

University of KwaZulu-Natal

***Boneyard*, an original novella,
accompanied by an extended essay
on experimental narrative
strategies in selected examples of
contemporary fiction.**

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DECLARATION

I, Vivienne Elaine Molloy (208517087), declare that the following dissertation is my own work. It is submitted for the degree of Master of Arts at the University of KwaZulu-Natal. This dissertation has not been submitted for any other degree or examination at any other university. This dissertation does not contain the works and/or ideas of any other person unless specifically acknowledged and referenced.

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ABSTRACT

The following dissertation is comprised of an original novel/la *Boneyard*, as well as a critical exegesis exploring experimental narrative strategies. The novella works within the shifting boundaries of postmodernism. Techniques will include “contradiction, discontinuity, randomness, excess [and] short circuit” (McHale 1987:7). The work will traverse the transliterated present of the South African landscape while reaching into the recesses of (marginal) historical record in order to speak both of the postmodern culture of the present, and the interconnectivity between time and space. By examining South African authors such as André Brink, J. M. Coetzee and Ivan Vladislavić, the links of the past, the present and the future will be examined in re-orientating identity in a multicultural, mass-mediated and heteroglossic contemporary culture. The critical essay will examine these issues as well as issues of historical representation. Jonathan Safran Foer’s *Everything is Illuminated*, the work which spurred my interest in the area of identity, historical discourse, memory, re-memory and forgetting, will be examined with particular emphasis of Marianna Hirsch’s term post-postmemory, a term delegated to the active remembrance of the diasporic Jewish American third-generation post-Holocaust community. The questions of memory and remembrance will be explored within the concerns of phantasmagorical amnesia and “museummania” prevalent in contemporary postmodern culture. Lastly, I will briefly reflect on my own manuscript, *Boneyard*, as well as the future of post-apartheid South African writing in terms of emerging genres, construction of identity via a traumatic past and the ethical implications of these endeavours.

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Boneyard

Baby Teeth

The smell from the kitchen made my eyes water. Digger, Richard and Frank were playing apothecary again. I heard the rush of boiling water, the hiss as it met the hot plate. “Shit!” someone screamed, and the others shrieked like children. I didn’t remember when they’d arrived or why they hadn’t left but Degor didn’t seem to mind. After his night shift he’d step carefully over the strewn bodies; he didn’t even go ballistic when they woke up at ten and played *My Generation* on repeat on his old cassette player. It pissed me off. I’d dig my nails into the backs of my thighs, making red half-moons. If I said anything they’d only turn it up louder.

Degor was at work and I sat guard. Not that he knew, but how could I trust them or the vagrant slackers who appeared at twilight. Always girls. Always darkly attractive girls who worked dark hours. I’d seen a pattern these last three years. A girl would turn up, say she knew Degor; that he’d offered her a place for the night. And then there she’d be. For a while. Two months, maybe three. At first I’d listen to the tales and tail-ends of their lives, curious how pretty girls ended up in a dirty place like this. But soon the small-town runaway lowlife boyfriend nowhere-to-go need-to-get-clean need-to-get-him-clean story grew too familiar, and after the fourth disappearance my hospitality waned.

A veil of smoke hovered above the head of the latest girl. I watched it drift towards the mottled ceiling. Yellow. Brown. A sooty damp. She followed my eyes following the smoke, swinging her freckled legs wide and then crossing and uncrossing them at intervals. She’d been here maybe three weeks, this one. Digger and the boys had no objections to a girl who walked round in her underwear, letting their hands slide across her polyester backside, not brushing off their gropes. The last one hadn’t been as accommodating. The boys had been drunk, and Richard shook her awake. He’d shoved a wad of notes in her face, yanked a handful of her sleep shirt, and pulled her off the couch into the kitchen. He really went for it. She’d come out with a chipped tooth and a swollen cheek then grabbed the black bag of her crummy life and left. She’d gone for it too. Richard was left whining meekly, mewling, really. His left hand streamed with blood, thin ribbons dripping from his elbow onto the carpet. Oh, and the tip of his pinkie finger was missing. Snap.

I hadn't seen that girl since and her replacement had arrived just days later. This one, the girl with wolf eyes, I named Juliet. She sat on the couch gnawed by cigarette smoke, her lower lip pouting, fierce eyes fixed on mine. It was too much. The whole thing felt like a primitive act of seduction and I eased out the way and went to the kitchen where I found the boys lounging on the lino, smoking a joint. They didn't even notice me coming.

The kitchen was pretty dated. Seventies, maybe. The tiles started waist-high on the walls, small and square and mint green. At least, they had been, once upon a time. Sweat and smoke and fist-fights and drunken spills had loosened the tiles from the walls; the remainder looked like a weird version of Tetris.

Richard sat on the floor leaning against the sink cupboards, his long legs stretched out. The sink was messed. It matched the walls the way older women matched their eye shadow to their outfits. The association was comforting.

Digger's bony fingers were conducting a fevered speech. "The police, man. Heard those pigs got John last night. Now he's gonna snitch and then what?"

"We'll be halfway to heaven by then," Frank said.

"Those cockroaches? Roaches's what they are. In the air vents, in the gutters under the street. They don't sleep."

"So the road won't be easy..."

A cockroach scuttled across the wall and Richard freaked out, scrambling against the cupboard door. Sealy and Frank laughed until they bent double, their long greasy hair sweeping across the lino. Richard fell into a sheepish sulk until his eyes settled on my shoes, then travelled to my face. "Oh hey! Grace."

He was only twenty six but looked way older. Thirty eight or so. His eyes were sunk into his skull as if the beams behind them had collapsed and been left to rot. Words written in black ink were hidden in the folds under his eyes, and he smudged the script when he woke up. He

looked at me now under long dark eyelashes, hazel eyes dazzling the way they did when he wanted to win someone over. Lucky I was made of stronger stuff.

His charms lost on me, he engaged his ammo elsewhere, smiling with one side of his mouth, imitating the romantic male leads he'd seen on TV. Hugh Grant was his favourite. Not my type, but still, the look was an improvement as it plumped his cheeks, gifting back years he'd wasted away. He did have good hair, true. Dark curls, shoulder length, and now he shook it out of his eyes. If I stared down at him, from this angle he looked like Jesus; you know the pictures. The type people hang on walls in oval picture frames. Jesus in your living room above the mantelpiece, or watching over you in your master bed in your master bedroom. But Jesus or not, Richard's charms worked no magic on me and he returned his attention to the boys who were reading palms.

Degor worked in a recycling centre that specialised in glass. He sorted the broken pieces into colours, huge plastic bins under factory lights bright as a blower's furnace. Remnants followed him home under his shoes: stained glass blessings ordinary suburban panes nosy oval spectacle lenses fat beer bottles – he'd leave chipped trails like bird crumbs on the pavements around the block. I'd follow them sometimes, wondering where they'd lead.

It was always the same place, the doormat of his gingerbread house. Degor's shift ended at 6 and he was in the flat by 6:30 most mornings. Without air or breath he'd walk through the darkened room, only the sound of crushed glass fragments being ground to powder under his shoes. He'd lower his weight onto the bed so as not to make a sound. Soon, the old mattress coils wheezed in unison with his sleep, a ribcage shrinking and growing. I fell asleep to the steady rhythm.

Degor and I had met in the town we grew up in. Went to school together. A place with red brick walls and inspirational banners, fancy Latin mottos trying to pretend we were destined for higher things. When really it was over. The mines. The railways. What was left? I'd left that school nine years ago, Class of 1981. I'd followed him. Though we'd only found new walls in the city, the writing still unclear except for the crude graffiti scrawls, either scrambled messages or regular rows of marching neon dicks. Still, these walls had windows, however small, and in hot months we'd open them and breathe.

“Shit I’m gonna gut you!” Digger woke up this way every day. Some called it Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. We called it Digger and just tried to ignore it, hooking our fingers over our heads, squeezing our eyes shut.

But poor Juliet had been taken by surprise her first morning. He’d grabbed her, skeleton fingers tight around her tiny neck. She was gasping. Her mouth the O of a dying fish, cause Digger could be stronger than the devil. Frank had pulled him off her but she wore that raw purple necklace for a whole week after. It was still there, a bit, though yellowed, and camouflaged by her sallow skin.

Digger was at the window now, crouched, holding an invisible rifle stiff, air, between his hands, resting it on his right shoulder.

Juliet yawned widely.

“Late night again?” Richard taunted. “Dem roaches gonna get ya baby...”

She looked at Degor’s closed door, eyes pleading with Richard. She didn’t want him to tell.

“All I’m saying is they’s everywhere now. Even here. Even past neon hours.”

She motioned her head to Degor’s door again, more overtly. Richard pretended not to notice.

“I’m not saying there’s anything wrong with it, hell, I’s’e” -- just then the train cut in and tin and glass stuttered in cupboards and shuddered under couches as the apartment felt itself passed by.

We live on the third floor, a height exactly opposite the railway line. Trains clatter directly outside the window, the lace curtains don’t hide much. The lounge is bare except for a couch and a small table in the centre of the room. In every other corner is a heap of cushions, or pillows. The place came with a TV unit and a collection of small ornaments, mainly angels and various dogs. These cluster like forgotten children in the place shaped for the TV, a wide cut-out circle once for wires is now a bald head.

The couch and the unit are placed against the walls on either side of the window, as if to provide the fullest possible picture for the people in the trains. Every time a train rushes by, things reel like film, each compartment cutting scenes that taper out into grey walls. Sometimes passengers seem to stare, split-second, into the room. Taking flash pictures. Jotting mental notes to hug their children more often. Perhaps that was it. Why they look so lost.

I could taste it, more than see. Under permanent daylight rust grew on rust on those rails, and hot from friction the room filled with the metallic taste. Coating my mouth. Hot on my tongue. The very tip of something.

The lift was the same, its system of pulleys and levers coated in a thick red gunk that was moss or something. The screech of life accompanied by the taste of red and blood and iron cut off by a sudden warped shudder and a hollow bang. The lift didn't work in the building anymore so we take the stairs. Which means Paulina. She lives in the flat directly below and always hears us coming though anyone would think her too loud to notice. Even her body was voluminous: full lips painted red, big teased hair, house dresses bedazzled with gold, plastic diamonds dripping off her ears and fingers. She growls her "r's" like a predatory lioness. Rrrrooi rrewolwer rromanties. Grrrr. A throaty paw lifting a lazy playful swat. Finding its mark. Except for listening to our comings and goings, she can do nothing softly; everything conducted across octaves. We've even developed a guessing game: each boom, clash, whirr and smash from the flat beneath our lives, what could it be?

Paulina unwrapping Quality Streets, crinkle.

Paulina stretching her toes, crack.

Paulina counting her bills, lick lick lick.

There could never be a winner unless we send Richard down to meet her. A task he'd lately refused.

You see, if Richard had a way of getting what he wanted out of women; a way of using women without their realising it, his methods sometimes came back to bite him. Take Paulina. Her flat was full of fancy furniture and expensive trinkets, a drinks' cabinet loaded

with bottles. She bought cartons of cigarettes. So Richard thought he'd summed her up as easy prey. Whenever we left the house he checked his face twice in the window, slicking his hair and clearing his front teeth with his tongue. He checked the rear end, looking over his shoulder at his backside. Good stuff. Tight, faded jeans, nicely worn. And certainly Paulina had been won over, for when he mooched outside her door she'd look at him under slow eyelids and ease him out a cigarette through the Trellidor like she was unzipping a fly.

After one such visit though, Richard didn't come home to the flat. It was only in the morning we found him on the couch, head in his hands, shoulders in a slump too late for regret. "Now you blown it, hey! Bitten off more than you can chew?" That was Digger, laughing, he just couldn't resist.

"Fuck you, man! It's not funny. I'm in too deep. That thing's gonna eat me alive."

"You said it!"

Today, Paulina paced in her doorway draped in a long red dressing gown that didn't quite reach her ankles, though it was meant to. Her waist and thighs had grown plump, pulling the nylon up to expose puffy ankles. Paulina. She could make a guy run a mile, or fall into her lap. You couldn't really tell. Richard hadn't been able to, after all. But basically she was lonely, I think. A woman of a certain age with nowhere to turn.

She loved the sociable stream of girls who took up temporary residence in the flat. "Môre liefie," she'd call out to Juliet, who'd beam coyly, feeling safely loved. Me she called the serious one.

"Grace man, why you allus so serious? You your own worst enemy. All's you need is you loosen up every now and again! Show a little. What man wants a woman who walks so straight and narrow all the time?"

I just shrugged. I wasn't offended though; I could hear the affection. But I wasn't wanting a man right then either.

Luckily someone else caught her attention. Richard. "Lover boy, where you at sweet cheeks?" Richard waved a few embarrassed fingers, holding back, skulking behind the group

as we ambled down the stairs. Paulina winked and laughed. And blew kisses at him. Loudly.

“Ooh you moooi ding, when you coming to visit me again? You suddenly got busy hey”

He shrank even further against the stairwell, and we laughed and broke ranks, so that he had to scramble for cover.

“Richie Rich!” Digger teased him. “You know what side your bread’s buttered boyo. How much you get off that old girl?”

Out in the street the glare found its own mark. Already the day was so bright it burnt my eyelids thin. I had a double shift at the bar; Digger and the boys had business and Juliet tagged along with them, nothing else to do at that time of day.

It wasn’t far for me, the bar just a fifteen minute walk from the flat. The sun on Point Road was so hot I watched it dry fresh paint on the walls: “Zee loves Kim”. Kim. Quick and fast. An appropriate name for a smashing little wrecking ball. The type of name you’d find on the side of a removal truck. Poor Zee, I smiled. He’d get what was coming to him, and most likely while his eyes were shut.

As I walked, the air smelt like petrol and fish, and the flat began to shrink behind me, absorbed into factories and nightclubs. Smugglers Inn had already opened for business. I watched a man sidle in, hands in shallow pockets. I quickened my pace. Turner Street was onto me sooner than I expected. Dark. Darker than the rest of the streets, a tartly poisoned tributary. Thin and cold, the sun blocked by high flats on either side. My neck craned back so far that I heard the grating of gristle. I always spooked a bit at things like that; when your body reminded you it was meat.

I looked up. Flats and more flat. Many windows were sealed with pages from the classifieds. Some with wedges of chipboard. On the (I counted) fifth floor a shirtless man stood at his window, stretching; his eyes had found me before I’d found him. Another odd, bare moment. And with the guilt of a shoplifter caught in the act, my eyes cut back to the road.

“The Back Room”, was a hole. Even for a bar. In the day, when I could see, the grimy carpet

stuck to my shoes. And always the charred smell in my nose. A few years back there'd been a fire, forcing the current owner to re-tile. But he'd done it on the cheap, fixing only the damaged area. The flames hadn't reached the lobby so he just left the carpet as is, burnt edge and all. I'd heard that the owner before him had been a child of the 60's. Orange shag carpet. Check. No better testament. But he'd been burnt, people said, some bad MDMA sent him over the edge and rumour has it that he'd gone nuts. All that remained of him now was a singed doorframe and baby blue walls, a wooden plank nailed above the entrance. I suppose there'd been a beaded curtain, once upon a time, but if so that was gone; long since ripped down by drunken brawlers. Must have been a pretty mess that business, tiny wooden beads everywhere underfoot like hardy roaches. Imagine the drunks trying to stay upright among that lot, never mind keep their heads.

Inside it was bare now. Two threadbare pool tables beneath dim box lights. In the far corner there was a large black couch that seemed reserved for men. (No sign. But the cool distance, the size, the statement, a woman would get the message.) Mismatched barstools ranked along the bar, a narrow strip covered in black vinyl, spanning the entire wall facing the entrance. The surface was slightly reflective, and seemed to invent faint disco lights in the weak, violet hours. In front of the bar was a motley tiled dance floor, and near that the jukebox, which everyone refers to as Celine.

Degor usually comes by at 3. He eats a late lunch at the counter and we unpick the sutures in our chests. Unburdening the cavity. When he has the night off he stays until Sealy and the boys arrive. They are always happy to see him; slap him on the back and shake his hand as if they haven't met up in years. He had a shift tonight and left as shadows grew long in the city and light-patterned squares plinked on in the residential towers. Daytime clientele shifted to night-time trade, and the red neon bar sign fizzed on outside drawing a flurry of foolish insects, flapping and inching ever closer. By morning there'd be confetti wings scattered everywhere across the entrance. By afternoon they'd be gone, crushed to dust by feet, eaten by geckos. Taken by the wind.

The night manager always arrives at 7. Steady streams of people start thronging in after 8. The crowd's a bargain box at a garage sale. Bit of everything. After 9, you can expect Sealy and the boys to join in. Same story tonight, though no Juliet. Missing in action. Business

must be good.

Digger and Frank sat the counter; Richard roamed the bar, chasing skirts and hair.

“They think it’s us, they always think it’s us” Digger said.

Frank nodded sagely.

“But they’ll get their time in due course. Or rather we’ll take it, take it from right underneath them man, when they least expect it.”

“Time is just fiction now,” Frank mused.

Usually, Frank never said much, other than to agree or disagree with what someone else had already said. Unless he was high, which meant he talked in gnostic parables. He was interesting. Had a dark gap between his two front teeth, the borders brittle black. No doubt his mother had been like all the rest, warning him about sugar as a child, but I guess his sweet tooth got the better of him. Frank was pretty damn ugly. I’d stare into the vastness of that gap, trying to imagine the hidden depths. I’d wondered if there was a key that would fit perfectly, releasing all those words that had never found a way out. What her name might be...

Frank sat with his elbows on the bar smiling at nothing. Digger had attracted a crowd. He crouched on the stool, eyes up at the people, gauging their anticipation. It was going to be the standard show. People never seemed to tire of it somehow. With an upward sweep of his fist he cut the air. He spun around on his heel like Chaplin, blinking imaginary stars away and clutching his invisible slouch hat to his head, throwing the crowd into hysterics. He pulled up his shirt revealing the scars along his ribs where the officers had cut him, and smiled triumphantly.

A man knocked the bar as if it were the front door of an old friend’s flat. I hadn’t seen him before. He ordered a Captain and Coke. Offered me a tequila.

“I can’t drink on the job.”

His eyebrows asked why.

“Till.” I indicated with my head.

“Till when?”

Hell freezes over, I thought. Idiot. The whole time, his eyes never left mine. Then after minutes of this intense kind of stare, he sauntered away. I turned to check my teeth in the mirror. Nothing.

Closing time came quickly, thank god, and we walked out into another day. New as it could be, I thought. Good and clean and fresh.

Then I heard howls up the street. The boys only swayed. I could hear the beer swilling in their bellies. Richard looked up at the slender washing stretched across buildings. Criss cross. Crisscross. He reached above his head and grasped at the air as if he might grab a sheet and glide to the moon. Digger had a wild look in his eyes. The same look he got when he'd once spotted a child masked in white powder during a dehydration. He'd reeled towards the boy, nostrils flaring, as if a life could be taken up in a sudden gust and deeply inhaled.

The howling again.

“Wolves! There are wolves at the city gate!”

Heavy thuds on the apartment door. Digger and the boys shouted. They were zonked. Junk still running through their veins. The rusted latch gave in, snap, and two large men entered the room. One with a misshapen snout, as if it had been broken many times. They grabbed Digger. Then they were gone.

Now Digger sat on the couch. Parts of him. Most of him pieced together. His face and hands were a rogue blanket, stitched from skin and glass and blue. He still smelt like blood and hospital. Blood knotted on his grey shirt. Rorschach's ink blots, forming frogs and locked knees. His right canine was cracked, a milk tooth, and he kept touching it, uncertain. Frank passed him a cigarette and Juliet, oblivious to the night's activity, stared at him open-mouthed. Her own baby teeth were white as pebbled pearls.

It's like this. Digger owed money to Kahl, the worst of all possible people. Kahl Kabel ran a chain of spare parts dealers around the city, owned them, more accurately. Six hot, square tins of chopped greasy metal. The closest workshop to us was two kilometres toward the harbour, close to the bar. Red and white paint peeling off the outside walls and the legend Kahl's Auto Spares announced above the steel entrance doors. Inside the walls were painted black, and four bare bulbs hung from the ceiling, casting dubious light. A netted wire partition separated civilians from skinheads, methodically cutting them slash left slash right into a series of vertical diamonds. The skinheads, mostly boys from the border, worked in all Kahl's outfits, their simmering aggression some cheap imitation of a dead resistance.

It hadn't always been like this though. Kahl used to employ burnt out fisherman, dark roasted men with thick scars, worn salami skin that stank of sour sweat. Back then the smell of tuna and haddock lingered in the car parts taken home. But things hadn't worked out with the fishermen; one of these guys had snitched to the police. Delivered snippets about Kahl being crooked, about dodgy containers, chop shops and corrupt port officials. (His anonymity, they swore, was guaranteed.) So Kahl had (reputedly) thrown in that particular towel, worked wonders with a coat of red paint and then brought in the skinheads, their aggro skulls a sure sign that no one was fucking around.

Rumours flew. About all the blood that was spilt and the pure chance of Kahl painting the place crimson. Someone who worked down the local hardware said they'd seen him casually fingering the paint chips like he was thinking about painting his lounge. Postbox Red. Clotted Carmine. Ruby Shoes.

"You sure about that colour, Sir? It's pretty intense."

And without a word - not 'Mind your own business,' or 'Fuck off. will ya'; not even 'Yes', Kahl had shrivelled the salesman with a single glare before getting back to his task. Plascon, Dulux, Prominent, he trawled them all, splaying the shades in neat, relational fans to assist his careful judgement. He'd stopped searching when he found it, a deep, crusted crimson called (rather obviously) Blood Red. That was Kahl for you, completely focussed. And the rumours were reinforced by the dogs. Strays that ran in packs, loping in wide arcs, drawing in and then pulling away, scattering as quickly as ripples of water. For a long time, the dogs stopped by the shop and licked the walls. Salt? Metals? Some odd, insatiable compulsion it

was, licking, licking. Those dogs tongued the lower parts of the red walls over and over, over time creating created knee-high banners of faded pink.

Karl's crew had to get violent, and the red paint job worked very well. But that was a few years back, and I think things had evened out, calmed down. The dogs disappeared, and as far as I could tell the skinheads weren't a mean crowd. The skivs were mostly in it for the girls and the glory, the occasional excuse for a workout in which lead pipe met bone. The more serious types worked behind walls of brass pipes and bolted metal frames. They ran the show. But both the small fry and the big Kahunas, you couldn't so easily tell them apart, since all the skins had the regulation muscle dogs and knob smooth heads; they all chewed gum and chain smoked. Most had neck tattoos too – your standard anchors, pinups, pit bulls. They also loved chunky letters across the knuckles: H A T E FIGHT fuck. Some of the men had solid black swastikas inked on their chests or forearms, pictures flexed on biceps of sinew and bone. The tattoos were framed by tight wife beaters and skinny black jeans tucked into black Doc Martins. Serious shit, those shoes. Steel tips for kicking ass and caving ribs.

I'd seen Digger and the boys hanging around the shop, and when I asked Richard he'd said they were only selling weed, small time, to some kids on holiday from Jo'burg.

“You always suspect us Grace. Ever heard of giving someone the benefit of the doubt?”

I had, though I never quite knew which side to emphasise, the benefit or the doubt. But the boys were persuasive, so I relaxed a bit. I figured Digger was right. It was none of my business, anyway. Expect the worst and next thing you're standing in it, right?

I looked at Digger again, his head between his hands, heavy palms pushing against his temples. He snorted. Spat splotted phlegm between his feet. No one said anything. Richard looked gloomy, as if god himself had just called with bad news. An earthquake. A tsunami. A raid. Who knew, except Richard. Juliet had turned childish, probably having spent the whole night being too grown up. She chewed mutely on the skin around her thumb, a sliver caught between sharp little incisors as she yanked her head left and right like a defective fem-bot. Nnh nhh nhh. She got what she wanted then seemed to forget she'd wanted it, staring down at her feet, her mind on pause. Frank was there too, parked cross-legged on the floor, the black

gap between his teeth a whistle waiting. His mouth gaped. (I suddenly thought he was a nose breather maybe that was it?) He fiddled with his shoelace like it could be liquorice.

Below us, in Paulina's flat, a crack sounded and the windows shuddered.

"Fly swatter on kitchen wall?" I ventured.

Silence.

Too soon I thought. Yes, definitely too soon. No one was quite with me yet.

Then Digger spoke through his hands, "Toilet seat. Closing."

Just then we heard the flush. Digger lifted his head and smiled, his teeth red with blood.

Digger got into it with a skinhead named Roger. I'd seen him around before, hanging around the alleys. Roger was all sharp edges and bumps. His square jaw could bust a drunken fist, and his wide shoulders were twice the man of his hips. A lumpy head creased heavily where his skull met his neck, fat folds of flesh. His back arched into an unfortunate scoliosis. Roger, far's I could tell, was an agent. Meaning the dealer to the skins who worked the streets. Although you wouldn't say it. He looked like the muscle.

One of his boys had recently taken a hit and he was in the market for a casual runner. A temp. Digger had been suffering a drought. His eyes were gaunt and bloodshot. Skinny as shit. So bad the vertebrae in his back formed a ladder all the way down. His congealed yellow skin was a dead giveaway. So Roger and D had come to an agreement. Digger was given a bottle of pills and some grass as a starter pack. The split was cost plus twenty. Sealy knew he was being cut, knew Roger was a rat but he was desperate.

"You look like shit Diggory." Digger winced, he hated people using his real name. Roger enjoyed the moment.

"Well hello to you too. Long time. Nice to see ya."

"Cut the small talk D. We on?"

"Twenty eighty plus a taste of the merchandise."

"No free samples."

“No good salesman in his right mind would go out blind.”

“Take it up with the Boss. His orders.”

The boys stood at the end of the alley, fidgety silhouettes against a bluebird sky. They’d also had a dry month, and Digger approached them rattling the pills like a hot mama maraca, flapping the zip locked bag of grass between his thumb and index finger. The wing of a broken bird. Richard groaned.

“You kiddin’ me. What chance we’re gonna slice that baby. That’s barely enough for one of us.”

“Never fear when Uncle D’s here: it’s all in the math. I got it figured.”

Frank nodded philosophically like he knew what Digger meant. (Got your drift man.)

“Roger wants his cut. Street value is two hundred bucks. Roger wants eight parts of that. So I owe him one sixty. But we up the deal, sell this stash best price to some rich holiday kids from Jo’burg and we keep the rest. Done! One pretty pill each.” He held the bottle up to his face and smiled, swung round on his battered heel, curling into a shadow dance.

Digger’s system had worked until it didn’t. He’d taken a pill, chased it with junk. It messed with his head. He turned up short. He’d told Roger that a loyal customer had bought on credit, that next time he’d be over and his debt would balance. Roger sniffed out the weasel then, tacked some ghosts to Sealy’s heels. His game was up and now it was written all over his face in shades of fresh purple and blue.

“How much?” I asked.

He stared down at his hands again.

He knew it didn’t matter, so did I.

The next day The Back Room was empty. The locals had heard about Digger’s predicament, knew Kahl was out for blood the way he was sometimes and that made people skittish. But

still the hopeless sat at the bar, the ones who didn't care either way whether he came smashing in. Couldn't care.

I was sweeping up the angel dust below the neon when the skins walked down the alley, three of them with grilled silver grins, one pulled a caramel Pit on a studded leash. They followed me in, *sans* Pit.

“The boss is tripping arder than most.”

They spoke to each other this way, like they were jobbers back in 80's England, working class punks. Maybe it was Kahl's influence. Who knows. I'd never actually met the man. He might have spoken like an alien for all I knew.

“I eard e choked out a guru las night. Walked righ up ta im in bust is nose. Boy choked on is own blood inna end.”

I shuddered.

“Boys ses eyve nevva seen anyfing lik it. Wiv all a stuff after n nat. Mess wuz terrible.”

So much talking made them thirsty, and they drummed their fists on the counter, telling me to shake it up, won't ya. I walked around the bar and did my duty. Three quarts, Carling Black Label. They slugged a few sips, then mooched around the place, carrying the bottles like rifles, the base cupped in the palm, the neck and lip nuzzling inside their elbows. Number One sat on a pool table, his Doctor Martins swinging heavily. An annoying tic. The silver tips constantly snagged my peripheral vision like fishing hooks. Numbers Two and Three leaned against the walls near Celine, picking out punk songs. First up was Hey ho, let's go. Hey ho, let's go. They're forming in a straight line. They're going through a tight wind. The kids are losing their minds. The Blitzkrieg Bop. They baltered, legs Kung Fu kicking invisible enemies, bumping backs and fronts and sides like the cars down at the beachfront funfair.

Then came The Misfits, The Circle Jerks, The Clash...

...The Sex Pistols, Buzzcocks...

...The Stiff Little Fingers, The Jam, The Damned, Rancid...

They left after three, just when my shift ended. The three of them shuffled out into the street

and went at it bare-fisted in the alley, toying with each other, swinging indistinct punches into the three-man ring, empty hooks and faltering elbows. I walked around them, hopping carefully over their vests piled in the gutter. They'd tied their Pit to a yellow fire hydrant. It licked my ankles as I walked by.

The bouncers at the Treasure Chest looked up and down the street like they expected a fleet of officials at any moment. The area was being watched. Everyone knew it. The night revellers knew it and soon they'd have to stomp new grounds. Flatten a place out and bury its bones beneath the surface of the living like they'd done to this place although to be fair it had always been a dumping ground. A giant bin bowl for the garbage of society. Meth heads, junkies, prostitutes, skinheads. A pretty regular sort of family.

The city came quietly into my sleepy head. Concrete and tar. Shades of brown and grey. Nothing white, only dirty bone. The harbour lights: here and there a wink of dried blood, and the yellow glare of fool's gold. Parking lots of scabbed metal on a Saturday hunt.

Early as it was, Paulina already stood behind her Trellidor watching the sky. She filled the doorframe, the diagonal trellis cut her into parts, exaggerated by the leopard print which she considered to be a neutral. She passed me a cigarette through the diamonds, and I took it gratefully. Tired to my bones. I leaned back against the wall, pulling in deep and closing my eyes. Letting the smoke curl in my lungs before I blew it out.

“When are you going to come work for me Gracie?”

She asked nicely, but still I hated that. Gracie. It reminded me of my mother. The pleasure of the cigarette was replaced by guilt. A burning stick in my fingers. The little skull and crossbones on the filter paper stared up at me. Eyes glowing red like the night embers of the Point.

“I don't know Paulina, I don't think it's for me.”

“What do you mean? Look at you, look at your legs. Let me tell you something, you won't have legs like that forever. May as well use them while you have them doll.”

I used them. I used them to walk away, smiling at her and nodding at the cigarette, the ash lipstick growing. “Thanks hey,” I said. Morning communion was over.

The door to the flat gave way without a key. Frank and Richard crowded the couch. An unfamiliar girl in a glittery skirt sat between them. She had a burning heart tattooed on the milky curves of either breast, skin barely covered by spaghetti straps. The three of them had just shot up, the kit was rolled in the corner. Rubber tube, cotton ball, spoon, lighter, needle. One. Sharing amongst friends. Splitting the kit like taxi fare. Bad news business incorporated.

I smelt something burning. Checked the kitchen, hovering my hands over the rust-pitted plates. Opened the oven door. Digger and the boys used the oven to dry their homegrown. Otherwise they stored their stash there, in between pans, oil slick from when Frank had made roast spuds once.

Nothing burning there though. Zilcho heat. I followed the smell to the bathroom. The door was wide open, Digger sat on the edge of the tub. Roger curled over him, head dipped below the peak of his back so he looked like a vulture. Dark strings of hair tangled on the grubby bathroom tiles. A can of hair removal cream on the closed toilet seat. Digger still black/blue/purple, a blueberry sundae topped with whipped cream. All that was missing was the red cherry.

The stink! The smell packed a punch like a major science experiment. Which took me briefly back to chemistry day and the school lab. The distant past. I pushed past the guys and opened the window, scaring a pigeon off the ledge. Soft down feathers settled on the windowsill.

“What the fuck you two?” (Shit, you know, you work all night and come home to this?)

“Getting a new do Grace. You like?” Digger looked sheepish, for once. The usual smug confidence faltered.

“You better clean this mess up when you’re done.” (Fuckfuckfuck, why did a girl always start to sound like her fucking mother?)

Roger raised his eyebrows, held his thumb to his middle finger and flicked his wrist, his free fingers smacking together. A bacon slice. Translation, Mommy says you’re in kak.

Back in the lounge, Frank, Richard and hearts on fire sat staring at the vacant TV hole. Spaced out. Richard began to kiss the girl's neck, running his hand up her pale leg into her glittery skirt. He didn't see me there, or he didn't care. Either way there was no room for courtesy. I walked into the bedroom and fell into the bed facedown. The soft pillow scooped my face.

The water was black like the bottom was painted in viscous oil. It was night, the collection was gone. The sheds. The paths. Nothing but the skeleton tree and scrub. The list was tacked still, swaying like a ghost against the bark bark bark of a wild jackal smelling blood in the distance. She knelt by the water, toes braced as if at the start of a race. Waiting for the gun. Bang bang bang in the sky, the stars shooting across the nocturnal field like emergency flares. And where is the shooter in all of this? The gun, the barrel which licks the throat. She looks at her reflection in the water. Stars freckled around her head, running running running the relay. Dead things float to the surface, a man, skin as dark as spice, a silver gun stained jelly red, a crucifix, a dog shot through with holes, a net filled with bones, a wreath of yellow flowers. Overhead a woman skates on the water. She wears no shoes. Her feet are shaped as shoes. She skates to Grace. Then

I'm not trying to cause a big s-s-sensation (Talkin' 'bout my generation)

I'm just talking 'bout my g-g-g-generation (Talkin' 'bout my generation)

I woke up to the familiar song, immediately pissed off. I was slick with sweat. It mingled with the moisturiser I'd slathered on behind the bar, felt like thick baby oil. And blubber. I stood in front of the dark window while I dried off. The window of my everyday. Every night. The frame that surrounded me.

The train lines looked sinister at night. Creepy. The kind of creep who jerks off into a street corner and wipes the snot on his trousers. There was rubbish all along the tracks, so much of it that the piles seemed artfully spaced by an exterior designer, some nouveau urban stomper who listened to Depeche Mode while he funk'd up the city. Polystyrene takeaway tubs. Used

condoms rolled into promise rings. Plastic packets trapped under the rail ties, waving their tiny arms. Hello? Goodbye? Save me? It was sort of beautiful.

Above it all was the Jockey billboard, lit by lights like watery blisters. The ad was a hunk cut from the naval to just below the main event. Lucky me. A bulging cock right at my window. His body was hairless, toned, clean; the briefs were the whitest things at the Point, gleaming like angel's robes. You could probably see them from space. Definitely from the air, in one of the planes that surged high over the coastline, tearing the seams of the sky with a white, whispery trail.

This is my generation, baby (Talkin' 'bout my generation)

This is my generation, baby (Talkin' 'bout my generation)

This is my generation, baby (Talkin' 'bout my generation)

This is my generation, baby (Talkin' 'bout my generation)

This is my generation, baby (Talkin' 'bout my generation)

There were two skins and their girls tamped on the couch. The girls were also skins, their heads shaved except for short, razor-sharp bangs. The four of them were watching a girl dancing on the table, spaced out, her short, glittery skirt winking. She stretched her arms over her head, slowly grinding her hips in a figure eight. Her eyes stayed closed. The song ended, started up again.

People try to put us d-down (Talkin' 'bout my generation)

Just because we get around (Talkin' 'bout my generation)

Things they do look awful c-c-cold (Talkin' 'bout my generation)

I hope I die before I get old (Talkin' 'bout my generation)

“Would someone change this shit!” Roger. Filling the room like a balloon inflating in a box, an effect he had on most places. He ejected the tape and slapped another in its place. Some

hardcore band I'd never heard. As the screaming kicked in the skins jumped up, slamming each other all over the lounge. Stomping their boots into the floor and punching towards the ground. I tried to get through, edging forward before one of them kicked past me. Eventually I jumped up on the table, edging past the girl who still danced like a snake charmer, waiting for my gap. It came during the breakdown. I hopped off towards the kitchen.

Frank held a cat. A stray with moon eyes, in the crook of his arm. Frank's black-gapped teeth on display between a goofy Cheshire smile. The guys passed a joint between them, Degor, Richard, Frank. Some skinhead I vaguely recognised. And Roger.

"Frankie Goes to Hollywood, I see you've got a new friend there." He pointed the joint at the cat. Frank nodded, smiled. High as a satellite.

Roger hogged the joint. Knew he could too since it was his stash. Richard waited impatiently, already stumbling drunk. His jeans hung low on his skinny arse.

"What's the matter there Dick?" Roger asked. Amused as a child dangling a white mouse in a snake's tank.

Richard hated being called Dick but he kept quiet, the truth being that Roger was a prick but it was best to stay on his good side. He could get you places. Or get you into a shitload of trouble.

"N-n-nothing. How's a puff Roger?"

Roger hesitated before passing him the blunt.

Degor pulled me between his legs. He was sitting on the counter, his long legs almost reaching the floor. He wrapped them around my waist like a knotted scarf and I leant back against him, waiting. We were next. I pulled in deep and the skunk scorched the back of my throat. I held it in, savouring the burn; the boys starting clapping before I exhaled, slow and controlled. I could always hold it in longer than they could. I could hold my breath longer than anyone I knew.

I passed the spliff to the skin. Shit! The skin was Digger. New Digger with his head as

smooth as butter. He'd replaced his usual gear outfit - dirty check skirt and hardwash jeans - with skinny black pants, a ribbed white vest, thin black suspenders.

"Is it Halloween?" I asked him.

"Nah Grace. Just working a new look. You like?"

I didn't reply. Roger looked smug. Well pleased with his efforts.

More people turned up. A cokehead who snorted lines off his girlfriend's neck. She had long straight black hair all the way to her arse and shiny vinyl boots laced up to her knees. Silver nose ring. Fishnets. A cookie cutter goth. A couple screwed in the bathroom even when Digger broke the lock, shoved past the two guys lying in the doorway and then past the couple, desperate to pee. They just continued panting, pants around their ankles, braced against the basin, rocking the greasy pipe which ran from the swallet into the wall. The two guys in the doorway had shot up, and they watched the constantly changing show behind their eyes. The junk kicked in fast. People needed a topper so Richard ran down to The Processor, this club down the street, and scored some free booze from a bar girl he was screwing. Or had screwed in the past. Or was planning to screw. I didn't know the details. Maybe Richard didn't either. With Richard it was hard to keep up. Uppers and downers and siders and climbers. The whole lot seemed to trawl through our doors that night.

The last of the skins only left as the sun came up. I lay with Degor, our legs tangled like koeksisters. We fell asleep easily to the sound of daylight life.

1978

The great drought had gripped the town. Red dust. More red dust. Dirty hands. Dry lips. Yellow Checkers packets blew into the air and hooked upon the gutters. Most days, a sheet or two of yesterday's news lay slumped off the pavements. Sometimes I bothered to read them. Camel - World famous for flavour! Margaret Gardiner crowned Miss Universe in Acapulco. South Africa Defence Force Strikes at Casinga in Angola.

Lining the road on either side were squat houses airbrushed red by the airborne sand, houses that faced each other stoically, their eyes drawn shut to keep out the glare. Unless it was for privacy, but there wasn't much of that in our small town. Why would we be the exception to the rule? Opposite us was a backyard filled with discarded toys and thin wire garden furniture. From my window, if I squinted hard, the heat melted the toys into sticky crayon colours that gunked up the chicken wire fencing.

Among the other colourful options, our house hardly stood out: lilac, the yard lined with yellow-painted wooden pickets. Mom's doing. My mom had married young, and Afrikaans, both to the dismay of her conventional English-speaking family. They were proud of their English settler name, though they hadn't gone so far as to trace the ancestry, or to hang some fake heraldic shield above an invented hearth. But my Gran was less than pleased when her eighteen-year old daughter married a solid, thirty five-year-old Afrikaner from the Karoo. It couldn't have helped that mom just announced, "I'm getting hitched". A betrayal. That's what it was. In my gran's eyes. And she'd never let my mother forget it.

I'd seen photos of the ceremony. Heard the memories. A pretty girl with white carnations woven into her hair she'd looked *pragtig; net soos 'n engeltjie*, the guests had whispered. And a long, lace train joined to her index finger with broekie elastic. My dad was in his father's war uniform, a stiffly laundered khaki suit pinned with three buffed medals at the breast. (Mom said gran had pulled her nose up. "Smart, in its way", she'd sniffed, "but never a perfect fit." My gran was like that. Snappy. Mean. I didn't want to fall into her camp, but actually, I also didn't get it. Still. Who wore a dead man's honours? That was plain weird. Why didn't dad earn his own? But that wasn't a great line of thought, I suppose, because then it meant, most likely, that dad would also be dead. And while my family got under my skin

with the arguments and tensions, I wasn't prepared to go that far. I never wished them dead. In this heat, we were all slowly dying anyway.

Outside was deadly. The few remains of parched grass snuffed into puffs of brittle dust if you stepped on them. The yard was cracked dry, bald in tufts. The kind of red, sunburnt scalp I remembered from church, the pews in front of you, the men with almost third degree burns but somehow still alive, and singing.

The garden furniture was bleak, abandoned on the wonky slasto veranda near the front door. Bones. Bleached to bones from the sun. Some days – my oath to God - paint on the roofs of parked cars bubbled like scrambled egg, drying at night into matte blisters. There was nothing anyone could do. Every day was another day like the next: the heat consumed us, stealing our breath to inflate the clouds. By eleven, the sun forced people indoors, and we shut every window for fear of the scalding red wind. Everyday it blew up and blew on. And on.

Things were especially bad over the Christmas holidays. Inside was a hell-hole of itchy tinsel and plastic needle droppings from the fake fir. The lounge was carpeted with Mom's best efforts to make things nice. Her baubles. Snowmen. Little Santas. Candy canes. Fake holly. She'd spend hours deciding, trying one spot then another, placing and then pulling off and replacing. Every year was more of the same. The Christmas tree had these wired arms, and parts were bald from where it had shed its plastic needles to my mother's long-suffering efforts to make the season merry.

Everyone tried, I suppose. This year, the editor of the newspaper must really have been feeling the heat. Instead of the usual hearty reminders of the Christchild's birth, and all the blessings for which we ought therefore to be thankful, he printed a poem. Really. Well, if it really was a poem, which judging by my family's reaction, was debatable. My father had summoned my mother to look, perplexed. They'd read the page at arm's length, frowning. "Utter nonsense!" "My goodness, what will they think of next!" They shook their heads. "Oh the devil's work, the devil," gran had muttered. Being gran.

But I liked it. I'd cut it out later because I could never manage to learn it off by heart, something so messed up. "The Computer's First Christmas Card". I understood the feeling of being a machine, on automatic, and trying so hard to find the right feelings, the words for what you thought you felt. The poem wasn't strange to me at all.

Jollymerry
Hollyberry
Jollyberry
Merryholly
Happyjolly
Jollyjelly
Jellybelly
Bellymerry
hollyheppy
jollyMolly
marryJerry
merryHarry
heppyJarry
bobbyheppy
berryjorry
jorryjolly
moppyjelly
Mollymerry
Jerryjolly
bellyboppy
jorryhoppy
hollymoppy
Barrymerry
Jarryhappy
happyboppy
boppyjolly

jollymerry

merrymerry

merrymerry

merryChris

ammerryasa

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AsMERRYCHR

YSANTHEMUM

The poem matched my head. It matched the intense heat of outside. The lack of air in the lounge, all the pieces of not-pine needling the floor; the carpet, the sofa, the radiogram...every surface strewn with loops of tinsel and tangles of lights that wouldn't work until you found the one blown bulb among the tiny hundreds and then anyway even after searching everywhere, which mom did, you couldn't find the extra bulb that came with the string so you had to send dad out to buy new. Which at this time of the year wasn't easy, not in our town anyway, which wasn't exactly a bustling metropolis.

Tensions ran high. The heat burnt higher. Still, I chanced it some days. Just to get out. It was that or go loony tunes and I had no intention of being that person, like everyone else round here. "Better the devil you know," gran always said, "than the devil you don't." Though some days it was hard to figure which was which.

My mom had been baking milk tart, sifting cinnamon onto the creamy surface when my dad popped his head through the stable door that opened into our kitchen. When he came inside, I saw that he wore what he always wore: a white work shirt and shorts, boere kortbroek stained with grease and sawdust, frayed holes on his thick thighs. His work clothes. If mom spent hours in the kitchen, dad spent hours out in the shed with his worker William, a short black man from the Zulu homeland about two hours away from our town. William lived with us. It was more convenient all round. Not in the house, that wasn't right. But he had the khaya out at the back, which was comfortable enough. An all-in-one sort of room fitted out with the basics. A sink, cupboard, single bed and an old desk for a kitchen table. There was a small window too, though it was plattered with plaster from a patch up job my dad had done years

before, when the concrete had crumbled with damp, back in the days when it rained almost every day, when in the late afternoon clouds formed a massive banner hanging over the town, and we knew exactly how things were. Those days were gone now. They weren't as dependable as William.

Things had gone quiet. The mines shut down and we became just another lonely town, another business dying every week.

Snap. Crackle. Pop.

Pop goes the weasel.

My dad still worked for the railways as a cargo coordinator, though most days work was quiet. There was still some freight, of course, because goods had to move and there were people in other parts of the country who needed things. To eat. To build with. To burn. Dad would be called in to oversee the loading of freight into the corrugated wagons. He had to check the script attached to containers in crinkled waterproof sleeves. Destination, volume, imports, exports. He was lucky to have kept any kind of job, but the quiet had meant he'd also had to think things through, and he'd started up a sideline, with William. They worked in the shed building dog kennels. He'd spotted a gap in the market, or whatever it was, maybe just 'a boer maak a plan', and he kept himself busy.

At night my dad and William laboured under bright lights machining pine planks into exact widths and lengths, hand sanding, creating piles of fine, mousy saw dust on the floor. They wore white dust masks, covering their noses and mouths. A dry pallor masked their boots, their heads. You could barely tell who was who. Together they varnished the wood with a gold maple syrup stuff, the heady smell of a surgery scalpel sharply between the eyes. Dad said it had nothing to do with looks. He said it kept the rot out.

Poor dogs, I'd thought. Pity the dog who had to live in one of those. The smell. The closeness. Baking in the back yard. A kennel would certainly keep the heat in.

The drought had started in 1971, when I was eight. I don't know if I remembered, but my parents said that it had been an unusually dry year for Natal. The air, usually humid and clingy in summer, had begun to tighten. It grew tighter, so tight that our skin constantly

itched, and our eyes often watered. My gran recalled the static crackling of her chiffon skirts, the way her petticoat clung to her in a most immodest way as she walked. No, that was very bad! The weather was ungodly, she said. Making a body show like that in public!

And you, she said to me, oh my child! she said. Apparently I'd spent hours drawing white, chalky scratches on my skin, what behaviour! Pale flower heads with no stalks, stickmen with no hands. Tattoos driven mad in the heat. Your mother said Don't, because you'll break the skin, dirty like that, then there's an infection sure to follow. But you would never listen! Right then the devil had me, she said, and she would have none of it. Bad behaviour was but one step behind evil and as God is my witness, Grace, I won't have it. She lived to root out evil, did my gran.

Wind chimes especially offended her.

“Satan's music.”

So my mom hung a wind chime right outside our door. A collection of thin metal tubes, fishing line suspended from dolphins with stupefied smiles.

Granny said nothing. Mom smiled. Round 1. (Though really I'd lost count.)

And as for black. “Black is the devil's colour. That, my girl, is why it absorbs the sun. The light of the world. Then reflects it back as burning heat that again burns everything black. The devil would have us suffer so that we fall back on him.” She offered all of this with hand gestures, a clear, pointed explanation.

It was strange to me. Not just the nonsense. But how she made the devil sound like Jesus. She stated these things like they were indisputable facts, knowledge that could be checked out of the library and read on pages that had been pencilled and dog-eared, regardless of official policy. Though her first point of reference was The Book. She really knew her Bible and I came to know it selectively through her, the pieces she touted were always more memorable than the chapter and verse of the church sermons I sat through. Granny had the fire and brimstone. The revelations. Especially the bit at the end about the lake of fire and of Death and Hades. That was hard to forget.

“Death and Hades gave up the dead who were in them, and they were judged, each one of them, according to what they had done. Then Death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. This is the second death, the lake of fire. And if anyone's name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire.” Thousands of charred limbs she'd say, swallowed into the burnt earth. I could almost smell the fatty ash.

“She's getting worse with age,” my mom murmured as she dried dishes near the sink.

My dad looked up from the paper, his thick, metal-rimmed glasses catching the glare.

“Maybe she should see someone,” my mom said, “a healer. Her aura's probably clogged. I wouldn't be surprised with all this dust out here enough to drive anyone mad I suppose everything all red all the cleaning and the sand in the washing. What do you think Hennie?”

Nutty as a fruitcake I thought but I kept it to myself.

He let her inhale.

“Maybe I'm just more impatient now could be the reason maybe it's the timing you know, like now in the heat and the dry you'd think after seven years it would end but no not for this country may as well change us on the map to all red or bleached white or does that mean mountains I can never remember?”

She'd been preparing for my gran's arrival for days. Scrubbing the red sand that caked the outside of the house. It crept up the foundations in strips of faded terracotta and streaked below the eaves of the tin roof like ancient bird droppings. Everywhere my mom could reach, she cleaned, bending and scraping. She washed. She starched white sheets that dried stiff as paper on the line, speckled with a fine red foxing. The first night under such sheets, you were trying to sleep in the pages of a book, and it all pressed down till you were flat as a dried flower.

In the Christmas holidays, there wasn't much for me to do. Forget Christmas spirit, I just hung around. On purpose, I walked barefoot on the warped tar and burned my soles until I

couldn't take it anymore. The tar had been melted by a mirage, deformed by the regular traffic of heavy military tanks and the ridge was as wide as my foot as I balanced one foot one foot in front of the other forcing myself to last until I reached the section where the tar spiked and flat-lined, flattening into a blackened, rock-solid pool. I was burning up. My hair was on fire. If I rubbed my hands and placed them near my head, strands rose like electric wires, and the static crackled with walkie talkies.

A cloudless day. Again. The sky a blue so pale, so bleached, it was almost nothing but white. I came to a road sign. S T O P. White on red. I gave a mock salute, said "Thank you, Sir! For spelling it out, Sir!" then swung aimlessly around the rusted pole and looked down the road. It was all straight and flat from there on, heading towards the centre of town, a dried up oasis plonked in the middle of nowhere.

The roads were bare. In most neighbourhoods the driveways sat empty. That's what happened in the summer, when most families went to Durban for the holidays. They left as soon as they could. Lucky them. I imagined it. Kids with their surfer cousins. They'd be at the beach every day. Or maybe they were staying at the Holiday Inn, and when they woke up, they could see the sea, right there.

I couldn't imagine it.

A few families stayed home, like us. Left behind. And with the heat, they stayed inside, coming out only when it was dark. In the dark cool spaces of night, people could be seen burrowing their feet into the dirt in search of damp the way dogs dig for bones or children dig for China. I'd see neighbours walking slowly, hair bolt upright, their feet magnets dragging against the reluctant earth. We were all red in the face, the blood near the surface.

Many yards were pocked with searching holes, the edges collapsing, the remains scattered like hopeless wells. Occasionally you'd spot a hole lined with black plastic or a proper tarp, turned into a make-shift paddling pool. Toddlers in grubby underwear muddied around. Water was rationed, of course, and the use of hose pipes was forbidden. But in order to stop the whining tension, everyone driven mad by the heat, mothers and fathers hauled buckets of used bath water into the dead gardens. The kids needed something, even if it was only a few centimetres. And the parents, equally desperate to find relief, were willing to go the extra mile.

I was too old for that, though sometimes I wondered. Anything to stop me from going nuts.

So I walked towards town. The dusty road was layered with the traffic of forgotten feet. Lots of army boots I saw, that would have been crusted with dry mud into hard shells that shed a little with each step. In December the troops were frequent; you'd see guys standing at likely spots, their arms outstretched, hoping to hitch a ride in the back of some truck, or maybe with some family, if the father believed in doing it for his country. The few cars that passed, quite often there was a boy in brown squashed between children in the backseat.

The *Fish and Fowl* came up on my left. I smiled. The sign had been vandalised a while back; the 'w' scratched out to a 'u'. Jokers with nothing better to do. I'd been in the shop enough times to get the joke. Even if you were just walking by, the chum and the bait were difficult to ignore. They were kept in the back in huge tin buckets, red wigglers, dillys, names that made me giggle. The chum bucket was a dirty foam pond covered in silver and pearl froth. The air that rose from it was hot and stung my throat, but it was water, and therefore enticing.

The inside looked like a museum. In the centre, arranged on a stand under glass, were elaborate lures and flies, each with its own tag: cowbell, crankbait, crickhopper, deer-hair bug. What could have been the bones of small animals hung in ornamental cabinets on two of the walls. Barbs and hooks. Tin live boxes and rubber buckets were packed in the corners up to the ceiling, where hundreds of rods, reels, lines and nets lay webbed across, suspended on a wooden rack, each item connected to the next in a complicated succession of knots and bows. When the winds picked up and curled into the crowded room, the ceiling moved like kelp. I loved that. I got quite carried away. (Of course there were also more mundane items: shotguns, ranked in cabinets behind clear sliding, padlocked; and a rail of camo jackets, all XXL.)

Ages back, the *Fish and Fowl* had been painted dark grey by the owner Mrs Jenkins who lived above the shop with her timid son. Now the paint flaked off, curls and guts like the gills of an enormous fish. I walked on. The corner shop was the last on the road. The other side of the road was taken up largely by a Mobil garage. I could see the blue and red lights through the eyelet curtains at night. It was next to the church, which was a small rectangle with a facade shaped like the Pope's hat, a small cross stood at the pointed peak, glowing neon at night under the 24 hours sign.

I passed the pharmacy.

The butcher's with the sawdust covered floor. Whole carcasses hang behind the counter. I count the ribs with my footsteps as I walk.

Then the pawnbrokers.

The hardware.

