Point of View in a Divided Society:

"The Parts" (a novel) and "Putting 'The Parts' Together" (an exegesis)

Mary Lynn Mather

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Abstract

The thesis comprises a novel that is written from four points of view and an exegesis on how a multiple-narrative text affords a useful means of depicting a divided society. In the creative work, each of the interconnected stories is presented from a different perspective, with its own distinct voice and dominant images. The theoretical component attempts to lodge the polyphonic experiment within a postcolonial, post-apartheid and transnational context.

"The Parts" turns on what appears to be a home invasion in contemporary South Africa as Lily Blake is attacked by Siyaya Songongo in her suburban house. However, in a land that is still torn by the effects of historical separation and discrimination, things are seldom what they seem and the central characters have more in common than they suspect. For Riaan Niemand, whose girlfriend is Lily's daughter, the violent assault is a reminder of why his family immigrated to Australia. Set further back in time, Cikiswa's tale is told by a group of women affected by HIV/AIDS. Lily's version of events reveals an absorption in art, detaching her from harsh realities. And Siyaya's rite of passage into adulthood is twisted into a journey of another kind. "The Parts" deals with themes of identity and belonging.

The quartet of separate vantage points offers a method for aligning form and content, with a composite picture emerging from the accounts. Research questions pivot on finding the strongest ways to set up and sustain the disparate approaches while deciding how best to reconcile them. William Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury* serves as the structural model while André Brink's *A Chain of Voices* establishes apartheid's legacy of conflict. Close analysis of point of view in Phaswane Mpe's *Welcome to our Hillbrow*, Zakes Mda's *Ways of Dying*, Antjie Krog's *A Change of Tongue* and Yvonne Vera's *Butterfly Burning* helps to locate "The Parts" within a broader literary framework.

Statement of Originality

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Signed:

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Volume 1: “The Parts”

(a novel)

I

THERE AND THEN

RIAAN

6 January 2012

Kalgoorlie-Boulder, Western Australia

It's always the same. You're alone in the desert, red sand stretching as far as the mind can reach. The soil is stained a rusty colour, like a ghastly inland sea of blood. It spills all the way to the horizon. The sky soars, an intense blue against the earth, the contrast hurting you with its brightness. There's the insistent smell of eucalypts, the burn of dry heat clogging nostrils.

An outcrop of rocks studs the flat band of land and you reach into your backpack for the geology hammer you've carried around since your university days. Fingers find the familiar smoothness, are soothed by the well-worn metal. The tap-tap-tap echoes against the quartzite, as unsettling as gunfire hacking through stillness.

You sense your brother is in there, buried beneath the stones which crumble into rubbish. With your bare hands, you dig, grit getting under your nails, turning skin raw. It's taking too long, you need a spade. You glance about but there's nothing here, you have to do it the hard way. His voice comes, muffled and faint, from low beneath your feet. It's as if he's on the other side of the world, drifting further and further from you, not closer. You panic and claw in the opposite direction.

Now you realise that this is not even the correct spot. It's too open. The trees have disappeared. You're confused. Rivulets of perspiration snake through the dirt on your face. You need directions, longitude and latitude coordinates, a mud map, any means of determining your bearings.

When the telephone rings, loud and insistent beside the bed, it jolts you out of that parallel realm and into this one. Like a miner returning disorientated from dark depths, you surface too fast. Ruthie is quicker, blurting out "hello" and jack-knifing off the mattress. She fires out single word questions as she walks across the hallway and settles on the couch with its creaking springs. You

concentrate on listening to the one-sided conversation, wondering who could be calling at such a late hour.

"What?"

It is almost a gasp. Ruthie sounds incredulous.

"Where?"

There's disbelief, as if it cannot be the right place.

"When?"

Her voice is duller, shrinking towards acceptance. She's almost resigned to it, whatever it is.

"No way! How?"

Fear spreads through your body, a wash of sweat. Something is very wrong. You consider turning on the light but the blackness is more suited to unknowing. Breathing has slowed right down. You're lost in a wasteland of waiting, pinned between the bad dream that never varies and the alien horror unfolding around you.

"*Ja, ja*. How is she?"

Now you feel a fraction better. At least the person is alive. There are degrees of hurt. Then you get angry. Relief should not lie in graduated measurements of severity.

Nonetheless, it is a comfort. She is alive.

But who is Ruthie talking about – her mum, one of her sisters or a close friend? Who is speaking on the other end of the line? From the way her accent has changed, ever so slightly, you know it has to be someone in South Africa. You do it too, the tongue switching back to the familiar inflections whenever you return to the land of your birth. It's as if she's slipping into a different region, crossing from one country to another.

"Why?"

Her query is suspended in silence. That's the question that is the most difficult to answer.

There's a sigh as you throw back the sheet on the double bed. You imagine it is the breeze, stirring in the palm tree beyond the open window. It's not your lover in the adjacent sitting room, exhaling as if in defeat. The air broods, the cloying scents of the garden hanging in the heat, intense and oppressive. It should storm, though you know it won't. Rain would bring relief. This sullen build-up just makes things worse.

A moth flicks back and forth against a lampshade, as irritating as a nervous tic. In the gloom, clock numerals glow: 02:15. The dead of night, when babies are born and sick people let go of life, when the worriers fret and the desperate do crazy things.

You are in limbo, heaviness keeping you from standing up. You want to go to her. You don't. You need to know what this is about. You prefer ignorance.

When Ruthie stumbles across the threshold, you hold her in your arms. Words are pebbles, clogging your throat. You swallow them and hook your fingers in her hair, holding on as if to keep her from floating away. Tears smear from her cheek onto yours. You taste their salt as you absorb her shivers, clenching with muscle and bone until the shuddering sobs subside. It's as intimate as sex, this blurring of boundaries, the peculiar fusion of calamity and comfort. You press together, cling to each other. If you could stay like this forever, you would. You're locked in the moment, a pair of fossils fixed in time.

"Ruthie, Rue."

This has to be about her mother. It is, though it takes a while for you to piece together a sort of truth. You think of yourself as standing on the sidelines of an archaeological site, watching layers being excavated and uncovered. A sense of the whole emerges in disjointed parts. Something seems to be missing.

"She... she was tied up, beaten. A strange man in the house... It can't be, no. *Ag* shame, I can't believe it. Not Mommy, not my Mommy."

Ruthie falters, rushes to the toilet, gagging on the words. She's puking, rasping and choking and coughing. You try to follow her, too late. The lock on the bathroom door clicks, excluding you from her grief.

You decide to make tea, acquiring a sense of stability with the slow spooning of the *rooibos* leaves into the pot. While you wait for the water to boil, you step into the backyard. Summer's warmth is trapped in the ground beneath your bare feet. You stretch, stifling a yawn. There's a dull thud against metal and the muffled thump of a kangaroo hopping. You live on the edge of the town, beside a disused golf course. The animals graze on clusters of grass, remnants of the manicured greens. Ruthie grins with delight whenever she sees them. You haven't had the heart to tell her about the incident.

About four months ago, a car was doing circuits in the dusk. Shrieks of excited laughter spilt from the vehicle. The driver accelerated and veered into an adult kangaroo, frozen in an upright position a few metres from the track. You witnessed the beige body somersaulting over the bonnet before it pounded the dirt. The hoons disappeared in a trail of dust and exhilarated shouting. You went to the dying creature. Gently, you checked the pouch on the abdomen. It was empty. You cradled the head in your lap, fondling the smooth fur of the ears.

The kettle is whistling, the noise shrill and invasive, like loudness at a funeral. You rush indoors to perform the mundane ritual. The clink of china and cutlery lulls you into a false calm, yet inside you're feeling the same rage that followed the kangaroo killing. If the cowards had turned back, you would have confronted them, adrenaline overriding caution. You bunch your fists.

When Ruthie reappears, her blonde hair is damp on her forehead where she's splashed her face. It's tousled in a knotty clump at the back of her neck. She resembles a child, woken in a strange place and bewildered by her surroundings. As you add two sugars and pour the milk, you don't joke that this is the way she likes her men: very strong, sweet and white. It's no time for humour, although you suspect she's teetering on the tightrope between laughter and weeping. Her eyes appear greener than ever, redness rimming the irises, her skin mottled from too much rubbing.

"So Mary got the call from the hospital?"

Ruthie nods. She sips her drink. Her favourite mug is more cheerful than it ought to be, with its psychedelic pattern of flowers and its shout of golden spirals.

She swallows, gulping back the liquid. You nod. As long as she does not speak, you can avoid the truth.

You're sitting on the opposite side of the kitchen table, wondering what her oldest sister has said on the phone. Ruthie's playing with the tie-dyed cloth you bought from the hawkers while exploring her hometown on holiday together last month. She pinches the material into ochre folds. You grab her hands in yours, holding them as if to steady her across the ripples of fabric. Or perhaps you're the one who needs to be grounded. You focus on the circular shapes, which run into each other like eroded peninsulas. It's disconcerting, as if you've entered a wilderness you should know. You've been here before, the terrain ought to be recognisable, yet it isn't.

Ruthie's expression is bland as she relays the gist of the message. She could be a wooden actor, reciting words without animation, a puppet on a tiny stage. It's as if she's talking about a stranger or discussing someone else's problem. You saw that look on Ma's face, when Pa had to tell her about your brother, Willem.

A savage seam runs through South Africa like an insistent vein patterning stone. Brutality is embedded in the society. Violence is integral to the everyday, scarcely hidden under a veneer of civilisation. It gets inside you. When you're there, you talk in clichés, expecting the worst because it can and does happen. Appalling stories insert themselves into casual conversation, as if bad news is normal. Death becomes just another aspect of life. Surviving can be worse than oblivion. But you cannot go there. The past is best left undisturbed.

You've become an Australian citizen, cut off from the harsh realities for more than a decade. People have rights. They deserve protection. Everyone gets a fair go. Bile rises in your gullet. This attack on Lily, this home invasion, simply should not happen. You calculate the time difference. It must be around half past eight at night in Grahamstown. You picture the small city in the Eastern Cape, hemmed in by green hills, tucked in a valley, as vague and dreamy as boyhood. Spires spike upwards, reaching for the heavens, impressive even though you no longer believe in God. The place has about as many churches as there are weeks in the year. It's a universe away from where you are now, Kalgoorlie-Boulder, a

man-made mining oasis in remote Western Australia. What's worshipped here is gold. The quest for quick wealth has become the dominant religion. Crews work around the clock. Trucks and road trains haul loads into the emptiness. Production pounds on and on and on, as relentless as a hangover headache. Ruthie is staring at you with a curious expression. You pull yourself together.

"Has she been discharged, Rue?"

"No, they need to keep an eye on her and maybe run more tests." Ruthie's forehead crinkles. "*Ja*, I think that was it. I wasn't listening properly. Mary was talking about them giving her some medication. Just in case. Riaan, I keep feeling it can't be true, that she can't have been attacked. Not in the house, not in her bedroom."

Was she raped? You push down the question that keeps surfacing in your mind. It's almost a foregone conclusion in contemporary South Africa. People, especially women and children, even babies, are violated, more or less as a matter of routine. There's also the very real possibility of being infected with AIDS.

"The police told Mary he'd tied her up," Ruthie's saying. "*Ag*, Riaan, she must've been terrified. She's so little. Why would somebody do that? Why, man? You've seen how she is. She wouldn't hurt a fly."

Ruthie's crying loudly, near hysterical and hiccupping with distress. You lean across the table, alert. You need to bridge the distance, to be closer. You have to do something and you wonder where to start. This is treacherous territory. You're like a mountain climber who's dropped into a crevice. Wedged between the options, you're unable to go up and reluctant to slip further into the chasm. You don't trust your voice, so you keep still, waiting for her to speak.

"Mom's shirt was torn, it was ripped." Ruthie sounds as if she's moved far away from you. "She was on the bed when they found her. The house was... it is... an absolute mess."

You're picturing the home you visited with Ruthie, where you were staying until less than a fortnight ago. Stepping through the front door was like entering the pages of a glossy magazine or living in a book on interior design.

Now the paintings are probably knocked askew, flowers toppled from vases, mirrors smashed, food strewn across carpets, clothes yanked from hangers. You saw what the thugs do, watching the nightly television broadcasts. Lily may have been cowering in a corner, pale and trembling, begging for her life. It's wrong to be thinking like this, as if you're the man violating her privacy. You consider the motive for the crime, latching onto the possibility of a burglary in the chaos you've imagined.

"Perhaps she surprised a thief, Rue. Was anything taken?"

"*Ag*, Riaan, I don't know, I just don't know. Shit, man, tell me this isn't real, that it's all been a mistake, like I dreamt it or something."

You jump up, the chair grating against the tiles. After wiping her tears with the back of your palm, you tuck a strand of long hair behind her ear. If you could sweep away this trouble, you would. Ruthie frowns, wriggles free. She presses thumbs into her cheekbones, fingers to her forehead. Her shoulders are slumped. You hate seeing her like this. It's all wrong. Ruthie's your terra firma. She's had years of being the tough baby sister, the tomboy who rises after every fall. You're used to her putting on a brave face, no matter what. She claims she gets her optimism from her father.

"Has anyone told Charlie?" you ask.

"What the fuck, Riaan? How would I know? I can't see why it would matter."

You dislike it when she swears. She's annoyed and it's your fault. You haven't met Ruthie's dad, not yet. He lives in England. Apparently he moved back there when he and Lily separated. You're saving to travel to the United Kingdom with Ruthie, possibly in October. You want to ask Charlie for her hand in marriage. You've discussed it with Pa and he agrees that you do it properly. To Ruthie, it's old-fashioned and hilarious. But it's important, this formality and having her father's permission.

From what you can make out, Charlie's not a model parent. He seems irresponsible and reckless, a gambler and a ladies' man. Nonetheless, his

daughters adore him. Ruthie has a passport shot of him in her wallet. She's inherited his olive skin and the almond shape of his eyes. Charlie sports a head of thick black curls, speckled with grey. Ruthie's friends compare him to George Clooney. He's been through a string of women since he and Lily parted. Ruthie remembers finding one or two in his bed when she and her sisters stayed over. You hold that against him. It isn't right. You've heard Lily's side of the story, over a few too many glasses of wine. She branded him an emotional bully, the sort who's abusive in a sneaky sort of way. Ruthie swears he's charming, that you'll get on with him, everybody does.

You glance at Ruthie, hunched forward with elbows on the table, fists in front of her face, like a boxer shielding herself from punches. She seldom needs your help but you always offer it. You believe you're meant to shelter her from harm, to protect her from evil. It irritates her, you know it does. But it's what Pa taught you and Willem to do. Be attentive. Be considerate. Be a gentleman. You control your breathing, in and out, pausing midway, just as you'd do when taking aim with the pistol, hearing his words. Slow and steady. You're in charge. You inhale. You exhale.

"So, it'll work out fine, Rue," you murmur. "She'll be alright. They want you to go back tomorrow? We could check online, see if there's a seat for the early plane to Perth and change the flights."

As soon as the words chip the quietness, you regret uttering them. It's all come out wrong, the opposite of what you intended. Ruthie's staring at you in disbelief, as though you're from another planet, out of touch with her feelings. You've missed the point, confused the signals as usual. She's overwhelmed, not ready for practicalities and this stupid talk of leaving.

"I don't know, I really don't know." Ruthie is agitated. "*Ja*, I suppose I should be with her. Shit, Riaan, I'm just so worried and it's fucking frustrating, being this far away and cut off from the rest of the world."

A stronger drink than tea is in order. You bang about awkwardly in the cabinet until you have the brandy and two glasses. She knocks hers back, numbing the panic. The heat burns and it warms your chest as you swallow it

down. Ruthie sloshes more alcohol from the bottle. She knocks it over, grabs at the neck. The spilt liquid fans outwards like a blossom opening. You stare at the patch of damp redness.

"Why, Riaan? Why is this happening?"

You shrug, mesmerised by the mark, which is dark and ugly. As the wetness spreads, Ruthie dabs at it with paper towels, forming a wall of tissues. It sets you thinking of the security procedures in South Africa, the sophisticated alarm systems, the armed response teams, the locked gates at every entrance and exit. You'd forgotten how extreme the situation is. Most people are obsessed with safety, on high alert, in a state of constant vigilance and awareness. They pay the price for the luxuries they enjoy. Lily's place is a fortress, with burglar bars on every window, destroying the beautiful views. You recall her snapping at you when you neglected to turn a key in a door or draw a bolt shut.

"How did this guy break into the house?" It's come out as a snarl, louder than you'd expected.

"*Ag*, Riaan, I don't know. Criminals have their ways. Don't you remember? They take out the roof tiles, cut holes in the ceiling, whatever. It's not that hard to smash glass or rip metal from plaster. Nobody gives a shit. The cops do nothing, absolutely nothing. Even if they catch them, the courts let them go with a warning."

"Sweetie, it'll be okay, it'll be okay, Rue." You squeeze Ruthie tightly to quell the shaking, to absorb the juddering that jerks through her body. "Let's try to rest for a few hours."

"It all seemed so normal when we were there," she says softly. "I can't believe it."

Everything did appear to be ordinary enough, if that complicated social structure could ever be regarded as typical or acceptable. It's meant to be over, but you detected its legacy in the stark contrast between the rich and the poor. The Australian tongue turns apartheid into "apart hide". That has a ring of coyness or concealment to it. Afrikaners make it sound hard and bitter, "apart hate". It's a

nasty word, with the r rolled in the middle. Pa's family has that guttural accent, diluted and mellowed with every generation. Ma teases him about his *Voortrekker* stock. He can trace the Niemand lineage back to the earliest days when the Dutch pioneers left the Cape Colony to find a better future. They would be amazed to see their descendants in Oz.

From here, discrimination is just a concept. You can pull apartheid to pieces. Shift it into separate stacks of words and thoughts: apart, a part, a part hate. Play with the details of a life, as if it belonged to another. In many respects, it does. There is the boy, growing up in Pretoria. Here is the man, a geologist in this isolated mining town. They are the same person, and they are not. That's apartness too.

Ruthie's cleaning her teeth and getting ready for bed. You've put the glasses and mugs in the dishwasher and you're about to turn out the lights when the phone rings. It's Susan, the middle sister, the one you haven't met. She's calling from New York to let Ruthie know that she has an important legal case starting the day after tomorrow, so she won't be able to get away.

"The suspect was at her front door earlier and in the garden during the morning," Susan says. "It wasn't old Joseph, he's been sick for months. TB, I suppose. This was a teenager."

"Yeah," you mumble, somewhere between yes and *ja*, trying to recall who Joseph is.

"Jesus, Riaan, show some emotion. He tied her up. He hit her, the prick. Don't you know anything about it? She's got cuts and bruises. There was blood on her clothes, her blouse was slashed."

"Did he...?" You want to discuss your fears. But your tongue can't deal with the language or the images.

"We don't know yet, Riaan," Susan says, brisk and businesslike, as if she's about to step into the courthouse and convince a jury. "The police took a statement and she's been examined by a nurse. Naturally, she's not making a whole lot of sense. She's in shock, damn it. Christ, they'd better catch him. I hope they nail the little arsehole."

You hand the phone to Ruthie. She's getting an earful, flapping her fingers together like a busy mouth at one point for your benefit and shaking her head. Ruthie paces up and down the passage, listening and consoling her. You'd forgotten that Susan was raped. The subject only came up once and you don't know the details. Ruthie was just a kid who didn't realise what had happened. Nobody mentions it. You can relate to that.

"Oh my God, Riaan," Ruthie says, dropping the phone on its cradle. "She accused me of not being there when it's required. As if I'm guilty and it's my fault Mom's been attacked and is in hospital."

"It's not, Rue, you know it's not."

You're sitting next to Ruthie on the bed. She draws her knees up to her chest, hugging herself and blocking you out. It's a variation on the foetal position.

"Suze is just so full-on," Ruthie grumbles. "She's right over the top. Things like this bring out the worst in her."

You feel as if you're walking in twilight, uncertain of your surroundings. Shapes appear in the gloom, like the outlines of furniture under dustcovers. You're in the surreal zone of your early childhood, at the sea house that belonged to Ma's family. On arrival, Ma whipped off each sheet with a flourish. You and Willem patted the humps of the exposed chairs.

"Surprise!" you'd both yell.

Ruthie's talking about Mary. You've missed the start of the conversation but you're on surer ground. At Christmas you spent hours chatting to the big sister Ruthie admires. You also got on well with her husband and their young daughter, Hope.

"It's probably better for Mary, anyway, not having Suze there," Ruthie says. "Suze is always attacking her and Dan about their political views, or the lack of them. Honestly, Riaan, it's exhausting, being around her. I don't know how Gina survives."

Susan is a human rights lawyer, very successful and obsessed with aid work. She's in a steady relationship with an American woman. You were astounded when Ruthie showed you a picture. To your embarrassment, you realised you'd expected cropped hair, skinny boy pants and a flat chest, all the stereotypes. Susan's the Amazon version of Ruthie, voluptuous and glamorous, dressed in a business suit. You asked about her partner.

"Gina's divine. She's the best thing that's ever happened to Suze," Ruthie had said.

You imagined Gina as a dark-haired Spanish type, wondered about the erotic things they might do to each other. Ruthie looked at you as if she could read your mind, pretending to be outraged. At Christmas, they sent a box of presents for everybody to unwrap around the tree. You opened a pair of star-spangled socks and a baseball cap. Ruthie tore the paper off a book on spells and a jigsaw puzzle of Joan of Arc, burning at the stake.

"Gina's a Wiccan," Ruthie reminded you.

"Oh, yes, she's the witch."

"Not the way you're thinking," Ruthie said. "She's like a healer."

"Hmmm, so who's old Joseph?" You recall your phone conversation with Susan.

"*Ag*, Joseph," she tilts her head, grins. "He's been the official gardener for as long as I can remember, even though he's ancient and super slow. Mom reckons he was part of the deal when they bought the house."

"Oh yes, we had Jackson." You recall a giant of a man with red eyes, twisting his hat in his hands as if he was wringing water out of it, whenever he came to the back door to ask for something.

"Shame, Joseph's not well. He coughs all the time. Mom's forever dropping him off at the day hospital. He has to wait in the queues there for hours but he hates the clinic in Joza."

"What about the maid? Prudence?" She was on leave over the festive season, so you never saw her. "Wasn't she inside?"

"Patience," Ruthie corrects you. "No, she only comes in on Mondays and she's about as dilapidated as Joseph."

"So it seems as if Lily was alone?"

"*Ja*, of course, she's usually on her own, except when I get back from the university in the afternoons. You saw what she's like, Riaan, in the studio from early till late, forgetting to eat, obsessed with her painting and catching the right light."

"Rue, it's very wrong, this whole idea of a home invasion, being surprised in your private space, where you should feel free and most safe."

You're thinking of Lily's vulnerability, how she's distracted easily, almost a target. The incident seems more real because Ruthie is with you. There's nothing unique about the story and it wouldn't make the news, not in a country like South Africa where violence is ongoing. It's become personal because it's filtered through Ruthie's responses, through what happened to your family, through the shared shock. One incident can have a massive impact on the world. It's like the concept of continental drift. Years ago, when you were explaining it to Ruthie, you found a website on the computer, showing how a single landmass was broken into fragments. She was enthralled.

The divide is the metaphor you choose to explain your life, every aspect of your existence split. There's before apartheid and after apartheid, before Australia and after Australia, before Willem and after Willem.

"*Ag*, Riaan, this must be triggering memories," Ruthie says, grabbing your hand. "Shit, I'm sorry, I didn't mean... You know."

"Hey, it's okay."

You collapse against the pillows, thoughts sliding to the desolate spaces where you wander about, poking with a dry branch at the ground, studying the alluvial swirls. Ruthie's lying on top of the sheets, which have creased into small peaks and dips. She twists onto her side, her back to you. You stroke the smooth,

tanned skin. Caress the crest of her shoulder blade. Touch the hollow beside her hipbone. You're obsessed with her curves and contours, just as you're fascinated by the lines and layers of the earth. It would be easy to get lost in the complexity of her. You try to merge your inhaling and exhaling with hers, to soothe her, hear the sound she makes when her lips part, as if she's smiling. Surely she can't be? Your fingers stray onto her breast, trying to get a sense of how far you can go. She whispers your name gently, breaking the syllables, as if she's explaining something to a child. "Ri-aan." It's an apology, not encouragement. You remain still, your arm draped over her, to keep her from leaving you, but she's floating to Africa.

In the darkness of no man's land, you wait, wanting. You long for her, like a thirsty traveller who yearns for water. Ruthie's breath keeps you company in the dark, fluttering, as light as the vibrations of an insect's wings. You journey in and out of her being, carried along the windpipe and into her innermost core, passing near the heart, which thumps its rhythm. As you rest your ear against her ribcage, you're calmed by the regular beat of her. In sleep, she's warm and innocent, more girl than woman. You're transported by her, in her, through her, the nearness and the smell of her. Love is a type of osmosis, a permeation of membranes and permutation of memories. You want to suffuse her with your feelings, blurring the boundaries entirely. When you have sex, you erase the line that's drawn between you. You're guided by a sharp intake of air, the tensing of muscle, just as she responds to your gasp or the growing urgency of your thrusting.

Your bodies fit together, your legs between hers, your arm enfolding her shoulder, hers around your waist, the separate elements merging. You can't tell which is her blood, pumping, and yours, quickening. It's like that thing you and Willem used to do as kids when you pressed your index fingers together and stroked them both. There was one thick mutual digit, which was numb. You pretended you were touching a dead man's skin, giggled. Don't think of it. Let it go, despatched with the other reminders of your brother and your previous life.

There are days when this closeness overwhelms you. It's as though you've tumbled into a hole and the space is filling up with fine sand, packed warm and tight around you. You hear the clods falling onto the coffin. The absence of light

is overpowering, a voluminous blackness that swallows you whole. You could be in an underground cave, boxed in by rocky walls, with no exit.

When you and Willem were small, you sometimes stayed on the farm with Ouma and Oupa. You were scared of the night, more terrified of your grandfather's temper. Willem knew you were afraid. He'd whisper and you'd tiptoe to his bed, across the rectangle of rug, glad to snuggle up behind him. Now you're reassured by Ruthie, the proximity of her flesh, the tick of her pulse. The past is on one side, the future to the other. You doubt you'll be able to return to sleep.

A bird calls and its whistle is a tentative beckoning of sound. It's searching for a response. All is silent. It tries again, reaching for an answer, pouring plaintive notes into nothingness.

You lie awake, in the in-between space. The unspoken crashes around you like meteorites. You pick through the debris. Not focussed, not dreaming. You relive your recent encounters with Ruthie's mother, sifting through images and impressions. You're searching for clues, much the same way that you look at rocks, checking for stress and strain. You reassess all you know about her, flicking from one perception to another as if you're trawling through samples.

The first time you met Lily was less than a month ago. In your mind, you're back there. Ruthie fetches you from the Port Elizabeth airport and drives you to Grahamstown. You're in that post-flight state, eager for novelty yet fuzzy from tiredness, lulled by the low growl of wheels. You get vertigo when you travel and everything's slightly surreal. Wild animals are visible behind a wire fence on the edge of the national road. Giraffes stick their necks through branches.

"Jafi," Ruthie murmurs, pointing at the buck in the khaki *veld*.

"What was that?"

"Just another effing impala." Ruthie's mouth tweaks.

Hints of the region's despair and destitution hit you on the periphery of the city. Straggling people hitch lifts from passing cars. Some walk wearily, thumbs

outstretched in hope. Others perch on suitcases on the bitumen. Grinning kids appear like apparitions, waving pineapples or pointing at buckets of prickly pears. You and Willem loved the green fruits with their thorny skins, though he teased you about eating too many. They always made you constipated.

The trip ends in a quiet cul-de-sac in an upmarket area, the house large and discreet, set far back on a gentle slope. You're at the gate in the high picket fence, fiddling with the latch. Flowers soften the brick path winding uphill. Trees stoop over benches, throwing cool shadows. The grass is thick and spongy. You haven't seen a garden like this for years. It's the opposite of Kalgoorlie where the water has been channelled by pipeline from Perth for over a century and the earth encroaches like a layer of crimson sediment. With every step, you leave that world behind and get closer to your childhood.

Lily stands before you, grey streaks glinting through fair hair. You're reminded of a pale rock, flecked with precious metals. She smiles and you recognise Ruthie in the quick flash of teeth, the full lips twitching upwards. You bend down to hug her, expecting her to melt into you as her youngest daughter does. Instead, she's stiff and aloof, holding back even as she tolerates the embrace. She's humouring you. Her skin is like marble, icy to the touch although it's December.

"Pleased to meet you, Riaan," she says, as if she's reciting poetry. "Do make yourself at home. Oh! Is that really for me?"

Ruthie was dubious when you said you were giving her a print of an Aboriginal painting as a gift from Australia. You rolled it up, the terracotta land with the maroon shadows that represent hollows. It reminded you of the desert's mysteries, the yellow dots popping like seed pods and the fauna merging with the flora, the lizards, goannas and snakes poised like reptilian sentries, the centipedes and grubs writhing between them. Indigenous canvases are like aerial photographs, offering a fresh perspective on what is taken for granted. From above, there are no borders and frictions, only patterns and intricate designs. Lily thanks you, but she returns the image to its tube and tucks it behind a chair. It's there for the duration of your stay.

You're in the guest bedroom, staring at three of her pictures, lined up on the wall. Delicate mauve petals curl into gentle smudges of colour. It's as if the paper has been left out in the rain. You step back and the images seem to float, threatening to flow out of their frames. These replicated plants disconcert you, just as she does. You can't identify the spindly flowers, yet you believe that you've seen them before. They hover, luminous against their murky backgrounds. The watercolours carry her professional name in the bottom right hand corner. Lily Fuller. They're dated 2010. You know she's good, though you don't have the vocabulary to describe the techniques.

When you enter her studio in the backyard, you have the same uneasiness. You're unnerved, for no obvious reason. There's an impression of space and light, balanced by hidden corners and secrets. Purple cloths are flung over a couple of the works. You expect her to whip something away, to reveal a trick. It's like a magician's elaborate illusion with smoke and mirrors.

"Surprise!" you hear Willem cry. He's messing with your mind, as he does whenever you revisit South Africa.

You examine a painting on an easel. It's incomplete. Patches of white have been left open, as if an object has been removed from the display. The emptiness serves as a kind of intrusion. On a ledge, tubes ooze worms of colours and dirty water clouds antique cups. Lily is at a trestle table, in filthy dungarees. She sweeps her brush in horizontal lines, a lazy swishing, to and fro. You like the subtle progression of the preparatory strokes. Incense spirals from a saucer. Like an elegant trail of smoke from a cigarette holder, it wafts towards the windows. Beyond the big panes of glass is an orchard. The house seems to have vanished, as if it's dropped further down the incline, slumped the way homes do in severe floods. It's lost in the lush greenery. But you've interrupted Lily's reverie. She watches you, over her spectacles. You sense annoyance behind the parting of her lips, dismissal in the polite smile.

