ('Ag  
pleez Deddy! Pleez!')

and heavyweight boxing champions like Mike Schutte and Gerrie Coetzee Where he  
always arrives breathless  
and heaving, his shirt-front wet with sweat Long after everyone else has left.

---

*Pause. Then.*

*Does something with his stained hands.*

*To take his mind off.*

*Blackout.*

*Hold. & hold. &.*

## **PART TWO**

**What ?**

## Scene I: The Room of Impressions and First Appearances

*Grey & drizzling.*

*With one new character.*

*On red high heels.*

-----

He is wearing

a cream polo-neck jersey with a white vest underneath, a pair of black chinos that his mother lengthened

by letting out the turn-up, old grey school socks, and his favourite brown Harris tweed jacket that belonged

to his grandpa (the father of his mother, not *oupa*, his father's father) who bought it in Johannesburg after the war

when he came back from up-North and the only job he could get was as a barman at the Observatory Golf Club

earning two-and-six for a twelve-hour shift with one day off a week She is wearing Pure Silk by Lentheric

with her short black hair in a bob just like his mother The tweed jacket is his favourite because it makes him look

older than he really is, and serious, and because coming back in the bus from the National School's Festival in his matric year,

the girl with the red hair, the girl who had a boyfriend waiting for her at home, the girl who had shown him how

to kiss with an open mouth and a wet tongue (his friends called it French-kissing), had said that all the writers

she had seen in pictures (and other intense people like psychopaths) always wore jackets like that There are

three precise rows of white plastic chairs with precisely ten chairs in each row There is a long trestle table at

the back of the room covered with a long white cloth that hangs down to the floor There is  
an urn on the table  
and three neat rows of cups and saucers, a stack of small side plates with yellow serviettes  
and two unmatched dinner plates  
with Tennis biscuits and stale Romany Creams (mint flavour) that he stuffs into his mouth  
two at a time during  
interval (just in case they are finished before he can return for seconds) and then promptly  
chokes on Just like he  
did at that wedding reception at the Lion's River Country Club when he was ten, when he  
vomited all over himself  
and everybody thought it was because he had eaten too many stuffed eggs, whereas really  
he had choked on  
the marble he had been sucking in his mouth (his lucky smokie) that his mother always  
warned him not to  
There is a Steinway grand piano in the front of the room with its shining top propped open  
and beside it  
three upright chairs without arms One for the cellist, at the end furthest from the piano,  
and two for the violinists  
first and second There are large French doors with a view onto a day without any sky or  
sun or colour  
and only a lonely *Piet-my-Vrou* calling And in the doorway he stands aside to let her pass  
The way his  
mother taught him And she smiles and lowers her eyes The way her experience with other  
men taught her  
And he pays for their tickets The way his father hated doing for anything without haggling  
first or wheedling  
for a discount And all the while he wonders why he accepted her invitation to come all the  
way out on a  
cold grey day to a cold sandstone house in Greytown to listen to the chamber music of  
Ernst Bloch Actually



he does not mind Classical music But then it must be popular classics like Tchaikovsky's *1812 Overture* (with real cannons) or *Bolero*, which he used to listen to over and over again in the lounge as a child until his father grew so sick of it he scratched the record with a long nail Just like that In front of him Finish *en klaar* Finally he concludes that perhaps he accepted her invitation because she is so much older than him (thirteen years, he finds out later) and a divorcee Which makes him feel grown-up for the first time in his life And that someone is treating him as a grown-up For the first time in his life But it might also be because she smokes long cigarettes and wears designer dresses and high heels like an actress in one of those slow and serious movies (the black and white kind with subtitles that he can never read quickly enough or work out who is saying what But where all the men wear old tweed jackets) He cannot dismiss the fact that it may even be because, with her long neck and her small head and strong legs she reminds him of a praying mantis (She studied as a dancer, before snapping a tendon, and becoming a nurse he finds out later) And though mantises terrify him (he had read in one of those Did You Know questions inside a yellow Chappies bubble-gum which he had twisted his brother's arm to steal for him, that the female devours the male after mating) he is the first to admit their mysterious power The power to decipher in the old air everything that ordinary people only find in the *Reader's Digest* and the *Huisgenoot* or the twelve o'clock re-broadcasts of the 'Bold and the Beautiful'.

---

*She lifts her thin arms.*

*Goes up on point.*

*He feels with his eyes*

*the way everything floats.*

*On anticipation.*

*Cut.*

## Scene II: The Room of Independence

*Incense. & candle-light.*

*& the same cold*

*long shadows from his childhood.*

-----

There is a wide

window with pale green curtains, facing onto Burger Street and the provincial offices of the Department of Transport

There are two doors that lead, one outside onto the front stoep with its cracked and broken red tiles, the other

into a long dark passage, with a dusty wooden floor and a dead light bulb that is never replaced There is

the same old pine desk with four drawers filled with unopened NBS bank statements and old school exercise books

that he had bought because the girl with the red hair, who had a boyfriend waiting for her at home, had told him

that all real writers keep notebooks for their profound thoughts and ideas But since he had never had any of these

(or the discipline or the will even to be still and to stare them down) the books are still sealed in their brown paper wrapping

In the drawers there are also dry Bic pens (only black), blunt pencils (Rexel HB) and dog-eared photographs and love letters

on perfumed paper from all the girls who could not love him the way he wanted, with their lips and their hands

But who wanted to be his friend instead (This is how he first learned the terrible meaning of the word 'platonic'

a word he had previously thought referred to a small planet) There is the same narrow pine bed that he slept on

as a child With the same old patchwork duvet he had dreamed beneath (of feelers and rough claws and sticky wet things) so many long years ago in Greyling Street, where his parents still live (although his father is struggling with the side effects of his Lupron injections for prostate cancer At eighty-one he is too old for them to operate) And where he goes every Sunday afternoon for lunch, and takes his dirty linen to his mother who washes and irons it for him and returns it in a neatly folded pile with a Tupperware *bakkie* of frozen mince on top or chicken stew or *melkkos* in winter, which he eats sitting on his single bed with his back against the wall and the door closed, out of sight of his housemate (so he does not feel guilty for still being Mommy's Big Boy) with a book open beside him (Stephen King or Douglas Adams) Perhaps even the local newspaper *The Natal Witness*, which he gets free because he works there now, just around the corner in Longmarket Street as a nightshift sub-editor The days are short and the nights are long and difficult, and he gets cramps in his stomach and headaches because he does not fit in with the other subs and journalists who talk about sex and parties and politics all the time, and wear gaudy T-shirts with slogans on them like "End Conscription Now" and "Troops out of the Townships" Although he cannot admit it to his colleagues, it is a source of deep shame for him that he was never accepted to do military service because of his weak chest and his unmatched feet and his heart with a hole in it Because above all else he wants to be a man and to do real manly things with his hands and his feet

like kicking and punching and slapping hard, the way his father did with his brother and his sister and his mother,  
and then his brother again (because the little boy has no mind of his own and always does exactly what his older  
brother tells him) and even Fluffy, their little fox terrier too Because straight after school when all of his friends  
had gone away on long noisy trains to learn how to strip and to clean and to shoot an R1 and how to march  
up and down *Aaaaandag! Eentweedrie Eentweedrie* in their big brown boots and their hard *staaldak*, he had been  
forced to take the only job that did not require any technical skills, and for which he did not need a qualification  
Teaching Afrikaans to black children at a farm school Even though six months later he was back home with his  
pine bed and his desk (but not the wardrobe) Because the job had been too demanding for his back and his feet  
and his heart with a hole in it Or so he had told everyone And his mother had said See I told you so  
No one ever listens to me But so what he tells himself now when the sky gets hard and heavy with disapproval  
(Father forgive us our Trespasses) There are many places to hide little secrets and habits in a room with four corners  
and a pine wardrobe and a bookshelf with a masonite back, and a belief that because he was chosen at birth  
not to be the same as everyone else, he cannot be subject to the same rules as them So after midnight  
when his shift at the newspaper is done and everybody in the street is fast asleep, he opens the curtains and opens  
the windows and sits still in his darkened room and stares out And then, while his stained fingers are busy, the night,

the merciful night with quiet eyes quietly takes off her shiny top, the one with a hundred little sequins and underneath she is wearing absolutely nothing, and he inhales deeply and holds it all in and suddenly everything begins to swim inside him

And on New Year's Eve when everybody in the street is dancing and drinking and singing 'Shuld auld acquaintance be forgot', when he is alone, with only his hands to console him and his secrets and his consoling old lies, an orange 1973 VW Passat stops in the driveway and the woman with the designer dresses and the Courtleigh cigarettes (in the red box) knocks at the door on the front stoep And it does not surprise him at all that underneath her velvet coat (with Arctic fox fur at the collar and around the cuffs) she is wearing nothing at all Only her pale skin, only her soft pale skin overflowing with something he has never felt before in anybody's eyes Not even the eyes of the girl with the red hair

Not even his mother's Something that trembles like the appetite of a size eleven scalpel blade And he believes that he is on the brink of something very significant in his life Something almost adult But then suddenly her face begins to melt and her hands disappear into her arms and her arms shrivel into her shoulders and quick as a flash she slithers across the red tiles into the dark undergrowth at the edge of his hunger And he is alone again

And there is a rusted anchor in his chest And he cannot breathe No matter how wide open he opens his mouth

And the sharp voices that speak sharply in the pit of his stomach in the voice of his father saying he will lose it all everything, one day, even his hands and his sneaking eyes if he ever . . . even once more . . .

The voices will not be silenced No No Not Not by anything.

---

*He doubles up.*

*There is no distance. Suddenly.*

*Everything that previously  
had happened slowly. One at a time.*

*Now happens at once. At the same time. In the same place.*

### Scene III: The Room of Wordlessness

*Yellow overhead light.*

*Curtains drawn about the prone shape of his hands.*

---

There is the smell  
of undiluted Dettol, that he remembers And ammonia and old vomit, fresh paint (Double  
Velvet – Velva Glo)  
and wet sea-sand A smell that swells and recedes as he slowly moves his head There is  
the sensation of cold  
and claustrophobia, smooth aluminium surfaces, shining needles, clear PVC tubes and  
sharp sea-spray  
There is the thin sound of wind far-away in the dark hollow of a shell whispering There is  
the gargle of sounds  
in a hollow language in a putrid mouth without a hint of him anywhere in it There is  
nowhere for him to look  
without seeing the thin body of someone who used to be his father before his father gave  
up being anyone  
and expected everyone suddenly to feel sorry for him There is the white uniform of a bed  
that silently carries  
a weightless cargo from one reluctant breath to the next There is nothing to be said by  
anyone, standing staring  
or sitting around the high bed staring at nothing So nothing is said Nothing at all Just like  
that Finish *En klaar.*

---

*Long.*

*Long silence.*

*Heavy as his hand.*



#### Scene IV: The Room of the First Time

*Dark. Only his fingers see.*

*Take the weight on your forearms. She says.*

*Slowly. Keep the momentum. Yes. Yes.*

*Don't worry if it doesn't happen the first time.*

-----

There is

There is a small pencil triangle (upside down) with a dot in the middle, in the top left-hand corner of a journal

(not a Moleskine, which is too costly, but the Croxley JD6235 with 128 lined pages and every page blank

except for the pencil triangle) that records the date at the grateful age of twenty-seven years, three months

and fourteen days when, in a cramped bedroom that smells of hair spray, old make-up and cigarette smoke

in her mother's second-floor flat overlooking the Oribi airport, he finally, at long last, leaves his long childhood behind

There is a large cross in black ink through the pencil triangle (upside down) with a dot in the middle, in the top

left-hand corner of a journal (the Croxley JD6235 with 128 lined pages and every page blank except for the

cross through the pencil triangle) that records the silent death of his father from renal failure in a small room

that smells of plaster and paint and old vomit, in the brand new state-of-the-art Grey's Hospital on the hill

on the night when no-one in the whole wide world knows where the hell to find him When at long last, finally,

his hands taste and touch and see everything in the whole world they have always wanted.

---

*The first time.*

*It was over so suddenly*

*he wondered. What's all the fuss about?*

*But that did not stop him coming back the next night. For more.*

## Scene V: The Room of White

*Continued.*

*Faster.*

-----

There is a pan-handle  
gravel driveway leading up to a small cottage that the woman in designer dresses rents  
after moving out from  
her mother's cramped second-floor flat, with its view of skydivers sliding off the steep  
pitch of the sky  
There is a small stoep with a white plastic garden table and three plastic white chairs There  
is a front door with no  
handle and only a heavy brass knocker that he must grip firmly to pull the door closed  
behind him There is a  
short passage with a bare wooden floor and an antique hallstand that she inherited from her  
father who was master  
of the Natal Supreme Court from 1962 until his sudden death from a brain haemorrhage in  
1980 in the parking lot  
of the court just as he was about to get into his brand-new V-6 Ford Granada, which he had  
only bought the week before  
There is a white king-sized bed with a red bolster pillow and three round red cushions in  
damask silk  
Everything else in the room is white The walls and the door, the floor and the ceiling, the  
bookshelf and the wardrobe  
Even the light that comes in through the white sash window There is a glass figurine of a  
dancer by René Lalique  
on top of the white bookshelf There is a framed print by Claude Monet against the white  
wall of a woman in  
a white dress walking through a field of red flowers On the bookshelf there are titles he  
has never heard of before

and that he is afraid are perhaps occult Titles such as the *Tao te Chen*, the *I-Ching* and *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*

There is also a large format full-colour manual with the Latin names of all the secret and scary things

that do not belong to his body Things like the *mons veneris* and the *vestibule* Or things that do belong to his body

like the *frenulum*, but mean something completely different in fact The way bleeding does Through the white

sash window one morning he sees the ghost of his father with wide open eyes, swimming up the long driveway

searching for him, like a bird with its long beak Because strange people are living at his old flat in Burger Street

where his father's ghost went to apologize for everything he had not done And for everything that he had

And like a reflex he ducks and he hides Because his father's ghost would not approve of him sharing a table and

a bathroom and a white king-sized bed with an older woman and divorcee, *nogal*, who smokes and who knows

the Latin names of all the secret and scary things that belong to his body The body he was left with at birth

after there was nothing else left to fill up the blank spaces The body he has always been ashamed of

because it cannot be trusted to stay upright or dry Even though deep down he knows it is futile to hide

Because his father always said that if he could change his job and finally, at long last, be someone, anyone in life

other than a store-man in a chocolate factory, then he would be a detective.

-----

*Spotlight.*

*Looks down. Sees something hard on his body.*

*That does not feel.*

*Cut without hesitation to.*

## Scene VI: The Room of Promises

*Water. Birds. Stone.*

*Headlong.*

*All.*

-----

There is

a tall blue sky without any railings He remembers He remembers the woman saying  
Marry me With this body

I thee worship Within this place of basalt and sandstone we shall make the nesting place  
for our souls

There is a sun-tanned wind with strong white legs Catch me, catch me he says (And he  
hears, but he also

does not hear himself using the same voice he used as a child, when he stood naked and  
wet and small on the green plank

across the bath, and threw himself into his mother's wide smiling arms) Look, look at me I  
am flying!

And the swallows celebrate with their quick wings And the cliffs ring with their singing  
And the loud voices

he remembers from all of his past, and their long shadows too, are overwhelmed by water  
A clear water welling up from out of the black rock.

-----

*Why*

*not? Why on*

*earth not? Why?*

## Scene VII: The Room of the Dream

*Except for a very strange  
green light. & even stranger  
sound effects.*

-----

But then

There are . . . Suddenly there are eyes, with heavy footsteps that follow him wherever he takes off his feet

From out of nowhere there are eyes, with heavy footsteps that run without resting or needing to breathe even

through all of the liquid nights that he dreams of sleeping beneath And in his sleep a man appears with no eyes

in his head, but eyes all over the soles of his feet instead, and his feet as large as a loaf of un-sliced white bread

in a brown paper packet from Van's Hoek Kafee at the corner of Boom and Oxford street

The man looks like someone

who visits dreams all the time, every day, even those dreams that are not remembered

Those that shine like the sun

with singing and flying and falling that is forever, not downhill This man, the man with feet as large as loaves of un-sliced

bread, is everything the dreamer is not, but at the same time too, everything the dreamer dreams of being And the man

with big feet is carrying an extraordinarily big bundle of rumours and lies, and wherever he stops, he lays a lie down

that immediately springs up fertile and tall behind him And this way the man moves and this way too

he grows lighter and larger as he moves and sheds the rumours and lies he carries Until his sack is empty

and his hands are empty But that does not matter now, because now he is as large as a mountain And the dreamer is overwhelmed suddenly by the weight of everything around him, which is the weight of the hole in his heart and of all the expectations he expects her to have and that he is afraid he will never, never, in all of his life be able to satisfy And he forces himself awake He sits on the edge of the king-sized bed, holding his heart in his shaking hands And the whole world suddenly feels so small and so distant and frail that he is afraid to stand up in case his two clumsy feet break something, and his father finds out, and finds out it was not his younger brother at all (This is why for so many long years, long after he could walk on his own, his mother always carried him everywhere) Everything is white all around him, as ash, as ice Even the thin night that comes in through the white sash window And he turns to look at her, concealed in stillness beside him, she, the woman, transformed into a legal term now (official as husband and spouse or homeowner, words that previously he had assumed would attach themselves like caravans to the ends of other people only) And everything lopsided and clumsy inside him, everything that had hoped he would disappear or at least change beyond recognition, once he had entered and come out on the other side of her, the woman with the long legs and the long white cigarettes, everything small and crawling with feelers and claws inside him, suddenly swells with ice, hard as ice and disapproving And a shadow close and compressed as the love of his mother's arms, suddenly rears up between him and the woman in the bed



And he cannot see over or under or around or through it Where are the birds? he cries out  
Where are the birds?  
But no sound comes out Where are the wings of the birds to take him up and over?