Outside the corner shop there was the smelly public phone booth. As I got closer, I made out trousers. Closed shoes. From behind the grubby glass a man walked out the booth, duffle bag slung over his shoulders. I could see he wasn't a soldier. He caught my eye but I didn't want to be noticed. I was all sweaty from the walk, hot in the face. I flicked my head so that blonde hair hid my cheeks. But then I felt silly. I was fifteen, not five.

He was standing right in front of me.

"Hello! Sorry, could you help me please?"

I wondered who he was. I also wondered why people always had to apologise.

"I seem rude. Let me introduce myself. I'm Angelo. From Cuba."

"Grace," I replied, "from here". I shrugged, like it was nothing, trying to seem mysterious and cool. Given his smile, maybe it was working.

He stuck out his hand and we shook. His palms were weathered, the touch rough and calloused. He smiled again. I quite liked his smile.

"So, Grrayse," (his accent wasn't pronounced, but my name did sound a little different, on his tongue) "I am looking for someone. Mebbe you know her?"

A Cuban. Gosh. I'd never met one before. You only saw them on the films, sometimes, where they were generally the bad guys. Shady. Lots of dark bushy hair. Beards. But my Cuban didn't look bad at all. He had heart shaped lips and a heart shaped face and eyes as dark as his hair. To me, he was a tall glass of water in this dull parched town. And his accent wasn't the stunted Cuban I'd heard through the busted bioscope speakers.

He was waiting for me to say something.

“Sorry?” (Now *I* was apologising...)

“Perhaps you know her?”

I must have looked blank.

“Enna Smeth?” He looked at me expectantly.

“Anna Smith?”

“Yes. Anna Smith.”

I shook my head. And then I was apologising all over again, because I knew no one of that name. Sorry. She wasn't familiar.

“But she said she leaved in this town. Described it exactly. I'm sure I've got the right place. Have you leaved here long?”

“My whole life. Fifteen years and counting,” I added, in case he thought I was just a kid.

He looked directly into the sun then back towards the shadows created by the stoep of the shop. I did the same, and blue splotches prickled my vision like punctured photographic negatives.

“I was getting a Coke. Are you thirsty?” I asked. More forward than usual but a girl has to take her chances when they appear. Though what I'd actually do with any such chance, I really had no idea. Well, of course I don't mean that; I obviously knew that. But I also wanted to feel that I, I mean, that *here* wasn't all that...oh forget it, ok. Never mind. I moved past him into the shop before he could answer. A saunter I'd practised in front of the mirror.

We sat on the veranda a while. I stretched my legs out in the sun, taking advantage, leaning back like the girls in the magazines did. He noticed. I saw him notice.

“I'm working oan a cargo ship; in the engine room. Tough work. Ist long hours. But ist a job, you know...? You aft to take what you can get.”

I nodded like I knew what he meant.

“We leave port soon. Tomorrow. We only arrived yesterday and I managed to change a sheeft because soon as I heard we were docking in Durban I knew I had to find her. But I've

found nothing. So now I've written this letter, scribbled it, really, because I want to leave her something, so that she'll know. My ride back is leaving soon."

I sat forward and took a long sip of Coke. Anna Shmanna. Maybe someone called Grace could take her place? I was feeling silly. Reckless.

"How did you meet her?"

"Long story."

"I'm in no rush."

He smiled.

"So six months ago, when we were last in Durban. Me and some of the others hit shore. Uh, ist, let's say things get a bit wild, see, after weeks of being cooped up. We started at this bar called the Astra, then went on drinking from there. The Golden Mile. Places people had told us about, other crew who'd been in this port before. I saw Anna first at Father's Mustache. Then at our next spot, Smuggler's Inn. I took it as a sign. I walked right up to her and before I opened my mouth she told me to buy her a drink. I said yes mam and she laughed."

He lowered his eyes.

"She's pretty. Like you. Long blonde hair. And she's got, what, fire? For me, this is important."

I smiled. "And then? What happened after love at first sight?"

"We, uh, we talked. We talked the whole night. Until morning."

"Mm. So the sun was rising in the sky and you guys are still talking and talking. Wow." I tilted my head. "But I suppose that's normal, two strangers. You would have a lot to say. So you're asking her all about her life, and she's fascinated by Cuba, and you're telling her about the Samba dancing in the streets and the smell of the cigars and before you know it you've established a new department of foreign relations and you're planning to raise a pretty family between here and there, on the sea right. Or Angola? I've heard there's a lot of Cubans living there."

He looked at me.

“Well, as you can see, Gr-ay-se, I am not Castro. Me and Anna? It was a man, a woman. If you are a girl old enough to understand that. If you are.”

I know I looked chastened.

“I liked her. She liked me. But the ship was heading out that day so we said goodbye. What else was there to say? She came to see me off and I’ve been thinking about her ever since. She told me where to find here, if I ever came back. And so here I am.”

A woman walked passed us into the shop. Stepping in between us although she could have gone around. I could hear her tutt tutting under her breath, as if we were doing something against the law. Sour old cow. It was damn hot. So weren’t girl and a guy entitled to enjoy a Coke?

He pulled the letter from his pocket. A scrawl of black writing on the envelope. He kissed the script. The ink bled a little into the paper.

“My lift back to Durban is in...half an hour. I’m never going to find her in time. If you could help me? It’s asking a lot, but if you could please deliver the letter? To this address.” He pointed to the smudged envelope. “Please? Otherwise drop it at the post office? And if you find her, please tell her that I’m on the Pantalis A Lemos, heading for Greece.”

I nodded. I felt that I was doing something important. That I should help him. Even the Bible said to help strangers and anyway, I needed an adventure.

He held out the letter and I took it, the sun dissolving the handwriting into a glaring white, the envelope so bright it seemed about to burst into phosphorescent flame. Overhead – how strange, in this hot, empty part of the day – a hadeda egret cried.

At home, I stored the letter in my dresser. Just for a while. So I could have something too. From my bedroom, I could hear my gran in the kitchen, using her cut glass voice. “You’ll never get the lumps out like that Elizabeth.” My mother hated that, anyone using her full

name. I listened to the brittle conversation, and imagined her slight arms beating faster and faster, beating the whisk into the milk, beating her mother, beating and beating.

By the time everyone was seated at the dinner table I could almost hear my mom grinding down her molars. The silence didn't help.

“Isn't anyone going to ask me about my trip? You do realise I've come a great distance.”

We chewed, and swallowed, and prepared to speak to gran.

“Well it was awful. And this landscape! What an eyesore. You should just see the state of the lakebed. It's cracked and dry and you'd think they'd clear the brush but no. It's all fish bones and hooks down there. I wouldn't be surprised to find a trap door that led all the way down to him—might be cooler than in that bus mind you. Those seats. They are ill-equipped for considerations of personal space. I had a man, a monstrous-sized creature, squeezed in next to me. Getting out at all the stops, crunching crumbs all over my dress, sweating like he was guilty! He'd better have been hiding something or all that perspiring was for nothing. And then I get here and my only grandchild isn't even at home! Elizabeth, dear, this mash is already cold.”

My mom didn't apologise. I said sorry, explaining that I'd had to run an errand that afternoon.

“Running! In the heat of the afternoon! It beggar's belief that your mother would even let you out.”

“How dar...”

My dad reached firmly for my mom's hand. I saw him squeeze, and lower his eyes as if in prayer.

“Actually I darted off before they could stop me. Good thing I did too, I met a person who needed my help.”

“Oh, what did she need?” My mother’s tone unwound, grateful for the turn in conversation.

“Well it was a he. Angelo. A sailor who met a girl in Durban, last time his ship was in. Anna Smith. Anyway, she told him she came from here and now he’s come to find her. He was only here one day and couldn’t manage it so he’s asked if I could take it to the post office, get the name checked out. See if I can get it to her.”

“How romantic” my mother mused. “Young love. The lengths people will go to. Was he handsome?”

I blushed. My dad looked up at me.

“I suppose so. Straight dark hair. Very dark eyes. He said he was Cuban, but he didn’t sound strange.”

My parents looked at each other and then at my gran. It was a long, dark look and I didn’t know what it meant except that it meant something. “What?” I asked.

My father gestured with his head at my mother.

“Where’s the letter, Gracie?”

“Mom! That’s my personal business.”

“Grace.”

I stood with my arms folded across my chest.

My mother smacked her hand down on the table. “I asked you a reasonable question. Is it in your room? Where in your room?”

“God! Of course it’s in my room, where else, in my *pants*? I stuck it in my dresser, mother. Jeez, what’s all the fuss over nothing for?”

Gran stuck her fingers in her ears. She hated anyone saying the lord’s name in vain.

Blasphemy was his work. At the same time my dad dismissed himself from the table and started dialling a number on the telephone.

I didn't know what was happening but I sensed that some shit was starting to hit the fan.

K

K, like the letter. Not Kay or Quay. That shakes them up, because people are shook by simplicity, by the truth that there's no mystery behind a single letter, and nor is it a nickname, either. It's just a name. Mine. It's on my birth certificate, I know for a fact. I've seen that with my own eyes. But that was another paper lost in the fire. Me though. As you see, I'm still here. Large as life.

I wonder: are you comfortable there? I could go next door and borrow a chair from Ms White. The springs are gone in that one but it's the only other one I have. My son Jude brought it in when I moved here four years ago. Four years. Has it really been that long? Time is a trickster, is it not?

Excuse me, please. No smoking, it's the rules here. You'll have to go out in the passage later.

What's that thing you have? Ah, a tape recorder! And where is the tape? I know that much from detective movies, you see. In the movies there is always a close up of the tape, the reels moving round slowly. So I know what to expect.

My word, did I hear that right? You don't need a tape anymore. My goodness. Now that I didn't know. It just goes to show! Well, now that we're settled, I am ready to begin.

I remember my father's shop exactly as it was the day before the fire. The memory feels like a dream I have. I've had it many times. Every time I think of it, the shop, the fire, every time I imagine myself back there... I pinch myself on my arm. That's what they say you should do. I have pinched myself many times. See here, look at these bruises. It is right ugly, maybe. Blue-black and rubbery. It looks like an inky squid has risen from the floor of the ocean and wrapped its tentacles around my poor old self. That's what happens, I sometimes think when I'm feeling otherwise. And when I look down at the marks I remember again and pinch myself to wake from the dream. It feels uncanny. I am never without the blue-black stains.

Some days I wish I could cut it off, damn arm! But I am not bold enough, and there are already phantoms too many. And I'd still feel it, I know that much, oh yes. Absence makes

the heart grow fonder; even you've heard that one, and don't tell me you haven't! And I guarantee it applies to limbs as much as to love. What would I pinch if my arm was gone? I would pinch the air. I would make blue-black clouds. Perhaps there would be a storm of memories? I'm not used to talking like this, to you and your machine. The words sound strange. You think I have nothing left to lose, but it is not easy, all this remembering.

Right, but you were asking about the shop. The shop. It was on the corner of Shepstone Place and Victoria Embankment, between Gerber's dentistry and the foyer of the block where I lived with my parents. A nice enough place. Right where the trains rumbled past. Compartments blurring. The train was always clicking and clacking in a metal language, carrying on and on and then suddenly screeching red bloody murder to stop at the harbour. That noise! The metallic shriek would make you bite down hard on your molars if you weren't used to it. Enough to tear your fillings out. I think it drove my mother mad.

The shop was sizeable, but it seemed shrunken amongst the warehouses and the high-rises. A tiny trinket box. A shoeshop store room. That was the way back then, to lay concrete on concrete until the mass wrung up like a ladder to God. In our neighbourhood at least, which was always a little rough and tumble, even though the people could be nice. All the buildings put together in a rush without the bells and whistles afforded to other spots. But it was more honest than God if you ask me. No pretence about the place at all.

The buildings seemed like big cardboard boxes, and to my mind they mirrored the metal containers piled up in the harbour yard a few streets over. When it was dark, look as you might, you couldn't hardly tell the cargo from the real deal. Which mightn't be surprising, since both places were but holdings, after all. Goods of all sorts. The flats are containers of lives if you look at it like that. So many small details that can be stripped away, gutted to make space for others. Over and over. I see it now, how everything is temporary. But during that time it felt permanent to me. I was young. Much younger. A boy hardly yet a man, so I didn't know things properly. Back then, it was like the furniture in my home and in the shop had grown roots deep through the concrete into the sewers below the seers.

They kept the yard low in those days so as not to attract the attention of U Boats, blue eyes. And don't forget the blackouts which forced my mother to tear down her favourite floral

curtains. Pink and yellow roses set against cactus green. Such flowers! And the foliage! A fine field in an English spring. But all that had to come down and she put up the thick black curtains to keep the light in. Velvet, they were. Which reminded me of church, and of school assembly. Back then, official places were always choked up in too much velvet. It is a heavy fabric, that one, choking everything. Velvet. Lining the walls. Keeping the light out and in at the same time. There was not space to breathe.

She'd picked the velvet curtains from out my father's stockroom, which was chock full of choky fabrics and dead furniture, as she saw it, although the room in the basement of the shop was the farthest thing from official. A mess, more like it. My father was a fierce collector. He held to him so many things. All manner of things. Collected things which landed in an upside down muddle in that room with no light. But it was a beautiful mess, you could find yourself thinking, lured by something attractive in it, drawing you in.

My mother would draw the curtains, as I said, and then it would be dark. Except the moths had got to them before she did and eaten through in patches, so the fabric was chunked with holes. Which has always seemed unbelievable to me, you understand, that moths might eat as wide and hungrily as they do. And without teeth, which is very curious. Yet we speak of something being moth bitten, yes, or certainly we did, in our family, and I couldn't help but imagine that bitten implied teeth and teeth implied enamel, and I saw those devastating moth bites curved back big as brutal horse snappers. Your fingers would be gone. Your arm. Taken by moths. Oh my young imagination; there was just no stopping it!

Yes, yes, you can smile, you can. Smile away. If moths were unlikely creatures to cause such harm, I have to say that I have never seen one smile in all my life. And not for lack of looking, either.

My mother had obliged me into helping with the curtains, and their weight was heavy as cerement. Even the word shrouds me now in grave cloths, waxy and suffocating. But I had to do it. Haul the velvet curtains up three flights of stairs to our flat. Which as it happened was just that, quite low in the ceiling, like it had been squashed under a giant foot. Though the ceiling itself was beautiful. Circular plaster patterns, it had, each one linked from tile to tile.

A perfect symmetry of scar tissue traced into ivory skin with a protractor.

Inside the room, we unrolled the bolts, and moth balls rolled out over the mottled green tiles which stretched over the front step like an overbite. The stairwell stank of stale cupboard for some time after. Days later, I heard that a young child had picked up one of the silky white balls and thought it a sweet. He'd popped it into his mouth and too late, he'd swallowed, and the shock of the naphthalene made him retch. He was violently ill. He was rushed off to the military medical outfit in Hospital Road, a soothing lolly in his wet, childish mouth. I don't remember if I ever saw him again. Did I see him? I wonder if I did... Those curtains, unrolling. Our lives rolling into his.

My mother felt guilty for weeks afterwards and she wandered around the flat like an ailing ghost, purple fingertips set against her aching temples to ease the ache. Don't look so surprised. There's no question. They *were* purple. They'd been that way since an incident in her own childhood, back in the cold home country. The snow it was had done it. Almost taken her fingers right off in a fit of wild wilfulness. The weather can do that, in some places. Though somehow the fingers remained fast, except for the nerves, which went forever dull of feeling. And of course the fingers turned dark, as I said, the deep colour of stewed mulberry. She was stained like that, my mother. Nothing she might do to correct herself though many days she was weepy, and bled tears no end.

For the rest though, my mother was milky white. Such pale skin. In the fashion of the day, once she had lain in the sun along the promenade, but that made her itch something savage, and in five minutes she'd turn the tender shade of a newborn kitten. Pink as anything. After that, she wore silk scarves and kaftans, all oriental prints and jungle florals, pastel watercolours and the intense stained glass clarity of a barefoot Mary, her praying hands held close to her heart. That was my mother for you, full of contradictions. If she wasn't crying, she was laughing. We ate bread for days, and then a feast of plenty.

From the street the block of flats looked like it was in mourning with all those black sheets and heavy curtains covering the windows. I remember that. How it looked. I used to look at the windows, trying to see in. Out. I confess that I still do. It's fascinating what you'll see through a pane in an apartment block, if you're lucky. To me, it's like looking into a Norman

Rockwell painting. The knick-knacks, the bric-a-brac, the lounging cats, completely indifferent to your curiosity. A man staring sadly out at the world. Or a woman. It amazes me. How the things that make up a life can be summarised in a squared frame.

I was wicked, in my way. A boy like any other, I suppose. I used to look out particularly for women's smalls. Brassieres, hung off the window latch to catch the wind. The black and white cones, some nude; sheer stockings thin as skin. Strange pantyhose. Petticoats edged with lace. Suspenders, their small teeth with sharp clasps. I would be biting my tongue hard, my fourteen-year-old self captivated by the intimacy of strangers.

And of course there were many women, oh many. Yes, the war brought shortages and we had supplies cut hard. There's no one can tell me anything about scarcity. Hard times, you don't even try to tell me. Butter, petrol, clothes! All of it. The meat hooks were bare as steel braces in the butchery; the newspapers were thinner even as the news grew more and more, and more and more terrible. Simple things like postage stamps...they shrank to the size of fingernails. Everything got smaller and smaller by the day. By the night time too, I'd swear, a gecko being eaten boneless by sugar ants until there was nothing left but the ghost of a life. That's how it was. But I tell you, even when Durban was a skeleton in most respects, there was always an abundance of women.

And I don't think it was only my youth that fabled the imagination. There were women aplenty. No, and not the prostitutes only. Though the prossies always come first to everyone's mind, for criticism and scandal. You'd think that set up was a new business, wouldn't you, not old as time, a life as long as men and women? There were women in places you wouldn't think to look. I'm talking wrestlers, I am. Female wrestlers! Oh your eyes grow wide, I see, your eyebrows turn sceptical. But it's true. The wrestling shows were hush hush, of course, but my father was never a hush hush man. No secrets between men, he believed, and so he took me to my first show when I was what, eleven? almost twelve, a boy just on the cusp. I remember us walking down stairs, many stairs, down to a basement under a hotel. Gardiner Street it was. It felt like we were walking down to Hades. The steps never ending.

At the bottom of the bottomless stairs my father steered me through a crowd of men half hidden beneath low trilby hats, the men surrounded by women bright and noisy as tropical

birds. The chattering rose to the buzzing hubbub of a parrot nesting area at dusk, and the noise reached a pitch that vibrated in my excited childish ears, whirring, whistling, throbbing, drubbing, pounding, beating in my brain until the master of ceremonies broke free with a drumroll and jumped up on a podium of wooden crates. With a flourish, he yelled:

“LAYDEES AND GENNLEMEN, LEND ME YOUR EARS.” He tugged hard on his large, heavy lobes, as if pulling down a mocking blind, and the laughing crowd egged him on like old familiars. He cocked his head. “AN’ WHYLE YOU AT IT, FOLKS, LEND ME YOUR LOVERLY EYES, JUST FOR TONIGHT” and he flashed two milky marbles in the arch of his thumb and first finger, the move sweeping deftly across his face like a winged mask. “GIVE ME LEAVE TO LEND, AND YOU WILL LIKELY HEAR” he tugged, “AND JUST AS LIKELY YOU WILL SEE” he flashed, “DELIGHTS LIKE YOU HAVE NEVVER KNOWWNN, FEATS NO MAN – OR WOMAN – `AS EVVER EXPERIENCCED BUFFORE!!!”

The noise hummed down to a white whisper.

“MAY I...MAY I HAVE THE PLEASURE..OF INTERODUCING... MISS MAY FLOWER!!! PLUCKED FROM THE HILLS OF DOVER, RAISED BY A DEN OF WILD FOXES, STRONGER THAN THREE OXEN...OR ANY OF YOUR MEN.” The crowd did what crowds do, and roared. Miss May Flower walked out. Her red bathing suit had butterfly sleeves which ended at her wrists, giving her wings. She was silent, a winged silent fox, a lean woman with long brown hair clawed through with red. Tall and solid. Confident. She smiled a generous gappy grin and fletchered quickly and quietly into the lights, feinting and punching towards the crowd. Again, the voices erupted. Then she gathered herself and stood cockily on the stage, which was shaped as a boxing ring, thick ropes edging the square.

“AND NOW...HER OPPONENT... DEFENDING HER TITLE... MISS MIGHTY MALLEY! HER OUT OF THE CIRCUS LEGEND LADY GOLDEN HAMMER, A DOUGHTY DAMSEL ABLE TO LIFT MORE THAN THREE HUNNERD POUNDS! There was nothing soft or gentle about Miss Mighty Mallet. She was a mountain range, a stony berg chiselled with sharply ridged biceps, her triceps and forearm muscles hard as stone. Her skin was deep flecked gold, the colour of a feral cat’s eye. She wore a gold bather

which reflected light like a mirror, and gold boots laced tightly up to her knees. If she was granite boulders below, above she had piled her wispy blonde hair on her head like a honeyed nest gone brittle, and as she strode fully into view, the crowd howled in appreciation, and there was a flurry of bills as all bets were hedged on her to win.

What I saw, small in the crowd, was a tiny nest balanced on a heavy rooted tree. I saw my father, big and tall; saw him smile down at me, the gold ridge of a capped canine glinting in the light. I felt him squeeze my shoulder, and very briefly, drawing courage, I touched his hand.

The barker was calling the final shots. Raucous as a rooster.

“NOW LADIES, YOU KNOW

THE RULES.

FIVE ROUNDS. FIVE MINUTES EACH.

THE JUDGES DECIDE THE WINNER.

CLEAN SHOTS. NO BITING.

NO SCRATCHING.”

He spoke like an auctioneer.

“NO RED ANTLERS! NO LEFT TIP ELE-PANTS!”

And then the fight began.

What a night. You want to know who won? You even have to ask? Miss Mighty Mallet had held her title for years, and that night was no surprise. A woman with that heft. But mind you, Miss Mayflower was no paper champion. She moved like liquid in the ring, water sloshing around in a glass. But Mallet was in a frenzy; she launched one highspot after another, hitting the ring floor, displacing the liquid. She nearly knocked herself out. I recall the match was pretty even until Mallet managed to get Mayflower in a pretzel and the crowd popped. The gold belt looked like an extra layer of golden skin around Mallet’s middle, so tight was the cinch.

We took the bus home that night, my father and I, choosing the long seat right at the rear, our backs against the wide window.

“What did you think?”

I asked if all the city basements hosted wrestling like that.

When he laughed, his eyes closed to slits behind his full moon spectacles. “Only when the basements are very deep, my son. Deep basements, you see, they are places of unexpected beauty. They’re on the margins, aren’t they? Somewhere between here and there, life and whatever comes after. Some call it death. But that balance, to me, hanging in the balance, it is a beautiful thing, though many people don’t think to look further than what they can see in front of their two eyes.

He gestured with his fingers. A V. Two fingers. Two eyes. I wondered what he meant. Above me, on the wide back window glass of the bus, I saw the word EXIT, printed in red. In case people needed to escape the ordinary vehicle. In case the familiar turned dangerous. I didn’t know. But my mind was capable of just such transport.

We passed the Dick King statue on Victoria Embankment. The man on the horse. The man with the wide-brimmed hat. Usually, he seemed slumped, but I saw him tip his hat at us right then and I felt like I was on top of the Trust building looking down through the streets into the innards of the city.

But I am sorry, again. For the second time, is it? I always digress. I was telling you about the shop. The shop was beautiful every day but especially on the days when you could see the light streaming from the sky. The rays formed a hallowed bridge, reaching all the way from the clouds. At some points in the day time, the plate glass shop-front glowed as if the glass were itself the sun, rays and panes catching prisms, casting a rainbow of colour across the interior which shimmered in the wind of the tall, waving palm trees. The ripples were further interrupted by shadowed lettering: **Klinger's Antiques**. A deep, flaked gold, gothic script.

I remember watching the world through that sign, filling in the gaps behind the curved letters

as they found people and objects, caught a man's foot smartly on the K, or slyly slid a slight s around a bust. There was a woman standing across the street, half obscured. She was wearing a red spangled dress, just like Dorothy's shoes before Toto stole them and ran down the yellow brick road. I remember that. Or am I remembering it wrong?

In any case, she was standing there, a beautiful floating head with her hair pinned to one side and I filled in the rest. A car's backseat packed to the padded roof with pedigrees straining their heads out of the windows. A man with a fat folded face, his large stomach an aquarium in which goldfish blinked expectantly like they were waiting for the bus. A woman pushing a mermaid from the docks, lushly doubled into a wheelbarrow, her scaled tail silver as an oyster.

Life through the shop sign was like that. I was forever connecting the dots of some picture, but not following the numbers. I drew where I wanted to, this dot and that one. Like my father. My father was an artist like that. Of dots. Little dashed lines. Going straight along for some time, then turning where he wanted. Things never turned out like he expected but he didn't mind. He taught me that. Where there was nothing, that didn't mean an absence. There could still be space for imagination. Vision, if you prefer to call it that. He knew what it was to envision. There could be beauty and fantasy; there *should* be. Nothing in life was more crucial.

So I saw such marks everywhere. In the dark drains slatting the pavements. The right field extending beyond my left periphery. Entoptical perceptions, they were. Though there were really pigeons. There were pigeons that strutted along the promenade, their oily wings making iridescent patterns outside the shop, giving the pavement the face of a melted wristwatch. It was a black face. A municipal worker who had fallen into the wet cement. The watch cogs had stopped at half past ten.

My father's shop needed no illusion, for as soon as there was an empty space, the shop attracted a supplement, plugging any breaches with the past, whether nostalgia or neglect or suffering. The sun shimmered, and blurred. The shop filled. That day, I sat behind the long teak counter as usual, perched on a three-legged stool with tarnished silver claws. Phoenix feet. A naval officer walked in, his hair quiffed slick and black as the oil that might leak from a beached whale. He ducked under a crystal teardrop chandelier which hung low in the front

of the shop and dipped his head between the array of hanging feather lampshades, displayed in every colour of a peacock's tail.

The man was dressed in full dress uniform, ribbons long enough to string around a Christmas tree. My father was fixing broken links in a vintage chainmail purse. The man ignored me and addressed my father's stooped head. Good morning. Did Klinger's happen to stock engagement rings?

"Diamond, of course."

My father looked up and took in the man. Satisfied, he smiled and nodded, reaching for a drawer under the boxy cash register. From this, he retrieved a red velvet ring cushion, setting it carefully upon the counter. Then, from the drawer he removed a small box, and from the box, carefully opening the clasp, he took a ring, setting it neatly upon the cushion. Not just any ring. A singular ring. It was a thin, rose-gold band set with a bouquet of diamonds arranged in the shape of a lily.

The man whistled. My father nodded slowly.

"It belonged to Vivien Leigh," my father announced. "*Gone with the Wind.*"

The man looked at him.

According to my father, every item in the shop was extremely well connected. Everything had a rich history linked to royalty or celebrity, to the outrageous, exceptional or bizarre.

He carried the yellowed dentures of George Washington. The extravagant wig of George V. A feathered fan originally gifted to Princess Royal Louise Victoria Alexandra. A walking stick (the head a painted glass eye) obtained from the auctioned set of *Frankenstein*. F. Scott's Fitzgerald's patent wedding shoes, worn only once. A string of pearls which, incredibly, had belonged to Judy Garland's grandmother and which she'd once threatened to eat piece by piece, in place of breakfast.

No wonder Klinger's was famous, he'd told me, since everything in the shop had a quality larger than life. Indeed, the shop could hardly contain it all, he said, gesturing boldly at his hoard. He was really something, my father. I never knew what to believe as I watched him at work, fixing this or that. Always bent over. Whether it was French Polishing the patina of a

box, or mending the links of the perplexingly heavy yet pliable fabrication that was a broken chainmail purse. There seemed nothing he could not do.

The officer held the ring up close to his eyes, examining it. He turned the gems towards the window, teasing the sun. He wanted it all right. But he drove a hard bargain. Plus my father was an incurable romantic, a sucker for a good story. So he took the less than tidy sum and prepared to part ways generously, blessing the union as he folded the ring in velvet cloth the same deep colour as the cushion.

"I wish yoo may see your chiltren's chiltren," he said, exaggerating the taint of his German heritage, as he sometimes did, for effect.

The navyman smiled, a little embarrassed, and thanked him, then picked his way back to the front of the shop over Persian rugs rolled one upon another like a heap of sweet-smelling cigars; around volumes of leather-bound books arranged (as I knew) from highest to lowest according to sexual content. (The rudest contained illustrations of naked women, and couples contorted like Chinese puzzles). He paused at the taxidermy baboon clutching a rifle its own height.

"Ben Wiljoen's pet baboon. Vrom za Anglo-Boer vor," my father said as he looked up over his round glasses from the chainmail purse, which was on his lap again.

Viljoen's baboon had a laughing face with sharp fangs and bristly hair. The dead baboon had been posed on its haunches as if squatting over a long drop, grounding the rifle for balance. There was also a photograph of this lively mascot hanging among the many other images and paintings that covered the walls of Klinger's Antiques. In the framed picture, the baboon was still alive, and it always troubled me to think that it was the same rifle, perhaps, as it now held forever in death's long grip. The photograph was black and white, washed in a brownish yellow light. The baboon squatted centre left, its shoulders hunched as if it were a cold day. The rifle waved in the air. The men, about seventeen of them, were dressed as civilians. One man towards the back wore a bandage around his head, marked with the sign of a cross. Not the Christian one, the first aid type. The rest wore hats and heavy jackets, odd-shaped waistcoats that might have been made from flour sacks or grain bags. They carried a motley of weapons, mainly long rifles or swords.

They men looked directly into the space of the photograph, calling me. And yet they always seemed like ghosts. Even now when I remember it, I see ghosts that take the shape of men. It is difficult to explain. Perhaps what I mean is that it was a haunting picture. It strikes me so forcibly: a man is a creature of flesh and blood, and even a baboon, though it is a baboon, a monkey is creaturely all the same. Flesh and blood. But the picture. That still seems surreal.

Like the day they caught the submarine. Unforgettable. I had been walking down the beach, following up on the night before. A hot day in July 1942. Antisubmarine nets had been strung between the north and south piers, and just one night ago I'd watched them lower the lattice with cranes, the workers silvered under a bright moon which drifted low over the sea. The scene was so curious. As if the men were trying to net the moon in a huge web. If not the moon, they still had their success. Snared a U-boat within two months and hoisted it from the ocean using a large crane set on each pier. The biggest cranes I had ever seen. Crowds gathered as far back as my father's shop to see the ominous rusted bullet suspended out to sea against the bluff horizon. The beaches had already been barricaded with barbed wire earlier in the year and wardens patrolled the barrier, snatching cameras from journalists and civilians alike, removing the film and lighting it up on the spot. People were furious. What was this damned *Verboten!* They felt policed in their own skins! I wonder what happened to that suspended submarine. Such an unsettling contradiction in terms. I heard that men took the U-boat apart piece by piece until just the skeleton remained, the metal ribs of a dead whale. Then the cranes kicked back into life, the nets were creakily lowered, and the remains were left to calcify in the sea. I suppose that story settled it.

But I'm doing it again. Digressing. Oh my. My memory now has many different routes, I'm afraid. So many uneven side streets leading to dead ends, and even when you think you're heading in the right direction, it's easy to turn the wrong way. And in my life, let's be frank, I have always been a wanderer. So. The day before, yes.

It was the day before the end of all days. I sat on that three-legged bar stool with the silver phoenix feet, settled behind the counter in the shop. Then my father sent me to Rakesh's Cubby to buy condensed milk for tea. This funny old Indian.

He and Rakesh had formed a rapport of sorts after my father received a shipment that included a statue of the Mahakali, brass with silver and copper inlay. Mahakali was the Hindu goddess of time and death, my father had told me, and he placed her in the window of Klinger's for all to see.

On either side she had four arms, shooting out. Eight hands. Each hand clutched a mirror image of its opposite, so: two daggers, two trishuls, two severed heads and two bowls beneath, to catch the mutual drips of blood. Tiny fangs were visible over her lips. She wore a garland of demon heads around her neck and a skirt of severed demon arms. Her foot was at the neck of a dead man and she had many heads which spanned out from her own.

Why my father put her in the window...a warning, a provocation, I was never sure. I mean, a woman like that. And another man's god. And it was months before the man we came to know as Rakesh happened to be passing by. But immediately he was struck, and he came into Klinger's for the first time. A little hesitant, I remember, but also dead keen to discuss the statue.

After that, whenever Rakesh was in the vicinity, he and my father talked. About the deities. About Life. Whatever it was that connected them. They explored a layer of interest which had enfolded my father's mind since boyhood, and which evidently had wrapped Rakesh, too, in its mysterious hold.

Though of course there came the day of reckoning when Rakesh could resist no longer and mysteries aside, he parted with his money. Mahakali was his. How gently he held his wrapped parcel, her arms twined tightly in brown paper and string. And out the door he went.

Even after that, on occasions, as if Mahakali continued to exert her sphere of influence, the two men enjoyed their chats, drawn to exchange ideas. In this way, we shared a little of ourselves, and in return we learnt something of Rakesh's own circumstances. Cementing the fragile link, my father took to sending me down the way to buy small daily goods from Rakesh's roadside stall.

That day, I walked out the shop with the coin in my hand, my mind turned to condensed milk and sweetness. Tea. It seemed too quiet outside. I remember people walking on tip toes, so softly, their fingers held up to their mouths. I recall how I obeyed, in silence. That's what I

remember. But maybe this is not the historical fact. Things keep changing for me. My head is increasingly troubled.

Rakesh had a stall outside the Point Railway Station, just beyond the arches. The main building of the station was flanked by gabled fronts; large, evenly-sized windows lined the façade. The stall though, that was a simple wooden table shaded by hessian that had been speared on four bamboo poles against the heat, as if for a beach picnic. Mahakali sat centre front, wreathed in orange marigold garlands. As ever, she wore no blouse. Her shoulders were uncovered. Her breasts bare. As ever, her bronze nipples caused a tightness in my trousers and I tried to conceal this embarrassment as I walked, an awkward, pigeon-toed gait, to the front of Rakesh's stall.

That day, though it was not yet late, his table held only a few fresh fruits and some dented tinned cans. Business must have been brisk.

“Good afternoon Rakesh,” I called out cheerfully, for although I was quiet in my youth I was not sullen.

“And to you, young K!” He was a thin man with a broad handsome face that was spoilt with spots of albinism that seeped from his hairline. He wore a loose white shirt which caught the wind like a tiny parachute. Between customers, he'd been reading a book, and the pages lifted in the breeze. As I approached, he closed the covers, settling things.

“Is everything well?” I asked. Because it was polite and because I was fond of Rakesh and because I was still learning how to hold an adult conversation.

“Yes, they are, indeed they are. Everything is good. My friends at the dock have kept me very nicely business so I am almost out. Today I must only smile, and pray for those less fortunate.”

“You're a good person Rakesh” I said to him, shocked even as I spoke by my own forwardness. I was a very shy youth, you see, though soon enough I would find myself glad of the sudden expression of honesty.

Rakesh smiled at the compliment, and I, in turn, well, my cheeks burned. I felt my face being tested over an open oven and I drew back, turning for comfort to familiar remarks.

“A tin of condensed milk, please.” And though there was none on the table, I knew to ask, since Rakesh kept a secret stock for his regulars.

“Here is the last tin for now, K. Please be telling your father. Nothing tomorrow, or the next. But never fear, there will come more stock early next week.” I nodded and passed the money to Rakesh, the coin by now wet in my palm. I lifted my hand to my nose. Smelt the iron tang of train rails. Wiped my palm on my trousers, and noticed that it left a dark trail. I needed to wash.

But that would have to wait, since I walked home by the beach that day, studying my footsteps, my attention hooked now and then on the barbed wire fences, the great guns resting against the public benches. If you looked quickly, a passing glance from sidelong eyes, you saw the guns as people praying. They knelt at the foot of the seat, and their heavy arms barrelled together, beseeching the ocean.

I turned left into the grounds of Addington Hospital for my usual visit to the museum on the ground floor. I couldn't stay away. It was the old Mrs Shroud who curated the collection, and she had also donated many of the pieces, after her poor husband eventually passed. It's a wonder he'd lived that long, with the life he'd had, that man. Or so I gathered, from the few things Mrs Shroud had said, and the pieces on display. It was almost too much for a fourteen year old boy to credit, you know. The Anglo-Boer war. A man blown halfway across the country by shell fire, and yet he survives. Minus an arm and a leg, An ear. His nose.

In the hospital museum, his prosthetic nose hovered over a headless dummy outfitted in an old fashioned suit. I was always fascinated as a child, *horrified*, at the fact of no neck or face or skull above the broad padded shoulders. I saw an invisible man slowly, slowly rematerializing from the waxy beginnings of his nose. The nose, I saw, was not alone. It was attached to a metal head contraption, and a pair of spectacles which wrapped thin armpieces around the missing head. A wire arched from the crown to the top of the bridge, and under that the nose protruded, bent like a swollen thumb. The waxy flesh appeared to be at melting point, shiny, though in places it was charred, sooty black, as if the man who wasn't there had spent time stooped over a candle flame. The time I spent! The hours I stood studying these pieces!

The rest of the place looked like a spare parts shop. Tables artfully arranged with elaborate models of severed hands; small to large, ivory through to black. Severed feet the same: some with painted toenails, some with black toenails, some with no toenails. Second-hand stuff, it broke, yes. Arms with large biceps, arms thin as rakes, arms covered in navy tattoos. Fleshy ears. Sizes graduated. Colours graded. Lined up in collectors' cases like swirled seashells. Whole anatomies assembled from foot to chin, an ancient hollowed armoury. The speciality items were displayed on pedestals under vitrines and bell jars. The arcane medical equipment. A Victorian metal arm laced with ornate patterns, the crude, sharp nails of a well-dunked crone.

The museum was almost always deserted, and that's partly why I liked it. The place was quiet as a library where time doesn't move except to open, and close. And at the museum there wasn't even a date stamp to change, marking the obligatory days. Mrs Shroud was another curious attraction, always there, and seeming ever unchanged. I thought of a mannequin in a glass casket, like you could see at a fair. Well, you could, back then. You put a coin in the slot and the box lit up to the noise of jingly carnival music, the dummy animating in jerky mechanical movements as her split jaws spoke your fortune, and the machine spat out a card. Silly things. But they stayed with you.

That day, Mrs Shroud was standing over her desk like a weeping willow, long white hair strewn over her shoulders and framing her face. If you cut her open, I suspected you would find a series of growth rings, and you would count close up to ninety.

When she saw me she jerked in surprise.

"Oh! K! I didn't even hear you come in. Oh, my hearing. That's how it is these days, everything is going from bad to worse." She fussed over the desk, then invited me to sit, sit, like she was beckoning me in to read my palm.

She asked if I'd heard the aircraft the night before, not waiting for my reply. "It flew so low it nearly took the roof off the hospital. I'd wager the trainee nurses could almost see the stars from inside the bathrooms on the top floor."

"I must have slept through it" I said.

“Then you must sleep like the dead! Though Harold slept like that, it’s true. You could have bottled his blood and sold it as remedy for sleepwalking.” She laughed, and glanced at the invisible man who stood at the door.

I sat in the seat opposite her desk. She still stood in the same spot, her long black dress leaking ink upon the ground.

“I tell you my lad, that plane! Ohhh the terrible tremble of it! The noise actually cracked the floor.”

I must have looked disbelieving, because she insisted. “It did! Indeed it did. Over there, in that corner,” she pointed, urging me to check the facts for myself.

Doubtless you may be wondering, by now, why a boy my age would bother to keep company with such an old woman. Why I have not spoken of any young friends, boys my own age. Because there were none. I never understood that properly myself, but I was considered odd by my peers, and my shyness and my body didn’t help to alter their opinions.

I’d had a growth spurt early on, when I was twelve. One night I went to bed a boy of five feet and in the morning I woke up twenty inches taller. My school shorts barely fitted me. They’d shrunk up my thighs. The shirt buttons threatened to burst. I was suddenly gross and gangly at once, a stranger in my own body. Large hands. Knee caps round as tea saucers. I walked like a baby giraffe. My hair slicked back, not like the other boys and I spoke funny, about funny things I mean. Art and books and old traditions and sometimes I whistled to myself without noticing like a boiling kettle.

Mrs Shroud reminded me of the basements my father had spoken about. The way she looked. The things she said.

“Seen any bodies at the docks?” she asked, like it was nothing.

And I answered the same, accustomed to our strange give and take. “No. Not lately. It’s harder to get down there now, unless a big ship comes in and they allow excursions. The harbour guards always ask you to move” I replied. “It’s a restricted area.”

“Pity,” she answered.

Which it was. A pity. Because Mrs Shroud had told me of the old graveyard from before the dredgers came to dig the harbour. Never mind that it was considered bad luck to disturb the dead, the business with the harbour meant they did it anyway, to hell with omens. The machines dug and dug, scooping and scraping, clearing the remains, packing tombstones and soiled heaps like catalogues. But however hard they went at it, there were always more graves. Deeper graves, graves buried beneath the graves of others. Bodies interred outside the boundaries of the cemetery. Bodies buried sitting upright facing one another like they were having a good long talk. Bodies that studiously ignored each other, determined to remain strangers in death, as they'd been in life. There were even bodies buried bare, said Mrs Stroud, with no coffins, not even a tarp. Discarded like animals among the other animals that had met their ends upon the Point. Emaciated strays, she imagined, dogs who most likely had dug themselves small curled places to die. A hump of sand, if nothing else. She spoke of bony cats, horse bones, garrulous monkey jaws, the smallest rat's jaws, needled with teeth. She mentioned delicate birds she'd happened on, almost caught unawares, their skeletal wings still dreaming of flight. Things the dredgers didn't bother with. And many graves weren't marked, either, she said. All that was just left. And then when the machines were done, the sea flooded in, claiming its own.

After some time, once the harbour was complete, random bodies began to surface. Mostly, the fierce currents battered them, pulled them apart so they surfaced in pieces, a conspicuous skull bobbing in the waves, although a few corpses drifted ashore intact. Divers busy with ship repair once found a granite headstone, too, though too large to retrieve. The men told of a vast, arch-shaped marker without inscription, in place of words and memory, a chiselled eye that mimicked the sun. Who, or when, no one could say. And why...well, that is always an impossible question.

It had been over ten years since there'd been a sighting of any body, but Ms Shroud believed that it could happen any time. That day. That hour or minute, it was foolish to think that buried bodies would forever stop surfacing. The floor of the harbour, she said, was a level deeper than death.

I nodded in agreement, and swore I'd keep looking, a vigorous, youthful promise that

evidently pleased her. I was not to give up. Ever. And I wouldn't. I said I wouldn't. Later, when I remembered my final words to her I felt happy. At the time, you see, they were completely sincere. But now I pinch my arm when the rest swells in.

I never did stop looking. Well, I never meant to stop. Right up until I could no longer get down to the harbour, once industry took over, you know, and you needed to swipe an official card or show an ID badge to gain access. Even then, sometimes I nipped under the red tape or slipped around the side of a makeshift harbour office until some guard spotted me and guided the mad old man back to the public road, after patting him down to find his papers and his phone, politely calling his son. Jude would always come get me, but I could see he resented the intrusion. The embarrassment.

It took me a long time to get home on the day before the fire. First the museum, and Mrs Shroud (how could I give them a miss?), and then I was stopped in my tracks by the Lost Persons shelter, set up on a corner near the hospital. It wasn't much: a concrete bench, a black and white sign bolted to a church wall. I found it difficult to walk past, and if it weren't the shortest route home, after stopping off at the museum, I probably would have walked another way. Because the people there unsettled me: always, a few people sat beneath the sign, kitted out in their Sunday best as if that might make a difference. They waited. They looked lost. They were lost. One man had a suitcase balanced at his feet. Heavy and battered. He sat with his face in his hands, avoiding people's eyes. A woman sat alongside him on the bench. She wore a long white frock, a broad white hat and white day gloves, a single covered button at each wrist. I stared long enough to notice that. She locked eyes with me, refusing bluntly to look away. I broke almost immediately, my eyes watering, and sought clumsy relief in studying my feet.

"Look at you," she sneered, "dead right *that* won't help. Better keep looking sonny, as you not going to find it that way."

Such a peculiar summons that was. I will never forget her. The look; the jeer. Despite her relative finery, her hollow eyes seemed steeped in bleach, and in the hot sun her whites had begun gradually to seem yellow. Speechless, somehow ashamed, I quickened my pace and a few alleys later arrived at our flat. I strode up the stairs two at a time, almost falling over my own feet.

In the kitchen, my mother sat at the table with the newspaper. “Have you heard?” she asked anxiously, “the Ossewa-Brandwag arrests? The men who broke into the South Pier gun battery were found hiding just down our road.”

I knew who she meant. The Brandwag men were opposed to the war against Germany, and in protest they’d started with petty crime around the city about a year after the war’d begun. Small time stuff for some: vandalism, defacing military property and equipment. For others it was bigger, and there was real danger from their homemade arsenals. Violence against enlisted men. Incendiary bombs that torched people who were suspected of being informants and spies. The type of things I’d read about in Raymond Chandler.

If the Ossewa-Brandwag members were caught, they were sent to internment camps, where they enjoyed none of the little luxuries extended to other prisoners of war. The Italians, I remember, POWs or not, they were authorised to amble around the city in their flamboyant uniforms. A man might be a prisoner, but there he was, braided and bejewelled with more medals than a show pony. The Ossewa-Brandwag members though, they were detained right through the war, many long after it too.

“So they caught them?” my father asked my mother that night across supper. “Most. Not all. Some escaped.”

“To the Valley, I wouldn’t wonder,” my father mused, “if they can get that far.”

He’d told me once about a secret valley in the Karoo. A place forgotten by many. A fold in time. He’d read about it somewhere. An ordinary place, marked by the rawest forms of nature; derailed from rails and roads and rules, it had been established during the Great Trek by a family of rogue Afrikaners who had broken away from the regular convoy.

“But they’ll never be heard of again, if they try,” he continued.

My mother nodded in agreement and bit her lip as she turned the page. The innards of the newspaper fell to the floor, but she didn’t notice, or she ignored them.

That night I lay in bed listening to the muted sounds of cars in the street, noticing that their

lights had to be on so low it might have been mist, rising, rather than regular traffic. The occasional hooter snorted. Some foolish pedestrian who hadn't the common sense to stay on the pavements, walking carefully back-to-the-wall in the blackout. But then who on earth could ever see properly, in such poor light? A horrible sensation ran through me as I remembered the woman on the bench. The lost woman with the lost eyes. I decided not to spook myself, and shook off the feeling, pulling the sheet up to my chin. I wasn't a child, after all. I knew that much.

The night was humid though, and soon I was wet with sweat. My skin clammy. A mosquito buzzed around my ear, and I swatted it away. The buzzing continued. I've always had sweet blood. My eyes were getting heavy.

I'm tired now too. I admit I'm growing tired. What if we stop now, and continue tomorrow? I think that's just as well, because the nurses here, they only allow visitors up till six. And it's getting dark, isn't it, so we would have to stop soon anyway. But no matter, you can come again the same time tomorrow with your clever little machine. Just sign in at the front desk, like before. They'll know to let you in.

Your face. You seem concerned. No, I'm just tired. Please. Don't worry about me. I will be fine. It's only time passing. But talking like this, I will say, it brings it all upon me again. And that's not easy to carry.

Rails

Jenkins holds Cecil Rhodes in the highest esteem. In the office, while they labour over the books, he tells Herman that Mr Rhodes is an extraordinary financier, a visionary thinker. He's a man with big ideas. Never mind only Africa, Jenkins says, Rhodes is big enough for the world. He sees how big England can become. Who else, says Jenkins, would ever have imagined all the way from the Cape to Cairo?

Herman doesn't answer. He is thinking. He thinks a sphinx no more or less inscrutable than a grain of sand.

When Jenkins speaks so highly of Rhodes, Herman remembers standing in the foyer of the De Beers Consolidated Mining office, looking up at the framed portrait. A gilded frame. Positioned high on the wall. His neck felt the strain. Rhodes, for all the world to see. Resting upon the arm of a chair, the still fingers of his right hand merged into a gaff hook. The other hand lay nearly invisible, draped in shadows of dark, painted cloth.

Herman felt an itch. His funny finger. Twitch.

Rhodes sat elegantly, one leg cocked over the other at the knee. Three upper buttons were tight in their holes but the rest were undone, so that the jacket splayed like a girdle of ocean around the hips. He had short oiled hair, Rhodes did. A receding hairline that revealed large, stranded ears. Small eyes, close together. A dissatisfied, downturned mouth that furrowed his cheeks like a missing moustache.

An English bulldog, thought Herman.

Whatever Herman thought, Rhodes stared down at him, unabashed.

Despite his admiration for the man, Jenkins is nothing like Rhodes. Jenkins is tall, tall and thin with a small jaw and a large bulging forehead. Shiny. A body tight as a long pull of brittle taffy. Always clean-shaven; always in a three-piece suit, even in summer when the airless heat and the flies are altogether slow and sullen. But Herman rather admires this about Jenkins, his unfailing constancy.

It is Jenkins who teaches Herman how to keep the books, showing how everything should

balance. It might seem improbable, he concedes to the questioning newcomer, but balance it would if things were done properly. There is a right way and a wrong way, he tells his new pupil, and from the start a person must learn to distinguish.

“I trust you imagine yourself capable?” he’d asked the quiet young man on the first day.

The youth nodded.

“Excellent. Just what we need! Because everything, finally, is up to you.”

He’d noticed a shadow of doubt cross the young face. Offered a word of comfort.

“Well, of course I am here, my lad. I am here now. But one can never know. At any minute, I might be called away on other business.”

To higher service? wondered Herman, studying Jenkins’ face. The shininess. The length. He pictured his new boss rising in the ranks, higher and higher into the air. Then, inevitably, saw him falling. Unable to face what followed, Herman looked away and bent down to wipe the earth from his boots. Saw his face briefly distorted in his shiny toes. In a matter of minutes, he knew, the dust would have settled again. It was that hopeless.

Jenkins showed Herman the abacus in his office, the beautiful instrument with the beads aligned perfectly to the left, waiting to begin. Hard left. That was the natural starting point for any calculation in the right order of things, and even with all the present difficult business, the men knew this to be their job. Order the beads. Manage the people. Whatever it took to maintain.

Now Jenkins and Herman spend their days filing (fiscal reports), paging (through delivery reports), constructing (financial projection graphs), classifying (orderly, calculated narratives). Their findings are arranged in columns which are sent directly on to Mr Rhodes. By courier despatch or pigeon post or tapeworm. After a whole day of this, sometimes Herman cannot think straight anymore, though he knows that the shortest distance between two points or persons is necessarily a straight line.

A-----B or A or a_____b
l
l
l
B

Hermans turns the page sideways, just to be sure. There seems to be no difference; he remains uncertain about many things. The directions. The spaces. Orientations. How exactly does one determine?

He stops pondering. Returns to the ledger, and the figures. The figures, if properly aligned, will make perfect sense. They can be made to make sense.

According to Jenkins everything counts. That is the fundament of accounting. A point may seem minor, minimal, but you cannot be off. A single decimal entails major consequences. And when you start talking an entire digit – heaven forbid. Any schoolboy bent over an arithmetic primer must know as much, from the start.

At the books, Jenkins works deftly and smoothly, small hands and quick fingers which quickly make the marvellous patterns appear. His ease makes Herman self-conscious of the horrible skewed finger which he prefers to tuck into his trouser pocket when he can, hiding the ugly claw deep in the cupped crook of the pocket's seam. Herman's Habomination. The digit 7. Beckoning.

Herman knows he is not alone in the loss of personal perfection, but he still feels the damage as his, as only he can. Sometimes he thinks to himself of how many men in the town no longer have all their fingers. Wonders where lost limbs go, after meat, and then dust. And what of those who have lost their minds somewhere in the melee of earth and ropes and buckets, his thoughts shimmer, never a diamond in the haul? He doesn't know, but of all the towns in the region, Kimberley is perhaps the least even, the most unbalanced, the oddest big hole in a bucket of a place.

That woman he saw who walked around the town, pretending to be blind. The crazed man called Union Jack, who wandered the dirt town wrapped in nothing but a flag for cover, until he was clapped inside. Even the dog chained to the post at the bar, his gnawed barking had something to say about the fights to come, though Herman hadn't stayed around long enough to find out, and then someone put a bullet to the dog's head and then the owner pulled a gun of his own and then...Herman wasn't sure how it ended, but end it did.

The miners figure prominently in the town's messy equation. Their equation was an equilateral triangle hung by the tips on a washing line to dry. Their shoulders twice the width of their waists if you cared to calculate. They sat shoulder to shoulder in the taverns when they weren't shoulder to shoulder in the mine. Fingert shoulders, Herman thought. Others fathers and brothers in family lives parts of units in small housing units close to the shafts and closer to The Big Hole. The Biggest Hole. Die Grootste Gat. He'd filed reports under all the different names. The calculations measured the same. Universal reckonings, Herman knew although he liked to make sure.

Once a year the miner's enjoyed a night hunt for a great mythical *blesbok*. The Ghoom. They ran out in white sheets like incomplete ghosts, holes cut for eyes, fastened at the neck. Women stood on the edge of the town holding candles as their men ran off in all directions into the scrub. Herman always watches from his window. Holding his breath lest they find the buck and kill it but he knows they'd sooner trip over boulders and claim them for bones. Celebrations follow, the men returning to their women and the usual clamour ensues. Amplified fivefold for good measure. Rattle rattle and roll.

Jenkins is the one who lets him know that they're coming, slipping Herman a note as he himself leaves the office with a look that says Goodbye. Herman took the paper. Looked at it, big as a question mark. Remembers the weight of the world in his hand. The weighty way it clotted his tongue as he chewed the note to pulp, carrying the mush through town in the secret of his mouth. All the way to his room above the chemist shop. Inside, he'd taken out the small starchy lump and placed it on the wooden table. Stared at it for a while, as if there were something to see beyond a wet gob. Then he'd rolled the misshapen mess into a soft pill between his fingers, and swallowed.