"Mom's just so out of touch," Ruthie says as you explain where you've been. "She's on her own planet."

"It's like she goes into some kind of a trance."

"Riaan, she's an artist." Ruthie snorts. "She's batty, switched off."

Lily. She's the antithesis of your own mother. Ma wears tailored outfits and looks smart from the minute she wakes up. Lily's garments are loose and unironed. Ma's hair is cut short, neatly styled. Lily's is heaped on top of her crown, tendrils escaping from an ornate clasp, like silver threads unravelling. Ma is level-headed, efficient and organised. Lily is whimsical, illogical and unpredictable.

You can't get the measure of Lily. Her attention is pulled towards the blush of a rose, arrested by the way the sun slants across a tiled floor. That vagueness leaves her open to trouble and risk. It's a fault line. You recognise it because you have your own weak point. It's a form of fracture, a recurring crack forking through the earth.

Time, space and circumstances have morphed you into a harder form of yourself, like a mineral that has mutated. Your reality has changed. What you took for solid fact has been shifting around, little by little, in the manner of plate tectonics. Ideas slide and rearrange in unfamiliar patterns. Nothing is certain anymore.

Going to South Africa unleashes mixed emotions in you: part love, part hate. The feelings are *ingewikkeld*, as Ouma would put it, both tangled and complicated, like a knot you can't undo. You turn to Ruthie, then Lily, for guidance. They don't seem confused. You copy them, observing the basic rules.

Privileged South Africans try to face the door when they're eating at a restaurant. They look over their shoulders before drawing money from bank machines. They raise the height of their home fences or add razor wire or currents of electricity. They keep rifles under their pillows and sticks beside their slippers.

You merge with this elite group every time you return to the country. You loop around the block if a car follows you as you reach your lodgings. You leave a large gap between your vehicle and the one in front of it, in case you need to escape. You go through a red traffic light without hesitation, if it could save your life.

Ja, you know how to get away in a hurry. That's why people like you keep flocking overseas, contributing to the brain drain. You think of Pa's joke, much used and deadly accurate.

"What's the difference between an emigrant and a refugee?" You chuckle aloud. "Timing."

A gust of wind sends an empty pot rolling along the patio. Ruthie stirs and whimpers. You move closer, rub your nose into the warmth of her as you mumble that you've been dreaming about Lily. A vehicle cruises by, splashing brightness into the bedroom as it takes the corner. You see springhares frozen in gun sights on the farm. Willem's excited breathing is in your ear. Ruthie gasps. You wrap a leg over hers, smooth her hair and whisper that everything's fine.

When you visited the Eastern Cape a few weeks ago, you confessed that you'd never been into the townships. Ruthie took you on an informal tour through the areas set aside for black people. She stopped at a noisy *shebeen*, perched on a corner, surrounded by shacks. The proprietor introduced you to the traditional Xhosa beer, which had been brewed in a large rubbish bin. You found it sour and tepid but there was something appropriate about drinking the stuff in the company of the local men. Most sipped from a communal jug. You were relieved to be given a glass.

An elder told you tales of what it had been like in apartheid times. He gestured to the hill, on the opposite side of the city, said that was where they had the searchlight. The army and the police used to shine it into these streets. Their tanks and armoured cars would trundle up the broad dirt tracks. Even in the midday heat, it was chilling, imagining the aggression and the violence.

Memories remind you of other memories. They're like layers, stacked one on top of the other, distinct yet connected. You sniff the African air, inhaling smells that are peculiar to the third world. You observe donkey carts piled with firewood, cattle seeking grass in the suburbs, buildings needing serious repair, speeding taxis and numerous vehicles that can't be licensed. You're absorbed by Ruthie's running commentary, amused at how she waves to passersby and stops without warning to share what she likes about the informal settlements. Pumpkins ripen on the tin roofs of huts. Skinny kids are kicking a plastic bottle in the street.

Dogs and pigs trot about, snuffling through litter. A mule offers its scarred hide to the sun.

"We used to drop Grace off in the Fingo Village sometimes," Ruthie says. "Her house is behind that block, over there. Mom has photographs of me strapped to her back in a blanket. Remind me to show you later."

"Grace?"

"She was my nanny. I loved her."

Ruthie was what Pa would call a "*laat lammetjie*". You were amused when she confided that she was "a mistake", created in a moment of passion. You've assured her you're very grateful for the slip-up. Ruthie reckons that Lily didn't have the time or the energy for a third daughter. Mary and the maid had to care for her.

"Grace died, you know. She had AIDS. At least, that's what Joseph told me." Her emotion is pure, a stinging rawness in the crack of her voice.

On another occasion, Ruthie gives you a history lesson, putting the region's battles into context. She's about to do her honours degree in the subject and is interested in the frontier conflicts. You view Grahamstown from the site of the 1820 Settlers National Monument, peering over a fort's stone walls. There's an ancient cannon, a nine-pounder. Willem would have loved it.

"A shot was blasted every morning, to tell the time," Ruthie explains.

The township lies directly across from you. It's as if you've switched sides, crossing over like a traitor. According to Ruthie, the municipality gets its name from a charismatic Xhosa leader, Makana. The spot where his men were killed is called the Place of Blood. Aloe spikes prod from the bushes, emerging like the warriors that rose up almost two centuries ago.

The Eastern Cape has a different mood to your birthplace, Pretoria, the Jacaranda City, which is perhaps to be called Tshwane. It's in the Transvaal of your childhood, now labelled Gauteng. The names alter, bearing no relation to your past, yet the essence must remain the same. It would be nice to go there with

Ruthie, to visit the Kruger National Park and the Magaliesberg range, to show her the Bushveld Igneous Complex and the quartzite cliff faces.

Barriers between racial groups bother you. You no longer relate to this sense of us and them. There's one nation. It should be as straightforward as that, except it's not. In Australia, coming from the same country is a link. There's a spark, the recognition of what's shared, from food to humour. Friends introduce you to other South Africans. It is how you connected with the girl you plan to marry.

"Oh, you must meet Ruth," someone said at a party in suburban Perth, leading you through the throng of dancing bodies. "She's gorgeous."

It would have been late 2008. You thought she was a goddess, just 18 and sipping a glass of wine with rare restraint. Her blonde mane skimmed her shoulders. It sounds cheesy, but you really did stare at each other across the crowded room. She kept looking away, shifting those striking eyes and then bringing them back again. It was love at first sight. You plucked up the courage to speak to her in the kitchen, got tongue-tied as you scratched around for words.

As they made noodles, a few kids discussed a writer who walked into the water with rocks in her pockets. You remembered a movie with that image. A woman with a nose piercing shouted about suicide never being justified. Ruthie listened politely and then argued that people had the right to choose whether they wanted to live or die, especially if they were ill or unhappy. You nodded. She responded with a sigh.

Straight away, you sensed that Ruthie was different to the others. She was intelligent and also sporty, on a Rotary Youth Exchange scholarship. You were almost finished with uni and five years older. She was your first real girlfriend, unlike any other you'd encountered. Australian women are very laidback and there's a part of you that they could never fathom. Ruthie understood, near instinctively. Your souls clicked. That was it.

You're pretty sure she has slept with other guys. She's relaxed in her body, as if it's not a big deal to be naked. You have no idea how many men there were before you. She refuses to discuss the subject and you don't press it. That's

how you know there have been a few. Maybe it's because Lily and Charlie split up before she even started school. Fidelity is important and she's loyal, that's what matters. It's not just a moral thing, your conservative family background. You want to protect her, though she is self-sufficient and smart. She's stronger than you, as resilient and supple as a branch that bends and springs back into shape. You'd like to be the ground that holds her, supporting and necessary.

For several weeks, you've behaved as if you've moved in together or like you're on honeymoon. You knew she'd be going back to study for another year. Now it's happening sooner than planned and your holiday together is about to be cut short. You think of Ruthie as a bride in training. She's stayed with you whenever you've flown her here, but now she's playing the wife. It's amusing, witnessing her attempts at baking a cake or sweeping the floor, as if she's auditioning for a role. The sponge is heavy and there are patches of dust on the floor. You don't care. It reminds you of when you first arrived in Australia and of how Ma used to be when she still made an effort. She kept wishing for a servant to do the chores.

Apartheid means apartness. The policy relied on segregation. But you and Ruthie agree that it's very intimate, having a domestic worker in your private space. You believe in people cleaning up their own mess.

A car thumps into a driveway, brakes squealing. It's your neighbour, Mike, back from the night shift at the smelter. Ruthie is fast asleep, under the covers. Her outline is becoming more certain. You lie on your back, a position that your mother says she could never adopt when you were living in South Africa. She always slept on her stomach, defensive.

The blinds let in wan strips of the dawn. Already it's getting stuffy. It's going to be another scorcher. You kiss Ruthie's cheek, slip off the bed. With a cup of coffee, you sit on the patio, marvelling as the sky shrugs into shades of yellow and orange on the horizon. The red of the earth will intensify as the day breaks. You're suspended in the heat, as if you've been embalmed in golden liquid, amber or resin.

Homes in Kalgoorlie tend to look similar and are mass-produced, made to common plans rather than designed by architects. You'd prefer originality but you're making the best of your investment. Old buildings are special. Pa's parents' rambling farmhouse concealed a colony of snakes under the floorboards. You and Willem loved the rondavel out the back. It was cosy, without corners, like a hut. In your games, you circled with arms outstretched, stroking the wall, the light switched off. Your fingers extended before you, finding your cousins and identifying them by the textures of hair, skin and clothes. There were gumtrees on the property too, not that different to those on the other side of your fence.

Ma's parents came from the Cape. The family residence boasts soaring ceilings with ornate designs pressed into the metal. You admired the twinkling teardrops of the crystal chandeliers and the mossy velvet curtains with their ripe plum colour. The antique furniture included an uncomfortable settee and a dresser that travelled from England. Their Hermanus beach cottage wasn't much smaller.

It doesn't matter where you are anymore. You never belong entirely. Mr In-Between, Mr Niemand. They can't pronounce it properly here and that suits you fine. In Australia you're a Newman, not a bridge between opposing realms, detached from all that used to be sure, pulled apart, a citizen on paper, torn into pieces.

The odour of blood and bone prickles your nostrils. A hint of bushfire clouds the air. You drag the wheelie bin to the kerb. In Grahamstown, you got a fright the first time you heard the whistling, shouting, dog-barking commotion of refuse collection. Ruthie reminded you that poor people go through the black bags of rubbish on the sides of the roads. She was incredulous when she saw your work boots and shoes outside the front door.

"Those wouldn't be there in the morning," she grinned. "Even the hosepipes get swiped."

She loves it that you have no front fence, that children drop their pushbikes on the lawns. She's impressed that the postie can leave parcels when nobody is home. She's starting to say traffic lights instead of robots. She's getting

the emphasis right when she uses words like metallurgy and project. She's even beginning to practise that questioning lift at the end of some sentences.

Ruthie would move to Australia tomorrow, to be with you. But she hates Kalgoorlie. She calls it "a racist, redneck outpost" and splutters with mirth when people add an s to the second person plural. You promise her you're in transit. It's a stepping stone zone.

"Nobody actually stays here long," you say.

"What about *Niemand*?" She's punning on the origins of your surname.

"Heck! No."

"Hey, your eyes are twinkling."

You assure her that you're serious. There are better places to be and Grahamstown is not one of them. You couldn't live with such extreme poverty levels around you.

"It doesn't take long to get used to it, which is what makes it so sad," Ruthie says. "But hey, we'll have to find our own place, somewhere between these options."

"Like an island."

As you walk inside the house to grab your second coffee, you pause in the doorway, wondering if you should wake her. It's after 5 o'clock. A ray of light falls across her bare back. The sheet is a tangled toga, draped over her lower body. She looks as if she's posing for a tasteful portrait, nude but covered up.

Yours is a strict God-fearing family. The uptight Dutch Reformed Church *dominee* in Pretoria would have a field day here in the Goldfields, preaching about temptation. As a boy, you used to turn to the back page of the weekend newspaper to gawk at the photo of a girl in a bikini. You even felt that the minister knew when you and Willem sneaked a peek at Pa's forbidden stash of magazines. He kept them in the garage, under the pile of oil rags. You gasped at the tits, with stars pasted on their nipples and wondered about the black censorship boxes. By the time you left South Africa, there was easy access to porn. It was to do with freedom of speech and expression, the rights of the

constitution. No more legal enforcing of what to watch, what to read, what to believe.

You're putting the milk in Ruthie's mug when the phone rings. You clear your throat and talk to Mary, ascertain that Lily's no worse. Ruthie stirs, holds the phone as she reclines against the pillows, your very own centrefold. You water the parched pot plants, trying to give her some privacy.

Now she's at the computer in your study, perched on a stool, dressed in a pink wisp of a sarong. Even her collarbones arouse you. She goes online while she drinks her tea, manages to book the flights. There'll be a long wait in Perth and again in Johannesburg. She'll be in Grahamstown within 24 hours. You rest your chin on her head, peering at the screen, at her cleavage. As you nuzzle against her hair, you inhale the floral scent of her.

"Hey, I'd better start packing, then get ready," she says, pretending to be more upbeat than she really is.

Ruthie prepares to go, gathering handfuls of clothes from your robe, dropping them on the bed, rolling panties and tee-shirts into neat balls. You smile at the stuffed koala toy, stuck among her shoes. As she walks past, carrying clothes from the laundry, you remember when she hung them out last night. You crept up behind her, put an arm around her waist and cupped a breast in your free hand. Her skin was warm from the sun. You made love on the patio, with the insects chirping in the garden. So much has happened since that. It seems to have taken place in a parallel universe. She clicks the suitcase closed.

"Want one?"

Ruthie holds a peach over the wire and paper fruit bowl you bought in South Africa. She takes a bite, juice dribbling down her chin.

"No, thanks, I want you." Ruthie laughs as you pull her onto your lap, smacking you with her sticky fingers.

You watch her in the shower, her outline fading as steam steals over the glass. You'd give anything to step into the cubicle and push her against the tiles. It's been a peculiar night and you're not sure how she'll respond. You put a cushion over your hard-on, cranking up the radio's volume. She's beside you,

unsmiling. The towel tumbles onto the carpet. You lie back as she straddles you, letting her set the pace. You'll do it slowly if that's what she needs. But it isn't. She's preoccupied, her motions urgent. It's almost like being with another woman, exciting, yet odd. You have no idea what she's thinking.

"Ruthie, Ruthie." You know she's struggling to hold back her tears.

When she kisses you, the senses explode, smashing into each other in overload. You hear her in your mouth, taste her with your eyes and smell her with your touch. She bites your lip as you lose control, taking only a few minutes to reach a climax as she rubs against you. As you try to hug her, she jumps up, escaping your arm. She is as skittish as a colt, wriggling into her jeans, stealing the white cotton shirt that you were planning to wear.

"Let's go past the Super Pit lookout one last time then grab brekkie in town," she says. "It'd be nice to ride on the bike, though I guess we'll have to take the *bakkie* for the luggage."

The traffic's light, the morning's fine. It's a perfect day, except that she's about to spend it catching planes and hanging around airports as she wings her way back to Lily and the unknown.

"Oh, wow, it just stuns me every time." Ruthie's on the platform, leaning against the caged railings, peering down at the giant open pit venture.

"Hey, I thought you'd hate the business of plundering and taking from the earth."

It surprises you that she likes the city's premier tourist attraction. You've grown weary of the mining operation, with its ordered tiers of benches and the access roads carved into the dirt. It's like a cross-section in a textbook.

"Geez, Riaan, it's so crazy." Ruthie's enthusiasm is infectious as she marvels at the mammoth machines crawling up and down the slopes below. "They're like toys from here."

"That's not exactly a unique observation." You don't mean to be sarcastic.

She is quite right about the scale being deceptive. It reminds you of the games you and Willem played with your armies of plastic soldiers. You were children, the options vast. Ants and insects were the enemy. Their holes and hideaways became craters and crevices, capable of swallowing troops of plastic battalions. You marshalled your forces and their arsenal across the ground while Granite the dog sniffed the little green figures. Willem countered from the other side. Snapped-off sticks were forests, puddles formed seas. Even then, you built bridges and dug out tunnels, planning your attacks and engineering escape routes. Older and wiser, Willem constructed stories and provided explanations. You miss his sage advice, his inspirational example. He was your monolith and your touchstone.

You're lifted high on Ruthie's laugh, surveying the panoramic sweep of your life, getting its measure from above. The past seems so very distant, as if it too has shrunk.

"Surprise!" Willem yells, deep within your core, not wanting to be relegated to your history.

Now you're parking the ute in the centre of the town. Ruthie is shaking her head in disbelief at how empty the streets are. In Africa, crowds would be jostling on the pavement, foreign limbs brushing yours, just as they do in the supermarket queues and on the trains and buses. A few visitors snap pictures of the imposing heritage buildings, with their Federation architecture and deep verandas. Ruthie scoffs at the chalkboard advertising topless barmaids beyond a hotel's swinging doors.

"It's like the wild west." She points her index finger at you, thumb up, pretending to aim for your heart.

"Good shot." You swoon, clutching at your chest, hoping nobody's watching you make an idiot of yourself.

"Well, howdy, pardner," Ruthie drawls.

"Let's give the saloon a miss, unless you'd like bare boobs and beer with your bacon and eggs."

"Really, they start that early?"

"Indeed they do," you reply. "Some of the guys will have just come off night shift."

Ruthie grins impishly. Her hair is scraped back in a ponytail. She looks younger than her 22 years. You forget that she's not much more than a kid. She's streetwise, clued up. As soon as she arrived in your current hometown, she insisted on seeing its infamous skimpies.

"I still find it bizarre," she says. "Imagine pulling pints, dolled up in lacy lingerie and high heels."

"Sure you don't want to put some of your leftover Aussie banknotes into the titty kitty, Rue?"

"*Sis*, Riaan, you're being rude." She puts on an Afrikaans accent, slapping your hand and acting prim.

At the café, over breakfast, Ruthie mentions that Mary caught a midnight flight and will be at the hospital to fetch Lily once she's ready to go home. You notice how Ruthie frets, chopping her pancakes without eating them, pushing berries into heaps.

"Hey, think of the starving masses." It's an attempt to distract her from her worries. "Or are you practising segregation on a plate?"

"I'm sorry, but I've lost my appetite." She frowns as the waitress refills your coffee cup.

If only you could get back to the place you were before she heard the bad news. You tell her Oupa's old joke, the one about the man having it off with the domestic servant, who delivers the punch line: "Faster, faster, master. The madam's coming."

"Riaan," Ruthie says, glancing around to make sure nobody has heard you. "That's so not PC."

She puts on her sunglasses, shaking her head as if to clear her thoughts or dismiss you. You know that she's on the verge of crying and you're determined to make her smile.

"In Kalgoorlie, of course, madam has a very different meaning." You point towards a sign advertising brothel tours.

"I'm sure it does but we'd better get to the airport." Her mood has altered and you guess that she's anticipating the worst scenario in Grahamstown.

The departures area is not as busy as you'd expected it to be. Groups of bored fly-in-fly-out miners mill around in fluoro orange uniforms, in no hurry to get onsite. You and Ruthie watch the plane landing and emptying out its passengers. She moves into the queue. You can't stop hugging her, kissing her, rubbing her arm.

"I wish you could travel with me," Ruthie says, dumping her overnight bag and gold bangles on the X-ray conveyor belt.

"Love you, Rue. It'll be alright."

"*Ja*, I know," she says, on the threshold, weeping, "but I'm scared, Riaan, I'm scared."

Beyond the runway, the land is the colour of autumn leaves. It's as though it's absorbed the blood of all the pioneers who staked their claims in the region. More than a century ago, they stumbled on this mineral-rich expanse in the middle of nowhere. They dug for wealth until they got lucky or were worn down by the unforgiving terrain. The intrepid inventor of the 600-kilometre pipeline from Perth was among those who bumped himself off in despair.

As Ruthie disappears into the cloudless blue, you shrivel inwardly, buckling into boyhood. You're in that cabin, diminishing to a pinprick in the distance, going back more than a decade. Inside your mind, inky skies unroll beyond the tiny window. They're monotonous, unpromising above the wingtip of the airbus. You wish you could hold a rock, be comforted by its firmness, the contrast of flatness and rough edges. Ma made you donate your treasures to a school friend who shares your passion. You think about your brindle mastiff.

Granite had to stay behind too. You sulk, inconsolable at leaving him. So what if he's found a good home? It's all wrong.

Your sorrow has subsided by the time you step into the busy international terminal at Perth, clinging to your passport and rucksack. The sniffer dogs greet you, undoing your composure. Ma's elegant and dignified, Pa's ruffling your gelled hair and embarrassed by your public sobbing. This is the arse end of the world. Everything is upside down. You're alone in a strange land, reduced to nothingness. Emigration is a kind of apartheid. You interpret it as two words: apart, hate. It means separation from what matters and you loathe it.

Now you know that moving countries is a form of dislocation. You couldn't compare it to the forced removals of black people, the bulldozed communities. But you can relate to the pain and shock of being in a different place. How much worse it would be to have zero.

Pa's been given a special visa to work in Western Australia. He's accepted for a job because he's still the right age, with business skills. When you hear that you're leaving Pretoria, you spin Willem's globe with the light inside it. You stare in disgust at the smallest continent, near the bottom, as your parents explain their decision.

"There have been too many attacks on isolated properties since the government abolished the death penalty," Pa begins. "It's the elderly and vulnerable who are being targeted."

"At least something good has come of this," Ma tells you. "Ouma and Oupa are moving into a cottage in a village for senior citizens."

"They'll be safe there," Pa adds, with an apologetic cough. "We won't worry so much."

"Granny Marsh will be okay and she's got everything she needs." Ma's mother lives with her other daughter, outside Cape Town. "And it'll be a new start for you."

You can't believe what they're saying. White South Africans insist that they are used to a certain way of life. They've become accustomed to the aggression and tension.

"*Ja*, well, that's just how it is," they shrug.

"We couldn't go, even if we wanted to," they sigh.

"It's a beautiful land. It's our home. Things will get better."

Ma and Pa used to be among those who laughed at emigrants, saying they were part of the PFP, Packing For Perth. Now they meet these same expats at the mall in Joondalup or catch up for a *braai*. They share biltong and *boerewors* recipes and reminisce about the homeland.

Adrift in a strange country, you stumble about, confused and clutching at anything that seems familiar. At school, the others laugh at your accent, which they don't understand. You look Australian. It's fine until you open your mouth, so you keep silent, pretending that you're not foreign. There's something comforting about overhearing the Afrikaans language in the supermarket. It's a tie to what you've left behind.

You think about how people were treated differently in South Africa, because of their skin colour. Here, you are set apart because of your voice, your culture, your history. You wonder how much worse it would be if it was obvious and your appearance or your clothes gave you away.

Memory settles like specks of sand. Your fingers search for the rocks in your pocket, touch the car keys instead. That habit you developed as a youngster is with you still. You're forever bending down and picking up pretty stones. The instinct turned to obsession on your fieldtrips as a geology student. Several shelves of your home office act as display cases for your collection.

You buy a newspaper because you need something to hold. The headline tells you a prospector is missing in the bush. All you care about is that Ruthie has left. The rest of the day gapes before you, waiting to be filled. You turn up the radio, singing to a Nickelback number from your teenage years. A car comes towards you, an old Ford Escort, pale yellow, and you raise your hand to say

howzit to your close friend, Johan. You and Willem have known him since you were *laaities*, growing up together.

Realisation hits you with a wave of surprise. This cannot be Johan. You are not in the town of your childhood. You are not even in the same bloody country. You're in Australia. You've lived here for years. He's still in Gauteng, with that past and those memories. Willem is dead. There's all the apartheid and post-apartheid shit and everything that could have been. You're nobody. A man bereft.

The house is a shell, sinister in its silence. It's as if you're the lone survivor of a post-apocalyptic disaster. You perch on Ruthie's side of the mattress, stroking the indentations where she lay. On the couch, a magazine is splayed at the fashion pages and her bikini top dangles over the bath taps, smelling of chlorine. You stare at the fabric triangles where her breasts should be.

Tonight you'll face the spaces of her departure. Much later, you may be reassured by signs that she was here. Right now, you can't deal with the absence that permeates your home like an illness. You yearn for the easy companionship of a dog. You have to get out. You don't know what you're seeking or where you're going.

The motorbike tyres hum on bitumen, the road's song as reassuring as the turnoff names you recite as you whoosh by the boundaries of the everyday. You sway with the explosion of speed whenever a truck spurts past on the highway. As you dance to the roar of the giant vehicles, you avoid the random splats of fur and scarlet guts lying flattened in the dust and tufts of grass prickling the margins.

Lily floats into your vision without warning, as incongruous as that ornamental bloom would be against this arid backdrop. For a moment she isn't Ruthie's mother, she's just a woman, the victim in a drama that's played out around the world, with variations. You imagine her, absorbed in capturing a still life, oblivious to intrusions, dipping her brush into the water jar. She's remote in every sense, a lifetime away, cut off from reality and wide open to the risk of violation. You consider the incident, the unsaid possibilities. South African acquaintances send you links to websites with gruesome pictures. People

speculate about what will happen when Nelson Mandela dies. They warn each other about the night of the long knives, fuelling rumours of genocide and ethnic cleansing. Maybe you've failed to read the signs.

If the outback is a state of mind, it's burnt on your inner skull. There are those who regard the barrenness as threatening, but you're not among them. With each kilometre you put between yourself and the city, you become stronger, more sure of who you are. You're liberated by the realm of nature and made bold as you retreat into the alien wilderness. In this uninhabited territory, your thoughts do not morph into each other in confusion. Rather, they are stacked in horizontal order. This is where you find yourself.

As you focus on your surroundings, you observe the changes in the rock formations, noting subtle shifts in shades. Whenever you see interesting deposits, you turn the bike off the main route. Eventually the track peters out, as it's doing now. You cover the rest of the distance on foot, forging a path through the scrub. A couple of ancient gumtrees tower over you. She-oaks lean in on themselves, foliage whispering. Thorny branches conspire to keep you out, the sun bouncing off their leaves. You part them and penetrate the thicket.

It is as if you're tumbling into another era, just as people fall into the derelict mine shafts camouflaged on abandoned leases. As you retrace your footsteps, you kick at stray twigs, alert and careful, watching for the disused workings. The midday air is as hot as a woollen scarf, wound tight around your neck, drawing out the medicinal stench of the eucalypts. Being alone here is dangerous and you quicken the pace, almost ready for lunch at the nearest tiny town.

Thoughts gather in an orange haze, like the small particles in a dust storm clogging your lungs. You pity the weathered fossickers who live solitary on the furthest rims of the town, coughing up dirt, dying alone in their simple camps. The bushes around you smell of stale sweat, releasing body odours that are too intimate for comfort.

In geology, superposition is much the same as repression, one layer piled on top of another, the oldest at the very bottom. Just as you drill downwards in

rock, so you're going backwards in your own time. You secure your memories, as if to mention them is to lose them entirely, holding them in the same way that you use a block of petrified wood as a paperweight to keep pages from blowing off your desk. What you fear is that unpredictable act of lifting up and scattering, the dispersal of your secret self.

Once in a while, the movements of the earth mess with the order and a chunk is displaced, lurching out of line, chaotic. That's the fault.

At the pub last week, a fellow geologist talked about a guy who stopped to relieve himself and spied a boot, attached to a dead leg, buried in the debris. He said the forensic experts estimated the corpse had been hidden in the undergrowth for more than a decade. The rest of the crew scoffed at the tale, but it's credible enough. Prospectors can lose their bearings. You consider the headlines and the missing man.

The imprint of an ancient river is etched in the sand. You follow the zigzag corrugations until you reach an outcrop of quartz. With your hammer, you tap the stone, chipping at the surface. The past has its own sound, echoing hollow beneath what appears to be solid. Time yawns before you. It is as vivid as your recurring nightmare, exposed in parallel sections, revealing the seam of violence.

When you were eight and Willem was ten, an elderly family friend was murdered in her home. You were old enough to commit the gory details to memory, young enough for the act to cut into your psyche. Every Sunday, you'd sat behind her in the same pew at church, close enough to breathe her distinctive aroma of mothballs. During prayers, you leaned forward to examine the liver spots on her neck, visible whenever her ornate formal hat tipped as she bowed her head in worship. The pale brown blotches arranged themselves in random patterns. You joined up the splodges on her skin, saw omens in the irregularities.

Willem overheard Ma telling your Aunty Elna, Pa's sister, all about the attack, over cups of tea and Hertzog cookies. Mrs Venter was discovered in a pool of blood. The crime was as vicious as it was senseless, with scarlet hand prints on the walls, crimson smears on curtains and covers.

"They butchered her." Ma crossed herself as if to ward off evil. "She was hacked to bits."

You imagined Mr Smit in his blue-striped apron, behind his glass shelves, filled with neat packages of meat, bent wings and crooked chops. You disliked the smell and the machine screeching in the back room but it was clean and tidy. Killing seemed a mass of contradictions. When Ma had her afternoon nap, you and Willem read the newspapers. It couldn't be the same woman, it just couldn't. You recalled Granite in the chicken coop on the farm, his mouthful of feathers and the redness.

There must be details that are omitted in reports, angles that journalists decide not to pursue, questions left unasked. You think of the TRC process. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission hearings were meant to bring people together, to unite them as surely as the paths in the new national flag, joining like a Y. Most of the tales were horrific confessions, therapy for coping with what had been kept quiet for too long. You understand how silence spreads its sediment over the facts, eroding them with the passing of the years. Even so, you had no idea such things had been happening in the land of your birth.

When you step into a peaceful clearing between the bushes, the stillness unnerves and disarms you. Natural activity has been suspended. Even the birds and insects have ceased their background noise. There is the same apprehension that you feel when you walk into the stuffy house at night. You bend to pick up a stone, rub the striations for luck and put it in your pocket. A delicate orchid spirals its mauve tendrils through the grass, a visual echo of Lily's trio of paintings in the guestroom. You reach for the flower. The perfume is peculiar and out of place, undercutting the dominant eucalypt scent. An iron taste taints your mouth and you stifle the urge to gag.

Perhaps the past is like a target, with concentric circles, South Africa and apartheid at the centre. Each year in Australia, you've been getting further and further from the bull's eye, your heritage fading. You steady your wrist, brace your forearm. Control your breathing, in and out. Pause midway, as Pa tells you to do. Hold it, slow and steady. You're in charge. You inhale. You exhale.