-----

*Wake*

*up. Wake*

*up. Wake up.*

## Scene VIII: The Room of More

*Shhh. She says. Shhh.*

*Just be still. She says. Hold me. Hold me. Like this. She says.*

*Let us just sleep. Just sleep together. Haven't you had enough? Enough.*

*But his hands can not & ever. Stop.*

*& his hunger will not & ever let go.*

*Wanting & wanting. Only & ever.*

*To want.*

*Enough. She says. Enough!*

*Stop it! Stop! You're hurting me.*

-----

*Sorry. He.*

*He. Sorry.*

**Scene IX: The Room of Free-Falling, That is Forever and not Downhill**

*1-2-3. 1-2-3. 1-2-3.*

*1-2-3. 1-2-3.*

*1-2-3.*

-----

There is the Odd Fellow's

Hall at the top of Longmarket Street, near the railway station and Dove's Funeral parlour

There are twisted

paper streamers strung across the dusty ceiling and coloured balloons that hang from the lights and the old wall fans

There is a raised stage at one end of the hall covered by a heavy maroon curtain There are screaming children

who run across the front part of the stage, between the curtain and the edge, and leap off

Then run up the short steps

at either end of the stage, screaming still, and leap off again and return and repeat the whole thing Until their parents

intervene At the other end of the hall, directly opposite the stage is a long row of steel trestle tables covered with

red cloths that reach half-way to the ground On the tables are glasses and bottles and bowls and plates and cups

and cutlery, and trays of stuffed eggs, spicy meat balls and little pointed sandwiches, cold chicken drumsticks

and wings, sausage rolls and small samoosas There is a row of fold-up armless wooden chairs with slatted backs

all the way round the perimeter of the old hall And here he sits (the one at the heart of his story, with a hole in his heart)

with his arms folded tightly across his chest and his legs closed and crossed at the feet like a sulking child

Like a child holding on to the hand-hold of its hurt And he refuses to look at the dancers in  
shining outfits and coloured smiles  
sweeping and spinning around the room like coloured tops (As a child his plain wood top  
never spun upright like  
the other boys' So he gave up and played Dingbat instead with a green Sprite paddle But  
then the elastic snapped  
and his father refused to get him another one Do you think money grows on trees hey?)  
And he sits still as ice  
instead, with his arms folded and his legs closed and crossed at the feet and he stares at  
the dusty parquet floor  
The floor is scratched and scuffed and there are drops of black paint in some parts, even  
the rusted head  
of a drawing pin stuck into the wood In other parts some of the small rectangular wooden  
blocks are missing  
And as he stares at the dirty gaps left in the parquet floor by the missing wooden blocks  
filled with dust and dirt  
and hair, something dark stirs within him, something far away in the dark turns and raises  
its dark head and looks at him  
full in the face, something magnified, with feelers and claws, whose patchwork cover has  
been snatched away  
And suddenly he is a child again, in the early icy morning, and his parents have locked  
their bedroom door  
He is a little child playing on the dusty carpet in the lounge with his green plastic soldiers  
and his farm animals, his wooden  
blocks and his Buddy-L trucks (the cool-drink delivery truck, the flat-bed truck for carting  
sand or wooden blocks  
the cement mixer and the panel van with sliding doors) and he is building a tower to reach  
all the way to the topmost  
icy peak of the sky Like the new all-glass Capital Tower on the corner of Berg and  
Commercial streets

with designer dress shops and a Chinese restaurant and a cinema on the second floor where years later he takes a young Dutch nurse whom he met while in Grey's Hospital having an infected ulcer on the ball of his left foot debrided and irrigated, and whose name goes clean out of his mind as he stands in the hot glare of the cinema's foyer lights and has to introduce her to a former classmate they happen to meet On the top of the tower he will place (as he always does) a small glazed ceramic figurine called Doc, who always wears a white safari suit with long white socks and white shoes, and who is missing the front part of his base so that he stands always with his feet poised on the edge of the void From the top of the tall new wooden tower Doc will be able to hear everything wet and whimpering, sloshing like a mop in a bucket of water, in the locked world below And to build this tower the little boy will first put two blocks down flat on the carpet (Fortunately the carpet is not fluffy, otherwise his design would not work) The blocks are laid horizontally, one above the other, just less than the length of a block between them After that he places two other blocks (also flat) across the first two, lengthwise, joining them in a square of sorts On top of these again he will lay two more, at the bottom and at the top, directly parallel to the ones below And so on And so on Turn after turn, slowly, whimpering and sloshing, the blocks alternate – on top and underneath, left and right – as the tower grows Until it is up to the boy's waist when he stands dizzy with something like vertigo now, and there are only four blocks left in the blue barrel that contains all of

his soldiers and his cars and his plastic farm animals The tower shakes slightly as he holds  
his breath  
hands sticky with hallucinations, and he prepares to place Doc on the platform he has made  
at the top out of the last  
four blocks in the barrel The tower trembles and he flinches as if before a blow, and the  
grimace on his face  
already has the shadow of a fat hand But Doc does not react Doc is not afraid of who  
dances with who  
quick or slow, close or not, whimpering and moaning, whispering slippery wet words all  
the while Like the surfer  
in the red beach buggy who seduced the girl with the blonde hair and the long legs on the  
beach that night  
when everything fell suddenly through the boy's fingers like burning sand and he was left  
alone Because Doc  
is not afraid to stand alone at the top of the tower with all the churning world below staring  
up at him  
pointing and sniggering Because he can fly Even from the top, so close to the peak of the  
sky, when the boy suddenly  
for no reason pushes the tower over Just to see what will happen (The same way he did  
when he promised blonde  
six-year-old Bunty she could have his old plaster cast when it came off if she put his lucky  
smokie into her tiny *koekie*  
and kept it there for a whole game of hide and seek amongst the bushes in the back garden  
Just to see what would happen)  
Just to hear the crashing of a hundred small wooden blocks down into a broken heap Just  
to feel the soft  
wings of Doc, like a moth, brush against his skin Like a glazed moth under the lamp of the  
moonlight  
As the little ceramic man swims unscathed out of the sulphurous flames and the retribution.

-----

*Pause.*

*Cut. Time slides. Across the bare floor.*

*Cut.*

*Then.*

*Flashback. With strobe effects.*

**Scene X: The Room of Self-Pity**

*(allegro)*

*Because*

*What? Because They all fall down Because There is a hole Where his heart Where his nerves*

*Where his breath is meant to be Because When he was twelve When they all played spin-the-bottle*

*Because Because he wants to know What if? What like? What? Because he missed out Because*

*When the bottle pointed at him, & the girl with the short mousey hair who had spun it, took him around*

*the side of the house where it was dark & narrow & his heart was beating fast because she was going to kiss him*

*Because that was the rules Because everyone else did But she said no No She did not want to Because*

*Because he has a hole where his heart Where his nerves His mouth is meant to be & she laughed & she*

*made him promise, promise to pretend, pretend to everyone else that she had kissed him With a soft mouth*

*and with closed eyes, like everyone else Because that was the rules Because when they came back*

*all the other girls were giggling Because they knew They knew That the girl with the short mousey hair*

*had not kissed him. That he had never been kissed before Because What? Because they all Because he always falls down Because.*

-----

*Blackout.*

*Silence.*



*Hold.*

*The moment wavers.*

*On the edge of unbearableness.*

## **PART THREE**

**Why ?**

**Scene I: The Room of This is Not It, No, This is Not It at All**

*Broken smell. Something  
like promises. & pale skin.  
Burning.  
Down.*

---

There is a floor  
There is a door  
There is a roof  
There is a ceiling  
There is a bed  
There is a wardrobe  
There is a window  
That starts at one end and goes all the way to the other  
That opens and shuts at will when left alone  
That covers only the essentials and leaves big dripping holes for his eyes to blow through  
That is in-between this and that So as to prevent everything else falling in  
Where he discovers just how much appetite he really has in the reddest part of his heart  
Where he prefers to keep the door closed  
That wants to see what is on the other side  
Because  
Because.

---

*Black.  
Humming of a swarm.  
In his two clammy hands.*

## Scene II: The Room of Going Nowhere

*Wheels. & feet. & memories  
of feelers. Crawling all day.  
Around his cold.  
His cracked mouth.*

-----

There are once again  
two doors, that he remembers And again they lead out of a room with a white king-sized  
bed into another place  
with a different shape But with the same sour air The first of the doors that he remembers  
(directly opposite the king-sized  
bed with the red bolster pillow and cushions that he recognises from other circumstances)  
leads into a narrow passage  
with the same antique hallstand (the one his wife inherited after her father's death from a  
sudden brain haemorrhage)  
that had stood in the entranceway of the cottage, and a heavy kist in Burmese teak that her  
mother brought with her  
when she was forced to move in with them Because she kept going astray between her  
bathroom and the bedroom  
and leaving her front door wide-open as a wallet the whole night long The second of the  
two doors that comes back  
to him is adjacent to the king-sized bed which he makes every morning with a sheet and  
blankets and bedspread Unlike  
the patchwork duvet which he used for so many years and which now lies folded up with  
mothballs in a black  
bin bag on top of his *oupa's* old wardrobe in the front room in Greyling Street, where his  
mother still lives  
thin and alone as a ghost, gnawed hollow from the inside by everything she had done for  
him and everything

she had never done for his younger brother But you never know what lies round the corner, his father always said

So she has put her name down on the waiting list at Sunnyside Home for a single room with frail care and one main meal per day The second door leads into another room Her (not his mother's) dressing room and walk-in wardrobe that smells of cigarette smoke and make-up and musty shadows, where the 40-watt bulb burns all day because the thick white denim drapes are never opened (You never know who might be watching, she says)

Impaled on the high-pitched voice of his father's ghost (Who left the light on hey? How many bladdy times must I tell you to turn the light off when you leave the room?) he turns off every single switch in the house, including the kettle and the stove, the radio and television and the microwave Even if he only leaves a room for a few seconds

Even if someone else is still there In her dressing room there are hanging racks with tops and dresses, jackets and pants skirts, scarves, cardigans and belts All carefully hung by colour, with the palest items at one end – the whites and greys and the silver – moving through to the darkest – the deep blues and purples, and finally the blacks at the other

Everything has its own white plastic coat hanger and a clear plastic sleeve to protect it from the dust and the dirt

And on the wooden floor underneath each item of clothing there is a matching pair of shoes Some with high heels and some low, some open or closed, and even boots, full or half, with zips or laces In the room with the shape of a room that contains a king-sized bed, there are (once again) two windows The first window, long and narrow

runs across the top of the wall behind the bed, just below the ceiling This window is too high to see anything out of except a strip of distant blue, with clouds that pass occasionally across and swell and change colour until the entire sky is hard and heavy with their disapproval There is nowhere to hide then or run away to as he could when he was a child And the only way he survives is to pretend The second window, in the room that has the shape of a room that pretends to forget, is directly opposite the door that leads into her dressing room where the light burns all day This window looks out onto the front stoep painted light grey with white wooden pillars and onto the small garden beyond, enclosed by a high concrete wall with spikes, so that he cannot see the street and only hears its drawn-out guttural complaint In the garden there is a large Leopard tree that the previous owner (a single man with a young child) had planted for its shade, and a wiry Bottlebrush which she bought from McDonald's Nursery when they moved in (to stamp the impression of her personality on their first property), and which he waters with a monotonous sprinkler during the day when she is at the hospital (he still works the night-shift at *The Natal Witness*) leaving him alone all day long with her monotonous old mother in her blue-rinsed hair and her knee-high stockings who is stuck on the same question all day long like a long-playing record with an itch it cannot reach What is the date? What is the date? What is – ? On the other side of the concrete wall, covered by a cat's claw creeper through a dark wooden door that always sticks, are the big old jacaranda trees, the uneven pavement slabs, the muddy verges slippery with squashed purple flowers, and the deep and the wide litter-filled gutters

of Boom Street

Parallel to Greyling Street, the street he was born and grew up in, Boom Street is the same street he walked along

so many long years ago in his little blue safari suit en route to the bus stop to catch the 9am City / Stad bus on a Saturday

to take him to the library for another book of myths about creatures with eyes all over their body instead of skin

and strange things that happened although they could not ever have Or in his little black cap and his blazer

and his striped red and black tie on his way to Model Infants' Primary, the first school he ever attended

(Unlike his brother and sister he did not go to crèche because his mother was worried that he would not

cope going to the bathroom without her) The same school whose orange-tiled roof he can see from his front stoep

sticking out above the concrete wall with spikes, a hundred metres or so down the road

But on the opposite side

It is no longer used as a school, having been given to the provincial department of Social Welfare because of

its large grounds where old people can queue for their old-age and disability pensions and child support grants

And yet in summer, when the air is gorged with the sound of lawnmowers and the smell of newly-mown lawn

then he imagines that he sees the old lollipop man in his white coat standing at the side of the road ready to rescue

the little children from their sticky toffee dreams (This was one of the many odd jobs his grandpa had

when he was boarded from the South African Railways for chronic emphysema When the specialists said

he only had six months to live And he went on for another six years In a single room at the Jan Richter Centre

with a bed and a built-in cupboard) And he imagines too that he is winning the dressing-up race on Sports' Day

(The only race he ever has won And only because his favourite game at home is to dress up in his older sister's clothes

So he knows how to do up buckles and belts and zips and press-studs, and how to slide-shuffle in his mother's

shoes that fit over his unmatched black boots Stop that You're stretching my good shoes she would always scold

But with a smile) And if he is very still, still as a stone, and he closes his eyes and makes a secret motion

with his hands, like a traffic policeman in white gloves, then he can also imagine that he is alone in the girls' cold bathroom

with the cold tile floor and the large white washbasins (Because he wants to know what it looks like inside and

whether it smells of the same sour secrets as the boys') And suddenly the headmistress Mrs Richardson, enters

with her bouffant hairdo and her long red nails and bright red mouth And inside him somebody shouts and

shouts sharply with the voice of his father And he runs And he trips And he scrabbles past Mrs Richardson

out into the blinding corridor that smells of crushed Jacaranda blossoms and sudden afternoon storms

and floor polish (the one in the red tin with the spiky yellow sun coming up like a welt).

-----

*Unable to run further.*

*Only his feet stop.*

*But. The rest of him. Keeps moving.*



### Scene III: The Room of In One Place

*Still. Still. With no movement.*

*& no sound. At all.*

-----

There is a chair now  
that sits in a small square room with white walls and a dim fluorescent light And does not  
do anything Or go anywhere  
Or speak even There is a chair that sits in a corner with its faded arms on either side and  
its old legs closed and crossed  
at the feet There is a chair that waits for something to happen that is not the same as the  
thing that is happening  
the same all the time around it, day in and day out, slowly and in minute detail There is a  
chair that sits in a corner and whines  
to all the old ghosts through its clenched teeth and its small grinding fists, that the best, oh  
yes, oh yes, the best is still to come Mark my words.

-----

*Time slides. Out. Slow.*

*Slow. Fade.*

*Out.*

**Scene IV: The Room of In One Place (Cont.)**  
**also known as**  
**The Room of Nothing Happened**

*Still. Still.*

*Still.*

-----

There is a chair now  
that sits in a corner of a small square room And sits precisely where he always does It is a  
high wing-backed chair  
with floral upholstery, faded as a scar and thin from wear and from where he has sat for so  
long speechless in one  
position The chair has a repetitive rocking action But because it is squashed into a corner  
its motion is restricted  
to static jerks, like small repeated shocks, that over the years have gouged two holes into  
the corner of the walls behind it  
exposing the grey concrete and the thinness of his heels There is a white masonite door  
directly opposite the chair  
that leads into a dining room with mottled grey floor tiles and a heavy antique table with  
carved ball-and-claw legs  
where no-one ever sits down to eat, preferring to eat off their laps instead in the lounge in  
front of the loud television  
(a 32-inch Sanyo) So that no-one ever needs to open or move their mouths to do anything  
except chew and swallow  
and chew again There is a window beside the chair (on the right) that looks onto the  
overgrown backyard of their  
neighbours, a sullen old couple who have lived in the same house ever since he was a  
child, walking the long uneven road  
to school in his black cap with its red *krans*-aloe badge and his little leather satchel over  
his hunched shoulders

Always walking in the same way, with his arms stretched out stiff like a tightrope walker  
to balance himself  
across the uneven pavement slabs and the little driveway bridges And always in exactly  
the same direction too  
Out of his green front gate with the number 82 on a small wooden block in the middle, then  
turning right and proceeding  
up Greyling street for about two hundred uneven paving slabs Past fat Mrs Adcock with  
her black 1955 Vauxhall  
Velox that stands unused after her husband dropped dead one day in the driveway from an  
aneurism Past his friend Yuri  
who trades marbles with him and has a large terrifying grey goose called Smokie Past red-  
faced Mr Hitchcock  
whose maid goes every afternoon to the off-sales at the Polo Tavern at the end of the road  
to buy him two Castle quarts  
for the night Until he comes to Oxford street Then turning right and walking for about a  
hundred slabs past his friend  
Jacques who has no father, but who can draw brumbies and pumas and whose mother  
works at the Polo Tavern at night  
Until he comes to Van's Hoek Kafee at the corner of Oxford and Boom streets (the dirty  
little store he always  
twists his brother's arm to steal stuff from) then turning left and walking under the old  
outstretched branches  
of the Jacaranda trees, past the same house he lives in now (Who lived there then? he  
wonders Did they too  
stand like him on the little stoep and stare at the world going by and stare at the ageing sky  
and wonder why the distant past  
was so much more real than the present? Walking until he comes to the crossing in the road  
where the lollipop man  
waits in his white coat to take him across for another day of pinching and teasing and  
beating by the bigger boys

(with names like Tasso and Vickus and Ferdie) There is his old pine desk in the small square room under the window  
and sometimes he sees the brown-haired daughter of the old couple next door when she visits on weekends  
with her squabbling sons And as he watches her bend over the little plastic pool in the back garden in her black skirt  
and low-cut top, something buried inside him stirs slowly and flashes its hungry eyes toward the floating surface  
But he looks away from that frozen gaze And the woman straightens up and flicks her mousey-brown hair  
out of her mouth and yawns with her wide-open pink lips And he is safe again On even ground again  
Because – next to holding his breath, and finding somebody else to take the blame – this is the one thing  
he is still good at, spying on the world through his fingers, and pretending he has a right to  
Because their bedroom  
door was locked And he could not sleep Because of the noise of mops in his dreams  
Because nothing would have happened  
long ago in that room without any corners, that room where there always was too much to hide Nothing would have happened  
if that little girl, bending over the bath in her little school gymslip, had not straightened up  
Had not turned around  
And seen And seen what his one hand was doing And he would have been able to forget  
Or at least pretend  
that nothing had happened Because nothing had Nothing He told them all so in that meeting in the principal's office  
with the large table with fluted edges and a bevelled glass top Because one day soon when he leaves *The Natal Witness*  
editing the Market Indices and the Property Guide and the What's On for the Week Ahead with a long table of sullen

night subs, he will sit down at his old pine desk (with its four drawers and its scratched yellow top)  
and he will unwrap one of his Croxley JD6235 exercise books (with 128 lined pages) and open it at the first page  
And in his spidery handwriting he will put down the whole story of what happened and what did not and what never would  
The whole story While it is all still so clear While it keeps coming back Clear as a syringe  
and as the fluid inside that he needs to keep on remembering, to keep on coming back to the whole story  
From the black and white wooden rocking horse on the front stoep with handles on either side of its head  
and the purple plastic helmet he wore when he rode his tricycle up and down the driveway pretending he was Jody Scheckter  
To the rough feel of the masonite placemats and pot stands that his father had made for the kitchen table  
And he will write down too (He will He will There is still hope It is the only thing there is still left  
in the bottom drawer of his old pine desk) He will write down everything that comes in to him through his eyes  
and his ears and passes out through his hands, as he sits still as a stone and spies on the world through his stained fingers  
Everything From the taste of his favourite smokie after it has been inside Bunty for a whole game of  
hide and seek in the back garden And the shadow of a fist that falls across his wife's face like a heavy muscle  
one night in her sleep To the monotonous low mumbling of her mother outside their locked bedroom door  
What is the date? What is the date? What is – And in his remembering, and in the putting down on paper of all

of his memories, in the remembering of them there (not for others – there is too much for which there are still no words in his vocabulary – but for the words themselves So that they may lie beside each other and softly touch and make up) he will undo the knot that had cut off the light to his heart at birth And he will kick it loose from him like a bird shedding air as it climbs the sky Higher and higher But suddenly the brown-haired daughter of the old couple becomes aware that someone is watching her and she slaps her arms across her wide-open breasts and snaps around and stares straight in his direction And he thinks that she recognises him and that she remembers the hardness of his lips and the hunger of his hands and his teeth as she kissed him that night around the side of her house When they all played spin-the-bottle When he tried to force her mouth open and to force his tongue inside Just like he had seen his father do with Auntie Audrey (who was not really his auntie just a good friend of his mother's) on New Year's Eve in the cold dark garage smelling of engine oil and concrete And like a reflex he ducks back inside the high wing-backed chair with floral upholstery, faded as the surgical scars on his legs and on his chest, and thin from wear and from where he has sat in one position, speechless as an eye and watering For almost all of his life Pretending.

-----

*Something.*

*Like an excuse. Swells inside his two hands.*

*He looks. For any cheap opening. To sink it into.*

## Scene V: The Room of What is on the Other Side

*Dark.*

*He only wants to know.*

*The size. & the shape. Of her areole.*

-----

There is a weightless night  
without the suspicion of a moon There is a weightless night with lying tracks that cannot  
be lifted once they  
have been laid across his heart There are furtive shadows of Plane trees that twist in and  
out of the long wind like lies  
There are the thin faded front seats of a 1982 VW Jetta Mk1 with a black long-handled  
hand-brake raised between them  
in front of the old cricket nets in Alexandra Park, behind the run-down Pavilion and the  
ruins of the Chinoiserie-style  
bandstand that was demolished by a tree in the Christmas day floods in 1995 and never  
repaired There is the steamed-up  
front windscreen that faces the uMsunduzi River and a faceless and pale king-sized bed  
with a bloodless bolster pillow  
and three empty round cushions in damask silk There is a bloodless deal to open her fat  
legs and let him in  
in exchange for a Taxi-Two KFC Special and a mini loaf (with gravy) on the side There is  
the smell of stale sweat and  
talcum powder and vaseline that remains on his fingers and on the faded front seats long  
afterwards Long after he has  
forgotten her name and the small animal sounds she makes as she sucks him like a bone.