He sat on his small bed which had stretched the length of the room. Studied the small wooden shelf he'd assembled when he'd moved in months ago, leaving his mother in the margins of the past, back where the convent had grown its stony roots. On the shelf, his files queued neatly along the plank. He remembers not feeling his feet. And he remembers not remembering how he packed his files and some clothes in a suitcase and locked the door behind him, sliding the key over the chemist's clean slab.

Still in his work suit, he walked through the town, still not feeling his feet yet one foot moved in front of the other until he arrived at a little farmhouse on the periphery of the mine. The green tin roof had rusted through. It made him think of camouflage, the leafy canopy of a humid jungle. The curtains blinked. A woman walked out the door holding a shot gun. She wasn't young. Looked about forty-five, with red hair that frizzed around her face out of a top-knotted bun like she'd been frazzled by an electric charge.

Keeping his eyes on the gun, Herman lowered his suitcase to the ground. Put his hands, open-palmed, above his head.

"They're coming for me. For all of us, now that there's war. I was told they'll keep us locked up somewhere until it's over."

Stupid. He'd wished he'd saved the letter now, since words were always taken for better truth when they were written down on paper, official paper all the more. In dark ink that didn't easily fade. Then the words would live long and clear, if not forever. Certainly long after the breath and vapour of the fearful sounds he'd just spoken.

The woman looked at him. She lowered the gun and motioned him inside, looking left and right into the empty veld.

"Sorry for the dust," she said. Small puffs followed him into the house like playful puppies.

His trouser legs were red to the calf. Inside, dust fell onto the floor, the patterned rug. He stood awkwardly.

"That mess is no matter," she said, "Not now. You've come just in time. My husband and some neighbours have planned a convoy. We're leaving soon. There's a commando not far

off, and the men are making the final arrangements.”

Her comment left no room in his mind for doubt. There would be a war and the majority ruled. Rounding up Herman thought. Getting rid of decimal figures although in this case there were many points after the place. Were it not for Jenkins, Herman would have thought this was all paranoia. That the Brits he interacted with every day couldn't turn on him. Definitely not serve him up on a neat garnished platter to the troops which would soon take up residence. Sly turns back in the direction they had once been like those distrustful 2s and 5s. You'd never see them coming.

He introduced himself to the woman, “Herman”. Tried to thank her. “I can't thank you enough.” Tried to explain. “When I found out, the news, I couldn't feel anything. I just started walking and now I'm here. I think perhaps we...”

“Lettie,” she interrupted. Suddenly she seemed busy and he regretted the intrusion.

The woman offered Herman a chair in a house that was barely there bare. One long room empty but for a few makeshift chairs near a dead hearth, and a girl. Wide-eyed. The widest autumn eyes Herman had ever seen. She looked about his age, on the edge of seventeen or just over, with incalculable freckles that bridged her nose, strayed out against her apple cheeks. He thought of lightly-toasted bread sprinkled with cinnamon and sugar. He felt so hungry. He'd never felt like this in his life. So it couldn't be hunger, then, could it?

He sat down in the chair opposite hers. It was dark in the room, a faint haze streaming through the thin curtains. He could just make out the remnants of logs.

“She is your daughter?” he asked the woman.

“This is Maria, my niece.”

Maria smiled at Herman. Adjusted her thick braid over her shoulder, as if pulling at a stray thought. For a while, Lettie hesitated, standing over them. Then she walked into the kitchen which Herman could just see through a broad doorway.

He began to count the wooden floorboards. The air would part with a butter knife. He has counted the boards three times before Maria speaks.

“Are you counting the floorboards?” There’s laughter in her voice.

“Uhh,” he doesn’t know what to say, so he speaks honestly. “Yes.”

“*Why?*” She asks too loudly. Her eyes sparkle.

Lettie peers around the corner, then returns to her work.

“Well, I don’t know. I’ve always notice the numbers of things. How many, and such.”

“Though I can’t imagine why you’d need to?”

“How. Why, When. There are many questions, I suppose, and I suppose someone should know in case one day things aren’t there anymore. What then?”

“So now it’s ‘what?’, also? You like complications.”

“No. It’s simple. It can happen that one day you need proof.”

“Me?”

“No, not you. Someone. Well, maybe you. Anyone. Us.”

“*Us?*” Maria laughed, looking playfully at him. “But what good is proof,” she goaded, “If really there’s nothing to prove?”

Herman couldn’t say. She was tying him in knots, the numbers spinning in his head.

“I like to keep records,” he said, as if that were an explanation. “Otherwise, perhaps nothing really exists. It’s only there when it’s there, but when it’s gone, what then? Everything would be gone and forgotten and for all intents and purposes it would never have been.”

“But who would ask? Who would know? And why would it matter once it’s gone?”

The questions began to annoy Herman. Snug borders which presumed to know where things began, and ended. He blurted, “So it wouldn’t matter that nobody had known you’d been alive after you’d died?”

“Well I wouldn’t know, would I? I’d be dead.” She seemed pleased with her answer and smiled, satisfied.

“You’re impossible.” He blew out a long frustrated breath.

They sat in silence. Thoughts swirled and stalled. The air grew too warm, and then it cooled. Much later, a man crashed clumsily through the front door. Lettie’s husband, Oom Ben. There were quick introductions and summaries; plans outlined. That night they all slept on blankets in the big living room. Herman could see the outline of Maria’s back, the rise and fall of her ribs. Before the lamps had been blown out, a large dark moth had flown in, settling in the high corner of the reed ceiling. Its wings made a pair of hands that reached across the walls like a stifled mask. Herman imagined dark, patterned eyes that could see them all, lying and waiting.

They leave before sunrise. A convoy of 25 men, 29 women, 14 children. The commando is sighted 13 kilometres from the town on a farm with loose soil that gives in under his feet. Herman grabs Maria, but Lettie is already pushing her into the back of the wagon, telling her to hide.

Then Herman runs. Runs. It is instinct. If you can call it running. For he is carrying his suitcase and his new bleeding heart and the case clunks against his thigh like stolen goods while his heart robs him of breath and his feet sink into the sand then flick it up, dust hazing everything. The loosely strewn sand makes a hissing sound, like a valve leaking. His own breathing.

Herman slides into the rough scramble of a mining claim. Shelters low. He can hear women screaming. Children crying. The convoy has been taken. He scrabbles at the sides of the hole, feeling for roots to grip, but it’s all hard, compacted earth. Nothing to hold. He feels his nails tear. An unbearable pain. He sits in the mining hole, shaking. Eventually it is quiet. The screaming has stopped. But he can still feel the voices clawing his ears. He looks up. Stares at a tight circle of stars. Nothing but the starred world, seen through a confused kaleidoscope.

The long night cuts through his coat. He tucks his cold fingers under his knees. His hands are stinging. He feels the hardened cloth of his trousers. He squeezes his knees closer together. His crooked finger aches.

Herman stays in the hole for two days, sun and moon, shading himself against the heat with

his suitcase which he holds heavily above his head until his arms can take no more. By then, he feels nothing.

By chance, a wandering commando spots a crazed stranger in a random hole. He will not speak. Cannot? He is limp. They pull him out and load him up and take him back to camp, 10 kilometres to the east he thinks. He cannot be sure of much in his state.

That is where Herman stays. Right there. Where else was there to go? Plus, Hiver is there. The man who shakes like a branch in the wind. Hiver, who met Herman when he was first brought in, who offered him his hand as if he were still human and able to stand firm, to shake hands without shaking.

So for Herman, as Herman is then, the camp is the world.

Herman begins his collecting after the first battle. The siege lasts 123 days, and in that time Herman comes to, collects his wits and establishes himself as a writer of unasked for reports, a keeper of untold tolls. Tolls of injury and death and belonging, belongings. Lists scribbled on scraps of paper. Even lists. Balancing numbers as best he could to find the symmetry. The pattern.

He thought of Jenkins back then. The careful lessons. He wondered what had become of that office, whether it was open to the sky; whether Jenkins would plug the holes. If Jenkins could. He surely would, wouldn't he, if he had the chance? Though Herman had begun to think that perhaps everything had changed in the balance, that things were altogether different, now, and that perhaps even Jenkins had also been driven underground into the mining tunnels, to live like a mole with the rest of them. Was that possible? Herman thought so much he didn't know what to think.

After the siege, the commando broke camp and got ready to move on, defeated. Driven back by the French, with their superior numbers and fire power. Before they left, Herman drew a map of the town from the observation balloon. The map had holes through the roofs he can see. Bullet-shaped holes through the corrugated roofs. Some of the walls crumbled out into the street. The blesbok statue was on the border of the opposite side of town. For a moment he saw it polished, in the centre of a large crowd. The horns were sharp dorings. Or office spikes. Herman saw pages and pages. Impala. Impaled.

In his dream he jumps on the blesbok and skitters through the town, clutching the ridged spiral horns. The buck climbs up and up, up Voorhuitzigt, till the ground turns to bloodied bodies. The hooves catch in the mangled heap and animal and rider fall into a black hole. Bottomless. But at the bottom, Herman wakes and wades through shifting sand to find Maria, dead at his feet. Maria, who suddenly is also his grandfather, cracked through the spine like a red pomegranate, body opened to bloodied stone. He can count the vertebrae. One person, two people, three people, four. Potatoes and potatoes more. His tongue feels cold in his mouth. The hole fills up. Shovels of sand are shovelled in from the top of the hole. Herman curls into a ball and turns to stone so the worms can't get him.

The commando takes the train east and sets up camp in the hills near Ladysmith where reinforcements have been called in. Herman shares a car with Hiver and they play cards. The sway of the train on its rails sways other men asleep, and they hold their hands close to their chests. Hiver smokes, his pipe shaking in his hands. Swaying. Littering its ash along the floor at his feet. There is a knock at the door. A broad Englishman asks if he can take a photograph. The other men in the car clamber into the shot. Hiver and Herman remain behind them, playing cards. The long arm flashes. A flash quick as lightning. They're cut out of the frame.

Some soldier says, "He's always on the train. Always taking pictures."

Then the route changes.

The train appears to travel through the brush that licks the carriage.

Herman looks out the window.

Hiver sits in the chair opposite him,

"Where are the rails headed?"

Herman replies, "I can't see any".

Dear Jude

How to put this all together. Words. Feelings. A problem that's haunted me all my life. Now, the past is tied around my tongue. My tongue has become a dead fish, wrapped in newspaper.

I'm sitting at my desk now. The desk. The same one from our family home. I sat there at that desk for so many hours when you were young. Trying to work. Watching you play outside. You'd crouch behind the rose bushes, digging tiny graves for dead insects. There was a ceremony to it, I could see, a solemn procedure. Because you respected procedure. You always have.

You'd pick up the lifeless bodies. The carapaces of beetles, spiders, crickets. Sometimes lizards and snails. You'd place the dead creature in the hole you'd shaped for it, a shadow of itself, then sprinkle the gutted earth gently as water. Then pat the mound, firming it down over the pit. Afterwards, you'd look into the sun and I would swear I could see your lips move, tracing your own language.

Once you caught me watching, do you remember? You were about five. As you lowered your eyes, ending your prayers or pleas, whatever it was, you spotted me. How cross you got. Your little face registered surprise, then immediately stiffened with indignation. You stormed off into the shed. I heard you yank the door. And then I heard the screams. Do you remember that? You'd stood on a rusted rake. Three bloodied spokes jammed into your right foot.

The memory feels like looking into a mirror. Those three brutal stabs. You sat on your mother's lap, crying into her neck while the wad of white tissues she gripped around your foot seeped red. And you flashed me a fierce red look. Hurt. Angry. And after that there was no graveyard and the insects just died and lay dead. I'd never noticed how many dead things there were before you stopped.

I sit here at this desk and forget there's a pen in my hand. The word for it. P E N. When I remember it - P E N - I o pen my mouth and say 'pen', many times. Over and over until it sounds as unfamiliar as a beetle trapped in my mouth. Pen, pen, pen, pen, pen, pen, pen, pen. So I write it many times over. Pen pen pen pen pen pen pen pen pen pen pen pen. And even

then the letters don't happen to make sense. Can letters add up? Who knows the number of times I have tried, and failed. I bite the blue lid fixed to the end of the pen. I bite hard. My teeth make ridges into the plastic. That might do it. Maybe that'll mark my memory.

Although I doubt it Jude. I have my doubts, if nothing else.

Pen. Book, paper, table, chair, wall, door, bed, -ink. Each day more words disappear, though the objects don't stop existing. They are there, I can see them, but they are becoming invisible to my mind, falling away like tumbling letters even as there they remain. Right there. I can touch things. The thing in my hand I drink from. The other, where I startle awake from sleep, and find myself tangled in the tangled. I am trying to show you how it is, Jude, though you can never really know. Slowly, the space of everything is narrowing. My mind is sparse. Yet full of sudden flooding. Each day, as things get less, more things, forgotten things, they rush in. I am overcome by the memories I've always kept at bay. It's more real than life itself. I cling to the memories, pathetic, yes, but true. For fear that I will fall away. I sit in front of the mirror, sometimes, and practice like an actor, mouthing I, I, I. Me, me, me, me. I let the words do their work, lips and tongue and cheek, reminding myself. I say the words to myself, an incantation, perhaps, a prayer even? Over and over so they're material in the world again. I, I, I.

Memory is a funny thing. Being present. What it is to exist? Is the past any less real than today?

I know. I know, my son. Raising such large questions. Long questions that go round and round in the heads of old men who listen for their hearts when even the dogs are sleeping.

Soon, I will lose pen. What then? Will pen continue writing without a name? When book, paper, table, chair, wall, door, bed and sink are gone will I live? In a memory room, surrounded by dead faces? And when I am gone, what then? Will the room be closed up forever? Where will I be, I wonder?

You will wonder why I'm writing, after all these years. So many angry, silent years. Well, a woman has found me. Can you imagine that? Me, a dying star hidden in a black sky. She wants to hear my story, Jude. My testimony, she calls it, the story of the fire and what happened after. She came by today and she will come tomorrow and then I think I would

have said it all. Things I could never say to your mother and later the things I could never say to you.

Perhaps it is a stranger's anonymity that has allowed me to unwind the wire that has been barbed around my words. Or maybe it's regret. Maybe men in their old age need to bury their truths like a dog buries a bone.

I could never talk to you. Even as a young child you were always so angry. That made it difficult. You were a rebuke to me, something unsettling lodged in the heart of our home. You won't recall, but as a baby you cried and cried. Shrieking. It wouldn't stop. Your mother thought it was the colic, that's what the doctors said too, but I think you always knew. You could sense death. You had been born into it, and you knew. And so you grew around it. What choice did you have? Because that's what a child had to do. Grow. And you grew into yourself around my silence into your own inexpressible void. I imagine it growing around your organs, separating them from each other. I think how your heart must have hardened until you were impenetrable. Silence, in that house. Mine. Yours. Both of us freighted with the unspoken. You turning more and more into the morose, unseen words that I know you buried in your journal.

I would like you to understand. If it's not too late. Understand the weight of my memories. The burden I could never share with you. An inheritance can be too heavy to bear, my son, and so I shut myself off, thinking I would protect you, keep you from the invisible fire that torched my mind every day, burning, relentlessly burning.

I anticipated the fire, all these years. The waiting made me hold my breath each time you or your mother left the house. The space of waiting; the certainty of what would one day come. But my constant anxiety only annoyed you, I could see. For you, there was no reason to live on needles. And you thought I was overly stern. Too strict. You thought I was unreasonable. It's how children think.

But perhaps I was. Everything you thought.

I am sorry Jude.

I never I never meant to cage you in the shadow of my secrets. But even now I hesitate to haul you into the light. It's force of habit, you see. That and the slowly extracted

pain of transference. I am afraid it will drag me under. And I am afraid for you when I know what could be yours to carry.

Your morose books cannot contain what I have carried. Not even your character Klein, who time and again meets a person's eyes across a busy room and in that second he enters through the opened window and walks into another life, a life he could have, with this woman or that man. These are beautiful lives, but also half lives, years filled with regret. Your Klein chooses neither. In your stories the window begins to disappear so he pulls himself through it back into the bustling room and the chance is lost forever. It makes me sad. It fills me with a strange longing. I have Klein on my shelf along with your Krister, the man who carries the pain of the people he has touched, absorbing their sadness like a conducting rod, scarred with electric burns.

Your stories used to trouble me. But your mother, she understood them. I suppose she had a way of reading you, our son. A boy who lived in his own world, closed off from the rest of us. Perhaps she could see that you weren't so different, after all. The way she looked at me sometimes. Your mother.

It may surprise you that I have read your stories. Well, I have. Many times. The spines of the books have split; some of the pages are loose. I've stitched the books back together so often that when I open them the seams resemble a smashed loom. Such a tangle of threads. Perhaps I could trace the lines back to the beginning, but that's a foolish thought, I know. It's too late, isn't it? Is it too late?

1978

I'd left my parents sitting outside on a wooden bench pushed up against the wall. Now, I sat in a small square room on a plastic chair. The bulb looked bare, though it was encased in a grubby glass shade, a bubbled design, amber, an off yellow colour which might have come with age. The poor light cast shadows in the room.

A large man sat in the chair opposite mine. Between us was a square wooden table, the edges chewed by invisible insects. The man had a bristly *snor* that hid his upper lip, and a heavy, stolid manner, as if gravity had a tighter grip on him than on the rest of us. I studied him secretly, waiting.

The drive to the police station had been silent. Dad, mom, me. Gran had been left behind despite her protests. No one spoke the whole way. I sat alone in the back seat staring out the window, watching the moon tailing the car whichever way we curved. From the highway the town was all lights, twinkles that waned and extinguished if you stared at them too long without blinking. We passed the lakebed and I saw hundreds of bones, ivory carcasses heaped under the pale light.

We pulled into a dirt lot in front of the police station, a long flat-roofed structure like a train car. Stunted cacti still in black nursery packets stood along the wall of the glass entrance. My parents spoke to the man behind the desk while I sat on a wooden bench. He made quizzical eyebrows, then walked around to crouch beside me, fish eyes staring. They would have to ask me some questions.

I glanced anxiously at my parents, but they nodded.

"*Mom!*" I panicked. She shook her head as if she wasn't shaking it, like no one else but me should see. What? I couldn't believe this was happening. I mean, just like that. And in I went.

"Had you seen this man before?"

"And you say he was of Cuban descent?"

"This letter, was it oddly weighted?"

"Did it have strange lumps or bumps?"

"Any visible stains on the paper?"

"And the odour?"

"What about a return address?"

"Was he"

"Was it"

"Did it"

"Can you"

What? The police made me very uncomfortable, then gave me a blanket although it was 32 degrees out. The itchy fibres irritated my skin.

They seemed interested that he was a foreign seaman, soon to re-embark. Interested, too, in the shape of his eyes, whether they slanted up or down. The questioner placed a stubby forefinger at the outer crease of each eye, then lent in towards me, very close, demonstrating: Was it this? Or that? I was scared, but also angry. What the hell were they *asking*? And how should I know the difference, I thought, when I had merely looked at the stranger when he spoke to me, asking me about someone called Anna. So he had eyes, that's all. Big deal. And he wasn't blind. What else was there to say?

"He looked nice," I said curtly, pleased with my refusal to deliver.

And the police guy shook his head mockingly, saying "Girlie girlie girlie. You silly girls."

Just then my father came in to say he was going back to the house with an officer who would fetch and secure the letter. It was needed as evidence. My mother would wait at the station until I was done.

"Ching chong cha!" the questioner exclaimed suddenly, flicking through the gestures and showing the flat hand which meant paper, though he had not invited me to play. I had no inclination, anyway. Honestly, if I was pissed off with the situation, part of me was starting to get edgy. I felt a bit nauseous. What was going on?

There was no answer except my stomach gagging, clutched in a curdled grip. I imagined a

yellowed strainer of clotted milk, rapidly souring in the sun. Granny panties. Crocheted doilies.

We returned home as the sun rose beyond the freeway. Another hot day. Heat. Again. Plus I was frazzled. Plus the drive back seemed so much longer than the journey out, because now the car was weighed down with some crappy load, something that was still taking shape. Past the mute deadweight I stared out the window, ticking off the leafless trees, their bleak backlit arms leaning in shadows against the tar. My parents said nothing. Big surprise. I said nothing. Ditto. My hands were knotted in my lap, my shoulders hunched. I tried not to shiver.

The night before played through my mind as if I were a spectator. I saw myself stare through the officer repeating his question. Cadet grey eyes set deep apart, studying my pale skin. Determined to make an impression. The man with the fish eyes came in and gave me tea. It was too sweet, but I sipped it at the end of each question, making time, watching the officer above the rim of the mug, pausing an immeasurable number of seconds until eventually he turned into a rock and pounded the table with a fist. That's when my mother had rolled in, and when she was ushered out almost at the same time. Didn't make a fuss about it though. My eyes trailed to the door as screeching brakes strained outside in the lot, crunching gravel and dirt. Imagined Anna's letter in my father's hands.

The radio crackled as my mother tuned the station through static, searching for her serial, *Brug oor Satansvallei*. Father was out in the shed, appraising planks and mitre joints with his spirit level. I sat on the living room floor on a mismatch of layered carpet that my mother had salvaged and quilted. The end result was an oval of blood orange, tropical florals, pastel geometrics and dark sensible cuts; plush pile mixed with rough rows of level loops in a synthetic fibre for scratching dirt from under shoes. Of course it itched. She looked at me, meaning stop fussing, but I tried to focus on the book I was holding. Plus I was still sore. At her. From everything. The words made crazy ant chain letters on the stained page. Four nights had passed since the trip to the police station. I'd spent my days reading, or pretending to. Because I needed to avoid my parents and their endless burning eyes.

The weather had turned. The stiff headwinds and dust devils had gone, and the fug of smog had settled upon us all. Abandoned by the wind the town was inert, and such stillness seemed

to call for a reverent silence inside the house. My parents didn't talk much in the day. Who knows. As if sunlight would show up the dark marks of their words. At night though, then I heard them whisper through the dry wall that separated their bedroom from the passage.

Grandmother slept through the days, said she couldn't take the sun's fire; that she'd end up six feet under before the second rising if she had to live here much longer. She sat behind me, trying to rouse the air from sleep with her brisé fan, an inheritance from my great great grandmother. The fan was all ivory pinnacles, a skinny web of stretched albino bat wings and veined cream lace. It looked pretty in her ugly hands, which were mottled blue and green and purple, as if she'd been bottled for some time. Poor Granny. She hid her hands when she could under old-fashioned gloves but the weather this time of year, it simply wouldn't permit her to hide. So she had to be as she was.

The station rose clear, a voice preening through the speakers. "The Nu-Shop. Clothing Your Family for Generations. Quality, value and price since 1948. New branches now open throughout Natal and the Transvaal." It ended on an upward inflection as if the message were a question that needed an answer. But any uncertainty was immediately neutralised by the deep, serious voice of the news: "In a recent update: a foreign national has died in police custody in Durban's Point Police Station. The man, accused of conspiring to commit an act of terrorism, was seized two days ago while attempting to board the vessel Pantalis A Lemos. Officials confirm that the man, found dead in his cell this morning, had died under mysterious circumstances. The case is pending."

I freaked. Jumped up like they were after me, making straight for the front door. Just enough sense to grab my takkies from the veranda, and then jeez, I ran. Closing my eyes against the bilious paving, the thick, jagged ends painted that sick yellow. Bile burnt my throat, the space behind my nose. I couldn't help it. I heaved. Hurlled green stuff just outside the gate.

I heard my mother yell at me from the door. Either bitching or worried, I couldn't tell. Then she shouted through the house for my father, out back. Her voice echoed, but I couldn't make out what she was saying.

Running. In that heat. The tar was so sticky it could be a second skin. Burning. As I ran, I

stumbled, struggling to slip the takkies on mid stride, double hopping on each leg before getting it right. The raw air seared my chest; my heart beat in my ears. I ran. I ran until the town faded behind me and all I could see was the Mobil sign. You know the flying Pegasus at the petrol station? It was stuck there on the tall pole, skewered an angry red, full on fierce, so angry I see its fiery breath scorching me. That was some crazy beast. Snorting. Enraged. Steam spewing from its nostrils and rushing back, furred into the bright neon wings. In my mind the demon had red eyes fixed fanatically on the road ahead. It reared up, dripping blood. Oh the fear I felt. The Bible. The Bible. Apocalypse. How many times had Granny warned me and I had been deaf. But part of me must have been listening after all.

I did that sometimes. Made myself scared. I had to stop. I had to run. I ran until my muscles burnt and my mouth was bitter. I spat. Gall or something stung behind my nose, causing my eyes to tear up, and I almost allowed myself to cry. Stupid.

I passed the town gardens – a few shrivelled trees, dead of leaves, bark peeling – which soon gave way to dry scrub. Shrunken succulents collapsed in the veld like carcasses. Armoured skulls sanded smooth by wind. Everywhere lay shrivelled pelts and crackled bones, piles fallen loosely over one another. A terrible tumbled totem, that's all we had left. Nothing else. No animal in flesh or spirit. Certainly nothing truly human. The few cacti that survived had thick stubby spikes in barbed rosettes. Or longer thorns like bayonet blades, brown spines sharp as stabbing spears. It was a place determined to make you understand the word of warning.

I stayed clear, slowing down to a walk. My chest ached. I stood half bent, hands on my hips, gathering breath in the dusk. It was getting dark out now. Steam exhaled from the tar in the silver glint of a reluctant rising moon; it was almost too much effort. Yet the pallid light, the curling wisps, they seeped through my tired feet into consciousness, reminding me that the skin above my ankles stung with the feel of salt on an open wound. I looked down. Takkies. Blood. My heels were torn pink where blisters had formed and opened, rubbing raw. Seeing such wounds, at once I hurt, so I slipped off my shoes (pulling gently past the crusts) and carried the takkies hooked in my fingers. I told myself to buck up and I carried on walking. As I'd run, so now I walked. Walked until even the last street ended, and the land was pared down to blackened brush and painted lines, the roads illuminated by the weak light of distant

stars and a sparse, hangnail moon. I was in it, now. This was for real. What do they usually say? Oh ja: 'There was no turning back'.

My eyes adjusted to the dark. Saw a cane rat scamper across the path. An unexpected sign of life. I stopped. It stared. Black marble eyes. A pearly hang tooth snagged below its chin. Leave well alone, I figured. Live and let live. I made a wide arc and the rat moved on into the blackout. Weird. How Granny's mottos always came back to me. They were like sugared sweets that you couldn't just scoff because they were hard and chalky. You had to suck on them for a long time, and when you looked again, the words had disappeared. The writing. The raised edges. Next thing, there was nothing but a sliver on your tongue, and after that, nothing at all except the memory of a taste.

The earth growled and creaked. Cricked sad old bones. The scrub rustled and there was an even tapping in the distance. Some insect signalling. In the quiet, I heard the country as an echo from years gone by, a web of intersecting scratches and rustles and flapping. Not a human voice to be heard. Only the darkness, coming alive. I hadn't ever known. About three metres ahead I spotted the tail end of a snake, smooth and supple as a sjambok. It slithered away. Slick liquid. Dark vinyl. Choking leather. As the snake disappeared into the dry underbrush, I watched the ground ahead of my feet slipping into the depressions of tar. There was nothing much to see, so I just walked on.

It felt like hours had passed and slowly thoughts returned. I wondered if he'd known. That it was me. How it must have felt. To be about to leave, and then you're caught. To be caught and then you're *dead* for pete's sake. *Just like that.* That was just too much, you know, even for here.

The tar at the side of the road dropped into a deep gully and I walked in it, precariously, needing to punish myself, my arms hanging, fingers numb and bloodless. Then without warning, the ground ahead began to lighten, a slow, slowly rising sweep. Dark shapes formed at my feet, stretched out, pouring thickly on the road in a viscous oil sliding down a slope. I turned. Headlights. Spotlighting me from behind.

A white Datsun pulled up, half across my path. Cutting me off. The windows were down, and

the tape deck or something blasted the Radio Rats ZX Dan. *My name is ZX Dan, I am a spaceman. My galaxy is doomed, so I've moved to your moon. So turn up your radio, and play me that rock and roll, Stop feeling so blue- I'm coming down to you. I've watched you on my screen, you're sweet, sweet sixteen I've monitored your mind, You're just the loving kind...* I stood there, long dry grass scratching my legs. Ears pounding. And my heart? Well, the less said. Inside the car were four soldiers in their browns. Suddenly the music died. *Meet me tonight at your window; Dress warmly for absolute zero...*

"Out here very late, pretty lady," observed the driver. He looked about twenty. Dark eyes and sandy hair, the little he had, shorn short in the regulation style. Thin lips that weren't unattractive, the mood I was in. I wondered what he'd do if I leant over and kissed him, hard.

"And you think it's a good idea, hey? What about things that go bump in the night...bump bump, humpy bumpy?"

The boys all laughed. I didn't.

Out here isn't safe for young girls you know."

I nodded. A small weak movement. Though I wanted to say that I wasn't actually so young. That a girl couldn't be, living around here, like this. In this place, you grew up pretty fast if you intended to grow at all. Take it or leave it. And so eventually I was leaving.

"Where you going?" a boy chirped from the back seat. "Cause we could take you. If you want." They looked like brothers, two of them, the driver a bit older, though that might have been only the uniforms and the military heads. Brothers in arms. I couldn't really tell. They could take me, I supposed. If that's what I wanted.

The soldiers grinned at me. Waiting. In the passenger seat, a short dark boy with grey-green eyes and thick black eyebrows. A butterscotch blond guy in the back. The door was flung open before I could answer and I was scooted along the back seat, passed quickly hands over till I sat snug in the middle.

It wasn't unpleasant. It felt pleasant enough. Pleasantly uncertain. Safe or unsound, I didn't quite know or care. Then the car idled to life and spat off, spinning in the ditch, shooting to the centre of the road before veering back into the left lane. Soon the boys were laughing like lunatics. I smelt acrid, smoking treads. The radio was turned way up again, drowning the engine. *The whole of outer space, is tuned into the human race. From pole to frozen pole, your world transmits rock & roll. So turn up your radio, and play me that rock and roll, Stop feeling so blue- I'm coming down to you.*

The fit at the back was tight. Wedged between the boys, my skin was slicked on the leather seats, wet behind my thighs, under my knees. It made me self-conscious. I wondered about myself. If and maybe. What if. Would I.

I had to get a grip.

"So where you going?" asked the younger brother.

"Nowhere." Which sounded stupid.

Silence for a while.

"But," he leant in closer speaking into my ear over the music, "everyone has somewhere to go. Or has to go somewhere..."

"Well. I suppose I'm going away."

"Away. That's not really a destination."

"It is if you're from here. Away is where I want to go."

He laughed. Butterscotch dug into a bag stuffed under the passenger seat and pulled out a clear, squared bottle, three quarters full, golden brown. The label had dulled, though I assumed the contents weren't black tea.

The younger brother resumed. "So what's your name? Or must girls who are going away remain nameless?" He chuckled, enjoying his own joke.

"Rachel," I lied.

"Makes sense, pretty girls always have pretty names. At least that's true."

A flush welled up my neck, spilling hotly onto my cheeks. That's what always happened. I became a splotchy red and white carnation. But he seemed to like the effect he had on me, and beamed, then stared for a second out the window.

Butterscotch nudged my arm with his elbow, offering me a swig. The sweet smell caught in the back of my throat, which was still raw from the gagging. Christmas cake lit in a paraffin flame. My nose filled with the heat. "No thanks." He didn't seem too fazed and prodded the younger brother with the head of the bottle, his golden forearm brushing casually across my chest. He wasn't bothered by this either. The younger brother drank seas deep until Eyebrows objected and reached over towards the backseat, contorting, grabbing his share.

"Bladdy bliksem man!"

Eyebrows hit him. A sharp blow to the cleft chin. The klap of jaws like a trap snapping. The car swerved to the right, the headlights splaying in a risky stream across the road. My head whipped back as the car righted, and I slid on the slick leather into Butterscotch's lap. The younger brother grabbed my t-shirt at the sleeve stretching it down, ripping the shoulder seam and exposing a ragged zigzag of pale flesh. My shirt hung loose across the front. In the red tail lights I saw the tire marks on the tar, the printed belly of a charred snake.

Luckily we hadn't hit anything, and only because there was nothing to hit. Just the tar unfolding as it pitched lighter in the beam and then fell back to black. I saw steam, or was it tire burn? Had we spun out that fast?

I looked down at my chest, remembered my body under the loose shirt. A cotton bra. Two ribbon straps knotted for adjustment. I thought of the soft white fabric touching my skin.

Two white triangles like ghostly hands. A defenceless 'I surrender'. I noticed the younger brother eyeing me.

"*Fok!*" the elder brother shouted, and sliced Eyebrows over the back of the head with a quick flip of his flat hand.

Everyone laughed and he snatched the bottle back, pulling a swig, his eyes fixed on the road. Then he passed the bottle over the headrest to his brother. His arm looked weird. Like a crane. The broken neck of a crane.

"You okay?" the younger brother asked eventually.

I nodded. He didn't apologise for anything, only smiled again, his mouth impossibly wide. Tilted his head back to the bottle, which was by now running on empty. "We all dry here brother!" he yelled at Butterscotch, gesturing at the dregs, swirling before slukking it down. Butterscotch fumbled beneath the seat and pulled out another bottle.

About an hour had passed and the boys sang along to the songs on the radio. Why Can't It Rain by McCully Workshop Inc. *Looking at the sun in the clear blue sky. Shaking my head and wondering why. WHY CAN'T IT RAIN, WHY CAN'T IT RAIN, WHY CAN'T IT RAIN...* They howled out the windows and pounded on the car doors. I was grateful for the noise. Their calls echoed far into the valley sounding back to places in the past, expanding in the void with Doppler drones and dark energy. I felt a bit crazy. I realised I didn't even know where they were going.

"Where you headed exactly?" I asked the younger brother.

He breathed sour sweet breath hot into my face. "Tailing you, sweet cakes."

"So you're also going away?" I picked up the game from before.

"Hell, we're gone already, baby. Long gone." He snickered. Abruptly turned serious.

"Everything's gone in the night, you know, like it's the days you have to worry about. In the

light..."

And he rolled the window right down and stuck his head out and howled like a wolf at the moon. AWROOOOOO... One cry after another, wrenched from his tight throat, loosed into the night. Afterwards, he didn't look at me, just rested his head quietly on the sill.

But evidently he'd started something, and not to be outdone, Eyebrows pulled himself out onto the window frame, where he sat, balanced, his feet inside on the car seat. He drummed the roof, a rock star performance that turned the car into a tin. My ears. The boys didn't even seem to hear. Butterscotch passed a bottle out the window, clear this time. Vodka? No, just empty. There was a pause while Eyebrows took aim at the rocks on the shoulder of the road - and then *smash*.

The first bottle hit, the shatter ricocheting, crunched under the rear tires. In the tail lights the shards were road kill, a bony dog I'd seen once, dragged and splintered on the freeway. We were sending it along the road; Eyebrows gripped the roof with both hands, steadying his grip as Butterscotch passed missile number two. The wind battered through his shirt like a ragged flag and in the supercharge from the open window, my hair whipped at my temples, snap snap, a wig to be torn from my scalp. I felt it. Felt alive to my roots. Ready to let rip. I started to scream (was that *me?*), and someone yanked me back inside, laughing and shoving.

The second bottle connected, the sound of gunshot against rock, and Eyebrows snatched the third in his right hand, tossing it underhand, *through the car*, aiming for the back right window. *Jesus!* I heard the neck connect with the window frame, decapitated. I felt a spray of sharp fragments powdered in my lap. When I looked, the younger brother was shielding his face with his arm.

"Logie man, get down you *mal* fuck!"

But while Logie had slipped back inside the car, he didn't sit down. He wedged himself between the front seats, facing backward, fixed on the stretch of road we were leaving behind. He was grinning. Admiring his work. He didn't care if the driver couldn't see. The rearview mirror? So what man, make a plan! And what was to see, out here in the sticks? He

didn't care about seeing anything else when he could see what he needed in the dark, all the sharp, sparkly shards glinting in the distance, and sprinkled inside the cab.

The smallest pieces nestled in the hem of my denim shorts. The dye was patchy, and ran down the fabric dripping indigo and baby blues like some weird, washed-out blood. The hairs on my thighs glistened thin and white. They caught the light like glass.

After a long while the soldier's gaze shifted to the younger brother who sat picking shards out his arm, thin streaks of red muddied along his wrist.

"Man down! Attention man down. Execute situation 115A, I repeat this is a code 115A, execute."

His mock megaphone was quickly cut off. "Shut up already you asshole. This really hurts. Pull over. Right here. Here, man! It looks flat for a while."

The Datsun slowed, pulling off the road, coming to a stop on a patch of bald earth. The younger brother got out first, nursing his arm just below the elbow, assessing the damage. The others piled out after him. I sat in the car and watched them in the headlights. Torsos chopped off mid-thigh.

I picked glass out of my lap, studying the jagged fallen stars. The younger brother leaned on the bonnet and poured what was left in the bottle over his cuts. Flinches. The effect in the lights was black and gold. Dripping and congealing. There were dark spots in the sand at his feet.

The others wanted him to hurry up. They were kicking up the dust, which lay thinly over stone. I heard their boots connect. They walked around, restless. Over here. Over there. Feral dogs searching for a mark. Butterscotch peed against a thorn tree, his back illuminated by the car. He was firing a gun, hips completely into it, pushed forward. The others did the same. Logie went straight into the light of the headlamps, like it was a great show. He grinned at me in the darkness of the back seat. I'd seen that face before. The type. I remembered the framed photos in the GP's office, the old doctor straddling his kill, rifle upright, the mouth of the

animal gaping, held open by a stick.

To the right of the car there was an outcrop with a wide, flat top. About four metres high. A blunt, clumsy knob that could have been hacked out of the earth with primitive tools, a clay epidermis streaked grey to startling red.

I was almost done with the glass when the older brother stuck his head through the door.

“Time for doughnuts! You in, pretty girl?”

The other two got ready, hauling a couple large rocks out the clearing, into the scrub. Groaning. Loud thuds. Noises that should have woken the birds and sent them flying, except there were none. Nothing but the night I thought. And us.

“So, you in or what?” the older brother asks again, leaning against the door frame. He made the proposition seem enticing. The knots in my stomach pulled tighter, lurching heavily between heart and pit. I shook my head.

“You don't say much do ya?”

No answer needed, so I shrugged and smiled, shifting along the backseat, a handful of glass in my fist, careful not to cut my legs on any slivers that had caught in the fabric. The night suddenly seemed so still. Too still, after everything. I crossed the road, skipped over a raised tar mound, landing with both feet on the other side. I dug a hole with my hands in the shallow dirt. Everything was hard as nails. Carefully I buried the splinters in the hole and patted the earth on top of it.

Across the road the boys were busy; shouting. Geometrically mapping marks with dry branches and dead grass which they pulled out in tufts closer to the roadside above the dust bowl. The crude signs seemed to indicate sharp turns, spots for braking. I took my time walking back to them, my eyes searching. I was looking for the younger brother but couldn't find him. My legs were beginning to ache.

I reached the boys just as they scrambled into the car. Logie saw me coming first.

“I’ll sit this one out,” he said and closed the back door. Bang. An echo to the moon. The two left in the car were making bpuk bpuk bpuk chicken noises. Clucking and cocking their heads back and forth, wrists at their chests. It made me laugh. Logie shot me a look.

“You want we should call your mommy?” Butterscotch poked the stick further into the nest.

“No, I’ve called yours already. She’s real excited. I promised her a good ride, just like last time.”

The older brother laughed and turned the ignition. Butterscotch swore under his breath. They pulled off like demons and immediately the night sky hazed over with dust. I wondered where the younger brother was, where he could have gone out here. I mean, there was nowhere. No truck stops or restrooms in either direction. I searched the black-eyed pit one last time. Came up empty.

After the headlights my eyes adjust, toning pitches of black to a faint grey. The sky fosters a crested moon. My easy sight made me feel nocturnal. I grew hair and scaled feet. I scurried over to the boulder and sat, my back against the rough red rock, still warm from the day. The spot faced away from the pit where the boys were going nuts in the car. My feet pointed towards the dawn, which would come up over the road. I pulled my knees up, clasping them to my chest.

Logie sat next to me. I wondered if he could see as well as I could, in the black. I don’t bother asking. He sat too close. I expected warmth but he was like a black hole. He absorbed the heat and reflected none. He lounged with his legs stuck straight out, arms behind his neck.

“Starry night.”

He gestured.

“Over there. *Die drie koninge*,” he seemed about to grab them out the sky.

I looked. I'd seen them before, though my mother called them *die drie susters*. Typical, I thought. That a guy would go big, and a woman would keep it in the family.

“You see them?”

I nodded, already looking the other way. Where could he be? Logie wasn't discouraged.

“It's supposed to be part of a belt, see; that point is the tip of the spear. The whole thing is a hunter.” He wet his lips.

I heard the car swerve close to the rock and the boys yelled out the window. The headlights passed over us, lighting Logie's face. I wondered if I also looked so pale.

Logie stretched, and let an arm drop behind my shoulders. With the other hand he continued to point out stars.

“The really bright one is Venus.” The star glowed, a strange, faint red. “You know what they say, hey. She's the Goddess of Love.” He moved towards me. I moved my head away, pretending to concentrate on the sky. That's how remote I felt from him, even at this close distance.

“You know from up here you can also see Uranus, Logie,” the younger brother's head suddenly popped up from behind the rock, his profile dark against the stars. I'm sure I almost sighed with relief. Logie tightened his grip around my shoulders.

“Leave her man. She's tired.” The two boys started to stare each other down.

Then the younger brother called me. Called me into play. “Rachel, you should come check the view from up here. I guarantee it's better.”

He held his good arm out and I braced my leg against the surface of the rock so he could pull me up. I felt the balanced weight of it, his body, mine. And then we were on the level and he let go, lying down on his back, hands cushioning his head. I did the same. I don't know where

Logie went; we ignored him.

Overhead the sky stretched out in an ashy black veil.

He hummed. *Each cigarette will light a thousand faces. The shade is passing like a thousand years. Midnight was turning into empty spaces. The sound of laughter'd disappeared.*

A Smokie tune I recognised from Springbok radio. I'll Meet You At Midnight.

Far beneath us, in the clearing, the car spun and splayed, burning rubber and kicking up dirt. I imagined the veld was scored with galactic rings, layers of them, twisting and smashed, like a world whirling out of control.

He reached over and touched the back of his hand against mine.

A part of my mind turned to Angelo. The letter. In his lined hands. An atlas I'd thought, my world was spinning now.

My heart clenched. Not now. I'm not ready. I held back. But then in the dark I closed my eyes and held the younger brother's hand.

"So there's a general night pass, from the base. But some people have to stay behind for security. That's us. We got picked."

I must have looked confused.

"It's no Christmas, I'm telling you, so we just left. We been driving for a day and a half now. Just anywhere. So there'll be trouble, later, when we go back. If. But I suppose we have to. I don't know what'll happen, exactly, AWOL and that, but I don't care. All the shit going down, you got to get your kicks somehow, you know. Otherwise you go nuts."

I nodded like I knew what he meant. In my town there wasn't much about kicks. Stuff for kids to do. And if there was, I didn't know about it. There were a few older kids from school who

went out to the veld at night, or they smoked outside the corner shop, lounging against the faded walls. If you went to the caffee to get bread, they were there. Milk. You couldn't miss them. They looked hungry all the time. I saw that in their eyes, though I tried not to. The girls. The chewed stubs of their fingers, the way they sucked so hard on the cigarillos they passed to one another, their lips wet.

The younger brother had been thinking. "A man needs his small pleasures, Rachel. A kiss from a girl who's going away."

I flushed invisibly. I wondered if he could feel it, in the dark. The burn in my cheeks. I thought he could. My heat. Angry. Desperate. Hoping. Everything mixed up together.

"What you reckon?"

Before I could answer he leant over me, weighing down my shoulders, pressing them down onto the rock. Sharp shoulder wings poked my skin. He was breathing on my face, stale and sweet. Clumsily he traced my lips with the tip of his tongue. Trying to be tender. Seductive. Instead I felt a thick wet squid probing at my mouth. I pushed at him. Pushed his shoulders away, my elbows digging into rock. He didn't budge. He tongued my mouth with a tentacle, black ink thick and hot. His hand slithered down my legs, squeezing, forced my shorts lower over my hips, pressing my thighs, determined. He found. His fingers. I was trapped in a small burning room.

I kicked out my legs then, bucking my whole body as if to break the glass. It worked. He fell off me, falling onto his bad arm. I heard the crunch of sand as he writhed.

He sat up spitting. "What was that?" I thought of the snake, earlier.

I looked down into my lap. Shame filled my head, making it heavy. I couldn't look up.

"No seriously, what was that Rachel? It's the holidays you know. Shit, you were wandering out here all alone. `Mean who does that?'"

I didn't say anything.

He stared at me, eyes cold. "Fucking girls. Why do you girls always have to play this game, huh? Now I've fucked up my arm all over again."

A boulder held my tongue. Pinned it heavily to the floor of my mouth.

"It's the same every time. These *games*. It's always the same. You smile and you blush. Your eyes speak. When I answer them you pretend you don't know what they were saying, what you really wanted. Then I've got to show you. I fucking know how this works. You do too. You better be worth it. I don't like trouble, I'm telling you that now."

Through my messed hair I saw the dried blood and dirt on his arm. Caked thick maroon. Then he klapped me hard with the back of his hand. The crack deafened my ears. Though there was still the muffled sound of the car engine in the clearing below.

I'd fallen from the blow, but I dug my heels against the rock, bracing my body on my hands. He pulled my wrist, a quick snap. A sharp pain seared up my arm and hooked on my shoulders. I felt myself hanging limply from a wire coat hanger. He grabbed the other wrist and bent my arms behind me. I thought they'd snap, pop right out the sockets. If I moved, they would. Then those would be drumsticks sucked clean, the smooth gristled ends that you can just bite off. That's what I'd look like.

He breathed a lion's hot breath hard into my hair, rubbing his fur against my cheek. My heart beat in my throat. My head felt like bleached bone. I pulled away from him and met his eyes. Ok, so I would play. If that's what it took. I put on my most seductive eyes, and smiled. He grinned like he'd won already.

"I knew it! I *knew* I was right! You can't fool this baby brother..."

He closed his eyes and leant in to kiss me again, his lips suckering for mine. I pulled back my head and smashed forward. Crackkkkk! Skull met skull. His neck snapped back so far that his Adam's apple bulged like a tumour. His hands loosened around my wrists and I jerked free,

though he pulled, grabbing at my ankles, spitting out a strangled noise. I slipped. My knees scraped on the rock. I turned around to kick but he was quicker and grabbed my leg. I bit. Hard. Into his shoulder. Bone on bone in a sickening snap. Blood and rust in my mouth. He was livid. Groaning. His pain gave me the chance to scramble away, jumping off the boulder. I hurt my hand, but at least didn't land on the death spine cactus close by.

My head spun. The car spun out in front of me. Headlights closing in. I ran around the car, ran past it, blinded by dust and danger, stones cutting my bare feet. Behind me I heard the car door slamming. I couldn't look back. I ran until I was sure I was just a dark shape in darkness, then I crouched still and breathless in the scrub.

“What the fok happened?” It was Logie. So he hadn't heard it all.

“I don't know. We were kissing then she got weird.”

The other boys groaned.

“No man! Not again!” This time the older brother spoke.

“What you mean? She spooked! You blaming it on me?”

“Ja, well, she was there, then she wasn't. And you were there the whole time! So...Jesus! This shit happens every time with you. It's what you fuckin' *do*. Ev-ry-time. Remember the girl from that town near the border? The one we met at The Skinny?”

“That hole in the wall? Red hair, peach cheeks? Oh crap man, she *liked* the attention. That chick was making eyes at me all night. I coulda had her like *that*.” He snapped his fingers.

“How come then, how come after a bit she ran away from you so quick her shoes left tire burns?”

“Dunno. She had someplace to go to in a hurry?”

“And the others. What about them? How come, with you, girls all suddenly remember they gotta be somewhere else? Don’t you get it?” The elder brother sighed. Gave a frustrated swat in his brother’s direction, no real chance of connecting. The guys stood around in the dark.

“We better move.”

No one argued. Doors slammed. The engine rumbled. And they were gone, pulling away in a haze, dust reflected in the slanting light.

I followed the road from a safe distance, close enough to see the painted lines but far out enough to be a night shadow in the bush. The land was rough, somewhere between earth and solar. The grazes on my knees had dried, and tightened with each step.

There was a chilling wail. A wild wailing sound that carried in the air and caught on the thorns in stuttering yelps. I shivered. Rooijakkals. Again the smell of blood and iron. His tongue in my mouth.

I stopped the hole from getting bigger.

The crater rose into view about five hundred metres to the left, at first just a jagged eddy in my eyeline. When I saw it, rising and sinking in the earth, I quickened. A familiar wound with familiar bones. Ok, I thought, there you are. The depths could shelter me from the night. For the night.

Up close it looked different. Above, from the road, it seemed shallow, neck-deep, surfaced with a strange white residue, the same remains that stained soil before the land had cracked up. Dull white. Scorched. Paper ash. From here the crater felt deeper, wider. I’d say about three women deep, feet to shoulders to arms up in a swan dive. It could have been deeper. But in the dark, depths were hidden under depths, and the depth of death under that. The place was a rusted boneyard, the red orange gold of old fishing hooks and worn coins. The taste in my mouth again. It was here.

The perimeter of the lake had once been clear. Now it was overgrown with sedgy reeds that

had almost forgotten water, their sparse, wilted heads brittle as desert brush. Footpaths curved. They led to the doors of collapsing buildings. The largest of these stared blankly in the direction of the road. A tin roof. Plastered walls crumbled to red baked brick. No windows, but a wide opening in the front. I walked around to check the back.

Inside it smelt like a musty towel. Right inside the door were stacked eight piles of *Huisgenoot*. 1962 to 1970, arranged in chronological order, January through December. All a bit mouldy. There were boxes too but I didn't bother to open them. They were marked with black marker that had bled and faded. The black night hid the black corners of the shed which swallowed the black letters on the dirty cardboard.

A wooden shed was next. Planks slatted loosely across the face like rotten teeth, half pulled, in a pained grimace. Inside were bags. One rattled when I kicked it, a fairground skeleton. Seemed a bag of bones from some knife trick gone wrong, so I left it alone. Some stuff you didn't want to find. The place was mouldy, anyway, the colour of meat gone bad. And it smelt bad too. The stink of sulphur like a giant match had struck the earth, littering white ash and grizzled red phosphorous. Spooky, though a strange part of me also liked the idea. The idea of something so big out there and mysterious and me all alone standing inside a charred ashtray on the edges of a secondary burn. Nothing was forever, I thought, good or bad. Which maybe wasn't a pleasant thought, exactly, but it wasn't unpleasant either.

The natural smell of the lake was ok, the same way with the petrol fumes from the nearby garage during Sunday service. Of course the oldies still blocked their noses with tissues or fanned their faces with the hymnals. Or the notices about prayer meetings and fetes and the Women's Auxiliary. The lake smelt familiar, comforting. Like a photograph of a day you can't really remember but apparently it's there, in your hand. The steamy outline of a handprint on a cold glass pane. You know it's yours', well, for as long as it's there. You made it; it was your hand that reached out and your palm that felt the cold. But your hands aren't guilty cause now you're standing looking through the glass, both hands hanging at your sides. Anyway. The night had been weird.

The air was still. The darkness had settled into itself and I decided to walk down to the lake edge, where a white border was piped in bitter salt. I traced the outline, but then the loyal

stability of the earth fell away, opening onto a massive hole, a sump where people had dumped stuff since back when who knew. A huge boneyard, filled with all kinds of stuff. I squinted. It was difficult to see properly, but right near my feet was a small pile of tiny bones, like toothpicks and beads, little skulls with high, deep nostrils. Rats? Further along was the jumbled skeleton of a dead dog, pieces whitened to a skull and clubs and blades. I suppose I should have been shocked or frightened, but though I wasn't hard-hearted, the night had steeled me. The recent days too. I think I was ready for anything. Well, almost. If the younger brother suddenly showed up, he was dead meat. That's for sure. His bones, out here. Who would ever tell the difference?

Other bones I couldn't place. Rusted carcasses. The slumped shadows of built things. There was a pattern somewhere, but right then I couldn't see it. You know those magazine puzzles, the ones made up of squiggles and overlapping shapes and where you have to almost blind the regular part of your mind and go cross-eyed, and then move the page very slowly up to your face and then slowly away again, until eventually a hidden picture swims into view? It was like that. I stood at the lake dump and looked. Hard. Searching for the pattern that would give me the picture.

The whitened bones glowed like phosphorous.

I saw buried faces, as you always do. *I* do. You look at the blankets or peeling paint, maybe tar or tiles, you're going to find people in there. That's what happens. Some old drunk. A woman in a scarf. Poor little boy with tears streaming down his cheeks. So? I mean, people see Jesus in scrambled eggs. I blinked to erase and started again.

This time I let rip. No sentimental bullshit. I made the pit open up; I swirled the bones the brittle bits the car bodies the baggy bogey men into a sinkhole tornado. It churned and heaved, a washing machine gone manic. Debris widened the hole, deepened the pit, made a tail that bore down down down even as the mouth was throwing up decades of bones and new old bodies. A cement truck running amok, animating scrap metal rusted limbs, pitchfork fingers which grabbed in vain at landfall. The noise was immense. I plugged my fingers into my ears against the rattling. The shrieks of metal against glass against bone. Overhead the sky turned the empty, gleaming white of a clean page reflecting the sun. I had to shield my

eyes. I wanted to push myself away from what I'd started, but something held me in the borderlands, demanding that I stay. This force entered my body from the ground up, like the iron in me was pulled towards a magnetic core, underground.

The lake turned faster and faster. My stomach turned. Everything was bones, bones. Bones clattering within a centre funnel like like like...

the remains of a chicken dinner chugging down the sink

Granny's eventual apocalypse, horsemen headless and scythed

a stuffed toilet, finally unblocked, but rising and rising, threatening to overflow, wads of paper and shit and stale yellow coming right up to the brim...

And the terrible noise! Of men disgorging, hearts being eaten alive, bowels ripped regardless from the earth.