Pistols were a part of your youth, though Pa has chosen not to keep them in the family home anymore. You're balancing on the back of the moving *bakkie*, careering over bumps and into potholes on the farm road. It's late at night, a spotlight swinging to and fro, picking up the reflected gazes of rabbits, immobilised. You're hunting springhares with Willem and your cousins.

Pa showed you both how to load and use the weapons at a young age. Ma never said so but you knew she didn't like it. Security was Pa's obsession. He locked the hardware and the ammunition in a special safe, hid the key.

"If you keep a gun in the house, you've got to be prepared to use it," he warned.

You and Willem learnt to aim quickly, to shoot without hesitation. Pa and his own father lined up a row of bottles on a crate. You pretended to be Clint Eastwood in *The Good, the Bad and the Ugly*. Willem was always himself. Your older brother was a legend, faster than any movie desperado.

"*Skop, skiet en donder*," Oupa used to yell.

Literally, the Afrikaans phrase means "kick, shoot and thunder". You thought it had to do with the recoil, the feeling in your hand, the crack of the glass ruptured and the roar in your head. Willem told you it was also a reference to the violent film genre. Oupa adored John Wayne reruns on the television. You can almost smell the powder, that scent of fireworks and metal.

If the past is a target, those concentric circles of pain have become your personal hell. You dream of the Highveld storms, the clouds bursting late in the afternoon, big raindrops bringing relief. Willem and Pa count the seconds between the flash of lightning and the crash from the heavens, the sky splitting open. You wish that you still believed in God.

Pa was conscripted into the army in the late 1970s, before you were born. He was called up for regular camps when you and Willem were kids. His khaki uniform was rolled in a matching sack. The same number was sewn on everything. Willem told you soldiers had no names. The pair of you tried on the

hat and the boots, which were too big. What you both really wanted to touch was the gun.

On a few occasions, Ma said Pa had gone "to the Border". You envisaged it as a thin margin on the edge of a page. Willem told you it was the gap between countries. You suspected it was more of an overlap. Apartheid was to blame for the troubles, Ma said. Apart, hate. It was fused to the adult talk of whites and non-whites, Europeans and non-Europeans, the National Party and the Opposition. The grown-ups discussed sanctions and sporting boycotts over their drinks at sunset. They spoke of insurgents and terrorists, bombs and sabotage. As you blew bubbles in your Coca Cola, it seemed as far away as Alaska, less immediate than the conflicts you and Willem created in the sandpit. You romped with Granite and fed him your chips, piled dirt over your hand to fashion a bridge. What you knew about violence was limited, yet it absorbed you. You listened carefully, trying to find the answer between the denials.

"Just because," Ma would say, whenever you asked the wrong questions, after the guests had gone home. Even Willem couldn't tell you what was going on although he liked to act as if he knew. Years later, when you were in high school, Pa gave you a concise version of this period.

"It was a civil war but there was nothing civil about it," he said, tapping out a military tattoo with his knuckles.

Whenever Pa talked about the army, which wasn't often, his voice changed and his gaze wandered, as if his heart was stuck in Angola or a part of him was lost on the Caprivi Strip. His fingers did a nervous dance, jiggling to a fading drumbeat that you couldn't quite catch.

"You know what the sergeant called the English *ous*? *Souties*."

Pa explained that the term was short for *soutpiel*. The image was of a man standing with a foot in the United Kingdom and another in Africa, his penis dangling in the seawater between the continents. Saying the word "salty" was enough to set you and Willem off. You both chuckled about it for months. It's so ridiculous that it still makes you laugh.

Now the expression reminds you of other idioms, like being caught between the devil and the deep blue sea or a rock and a hard place. You are always betwixt and between, neither here nor there.

The first time you went back to South Africa to visit the grandparents and the rest of the family, you felt at home. Everyone was talking about crime and how much the country had changed, complaining about quotas in teams and in business. All you could see and hear and smell was a world you loved and knew: the wild animals, the *veld*, the food, the voices. Pa boasted to the cousins that you were still "fully *tweetalig*". But Afrikaans took you in one direction, English another. These days, it's difficult to pin down your accent and people guess you're German or Dutch. They don't realise that elements of a mysterious place are inside you, the language and the customs residual, coiled up, waiting to pounce.

Stille water, diepe grond, onder draai die duiwel rond. The saying echoes in your head. You hear Ouma intoning it, as if she's mumbling a spell. She begged you not to bottle up your emotions, said it couldn't be healthy, all that repression and control.

When you were a student at the university in Perth, a mate sent you an email featuring a photographic presentation of amazing scenery. It looked like a travel catalogue of perfect destinations. The message unfolded in instalments, as you scrolled through the series of idyllic landscapes: "Australia ... is filled with ... so many beautiful places ... to conceal a corpse."

Now you lean against a broad trunk, hand over your nose. Sticky resin oozes from the bark. Death stirs, rotten and ripe as a vintage cheese. You search the surroundings, convinced the missing prospector has met with an accident or foul play.

Ma often talks about the stress of being uprooted from her native land. You think of her as an elegant tree, unable to tap into its support system or draw sustenance from foreign soil. Pa jokes that a migrant is a mercenary of sorts. His boundaries have shifted and he has switched allegiance. Neither metaphor is right for you.

You were born in 1984, in a private hospital in Pretoria. History books show it was a time of explosions and anger, rallies and riots, banning and burning. A State of Emergency was declared when you were a toddler. Ma tells a story about a shopping centre that blew up, minutes after she'd wheeled you out in the trolley, Willem holding her hand.

He is talking to you, under his breath. He saw them. He turned around and noticed the bodies, flung into the air as the wall fell down, scattered in a hundred pieces. Ma shakes her head when she overhears this exaggeration, says there were no fatalities that time. Similar incidents occurred around the country. It went on for ages. Pa spent months on the border.

You want to know how it happens, how a bomb can get into a store. Pa explains that people leave them in the packages they drop off at the cigarette counter. They are put into the numbered pigeon holes for storing the things you can't take into the shops. You'd be given a ticket, which was returned when you collected your goods on the way out. You clasp the grimy plastic square in your fingers, the corners bent. You're holding it for Ma, clutching at potential oblivion. Reality can shatter a supermarket aisle at any minute.

"Surprise," Willem whispers.

When life as you know it really does implode, it's not spectacular. You have to escape, to evacuate your own soul. It's as if you're a survivor in a tragedy, the grocery store empty and the products about to be blown off the shelves. You hear someone counting down to detonation and you put your hands over your ears, as tragic as a boy in a trolley, holding a ticket.

You no longer speak Afrikaans. It's a deliberate decision. Your identity was bound up with Willem. You were Niemand's little brother. Now you are just nobody. As kids, it was always Willem in the sunlight, dazzling everyone with his brilliance, the golden child, in all his glory, head of every sporting team, president of each club, the dux of the junior school. You have hidden in the shadows for so much of your life. Like the understudy, you wait in the wings, second rate, second best, the second son. You even start to think of yourself in the second person.

As a geologist, you know about foundations and intrusions, cross cutting to reveal folds and faults. You keep going deeper and deeper on your quest for answers, sifting through what is invisible on the surface. You try to draw an analogy between yourself and a fossil. You are trapped between the strata, sandwiched between before and after, wedged in the interstices of the moment.

When you hear the swarm of flies, you swallow hard. You tear at the tangle of leaves and the branches claw your face. As the putrid odour hits you, you expect the worst. The past is subterranean and not to be excavated. You feel as if a hammer is chipping at your core. The din reaches a crescendo. You vomit, resume the search.

Something lurches inside you, seismic and structural, as inexorable as the earth shifting its plates with a mighty groan. The roar is building in your head, your pulse pounding with a demented rhythm. You're a child, rushing to the hiding place he always favoured as a boy, the sound of the shot still ringing in the air, guiding you.

Willem is propped against the tree trunk, the gun fallen from his hand. His blood is like the spilt brandy on the tablecloth, fanning outwards on his white shirt. It's a bud opening petals of red, merging the life force with the African soil.

But there isn't a body. You are as lonely as a stone, picked up and relocated, deposited where you do not belong. This is no man's land.

CIKISWA

29 September 2000

Grahamstown, South Africa

Memory is stored in these boxes we are making, these fragile receivers of all that is most important to us. They lie on the floor, unfinished and rough. The outlines of the faces and the selves we have created in our portraits stare back at us, hinting at personalities and character traits. Time lines unfurl down the sides, long ropes of dates and decisions, births and deaths, unions and separations, victories and failures.

We cover the boxes in words, in pictures, in assorted decorations. Each one is very different, but the essence is the same. These cardboard structures hold unseen worlds as well as our few material possessions. We pack into them our passion and we imbue them with our pain. The things that we deposit in the box have been touched by our fingers. They have been close to our hearts. We fill the containers with the letters and the photographs, the documents and the diaries, the trinkets and the trivia. These are the things that we put in the box.

As we paint and we express our messages for our loved ones, we tell our stories and we share our lives. We are inside the box, merging with the papers and slipping into the images. Our stories are in the box, rubbing against its flimsy walls. The box can wrap itself around the everyday things. The box can be home to what is most dear. The box can be a prison or an escape. The box can be laws and regulations. The box is closed and sealed. The box can contain a person or shelter emptiness. The box can become a monument to vitality or yet another coffin.

Even in our dreams, we wind our way, solemn and slow, spreading towards the cemetery, rippling like a dark river in our dress of black. The sun sinks into the fabric, yet we are as cold as the insides of our houses on a winter's night. Our numbers swell as we move through the nameless streets, collecting an individual here and a couple there.

We are many, but indeed we are one body. This is what we murmur in the church on Sunday mornings. It is what we enact in the community in all we do. We are united in our grief and our agony, just as we come together in our happiness and our delight. Our hurting is carried on the music of our voices, haunting. It is in the crying, above the hymns that float and soar like the birds in the sky. Our pleasure lifts and flies, swooping on the melodies and ascending beyond the clouds. We stretch the shivering wings of our song, trying to reach the highest notes.

At the funerals, reality clutches us in its cruel grip. Feathered freedom is clipped and we are caught. We shuffle forward, our shoulders crushed and our feet dragging. Our knees are heavy, but we keep going. The disease casts a thin, grey shadow over our lives. This shadow is not heavy. Even so, it is a burden, with its own peculiar weight. We feel it in the ceremonies, one after the other, grave on grave, without rest. We do not want to be burying our young. All the time, we are burying them, giving our flesh to the soil. We weep for these orphans, the babies left behind, the dead whose numbers are swelling every day.

The hole in the ground is freshly dug, soil heaped to the sides. It yawns before us like a bored monster with a very big mouth. We feed it our children and our parents. The beast consumes our beautiful and our plain ones, eating the exceptional and the ordinary, spitting out nothing but empty shells. That giant gash in the earth, it is always hungry and it does not discriminate. It never seems to tire of swallowing these fragile bodies, one after the other, weekend after weekend. We grow weary of this terrible ritual.

Ashes to ashes, dust to dust. Ashen is the colour of the sick, these precious ones being buried. We have watched them growing ever paler, ever greyer. They are like the blaze which is no longer burning. They are as dead as the embers that greet us every morning when we rise from our sleep. Their skin has turned to cinders, the flesh to softest charcoal.

This is the shade of the square of velvet, tinged with death and the hue of what remains. The square is a patch from a quilt we have been sewing, the leftover square that we did not need. We rub it with our fingers and we brush it against our faces. This is what she puts in the box, the pretty girl, the woman who

was the beauty of the village. She rests the velvet square at the bottom of the cardboard, smooths it flat, a lining and a base for what will follow.

What comes afterwards, without exceptions, is the funeral ritual. In the beginning, the sickness wanted silence. Silence is feeding the secrets and making the virus stronger. Now we are speaking out. Its power is shrinking. We have beaten the white man's government. So why can we not get rid of this thing, this thing that is killing our people?

Our president is watching us. We see his solemn face on the billboard when we wait in the queue to catch the taxi. "AIDS is not someone else's problem. It is my problem. It is your problem." That is what it says in big writing. The red ribbon we know. That red ribbon is the blood of our people, the people who are dying in the thousands.

AIDS is not someone else's problem. It is ours. We confront it as we stagger from our sleep, wiping sticky eyes, stirring ahead of the cock that crows and the hens that cackle. Before the ball of gold breaks over the hill, we are up and about. We start the morning fires with twigs and our precious matches. We carry the pots of water and we heat them up on paraffin stoves. We boil the tea and we prepare the *umphokoqo*, if we have any left. Often there is only the black tea for breakfast.

Far away, the tips of the church spires and the tops of the trees are protruding from the valley. Fog covers our city, eRhini, hiding the rich people's houses, the offices and the shops. It is another world, the place under the blanket of that mist, with the security of wealth and the privileges of money. Apartheid is supposed to have gone, but the divisions are still there, entrenched in our society like the wrinkles on our brows.

We fold the clothes that have been drying in the night. We sweep the sandy dirt from the area beyond the front door. We get our children ready and we feed them if we can. We send them to school with clean shirts, pants, skirts and blazers. We keep our houses spotless and we keep our yards tidy. We have learnt that cleanliness is next to Godliness. The walls solidify in the increasing light, the

walls covered with the pages of catalogues from the supermarket and the pictures of the products that we cannot afford to buy.

As dawn's glint begins to sparkle off metal and plastic, we walk slowly in the direction of the taxi rank, following the shortcuts through the scraggly bushes. We are walking every day. Among us are those who are fortunate enough to have jobs. Every single day of the week, we are walking. Some of us have Sunday off, to go to church and to spend with our own families, but not all of us. Wearing holes in our shoes and hurting our feet, we are walking. We come from different sides of the township, hailing our acquaintances, everybody walking. We are getting nearer and nearer to each other, our paths meeting as we close in on the taxi rank, all walking. We cross and we merge, like the trickling streams that flow in flood into a single mighty river. We know that there is strength in numbers, like the units of the soldiers in the army. We have each other, as our mothers had each other, throughout the generations. Time flows, the river eternal. We are patient as Job.

"*Molo*," we are shouting. "*Molweni*," we greet. We have passed the dwellings in eRhini's nameless streets, numbered with the letters of the alphabet. We have cut by the ditches of stagnant water and sewage, waving the small children away from the filth. We do not pinch our noses. Nor do we complain about the stench that chokes us and creeps into our lungs. With every humble home we leave behind, the other realm comes closer. We have moved beyond Fingo Village and the houses built on top of the old cemetery, the living coexisting with the dead. We have tried to find hope in the buildings that look the same, these rows upon rows of tin and board, yet we feel the roofs pushing down, unyielding as bullies and the floors rising up unsteadily, like indecisive fools. We smell the curls of the wood smoke that linger everywhere, thick as the fog, and the odour comforts us with its reminder of warm fires and the love of family and friends.

The wind, it is dancing in the trees and the plants as we walk, stirring up the packets we have thrown out, rolling the empty containers we no longer want and tugging at our skirts. Old shopping bags, worn thin as lace, are pinned to fences and stuck on bushes as we walk. The empty cartons and bottles blow to

and fro, nudging at our ankles. We walk. The tins and the cans, they rattle backwards and forwards, clinking like chains. We walk. Gusts of air tease the scarves on our heads. We do not stop, we walk.

As we wait finally, not walking, for the taxis, we talk and time unwinds around us, slow and relentless as the river, unfolding like the ribbon. Time is infinite and we see its signs in the seasons as they are passing. Winter yields to spring and spring is becoming summer. Always the river that is eternity rolls on, a dirty brown torrent or a crystal surface reflecting blue skies. Time has its own rhythm and it blends with ours as ours blurs with its. Time is in the breeze that flaps the packets and in the words that we share. Time is in the light that travels across the heavens and slips into our clothing. Time is in the sickness that squeezes our chests and keeps us busy on the weekends.

She is late, Cikiswa, whose name means Pretty. Cikiswa, our lovely sister, the one some know as Nolubabalo or Grace. That woman who was the beauty of the village is growing old too soon. We hear her quick, hard breath when she is rushing, hah-hah-hah. Some days she cannot carry her bags. She has four children to support, with no husband and she is so weak. Eish, just over 30 in years and inside she is older than a grandmother.

But still she turns heads and the greedy eyes of the men will be following her as she makes her way to the taxi. We imagine them, resting their hunger on her buttocks, playing over her breasts, stroking her long legs. They are conjuring up her body under the pale blue cloth. They do not notice the sores on her skin, dry and itching, or the spots in her mouth. They do not smell the scent of the sickness that clings to her like a desperate companion and they do not hear how her breath comes hard and quick, hah-hah-hah. They do not taste the bitterness of the aloes or the medicine coating her sweet tongue.

The foolish men, they do not listen to the cloth that is whispering its name as she walks. Shweshwe, delicate from the years of washing and scrubbing, soft as a woman's warning. She wears a scarf wrapped over her head, casual as a caress of fabric. The men are not aware of the hair she is losing, the hair that falls on her pillow, suggestive as a lover's touch.

All they are seeing is what she once was, the beauty of our village. They do not realise that the girl who won the hearts of everyone with her charm and her grace has gone. That wild and wayward creature none could catch, that trembling buck with the gaze that froze the hunter, has been tamed. In her place is a woman, trapped high on the mountains of a terrible sickness. She is a traveller staring over a steep cliff, marvelling at the strangeness before her.

Cikiswa is sociable and she spreads her affections, like a butterfly flitting from plant to plant. We guess that she is conversing with those she meets on the track to the taxi rank. We hear her singing with the children who are playing their games before picking up their satchels and dawdling down the hill. We observe her hand on the shoulder of an old beggar, patting his torn coat as she reassures him with her touch. We feel her in the insistent wind, the wind that shakes the flowers of the weeds, the weeds that peep through the hard stones.

Clouds tumble in the sky as she walks closer to us, her breath coming quicker, hah-hah-hah. We hear it, a trembling draught or a whistling wheeze, so quick, so frail. She is flowing with the wind, the wind that shakes the flowers, bending with the breeze, like the trees that sway their stems, gathering strength. In this weather, we find it difficult to know what is still and what is in motion, the same way these clouds confuse us when they roll in different directions. Cikiswa is near, she is late and still she is plucking pale pink blossom from the branches.

Suddenly, she is beside us, laughing mid-song, bright as a bird with red and green feathers. From under the fold of fabric on her head, hints of peppercorn hair are protruding. This is a cloth we do not know, silky and slippery smooth, perhaps a hand-me-down from one of the haughty madams living on the rich folks' hill. It yearns to be fingered, this cool waterfall of cloth, yet it slides slyly away.

Cikiswa warms us up with her smile. We glance at the body she has swathed in the traditional manner. She is inviting and alluring, dipped in indigo, a gift wrapped in beautiful paper with the patterns repeating, over and over, insistent as a *Gogo* mumbling. Her skin crinkles when she giggles like a girl, like the pretty girl of the village. She is teasing the taxi driver as we pull ourselves into the ancient vehicle, revealing her white teeth. She is sniffing and snorting through

her nose, very loudly, as she does when she is excited or agitated. She sounds like a horse but nobody else seems to hear the laboured breathing, hah-hah-hah. We are listening for it, squeezed together in the little bus, and we are gasping with her. AIDS is not someone else's problem, it is ours.

The large purple dice hanging from the rear view mirror begin to sway and bounce and the taxi is off, without warning, bumping over the potholes that pock the streets. We put our lives in the hands of God, not these insane drivers who race down the main roads as if they are aiming to hit the pedestrians who are strolling like stray cattle, wandering where they should not be. These drivers, they apply the brakes only if there is truly no choice and these brakes are not always reliable. Kwaito music blares from the speakers, pumping through the minivan, the pounding sound loud as the bright shirts of the *tsotsis* who are checking out our bags and our packages. We shout over the throb of this racket, which is pulsing into our heads and pushing its nonsense through our blood. We ride as far as we can, climbing out at the informal bus stop on the corner near the hairdresser's salon. We express our collective disapproval as the taxi shudders towards the CBD, which is what we call the central business district.

It is a short walk to the shelter, but the laneway is so steep that there is a sign forbidding the donkey carts here. Cikiswa is panting like a dog, out of breath, as we approach The Haven of St Mary Magdalene and the lime-washed walls which enclose our sanctuary halfway up the hill. This is our refuge, our place of safety where we regroup our forces in the ongoing fight against the disease. We are survivors, we must endure, and we support each other as we battle for our health, our dignity and our lives. A person is a person because of another person. Our tasks are to raise awareness and to build up hope.

We unlock the padlock on the bolt of the security gate and open the solid wooden door, which creaks as it jams against the floor, resistant as a naughty child. The memory boxes are waiting in the room where we left them, incomplete and unfinished, like our lives. Hundreds are the hours we have sat in this circle, our feet almost touching each other's feet. God is watching over us and from above we are like the petals of a flower, splayed out on the wooden floor.

In the early days, before the boxes came, we were reaching for the store of tiny beads, the red and the white. We extended our arms like long beaks, dipping into the centre. We threaded the beads onto the string, twelve across and nineteen down. We were following the pattern, one white, two red, six white, two red, one white, every row shifting, until the whole became stamped in our actions. We made the key rings and the brooches attached to safety pins, the products to be sold to the tourists and the foreigners. We transformed the beads into the symbol of the red ribbon, looping and crossing over, the ends going down. It folds itself like a scarf, that red ribbon searching for a neck. That red ribbon is our symbol of solidarity.

Cikiswa's fingers, they are twitching and shivering when she drags the beads onto the string. They shake, every time, they shake. She is not well, not well. We see her hands, scrubbed and clean, the nails pale moons at the end of those long fingers. Now she places one of the very first key rings that she made into the box. We have produced endless replicas of the ribbon, passing them back and forth between us, letting them flow in our hands, the pattern red on white. The beaded ribbons have grown, small as one, powerful when massed, like the voices rising in unison as we open the windows and invite the sun to enter our sanctuary. The ribbons, they have become a tidal wave of colour, the modern Blood River, the red that is washing through our country.

This is what she puts in the box, an imperfect key ring, her early attempt at beading the ribbon. The stitches are too loose and some of the colours are the wrong way around. She lays the symbol in the corner, on top of the square of ashen velvet.

What we need is a rainbow fabric, to reflect the promise and the many colours of our nation, we who do not lose hope. Every day, we hold onto it and, for many of us, hope is all we have. AIDS is not a death sentence and that is the slogan on the poster, the words that are pinned on the board in the kitchen. We keep that message, we who are positive, next to the kettle where we make the tea and the coffee. The sugar has finished but we are focussing on life. We are trying to stay strong and we are striving to be healthy.

There is a new poster on the other side of the board, next to the pamphlets with information about the disease that attacks the immune system. "No glove, no love." That is what it says and it is for the condom, the condom that the men refuse to wear. Those stupid men, they argue that wearing the condom is like making love through a glass window and they want flesh on flesh. We know that their blood is dirty, yet what can we do? A woman cannot force a man to wear a condom. He will hit her, he will call her bad names and he will ask her who she has been sleeping with that he has to wear the condom. These men, they do not take the test.

Gospel music is playing on the radio. We believe in God, the Lord who will save us. He is the light of the world. We have left the doors open, to allow the sun to shine into this room, this room that is the heart of our haven. The paint is peeling off the walls like dry skin but outside in the garden there is nature's abundance. Jacarandas are flowering and the little children they are laughing with the buzzing of the bees. It is infectious, that sound, it soothes our spirits and it makes us smile. There is a reason for everything, we have a purpose and the sickness is not without meaning. Cikiswa, who has the voice of an angel, is unfolding her notes, reaching higher than the choir on the radio, her hymns feeling for the heavens. The sound soars and glides, floating up to the white puffs of airy cloud, those balls of cottonwool tumbling in the blue sky. She says that the Lord is our strength and the Lord is our song.

We are the fluttering petals of a giant bloom, sitting in our circle, soothed by the rhythms of that holy song growing softer. The gentle hum in Cikiswa's throat is the accompaniment to our day. We are braiding each other's hair and we are telling stories. We have liked to gossip in this same way since we were girls. We know who is sleeping with someone else's husband. We are hearing about the woman who ran off with her father-in-law. We are tut-tutting and we are smiling, our hands are raised to our mouths in mock shock. We are the voices of the moment, merging with the strains of the music, and we are the voices of the past, singing the song of our ancestors.

Cikiswa has brought the looking glass, the mirror in its round plastic frame with the handle. We wish it was whole and not broken, with that crack

forking like the split of lightning in darkest night. The glass, it is not clear, it is frosted and blackening on the edges, but what it gives back is a wonderful sight. Cikiswa, our sister, who was the pretty girl of the village, is staring at her image, just as we all peered into the river when we were children, dallying on its banks.

She has the sort of face that moves with the moments, with her moods, with the weather. The features are not perfect in themselves. Those large brown eyes are skew and the cheekbones are chiselled sharp, dangerously so. That regal nose is much too wide, even by African standards. Her broad lips, they stretch and strain, closed over big teeth. Fortunately, each attribute is a member of the group: pleasant enough taken alone, amazing as a whole. The eyes pair up and sparkle like jewels when she greets us. The cheekbones catch the rays on their sculpted planes. The nose is generous, gracious and trustworthy as an old friend. The lips are the most alive of all, rippling and reaching in various directions, like the banks of that river where we played. And her tongue! Her tongue is the water flowing sweet over rocks. Dimples show themselves in the curves of her upturned mouth, pools of joy revealed in liquid light.

Cikiswa has kept her mesmerising beauty through 30-something summers, though the sickness has lefts its marks. Like a violent lover, it has squeezed her tight around the throat. The large brown eyes, they popped forward before slipping deeper into their sockets, where they skulk, concealed in shadow. The cheekbones are blades, dipped in blood. The nose appears even bigger than before, a giant in a little room with nowhere to hide. And those lips! Those lips have become the riverbanks in flood, swollen to the point of breaking. White spots lurk in the cave of her mouth. Debris bobs on the roaring water of her tongue and two of her teeth have floated clean away. Her dear dimples have dried up, empty as dams in the drought, crusting into sores. *Eish*, Cikiswa!

Now she lowers the looking glass, shakes her head and sighs, turns it over, so the mirror is towards the fabric of ash, that velvet grey. This is what she puts in the box, the glass, the red ribbon key ring and the square from the quilt, the quilt that we were creating from leftover scraps of material, from what remains.

This city has scarred her, Cikiswa, our sister, just as it has marked us, this small city with its poverty and its stench of unemployment. It has thrust its grime

under her skin, getting its pollution into her lungs. The smoke has seeped into the peppercorns of her hair and it has burnt her eyes, stinging them red. That smell of the wood fire clings to her clothes, that acrid scent which holds tight, just like the babies that did not want to let us go in the mornings when we had to go to work. We had to bid them goodbye, to harden our hearts to the tears rolling and to ignore the globs of mucous sliding from their nostrils, needing to be wiped. For years we had to leave these precious children, flesh of our flesh, in the patient arms of our mothers and our grandmothers, each other's mothers and grandmothers.

Before the virus began to spread its sickness through the community, many of us had jobs. We have been domestic workers, taking the knowledge of our own homes to the expensive houses on the opposite hill or in the valley. We have left our children, we have left our mothers. We have walked, the soles of our shoes worn to paper, our feet weary and our knees heavy, until we arrived at those fancy places where we received the infants of the madams, those madams dressed in expensive clothes. We extended our arms, our always outstretched arms, the arms that reach to the centre of this circle, those beaks dipping up and down. We took the children, we took the plump children with the milky faces and the watery blue eyes, we took them, those children and we abandoned our own.

Being a servant is not good and we know that too well, better than any man. It is not right, all that bending and buckling before another person. We have scrubbed the filthy floors of the families we did not want to know, bodies aching against the hard tiles and muscles locked as tight as the fists we dared not form. Our own home surfaces never gleamed and glowed quite the way these did, no matter how we spat and we polished and we rubbed. These people who employed us, they absorbed the best years of our lives, our energy, our youth, and ground it into dust, ashes to ashes. We returned home late, often, much too often, long after the birds had settled in the trees, weary and worn down, lacking vitality. They sucked the very marrow from our bones, our bones that are growing brittle with every bitter thought and each interminable day.

Ah, we do not wish to complain, though we talk about the problems of the past as we do our work. We are time and we are timeless, our limbs stretching and

moving, ticking slowly like the arms of the clock on the church tower. The hours chime from all directions, here in this town in the Eastern Cape, this City of Saints, with so many places of worship. We are eternity and we are unhurried, as we speak of our old jobs and our children and we listen to the laughter drifting in from the garden. The Madams did not want to have us in their homes when they found out about the virus. They fear the disease and they expect the worst of us. They are going to foreign lands, to get away from the crime and the sickness. They are weeping for the land that is theirs as much as it is ours. We are replaceable, even those who had jobs that were kept in the family, passed from mother to daughter, sister to cousin.

Cikiswa, she is one who likes to bring her toddler to the shelter. This day, she has left him behind with the grandmother, that poor deaf woman who cannot hear her own daughter's exquisite song. Little Thando, usually he is cocooned in a towel and tied to Cikiswa's back, as snug as a fat caterpillar that has chewed up the greenery. He is always quiet, a peaceful boy, sleeping or awake, a gift from God. Luthando means love and he is Cikiswa's darling, her cherished lastborn, the baby she thought she could not have. When he opens his eyelids we see his father, when he grins coyly we spy his mother's dimples. He is happiest if we are singing, his smile widening as his mother's voice soars towards the clouds.

This is the white plastic tag they put on the baby's leg and Cikiswa tells us it has Luthando Thembalethu Songongo written on it. Thembalethu is our hope and this baby is our love and our hope. His weight at birth is there, 2.1kg, and also the name of his mother, Cikiswa Nolubabalo Songongo. This is good, we have heard of babies being muddled in the wards, the wards that are always full of people coughing and infants crying for the milk of their mothers. Cikiswa is lifting it to her lips, this identity bracelet, so ordinary and so important. She places it on the dusty velvet, beside the key ring and the looking glass cracked. These are the things that she puts in the box.

She did not know she was carrying the sickness, back then in '98, when the government decided not to introduce the AZT, the azidothymidine. They were very quiet on the subject of mother to child transmission. She discovered, like so many of us, that she was carrying the virus when she went to the day hospital and

they did all the check-up tests. The nurses were getting scared of delivering the babies. There were rumours of doctors who had been splashed with infected blood. Many medical workers were afraid of the risks, even with the masks and the gloves, the faces and the hands covered.