-----

*Dark.*

*On. & on. & more.*

*Now. Now there never will be.*

*Enough.*



## Scene VI: The Room of Spillage

*Faster. Faster.*

*What is the date? What is  
the date? What?*

-----

It all

comes back to him It keeps on coming The back-to-front image of his mother, burning  
like a negative

Back-to-front and intimate as a negative, headless, with white skin all over her body All  
over white as a negative

And him on his bare knees On his knees in front of a small black keyhole When she is  
whiter than anything

he has ever seen or dreamed When he wakes up at the back of a house in the dead of night  
with clammy fingers

around his breath, dragging him away from somewhere with him in it to somewhere where  
he is not Where

there is only the smell of engine oil and cold and darkness Where there is no explanation  
for the sudden

hot dryness in his bones that swallows all of his voices and his ability to move on his own  
without handles

Where there are a hundred excuses, explanations, justifications and mitigations that he  
makes for snatching an old

woman by the wrist one morning after work when he is desperate to sleep And wrenching  
her away from the bedroom door

and shaking and shaking her until she stops her questions And dragging her through the  
cold dining room

and shoving her back into her own floral wing-backed chair in the windowless lounge.

-----

*He cannot.*

*Feel. The end of his skin. Any longer.*

*But still his hands. Will not.*

*Ever stop.*

## Scene VII: The Room of Repetition

*While still dragging.*

*Everything hot & sticky.*

*Behind him.*

-----

And then

there is room 37 on the seventh floor of the Albany Grove Hotel opposite the City Hall in the middle of Commercial Road

Then there is a man at the window with a hole in his pump, holding on to the blood in his hand-on to prevent himself

leaking all over the carpet While the early morning pigeons and raucous mynah birds throw themselves off the ledges

of the tall buildings about There is a small woman with a freckled face and a flat chest, and her wedding ring

in the bedside drawer, washing his monotony out of herself in the small bathroom with the flickering light

On off On off Like the monotonous beacon in the black bay beyond that all night long over and again

tried to drown something that had lost all feeling in its skin Until he can feel no longer And never again.

-----

&. &. &. &. &. &.

## Scene VIII: The Room of Afterwards

*He tries. To pick up his feet.*

*Quickly. Quick.*

*Before the other guests wake up.*

*But his eyes spill.*

*Every whole thing.*

*Lights.*

*Quickly! Quick!*

-----

There is

with every step he takes, a feeling that he does not know what the outcome will be

Whether his feet will

find the wooden floor Or whether they will not Whether the floor will even hold him up

There is, with every

step he takes in the direction of his eyes, with every day he swallows, tasteless and hard as  
the one before,

a feeling that all forward movement in his life has stopped and that he is slowly rolling  
back And the chance

he might once have had to do something about it went by several years ago But he is good  
at pretending not to notice

It is almost second nature Not noticing the heaviness in his breath The static in his  
muscles all day and night

The weight upon his tongue And, besides, he does almost like feeling sorry for himself It  
is at least some kind

of compensation For feeling that something more vital than muscle and nerves was left out  
of his machinery at birth

And so it is that in the early morning, in the icy morning there is just a boneless echo left in  
the bathroom mirror

under the flickering light when the hotel maid comes to change the sheets and towels and  
to empty the sanitary bin

An echo that drags its slow sound up the hill back home Fatal as a hospital.

-----

*& tries.*

*Again. & again.*

*To stand. Yes. Yes.*

*No.*

## Scene IX: The Room of What is Left

*Less.*

*& less.*

-----

There is  
just a long crack left in the wall that opens and closes depending on the weather There is  
just a wide window with  
broken green blinds that faces straight onto the past, that runs left to right and back again  
all day and night  
every day Even when he is not there There is just a bare wooden floor with a hole in the  
middle through which  
suddenly everything drops There is just his mother, musty as a wet towel, on her knees in  
her blue crimplene dress  
thinner than a ghost, sweeping up the fragments of fifty years in the same leaking house,  
and packing the pieces  
into a cardboard box and closing the lid and taping it shut and never opening it again Not  
even when she gets  
to the other side To the Green Wing that smells of urine and stale photographs There is  
just his wooden  
rocking horse Just a long green couch that he always hid under, to escape from his father  
A chiming clock  
that only worked if it hung skew Just a formica kitchen table with five matching stools  
(bought by his father at  
discount because the sixth stool was missing) A glass display case keeping the faded  
reflections of smiling faces  
(The way the eyes of the dead keep for all of eternity the last thing they ever saw Or so his  
mother believed)  
Just a brown stain in the centre of the garage floor where something that could not ever be  
mopped up or replaced

leaked out and ran a long time ago There is just a blue Ford XR3 that sat unused in the dark garage after his father's death  
Because his mother never learnt to drive Because his father would not let her learn in his car (What if you bump it hey?)  
Because no-one ever wanted to go into the garage afterwards After the darkness moved in It is too dark in there  
his mother said It smells he said Of oil and concrete and darkness without any breath  
Like falling from a  
thin cold height And lastly The very last piece that his mother sweeps up and packs away into the cardboard box  
is the hefty block of his father's voice faraway at the bottom of her watery eyes That is it  
That is all  
The rest of her life she puts out onto the pavement And leaves there And by the morning the whole lot is gone Every last drop Just like that.

-----

*Finish.*

*En. Klaar.*

## Scene X: The Room of And Just This Once More

*Tongue inside his.*

*Two cracked.*

*Hands.*

-----

And then

there is him And then there is her (with a hint of fine hair around the areole of her nipples)

Plus the other one

(The one who chews gum all the time) And they are tangled in a sticky slippery sloppy knot on the white

king-sized bed with the red bolster pillow and three round cushions in damask silk Then there is the low

monotonous mumbling (What is the date? What is the date? What – !) outside the locked bedroom door

of an old woman with blue-rinsed hair who leaves the bathroom door wide-open like legs whenever she goes

There is his small uncircumcised penis, flaccid and slow as a slug, *Allopeas Gracilis*, the common garden variety

with no shell or body parts or blood pressure in its responses ever again There is the brittle sound of collapsing

A thousand wooden blocks all in a heap There are photographs of broken skin and bruises and big red welts

all the way up the old woman's arms and around her neck too, her thin skin wrinkled as an old fowl's There are no

excuses There are accusations, implications and denunciations instead There are signed dated and stamped

forms in triplicate instead, in the matter between the plaintiff and the defendant, initialled on every page



in his precarious scrawl, and spread out across an official-sounding table with fluted edges  
and a bevelled glass top  
that for all of eternity keeps the reflection of that moment burnt like a negative, white-hot as  
a negative  
in the acid of his blood There is the flailing sound of collapse, all in a heap, as the small  
ceramic figurine falls  
And falls Through his hands Through the deep air And its neck snaps.

-----

*Black.*

*Glass cracks.*

*In his head.*

## Scene XI: The Room of the Last Dream

*On all sides. Steepness now.*

*He tries to speak.*

*From out of the hole.*

*But.*

-----

There is

There is a voice somewhere far away underwater that remembers a nightmare she once had  
(the one who once

once upon a time was a wife, when wife was a word he still could remember) when she  
fell asleep

under the wisteria bush with her head in his lap and his two hands and the ten fingers on  
his hands dragging themselves

back and forwards and from side to side through and through her short black hair and  
across her pale

soft skin When she woke herself up whimpering like a dog, whimpering like a dog on a  
chain because of what

she had dreamed A dog with a hole right through its heart With a chain right around its  
neck With its neck

dragging around a concrete yard back and forwards and from side to side, all day long  
Until it choked.

-----

*Silence.*

*Every single thing.*

*Hanging.*

## **PART FOUR**

**When ?**

**Scene I: The Room of Something Suspended**

*(sotto voce)*

*Shhh.*

*Shhh.*

-----

*No sound No No movement No None at all Because It keeps It all Keeps coming Back  
& back*

*To him What? What is that? There A garden? With cracked scents & dripping Things  
with feelers*

*Feet with boots That bite Brown shoe polish Inside his little chest His favourite smokie  
Inside her little koekie*

*& concrete The taste of oil On his eyes The smell Of falling Without any bottom Shhh  
Shhh No sound No*

*No movement No Because Because It keeps Keeps coming Back & back & back To him  
The garden*

*With claws Hands with feelers Eyes & fingers & fingers that smell Cold & darkness  
His favourite Yes*

*Keyhole In his mouth On his knees Yes Still as a stone Holding Who art in heaven  
Father His breath Her*

*Skin Forgive us Her White as a negative When He Suddenly White-hot As a negative  
& wet All over*

*Like a mop Jerks the door open You little pervert! I'll teach you to spy on your mother  
and I!*

-----

*I am.*

*I am so.*

*He says.*

## Scene II: The Room of That Last Time

*So. So.*

*Very.*

*Very.*

-----

It comes

It all comes Back to him There where he is now In his faded chair Still Staring at  
nowhere Where he is also

Not where he is Where it all comes Back The oily cold And air Dangling from concrete  
A small wooden bench

made by his grandpa (the father of his mother not *oupa*, his father's father) from a World  
War 2 packing crate

in Egypt In the stores In Tobruk, where he was a storeman The small wooden bench

With a hole in the middle

On the top Through which he tried to push his small penis one night in imitation of  
something he had seen

Over and again On his knees The small wooden bench lying on its side And the smell  
The smell of faeces

running down white legs Turning slowly On his brother's brown school shoes, with black  
laces, broken at the ends

where the little plastic seal had come off His brother's brown shoes scuffed on the soles  
from being dragged

all the way through the dust and over the stones of his short life towards that other small  
room where he was kept

overnight That last time Buried in the deep end of a dark passageway Until his father  
came to fetch him

And to take him To the garage That last time After the security guard at OK Bazaars (the  
one in Church Street

where there is a charismatic church now Father Father forgive me) caught him stuffing  
comic books down the front  
of his trousers (*Kid Colt*, *The Fastest Gun Alive*, and *Tessa*, with her long blonde hair and  
her white bikini, and Rocco de Wet,  
*Die Grensvegter*) That last time In the dark garage that smelled of oil and concrete and  
something invisible Like oxygen  
Or pressure Or regret That once released, no matter how long ago, far away and  
shrinking, is too large ever to be reversed.

-----

*But the.*

*Word cannot.*

*Come out.*

*Out of its hole.*

### Scene III: The Room of Folding Up the Cold

*He freezes.*

-----

There are

There are

only two holes left in the cold of the small square room where the high wing-backed chair  
with faded

floral upholstery once sat, arms tied on either side and two thin legs with varicose veins  
closed at the clamp

and choking There is no light left at the end of the day for the washing of all the eyes he  
has used up

There is with every breath, with every step he takes in the direction of the cold wind, the  
feeling

that he is walking across old mattresses Or empty water The feeling that he is breathing  
through a sheet of ice

That he is seeing from a long way off And that is it That is all That is all there is left for  
him to pack into a cardboard box

and fold closed Left flap first, then top, followed by the right, and finally, at long last, the  
bottom which he bends

carefully at the corner and pushes underneath the first flap Just like that Finish *en klaar*.

-----

*Cold.*

**Scene IV: The Room of And How Now**

*Cold.*

-----

There are

There are

only certain indelible questions that remain in the room that has the smell and the shape of  
a room that cannot forget

How does he still stay upright? After crawling

How does he stop himself leaking away into the red earth? After leaking away

How does he walk straight? After bending

How does he stop himself falling over when the earth tilts? After falling over

How does he keep looking up? After looking the other way

How does he stop himself feeling that all feeling for him has ended where his skin begins?

How does he?

Yes Yes

How does he do any of it? Afterward

Anymore.

-----

*Silence.*

*Cold. In all.*



## Scene V: The Room of Hunger

*In all of his.*

*Every & only.*

*Thing. Every.*

*Where.*

-----

Where it is

It is as if the old kitchen has no linoleum floor As if the ceiling is not white ryno-boards

As if the old walls

have no shelves built into them for rows of antique cups and saucers, pink and pale blue  
with flower motifs

roses and geraniums and small yellow daisies It is as if the kitchen table with the streaked  
grey formica top and the

four black metal legs and the four low stools covered in grey plastic are not all bending  
slowly, under the weight

of something invisible Like time Or regret As if he is not back there Not opening the old  
drawer with the broken

metal handle Not taking out the masonite placemats that his father had made from off-cuts  
scrounged from the factory workshop

As if he is not setting out the placemats on the cold table Two on one side (his father with  
his sister) and one on

its own For himself And the other at the head of the table For his mother So she can be  
close to the old Kelvinator stove

behind her (with one dead plate in the front on the right) To serve up Roast chicken on  
Sundays After church

After he has changed out of his blue safari suit into his khaki shorts and his white vest

Roast chicken for lunch

with thick dark gravy and crisp roast potatoes and mashed beans and mashed pumpkin and  
white rice and nothing to drink

Until afterwards 'Cause you'll fill yourself up, his father always says And you won't have space for your mother's delicious food Fish fingers on Monday night with mashed potato and thick dark gravy And mince on Tuesday with spaghetti and gem squash, in their shells And something else on Wednesday And Thursday And Friday And Saturday And Sunday again Roast chicken with thick dark gravy And afterwards rice pudding or sego pudding or even, for special occasions like birthdays, a baked ginger pudding And always with everything Custard Dark yellow and thick From a blue and yellow jug with a man in a blue suit and a pointed yellow hat as the handle And always Springbok radio Consider your Verdict The Money or the Box If I don't see you through the week I'll see you through the window And through the window he sees the ghost of his brother with wide open eyes swimming up the long driveway that they always raced their tricycles down, and back up Racing each other to see who would be the first to get back to the garage, and slap the cold roll-up door OneTwoThreeBlockMyself! And he sees his brother's sad ghost Searching for him Like a hadedah with its long beak Here There Everywhere No matter where he (the older one) goes Even when he ends up at the Jan Richter Centre, Convalescent Home Day Care, Frail Care, Assisted Living, Any, on the corner of Stalker Alley and New Scotland Road (No Hawkers Allowed), behind a high palisade fence painted green And an electronic motor-gate With spikes on the top And a bored guard at the gate with his clipboard and his tattered sheets of paper Where he (not the guard

But this one (The one at the heart of his story (With a hole in his heart)) has a single room  
with a bed and a built-in  
cupboard and a built-in desk, in pressed chipboard with a plastic coating and a polished  
parquet floor  
that is perilously slippery And a shower and a basin next door, and a bath and a toilet half-  
way down the passage  
on every floor And on Sundays, in the big dining hall that can accommodate two hundred  
and fifty residents  
sitting at rows of steel trestle tables covered with red cloths that reach half-way to the  
ground, on Sundays  
he has mince and mashed potatoes with boiled cabbage and carrots, and afterwards for  
pudding, stewed fruit  
and Ultra Mel custard, vanilla flavoured And it is not It is not It is not as if every single  
nerve and muscle and vein  
in his body is not growing a skin across it Thick and cold as old custard From a blue and  
yellow jug with a man in a blue suit and a pointed yellow hat as the handle.

-----

*Scraping.*

*Scraping. Up.*

*The fragments.*

## Scene VI: The Room of Whiteness

*Of where*

*he is.*

-----

There is

There it is again

The chair that sits in a small square room with damp walls and a dirty beige carpet and a dim fluorescent light

The chair that cannot do anything Anymore Or go anywhere Or speak even Anymore

The chair that sits

in front of a louvered window with its faded arms on either side and its thin legs closed and crossed at the feet

The chair that sits precisely where he always is Now And again And still On the dusty carpet in the lounge

at the feet of his sleeping father Playing with his green plastic soldiers Again And his little farm animals

Again And his little wooden blocks for building his garage Still Pretending that something is happening

Anything That is not the same as the thing that is happening the same all the time around him Now Day in Day out Again Slowly Close-up And in minute detail.

-----

*He is losing.*

*Whatever.*

*There is.*

## Scene VII: The Room of Absolute Whiteness

*In handfuls.*

-----

There is

There is

a louvered window that faces straight onto a flat sky That runs left to right and back again

All day All night

Even on public holidays Even when the wind is not there When the sky is deserted The  
blood stalled

in his little engine And the small sounds of cooling from the contraction of all his muscles  
and his nerves

and his brittle little bones There is a louvered window that overlooks a car park (Residents  
Parking Only – Vehicles Parked

Entirely at their Owner's Risk) A window that is unable to remember anything From one  
moment to the next

The way the eyes of the dead forget forever everything they ever saw Or remembered.

-----

*Slowly.*

*Slowly.*

*He only has.*

*Now.*

*Two thoughtless sockets.*

*Left.*

## **POSTSCRIPT**

**Scene I: The Room of Nothing More  
&  
Nothing Else**

*No. Sound.*

*No. Motion.*

*No. Words.*

*Looping through his head.*

*At all.*

*Is he?Is he?Is he?*

*No.*

*No. There is still.*

*There is just.*

*Still habit.*

*There is.*

*Still just.*

*The in. & out.*

*In. Out.*

*Of time.*

*Then that is all.*

*That is all there is.*

*Left of him.*

*When the night.*

*At last.*

*Comes.*

## ACT VIII

### THE THIRTEENTH

*A tender slowness is the tempo of these words.*

– Friedrich Nietzsche



HUSBAND: *Never looks at Wife.  
& does not appear to hear her voice.*

WIFE: *Refers to Husband.  
But does not appear to hear his voice.*

*What happens in the tight space between a husband & a wife.*

*What keeps the string tight even across a great distance – like death.*

---

*Just two beds.  
& a light, from below.*

WIFE  
When he went in. He knew he wouldn't be coming out.

He didn't say anything. He didn't have to.

HUSBAND  
Nope.

WIFE  
He just looked at me.

HUSBAND  
The thirteenth.

WIFE  
And I knew.

HUSBAND  
Of the month.

WIFE

That he knew.

HUSBAND

Yup.

WIFE

He wouldn't be coming out.

HUSBAND

It was a sign.

WIFE

The thirteenth.

HUSBAND

Our lucky day – Everything important always happened on that day.

If we did anything big. If I had to make a big decision. Sign anything. I'd look up. Look around.

WIFE

Thirteenth. That was the date. The day we got married.

HUSBAND

And she'd be looking at me. And we'd look at each other. And we'd both know.

WIFE

He woke up that night.

HUSBAND

Sure enough. Would you believe it?

WIFE

He woke up. Because his feet were cold.

HUSBAND

It'd be the thirteenth.

WIFE

He woke up. Because his chest was cold.

He woke up because his head was on fire.

On fire with thoughts.

HUSBAND

So I knew. When she went in. That day. We both did. I looked across at her. We didn't have to say anything.

Some things are like that. Hey? Between married couples. Couples who've been married for a long time. As long as us. Old couples. Like us. Married how many? Forty – Coming on fifty years.

WIFE

Thoughts he shouldn't have thoughts about. As an old man. As a married man.

Married and old.

HUSBAND

Married bliss.

WIFE

But thoughts he'd always had. Ever since –

HUSBAND

A lifetime of it.

WIFE

Ever since he was small.

At night in his little bed with his parents next door.

Shouting. And throwing things at each other.

And him. Holding his breath in his little bed. Imagining he was invisible.

Imagining everywhere he'd be able to go.

Everything he'd be able to do.