I heard the anguished cries of men. Bodies dragged across dry earth, a feeling as familiar as the searing itch of drought on my skin. I was peeled through layers.

I heard gunshot and cannon crumps. The smell of warm blood splattered hot on my face.

I heard a woman wailing, the slow, sad song of a ship's horn harbouring her voice.

I heard funeral dirges, breaking glass, dogs yelping, jukebox music, the snicked catching of a flintlock lighter.

Under that white-scarred sky I heard it all.

Not in my ears, only, but in the pull of atoms in my blood, an unequal balance of fragments suddenly found and immediately lost, sucked up into that darkbright vortex which threw the bones before me. For a mad brief moment I saw stars rattling into truth, the lie of the land burdened with holding everything together.

I'm telling you. It was all there, whatever it was. A one-armed man with a pistol, a slight girl

with porcelain skin, crypts and boxes and papers. Everything at once, overwhelmed into one.

I was the one.

I just stood there. I don't know how long I stood before I collapsed.

K

The voice megaphoned through the thick velvet curtains of the flat. Perla Gibson. Which meant that troops were leaving, or arriving. The overcrowded ships passed the harbour close by the wharf, you see, and she sang for them in her white dress and her red hat, her feet together heel to heel, chin braced in salute. She sang an empire song, I remember. “There’ll Always Be an England”. “...*red, white and blue; what does it mean to you?*” Something about “*proud, shout it aloud, “Britons awake!*”

Oh my voice. I know it’s terrible. Worse than warbling. My voice doesn’t do that song any justice, and of course I don’t even have all the words. Though how many times I heard that song, living where we lived, near the Point. Sometimes I still wake up with her voice in her my head, pieces of music, disjointed words, and then I pinch my arm.

More and more days start like that, with a pinch of flesh. The skin on my arm feels like paper now, and it crinkles so easily. Should I show you? Then you’d see how the impressions remain. My poor old arm is black and blue. A blue-black network, that’s what it is! But you grow accustomed to it, I suppose, when you’re as old as I am. When you’re this old, my dear, the slightest change sometimes seems like no change at all, and then suddenly it threatens to be permanent.

That mirror there? Sometimes I no longer recognise the person it shows me; it’s as if the wind blew my face out of shape. It’s not who I was before. And memories! Oh, they are tricky things. One day they’re slipping away, and the next they’re clear as anything, so fresh I feel I’m living them right now. It is confusing.

Eighty-four, you know. I’m eighty four. Though I’m sure you did the mental arithmetic already. In your head, yes, your head. The marks of memory. The old body. Everything starts to betray you.

It’s nice that you’ve come to see me. I don’t see very many people now. Which might be a good thing, though perhaps I’m so changed that they wouldn’t see it all. My history on my face. Everything has changed. People don’t read my long nose or my heavy eyelids in the same way anymore. They wouldn’t spit the word in the same way, I think. *Jew. Jew!* Oh, people. What do we know? Can you tell I’ve still got all my own teeth. Should I show you?

No, maybe not. Looking at your face. I do apologise; I'm being foolish. But we were talking about the singing, yes, the singing.

I pulled open my curtains to let in the light, and the summer sun streamed in. White as Perla, as strident as her voice. *Land of Hope and Glory, Mother of the Free, How shall we extol thee, who are born of thee?* Such elocution she had. The Queen's English, nothing less. I have been told that my singing sounds like an animal's slow death. I don't want to believe it! But even my wife, my beautiful Emma, she discouraged me. It was simply too much to bear, she said. Which was honesty of a kind, I imagine. An honest kindness. That's how I took it.

I could smell the mealie meal porridge on the stove. Hear that bubbling glop glop glop. Like something alive! Oh, wonderful, a wonderfully intriguing sound. And the taste: my mother used to make it doused in honey.

That day my mother twirled round the kitchen in a turquoise kimono with lilies embroidered down the back. She was dancing to gypsy jazz. An LP on the record player that my father had bought from the Flamenco dance hall in Gardiner Street. Servicemen used to get in half price, and it was always packed. Soldiers, sailors, airmen. All there in full kit, twirling girls in wide skirts. They were like flowers, weren't they, when they spun? The fabric blooming like that. The servicemen had it quite lucky, in a way. All the special concessions back then. The servicemen almost had freedom of the city, and so they trawled it inside out, especially at night. Perhaps it was just that they'd become used to secrecy, covering their tracks. Whatever it was, they had girls on their arms every night. There was no shortage of girls in the city in those days.

My father sat at the dining room table, poring over the large encyclopaedia as he so often did. I pulled a white cotton shirt over my head, right arm, left arm, head, and walked to the door to collect the bagged rubbish which I took to the back end of the building where they kept the big rubber bins. It was very humid. As if there were a membrane suffocating the city.

The balcony blocked the light so the place was dark and damp. Almost a cave. The path was sponged with green moss, but the rest was all ragged tar that crumbled where it met the walls of the buildings. A strange pattern of broken pieces. You felt yourself hovering, unsure of where to step. Oh that back alley was dirty alright, layers of paint peeling off the walls, years

peeling back like dirty tongues. The archway leading into the back was especially grimy. The curves, you see, the dirt settled there. I'm sure my nail would have left a clean scratch on the brick, like sheer black magic.

We made those pictures at school. Black magic. You'd draw with crayons, pressing hard until the wax was thick. Then you'd go over all the colours with a black crayon. Over and over until there was only black, no hint of anything underneath. You had to press down so hard the crayon became warm in your hand; it bent like putty. When everything was completely blacked out, then you'd scratch a new picture with something sharp. A paper clip, a sucker stick. A twig. You scraped gently, and the black shaved back leaving the colours underneath glowing like party lights. You could blacken the work over and over, and then the old picture, the one from before that would be covered in layers, though sometimes you could make it out, just a hint, by reading the outlines and shading. Even then you could go wrong, because there it was impossible to remember exactly what you'd drawn, where the lines were.

That day, the alley was deserted. I lifted the heavy lid of the first bin but it was full. The first bin gaped full. Silver nail clippings. Hair, about an inch long, curly and golden brown. A half full bottle of peroxide. A box stuffed with two stained rubber gloves. The smell was intense. My head rushed.

In the second bin the top bag was bright yellow, marked with black patterns and the words "medical waste" printed on the side facing up. Through the bag I made out teeth. Hundreds of them. Teeth like shards of a shattered china tea set. Good grief. I dropped the bag I was holding and bent over the bin, bracing my hands around the rim. I shook it. Listened. A faint chinking rattle. The entire bin tinkled with them.

Teeth? I had never given much thought to it before, I mean, teeth. And where they went. That if we were lost, we could assemble them, pull them to our bodies. Make maps with the pieces. And if we lost, we could acknowledge that we grew and that we lost and that this was natural, the natural order of things, although it's not always the case.

Even now, all that comes back to me. I think of it. Of leftovers. Genetic trails. Hair, eyelashes, nails, scabs, baby teeth, the rim around the bath. Where does it all go? Just down

the drains? Many times I've imagined it might spiral down the sink into the drains and on to some primitive place where reincarnations are finalised. Where new lives are made from the remains of others. Have you ever thought that, my dear?

Why is it that you'll pass someone on the street and get the feeling you know them? Then your head spins like you're standing in a newly painted room, windowless. I get the feeling often. I always have. When it came upon me I would secretly reach out and touch the person, briefly, feigning accident, apologising even as I sought my mark. I had to. I had to realise their familiarity, and their absolute strangeness. My touch was an earthing wire; it helped to ground me.

There is much in life that has perplexed me, I will say that. A magazine story about a man who collected his scabs in glass jars, put them all over his house. A legacy of detritus. For whom? Another man who wouldn't part with his hair, growing it so long and tangled that he was suffocated by it. When they eventually found him, hair snaked around his body, his skin blue and purple. Is this a normal madness? These people who hold fast to pieces of themselves, pieces that the rest of us flush away.

Some cultures, you know – perhaps you don't - they burn teeth. They put a baby tooth in a little wooden box and set it alight. Light it like a birthday candle and watch the smoke disappear into the air. I wonder if there is a smell? Still, I think that's better than the tooth fairy idea. Teaching children about the exchange of parts for money! What a notion; that bits of yourself can be sold for a coin placed under a pillow. Ah, well. And then you have illicit kidneys, later, organ trade. Where does it all end?

But I digress. I was... Where was I? Standing. Over the dustbin, yes, a bagful of teeth. I peered more closely than was sanitary and saw the whole gamut: molars, incisors, canines, wisdom teeth, milk teeth, teeth with white calcium marks, broken dentures and iridescent mercury fillings. Beneath the pile I made out a bitten X-ray, a ghostly phosphorescent jellyfish.

I'd been in Dr Gerber's rooms before. Once. As a boy, I'd developed a searing toothache in an eye tooth. (A deciduous tooth, Gerber had told me much later. But the word wouldn't have registered if I'd heard it as a child. When you're eight, well, when *I* was eight, I was vertical

infinity itself. I knew nothing of time and its seasons, believing myself limitless, my life following an endless, continuous figure.)

Ah, but that toothache! My mother steered me into Gerber's rooms, and sat cautiously on a large green chair, upholstery the colour of pond scum. My feet dangled helplessly above the tiled floors. The room was wide, lined with matching couches and armchairs, everything in slick, algal green.

Along each wall were silver-framed photographs of teeth, in black and white.

A boy with a metal cage cornering his head like a mousetrap, alongside an X-ray showing teeth ground down to plateaux. The caption: "Bruxism".

An impotent, gummy jaw, above the head of a man with a cold pack on his jaw and a black swollen eye. The caption: "Edentulous". (I remember so clearly how the skin ballooned, turning his eye into what appeared to be a voluptuously puckered mouth.)

"Impaction", underneath a piano jaw of torn up keys. "Teratoma tooth" below a photograph of a fleshy mass sprouting patchy clumps of hair. A tooth like a growth on a potato.

While I was examining that faceless mound they called out my name, "Master Klinger, K", and my mother squeezed my hand before handing me over to the nurse, who led me down a long, white-tiled corridor. We turned in to a door with a brass nameplate. "Dr Gerber (DMD)".

The surgery was white with red accents. A forest mural painted on the ceiling. In the centre of the room was a black dentist's chair with white tissue covering the headrest. The chair looked new. It smelt of chemicals, of leather. The nurse told me to lie down, saying the doctor would be with me shortly. She left the room, and I lay there, looking up. I saw it then, the trick. The mass of abstract faces hidden among the foliage and the branches and the bark. A forest which hid sagging old people and apple-faced children. There was a violence which made my skin flesh up. Even now, when I think of it. Gooseflesh. In this humidity! Ha! I jerked up, felt the waxy polish of the chair. Tried to rub it off! (For days afterwards the stuff clung to my palms, flattening my fingerprints. When I touched a window, or a mirror, there were the muted lines of some disturbing ancestry, glossed to a faint trace.)

Dr Gerber came in just as I was trying to scratch the stuff off with my fingernails, the nurse close behind. She gave me a sideways look and took hold of my shoulder, pushing me firmly back onto the chair. Aaah, she made with her mouth, and very obediently, very terrified, I opened my mouth. I'd rather have bitten down, hard, and thrown everything into doggish disarray.

“So young man, what are we looking at today?” Dr Gerber asked. “Your mother tells me you have a little toothache? Right here?”

He'd already slipped on his powdery gloves, and tapped my tooth with a fingertip as he spoke. “This, Master Klinger, is the eye tooth.”

I flinched at the shooting pain of it. He pumped a handle below the chair, levelling my face almost with his. Then he leaned over me like I was dinner. And all the better to eat me, a big light was angled at my mouth. I had to close my eyes for the glare, although that too scared me, not knowing what I wouldn't be able to see.

“Just as I thought! It's rotten to the core. You, sonny boy, have been eating too many sweets.”

Which assumption made me awfully cross. Since I'd always preferred salt, you see. I stole it from the pantry in handfuls, ate it with a wet finger, dipped and dipped until my mouth was raw, and the taste of salt was nothing I could taste at all. I was strange, I grant you. The appetite on me. When we spent a day at the beach, my mother even had to stop me from drinking the seawater! She'd catch me at it, my lapping tongue, my gulping. She'd stick a finger down my throat until I retched it all up.

Dr Gerber prodded at my mouth. Nothing unusual, I suppose. He was a dentist, after all. Though at the time, I sensed an armoury, a whole array of menace. A glinting mirror. A sharp silver claw. I tasted blood.

“It's only a milk tooth,” he said, “we can pull it out”.

I had no chance even to wonder at that 'we', how I could possibly help, because he pinched the tooth between thumb and fore finger and with a firm tug - *crunch* - it gave way. I felt the sharp edges separate from my gum and there it was. The troublesome tooth was clean out my

mouth. I glimpsed it in passing, lying in the little dish held by the nurse. Bloody and blackened, eaten away from the inside. And slowly I felt the tender, matching gap with my tongue, the hint of another tooth already shadowing in.

When I leant over the dustbin, staring at the discarded cache of teeth, I felt the same spot in my memory. My own small tooth taken too soon. Or too late, if you considered the decay. I didn't know. But a childish part of me wanted to dig in the bin for my loss, as if I might find it; as if, even *were* it to be found, I would recognise that part of myself. What was I thinking? That I could wear it around my neck, perhaps, or sew it clumsily into the ear pocket of my favourite trousers? Though I knew. I knew in the back of my mind that it was already lost. Tossed in a bag with its like and taken to the dump, where just maybe a rat gnawed it, clawed the tooth back to the nest. Who knows. I obsessed over that tooth! Hoped perhaps a superstitious scavenger had found my little something and felt enough to bury it with a few kind words. Some sort of ceremony. Foolish, I suppose. But every man is a fool, in his own way. A woman too, I imagine, though one might not think it, to look at you.

After Dr Gerber pulled that tooth, I immediately went blind. No, no, it was purely the shock, my mother soothed. It would be alright. And doggedly she led me out, and home, where I felt my way back up the stairs, my mother holding my hand.

I went blind. I was blind. I swore it. Which was a feint, of sorts, of course it must have been, but as a child I believed the blindness completely. I had given my eye tooth, lost it, and therefore, logically, I could not see. Oh the shapes were there, and the faint colours; the outlines of things. But altogether they were just nonsense. They made no sense to me. I couldn't make my way around that missing world. Not with my eyes open, or my eyes closed. I traced things with my fingers. Felt the dank walls of our flat near the sea. The knotty surface of the dining-room table. The shape of my father's big book.

It was a very difficult time, I remember that, not seeing. Learning to see without my eye tooth. Like I'd been spinning round and round and stopped suddenly, my head rolling with swirling marbles. Though perhaps I should say that I had been blind once before. Which was when the Guide Dog Association visited our school. For an assembly. They'd brought along a golden Labrador, to demonstrate the intelligence of a Seeing Eye dog. When a green light

went on, the dog crossed the stage. When the light turned red, the dog didn't budge. Each time, as a reward, the handler fed him strips of meat from a pocket.

For his final skill, the dog opened a door which they'd set up on stage, a little door which stood in a frame, but with no surrounding walls. I stared. It was an entrance to another universe, something from a magician's show. I so badly wanted to step through that door, to find out what things would look like on the other side. Would it swallow me up into a place where I wasn't K? Where instead my name would be Jack, and if I repeated it (JackJackJackJack...yakyakyakyak), it would sound equally strange on my tongue. That's how you know if life is real or not.

We exited the assembly in lines, row by row, leading into one another as seamlessly as if we'd been practising. The man from the Association stood at the door with the dog heeled at his side. "Put yourself in the shoes of a blind person for just fifteen minutes today," he'd urged us, "and then you'll appreciate your sight, and the faithful dedication of old Archie here." He'd patted the dog's head. "Just fifteen minutes," he'd repeated.

I took his words to heart, blindfolded myself before bed that night with a black scarf borrowed from my mother. In the morning, in the scarf-dark, I felt my way and dressed slowly in the uniform I'd put out on the chair the night before. My parents said nothing as I walked carefully out my room for breakfast but I could hear the smiles in their voices. My mother shepherded me to school, which was a few blocks down from where we lived. I found my desk by feeling the wood, my fingers reading for the scratched skull and cross bones, two X's for eyes like the picture on the box of rat poison. At break time, though I walked haltingly all the way to the outer edges of the schoolyard, still the children came for me. They'd followed, quietly, invisibly, and then suddenly *Bah!* they screamed and sprang. They pushed me from hand to hand, spun me around, surrounded me like a vortex, poking their spindle fingers into my ribs until I heard a shout and the clomping approach of adult feet. And the teacher had ripped the blindfold from my eyes, and said "Enough! Child, it is *enough.*" And so ended, I suppose, the first of my childish blindnesses.

After the visit to Dr Gerber's, when I arrived home I felt similarly struck down, and inched my way around the flat, feeling for the door of my room. My father had asked what I was

doing. Why I stretched my arms in front of me like that, stepping so carefully. And I'd told him. "Today I lost my eye tooth and now I cannot see. I am blind."

He'd laughed so hard, guffawing, almost falling off his chair like a caricature, clutching at his belly as if some squirming thing was trapped in his shirt.

"There is nothing funny about the loss of sight," I rebuked him.

And he'd straightened up then, solemnly, and nodded. (He'd suppressed a smile, furrowing his eyebrows as deeply as he could. That, certainly, I saw. There was no avoiding it.)

"Ja, this is right. The loss of sight. It is very serious matter. So now, my boy, now, there must be imagination, see, it must come to bring vision,"

My eight-year-old brain worked this idea over, crawling everywhere like ants on sugar.

Somehow, I awoke the next day having made a full recovery.

I had just dropped off the rubbish. I was still feeling that tooth as I walked up the stairwell back to our flat, pushing it with my tongue remembering the space it had filled and the way the root eventually dissolved until it was only dented gum. My mother had dished up the thick creamy porridge into bowls which she placed around the table. We ate while the gypsy jazz still played through the record player and my mother tapped her barefoot under the table to the rhythm.

Later, my father walked into my room, closing the door behind him and slapping the newspaper on his wrist like he was indicating the time.

"De new Sherlock Holmes ez ztaring tonight. Sherlock Holmes und de Voice af Terrar." (I liked it when he exaggerated his accent. It seemed an intimate revelation, a kind of gift, I suppose, intended just for me.)

"Vould you like to go?"

I was surprised. They'd changed the age restriction of all the films which mentioned the Nazis or the Jews. You couldn't get in unless you were eighteen. In those days you didn't talk to your children about the war. Everything was very secretive, hush hush as they say. But father was not a man who walked the streets with his silencing finger held tight across his mouth; not like so many other people in those days.

“But Papa,” I asked him still, “How would I get in?”

“Ju? Well of course ju are de right age. I would never bring an unterage child uf mine to a film about de secrets of de war! No no no, nevar!” And he held up his hands in a mock display of shocked innocence, and winked at me just as he closed my bedroom door.

It was a Sunday so the shop was closed. I helped my father wrestle new old things from under old old things to replace the items he’d sold that week. Not that there were gaps. There were never gaps in my father’s shop.

We pulled out all sorts of things.

A box of chocolates – well, an empty chocolate box – which, he pointed out, had been issued under licence from the Queen of England to a lieutenant in the Anglo-Boer war. The box was imperial red, the monarch’s face a golden, convex profile. I imagined faces and faces, layered underneath.

A silver brush with pure boar bristles which belonged to a woman who’d boarded the ill-fated Titanic.

A pair of tiny ruby studs set on a velvet card. Taken together, • •, they resembled a vampire bite.

“What are you looking for?” I asked him after he’d emptied the third cardboard box, propping the contents wherever he found an empty spot.

“De votch of my fadar,” he’d answered. “He giff it to me before he died. I am like ju, same age, and always I keep it here – he patted his shirt pocket – until we haff move to de flat.” He pointed upwards to our home. “Now, it has bin down here.”

He found it buried in the heart of a set of unusually large Matryoshka dolls. He took it out, held it up by the chain and it swung like a hypnotist’s pendulum. The chain was linked gold, oval links struck through with a vertical bar. The gold case snapped back like a compass case when I pushed the crown. The case felt cold in my hand even after I had held it for a long time. A calligraphic “K” was engraved on the back.

“Is nice? Ju like it?” he asked. He was looking at me very intently, as if my reply might change the world. I felt I was expected to answer the question of life itself.

But I nodded, truthfully, because I did like the watch. I stared into its face, the mother-of-pearl shimmering cream and pale pink and hinting at blue under the fluorescent light. I could hear a faint even-handed ticking as the hidden wheels turned, cogs beneath the surface.

That watch, my father told me, had been custom made for our family more than two hundred years before. He said his own father had believed it was magic, the face carved from of piece of fallen moon. Which was why there was a crater when you looked up at it. The moon. That’s what my father said, looking up as if he could see the gaping hole right then. I looked up too, but all I could see were spidery cracks across the ceiling.

That watch. He gave it to me. I think about it often. The watch. The giving of it. I suppose the memory is still with me, for now, even though the watch was lost in the fire, like so many other things.

I clipped the chain to my belt loop like a man and slipped the watch into my trouser pocket, cold and golden against my thigh. The strangest sensation. And then we left the basement, carrying our small discoveries up to the shop and my father locked the door, turning the lock twice as he always did.

Upstairs in my room I stood in the corner by the window and stared out at the harbour, at the tips of the cranes behind which I could make out the green bluff on the other side. I closed my eyes and I could hear the flopping of the divers’ flippers against the concrete pier. Commercial divers, mostly to retrieve sunken ships. It was a lucrative business. Tons of the stuff sank off the coast. Back then, and even further back, in the past.

One ship had sunk just outside my school, which as I said was near the embankment. What fun it was, that disaster! The teachers couldn’t get the children back to class all day, we simply scampered off, and there were the teachers, dresses hiked and trousers rolled, adults all uncomfortable and ankle deep angry in the sea, calling for us to come back inside, threatening detention, whippings. But they couldn’t deal with all of us. We were having none

of it, especially the rough and tumble kids, who seemed to set the independent-minded tone. Even I, from my little distance, felt part of some uncertain occasion. We stayed in the sea, come what may, until emergency workers pulled a body from the water, a grey bloated body which had been savaged by sharks. Chunks here and there, blunt bites turned from red to purple. They placed the body on the beach and covered it with a thick blanket before rushing back to the rubber duck. At that sign, we children began to purl from the water, suddenly chastened. And of our own, ignoring the teachers, we'd turned back to school. There, we'd let the teachers call the place to order, and we'd returned, rows and rows of boys and girls, to our desks. But I remember the sandy school shoes crossed at the ankles next to the bent metal legs. The socks that dripped onto the linoleum floors. The boys' white, clinging shirts, wet through, as though a boy were nothing but a pale chicken fillet. When the bell finally rang at three o' clock, only a handful of children headed back to the beach. This time, I wasn't carried away by the crowd, and I didn't join in. I only watched them from the promenade. The tide hadn't yet erased the dent in the sand that had been the resting body, and I still saw it. Bitten. Inert. Against that I set the sight of three boys who swam out to a sand dune not far from the wreck, the side mast and the bow still fingering the surface. I watched as the boys disappeared under the waves, then emerge as bobbing heads. Before they dived down again, and disappeared, and then surfaced a little distance away. I couldn't tear myself away.

My father and I left for the film at five, the bioscope a short walk from our flat. The sun was sinking, casting our shadows long-legged across the pavements and up the walls of the buildings, making no distinction between factories and tall blocks of residential flats. On the other side of the street, the railroad ran beneath metal pylons, a strange grace of poised ballerina legs suspended by thick metal cables. For some reason, they made me feel small, yet their human appearance also offered some small comfort.

My mother had decided to stay in. She was feeling off-colour, a headache, I think she said, and she lay on the sofa with her eyes covered by her stained hand.

"I'll be fine," she'd said to my father as she shushed us out the house, "You men go already! I'll be better when it's quiet, you two out of my hair for a while!"

And my father had kissed her on the forehead in the air, through the gap of the closing door.

It was still light, out near the Point, but already we passed many familiar women on the streets, prostitutes beginning to claim their places for the night. They talked amongst themselves, taking no notice of us. Their business was with the servicemen who disembarked at the docks and the men who worked on the cargo ships. They must have serviced a few city locals too, but perhaps that was small-time trade, mere petty pennies. At the time, of course, I didn't really think anything, and simply walked by, a young chap with his father.

A girl walked in front of us, about twelve paces ahead. I recognised her. Natalie Symes. She went to my school. Though on the street, I saw her as if for the first time. She wore a black pleated skirt to her knees. A red blouse collared with eyelet lace. Her hair was scooped up into a high ponytail, tied with a black ribboned bow. She carried a familiar box which hit against her hip at the end of a rope chain. She had slung the chain across her body like one would a bag.

I felt anxious, because Natalie Symes walked dangerously close to the Lost Persons area. That day, there were two people sitting underneath the sign. That was what I could make out from where I walked behind her, though there could be more, as the lost people seemed to fade into and out of the world like pulsing stars except they had no light, almost the opposite. I considered warning her away from there and began flapping my arms like a swimmer far out to sea trapped in a current. She crossed the road before she caught sight of me and I folded my hands behind my back as if they had always been there. My walk took on a more casual style than usual. My father looked at me and then looked ahead at Natalie.

“Ju know her?”

I nodded. Told him she was in my class. “That’s Natalie Symes,” I said.

“Oh, the Symes girl.” He shook his head. “Vot sorrow for zat family.”

Natalie’s older brother had been sent to Egypt for the war. So many men shipped North to uphold the cause. Fighting in the shadow of the Sphinx, I imagined, struggling to keep off the burning desert sands, a bed of red coals in the summer, bringing you too close to the sun. I thought he’d died of homesickness. Because I would have. It was not uncommon. I’d read

that nostalgia was one enemy among many, in war, when men are sent off to other countries, uncertain if they will ever return home. Such fear - of never seeing your native land again; perhaps, even, of never again feeling at home in your own body - that could bring the brawniest man down. In my father's shop was a book titled *Death by Nostalgia*, by a Dr Lorraine Newland. The symptoms were simple: loss of appetite, weight loss, fever, heart palpitations, anxiety and severe depression. Hundreds of men were diagnosed with nostalgia during the American Civil War. I'd heard through neighbourhood whispers that Natalie's brother was the image of skin on bone in the end. That his heart stopped working like a clock stops ticking. To my mind, it was death by nostalgia.

They'd shipped his body back in a coffin draped with the national flag. The service was held at Christ Church, near the fenced off Lost Persons area. The whole community attended, including me and my family. My mother had dabbed at her eyes with a white linen handkerchief. Intermittently, she'd held her cheeks in her gloved hands, black lace. Natalie had sat in the front row with a box in her lap, never letting go, never taking her eyes off the box even when her mother was carried off the podium, doubled over her loss.

I knew that box well. The box she carried. I sat behind her in class and watched each day as she rested the box on her desk, opposite the deep, stained inkwell. When she was done with work, when she'd lapsed into musing, she'd open it and go through her brother's little belongings: a few photographs of him, a pin of an airship, an old spinning top, a thin journal, a superhero comic, a shoelace knotted into a lasso. Boyish things. For he was hardly more than a boy when they sent him over.

The box was nothing but thin wooden board. It lay patiently next to her every day, like a small sleeping animal. Devoted. I imagined that sometimes she fed it tidbits, believing that it could live forever as long as she took great care.

I remember an air raid drill. They'd started to happen several times a day. The warning siren shattered the corridors, and as drilled we'd huddled immediately beneath the double desks, either a pencil or an eraser bitten between our teeth. Natalie had grabbed her box first, and balanced it between her knees as we crouched. My eyes fixed on it. The siren ceased and while the rest of the class resumed their seats she and I sat frozen to the ground. You can

imagine my embarrassment. Caught out, tried and judged under her blank stare. I felt blood rising to my cheeks, my face burning as if hot irons were being held on each side. She could not move under the desk for fear. I could not move under her gaze for a strange sensation of lost love that had never yet happened.

The teacher eventually crouched beside us. Mrs Harp. She chivvied me out, silly lad, but left Natalie hiding in plain sight, talking softly to her so that the rest of us might not hear, although the classroom was silent as a morgue at midnight. At last Mrs Harp coaxed Natalie free, unfolding her from the cramped space, then steadying her by her elbow. All the while, Natalie had clung to the box.

There was only one more time that Natalie and I had any contact. Back then, far into the war, our classes were slowly abandoned for more useful instruction. Girls were trained in First Aid and the boys, well, we were split into fire fighting teams and taught to put out incendiary bombs and the fires they caused. Just in case one hit our neighbourhood.

It was all such chaos back then. Everyone and everything. I was assigned to a team made up of evacuees from Malta and Ismailia. The school accommodated many such children, who had leaked down from the North to escape the war. Many of them had lost family back home, and they were quietly displaced, resigned, adjusting to their new surroundings like sardines flung onto the beach during the run. But the teachers did their best to make these children feel welcome. Most of the children were nice enough to them too, with the exception of a few. I suppose it was trying. Trying times. Children from all over and all expected to get along as if life were just going along as usual. Was that possible? I mean, Polish children. Jewish Poles who had escaped as close as a hair's breadth on one large vessel. About two hundred of them. They were with us only a few days before they were taken inland. Pietermaritzburg if I remember correctly.

Because I was polite and because I was quiet, the teachers often asked me to perform small tasks. The girls were learning to take a pulse the day the teacher called me to assist. I was to be the body. The patient. The girls stood in a line down the centre of the hall. One by one they advanced, each pressing down on my right wrist with a middle and index finger, their fingers, my wrists, under the eyes of the teacher. Under the circumstances, my wrists felt especially white and smooth, just as I imagined a vulnerable gecko's skin.

Natalie was fifth in line. I had four to wait. She carried the box around her neck on a frayed hangman's loop. When she touched me, her fingers were cold, like a hand you'd slept on all night, and when you woke it was numbed dead, for a while, until you flexed and reconnected the brain, and then suddenly the hand was yours again. Though you didn't forget the feeling in a hurry. You carried it with you the rest of the day. Sometimes checking.

When she touched me, my 13-year-old pulse beat fast. Faster. Such a minor thing, I suppose, that first touch. But how important it felt then. As if something, somethings, had aligned. Young foolish hearts, eh? Maybe that was it, I don't know. But of the many faces I have forgotten, Natalie's is not one. She has not disappeared under the water, sunk into the thickening ice. She touched me and I remember it. She marked the page and looked at me and walked silently back to her seat in the hall. That was all.

That evening, as my father and I walked along the promenade toward the cinema, Natalie turned, and I lost sight of her. Natalie and her little box, out on a limb.

The lobby was filling with people; they mingled, rested awhile on red couches near the door. Behind the confectionary counter, a youth sold us toffees and mineral water. They'd run out of chocolate weeks back, popcorn too. He looked almost eighteen, the boy, one of the many boys who looked forward to the war, wanting to be shipped North. The usher in a tailed suit clipped my ticket at the door and my father and I secured seats in the back. People continued to stream in until there wasn't an empty seat left. For a while the cinema was loud with conversation but then the voices faded with the lights and the screen lit up. *Men of Lightship 61*. A short film first, as was customary back then. And you never knew what this opening act would be. Mostly they were films about the Queen. England triumphing over evil. You'd see a cartoon bomb zinging right over the English Channel in the direction of Germany and it would land true on Hitler's head. The audience would rollick and chuckle. At the end, everyone would stand and cheer.

That night, the show opened with a longshot of a lightship. They're stationary ships used as lighthouses. There was talk between men coming off their shift then a shadow over the dark sea. Luftwaffe aircrafts flying needle-nosed. The audience boomed in unison. The Luftwaffe opened their bellies and dropped bombs, hitting the lightship but some of the men manage to

make it onto a lifeboat which capsizes not far from the wreckage. As the men fight against the waves the Luftwaffe open machine guns, firing on the few survivors. Only one man survives to tell the story to a sympathetic British naval officer. Then the camera focused in on the faceless narrator, a man still wet and shivering, a blanket around his shoulders. He was seen from the back, staring at the desk of the Officer which bore a framed picture of the Queen, a Union Jack and an atlas marked with red pins. I barely remember the main show, but that first movie has stuck with me forever. Like a reel in my head, turning in my mind when I choose to flip the switch and the tape tickers.

Outside the cinema a crowd had gathered in the street. A Volkswagen had been gutted, and the innards lay strewn everywhere. Road. Pavement. The bonnet had been sliced open and stomped, ripped and bent, then discarded in the middle of the road. The petrol line had been cut, and fuel pooled in dark, bloodied puddles. Traffic swerved around the wreckage, hooting at the oncoming vehicles that failed to yield. It was chaos. The car a bare carcass picked to metal bones, and the crowd growing bigger and bigger as people flocked to witness the carnage.

My father walked over to some man. “Excuse me, unt vot is happened here?”

The man was tall and square, thickset shoulders tapering down to his waist. A swimmer’s build.

“A mob came through. Oh, not twenty minutes ago now. One of them fellas struck the car, kicked the back in. That’s what grabbed my attention. I thought it might be personal, you know, some hi jinks about a girl. But then other fellas joined in and started hollering about ‘Germans’.”

I stepped behind my father, and the man glanced at me as if he should continue to speak in my presence. My father addresses the silent question with a nod.

“About seven of them. Dressed real sharp too. I’d say they’d come from the Panama Room, the brandy I could smell on their breath. Smelt it right across the street. They were pretty sizzled, I tell you. Kicking that car like it was a body, and all the time hollering about German pigs, filthy German poison. They wanted none of that in our city, and boy, were they making -”

He stopped mid-sentence, suddenly discomfited. I could see him making the connections dot to dot in his head, the thoughts swimming from one mark to the next.

My father never flinched though, he just said, “Ja, es not gut”, and urged the man to continue.

“They was riled up, mister. If they’d had service guns they’d have shot them at the stars no doubt. The body was beat out of shape. Then they started tearing her apart, piece by piece like they was a pack of wild dogs. All over the street they threw it. Other cars had a hard time of it, they had to swerve out the way. And all the time the mob is still cussing about Hitler and his helpers. How there were moles and god damn it was time to put them in the ground where they belonged.” The man looked at me again, and apologised for cussing. “And then they ran off, fast as they arrived; they took bits and pieces of the car with them, I don’t know. Trophies or weapons. But anyways they run off shouting about smoking out the German bastards, all the Ossewabrandwag sympathisers. I saw them headed towards the harbour”.

My father was running. I ran behind him. Running. Running. The unfamiliar weight of the watch bouncing against my leg.

The man yelled after us, “Yous might not want to catch up with that crowd they...!” but his words were drowned by screeching brakes as a car nearly hit us. But my father never even stopped. Never looked back to see if I was alright. The driver held his hand down on the hooter for a long time, but the sound grew fainter, fading as we ran, my breath harsh and ragged in my head.

The fire tore through our window, burning through the thick velvet curtains, creating another curtain, of black smoke, which soared up the face of the building. A bizarre inverted waterfall of ash-black plumes. People sprawled out the block onto the streets, tumbling down the green stairwell which was streaked black as the cinders were mixed and trodden by the frenzied feet. From the pavement, people craned their necks to see, and I watched as my father ran up the stairwell into the black smoke calling and calling. Klara Klara Klara Klara he called, calling my mother’s name again and again againandagainandagain Klara Klara Klara Klara Klara Klara KlaraKlaraKlaraKlaraKlara. Then an unexpected light from the ground flashed across my face and I felt warm and then tight as sunburn and I looked across to see my

father's shop going up in flames. The glass shattered over the grave of the workmen, the buried watch, and the pigeon scratchings, and the gold-flaked front. The world lay in pieces hundredsofthousandsof and a man stepped quickly into the mess and grabbed at a framed face, he lifted a small box, and ran off and other people hastily began to pick at what they could before the flames beca...too...fier...and they also ran, down the straight street, running, I could see them running clutching my father's things to their chests.

When the fire brigade arrived in the big red truck the men in yellow ran up the stairs, fighting to control a massive hose, thick as a giant trachea and all the time my father was screaming KlaraKlaraKlaraKlaraKlaraKlara even when they carried him down and set him on his knees and people moved around him like there was a wide chalk circle drawn around his body and all I could do was stand and stare at the fire and the smoke which swept up and up like a windswept veil and my mother blown with it away away and my own feet rooted to the tar like a cenotaph as my life went up in the petrol flames which burnt my throat and they burnt my nose and they burnt the heart of my scorched, watering eyes. I was there. I saw it. The bomb arching, arcing, the red bomb finale...



The Black

Watch arrived and they helped my broken father to his feet and they asked him Sir, Sir! Do you live here Sir? Who lives here Sir? Was there anyone at home?

Wasthereanyoneintheapartment asked the white man in the crisp blue uniform and my father sobbed Klara Klara Klara. He wilted like paper in a stream KlaraKlaraKlaraKlara and a fireman exited the lobby watercolour boots prints with a rolled blanket over his shoulder purple stained fingers showing limp. And then something broke at my roots at my feet and I ran pushing through the crowd of craning necks looking at the veil of smoke and the starless sky crying mama mama mama.

I remembered a short film a short film too long to forget an Atrocity Report and the gold teeth that were taken and put in piles and piles andpilesandpiles I felt my tooth from that

morning the permanent tooth the replacement tooth the supplement tooth my father's gold tooth and the weight of the watch in my pocket was cold against my legs and the waves crashed on the docks and the blood pulsed in my ears and I couldn't distinguish the sounds. The watch went tick tick tick and it made a heavy noise as it hit the water and when I looked back all I could see, still, was the smoke rising, feel my chest rising and falling. My father fallen in a heap, my mother blown into ash.

00:04:52

I am sorry. I must catch my breath. I am fine. I am fine. Please. Don't worry about me. Don't worry about me.

IT STARTED WITH ONE

Before The End, he thought, there was the beginning and then the middle, a balance threaded on the abacus, everything held together in the right order, events in the proper place. Though occasionally the wind came from nowhere, blew so hard that the knots crossed over, and from start to finish and back to front everything threatened to tangle. At times like this, the highly-strung cords of the abacus shivered in their bonds. Then the knots seemed tighter. Or then they seemed on the verge of letting loose. Herman touched the smooth wooden counting frame, tracing the deep red grain. Bora wood, he specified quietly to himself. AKA: Miki miki. More properly: *Pemphis acidula*. He felt a little better, after that. For a little, at least.

Herman himself – was he himself, these days? – fixed the beginning as 1. No wind from any sea or moon could unstick that origin. One was his single mother who gave birth alone in room 2, cubicle B, a neatly geometrical alignment, a perfect square, a cube painted white in the white-painted city hospital. His mother had told him the stories. How Baby Herman had been very pink, like all the babies, though he was naturally given as White, his consciousness still almost blank, his conscience completely clean.

Soon, more evident than Herman's pale skin was the one self-evident thing about him, the embodied memory that would stick for life: a right index finger that had been jammed in the lavatory door when he was a curious child, a finger which had grown crooked ever since. That particularity upset him because the 1 now resembled a 7, which certainly wasn't right.

But he took comfort in the fact that even aslant his distinction was more direct than the sly curves of portly Major Mollicoil. Fat fraud. Fat fingers. A pork sausage face moustachioed with the tails of baconed pigs, silver buttons always about to bullet from his strained jacket. Such a man couldn't keep a record if he tried, Herman thought, and Major had no time to try because he was always eating. He liked to eat. He ate regardless of where he was, behind him and around and to the left and right, in his wake lay nothing but a boneyard of discarded platters, strewn with remains. Unable to move, at last, or not beyond a finger, he would crook his pointer and summon others to clean up after him. He called and you went, drawn into the mess. Herman watched the men scurrying, then turned back to his own work.

What meant most to Herman in these difficult times was his level-headed book shelf, an

orderly alignment on which he set, carefully, his care-filled registers. The shelf of registers was his only comfort. Straight and true. Underlined. Much more honest than avoidance. Strange though, how even then one could never be too honest, since every one, *everyone*, was but the beginning of a list. Herman put down his pen. He had to stop. His mind was starting to play its usual clever tricks.

MOTHERload

Here is what Herman knew:

- his mother was born 5 kilometres off the New Rush fields of Hope Town.
- the glottal gap, the doctor noted (a record, thus, forever after) was shorter than a hair's breadth. Or a rabbit's tail.
- it was the same day the first diamond was discovered.

Herman recounted the story in his mind, imaginatively stringing beads. Each time, he considered the hole and the thread. Time and again he passed through the eye of the needle, almost, and a bead was eased on and then it fell as he moved to acknowledge the next.

His mother was born forty three minutes past the eleventh hour, when the sun was reaching its apex above the corrugated tin roof of the hospital. The glare was intense. It hit the white-painted rocks near the hospital entrance, turning them into stark markers upon a burial site. The effect cut the eyes of a passer-by who seemed to wink, as if flirting with the nurse who stood at the door waiting for something to change before her shift. She was a nun, really, as well as a nurse, a female juggler. She wore a startling white habit and a wimple which failed to hide a rope of red hair which lay upon one shoulder. A scarlet accusation (< pheomelanin Herman had written on the original report when his mother had relayed the story).

For want of nerve, Herman's grandfather had paced the aisle; stuffy ward, stuffy puffing clay pipe making matters worse. He couldn't stay still. Her name was Julia, the pipe, and he cupped her foot in his crusted hands, holding her close, taking her in.

At the same time, there along the banks of the Orange River, the boy Erasmus Stephanus Jacobs had been wandering in a stifling corduroy suit. Hot so hot hot. But he wouldn't give up. Tenderly he'd bent down, red faced. Picked up the shiny stone and placed it in his shirt

pocket. By then it would have been forty five minutes past the eleventh hour. At the twelfth hour, he took the stone out again and weighed it up in each hand. Bit it. Chipped his tooth. Not a milk tooth, either, so his discovery was marked forever.

The boy and the baby made local headlines:

Baby girl brings glittering luck

Touched, or perhaps noddle-baked in the heat, a queue two hundred men deep had snaked around the town to shake the father's hand, and Herman's grandfather (as he would become) had grown more callused by the second. So much squeezing. So much bone crushing. Herman heard the story and imagined wrestling a boa constrictor.

Though there was nothing of that nonsense in the 10 by 10 inch charcoal sketch on the front page of the local gazette. Only lines and shadings which purported to show Herman's infant mother swathed in her own mother's arms. Granny, by the looks of it, was decked in an elaborate cross-hatched lace ensemble that button -ed -up -to -the -chin. Both mothers, unsurprisingly, given the artist's strict black lines, were unsmiling. The father (*grandfather*) stood equally straight and solemn behind the high-backed chair, six straight legs in all. Herman noticed one thing especially: that the artist inadvertently admitted to having no aptitude for eyes. All the eyes were lifeless currants, shrivelled on the page.

Still, he kept it, because such a paper was something to keep. Herman stored the cut-out in his pocket where it was quartered in quadrants from where his grandfather had folded it like a handkerchief, unfolding and folding, showing and replacing, until the picture was scored with ley lines.

THE FORTY-NINERS

Diamonds brought an influx of men with wide eyes into the place. Prospectors. Men looking for better prospects, starry eyes on the underground prize. They were a bare-backed lot with less grace than a prayer snatched in the throes of adultery, and they descended upon the town on horses liberated at a glib gallop from the British.

(Note to self – also FYI if BTW you are interested – re last mentioned: horses arrived Cape Town on Lady Sainsbury. Unstable vessel. In effect: coffin. Irony: sank only *after* departing

Cape of G. Hope. Rumour: fireworks. Russians. Rowdy. Raw liquor. Also involving: game approximating roulette, played with glass eye. All but one man perished at sea. Fate of horses as per above. Also see below.)

The prospectors set up a rudimentary camp along the river, rag tag and hungry. Rats. Snakes. A clutch of bony sand grouse. Eventually, there was nothing but for them to eat the weakest horse, a sad mare who had developed an embattled limp owing to the weight of Fat Ferdinand, as he would soon become known, as if he ballooned with the nourishment of oxygen. Oh the horse. It was all too much to bear, especially since she had so bravely battled on.

After the men had done the dirty, they ran a line between two trees and hung the carcass, cutting and cooking from the horseflesh as needed. She shrank hands smaller, smaller even than a child's petting pony, though even a small horse could be made to last. The birds too dropped by for their share. Cocky little butcher birds, mostly, that perched upon the fenced ribs, snatching and picking. In and out. The little birds flew in and out of the bony cavern, skewering shreds of meat and flying off to nearby nests. Jacky Hangman.

The prospectors made a poor first impression, and it stuck. The town's people tallied the newcomers as savages, well-nigh cannibals who'd pick the fat between their rotten teeth with a stillborn's shrivelled pinky, were they given the chance. A scabrous bunch, the lot of them. People without people are never to be trusted. Not the least by towns of long established families. Farms with family names. Not a single person unaccounted for (Herman's lists could attest to that). Their appearance was unsettling to the towns' people who felt naked as plucked chickens to these foreigners. *Die uitlanders* as they'd come to be known.

Most were relatives of British tradesmen who, anchored at port, overheard the general talk of *uitlanders*. Murmmmmurs wwwwashed across the ocean to the trading post of The Dutch East India Company where men of nomadic good fortune marked out maps that fixed on the smudged tip of a dark continent, drawn in Indian ink. Of course there were others in this new nation too. Germans. Latvians. Americans whose lines led back to the Colorado gold rush. The last arrived laden with history and instruments, and they busied themselves with both under the stars and the washline stripes, banging loudly as they walked. They rattled the

locals. In such noisy talk, the brash swagger; there, in those men, was the flash of luck that had already passed the finish line, and it was troubling to decipher the meaning. Did it mean first, or down to the last? The locals didn't know.

When they hit shore, the prospectors descended the gangplank in biblical doubles, two by two, the shadow of famine etched darkly on their gaunt faces. Desperate times. They called for desperate men, and it wasn't long before the newmen marked out land on the hill, then they squatted in the dust, sifting, or brawling over their relative claims. The lines were loosely demarcated with scarves and rope, so that from a distance the hill appeared to be hosting a jolly May Day fete, a tangle of lines and layered things that began to look promising. It called for celebration, surely? Local loblollies, not wanting to be left behind, feeling behind the times already, made to join the ranks. In for a penny, they felt, throwing their weight behind the pounds of zigzagging dishcloths and jute twists, the huckabacks and hobbled hoists, the washing lines angled in squares and tricky tangrams, a slew of intersecting geometrics shaping spots of dirt for cherry-picking and hen-scratching.

Line by line the town grew. It grew into a town. As it grew, there formed inns and taverns. There opened a digging depot stocked with all manner of necessities. Toothed spades and bladed spades; trowelled spades and spaded trowels. All and any of which could cut through a neck, should the need arise.

Also: z-line saws, slotted sifts, picks, rakes, scoops, spiral hand drills, hand dredgers and chisels. Chasels chesels chosels chusels a chockload of diverse chumpery.

Also other instruments: things with funnels, plugs, shiny bits and bobs, matte spots, pointy ends, blunt ends, ends with no ends. The occasional unnamed thingamajig, widget, doodah, or what-what. Sundry devices, call them what you will.

A man called Bob U. Roncle of field F, Section g, Square 13, poked his eye out with one of those doodackys. Skewered the ball clean out, though whether anyone still re-members...?

At night, a tavern was a popular choice, and there were many. Taverns meant warmth, which meant whisky and women. A bird in the hand, the prospectors knew, having spent hours staring out at the scant bush. Plus taverns were likely spots in other regards, good for hot

heads who wished to resolve the day's disputes, since men often came to blows over the digging. Outside, in the dust, roadies scrapped with bare fists while more civil fellows refined their quarrels indoors, at table. Such entertainments drew spectators aplenty.

After much red facing and pig grunting, you heard a forearm smack as it met the table, and with that crack you knew: the winner had secured yards of land; the loser had gone for broke. You roared with excitement when a bone snapped, yells raising the roof. Perhaps, then, you thought of some fabled land where giants lived, and then you slapped at a fly with your hand, forgetting in a second as the noise sucked you back into the maw of the brawl.

Even with that noise though, many nights you might hear stones clinking, stones hidden in almost every pocket, stones mainly small, lonely, little parts of the good earth seeking out sparkling company. On especially prosperous nights, the stones were so numerous and so intent on having it out that taverns along the main dust crescendoed into a fusillade of hail on a metal pan. More and more and more. At that racket, the Kimberley guard kicked into action. Meaning: the town's three sharp shooters Ou Piet, Ou Du Toit and Ou Krauss, and they scrambled legs out their houses in long johns, top coats hurried for cover, bandoliers slung across their chests. And as God is my witness, they burst among the busy drinkers, shouting orders at the publicans.

Though from first to last, hardly a man among the lot bothered to turn a head, because the men in the crowd were busy. They had to throw back their heads and knock back the Dewars, didn't they? To slam their tin cups on the long pine bar. And that, excuse you me, was bloody hard work.

Over the years, a tipsy eye could trace hundreds of interlinked circles indented in the wood, a surreal Olympian logo.

The inns did good trade in newcomers, though whether inside or out, the *uitlanders* stayed outsiders, however long they'd lived in town, and they bore the scorched, crowfeet scorn of Herman's grandfather and the other Dutch settlers. How vivid these despising were, for Herman, who recalled his grandfather insisting that a man (A Man) should never forget. Though the what and the why...in that he left the boy to his own intelligence and the child's devising fixed on crow's feet as a map of memory, imagining that his own eyes would one day follow the same route, sure as prejudice sought pot-shot shelter in convenient gullies. He

wondered if it may be better for men to pull their skin back to their temples when looking led to hate.

He soon learned better, the sympathisers who made their views known were summarily evicted from the inns; they took lodging above the taverns, although these rooms were less than comfortable, since they clanked and rattled with stones, pebbles passed from hand to hand after hours.

A makeshift council was established to manage matters, to make the town more civic than it presented. The founding fathers put shoulders to the wheel and set mind over matter. They also toyed with the notion of renaming the town. Prospect. Why not? Or Windfall. Either way, it would mean a fresh start. But they were shot down by the church who said such language encouraged nefarious activity and greedy, ungodly transients. The old nameless name stayed, and nothing changed, except for the worse.

3. THE CONGREGATION OF PROPERGOOSENGANDER

The arrival of the prospectors was followed by that of the missionary nuns and priests, harried flocks of white and black and brown. The religious orders followed their obscure commands. In the Congregation of Propergoosengander, for example, holy rollers barked from boxes, having hired fearsome geese to honk and hiss at passing renegades, fluffing them into the fold. From small beginnings, the holy soldiered on and worked to set up the Whole House of the Lord, Entire. They did the Good Lord's handiwork in the valley of the shadow, their praise erected churches of canvas and rope, high hope cathedrals clinking countless metal pegs and hairthin spikes that never mind mallets and immovable devotion, soon bent against the unforgiving wind. It was a difficult business, the Lord's work. So hard it was, this task, the ground so blunt, that the devout, however doubtless, came fervently to believe that the town was founded on the very anvil of the devil's iron basement, and that nothing anyone might do could alter the topography of the Lord's own providing. If it was rock he had wanted, then rock it was and ever would be. (This suspicion was confirmed years later when compasses came to town; each and every introduction failed to point true. Every needle wavered, leading men and women off the straight and narrow, off into the wilderness.)

After the British took the town in 1875 following the Second Boer War, the empire took charge, and named the place after one Lord Kimberley (a man with a long serious face who was rumoured to bleed purple, a tribute to his noble lineage). The locals took it hard. They fell into a depression deep as a hole, none more so than Herman's grandfather. He took to disappearing into the night, running out into the endless black screaming and cursing, the sound as distorted as if he were turning through discordant frequencies. (Vocal fold lesions, Herman imagined. The bumpy calluses on the cords. Stared down at the thickened skin which leathered the base segment of his hand, and he pictured a call[us] heart.)

He, the grandfather of Herman, sat on the back stoep during the day staring red-eyed over his fields. Watched them as they turned brown. She, the grandmother of Herman, documented these days in her last diary. A book which his mother had stored in a hiding place that she forgot and so it came to be lost for good.

It was a bad case: the crops wilted. Wilted some more. Then dried up. Crusted unto dust until the field was levelled. You walked in that, your feet raised a choking yellow ash, and somewhere, just tickling beneath your nose, the taunting smell of baked bread.

The farmhouse fell next, following suit. The paint peeled back from a fruit split in the sun, stripped off like blistered sunburn from skin, leaving a patched, pocked effect. The mud bricks began to crumble. The hearth became ash.

Herman's grandfather turned grey. The bleached colour ran from the roots of his bare hairline down his ashen face through to the keratin edges of his fingers and toes. He barely moved, during the day. His worry became completely transparent. In the sunlight, which scorched every day, it appeared he had turned to some miraculous stone, a clear monument to loss and defeat. People began to avoid him. Neighbours from the local co-operative stopped stopping by. They rode past and averted their eyes when they saw what stood for a house, the pile of stone that was meant to be a man. They turned away, lest looking turn them also to stone even sooner than would the drought.

At night, every night, he wandered in the wilderness, wild as a beast. Searching. He would return later and later each time, mumbling in long syllables as he stumbled to bed, the dawn already scanning the sky.

Herman's grandmother held her breath, concerned that he would collapse from exhaustion and worry. Quietly she pinched the bridge of her nose under the covers, stifling herself. Though even she had not water enough now for tears.

One night he never returned. The townsfolk whispered for weeks after, and offered their own accounts of his disappearance.

On Kurt, the oldest man who ever walked, he swore he'd found a suit of empty human skin slipped off at the far boundary fence of the veld. (It was dark; he couldn't be expected to see properly.) He'd returned the next day for a closer inspection, meaning to bring home the proof, but in only a few hours the sun had crisped the suit into nothing but a pile of brittle mielie leaves. When he'd reached out, the thing had atomised, thousands of invisible particles taken by the wind. That was one story.

Others held differently; said that the boot prints leading to the dusty pile could clearly be seen to disappear *after* the limit line, and that could mean only one thing, could it not?

Little Herman was all ears, but could make no sense of it. And of his grandfather, there was never again either hide or hair.

Many believed that Herman's grandfather had indeed crumbled, transformed into stone as he set his mind on the search for water. Which there must be. On his land. Except it wasn't.

But there he was, if you looked. That rock, see? And that one... If you timed it right, looking into the sun, if you squinted, you could see pieces of Himself. You could convince your eyes that you had found him and that you could put two and two together.