We think of the new poster in the kitchen, the one saying "no glove, no love". Cikiswa, she was afraid of Mandilakhe's anger, too afraid of his anger to ask her husband to use the condom. Ah, Luthando, he is indeed her gift of love, the baby she thought she would never have after the assault, the thrashing that left her crumpled and bloodied, the terrible night she almost lost her other son.

Eish! What can we say of that man, Mandilakhe? He was one of the heroes, but we cannot pretend he was the right sort of husband, a kind father, a good son-in-law. Mandilakhe was a fighter, a striker on the field, a soccer player with a fondness for the martial arts and kick boxing, not a large man but strong and always on the brink of violence. He was looking for an excuse to fight, all the time, over any little thing. That type of man we know too well. His rage is like the mercury in the thermometer, dangerous if it is spilt and hard to contain when broken on the floor, moving and changing shape.

He had a reputation as a lady killer, even before he removed her from the village, Cikiswa, sister of our heart. Mandilakhe was the sort who has to have a woman. We know it is like an itch and they have to scratch, these men with so much fire, so much passion. Mandilakhe snatched her from her family, when she was not much more than a child. He abducted a young girl and brought her back as a woman, his bride! Ah, we remember how Mandilakhe treated her, from the very beginning, as if she was a possession, a valuable treasure he had stolen and would not share. He kept her captive in his hut for three weeks while he started talking about the *lobola* and the amount of cattle she was worth, carrying out the marriage negotiations with the male members of her kin. She was his prisoner and she was frightened, though she insisted he did not harm her, not in the early days. He wanted to keep her hidden, to have her for himself alone.

The people of our community were furious, especially the men. We tried to calm them in the ways we know best, with the gentle strokes and the soft words. They were picking up their sticks, ready to find him and beat him for his

bad behaviour. There is a method for everything and he did not follow the convention. If there is one thing our men cannot abide, it is when someone goes against our culture.

There is a practice we call *ukuthwala*, where the girl is pursued and carried off. It is a custom that happens with or without the consent of her parents. Those who steal the young woman, they must tell the parents of the deed, straight away after the abduction, so the mother and the father are not worrying. This practice was fine, a long time ago, for different reasons, but it has lost its traditional meaning and its original purpose.

We have experienced so much, over the passing decades. Some of us are very old, in years and in the spirit. We are going blind and we are becoming deaf, as deaf as Cikiswa's mother who has never had the use of her ears. We are fully aware, we know what is happening, we who are surrounded by crime and violence, living with corruption. We are witnessing transformation and we are part of the change. We are hearing the stories of old men, luring young girls with food and lies. We are seeing how these men are kidnapping the girls when they walk from school. We weep for this stealing of their innocence, the robbing of their childhood and this act of forcing them to do the things they do not want to do.

"AIDS is not a death sentence." It is ignorance of the sickness that is causing the damage. There are those who believe that sex with a virgin is a cure for the disease, the disease that is killing our people. To be one hundred percent sure that they have found a real virgin, they are even forcing themselves on the babies, the babies that are clean and pure. We live with rape, murder and theft, it is in the neighbourhood and we have come to think of it as the normal behaviour of certain bad people. That is an ugly thing, what they are doing to our children.

Keeping quiet about rape is never good. We know it is all about the power. Some men are scared of women and what we can accomplish because women are strong. Men have the muscles, but it is we who endure. We have put up with so much. We discuss it among ourselves and we learn how so very many of us have been abused, in one way or the other. Our stories feed into each other, with minor variations in the start, the middle and the end. After rape, we find it

hard to breathe, as if there is a dusty rag tied across the mouth. We feel dirty and there is not enough water to wash away the shame. Real men do not rape. Hah! That is what it says in the advertisement. These men, many are raping the babies. They are also forcing themselves on the elderly and the ones with disabilities. *Eish*!

Cikiswa is putting the pamphlet in the box. It is from the visit of a counsellor, who talked to us of violence and putting an end to the abuse. A woman is being raped every 26 seconds in South Africa. That is what it says in these strange words, these signs that she can read but most of us cannot, Cikiswa, our beautiful interpreter. She glues the information booklet to the side of the cardboard, away from the square of velvet that feels like moss, far from the key ring and the broken mirror. Now she sticks two small photographs, one on either end, beside those strange words, rippling on the paper like snakes and crawling like insects.

Ah, Lindiwe and Ntombekhaya, the daughters of the sister of our heart. They could be twins, so close are they in age and appearance, near identical. The pictures show the similarity. We approve of their high foreheads, their eyes eager to learn and to please, their dimples that are flashing from the corners of their mouths. They are dressed in their clean white shirts, with the black pinafore, ready for learning. The photos are cut above the breasts, hiding the thing that sets them apart.

We choose the names of our children with care. We pause during the pregnancy, listening for the signs. We allow God's divine purpose to be revealed in the meanings. Lindiwe is the awaited one and she was a long time coming. Mandilakhe was beginning to think he had taken a wife who was unable to bear a child. He was looking at other women while Cikiswa was working at her first madam's house. Nonyameko is Lindiwe's second name and it is true, it is right, she is patient and in no hurry. She is a teenager now, 13 and she is menstruating. We talk of these things and we celebrate them, we who have known the agony of giving birth and the joy of suckling babies.

Ntombekhaya is the home girl, also called Nozuko, meaning she is with glory. That one, she is 11 or 12, we cannot remember exactly. Ntombi is holding

on tightly to the things of her youth, skipping with a rope and playing games with her friends. They are getting on well with each other, the daughters. Their mother is so very proud of them because they are clever and doing well at school. They are not interested in the boys, not even Lindiwe who is crossing into her womanhood. We are fond of them, we who appreciate good manners. We are happy with their politeness and the respect they are showing us. We are glad that they are not plain, yet we are pleased they are not as mesmerising as their mother.

Ah, Cikiswa, the pretty girl of the village. We adore her, but there are those who do not like her. Women can be envious and beauty can be a curse. Look at her, walking through the years, tall and elegant, even when she is carrying the wood for the fire or balancing the bucket on her head as she returns from the communal tap. We watch her, standing outside in the garden, important as the child of a chief, her back straight and her arms swaying to the strains of our gospel music. She is lovely, now as then, the exquisite song escaping from her body and the breezes touching her skin, as eager to caress her as the flocks of admirers.

When we were young, just little girls like Lindiwe and Ntombekhaya, we wanted to romp in the big green park and test out the swings. We dreamed of pushing each other, backwards and forwards, legs straight forward and stiff, flying through the wind. We desired nothing more than to roll on the prickly mat of grass and to hide behind the forests of trees with their thick branches of leaves. We did not understand why we were forbidden to be there when other children were having fun and running free.

At Christmas, we visited the sea and the waves were calling to us, at once terrifying and tempting, blue and green and grey, spraying huge and rolling smaller. Many of us had never seen such things before. We were amazed to taste the salt in the water. The shore stretched, open and empty before us, beckoning, suggesting wonderful opportunities to pass the weeks, far away from routines and what we knew. We were ready to strip down to our underwear, to splash each other with water and to yell with delight. Others were already there, doing just that, the drops sparkling in the sunlight. We wanted nothing more than to be like those children, to be there with them.

It was not allowed. We were shut out and kept away, excluded by the laws, those endless laws, stretching bigger and broader than the parks and the seas. Our parents tried to explain that only some people could go there and that there was another beach further down the coast, beyond the bushes, just for us, but it made no sense. There were benches, at the sea and at the park, with words painted on them, Blankes/Whites on one side and Nie Blankes/Non-Whites on the other. It seemed as if everything in the world was being chopped into two halves, like a piece of fruit split down the middle and we got the part with the worms and the bad flavour. We wept tears of sheer frustration. It was much later when we understood the discrimination in all its rottenness.

As we grew older, we hated the double standards and the separate paths. We were forced to receive the inferior Bantu education. We gave up our books, leaving school sooner than we wished to do. We had to help our mothers when they worked in other people's houses. Every road seemed to lead nowhere good.

When we were the age of Lindiwe and Ntombekhaya, we were never asked what we wanted to do when we grew up. We were not questioned about our deepest dreams. We accepted we would be domestic workers. We would be like all the women before us and before them. We believed we had no choices.

Today we can see that there were advantages, back then. We remember when it was safe to sleep outside and stare at the stars. We remember when the elders told us tales around the twinkling fire. We remember when their wise words were not drowned out by the din from the tavern. We remember when we knew our neighbours and upheld our traditions. Ah, how our society has changed. It is torn between the traditional and the modern.

Some of our customs remain the same. We see the young boys going to the mountain, painted with white clay to ward off evil spirits. We have heard about the dangers of drunken guardians, of initiates taking alcohol and drugs for the pain. We have picked up tales of the bleeding that does not stop and the penises rotting when the thong is too tight. Ah, we are not supposed to know of such matters. What happens on the mountain and in the bush, it stays on the mountain and in the bush, and yet we know these things, we who are mothers, who do not want to let our children suffer. The ceremony of the cutting is

symbolic of the rift between a man and his mother. We cry at sunrise when the *ingcibi* passes. We wait in the home, praying for the son's safe return. We do not want his clothes dumped on the doorstep and the wailing that follows bad news. We hear the men singing the war song, the song of victory. We glance at the new man wrapped in a fresh blanket, the sticks poking the air. It is our way.

We are the past, the passage that travels to the ancestors and the earliest stirrings of our people. We have lived through the massacre of Sharpeville and the student uprising of Soweto. We have burnt the pass books, those documents we had to show wherever we went, that piece of paper that restricted movement. We have marched to the government buildings in defiance and the women have never been lagging. We know the language of the struggle, the shuffle of the *toyi-toyi* and we have been the protest.

Mandilakhe, we are meaning to speak of Mandilakhe. Our thoughts keep moving to other places, other ways and other things, turning from him like a boy from his mother. What makes a man so very bitter? What leaves that bad taste in his mouth?

We were there when they tortured the comrades, we who have lived through apartheid. We have stared at the police driving their vans along the wide dirt tracks, big enough for the tanks of the army. We have sworn at them, urging them to turn back their *kwela-kwelas*, thrown stones at those awful vehicles. We have heard them crushing what was precious to us, those police and the army, like crunching pebbles under hard boots. We know that life is as fragile as egg shells and the yolk can pour out from the fine skin. Our people became as the sand or the dust. The enemy held us in their hands and they let us fall through extended fingers. Through those open fingers, we fell, we fell.

We have seen the spotlight, swinging from the fort on the opposite hill. It was reaching into our houses, a long yellow finger, that beam prodding and prodding, an eye searching and searching, never blinking. We suffered the activities of the small hours, the indignities of the front doors broken down and kicked off their hinges, the terror of torches poked in our faces. We remember the pleas and the screaming, the desperate cries of our community cutting through the dark, echoing from one home to the next.

We recognise the pattern of pain, an old hurt etched in the mind and carved deep on the heart. The noises of the night are different now, but they are no less disturbing. Our houses are so very close together, with the common walls or only the smallest of alleyways between them. We hear the ragged breathing, the shrieks of anguish and the desperate nightmares of the sickness taking hold in a fever. We feel the virus in the sweat that coats our skin and clogs up the pores, the fungus of the thrush that grows like a white plant spreading and the hand that squeezes and twists inside the lungs. We smell the odours of the putrid pus, the strong urine and the overpowering diarrhoea, the cruel scents of the infections wafting in all directions of the township. When we close our eyes, the virus is still with us, loitering like the uninvited guest at the party, as unwanted and insistent as apartheid, which was in our lives until 1994.

Yes, we must speak about that man, that Mandilakhe, though it hurts our sister. He was one of the neighbours being taken away for interrogation, his wrists bent tight behind his back. We know that there is always supposed to be a lawful procedure but they did not all return, these heroes of the struggle, and so many were sent home broken. We have lived through oppression, when they used the elements to overwhelm our heroes. Water and air, earth and fire, light and darkness, they turned nature against us. They drowned us and they suffocated us, they buried us and they burned us, they blinded us and they abandoned us to despair.

We have lived and died through apartheid, over and over, so why must we be fighting this thing, the thing that is killing our people? It should be enough that we have overcome an evil system. Now AIDS is our problem but we are not letting it win, even though we are afraid of this sickness that has no cure. We knew what we had to kill with the previous evil and we put an end to a wicked system. We are learning about the sickness, arming our minds with the knowledge of the disease. We are building a bridge between life and death. We are sharing our stories and offering our truths. We do not give up easily.

Ah, Mandilakhe, husband of Cikiswa, father to her children, he had a mission. He was a fighter as a schoolboy in ’76, the year when the youth took a stand for our people. We remember the times when he was missing and that was

not uncommon with the activists. The comrades would get a signal and go into hiding, at short notice. There were nights when he would be attending a meeting in the church hall and not return, or when he would slip out to the shebeen for a drink and come back months later.

Cikiswa is adding the marriage certificate to the box, the legal page that binds him to her and her to him, until death do us part. It covers the cracked mirror and the flawed key ring, resting on the fabric of grey velvet. Next to it is the pamphlet about domestic violence, the words of rape glued to the side, with the photographs of Lindiwe and Ntombekhaya.

Rape and abuse can happen even in the safety of the home, behind the door that is meant to be a shield, the protection from the real world. There are many ways to hurt a woman and Mandilakhe was master of most of them. We, who are one body, we know of the festering lesions and the ridged scars. We clean our wounds and we rub the ointment on our cuts. We heal our hurts with prayers and we count our blessings.

Our voices rise in solidarity, just as they did during the struggle, we who are many. There are things that Cikiswa is not telling us and there are the things she believes it is better for us not to know. We can detect this from her manner as she drops her eyelids, from the casual way she is letting her vision go elsewhere, not looking at us directly, as she puts that paper in the box.

Whenever he was getting angry, Mandilakhe would argue, alcohol feeding the sourness in his mouth and fuelling his rage. We have heard him shouting accusations inside the house in Fingo Village. We have heard Cikiswa's denials, her pleas and her sobbing. We have heard her body being banged and thrown against the metal. We have heard her screams and we have heard her silence.

The smell of excrement lingers in the community like a bad thought. Clouds of smoke belch from our wood fires and dirty the air. There are no proper drains to channel the filth, to wash away the diseases and the blood. Many of us still have the outdated bucket system in our homes, not flushing toilets. The police, they do not heed our calls, especially when a husband and a wife they are fighting. The fire engines seldom arrive before the blaze has ripped from one

shack to the next, to the next, to the next. The ambulances cannot always find us in these crowded streets, these streets that often have no names.

What of a child who is born in the very midst of such violence, in the throes of despair, in the turmoil of the storm, at the threshold of death? We have not spoken of our sister's first son, the baby she almost lost after the dreadful beating, when Mandilakhe was kicking her, again and again, even as she cried out for mercy, kicking her in the round mound of her stomach. Mandilakhe, he did not care and he was flinging her against the cold corrugated zinc as if she was nothing, as light and noisy as the wind that howls around our homes. He was throwing her against the mean partitions that divide our lives.

Cikiswa was eight months pregnant or perhaps it was only seven. These are the details that it is difficult to keep clear in our minds. What we do remember is the red and blue lights, going round and round, not as revealing as the strong beam of apartheid, though as insistent. Those red and blue lights, going in the circles, they were shining on what we glimpsed through the open door. We saw the pools of wetness on the linoleum, the body wrapped in the blanket, queer and quiet as a corpse. Her little girls, they were weeping, hiding behind the skirts of the grandmother who was shouting, shouting in that strange language of the deaf. She was taken to the hospital, Cikiswa, our beautiful sister, crushed and broken, rushed there in the vehicle of speed with the sirens slicing through the blackness. That sound, it sends panic into our hearts and ice down our skin. Mandilakhe, he was nowhere, he was invisible, he had long disappeared as he always did when trouble came looking.

Ah, Siyaya, the small one who we thought would not last the night, delivered by emergency caesarean while the doctors and the nurses were saving his mother. He was lifted from the womb, the small one with the amazing eyes. He was lifted from the womb, unbothered by blood and bruising. He was lifted from the womb, the small one perfect and crying high, like a marvellous note prised from his mother's throat.

None of this Cikiswa puts in the box and yet it is there, in the emptiness where a father's love should be. We worry about Siyaya, even now, we who watch each other's children. He is like a tree whose roots are too shallow. There is

no positive male role model in the family, only women and girls. Cikiswa's father was there for the first five or six years of Siyaya's life, until he caught pneumonia and died. Ah, Siya! He is always busy, that boy. We have seen him wriggling on her back as a baby, not content like little Thando. Siyaya, it was near impossible to keep him still in the towel, no matter how securely it was tied. We have heard him, restless and not sleeping, making noises with the mouth, sucking at the thumb. It was as if he was having nightmares, wrestling with the demons of his delivery. We have felt his anguish, his urge to be getting away from the bad memories that she is not sharing. It is impossible to predict which way he will go, Siyaya, born of violence and despair, born of fist and song, born in the space between our stories.

We are recalling April 1994, a year after Siyaya's traumatic entry into the world, the dawn of freedom and the queues looping like snakes through city and *veld*. We are waiting to vote for the very first time, some of us senior citizens, others barely 18 years old, the same situation around the country. We are talking, singing and clapping, happy to pass the hours with each other, as patient as the day is going to be long and satisfactory. We are there again, with the warmth of the sun travelling into our bodies, that hot ball shifting in the sky. We are praising God for this chance to be stepping into the booth and making an X on the paper.

The two little girls, Lindi and Ntombi, are playing a game with sticks, jumping as far forward as possible and measuring their progress in the dirt. On Cikiswa's back, swathed in her blue *Shweshwe* cloth, Siyaya is moving into the future. He is restless as the first flames of a fire, searching for wood to burn, even as a baby. A strong man leaps into the air beside a tall tree and touches the highest branch he can reach, whooping his excitement. It is Mandilakhe, he has cast his vote and the feeling is sweet. We are all of us putting our trust in Nelson Rolihlahla Mandela, a noble Xhosa leader who has walked the talk, spending almost three decades in prison and never losing hope.

We had never seen Mandilakhe appearing that happy, all traces of the bitterness erased. His arm was relaxed on his wife's shoulder, his eyes seeming to relish her beauty as the little girls were jumping over the sticks and that baby was niggling, desperate to be in motion. Even so, just a few mornings later he had

gone, Mandilakhe. He came back for three or four more visits, when we had democracy. He came back to bring presents for the three children and to pretend to be a good father. He came back to sow his seed inside Cikiswa, not using the condom, leaving his gift of love. He came back, we do not remember exactly how many times, and then he was gone. Nobody knew what he was doing or how he was earning the wages he spent so easily or where he was living. We do not know what became of Mandilakhe and that not knowing is the worst thing. The family needs closure or the options are forever open-ended, going round and round, like the red and blue lights, like the gospel music looping, like the circle we make, over and over, when we enter this room.

Our men were wiping the perspiration from their brows as they laboured in the gardens, wringing out their wet shirts, tying them around the waist. Our men were working on the roads and unblocking sewage, their black rubber boots sloshing through mud and shit. Our men were breaking rocks and slaving under the earth in the mines, digging for gold that would not be theirs to have. When our men disappeared, they sent the money back to us, to our homes. Eventually, they came back, our men, old and weary, they came back.

Mandilakhe, *aikona*! We like to believe that he is still alive, far away, with a new woman and another family. We know that most likely he has passed on, taken by TB, pneumonia or the poison in the stomach. We suspect that he was the one who gave the virus to Cikiswa, our beautiful girl, our sister. We worry about her, when her breath comes fast, hah-hah-hah, when she is growing old too soon.

There is much that Cikiswa does not share. We have seen her with blood dripping from her head. We have seen her with the deflated look, as if the air has been punched from her lungs. We have seen her struggling to make and hold eye contact with us, glancing quickly over her shoulder.

Yes, we have heard the tales of those who testified at the hearings and she was there, sitting with us. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission gave us story after story about those not found or heard, about the ones who disappeared, floating in the air like the spirits. It was not unusual for our people to become as the shadows. Sometimes we discovered the answer to a query in another person's recollections. We put two and two together. A mother telling the tale of her son

could answer the questions posed by another mother, searching between the lines of the reports and the phrases of speech for something that made sense. We were seeking the truth behind the laws and in between the lies. Mandilakhe's name was mentioned, on several occasions.

We are women, we absorb the silence. We can be quiet, we can accept. We do not like this situation, we who are sitting with our feet flopping outwards, toe to toe, shoe to shoe. Some have no voice of their own and we speak for them, reaching across the stillness with our chorus, our cries. The words endure as we do and they are carried through us, from the one generation to the next, as they were transferred to us by mouth. Ours is an oral tradition and our utterances are connected like the links in the chains, reaching back in solidarity to the slaves of Africa and the shackles that bound our people when the settlers came. We are the mothers of the nation, we believe in human rights and we assert our dignity.

Bad things happen in our community, just as they happen in villages around the world. We have heard of people living with AIDS who have been stoned, kicked and beaten with sticks because they revealed their status. We have seen women being tortured on suspicion of witchcraft, their limbs tugged from sockets and their eyes gouged out. We have smelt the burning rubber and the melting flesh of the terrible necklace, the ribbons of black smoke rising with the cries of agony.

As we sit in the circle, our legs pointing inward, we are completing the memory books that we will put in the box. These pages are filled with the answers to the headings, headings that prompt us to explore our likes and our dislikes, to list our important friends and our family members, to explain what is special and what it is that we believe. We are discussing our childhoods, our working lives, our educations, our homes, our hopes for the future and our fears of the past.

Students from the university, they bring a gust of enthusiasm into our midst. Their energy blows into the room, chasing away the tiredness and the apathy. These young learners, they are stirring us up, like the leaves in the wind. They are helping those of us who cannot read or write. They are encouraging us to draw pictures. They are taking our photographs. They are recording our voices.

They are transcribing our messages. They are asking us to collect the things that matter.

The boxes will live on and we live within them, pressed against their decorated sides, these cheerful cardboard homes for remembrance. We have lived through the horrors of unjust laws. We have been refugees and second class citizens in our own land. We have served the masters and the madams who raised themselves above us and finally we have beaten apartheid. We can get rid of this thing, this thing that is tearing through our land. We are facing our fears and we have not lost sight of hope. It is pure and perfect as the children who will touch the items in this container, this box that has become a life.

We are talking and we are listening, we are overhearing and we are eavesdropping. They are reading our stories back to us, those stories they are transcribing. The stories are blurring and the voices are merging. The stories are overlapping like the sheets of metal on our houses and the waves on the beaches. The stories are spreading into each other, bleeding together, red as the ribbon of the river looping.

No, we cannot talk of what Cikiswa includes in the four booklets she is creating, one for each of her children. They are for Lindiwe, Ntombi, Siyaya and Thando alone. We cannot catch this part of the conversation because Cikiswa is not speaking out loud as we are, she who has learnt to read and to write, although she never got to high school. Her head is bent low, her hair tucked under the red and green silky scarf, her nose close to the paper and her hand it is moving with the pen. It is her life that is flowing in the patterns she is making.

We like it that she can write and she can read, though the older ones among us, we do not understand it. It may be that Mandilakhe, an educated man, took books out of the library and shared them with her. It may be that a child was teaching her, one of the white girls living in the house where she was working. It may be that her secret lover was communicating with her and making her practise her strokes.

Ah, we have not spoken of this man, this man she hides from the light. We have seen her, Cikiswa, the pretty girl of our past, striding up the path, her eyes

glittering jewels and her jaw thrust forward. Mandilakhe was not the only one who was receiving her caresses and her kisses. This man was making Cikiswa happy in a way her husband never could. She whispers his name and it rustles the vegetation on a hot summer's day. It shivers in the sun and it glimmers with promises.

Tjali, what kind of a name is that? It is not a Xhosa name and it is not even an African name. We all know that she is in love with a stranger, one not from our land. From the way she does not drop her eyes quickly, the manner in which she holds our gaze a little too long, we guess that there is a problem. We are nodding our heads, tut-tutting in unison, clicking our tongues against the roofs of our mouths like the insects that are humming in the dark. He is married and we sense it, this Tjali. Still, he makes her happy and we like it when a woman is smiling and singing. It gives us hope.

We need to be optimistic, we who are living with sickness in the time of the disease. Our government is looking for the cure, the drugs that can fight the infections. Our president is telling us that HIV does not cause AIDS. Our leaders are blaming poverty and the illnesses that are so common in African society. Our minister of health is advising us to eat the garlic and the lemon, her answer to the virus.

Eish, we do not have the money to buy the bread and *amasi*, so how can we afford these vegetables? We are trying to grow them in our backyards. We dig the seeds into the hard soil. We nurture the plants with the water we have used for our cooking and our washing. We square the garden beds off with the strips of old iron, making a fence to keep out the animals. Dogs, pigs and donkeys, they are roaming free, rooting in the garbage and sniffing through the rubbish. We are adapting to conditions that never stop changing. We pull handfuls of carrots and beetroots from the ground. We are holding them up like hanks of hair ripped out in battle. We are the winners, triumphant, proud of our skills. We are inviting experts to give us the talks on nutrition and we are growing strong, so that we can beat this sickness.

Cikiswa is a very good cook. She makes magic with the simplest ingredients, transforming a humble dish into food for the soul. She soothes our

troubles with a pot of the wild spinach we pick on the side of the road. She takes away our cares with the soft boiled maize, seasoned with her love. She uses pumpkin leaves and even meat on special occasions when we can afford it, the cheapest cuts flavoured with slow stewing time and thickened with the rich gravy. These students who are writing down the stories, they have brought fresh vegetables, rice and beef. Delicious smells are suspended in our haven, no longer trapped in the pot but escaping to the garden and fleeing down the hill.

The smell of the juices of the tomatoes, it clings to her palms, the greens that she chopped are lingering on her fingers and the fat from the steak has smoothed her skin. Cikiswa, our sister, places the four memory books in the box, with the hints of a feast on her hands. She positions Lindiwe to the north, Ntombi to the east, Siyaya to the south and Thando to the west. They are her direction and her guides, these children she must leave behind. We can no longer see the lining of grey velvet, comforting as moss beneath a dripping tap. The imperfect key ring and the mirror that has cracked, they are hidden, somewhere below the surprising weight of that empty marriage certificate. She has placed Lindiwe and Ntombi's books on either side of the pamphlet about rape, the information arranged with the two small photographs.

We cannot defeat it fast, the violence and the abuse, just as we cannot quickly be rid of this thing, the thing that is killing our people. We have been hearing about the antiretroviral drugs that can save us. We are waiting for the rollout program, but it never seems to come. The big companies are cutting the costs of the medicines, making them available to the poor. They are calling AIDS a pandemic and saying our part of Africa, the part below the Sahara, is the hardest struck. We are behind the TAC, the Treatment Action Campaign, we who are suffering, waiting.

Ah, our beautiful motherland, disfigured with this virus. We weep for the devastation that the disease is causing. Living with HIV has become another form of discrimination. There are those in the community who refuse to name the sickness, as if to say the word is to make it real. They will not associate with us if they suspect we are carrying it. They isolate the ill members of our community when we are most in need of the warmth of kindness. They shun us when all we

want is tolerance and a measure of acceptance. This stigma that shrouds the truth, it is another kind of segregation. Be careful, we say, the foot has no nose and none of us can tell what is coming.

We have been sewing a quilt, each contributing a patch, decorated and personalised. Every square is similar although none is the same, it is a part of the whole yet it is able to stand alone. We are joining the individual sections, threading our stories together to become a colourful wall hanging, a tribute to our rainbow nation. With our beads and our stitches, we have been forming cattle and flowers, *mealies* and huts, water and trees, reaching backwards and forwards, dipping into nature and the environment with our needles and our cotton. We weave our designs and we tug at our memories, talking and reminiscing as we work.

Cikiswa has made a butterfly from tiny scraps of cloth. The fabric is fine and flimsy, so it is being held with small borders of raised twine and embroidered with precision. She has such talent, our sister. The creature has round shapes on its beautiful back, orbs within orbs, like the ripples when stones connect with the smooth surface of a pond, shattering the stillness. They are as striking as the eyes within the face, these orange segments that she has set against the shining brown fabric, bronze and metallic in appearance, shimmering with the changing light. The butterfly extends its wings, seeming to tremble towards the edges of the quilt, the tips touching the furthest confines of the square, struggling to be free.

We are sharing our thoughts and our impressions, every woman finding words to describe the others in our group. The students are writing these down, for us to put in the box. Ideas are floating around the room, dancing with the dust motes in the beams of the sun. They are as irresistible as Cikiswa's song and the substance of our pretty sister is in that tune reaching ever upward, as clear as vapour from the kettle. We are trying to catch the airy soul of her being.

Ah, Cikiswa. She is the pretty girl of the village, the one who brings quietness into a place when her beauty is first seen. Ah, Cikiswa. She is the soft wind that refreshes and stirs, the draught that brings relief on a hot day, when plants are drooping. Ah, Cikiswa. She is grace and charm, all that is delightful and elegant, she is an embellishment and an adornment to the ordinariness. The

praises drip off our tongues like thick sweet honey from the comb in the hive, deep within the forest.

Cikiswa, she causes us to smile, yet she also brings fear, with her courage and her ability to walk alone. She stands out, like the solitary flower in the bush that is full of leaves and we are afraid for her. We are like the ants in the colony below the earth, each having a role, and being an individual is not a good thing in our community. She, who is one of our body, she is forever trying to break away, like the guinea fowl that does not stay with the flock or the buck that lags behind, hunted and caught by predators. It is dangerous, how she is behaving, but that is her nature, that is Cikiswa.

Eish! Cikiswa is caring too much, feeling pain for others and absorbing their hurts. She is touching that old man on the shoulder, she is laughing with those sick children and she is carrying our burdens for us. There are some days when we consider her a saint.

Cikiswa, Cikiswa, Cikiswa. There are those who do not like her, who frown at her beauty and her fondness for fine things. They are saying that she thinks she is above us and that she is easy with her favours. Ah, but we are all sinners, we should not judge and we are not putting the bad things in the box.

We are sustained by our spiritual strength. We forgive, even when we do not forget, we who are many and are one body. Our religion is our salvation and our solidarity is our strength. Cikiswa is Grace and Grace is mercy and pardon, she is God's free spirit and she is gratitude, all that is agreeable and a wealth of blessings.

These are the things that we are putting in the cardboard containers, our words and our impressions, the phrases and the descriptions, the plain facts and the poetry of the moment. We slip into the boxes, between the walls that are plastered with pictures and information. Our essence is in the boxes, our passion and our pleasure locked in letters and photographs. The details of the ordinary are in the documents, beside the reminders of the bounty of nature. We are encased in the grey square of velvet, in the imperfection of a key ring made askew, in the battered face of a wife abused, in the memory books that we pass on to future

generations. Ah, we are even in the sprig of scented pink blossom that Cikiswa has put in the box without anybody noticing.