HUSBAND

Yup. Some things are like that. Hey? Things that don't need to be put into words. Between married couples. Old married couples.

But maybe. Hey? Maybe too. Things that can't even be put into words. Ever. Never. Who knows. Or shouldn't. Things that shouldn't be said.

Between old married couples.

I'm sure you know what I'm talking about, hey? Don't you? Ja, you do. I can see it. You've been there. I can see it in your eyes.

WIFE

Without ever being seen.

HUSBAND

Well, it was like that between us.

WIFE

And he looked at me. With those watery blue eyes of his.

Couldn't move. Couldn't speak.

Sinking away from the world. Like a stone.

HUSBAND

The two of us.

WIFE

And then I knew. Marge, this is it. This is when it happens.

What you've both been dreading for so long.

HUSBAND

Forty – Forty – Coming on fifty years.

WIFE

I phoned the neighbours.

Middle of the night, I know. But what else could I do?

I didn't want to bother *him*. Don't think I even had his number.

Fat lot of good he could do anyway. Sitting half-way across the world.

What time would it be there? Middle of the next night.

And he probably wouldn't even be there. Out gallivanting as usual.

HUSBAND

So I jus' said I had to go to the bathroom. Needed to point Percy at the porcelain, as the old man always used to say.

Jus' help me. Jus' help me stand. That's all. I can do the rest. Been doing it for seventy-odd years. Don't need anybody to tell me where it is. Or what to do with it.

Jus' help me get onto my old pins again, I said.

WIFE

Can't even remember what their names were now. Johnnie and something.

They left afterwards. After it happened.

Emigrated somewhere. Like everyone else.

She was a sister. At Grey's Hospital. If anyone knew what to do, she would.

HUSBAND

So she got off the bed. Very slowly I'll admit. As if everything inside her was sore. As if the floor was so far away from her feet she was scared she'd fall and break something.

And she got me out of the chair.

WIFE

He was blue. Blue all over by now. And cold. Cold as a wall.

And quick as a flash they were there.

HUSBAND

I took my time. Had to wipe down the bowl first. Clean off the drops on the front of my trousers.

When I got back she was fast asleep. On her back. Snorting like ol' Butch the dog used to when he'd forgotten how to breathe. Dumb bladdy schmuck.

WIFE

And I still remember what she said. What was her name now?

HUSBAND

Frightening sound, hey. Guaranteed.

Jus' as bad as that other one. What? What? I'll tell you. Jus' wait. The sound of a bloke pissing like a horse into the bowl in the cubicle next to you. Ja. And all you can ever manage is a few flipping fly drops!

Anyway. Anyway. So I thought to myself, *jissus, ou*, this is it. This is the big one. This is when the shit hits the fan.

WIFE

'Marge,' she said. 'There's nothing I can do. This is bigger than me,' she said.

So they got the ambulance.

HUSBAND

But you know how it is, hey? You know how human nature is. I still thought. Told myself she'd be fine.

Jus' a turn. That's all. If I left her. Maybe put another blanket over her – Although I knew she didn't like too many – Warm her up a bit. Her feet were cold as ice. Then she'd pull through, you know. She always did. Tough old cow. Tough as nails, hey? Tough as raw bolts, the old man always used to say.

Don't know why I'm thinking of him now.

WIFE

He opened his eyes then. When they got the oxygen into him.

And he looked at me.

And I could see everything he'd been saving up.

For that moment.

Welling up behind his eyes.

With nowhere to go.

HUSBAND

Haven't thought of him in centuries.

WIFE

Then sinking away. Like a stone.

HUSBAND

Tough old thing. She always pulled through. So I thought – Ag, you know – I'd still get the chance to say the few little things . . . The little stuff I'd been saving up. Mainly – mainly – You know.

WIFE

Into the black night that vanished behind us. As we drove on.

Rushing toward something that was rushing at the same time to meet us. Head-on.

And all I could think of saying –

HUSBAND

After forty – Coming on fifty years.

WIFE

I can't remember.

Joey – That was her name.

HUSBAND

Of married bliss.

WIFE

Sister Joey.

HUSBAND

But there's too much. Between you, me and the wall, there's always jus' too much.

You can't. I mean – You jus' can't. Where do you start? For starters. Tell me. Hey?

Where the hell do you start to say everything you should have said thirty years ago. And never did because you were afraid? Afraid she'd say the same things back to you.

WIFE

I can't remember.

HUSBAND

Afraid she was thinking the same things about you.

WIFE

So all I did then. I think –

HUSBAND

And anyway – That's not the time for snot and tears and all that stuff. No ways. The time for that *kak* is long gone. Now you gotta move your arse.

WIFE

I think. I think I held his hand.

Yes. I must have.

I held his hand. And every time we went over a bump, I just squeezed it.

I don't know why.

The inside of those vehicles is so white.

And the emergency room was empty.



Not empty. Really. There were lots of things all around. Shining machines.

And people. Everywhere. Staring at their hands.

Everyone was really helpful. But still.

Still you felt like you were in a very big hall. Or like a big aeroplane hangar.

And everything you did and everything you said and didn't say and thought.

Everything echoed. Loudly.

Inside you.

#### HUSBAND

So I phoned him. I know it was the middle of the bladdy night. But what else could I do, hey? You tell me.

Now if I'd still had the car. Ja. If I'd still had the car. Ja. Then I could've done something myself. But my bladdy hands were tied. She'd tied them. Forcing me to sell it because I couldn't judge distances so good anymore. Because of that one little incident with the dog – Ag, let's not go there. Not now.

Anyway. Anyway. He'd always said: 'Anytime. Anytime, Pop. Pop Shop. Just Pop in. I mean it. Doesn't matter if it's the middle of the night. Whenever. These things always come when you least expecting them. Like babies.'

So I phoned him. And like a shot he was there.

#### WIFE

And then they pulled the curtain around him. And I wondered:

Would I be on the inside or the outside of that curtain?

Inside? Outside? Inside – ?

But then the nurse said, 'You can come in, Mrs Smit.' So I knew.

#### HUSBAND

When she went in, she knew. She didn't say anything. Didn't have to. She jus' looked at me. You know, that way. With everything shoving up behind her eyes. Like mud. Like that time the river came down on that little town. What was its name now? Somewhere in the Cape. Covered everything in black mud.

And I knew she wouldn't be coming out.

But I was joking around. Laughing and joking with the nurses and charfing them a bit. Jus' so's she wouldn't get suspicious, hey. Wouldn't think there was something up. Out of the ordinary.

I mean – You know – you know, it's not normal inside there. Doesn't matter how hard you try. Laughing and all that. It's still jus' like being in one of those bladdy cattle trucks. Or pigs. Or sheep. Whatever. On their way. You know where. And they know too. Sure as nuts they do. Covered in yellow shit.

WIFE

So I knew. I knew it would be okay.

HUSBAND

So now. Now. Whenever I see one of those trucks going up Field's Hill. Or wherever. Then I think of her. I think of her again and I jus' want to get out and let them all go. But, of course, I'm not driving. Not anymore. So there's nothing I can do. My hands are tied. My hands are shaking. There's piss dribbling down my leg. And all I do is look the other way.

WIFE

Everything was going to be okay.

It was our lucky day.

HUSBAND

Jus' close my eyes . . .

WIFE

The thirteenth.

HUSBAND

Anyway –

WIFE

It was a sign. If you believe in those things.

I don't. Not really. Not really in anything.

Always said I'd think about that stuff another day.

When the day arrived.

When I couldn't stand up on my own anymore.

When I found I'd put my toothbrush in the refrigerator.

#### HUSBAND

Anyway, there's always lots of forms to sign in those places. Name. Age. Address. Sex – Yes, please.

So I kept myself busy. While he sat with her. Doing what? I don't know. Catching up. No. Not speaking. Jus' sitting there. With her hand against his mouth. While they pushed and prodded her. Needles and tubes all over the place. I've never been good with that kind of stuff. Not squeamish, hey. No, no. Jus' – uncomfortable. So I kept myself busy.

Name. Age. Sex. Yes, please. Three times a day. After meals.

When I came back, her eyes were still closed. She hadn't opened them at all since we left home.

#### WIFE

So I told him I was going to the bathroom. I didn't want him worrying.

He always worried where I was. Wanted to know where was I going? What was I doing?

When was I coming back?

When are you coming back, Marge?

Couldn't do a damn thing without me.

Couldn't even make a cup of tea.

Couldn't even find the spot. You know – I'm sorry to talk like this. But it's true.

I'd have to guide him inside me every time.

#### HUSBAND

I think she was jus' resting. Worn out from all the pushing and the prodding. All the needles and the tubes –

WIFE

And then every time he'd withdraw too far. I'm sorry to talk like this. But it's true.

He'd withdraw too far. And he'd slip out. And I'd have to put him back in again.

HUSBAND

Going in this side, and coming out that.

WIFE

Just like a Laurel and Hardy show.

HUSBAND

And I thought she'd wake up.

WIFE

But did I ever look for it somewhere else?

Did I?

Did I ever even think about getting it somewhere else?

HUSBAND

Jus' now.

WIFE

No. I stuck it out.

For the long haul as they say.

HUSBAND

Maybe later. You know.

WIFE

Anyway –

HUSBAND

Then I'd have the chance.

WIFE

So I said I was going to spend a penny. As mother always used to say.

But when I got there I just sat. Don't think I even lifted the lid. Just sat there.

Knowing that something very big and black was busy happening to both our lives.

But we couldn't see it yet.

HUSBAND

To say everything I'd been saving up. You know . . . Find the words at last to make up for everything I'd never been able to say.

WIFE

So I just sat there. Listening to the sounds of the hospital far off.

Like a big machine. Turning all by itself.

HUSBAND

Sorry.

WIFE

So I just sat there. Thinking about what was happening to our lives.

HUSBAND

I'm sorry, Marge.

WIFE

Then someone came in. She went into the cubicle next to me.

She must have just sat there too. Like me.

I didn't hear anything. You know, you can always hear someone unzipping themselves.

Sliding their skirt down. I'm sorry to talk like this. But it's true.

She must have just sat there. Like me.

Then I heard her crying. And she was whispering to herself.

Oh, God! Oh, God! Oh, God! She was whispering.

And I thought –

HUSBAND

I'd always been meaning to fix everything at home. Really. There was a list. She had a list for me. On the side of the fridge in pencil. So I could rub the things out. As I finished them.

WIFE

Help me!

Somebody! Somebody!

Help me get out of here!

HUSBAND

And I'd been meaning to start at the top, hey. Really, I had. Work my way down. Rub the things out as they were completed.

Have a sense of achievement, you know. And pride. That you'd at least finished one bladdy thing in your life.

WIFE

When I came back he was vomiting all over the place.

HUSBAND

I'd been meaning to. Honest. Honest to God. In my heart I'd really been meaning to start at the top. And rub everything out.

WIFE

Big black chunks . . . I don't know what.

Sorry.

HUSBAND

She always thought I was spoilt. Jus' like a big child. I know. She didn't say so. But I knew. She always thought I was spoilt. By my mother. Only child and all that. And lazy too. Couldn't finish anything I'd started. The house and the garage and the garden all full of undone things. Broken things I couldn't ever fix.

That's why she was so hard on *him*. Never gave him a bladdy inch.

WIFE

And he looked at me. Vomit all down his pyjama top.

Dripping down his mouth. Off his chin.

And he looked at me. Like a dog that had messed inside the house. And knew.

Knew you were going to shout at it. And send it outside.

I couldn't take it.

HUSBAND

Always on at him about something. Insignificant usually. If it wasn't this, it was that. If it wasn't his bedroom, then it was his clothes. Or his homework. Or his hair.

WIFE

It was all too much! Bugger the lucky thirteenth!

Just bugger it!

Sorry.

HUSBAND

The stream of young girls through the front door. Into his room.

WIFE

And I knew then exactly what was going to happen to me.

HUSBAND

A never-ending stream of giggling temptation.

WIFE

Alone.

HUSBAND

That's why he ran away. If you really want to know.

WIFE

And all on my own.

HUSBAND

She'd never admit it. Oh, no. But between you, me and the wall. That's why. Not all that other stuff she said about him needing to spread his wings. See the world. Sow his wild oats. What for?

WIFE

The first time in fifty years.

HUSBAND

I mean – He'd been bladdy sowing it already. Ever since he was fifteen. Behind the aviaries, where I kept the Norton that I was going to put together. If I could jus' find –

Jus' like his old dad. And mine too, come to think of it. But let's not go down that road.

No. No. No. Between you, me and the wall, I think it was something else. Ja. Definitely. She was trying to get at me. Me. Because . . .

WIFE

On my own. In a room that smelled of urine and mothballs.

In a chair I couldn't get myself out of.

With photographs beside the bed of people I couldn't remember anymore.

HUSBAND

I don't have to spell it out for you. Mus' I really spell it out for you?

WIFE

The sun was watery and thin when I got outside.

The grass just white and dry.

An irritating wind that kept trying to get under my skirt. Like –

Plaid. Brown skirt. If I remember right.



HUSBAND

Because he belonged to someone else. That's why. Who did in one stinking night and nine months what she couldn't ever do in forty-five years.

There. I've said it.

WIFE

Where is it now? What happened to it?

HUSBAND

You happy now? Now that it's all out. Out in the open for the whole world to smell.

WIFE

What happened?

Lost in the move. Like everything else.

Or in a box unpacked in the corner.

With his school reports – 'Jack is a good boy. If only he can concentrate on his schoolwork, and leave the girls alone.'

And all his sports trophies. First team this and first team that.

And his certificate from the Scouts for lighting a fire without matches.

HUSBAND

Anyway. That's all stinking water under the bridge, as the old man used to say – But maybe – Maybe it wasn't him, hey? Maybe it was someone else. I don't know anymore. I'm not so sure of my facts nowadays. Everything runs together. Yesterday – today –

WIFE

Where was I?

HUSBAND

And I thought she'd wake up. Honest to God. And I knew she thought I was spoilt. But she was so hard on him. And there was always a stream of pretty young things traipsing through the house after him.

WIFE

Where was I?

HUSBAND

Pretending I wasn't even there. Jus' a piece of old furniture that ogled at their legs.

WIFE

Standing outside.

With a wind that kept trying to get under my skirt.

HUSBAND

And ogled their little breasts.

WIFE

I'd missed the three-thirty already. And the next one was only at five.

HUSBAND

So I jus' closed my eyes and put my hands over my ears.

WIFE

Pitch-black by the time I got home. I couldn't see where I was going.

HUSBAND

And pretended I was invisible.

WIFE

Tripped on the top step. Put out my hand and pulled the number off the wall.

Number thirteen.

I'd asked him so many times to move it.

HUSBAND

So I didn't have to hear what she was thinking.

WIFE

He never said no. Oh, no.

That would've been more honest. Far too honest for him.

It was always –

HUSBAND

The hollow sound of the hole he left in our lives.

WIFE

Yes, yes, yes, yes.

HUSBAND

Jus' now.

WIFE

After I've fed my love-birds.

HUSBAND

Jus' a minute.

WIFE

So I did it all myself. Even the things I couldn't.

Changed the globes.

Replaced the washers.

Fixed the plugs.

Painted the walls.

HUSBAND

I'm nearly ready. I've jus' got to go and point Percy . . .

WIFE

Paid all the accounts.

Did all the shopping.

Ordered the medicines.

Took up his trousers.

Fixed his zips.

On my mother's old Singer.

The turn-ups were the worst.

He only wore pants with turn-ups.

HUSBAND

Help me up. I can't get up. Help me. My legs can't hold me anymore.

WIFE

An empty house.

Put the television on loud to drown out his incessant questions.

Made myself a cup of tea. And a sandwich.

Mayonnaise and cheese. No butter. On white bread.

Lay down on the sofa. Put a pillow behind my head.

And just rested.

For the first time in fifty years.

HUSBAND

What's going to happen to me?

Who'll make my porridge in the morning?

Who'll bring me tea in my chair?

Who'll take up my trousers?

Who'll cut my toenails?

Who'll run my bath at night?

Who'll feed my birds?

Who will anymore?

Ever again?

What's your name?

Do we know each other?  
In what unit did you serve during the border war?

WIFE

Closed my eyes.

Thought of all the things I was going to do now that I had no-one to answer to.

HUSBAND

What is the date?

WIFE

Fell asleep with my mouth wide open.

And dreamed that I had a child by my own son. Who wasn't dead. Dead in his cradle.

Who turned out to be not my son at all.

But someone my husband had found in his aviary one morning.

Eating his birds raw.

And I woke up in my dressing-gown in a tiny room stinking of urine.

With my false teeth in my lap and a big pool of spit on my chest

HUSBAND

When are you coming back? Hey? When are you coming back?

WIFE

Woke up on the sofa.

With that pornography they play now on television just before midnight.

There was a girl on her hands and knees.

Impossibly big bosom. Round as musk melons.

And he was coming at her from behind.

From behind like a dog. Like a mad dog.

Like he wanted me to do. But I refused. I'm not a dog, I said.

And I wanted to get up and switch it off.

But everything – Everything was shaking so violently.

Her head was shaking and her bosom was shaking and the television and the sofa and the walls and the whole room . . .

#### HUSBAND

I woke up once. In that dark ward. Then never again. The sound of snoring all around me. Strangers moaning. Turning in their beds.

And for a long time I jus' lay there. Staring into the darkness all around me. Trying to make out the shape of the black thing that was coming closer.

Was it a bird? Was it a dog?

My last thought. My last thought – What it was like being fifteen again and back at school. Dreaming I was invisible. So I could go into the girls' change-room after swimming practice. And jus' sit in a corner. All quiet. And watch.

*Smell of black & white memories on the furniture. On the ornaments. On the pictures & the stopped wall clock.*

*TV makes the sound of growing old. Slowly. In the background.*

*Fade.*

## ACT IX

### DEUS EX MACHINA

Is there no coming through  
and who and what to get through to?

– Joan Metelerkamp

*Late.*  
*Almost stationary.*  
*Behind the dark*  
*Something cold*  
*Smouldering in his hand.*

– Are you

–

– I remember

–

– You

–

– Are you

–

– Listening

–

– Remember

–

– Can you

–

– Yes

–

– Hear me



– Under  
–  
– The water  
–  
– Are you  
–  
– There  
–  
– Hear me  
–  
– Remember  
–  
– Under the sand  
–  
– See me  
–  
– Under this heavy mountain  
–  
– Behind  
–  
– This cold shadow  
–  
– There is

–

– There is

–

– Smoke

–

– Ash

–

– There is the dust

–

– Remember

–

– Of neglect

–

– The dirt

–

– Between your toes

–

– The stench

–

– Of old air

–

– There is

–

- There is
- 
- Yes
- 
- I remember
- 
- I know
- 
- Nothing else left here
- 
- I know
- 
- No-one
- 
- Else left
- 
- Except you
- 
- Except the wind
- 
- The deep black
- 
- Water in your hands

–

– The wings

–

– Of your long darkness

–

– Yes

–

– And cold

–

– And more

–

– And silence

–

– Upon everything

–

– The silence of your

–

– Infinite

–

– Infinite memories

–

– Wherever I look

–

– Remember  
–  
– Are you  
–  
– You  
–  
– Awake  
–  
– There is nothing  
–  
– I have nothing  
–  
– Left  
–  
– Except wind  
–  
– In my mouth  
–  
– Except water  
–  
– In these rusted hands  
–  
– The wings

–

– Of loss

–

– Can you

–

– Can you

–

– Hear them

–

– Hear them

–

– Whispering

–

– Like flames.

*Something*

*Soft*

*Against the glass of the air.*

*Something*

*Leaving.*

*Then*

*Nothing.*

ACT X

EXEUNT

## CURTAIN

*Torn from top to bottom.*

Wind  
through the bones  
of the earth.

Light  
melting into water.



FINIS

Without water

Without wind

Without silence

Without shadows

Without darkness

Without daylight

Without blood

Without breath

Without in

With out.