Sometimes people laughed when they told this one, but Herman liked this possibility the most, the idea of a body returning to the earth seemed less religious than scientific, like a circle meeting its end point. An O. Score settled, owing nothing. Zilch. The symmetry made perfect sense, whichever way he looked at it.

In the dry climes, the stories swelled like fantastical sails and the final history on which the townsfolk decided was that Herman's grandfather had assumed a different form. It was obvious: he had become a giant blesbok which roamed the burnt planes. There were sightings

of this fabulous creature. Twice the height of a man; its girth the width of an ox pull. Hunters started to report spotting this blessed bok soon after Herman's grandfather's disappearance.

In the sudden flap between sheets, a woman hanging her washing happened on its huge white face in the veld not far off and ran screaming through the town. She eventually fainted outside the diggers' depot, and was carried into the skimpy shade in a wheelbarrow. Though there was no shade sufficient to effect a proper recovery and after that, everyone called the crazy lady Bokkie. Many who caught a glimpse of the fabled animal met no such fate; they simply described its white marked face, a distinct blaze from nose to horns, divided above the black eyes by a horizontal strip. Others claimed they heard it at night, moaning, a low harmony invisibly pacing the boundary of the town.

The stories kept coming. No wonder the blesbok became legendary and civic-minded citizens voted to erect a statue in its likeness as a fitting memorial to Herman's grandfather. The statue stood at the end of the road, a long stretch out of sight of the digging fields. It was made of solid brass, melted bent pegs. Leftovers from the Congregation of Propergoosengander. It bulked three metres above the ground on a cemented stone cairn. A plaque was engraved on the mount but Herman could never make out the words. They'd slowly gone green. Which meant history. And then later there were the bits scored by knives. Which meant the quick work of vandals, which was history too, he supposed.

Herman busied himself with that mysterious plaque. He thought up words and dates and numbers. He linked them to people he knew from the town, places he knew by heart. He shaped words around the plaque, wrote them on toilet paper and draped them upon the pedestal. Spat on the paper and moulded it into the desired shape, hoping to find meaning. To make the monument mean. Some days he simply did the obvious and he held a piece of jotter paper over the plaque and rubbed away with the side of his pencil, so badly did he want to see exactly what was there. But the knives had scored too deeply across the words and time, too, had worn the more promising glyphs away. Herman was left with nothing. Time and again the same timeworn happenings. Time happened everywhere. And elsewhere. To people you knew. And to other people. If it did nothing else, the plaque brought that message home to Herman, and hard.

Take Herman's mother. After her father's disappearance, and following a series of dire circumstances fortunately too predictable to relate, Herman's mother was taken in by the local

convent, a sect of The Holy Family Sisters which was a wing of The Sisters of Mercy, which was a branch of the religious order which, now more orderly, had evolved into that respectable institution known as The Church of Propaganda.

Herman's mother had shown him the annual photographs taken of the children at the convent. Uniformed rows, shortest to tallest, a dumpy range of silly or sullen queues. His mother was always middle centre with long wild hair which billowed shoulders against the shorn mops of the others. He could see for himself that she'd possessed a potent charm, this child, her loveliness able to convince the nuns that beauty, in her innocent person, was the good Lord's love. Come Saints' Days with all the delicious trimmings, she would persuade Sister Cutlet to knick but a whisper off her thick blonde locks while the other girls' heads were heeled into standard, blunt bowls, undistinguished orphans every one. The curt bobs lopped their chins. Gave them thick necks and gormless grins. At last, when this covetous cutting of corners had gone on for so long that the nuns could not recall its beginnings, they could find no cause to deny the child her small shelter of divine wilderness, and her heavenly hair enwrapped their wimpled dreams, whether for pleasure or for shame.

By age fourteen her hair hugged her hips. By fifteen it brushed her thighs like a sigh, then, aged sixteen, it dipped past her knees (the sweet, inside curve), calves, heels, until it left her behind, trailing like a bridal veil. At length, the hair grew so long she wound it up in a knot and kept it in a suitcase which was always with her, for better or for worse, through thick and thin. Even Herman remembered that. When he was very young, she carried him in her arms and the case on her head like a mad Madonna. Though it was not altogether surprising, in retrospect, the other local customs considered. The best among the women wore silver locket and hearts upon their sleeves; the worst, it was said, were strung with ochre snuff boxes and dried bladders. Of all the women, Herman's mother alone had a finely foiled false top, closeting her comfort. So she was happy, in her way. The way few women knew how.

3. NONE OTHER THAN NUN HIGH NOON

Herman's mother often spoke of her favourite nuns to Herman. Some days, she spoke of none other. It was sister this, sister that...all the female relations she'd never had.

- i. Sister Dania Deary, by name, a fair Scot with a proclivity for moonshine. Not the imbibing, but the wholesale industry. It kept her busy on the side.
- ii. Sister Gregory Rose, a tall androgynous woman with the tender facial hair of a youth, pale chin tufts which she plucked with long fingers when she thought no one noticed. The effect was exacerbated by her habit, a swirling black serge held with a dark woollen belt, and up above a starched white wimple which grew across her cheeks and under her neck like a vast white beard. Father time, she might have been, crossing the veld in some canny guise.
- iii. Most of all his mother spoke of Nun High Noon, a woman who could fill every mining hole with all manner of matter if challenged to do so. (You talking to *me*, mister?) Noon had been born to Yugoslav parents in Eire, and had ventured to the dark continent with the Irish Mercy Mission. Thus departed, she had of necessity developed her own strange ways. She kept her habits white as virgin snow. (Some misty memory of the girlhood Balkans?) Forsaking ice, but not potatoes, she had found her place among the red and the grit and the hard earth, growing into a woman to be reckoned with. That she was, was Sister Noon. Facing off a sinner she would grind her tough-soled Jack and Jill's into the ground as if putting out a final cigarette before the gallows. This action she completed with jaw dancing, grinding teeth without mincing her words. After years of the habit, her teeth had worn down, and had been capped by the smithy with iron bites that winked in the light. (Herman had listened to his mother's story, imagining the effect. Imagined his bent finger severed at the knuckle between metallic molars. A straight, clean cut. Restorative. The idea incited revulsion, and intrigue.)

Nun High Noon was a keen shot. She loved gunslinging, could slice a rope into halved tufts with a single bullet. Bang. One became two. Just like that. Evidence of her craft could be located at the back of the convent in the orchard which stretched out to the foot of two red hills which looked like breasts, as most things did, if you considered it. The gum tree stumps had bled from the perfect rounds and dried in a sticky gloop of honeyed gold. (Her own dear papa had been a collector of the world's finest guns, you see, which he'd stored in ebony boxes all

around their house in towers that traced the walls like rickety coffins, threatening to expose the dead at any time. This current rippled through her still, shook her up at the smallest thought of him.)

Nun High Noon wore a holster hiped with an American flintlock pistol. The metal-grip was set on an ornate wooden frame; the barrel was shot gold. The cock-lever, frizzen stem and flash pan sat to the right of the body (like the dislocated leg of a grasshopper, Herman imagined). The ramrod was perched below the barrel (like an antenna), held in place with an ivory clip. The pistol jutted out at her side like a malformed bone spur which would have given the impression of a limp were it not for her arrow straight spine.

4. ERASMUS STEPHANUS JACOBS

Few men ever knew the women of the town as well as Erasmus Stephanus Jacobs. His voracity and rapture acquired mythic status via the words of Mary by Johanna by Priscilla by Ethel by Jane by Eve. He was said to be a man possessed of a dexterous capacity unmatched anywhere in either frequency or skill.

After the Second Boer War Erasmus very kindly visited the widows to do his duty. He came with a suggestion of vulnerability, which is perhaps why they invited him easily into their beds, after undressing him like a child. Perhaps that was his secret. His endearing baby face and the boyish, chipped tooth. A woman would willingly hold him to her breast as if she alone could offer the nourishment he needed.

He fathered eleven children in the town. The ones he knew of. When he visited, the pretty babes climbed his legs like tumbling kittens.

5. FATHER

There was never a reliable record of Herman's father, but here's what Herman knew:

- * he smoked Red Key tobacco which smelt like whisky and caramels and maple trees;
- * he kept two pistols on his person at all times. One in his hip-holster and another concealed in a shoulder bandolier which he never (ever) removed;
- * he was reputed to have had the darkest eyes in Kimberley. Deeper and more silent than the

mining holes, or so Herman's mother had once said. Herman tried to imagine a woman falling into those impossible holes. A woman could fall. A woman fell. Herman heard the sick crack of bone smacking on the rock. So that, then, was that.

That it was.

6. MINING HOLES

The circumference of the largest hole in the mining fields was 2.378 kilometres. (He'd measured that in steps, first off, arms rigidly held at his sides, the angle of gaited legs 45 degrees. That much he recalled). The diameter was 0.757 kilometres, measured using a rope and two iron pegs hammered into the ground 1.189 kilometres apart. The depth seemed endless, immeasurable, but when Herman was seven-years and thirty-four-days-old he attached a brick to a rope and decided to begin.

He knotted rope to rope with the eagle's knot he had learnt from his mother (who had learnt it from Nun High Noon). At night he secured his rope to the ground with two pegs and left a sign "Site under inspection" in his symmetrical child's hand. The height of the letters carefully balanced. The heavy curves of the u echoing precisely the inverse arc of the preceding n which met the potbellied d as if all the letters were compressed under the pressure of the same invisible equilibrium.

The following day he lowered the rope again, adding 23 more ropes to his knotted braid, the next day another 19, and the next another 21. Eight days passed until the rope went slack. The exact point at which the rope met the ground was recorded with a charred stick from a transient's abandoned campfire. It took two days to pull the 142 ropes out of the hole. The ropes at 20 metres, each with an average of 40 centimetres removed for knotting, he calculated at a final tally of 2.283 kilometres. Herman drew a diagram, along with a scale recording his discoveries. This he slotted into a register in his room where he kept his records.

7. WALL OF RECORDS

They were arranged into three groups, three being the appropriate number for groups which were at once orderly and beautiful.

ONE: the first group was for people and their things.

Herman kept a record of all the people he encountered, their height, approximate age, family name, the things they kept closest to them. By the age of 12 he had 154 of these registers. He was one, the beginning, the beginning of his lists as creators naturally are. The egg before the chicken as life would have it. This one had apertures.

TWO: the second group was for diagrams and scaled drawings.

These he labelled with excruciating care and flattened them out with the palm of his hand so that they were crisply uniform. The drawings ranged from living things – “Horse pulling a cart slowly across a level plane”, to objects – “Diamond discovered on plot 36 on 2 February 1886”, to alluring absences – “Mining hole 23 May 1891”.

THREE: the third group was for lists and reports.

“Man falling down chute”. “List (5) of unexpected items uncovered whilst digging”. “Scuffle (8) outside Slang Vel Inn”. He accrued these records in such a way that he had to pile them under his bed, eventually sleeping 3.2 metres high so that his nose (when he lay on the flat of his back) missed the rafters by 42 centimetres.

REPORT 26 (8 NOVEMBER 1899)

UNIT 356 Unit 22 consisting of 1346 men entered battle with enemy forces at approximately 06 hundred hours. Enemy forces numbered at approx. 2572 men. 14 Boers killed. 121 Boers wounded. 1 Boer missing. Roughly 79 enemy killed. 200 enemy troops wounded. 194 captured. 497 bullet wounds.

Carefully, carefully, Herman gathered the belongings of the soldiers he had documented. He recorded his findings in the book he carried in the front left pocket of his cavalry uniform. The fabric was stiff with sweat, and with constant tugging; the hem thick, but worn thin with

time and anxious attention. In his uniform, Herman looked faded, the fawn colour of a shallow river after a storm.

The book in question was bound in bovine leather and etched with horizontal lines in which the number 78 was repeated.

27 boots

12 photographs

13 letters

2 flint lighters

7 rings

1 lock of hair

3 gold teeth

Carefully he retrieved the pieces, packing them neatly into his haversack though he had to make quick work of it before the looters routed the bodies, scuttling from site to site. The gold would go first, if there was any. Wristwatches removed leaving naked white bands which could be mistaken for bandages at a distance. He slung the strap over his shoulder, feeling the weight of the battle dig into his muscles.

Moiling through the peat, post-battle, Herman made his way over to Willem, a youth he knew to be aged 24, height 1.72 metres. A young man missing his fourth toe on either foot.

Willem's eyes gaped. Milky marbles. Using his first finger and his thumb, Herman closed the eyes. Willem's skin felt damp, although the sun had only just begun to dip below the knoll.

Herman looked around. All around was burnt flesh. The smell in his nose. Flesh of their own and of the British, impossible to distinguish. The reek of copper and salt and sulphur. The smell barely mitigated by the rainwater which pooled ankle-deep in the trenches. The mud sucked at Herman's boots. With every move he made a thuckering puckering sound. Willem. Group 1. Register 260. Soldier 34. Death by Mausers.

The sun dipped, casting a rosy light over the veld. The red glow cancelled out the blood,

washing scorched faces and bloodied stretchers clean. Behind Herman, the balance of the wounded were propped against rocks. Denys (register 260, soldier 435) had three bullets in his leg. He blocked the holes, pressing the balls of his fingers against the red, spurting currents. Two Indians came towards him carrying a dirty khaki stretcher. They wore white turbans swathed high above their heads, to fend off the heat. The white set them apart, and when they ran they seemed to Herman like tall dandelion buds bobbing in a field. The pretty green fields he vaguely remembered from biscuit tins. The battlefield which now claimed his vision.

Willem was the last one in Herman's count. The last. The final one always came as a relief to Herman, though he acknowledged the guilt of this feeling, a sharp ache which arched from his breast plate through to his teeth. Piercing as eyes. He stood up. Returned the leather ledger to his pocket. Heard the odd popping of his knees.

The uncollected bodies lay across the veld in heaps. Pieces. The shells had subdivided the fleeing Brits, their remains scattered by the Boers fire. (Pommm pommm pom.) In the morning, the mangled parts would be buried in anonymous graves. Herman marked the patted mounds of earth as best he could with what traces he could rummage. A small buried bible. Bits of medals. What he found closest to them. The truth was subjective he thought.

The injured soldiers, still too stunned to know that they were lucky to be alive, were carried to the camp in a winding single file. One stretcher bearer after another, climbing over stony outcrops and through dummy trenches. Just so many ants carting the debris of a picnic back to their nest. Herman watched the queue for a long time. Watched as the stretchers see-sawed unsteadily, disappearing out of sight around the uneven curve of the hill.

The camp was set up on the far edge of the hill hidden behind the crest, protected by bulky rocks which could have been cut clean from the summit with a hot knife. Herman passed the sentry post where Schalk skulked with his fox face. Schalk nodded, tipping his thin nose low at Herman as he passed.

The artillery was guarded on the edge of the camp by Riaan and Ruan, identical twins. They moved together, and finished each other's sentences. Puppets, some people mocked. Double-jointed Siamese. But their closeness seemed as natural to Herman as the attraction between

ions. He greeted the men. (Hallo. Hallo.) He moved on, imagining one the negative of the other. Like a photograph. He imagined Riaan (or was it Ruan) ghost-lit blue and black, white shining teeth and bright eyes. For a brief moment, he held the image up to the light. It comforted him, somehow, to know that if there could always be more than one, two could be enough.

The Tommy Atkins were rounded up in an area that resembled a kraal, a circular stand studded with tents and cordoned off with wire strung between wooden posts. The men's faces radiated defeat. Some wore relief like a mask. Young men. Dirty faces burned red-brown by the unfamiliar sun. Shoulders slouched.

So this is how it was. Herman imagined the loss, the ungainly kyphosis hunched on a man's back; on the backs of every man, holding him down. He wondered:

at the end of all of this

if these things were clear-cut

if the beginning could be imagined

as other than frayed rope

would it stop then

all men stooped

to guard their loss?

Quickly he scribbled the idea. In group two. The words. But also sketching stick figures with mountains on their backs. He couldn't finish. He'd have to complete it at the end.

The medical tent mimicked the unlikely style of a big top. It stood near right of the crude enclosure, and arrayed around it, small khaki tents spoked out from the central hub. A-frames. Tipis. Officer Groot's tent was situated at the heart, and Herman headed there to file his most recent report. Groot surveyed the document in silence, nodded, and handed it back. Once again, Herman fixed on the man's swollen, hammer-hand. Herman had illustrated the hand and filed it in group two under scaled drawings, Appendage A. The scale of the hand

skimmed the limits of the page, an indication of the oddity's enormity. The skin flaked in half moon ridges as if it strained against the beast of his ham fist which could suddenly break through. (Stop. Enough! How could he stop himself, Herman chided, when the details were everywhere, a fine dust in every crevice of consciousness.)

The next day, Herman delivered the report to the heliograph operator, a certain Sal, a skinny, surly man, unusually pallid. He had the appearance of homemade paper, with cheek bones that cast shadows across his face.

Sal said nothing. Only stared at the sky when Herman passed him the report. Herman noticed how the man's scrawny neck arched back to reveal the ribbed trachea of his throat. (Five. Made a mental note to record this fact under Sal's profile in group one).

Sal stared upwards. The sky was sheeted in thin layers of cloud, blocking the sun. This seemed to please Sal who was then free to sit, rather than work. Sal puffed out his cheeks, filling the silence.

Back in his tent, Herman laid out his field collection. (The administrators had hauled the 27 boots back to the stock barrack, disappointed with the odd number but not requiring an explanation.) He dragged the cardboard boxes from under his stretcher. Bibles. Diaries. Flint lighters. Hair. Letters. Locketts. Miscellaneous. Photographs. Rings. Teeth. Wristwatches. He lined them in the narrow passageway between the bunks. Stragglers began to gather to watch the rite, knowing that Herman would take each item from the box before adding the new artefacts. Knowing that Herman would slowly count the pieces, touching them one by one. The soldiers counted with him in silence, watching Herman's lips as he synched the numbers under his breath and then stacked the pieces back in their boxes. No one ever spoke. There was nothing to say.

The photographs were the most common, slotted into bibles, letters, diaries. Bent in pockets. Crinkled white lines on the fold like dried up spilt milk. He had collected 586 photographs at the siege, where all his collecting began. So the siege was the start of it, he thought quietly to himself. Though when he studied the photographs, it was difficult to determine. The photographs were the trickiest of items, because the surfaces went tacky in the heat and the

pictures stuck together in places, the emulsified images transferring in interrupted layers. There were gaps in some pictures which could only be located on others. Herman turned one photograph over. An inscription in elaborately curved, feminine writing: "Yours forever, Ann. 1897". He looked. Saw a dark blurred patch which could have been the backdrop of a photo booth or a waving arm, a landscape or smiling teeth. Herman put the photo back among the other gaps and holes, the parts buried under the lace of memories, brittle-suited skeletons, the grimace of smiling teeth. A sudden notion claimed him, and while the other soldiers watched, unfussed, by now used to every oddity that might be cast their way, Herman pulled out notebook number 78. Herman, Herman wrote...

Curator of Bones

And then another version: Herman...

Creator of Bonds

He turned the possibilities this way and that. Pondering his titles. Which find offered the best fit? It was not the kind of question that he could ask of anyone. Or, indeed, that anyone might be able to answer.

8. OFFICER HIVER

Hiver shivered next to Herman in the dining tent. He sat to Herman's right, since a childish game with sticks had rendered him, aged 8, stone blind in his left eye. But here he was, soldiering. On so-called inactive duty, it was true, which entailed much behind-the-scenes business, readying the guns for battle, carrying messages between tents, mountains of administrative work. An agterryer with a fancy title really, Herman thought.

Hiver was constantly shaking and chattering, his teeth rattling the tents at night, much to the chagrin of the other men. They called him Morse. When the company was in a good mood they liked to jest that the teeth were tap tap ping out Hiver's dreams, a monologue lengthy and verbose. "What's the story, Hhhi vver?" And the trooper would jigger dance like a lunatic skeleton, claimed by the moon. When the mood was less mild, when the men were desperate for rest and Hiver's teeth continued with their relentless mission, inevitably some man would get up and shove Hiver awake, threatening to smash his mouth. "Enough of the

damn *code*, man, Jesus wept!” But he couldn’t help himself. So Herman left him alone, and just called him Hiver (like the French ‘winter’, not bees or welts). Both the courtesy and the accuracy Hiver appreciated, even taking them for friendship, of a kind.

Like Herman, Hiver had never seen battle. A battlefield, yes, but actual fighting, no. So he imagined it often in fears and dreams which he unburdened to Herman, elaborate accounts rendered with tremendous effort and dedicated detail, the accumulations so minute that the narratives were gnomonic. Herman suggested he write a book. That he call it *A Vulture’s Guide to War Dreams*. Which was surely as good a title as anyone could invent. But Hiver seemed reluctant. He said the title didn’t catch.

“Fish?” asked Herman.

“We’re not birds. We’re not picking meat off dead bones.”

“What are we up to then?”

“To my mind, we’re caretakers. Of warm ground.”

Herman had mulled over Hiver’s reply. Perhaps he was right. At any rate, in some respects Luke Hiver’s answer rang true. And it helped Herman somewhat, to discover a reason, to know that another man envisaged himself a custodian.

After breakfast Hiver accompanied Herman to the small ceremony where the chaplain read passages from the Bible.

They overcame him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony; they did not love their lives so much as to shrink from death. Brothers, we do not want you to be ignorant about those who fall asleep, or to grieve like the rest of men, who have no hope. We believe that Jesus died and rose again and so we believe that God will bring with Jesus those who have fallen asleep in him.

The burial detail began to fill the graves. They used what shovels they had. They used their clawed hands, like crabs. Then groups of men stood smoking around the disappeared holes of piled earth. From where these men stood the white and canvas coverings peaked into vision beneath the slowly piling dirt. They quickly stared at their boots, unblinking. When they left together the smoke trailed behind them in the air like hot steam from a coal engine.

Hiver helped Herman write the details of the lost on a tree nearby. Names, births and deaths in a list from the base of the trunk to the fork. Ants began to trace the wounds of weeping sap.

The regiment had been stationed at this camp for a few weeks now and had routed the British in three battles. Significant loss to the enemy; far fewer numbers lost among their own.

Though in the thick of it, the battles surging and screaming, a man might lose his senses and never come to. The battles lasted dark until dark. Incessant enfilade rang in the ears, though the pitch was soon enough lost on the men, who fell deaf and felt dumb, creatures living out their own deaths. The medical tent overflowed, spilled out with shell-shattered bodies and endless cases of the filthy dysentery and enteritis which had claimed more men than the British guns and blades. Officer Groot had been overwhelmed; he'd sent for an ambulance to carry the excess wounded to the field hospital at Intombi, but the ambulance never came. It was shelled by the British over Lombard's Kop, leaving another gap where something else was needed.

Hiver and Herman passed a line of cypresses as they made their way back to the camp. Tomb trees. In the dull light, they loomed large as spectres about to speak and Hiver shivered, found himself obliged to find his voice in order to establish who he was.

“Your records,” he asked Herman, “You ever make things up?”

“Hiver, really. I am not imagining this.”

Hiver had looked around at the ghostly trees, the haunting impression of living figures. “No, but maybe to fill the blanks?”

Herman sighed. It wasn't the first time. Hiver had taken to bothering him, asking all manner of questions, incredulous that one man might ever account for everything. Hiver, unfortunately, was not a believer. He liked Herman, but was sceptical of the boxes and papers and lists. He couldn't credit the people and their possessions, the scaled drawings and diagrams, the lists and reports. It was all too much. Plus Hiver had a terrible mind for remembering. He saw life through a blurry lens, an out-of-focus account that he filtered more vitally in his dreams.

Herman shook his head. Replied that everything could be accounted for, that even emptiness could be measured with the right instruments.

A VULTURE'S GUIDE TO WAR DREAMS

The days that followed the most recent encounter were warm, and the battle waned and waxed, the Boers' Maxim-Nordenfelt smashing through. The end was a field-study in horror. Skull shards. Soft, full-blown stomachs. Mismatched limbs. British and Boer bone broken and blown to splinters. A mangled mess of flesh, cloth, bone and hair piled into trenches between the living.

The British, approaching from the south, crossed the Tugela. There, in the water, the Boers had planted barbed wire, cleverly submerged. So the harder the troops sought to escape, the faster they were held. Men turned to mess, caught in the metal tangle. Writhing to get free. Clutching at metal straws. Fearing the fierce flow, many held fast to the barbs and drowned. Soon, bodies created a filtered wall where debris from the veld piled up in red scum. The scum rose up the river bank then receded. A line of crimson foam, floating with awful bric-a-brac.

THE HELIOGRAPH

The day was so bright that everything seemed whitewashed. As if the night rain had bleached the ground and the canvas tents. Herman walked briskly over to Sal's station and watched as he set up the heliograph. Sal angled the trivet to the north, so that the silver face reflected the faint light of the opposing heliograph in the imperceptible distance. He tuned the aiming rod and the sighting vane, adjusting the cross wires to bisect the target. The mirror was aligned using the tangent box and the elevation screw (Sal's long bony fingers were suited to this task) so that a small, dark shadow showed at the intersection of the marking wires.

Herman oversaw the process each time. Partly, he was taken with the procedure, the care and precision. Partly he was anxious to ensure that his report would be accurately conveyed. But Sal resented an audience. Suspected it were not a spectatorship for watching but a surveillance of himself, and he showed his sentiments by sighing and huffing. He sucked the air and exhaled with such noisy force that in a matter of seconds Herman could see the man transformed. First there were the sharp, grave contours of Sal's cheek bones (malar but really zygoma, zoomed in zygomatic arch), and then his face bloated into a balloon, ready to burst.

And yet these extremes were Sal, both himself. Indeed, thought Herman, indulging a passing fancy, people were remarkably odd.

Sal held Herman's report in his left hand, his dirty fingers leaving ridged prints on the page. (The imprints turned Herman's stomach.) Then the flashes began as he tapped the key which regulated the rear lever, tipping and tilting the mirror through fractional degrees. At the end, Sal cut Herman a dirty look and bowed sarcastically. Herman took his leave.

Four pigeons had been sent to Durban but they'd not returned. And there'd been no helio messages for days. The men were unsettled. Schalk had found a British spy hiding in a den dug into the hill. Some of the men had begun to act strangely. They were dreaming wildly; they sprang up in their sleep and clutched their chests, shrieking at invisible bayonet wounds. They wept. They fell to the floor. They writhed like snakes or convulsed in fits. They lay still as the dead, from fatigue.

The majority – too many – were moved to the medical tent, though this was as if under siege, the occupants still spilling out into all weather. The second ambulance had not come either. There had been nothing but silence in the air for weeks. No searchlights at night or runners.

And then it started again: the even roll of the Mausers.

THE HELIOGRAPH

The morning that the first message came through Herman was talking to Hiver at the edge of the garrison. Hiver was describing a battle near the Orange River, a dream, his eyes widening at his own account of an explosion, the thin blood vessels at the edges of his eyeball mimicking the trajectory of the blast. He threw his shoulder forward, fists held close to his chest, as he described a soldier rolling into a trench from lyddite fire, burying his mouth and nose into a kerchief around his neck talking through the fabric so that his words were muffled.

Behind them the men began to stir and shots rang out from the artillery camp where Riann and Ruan were on duty. Herman stood up. Climbed on a high rock and saw sand kicked up in a smoky brown haze like a small tornado was passing through. He and Hiver ran to the camp.

Ran through the brown dust, ran through the dirty sweat that soon streamed down their faces. By the time Herman and Hiver arrived, the crowd was already a murky river, brown uniformed bodies swirling in waves. Officer Groot stood in the central clearing holding a message. It looked incredibly small, almost lost in his impossibly large fist. His face was ashen. He stood. Staring straight through nothing as if his retinas had burnt out.

Officer Groot dropped the paper. Herman retrieved it. He recognised Sal's untidy scribble. The brief message spoke of internment camp in Pretoria and Bloemfontein where the Tommies had rounded up Boer women and children. The last word of the letter was death. In Herman's mind it said 'Maria'.

Herman followed orders. He packed his boxes into the last wagon in the fleet, and carried what else he could in his haversack although his topcoat, water bottle and the unfamiliar rifle in his hands weighed heavily. The boxes filled half the wagon from floor to canvas cover. The other half carried medical supplies, sharp goods which clattered together as the convoy moved. Scissors, scalpels, bone saws. Hiver walked with Herman in the marching line, clattering and clanking. He carried a rifle too.

Groot's men marched in echelon, forming oblique lines to the left and right of the rear unit, Hiver on the right because of his crummy eye. The men marched. On through tall grass and dirt tracks. The sun hardened the mulch to stone as they went.

A VULTURE'S GUIDE TO WAR DREAMS

At the peak of a hill they spotted a British convoy. Herman scanned quickly: 14 wagons, 78 horses, at least 600 strong. We fired first. Hitting them while they were wide open. The British responded with rifle fire while they looked into the sky for their enemy. Hiver and some others worked on constructing a sangar from small rocks. Two thin mares pulled the howitzer to a shooting point. Herman shut his eyes and counted the seconds to the shell's suspended crump.

It found a spot. Shouted kill. Broke up into pieces of bone. The survivors charged up the hill. Bayonets at hand ready to stab stab stab. Pom pom pom, gone gone gone, one by one by one.

Kneeling like they were praying. Hiver shivered behind the sangar he'd help build. He clutched a rifle between his legs, his eyes closed. They surrounded in due time. Armistice to collect the bodies, scooping them off the rocks like shot down birds from the sky.

MOTHER

He remembered his mother brushing her fingers through his hair. He remembered that his hair grew in a white tuft at the crown when the rest was the colour of shadow. He remembered the shadow as his father. And he remembered.

FATHER

He sat shaking at the base of the mining hole. He stared above him at the circle of stars. He saw nothing but the window of stars, as if he were viewing through a kaleidoscope. The night was cold. It cut sharply through his top coat. The screams of the women played over in his head long after they were gone. Maria's screams buried into his heart like a splinter.

He sat on his suitcase. Burrowing his fingers under his knees. His wrong finger aches. He sleeps sitting up.

He hallucinates on the second day. Stung hysteric by the sun and dehydration. He walks forward to read the inscription on his grandfather's statue but the words melt down the pillar before he can distinguish them. He drinks the words. Collecting them in his palms. He vomits them right after, a mess of bones and fur. He gets down on his knees and collects the pieces for assembly but it never comes up right. The pieces don't add up so he sleeps with them nestled under his head.

A VULTURE'S GUIDE TO WAR DREAMS

The men pushed through the first British defence, some running straight into the bayonets in a blind rage. The first line fell like mad dassies, lemmings over a krantz. The tearing and the ripping scratched at the space behind his eyes. The Boers infiltrated the trenches and fought at close range. He shoved a man down with his foot. Held him at bay with the muzzle of his rifle. Shot him through the chest. Right through. A hole where the bullet had gone, blazing its trail. Through the hole he could see the ground behind the man. The wet dirt.

JOURNEY

The journey to the camps took one hundred days. Hours and hours of silent sun and silent moon. Few people spoke. What could they say? Occasionally someone whispered and the words picked up and echoed off the rocks like air, kicked up a susurrating wind that whistled in the ears for days. Many men could not stop crying. The tears formed a river, deep and wide (“Wide, wide as the ocean, high as the Heavens above...”), a sad stretch of imagination that was christened the Trane van Begrawing. There was no monument, only water, the unstoppable tears. Years later, when the blue line was commissioned for the new map, the name was officially changed. It stung. But whatever it was called, The River still flowed; it rolled on and on, down into the Indian Ocean, salting the sea with sorrow. Sometimes, as evidence, there would be a small dead fish lying stiff on the shore, nameless and forgotten.

They’d been walking for five days. Five men. Lost out in the scrub. The other four shared the load. Lugging the boxes. Piling them on their heads and clutching them under their arms until their sweat made the tops soggy. They’d dry overnight then they’d start the whole process again. They found the lake by chance. Not by memory. It wasn’t on any map they’d seen before. Although it was large enough to make a mark. The men named the place while Herman organised the boxes. The weight of his collection had been too much to bear at the end of it all. He dropped them in places. Buried them in the veld, in hills, in and amongst the dead under the naming trees. These he kept. Hopeful to hold on to someone. He’d saved the bits that affected him most. The photographs of children and wives, the teeth too, all the letters and the diaries if they were small enough. Most of all he kept his ledgers. The lists of the lost men and their artefacts, their facts, their histories. Words were better than nothing to the dead. Words were a stand in for the things people lost so they lived again. He’d never lose the words he thought.

Herman took his boots off and waded his feet in the water. He splashed his face and it tasted of salt. The water. Mixed with his sweat but maybe that wasn’t it. He was too tired to worry. The others swam at the surface. The lake was black, deep, black-bottomed. Herman tried to imagine how deep but his tired mind gave up the count. If he was being honest he’d lost count. The count of war. His numbers no longer made sense in the face of their reality. And

Jenkins was wrong, you couldn't calculate everything, there wasn't always a balance. The sum of war was not an equation. Nor was the sum of life. Herman felt defeated. He looked over at his boxes and a slight twinge of hope reinvested his spirits.

They set up a bivouac before dark. The men start a fire fast, the land is dry despite the recent rains. They gather up a pile of hollow sticks. Everything seems dead here. Everything seems dead here. Twice. Herman notes it. Bullie, one of the men stalks a guinea fowl with his hunting knife. He tiptoes behind it before he pounces and snaps its neck. He's happy to gut it, proud to provide. The men roast it and eat it with their fingers. The fat makes Herman's fingers slippery. He walks to the water's edge and washes his hands in the water which appeared oil black at night.

There was no talking between the men before they sleep. Each stretched out on their stomachs, their arms a barrier from the ground. Herman sleeps next to his boxes. He counts them before he falls asleep wrapped in the comfort of the record. The certainty and the materiality of the books.

Herman was woken by a shudder. A rattling of the earth like a large rodent running through an underground tunnel. He sat up and put his ear to the ground. The water was moving, a wet tornado swirling down a giant plug hole. Herman stood at the edge of the lake. The water turned white in the middle, bubbled white horses chasing one another in a game of catch. The sky matched its colour. A gleaming white that lit the lake like a heliograph spotlight. Herman searched for the message. He couldn't find one. The water continued to spin, growing louder. He looked back. The four men lay sleeping in their spots. Unroused by the ruckus.

The lake began to open from the middle. Edging outward towards the shore. Herman felt his knees lock. Fastened to his spot. Sinking into the earth or becoming one with it he didn't know which. His feet felt like roots in the ground. Herman heard a woman singing, a deep sad song, he heard the sounds of two young lovers and a girl screaming the names of an Angel. He heard the sound of pain, the sounds that plagued his mind when he slept. The splatter of blood, the rattle of shots, bombs, bowels, death. And other pain, a boy crying. An old man looking for a link. He smelt fire. Tasted the smoke. Felt the weight of life and the lightness of death.

In the morning the men searched for him. Then they searched for a body. They buried the boxes instead.

Dear Jude

She stood, slipping her tape recorder into her purse which was already slung over her shoulder. I remember wondering how she did that, the movement all-in-one. I think only women can manage it. I sat in my chair silent as a Sphinx, my clumsy hands gripping the curved arms. My knuckles were white.

I had spilt my guts, Jude, emptied myself out until I sat there like a gutted mollusc. Even less. A cloud. Would I soon float up to the ceiling and on into the sky, lost to a bird's life? Right then, it seemed possible.

"You sure you're okay?" she asked. For the fifteenth time, it could have been. The umpteenth. But I wasn't counting.

My ghost head nodded.

"Because I can call someone for you. Your son maybe?"

The ghost shook its white hair. The ghost mouth trembled like smoke. I heard a voice – mine? – as if for the first time in years.

"No, no, it's quite alright. I'm quite alright." Kwaightallright.

She walked to the sink in the kitchenette. "Would you like some water?" The drains cried like a whale in a tank; eventually the calling stilled to an intermittent knocking, then silence. Behind the chipboard screen, she was only legs. She returned before I could answer and placed the tumbler on the table next to me. She hovered. The room felt crowded but I was too polite to ask her to move.

"I'm sorry" she said and she touched my hand. I flinched in surprise, and she pulled away.

My head began repeating a word. The word. So long forgotten word. Tu... tu...ouch. In pain, I closed my eyes and imagined each letter on the inside of my eyelids. T O U C H. I felt the pull of memory. In reply, I said No. When I opened my eyes she was still standing there, her face furrowed in concern.

She glanced awkwardly at the door. “I have to leave. Are you sure you’re okay?” Sixteen, I thought. I nodded again, my head low to the chest. She waited.

“Yes. I am alright. I’ll be alright.” And I may have said this more times to match her sixteen but I was always a lousy counter.

She gave me one last look. The look of someone who may be giving a last look. As if she was thinking my ticker was maybe on its last legs. There was a gravity to the situation. Deep. Serious. But perhaps the mood wasn’t mutual; it could be that I read too much into it. Me, the great reader.

She moved to the door quick as ripping off a plaster, and I tried to rise, holding on to the chair.

“Oh no, please. Don’t. I’ll see myself out, don’t worry. Thank you very much for your time.”

Just like that, like an anonymous voice on the other end of the line.

And then I realised that I had definitely read too much into that last look. I had seen my mortality, but she hadn’t. She didn’t really see it, the frail old man in the armchair, clutching to the armrests in case he disappeared.

Then she was gone, Jude, and the room felt airless again, even more of a vacuum than it had been before. I was confused. Did I want her there? Not? I looked up at the air vents. They seemed to be sucking out what little life there was. I looked down at my blue-black arm as if it would suddenly be healed, that in its place would be someone else’s arm. A prosthetic limb or a severed stump. Any arm but mine. Though there it was. My arm. Curved to the body of the armrest, almost merging with it, shadowed by fabric dark as the ocean floor.

I reached for the tumbler. What a shock. I thought my heart would stop beating, Jude. In truth I think it did, for a second, a sharp pain shooting through my chest. I looked twice, but it was real. Lying next to the glass was a gold fob watch. When I picked it up, the cold weight meant I wasn’t dreaming. That familiar cold. Though it was hot out, you know, the air close. You remember how it gets when a Berg wind descends on the Berea, stifling. The air like lava.

Engraved on the back of the watch was a clear “K” on the back. When I prised, the case snapped open like jaws. What a thing! It looked as if it had been preserved in an airtight box, hidden from the sun, buried for all these years. Seventy years Jude. Like it had really been locked in a room in my mind all along.

I wanted to weep. All the searching. All the long years, my face pressed against antique display cases, newspaper clippings pressed between piles of books like flattened silver moths. Me constantly in pawn shops; you and your mother hovering at the door. And now here it was. In my hand was a piece of the moon.

And so I don't know why, after a lifetime of drawing circles, that I felt the circle in my chest growing larger. The watch was just a watch and my mother had died and I had run away and my father had been taken into questioning and he had lost everything and he had lost himself and we lived like basement rats after that in a camp and later in The Point again but we battled, and my father struggled with his memories right until the end and I wandered the docks searching for the watch, like it would miraculously float up out the sea like a buried body. That's where your mother found me. When I was wandering the docks. And I suppose the watch saved me then, that your mother saved me and so did you but I still thought there was a void and nothing was the right size to plug up my anger and my sadness and the sadness of my father who had by then lost his memories though I remember how he held his breath one night and that was it for him and you were only two and you didn't understand my sadness as I wept for him and wept for KlaraKlaraKlara.

The coroners came for his body the next morning and I held you in my arms so tight that you started to cry. They wheeled him out the house on a steel gurney with squeaking wheels. I imagined mulberry fingers beneath the white sheet which threatened to lift like a ghost at the door. The neighbours came out to watch, a crowd gathering like a pool by a blocked drain. When the van drove away I stood in the middle of the road with you while the crowd trickled back to their houses. There was no longer any trace. Not a person, not a possession, to follow back to my past.

The hole in my chest expands. It takes me over. I cling to the armchair and hope not to disappear.

The watch is not a fit for me. Perhaps, if you allow, it will be a fit for you? I know you have your words, Jude, as I have had my endless watching and searching. You've had your own ways to fill the holes. Has it helped? Have you managed to be whole? I fear you inherited the worst from me.

I sat there until the windows were black and the crickets chirruped brassily on the verges. A nurse knocked. Dinner. She made a fuss about the place being all shut up. It was a hotbox, she complained. I should be more careful in the summer, unless I wanted to suffocate!

I don't know. Did I?

She opened all the windows wide as they could go. The curtains billowed. Sails. Air bags. Lungs. She fetched a foil tub from the trolley in the corridor and sat in the chair closest to mine as if she actually intended to feed me. I waved her away. My other hand still clutched the watch.

"I'm not going to fight you, Mr Klinger. I cannot force you to eat. But look, why not have some dinner now. It's dinner time. The food is good. You should eat."

I lifted myself from the chair and with my back braced against the wall I eased myself to the bed. I lay down on the narrow mattress, then put the watch on my chest as if the moon might anchor me to the world as I slept. Unless it fell through the hole in my chest. I felt the tide of sleep wash over my bed, let go of the mattress which I clutched in handfuls.

1978

He found me under a skeleton tree the next morning. The sun haloed his head so he was just an outline. My eyes found his shadow. I rubbed my eyes. They felt burned. Patted my sheep-knotted hair. The shadow put out a hand with the caution of a person entering a snake pit.

“Degor”

“Grace”

His face came into focus.

His hand, helping me up, felt hot. An electric surge to melt tallow. Degor looked wary, like he was staring at a ghost.

"Are you okay? Looks like you've been in a fight with a cactus."

I noticed the cuts on my legs, the scattered, sticky brown scabs.

"I'm fine." Said too quickly.

In one hand he held two dead guinea fowl by the feet, their necks dangling limply. I turned away.

“Weak stomach?”

He put the birds down. Unslung a backpack and a rifle then carefully picked each bird up and packed it away. All before I could answer.

Degor. I didn't exactly know him, but I recognised him from school. He was two years ahead of me, a matric next year. He was tall, with dirty blonde hair and intense grey eyes which matched the metal in mine. A thin face with a long prominent nose. He always had a serious expression on his face, his eyebrows furrowed like he was trying to figure something out, searching for something he couldn't quite remember. Even at school I'd noticed that about him.

He lived with his uncle a bit outside town, that's what people said. In one of the old mining houses, pretty much a dump, patched up with things from the landfill. Car bonnets.

Corrugated sidings. People even spoke of chair frames, spatulas and tennis racquets, as people do. They said the house seemed to creep out in all directions, as if it didn't know where to stop. The backyard even, I'd heard it was a jumble of stuff, the used rubbish buried in shallow, half dug holes. Which sounded pretty far gone, really. Some crazy people's tea party on a non-existent lawn.

I'd heard my parents talk about Degor's uncle. The man who'd inherited the house from Degor's father, who'd worked on the mine when the mine had still been working properly. Some accident. He was lost down a chute one day, slipped into the darkness and was never found. The mines had shut down since that time, not because of him, but because everything was closing, moving to bigger, better areas. The mines took the businesses with them. Houses too, in a way. Sure, so a few mining houses were still there. But they were empty and in bad shape. Like the innards of the town had been scooped out by earth movers, sleepy families sidled off in the buckets of crane jacks while they were dozing, or eating Post Toasties for breakfast. Up and under, just like that. Up and away. I couldn't get my head around it.

Degor's uncle was in the grave-digging business (wouldn't that be the case?). Said it was in his blood to dig (I'd heard him tell my neighbour). Business was slow in town with our small population, and if death had come quickly for his brother, the town made a slow dying, always on the back burner. People still died, but there were too few of them. If you were a grave digger, I imagine sometimes you could wish for an epic outbreak of flu or something, a major epidemic or wipe out. Just so you could keep going with more than your head above ground. Though Degor's uncle kept at it, kept trying to make a go of it my parents said in pitying voices. Tiny Tim type sympathy. What else was there? His flyer pinned outside the corner shop said he did the digging that he could when it was required, shovelling sand for beloved pets and the last of the old people. Sometimes a sad young one who'd been driving recklessly. Everyone gets called, I'd hear him say. And there is only one God.

Our neighbours hired Degor's uncle to dig the foundations for their wall. My father had snorted – What, the *saghande* couldn't do it for their lazy selves? My dad wasn't unkind, but he had eyes on him alright. Nothing wrong with his vision, that's for sure.

I watched the hired man dig the trench, innnn, eeease, loosen and out with the soil; saw him

picking this and that out the dirt, whatever tokens he chanced upon and happened to like. Into his pockets. He used to thread his discoveries on wire and hang them from the eaves of his house. My mother thought it was cool. When we drove past she'd go all simpery, and without having to be asked my father would slow down. He didn't have to but he knew the drill. It was easier all round to oblige my mom, and to smile like it was interesting when she warbled about the wonderfulcolourssogorgeousarentthey? I didn't get it. She'd seen it so many times before.

Degor picked at the fingers of the skeleton tree, an unspoken question suspended between us. He didn't ask it. Registering the tone like a mood ring out of a lucky packet.

"I'm heading back to town now, if you want a ride."

I recognised his 122cc bike from the parking lot at our school. It had a faded red body and a worn leather seat which reminded me of a Western horse saddle. He handed me his helmet.

The bike started up on the third kicked try and as we rattled onto the freeway I watched the lake as we passed it. Tried to see into its depths but we were too far now.

In town, Hib, Mrs Jenkins son, sat with his mother who perched her bulbous feet on the railing of their first floor wraparound, wailing into her glass and choking into a hyena laugh which cut through the engine's monotonous clangour. A runaway dog chased the bike as we rounded the corner to Main Road, trying to gnash its milk teeth at my ankles. Degor accelerated and it gave up the chase, turning to bite its mangy tail and kick behind its ear. We pulled in at the petrol station.

"Where's home?"

"I can walk from here"

"You sure?" His eyes passed my crissed-crossed cuts and eel bruises in speculation.

But I was already getting off the bike. I handed him his stickered helmet and thanked him for the ride.

My mother was sitting on the stoep when I walked in the door. From inside my grandmother

yelled, "High time too! High tide timing she has, that girl." My mother pulled me to her, a hard embrace. My lungs squeezed empty, pressed into my ribs.

"What's she got to say for herself, Elizabeth?" my grandmother called although she was cut short as I walked through the lounge to my bedroom at the end of our long corridor. I walked into my room and slept for the rest of the day, curled under my duvet although the sting from the heat bit at my body. I saw stars splitting behind my eyes, heard the voice of the sad singer and the immutable silence of a hundred days of grief and when I woke my cheeks were tight with salt and my hair was glued tacky to my face.

My throat pulled dry from misuse and when I swallowed it felt as though my trachea was the stretched length of a Rhombic Egg Eater snake enjoying its dinner. It had been weeks since the incident and I couldn't bring myself to say anything. At night I listened to my parents' worried whispers through the dry walling. I couldn't blame them, could I. What could they do with a mute-stunned daughter. Our town had its share of abnormalities. Felicity the dog born with two heads, a provincial feat which placed her at a museum of natural science in Johannesburg after she died. Other feats of the unnatural too. There was a book in the library indexing them. But my parents, I think they thought they were sliding into last base without a nick on them.

That's how I became a somnambulist. Some nights I'd wake far from home, my bare feet aching, ashed with salt. In my heart I must have known, yet each time I woke, there was a hole in front of me, large as a lake. I was shocked to find myself out there, and I'd turn away, confused. Turn around, something said. Turn back, said something other. My head was noisy. I was tired. Whatever way I looked, there seemed no sense at all.

I always went home because home was there and it was where I lived and there was nowhere else. I walked home in an exhausted stupor, in my T-shirt and panties, feeling half crazy and looking the same, I'm sure, to the few lonely birds who fluttered awake with me. Tweet tweet, chirruping, I imagined they were making remarks. There goes the loony tune again. Mad stuff like that. I suppose it was understandable, really, because things back then had turned so strange. The sailor. The boys. The way the lake had opened up to me. I looked like the classic nut job. Even the birds knew it.

I'd make it to the house just as the sun came over our neighbour's wall, and I'd drag myself quietly to bed. The heat would already be rising.

If I'd sleepwalked at night, I'd sleep most of the morning. My parents were worried. Was I up to something. Bad friends maybe, or...they couldn't say the word, but the way they studied me so closely, I knew what they were thinking: 'drugs'. Granny fretted too. I heard her warning my mother about Grace needing more discipline! But then that was Granny. Pretty extreme. She'd listen outside my bedroom door, trying to find out what was wrong. As if I couldn't hear her snuffled wheezing. She hobbled off, eventually. When I surfaced, that day, it was to a kitchen full of little crosses, twigs tied with string. They were soaking in bowls of vinegar water. I tasted, and Granny smacked my hand smartly, muttering about contamination. Too many cooks, she said darkly, and shooed me out. Later in the day, she went outside and spent ages measuring with footsteps, to and fro, checking the sky every now and then, and trying to angle the sun. By dusk, the crosses stood thickly along the boundary wall like trip wires. And let's not even get into the odd little notebook she filled, a homemade guide to exorcism that my mother found, a long time later, after gran died.

3. Bury dead flowers under the shed, sprinkle grave with salt

78. Anchor your foot to the left leg of your bed, tying twine works best. Bluish string acceptable.

104. If all else fails, pray with a chicken heart under your tongue, it channels the message

No wonder mom was laughing and crying at the same time.

The night before, I'd woken up en route to the lake, just a few houses down the stretch. In the morning I felt resuscitated, like someone had blown pure oxygen into my lungs during a CPR drill. I decide to go into town and as I pass the kitchen my parents stare with anxious nagaapie eyes. My mother is so distracted she butters my father's hand. I want to laugh for the first time in weeks. It surprises me. I surprise myself. Out on the road I feel lighter and

jump into my shadow in large leaps, following the thick lines of the main road. The holes in the yards which lined the road were deeper than they'd been before although the mounds of their innards were not in sight.

Soon the public telephone came into view, a small metal booth. I remembered the first sighting. His pant legs visible beneath the partition. I pushed them out of my mind. There was no one to call and I thought I'd rather be alone. I was hearing enough voices as it was. Go. Go! I didn't have to tell my feet what to do. They instinctively changed direction and I headed toward the main highway which ran parallel to the town. I had to cross the railway line. The railway tracks were already burning hot and I felt my rubber soles soften, like marshmallows just beginning to warm over a fire. The highway was quiet, because an alternative route pass had been built a few years back and that meant our town was passed over. Off the map, just like that. You wouldn't think it could happen, but with the exception of the armoured tanks which had been around since I could remember, there was hardly any traffic coming through. The road had lost all sense of direction; it was slowly breaking down, the tar patchy, rough veld grasses battling in the dust.

I heard him before I saw him, the high drone of the engine gave him away. He pulled over a few metres ahead, kicking the motorbike onto its stand.

"Where you walking to?" His forehead furrowed deeper than normal.

"Following my feet." Though I recognised the route as my subconscious one. My voice sounded foreign and I swallowed hard to clear my throat.

"Want to give your feet a rest?" The question was earnest and made me smile.

We pulled up by the lake. I had dreamed about it every night, or maybe seen it during a sleepwalk. I bent down. Felt the sand between my fingers.

"Can you shoot?"

The question startled me, "What?"

“Can you shoot?” He was suppressing a laugh.

“*Me? A gun?* No. No definitely not.”

“Want to learn?”

He scratched around in a hut with a rusted roof. Sky holes like tiny, burnt-out stars.

“What're you doing?”

“Looking for old tins.”

His face was speckled with dots of light, scattershot beams slicing dustily down through the shade. He rattled boxes, an ear out for metal. He bent down and stood up with two framed photographs. The photographs were ghosted, blotched. Degor slipped them out their frames and turned them over. Their backs appeared bruised and any writing they may have once bore was now a dark seeped shadow in the pattern. He shrugged and slipped them back in.

He set the frames on a rock a few metres away, cocked the rifle and rested the handle on his shoulder. He hit straight at the heart and the glass shattered wildly. Though I stood behind him, I jumped to dodge the spray. He looked over his shoulder at me and laughed. A nice laugh. Even and low and not unkind. While he laughed, his forehead still frowned.

“Your turn.”

He walked behind me, handing the rifle over my shoulder. My hands felt small in his as he positioned them on the body.

“Left hand here. Hold it steady. Then right hand over here, finger on the trigger. I'll do it with you to start.”

The shot shoved me back into him, but he never budged. My ears rang, an empty radio frequency deep in my eardrum.

The bullet had hit true. Smack centre.

“That wasn't me.”

“It was! I was just guiding you. Like a leash on a dog.”

“What dog?”

He looked embarrassed. “Well, I mean, you’re a natural.”

“At what?”

He smiled awkwardly.

I smiled back, naturally. I liked this feeling.

After, we sat under the hot, tinny shade of a collapsed shed, legs outstretched. Degor dug a sandwich out his bag and unwrapped the cling film. Soggy cheese and tomato. He passed me half.

“Were you coming here to hunt today?”

“Mm-unh. I just,” his mouth was full, and he brushed the words politely with the back of his hand, “brought my gun in case I spotted a bird. I come here to clear my head, mainly. It’s quiet. Like the whole town forgot about it. This place,” he gestured broadly.

“Mmm. Why is that, you think?” The tomato was too salty; my tongue burnt.

“Because there’s no point, isn’t it. So what if this is right here, people go blind when something’s not useful anymore. The lake,” he gave a little laugh, “what *lake*? It’s gone. Only a dried up crust now, good for nothing except maybe a dump for waste. Forget the lake. Everybody wants to keep their hands clean.”

He bit a chunk from his sandwich. The bite left a jagged half circle that only his teeth could have made.

I liked thinking of him this way, almost absent-mindedly even though he sat close enough to touch, like the sun which was burning my feet, reddening legs stuck outside the little shelter. I like that he was drawn to the lake too, that was another plus. I wasn’t the only one. I pulled my legs inside, tucked them underneath me. I thought about the town. How it was pretty much like the lake. The buildings had wide cracks in them. The roofs seemed to have shrivelled up, too small for the boxes they were supposed to cover. The roads were

earthworms shrunken to flat ribbons in the heat. Our town was gone and forgotten, useless except to the army who used it any which way they could, though even then we weren't always much good to them either. A route march from here to them. A storage magazine. A pit stop on the way to bigger manoeuvres.

My stomach felt scraped out at the thought of the soldiers. My soldiers. A boys' league of oddly banded brothers, on the run. And with nowhere to turn, eventually, except back. To what? To *what*? My brain fizzed like radio static, thinking of the things we heard on the news. Wondering about what we didn't hear, and never would.