For the best of us, Cikiswa is like that butterfly in the quilt, beautiful and light, even when she is being tossed by the gales and tested by the storms. Her sighs are shivers as she is carried on the rough cross currents and thrown against the sharpness of objects. Her playful movements and those fluttering songs are giving way to shortness of breath and gasps of pain, hah-hah-hah. Her wheezing will become the everyday pattern of her inhalation, flickering fragile and rasping. Her lungs tremble, fluttering in and out like wings, vibrating with fear and tightening with apprehension.

Hear us, listen to our chanting. The tongues in our mouths are speaking. We are the female elders, we who have lived through the good and the bad, we who know about the cycles of birth and death. We are passing away, lost to tuberculosis, pneumonia, hepatitis and the poison in the stomach. We are being killed by the virus, whatever causes are listed on the death certificates. We are harbouring the disease and we know it hides inside us. Our voices are arguing, some of us going one way, some another, but we must stick together. We have to defeat this sickness that is cutting its course through our people, like Moses parting the red sea. HIV can attack the young and the healthy, not only the weak and the frail.

Now we are urging everyone to test for the sickness and we are developing our defences. If we know our enemy, we can fight it and we can overcome it. Ignorance is the problem and we must protect ourselves as best we can, with the condoms, with words of encouragement and with the support of the group. We are discussing our CD4 counts and our viral loads. We are carrying our medication with us when we are far from home. We are coexisting with the disease, an ugly neighbour. We bear its heavy shadow as we carry the buckets, the baskets and the packages on our heads. We walk carefully, balancing our loads, lest we spill what we cannot afford to lose, we who are struggling to live and not ready to die.

Love is the way forward, love and acceptance, but acceptance does not mean giving up. Disclosing our status is part of the process and it offers a form of

healing. We empower ourselves when we face this monster that is taking over our society. Not all of us who are meeting at the shelter have the disease. We are a mixed crowd, with health workers, counsellors and artists counted among us. We offer support, inspiration and the sustenance of the spirit, turning to each other when times are hard. We gather here because there is strength in numbers and together we can destroy this AIDS.

Ah, we have heard it said that the disease is the great tragedy of our times. HIV hides in the shadows like a gangster, dark and of the night. It is operating in secret, as stealthy as the underground movement in the armed struggle. The virus is camouflaged and it is relying on guerrilla warfare. Medical experts are telling us this enemy is weak, it is not hardy. If we remain silent, we are helping the disease to break down our immunity and win, even though we can beat it. The thing is increasing its control with each lie told as fact, feeding off the unknown and swelling with every untruth spread across our society.

AIDS is not passed on through normal daily contact, so we hug each other and we are pleased to give support to our sisters who carry the sickness. We hold them close to our breasts as they hold us close to theirs. There are still those who condemn, who believe that we need separate cups, plates and beds for the ones who are not looking healthy. They dread contagion, as if the virus floats in the air, searching for a host. These are the people who turn their backs on us, who turn their backs on their own families and communities. They walk away from our outstretched arms, they are walking away, and they block their ears to our calls. They throw stones at us, stones pelting down like hail, at us, the same women who brought them into the world and looked after them as children.

We tell them that abstinence from sex is the means of preventing the disease from spreading, we who are not stupid, even if some of us are illiterate. We tell them to be faithful to one partner, each to each, and not to sleep around or turn to those with loose morals. We tell them to use the condoms, in steady relationships and not to trust to other methods like washing with Coca Cola or lemon juice.

Those who can read and write, they are arguing and debating these things. Education is the way forward and they are talking of the campaigns and the shows

on the television. People need to know about the virus and they must arm themselves for the fight. The Lord will protect us but we must also shield ourselves and that is commonsense. We are safe inside the shelter, inside our Haven of St Mary Magdalene. Here we are able to let go of the burdens, whether we are battered on the outside or damaged within. People who are living with AIDS are not always weak and we are not dying overnight like the flies. We can be strong and we can break the stereotypes.

Our time lines scroll down the sides of our boxes. This is when we got married, this is when we gave birth to the first child and this is when we disclosed in public. Our anniversaries and our important dates are here, listed for eternity. They will last, after we have gone, our bodies turned light as air when they carry us to our coffins, our heads floating like the thistle feathers of the dandelion that is blowing in every direction, insubstantial as our dreams.

What we are doing is preserving our lives, keeping the memory strong in words, images and thoughts, holding it in the assorted objects that we have touched and used. Hope clings to all that we put in the box. We become what we can remember, reaching back into the folds of time, sifting through its sands, searching the mind for the pictures and the phrases that show what we mean. We are vehicles for love and change. We are the bearers of the promises of a better world. We are the box, deep and timeless, storing the stories.

Cikiswa is taking a brown paper packet from her bag and carrying it carefully to the window, the window where the sun shines in and the gospel music plays. She removes pieces of padding from small shapes, which are tied with strings to a circle of yellow glass. As she lets them go, freed from their wrappings, small bells begin to touch each other and they make a noise like bottles jingling. She is holding up the strange and glorious decoration, crafted of sound and glass, light and love. Most of us do not know this thing and none of us have seen wind chimes that are this wonderful. She hooks the tinkling object over the burglar bars that help to keep the thieves from our place of refuge.

In the slight breeze of the early summer, the glass bells are touching, their tips connecting. The glass bells, each separate on a string of a different length, are connecting and touching. They are touching tips, connecting with glass, catching

the clink of the early summer breeze. The glass bells are ringing and singing, touching, like the notes in music, going in a circle, connecting. They are bursting with love, from top to bottom, a spiral of sounds, a round stairway symphony. This is the breath of the angels singing and sighing in unison, the purest melody of memory. It takes us back to the earliest times, an elemental era when nothing was out of tune. We marvel at the heavenly magic of these bells.

Change is in the air, fluttering and stirring. The trees are shaking their leaves in the afternoon winds, rustling the restless tune of lovers and whispering a name. We feel a shift in the atmosphere, the promise of life as the clouds tumble. We are birds, rising above the difficulties and we are butterflies, beautiful but breakable, our wings lifting invisible and our hearts soaring.

Cikiswa sings when the dawn is opening its box of colours and the dusk is putting them back. We are walking down the hill towards the taxi stop, the crowds and the billboards. Smoke hangs in the twilight and the material world is fading, melting away with the late afternoon rays. As we smile and we talk, we are supporting each other and we are carrying our burdens. Our sister sings over the moan of the traffic and the drone of the workers walking home. She sings past the sickness and she sings us into a better future. We are love and Cikiswa sings.

II

HERE AND NOW

LILY

5 January 2012

Grahamstown, South Africa

Early morning light quivers behind the line of trees, ready to burst over the hill without warning, and I mix swirls of cobalt blue with a dab of ultramarine and hints of rose madder and raw sienna, eyes moving up and down as I blend the pigments, staring into space before dropping back to the enamel lid of the tin. It seems as if I'm poised on the tip of the transient, balanced on a wave, waiting for that eruption of energy, the inspiration and the surge of power which will pulse me into a frenzy of creating. I'm trying to catch dawn's first flush, pink and gentle with its variegated hues, before the vision slips through my fingers, fast and fleeting, and it is like lifting rainbow liquid in a rock pool, a cascade of colour falling.

Shards of sun are splayed behind the branches, casting long shadows across the lawn and the droplets from the sprinkler system are twinkling on blades of grass, diamonds scattered over the sea of green. I must not be distracted from the task of pinning down the prism, getting the tints and the tinctures just right before they change again. It would be easy to take five or six photographs and freeze the picture as I see it, all that illumination and brightness contained by the click of the shutter, but I don't work like that – it always feels dishonest – and I return to the view before me. It's capricious, this glimpse of nature, and quick to move on and it's the spontaneity that I adore, the thrill of the chase when I'm aware that it can go wrong in a heartbeat and that is the charm of my chosen medium.

The moment that I have been anticipating arrives – suddenly – and I jump into its splendour, as exhilarated as a child running up and down the shore, adding a dash of golden baroque red here, a splash of yellow ochre there. This is the most beautiful time of all, translucent and pure, as if the heavens are opening section by section and pouring out their lustre, spilling the glow like a gift that saturates the

earth. The clouds are far away in the distance and I'm absorbing the wonder and the loveliness of the stippled sky, happy that I have what I need, the arc above reflected in the puddles of different shades that I have captured to use in the studio.

If anyone saw me, sitting in my nightgown and overalls in my backyard, they'd think it daft and I wish I could pack up my equipment and paint outdoors properly, in the middle of a field perhaps, somewhere secluded and tranquil. Of course, it's just not safe to do that anymore, not unless you're in a group, which always feels too organised and enforced, like a formal lesson or a guided tour, and I can't work in such controlled conditions. Long ago we would take the family for the occasional picnic in the countryside, him driving the car and me getting lost in the landscapes around us, stopping when I saw a scene that I liked, and he would be whispering "*en plein air*" in my ear, putting on the French accent that made me go weak. Subdued shrieks of girlish glee and the faint gurgles of their father's laughter would reassure me, in the background, as vague and necessary as the underlying layers of the wash, those horizontal bands that form the foundation for what follows. These days I'm not obligated to anyone else, which is often a godsend because I can be self-indulgent without guilt, though it's also as if an essential element has been lost, and the hours stretch before me like paper pinned to a board, as empty and expansive as a lake shimmering with options.

Memory disrupts the tranquillity like a stone plopping into water and sending out ripples of discontent, altering the shape of my day. I have to buy supplies from the shops this morning, to frame the still life that I finished yesterday, and I'd forgotten that George or Tash will be fetching it this afternoon for the hanging. The peace is shattered as I'm being pulled in different directions and there's the raucous scream of a Hadeda Ibis, flapping in the acacia tree – how could I not have heard it? – and it's setting off the colony of weavers in their hanging nests. This absent-mindedness is a problem, especially when I go to fetch something only to find that I can't recall what I wanted once I get there or I become distracted on the way. If I don't keep daily lists, I miss birthdays, anniversaries, tea dates and appointments. The blank diary page is before me in

the kitchen and I jot down a few details: collect wood and glass, leave dress at the drycleaner's, check on Dad, draw money from the bank.

And I think of that river, Lethe, in the gorgeous mythology book that Susan and Gina gave me for Christmas, although they celebrate something else – could it be the winter solstice? – and it's linked with oblivion. Ruthie teases me about zoning out and Mary was offering me hints on how to be mindful and I suppose they're right and I close my eyes, trying to be in the moment. I read somewhere that when one sense is impaired the others become stronger, and the sounds of my immediate environment are entering and guiding my thoughts, the coffee machine burbling like an incoherent person, the birds chattering in unison, as excited as an audience before a big event, and closer by there is an insect buzzing. As I squint towards the window, I spy the creature twisting and turning in spirals, winding and unwinding like a corkscrew, hapless as a fish hooked on the end of a line. When I push my spectacles higher on my nose I discover that it's no more than a leaf, trapped in a spider's raggedy web and the pane is filthy, the dust forming patterns like miniature paths leading nowhere and the smudges merging with the floating particles that swim in my vision.

Reality intrudes and I'll have to ask Patience to clean that when she comes next week and I don't want to think of her, though she's been a part of our home for several years, and I only keep her on out of loyalty – surely she should have offered to retire? – because she isn't in the best of health. It's embarrassing, how she dodders around the house with her wipes and the spray bottle, complaining incessantly about her knees, the finicky ornaments and the size of the house, inducing my guilt even as I'm trying to help her. She natters on and on, moaning about the price of food, as if I don't realise that these are difficult times and money is tight, and I do feel sorry for her but also frustrated and it would be simpler if she wasn't working for me anymore. I've never known how to treat the servants but he had it down pat, that ease of giving orders and issuing instructions, polite yet proper, friendly without being too familiar, and they respected that.

Now my glasses slide down my nose and once again I'm looking at a realm that seems less harsh and as abundant with possibilities as the suggestive

strokes of watercolour. Everything is vague and pretty, flowing over the borders like a generous amoeba spreading. Here is the blur of khaki vegetation and the splodge of seedlings, there is the spattering of saplings and the irregular blobs of fruit, and an unlimited radiance is suffusing the humble orchard with brilliance. The alternative view is rigid, with definite boundaries and limited options. My metal rims become barriers, enclosing perceptions, and the lenses reduce what I observe, so that it all seems meaner and sharper, pulled tight and snapped into focus. Rough ridges and troughs that were as thick as acrylics on canvas are transformed into walls and hollows, a boring sameness emerging from the random chaos. On the horizon, burnt tree trunks are not skeletal sentinels standing rigid. They are simply reminders of the last *veld* fire. These two levels coexist in a kind of double vision – if I do not see something, is it actually there? – and when I'm rapt in thought I sink into the precipice beyond the edges, dropping into the optical chasm that seems to swallow me whole.

Hope chose a special mug for me and it's in the sink, caked with the remnants of last night's hot chocolate, resting beside the wine goblet, the lonely plate and the small pot. When she passed it to me, with its "I love my Granny" inscription, I was worried that she'd break it but Mary was unconcerned, saying she'd get another if necessary. I'm running my finger along the rim of a glass, squeaky and high-pitched, and this is how I feel, tense and liable to splinter into shards, and I rinse it and put it on the rack. Mother insisted on a fresh towel each time, but I'm not her – not yet – and froth drips down my arm like a frilly sleeve and I smile. My spectacles are sliding, so I nudge them with the back of my hand, leaving beads of moisture on my nose, and I see the *veld* through the dirty window. Grey on green, the bushland stretches to the top of the hill and it wouldn't be the same with razor-wire on the wall and I hope they don't decide to build houses there, with all the new development.

Narcissus wraps his furry body around my legs, miaowing in expectation, and I sprinkle food into his bowl. He's crunching loudly as I cross into the dining room and the lounge to pull back the curtains, glad that at least the mist hasn't swallowed the city today. Sometimes the fog is so thick that the world appears to end at the edge of the front garden, the university lost in the haze, the tips of the churches emerging as if cut off from the buildings, the townships non-existent.

The photograph albums are on the table – it's amazing just how much little Hope resembles Ruthie as a toddler – and I carry them to the study where I put them on the shelves. That large jigsaw puzzle is still on the desk, a corner incomplete, and it could be a symbol of my life, with its missing pieces. The rocking chair where Mary was knitting baby clothes is empty and the wool, needles and outfits in various stages of completion are not tumbling from her basket. Every one of Hope's toys has been packed up, the dolls and fluffy animals crammed into a travelling bag with her bottle and the things to amuse her in the car on the trip back to Knysna.

It must be getting close to Twelfth Night – is it today or tomorrow? – and Mother always insisted that the decorations came down at the correct time, and tonight I'll pack away the tinsel and the baubles that have been in the family for decades. How peculiar it is, that I'm beginning to take Mother's advice now that she's dead, as if that gives her indisputable authority! They're so fragile, these delicate glass orbs with their nativity scenes, the figures worn away in places, yet still more beautiful than the commercial rubbish that they sell in the supermarkets and online. The cat lets himself out through the dining room window, the burglar bars rattling as he squeezes through the space to sit on the ledge outside, where he'll be washing his sleek grey coat in the sunshine and staring at the paved driveway.

When the albums, the books and the magazines were still lying around, left open to mark the places of interest, I could imagine that Ruthie had dashed out to a class, or that Mary and Hope were taking a stroll through the geraniums, or that the family would be back for dinner, noses and cheeks sun-kissed and hair windblown after a day at the beach in Port Alfred. Now, as I remove the last traces of the visitors, I'm missing them more than ever. It's like that stage when a painting is in progress, dotted with empty spaces and waiting for the colour to be dropped in, and I savour the possibilities and the unrealised potential in the blank areas.

It's time for my cup of coffee, perhaps with a rusk or a biscuit to dunk in it, and as I open the pantry cupboard door a vortex of shapes sways and settles into imprecise patterns, tins piled on tins, boxes atop boxes like an architect's

scaled-down impressions of tall office buildings. There's a tenuous geometry, a searching for form, as the labels, bottles, cans and containers seep into each other, rows of packaged sauces and pitted olives blending with sugar-reduced jams and instant meals. Why on earth do I buy so very much each time I'm at the shops? Mother used to do it, blaming it on The Depression – "nothing great about it," she'd wisecrack – and perhaps I copy her. I remember when people were expecting the worst in the years after Nelson Mandela was released from prison and the blacks were going to be voting for the first time. White people were getting extra goods from the stores, stockpiling in case things turned nasty because there were rumours that there would be looting and plundering. Apparently the poor were promised their pick of the houses in the suburbs, choosing where they'd live after the elections, in the land of milk and honey. In the end there wasn't any violence, only a happy rainbow nation, with South Africa becoming an example to the rest of the globe. We practise reconciliation, living in harmony and showing tolerance, and the only downsides here are AIDS, the terrible crime and the brain drain with so many people emigrating.

Of course I can see why it's tempting to up and leave but this is my home, for better or worse, and my family's been here for five or six generations and they helped make this land what it is. This is where I belong and I can't imagine starting again in a foreign land, surrounded by an alien culture, and however exotic it is to travel I don't do it well. Ruthie has the bug – being an exchange student and backpacking in Europe both suited her perfectly – and she keeps sending me postcards of that place where Riaan has a job with the mines and it looks like a dump, far too isolated and uncivilised, like a *dorp* in the Orange Free State. A holiday's fine but I loathe the idea of her leaving the country for good, settling on the other side of the globe like Susan, although New York has its merits and Gina was born there and it's different with Susan, it always has been.

I open the front door and unlock the security gate, examining the garden as I follow the path down to the property's boundary to collect the daily newspaper. Thick leaves of creeping ivy are clinging to the walls, holding on for dear life, and Dan has told me I'll have to get rid of that soon or it'll cause considerable damage to the plaster. Somebody was mentioning a good handyman recently, though I forget who, and it's important to find the right guy, trustworthy

and reliable, not a shoddy fly-by-night type. Affirmative action is such a nuisance and it's hard to get a contractor I know these days, what with BEE – black economic empowerment, is it? – and the pressure to transform business. It's good to give them opportunities but it's the other races that are hit hard, a kind of reverse discrimination, and incompetent people get jobs because their skin is the right colour and government departments are the worst, with their tiers of bureaucracy and queues.

My spectacles have slipped down my nose, so the hibiscus is a blood red blur in bloom, absorbed into the whole like wet in wet painting, as if a giant hand has wiped over the dampness. And I'm remembering the rose I sketched on my honeymoon, and I still have the image of that wondrous bloom, with its fragile petals and fleshy folds, and I inhaled the spiciness of it, the thorns on the stem a warning even before I pricked my finger. Beside the bench, the impatiens offer a mass of pinks but they'll be drooping and cringing by tonight, and I must water the Busy Lizzies before it gets too hot, and the groundcover that Mother loved so much is already wilting because this extreme weather kills the flowers that were cultivated in cooler climates. When the exhibition is done, I'll check the moon calendar for a good time to do the planting. I'll visit the nursery and I should buy indigenous shrubs – though I prefer the English country look – and herbs could be an option.

The picket fence casts the shadows of its wooden spears across the grass and they're reaching for my slippers, as sure as long knives, when I hear a cough, hacking and deep. Frightened, I lift my face to stare through the lenses and there he is, a young black stranger, sitting on the pavement across the street, with his knees apart and his head down. He seems to be waiting, and I pull my dressing gown closer to my body and quicken my pace as I walk back to the house.

A headline is shouting – COUPLE SLAIN ON FARM – and I shiver and hold the tabloid away from me, as if that will erase the horror story or stop the chorus that seems to cry from the pages. The picture is gloomy and grainy, as though the victims have been photographed at dusk, and they could be any middle-aged pair, and I hear the familiar voice of my neighbour booming out from next door, which is reassuring because Mr Benson used to be with the

police. He tolerates no nonsense, so if there's a suspicious character loitering in Nemesis Crescent, he and his Rottweilers will sort out the problem and the dogs are silent, so all must be well.

Inside the newspaper there is an article about a baby being gang-raped and it's nauseating – I see Mary doing her needlecrafts over the bulge of her belly and I had morning sickness with all three of the girls when I was pregnant – and I'm crying before I know it, for the first time in months. Imagine if something like this happened to Hope! The tears are coming from nowhere, the percolator is hissing and spitting, drops trapped between the warmer and the pot, and my hand shakes as I pour another cup. There are so many theories about caffeine and what it does to the body. I should give it up or cut down and I sit at the lounge window with the pages spread out before me on the carpet. There is a report on the drug known as *tik* and apparently it's another name for crystal methamphetamine, which seems to be similar to speed. It appears as if they put it in a light bulb or a glass pipe – they call it a lolly, oddly – and the users become aggressive, and I suppose the murderers and other criminals are all tripping out on drugs. And Ruthie went through a wild phase, smoking weed and being promiscuous, and I just couldn't deal with it.

When she came along, it was such a shock, because he and I were drifting further and further apart. Ruthie was like the back run – that unplanned effect when new paint leaks into the old – and it can be a nuisance though it's often beautiful. Mother said she was fey, a wilful fairy infant, and Mary was the only one who could get Ruthie to go to sleep as a baby, Mary and the maid whose name always escapes me. It's lovely that Mary and Ruthie still get on so well. It's come full circle because Ruthie was good with Hope, reading stories to her and playing hide and seek in the garden. Mary could put her feet up for a change and take it easy. She's in that glorious middle part of the pregnancy, glowing with good health from all the yoga and vegetarian food, and I wish they were still living in Grahamstown.

This story about the baby is beyond comprehension – a sleeping toddler, in a cot, in nappies, savaged by those animals – and I want to skip to the next page but my eye is drawn back to the text. It seems as if the alleged offenders

were meant to be caring for the child while the mother went to the shops and I wonder if the violence has to do with that awful drug or with AIDS. There's a bizarre superstition that having sex with a virgin is a cure for the disease and it's so disturbing and primitive, difficult to believe anyone would think like that in this day and age, and can it really be 2012 already? It seems just yesterday that we were sitting down for the traditional Christmas dinner – if only Susan and Gina had been able to join us! – and we were pulling crackers and reading out the riddles, wearing silly hats, eating ham and turkey, and the festive season is over and it's a new year.

I don't know why I keep getting the newspaper delivered. It's one sensational story after the next. Of course it reminds me of that ghastly incident, when Susan was attacked in her own flat in Cape Town, though I don't want to think about it, the experience scarring her so deeply that she swore she would fight any kind of abuse. She always says that rape is about power, that it's not a sexual act, and I wonder if that put her off men. It must have made it hard to trust others but it's turned out for the best, in a way, because Gina is sweet**,** like another daughter, their relationship is the real deal and they've been together for years.

The cartoon page brings relief and we South Africans have a wonderful sense of humour, which has seen us through apartheid and we have to laugh or we'd all go crazy. I glance at my horoscope, Pisces. We're being advised to share with others but not to reveal too much and we have to be willing to be vulnerable, whatever that means. There's a wonderful astrological programme on the computer and I've printed out a copy of Hope's chart. I'll post it off to Mary as soon as I've decorated it and darling Hope was helping me choose the sort of illustrations she loves. My mug is empty, so I wipe the crumbs from my mouth, I stretch my arms over my head and I stand up, ready to get on with the next part of the sunrise picture before I have my bath. I tuck the paper under a stack of glossy magazines, beside the collection of coffee table books. The street below me is empty and everything is peaceful.

A hoopoe needles the ground for worms as I stroll through the orchard, pausing before the tangelo tree to admire a massive spider web that's strung

between the branches, beaded with drops of silver, and the bulbous resident sits near the middle, ready to pounce. There's nothing kind about nature and I suppose life goes on and creatures have to eat other creatures to survive, but I pity the flies and moths that get trapped in the filigreed threads, making it worse with every desperate flap of their wings. The path rambles upward as I climb the gentle slope and Ruthie was reading Hope the story of Little Red Riding Hood, scaring her with those references to the big bad wolf, while Mary was listening, widening her eyes and pulling faces to entertain the toddler and I'd forgotten it's such a menacing tale. Of course I'm the grandmother now, so my sympathies have switched, and none of us are getting any younger, as Dad always says, and I'll pop by the cottage later this morning to see that he's fine.

Far away, there is a dull clanging, like a distant dinner gong or the smallest bells jingling. It could be my ears ringing or perhaps it is the clink of a spade against rock. Dazzling rays glance off leaves and grass – gleaming like metal, glinting like gold – and the warmth penetrates my flimsy nightclothes. I'm leached out, underexposed in all this incandescence, a speck of paleness amidst the brightness, like those reverse images on photographic negatives. Vincent van Gogh's startling sunflowers pop their insistent beauty into my mind and I'm overwhelmed by the exaggeration of it all, the intensity and the passion of those rich yellows, enthusiasm lifting me as I cross into the cool, airy space.

The completed still life is on the easel, where I left it to dry last night, and I envisage the frame as I put on my motley overalls. I admire the shrine that Hope and I constructed, a low shelf filled with the treasures she gathered during her stay: the pine cone, the husk of a locust, three feathers and the luminous bone that is shaped like a shark. The sense of urgency grips me afresh as I retrieve the palette of colours I mixed at dawn, marvelling afresh at the rosy pinks and the lemony orange. My bench is dappled with flecks, as if I've tested a million shades on its rough surface, and the textures are as reassuring and soothing as the layers of paintings past. When I inhale deeply and begin, it's a form of meditation, like slipping underwater where there is no sound. I am suspended in my own creativity, floating in a blue-green haze. This is the realm I love, the reason I am an artist. It's not so much entering a zone as being sucked into the tube, a subdued mirror image of the real world, all harshness diluted, until I can't hear anything

except my own breathing, my hand steady and yet remote as I dip the brush into that liquid sunrise and it bleeds its own horizons.

Now I am the suggestions stirring between the spaces, the bristles tickling against the skin of paper, the splashes of pigment seeping into each other. Truths overlap, the hues emerging in concentric circles, and I am my medium and my content, involved in the process as well as a humble spectator, rapture flowing its stream down my spine, electric and charged. Sometimes I set the alarm on my phone as a timer to bring me out of the hallucinatory state – fortunately it doesn't emit that loud whistle that Ruthie selected for my ringtone – but today I wallow in the dreamscape, becoming surer with every stroke.

It's almost done and I clap my palms as I step back to stare at the composition, absorbing the effect of the whole. I'm trying to view it impartially, pleased with the tonal contrasts and the definite sense of drama emerging between the disparate elements. The hills undulate dark and gloomy, reaching back to yesterdays, emerald yet opaque. A final transparent wash will emphasise what comes forward and what recedes. And I'm thinking of Mother, aghast at how the brain retains some things and lets others go in a whimsical fashion, as indeterminate as these images and impressions. I lean forward, bending as if in prayer, stabbed by a tinge of regret – we did not bond, we could have been more loving – and the section I have just finished is how I wanted it to be, the sky fractured and fragile with a nacreous beauty. There's leftover red paint because I blended too much, so I pour it into a cracked saucer, the one with the ring of violets around the rim, placing it on the windowsill to dry.

The garden is wilder here, like a jungle as my father says – I've seen lazy snakes on occasion and there are plenty of chameleons and tortoises creeping about – and the property borders on an empty plot, which is visible beyond the wall. Dan was alarmed when he first noticed it. He said the fence should be higher and he was ready to put rolls of razor wire along the top of the bricks, to prevent anyone gaining illegal access, but it would look hideous and spoil my view from the studio. He seemed to understand when Mary explained how I love watching the birds as I rest on the bench. It's far from the road, right off the beaten track and only once have I spotted children playing in the undergrowth. As I walk down

to the house I check for ripe fruit, picking some apricots and dropping them into the basket. Perhaps I'll make jam if I have time this afternoon, and I'm sampling a purple plum. The bark of the tree trunk has sunk into the shadows, distorting the known into a nightmare of gnarled twists and turns, though the ends of the branches are illuminated and I'm searching for the term we used at university – it's on the tip of my tongue – and I guess it is chiaroscuro. A barbet utters a mournful note as the long grass rubs against the thin brocade of my slippers and the cathedral clock chimes, down in the valley. How lucky I am to live in a land like this, a paradise, in harmony with nature!

There's a gurgling from the swimming pool and the engine of the vacuum cleaner seems to be straining but there's no obvious cause for that. The glorious turquoise wavers against the tiles, corrugated lines wriggling and lapping against the paved edges, licking the sides and sliding back, slapping against the stone. A dragonfly flips and dips and somersaults as I skim a few stray leaves into the basket, the tall pole as stiff as a gondolier's oar. I grab the points of my gown and lift the fabric, letting the material rise and fall and ebb and flow as I dance and swoop with the insects. If anybody could see me, they'd think I was dotty, pirouetting around like a girl – and in my sleepwear too – but the weather is wonderful, the painting is almost finished, I'm free and there's nobody watching as I skip and laugh. Overhead the hadeda heaves rasping wings while I scatter a handful of chemicals into the water to keep away the algae that thrive with the thick summer heat. I bend down to scoop out a stray ladybug, wet fingers tingling with the cold.

Now I'm sitting on the daybed in this area that has become my sanctuary, flicking through the mythology book and gazing at a drawing of Pandora with her jar and I hadn't known that she and Prometheus were related by marriage. The pergola over the patio is covered with the convolvulus creeper – in the evenings the moonflowers open their snowy throats to release their heavenly perfume which I can smell as I go to sleep – and I detect the smallest suggestion of the intoxicating scent. It fuses with the gust of wind that stirs the bamboo chimes, wood tumbling against wood, an enchanting sound, trickling its tinkling notes, hollow and harmonious. I had a mobile ornament when I was a teenager, a spiral

of glass bells, each one set a fraction lower on its string and they made a glorious music in the breeze. The jasmine releases its incense and it's as if I'm a boat being pushed out on a stream, losing my moorings. I'm bobbed on the currents of my life, the debris of the domestic realm floating beside me, and I let it go – yes, I release its hold – and I'm sinking into the vortex of my meditation, sucked into the place where nothing matters. Stray thoughts evaporate as I focus on my mantra – so, hum, so, hum, so, hum – and I am calm.

There's the sound of water gushing and I've forgotten to turn off the tap somewhere and as I dash inside the house the shade is disorientating, spots appearing before my eyes, squiggles on my inner eyelids, exploding balls wriggling like tadpoles. As I burst into my en-suite bathroom, I gasp, stifled by steam, the mirror on the medicine cabinet misted up, shrouded in grey, vapour billowing, tiles wet, air stifling and it's impossible to breathe. I part the curtains with their batik patterns of shells and fish, flinging open the frosted window to let the air blow in, marginally cooler. My spectacles are hazy and fogged up, so I wipe them on my towel and place them on the ledge and that is when I discover it, Hope's Little Mermaid facecloth. She has left it deliberately as a token of her devotion, to carry me across the sad gaps of her absence, and I am delighted.