# **“ORTHOPAEDIA”**

## **Understanding the Writing Practice**

## PREFACE

Orthopaedics we recognise as the branch of medicine dealing with the correction or prevention of skeletal and muscular deformities. The word has its origin in two root forms: one, *orth* or *ortho*, meaning in Greek, straight or correct; and two, *paid* from *pais*, meaning child or boy.

And to correct or straighten such deformities in the child, in the boy, who is also a man, who is at the unsteady centre of his own crooked narratives, the following can be used: callipers (single or double, knee-high or up to the thigh), various braces or casts (in leather, metal or light-weight reinforced plastic), orthotic shoes or boots (with or without build-ups); not to mention the multitude of plates, nails, screws and wires that can be applied (internally or externally) to the legs, hips, feet, arms, and back, or to the bones thereof.

To the bones' unstable autobiography.

And after the child, the boy, has been straightened or corrected through the above, then he can be lifted off the high examination table (covered in brown plastic with a white sheet over the lower half – which the boy was always afraid to put his dirty boots on in case his father disapproved) and ushered into the centre of the room and told to walk, walk up and down slowly, across the green carpet (heel – toe, heel – toe), turn, bend, without holding onto anything, 'holding tight onto air' (Moolman 2007a:4), so that the doctors and the boy's parents and the priests and his teachers and the policemen and the judges can stare and nod and approve their handiwork.

Don't look now.

Don't touch yet.

Leave it alone, they say.

In case it should bleed.

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## INTRODUCTION

In a work of art the umbilical cord linking it with the totality of our concerns has not yet been severed, the blood of the mystery still circulates; the ends of the blood vessels vanish into the surrounding night, and return from it full of dark fluid.

– Bruno Schulz (in Coetzee 2008:71)

*Autobiography of Bone* stems from the propulsion in one who sits and waits and watches (whether on a school bench, the backseat of a car, or on a chair in a doctor's waiting room) to participate, to act rather than to be acted (or operated) upon.

It is a literary text that is rooted not in the imaginative, but in the somatic. It is influenced by the idiosyncratic structure and rhythm of the subjective body, as much as by words, and sights and smells and sounds.

Yet it is not autobiography.

It bends back upon itself. It turns just when it seems to be going in a straight line. It stretches and reaches out for words. For images that will open and release, not enclose, the words. It overbalances. It trips over its own memory. And falls. And picks itself up and dusts itself off and starts all over again.

From a completely different place.

It is a long poem that was written to find out whether it was in fact possible a) to write a poem that did not look or behave on the page like a poem, b) write a poem that was not a poem really, but was something else instead, a play perhaps, or a piece of unconnected prose, a list, an advert, a recipe, a set of operational instructions, c) write a poem that was still in fact a poem, but that was not at all concerned whether it was called a poem or called late for supper, and d) write a poem that was ultimately not as short as virtually every other poem I had written in the past.

*Autobiography of Bone* stems from the propulsion within me as writer and as researcher, to push through and beyond the generic, stylistic and thematic concerns that have preoccupied me for most of my writing life; since, in fact, the amateur production of my first play during lunch-break in high school (grade eleven), and my first poem written three years before, sitting on my single pine bed with my back against the cold cracked

wall and a soft-covered school exercise book (Repsta, Feint and Margin / Dof en Kantlyn, 48 pages / 48 bladsye) on my lap.

*Autobiography of Bone* finds its origins in a need within me to say something else, something other than what I have been saying in more or less the same way for so long; because, as the Canadian poet and translator, Erin Mouré, writes in *My Beloved Wager*, her collection of essays on the art of poetry: 'Part of the job of poets, and art . . . is to reach past what we already know' (2009:228). To seek after a form or, more accurately, a range of forms that will not so much be original (all language is recycled, I believe), as an illumination, a light slanting in through the dust from a completely different angle.

Not so much a 'new' poetry, as an 'other' poetry.

Of course, quite what the constituents of this 'other' poetry would be – what its legs would look and feel and smell like once the battered old cast, covered in signatures and koki-pen drawings, had been removed – I did not know before I began writing. For that would be the material and the trajectory of my poetic research. That would be the *terra incognita* that I would urge my way into (on thin, unsteady legs, white as ash), and tentatively explore and record my surroundings, as I went along. Athol Fugard describes the necessity of this uncertainty for the writer in his *Notebooks*:

I've always known that in my writing it is the dark troubled sea of which I know nothing, save its presence, that carried me. I've always felt that creating was a fearless and a timid, a despairing and a hopeful, launching out into that unknown. With me it has never been so much a question of something to say as of something, or nothing, to find - the "searchingness" someone called it. (1983: 73)

But, continuing with the metaphor of navigation, although I did not know what ultimately the land was that I was seeking, I did have a direction. A set of coordinates as vague and imprecise, yet evocative, as that most ancient of geographical descriptors, 'east of Eden'.

Since having started writing poetry and dramatic scripts almost thirty years ago, each genre had generally held onto its own distinct, even rigid, structure, voice and purpose. While there had been some tentative experiments with shifting the boundaries between these two distinctive genres of my creative expression (see section one of this

study), they each maintained a form-based and conceptual ‘purity’ that demarcated the dramatic territory of character, dialogue and plot as separate from the poetic space of voice, image and sound.

In order then to reach past what I as writer already knew (to paraphrase Mouré), to renew, even refresh, my creative production and research, I decided to begin with what I was already doing and to work my way forward from there. Thus I came to seek ways that I could re-imagine and re-configure the dramatic and poetic elements of my work.

By shifting, blurring and sometimes even completely collapsing the boundaries between these genres, I was testing and assessing the limits and possibilities open to me as writer.

Did the formal conventions of the play and of verse preclude a radical practice of borrowing, imitation and influence?

Was it possible to create a multi-layered, wide-ranging and constantly-changing, rather than a unitary and undifferentiated, response to the challenges of form and language posed by such genre-based questioning?

How would such undifferentiated and sprawling responses cohere within a single collection?

What would be the consequences for narrative and character in an extended imaginative project that dispensed with the imperative for an over-arching, linear plot, and other conventional structures of continuity?

These questions cannot be contemplated or even understood, distinct from the writing process of *Autobiography of Bone*. Or distinct even from *Autobiography of Bone*’s final idiosyncratic language, logic and (dare I say it?) sense.

Hence the necessity in my research for, and the value of, a practice-based methodology. For it is only in the act, in the present-tense of writing, that such questions, as above, would be able to be examined. Moreover, only the writing process itself would yield the new (or rather ‘other’) combinations, permutations and variations that would enable me retrospectively to understand and evaluate the project.

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“Orthopaedia”, as the critical and reflexive component of my doctoral thesis, is comprised of the following inter-related, but, for the purposes of discussion, autonomous sections:

Section one, Beginnings, provides a brief overview of the trajectory of my published work from 2000 to the present. It is important to note that this is not an exhaustive discussion of this body of work. Instead the overview highlights some of the general defining characteristics of the material, and then draws out those elements (however faint or tentative) which indicate a direction forward, a direction which ultimately would end up at *Autobiography of Bone*.

Section two, Poetic Drama, begins the first of a two-part discussion of the contemporary literary traditions which influenced the direction of my final writing project, and the shape that it took. In this section I concentrate on the tradition of poetic drama, and its impact upon my work.

Section three, the Contemporary Long Poem, focuses on the second major influence upon my writing, the tradition of the modern long poem, with particular emphasis upon its Canadian and North American exponents.

It is important to clarify here that section two and section three are not critical discussions of these respective literary traditions in their own right, but that the focus in these sections is rather upon the manner in which these traditions have inspired and influenced the writing of *Autobiography of Bone*, and have aided me in conceptualising the nature of my extended project.

In section four, the Body of the Text, I research the relationship between form and content, and the manner in which the shifting territories of drama and poetry affect language and the impulse towards meaning construction in my material. This section also examines time and memory, with specific reference to narrative and identity formation.

There is a concluding Postscript, and a detailed Bibliography.

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## ONE: Beginnings

One must be sceptical, but throw caution to the winds and when the door opens accept absolutely. Also sometimes weep; also cut away ruthlessly with a slice of the blade soot, bark, hard accretions of all sorts. And so (while they talk) let down one's net deeper and deeper and gently draw in and bring to the surface what he said and she said and make poetry.

– Virginia Woolf (1951:170)

Since 2000 I have published five collections of poetry: *Time like Stone* (2000), *Feet of the Sky* (2003), *Separating the Seas* (2007a), *Anatomy* (2008b) and *Light and After* (2010a).<sup>7</sup> In 2001 I published a joint collection of poetry, *5 Poetry*, with Clinton du Plessis, Gillian Schutte, Bofelo wa Mphutlane and Lionel Murcott. I have also published two collections of plays: *Full Circle* (2007c) and *Blind Voices*, a collection of radio plays (2007b).

With few exceptions, my published poetry has been dominated by the lyrical mode of expression and address. In these poems the subjective self speaks to the reader in short, entirely self-contained personalised utterances. The first-person singular is the predominant mode of address, as well as being the focalising agent for all the narrative and figurative elements. Furthermore, the focus of this speaking voice is concentrated and singular, and wholly consistent throughout each poem. There are no deviations, distractions or sub-plots in the poems, which move in a compressed, highly focussed direction towards their conclusion. The poems are also emotionally charged, with dense, sometimes even cryptic, imagery:

A square window sits  
beside me watching the world:

Evening, a pale gray hour

and now a solitary bird, wide-winged  
rides slowly the lonely railroad

---

<sup>7</sup> My discussion will not involve *Light and After*, my most recent collection, since its writing coincided with the writing of *Autobiography of Bone*, and benefited from the experiments and discoveries made there.

of a neighbour's sky . . .  
("Viewpoint", 2000:17)

In general, the subject matter of the poems is personal rather than social; frequently revolving around intimate human relationships, and their complexities: 'I long to smell the roses again / on the breath of your hands' (2000:39) or 'On the wet earth she lies / back and feels night slowly moisten / the silence in their clay hearts' (2003:53). The poems express feelings of loss, alienation, loneliness, longing, as well as desire, sexual abandon and joy. In this sense, they satisfy Ruskin's definition of lyric poetry as 'the expression by the poet of his own feelings' (in Wynne-Davis 1994:354) and T.S. Eliot's notion, in his lecture "The Three Voices of Poetry", of the poet expressing 'his own thoughts and sentiments to himself or to no one' (1969:89).

From a structural perspective, the poems are short; usually no more than half a page, some even less than that. (See "Sky" and "Tulip Tree" in *Time like Stone*; "In the Way" and "Grocery List" from *Feet of the Sky*; and "Landing", "New Moon" and "Short Breath" from *Separating the Seas*.) They are entirely self-contained and inwardly focussed. They do not follow-on from a previous poem or lead on to another; neither do they consciously cross-reference each other or repeat figurative tropes in a deliberate or patterned manner. The poems employ a loose, open-ended stanzaic structure, with the ragged, seemingly random, and often terse, run-on lines of free verse.

Clearly this is not a satisfactory examination of the poems in these early collections (2000-2007). But my aim is to outline some of the basic elements occurring within these poems so that a comparison may be affected with the stylistic and content-based concerns of *Autobiography of Bone*, and we may be able to chart the development between the earlier and the more recent work.

Turning my attention now to my published dramatic works, both *Full Circle* and *Blind Voices* are in the traditional realist mode of rounded individualist characters. Each of the characters possesses well-defined back-stories and personalised memories, plus defined desires that orientate them on a clearly discernible trajectory. Their characterisation is unambiguous and believable, with strong personality traits, idiosyncratic preoccupations that recur within their dialogue, as well as speech patterns and rhythms that are entirely

appropriate to each of their characters. (See the differences between the character of Oubouet in *Soldier Boy*, from the collection *Blind Voices*, and Miss Dolly from the eponymous play in the same collection.)

Moreover, the protagonists in all of the plays demonstrate a distinct unity of character which, despite their development or change, is entirely consistent and plotted in a logical manner. Added to this is a unity of action which, according to the Aristotelian model, delineates a single central action to which all of the characters are subservient. In *The Poetics*, Aristotle does not, of course, rule out the notion of a sub-plot (or sub-plots), but he emphasises the idea of a unifying ‘whole’ which holds an entire play together in a coherent continuous structure (see Enright & De Chickera 1962:387).

Increasingly, though, I grew dissatisfied with the lyrical voice, with the structural limitations of this mode of address, and with its inability adequately to house and reflect my changing concerns: concerns of language, form and meaning, and the complex ways in which they acted upon a reader. The single self-contained short poem that previously had been able to reflect all that I had wished to say – that terrible, sometimes beautiful, outburst of self-consciousness – now felt forced and contrived and plainly repetitive.

Had I been writing too long? Could I only carry on saying the same old things in the same old way? And what about all those strange new impulses – the perplexities and contradictions, the paradoxes and unsolved longings – which, as I grew older and became more aware of the limitations of my body, I could no longer express in the tired vehicle of the lyric? Or at least the lyric as I had been practising it?

I knew that something was lacking, something was missing from my writing. But I did not know what it was. What was it that I had wanted to say for so long, but had not yet been able to say? What was I concealing from myself, which was preventing my work from reaching past what I already knew (to paraphrase Mouré again), and finding an other form and other voice?

The answer had been staring me in the face for the past forty-odd years. It was not the capitalised Self. The individual ego as I had been expressing it for so long. It was the body. What Seamus Heaney, in his translation of *Beowulf* (1999), has dubbed a ‘bone-house’. And it was my body specifically. My knees, my ankles, my back, my shoulder, my

wrist, my neck, my bladder and kidneys. It was the body defined in medical terminology as having a congenital *spina bifida* present from birth from L5 down to S5.

For much of my writing career I had either ignored my own body or concealed its presence within highly abstruse imagery. In *Time like Stone* the presence of a broken body slips in indirectly: ‘So a broken set of feet / dream swimming into distance’ (“Of Drowning and Drought”) and in a throwaway reference to ‘the man with a stick’ (“Age of Leaving”). In *Feet of the Sky* I refer obliquely to ‘making the sign of the cross / over his blunt feet’ (“Autumn Evening Rain”) and to ‘a leg that will not bend’ (“In the Way”). In the same collection there is a more direct reference also: ‘On two feet, broken / by birth, I / strain to see what is beyond’ (“Defenceless”). *Separating the Seas* takes these references even further, both explicitly and metaphorically; something which Michael Chapman recognised in his article, ‘“Sequestered from the winds of history”: Poetry and Politics beyond 2000’, and termed, ‘the world perceived through the disjointed anatomy of a hand separated from a foot, or a foot one good, one game’ (2009:190). See the poems “He”, “Self-Portrait in a Window”, “Progress”, “Weight”, “Shore with no Feet”.

In my dramatic writing, too, the subjectivity of the body and of disability had been present in a range of disabled characters. In *Full Circle*, Meisie, a kind of misguided Afrikaner prophetess, is blind. The eponymous Miss Dolly, a bag lady, is mentally challenged. In *Soldier Boy*, the main character’s younger brother, Boetie, walks with crutches. And in the unpublished play, *Stone Angel* (2008a), the reclusive Dollie suffers from Porphyria’s disease. But why had I not wanted to engage with this subject matter more? Why had it only been presented almost in passing?

The answer is complex, and no doubt rooted in personality; in that intricate weave of shame, pride and defiance that characterises the tension between wanting acceptance (and not wanting to stand out) and at the same time insisting upon the right to difference.

Interestingly, too, I also see now that this reluctance to commit my writing wholeheartedly to confronting the issue of disability (my disability) is that I did not want to limit my writing, to circumscribe it within a self-referential field. Despite insisting upon the personal voice in my lyrical poetry – and upon the legitimacy of such a claim for an expressive interiority – I wanted at the same time to withdraw from placing too much

attention upon the self. A paradoxical forward-backward impulse that could not go anywhere. (Except fall over.)

So there was a breakdown of sorts in my writing, an absence or lack, at the heart of my lyrical work that became more apparent as I continued writing, and which produced frustration and dissatisfaction. Because – and this is the crucial point – I was lacking the form and the language that would enable or allow me to look at and to speak about the self and its ‘bone-house’, in all its broken, disintegrating and ageing aspects.

So it was a form (or forms) together with an appropriate expressive lexicon that I needed. But where to turn in order to find such? And what were my models, if any?

When I examined my own work closely, I once again found clues, small precursors that I might be able to exploit, or elaborate upon. In my dramatic work, I had as far back as 1985, begun experimenting with an non-sequential, non-representational narrative; a strategy which, without forsaking engagement on the part of the reader, I was to push as far as possible in *Autobiography of Bone*.

In the early experimental short piece of theatre, *Womb Tide* (published in the collection of radio plays, *Blind Voices*), which I had originally written to be played entirely in the dark, the idea of character and action is downplayed (the characters are merely described as Voices) in favour of a greater emphasis upon language and upon the fluid, abstract style of the piece. In fact, Voice 1. speaks exclusively in poetic format, using two or three-word lines that wander and digress and circle back upon themselves:

the ebb and flow  
ebb and flow  
on the bed  
pushes  
until  
in the end  
the dark  
the silence . . .  
(2007b:159)

This emphasis upon rhythm and repetition, employed in a self-conscious manner to draw attention to its artificiality and to its effects, recalls my later play, *Full Circle*. In this full-length play the cumulative patterns of the Zulu praise poem<sup>8</sup> are used in order to emphasise the hallucinations of Meisie, the blind visionary:

MEISIE:        (*over the sound of the bees*) What is that noise? Can you hear it?  
                     Sounds like . . . like cattle.  
                     Yes. There! Can you see?  
                     A huge herd of cattle, all bunched together.  
                     Red and black and white and brown.  
                     Spotted like birds' eggs.  
                     Dappled like the sky between the branches of the thorn trees.  
                     But who are those men? Hey?  
                     Who are those men in plastic aprons and gumboots, with long  
   knives?  
                     (2007c:51)

In my poetry, too, there are several stylistic elements which – though modestly and perhaps apologetically utilised – point the way towards new alternatives for my work, alternatives upon which I have capitalised in *Autobiography of Bone*.

In *Time like Stone*, the objectification of the speaker as 'the man' in the poems "Strangers", "The Dream" and "Out of the Side of God", turns the inwardness of the poems on their head. It replaces the narrow, solipsistic focus of the 'I' with the wide, objective gaze of the impersonal third-person. In this way a character (personae in the classical sense) is deliberately created who can act as a filter or mediator for the presentation of emotions which are too close to the bone, what George Bowering in his long series-poem, *Kerrisdale Elegies*, described as: 'Things that could never be told / so we gave words instead' (2008:105).

By the time we get to *Separating the Seas*, only four out of the forty-two poems employ the first-person singular. The distancing device of the third-person combines with elliptical imagery in the poem "Transfiguration" to produce a dislocation of sensory

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<sup>8</sup> See Brown's study (1998:75-117) of the praise poems of Shaka kaSenzangakhona.

experience as a way of enacting the difficulty of poetic composition. This dislocation, or what Chapman intriguingly describes as ‘disjointed[ness]’ (2009:190) in my writing has been profoundly affected by the challenge inherent in the work of Paul Celan; especially his poems written after 1963 – brought out in English in collections such as *Fathomsuns* (2001) and *Snow Part* (2007) – when he increasingly came under the charge of being ‘hermetic’; a charge he vehemently denied.<sup>9</sup>

The provocation that Celan’s writing offers to the conventional way of understanding a poem, and to the allusive way in which meaning can operate in a poem – what Mouré refers to as its ‘subliminal code’ (in Geddes 2001:493) – has influenced my approach in *Autobiography of Bone*, where discontinuities, paradoxes and negations are consciously employed in an effort to render into speech that which is almost unspeakable, the experience of the body and of the body’s private story.

But I am getting ahead of myself. This aspect will be examined in section four.