By the time we rode back into town, the buildings were beginning to cast long shadows over the tar. In the church courtyard, teenagers milled around, waiting for Friday night Youth like it was the main event. They turned when they saw me. Grace. On a motorbike. With Degor. Stared at us like startled meerkats, then started chattering.

At the Mobil garage, I swung myself supercool off the saddle and stepped onto the forecourt like an old pro, the ground oil-stained and stained red, now and then, by the red neon that flickered overhead. I was in another world. Carefully, but like nonchalantly, I undid the helmet, torn between keeping my head down and looking the local cows straight in the eye. I suppose I managed a bit of each, which wasn't anything, either way.

One of the girls puckered up and gave an exaggerated *ōō*. (Moo oo ooo. A mocking kiss. A major moment. *Please*.) A few other kids snickered. Someone (some girl from school acting really childish) started under her breath: 'Grace and Degore sitting in a tree, kay ai es es ai en gee'. Everyone packed up laughing. Degor didn't hear them so he took no notice. Or at least he pretended not to. It was a good act.

"How's about we do this again tomorrow?"

I found myself saying yes before my brain registered the response.

The next day I woke up early. I scooped my hair into a high pony and pulled a pretty blue

dress over my head. My family sat around the breakfast table like a model family, all nicely assembled. The same as the day before except this time my mother says cautiously:

“You look nice today.”

I give her a look. “It’s just a dress.”

My parents glanced at each other, not bothering to conceal the message passed between them. I nick a piece of toast from the table, ignoring the elephant in the room. It’s huge. A big grey thing crushing the table. Its trunk slumps into my father’s lap and he’s fidgeting with his fly, the ears have wrapped Granny in a leathery shawl. My poor mother is trying to deal with the tusks, and they’re mean ivories which could do serious damage to her dishes, her curtains, her everything, if she’s not careful. Me, I don’t have to admit anything. They were still staring at each other in confusion and excitement, when I walked out the front door. I passed William out in the front garden.

The day was another stinker. So early, but already the heat was turned up. I began to wonder if our town was just that, the flaming centre of a massive Bunsen burner erected by giant gods. Celestial playthings, are we? The thought invoked images of large bent metal rods burning red at the tips, drawing back like shooting stars to the dark recesses of some otherworldly workshop. The kind of thing I do. But it was not long before I heard the familiar, rumble of Degor’s motor. Only 122cc but he managed to make it sound serious. I was already sweating at my hairline, a salty margin of some lake, and I tried to dab it inconspicuously with the back of my forearm, the same time as I shielded my eyes from the sun. I felt very awkward. Unsophisticated.

Degor pulled up. “So, d’ you come here often?” He arched an eyebrow suggestively, and leaned forward against his handlebars. He looked little boy cute.

We both started laughing. Very loudly. Maybe it’s just fun, or perhaps it’s also embarrassment; something about how we know things about each other though we hardly know each other. Makes us slightly crazy. We knew we were noisy. We were bent over and gasping for breath.

A woman's had enough. She opens her front door to sort out the ruckus. She has curlers rolled tightly in her hair, and she's wrapped in a tatty peach coloured dressing gown. There's a small dog cuddled under her arm. It has an anxious face. The woman purses her mouth, revs her engine, and starts at us.

"You kids! Be quiet man!" The dog shivers like a bobble head under her armpit.

We laughed.

She purses her mouth tighter and storms off. The dog is squirming. Its backside echoes her mouth.

We both noticed and laughed even harder.

"Poor dog," I say.

"Poor *woman!*"

Which set us off again.

The door has slammed in the frame and the windows stammer. Inside we heard cursing like you can't believe; language that would have had my grandmother breaking vials of holy water over the roof.

As my feet touched the ground near the lake I felt an overwhelming sense of relief. It was bone dry, really, but what washed over me was the feeling of a first dive into a clear deep pool on a blue summer day. Degor was already busy rustling through a hut. He came out with three plastic Frisbees, cracked, and dried white around the rims. He propped them up with stones on an old piece of wood balanced between two rocks.

"Ladies first?"

He passed me the rifle which I steadied against my arm with deliberate effort. The bullet hit the heart. I ignored the pain in my shoulder.

Degor whistled.

“I told you! You’re one hell of a shot.”

He walked to the Frisbee to inspect the kill. After a second or two he turned around,

“Pret-ty go-od. You must have had one hell of a teacher.”

“He was okay,” I smiled.

We shot until my bones were vibrating, shot to quivering pieces under straps of tendons and veins. Afterwards we sat in the same place as before, staring at the lakebed in silence for a long time.

“You ever hear the stories about this place? The legends of the lake?”

I’d lived in the town my whole life. I’d seen small buildings erected and corner shops die. I surveyed walls going up between neighbours and watched as the traffic dried up and the tar warped and the soldiers began to stream through. I’d dog-eared so many books in the library that I could pick them out now probably blind-folded, and easily find my mark. But never a word about the lake. Nothing. Not in a book, not a sound from any lips. The lake was just there though it wasn’t any more because it was dead and so that was that.

I shook my head and sat forward.

“Well, it’s quite something, the stories. You need a pinch of salt, maybe, but still. This lake – this place that used to be a lake – once way back led to Durban harbour. Some portal opened up underground, and the water flowed all the way between here and there. When people drowned – I mean, it’s a lake, people swim, sometimes they drown – the bodies sank to the bottom and when the currents were right, spring, maybe, and the water table was high, people who’d drowned out here were found floating face-down in Durban harbour. Sometimes the ships found them, see, the body bobbing up against a hull. They hauled them up and that, and turns out it was one of ours. They’re all buried in the town cemetery a catty shot from the mines. The town council couldn’t explain it so they didn’t try. They just ignored the whole thing, like it wasn’t exceptional.”

He looked back in the direction of the town as if he could see the dry fenced patch of hollow ground from where we sat.

“But what do you mean. A portal? How did this portal open?”

“Oh, there’s the usual stories. Lots of versions explaining the hows and whys. The one I always think of is that this town, before it was a town, well, it was taken from an African tribe. They believed in powerful ancestral spirits, and the spirits cursed the land, deciding to claim the townspeople one by one, and suspend them in a timeless place.”

“Like purgatory?”

“I don’t know much about the Bible but something like that I’d think.”

“And what about the other reasons?”

“It gets even crazier....They say when a place is built on loss, you know, too much of it, when it’s seen enough death to be turned inside out, then it becomes magic. Well, haunted more like. Which is certainly true of this place, isn’t it? If you believe the legend, then right here is connected to all the other haunted spots in the world, places where lives have been dramatically unsettled. The lake, if it had water, then it could take you in and you’d be somewhere else in an instant. Like you’ve been transported.”

I was quiet for a long time. Obviously.

“I know it’s weird. It’s probably all rubbish.”

I shrugged. “It’s not that. I’m just thinking. About how things could be connected. You’re saying that the lake and the harbour, right? They’re both places of loss?”

“Well yeah, though it’s got to be *major*, right. Not like a pencil. You lose a pencil, don’t expect the lake to find it for you!”

I made a *ha ha* face. He continued, “that or there was some natural disturbance, some *unnatural* feat of nature, a surge of the earth’s core or something, that whammed here and there. It’s possible, you know. That can mess up the natural order of things. The balance is pretty fragile. The, the, like the psychic feel of a place too.”

“M-hm. So how’ d you know all this weird stuff?”

“Oh, our neighbour, Miss Vates. She says that we’re living on a ley line, hey. That ley lines open up the door to other planes of life. She says she’s seen them.”

“Kinda odd. Could I see her? I mean could you take me to speak to her sometime?”

“Sure, absolutely. You really interested in this stuff, aren’t you?”

“Hm. That’s because it’s inter-est-ing.”

I gave him a playful nudge, trying to erase any urgency my face might betray.

The ecclesiarch stood front and centre, elevated behind the altar. Already the heat was beyond balmy. In the congregation, many people sat fanning their faces with the printed hymn sheets that had been distributed by two young boys the door.

‘And now let us all rise to sing Hymn number 3, “God is my Shepherd”.

There was a collective sigh as wet thighs sucked off shiny wood benches. My grandmother stood beside me, singing the loudest, her hands balled into fists as if she were about to punch Satan straight in the gonads. My mother wore a stoical expression, worn down. You see, Granny had extended her visit, she’d decided to stay. “For the child’s benefit” she’d insisted. Just before she curve-balled another criticism at my mother for the way she was raising me.

“Honestly, Elizabeth, you might as well let wolves do it, my girl, the way you let that child live!”

“Wolves?” my mother had said quietly. “Perhaps that *would* be better than this.”

My father had looked a little indignant till mom said, “I don’t mean you, love”.

“Well, *what* then?” he asked. “Explain yourself woman, *please!*”

But mom had gone back into her shell and so we’d all sat around the table, trying to stomach another meal.

God is my shepherd

*I won't be wanting
I won't be wanting
He makes me rest
In fields of green
Like quiet streams
Even while I'm walking
Through the valley
Of death and dying
I will not fear
'Cause you are with me
You're always with me*

Grandmother pronounced death like it was the final word, she spat it out and the people in the pew in front of us turned back to rubberneck. After the service she dawdled as usual, taking Pastor Isaac's arm, steering him like a coxswain might. The man's lost-at-sea expression made me giggle. Granny's destination was always points of religious interpretation. Something he'd remarked in the sermon, and she wondered whether... Poor sucker, Pastor was. He couldn't slip free.

From the front double doors I looked across onto the courtyard where the townspeople gathered in groups that from a distance seemed to threaten juntas. A nervous voice behind me piped,

Mom. "Where are you going Grace?"

"Just for a walk."

"Now? Where to?" She shot my father an apprehensive look, but I shushed her and strolled out the gates.

I walked and walked. Wide awake this time. I walked all the way to the lake, cutting through the veld. I felt half-baked and burr-snagged by the time I got there. Almost a piece with the dried vegetation. I half expected (half hoped) to find Degor, but he wasn't around. A part of

me felt disappointment, the other part recognised the same relief I'd experienced the day before. He wasn't there, but I was. I was here. Here, at the lake, I felt weighted to the ground, as if there was a certainty to the earth's gravity that I felt nowhere else.

I walked to the edge of the vast pit, a dusty expanse of debris. The closer I got the lighter I felt, like pieces of me hung in the air like static, carried on some invisible current. I stopped. Remembered Degor's legends. Even without water, there seemed to be currents, and I felt a childish fear that I'd land up a bloated body in a dirty harbour. Only the gulls would know me for what I was, dead, unburied, and they'd peck at me until I turned into a flayed old rag. I walked away from the hole, feeling my body drawn to the earth as if by some magnetic field. I backed into a skeleton tree and sat down slowly. I stayed there until the sun began dipping in the sky. I tried focussing. Nothing. I tried falling into a hazy doze. Nothing still. I waited and waited for Angelo, and Anna. I put my hands to my mouth and called. Angellloooo! Aaannna! The sounds of their names echoed in my cupped hands, making my head spin. I wanted it to happen again. For the sky to open, the men to scream among gunfire. I wanted the sounds of the woman singing her lonely songs, but the chaos never came.

Only the low, maddening hum of midges. Inside my head. No mosquitoes. That high buzzing was a privilege reserved for the town, because in the veld there was no longer a drop of water. Not even if you dug. There hadn't been for years. Even in town, the wells had dried up. So it was only the intermittent flow in the taps, the hours sectorised and rationed by the council. We were all so caked and hardened that we were growing carapaces. Whether I'd one day turn into a midge or a mosquito was anyone's guess.

I got home late, in the almost dark, passing people sitting in their front yards, paper fans and resurrected bone-cut heritage fancies wafting in their hands as they tried to rouse the listless air. "Grace..." some of the oldies hailed me, half-heartedly. I gave a half wave in return, and walked on. The men had their trouser legs rolled; the women had hiked their skirts to the thighs. Everyone wanted relief from the claustrophobic heat which relentlessly radiated from the ground. Like we were living on top of an active volcano.

At home, my family sat at dinner. Granny made the sign of the cross when she saw me, Father, Son and Holy Ghost. I suppose I must have looked a sight. Covered in red dust and

scratches from the veld, like a captured caracal. I didn't say hello. I walked straight to my room and collapsed onto the bed into a dreamless sleep and that night I slept through, untaunted. Not pulled by the lake, or called by the currents. I slept, just like the night before, and the night before that. A dreamless sleep unknowing as death.

The phone rang early the next day. My mother grabbed the receiver.

"Gracie, phone for you," she called in a light, musical voice. "A boy," she whispered enthusiastically, passing the receiver.

"Hello?"

"Hi, it's Degor."

"Oh, er, hello."

"Is this a bad time?"

I wanted to say yes, because my mother hovered in the living room, a *lappie* thrown over her shoulder. But I didn't want to scare him off in case he never called again. So I turned my back and cupped the mouthpiece like I was telling it a secret.

"No, um, not at all. What's up?" I tried to sound casual, my lack of practice betraying me.

"Well, you said you wanted to meet Miss Vates." He paused, waiting for my response.

"...Yes?"

"She can do today." He spoke quickly.

"That sounds great. Um, good."

"Pick you up in about an hour?"

"Ok."

"See you then." And the line went dead. An electrifying click followed by the even purr of an ecstatic cat.

There was no fence between Degor's house and Miss Vates'. The whole set up was like the houses on the black land, an open maze of structures dotted all over, like everyone was part of the same scene. Her place was set back away from the road and so I'd never noticed it before, all those times we'd driven by it in my dad's 69 Corolla. It could also have been because of the blood stone colour, the same colour as the red, scrubby veld out on the old mining land. Dried up thistle bushes lined what would once have been a walkway to the house, though it began very arbitrarily on the flat land, with no gate or sign. The veranda was lined with porcupine quills and feathers. The door was open behind a rusted metal fly screen.

"Miss Vates," Degor called.

I heard a rustling like vermin in a dustpile. An old woman padded to the door, about my gran's age. Short pixie hair, steel grey, a long blue dress. Hers shoulders were draped in a fringed shawl.

"Ah, lovely, lovely. Degor! And I see you bring a lovely friend. Come in, please." She beckoned us with a fringed wing, showing us to sit.

We sat on a long fainting chair. I took the room in, trying hard to hide my curiosity because as my Granny had taught me, it killed the cat. The room seemed ordinary until you noticed the oddities. A lampshade rolled from atlas pages, and marked with khoki lines. A circle of stones, rose quartz, I thought, which encompassed the perimeter. And a larger than normal pot plant, a tree really, that stood watching in the corner. Its branches had taken direction from the shape of the house, a trunk growing straight up, up, and then suddenly turning at a right angle to brush the ceiling. The bend of a broken finger.

"Water," Miss Vates asked, "some water?"

We both shook our heads. Then Degor spoke. "This is Grace, Miss Vates, she's, well, she wants to know about the lake. Its history and such. The things you've told me about it."

Miss Vates stared at me with intense concentration. Her eyes made me freeze, as if I was

sitting for some old-fashioned portrait, and soon the phosphorous would whiten in a blinding flash. Yet when she spoke, her reply was perfectly cordial.

“Well Grace, is it? Grace. Oh that’s such a lovely name, dear, quite lovely. How nice of you to come! It’s not often that folks from this town take any interest in local history or lineage. It’s usually the out-of-towners, you see, those ghost hunter types who turn up looking to stay for a night in haunted hotel rooms, sipping mulled cider in dark graveyards while they wait with heat sensors and such.” She gave a mocking laugh.

“We have people like that who visit? In our town?”

“Oh yes, yes. Spirit chasers. Most of them are just day trippers looking for fun. They’ve read something somewhere, the papers. Or a friend of a friend has mentioned...Mostly it’s nothing for them but a little weekend break. But Grace. Actually there’s something in it, if you’re serious. I can tell you, there’s a good deal of psychic energy running through this town, if people put their hearts in it and look properly. I do. I’ve tuned my frequency to match the land’s energy.”

I looked at her. What was I doing here? I couldn’t tell if she was a phony, or for real. I tested the water.

“So, Miss Vates, have you ever seen a ghost round here?”

“Ooh, no. But my mother now, my mother had the gift of *sight*. Though it can skip a generation and this time it did; it skipped right over me without a care in the world. Although, I *can* read the tarots and feel a place. But ghosts? Unfortunately, ghosts don’t show themselves to me.”

“But *are* there ghosts at the lake?”

She smiled, surprised. “Of course! There’s ghosts everywhere there’s been death. My mother used to say they hovered like flags, yards of fabric with feet caught between the window catch of here and gone.”

“And what about traces?”

She looked quizzical.

“I mean, if there’s an event that set in motion the other events leading up to the death. What then? Can there be a trace, or something. A, a, let’s say a *feeling*? Can a place have that kind of feeling. Can it *cause* it?”

I thought about the telephone booth. How I couldn’t walk near it. How the bile climbed my throat like a clawed lizard. The fear.

“I suppose a place might have dark energy,” Miss Vates mused. “You could follow that maze to find the flag, the vestiges of a ghost. I’ve never done that. Dark energy. It’s everywhere you go though, everywhere you go.”

She was looking hard at me, full of unasked questions. I just nodded, in thanks, and we said goodbye. Her remarks had given me some tough things to chew. I’d be at them like biltong for days, down to the slivery sinews.

We walked out into the veld just as a passing sandstorm kicked up, whirling dried leaves and feathers, small hollow bones. Ms Vates’ veranda rattled. Half closing my eyes against the grit, I spotted Degor’s house in my side eyes. The strange ornamented tree. One family’s rusted Christmas. Degor saw it too but he drove right past, without giving even half a glance. If that’s what he wanted, fine. I didn’t bring it up.

In the weeks that followed, town began slowly to turn back into something else. It’s old self. A new self. Who could really tell. Christmas had come and gone. New Year’s dead drunks had come to life again and dried out. In the air was a confusing muddle of parched and promise.

The annual celebrations were finished. To the extent that they’d been. Cold meat and salads, thin crepe paper crowns that stuck to our foreheads and left dark tide marks. The welted brims of missing hats. Or haloes. My mother’s sickly punch with the tinned fruit chunks bobbing on the murky surface. Just looking at that pale pineapple, those blanched cherries...Listening to the predictable radio countdown of 4, 3, 2, 1...Should Auld Acquaintance...and then a few minutes later you’re back to absolute bloody normal?

I couldn't stand it. I couldn't take this place any longer. I'd spent most of my time with Degor at the lakebed, shooting, doing nothing, talking. We'd developed a sort of rhythm, and its quiet, unassuming pattern became the internal bell that kept my head clear.

And now it was ending.

Cars cruised in, coming home after the endless holidays. Datsuns and Toyotas, lots of bakkies, they all pulled into town and claimed the long vacant driveways and sandy yards, off-loading sandy, sunburnt children. There was lots of noise. Shrieking. Crying. Shouting. You had to stand in queues again, if you wanted food. And school. That was around the corner.

"It's school next week." I stated the fact.

Degor threw stones at the dried lake, skipping them across invisible water. I sat under the gap-toothed shed.

"It's your last year. What would you do after? Like, you know, if you had a real choice?"

"I don't know. Maybe I'd move somewhere else. Somewhere quiet and new."

"And what about me?" I teased. Although I felt hurt that he could leave so easily.

"You could come with me if you want."

I couldn't tell if he was serious so I just dropped the subject. I think my face must have given me away. Sadness. Shock. I don't know. But I felt it, something falling away.

"What's wrong?" he chucked a pebble at my feet. "You seen a ghost?"

I looked across at him. "Do you even believe in ghosts, Degor?"

"All that stuff Miss Vates goes on about? It's a good story."

I stayed quiet.

“Though look, I suppose some of it could be true. I’d like to think that we do something after we die. That we don’t only rot in the ground. Ghosts, maybe. But don’t start now about heaven, hey.”

I nodded in a noncommittal way.

The day before school, Degor and I went to the lake. As we drew up, I spotted a heap on the side of the road. Degor stopped a little ahead of it. Dead jackal. The fur was matted in clumps on the hind legs. I bent down and put my hand on its stomach. Still warm, or the sun warmed its pelt. I couldn’t tell. The tongue lolled from its mouth. A female: she had worn teats, like the long fingers of a rubber glove. Degor lifted the carcass off the road and carried it towards the lake. I followed him, watching the lifeless seem suddenly alive as it moved with his steps. He was gentle. “Must’ve been a car,” he said, as he walked towards the rim of the lakebed.

I couldn’t go any closer. I felt my body leaving me as I drew near, so I stepped back, knelt where I was and started digging. Degor tried to break the ground with the heel of his shoe, then he went over and found a metal shaft. The hard layer of close, baked clay gave in like the hard shell of an ostrich egg. We dug the grave in silence, filled the hole in silence too. When we were done Degor stood up next to me and held my hand. We held hands for a long time, cementing the loss, firming the connection.

As my mother ironed my uniform, the damp smell of steam filled the living room. Granny had further extended her stay with us, an unusual length of time for a person who couldn’t take this town, and most of the people in it. The heathens were her habitual bugbear, and by all accounts her eyes indicated that I was fast joining their number.

News of Angelo had spread, now that people were back in town and there were more tongues to wag, more boring days to fill with scandal and horror. He was a commie, they said, and a certain Grace [Surname] had been hauled in for questioning. Who would have thought, you know, that girl. That she’d be connected!

“Got right what he deserved.” That’s what I heard in the butchery, a man who’d been talking to his friend and casting deliberately knowing glances in my direction. “His just desserts!” he hissed the next time, more loudly for my benefit.

I looked at him and walked off, away from the aisle of frozen pigs’ head and ox livers and small veal cutlets. Away. As far as I could get.

The street wasn’t far enough.

“They’re killing off our boys one by one up there you know, all because of those dirty commies.” Another woman had spat over a boundary fence to a neighbour who shook her head, a damn shame it was, the route of youths.

They spotted me, transfixed like they were looking at a rare find on a game drive. I quickened my steps. Home home home.

Degor was waiting for me at the school’s entrance. The school had gates that opened like wings, impractical if you asked me but it impressed division which was, bang, right on the nail. He looked cute in his patched Matric blazer. Behind him the school looked ugly, facebricked red, built as boxy as a brick shithouse. Some kids stared at us, the number gathering as we entered the hall for assembly. Assembling eyes, they could walk off a short bridge into a deep lake for what I cared. Matrics sat in the front, standard practice, standard eights in the middle ahead of the nervous looking standard sixes who fidgeted in their crisp uniforms, crackling shop starched.

The sun was barely in the sky yet and already the blazer swaddled my body, uncomfortable warm currents of air trapped between my white cotton shirt and the outer shell of polyviscose. I held my arms out, an unformed O as far as I could reach without seeming weird to the person sitting next to me. Like it would help. Mr Fourie took to the stage. Fubsy Fourie. Short legs he had on him, like a Shetland pony. An arched back and bulging belly like one too. In fact if he grew a mane and walked on all fours you might not tell the difference.

The rest of the assembly twitched uncomfortably as they settled, but the school was nothing if

not traditional. So we wore them through the season of fainting spells. As his speech commenced he trotted across the stage with one hand behind his back, gesturing dramatically with the other when the verses called for it. Somewhere between “rodding discipline” and “patriotic duties” the bell rang. A simultaneous rustle swept through the pupils like a quick gust of wind through the room, snuffed by Fourie’s infamous fury. Trembling – booming voice – red – air-deprived face: finale – sweat and threats.

The first lesson was maths with Major Meyers. I swung my bag to the floor, it dragged, heavy already with tatty textbooks they practically hand out in the parking lot. I reached down to retrieve tatty maths when I heard the first whisper.

“I heard he killed himself because of her, tsssst.” Like a snake only with more venom.

“My mom says she was in on it. Part of the plan, *nogal*.”

I slammed my book down onto my desk before they could continue. My palms stung from the smack. The girls jumped, the front one turning back to face the front of the class sheepishly. They stifled a collective titter. Snorting noises. Cows.

We were doing geometry but I couldn’t follow the lines. They were just points from here to there after all, ink on a page which you could burn in seconds. My thoughts traced Angelo’s cold face instead. The face he’d have now, if he’d still have one. The lines of pain traced in Anna’s face or his family’s. *God*, his family. He might have had one. The retch built in my chest but I kept it down, breathing deep even breathes until my head felt light.

My head remained light, like a trapped air bubble in a spirit level, drifting as I drifted through the rest of my classes. My hearing filtered as if through a fish bowl. *There are how many Provinces? Othello did what? If Peter Piper picked a peck of pickled peppers. Where’s the peck of pickled peppers Peter Piper picked?*

Tea break came and I found Degor waiting at the base stairs which led to the field. A teacher on duty eyed him suspiciously, eventually walking over, sizing him up, before nodding her head and resuming her panoptic position.

“What did she say?”

“She was asking why I’m not in the Matric quad. I told her I was waiting for a friend. Don’t think she really knew if I was breaking any rules so she left me.”

We sat on the field. Familiar eyes burned holes through us. We shared lunch in the heat. The trees that lined the field had long since lost their leaves, hollowed. Cardboard trees I sometimes thought. They might be stronger then. If they were built like cheap store displays except here they were, as things were, ready to come tumbling down at any minute. Degor ate a cheese and tomato sandwich. I wondered how he stomached all that salt. How it didn’t zap the sap right out his cells. Amidst all these thoughts the bell rang. I didn’t hear it. Degor patted my arm, we were nearly the last left on the field.

“Anybody home?” he teased.

I jumped up, unwrapping my blazer from around my waist.

I laughed then remembered the voices. It freaked me out but I smiled.

After school we went to the lake. We went to the lake after school every day that week, and the week after that. Settling into a routine that eased the increasingly violent force that pulled me there. When I wasn’t there I felt like a flying ant with their wings picked off by some sadistic kid. It didn’t feel right. Off the mark.

Before too long they stopped staring, the kids at school I mean, although the whispers continued, seeping into the fug teachers’ lounge, whispers about my summer, the commie, the letter I had *stowed* and about Degor and I. What was up with us.

“They’re doing it, you know?”

“Where are the parents?”

“Right out in the open fields after school.”

“Surely they should know what’s going on. Can’t live with your head in the sand with a teenager in the house. No-sir-eeee.”

None of it registered through the filter of apathy I carried like a blanket. Degor seemed oblivious to it. Like a reflector.

The conscription officials came at the end of the school year. I spotted them enter the gates during Tea Break. Short hair, one had a hair lip, the other a saddled gait. I'd doubt they'd seen more than a desk. Sheets of eligible names in large piles, arranged like a fake city. I felt contempt for them immediately. It ran cold through my heart into my limbs which thawed as the bell rang for lessons. The boys were called into the hall to have the logistics of obligatory warfare presented to them. It had happened every year but I'd never taken much notice until now. Until Degor and the other four happened I suppose.

“What did they say?” I asked.

Degor sat beside me under the shade of a shelter, loosening the tie around his neck like he was fitting a noose.

“What did who say?”

“The conscription guys.” I fidgeted under my tented knees. My legs pitched straight.

“Oh. They just explained where we would go when we signed up. Who was eligible, who wasn't. Do you know, they pay for all your meals there and you get to, like, travel too.”

“Yes, and you get shot at too.” I answered curtly.

“It's not as bad as it seems. And if I ran away what else could I do next year? Start digging? Dig from here to America?”

I had no answer except that I wanted him here. But I wouldn't tell him that. Not in so many words. I was scared to be alone at the lake. Like I could slip from here to some massacre spot in Timbuktu if I wasn't careful. In the end, like so many other things, there was nothing I could do about it.

Degor was one of the first to sign up, not that he had a choice but he was happy about it anyway. It irritated me. His happiness. Its smugness stubbed out any of my own. He'd been trying to cheer me up with more stories, elaborate ones of the lake and of the stars, of

princesses separated from their true loves by the obstruction of the Milky Way. Of a time when the land was more than landfill, like he'd been a bird in a tree watching over them all instead of a swimmer in his father's pants.

The night before he left we went to the lake. The gibbous moon signified a change. That's what Miss Vates said. A psychic shift and a physical one. It was when ships were most likely to be taken by the long, cruel fingers of Lady Fate. Typical it would be a woman, a *bitch*. Lady Luck could also deal you some crap cards. Now Father Time, that old clucker was consistent.

"It won't be that long you know. It'll be over like that." He snapped his fingers.

I looked down from the sky to his face which was serious.

"I know" I said and smiled weakly but he bought it. He trusted the surface of things.

"I'll be back next summer. The rail pretty much runs from Angola straight to here. On the map it looks like someone has drawn a ruler on the page, that's how direct it is." He displayed the line from his elbow to stiff straight fingers.

I smiled and nodded and he believed it more. Slurped it right up. The truth is that I was scared to be alone with my own thoughts, the other voices that swam in my head like it was a bloody public swimming pool. It made me feel right off my rocket. And the force that pulled me to the lake, it was starting to feel more threatening, like a great white wave which would wash me out into the ocean. I didn't have the gills for it.

My body shut down at the fear. I put my head on Degor's lap and fell into a dreamless sleep.

The sun woke me up. Piercing through, rutilant light, even when it was only at the horizon. Degor dropped me off at the Mobil station. Our rhythm. The light still flickered overhead, a clear indication the manager had yet to arrive. The sky was stroked with high pink clouds, like wound cotton wool pulled loose. The type you use to strip nail polish off your toes.

"I'll write to you as soon as I'm stationed. And time has fast feet, you'll see."

I wasn't going to cry. That I was bloody sure about.

"I'll see you in no time."

And then he was gone, in no time, and I watched the sand from the road kicked up under the back tyre of his Honda from the colourful fence of my home. The dust took a long time to settle.

That summer I walked to the lake at night, despite my fears, slipping through my bedroom window like a coin through a metal grid. I minded to stay out of sight, as far off the road as I could so I took the route through the veld which was quicker anyway. My eyes adjusted to the dark like a nagaapie's. For the most part these trips went smooth, undisturbed. The minor exceptions of crossing an open camp fire, the voices of tramps or their PC term, temporary vagrants, held fast through the night's fug air. I passed them like a ghost. Perishable footsteps along an invisible death trail. I was sure I'd walked along one before, didn't know it. Walked through a flagged death spot. The thought gave me goosebumps although it was muggy out.

I waited for the lake to open again, I figured that was the pull, the trigger, which pushed one foot in front of the other in the uncertain darkness. But it never did. Just a sunken bone garden. No matter what I left out for it. Little talismans I thought would please it. Like a virgin in a volcano. It did diddly squat.

I slept in the day. Falling back into the worrying patterns that had my grandmother bringing Pastor Isaac to the house for tea. He sat nervously on the couch next to her, his shoulders rounding making him appear small in his pants suit, a respectable uniform albeit unsuitable to the climate. He must have been slick under it. Slippery as a slip 'n slide. The long thin plastic and the jetting garden hose which would be held at the top. Not in this town. The thought of him naked grossed me out so I thought about the lake instead, not that I had a choice. I sat on the one-seater opposite him. Chewing at the ends of my raw fingers. Eventually Granny screamed, splicing through the silence, "He has got her! Can't you see It!"

The pastor jumped, swinging his head around searching for this Him and this Her my Gran referred to. She pointed an accusing bony finger at Her, me.

“Mam, she seems to be fine.” He cast me a sympathetic look but I didn’t take the bait.

My mother ran in then, throwing her arms in the air at the scene before her. Her face red and splotchy. I left, unnoticed before the last act. Pastor Isaac tried to do the same but he didn’t stand a chance. He looked like a spayed dog between them.

I started visiting the lake in the day too after that even though the sun beat upon my head as I walked through the dust which clung to my sweating calves. I began to look through the abandoned sheds, nothing else to do. Something to keep my mind busy instead of the dogwatch. I entered a hut closest to the edge of the scrub away from the road. I felt the pull as I walked along the outgrown path toward it. A nipping at the Achilles. Time tugging my ponytail. I ignored it. The building was square, made out of corrugated tin. It was chained shut with a rusted lock which snapped like brittle bone and left marks like dried blood on my hands.

Inside, the thinly laid cement floor was rubble, and the air stung with the distinct smell of hot metal. I put my shirt over my nose. Light filtered through the room from the open door. Stained sheets dressed cardboard boxes that were eaten through by fish moths. Through the teathed holes I saw the matted hair of a hairdresser’s dummy. Creepy. The only salon in town was in the converted double garage of Mrs Maine. A woman with woworange hair, like it had been soaked in carrot scum. The section of road outside her house smelt like chemicals, and inside dyes packed the shelves dusty and expired. The faces of 50s’ models smiling through yellowed teeth. Her hands shook when she cut my hair, and she brushed too hard. I always left with a headache.

I pulled the doll’s head out by her hair, held her crusted made-up face to face mine. Her caked red lipstick smeared across her cheek and creviced. The rest of the items matched the theme. Melted lipsticks, set hard as cement, glittery eye shadows, dirty spiked curlers, dye stained towels, rusty scissors. Laid out in the passage of light from the stiff open door.

The second day I found a dead budgie. A dead pet injected with preserving chemicals. It was stiff and lay on its back in a box of broken miscellaneous. Its highlighter blue wings were grubby. Gummed together black like dirty school glue. It was missing its beak. I buried the bird close to the lake. Near the spot where Degor and I had buried the jackal. Tracing it back

without a marker.

The days increased in heat like someone was turning up the oven dial but I walked to the lake anyway. The town felt deserted. Shut in behind heavy curtains. Electric fans produced a buzz that could be heard all down the main stretch. *Bzzzzzzzzz*. A swarm of a million bees except the sky was not dark with wings. I walked in the middle of the road. Balancing on the cracked white line which was barely there anymore. Rubbed out by tyre tread. More likely reduced by the heat. I stretched my arms out for balance and the sun seared my skin. I pulled them inside my open button up blouse that I wore over a holed-vest. It felt good to be alone like this. Like everyone had upped and left this place and now it was mine. The ownership a kid feels in a blanket fort under a dining room set.

The butchery was closed on account of the cooling system which had “conked” the sign said. The Fish and Fowl had a particularly puissant odour. The chum heated at the sides of the metal bin, as hot as a stove plate I imagined. The silver mush bubbled where it touched sides. It looked radioactive. Maybe it was. Might explain a lot of the people around here.

Halfway through my mean-spirited thought the public telephone came into view. My stomach lurched but I continued forward. The nausea I experienced from leaving the lake was now second nature. I stomached it, barely flinching at the heat climbing my gut. I stopped, still standing in the road, staring at it for a long time. Straining to see beyond the heat from the tar which wavered my view. Miss Vates’ words about a death trace were clear in my head, I searched for dark energy, imagining that the ascending stream of heat might expose the other side like supernatural paint stripper. The same way Miss Vates said you can see ghosts through a marrow cavity. I hadn’t tried it but the old kook seemed right about most things. Also, if she was wrong I was crazy and I couldn’t accept that just yet.

I couldn’t see it, the death trace. Although I didn’t know what it looked like I imagined that you’d just know. I didn’t know whether to be relieved. That his death hadn’t started with me, that I wasn’t point A to his flagged point demise. But I couldn’t cop out on my guilt. It wasn’t like sidestepping a mirror. This guilt felt different, not a cutlet you could neatly wrap and bury under grass, this guilt was reflected, like walking through a shiny foiled universe. Locked doors and windows in a carnival house of mirrors and the guilt was mine, reflected

back and reabsorbed time and time again and over. I'd become impermeable to all stabs except this.

The relief was fleeting, light, like levitating over the ground for a second before falling back to earth heavier than before. A sense of your weight felt after jumping on a trampoline. A car hooted behind me and broke through the chain of my thoughts. It swerved around me before I could look back, an exaggerated turn although the road was wide enough for me not to obstruct its pass. Arsehole. The dirty white car was shaped like a hearse although it was bigger. I made out the sticker on the back where the dust was wiped off the width of a sleeve. Musso's Midnight Circus.

They were setting up in the veld not far off from the town, a little off my route to the lake. Small men, strong men, a bearded lady, an albino wearing a turban and a boy as thin as twigs helped pull the ropes that hoisted the Big Top tent the colour of the deepest part of the ocean. Weird colour to attract an audience but then there was nothing normal about it. No clowns either. The staple of circus performance. I was glad for it. Their fake wide painted smiles gave me the heebie jeebies.

Caravans shone like stars surrounding the tent. People gathered at their doors and busied themselves in front of them. A girl sat on the folding steps of one, holding a piece of string tied around a thick snake which slithered in the dusty dirt making dust clouds that smoked over her head. Outside another, a young girl folded herself out a squat square suitcase. Coming out legs first like a low spider, unwrapping her shoulders from under her thighs, eventually unfolding her spine from the base to the tip. She closed the case and walked into the caravan, shutting the door behind her.

I could hear the thud as they slammed pegs into the hard ground. The skeleton boy sat resting, he turned around as if he felt my eyes on him and caught me staring. I started to walk, shamefaced red.

"A letter came for you today Gracie." My mother sounded worried, wary. She had shrunk in the last year. Since the incident. It was like watching a pair of lungs slowly exhale. I think it

had really messed her up but we never spoke about it. So she grew smaller but then, the town seemed to be shrinking too.

I grabbed it off the dining room table and ran to my room.

I sat cross-legged on my bed, crouched over the letter I had been waiting for since he'd left six weeks before. It took him long enough, I thought to myself as I tore the envelope messily at the top. I'd never seen his handwriting before. We'd never sent letters or left notes, not even messages in the dust. It slanted like it was being pushed by an Easterly wind. He was stationed at the Angolan border, he had seen some fire but nothing he thought to worry about. Typical. He described the rain. How it felt on his skin, said it felt the same as it did when he was a child, when everything felt like magic, like a strange miracle meant only for you.

I wrote back right away on punched feint-ruled paper. I wrote about the budgie and about the midnight circus and the mannequin's head and the visit from Pastor Isaac. I wrote until a callus formed on the inside of my middle finger, red and shiny. I walked to the chipped red post box at the corner of the stretch, where the houses faded to businesses. Some getting caught in the middle.

I popped the letter into the post box's dirty mouth. Down the stretch a large black man with a keloid face walked. Shop owners stood at their doors like toothless guard dogs. His dark scars formed circular patterns on his cheeks and forehead, rounded down to his chin. A half-light closed the day and people emerged from their homes like moles. They stared at the man, stage whispering to neighbours across the street. I walked back to my house, catching fragments of their words.

“why would he do that to his”

“told you they're diff”

“his papers”

“lock”

“out”

“different native”

I discarded their words, letting them brush through my hair like a wind. Nothing getting caught in the knots. Useless words from barren mouths. Maybe meaning less, less meaning mouths. I'd try give them the benefit of the doubt. Still, I'd rather not hear that kak in the first place.

In the dark the tent looked like a shadow during a night swim. The caravans were lassoed with rope lights, reflecting off their surfaces into the ether. From the lake it looked like a dark solar system. Few families had ventured out to the premiere performance. But then, the town had never welcomed the unacquainted. Some soldiers hung about, leftovers. I watched them from the veld, me the invisible voyeur, watched them watching a man who serenaded a snake into his mouth. They jumped around in disbelief.

I couldn't hear them laughing or the music from the busted speakers I'd overheard when I passed. There was only silence at the lake. My muscles relaxed as my feet touched the ground. I started to work through the huts. I'd been through two shacks, rather monuments to forgetting. I began to discern the third one that morning finding more than forgetting.

It was the same hut Degor had searched through our first day here. The roof was shot through with holes. The moon was visible through them in round apparitions. The boxes inside were old, not sticky taped shut like the others had been. They were packed tight inside.

I'd pulled out the photographs first. Some of them had held up, the ones in the middle, sandwiched between the others which had seen better days. All moulded and some scorched. I held them at the edge out of habit. No sticky fingerprints. The backs were always inscribed. The names of loved ones, short messages of hope and wishes of safety. Dates 1898, 1899, 1900. Older than the town I'd think but maybe I'd be wrong.

I made a pile of the less damaged ones, the ones visible even if only in parts. Like an exploded view half thrown out, sometimes you could put it back together to resemble what it had been before. Other times you may as well not have bothered. Still, I bothered with them. There were about fifty when I was done. I wiped my gluey hands on my jeans. At the

boundary I stopped abruptly. Pushed back like a giant hand against my chest. My limbs felt deadweight where I stood, like two iron pegs stumped into the ground.

I tried to step forward again. Pushing against the palm of the force. When that failed I tried to step back. It worked. The photographs in my hand burned my skin like a dry clothes iron. I dropped them into the dust and bolted through the boundary, this time unheeded. Was I losing the plot? My mind thought between run run run. Run run run into my yard. Run run run through my bedroom window. Run run run to the bathroom. My fingers were red. I ran them under the cold faucet. Voices were one thing but hallucinations, well they were another. I put my fingers in my mouth. They felt thin and raw. It had to be real.

I avoided the lake for the next two days. By the third I was sick, decarnated. It felt as if my life-force had crawled out of me like a Hermit crab. A Hermit crab that wandered over the train tracks, through the dustbucket and scrub to that empty pool of loss. I walked, as if sleepwalking, not fully registering my surroundings. A neighbour said “Gracie,” half raised her hand. I must have scared her halfway to heaven. She pulled it down into her lap quickly. I didn’t notice that the circus had packed up and left. I read the Daily later, they’d been chased out by the townspeople. I imagined fire and pitchforks. The reality was probably closer to bakkies and pitbulls. Pot-bellied men and their thick-necked sons. God, I couldn’t wait to get out of this place.

The closer I got, the harder I looked for a force around the place. I squinted again, the same as when I looked for the death trace but there was nothing. Not a damn mirage, not a dust devil to suggest a barrier around the place. The photographs lay scattered in the same place I’d dropped them. I bent down beside them. I picked at one the way a person would pick at a garden snake. I piled them up again and left them on the ground.

Nailed against the skeleton tree there was a list. I looked around me, a little freaked. I’d never seen anyone here but Degor. My chest filled with hope. It drained quickly when I realised the impossibility. Stupid girl. I took a closer look. It was crumpled, some of the folds overlapping letters. I pulled it straight. It was a list of names. Men’s names. It didn’t say for what. Weird. Though, weirder things had happened here. I shouldn’t be surprised that someone else would come out here but the idea rattled me.

I sat down in the shade. The sick feeling I had carried was gone. The names on the list swam through my head all day. They were in no particular order it seemed. Not alphabetical, not arranged in syllables, length. Some of the names sounded familiar. Like I'd read them somewhere before. Others I were certain were strangers. I was sure they were all dead. An intuition maybe. Most people only get recognized after they die. Like these military men, for glory and honour and a state-funded slab of granite. So they'd never be forgotten when there was so much else to be remembered.

Although, it wasn't their faults I suppose. The guys out at the border. Some were probably scared right out of their skants to be there and then there was Degor. He'd run right into the line of fire if it was the opposite direction of here it seemed. Maybe that was it. They were names from the border. But why here? Why not the noticeboard outside the corner shop or the post office. Some place with people and not just ghosts. As soon as the thought entered my head I turned around. Looking over both shoulders. Suddenly freaked. The photographs lay in the pile exactly as I had left them. I left them behind.

After that time was slow like someone was pulling the earth back with elastic bands. It must have rolled slowly like a thudded bowling ball, the shadows were still as praying mantises. The town was shrinking, something chewing away at it like a dry bone. Like a cancer had been waiting under the skin for the heat all along. I watched the soldiers marching on the malignant tar. Some of them made eyes at me. Kissy faces. I gave them the middle finger most times, ignored them others. I waited for Degor but he never came back. Not when he said he would, only after.

February 15, 1980

Lesson One: Maths

Lesson Two: Geography

Lesson Three: English

Lesson Four: Biology

Lesson Five: Afrikaans

One

Two

Skip a few

The list has changed

Four more names

Ag, shame

William saw me coming home through my bedroom window

Doubt he'll say anything to dad

Dark sleep

I saw a ghost right before he returned. I was at the edge, fishing for my collection, petering on disappearing. I sucked my stomach in as if that would help. Could feel my ribs brush my cotton tee shirt. I stuck my fingers underneath them, maybe I could touch my heart that way. I almost had it when I heard a rustle behind me. Then I saw it, the ghost. Clear as the moon in front of me. It stood there for a while. I stood very still. My muscles started to ache. It started to move towards the lake. Walk anybody could. One leg in front of the other except it was like static. Like white noise between one station and another trying to tune in, weak signal out here. It evaporated at the lake. Wiped right off the grid like it had just dived into the invisible water and was holding its breath beneath the surface. It never came up again. He. It looked like a man.

I wrote about it in my diary. I'd kept one since Degor left. In it I wrote everything, how the children had stopped growing and how parents looked old, how slowly from house to house the scene grew desolate, about the man who hung up cages of kittens in the tree outside his house until someone ratted on him and the police came and told him to take them down. How everyone watched as he cut the ropes with scissors and the kittens mewed all together like a choir of squeaky toys. I wrote about the boys at school who tried their luck. And the how the girls who kept their socks up with clear sticky tape whispered when I walked past. They could go screw themselves. In fact, they could screw each other. Maybe that would solve

their problems. I wrote about the soldiers who whistled when I walked to the lake after school. I wrote about what I found at the lake. That was probably what I wrote about most.

September 12, 1981

Found:

a burnt out diary

some army boots

a copper ring bent out of shape

an old gold pocket watch

a flint lighter still working

March 6, 1981

William left today

Said he had to move back

Where he was born.

Mom agreed that people should die where

they are born.

I told her he didn't go home to die.

Granny watched him leave from the veranda.

Sat on an old bleached out patio chair.

Good thing she was so small.

She watched him, his bags

measuring them with her and telling my mother to check the outhouse for its copper pipes.

I rolled my eyes and went inside. I was sad to see him go.

My father sat out back in the shed behind the kennels.

June 24, 1981

Found:

New list

Names scratched into the tree

A silver ring

A rotting bible

Degor came back home two years after he left. Almost to the day. I'd just sat my matric finals. We had sex by the lake. The same spot as before. After, I pulled my panties up from around my ankles.

He said, "A friend of mine lives in Durban. He says I can stay with him. You too, if you want to?"

He was exactly the same. Not at all changed by the Border which made some of the other boys go *bossies*. I searched his face for signs of change. His eyebrows still furrowed. He looked older I guess but still the same, like not even a day had passed between us.

I thought about his offer then thought about the pull of the lake. How I'd be sick for sure but how could I tell him that. It was worth a try though. I'd have to get out of here someday and now seemed as good a time as any.

"When would we leave?"

"After Christmas. I told my Uncle I'd stay with him until then. He hates it when everyone's gone. Said it's the worst kind of silence."

I realised I could wait that long. Hell, I realised I could wait until the cows came home but I wasn't an all-talk-no-action kind of girl. I pulled my shorts on and did up the buttons.

“Cool. I'll be ready.”

We left before New Year's Eve. My mom cried when I packed my bags and my dad held his big arms around her. A fresh layer of sawdust dusting the hair on his arms. My gran tucked some money in my palm when I hugged her. Then the crazy old bird whispered an exorcism mantra in my ear. My dad was the worst. We hugged which we never did. It was weird. I felt small in his wide body, like he could wrap around me twice. Degor's 122cc interrupted the thought. He idled outside the gate. I pulled on my rucksack as I walked out. Newspapers littered the road, catching at pavement ridges. Through my neighbour's chicken wire discarded toys looked as if they were melting. Colourful plastic oozing into the sand. My family stood on the veranda as I swung my leg over the saddle. They waved as we kicked up dust towards the new freeway. Tears ran into my hair. I blinked them out. Bloody good riddance to this place.

Herman at the monument

Herman felt the flat reassurance of the ground beneath his back. He lay at the base of a monument. A concrete circle, steps leading down to sharp, yellowing grass. A man walked toward him. Hobbled, rather, like a one-legged monkey. His hair fell in greasy waves over the wide ocean of his forehead. Everything about him flapped open. His gummy smile, his wavering eyelids which gathered in folds over crow's feet so that you couldn't tell easily his age. Unless you looked at his worn down knees. The man was finished.

He walked with open arms, an open jacket, an open mouth of missing, mielie-pip teeth.

“Welcome, welcome, you're just in time for the tour. We've been waiting a long time for you man, a long time. You have enjoyed the sleep of the dead, my friend, and boyo, did we wait forever!”

He helped Herman to his feet. Lifted him up so high he landed on the concrete rink with a tap, his army boots still intact. Then he patted Herman firmly on the back as if he were a child, choking. Pat pat pat then shook his hand, simultaneously pulling him toward the building beyond the stairs.

“Hard grip you got there sonny.” Herman looked at their hands. His, the man's. The man's hands were stone. His own hands were stone. And yet they felt as fleshy as a freshly gutted fish.

“They're all ready for you,” and with that he pushed Herman through the glass swing doors (“Nasionale Vrouemonument War Museum of the Boer Republics”), a rubbery klap as the doors closed behind him. Inside sat a group of people with small cameras and sunscreen streaked across their noses, the noses clustered like buttery corn on the cob. One of the men stood with an opened suitcase over his head, the suspended jaws threatening to swallow his face. Herman thought this very odd, even given the oddity of everything in general, but he didn't ask.

The tour commenced. Many people in the group chewed broadly as cows with four stomachs to fill, and some people bent over with great interest, eventually walking on their hands, faces toward the guide.

She was a small excitable woman who flashed Herman a quick smile, blinked rapidly, then forgot about him as she shuffled her troops to the next exhibit.

Herman tried to remember. Where he'd been before this. Hadn't he been lying on his back feeling reassured by the feeling of solid ground?

He looked down at his stone hands. He should leave a message. He'd write something down. But where was something to write with, and what was it called. Ah pen. O pen. *Yes!* So maybe he'd ask the man with the suitcase open over his head. But then, maybe the suitcase would close up, taking Herman with it. So he decided not to risk things and counted on his fingers instead, since numbers always lead to something, one after the next, stepping stones you could follow endlessly. Herman knew that much.

He stepped on the hand of a woman who was hand-standing. She blew at her fingers, suspended on one arm in a way that made Herman think he'd been flying before, gravity seemed weak here, bad signal. They trooped from room to room peering through glass-fronted cabinets and into drawers. Brushes, cooking utensils, letters, bonnets, diaries. Coloured posters layered with some shiny transparent sheen hung on the walls. The light was sharp, and underlined blind spots.

Many of the women

and in the morning

Mevrou Kerk befriended

afforded her

They exited the building through the back entrance which led over the glass grass to the concrete rink where Herman had woken up. People pulled out their cameras. Clicking. Elbowing each other for the best shot. A tall monument arose before them, a pillar "of honour and strength" the excitable guide explained excitedly.

Just then a crowd of mad mangling malicious mutts baltering towards them. The dogs grabbed a luckless individual at the outer edge of the group biting into his shoulder and dragging him down the grass. Now, Herman could smell dog piss, since the beasts had marked the place and acid burnt it and stained it as they wanted. They'd also been digging, burying bones under heaps of soil. He noticed the small graves now. Small calluses of earth that studded the grass. And the trail of blood which led to the darkened edges of the grass.

The man was gone. Though the old man from earlier in the day waved at Herman, fat stone fingers carved into raw pork sausages. He stood and waved, all friendly, near the end of the trail, grinning his open-mouthed smile.

The tour moved up the stairs to view a frieze. Two woman, one seated with a child in her lap, one standing. Their curves and lines were growing from stone. Herman couldn't read the inscription, although others in the group nodded and shook their heads. He tried again: it wasn't that he couldn't see the words, but he couldn't string the letters together in any way that made sense. Each time he tried, he came up blank, and empty. He tried everything, slotting the possibilities into place, hoping to find the best one. One that rang true.

He was interrupted by a pair of hands that pulled him by the neck deep into the moulded scene of a battle. He read the inscription on that just fine. Vaderland. The land of fathers. The land of (in)vaders? Inside, the scene was a far cry from the placid turmoil of the picture. The half melded face of an Officer spat words, stones rumbling out his mouth.

“Soldier! Do you know what you're doing?”

“As a matter of fact, Sir, no.”

The frames of other bodies lay all around him, mounting up into a pillory as high as the hollow monument.

“You are to stay here! No point in trying to leave. And anyway, you'd sleep the same out there.”

“I don't understand.”

“You will,” the Officer assured Herman.

Herman found a spot near a face. The face of a man and a face of a wall. The man was encased from his temples back.

“Excuse me, but do you know what's going on here?” Herman enquired of the face.

Which only stared at him.

“You won’t get much out of him, he’s deaf. See.” The man, who spoke pointed to his own ear, the other encased in the wall like that half of his body. His legs were positioned as if to run.

“Get used to it. You’ll be here a long time. Every now and then someone gets out, but not for long. You were lucky this time. But as always, someone comes along and puts you back in your place. Oh, yes, some of us rise to the surface more easy, if you got the gift. I’d say. But it’s not much long-term use to you, buddy. Believe me.”

A collective moan groaned throughout the hollows. The faces at the top split, and spilt stones down upon Herman’s head.

“Never mind, eventually you won’t feel it anymore. Best you get some sleep. You just pick a place. Any spot you like.”

That night Herman dreamed hard.

The days that followed the most recent encounter were warm. The battle waxed and waned as if in a dream, the Boers’ Maxim-Nordenfelt finally smashing through. The end was a field-study in horror. Skull shards. Soft, full-blown stomachs. Mismatched limbs. British and Boer bone broken and blown to splinters. A mangled mess of flesh, cloth, bone and hair piled into trenches between the living.

The British, approaching from the south, crossed the Tugela. There, in the water, the Boers had planted barbed wire, cleverly submerged. So the harder the troops sought to escape, the faster they were held. Men turned to mess, caught in the metal tangle. Writhing to get free. Clutching at metal straws. Fearing the fierce flow, many held fast to the barbs and drowned. Soon, bodies created a filtered wall where debris from the veld piled up in red scum. The scum rose up the river bank then receded. A line of crimson foam, floating with awful bric-a-brac.

Baby Teeth

The TV in the corner of the bar mumbled between lost transmissions. The static stringed across the screen like the spider webs that threaded around the small box set. Skins came in. One had a knuckleduster hanging around his neck on a thick industrial chain. He wrung it through his fingers and jumped at an unsuspecting customer. An old regular with thick rosacea lines mapping his nose and cheeks. The man scurried out like a startled cat. Several other drinkers followed. Two men remained, morning drunks, although who was I to judge. One man had a long nose which drooped into his drink like the crooked walking stick of a blind man already plunged into a hole. The other had a limp, a calf which gorged into a foot, stuffed like a speckled sausage into a sock. (I liked to make these things up. Kept me awake. Made things interesting.)