As I rub the looking glass with my fingers, trickles of moisture are dripping in runnels and I emerge, amorphous and alien, as if there's a screen between me and reality. Everything is out of focus and it's like peering through the wrong setting on a pair of binoculars. The familiar seems foreign, as if I'm viewing things through a veil or at the end of a tunnel, the ordinary objects vague and illusory, and I know that our universe is filled with infinite opportunities and instances of serendipity.

In the kitchen, I sip a glass of cold juice but it's not the reason I entered the room – what was it that I came to do or fetch? – and I fill the kettle before putting two bags into a pot, anchored by these ordinary motions. These cups that I'm inspecting have been with us for generations, passed on from my maternal great-grandmother, and they're precious relics of a bygone era. Pastel hues ooze into each other, the delicate blues and pinks overlapping in the climbing briar and the twisted trellis, with a strip of gold to keep the design in check. The handle

curls like the whorl of an ear and I turn the bone china around idly, taking in the emblem of the crown and the Royal Albert inscription. They don't make them like this anymore and there's a truth in that old-fashioned sentiment which reassures me, that and the porcelain's firmness, the steely strength beneath the veneer of civilisation and refinement. Somehow, this tea set always reminds me of Mother, the British heritage, the stiff upper lip, and she insisted that I use it every day, rather than keeping it for special occasions, a tradition I've grown to appreciate. I had a spare set, also floral but not as valuable, which I gave away to the maid with the hearing problems, because she loved things like this and took such care whenever she did the washing up. Some of them are so rough with other people's possessions and they don't care but she was different, companionable in her silence. I think of Dad, insisting on drinking his *rooibos* from a giant mug and I wish he lived with me even as I know it wouldn't be practical.

Mary was saying I should consider selling the property and moving into something smaller in a few years' time. Maybe the house has become too big, the three bedrooms in the front unused except when the girls come to stay. Next week I'll get Patience to clean that wing and we can close the doors for a few months, airing the space occasionally. It'll be simpler that way, almost like experimenting with downsizing. Of course, Ruthie will be back in February, with her clothes on the floor and the things she leaves lying around wherever she pauses – here a hat, there a bag – and I complain about her messiness though it's very strange when everything is neat and tidy. I think of her in Australia, dreading the fact that she might decide to move there forever when she's done with her studies. That's unfair of me because it's normal that she'd want to be with Riaan, who seems a nice enough man, the dependable sort. Perhaps they'll decide to come back to South Africa, which would be a blessing, and I should be pleased that she's happy instead of wanting her to stay here. However, she's still young and it's so easy to make a mistake, I got married too early, without thinking things through and I know she's not me yet still I worry.

My thoughts are damming together, going nowhere, and as I sip the Earl Grey – what is the name of the fragrance, bergamot? – I wonder about Riaan and the phrase that always comes to mind, whenever I think of him. Still waters run

deep. There's something that doesn't add up, far more to him than meets the eye, which is concerning too. Ruthie started telling me that there was a terrible accident, to do with his brother, I seem to recall, but she never finished the story. Oh, I can see what she would find so attractive, but appearances can be deceptive and he could be an axe-murderer for all we know. She's a sucker for well-built men, the muscles and the macho attitude, the lantern-jawed, Hollywood hero look! Riaan has that conservative Afrikaner upbringing, perhaps that's what it is, the clash of cultures and customs. He keeps himself apart, a man's man, not given to small talk and easy conversation, as though he's putting on a mask. The strong, silent type has never appealed to me and I do like Dan, who is straight down the line. He and Mary are very happy together, which is such a relief, especially now that dear Hope is about to have a sibling.

I check my email – for once my old reading glasses are beside the computer – and there's nothing from any of the girls, not even Ruthie who tweets and uses Facebook non-stop, updating her status with every new thought she has. The tarot card of the day has arrived, the five of pentacles, foretelling material trouble, domestic disorder, events which threaten financial or physical security and alternatives that struggle to be harmonised. As if I need predictions of anxiety! The rest of the messages are junk mail, cheap flights and overnight accommodation deals. I can smell a rotten peach in the fruit bowl – there it is, at the very bottom – and I throw it into the bin and I should write in my journal to cleanse myself of the horror in the newspaper but it's getting late.

Riaan brought a print of an Aboriginal dot painting and I unroll it on the dining room table, weighing the edges down with four heavy art books. It's interesting, even though I don't understand what it means. Somehow, it's too harsh, raw and fiery, not at all restful, with a pain in the intricate patterns and the detailed replication that disturbs me. He was trying to explain the symbolism, going on about dreaming and waterholes. It's a generous gift but it's like offering a pair of walking boots to a deep-sea diver and there's no place for these dull earthy hues in my life. The colours don't fit in with any of the rooms and I've no idea where to put the image. Australia doesn't appeal to me – it's an afterthought of a continent, remote and small, Down Under – and I really don't want my youngest daughter to move there.

The bath has cooled down but the room is still very steamy. I step into the tub, kneeling down slowly, the cake of soap and nailbrush appearing formless on the holder beside me. The chair and the mat waver and it's as if my possessions have been submerged so that I'm regarding it all through liquid, fluid and insubstantial, with nothing solid or fixed. Lying on my back, hair billowing behind me like seaweed, my body is ill-defined as if the angular essence of who I am has seeped away, little by little, just as it did when I became a mother. My legs and stomach look larger and more significant, with latent curves in the bones that seem to have softened and the skin that has melted. When my feet touch the end near the plughole I almost go under again, and my flesh is turning blotchy as though I'm about to dissolve, limbs shapeless and other, and I sit up suddenly and cling to the enamel sides.

The curtain twitches almost imperceptibly and a shadow crosses the walls, a sullen premonition. I suppose a cloud has passed over the sun. The change causes a shift in my mood. Normally I immerse myself in the bath for at least half an hour – Riaan had the audacity to lecture me on wasting water – but I feel uncertain and vulnerable, as I did when I fetched the newspaper from the post box, and something is wrong though I can't put my finger on it. I put on my spectacles and glance out the window to confirm my suspicions. The sky is even clearer and bluer than it was before, the birds are chattering and singing, the humdrum noises of everyday activities a murmur in the distance and it all seems very normal.

Before dressing I do my yoga routine and I'm lying on my mat in the corpse pose – winding down, absorbing the silence, taking it in, letting it out, visualising myself as a flower, tranquillity radiating from each petal – when I hear a noise. Somebody seems to be at the front door. My acquaintances never visit in the morning because they know that's when I'm meant to be painting. I try to ignore the knocking but the caller is insistent, so I tiptoe down the passage in my tracksuit, peering through the peephole to see who it is.

A young black person is standing there, with a jaunty golf cap on his head and orange marks on his face, which is pocked with boils. He offers his profile, the sun gleaming off his sweaty skin, and he can't know that I'm staring, less than

a metre away, separated from him by thin strips of wood. Now he's frowning right at me and I hold my breath – I can't help it – and I move backwards very quietly, not sure what to do. My heart is racing, my knees go weak and I won't open the door – it's just not safe, even with the security gate – and after five minutes I know that he isn't leaving the property. He's ringing the bell when I call through the lounge window, asking if I can help him, and he spins around, swaggering towards me. Instinctively I realise that I've made a mistake. It is too late to change anything and I'm glad to have the burglar bars between us. He speaks and his voice is gruff though not uneducated. His speech is formal, yet he doesn't address me as Madam, and he says that he would like to talk to Charlie.

I come up with some excuse – I don't want him to know that I'm alone but I can't have him hanging around, waiting for a man who'll never arrive – and he's watching me, without any signs of embarrassment. He's looking straight through me as if there's someone else that he would like to see or there's another woman behind me, and I resist the urge to turn around. There's the queerest impression that I've encountered those eyes before, though I'm quite certain I've never met him. I wonder if he's Joseph's grandson or a nephew perhaps but he doesn't mention my regular gardener and I don't think it is old Joe that he resembles. There's a sense of déjà vu, as certain as walking into an empty room and knowing that I've been there before or dreamt about it, and I've encountered this boy somewhere. It may have been a long time ago or in the newspaper or on the TV. He recognises it as well. I could surprise us both by asking him if he'd like to do the weeding in the front garden – I'll be in town for much of the morning anyway and the flowerbeds are overgrown – and yet I don't.

Instead I bid him goodbye. The words settle into the silence, their weight readjusted. I'm guessing that he is angry – he has a stick and he swishes at the flowers as he stomps down the path – and I feel threatened by his aggression. Now I hear the click of the gate and he'll be walking along the pavement and I suspect that he'll return. He's heading towards the neighbours that are on holiday, not Mr Benson but the family I don't know, though we wave at each other. We never talk. It's very private here and people keep to themselves. It's not like when I was a young girl, growing up near the harbour in Port Elizabeth, and back then I

called everyone Aunty or Uncle and my parents were friends with all those who lived in our street and many others besides.

The past sweeps me up, reaching further and further back, stretching to some distant source in the depths of experience. I'm dragged by it, though I don't want to think of my ex-husband – he hasn't crossed my mind for months, not since I packed up the last of his things in boxes – and I'm like one of those molluscs on the shore, a little crab with its own carapace, trying to cling to the sand but being sucked out to sea. The waves wash in and out, overlapping, each reaching further forward, as rhythmic as the brush when I'm painting, to and fro, over and over. I'm back in my final year of high school, nestled under the cheerful segments of the beach umbrella – my friends call me Lily White because I'm so very fair – and I'm sketching, my pencil edging back and forward, in sync with the breakers.

This is where I first meet him, the man who is the opposite of me, my other half. He has a psychedelic towel slung over his shoulders like a superhero's cape and his skin is that nutty colour, like coffee or caramel, damp from his swim, black hair skimming his shoulders and dripping. When he asks to sit next to me, this pirate, dashing and larger than life, with his surfboard and his attitude, his voice is a revelation. I haven't expected the accent, not with such a dark complexion. He explains that he moved from England as a teenager, that South Africa's so much nicer, especially now that he's discovered me. I'm travelling above my ordinary self – is this astral projection or is my imagination getting the better of me? – and I can see them, beyond the dunes, the two that were us, that were one and then none, on the sand with the ocean sighing in and out.

Charlie was saving his money to buy the perfect house and he was waiting for the right woman and I was her and of course I believed him, his mouth tasting of salt and the wind knotted in his jet curls and the sun in his eyes and on his fingers and it seemed so very right. He made me laugh with his jokes**,** buoyed me up with his confidence, and he was never shy or withdrawn, seven years older than I was, which my parents didn't like, yet he wasn't heavy in any way, just easy to be around and he could melt me with a glance. I'd draw hearts in my exercise books in class when I was meant to be copying from the blackboard and I

practised signing my name as Lily Blake, testing out endless variations, dreaming of marriage. I designed my wedding dress and the invitations to the ceremony when I should have been paying attention in the weeks before the final exams and everybody laughed when the teacher clicked her fingers to wake me up. And in the beginning, he would bring me shells and pieces of driftwood to draw and then he started paddling further and further out to sea and he stopped looking back.

Perhaps I'll have another coffee, for the buzz, and I know I should cut down, that it's a bad habit, because I read that caffeine destroys calcium and can lead to early osteoporosis, a genuine threat now that I'm 50. I wonder if my bones are starting to crumble inside my body, like silent foes. Maybe I need to start walking around the suburbs in the afternoons, to build density, and I wish I had a dog for protection because one of my friends – was it Norma? – told me about an older woman who was mugged in broad daylight a few doors from her home just last week. But I don't like them, too smelly and needy, tongues out and panting. Cats are independent yet companionable, and I'll have a cup of tea instead and the kettle is shrieking. Already it's very warm, probably about 35 degrees, and the suburb is silent, activity suspended, and it's going to be scorching out there and time is marching on – it waits for no-one, as my father always says with a chuckle – and I must visit Dad this morning.

If the girls were here they'd be teasing me about dithering and a million things distract me when I'm meant to be going out and they call me a hermit. Even he used to think I was too reclusive, especially when a painting absorbed me – why on earth was that boy asking for Charlie? – and I'm making certain that I've switched off the stove and all the plugs. A column of ants weaves from the jam tin and I decant the sticky mixture into a beautiful jar that belonged to a great aunt, straightening the toaster, flicking crumbs off the kitchen bench. I dash back to my bedroom for my sunglasses and they're on the embroidered pillow that complements the floral quilt on my antique brass bed, and I slip my feet into comfortable sandals and tie up my hair, which could do with a cut. My walk-in cupboard is a mess – I'll give some of these clothes to charity when I have a chance to sort through the dresses and skirts I never wear – and I grab a silk scarf to conceal the crinkly skin on my neck.

Sunbeams stream into the entrance hall, setting the motes of dust dancing and picking up the subdued texture of the velvet chair and I stroke the smooth fabric, thinking it would make a lovely painting, with the fall of the light and the play of the colours. I glance in the mirror, flinch in the brightness and readjust my clinging shirt. A rose has lost its petals and the full-blown blooms are sagging in the vase as I sniff the flesh-coloured flowers. I reach out my hand to punch the code into the box to activate the burglar alarm and it's on the wrong side of the doorway, and sometimes I get confused and it's as if I'm in another house, although I've been living here for more than two decades. It's odd how ordinary objects aren't where I expect them to be, and the beeping noise begins, which means I have a minute to get out of the house, so I snatch my car keys, lock the door and the security gate and check them several times.

The past is like the wash that's below the painting, that layer of background colour that's hidden yet serves as the rough base for all that follows. It peeps through the obvious, there behind the humdrum everyday stuff, a flicker of light below the surface like an orange fin in the darkness of the koi pond. What's underneath, the tonal foundation, is what gives the vision its depth and creates a sense of perspective and those initial sweeping strokes are invisible even as they lend richness to the hues and bring out the shadows.

There's a truck rumbling in the distance and I wonder if I've forgotten to put out the garbage but at least I've left the side gate unlocked for the meter reader. They change the dates around Christmas and New Year, with all the public holidays, and it's very confusing. The gazanias are a tangerine blaze and they're doing as well as the weeds, which Joseph must remove next week, if he bothers to pitch up, and that young man has broken some of the azaleas with his stick and it's not necessary, I hate aggression of any kind.

This midsummer heat is a thick gag, suffocating me, but it's cool inside the garage and the car. I reverse down the long driveway, adjusting the volume on the classical music radio station. Somebody has left three boxes of junk on the kerbside and there are packets strewn on the verge of lawn, with more mess in the gutters of the road. I'm not a racist but these wretched beggars that scratch through the rubbish irritate me so much and we have to clean it up or live with it

as the municipal workers are always striking for more pay so they won't do it. Ever since we had the change of government, there have been water shortages and power cuts and the infrastructure which used to be good is collapsing.

Now I'm driving along deserted streets, passing clipped hedges and high fences – one is even electrified – and I like how accessible everything is, so that I can be in the city centre within five minutes or at Dad's place in the event of an emergency in three. It's the school holidays, I'd almost forgotten about that, so most of the houses are closed up, with everybody at the coast, and it'll be quiet until school starts again in February. This is such a lovely area of Grahamstown, old and established, and I suppose the maids and the gardeners are keeping things neat and tidy. Closer to the shops it's busier than I've expected with crowds of blacks strolling about and sitting on walls, chatting and smoking cigarettes, and there's a man passed out in front of the hardware store as I search for a suitable parking space.

The sidewalks are jammed with informal traders, their trestle tables spilling imitation designer clothes and plastic goods, and there are hawkers with their wares spread out before them on the ground – a riot of bananas, pineapples, tomatoes and apples, like a gaudy fruit salad – and everyone is trying to get my attention. A woman with a broom is sweeping vigorously, intent on clearing a layer of dust and mess off the path in front of a shop entrance, and the window at her back is decorated with straight-faced mannequins in party outfits, sequins and ribbons and cascades of satin and silk. Car guards wait on the grubby kerbs, their distinctive neon bibs pulled over everyday clothes, about one person to every eight vehicles, and they offer a microcosm of African society in a poor regional city. Close by, a large matronly type takes a handful of coins from a man in a business suit, puts the money in a small plastic bag and then tucks it into her bra. As I check that I've locked the car, she catches my eye and her deal is sealed although I don't acknowledge her.

Inside the framing shop, some of my own watercolours are on display, along with others by several prominent Eastern Cape painters, and it feels rather peculiar to find them here, but also pleasant and even a little thrilling. It's like seeing your children at a public event, when they don't know you're watching

them, and realising they're just as good – perhaps even better – than everybody's else's kids and more than capable of holding their own without your help. I examine a print by an artist I've always admired and I'm still gazing at the confident lines, a figure outside a hut with a thatched roof and a few hens in the yard, when I hear a voice, ebbing and flowing around the edges of my thoughts. It seems that Mr Miles has been talking for a while and I wasn't listening and for a few seconds the words are on the tip of my tongue, I know what I want to say yet I can't get the sounds out. The panic passes and I order my strips of wood, reading the measurements from a scrap of paper I retrieve from my wallet. I resume my study of the linocut, allowing myself to be drawn into the created world, which is at once true to life and oddly distorted, like a dream.

Beside it is a series of photographs of Xhosa traditions. There's a woman smoking a long pipe, beads looped around her neck and a turban on her head, and a guy whose skin has been smeared with white pigment of some sort and it looks like a tribal initiation. I've forgotten the name they give to the newly circumcised men – could it be *amakwetha*? – and it seems rather an outdated practice, sending modern teenagers into the bush, and dangerous too, especially as there's blood and the risk of infections, not to mention HIV and AIDS. There was a report in the newspaper just last week about how at least fifteen of these boys had died and many more were hospitalised and had to have amputations and it's not a nice subject.

Outside it's becoming too hot for comfort, I feel claustrophobic and I'm tempted to go home without buying the rest of the things, though as I'm here I might as well do it or I'll have to come back later and I don't want that either. Pungent smells hit the summer morning air, a heady mix of odours: stale cooking oil, fish sizzling salty, char-burnt *mealies* and a musty mayhem of spices. Beneath that there's a whiff of something fetid and possibly deceased. I know that as the heat intensifies, the stench will sweat and swell until it becomes unbearable, and a slumped figure in a wheelchair gestures as I pass, thrusting a tatty cardboard sign towards me and he's shouting in the language I don't understand. He seems angry or mentally disturbed and I've no idea what he's yelling because I can't communicate with him, and this is my country too, and he's pointing at my

handbag and I clutch it to my ribs because I've heard the stories of thieves cutting the straps with knives.

Picking up the pace, I walk past the statue of an angel with butterfly wings, perched on a plinth where the main roads intersect, surveying the bottom end of the town. She's detached and aloof, with the rubbish bins overflowing around her. The Observatory Museum is on my left, across the street, and I wish I had time to visit the camera obscura. These buildings are wonderful with their original facades and fancy gables and ornate details. The newer blocks just can't compete with them. A mirror flashes my reflection as I go by, an apparition in airy garments, surrounded by dark bodies, a chip of alabaster in a sea of brown, and I duck into the hardware store where the assistant whose name escapes me cuts the non-reflective glass. It's civilised and safe inside and I'm browsing through the gardening section – the pots are lovely, with a lacquer glaze – and I take my package, wrapped in thick paper and tied with string so I can carry it easily, and I'll pick up a loaf of fresh bread on my way back to the car.

There is a flurry of activity near the bank, with its elaborate pillared columns, a testament to the British Settlers, and the police seem to be arresting a boy who has stolen something, which flashes as they hold it aloft triumphantly – could it be a mobile phone? – and he is screaming, the sound sharp and serrated. They are pushing him into the yellow van, the metal door is clanging shut and a dog is barking from within the cab as the clock on the cathedral spire tells me it's after 11, which is later than I'd realised. Beside it, lower down, is a colonial giant in stone, armed with sword and shield, a memorial to those who died in the world wars. Clusters of people are sitting at the base, unfazed by the grandeur, eating food with their fingers and flinging their litter about them and it's easy to see why plastic shopping packets are known jokingly as the national flowers because they are everywhere on the open *veld*, blown into bushes, hooked on fences, strewn on grass.

Red flame trees and purple jacarandas line the streets, spilling their vibrant petals like rain, and I must be careful not to slip on the pavements and there are also swarms of bees at this time of year, and I could be allergic and I get asthmatic when I'm anxious. The man who makes miniature bicycles, animals

and baskets from wire is very busy, manipulating the discarded metal into magic. He leans forward in my direction, showing me the rhinoceros body he is fashioning with quick, deft twists but I duck into the organic shop to pick up my sage smudge sticks and a bar of rose geranium soap, chatting to the girl with all the piercings. The bakery is warm and smells of yeast and I decide to get half a dozen Chelsea buns because I haven't had a proper breakfast and suddenly I'm hungry. There are four tiny children at the door – shouldn't someone be supervising them? – and I feel sorry for them, in their rags, with their knees and tummies showing. And I don't know what to do because if I give them bread they'll never stop their begging and someone bigger and tougher will steal it from them in the nearest alley anyway and I shake my head and hurry to escape their outstretched hands and heartrending pleas.

As I turn the corner, a man thrusts out a pamphlet about a traditional healer who is offering to cure patients of erection problems, straying wives, bad dreams and a host of other ailments. He even claims to have a remedy for AIDS and I saw a magazine article recently with the most amazing pictures of the virus under the microscope, the cell protrusions like fuzzy balls or distant planets. There are urban legends about the black youth using the juice of a lemon or coca cola to stop pregnancy when they have sex and I find that difficult to believe, though people are very superstitious, and I shiver when I hear about atrocities like *muti* murders. A boy is dancing beside a boombox – the lyrics are loud and rude – and his trousers are sliding down, boxer shorts showing, and he is doing that awful thing they do, with the fingers pointing at his crotch.

The car guard is chatting to a friend, not watching the traffic at all, and she rushes towards me as I reach my vehicle and jingle my keys, not to help me offload the parcels that I'm almost dropping as I try to open the hatch door, but to take the money she is expecting me to give her, just for hanging around and being idle, talking to others, and I mumble that I don't have small change. There are stories about what happens if you do not pay enough to these people, the random acts of their vindictive vandalism include snapped radio aerials and scratches on the paintwork, but today I'll have to take my chances.

In the distance is the archway leading to the university and for once there are no students pouring down High Street because they're on vacation for another month and I'll be pleased when Ruthie's back. Instead a bus has deposited a group of overseas tourists on the sprawling lawns and they resemble a flock of loud birds, their language shrill, excited and quite incomprehensible. Greedily they finger the beaded trinkets, the red and white key rings, the multi-coloured flags and wooden sculptures the local craftsmen and women have put out on blankets, and their skins are tanned golden and most are dressed in shorts and tee-shirts and their expensive cameras are aglitter, their wallets at the ready.

Now I'm shrinking into myself, wilting in the midday heat like the flowers in my garden, and I don't belong here even though this is my home, and the car guard is scowling at me, not happy with what I've given her. She's hurling a torrent of abuse in my direction, her tongue clicking and clacking on the insults and I'm unwanted, a visitor from another realm, as foreign as these people from Europe. The trees are shimmering and the tar is waving on the horizon, patterned and rippled and insubstantial as a mirage, blinding me with too much light. Everywhere I turn, I seem to see the beggars – bent, apathetic, inward folding, outward reaching – and I have to get away from them. I'm feeling vulnerable, exposed as an insect that's no longer able to hide under a stone, open to prying hands, the glaring eye of the sun and an ancient power that's much larger than anything I've ever known.

It's a relief to be in the station wagon although the warmth is stifling. My face is reddening, a fierce blushing shade, perspiration dampening my blouse and my hands are clammy and the steering wheel is too hot to touch so I hold it with just the sides of my palms, the backs of my legs sticking to the seat. I should draw more money and I stop at the mall, near the bank machine, looking around before I enter my PIN and I get it right – last week I went blank and had to eject the card – and it's not too busy here. Inside, I'm considering pastrami for lunch and perhaps a ready-made salad though at the deli I can't decide between the meats. The products are garnished with wisps of green leaves and a lattice of scarlet peppers, and a voice is muttering about a silly old bitch as I opt for silverside, the queue trailing behind me, and I'm embarrassed. Now I'm remembering things I should get while I'm here, mumbling under my breath because I don't have a list

– coffee, biscuits, loo rolls, coffee, biscuits, loo rolls, coffee-biscuit-loo – and I choose pastries and a cake to give to Dad as well as a bottle of wine he'll like.

The heat hits me with a dull slap and it really is like entering a furnace, the vehicle's air conditioner providing scant relief. I sense a tension in the atmosphere, the brooding build-up to a storm that will erupt later in the afternoon, although the sky is still cloudless. And I must be crazy, going out at this hour. I feel faint as I buzz the bell and my father answers, letting me into the complex, and I admire the *vygies* lining the path. Inside I pour a glass of icy water for each of us before unpacking the bag of groceries in his tiny kitchen. He sits on his favourite chair with the stuffing leaking from the cushion, thin legs spread out and knees apart, his grey hair as fine as a baby's down. I spy cigarettes beside the ashtray though he always promises to stop the following Monday and with every visit he seems frailer. None of the windows are open, so it's stuffy in here, the smell of stale tobacco lingering like a dirty cloud. As I let fresh air into the place, he coughs loudly in disapproval, the sound scratchy and rough. A soap opera flickers on the television and I fix him a sandwich while he waits for the cricket to start. In his bedroom the cupboard reveals four or five identical beige shirts on hangers, shoulders drooping in dejection as if they gave up long ago. Photographs of Mother jostle for prime position on the table. When she was younger she smiled for the camera, teeth bared and gums showing, but in the later pictures she looks frightened and dazed. I can chart the progress of the cancer and the chemotherapy by her appearance and I don't want to cry in front of Dad.

He's singing about mad dogs and Englishmen going out in the midday sun. Of course that reminds him of Charlie, so he's asking for news of him and the girls and I say I'll have to leave soon. I tell him about the paintings, promising to fetch him for the exhibition opening tomorrow evening. As he ambles out with me, shuffling his slow waltz of a walk, he complains about the black nurses. He's patting the bonnet of the car, asking how she's going and he always loved tinkering with machines, and he was the one who insisted I follow my dreams of becoming a painter. Mary and I helped him to pack up the house when Mother was dying. We moved him into this cottage, close to the hospital, and he persuaded Ruthie to have his ancient Daimler. She humoured him because she thinks it's quaint but it's becoming unreliable and I worry about her driving at

night, in case it breaks down. As I wave goodbye to my father I blow the horn twice as he always did. Sorrow washes over me and I bite my lip. There's smoke from a *veld* fire on the hillside near the 1820 Settlers National Monument. It mushrooms on the horizon, indistinct as the fog of memory.

Back home, I look carefully around Nemesis Crescent and there's nobody on the pavement outside my house but there is a terrible mess from that rubbish. It'll take ages to pick up the fruit peels, disposable containers and other bits of litter. Now I'm limp, drained of vitality, exasperated and frustrated at once. The emotions run into each other, watercolours gone awry, the layers dripping together, and my earlier good mood has vanished. At least it's pleasant inside the house as I take the shopping to the kitchen, put the things in the fridge and leave the rest of the stuff on the bench with my handbag.

I hate going to town, even though it's not far away, because the crowds unnerve me with the overpowering choruses of voices. The social situation now is appalling, but violence is never the answer. Ruthie and Riaan were discussing revolutions, sympathising with the downtrodden and the destitute as they drank fancy wine and ate a three-course meal, the beggars waiting outside the restaurant. There's something about a mindless mob of people that is terrifying. It's to do with the inevitability, the slow grinding or churning of the wheel of fate. When force is used, something often breaks. Being patient and gentle is more effective. The chaos on the pavements destroys the dreamy images that usually flood my mind. I give in to the solitude and there are definite advantages to living alone.

Now there's the noise of those machines that cut weeds, coming from a property in the immediate neighbourhood. I'm guessing it's a gardening service, with several workers blitzing the yard at once, appliances droning and buzzing like insects, the din roaring and expanding. Heat is consuming the studio and I'm pleased I'm not trying to concentrate with that commotion going on, and the disturbed hadedas thunder overhead, indignant and countering the awful racket with their own.

Pieces of newspaper are strewn about the work surfaces, used for mopping up spills, and I rest the wood and the glass against the trestle table as I read

snippets of stories after I've rearranged the washed water jars and the rinsed brushes. There's a photograph of a group of women from an AIDS centre who have made a quilt and their faces beam out, teeth very white in dark faces, looking healthy enough, though perhaps a bit thin, the cheekbones sticking out too sharply and at least people are talking about the disease. I remember when Thabo Mbeki was denying the connection between HIV and AIDS, and it was as if the country was in denial, trying to pretend the illness didn't exist. Now they're saying that one in four – or was it three? – people are carrying the virus and it's killing off millions. It seems so sad, because it could be prevented and at least children are being educated these days. I wonder if the big pharmaceutical companies are profiting from the epidemic. Susan told me about a man in the US who was infecting his partners on purpose, because he knew he was dying and he didn't care, and it's disgusting to think of someone doing that, like a sick sort of murder.

These big windows that let in so much natural light are a curse in the summer months. I leave the door open, turning on the fan – the red paint in the saucer is sticky and congealing – and it won't take long to do the framing but I'll come back after I've eaten my lunch. Two voices are shouting from the washing lines, and I watch Mr Benson's maid unpegging the clothes and dumping them into a basin on her hip, and I've no idea what the women are discussing. Their tongues are rising and soaring on the sounds, they're laughing with mirth and I would like to know what they're saying – how can I be a real African, here in the land of my birth, when I don't understand the words of the people? – and I wish I'd picked up a smattering of Xhosa, enough to follow a basic conversation. Ruthie took a course at the university and enjoyed it but I'm getting too old to learn a language and everyone would be looking at me, listening intently in the class, and my memory isn't what it used to be.

It's quiet and I'm feeling so very tired. There's a flapping in the loquat tree, stems and leaves merging with feathers, as muddled as spilt paint, an anarchic jumble of colours that's a murky brown. I let the world be cleaved in half, not neatly but distinctly, looking over the rim of my glasses and it's a beautiful blur, as abundant with possibilities as the suggestive strokes of watercolour. As I glance down through the lenses, everything snaps back into focus, prim and precise, with little left to imagine. The hydrangeas are drooping –

without the spectacles they are gentle inkblots of violet blue, so soothing – and I'll water them when I'm less busy and Mother always said it's better to wait for evening or do it first thing on rising, but that's the best time for painting. I pause to admire the Carissa macrocarpa – the plant with the exquisite star flowers which the butterflies frequent – and my shirt catches on the bougainvillea, hooked by the thorns that are hidden in the thick of the shrub. The sheerness rips before I can stop moving and I've torn a favourite piece of clothing. It's too much, the tears flowing again as I rush to my bedroom, remove the ruined blouse and stare at the gash that has sliced the gossamer fabric.