Let me return to the question of the third-person. In *Autobiography of Bone* the use of the third-person as a distancing device forms the basis of the entire collection’s focalising agency. Purely because the material was in a certain way the most personal I had ever dealt with (my disability, my experience of divorce, illness, ageing and death) I needed to find a mechanism that would allow me (if only in my head as I was writing) to stand back from personal history and examine, comment and reflect upon it without risking solipsism. Certainly, the range of structural forms that I devised for the collection contributed greatly towards this same result. And much of my analysis in section four is devoted to this. But it is the characters of He and She (together with their various incarnations: Man, Woman, Husband and Wife) who sustain the weight of memory and time in the collection, and they are the constructs who mediate between the private, particular experience of myself as disabled poet and the reader, and transmute the personal into the impersonal.

Towards this end, then, I have striven in *Autobiography of Bone*, to remove the first-person singular as the locus of signification, authority and empirical experience; offering instead a pluralisation of identity which refracts experience and biography in terms of flux and ambiguity. This gives rise to what Juliana Spahr has termed ‘an autobiography

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<sup>9</sup> See Coetzee 2008:116.

of multiplicity' (1996:11), and it aids further in problematising the assumed resemblance between the textual subject and myself as author. In so doing, possibilities are opened in the text, not just for alternate, but also more complex and deeper ways of reading and understanding.

Accordingly, a poem like "His Explanation" was originally written entirely from the perspective of the speaking 'I':

She wants to go to the cemetery again  
to visit his grave. And I (who have a car) will take her.

We won't spend long  
because it isn't safe in the cemetery anymore.

In an attempt to shift this poem away from a private focus upon death (the death of my father, and a trip to his grave with my mother) the final version became the following:

He said:

She wants to go to the cemetery again  
to visit his grave. And I (who have a car) will take her.

He said:

We won't spend long  
because it isn't safe in the cemetery anymore.

(2010b:115)

What this last version demonstrates, too, is the use of the formal strategy of dialogue, as it occurs in a printed script, to add further layers or distance between the speaker and the experience, so that a reader is compelled (by the conventions of dramatic scripts) to read 'He' as a dramatic character. This strategy is in keeping with the structural positioning of the whole collection as occupying a hybrid space between drama and poetry (something I will discuss further in section two). Of course, there is an added element of cross-genre borrowing taking place in "His Explanation", because the tag 'said' is a dialogue device used in fiction, and not in drama.



Another stylistic element in my earlier poetic work which would be mined further in *Autobiography of Bone* – so as to yield a deeper, more diverse vein of truth – is the idea of the sequence; the division of the unit of the poem into multiple sections. These sections may or may not be numbered in series – or may simply be presented as parts. The first time this strategy occurs in my poetry is in my second solo collection, *Feet of the Sky*. Here, the poem “Transkei Trekking” utilises the filmic device of numbered ‘takes’ to present stand-alone snap-shots of a trip through the Transkei:

*take 1.*

winter day.

*take 2.*

in the middle of a dry field  
old woman sits  
legs stuck out in front of her.

*take 3.*

tired ox pulls a makeshift sledge  
up the side of a hill.  
(2003:19)

The emphasis in these ‘takes’ is upon the fragmentary, the isolated and fleeting as opposed to the notion of continuity and connection. The individual moments, of course, are not so random as to defy comprehension; they are all in fact bound by the framework of a journey which they all share, in both spatial and temporal terms.

In *Autobiography of Bone*, the whole of Act II (“Anatomy of a Scene”) is dedicated to the idea of the transitory moment, frozen temporarily in a filmic ‘still’, but open to discontinuity, to being un-made and re-formed in a variety of patterns. Thus, in the poem “Sitting” (2010b:46) and in “Stage Directions” (49) a range of options are presented to the reader as to the sequence of events and to whom they happened – with none of the options enjoying any greater veracity than the others.

This deliberate undermining of authorial authority, and of narrative, is a feature of *Autobiography of Bone*. Memories are presented as part of one particular character's past, which are then later in the collection attributed to someone else. In "Sick List" the female character remembers, 'this is how it all started. On her pine bed in the front room with the crack in the wall that opened and closed depending on the weather' (130). Yet in "Brief History of Rooms" the male protagonist has the same memory: 'There is a long black crack in the wall that opens and closes depending on the weather' (151).

This is not a contradiction; neither is it, interestingly enough, actually a repetition. Rather, it points for me to a re-conceptualising of the manner in which we believe memory to operate and, in fact, to what memory ultimately is. In this way, the notion of the past as irreversible and irretrievable is questioned, in favour of something more fluid, something that shares closer ties with the present than we have conventionally assumed. But I will return to the functioning of memory and the past in more detail in section four.

In *Separating the Seas*, there are two sequence poems, "He" (subtitled 'a writer's biography in eight parts') and "Messages from the Other Shore". Both poems are much more progressional than "Transkei Trekking". "Messages from the Other Shore", particularly, seems to promote a logical rendering of events, albeit that the events themselves take place in a dream:

He had a dream  
that he was stuck in a wheelchair.  
He had a dream  
that he had lost his tongue.  
He had a dream  
that something had changed for the better.  
He had a dream  
that he went to visit the old blind woman  
to tell her the good news  
that he had stopped asking why.  
(2007a:7)

However, a closer reading of the poems reveals that all these events are actually taking place not just in the same dream, on the same night, but at the same time, in fact. In the same way *Autobiography of Bone* posits a space and a time ‘when coming in and going out happen at the same time’ (“When” 2010b:20). In the collection, negation and paradox become stylistic principles that are ways of teasing the reader beyond the expected and the formulaic, into a deeper way of reading the poems, where meaning is viewed at an angle, out of the corner of one’s eye, as it were, rather than head-on. Thus a poem like “He Does Not” can describe something that never took place (or did it?) as if it did (or did not):

He says: I must not. Think of what did not happen.

He says: I think of what did not happen. And I wish that it did.

He says: I wish. I wish. I wish. That it did not happen. That. That did not happen.  
(104)

Or, as in “He Entered Stage Left”, with its seemingly contradictory and unsettling refrain:

But still there was nothing to be seen.

And the house was not empty.  
(149)

The idea of the sequence, then – whether in accumulative, non-linear sections, or apparently random and disconnected divisions – prompts a shift away from plot as an organising principle towards what Gary Geddes in his anthology of Canadian poets, when speaking of the work of Patrick Friesen, calls ‘the kind of tonal unity you might expect to find in stream-of-consciousness fiction, where the twists and turns of thought and feeling matter more than causality or the paths of logic’ (2001:517).

Friesen’s introduction of the idea of ‘*tonal* unity’ [my emphasis] is critical in understanding something about sequence or long poems which I discovered in the writing of my own first long cycle of poems, *Anatomy*.<sup>10</sup> This series of meditations upon the body is structured into six independent sections, each focussing upon a different part of my body

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<sup>10</sup> The collection was written during a writer’s residency at the Caversham Centre for Writers and Artists at the beginning of 2008, and first published as a limited edition chapbook, illustrated by Witty Nyide. The collection marks a significant stage in my poetic development.

affected by *spina bifida*: thus we have “The Hand”, “The Foot”, “The Foot (the Other One)”, “The Shoulder”, “The Foot Re-visited” and “The Wrist”. A key element of *Anatomy* is its use of repetition and parallelism to produce an incantatory, almost hypnotic, rhythm that carries the poems through progressively intimate and visceral revelations of the body.

*Autobiography of Bone* employs precisely the same rhythm through its use of long sentences, rambling repetitive phrases, sometimes jumbled syntax, and by occasionally even dispensing with punctuation. Thus the long dramatic poem, “The Same Room”, possesses no punctuation whatsoever. Although it is sometimes difficult to follow the sequence of the sentences, the resultant rhythm is allowed to override sense in order to concentrate attention upon the surging current of the whole, the idea of being overwhelmed by an extreme experience:

M:                   What did she say when you told her what did she say when  
                          you told her you were coming to see me did she did she say  
                          anything did she give you a message for me did she did she  
                          swear at me did she cry what was she wearing does she still  
                          cut her hair short does she still wear black all the time  
                          (2010b:66)

Apart from its episodic structure, and its exploitation of a rolling rhythm, *Anatomy* also anticipates the figurative use of language in *Autobiography of Bone*. At the beginning of this section I discussed the imperative I felt for a new form and a new way of speaking that would make possible a rigorous and ruthless confrontation with the uniqueness of my own ‘bone-house’. In *Anatomy*, I succeeded, I believe, in fashioning a complex interweaving of metaphoric language that is able to transmute the closed specificity of individual lived experience into a set of evocative codes which allow a reader imaginative access to that experience though they might a) not ever have shared it, such as disability, for example, or b) might not even really be sure precisely what is being described.

The Spanish poet Federico Garcia Lorca has described this way of functioning of the poetic image as being ‘a transference of meaning’ (in Hamburger 1982:203). I find this

to be a useful way of understanding how imagery operates, and one that elucidates my own practice.

In the section titled “The Foot” from *Anatomy*, therefore, reference is made to ‘a hole’: ‘The foot is a hole made by a shard / of memory’ (2008b:14). On one level this is a direct reference to an unhealed ulcer on the ball of my left foot (which I have had for more than twenty years), but crucially the image also operates (must operate) beyond that specific knowledge: it speaks to any experience of absence, of loss, buried in the past.

The figurative language in *Autobiography of Bone* is constructed on this same idea. The ‘transference of meaning’ about which Lorca speaks is the operating principle behind all of its language. This use is clearly informed by my deep reading of the European poets from the first half of the twentieth century: Akhmatova, Tsvetayeva, Vallejo, Sachs, Bachmann, Ritsos, to name only a few.

Returning to Lorca, however, I would like to caution against viewing his idea of the ‘transference of meaning’ as being purely once-off; as a more or less permanent transfer from the tenor to the vehicle within a metaphoric image. Instead, I would propose that this be regarded as a more dynamic process, one that operates like the synapses between nerves, between which there is a constant movement of energy, never at rest, never able to be fixed and held.

This open-ended, fluid process is driven in *Autobiography of Bone* by the energizing tension that is inherent within a multiformity of metaphor; appearing in the collection now as paradox, now as deliberate mixed metaphor, now as associative image – what W.S. Merwin in his preface to *East Window: The Asian Translations* calls ‘the moving rings of associations’ (1998:96).

In “A Short Walk”, for example, the subject hears ‘her’ voice and is ‘struck by how much she sounded like someone he had never met’ (2010b:16). How does he know what someone’s voice sounds like if he has never met them before, one might ask? But that is not the point of the line. I am not interested in the literal content or the meaning of the references. But rather in what happens precisely at that point where the reader is forced to abandon causality and sequential chronology, and in so doing is encouraged to enter into the ‘other’ life that the language of my poem sets up.

In order to understand the way in which this ‘other’ life of my poetry is conceptualized, and the manner in which it operates in my collection, it is critical that I situate my study first within its literary context, revealing briefly the lineage of existing knowledge in this field, as well as how my own creative investigation overlaps and departs from this.

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## **TWO: Poetic Drama**

A verse play is not a play done into verse, but a different kind of play: in a way more realistic than ‘naturalistic drama’, because instead of clothing nature in poetry, it should remove the surface of things, expose the underneath or the inside of the natural surface appearance.

– T.S. Eliot (in Leeming 1989:20)

In the previous section, I sketched briefly the trajectory followed by some of the poetic concerns in my work (mainly language and form) from my earliest published collections to the present, and I examined the manner in which these concerns altered as I sought to extend my writing into new territories.

*Autobiography of Bone* itself evolved out of these changing concerns. It did not appear *ex nihilo*. With hindsight, it is possible to identify clearly the shapes and tones of literary influence which inspired my writing process, and also helped me to conceptualise and understand the nature of the final project.

Essentially, there were two prominent literary traditions, the stylistic and expressive alternatives of which stimulated my writing, and within the well-documented fields of which I situated my project – in order to explore the patterns of overlap and divergence that occurred. The first significant tradition was that of poetic drama, examined here. The second was the tradition of the contemporary long poem, to be examined in section three.

In the case of the former, the shared dialogue between poetry and drama has a long and rich history – running parallel to each other, crossing over, merging even in places. This section is not intended to present a detailed survey of poetic drama. Suffice it to say that in literature in English there has been a line of poetic drama from the Middle Ages right through to the present; from the medieval Mystery and Morality plays and Chaucer through Shakespeare and Milton, to the Poetic Drama Movement of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, exemplified in the work of T.S. Eliot (1974, 1976, 1979) and W.B. Yeats (1964), through to writers from the post-colonial periphery and the diaspora, such as Derek Walcott (1978) and Wole Soyinka (1974), to name a few.

Of late, though, experimental forms, radically different from the verse plays written by Christopher Fry (1949), Eliot and Yeats (some of the leading exponents of this genre in

the twentieth century), have burst upon the contemporary world, requiring writers, researchers and the public to develop alternate methods of describing and understanding drama and poetry.

In this new field of porous boundaries and shifting genre-specific identities, there are several practitioners whose work has pioneered a range of new forms, and who have strongly influenced my current writing practice. Writers like Harold Pinter (*Silence* 1979, *Family Voices* 1981), Peter Handke (*Offending the Audience* and *Self-Accusation* 1971 and *Kaspar* 1986), Steven Berkoff (*Agamemnon* and *East* 1978), Peter Weiss (*Marat/Sade* 1982), Yasmina Reza (*The Unexpected Man* 2005), Deborah Levy (*Clam* 2000) and Sarah Kane (*Cleansed*, *Crave* and *4.48 Psychosis* 2001) have consistently pushed the use of language, narrative and characterisation into the non-representational and the abstract, into the poetic.

In Pinter's *Family Voices*, for example, the characters are simply represented as Voice 1, Voice 2 and Voice 3. Voice 3 (the father of Voice 1) is, in fact, dead, and he speaks to his son from out of his 'glassy grave' (1981:81). In Act VIII of *Autobiography of Bone*, "The Thirteenth", I employ similarly non-specific descriptors for the characters; they are simply Husband and Wife. And their physical status – who is alive, who is not, who was hospitalized, and who was not – is deliberately rendered ambiguous so as to unsettle the notion of sequential narrative and causality in the reader's mind.

The strange isolation and introspection of Pinter's characters is represented in minimalist dialogue, rendered on the page in sometimes short, isolated fragments, which emphasize the unspoken:

I'm not so sure about the other people in this house.

One is an old man.

The one who is an old man retires early. He is bald.

The other is a woman who wears red dresses.

The other one is another man.

(1981:70-71)

Pinter's carefully wrought prose lines, while seemingly arbitrary and routine, call attention to something in the lines other than their strictly functional meaning. This is even more



apparent in *Silence*, where a deliberately stripped-down syntactical rhythm is combined with a concentrated and allusive use of imagery:

Caught a bus to town. Crowds. Lights round the market, rain and stinking.  
Showed her the bumping lights. Took her down around the dumps. Black roads  
and girders. She clutching me.  
(1979:202)

Act III from *Autobiography of Bone*, “The Same Room” – whose characters are also merely a Speaker, a Woman, a Man – utilises the same fragmentary mode and detailed emphasis upon the quotidian, as in Pinter. By removing all punctuation marks from the text and relying instead upon the properties of the line itself, broken into isolated flashes, an alternative organizing system to the grammatical sentence is proposed; one that offers the fragment as a counterpoint to the conventions of narrative stability and coherence:

She sits at his bedside  
  
And listens to his breathing  
  
Shallow rough snagging on something that cannot be seen  
  
Beneath the surface of the white blankets  
  
Beneath the thin lids of his closed eyes  
(2010b:55)

Furthermore, through the introduction of an interlocutor, the Speaker, a subtle balance of dramatic dialogue and a non-focalised narrative mediates the isolated, abandoned experience of the two protagonists through seemingly random bursts of action and expression:

A room  
  
She sits at the bedside  
  
She looks at him  
  
He is sleeping

She almost does not recognise who he has become

But then she recognises his hands

Then she remembers

(2010b:54)

To turn to the British playwright Sarah Kane, whose excessively violent theatricality shocked the public in the 1990s with plays like *Cleansed* (2001), *Crave* (2001) and *4.48 Psychosis* (2001), we encounter a relentless push at the naturalistic boundaries of theatre. Each of her five plays, according to the critic David Greig in his introduction to Kane's *Complete Plays*, 'was a new step on an artistic journey in which Kane mapped the darkest and most unforgiving internal landscapes: landscape of violation, of loneliness, of power, of mental collapse and, most consistently, the landscape of love' (2001:ix). Kane challenges the director with the physicalisation of her explosive, yet at the same time strangely lyrical, imagery. What is one to make, for example, of her stage direction in her play *Cleansed*, 'The rats carry Carl's feet away' (136) or 'Out of the ground grow daffodils. They burst upwards, their yellow covering the entire stage' (133)?

*Cleansed* is certainly Kane's most brutal play: characters' bodies break apart; their limbs are removed, their skins and genitals are removed; until by the end of the play the very identities of the characters are forcibly interchanged. So, in terms of staging, how practical are her plays? This is a question that goes to the heart of Kane's writing and her daringness. As Greig continues in his introduction: 'By demanding an interventionist and radical approach from her directors she was forcing them to go to the limits of their theatrical imagination, forcing them into poetic and expressionist solutions' (xiii).

The broad problem around performance is one which I as author also had to confront time and again in the writing of *Autobiography of Bone*. Since I had conceived of my long project as a re-configuring, a re-imagining, even, of the boundaries between poetry and drama, what to do then with the inevitable imperative towards performance?

Clearly the sections within *Autobiography of Bone* are enormously varied; some representing more closely what we associate with the structure of a dramatic script ("The Same Room" and "The Thirteenth"), while others are more easily identified as prose

poems (some of the pieces in “Intermezzo”, for example), or even a novel in verse (“Brief History of Rooms”). Instead of representing closed, distinct forms the different parts in the collection (what I have called Acts) are better understood as temporary markers upon a graduated scale of generic conventions – without the need for positive or negative values.

This still does not, however, resolve the problem of performance. Are the dramatic pieces in *Autobiography of Bone* written exclusively for the page? To be read? In order to understand this, one must make a clear distinction between the dramatic and the theatrical. My entire project revolves around the use of dramatic elements, and usually not in their standard application; character, dialogue, stage directions, and action are employed throughout as formal devices or strategies which can release or enable deeper readings of autobiography and the confessional. But these elements are not dependent upon dramatic presentation in order to achieve their effect. Instead, my collection proposes to investigate the efficacy of alternatives that preclude a rigid binary between the acts of performance and reading. Something hinted at in a letter by the German poet Nelly Sachs to Paul Celan: ‘Sketches that may be impossible to perform, but that want *to leap out over the edge of poetry* [my emphasis]’ (in Celan 1995:6).

This involves, of course, a radical re-interpretation of what we mean when we use the words ‘poetry’, ‘drama’, ‘theatre’ and ‘performance’. And it forces us to re-evaluate the very mechanics and functioning of these concepts and genres.

Let us return to Sarah Kane to help us understand the direction of this argument more practically. In *Crave* Kane dispenses with all but the most tenuous hints of explanatory narrative. The four voices (identified only as A, B, M and C) speak in elliptical snatches that have a liquid, non-naturalistic quality. The four voices almost become one, and they reveal the meaning of their story not line by line (character by character, if they are even characters at all?), but rather more in a hypnotic interplay of themes, much like a string quartet.

In *4.48 Psychosis*, the play that Kane was working on just before she died,<sup>11</sup> she pushes still further the formal elements she had explored in *Crave*. This time there are no delineated voices, and no textual indication of the number or even the gender of the

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<sup>11</sup> Kane committed suicide on 20<sup>th</sup> February 1999. The title, *4.48 Psychosis*, refers the time that she woke up, every morning, during the period of clinical depression which preceded her death.

performers. The text consists of snatches of dialogue (indicated by long dashes only) and fragments of monologues, written in a range of expressive styles, from ragged lyrical outbursts to prosaic descriptions of her medication, to obsessive lists of violent gestures – redolent in the forcefulness of their imagery and the wild, unconnected trajectory of the narrative of the writing of Antonin Artaud (1995).