“Oi, luff, `owabouadrink ova `ere?”

The news anchor’s voice stuttered into and out of earshot. It was always politics, any which way you listened. When you passed techie stores with their electronic displays. The news had a lot to say these days. I turned the volume down on the remote, klapping the back, jolting the batteries to life. The skins filled in the gaps.

“I’ve got a peanut willy te match me peanut brain in me head. I’m goin’ to read what they feed me ‘til I’m dead.” The skin who spoke measured the syllables with his hand like he was testing his registers. “I’m a suit, a joke, a well-disguised lie. I’ll live like this ‘til the day I die.”

He bowed deeply and the skins applauded his impromptu poetry. The applause was cut short, quick as severing a fishing line, lost when a group of serious-looking skins strolled in. They headed straight for the black leather couch in the far corner. The skivs looked right scared, like they could shit their namesake undergarments. These guys must have been the real deal, the big business.

I took a good look at them, not bothering to conceal my curiosity. There were three of them, and they all conformed to the aesthetic. Shaved heads, tattoos, Docs but more. A boxer’s nose on each of them. Muscled up. Festering mania. Like they could pull out the pistols tucked into the back of their jeans and shoot the place up. Set it on fire. Piss on the ashes. Anything.

Whatever they felt like. No consequences.

One of them gestured, calling me over. Usually I'd tell him to go fuck himself but self-preservation was a useful attribute. I prided myself on knowing when to pick my battles.

“Three Carling lagers.” He was lean muscle. Carved like the field of a pinball machine. My eyes hit his tattoo like a bull's-eye. A thin swastika between the brows. There was no aggression in his manner, and he'd given a request, not an order. But I knew to obey. His authority was toned outside the human frequency range, like a high pitch whistle only dogs could hear. Except I got the message. Maybe because I was some clever bitch. The other two watched me walk to the bar. Men built like brick shithouses. Facial tattoos the order of the day.

They drank, quietly leaning in to the conversation. The other skins, just low-grade skivs, muzzled their usual calamity to a mild rebellion and watched as the three heavy skins downed the foamy dregs of their draughts and left. They nodded in passing, and the skivs nodded back with the fanatic adulation of teenage girls at a New Kids on the Block concert.

“Shit!”

“Jesus Christ Mary Joseph!”

“D'you see 'ho that was?”

“Kahl bla'ee fuckin' Kabel. Inna flesh as 'e livs 'n breaves.”

“Bloke's a legen' innis time.”

“A fuckin' magician may'te, 'e makes blokes disappear. Whphoof. Fuckin' puw's a rabb't ouw 'is hat an' bang bang bang ya dead. Dead 'n gone.”

“ 'e star'ed t'e entyre mo'vmen' 'ere.”

“Wewl roigh'.”

“Buiw' 'i up froma groun' 'e did. 'Imselff.”

“Yeah, to'ull fuckin' legen'.”

They'd found a body in the road. I spotted the shiny silver blanket through the thicket of the late partiers, early drunks and industrial workers. Death wasn't a stranger to the neighbourhood but it was usually junkies shooting bad skag, a bubble in their syringe, dirty needles with the Virus. Some domestic disputes. Death kept indoors. But here the blood was starting to dry in the morning sun. And not a patch; buckets of the stuff. On the pavement spilling into the road. I narrowly missed a sprawling seep as I stepped around the crowd.

The manager had already opened the place. He was counting the previous night's takings in the crappy back office. Also a storeroom. It tripled as a staff toilet though we just used the customers', as they were slightly better.

Angel dust from under the neon clung to my takkies. I shook it off behind the bar, and ran a wet cloth over the spills and circles, which had already hardened into tack. Shit. All this fluff and muck. Fucking Anne. Never cleaned after her shift. Big tits Anne. Big tips Anne. I could bitch all I liked, the first regular was in before I'd finished.

"Did you see the body?" He spoke slowly as if he were already drunk, sounding the words out with a deliberate concentration.

"Ja, tough break hey."

"Some theemeri boy."

An Indian firewalker. They did it every Good Friday. Crocodile skin under their feet. It had evolved. Scraping the wombs of their mothers. Tough life women. But the theemeris could walk across the Lake of Fire if they were called to. Screw the Book of Life. Shit to Death and Hades. Fuck the second death. They could powder their faces with immortality as long as they damn well pleased. Except when they died. Died out.

They'd lived on the edges of the harbour as subsistence fisherman for years but now they'd moved in towards the centre. The younger ones were in gangs. Like the skins. They kept out of each other's way. Same business, but different lines, I guess. Theemeris were into guns. Carried serious artillery in their car boots. Paulina had bought her heat from them, and had also given each of her girls a small burner. Handbag sized. Pocket rocket protection. The taxi

drivers had them too. Large women with brick-hard faces, massive airbag breasts. Boom sticks in the drivers' doors.

“Bludgeoned to death by a metal grinder. Organs kicked in until they burst. Blood out his ears, nose, mouth and eyes. They say he looked like a watering can tipped over. Some sicko just washed the pavement with this guy's guts. Turned him inside out.”

My stomach flipped like a load of laundry in a washing machine. I had a bad feeling this was the start of something or the end. Back or front, it wasn't any fucking good.

“Quiet aren't they?”

Degor hadn't been to the bar in a few weeks. He was pulling extra shifts at the recycling factory. Saving up for something. He hadn't said what.

“Ja, ever since that theemeri kid died they've been skulking around with their tails between their legs.”

We both looked. Four of them were playing pool. Two skin girls watched from the bar, balancing on the barstools, knees under their chins. The skinheads shouted. They punched each other at intervals, but a far cry from the bold bashing they'd favoured before. One of them sank the black ball. The other snapped the cue over his knee. Threw the halves into the corner.

Richard and Digger walked into the bar. The skins acknowledged Digger, who was by now an honorary member. Though of course he already knew some from the border. He had cling film stuck to his arm, pressing a fresh tattoo. Droplets of blood dotted the plastic like packed meat in a supermarket butchery.

“New chop hey?” Degor said.

“What's it this time?” I asked. He'd been collecting them since his bust. Since Roger gave him his neo-Nazi makeover. I knew he was in debt. That he'd run for them for a while before Kahl let him off the hook. A more generous deal than most. Better than growing gills in the harbour. But I hadn't expected the ink, the permanence it implied.

He peeled back the film to show a zombie fist. Green stewed skin shedding from the fisted fingers. Held up in a power sign.

“So sick” Richard piped in. He was with the girl from the party, the one with the glittery skirt, her arm draped over his shoulder like a dirty towel. I think her name was Charlotte. Charlene. Char-something. Rumours were flying that Richard had knocked up Juliet, so she’d kicked it back to her family in Maritzburg. Paulina was furious. Richard was cute, but he’d cost her a girl. A commission. More than that, Paulina was mad that Juliet had been left with the kid. Richard was contagious, and she’d banned the other girls from going near him, never mind with him. Of course that made them want him more. He was up to his eyeballs in skirts these days. He seldom came up to breathe.

Later, Digger left with the skins. They looked serious, walking heavily like they were stomping out a fire beneath their feet.

Degor and I walked home together. It was starting to get dark out. He held my hand, steering us towards the harbour. I felt the draw, the current through my legs, relief as I got closer, the same as I’d felt at the lake. I pushed it back. I’d learnt to control it. Pushing away the bad with the good.

We sat on the edge of the dock. Dangling our legs over the brink. A small crab scuttled up the wall. A black cat shadowed beneath the pilings. The port was busy, hustling with workers onloading and offloading. There were some fisherman too, keeping company with small pitted cooler boxes stacked with beers.

I sat and dangled, looking into the old water as if a lake might come floating up. And the sheds, and the skeleton tree. All the bones of my past.

“What are you looking for?” Degor asked. His eyebrows still furrowed, except they were deeper now. A mark of his mortal concern.

“Just looking.”

“Ja, Grace. Like I’d believe that.”

I smiled. I still smiled. When I didn’t know what else.

“Do you remember the stories I told you at the lake,” he asked, “the ones Miss Vates told me? Weird hey. Wonder how she’s doing. Even still alive. You speak to your folks lately?”

I hadn’t. We hadn’t spoken in months. The last time was at a payphone close to work, where I struggled to get past a shitload of stuff, forget fingerprints smeared on the salt-blasted plastic. I’d held the mouth piece as far from my lips as I could, as if the perforations might pierce me.

“Gracie, is that you? Grace? Why don’t you come home for Christmas, your father would love that. His little Gracie back in her old room. We’ve left it exactly how you had it.”

I thought my mother would never stop. I hadn’t even started; had not said a word. Spoke then: “I’ve got work mom.”

“Oh. Well maybe Easter? Come home at Easter. Pastor Isaac is organising a weekend of special events.”

“Maybe.”

“Okay, well. Have you been alright? Have you been eating enough? You were so thin the last time I saw you. Practically all bones.”

“I am mom.”

“All bones?” The quiver in her voice.

“Eating.”

“Oh.” (Hardly reassured.) “Well, good then.”

“Is dad around?”

“He is... just a second...” I thought I heard her calling him, though it may have been a bad connection. “Sorry Grace, he’s busy.”

Silence.

“Well, should we talk again next week?”

“Sure mom, I’ll give you a call.”

She sounded small on the phone. Even less than the last time I’d seen her, more than a year before. They came to Durban every now and then, stayed at The Holiday Inn on the beachfront. They’d looked in a bad way. My mom worse than my dad. She seemed defeated. Burnt out in a way only my hometown could blister.

“Grace?” Degor whistled, palming his flat hand in front of my eyes.

“Oh, uh, sorry. Ja, I do. The portal and the loss. Loony tunes stuff.”

He laughed. “Yup. Local loony tunes.”

We looked in the water, watching the litter ebb against the harbour wall. Empty beer cans. Simba chips packets that still gleamed silver. Plastic bags floating like jellyfish ghosts.

Back at the flat Digger was getting ready to go out. He ran his hands over his shaved head in front of the window. Smooth. He bent down and tightened the laces on his boots, pulled the suspenders that hung at his sides over his shoulders. Snap. The cat perched on the arm of the couch and he scared it off by jumping loudly, his boots whacking the floor. Poor cat scarpered. Digger. He could be a prick like that.

“Going out for a bash are we?” I asked.

“As a matter-of-fact I am. Scores to settle. What’s it to you?”

It wasn’t anything I guess, though it clearly meant more than a mere party to him, so I shrugged my shoulders. Dumped some shopping in the kitchen. For all I cared these days, Digger could do what he’d been named to. Dig. His own grave. It had just better be small enough for only him. None of this deadweight shit where you dragged other people down too.

Richard and Frank came back later, a girl for each of them. They’d got some pills from Roger, borrowed a TV and a VCR from some poor sucker and had set it up on the edge of the cabinet. They had to push the ornaments back and an angel fell, head cracked off at the neck. It rolled next to a skinny, shiny statuette of a mean Doberman.

Richard rigged up the movie. He'd hired some Arnold Schwarzenegger thing. The Terminator. Typical. Nothing better to do, I settled in to watch Arnie terminate. Richard and his bird soon went into the bedroom. Frank and his girl, a tiny brunette, necked in the kitchen. I stretched out on the couch crunching handfuls of NikNaks. My fingers went orange and the top of my mouth scratched raw. Just as Arnie was about to bust in on Kyle and Sarah at their hotel, Digger busted through the door of the flat. I jumped, spilling the chips all over the floor. Digger crunched them to dust as he hurried to the window.

He peered down into the road. Holding the curtain in front of his face like a Burka.

"What the fuck is going on?" I yelled.

"Ssshhh... would you shut the fuck up." He hissed.

I heard some men shouting, their voices echoing up the walls of our flat. They passed through. Digger fell to his haunches, leaning against the wall, wiped his face like he was trying to wipe away worry.

"Seriously, what the fuck is going on?"

He gave me daggers. Throwing knives.

"None of your business Grace. Just fucking leave it alone."

The next day at work I overheard some skins who were sitting at the bar. I kept my eyes directed at the TV, hoping they'd spill some secrets about the night before. It didn't take long.

"Those theemeris arre radge lo't. Fuckin' scum. Carn' fuckin' believe `ey sho't Luke."

"Theemeri bastards. Kahl's doin' `is nu't. Saidda street's goinna run red with theemeri blood."

"`Evvy. Think `e's innit forra guns like?"

"I dunno. Didn' fink ofvat. They's `avin' a mee'in' a` a chop shop tanigh'. All ovva top cats. We migh' be goinna war soon bruva."

“Ta war soon.”

They clinked the necks of their quarts and drank. Slamming the bottles down so the one cracked and foamed in a receding wave down the bar counter. I picked up the pieces of the glass, suddenly pissed. Pissed and scared.

The place filled up. Celine shouted post punk songs punctuated by 70s classics the older crowd picked. Suitably schizophrenic. Skins head banded and slam danced, spilling their draughts onto the tiles making them slippery. At intervals the older crowd *langarmed*. It was trippy. Like being trapped in a Lynch movie. The boys showed up. No Degor. Degor was working again. Another double shift. I hardly ever saw him and was beginning to think he was a vampire.

Frank went straight for the tiny brunette, they necked immediately, settling in at the end of the bar. Digger headed for the skins and Richard for the skirts. Fucking Anne was splitting my shift. She *langarmed* with a man who looked in his fifties. Silver hair but no silver fox. He held her tight at the waist, spinning her around the dance floor like a ride at the beachfront. Some more skins walked into the bar. Not just some I noticed, Kahl and his thugs. They headed straight for the black couch like before, and the skin kids necking there jumped off quicker than a pre-mature ejaculation.

Kahl and co had the desired effect: the room slowed for a minute, the skins all staring at once. Hesitant, awe-struck, like Jesus himself had just walked into the bloody bar. A brave skin with a tattoo of a scythe down the side of his face bought them a round. They clinked glasses and nodded at the bold benefactor, who looked relieved. Soon some skin girls strolled over to talk to them, and settled on Kahl's lap. Two bleached blondes. Shaved heads, blunt bangs, short black skirts, sheer stockings, white socks rolled down to Doc Martins.

He caught me staring. An intense focussed gaze I couldn't break like he had magnets in his sockets to pull the metal in mine. One of the girls noticed the connection. She stared at me, grabbed his face and kissed him, claimed him like a tramp stamp.

The skins partied like they were zealots and it was the second coming of the Messiah. The bar was dry before two. The manager had to walk down to The Processor to buy in more booze

and we closed well after the sun was up. Anne was working the day shift. I chuckled to myself. She'd ended up ditching early to run off with the *langarm* man. Sugar daddy. Girls never learned that men like that, they had a sour aftertaste. Kahl had left with the two girls. He looked over at the bar as he was walking out. His magnet eyes drew mine again.

Frank was sleeping on the couch, the small brunette next to him in her bra. Degor lay asleep on the bed. I lay next to him and put my hands down his pants. He didn't respond. I rolled over and pulled a loose shirt off the floor and over my eyes.

"They's said `e `ad almos' a `undred bullets inim."

"Fuckin' shame `at, real fuckin' shame."

"Billy says they's weighed the metal. Eavy as an AK. Fuckin' mad."

"You righ' `ere."

"En `e `ad a li'ul one. Only one likes."

"Tragedy man."

"Kahl wants te ge' a scum who did i'. Mebbe a same lo' wo' di' Luke in."

"Yeah cou' be. We needa ge' our own bac' likes."

"Theemeri bastards'll respec' a bac' o' my basebawl ba', `a's fo' fuckin' sure."

It was all anyone could talk about since it happened. This skin who'd had more metal shot in him than there was in the Eiffel tower. Followed down an alley by the harbour then pow pow pow. Some of the people in the flats had seen it, a lady smoking in her bath robe by the window, a girl tracing out her steamy breath on the windows, leaving secret messages for the boy across the way. Everybody was talking. But nobody was talking. The only rats in the Point were gutter rats and dead rats. Still the police had tried.

More skins had started hanging around the flat. It felt like a waiting room. Digger was creeped. He didn't say so but you could tell. His PTSD was worse than normal. Nightmares. Violent ones. We all took cover. Hell, I didn't blame him. Not with the talk in the streets about the war coming. Places were starting to close early. Smugglers was one. Their shifty

clientele shifted to us so we had ponytailed paedophiles in the barstools at eleven. Chaps with laps faded from friction. They gave good tips. Always in ten rand notes. So I couldn't complain.

I served the guys at the bar another round, listening in. Not pretending not to.

“ `is load wuz messed wiv a` a` docks. Rank came in en jus` tooka stuff.”

“They`lls be havin` a party now, `at`s for real.”

“Is gettin` dire, mate. My burdz getting` worried. She doan wanna lemme ou` a` nigh` no mor. Sais is fo` a baby. She won` `ave me commin` `ome inna woo`en box. No luv, I sais, is ok. Theys respec` a basebawl ba`. Shore. N wot kin I do, `ey? A bloke`s go`a stan` up fir hisself. N for `is lads.”

The other skin had gone quiet. He was starting to sway in his chair, resting his elbows on the sticky bar for balance.

Digger walked in then. Looked to the door before he sat down. Did a double take then a third.

“You expecting company?”

“Nah Grace, just looking.”

He looked like shit. A light brown fuzz grew across his head like mould on a peach and his eyes were sunk into dark pits. He`d been dealing for Roger, hanging around the old railway station at night waiting for cars to slow down so he could scoot to their windows and make the exchange. Easy as 1 2 3, pudding and pie. At first. Then theemeris started picking the skins off one by one like scabs around a roastie. He`d ditched the spot a few times, dealt closer to home, but Roger got pissed. Everyone had their spot, the skins knew it, the clientele knew it. It was bad for business. Roger could have made him a runner but Roger could be a prick sometimes.

“You seen Frank?”

“No. He`s been off banging that girl all week. They`re together all the time. I haven`t seen them apart since...”

I hadn't seen them apart since the night Digger had burst in, crunching through my NikNaks. The night of The Terminator. It was a touchy subject. He still hadn't come clean about it. I nosed around for a while, remembering what had happened the last time I hadn't stepped in. It hadn't ended well. He'd put his fist through the bathroom door. Split his knuckles so bad the blood ran down his hand, splinters like tiny rafts on the red rivers.

"And Richard?"

"Skirts," I said

He nodded like he didn't know why he'd bothered to ask the question.

We'd been sitting around the table smoking a joint with some tea heads Richard had met at The Processor and brought back to the flat. The petite brunette sat on Frank's lap, Richard leaned into a girl with jet black hair, dead straight, cut to her chin. The other two sat beneath the window sipping the leaves they'd brewed. God, it must have tasted awful, like watered down piss. I pulled the toke hard and passed it to Frank who stroked the cat with his other hand. They could have been twins, the tea heads. Instead, they were husband and wife. They had long, wavy sun bleached hair, tanned skin that almost looked dirty and light linen pants and shirts. Hippie types. The white bulge of the Jockey billboard shone through the open window over their heads. A ray of light and hope.

"Grace is spaced!" Richard teased. The whole room looked at me.

I was spaced. My head felt weightless. The breeze through the window iced like an arctic wave. Digger crashed through the door. Cutting through my buzz. I got paranoid when I smoked. He ran through the room, jumping between the tea heads crouching low at the window. After a few minutes he slumped to the floor, his back against the wall. Jesus, hadn't we been here before? Only this time he had a leg in the lap of each tea head.

"And that?" Richard asked. He'd missed the premier, the time before, though I watched the scene before me like a lame repeat.

"Nah, nothing," Digger said. He shot me a look as if I'd have something to say but I put my hands in the air, palms facing him. I had nothing.

The atmosphere in the room had tensed like a stretched elastic. Everyone waited for the slingshot recoil. The tea heads gave their apologies; made up some excuse about an early start. After they'd left, the snap hit home.

“What the fuck was that about?” asked Richard. Frank sat between them, the girl still on his lap like a played out puppy. Frank could have been watching a tennis match.

“What the fuck was what?”

(Frank turns left.)

“You know. Running in like that. Scared us all shitless.”

(Frank turns right.)

“It's nothing. Drop it okay.”

(Frank etc.)

“You can get out this business you know. Kahl? Shit he's got bigger fish than this. He's not planning to get caught in any shitstorm heading his way.”

“You know nothing `bout it.”

“What'd you mean? Every cat and his Uncle knows, man. That shit is everywhere, they may as well paint it on the fucking walls.”

Digger looked down at the space between his feet, his arms balanced on his knees. His arms were scabbed and bruised. Full of tiny holes. He'd been shooting up more these days. Tapping new veins. I'd watched him shoot up in his leg the day before. Sitting in dirty white skants, his tight pants pulled down around his knees, bent over looking for a vein inside his white hairy thigh. He'd found one close to his crotch. “That shit will rot your cock off,” I'd said. But he was already gone. Lying flat on his back on the floor. Pants still pulled between his knees. Space cruising. Magic Jedi.

“Just get out man.” Richard said now. “Ja, so Roger can be a prick but what's he gonna do? He's up to his eyeballs in this theemeris kak. This is the time. Bail.”

At the mention of the theemeris, Digger's eyes went crazy. He was suddenly wild. Rogue. Like somebody had pulled the plug.

He made a move toward Richard. The girl with the jet black hair jumped out the way. Smart cookie. They guys churned on the floor, roiling. Digger had the upper hand, pinned Richard down with his knees, punching him in the ribs. Richard kicked out the hold, got Digger around the stomach. It looked like they were hugging. Digger shot back with an elbow to Richard's side before going limp. Giving up. He sat with his head between his knees rubbing the peach fuzz on his head. Richard starting rolling another joint. He lit up and passed it to Digger.

Kahl had gone for the heart. Beaten some poor theemeri kids to mash. Beetroot. Young kids, fourteen, cousins of the theemeri bigshots. They'd landed up in hospital. Addington. Richard was doing some nurse there so he filled us in. A trucker had picked them up, brought them to the hospital. The boy was soaked like it had been raining blood, strawberry slush gunking the drains. The girl got off better, less blood, but still; she was pretty beat up. Cuts on the face; a black eye that bulged like an over-ripe plum. The boy had lost some teeth. His eyes were gummed shut. They'd broken his leg, but nice and clean, a homerun. Worse, they'd shaved his head. Kahl was two-bit, bat-shit, loony tunes. No question about it.

No wonder the skins were on edge.

“E fuckin' beat a gurl.”

“At's `evvy.”

“Ad sum low blows m`sell, bu' I neva hi` a gurl.”

“Yeah.”

Lots of sorry head-shaking.

They sipped their quarts. The bar was filled with skins. Talking about what had gone down. The room buzzed with their low boiling, like strange night insects in high summer.

“I dun wanna be round fir wot's cummin' mate.”

“Yeah. Na chance.”

“Ya gonna split?”

“Dunno.”

“I migh’. Go inland for a wyle. I `eard the scene is summat. Ya ge’ gurls all ova ya whenna knowz ya frumm Durban. Go silly fir i’.”

“Yeah?”

“Straigh’ man.”

Degor came in, bloodshot eyes, crunching glass under his shoes. He’d been working double shifts for weeks now.

“What’s happening?” He looked around, the place filled with skins, quietly subdued. No music; Celine untouched. It felt weird. Like watching some art movie with no sound, suspecting the killer could be around any corner. Every corner.

“You don’t know?”

He shook his head.

I gave him the details. The gritty bits, the nitty bits. The bloody bits. The stuff that gets under your fingernails.

He whistled low and deep.

“Hells bells.”

“And Digger?” he asked.

“He’s losing it. Going nuts. I don’t really know what’s happening. Why he doesn’t split.”

Degor shook his head but didn’t say anything. He had a strange expression that I couldn’t name. I shook it off.

Degor and I walked back to the flat after my shift. The blood from the first theemeri still stained the concrete pavement. Paulina waved at us from behind her Trellidor.

“What happened this morning?” she quizzed.

“What’d you mean?”

“There was a horrrrible noise from you guys’ flat. Then it sounded like a bigggg fight. You running a boxing school up there Gracie? Going one on one with all those men.” She licked her lips and looked at Degor.

“No, uh, I was at work.” (Shit shit shit.) “I better run, Paulina.”

I ran up the stairs two steps at a time. Digger sat on the couch. Frank on the floor. The place was trashed.

“Have we been robbed?” Even as I asked the question, I knew it was stupid.

I looked at Digger, at the scratches up his forearms, red and raw.

“He killed it.” Frank rarely spoke.

“He woke up all crazy and he killed it. Launched straight at it. Snapped its neck before I could stop him.”

I saw the marbled fur, the small pile at the edge of the room lying like a slouched handbag.

“I didn’t know what I was doing! It licked my face while I was sleeping and the next thing I knew it was in my hands. I’m sorry, okay. I am.”

“Bullshit, you never liked that cat!” Frank said. “You were always chasing it off. Kicking it out the way.” Frank looked shattered. His words used up. He got a black bag. Went over to the mess. Carried the cat out. He left straight after that. Moved in with the petite brunette.

The theemeris had taken out a group of skins in a drive-by. The skins retaliated, left two theemeris slugged in a sidestreet. I was nervous. Had started to sleep with a knife under my pillow, just in case; carried it with me on the streets too.

Though the streets were empty when I walked to work that evening. Not even the packs of stray dogs. Kahl’s shop had been closed up. Too easy a target. Plus, in the present climate, nobody wanted to work there anymore, and his men were dropping like fleas off a wet dog. Even the bar had gone quiet. Only the pedos left and some of the diehards.

“Dyaherraboudatheermerissssfellas?” A regular slurred his words.

I nodded and smiled. Not in the mood for that conversation.

He got the message, and turned back to his glass, staring hard, like was it half empty or half full.

Digger came in. Things had been pretty weird since the cat incident. His hair was growing out but he was still Roger's bitch.

"Seen Richard?"

It had been a while since he had been to the flat.

"Didn't you hear?"

"Hear what?"

"Richard got a girl pregnant."

"Yeah, so?"

"Yeah, so, her dad is a mean one. Threatened to shoot Richard's balls off if he didn't man up. He was packing, too, so let's just say he was very persuasive."

"Holy shit."

"Ja. Richard's moved in with her on the Bluff. Her parents' granny flat."

"Jesus. Happy fucking families."

"And you? Where you been?"

He looked up. Looked away. "With Roger. Here and there."

I didn't push it.

Later that night, there was a shooting down the street. I ducked under the bar at the first shot. For the rest I jammed my fingers in my ears. It was that close. My ears hurt. The place cleared out pretty quick. Tragedy was hard to look at, but hard not to. The drinkers shuffled after the blue lights like zombies to a hospital, stumbling over the uneven pavement. I walked home in the other direction. And fast.

Upstairs the flat was dark. I called out. Switched on the light. Nobody. I'd thought Digger would crash here, like he still did from time to time. But no. Though there was a note on the bed: all it said was, "I'm sorry" in Degor's slanted script. I checked the built-in cupboards. The empty spaces brought the message home.

I packed my clothes into a small rucksack and caught a taxi to Durban Central. The woman driving the cab had thick dark hair, tangled jungle roots.

"Where're you going at this time of the night, honey?"

"Back home."

"Like a lotta folks. Plenty people been going back home. Almost Christmas now too. So where's home at, sugar?"

"Nowhere you would know."

She drives into the lot to drop me off. She was right. The station is full up. I sit on the curb, as all the benches are taken. The Greyhound pulls up fifteen minutes later. I take a seat at the back. Places are dark like rubber from chewing gum. I pull my legs up to my chest and sleep.

I got off the bus at a small station, if you could call it that. A double bench with a round roof like a stunted barrel wave. The town was still a way on but the bus didn't stop there anymore. I started to walk. The smooth, flat road started to bubble. Heaps of tar like compact blisters. The heat already burning me up. I heard a car coming down the way. An old rusted bakkie, I put my thumb out and it slowed down and pulled over. I ran to the passenger side. A woman. Maybe mid-forties, younger. It was hard to tell.

"Hop in."

I swung my bag to the floor.

"Thanks hey. The heat was already killing me and the sun's only just coming up. Seems like nothing has changed."

She looked across at me. "Oh, you're from here?"

“Ja, born and raised.”

She made the sound people make when they look at puppies or babies but didn't ask questions. I was grateful for the silence.

She dropped me off at the Mobil station. I watched as her car coughed back the way we'd come. Wondered where she was heading, if her rust-bucket bakkie ferried people to this place like it was Hades and she was Charon, the friendly Tannie. The choppy black tar a river. The coin slipped from under my tongue. I shouldn't start with all that.

The concrete floor of the petrol station had fissured like a massive earthquake had rippled through, the devil finally coming to claim the place like my granny had always said would happen. The pumps were coated in a fine dust, no fingerprints, like some exhibit in an archaeological museum.

The place reminded me of Degor, of his old 122cc, I wondered where he was. All the saving. The look on his face at the bar that day. I should have guessed the total. The grand score. But I wasn't angry. You've gotta do, what you've gotta do, you know.

The neon light stuttered just as the sun came up full round. The town was still. Or maybe it really was deserted. I half expected a tumbleweed to come rolling by. Clint Eastwood with his gun ready, spaghetti laced through his pockets. Maybe everybody had finally had enough of the heat and off they'd gone. Greener pastures.

Because shit it was dry. Drier even than I remembered. Clearly still no rain. All these years. My mom had said people were losing their minds from the heat and the static. They couldn't touch each other without an electric snap.

I walked into the road staring down the main stretch. The corner shop crumbled into itself. A gaping hole in the roof like a pie with the crust picked off. The façade was gone too, broken bricks and shaved plaster, but the stoep remained. Pointless now. Just a slab of concrete leading to nothing. Still, the foundations of things were reassuring in a way I couldn't explain. The payphone still stood although it leant over. Not much, but enough to notice that something wasn't right. My stomach sank a bit. A drowning swimmer. I kicked back up to the surface. Treading water. The receiver hung off the hook by the black metal cord, all the silver rubbed off. It hit up against the partition, swaying to a breeze I could not feel.

The rest of the shops were heading the same way, covered in red dust. There were a few places completely gutted, closed for business signs taped on their windows from the inside. There were huge cracks down the faces of the buildings. Thick scars. Even the church had gone to shit. Crumbling plaster, a sand pit courtyard, one smashed up window, the stained glass gathered beneath the toothed frame. Churches were the last to go in a town like this.

I walked down the stretch, taking in the squalor, following my old route through the scrub. A smoky smell. The tall grass grazed my legs, leaving fine white scratches. Then suddenly black. Someone had burnt a firebreak. Charred as far as I could see like a dark tattoo gunned into the ground. The burn in my throat was sweet.

A few minutes longer and there was the lakebed. The rusted boneyard of coins and hooks and bones that had been pecked clean. I felt lighter with each step I took, grounded as my foot touched the inside of the perimeter. The current which pulled me to the floor ran up my veins like an electrical impulse. It looked exactly the same, not a bone unturned. I saw the photos I had dropped piled the way I had arranged them. The collected stuff too. Bones. Watches. Coins. Bibles. Like I had been here just yesterday.

I dropped my rucksack by the rot-tooth shed. The list was up at the skeleton tree, the names wiped clean off the page like they'd been soaked in milk and had evaporated. Instead, the initials had been carved into the trunk of the tree, extended over the twigs too. It reminded me of the people who wrote on rice. Haikus on rice, names on rice, short stories on rice. Thousands of words boiled into an inky stew. I sat on the edge of the lake. Staring out at the vast garden of rust. Remembering the bones.

Critical essay

Forms of Narrative Experimentalism: Notes on the Novelisation of History

The following essay will explore forms of narrative experimentalism in strategically selected works. The focus will fall on Jonathan Safran Foer's *Everything is Illuminated*, but I will also demonstrate (through notes, parentheses and references) a range of reading in the work of contemporary fiction authors who have deliberately breached the constraints of traditional realism. In effect, this brief essay comprises a form of scholarly reflection on my own interest in writing a novel which grapples with the ethics and aesthetics of using history as subject matter. Instead of writing what I feared would be a rather trite, self-absorbed 'reflexive' account of the writing process associated with the preparation of my own manuscript, *Boneyard*, I have opted to demonstrate my understanding of form and concept via an engagement with the novels of others. My account will inflect new critical concepts such as 'Translit' and 'postmemory' through more familiar categories such as postmodernity and magic(al) realism. Here, I concede that 'realism' is a broad church, but also understand that the term is conventionally taken to describe a mode of representation in which moral coherence, life-like verisimilitude, emotional depth of character and language as transparent medium of communication predominate over an author's evident, even metafictional, insistence on formal idiosyncrasy and a linguistic-conceptual engagement with the world of form, idea and discourse.

In the South African context, two especially influential examples of narrative experimentalism that come to mind are Andre Brink and J.M. Coetzee, both of whose preferred modes of fictional representation have tended to reconfigure realist hegemony. Brink, for example, innovatively explores and rethinks, in his fiction, the identity positions of Afrikaners in a politically-shifting South Africa. He avers that "South Africans have to reinvent the real and consider the past from an alternative perspective when trying to imagine a new South Africa" (Bowers 2004:57). In his novel, *Devil's Valley* (1998), for instance, Brink employs magical realism to exhume ghosts among the living in order to embody claims about the haunting, frequently unacknowledged continuities between past and present, and the relevance of supposedly closed historical chapters to the processual formation of the present, and the projected future. The narrator of the story is Flip Lochner, a journalist who ventures to the valley to investigate a mythical community descended from a family of

Afrikaners who broke away from the Great Trek. (From the outset, then, Brink's interest in digressing from inherited cultural-historical lineage and established account is clearly evident; his will be an 'other', an alternative route...) Flip loses his camera and his tape recorder, meaning that the author renders him both unable to document and (uneasily) freed from the comforting expectation that everything he encounters ought to be demonstrably verifiable. He is initially ill-received by the community; they ignore him and offer him conflicting testimonies. At the same time he witnesses events he knows objectively cannot be real: a girl diving into the sand; girls who run naked through the forests gashing each other with branches but who appear uncut the next morning; a conversation with the founder of the community, who is more than one hundred years old. These events challenge the journalist as a man of 'facts' to reassess his habituated perception of reality. His experiences comprise a cumulative epiphany through which Flip comes to terms with the one over-riding fact: that he will not be able to represent a single, coherent version of the history of this curious community that exists in and out of time. Consequently Flip, and by consequence Brink, renounces the colonial practice of homogeneous authoritative representation (Bowers 2004:100).

J.M. Coetzee is another pre-eminent South African writer who challenges historical representation and questions history as the dominant mode of representation. Much of his fiction – whether early novels such as *Waiting for the Barbarians* (1980) and *Life and Times of Michael K* (1983) or more recent examples such as *Disgrace* (1999) and *Diary of a Bad Year* (2007) rework historical master narratives, in effect re-writing dominant discourse. While I can only briefly remark on Coetzee's methods in this short paper, it is widely recognised that Coetzee's fiction engages history through postmodern strategies, and that his writing remains unmatched in South Africa for its “multivalence, formal inventiveness, and virtuoso self-interrogation of narrative production and authority” (Attwell in Ahmad 2012:143). Coetzee's ambiguous and experimental strategies have opened his 'historical' fiction to criticism on ethical grounds. For many, Coetzee's oblique, erudite aestheticism in a culture of violent political materialism was the equivalent of irresponsibility and irrelevance. Coetzee's radical aestheticism derived from his disinterest in realism, his suspicion that realism was a naïve mode. He admits in an interview with Tony Morphet that he cannot seriously engage himself with any kind of historical realism that takes pride in, or deludes itself about, copying the world objectively, the 'real' world. Instead, he holds the view that

history is shaped by deconstruction (Ahmad 2012:145). In “The Novel Today”, a much-quoted speech turned article, he writes that:

History is not reality; that history is a kind of discourse; that a novel is a kind of discourse, too, but a different kind of discourse; that inevitably, in our culture, history will, with varying degrees of forcefulness, try to claim primacy, claim to be a master-form of discourse, just as, inevitably, people like myself will defend themselves by saying that history is nothing but a certain kind of story that people agree to tell each other (1988:4).

Coetzee then evades engaging with history that tries to claim primacy *as* History, thereby deconstructing the inherited power structures on which representations of the other rely. Realism, as a structure of representation, merely mirrors or reproduces these underlying power structures. Coetzee’s divergence from realism then, does not, as the surface suggests, aim at escaping reality, but rather it attempts to challenge the invisibility of power structures inherent in realistic representation.

Ahmad elaborates on these inherent power structures, broadening the field from linguistic struggle to the physical act of colonisation, both of which he believes are governed by a hegemonic code. He suggests that a linguistic ‘code’ that manipulates ideology parallels the physical code of colonisation, the dominance of one group of people over another. He qualifies this statement by suggesting that both are employed by a dominant code that enables both mental and physical colonisation. For his part, Coetzee casts doubt over realism as the appropriate mode of representation over South Africa given the violence of obedience to codes of any system (linguistic or political). Instead, Coetzee uses alternative modes of representation to extricate history from the hegemonic code that is acknowledged as standard. As Stephen Watson states, this doesn’t mean that Coetzee’s novels don’t allude to historical reality, but rather that the deconstruction of realism is intended to “decolonise” language, a political gesture that alludes to post/colonialism (Ahmad 2012:147).

Coetzee uses postmodern allegory to destabilise “fixed monuments of colonial history” thereby “opening up the past for imaginative revision” (Kehinde, in Ahmad 2012:148). Similarly, Coetzee is hesitant about imposing interpretative guides in the form of master narratives in his work (Kossew, in Ahmad 2012:148). Narrative gaps, cryptic dream sequences, the demand that a reader produce meaning...all of these are evident in Coetzee’s

fiction, meaning that his novels are deliberately intended as “writable” texts.

Notwithstanding my brief discussions of the fiction of Brink and Coetzee, it must be said that Jonathan Safran Foer’s *Everything is Illuminated* (2002) is the novel which initially sparked my interest in experimentalism and history represented as a form of narrative discourse. For the remainder of this paper, then, albeit with strategic forays into the work of selected additional writers, it is this novel on which I will focus. Foer’s text has proven contentious in its iconoclastic handling of the ethical and emotional hi/stories of the Holocaust. He employs miraculous births, morphing shetls, uncanny record-keeping, melancholic sentimentality and outrageous humour in order to invent, via the displaced, second-hand accounts of postmemory, a mythic tale which claims for itself the imaginative power to animate forms of Holocaust heritage in ways more immediate than the undisputable facts of documentary truth. Foer’s novel is determined in its formal experimentation. Through deliberately ludic and postmodern tendencies, the text explores unsettling links between comedy and tragedy, memory and forgetting, history and fiction. His preferred narrative tactics produce a novel that is aesthetically provocative and simultaneously ethically questioning. Foer questions the ethics of representation associated with the discourse of the Holocaust; the text enables pertinent questions of the ‘unrepresentable’ to be explored.

I will begin my exploration of these questions with a quick (and doubtless selective) survey of the postmodern in relation to the contemporary literary landscape, addressing the fate of memory in a world of fragments and traces that have been displaced from their original referent, producing a materiality that is paradoxically phantasmagorical. Also linked to this volatility is the emergence of a new generation of evolving online readers and the correlating fragmentation of literature which embraces a culture that is contradictorily both nostalgic and “terminally ill with amnesia” (in Peterson 2002:167). The emergent genre of “Translit” will be discussed as a response to a new media society in which the concept of history is distorted and flattened out. The implications of these trends, and their effect on memory and postmemorial construction in third generation post-Holocaust writing, will then be addressed.

Overall, I am making a claim for the ways in which the experimental narrative

strategies which drive Foer's novel are relevant to the writing of what might loosely be envisaged as South African historical fiction, meaning, fiction which overtly engages with the received, official narratives of History. As a young South African writer, I am, like Foer in relation to the Holocaust, similarly at one remove from South Africa's fraught apartheid history. By using writing techniques which refract realism as the dominant mode of storytelling in difficult socio-political conditions, I hope to offer innovative and ethical explorations of identity within contemporary South African society. Here, as I will shortly show, Marianne Hirsch's concept of postmemory enables me to negotiate, in conceptualising my novella, the claims of memory in relation to amnesia (2008). Of course I am hardly original in this undertaking, and extrapolating from Foer I speculate about the possibility of analogous prose experiments by some South African writers who have used fiction to recast received histories of colonialism and apartheid. My primary examples, here, are J.M. Coetzee's *Dusklands* and *Life & Times of Michael K*, viewed through David Attwell's comment on Coetzee's "authorial struggle" (8) to find a mode of narrative imagining that is adequate to an "anti-realist attempt to complicate historical knowledge" (1991: 9). I will also refer to Ivan Vladislavić's *Propaganda by Monuments*, and Lauren Beukes' innovative fictional shape-shifter *Moxyland*.

The parameters of postmodernism have expanded with the proliferation of new social media. In a techno and literary culture increasingly infiltrated by flash, tweets, status updates, SMSs, WhatsApp messages and headlines, postmodernism is evolving for audiences. According to Sam Anderson, the internet has created new and potent rival genres of reading. He lists the blog, the chat, the tweet and the common thread as genres that not only lure our attention but also change the way our brains process text (2009). Anderson then begs the question: what new species of book can survive in the "attentional ecosystem of the aughts...[and] can appeal to readers who read with 34 nested browser tabs open simultaneously on their frontal lobes?" (2009).

Anderson admits (resolving his own question in the process) that his favourite novels of the aughts have been those that imitate the experience of reading online. He lists their characteristics: "They show quasi-bloggish tendencies: They're relatively short, deeply style conscious, and built out of text fragments narrated by radically different voices" (2009). With its increasingly simultaneous narrative fragmentation and multiple overlaid voices, this latest

'postmodernism' variant may be an especially apt medium for young South African writers who consider themselves to be global rather than primarily national. The possibility of this experimental branch will be discussed later in this essay.

A further issue is the effect of such postmodern culture, how it plays on memory and the representations and perceptions of history. What are the consequences for, the effects on, the project of writing historical fiction? Andreas Huyssen voices his concern over the fate of memory, describing contemporary culture as "terminally ill with amnesia" (in Peterson 2002:167). This concern is relevant to Foer's fiction writing, as well as to the experiences of second- and third-generation family members of Holocaust survivors. It is additionally pertinent for the descendants of other groups whose culture has been characterised by upheaval, marginalisation and violence. Huyssen argues that in a world capable of being simultaneously connected via new media, "active remembrance" in traditional forms of personal and collective memory is becoming obsolete (in Peterson 2002:167). René Green holds a similar opinion. She discusses a phantasmagorical overload which could induce forgetting, a "negation in abundance... which is possible when confronted with more than is comprehensible" (2006:46). Here, she is probably thinking of the incongruities and surreal juxtapositions which mark contemporary culture, the fantastically disparate associations which, instead of being considered disturbing or fevered, have been naturalised, cancelling out spaces for dissent. For many scholars, a considerable concern is the hijacking of collective memory by a "Disneyland culture", a so-called Coca-colonisation which trivialises and empties events of meaning. This media commandeering is particularly distressing to Holocaust memory as the relegation of genocide and atrocity to commercialised mediatisation may as well render memory obsolete (Sicher 2000:71).

Huyssen stresses the particular importance of active remembrance in terms of the Holocaust, the survivors of which are slowly being extinguished, their memories along with them, memories crucial to a contemporary understanding of trauma (2002:167). However, despite his criticism of a mass-mediated postmodern culture, he concedes that technology simultaneously offers potential for the preservation of memories, the imperishable storage of testimonies for those who have not experienced the trauma first-hand. This, then constitutes a form of memorialising archive; the mechanical or electronic reproduction of such memories allows them to morph into "rememories" which hold affective power beyond the immediacy

of the historical suffering body (2002:167).

Huyssen's emphasis on the fate of Holocaust memory, a project central to Foer's *Everything is Illuminated* as well as to the work of many young novelists who share his diasporic Jewish American third-generation identity, opens many questions pertinent to contemporary commemoration and memorialising. Huyssen, for example, argues that Holocaust remembrance needs to be active and collective, not frozen and private. In Huyssen's opinion, Holocaust museums, postmodern public spaces, offer these memorial prerequisites (2002:167). However, he argues that the proliferation of such establishments is a characteristic of Western and American culture and displays an intense drive to "memorialize history" (2002:167) in the service of "museummania" (2002:167). In the context of such cultural phenomena, I believe it is feasible to consider Foer's narrative experimentalism as conscious breaking with monolithic or hegemonic history commercialised as heritage. Instead, he fragments grand narratives, renders them piecemeal – not in order to destroy or to diminish significance, as some more fundamentalist imaginations might contend, but so as to coax the established cultural-collective consciousness towards an explicit understanding of the ways in which history is made as discourse. Here, multiple narratives perform meaning as contested, and any preferred view is likely to find itself under pressure to re-locate, to become hierarchically unsettled, in a *relational* system of meaning.

Jean Baudrillard contends that "We no longer make history, we protect it like an endangered species" (in Lowenthal 2012:2), a view germane to the cultural impulse to create surrogate memory sites as discussed above. Efraim Sicher discusses the implication of this cultural construction of memory on the writing of history and on the act of remembrance itself. In his article "The Future of the Past: Countermemory and Postmemory in Contemporary American Post-Holocaust Narratives," Sicher suggests that collective memory cannot be dissociated from its construction in culture (2000:56). The specific culture Sicher questions is what has been called "The Americanization of the Holocaust", the absorption of the Holocaust into American popular culture through television miniseries, major Hollywood films and heritage museums (2000:56). This cultural movement has not been received without critical reproach. Norman Finkelstein's *The Holocaust Industry*, for instance, represents the centralisation of the Holocaust in American culture as a "fraudulent misappropriation of history for ideological purposes" (1994:12). Such suspicious mistrust is

not an isolated or even culturally idiosyncratic sentiment. In relation to memory of the South African War, for example, Liz Stanley and Helen Dampier critique the practice of historicising (which, paradoxically, empties history from the historical event, rendering it myth) the war, they suggest, has been stripped of its temporal and historical specificity by a heavily mythologised account of part of the South African past produced by the activities of nationalist political and cultural organisations and entrepreneurs (2005:91). In other words, the selection and exaggeration of, the emphasis on, and the extrapolation from certain ‘facts’ amounts to a mythologising of history as History, and is inevitably associated with partial, and never impartial, political objectives (2005:96).

In terms of the Holocaust, it is unlikely that the horrific events have been exaggerated. (I am no Holocaust denialist.) It is, however, pertinent that through retelling, the Holocaust may have been positioned in contemporary culture through rhetorical strategies which have sedimented over time into the banality of evil, a species of archetype or even stereotype which may have the effect of reducing historical meaning for third generation survivors. The disquieting perception of history debased into tritely declarative, instantly recognisable vignettes or caricatural types is shared by Sicher. Sicher, too, identifies the relegation of history into recognisable myth. He questions the implications for writing history embedded within a mass-mediated society in which the past is perceived as confusing myth within conflicting discourses (2000:57). In highly mythologised media memorialisations of what are in fact divergent, distinctive Holocaust experiences, the appropriation and relegation of ‘The Holocaust’ to the realm of ‘typecast’ experiential pattern, character cipher or cued setting (think ‘Holocaust’; note the predictable eidectic flashes which come immediately into the mind’s eye) risks reducing Holocaust suffering to a “trivialized trope”, a representation of a “memory or as a memory of a memory in a twilight museum culture of simulacra and hypertext” (Sicher 2000:58).

It is precisely such palimpsests which Foer confronts in *Everything is Illuminated*, variously layering, and laying on thick; stripping/ripping away, and tripping/tipping up. Throughout the novel the practice of remembrance and of creating tangible links to the past is a driving feature of the narrative and structure. This is compellingly represented in the motif of string. Inhabitants of the shtetl of Trachimbrod, for example, are obsessed with recording every past event in order fully to preserve memory. Didl S, a narcoleptic potato farmer

speaking to The Sloucher congregation, states that “*It is most important that we remember*” (Foer 2002:36). When called to explain what they were remembering, Didl S responds, “*The what is not so important, but that we should remember. It is the act of remembering, the process of remembrance, the recognition of our past*” (Foer 2002:36). The Slouchers also repeatedly, endlessly, add to The Book of Recurrent Dreams. In this instance, Foer acknowledges the impossibility of total remembrance, as dreams are often forgotten or received in fragments, as well as the compulsive desire to preserve everything.

Additionally, the people of the town keep a library of record journals that documents every history of every person who has passed through or lived in the town, and a book of every occurrence and thought. One such thought recorded in *The Book of Antecedents* is that:

Jews have six senses. Touch, taste, sight, smell, hearing... memory... for Jews memory is no less primary than the prick of a pin, or its silver glimmer, or the taste of blood it pulls from the finger. The Jew is pricked by a pin and remembers other pins... It is only by tracing the pinprick back to other pinpricks... that the Jew is able to know why it hurts (Foer 2002:198-199).

Commemoration practices are also sacred in Foer’s novel. The story of Brod’s mysterious birth from the river is commemorated as a festival every year in which they search for Trachim in the river. The Kolker’s statue, named the Dial, is erected in remembrance and people rub his nose for good luck. When Yankel is losing his memory he writes notes on the walls to remind himself of the people he loves, demonstrating a desire “to retain memory as the only link to life” (Foer 2007:40). And lastly, when the Germans are invading the shtetl, instead of fleeing, Trachimbrod is paralysed in reflection. The novel then is permeated with images of memory and attempts not to forget, tussling with the challenges of how to keep significant, even cultural-historically defining moments, ideas, and experiences in mind without at the same time suffocating in a conceptual ghetto or disabling cultural keep.

As mentioned above, string emerges as a recurrent motif throughout the novel. String, for instance, links the town on the festival celebrating Brod’s birth:

Canopies of thin white string spanned the narrow cobbled arteries of Trachimbrod that afternoon... One end of white string tied around the volume knob of a radio (NAZIS ENTER UKRAINE, MOVE EAST WITH SPEED) on the wobbly bookcase in Benjamin T’s one-room shanty... thin white string like a clothesline... white string connecting freelance

journalist (GERMANS PUSH ON, SENSING IMMINENT VICTORY) to electrician... white string from the monument of Pinchas T, wandering snakes of white string (kept at 56 degrees in the Museum of True Folklore), forming a scalene triangle... (Foer 2002:267).

These motifs reveal the importance of lineage, even the excessive and obsessive degree to which genealogy has become a defining element of Jewish identity. If string is a useful metaphor of connection, overcoming individual isolation and representing the possibility of some 'imagined community', it also may entail entanglement to the extent that lineage becomes a binding burden, a dangerously delimiting knot of (confused) parameters. For example: when Jonathan's grandfather's first wife gives birth in the river, it is the umbilical cord and therefore the connection that pulls the baby down with its drowning mother. It is unable to separate. From birth, the infant is bound to the experience of death. (The extrapolated analogy, here, may bear upon the restraining sense, for some young contemporary Jews, that their identities are defined by the difficult inheritance of Holocaust memory and memorialising.) Moreover, the reflective inertness that overcomes the villagers before the Nazis invade Trachimbrod becomes an "obstacle to their survival" (Ward 2008:20). Foer implies the danger of looking excessively to the past for cultural-individual definition; he draws attention to the debilitating effects of a Jewish obsession (as he sees it) with memory and the deforming weight of this inheritance.

In this novel, Foer also specifically explores the idea (as does Sicher in a more scholarly context) that the Holocaust degenerates into a trope, a memory of a memory. He presents this concern via Sofiokwa. This individual is the mad townsman after whom the shtetl is eventually officially named and, as it were, thus brought into the formal realm of history as public memory. Mad Sofiokwa winds himself in string in order to remember; but he ends up forgetting, remembering only the string instead. He was once found:

...bound in white string, and said he tied one around his index finger to remember something terribly important, and fearing he would forget the index finger, he tied a string around his pinky, and then one from waist to neck, and fearing he would forget this one, he tied a string from ear to tooth to scrotum to heel, and used his body to remember his body, but in the end could only remember the string (Foer 2002:15).

Through his own preoccupation with memory as a form of cultural critique, Foer creates debates around the ways in which supposed history also entails selective remembering, to the

extent that point and purpose are effaced, the nuances and subtleties of historical memory curtailed in the easy lineations of heritage culture. The desire to commemorate and memorialise is central to contemporary rhetoric around Holocaust remembrance. In Foer's writing, his criticism often takes the form of parody in order to debunk prior representations of the Holocaust and the grand historical narrative that informs Jews as 'a people'. Susanne Rohr reiterates this point of destabilisation by arguing that Foer represents "a critique of Holocaust discourse" (in Ward 2008:16). She further claims that the novel deals with "not the unrepresentable but the discourse of the unrepresentable" (in Ward 2008:16). For Rohr then, the comic element evident in Foer's novel, the arch and mocking tone which some have found disrespectful, is not directed at the Holocaust *per se* but instead operates at the level of discourse. Foer's comedy takes issue with versions of historiography, with the ways in which Jewish history has been written and handed down. His critique is thus of the "transfer of knowledge, commemoration practices, processes of mediatisation and Americanization" involved in representations of the Shoah (Ward 2008:16).

Another significant concern in an era of fluid, globalised identity and dispersed community formation is the mediation between public and private, between individual and collective. What is a communal identity when personal profiles are brought into the public sphere by the means of new social media? Sicher takes up this issue, arguing that the destruction of European Jewish lineage foregrounds latent tensions between individual and collective identities which are no longer clearly distinct entities due to the shifting claims of nationality and cultural distinction upon individual senses of self, traditional notions of identity often being dissolved, or at least reconfigured, through more globalised affiliations and belonging. As Sicher (2000:83) indicates, such contemporary cultural dispersions have come to constitute a new form of diaspora and, in terms of Jewish descendants, Jewish identity has had to be revised. As I am suggesting in the present paper, authors such as Jonathan Safran Foer play an important role in debating the possibilities and constraints of such newly-defined understandings of Jewishness as both inheritances and as futurity.