Perched on the dressing table chair, I drop my head and I weep, lenses streaking like the dirt on the window panes. I place the spectacles beside the hairbrushes and dab at my eyes. What I see is like an impressionist painting, the sploshes of colour joining up and reassembling. The material lies in a reproachful heap on the carpet, and I turn to my reflection where I'm blurred, shapeless and insubstantial, shadowy and emerging dimly. My bra straps are vague stripes on my shoulders, my small breasts forlorn, loose tendrils of hair sticking silvery-blonde and damp to my neck. It seems as if I have sat before this looking glass all my life, willing it to show me something else, whether it's a teenager on the brink of her first real date or a woman with fewer wrinkles, and I examine my face from every angle, as I always do. And I'm hoping for a glimpse of the person I think I am, searching for a different profile, and every time she stares back at me, the same, only older, and there is the eternal ache, the disappointment that something isn't right.

On the good days, I detect evidence of my daughters in my features and when I spot my younger self in their eyes and mouths and cheekbones, I feel amazement though I'm pleased that they seem to have positive images and to like what the mirror shows them. It's only Ruthie who still worries me and I'm missing my girls, the years of living alone in this giant house stretching before me like waves, the self a lonely island, and she's far away, marooned in that mining town. Mother had a favourite saying – marry in haste, repent at leisure – and I want to tell Ruthie that romantic love is deceptive. It's like painting into dampness, the excitement of wet in wet and the delirious potential of soft

undefined shapes, slightly blurred marks and the subtle background. Eventually, reality intrudes on the bright promises that flow in unpredictable directions like rain pouring down glass, everything smudged with possibilities.

A marriage can dissolve too, the textures of the everyday disintegrating as surely as the compressed colours that crumble with the sudden dab of the brush. The blocks of trust break up, the squares of pigment fall apart and the fine powder is clogged with suspicion. For me, there was no loud crack when it ended, no distinct moment of severing. It was more like a gradual absorption into something else and there is still a part that I can't see – a missing piece in the puzzle that was our relationship – and one day it will strike me, like an epiphany, and I'll understand.

Infidelity dirties the water – oh, Charlie, what can I say? – and I've thrown him out and taken him back so many times that even now his name evokes a storm of emotions, cheeks flushing at his affairs and it still hurts though I try not to have anything to do with him. It's difficult because of the girls and they keep in contact with him, he's their Daddy, no matter what he does and what he has done, and of course they talk about him and visit him, they always have and it's how it should be. It takes time to build up a relationship with its accumulated details and its layers of meaning, each small stroke contributing to the overall picture, but love can be destroyed with careless actions, just as a painting can be ruined by overworking.

What bothered me in the end was not so much his leaving as my stupidity, that I'd put up with it and sanctioned his bad behaviour with my continued acceptance. I was so naive. And I'm remembering the past as though it was yesterday, in vivid detail and even the sensations are exact, though I can't recall the ordinary things from day to day. If I could lift off the disturbing pigments with a damp sponge and drop in different colours, I would, intensifying the good and removing the bad.

I wonder what he's doing in Walton on the Naze, and it's such a funny name but a very pretty village, on the coast of England, and I've seen the peninsula and the craggy cliffs online although we never went there. He had no

guilt about South Africa's problems – he was always quick to point out that he was born in the United Kingdom – and he criticised a couple of friends for not employing servants because they weren't helping the ordinary people on an economic level.

Something whips me back into the moment and I pick up the arrangement of strelitzias in the tall vase, the one the girls brought me when they visited the aquarium with Mother and Dad, and I hold it up so that the sunlight plays through the glass, making splashes of colour on the wall, letting the blueness spill onto my skin. As I reposition it, I study a framed image of my daughters, younger and putting on a concert in the shed, Mary earnest even in full song, Susan scowling because she has to wear a dress and Ruthie grinning with missing front teeth. I've tucked a loose photo of Ruthie's sixth birthday party into the corner, one that Mary was laughing at when she went through some of the old albums, and it's a marvellous shot of Ruthie and her friends leaning over a ballerina cake. In the shadows on the far right is the maid we had back then – could her name possibly have been Serena? – and she's putting down a tray laden with cups and the teapot, no doubt for the mothers in attendance. This is the first time I've noticed her exceptional beauty, but I suppose at the time she was just the girl who did the washing and cleaned the house, invisible even as she touched our lives in the most intimate manner.

I'm staring at my daughters and now I cannot find my likeness in their images and they return my gaze and I marvel, as I've done since they were born, at how self-contained they are. In another portrait I'm there too, looking out at myself, squeezed between their fresh faces, and I'm pasty and pale, even with my makeup, and they are all taller than me, as if I'm the child and they are the adults. I place another picture in time, December 1995, our 16th wedding anniversary, before Mother died and before the separation, and I've scissored Charlie out off the family group but closer inspection shows his charcoal-suited sleeve behind Susan's back. When he said he wanted a divorce, I was outraged and yet also relieved – hurt that it had come from him and yet glad that the pretence would soon be over – and he promised that the girls and I would have more than enough money. I suppose he imagined that my heart was broken, and it wasn't, strangely

enough, though I felt numb and I was grateful because he gave me the financial freedom to paint and I employed a new servant because the pretty one had disappeared overnight, but they do that. And I took refuge in the blurry realm, got lost in the patterns traced by the brush on the paper, slipping into the fuzzy spaces where hues and feelings overlapped like puddles of paint, and in my work I found my purpose and my salvation. I've kept my favourite wedding photo on the opposite side, with me in silk and the gorgeous roses and my hair up, under the veil, and of course it's not such a good shot of Charlie – why was it so hard to find a perfect portrait of both of us? – and he's looking out of the frame, his attention drawn elsewhere, as though he was planning his getaway even then.

As I listen, still and alert as a rabbit in the undergrowth, all I hear is the ringing in my ears and the drone of a lawnmower, and I wipe the tears and my mascara has left a trail below my eyes, like dull charcoal bruises, and I smear the sootiness with a blob of lotion on cottonwool, and I put my glasses back on and I sigh, slow as air released from tyres, letting go of the tension. I lean forward and that man is behind me in the mirror, the black boy from the kerb, paused on the threshold of my bedroom, dirty handprint on the doorframe, and I want to scream and my lips are stretched open and wide, and I am trying to make a noise but no sound comes out of my mouth. My arm knocks into the photographs, sets them off like dominoes collapsed and the vase smashes to the ground, bursting as if it has been dropped from a much higher position, water gushing, flowers flying.

SIYAYA

4 and 5 January 2012

Grahamstown, South Africa

Siyaya Songongo paces the street, shuffling the dirt. His feet pound, shoes hit the ground, scattering loose gravel, the sound tapping out its rhythm in the dark summer air. He pauses to stare at the broken landscape. The past murmurs, history spoken indistinct as the shapes in silver light. Moon's cruel sickle slashes the night, hovering surreal over roads untarred, above the sprawl of graveyard that lends this area its name: *KwaNdancama*, one and the same, "the place where I give up".

Siya needs water, makes a cup of his palms and hard brown fingers. He stoops, shakes his head and lingers beside the trickle from the public tap. The stench of his community's crap assaults his nostrils, heaves into his chest. Siya knows it is always best not to think about all that is bad in the world. It drives him mad, but once he starts he cannot stop. Far off, he hears a siren's howl, a cop. He senses the blank eyes of the dead watching from the other world. Siya looks down, not sideways or ahead. He swears he loathes this place. It is sick, diseased, a disgrace and he hates the putrid, clinging smells.

"Fuck this, fuck all of it," he yells.

He wishes he could run. It has been less than three weeks since he was done with his tribal initiation at the circumcision school. In the bush, Siya learnt how to behave, rule upon rule, as his wound throbbed inside the dressing. There was no infection and no pus, a blessing in this age of HIV and AIDS. The warden had bound strips of *izichwe* plants and bandages around the tender tips of the penises and tied the strings. Some boys tried to smuggle antibiotics into the lodge. These ploys did not succeed. It is cheating the ancestors to resort to Western medicine. The culprits were caught and beaten with sticks until their buttocks bled from criss-cross gashes. Siya would rather be killed than endure a traitor's mesh of scars. The cut has lifted him to another level, primal but powerful. His status

has been altered, so he takes it slow, forcing himself to walk with the utmost dignity, in no hurry.

"I am a man," Siya says softly.

He recalls sitting with his legs apart. The pounding of drums was merging with the tripping of his heart. He was aware that he could show neither fear nor pain. Siya regarded the traditional surgeon with disdain. He ignored the flash of the blade as it attacked him. The circumcision cut was made. Siya was stunned yet he gave the requisite shout.

"*Ndiyindoda!*" The affirmation came out in a blaze of triumph.

Now Siya is passing one ruined shack after the next. He has experienced the lack of amenities in this shanty town too often. If he shrugs as he turns down the main road that leads towards the city centre, it is because there is nothing pretty about a patch of thorns and scraps. He, his sisters and his younger brother grew up accepting this filth. They knew no other way. Thando and his friends play cricket in this squalor every afternoon and deep into the evening. The wicket is an empty beer bottle crate, the pitch a desolate waste. Kids field beside the ditch where the sewage seeps, slimy green and sludgy brown. Siya thinks of his world as dirty and bare. His prospects are bleak. The politicians do not care. All they want is the money, the glory and the votes. They are unbothered by the disgusting moats of foul water and these garbage piles that stink.

Siya growls and feels his useless anger sink like the masses repressed. No matter what everybody says, the lies, the pretence and the rot continue to exist. Nelson Mandela's release and the talk of democracy ushered in hope. There was ululating and joyous cheering. The government announced that it was time to bring about serious reconstruction and development. Change seemed imminent. People were ecstatic. It was exhilarating to have the power after being oppressed for so long.

At first the ANC leaders could do no wrong. In eRhini, local partners were digging the land when they found the first of the old bones. A hand was reassembled, stark and accusing in dry earth. KwaNdancama, the sorry region of

Siya's birth, was cursed. Progress ceased, just like that. It was as if a mighty malevolence had spat on all the residents held most precious and dear. Throughout Fingo Village and its surrounds, the fear of restless spirits was aggravated by sheer frustration. It seemed ridiculous that the newly liberated nation had cast off apartheid's heavy chains only to be faced with these unidentified remains and a problem: Nobody claimed the dead as their own. All was in confusion and instead of going forward with the housing, the developers had to wait. Siya sighs as he recalls the setbacks and the stalemate.

He looks around at the township structures stacked on near-identical streets. The desire to run is back. He wants to let himself go, to escape from this terrible area, to forget its troubles. Rage roars until he is itching to drop a match, to watch the tinderbox houses and scraps of wood catch and flare, fast and fervent, inciting cardboard walls to collapse quickly into barriers of hardboard. He imagines the thrill of these ugly parodies of homes being transformed into a whoosh of glorious poems. Brightness rushes, orange into yellow into red, as the massive inferno of his fantasy is fed. Siya bites his lip, fighting the overwhelming urge to purge the neighbourhood of its problems.

A surge of energy pulses from a shebeen he used to frequent before he became an *ikrwala*. Drunken noise and pent-up violence ooze from the modest building. Siya is keen to resist temptation. He is about to retreat from the scene when he catches sight of a drug dealer, beside the consultation rooms of a traditional healer. Siya buys a bank bag of *dagga*. He is not into conversation, especially idle chitchat about how the rainbow nation is doing. A real man does not have to talk. In the shadows, Siya rolls a couple of *zols* and tucks them into his jacket pocket.

He strolls, feigning nonchalance, finding an area where he can smoke: an unlit corner beyond his old high school. Its windows have been hit by vandals as usual. The panes of glass are smashed. He wonders why they even get fixed, only to be trashed again. Siya urinates against a fence, clutching the wire as he sprays, feeling the tormenting burn, the sting of fire where the *ingcibi* made the incision. He drags deep and long on the marijuana, grateful that it is strong. The pain has almost gone. His pink foreskin is proof that he is fully human. Siya can think of

little but the ritual as he inhales the herb. He remembers how he kept one leg bent on his blanket by the embers that glowed in the centre of the hut with its fragrant smell of the forest. When his thighs rubbed together, it was hell, a jagged jab of heat in the groin.

Siya hates keeping still. He tacks across the *veld*, exercising his strong will, moving as though he has no need to rush, without haste. There is the stench of dead animals, faeces and other waste. A rubbish dump spills where a park should be, on the open plain. By day, children frolic in the debris, oblivious to the hazards. Siya takes the short cut. A donkey brays forlornly while a stray brown mutt picks through packets of garbage.

Like a hero in a tale, Siya believes that he is fated to carry out a challenge. In the fantasy he has created, he is a mighty chief. Fear has disappeared with the death of his childhood. He pictures himself as the noble warrior, Macbeth, a character he learned about in his English class at the nearby school. For his final examinations he earned a decent pass in the subject. Siya regards language as the tightrope he must tread to flee the Fingo Village. Hope is embedded in the words he copies and learns every evening, saying them aloud, practising the phonetics, as he turns the pages of his tatty dictionary. He found the book in an abandoned satchel on the ground near the Haven of St Mary Magdalene. Whether dropped or stolen, it has been invaluable as a tool to awaken his potential. He has seen fresh options and glimpsed an exit from the maze of poverty and disease. Siya stretches his vocabulary to raise himself from the hold of the township. Escape is on the tip of his tongue.

He is not meant to be out; he should be at home, asleep. Things went wrong when his grandmother began arguing with him. He has already forgotten what prompted her nagging insinuations, rotten as cheap fruit from the spaza shop. Makhuku had said he was bad, like his Tata. Siya had thought of the other man, the one he first learned about when he returned from the bush, the stranger.

“Why must you always compare me to Mandilakhe?” he had shouted. “It makes me crazy. He is not my real father.”

Siya had sensed danger, as subtle as the first rustle of a bushfire, stirring in the air. Makhulu seemed to know what he was talking about, twisted hands tugging at her greying hair. She had been jittery and afraid.

"What are you saying, Siyaya?" His grandmother's face was grim.

"I do not know him, the man who is my father. I want to meet him, Makhulu, to find out who I really am."

"That may not be wise. Siyaya, be careful."

"I'm sick of the secrets."

Makhulu had squeezed her sunken eyes shut, dismissing him. He knew she resented his power. She had stopped watching his moving lips. Siya had stood in the doorway for a few minutes, asserting his authority, his fists on his hips. He picked up his stick and whacked it against the wall.

"I know the address."

The deaf woman ignored his words. Siya had wanted time to think before acting, to avoid the stress of impulsive behaviour, to consider his options like an adult. He blames Makhulu for rushing him, with her jeers. It is her fault that he is feeling as scared as a dog. Now the dope is kicking in, fuelling his paranoia as it often does. He jumps at the din of a train, thundering on the tracks.

Siya pictures the letter. It had been lying beside the bells of glass, inside the memory box that Mama left behind when she passed away. It was four drawn-out years before he could open the envelope. As a boy, he had cried tears of frustration at her instructions to wait until he was a man. He obeyed the commandment because he could see that it was serious. It was like a ban against temptation. When Siya was able to read the message, he was unsure what to do next, torn between curiosity and denial, yet lured by the tone of the note. Mama had provided him with the details he would need to find his father, including a charcoal portrait of the man.

The metallic rails glint beneath the stars. Siya is close to the Egazini site where Nxele, the prophet Makhanda, fell in the fight against the British settlers. When he was little, his grandfather told stories of the charismatic leader with the persuasive ways. The old man explained how Nxele convinced his brave soldiers that they could conquer the rows of crimson uniforms, turn the enemy bullets into water and send the white invaders back into the sea. Siya's Tatomkhulu had the gift of the gab. Young Siya yelped with glee at the descriptions of the sharp assegais, heavy shields and dancing feathers. He imagined the Xhosa warriors pouring down the hill, prancing and shouting, as if in a trance. Tatomkhulu praised their prowess and their skills. Siya and his childhood companions improvised with weapons. They engaged in mock battles, duelling and dodging attacks.

As an *umkhwetha*, he practised stick fighting with the other initiates. The rhythmic aggression was exciting and a reminder of his youth. Here, beyond Makana's Kop is the place where they gathered the chalk which was painted on each face and body as part of the initiation ceremony. Coated in white clay, the group in the bush resembled muscular ghosts. Their play rekindled sweet memories, the parrying and the lunging, the jabbing and stabbing of nature's swords plunging them back into a carefree time and an innocent age. Siya went by instinct, anticipating strikes, able to gauge when to go forward and when to retreat, his feet quick and his bearing confident. He carries the *intonga* now, its weight reassuring in his hands. The heavy wand of wood is his defence against trouble, his protection. It feels good.

Siya suffers a pang of nostalgia as he calculates the cost of Westernisation. Tatomkhulu takes the form of what has been lost. The original customs have been weakened, blended with modern convention. A tradition of nobility has ended. Siya is becoming sentimental and he is missing the old man. He appreciates how his grandfather always cheered when he ran in athletics meetings, beating the bigger boys. The first cup he won was dedicated to Tatomkhulu. While growing up, it was to his mother's father that he turned for advice. His is the patriarchal voice that rings in Siya's head, sharing the oral traditions of the ages. Knowledge is the thread joining generations. He listened to the elders throughout his youth,

wishing Tatomkhulu had lived longer. His grandfather was wise. He believed in more than a single truth.

The one he had thought was his father was absent, involved in the struggle and caught up in politics. Siya has a vague recollection of his rare visits, a few images of a brooding presence with giant fists. Mandilakhe knew how to impress people with gifts, bringing fancy toys and foodstuff from the bigger towns. Siya's friends were ecstatic. It was enough to them that he was a soccer legend and a hero for the cause. Siya wanted him to stay at home in spite of the laws that restricted freedom and spurred his defiance. As a boy, he hung on his Tata's every sentence, needing to be acknowledged. He clung to the scratchy coat sleeve.

Siya's confidence is wavering, growing thinner with each hour that brings him nearer to the unfamiliar side of town, with its power and wealth. Fear has taken hold of his heart. It is snaking through his veins and his limbs as if he has been bewitched, making his legs feel weak. Sitting on a low stone wall, he cannot seem to steady his pulse, which is usually so sure. Perhaps, after all, he is not ready to face this aspect of his mother's life, the parallel past that she hid so well. Siya senses it is happening too fast, the crossing from his boyhood accelerated by Mama's words and his reaction. He questions his jumbled-up emotions, searching for a distraction in the darkness. There is nothing but the cloak of warmth, the smells of summer and poverty merging.

"I am a man," Siya tells himself, rubbing his brand new tweed jacket, the symbol of his altered state. "I have courage."

He jumps up, as nimble as an acrobat, and starts walking towards the railway station. The day hospital is beside it. He recalls the boredom and frustration of its queues. Waiting was offset by the precious quality of moments spent with his ailing mother. He had guessed the fatal nature of her disease, so it meant a lot to be together. Mama's bony shoulder dug into his as her breath whispered its hopes and desires in his ear. They were not urgent. Death was still a few years away.

The footbridge is a curve of metal, arcing over the train line. He knows it would be unwise to use it. The parking lot is empty, beneath the giant billboard

advocating safe sex. Siya considers his behaviour before the circumcision, an ex-girlfriend surfacing briefly to flash her jiggling brown breasts. It is a battle, this pull between what he was and is now. The tests and trials of manhood are far from easy. Lust flickers its flames as he thinks of the numerous women he has known. Siya blames them for seducing him with their charms. He is desperate to get laid after the weeks of seclusion from females in the bush, yet he is afraid of tearing his foreskin. It is paper thin, sensitive and fragile, after the traditional operation.

Siya hears a noise. He is alert, agile, prepared for confrontation, the stick firm in his grasp. A black cat dashes for cover. He gives a quick gasp of relief as he softens his hold on the weapon. A shop window is filled with tiers of sporting gear. Siya stops and puffs on the second joint. He is reluctant to lose the sense of relaxation, being lulled by rows of single shoes marked with starry price tags. That makes him smile, though he is unsure why he finds the sight amusing. The style of a rust and cream brogue is similar to those he is wearing on his feet. His formal reflection stands in the glass, peering back at him. Siya adjusts the starched collar of his mustard shirt.

The roads are strewn with garbage and the noxious dirt tumbled from bins during the municipal strikes. Luminous ribbons stream out of neon signs. The glare of the artificial brightness seems like a scene from a nightmare. Festive decorations shimmer and sparkle in a nearby clothing store. Siya notes his shabby surrounds, the glimmer of truths made worse by the tinsel. He despises these commercial hints, the advertising ploys and cunning enterprises of business, recognising them yet finding them difficult to resist. The stick smacks a bench. His knuckles tense in a fist as his calm disintegrates.

A drunkard staggers from nowhere, slurring salutations as he clutches a bottle to his chest, blurring words into actions. He disappears with a groggy groan. This street will be overcrowded later but now Siya is alone with his anxiety. It is spreading like a fuse that has been lit too soon and he cannot control the jittery nerves. From the pit of his stomach, the emotion jumps to his bowels and gnaws at his innards. Though he wants to run, he forces himself to pause

before a mirror, touching his checked cap before proceeding. His mask of orange ochre surprises him. Sweat is beading above his lip.

Flattened boxes litter the grubby pavement. He does not want to feel bitter but he does. Hints of spices and cooking oil float through the night. The marijuana has given him the munchies. On his right is the bakery, the sounds of production banging within and the scent of yeast wafting out. Siya hopes that he has not spent all of his money on the dealer. He checks his pockets for change and scrapes up enough for a half loaf of white. He manages to arrange things with a guy he knows who works at the place. The bread is hot in its wrapper as he rips off chunks. He keeps moving.

Ahead, several kids lie together under a square of industrial sheeting, huddled body to body like puppies. He has been in this situation. It is an effort but he stops eating to give them the crust. The smallest has a grubby bandage around his right paw. He resembles Siya's brother, dimpled and innocent, the wound as raw as a reproach. Siya remembers what their mother has done. He and Thando have different fathers. The blood ties have been altered by her act. It is a betrayal. A flood of confusion dampens his love, putting out the flutter that stirs in his heart and hardening it. He begins to mutter as he recalls Mama's face. Her hold snaps. The drone of an air-conditioning unit hums in the heat. Alone, Siya surveys an alien space, frightened of the charred expanse of his youth. His boyhood has been burnt with the flaring crackles of the circumcision lodge. He lets down his guard. One of his parents is dead, the other a mystery. Fear tightens its grip, scorching his chest.

History lurks in the guise of a statue, an angel, her arm pointing at the past. Above a crumpled soldier she soars dignified, calm and tall. Ntombi, his younger sister, has always loved this stone image. It is as if Siya is in a daze, rapt yet detached. The sculpture has an expression of pure peace and the gaze is serene. He is losing track, unsure of where he is and what he is doing. Siya shakes his head to clear it of drugged confusion. He takes a step back, hearing his Mama's heavenly voice gliding into the black silence. There is a choice. The solid wings seem poised for flight. He could turn back, retreat into the comforting night and be asleep on his mattress within half an hour.

"No," he whispers. "I am a man."

He refuses to cower and he will not give up or run. Siya stares at the town hall, which has witnessed so many events down the years. The building gives out a golden glow. He glances up at the clock, wondering if it is slow. Shafts of light are spilling onto the pavement, illuminating its cracks. The chimes strike: one, two, three. He is waiting for the final clang: four. From a laneway comes the dank odour of something he cannot quite place. The bank looms pompous and pale, solemn columns stretching upward. Siya stares at the cathedral, with its steeple and tall walls. The square will be filled with people by noon. Its emptiness now is eerie, as if the connection with others is just an illusion.

At the traffic intersection, Siya avoids company, slinking into the welcome shadows where he hides. The sinking sensation takes hold and he hopes he will not swoon. He has been getting dizzy since the circumcision. The moon leers at him, its mean sliver like a twisted smile. Siya leans against a tree trunk, keeping still for a while longer. The Haven of St Mary Magdalene is up the hill. If he turned left he would be there in minutes. Until now, it has not seemed real, the thing he has to do and the direction he must take to discover who he really is. He pictures Mama, writing the letter at the sanctuary, surrounded by those who want a better future, a world free of HIV/AIDS. Once or twice, he visited the place after school. People seemed nice enough. It was friendly but the sense of sickness and dying disturbed him. There was too much noise: shouting, crying and laughing, as if every aspect of life had to be grasped in full. He hears the women's hymns in his head, with the pull between the chorus and his mother's soprano rising again and again like a solitary bird. Loud and joyous, the refrain is a hook. It was in the memory box, a recording of songs on a cassette. When his sister Lindiwe listens to it, he longs for his Mama, the pain a fresh ache every single morning. It is a family ritual, the taped music greeting the dawning of the new day.

The acacia's bark presses against his spine as Siya pushes himself upright. Down the incline he meanders, admiring fleets of German cars on sale at the garage. There is a dip and a small platform with a rail, over the drainage way. He is walking from the town towards the suburbs, leaving the familiar behind him. A

frown puckers his forehead. Somebody seems to be screaming in the distance. It is disconcerting. He has been dreaming of Mama's beautiful voice, lulled by her soaring notes and not paying attention to the ugly reality that floats around him like a spell. This is how people get mugged and he knows it. The *dagga* has turned him into a drugged parody of himself. Siya is horrified that he is out of touch when he should be most vigilant. He is aware that much of the crime that happens could be prevented. It is easy to become a victim. He is rattled by the lapse, queasy uncertainty quivering in his belly. His legs, so accustomed to exercise, are jelly-like where normally he is hyper-alert, ready and strong.

"Fuck," Siya murmurs. "Fuck."

It all seems wrong. Looking back, he sees the tangle of branches clawing the blue-black sky. The spiky spires are a child's drawing, a vague impression of turrets. Buildings loom and recede like ghosts, the spirits of another time and place. The need to find answers seems ridiculous as the marijuana kicks in, clutching his mind. It is causing his head to whirl and spin like a loose wheel. The dope seems as potent as a trip on *tik*. He has to grope in the greyness, staggering towards the petrol station. It is taking forever to get closer, like a kind of damnation, this sense of moving yet reaching nowhere. Siya is sprawling in space, hovering over his outline, a grown man crawling through the weeds and grass. He has to lie down. Prickling jabs of pins and needles thread up his arms and legs, tickling him into uncomfortable awareness. The kerbside reeks of urine.

In the bush with the other initiates for several weeks Siya did not smoke. During the first seven days, no water was allowed and the hours stuttered by in a haze of parched throats and cracked lips. Like the *veld* in a drought, they were too dry. Their guardian gave them *samp* without beans. Salt was forbidden. They stayed in the lodge, with only the fire, the pain and each other for company. It was lonely and frightening, silhouettes distorting against warping walls of plastic sacking. As they shared stories, they heard the calls of wild animals, the lions thundering and hungry hyenas scratching through the scrub. With their whitened faces and matching expressions of terror, the *Abakhwetha* looked like lost kin. Their eyes had sunk into the sockets, the dehydrated skin as tight as the hide on a drum.

Peculiar visions came to Siya as he rested on his grey blanket. He was trapped in crocodile-congested rivers. Armed with the stub of an assegai, he had to fight a ferocious leopard. He was hallucinating, light-headed from lack of food. Serpents writhed at his feet and the *Inambezulu Inyushu* was even trying to eat his foreskin. He woke, trembling and slick with sweat, sure that the small piece of flesh had been buried, yet worrying about witchcraft and *muti*. In a recurring nightmare, five very beautiful women were luring him into their beds. As he approached, they turned into hags, as hideous as those encountered by Macbeth. Their monstrous fingers yearned to stroke his frail new manhood, to hinder the healing process. Siya, who had minimal experience of dealing with the supernatural, was scared and uncertain of what to do. The creatures appeared behind a curtain of swirling smoke and whirling fog, as if veiled by nature and hidden in the elements. Siya failed to keep the hellish beings at bay. They cackled and crowed. Flames licked his loins. Coals crackled on the fire, throwing up sparks.

"*Ndiyindoda*," Siya cries, memory fusing with the moment.

He refused to be tricked, recognising the wicked lies and cunning deceit of these feminine presences. The break was made. His circumcision brought the responsibility to take the next step. Siya emerged, triumphant, from the liminal stage. He had learned the answers to the questions, coming of age with a shout of victory.

But now he stirs. The concrete stinks. He feels ashamed and exposed as a fraud. An *ikrwala* is meant to be dignified. He is not supposed to abuse substances. Siya is embarrassed that he almost fell asleep. He springs up. He dusts off his smart jacket. He knows he has to keep going, to reach the affluent address before it becomes light. Ahead of him is the sweet silence of suburbia, where white people and the elite members of the black middle class live. He is about to cross a line and he trusts the ancestors will forgive him for straying from the path. A truck rumbles by. The driver raises a weary hand. Siya returns the wave with his stick and gazes ahead.

He realises he will have to avoid the broad tarred road, so he stays on the dark verges where others will be unlikely to observe him. Beneath his feet, the grass is thick. Flowering creepers overwhelm him with perfume. He feels sick as he scans the grey barrier of high walls and tall fences, blending together to keep him out. Siya is done with pretending. This area of town intimidates him, defeating him with its display of abundance. The ostentation is evident, whichever way he glances. Each of these rambling properties appears as large as a village. Beyond imposing facades, yards conceal a mirage of gardens. He hears fountains bubbling and the gurgle of pools. There is an expanse of tennis courts as he reaches a school's premises. Playing fields roll before him, glowing in nauseous green waves. The state-of-the-art facilities, which everyone raves about, are out of reach for the ordinary folk. His mother tried to save a portion of her wages for education. She would confide in him, sharing the exorbitant cost of uniforms, books and fees. Siya said it was unimportant where they studied, that apologies were unnecessary. Still Mama put money aside. It was a losing battle. He remembers her laboured breathing, the anguish in the rattle of air exhaled.

Outsiders talk about poverty as a burden and a trap. They describe the townships as ghettoes or slums, parts of the map to be avoided. Siya regards his birthplace as a snare, poised to tighten around him. Like a wild animal, he does not care to be caught in the Fingo Village. He is prepared to bite off a limb, perhaps even to kill, rather than be stuck in a place without prospects, held against his will. Not for him the eroded land, the sorry houses and the shit that piles up in buckets. Acceptance is a form of death and he refuses to adjust to fit the circumstances. That is why he chooses to be moving, to get away, to make a clean break, as if running is improving his chances of escape. He has done it throughout his life, using his muscles for volition, as a means to avoid the strife and stress of his surroundings. When he was young he discovered boundaries could be pushed through motion. All Siya needed was the smooth poetry of his blood pumping through his veins, the steady rhythm of his heart thumping against his ribs.