Although strictly speaking not a dramatist, the work of Anne Carson has been a major influence upon the direction and the manifold shape/s of *Autobiography of Bone*, particularly her exhilarating ability to mimic different genre conventions. Writing of Sappho in *Men in the Off Hours* (2000), Carson might very well have been describing herself: ‘namely that she plays havoc with boundaries and defies the rules that keep matter in place’ (152). This, almost Protean, talent of Carson’s is notably evident in *Decreation* (2006), where the forms and registers in the collection range from the dramatic (opera libretto, screenplay and oratorio) to the non-dramatic (poem, essay, list and montage).

I encountered the work of Anne Carson at the beginning of 2008, at the same writer’s residency in which I wrote *Anatomy*. Her work struck me because of the radical way in which she as writer re-conceptualised structure, content and form, thereby forcing me as reader to do the same. The eclectic mix of styles and voices in her work, and the sophistication with which she seamlessly wove these patterns together, brought home to me the truth of what Mouré wrote in *My Beloved Wager*: ‘Poetry is a limitless genre. Its borders are only in ourselves and we can move them, in our lifetime, if we dare to’ (2009:18).

If, as Jonathan Culler argues, genre conventions are essentially a contract of sorts ‘between writer and reader so as to make certain relevant expectations operative and thus to permit both compliance with and deviation from accepted modes of intelligibility’ (1975:147), then what attracted me to Carson’s work, and what inspired me in the writing of *Autobiography of Bone*, was precisely those moments when she broke contract: when she challenged the structures of generic categories that I had held; structures (or should that be strictures?) of reading, and writing, and making sense of language and the world.

In other words, when she challenged my self. And challenging the self, to quote Mouré again, ‘leads to seeing where self is constructed, recognizing where thought’s wires act as stop signs. Challenging the self is learning to walk past those wires, learning that the

borders in one's thoughts are but seams. There's cloth past them, too, and fields, light, birds' (2009:14).

Inherent in this challenge, therefore, is the necessity that we conceptualise genre as a dynamic process rather than as a set of fixed rules. For it is precisely those edges and margins in Carson's work – where the boundaries between categories begin to blur and merge – that excite possibility, because in their open-endedness they make possible Lorca's idea of the 'transference of meaning', which I examined earlier.

This interstitial space at the edges of generic categories rejects the epistemological presumptions of authorial absolutism and the expectations of closure and coherence. It posits instead what Jacques Derrida in his article, "The Law of Genre", refers to as 'a law of impurity or a principle of contamination (1980:57). In *Autobiography of Bone* such principles 'of contamination' underpin not only my experiments in the permeability of form, but also the specific discursive registers to which these forms give rise. Thus diction, vocabulary and phrasing are consciously manipulated in my poems so as to absorb and re-contextualise the stylistics of a range of literary and non-literary registers. For example, the overblown commercial register of advertising (specifically junk-mail) is employed in parts of 'Drame Bourgeois' in order to interrogate the tenets of consumerism and the materialistic aspirations of the 'She' character:

*Mabula*

Elegance meets its master.

Classic in design to catch your eye with crafted  
perfection to stir your deepest desire.

Comfort in motion, the secret to your luxury.

("What the Jones's Saw", 2010b:128)

The intertextual referencing in *Autobiography of Bone* between the range of what Richard Bradford calls 'communicative types' (1997:128) includes, amongst others, found-poems constructed out of junk-mail (above), crochet instruction manuals ("Guide to Staying Young (I)" and "(II)") and the names of house paints ("If Only I Could Make Up My Mind"); scabrous speech ("Salt"); numerical lists ("Fifteen Things He Carried . . .", "Sixteen Things He Owned" and "Twelve Other Things He Forgot"); as well as the

intrinsic textual characteristics of literary models such as stage directions in scripts (“Sitting”, “Sitting and Waiting and Watching” and “Standing”) and dialogue tags from fiction (“S/He Said” and “His Explanation”).

Such referencing deliberately unsettles the reader’s expectations, encouraging a fresh process of discovery and learning. But these references also set up an inquiry into the purposive function of such forms of communication in a given discourse (such as a poem), and the way in which the poem will then ‘evolve its own typology of stylistic conventions’ (Bradford 1997:129), and what the consequences of such are for narrative and for subjectivity. This is a complex idea which I will examine in greater detail in section four, once I have established more clearly what is at stake in this argument. In the meantime, it is important at least to outline some of the fundamentals of this concern now, especially with regard to form and content and the composite manner in which they are interconnected. We need to be reminded here of what Coleridge argued in *Biographia Literaria*, that a poem always ‘contains within itself the reason why it is so and not otherwise’ (in Enright & De Chickera 1962:194). In this claim, Coleridge shifts attention away from the poet’s intention in a given piece towards the intention of the piece itself. He posits a treatment of a poem as a dynamic entity, one that is a virtual signifying system of an order unique to itself, what Bradford has called ‘the fictive world of the poem’ (1997:159). At the same time Coleridge also indirectly diminishes the interpretive authority of the poet (as author) and advances the independent and constructed reality of the poem itself.

This may seem obscurantist. It may even run the risk of reifying the work of art. And of this we must be cautious. Nevertheless, I do believe that there is still a valid and productive space within which we might be able to understand Coleridge’s claim and the way that it relates to Bradford’s idea of the poem evolving ‘its own typology’. For it seems that we need to ask questions of the poem itself regarding its form and its content, and its meaning.

But of course the critical question is, how do we do this?

And specifically, how have I, as the writer, been able to stand back and contemplate *Autobiography of Bone* and comprehend what it is, what it seeks to do, and how it does what it seeks to do?

To understand the impact of these questions and the manner in which they were resolved during the writing process we need now to examine the second literary tradition which influenced my work, the contemporary long poem.

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### **THREE:        The Contemporary Long Poem**

The prairie is full of bones. The bones stand and sing and I feel the weight of them as they guide my fingers on this page.

– Louise Bernice Halfe (2004:2)

Writing in the compressed space between a poem and a play, writing a play that sounded like a poem, writing a poem that gestured like a play, I was at the same time, all the time, writing in the dark. The dark of the page. That all too familiar experience of E.M. Forster: ‘How can I know what I think till I see what I say?’ (1976:99).

And yet, once the words were out on the page – rough certainly, chaffing in parts, stiff in their straps and their hinges – I did not know what to do with them. How to re-work them. Develop them. Because actually, and this is crucial, I did not know what type of ‘thing’ they were. By the end of 2009 I had written more or less half of what the final project would ultimately be, but I was frustrated and dissatisfied.

It had no coherent story. It did not conform to the traditionally linear structure of an autobiography, beginning with early memories and then moving forward in time according to the natural logic of cause and effect. Its characters seemed not to ever own their memories or their back-stories. One moment something was remembered by someone, and the next moment by someone completely different. Were the different characters in fact one and the same person? And yet the one was dead and the other was still a child. And they spoke in so many different voices; hoarse and soft and sad and coarse, crude and lilting. About the most arbitrary things. And, then, what to do with all the different structures that kept appearing throughout the collection, never consistent, shifting and mutating just when I had got accustomed to them?

I was stuck on the notion that somehow I was writing a verse drama (a combination of the two forms). And yet the many and varied parts – in verse, in prose, in long lists, in script form or as found objects – pulled against this, each going its own separate way.

I had dispensed with the imperative for performance. I did not need consistent, naturalistic characters. I did not even require a coherent plot with a beginning, middle and end. My readings in Pinter, Kane and Carson had dissuaded me of these ideas long ago. And yet I was not confident about the shape of the whole. Its disjointed and fragmentary



quality, which I had hoped would be a stylistic feature of the writing, was proving difficult to handle. The text was digressive and long-winded; not at all engaging in the manner, for example, in which W.G. Sebald uses detailed asides and deviations from the main plot, as in *Austerlitz* (2001). I needed an overall shape. Not a narrative. But an empowering structure that would give ‘lift-off from the biographical . . . into the realm of the imaginative’ (Coetzee 2008:148).

But where to find this?

Then in the early part of 2010, as part of an extended sabbatical (intended to provide me with the time and the space to complete my writing project), I spent two months at the University of Calgary in the city of Calgary, Canada. The main (although not exclusive) aim of my visit was to study the Creative Writing teaching practices in the English department of that university, the only higher learning institution in English-speaking Canada which offers a doctoral degree with a creative writing specialisation.<sup>12</sup> A significant period of study was also set up with the writing programme at the University of Alberta in Edmonton, in order to learn the similarities and differences between the approaches to teaching creative writing at the two institutions, and so to broaden the scope of my pedagogical research.

I was also fortunate in being able to spend time in the writing department of the Banff Centre for the Arts, west of Calgary. This helped to complete my experience of North American writing pedagogies.

On top of these periods of study at three leading Canadian institutions that focus on writing, I also presented research seminars at the University of Calgary and the University of Edmonton. Both focussed on the nature of my doctoral research, and involved readings from my manuscript in progress. Furthermore, I was invited to participate in the annual Calgary International Spoken Word poetry festival, where I took part in a panel discussion

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<sup>12</sup> There is a French-language institution in Quebec that also offers a creative-thesis PhD. It is important to note that the University of Calgary does not offer a “creative writing PhD”. Calgary's creative doctoral students have to take all their usual graduate English courses, and sit all the usual comprehensive exams (a major and a minor field exam). But the students may substitute a creative work (including a critical component, and involving research) for the standard critical thesis.

on performance poetry at the Banff Centre, as well as conducted two public readings; one in Canmore, west of Calgary, and the second in Calgary itself.

It was during research in the library of the English department at the University of Calgary that I first came across references to writers like Robert Kroetsch, bp Nichol (*ibid*), Phyllis Webb, George Bowering, Fred Wah and Roy Kiyooka (to name a few). Then I went to Edmonton, and I visited the University of Alberta Press and NeWest Press, and I was given (yes) copies of Dennis Cooley's *Bloody Jack* (2002), Kroetsch's *Completed Field Notes* (1989a), *Diamond Grill* by Fred Wah (2006) and Gerald Hill's *14 Tractors* (2009). I became aware for the first time, of the scale, extent and depth of the Canadian contribution to the modern long poem.

Of course, I had long admired the multi-dimensioned collage technique of Michael Ondaatje's *Collected Works of Billy the Kid* (1989) and the extended evocation of the immigrant experience as evoked in Margaret Atwood's *The Journals of Susannah Moodie* (1970). But, to my shame, I had not configured these writers within a broader tradition of poetic and stylistic concerns.

The long poem is widely acknowledged by writers and scholars as a vital and powerful form in post-modern Canadian writing (see Kroetsch 1989b; Thesen 1991; Geddes 2001). So much so in fact that several publishing houses in Canada – Coach House Press, University of Alberta Press, and NeWest Press, for example – specialise in this form.

In his introduction to *The Long Poem Anthology*, Ondaatje claims that 'the most interesting writing being done by poets today can be found within the structure of the long poem' (1979:11), and Milton Wilson, writing on the importance of E.J. Pratt's long parodic epic *Towards the Last Spike*, comments, 'I have the notion that the problems involved in *Towards the Last Spike* are going to be the central problems of the poetry of the future . . . [Pratt writes] narratives, no doubt, but discontinuous narratives which are always turning, on the one side, into documents, letters, and jokes, and on the other, into pure lyrics' (in Geddes 2001:2).

While the long poem is not strictly speaking anti-lyric, it is important to emphasise that it is not simply an extension of the discrete lyrical voice over ten or twenty pages. Rather, time and length (or what Kroetsch in his collection of essays, *The Lovely Treachery of Words* (1989b), refers to as 'delay') act upon the urge towards closure in the lyric,

retarding the impulse for an undifferentiated unity and permitting a greater access to the stylistic concerns of process and of perspective (varied and shifting) than the single, self-contained poem is able to. Thus most contemporary narrative, documentary or 'persona' (the term is Thesen's) long poems in Canada are, in fact, book length, and therefore are actually not so much collections, in the strict sense of the word, but rather cycles, sequences and serials.

Of course, the tradition of the long poem is long-standing in English literature. Under the guise of narrative or epic poetry it has been a consistent preoccupation for poets in English, from Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales*, Milton's *Paradise Lost*, Pope's *The Rape of the Lock* and Wordsworth's *The Prelude*, through to Pound's *The Cantos*, Eliot's *The Waste Land* and William Carlos Williams's *Paterson*.

In South Africa, too, within the last sixty years, we have N.P. van Wyk Louw's *Raka*, Mazisi Kunene's *Emperor Shaka the Great*, Mongane Serote's *No Baby Must Weep*, Ingoapele Madingoane's *Africa, my Beginning*, and, more recently, Karen Press's *Echo Location* and *The Little Museum of Working Life*, and Don Maclennan's *Notes from a Rhenish Mission*, to name a few. Joan Metelerkamp, too, in her three recent collections – *Requiem*, *Carrying the Fire* and *Burnt Offering* – has proved the resilience of the long poem format as a vehicle for concerns which cannot be satisfied by the individual occasional short poem.

But the narrative and epic tendency in the traditional long poem – the momentum towards a linear sense of the passage of time, the centrality of cause and effect, the exaltedness of style and action, and the focal presence of a hero of stature – is treated sceptically by many contemporary Canadian poets.

I must make it plain here and now that I am not commenting critically on the Canadian long poem *per se*; neither am I attempting even to sketch an overview of this tradition and its major concerns. My focus rather is on those elements of the long poem which coincide significantly with and contribute to illuminating my writerly concerns in *Autobiography of Bone*. Furthermore, I am attentive to the manner in which the long poem (especially its varied contemporary Canadian expressions) has helped me both to conceptualise the nature of my writing project, and to resolve some of the impasses which a project of this length inevitably faced along the way.

In structure, content and style, the modern long poem is meditational and processive; it moves forward only by moving in circles, or by moving backward even. As noted before, it eschews a linear sense of narrative and time in favour of an irregular and repetitive accumulation of effects. Thus the South African poet, Joan Metelerkamp, in *Burnt Offering* can write of 'breaking open narrative // like a symbol, the host, take, break, like the day' ("Prologue" 2009:11), while in "Points on Poems" she explicitly states: 'it has nothing to do with linear narrative / even though it's made of lines, / and although it is really a story' (14).

The movement of the long poem is often accomplished by the rhythmical employment of multiple sections, in either rigid stanzaic format (see Carson's "Book of Isaiah" and "The Glass Essay" in *Glass, Irony and God*) or entirely loose and open-ended (as in Nichol's "Inchoate Road", anthologised in Thesen 1991:231-254). These sections are frequently designated as 'cantos', 'letters', 'songs', 'passages', 'suites'; or simply as parts numbered in series. The ten Acts of *Autobiography of Bone* are configured according to dramatic terms (with the exceptions of Act III: "The Same Room", Act VII: "Brief History of Rooms", and Act VIII: "The Thirteenth"). Each section is subservient to its own internal rhythm and structure. Thus the longest section, "Brief History of Rooms", follows more or less the pattern of a verse novel, with alternating short and long lines. There is no rhyme or metrical structure to the lines, but the deliberate omission of all punctuation marks, except for commas (and a full stop at the end of the last line of each section), is instrumental in keeping the poem moving across its repetitive and obsessively detailed course. By contrast, Act IX: "Deus Ex Machina", is a one-sided scripted dialogue in usually brief and fragmented bursts, with very little detail of event or setting: 'Are you // I remember // You // Are you // Listening // Remember // Can you // Yes // Hear me' (2010b: 264).

The challenge of maintaining movement and tension across a range of contrasting expressive forms was critical during the writing process. In his essay, "Making Strange Poetics", Fred Wah elaborates upon the forces that sustain his own long poems, describing the 'looping ways in which they pause in order to continue' (in Thesen 1991:14). This 'looping' pattern of Wah's (what I would describe in personal somatic terms as three unsteady steps forward, two unsteady steps back) played a vital role in helping me overcome what could easily have become a digressive and incoherent exposition. The

method is evident in my collection not just in the conscious patterning of lines described above, but also, very importantly, in the actual imagery employed throughout; in the specific type of vocabulary used (concentrating on the one hand on terms that derive from the body – the trope of walking, for example – and on the other on the purely quotidian, especially the domestic), and the deliberate way that this vocabulary is then re-configured so as to shift the emphasis away from referentiality (and self-referentiality) towards something more aligned with Lorca’s idea of the ‘*transference* of meaning’ [my emphasis]. As Mouré argues, in terms uniquely suited to the medical concerns of my long project: ‘The opening up of sense perception is an opening of the powers to heal. Referentiality distorts more than it conveys, it injects us with the comfortable’ (in Geddes 2001:493).

It would be a misjudgement, however, to see this ‘looping’ pattern as consisting either simply of repetition or caesura. This would be to deprive it of its imaginative energy. For it does, in fact, possess elements of both. It moves while standing still. It returns to where it was before in order to move on to somewhere else. How so? In the same way that the He in my collection can be ‘present everywhere / even / when he is absent’ (2010b:11) or that his father could have ‘one dead eye staring, and the other one fast asleep and dreaming’ (23). Because in the same way that the past is never entirely over for any of the characters, but keeps being re-lived, and being changed in the process (more of this in section four), so too does the present keep recurring, on a ‘loop’ of time that sees the aggregates of subjectivity (memory, emotion, thought) being shared between characters, rather than individualised.

This ‘looping’ about which Wah speaks is developed into an all-inclusive strategy in my writing – unsettling fixed ideas of time, space and identity. It acts as a frame for the narrative, and accommodates the multiple strands and the tensions of the narrative without diluting any of the required effects. This strategy – the delicate balancing act of containing without restraining the elements in my narrative – is more clearly understood when we examine a key influence upon the contemporary Canadian long poem tradition: the Japanese *Utanikki*, a ‘song’ diary or poetic travelogue. According to Thesen (1991:15) bp Nichol regarded the *Utanikki* as a decisive influence upon *The Martyrology*, his vast serial poem which grew, from 1972 until his death in 1988, into a major life-work; while the

impact of the *Utanikki* is also noticeable in Wah's *Waiting for Saskatchewan* (1985) and Kiyooka's *Pear Tree Pomes* [sic] (1987).

In brief, the *Utanikki* is an ancient Japanese poetic tradition (see the spiritual travelogues of Bashō, for example) which tracks an element or section of a writer's life as 'a discontinuous yet continuing story of consciousness' (Thesen 1991:15). Crucially it faces the challenge of autobiography head-on, but avoids the pitfalls of confession and the demand for veracity by a process of alienation or estrangement. Such estrangement can take many forms.

The South African poet Joan Metelerkamp uses contradiction and paradox in her cycle of poems, *Burnt Offering*, to hold at a distance the reader's obsession with wanting to know or to work out biographical truth: 'nothing to do with what those who know better call / "your personal life" ' ("Points on Poems" 2009:16). And in *Waiting for Saskatchewan* Fred Wah uses a convoluted syntax, free of grammatical construction, to problematise the expectation of the confessional:

You can't drive through a rainbow I said hills to myself in the mountains glory  
of a late summer early fall thunder storm the Brilliant Bluffs brilliant indeed  
the shine rain and sunshine waves of science breaking lickety split school  
systems

("This Dendrite Map: Father / Mother Haibun #5" 1985:79)

As discussed already in section one, I transformed the third-person singular into a fictional character in *Autobiography of Bone* in order to negotiate the temptation of the intensely personal. But the confessional is not simply held off or estranged. It is consciously transmuted through the activity of new forms into something that no longer privileges fact over fiction, the real over the imaginary. Through an attention, then, to alternative writing practices in my collection, to multiple ways of representing and telling, something new is created (something 'other') that unsettles the narrative conventions of autobiography: conventions that to this day draw for their significance on Philippe Lejeune's description of autobiography as a 'retrospective prose narrative written by a real person concerning his own existence, where the focus is his individual life, in particular the story of his personality' (1975:4).