The question of Jewish cultural identity revision is complicated by nostalgia and the resurgence of a prescriptive heritage industry. In his article "The Past Made Present," David Lowenthal explores the contemporary resurgence of nostalgia as an element of historical affect. He quotes Maureen Dowd, who astutely observes that "[m]emorial statues are not

simply comments on their subjects, but comments on their makers” (in Lowenthal 2012:6). Perhaps this “museummania” has emerged as a counteroffensive to Huyssen’s amnesiac society (although I imagine he would prefer to consider nostalgia an analogous symptom, rather than a solution.) Despite the risk of oversimplifying complex debates, it is fair to say, I think, that similar arguments are promulgated by Fredric Jameson and Jean Baudrillard, both of whom assert that “postmodern society has reached the end of history” (in Davis 2002:75). (I cannot help but observe, here, that even the term ‘postmodern’ may have reached some sort of an end in critical language, falling out of currency, or becoming a self-conscious parody of what was once an innovative, meaningful concept.) Many scholars maintain, then, that instantaneous communication has distorted the concept of history, flattening it out and constructing a perpetual present in which images are removed from their original context (Davis 2002:75). This point is emphasised in a passage from Robert Bolaña’s *2666*, “images with no handhold, images freighted with all the orphanhood in the world, fragments, fragments” (in Anderson 2009:2) Our concept of nostalgia is then constructed of these images, of the many fragments which threaten to engulf memory.

What are some of the implications for contemporary long-form narrative? In a review of Hari Kunzru’s *Gods Without Men* (2011), Douglas Coupland speculates about an emergent literary genre known as “Translit” which has arisen in the cultural context of the Internet. He refers to novels which reflect “an aura-free universe in which all eras coexist at once – a state of possibly permanent atemporality given to us courtesy of the Internet”. He contends that:

Translit novels cross history without being historical; they span geography without changing psychic place. Translit collapses time and space as it seeks to generate narrative traction in the reader’s mind. It inserts the contemporary reader into other locations and times, while leaving no doubt that its viewpoint...speaks entirely of our extreme present (2012:1).

Coupland states that the theme in Kunzru’s *Gods Without Men* is interconnectivity across time and space, in a sense, then, a refracted image of the ‘global village’. In traversing a transliterated present – a present beyond the parameters of traditional literature and its forms, whether considered as print format or genre - the author assumes that the savvy new media (e) reader has the wits to connect the dots (2012:2).

“Dots” in literature can be connected to form multiple meanings. Barthes calls this a “writable” text, one where the reader is no longer just a passive consumer of the text but rather a producer of meaning. “Writable” texts embrace the plurality of fiction and reject fixed meaning (Ahmad 2012:149). With the proliferation of fan fiction on the Internet, for example, this prosumer ideal of fiction has significant cultural resonance. South African author, Ivan Vladislavić’s *Portrait with Keys* is an example of such plurality of meaning. The text comprises 138 fragments which attest not only to the interruptibility of urban experience, but also to the fragmented modes of representation understood as textual *performance* and to the odd, fractured ways in which memory and remembering work, claiming erratic and yet persistent attention. The “key” explicit in the title can be found at the back of the book on the “Itineraries” page, where a collection of possible (yet also impossibly infinite) routes is outlined, classified as long, medium, and short. The routes range from “An accidental island” to “Engaging the Gorilla” to “Street Addresses in Johannesburg” (Vladislavić 2006:205-207). Readers are encouraged to follow the itineraries or wander through the fragments in the manner of Debordian *derivé*.

Vladislavić’s project as a white writer re-orientating his identity post-apartheid is to engage with the architecture of the post-apartheid urban space. As Shane Graham notes, the problem facing urban planners (including authors of urban novels) is the “making visible of memory” (2006:38) in a post-apartheid life marked by disorientation and historical amnesia. Vladislavić’s wordplay then functions not merely as aesthetic postmodern device but rather “attempts to map the rapidly shifting, labyrinthine social and physical geographies of the post-apartheid city” (Graham 2006:36). The archival impulse implicit in Vladislavić’s work then responds to the amnesiac tendencies of a capitalistic postmodern culture by trying to maintain a cultural permanency and moreover, establish an identity through fixed spatial configurations (Graham 2006:38).

Foer’s fragmented novel operates similarly. It escapes singular definition and the readers are challenged to follow the string of the non-linear narrative, dual narrative time-frames, and the gaps and silences of the shifting narrative voices of ‘Jonathan Safran Foer’/Jonfen and Alexander Perchov/Sasha. Foer’s determinedly unusual novel turns to experimental techniques in order to explore memory and history in a mass-mediated and atemporal society in which museummania threatens to appropriate and negate memory. In

terms of 'Translit' the novel indeed exemplifies the e-readers experience, migrating through time and space seamlessly and representing two narratives simultaneously. However, Foer's novel does more than comment on the social construction of time and space in our contemporary culture. The novel is more than merely flash postmodern intellectual observation. It does more than Rohr's assertion that it challenges the rhetoric of Holocaust memory. While it achieves this commentary, the novel also has a personal connection to the preservation of Holocaust memory. As mentioned earlier, Foer is a Jewish American third-generation Holocaust survivor. A multiple, hyphenated identity. As Francisco Collado-Rodriguez notes, Foer considers the effects of a consumer-mediated society that "insistently – but also paradoxically – favours renewed quests for identity roots" (2008:56). Lowenthal concurs that the present day fixation on memory suggests efforts to reclaim the past in order to navigate claims upon identity (2012:3).

Fredric Jameson asserts that "personal identity is itself the effect of a certain temporal unification of past and future with one's present (in Duvall 2002:5), and Foer alludes to this in *Everything is Illuminated* when the rabbi who is about to record entries into *The Book of Recurrent Dreams* states that they must first review previous entries, "*We must go backward in order to go forward*" (2002:37). Jewish American third-generation Holocaust survivors compulsively return to the past in order somehow to retrieve a traumatic identity that has been at once obliterated by genocide and determinedly remembered and memorialised (Sicher 2000:63). Nadine Fresco likens the relationship of the post-Holocaust generation to that of a person who has lost a limb: "They are like people who have had a hand amputated that they never had"; they feel a "phantom pain in which amnesia takes the place of memory....One remembers only that one remembers nothing" (1984). This description is especially apt for third-generation survivors who are witnesses to witnesses (sometimes witnesses to witnesses of witnesses) and witnesses of documents.

This phantom pain necessitates that third-generation Holocaust survivors attempt to create, recreate, a history that they will never fully be able to understand. The Holocaust destroyed the cultural repertoires and disrupted the lineage of many Jewish families, cutting possible ties to the past through the destruction of homes, photographs, material artefacts and, in many cases, exterminating entire generations of families. Witnesses who were children may also have been too young to remember the events and therefore even witness testimony

is riddled with gaps and silences, inconsistencies and embellishments. And yet, paradoxically, these ostensible discrepancies, the divergences from documented fact, may exert a powerful emotional affect upon the imagination.

Second and third generation Holocaust survivors may feel an exilic relationship to 'their people', having never experienced the event that wrote the master narrative of their being. They are therefore compelled to struggle in (re)orienting themselves and their identities to 'their' past. One of the ways that second and third generation Holocaust survivors can supplement their past, or perhaps their only connection to Holocaust memory, is by what Marianne Hirsch terms "post-memory". Post-memory is "distinguished from memory by generational distance and from history by deep personal connection which characterises the experience of those who grow up dominated by narratives that preceded their birth" (Ward 2008:11).

Hirsch's theory of post-memory incorporates an interest in old family photographs which she sees as a powerful medium between memory and post-memory (Ward 2008:11). Significantly, in *Everything is Illuminated* it is an intriguing old family photograph that propels Foer, through his fictional character Jonathan (alter ego? persona?), to visit the Ukraine. The picture is of grandfather Safran with a woman. Her name is given as 'Augustine', and she appears to have helped Safran to escape during a Nazi raid on his village. A second photograph which carries considerable weight in the novel is that of Alex's grandfather: he is with his wife, child and his best friend Herschel, whom he pointed out during the Nazi raid. This photograph is retrieved from Lista's box, which contains Trachimbrod's remains. The photograph unleashes powerful repressed memories, leading to the grandfather's confession and ultimately his suicide.

As the photographs in Foer's work are staged in the medium of a literary work, they become examples of "ekphrasis... a description of a visual work of art, whether real or imaginary, in another medium" (Wiese 2012:3). Foer's instances of ekphrasis in *Everything is Illuminated* are illustrative of Hirsch's abovementioned theory that old family photographs are powerful mediums between memory and post-memory. Hirsch employs Barthes' *Camera Lucida* to further support this idea. Barthes' speaks of a photograph's mysterious 'noeme', its ability to show the reality of the past (Haverkamp 1993:264). This combined aesthetic-ethical

quality occasions an effect, affective and cognitive, upon the receiver of the image. Barthes calls this a 'punctum', from the Latin etymology meaning wound or puncture. Barthes describes this as "a sting, speck, cut, little hole" (cited in Haverkamp 1993:264), and his suggestion is that people can explore photographs as wounds. Such a notion is especially apt in relation to Foer's *Everything is Illuminated*, as Jonathan feels a wound/hole/void that is evoked by the photograph of his grandfather and Augustine. The photograph makes the absence present. To elaborate on the punctum: Barthes continues that the trauma of a photograph cannot be located at its origin but must be transformed into written word and repeated (Haverkamp 1993:275). This is Foer's venture through the novel, to bridge and mediate the gap between the past and the present and subsequently the future in order to mediate identity.

Anselm Haverkamp understands photographs as "citations of and about history" (1993:264). While they depict people and objects at a certain time, they also reflect the irretrievability of the moment the photograph was taken, what Haverkamp calls the "given-to-death" of the person or object in the photograph. In a sense then, these photographs depict ghosts and spectres of the past. Hirsch's concurs with Haverkamp's view. She argues that photographs do not have a direct link with the past, rather, "Photography's relation to loss and death is not to mediate the process of individual and collective memory but to bring the past back in the form of a ghostly revenant, emphasising, at the same time, its immutable and irreversible pastness and irretrievability" (2008:116). Jonathan experiences this irretrievability when he finds nothing on his journey. Photographs then, as with post-memory, exist at a remove from the historical past. The connection to its object and/or subject is mediated not through some essentialised memory and pure recollection, but rather through "imaginative investment and creation" (Ward 2008:12).

Foer, triggered by an old family photograph, engages his own post-memory to re-imagine a history for his family, along with the broader history of the Jewish shtetl of Trachimbrod. He opts to treat history not as monological record, but rather to understand differential investments in the creation of meaning. The extent of the narrative experimentalism employed by Foer, what has been called a combination of 'zany' postmodernism, parodic realism, and magical realism, suggests the vast gap between Jonathan and his past, unbridgeable by any conventional, linear means. What expands this

gap is of course time, Foer has a third generation relation to the Holocaust, and the aesthetics of post-memory need some adapting to illustrate this remove. Therefore, Ward suggests that the relevant aesthetics should be classified “post-postmemory” (2008:12-13).

One can conclude then that in photography the texture of history is necessarily shaped by the irretrievability of a person, time or moment, and thus by loss. The ekphrastic reworking of the photograph into another medium of representation attempts to capture the missing essence of the photograph in order to mourn the impossibility of ever retrieving life lost, and the mourning brought about by the trauma of death (Wiese 2012:4). This necessary transference does not attempt to mimic history or some essential memory, nor to replace the work of memory. Instead, it works as what Haverkamp calls a “quotation” in that it is re-cited, “cited from the text of history and quoting the texture of history” (1993:275).

Of course, when one is dealing with such imaginative investment and creation the issue of contested truth arises. This is a concern in all forms of historical fiction or fiction that engages with the received historical record, and no less so in Foer’s inventive realm, where essentialised truth seems to have been completely thrown out the window.

History has long reigned as a trusted source of objective truth. According to Barthes, the reason for this misconception is that the writer is perceived to be absent from the historical text, any narrator effaced. As a result, we have the pervasive illusion that history is “telling itself”. Barthes calls this the “referential illusion” whereby “the historian claims to let the referent speak for itself” (Frost 2010:9). Moreover, the genre, plot and voice of a historical text invites certain interpretations, therefore the illusion of transparency in historical writing cloaks its construction *as discourse*. However, the smooth, linear atemporality of historical writing betrays its very constructedness as, in reality, events are fragmented, disrupted and nonlinear, needing precisely to be *arranged* in order to *seem* neatly and dispassionately aligned (Frost 2010:9).

Foer, while he looks to the historical past, blurs the line between official history and imagination, realism and magical realism. Scott Simpkins avers that magical realism often tries to improve realism by supplementation; however, although it appears to overcome the limits of realism it is trapped in the inadequacy of language (1988:140). Simpkins suggests

that magical realism's goal is to draw our attention to the construction of texts by defamiliarising them and exposing their production and function (1988:147). In this sense then, Foer's use of magical realism deconstructs his text into its 'parts' exposing the architecture of his work and disavowing, the pretence of transparency that history is often seen to uphold.

In terms of Foer's post-postmemory's claim to truth, it is illuminating to read the work of Bruno Schulz, a Polish Modernist author by whom Foer has admitted to having been influenced. (Foer's latest publication, *Tree of Codes*, is an explicit revision of Schulz's *The Street of Crocodiles* [1934], in which Foer literally cuts the words out of Schulz's novel to create a sculptural object.) Tadeusz Rachwal explores Schulz's *Sanatorium under the Sign of the Hourglass* in terms of its pointed reworking of truth. Rachwal sets the tone for the article by quoting Gary John Percespe who, in an answer to the ineluctably political question of truth, contends: "The answer, inasmuch as there is one, is...derailing the truth from its track - by the track of the other - not present, and lost" (Rachwal 1994:85).

In Schulz's story, the protagonist, Joseph, visits his father in the sanatorium, a place described as a region of time and death where the realities of life and death are altered but somehow still retain their truth. Joseph takes the train to the sanatorium. The conductor's reluctance to declare the 'here' of the place and the neglected appearance of the train and its passengers both suggest that Joseph is travelling to a 'when' or rather a 'then', rather than a located geographical place. The protagonist is travelling to the past and, as a writer, Schulz undertakes to journey into pastness via his eccentric version of historical fiction. Schulz suggests that official history needs rails of linear time and "stations of events at which it can stop and thus prove their factuality" (Rachwal 1994:87). In reference to Derrida's chain of supplements, Rachwal claims that Schulz's journey can only be written out of time, as a supplement of official history which Schulz accuses of being full of intentional gaps.

For Schulz, meaning and truth entail an "originary creativity, flux and change" (Rachwal 1994:88). Like Foer's post-postmemory triggered by a photograph, Schulz's journey to the originary region of the sanatorium is triggered by random fragments, "a stamp album, a tree, a scrap of paper..." (Rachwal 1994:88). For Schulz, this deep, originary region is marked by an infinity of destinations and therefore a multiplicity of meanings. This

constitutes a form of historical-cultural ‘illegality’ in that hegemonic History prefers to deny or erase the possibility of divergence. The transgressive quality is shared by Foer’s work which wilfully refuses singular meaning and thus escapes dogged interpretation. In *The Sanatorium under the Sign of the Hourglass*, Schulz describes this region as “dark, spicy and tangled... nether side, at the lining of things... tribes and generations... Wanderings and tumult, the tangle, the hubbub of history!...among the Mothers...” (in Rachwal 1994:90). This is an odd, eclectic space of mysterious lore.

Interestingly, in Jonathan’s narrative his lineage begins with a mother, a matriarch, Brod, who was born out of a dark tangle of flotsam. Perhaps Foer is suggesting his post-memory creation of the history of Trachimbrod begins on an ‘illegal’ line of time, one that subverts official history and, in its stead, offers more fluid and diverse alternatives. As his narrative descends from an originary region, his magical realist story constitutes an alternative way into truth and meaning and travels along an ‘illegal’ rail outside history. This idea is reinforced when Rachwal describes a fake world, a world of “absolutely fixed, dogmatic order... the semi-world which pretends stability and order” (1994:94). This system is governed by the figure of the father, a dictator who rules from a remote space. This dichotomy of mother and father resembles the dichotomy of magical realism and realism, postmodern historical fiction and History. Schulz obviously favours the creative world of lore over the authoritarianism of institutionalised law. In Schulz’s story the sanatorium is contextualised within a time of war and revolution. However, Schulz rejects revolution, the attempt at legalising the illegal, as he argues it contaminates both tracks, in effect producing a “fake, secondhand world” (Rachwal 1994:95).

Foer’s work, if one interprets Schulz’s worlds of mothers and fathers as modes of representation, shows these modes in uneasy relation. Does Foer then attempt a revolution without contaminating the tracks of the “train to elsewhere”? I’d argue that Foer combines the modes in an attempt to position a reader towards an ethical reading of Holocaust memory by providing multiple interpretations while simultaneously exploring the claims to truth and inadequacies of both representational modes. As Rachwal concludes, Schulz does not tell the reader where to go but rather suggests that there is elsewhere to go, that there is truth in the dark places of chaos, and maverick ways of accessing these.

In *Everything is Illuminated*, Foer attempts an analogous re-writing via his iconoclastic, post-postmemory depiction of the shtetl, Trachimbrod. The point is that quirky imaginative power can animate forms of Holocaust heritage in ways more immediate and affective than the indisputable facts of documentary truth. Lowenthal concurs, stating of our present that history is not the privileged mode of access to the past that it was once considered; instead, the emotional immediacy of recreated memory, whether poignant or harrowing, sardonic or sympathetic, often trumps more dispassionate methods of rendering history as accurate record and archive. Similarly, Karein Goertz asserts that in an attempt to navigate inherited trauma, Raczymow and Dischereit (second generation Holocaust-survivors and therefore second-hand witnesses) “do not focus on the actual, veridical truth about the past, but rather on ‘memories’ that possess a certain narrative and emotional truth” (1998:33).

As Wood argues of trends in contemporary fiction more generally, “It ought to be harder, now, either to bounce around in the false zaniness of hysterical realism or to trudge along in the easy fidelity of social realism. Both genres look a little busted.” Instead, authors are experimenting with a narrative space which allows:

for the aesthetic, for the contemplative, for novels that tell us not ‘how the world works’ but ‘how somebody felt about something’ - indeed, how a lot of different people felt about a lot of different things. . . . A space may now open, one hopes, for the kind of novel that shows us. . . the newly dark lights of the age. (2001:41)

On Foer’s journey (the author’s real visit to Eastern Europe) as well as on the ‘Foer’ persona’s travels to the Ukraine, nothing is found. Nothing but a field, purportedly once the site of Trachimbrod. In an interview Foer describes the void associated with writing the novel: “In a sense the book wasn’t an act of creation so much as it was an act of replacement. I encountered a hole – and it was like the hole that I found was in myself, and one that I wanted to try fill up” (Wagner 2002).

This void invokes Derrida’s theory of supplements. Derrida reflects that supplements only add to replace. They intervene or insinuate themselves “*in-the-place-of*; if it fills, it is as one fills a void” (Attridge 1992:83). Therefore, the supplement takes the place of, or rather substitutes for, but can produce no relief or add to a presence. Moreover, it is assigned by the mark of an emptiness or absence (Attridge 1992:83). To reiterate, to fill a void is impossible

to Derrida. Replacement might be a more legitimate practice than representation.

This is also apt in respect of magical realism, which Scott Simpkins argues often tries to improve realism by supplementation. However, although it appears to overcome the limits of realism it is trapped in the inadequacy of language (1988:140). This linguistic inadequacy is addressed in *Everything is Illuminated*. Consider the example of Alex's grandfather's stream-of-consciousness confession, where his capacity to communicate in syntactically conventional language breaks down. This is expressed in his repetition of phrases and omission of spaces between words, an increasing incoherence. Ironically, this nevertheless manages to convey his confession, meaning that even the subversion of linguistic expectation is not completely beyond the communicatively explicable, albeit that the strategy is intended to connote the inadequacy of language in containing and expressing posttraumatic testimony.

Similarly, the language Alex uses in his last letter in the novel mirrors this linguistic breakdown and signifies the difficult transmission of guilt from one generation to the next. Additionally, though the Nazi bombing of the shtetl is an event which comprises the central wound of the novel, the act itself is absent from the book, its representation replaced with a series of protracted ellipses which stretch over two pages. These dots are the only trace of the event which is transformed into an absence. Therefore the bombing is represented as an absent presence in the novel. This void within the novel represents trauma's inexpressibility in language.

A common trope in both Derrida's theory of supplements and the inadequacy of language to express trauma is an absence, or rather a void and in terms of inexpressibility a silence. It is therefore, not surprising that Jewish American third generation post-Holocaust novels are permeated by gaps, silences and absences, which Philippe Codde refers to as the hauntings, Derridian traces, "spectral elements that are at once concealed and discernable within the text as absent presences" (2011:674). The idea of these absent presences is expressed in *Everything is Illuminated* in a dream recorded in *The Book of Recurrent Dreams*:

You will remember when a bird crashed through the window and fell to the floor. You will remember, those of you who were there, how it jerked its wings before dying, and left a spot of blood on the floor after it was removed. But who among you was the

first to notice the negative bird it left in the window? Who first saw the shadow that the bird left behind, the shadow that was better proof of the bird's existence than the bird ever was? (2002:38)

A void which fits the definition of absent presence is the hole Brod cuts through a wall through which to have sexual intercourse with her husband, The Kolker. After his death she cuts the hole from the wall and wears it around her neck on a necklace. She considers that the "the hole is no void; the void exists around it" (Foer 2002:139). Similarly, I notice that the confession of Alex's grandfather is given in parentheses, "which is an orthographical way to indicate a presence that is really absent" (Codde 2011:690). Codde notes that a marked variation of absent presence is evident in Jonathan's letters to Alex which are in fact missing, since their form and content are reconstructed only in the proxy of Alex's responses. Thus, instead of playing witness to unmediated historical events, the reader is positioned in a third generation perceptive stance as the reader confronts incomplete documents (2011:679). (This notion recurs in *Great House*, a novel by Nicole Krauss' which I subsequently discuss in some detail. Krauss' character Weisz relays the story of ben Zakkai and asks the question, "What is a Jew without Jerusalem?" The answer is "To turn Jerusalem into an idea... [to] Bend a people around the shape of what they lost, and let everything mirror its absent form" [2010:279].)

In Krauss' *The History of Love* (2005), the most manifest absent presence is constructed as an entire character, an ode to Bruno Schulz who was killed by a Nazi officer during the war. Krauss presents Schulz as an absent presence in order to preserve his voice and his memory and thus reverse history. In this undertaking, she creates an alternative history for Schulz by creating the character Leopold Gursky, a man who was believed to have died in the war but reappears in New York with a manuscript everybody thought was obliterated. Here, it is important to note that Schulz is rumoured to have died carrying the manuscript of his first novel, *The Messiah*. Schulz also painted a mural in which he painted his own face and the faces of his family and friends, not in a realist mode but layered through the characterisation of fairy-tale figures. Similarly, Krauss' Leopold makes a point of being seen, even posing as a still nude, for fear that he would die unnoticed (Codde 2011:686). References to Schulz' life are littered throughout *The History of Love* and Krauss attempts to revive his modernist voice by creating chapters of Leopold's novel in the style of Schulz's

writing.

In a metafictional feat, Krauss stages a postmemorial endeavour by Leopold through the creation of the imaginary character 'Bruno', the "greatest character [he] ever wrote," his friend who actually died in the war in 1941 (Krauss 2006:249). Leopold, afraid of his friend dying unseen, unremarked, creates him as an absent presence in his novel which features in Krauss's novel. Thus both Krauss and her character attempt via the creation of absent presences to overwrite elements of the Holocaust as a history of erasure and effacement by making its victims live on in fiction (Codde 2011:687). However, just as it is impossible to fill a void, this, too, we might reasonably suspect, is an impossible venture.

Foer's and Krauss' desire to fill the gaps of an unresolved or unspoken past is not an isolated feeling. Fresco describes her own desire to fill in the gaps of her past when her parents had only transmitted a wound of the past and not the memory. Fresco asserts that post-Holocaust survivors must rely on their imaginations which are affected by these wounds to reconstruct the memories of their history (1984).

In assessing this claim, it is important to explore the transgenerational transmission of the wounds. Goertz turns for assistance to psychoanalytic research which reveals the psychological burden of children who inherit their parents' incomplete mourning. Often this traumatic past is not voiced but rather transmitted through silence, an unspoken presence. In Foer's *Everything is Illuminated*, this silence is evident in Alex's relationship with his grandfather, a man who represses his traumatic past: "Amid grandfather and I was a silence you could cut with a scimitar" (Foer 2002:7). This transgenerational muteness is alluded to in Jonathan's heritage too as he travels to the Ukraine to discover his roots with few leads about his past. This generational silence can then be traced back to the silence of his grandfather as actual historical witness, which is then transmitted in interrupted, fragmented narration to the second generation string of Jonathan's parents, who in turn have even less concrete, verifiable information to pass on to Jonathan, a child of the third generation. In such an inevitably interrupted transmission, mourning cannot be coherently effected. It is marked by gaps, inconsistencies, perhaps a desire to comprehend even as the narration seems incomprehensible. This inherited, improperly mourned past can return as psychosomatic sensation, intrusive images such as nightmares and behavioural re-enactment (Goertz

1998:34). In the minds of post-Holocaust children, boundaries are blurred between self and other, real and imagined and past and present. This has obvious implications for the process of identity mediation. In an already uncertain and wavering present, where cultures are being subject to mediated shift and formation, unhoused ghosts of the past glimmer into mind, are perhaps internalised as restless anxiety, or overly assertive indifference, or even, again, obsessive memorialising as heritage (Goertz 1998:35).

In terms of Foer's novel, the author and the authorial persona who shares his name blur the lines between self and other. The real and the imagined are (mis)aligned in the story in the dual modes of realism and magical realism which I will later explore as a comic and tragic dichotomy which troubles ethical modes and reconciliation. Additionally, the past and the present are blurred by the fragmented construction of the text. The very form of the novel disrupts a linear perception of time, with part of the story being historical, moving forward in time, and the other part set in the present, attempting to move back. (Schulz's tracks or routes come again to mind, although these cannot, in this instance, be mapped as lore vs. law.) These two narratives meet at the end of the novel when a major event of the Holocaust is represented.

Nicole Krauss, a fellow Jewish American third-generation survivor (who also happens to be Foer's wife), explores the issue of transgenerational trauma in her novels *The History of Love* and *Great House*. Alan L. Berger and Asher Z. Milbauer's article "The Burden of Inheritance" critically engages with Krauss' own sense of loss as well as the loss experienced by her characters. Like Foer, Krauss feels an absence that she feels an urgent desire to fill. She asks what Holocaust survivors transmit to their children, both knowingly and unknowingly (Berger and Milbauer 2013:67). In the complex story of *The History of Love*, one of the protagonists, Alma Singer, goes in search of her name. Her mother translates the book, a lost book written by the protagonist Leo Gursky, who (as I've said) fears going unseen and forgotten in history and therefore tries to make himself more visible. Alma (a third generation survivor) reads the book and learns about her heritage while simultaneously allaying Leo's fear of dying an invisible being. The burden of inheritance and transgenerational traumas, then, can in the space of fiction be converted into rich reciprocal relationships.

Krauss, however, is not naïve in her understanding of transgenerational trauma, the debilitating effects of which she explores in her latest novel, *Great House*. The narrative is highly convoluted, the distinguishing of voices making substantial demands upon a reader. (This itself is a strategy which refuses the simplicity of received Holocaust ideas.) Weisz, a widower and first-hand witness of the Holocaust, transmits this trauma to his children, Leah and Yoav. Weisz works as a travelling antiques dealer, tracking down belongings pilfered and lost during the Holocaust. Weisz himself is missing his father's desk, the lynchpin that holds this multi-narrated novel together. Leah observes that her father was burdened by a sense of duty that commanded his whole life, and later her life and that of her brother (Berger and Milbauer 2013:75).

Krauss' novels imply that having children means having a future and the implications of having a future are inheriting and embracing the burden of memory. She indicates the burden of the third generation by having Leah place a key to the New York storeroom that contains the desk in an envelope marked for Yoav's child. It is inevitable then, when the key is found (an event implied rather than described in the novel), that the active, even obsessive search for identity is precipitated, and the burden of inheritance as it passes with struggle from one generation to another becomes inevitable (Berger and Milbauer 2013:82-83).

Transgenerational trauma is also evident in *Everything is Illuminated*. After Alex's Grandfather's stream of consciousness confession he admits to being responsible for Alex's father being an abusive alcoholic:

I could never allow him to learn to learn whoIwas or whatIdid... I pointed and for him that Herschel was murdered... and this is why he is how he is how he is he because a father is always responsible for his son and I am I and Iamresponsible not for Herschel but for my son... I loved him so much that I madeloveimpossible and I am sorry for you and sorry for Iggy. (Foer 2002:251)

The passage is marked by the narrative memory of trauma. Psychiatrist Bessel van der Kolk believes that the emotional intensity of trauma makes it difficult for victims to construct narratives. In his research, patients suffering from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder tend to exhibit in consciousness and expression an inclination to use "narrative fragmentation, repeated phrases, speech fillers, and unfinished thoughts" which disrupt the linear flow of the story (McNally 2003:135).

These symptoms align well with the structure and style of *Everything is Illuminated*. As I have mentioned, Foer's novel disrupts a linear perception of time, with part of the story being historical, moving forward in time, and the other part set in the present, attempting to move back. Within these disjunctive (yet oddly counterweighted) chronologies, the narrative jumps schizophrenically from one event to the next, segueing together at the end of the novel in order to enable the author's spectacular representation of an incidence of Holocaust extermination. The novel, apart from its disrupted linear progression, is also composed of letters. These are written by Alex Perchov, the translator whom the authorial persona Jonathan Safran Foer employs on his trip to discover his roots, to Jonathan, and they comment on the chapters of a book that Jonathan is writing, and has apparently sent to him for comment. The second narrative is composed of these chapters, and Jonathan's folkloric revision of Trachimbrod's history. Lastly, the third narrative voice is provided by Alex in the form of his own book about their joint quest to locate Trachimbrod. Thus the novel takes a complex epistolary form, overlaid upon the writing of texts which desire to record but also struggle with truthfulness and turn to invention. In this highly contradictory take on writing, sections and phrases are repeated; dreams are repeated in *The Book of Recurrent Dreams*; chapter names are duplicated; Brod's meeting her husband is played twice. In terms of confession, words are repeated and punctuation breaks down completely. The novel, then, can be categorised as a post-postmemory narrative of the memory of trauma.

Foer's identity as a Jewish American third-generation Holocaust survivor clearly contributed to the experimental structure of the novel. Identity building in a postmodern culture three generations removed from the Shoah requires an innovative archival impulse. James E. Young states that the post-Holocaust generation of artists born into the present mass-mediated and postmodern society do not attempt to address the Holocaust in ways outside how they received it (2000:1). As has been previously discussed, the postmodern affinity for the disjunctive structure of fragments is set, in a novel such as Foer's, adjacent to the interrupted ways in which post-Holocaust generations receive their information on Holocaust history as fragments or traces. Derrida might see this through his definition of "the simulacrum of a presence that dislocates itself, displaces itself, refers itself, it properly has no site" (Attridge 1992:90).

At its most basic level the structure of *Everything is Illuminated* fragments time,

place, space and narrative voice. The beginning of Jonathan's lineage and the extraordinary history of Trachimbrod begins with shards and debris when Trachim's wagon crashes into the river. Out of it arises fragments of his life and Jonathan's ancestor Brod: "The young W twins were the first to see the curious flotsam rising to the surface: wandering snakes of white string, a crushed velvet glove with outstretched fingers, barren spools, schmootzy pince-nez, rasp- and boysenberries, feces, frillwork, the shards of a shattered atomizer..." (Foer 2002:8). The townspeople sift through the remains but they never find a body; however they determine to continue searching each year, which becomes a festive but historically empty tradition, which annual festival perhaps underpins the piffling pageantry of the act of remembrance and the omission of any serious search for meaning in the staging of the search for meaning.

As it is the responsibility of the townspeople to collect the fragments of Trachim's wagon to stitch together a version of his life, so it is Jonathan's to piece together the fragments of his past to forge an identity. Other instances of the (re)collection of fragments in *Everything is Illuminated* is when the baby Brod is brought into the synagogue. The women of the shtetl, who are not permitted entry into the synagogue, cut an egg-shaped hole out of the back wall. Through this hole they are able to assemble fragments of the scene inside, "The hole wasn't even large enough to show all of the baby at once, and they had to piece together mental collages of her from each of the fragmented views" (Foer 2002:20). And lastly, Jonathan, Alex and grandfather sift through the fragments of the remnants of Trachimbrod that are stored in Lista's box.

Nicole Krauss' novels *Great House* and *The History of Love* also deal with fragments. In *The History of Love* Krauss seeks to reassemble the fragmented lives of her characters (of various witness status), thereby renewing meaning to their lives. Her characters are all connected by a book of the novel's same name. For Krauss, the fragmented lives of her characters describes the uprooted, exilic and disjointed nature of modern-day society. It is through a complex narrative threading that Krauss is able to reassemble the fragmented characters of the story into something resembling narrative and experiential coherence (Berger and Milbauer 2013:70). The already complicated lives and tenuous connections of her characters are further exacerbated by cross-referencing diaries, journal entries, and letters which the reader as well as Krauss must piece together in order to understand memory as comprising elusive workings and permutations rather than singular instances or even any

received collective sanction.

Krauss' latest novel, *Great House*, is also constructed of fragments. The central trope of the novel, a massive overshadowing writing desk, is described as having many drawers with numerous compartments in which to store and conceal. This is analogous to the structure of the novel itself, which demands that a reader find her way through copious compartments and sections. Using a patterning already evident in her first novel, in her second Krauss explores the lives of various characters who are variously connected. Weisz, the antiques' dealer specialising in locating belongings pilfered or lost during the Holocaust, gathers the fragments of survivors' lives. Toward the end of the novel, Weisz repeats his father's reflections on Jewish memory: "We live, each of us, to preserve our fragment in a state of perpetual regret and longing for a place we only know existed because we remember a keyhole, a tile, the way the threshold was worn under the open door" (Krauss 2010:279). He imagines Jewish memories as shards which, if put together again, might rebuild the House lost in the Shoah (2010:279).

Krauss' writing, like Foer's, paradoxically reflects the fragmentation of the postmodern world and exhibits an impulse towards archival preservation and restitution. Relevant here is Hal Foster's analysis of the archival impulse, where he characterises it as an attempt to "collect, archive and make present fragments of the past, and an attempt to engage with archive itself" (2004:21). The archival impulse is therefore marked by a self-reflexive awareness of the archive. Foster further describes the will to connect what is impossible to connect in archival art. This will is not necessary a will to totalise (it avoids consignment) but rather to link, to explore an absent past and to determine the implications for the present and the possibilities of the future. These wills mirror the wills of Foer and Krauss. Foster argues that the postmodern technique in archival art does not cancel out affect, in fact it does the opposite. By assuming the structure of fragmentation, archival art represents the possibility of affectively working through these fragments while simultaneously acknowledging the absurdity of this endeavour (2004:21). Foer's work, as I see it, is a postmodern exemplar of archival art.

It is by the act of production, then, in this instance the act of writing, that memories and misplaced pasts can be affectively investigated. For Freud, filling in the gaps of memory

by repetition (the creation of a quotation) may liberate people from repressed trauma, as they work through their anxiety (Sicher 2000:82). The task of a post-Holocaust writer begins after the trauma. Jonathan’s writing begins at the accident in Trachimbrod. It is the author’s job then to discern and render visible a range of possible, previously unimagined, connections among the fragments, the detritus of history (Feuer 2007).

Throughout *Everything is Illuminated* readers are encouraged to reflect on novel writing (Safer 2006:124). The narrators debate issues of truth, Alex cannot believe that Jonathan would write incriminating stories about his grandfather’s promiscuous life. He also asks why, if Foer is going to write “non-truths” then why not make them “more premium than life?” Foer subsequently opens the subject to readers’ contemplation. For Krauss’s part, her characters are all authors, and they are burdened by an inherited trauma that stunts their identity and growth. It can be argued that the desk in *Great House* then acts as a symbol, representing the inescapable historical burdens of being a writer (Berger and Milbauer 2013:72). History challenges the possession of the past which memory helps us control (Lowenthal 2012:3). Writing memory then can be an act of control, a desire to change one’s history. This desire is exhibited in *Everything is Illuminated* when Jonathan tries to alter the fates of the people of Trachimbrod by suspending time over two pages of ellipses during the bombing of the shtetl:

She threw them high into the
air.....
.....
.....They hung as if on
strings.....
.....There is still time (Foer 2002:270-271).

Jonathan’s attempt to re-vision the fate of the shtetl must inevitably prove futile. He cannot alter the course of history. Yet his *desire* to effect change is not inconsequential, since it implies a will towards futurity. What Foer suggests is that writers cannot change their pasts but rather that writers can impact the future. The job of the novelist then resides in shaping the future via the past (Codde 2011:680).

Foer expresses the possibility of mobilising even a traumatic history to express

something positive by showing how Jonathan's grandfather and his gypsy lover use news clippings about the war, cut and paste them, to write love letters to each other: "*Meet me under the wooden bridge, and I will show you things you have never, ever seen.* The "M" was taken from the army that would take his mother's life: GERMAN FRONT ADVANCES ON SOVIET BORDER; The "eet" from their approaching warships..." (2002:233). If writers' attempts to undo the past in the face of powerlessness cannot achieve this goal, nevertheless, these revisionisms, their attempts to manipulate the past, hold positive potential for the future (Codde 2011:688). Doro Wiese discusses this idea in her article, "Evoking a Memory of the Future in Foer's *Everything is Illuminated*". Wiese, as previously mentioned, explores Haverkamp's idea of the given-to-death characteristic of photography, its irretrievability of the moment or subject. Wiese argues that the photograph of Augustine in *Everything is Illuminated* challenges, or at least renders more complex, this belief. Barthes assumes that photographs always express someone's death, but in Foer's novel the opposite is true, since both Jonathan and Alex see the image as proof that Augustine may be the only one still alive. The ekphrasis of this photograph then transmits hope instead of despair, as she presents hope of survival in the events of horrific death (Wiese 2012:4). In contrast with the general characteristics of photography, her photograph is proof of hope (if not life) in a time of overwhelming loss and death; proof of her "given-to-life" rather than "given-to-death." Moreover, it is Augustine who saves Jonathan's grandfather from death (Wiese 2012:4).

In terms of looking to the future, the issue of possible reconciliation is brought to the fore. The dual narrators of *Everything is Illuminated* are marked by their differences. One is the grandchild of survivors and the other the grandchild of perpetrators. They are from different countries, speak different languages and practise different religions. They are further differentiated by their opposing modes of representation, realist in the case of Alex, and magical realist, for Jonathan. According to Menachem Feuer, in the juxtaposition of this basic dichotomy of a novel dealing with the Holocaust, there is a struggle between tragic and comic modes of representation. Alex's initial drafts of his novel, Feuer suggests, could be classed as a Journey Romance in which people of differing origins (Jonathan, Alex and Grandfather) set off on a quest to find a lost object (the truth/Augustine) and in this process overcome their differences. However, if Alex very obviously seeks friendship from Jonathan in the novel, his eagerness is never reciprocated (2007:25). Jonathan may on occasion warm to him, but he

generally keeps his distance, unwilling to relinquish cultural-personal authority. Through the contrast of tragedy and comedy, Feuer argues, Foer questions the ability to reconcile, a possibility obviously impossible or unlikely due to the unrequited friendship.

The dichotomy of comedy and tragedy is dissolved towards the end of the novel. If the novel ended in friendship rather than antagonism the comic element may have been sustained. Feuer states the reason for the failure of comedy and the fact that the gap between Alex and Jonathan is left open has much to do with history and memory, therefore writing may lead to self-discovery but it cannot change the relationship between the narrators which is ultimately formed by history (2007:27). Furthermore, in instances when comic and tragic perceptions oppose one another Foer enables the reader to comprehend the role that history and memory play in the construction of an unbridgeable gap between victim and perpetrator, thus illustrating irreconcilable differences. An example of this occurs in *Trachimbrod*, set in the present, when Jonathan tells Alex the story of how his grandmother would always pick him up. Alex, in the comic mode, perceived this as a display of love. Jonathan corrects him by saying that she lifted him to weigh him, as she was worried if he was eating enough. Thus joy is replaced by fear, a vestigial trauma which originated in her Holocaust experience in which starvation was a real threat (Feuer 2007:31). The story is punctuated by a sad laughter which is gapped with silence, a silence that Alex describes as a mountain, in essence a barrier between Alex and Jonathan (Feuer 2007:31-32).

The comic postmodern strategies employed by Foer enable him to revise the past in terms of his identity and his history, but they also display the multiple new identities which are possible given the revision of Jonathan's past. In other words, through the revision of his past, Jonathan is able to create possibilities for the future (Feuer 2007:36). Similarly, Alex's grandfather's confession, near the end of the novel, initiates Alex's own journey of self-identity and his own process of coming to terms with the past to create a meaningful future. His final words, "And I will" suggest futurity, the possibility of moving forward (2002:276).

The revision of the past in post-postmemorial imaginative invention and creation and the juxtaposition of comic and tragic modes, as discussed above, introduces questions of ethics. To commemorate is an ethical imperative of Jewish authors. Collado-Rodriguez claims that Foer uses his experimental structure, intertextual references and ludic postmodern

language to address the issue of “truth” and ethics problematised in post-Holocaust writing and, on a broader scale, trauma fiction. The literary modes that Collado-Rodriguez cites as being pertinent to Foer are undeniably postmodern. Take Linda Hutcheon’s argument: the term postmodernism in fiction should be reserved to designate complex paradoxical historical narratives she classes “historiographical metafiction.” The terms then exist as interchangeable (1980:3). Hutcheon defines historiographical metafiction by its action; blending self-reflexive metafiction with an ironic sense of history. This combination foregrounds the distinction between violent events of the past and the ‘facts’ we construct about them and relegate to history (in Duvall 2002:10). This practice draws attention to the problems inherent in historical representation. A paradox emerges in that historiographical fiction uses the medium which it contests and critiques; however, it is also always aware of its own implication in the very fabric of historical culture.

Holocaust memory is, in a crucial sense, an act against forgetting. In order to resuscitate the dead, survivors must rescue memory and combat its recession into forgetting and therefore ultimate death. In a sense, this is the project of many second and third-generation survivors. However, rescuing memory does not recover ‘historical’ knowledge of the event but may, if misappropriated, distort its meaning and further “perpetuate the cultural transformations of the memory” (Sicher 2000:74). The question of the justifiability of second and third generation personal claims to the Holocaust and to post-memory may fall on shaky ethical ground. Many critics have lambasted post-Holocaust generations for their emotional identification with the Shoah. One such critic is Alain Finkelkraut who claims that second generation survivors disingenuously appropriate the lives of their parents to give their own sheltered lives weight and meaning. He condemns these as “borrowed identities”, forms of inauthentic, vicarious victimage. Indeed, Finkelkraut has coined the phrase “imaginary Jew” to describe those who live a life in fiction (1994:12).

The question is whether Foer achieves an ethical reading of the Holocaust or falls into the pitfall of expedient surrogacy. Collado-Rodriguez supports the former view. He states that Foer uses the dual narrators to navigate two aesthetic traditions in order to make strong ethical claims. Therefore, the novel’s combination of literary modes and structural experimentation moves toward illuminating readers by rendering the *readers* witnesses of a tragedy of culturally mythical proportions (2008:55).

Wiese concurs, suggesting that Foer positions readers to assume an ethical reading of the Shoah, a position she regards as crucial in the post-Holocaust generation. She ascribes these postmemorial ethics to Foer's novel because it explores the relationship one may have with the past and the impossible hopes survivors may have for the future. This hope is explored by the last words of the novel, "And I will" (Foer 2002:267). This proclamation suggests a bond with the future in which choices are possible, choices "illuminated by everything that [has] occurred" (2012:7-8).

Foer distances himself from inherited, traditional narratives of the Holocaust, creating a filter of self-reflexive, mediating layers through which to deal with issues of commemoration and Holocaust memory. Firstly, Foer chooses fiction to record his own actual, documentary journey to the Ukraine. Ward suggests that perhaps Foer cannot find a first-person voice to describe the events in which he had no experience, therefore while his authorial persona appears in *Everything is Illuminated* this character is imagined and fictional, a character through which he can discuss his own (both real and imagined) journey (2008:10). Ward elaborates that Foer avoids ethical misappropriation via a dualistic narrative and the use of multiple narrative voices; this combination allows him to approach the Holocaust with "simultaneous proximity and distance, that is, with empathy rather than identification" (2008:11).

The double narrative structure that Ward refers to provides a self-reflexive element to the narration, informing the reader that the author is conscious of the text as a product of construction (Bowers 2004:80). Alex's letters as a response to the chapters that Jonathan sends him act as a proxy for the audience, foregrounding ethical issues around truth and representation. It is with the narration of Alex that Foer constructs the self-reflexive element of his text. Ward offers an interesting angle on this, suggesting that Alex may be read as Jonathan's conscience, another side of his personality, in effect combining to form one narrative persona. Either way, the proximity and distance inherent in Foer's treatment of his Holocaust heritage enable an approach to history which is at once empathetic and questioning (2008:11). Furthermore, we remember, the novel presents a mediated exploration of Holocaust memory in its structure. The novel itself is made up of Jonathan's chapters, Alex's chapters and Alex's letters, books within books in the folkloric Trachimbrod, all fictional

fragments that form Foer's novel. Therefore, Foer is able to distance himself and avoid emotional over-identification with Holocaust memory by creating these self-reflexive layers between himself and the event represented. Moreover, when Foer describes his novel as an act of replacement rather than an act of creation he is describing the way that the novel self-reflexively recognises problems of absolute truth and representation, nodding to an empathetic approach of multiplicity inherent in postmodern strategies (Ward 2008:24).

The alternative representation of history is an issue that will, in my opinion, become more and more prominent for contemporary South African writers as they seek to depict shifting identities and cultural displacements in a multicultural, multilingual and mass-mediated South Africa. Writers will be challenged to discover ways in which to reference history while simultaneously experimenting with the decolonisation of language and concept, the deconstruction of hegemonic discourses so as to challenge inherited systems of meaning. Lauren Beukes' novel *Moxyland* (2008) is a case in point. It explores mass-mediated postmodern culture, making oblique references to apartheid and 'the struggle'. The cyberpunk novel is fragmented, with multiple narrators and set in the Cape Town of the near future. The language of the novel is highly stylised, infusing South African slang, high-tech jargon and social media abbreviation. While the genre is sci-fi rather than historical fiction, Beukes looks to an uncertain political future while making references to the past and the roots of apartheid which are not easily dislodged even in a future-oriented narrative. The result is a corporate apartheid of the future. High-tech Aidsbaby crèches inquire into the nature of the next generation and the repercussions of the past. Beukes also alludes to a heritage consumer culture and a capitalist museummania when she imagines a "Robben Island Memorial Industrial Park". Via this idea, Beukes could be pointing to the loss of meaning in our memories of history and memorials; they are mere devices in a consumer-driven society, hollow and void of historical significance. Her dystopian Tokyo tech-grotesque acknowledges the fragmented universe of the postmodern where the past interacts with the present in an oddly seamless, yet simultaneously disjunctive, coordination. For example, the city has adopted a railhover system but still utilises traditional 'African' taxi buses, and Beukes acknowledges the lingering effects of the past and the fragmented nature of the (projected) present.

My own fiction manuscript, *Boneyard*, attempts to work via experimental strategies of form and style. The novella engages techniques that might variously be considered postmodern, magical realist and/or translit in an effort to challenge historical narrative as a priori origin and developmental chronology. The techniques include “contradiction, discontinuity, randomness, excess [and] short circuit” (McHale 1987:7). The novel comprises anecdotes from The Boer War, The Second World War, The Border War and Durban’s urban historiography, along with selected pockets of sub-cultural occlusion (a nascent local Nazi culture) and cultural mis/translation (the opaque, confusing handling of a letter from a Cuban sailor). Overall, in fluidly spanning more than 150 years, the novella offers a series of more unusual narrative angles than those associated with realism.

The lives of the young protagonists in *Boneyard* are intermittently (over)shadowed by moments of pre- and post-apartheid beyond their immediate experience. The narrative focus falls on regional links to such subject matter as incidents from the border wars and the South African war, the buried personal histories of locations such as the Point, and the interrupted routes of human connection between a major port and outlying small-towns. My authorial interest lay in exploring methods of fictional representation which straddle conventional, affective realism and more experimental contemporary modes. This facilitates the ‘re-visioning’ of received historical material and the imaginative exploration of links between past and present, memory and the forgotten.

As the title suggests, *Boneyard* explores buried histories, the ‘skeletons’ of time and place which may or may not be fractured or incomplete, lost or buried in unexpected locations, broken up into parts which may or may not be able to be reassembled. Through excavation and innovative re-assembly the novella explores the nature of (post)memory as bones and fragments.

The idea of buried history as exploded archive is explored most vividly in the symbol of the lakebed. The lake is forgotten, cast aside as no longer useful to the people of the town. It is a symbol of rot, decay and abandon. The lakebed is linked to memory and to loss, especially Herman’s loss. His collections of records, photographs and diaries, testaments to soldiers’ given-to-death are buried at the lake. The lakebed then functions as a quirky, unofficial memorial site, a landfill of marginal history. Moreover, the town outside which it is

located is an old mining town, suggesting tunnels underground, unseen paths and dark unexplored areas beneath the surface.

The lakebed as a memorial/burial site also functions as the central magical real element of the novella, a portal which links to places and times of loss therefore connecting the past, present and the future. This element nods to the genre of Translit (Coupland 2012) by establishing a central time/space continuum through which one may read the fiction, which moves freely from one historical epoch to the next through multiple narrators, traversing and compressing locations in time and locale. Moreover, the magical realist element of the lake destabilises the mode of realism and opens the novel to multiple interpretations while at the same time introducing issues of truth as they relate to the aesthetics of (re)presentation.

The structure of the novel is fragmented, acknowledging the erratically dispersed means through which a contemporary e-generation acquires diverse forms of knowledge. The multiple narratives and focalisations from divergent perspectives contribute to a narrative shape that is mobile, at once tangential and circular, rather than linearly sequenced. The recombinant of these fragments is the lakebed. As Krauss uses the desk in *Great House* and Kunzru uses the three-pronged rock formation called The Pinnacles in *Gods Without Men* to link stories that appear random, a set of sub stories rather than a conventional novel, so *Boneyard* uses the lakebed as a lynchpin in the novel, a portal through which the reader can make links and connect the pieces.

The lakebed is situated on the outskirts of a town which has been passed over after the construction of a main highway. The town then may represent a marginalised social history that is neglected for a straight-forward and convenient history, a history without complications. The strange, inexplicable drought experienced in the town during the 1970s is set in symbolic relation to the historically-verifiable event of the Border Wars that were mobilised in South Africa at the time.

The novel is also concerned with memory and memorial practices. One of the protagonists Herman, who fights in the Boer War, is obsessed with keeping tolls of death and recording minutely the lives of the living, making the inconsequential consequent. He carries

the weight of the dead with him, moving from camp to camp with boxes of their personal possessions until the weight of these memories, memento mori, becomes too much to bear. This hints at the impossibility of complete memory. Memory by its nature is filled with gaps, blind spots and is non-linear; memories do not present themselves as they happened but rather emerge randomly as fragments and flashes of thought. *Boneyard* attempts to mimic the structure of memory with a non-linear plot which moves through time and place like a (neural/cellular/particle?) collider.

In terms of Herman's chapter and the exploration of war and death, one may question the ethical territory of the chapter. A book is mentioned in the novel, *A Vulture's Guide to War Dreams*, a space in which dreams and real war scenes can be recorded and therefore commemorated. Hiver, Herman's military colleague who has not seen battle, describes in vivid detail these imagined war scenes and Herman suggests he write the book. Certain scenes to follow are written under the subtitle of this book's name thus mediating the experience and drawing attention to the work as a construction. In this, the novel attempts to mediate issues of ethical representation and appropriation.

In terms of war, the nature of trauma is also introduced. This is dealt with in Grace's chapter which takes place in the grungy Point area of Durban (thus simultaneously addressing the under-representation of Durban and the wider KwaZulu-Natal region in South African literature). This chapter explores PTSD from the Border in the character of Digger who displays characteristic symptoms of the disorder. Moreover, it emerges that many of the neo-Nazis have served on the border, suggesting their displacement and further issues of PTSD expressed in their aggressive behaviour. Furthermore, the idea of inherited prejudice is explored in the neo-Nazi culture of the men. Trauma is further explored in K's chapter, set in the same location but during the Second World War. K is traumatised after his mother is killed in a fire and his father is taken into internment. His trauma is marked by a silence which he transmits to his son Jude, who resents his father and develops his own form of emotional muteness and silence. In a final letter to Jude, K apologises for his lack of fatherly affect, despite his love for his son, making clear that he understands that Jude has inherited his father's historical-personal pain and has by extension suffered the proxy trauma of his loss.

In ways similar to Foer's exploration of third generation American Jewish post-Holocaust identity in *Everything is Illuminated*, I explore apartheid forms of post-postmemory, imaginatively recreating elements of South African historical pasts and questioning the possibilities of reconciling cultural-experiential difference. Like Foer's my novel/la investigates transgenerational trauma and navigates claims upon identity within a postmodern culture of fragmented information, questioning the easy (nationalist) rhetoric of memorialising. Through experimental methods of magical realism and postmodernism, I suggest, fiction may offer an empathetic take on historical truth. Foer, Coetzee, Brink – and I, in my small ways - exhibit an experimental impulse through which to explore history. Post-memory is relevant to South Africa's emergent literary culture as post-apartheid writers begin to question their history, a history which deeply resonates in the present and therefore still affects lives today. I suggest an experimental postmodern route through which to establish identity via the past.

Through the exploration of South African historical zones. *Boneyard* superimposes historical myth (specifically Afrikaner myth), historical record and the fantastic modes of magical realism to craft an apocryphal history, a rival to hegemonic forms of remembrance and commemoration. The novella endeavours to fill a void, namely the lacunae, silences and ellipses of memory and more specifically postmemory, inherited by the so-called 'born-free' generation. Through the formal stylistic elements of the novella, including the non-linear and fragmented narrative and the juxtaposition of reality and the fantastic, structures such as myth, memory, postmemory, historical discourse, trauma, guilt, postmodern culture and identity are explored.

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