Against this conventional view, Julian Spahr, in her essay, “Resignifying Autobiography: Lyn Hejinian’s *My Life*”, argues that ‘despite the relentless challenging of the subject in twentieth-century theory, it is still a cliché that autobiography is the place where conventions of representation are narrative, where text “uncovers” a visible and essentially legible self’ (1996:139). The long prose poems of Lyn Hejinian – as in her serial collection, *My Life* – have strongly influenced my conceptualisation of the confessional, and have helped me see beyond the limiting components of Lejeune’s definition: ‘retrospective’, ‘prose narrative’ and ‘individual’. As Spahr writes:

Hejinian’s work, centrally concerned with biography and autobiography, explores and complicates the relationship between alternative, non-standard writing practices and subjectivity, that the generic conventions of biography and autobiography often smooth over.

(141)

In *My Life*, Hejinian mixes poetry and prose, autobiographical confession and what Spahr terms ‘language-centered aphorisms’ in an unchronological fashion through reminiscences, observations and commentary. Hejinian insists that alternative means of expression are necessary truly to represent the confessional or the real. The alternative form that she uses most frequently is what has come to be called the ‘new sentence’; a form of long prose poem composed mainly of sentences that have no logical transition between them:

You spill the sugar when you lift the spoon. My father had filled an old apothecary jar with what he called ‘sea glass,’ bits of old bottles rounded and textured by the sea, so abundant on beaches. There is no solitude. It buries itself in veracity. It is as if one splashed in the water lost by one’s tears. My mother had climbed into the garbage can in order to stamp down the accumulated trash, but the can was knocked off balance, and when she fell she broke her arm. She could only give a little shrug.

(1987:9)

The interruptions and gaps created by a text that moves rapidly and randomly from one subject to another without clear transitions disrupt assumed reading practices. Readers are

encouraged to choose between a range of competing multiplicities, rather than to follow a stable and essentialised subjectivity through the conventional structure of continuity. In so doing readers are exposed to broader possibilities of meaning, which they themselves are forced to bring to the text, and they are confronted with the imperative to ‘question the changes in perception, knowledge and thinking [that] they undergo in this autobiographical encounter’ (Spahr 1996:147). In so doing the primacy of form – of alternative forms structured specifically to meet the demands of multiple contexts – becomes apparent.

But what is the relationship between form and the content that it signifies?

And how have I been able to negotiate and represent the complexities of this in *Autobiography of Bone*?

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#### **FOUR:       The Body of the Text**

All of this is meant as a challenge. It's not a prescription. Accepting the challenge means challenging preconceptions, taking a chance with poetic structures, with using sounds and words to call out those deep and senseless images and connections out of you. A whole world of possible and as-yet-unimaginable results opens up.

– Erin Mouré (2009:55)

From the outset, concerns of form have been at the heart of *Autobiography of Bone*. As explained already, it was precisely the search for alternatives to the previously solid genre-specific distinctions of drama and poetry that prompted my project. And it was out of these multi-form alternatives – this sometimes heady range of combinations and mutations – that my writing developed.

Form thus was the primary motivating factor behind the project. But at the same time, in the course of the writing process, form also became the defining characteristic of each individual poem within the ten different Acts. What I would term the 'stance' of every piece was its primary organising principle, and not concerns of theme, imagery, tone or narrative (elements which one might loosely call the content of the poem).

Interestingly, as I wrote this last sentence I was tempted to replace the word 'stance' with 'voice'. Voice, I had long believed, was what I as a writer was in search of. When I had found my voice, my writer's voice, then I would have arrived! Yet Albert Camus, in a letter to Patricia Blake, wrote:

It takes years to find your real voice, your tone and the truth in your heart. People believe that this is given at the beginning, and a writer's work is to translate this given. Not at all! The writer's work consists of writing with as much effort as possible, and at the end of this labour it sometimes happens that he finds what he sought for so long inside himself.

(in Todd 1998:228)

Without contradicting Camus' sentiment (which I share), the process of writing *Autobiography of Bone* has taught me the value of shape in a poem. I do not doubt that

perhaps ultimately the shape of the poems in my project is the voice of the poems; but at this stage in my argument it is important for me to separate the two ideas, so that voice (which inevitably has the connotations of sound) is not confused with what I have termed stance – with the literal shape that the lines and the words assume on the white paper. For the poise of each individual poem – the way it stands, its knees bent, hips twisted; the way it walks, its right knee collapsing at every step, its right ankle giving in, going over further with every step; the way it lies, still, but every nerve jerking; the way it sits, or sleeps, dreams, or loves – is in a fundamental way what each poem actually is *about*, before the poem is about anything. Thus the meaning and the narrative of each poem is inextricably linked with its form.

With – as it is phrased in the Preface to this study – the bones’ unstable autobiography.

In this sense, a poem like “Standing” mimics the stiff, upright, but at the same time, precarious and nervous, posture of the speaker involved:

All lined up in a row.  
During assembly in.  
The hall with his eyes.  
Closed murmuring the.  
Lord’s Prayer losing his.  
Balance swaying like the.  
Mast in the film Moon-  
Fleet about smugglers in.  
Sailing ships during a.  
Storm while he is afraid.  
(2010b:48)

And “Propped up” keeps slipping, sliding over, falling away from its centre of gravity against the left-hand margin:

Against  
the moon

Because

he keeps slipping  
over  
when he opens his mouth.

(37)

While the found-poem, “If Only I Could Make Up My Mind” – based entirely on the descriptors occurring on paint swatches – jumps restlessly from one overblown and utterly inane, apostrophised term to another, without ultimately being able to settle on any, because they are all equally superficial:

Phantom Moss	or	Filtered Forest
California Dreaming	or	Green Mamba
Greek Island	or	Love Bird
Periwinkle Palace	or	Eyes of Iris
Sapphire	or	Dutch Crocus

(126)

It would be a fundamental error, however, to regard the poems, purely because they are so radically distinct in structure from each other, as wholly discrete, self-enclosed units. This would be to shatter and fragment beyond focus the concept of *Autobiography of Bone* as a whole; a whole which, after my study of the contemporary Canadian long poem, I understood now not as a collection (a notion foregrounding dissimilarity and disconnection), but more as a series or cycle – possessing both its own conceptual integrity and intrinsic, patterned movement.

The challenge which I faced in section three – needing to frame my narrative and hold it within some kind of conceptual format, without forsaking the energy of its diverse elements – and for which I finally found relief in the structures and rhythms of the long poem, re-emerges now when considering the intensity with which each poem asserts its own shape and stance. And while Fred Wah’s concept of a ‘looping’ practice does offer

some remedy for this problem, it is critical to examine how, on the micro scale, the poems also operate as co-relational, interlocking systems.

Individually, each poem pursues its own distinct narrative; it follows a set trajectory and adheres to a scheme of expressive language that is subject to the crucial demands of 'its own typology' (Bradford 1997:129); or, to return to Coleridge's argument in *Biographia Literaria*, 'the reason why it is so and not otherwise' (in Enright & De Chickera 1962:194). However, there is also a definite correspondence or co-relation between the individual poems that occurs on a range of different levels at the same time. The poems share and interchange the identities of their main characters, for example. They cross-reference each other with memories that are held in common; memories such as the smell of milk that has boiled over on a stove, packing cardboard boxes after the break-up of a relationship, cutting him/herself with a scalpel, or climbing the old lemon in his/her childhood garden and imagining it to be the mast of an old sailing ship. The poems also have a variety of concrete objects that act as linking elements between them: objects such as a walking stick, a wing-backed chair, a pine desk, a formica kitchen table, or a small electric saw with a rotating blade.

In this way the poems move forward in space and time while also, and at the same time, moving back upon themselves in interconnected circles. In this way they both affirm and disavow narrative conventions, affirm and disavow the authority and authenticity of the subject.

Again.

And again, and as before, as so often, there are two things (maybe even more) happening at once.

Again, as before, it is a case of this *and* that. Not *or*. Again, it is Lorca's 'transference of meaning'; an act that does not cancel out or remove the twin poles of the tenor and the vehicle in a metaphor, but actually holds them both in a fragile, agitated poise; a process that Hejinian in an interview <sup>13</sup> describes as

the *point sublime*, which is the point of encounter in which unlike things encounter each other, and create an extraordinary, albeit usually a very

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<sup>13</sup> From the second annual Poets Forum, presented by the Academy of American poets on November 8, 2008, at New York University in New York City.

momentary place within a work – if that makes any sense. And I think you hear it in the Stein [Gertrude Stein], in those copulas that she puts of: ‘an elephant and a strict occasion,’ and if you linger on that juxtaposition, there is a moment in which an elephant and a strict occasion are absolutely in place together, logically. And then the logic explodes.

(<http://www.poets.org/viewmedia.php/prmMID/20940>)

I would argue that the ‘encounter’ Hejinian describes above takes place at the interface between form, content and meaning in each of my poems; what Eliot in “Four Quartets” terms that ‘still point of the turning world’ (1963:191). But in order to understand this process more clearly we need to examine in greater detail the intricate relationship between form and content.

Before *Autobiography of Bone* I had not really thought consciously about the interaction between form and content. I had assumed that form was merely what I did to a poem at the end which held it all together. Or that form was just the vehicle for communicating my ideas to the reader.

In the process of writing my long cycle of poems, however, I have come to understand form and content in a completely new way. What sometimes felt for me, at the outset of the writing process, as if I were simply forcing the weirdest and most radical shapes (for me, at least) onto the idea of a poem, gradually shifted.

Under the pressure of the wide reading I was doing, and because I was deliberately now having to pay attention to the precise structure of every single poem, to see and to feel how each poem differed from the other, I increasingly came around to a different way of perceiving form and content – which brought me to a different way of writing too; one more instinctual, more blind and, ultimately, more trusting in the words themselves, in their own ‘subliminal code’ (to quote Mouré again).

The form of a given poem, I understand now, is neither a shell enclosing the content, nor a vehicle transporting content between the page and the reader. Neither ultimately is form a reflection of content. For if form is a shell or the casing around content then it presupposes that the two elements remain throughout entirely separate; that there can be no reciprocity or engagement between them. Their surfaces touch, but that is the

only point of contact. Deeper than that they remain cold and unaware of each other's existence.

If the relationship between form and content is configured as a process of conveyance, of form transporting the messages of the content to the reader, then that is to devalue the significance of form's contribution to the ultimate effect of the whole. This understanding (of simple transmission) does offer a defined role for the function of form, but it is a significantly diminished role. It regards the process of conveyance from the one to the other as more or less neutral, where the form of the poem is seen to be having little effect upon or consequence for the content itself. And it was the reciprocity between the two that came to interest me.

I also would reject a model that regards form as purely a reflection of content. This, in my opinion, would again deny any agency, as it were, on the part of the form. It would, as in the example of transference above, relegate form to a singularly passive role; in the same way that a mirror image is merely a re-presentation of its subject, unaltered, untouched, and totally obedient to its origin.

During the course of writing *Autobiography of Bone* a different 'paradigm' to all of the above slowly emerged. As I started to concentrate less upon telling a defined story, less upon revealing a full and stable subjectivity through character, less upon communicating any specific idea (about the body, ageing, memory, time or the past), another way of understanding form and content, and the way that meaning operated in my poems, began to unfold within me.

Now, at the end of the long project, I see form more as the embodiment of content. It is the body of content, in fact. Not as in a shell, where there is a definite separation between inside and outside. But as a literal body, which we can see and touch; that which content shows of itself to the world. And if we spend time meditating upon the analogy of the body as a more appropriate way of understanding the relationship between form and content, then we begin to perceive more fully how complex it is, and how extremely difficult (if not impossible) it is to separate form from content, or vice versa.

However – extending the analogy of the body – if form is what we can see and touch, the external, what we might be tempted to call the skin, how then do we understand memories, feelings and thoughts? Just because they cannot be seen does this make them

internal, as opposed to the externality of skin, which can be seen? Where then are thoughts? Where do they happen when they happen to us? The same applies to memories and feelings. Can we really say that memories happen *inside* us?

When the different characters in *Autobiography of Bone* remember the same event or the same significant object – the ‘small wooden bench made by his grandfather from a World War 2 packing crate’ (2010b:46) or playing spin-the bottle with ‘the girl with the short mousey hair’ (200) – it would be tempting to assume that we are dealing with one and the same person?

But can they really be the same person? In the instance of the kissing game, for example (referenced in “The Same Room” and in “Brief History of Rooms”), the two male protagonists, while they may have some things in common (their serial adultery, their divorce), also have much that significantly distinguishes them. The man in “The Same Room” has a child, a daughter. The man in “Brief History of Rooms” has no children. The latter character has an unspecified disability that includes a hole in his heart and weak legs. The former character has no such disability. The one is an itinerant salesman of domestic appliances (“The Same Room”), the other is a sub-editor on a local newspaper (“Brief History of Rooms”). Where then does this leave the idea that they are the same person, only viewed perhaps at different periods in their life?

I do not believe this interpretation will take us very far.

Rather, I suggest that we need to be focussing not on the subject involved in the act of remembering, but on memory itself, and on the process of time specifically.

In his novel, *Austerlitz*, W.G. Sebald claims that ‘all moments of time have co-existed simultaneously’ (2001:144). He posits a radical unsettling of our traditional notions of time as a continuous medium, as a linear procession of moments that fall behind us and disappear as we step forward. Sebald argues instead that ‘there exist interconnected pockets of space-time whose topology we may never understand, but between which the so-called living and the so-called dead can travel and thus meet one another’ (in Coetzee 2008:149). The notion of the past as irreversible and irretrievable (to return to what I suggested earlier in section one) is transfigured in *Austerlitz* into one that conceives of the past rather as ‘a set of interlocking memories in the minds of the living’ (149).

In Act VII of my book, therefore, “Brief History of Rooms”, an account is presented of the variety of rooms in which the protagonist has lived. But it soon becomes clear as we read that this cannot be an historical treatment, one that delves into the archaeology of the past, because the entire long piece is rendered in the present tense, in the ‘now’ of the moment as it happens. Thus the ‘now’ of the character at the age of eight, say, is happening at the same time as the ‘now’ of him aged thirty. We will not know how to make sense of this until we deny the linearity of time in favour of Sebald’s ‘set of interlocking’ moments, or of Wah’s continual pattern of ‘looping’.

An individual’s past, accordingly, is ever-present to themselves and to every one else, including the dead. In this way, all the characters in *Autobiography of Bone* have access to the same memories, at whatever age, irrespective of whether they are in fact dead or alive. The ‘He’ in “The Same Room” dies at the end, but his memories return in the experience of ‘The one at the heart of his story With a hole in his heart’ (2010b:235) from “Brief History of Rooms”. And in “The Thirteenth” it is not clear at all whether the Husband and the Wife are dead or alive, because it does not matter. Even if they were dead we would still hear them.

We have diverted from our previous discussion of form and content, and from the analogy of the body as a way of conceptualising the manner in which they are organised in a poem. But this digression has been necessary. It has helped us clarify the operation of memory, thought and feeling in *Autobiography of Bone*, so that we are able to move forward, better prepared, with our discussion of form and content. Because now we can see how notions of inside and outside are exploded in my poems, forcing the reader to re-think the convention that form equates with the external and content with the internal, and the conception that the two are irredeemably divided. Such a dichotomy is false.

I would suggest instead that we need to adopt a more holistic and nuanced approach; one that views the body (and the poem) not as cleaved into an internal and an external dimension, but as a co-relational space or entity – as a continuum, in fact.

In this way all the parts of the body (and the poem), all the sides (inner and outer, tangible and intangible) can be more accurately understood and described as happening together all in the same place, all at the same time. (As is described in the poem, “When” (17): ‘When coming in and going out happen at the same time.’) Thus content is actually



only another type of form, and vice versa, and meaning is best comprehended as ‘operating’ in response to the exigencies of a given context, rather than necessarily as something that signifies anything. By writing, therefore, we create contexts, or acts, highly charged and emotionally unified, outside of which meaning does not exist. It is, therefore, no longer fruitful for me to ask what a poem is ‘about’, since as Mouré argues, ‘I want the overall sound to be one of making sense, but I don’t want the inside of the poem to make sense of anything’ (in Geddes 2001:493).

In the course of writing *Autobiography of Bone*, then, I discovered that I was less interested in wanting to know what my poems were about, what they meant, but that I was much more interested in asking what they did and how they did it. How they embodied and enacted their own unique and very specific contexts.

As I learned to trust ‘the fictive world of the poem’ more, writing quickly and even automatically, without concerning myself with sense, a deep connectedness between all the different elements within that poem, and between that poem and the rest of the pieces in the whole, slowly manifested itself. And it was this shared ground, this communality, that I tapped into in order to find the energy and structure of each piece as I wrote it.

Intriguingly, then, my poems ceased to be mental or abstract objects and became material rather; they assumed a physical presence that I could look at and listen to, and in this way recognise how and what they wanted to be. To seek for an appropriate analogy, the poems that constitute *Autobiography of Bone* perform less in the abstract world of music and more in the material space of dance – albeit a disjointed, stumping type of dance. They are embodiments of a complex act or process, one that is ‘occupied with frontiers of consciousness beyond which words fail’ (Eliot 1969:30).

They are a way of knowing and being in the world that, as Mouré argues, enlarges possibilities and alternatives to the strictures of meaning laid down by language:

The point of writing as act is a point of great risk, for me, a point of great uncertainty. The thing is to get that point to endure long enough to listen to. It’s not easy. We tend to pull back from feeling, repress connections, want to diminish anxiety. Even our childhoods are largely hidden to us because of this necessity. ... But I can only say, as I have said before, that the borders of poetry can be moved, in our lifetimes, if we dare to. For the borders are not

only subjective, they are *subjectifying*. We can act to cultivate a kind of curiosity that wishes the world bigger, and discovers and enacts a world that is more striated, less constrained.

(2009:56)

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## POSTSCRIPT

What follows a strict chronology has no memory.

– Lyn Hejinian (1987:13)

And so it is the terror of the blank page that confronts him once again. And once again he does not know what to say. Once again he does not know how to get across the empty white wasteland to the other side, to the land of solidity and sureness, without crawling slowly, his eyes closed, his clumsy fingers fumbling over frosted nouns, verbs that are frozen hard and cannot move, pronouns that echo and whistle like empty iron drums.

He knows that this is the last stage of his journey, that he only needs to make one last effort, that he only needs to set his teeth and clench his fists and gun the little engine of his will one last time, and then it will be over.

Then he will be on the other side of the page. Then he will be standing on the other side of the room with the green carpet and the large windows overlooking ‘the leafy part of the city and the uMsunduzi River in the background’ (Moolman 2010b:158). Then he will be standing there in that ‘small courtyard with a garden and a pond’ (159) on the other side of fear and pain. And he will be still at last, ‘still as a stone holding its breath’ (159). Still as a memory, close up, in detail. Full to overflowing with only wind. And light.

Just one last time.

And so he will sit on his slatted, straight-backed wooden chair, with the striped cushion, and type slowly the last sentences, the last stumbling uncoordinated words. And as he works, now looking up, through the dirty window of his study into the dark green garden outside, now looking down, at the dusty and stained keyboard, as he works he hears again, one last time, the paddling of soft footfalls far away in his bloodstream. The dragging of small clumsy feet. And he recognises them. He welcomes them. He knows that they are there to show him the way. That they are the way. Through his flesh, beyond his bones, across incomprehension and blindness, across falling, to the far bank and the deep shadows of silence.

Just one last time.

If he has the will left. If he has the strength.

If he can hold onto his hand, holding him up, just long enough, long enough to believe.

'Then he came up out of the water. / Then he found that he could still breathe. Even though it was air' (142).

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