With effort, he resists the compulsion to sprint towards the *veld* as fast as he can. Instead, Siya saunters up the well-lit hill, his eye on the last turning before the vast expanse of wilderness. It is pleasant and peaceful up here. A sign

announces Nemesis Crescent, his destination. He has the house number on a crumpled page, tucked into his handkerchief pocket. The rage that consumed him earlier has passed, as has the panic. Now he is calm and alert, in spite of the *dagga*. Beneath a fist-shaped cabbage tree, he stands, tense and cautious, shrouded in shadow. Streetlamps drop orbs of orange into darkness. To soothe the insistent stab of cramps, he removes his polished shoes and lifts a tense calf, bending his toes. He would prefer to be wearing trainers, but knows the requisite brogues suit the appearance of the man about town, smart yet sharp, the beige leather offset by the brown trim. While the sports jacket's stiff texture still feels strange, he is adjusting to its solemn weight. Siya had to arrange the finances with Mama's uncle, a relative on Makhulu's side of the family. It was not cheap. However, an *ikrwala* takes pride in his appearance. Siya fingers the top button of the shirt where a tie should be.

He supposes it is wrong to hold onto hurt. Grudges are like curses, stubborn and self-defeating. All the same, resentment simmers, the bitterness eating into his core. The virulence is a foul liquid bubbling from a pot, scalding whatever it touches, troubling and terrifying. Siya has gone through life without a father's support. Repeatedly, he has had to flout convention, to make his own rules and to adjust to the emptiness. He experiences a glow of disgust when he considers Mandilakhe, a parent in name, nothing more, as if he did not even exist. Hot shame brings a flush. Mama left little trace of the one she wed in the box filled with memories, as if he was dead and gone before he left. His facial features are a blank. Makhulu often mutters that she has "that monster to thank" for her daughter's death.

Siya erases the tyrant from his mind. Questions about his biological Tata, the stranger he will find in the house before him, flicker to and fro, possibilities flaring and catching like objects tossed into a blaze. Caring about others is dangerous, yet he craves acceptance and unconditional love, as well as good fortune and a grand ending to his tale of woes. Siya focuses on the home spread before him. He wants to open the gate and roam around the property, as if it is already his. It comes as a shock to discover the thick chain and the cold metal

padlock. He inspects the grounds, peering over the jasmine lacing the picket fence. Sounds of water splashing over stones become a turbulent crashing.

There is a whining noise too. Siya turns. A flashing beam is creeping towards him, like a giant firefly. Wheels groan in complaint as someone pedals a bicycle uphill, the mechanical moan getting louder. Siya slips beneath a willow's drooping fringe. There is a thud. Fresh sweat clogs the air, intimate and unnerving. Siya's blood pounds inside his head. A newspaper pokes from the letterbox beside him. Breath is suspended. His eyes are averted. He strokes the leaves with his gaze, praying to go unnoticed. The delivery man is so near that he could touch him. Siya's fear is released as the squeaking resumes. He eases back into the moment, looking over the wooden poles at the yard. Discreet, the place guards its secrets. His heart seems to trip and skip a beat, irregular with excitement and relief. Night has swallowed most of the view. Lanterns throw their wan light on a crooked path which winds up to an illuminated porch, showing him the entrance. The moment he has anticipated has arrived but he is ill-prepared for it, without a plan or access to the beautiful garden.

"I am a man." The words echo in his head and he knows he can choose his own destiny.

Siya slips his feet into his shoes, picks up his stick and swishes at blades of long grass. He ambles towards an expanse of bushland where he hopes to pass a few hours in solitude, shielded by the dense scrub and overgrown vegetation. With care and intense concentration, he feels his way, listening to the distant barking of dogs, insects chirping, the panicked flap of wings and frogs burping low endearments. Down in the valley, a car alarm wails unchecked. Tendrils of a trailing vine entwine around Siya's lower leg. He leans against a knobby tree trunk, finding an impromptu peg for his jacket. The summer heat is soothing and the air is still. He sits on warm earth, rearranging his limbs, high on the hill.

His palms press flat against the soil. He had a chance encounter at a party before the circumcision ceremony. A girl in a bright red blouse was swaying in a corner, dancing to her own tune rather than the thump of the kwaito song that was playing through the speakers. Siya waited and watched. He sensed it would be

wrong to interrupt her. His glance was drawn first to her cleavage, then to her wide-set eyes, which mocked and teased him as she rocked from side to side. He did not recognise her. She seemed to be alone, an outcast in the crowd of people he had known since childhood. Her skirt was riding on her thighs. He believed she was flirting, peeking at him and smiling before averting her stare. She was leading him on. He pretended to ignore her before stealing an appreciative look. She was shuffling in slow motion to the music. As it sped up, she shook her large breasts.

Siya did not want to enter the blurry zone where he forfeited control. The girl had drunk too much. He tasted the furry sourness in her mouth. Siya rubbed his thumb against the flimsy fabric of her top as she waited in the queue for food. Her nipples were as hard as the tiny buttons straining against her chest. She squealed and wriggled from his grasp. He collected a plastic plate and cutlery as well as a folded serviette. She giggled while he passed them to her. After she had picked at the meal with little interest, he steered her by the elbow. She gripped his sleeve, tipsy and wobbling on high heels.

Now Siya lets the loose sand fall in a spatter of stones. He grins as he recalls how he took her to the strip of bare land near the old squatter camp. There was no doubt she was the sort of girl Mama and Makhulu had warned him about. In isiXhosa, he told her he thought she ought to be taught a lesson. He expected fierce resistance but she fought for just a few minutes before giving up meekly. She sank into the rubble beneath his weight, weakly, as if she had fainted. Siya reminded her that she had been asking for trouble the whole evening. As she uttered a soft moan of complaint and gave a whimper of fright, he put a hand over her lips. He muttered that the sex was going to be violent and rough. Her vagina was how he wanted it to be, dry and tight. She went limp, as silent as a doll. Siya soon tired of the game, ejaculated and yanked up the zip of his smart trousers. The girl appeared to have passed out. He left her there, lying in the dirt. Back at the party, the aroma of roasted *inyama* had been replaced by the smell of bones being incinerated on the coals. Siya considered boasting about his conquest, but the spark had died. Like a guilty dog, he was fleeing the scene before he could control the impulse, running as if he had committed a crime. His muscles slipped into

their customary mode. He was sprinting for one last glorious time before he became a man.

It was early December when this happened and the weather was mild. He had done as his uncles had instructed, testing his penis before he went into the wild for the traditional operation. They suggested that when he came back from the bush he should do it again. Siya fondles his smooth new skin with pride. Urine hisses onto the weeds like a torrent of rain. The noise distracts him from the sharp, burning sensation. He will follow the advice of his male relatives. For the next act of penetration, he must select a woman he does not love and will never marry. His oldest cousin says it takes away bad luck.

A reptilian coldness brushes his ankle. He wakes with a start. Something is wrong. The vital fire in the centre of the lodge has been snuffed out. He gropes for the certainty of the blanket. It is gone. Fingers connect with tufts of spiky grass and prickly twigs before he manages to grip the *intonga*. He is unsteady. The ghosts of his fellow *abakhwetha* have vanished. Siya stiffens. He is ready to defend the *iboma* against attack. A branch claws his face, reaches for his ear. He is turning in all directions, alert, crouching and peering at the altered features of the environment. Squat buildings emerge beyond the confusion of boughs and plants. Siya is trembling as he absorbs the threat of the alien surroundings. He wants to return to the township. His pulse is racing. It is a mistake to be searching for his father. Inside he is shrivelling. His scrotum is tightening. He is a small boy, shrinking and desperate to hide from the people with money. Hunched in the dawn, Siya hugs his knees to his chest. He reminds himself that he is not a child, scrunched up in a ball of apprehension. There is no reason to be scared and yet he is.

His jacket dangles in the tree, a hollow outline of the man he should be. He gains authority as he shrugs it on and retrieves his cap. The sunrise pops with colour. Tips of aloes protrude from the bushes like spears dipped in blood. His brogues are a mess, so he spits onto a tissue and wipes the leather. His trousers are creased. He must not stress. Like his hero, Macbeth, he has come too far to stop. The strange, smokeless air fills his lungs. He is courageous. He has his

ambitions. He will not fail. He is climbing the rungs of a ladder that leads only upwards.

Birds are stirring to greet the dawn, their twitters more confident with every minute. The sky is pale blue, branded with searing strips of orange, pink and yellow. Siya feels better as he explores the tranquil neighbourhood. Power has shifted. It is the sleepers who are vulnerable and it is good to be moving. Signs remind him to "beware of the dog". A brute whines from behind its barriers, reinforcing the point. Makhulu would complain that he is doing what the *tsotsis* and burglars do: casing the joint before taking action. He grunts and holds back his laugh. His grandmother believes he has the makings of a gangster. She says it grieves her to know he has become a thug, no better than those who steal handbags, hijack cars and mug old ladies. Siya humours her, hamming it up as he brings a mean slit to his eyes. He adopts a swagger, his lean body insolent and sly, thumbs in the metal buckle of his belt. Makhulu snorts before aiming a wry chuckle at his poor impersonations.

Siya imagines her, wizened and weak, fretting after last night's argument, perhaps even weeping. She will be getting up from her rickety bed, which is raised on bricks to protect her from the Tokoloshe. Around six o'clock, Makhulu will call to his sisters, waking them. Luthando will be lazing with the babies, taking it easy because the school is closed for several weeks during the holidays. He pictures Lindiwe's twins, seeing chubby cheeks and big brown eyes. Siya wishes he was still at home with his family, lying on the flattened strip of his foam rubber mattress, waiting for Xolani's crazy rooster to crow like a braggart. Makhulu never hears it, embalmed in her deafness, no matter how much it struts and how hard it squawks. She will be brushing dust off the doorstep while she talks to herself, bossy and convinced she is in charge.

In the suburbs, everything is well-maintained, the lawns trimmed and the gardens neat. Servants are employed to bow and scrape, to rake and sweep. A security company is paid to keep criminals out of the area. The uniformed guards are prepared to shoot those who run, without hesitation. Siya is unsettled by the scale of wealth and the vastness of the properties. He sticks close to the trees and the hedges, using them as camouflage. Stealth is essential. The edges of the

residences do not merge. Each is a distinct rectangle, private and lonely, disconnected and separate. There is no tangle of walls and windows as there is in the Fingo Village.

A hush smothers Somerset Heights, as if it has been cocooned in quietness. The peacefulness is eerie. It seems to swoon over the luxurious homes and lush gardens. He concentrates on the creaking of a cricket. It stops its noise as he steps towards the kerb. Siya plays a game with it, staying still until it speaks again, darting back and forth, in and out of its orbit. He is standing by a row of pines, diagonally across from where his unknown father lives. His is one of the few houses not obscured by solid walls. The widening road closes in on itself, a circle leading back almost to its start. Siya smells the scents of flowers and freshly-mowed grass, yet the street seems empty. The buildings appear deserted, as though they have been evacuated during a natural disaster. Everything is idyllic, scrubbed as fresh and clean as the world of an advertisement, stripped of reality's grime.

Siya is fascinated by the nearness of what he does not comprehend, fear giving way to curiosity. The ground is solid beneath his buttocks but warm air strokes the nape of his neck. He draws patterns in the sand with his stick. Hopeful swirls emerge as he scrapes in the earth. He wills his Tata to fetch the newspaper from the box.

A sudden click compels him to look up. There is a quick movement at the gate. A rag has caught on a thorn bush. It flutters, insubstantial and frail, beyond the picket fence, flapping like a packet torn in a gale or a restless animal shuddering. Siya is about to stare elsewhere when he discerns motion, a figure emerging in pieces through the wooden slats. It is an ancient woman, scarcely bigger than Makhulu, walking on the path. Her hair is long and grey like that of a witch. She squints in his direction, flounders and stumbles. Siya carves a ditch in the soil with his *intonga*. He gazes straight ahead and pretends he is bored.

When he is sure she has retreated beyond the front door, he strolls across the street. A booming voice arrests him before he can reach the entrance to the property.

"Hey! Boy!" A figure looms over the brick barricade of a fortress, invisible dogs snarling their support.

Siya considers glaring at the inquisitive neighbour. He yearns to show the angry retort of a clenched fist or to ignore the insult, feigning ignorance, but he has heard the warning in the loud reproach. "Boy!" He hates the sound of the old-fashioned word. Makhulu has told him how, in apartheid times, Afrikaners talked of themselves as "*die baas*" and "*die nooi*". The English were just as bad, according to her, referring to their elderly servants as "the girl" or "the boy". Siya is amazed people believe they can use these derogatory terms. Indignation leaps inside him like a flash of lightning. He would like to see the *boer* squirm and apologise.

"*Ndiyindoda*." He has an urge to shout the response he made, loud as an elephant enraged, when the *ingcibi* sawed at his prepuce with the blade.

"I am a man," he says, very formally.

"What are you doing here?"

"I am waiting for a friend."

"*Oppas*," the man threatens, unconvinced by his excuse and waggling an index finger. "I'm watching you."

Siya feels as if he is visiting a foreign country, which exists side by side with his own. He is flat and unreal, an invader in an enemy nation he cannot inhabit. His shoulders slump and the earlier elation he had experienced at the prospect of meeting his father has evaporated. He has no idea how to behave in this environment and he lacks the bravery to bluff with conviction. Siya whacks his stick against the kerb. He has had enough. This is not his lot. He must go back. Wiping his hot forehead with his handkerchief, he finds the *dagga* in his pocket. The herb seems like the antidote to his worries. He ambles towards the region where he slept just hours ago, not hurrying, pleased he kept a small stash of marijuana for such an emergency.

In the bush a young girl watches with a frown as he rolls the joint. She shakes her head. Siya follows her as she wanders down the treacherous, slippery stones of a steep incline. She carries a baby wrapped in a ragged towel, its bump bulging against her spine. Siya laughs with her as she skips through dandelions and weeds. He tumbles back in time. Her bare feet prancing on the gritty track remind him of his sisters. He is thinking of how they used to turn their tattered rope and jump, linking hands and chanting out their rhymes, Ntombi bouncing like a young springbok, Lindiwe as regal as a lioness.

Siya steps around a heap of dung, mindful of his shoes, as he comes to where a family of squatters is living in squalor. The mother is searching through piles of trash, no sign of horror on her ash-stained face. She tells him her husband of many years is in jail for theft. A scraggly puppy is biting its own tail as the ragged kids play on the mound, beside discarded nappies, jagged tin lids and assorted junk. They have found a guitar. It has no strings to twang, so they sing out of tune and bang on it instead. The woman offers Siya a few overripe plums and he realises how hungry he is. Juice drips from his lips as she hums and stacks the rubbish into haphazard towers. Numbed by the morning heat, Siya sits, smiling at the children and reluctant to stir. A butterfly flits to and fro, beckoning with wings of orange and black. He marvels at its fragile beauty. On the path, he smokes the rolled *zol*, his sense of purpose returning. He is ready to meet his father, who will do his duty and welcome back the prodigal son.

In Nemesis Crescent, Siya goes straight to the gate. The padlock is open, slung over the chain. He fumbles with the latch. It must be later than he had realised. His finger catches in the clasp and he curses. He mumbles an apology to God, asks Him to forgive him and guide him. The sun is beaming above the trees, filtering its rays through leaves and branches. At his feet, the earth is teeming with ants. They weave in military lines, their paths connecting him to the ancestors. Neat borders separate tumbling flowers from dense green lawn. The contrast between this ordered life and his is so very marked. Siya has an urge to sit on the weathered bench and merge with the exotic blooms and feathered grasses. He yearns to rest, undisturbed and invisible from the road. The motionless air is dry with the whisper of fire. A crow moans from a branch above

his head. He recalls King Duncan's misguided perception of Macbeth's castle. His teacher taught him that the raven's croak hinted at deception and death. It is still in this peaceful and private space. He can deal with his fears.

"*Ndiyindoda*," Siya murmurs, touching his face.

He stares at the ochre on his finger. This is not the time to relax. He needs to keep alert. He puts his hand on his heart, beating steady inside the mustard shirt. He has become a member of the *amakrwala*, admitted to the esteemed ranks of adults. He no longer sits with the boys at communal gatherings or joins their silly pranks. His uninitiated friends have to call him *Bhuti*. The joys of his new position include being able to take a wife. He has earned the right to own property.

"I am a man."

Siya glares at a stack of blue pots filled with smooth stones and rubbery vegetation. He is tempted to snap the stems to see if the plants are real or fake. Lizards carved of wood and chameleons crafted from metal snake across the wall. Wind chimes clank and clunk beneath a dusty striped awning. The front entrance is before him, painted bright red. He interprets the colour as a warning and steps back fast. A stagnant pond of inky water is beside him, almost hidden by giant leaves and waxy blooms. Siya looks beyond the foliage, unsure what he is seeking. Nothing moves in the gloom. Even the insects are dead still, as if charmed or asleep. A massive pane of solid glass reflects the garden in its mirror. Two windows are shielded by a design of twisting spirals, hardened to form a brittle barrier. A yellow sticker states that the premises are protected by the armed response company.

Now he notices a cat behind folds of curtain. Siya hates the furry creatures. He associates them with witchcraft and is certain they bring evil. They are unpredictable and vicious, bearing their teeth and hissing. This one has stiffened in shock, the ridge along its back rearing up in protest. Siya lunges at it with his stick, in mock attack mode. The animal disappears. Siya raps on the door, listening for sounds within the house. He imagines he hears steps on a carpeted floor. There is no answer. He sees the button for a bell and prods it.

The fronds of a fern hang from a basket, caressing his arm. Something is telling him to turn and go. He should listen to his instincts. He should heed the omens. He cannot. The man who shares his blood lives inside this house. It is the dwelling of his relatives, the clan he will grow to know with time. His lineage is as noble as that of a king. He has a right to be here. This is the home he has been promised. Siya rests his hand against the whitewashed wall. The skin becomes lighter. He stares at his palm, smeared with the chalk of pale potential. It is like the coat of clay that covers an initiate. He will not fail. This is his fortune. He can change his fate. An *ikrwala* does not give in to doubt. He must be strong, resilient and unflinching. Siya stretches and stands up straight. He is about to ring another time when he hears a dull clatter and an intake of breath. The choice has been made for him.

"May I help you?"

The old woman's voice is tremulous. She waits behind the burglar bars. Fear has its own smell and his nostrils know the scent. He picks it up when haughty ladies glance at him in crowded streets. They press their bags against their dresses as they pass. He confounds their worry, narrowing almond eyes in a menacing fashion. It is a game. In deserted township lanes, girls hurry in the opposite direction when they spy him. He is the wrong type of guy and the reason why their elders warn them never to walk alone. This mean appearance is an act that Siya perfected as a boy, whenever he was frightened or feared being rejected. He learned to mask his apprehension, conquering panic and outlawing meekness. Anyone can drink too much liquor and have the courage of alcohol. That is a weakness. He does not need a gun under his pillow to sleep secure at night. He relies on his stick and his wits. He is prepared to fight a stranger. He has mastered the language of men, words clicking like bone on bone. He knows the tongue of the bush, the speech that rustles like flames in leaves. He is as fast and lean as a leopard, with the honed muscles of a long-distance athlete. He is a mighty warrior, like his hero, Macbeth. He has paid his dues and he will take his place in the sun.

"Yes? Has Joseph sent you?" Her tone is anxious.

The question confuses him. He pauses as he wonders who she means, but regains his composure.

"I am seeking Charlie Blake."

"Well, that's too bad. He's gone away." Her laugh is odd.

"It is very important that I am speaking with him. I shall await his return."

"Oh, I wouldn't bother. You could be here for a very long time. Goodbye."

She shuts the window firmly and sinks into the shadows. Siya tries to appear casual, but his gut is churning. The woman was dismissive and rude. She is preventing him from meeting his father. He suspects she is watching from behind the drapes. It is like a dream that has ended too suddenly. Siya tries to reclaim his buoyant mood, searching for a sign of hope. He flicks at a lizard with his *intonga*. It scurries through pink flowers as he strolls down the slope. A few battered blooms fall onto the path and he kicks the ground as he approaches the gate. He expects to hear the booming voice of the neighbour, harassing him. Apartheid is not dead, whatever the government has decreed.

"I am a man," Siya says, repeating the words like a prayer.

He is astonished at how warm it has become. Even the birds have been silenced by the oppressive heat. He will not be put off by insensitive white people. This is his land, not theirs. His ancestors claimed it as their own, long before the settlers took the lion's share. Siya walks across the broad suburban street with all the dignity he can muster. It is not a crime to sit on the side of the road. He will not be commanded by colonisers or flustered by bullying types from a bygone age. A labourer shuffles up the hill, sipping his *Amasi*. He offers a greeting in isiXhosa before throwing the milk carton on the grass beside Siya. Sweat drips from his gleaming brow. He wipes it with his sleeve as he trudges around the corner. Mandilakhe used to do the same thing. Siya shrugs. It does no good to hold grudges or harbour resentment. A kid with freckles zips by on a skateboard, wheels whirring as he goes.

"Hi, Chief!" he shouts.

Siya envies him his freedom. A child can do whatever he pleases, blurring the boundaries. Thando is the same. He has no responsibilities and does not have to uphold social customs. Makhulu is often cross with the lazy adolescent, scolding him whenever he is cheeky. She says Thando gets away with murder. Siya is proud of his younger brother. A boy does not know right from wrong or what is and is not allowed. Thando makes mistakes but he never shows malice. He is placid and tolerant, loved by all who know him. Siya used to get jealous, calling him Mama's precious baby. He shoved Thando whenever she was not looking. He teased him for having the round eyes of a girl. He did not let him join in the games, chasing him away and taunting with cruel threats, hurling insults like sharp rocks. Thando never gave up, following him about like a devoted puppy. Siya admired his patience and his persistence. Thando smiles and he whistles, merry to a fault. He is a team leader with a talent for sports. Siya prefers his own company, finding it difficult to follow the orders of others. A free spirit, he gets frustrated by the rules that bind him to convention.

Running is his form of rebellion as well as a joy. He misses the feel of feet hitting ground, legs hurtling him forward, the sound of whooshing air. The swift beat has been replaced by the steady pace of walking. It is the tempo of tradition, the measure of his manhood. Countless others before him have done it, yet it brings no pleasure. He waits on the kerb, static and sullen. Siya surveys the stretch of shimmering tar with longing. It undulates in dark waves, forming a mirage in the far distance.

The revving noise of a car takes him by surprise. He watches the woman who spoke to him reverse a station wagon down the steep driveway. Her hand emerges like a cream glove, aiming an electronic device at the fence. It beeps. A wide gate slides open slowly as if in a dream. It begins to close as she accelerates. Siya slips into the yard as the vehicle takes the bend. Metal clanks behind him with a thump. He jumps. He grips his stick. He looks around, catches his breath, astonished at his boldness. It is important to remain concealed behind the clusters of shrubs and trellised creepers. He moves towards the main house, avoiding the formal approach, afraid of being seen by the *boer* and his barking dogs. Siya

believes he is shielded from the neighbours. He reaches an open patch, as green as a park, pauses, unsure where to go next, drawn towards the outbuildings that he notices further up the slope. The stretch of lawn sweeps before him like a challenge. He is lurking in the shadows as if he has no courage. It is bad to be behaving like this. He crosses the open expanse as fast as he can, without sprinting, glad when he reaches the shelter of vegetation.

Without warning, the terrain has changed. He has come to a large pool beyond a glass fence. It is like a restless river or the sea at high tide. Siya freezes in the gloom beneath the branches, shivering with apprehension. He cannot swim. Long ago, a close friend drowned in a dam on a farm. Siya heard the stories that the adults spread. His playmate was found, trapped in the reeds, dead. The plants had wrapped around his limbs and they kept him there, pinned beneath the surface. Siya imagines the panic, caught in the murky depths, the sun a glimmer overhead.

"*Ndiyindoda*," he whispers.

This is not the way for a man to behave. Siya gazes at the band of shimmering blue, searching for boldness. He relives his last day at the circumcision school, tapping the ground with his *intonga*. The initiates had their heads shaved. They were stripped of their loincloths and chased to a nearby stream. There they dipped their toes and shins in the tepid water. The men of the community were scrubbing them, washing them clean. Milky clay dripped down their thighs and their calves in streaks, quashing the last traces of childish weakness. Siya was exhilarated, virility coursing through his veins like a blaze untamed. Globs of butter were being smeared onto his naked skin. The ancestors had deigned to smile on him. A flutter of excitement lifted his spirits. He was among the successful *amakrwala*, gleaming strong and brown in the *veld*. Siya peers down the long tunnels of memory, witnessing again the diluted whiteness pouring off in runnels. His boyhood has gone.

Summer air burns his nostrils. Siya makes a beeline for a pair of derelict shacks at the back of the property. He cuts across the steep incline, no longer apprehensive but moving with intent. This section of the garden is neglected and

wild. The grass swishes against his khaki trousers. He smacks it with his stick, riled by the chaos of weeds. It is the ideal habitat for snakes. He peers over the brick wall that runs along the perimeter and recognises the wasteland where he spent the night. It is odd that he was so close to his destination without realising where he was. Siya knows that God works in mysterious ways. He pauses in a grove of citrus. Orange fruits gleam like glowing coals. A stone bench tempts him with its cool seat. He would like to stop and rest as befits his status but the quietness disturbs him. It is the calm before a storm. He sees the dehydrated segments of an earthworm, embalmed by the passing of time.

The outside rooms are not much bigger than huts and seem to be in disrepair. The first is padlocked shut. He glances through a window, expecting to see a bed or a chair and perhaps a table. Strips of wood and piles of newspaper stretch across a broad shelf. He creates a hood with his hand against his forehead and presses his nose to the pane. Colours crowd before him, twirling. The indistinct shapes could be leaves or flowers, church spires or clouds, twigs or towers. He cannot make sense of the images that unfurl in rows of insipid hues. They recede into the darkness like mirrors reflected within mirrors. He does not trust this type of art. If he could, he would destroy it, dashing it to the floor.

A sudden noise makes him swivel. He must hide before anyone appears. Siya's mouth drops in shock as he turns from the studio space. He sees an altar with bones and feathers. Near it is a bowl of blood. He guesses it is a type of *muti* for protection. Siya is unnerved by the creepy place. The silence is heavy with foreboding. What was it that he heard? He is becoming convinced that the old woman is possessed by an evil power. She is exerting a supernatural hold on his father and keeping them apart. Everything is going wrong, turning foul not fair. He is coming undone. A creature glares at him from a ledge, round eyes glowing. It could be an owl or even the cat, could be real or could be false. There is the sound again, abrupt and insistent. It is his knuckles, raw from knocking against the opening of the other shack. He is conscious of a peculiar smell. He is leaning against a door. He is frantic, he is pushing against it in panic and he is plunging into hell.

Siya collapses onto cracked linoleum, his stick rattling into a corner. The state of the little dwelling takes him by surprise. It is dingy, dusty and cluttered with assorted objects. He is battling to breathe. Skinny spiders dangle from the roof and rusty tools hang from hooks. Two rickety bicycles are propped against a large washbasin. He has an impression of crookedness, as if the very foundations are askew. Siya finds a toilet, concealed behind a screen. It has a dangling chain, a wooden seat and no lid. The bowl is stained although it seems clean. Anxiety claws at his stomach, gnawing like a rat. He experienced a similar churning dread on the eve of the rite of passage, wondering what lay ahead in the weeks of seclusion. A goat had been slaughtered for each of the initiates. Siya ate the right shoulder of the animal, sinking his teeth into the succulent pink meat. He felt older, swallowing the sacrifice, his throat thick with the sweet taste of flesh. Now his innards heave and roll. His fingers clutch the cool porcelain. He lets go as he realises that he could be touching filth. He is unstable and wobbling on his legs, as woozy as a drunkard and unable to hold himself straight. He is swaying and reaching for the partition, bracing himself for the hot rush of fire as he urinates. Afterwards, he feels better. He rinses his hands at the taps and drinks the refreshing water.

"*Ndiyindoda*," Siya says, puffing out his chest with pride and patting the smooth fabric of his mustard shirt.

His manhood is not in question. The polo neck version of his penis has gone. He and his friends compared their circumcised members to luxury motor cars. He considers his Benz to be a source of pleasure and power. He jokes that the girls will be lucky to have a ride. The *amakrwala* have heard that it is important to have sex after the initiation, to be rid of the dirt. Siya's mind wanders back to his last fuck, the woman with the breasts squeezed into the red shirt. He will search for her when he returns to the township. It is necessary for him to iron out the creases after the operation. He guesses there is a chance that he has an infection. A man must be free of diseases. He will regale his next conquest with elaborate tales of the mysterious father he has found and the property he will inherit. That and his new Mercedes will win her over. She is bound to be impressed.

An enamel plate and matching bowl balance on a crate, beside an old-fashioned cup with a chip on the rim. Siya knows the floral design. He recognises the gold band that loops around the brim of the saucer. Memory stirs, as slow as a lazy flame, and he struggles to focus. Where has he seen this object? He imagines Makhulu drinking from it, sitting in the sunshine of her neatly swept yard. It seems implausible. A pink uniform, neatly ironed, is hanging behind the door. Next to it is a pair of faded navy blue overalls. Both are washed and fresh, smelling of lavender. He guesses that this is the servants' quarters. Siya is deflated, squashed by the idea of black people being forced to inhabit a storage space, surrounded by tools and junk. It is a sign of disrespect. He pictures Mama, getting ready to go to work when he was very young, looking fine and as beautiful as ever. She took a plastic bag, holding the same sort of outfit: a dress, a *doek* and a white apron, starched stiff and pressed smooth.

Siya finds these items of clothing disturbing. Servility is not for him. He came into the world a year ahead of the born free generation. He does not remember apartheid and he is entitled to vote. He expects to benefit from the nation's affirmative action policies and equal opportunities. There is a craze among the affluent youth that intrigues and excites him. He has heard about guys who delight in burning brand-name fashions in front of an audience. In truth, they have earned the right to trash what they own, flouting conspicuous consumption and disrespect for property, competing to discover who cares the least about money. They are pissing on poverty and the struggles of the poor, showing off by damaging expensive phones and stamping on buckets of fast food. Siya approves of the role reversal and is glad the bad days of the past are over. He can force his way out of the ghetto. Black people are in charge. The world is changing.

A whining noise on the other side of the wall brings him back into the present with a jolt. He hides behind a stack of cardboard containers, confined to a corner. It is undignified to be skulking in the shadows and behaving like a common criminal. Siya tries to reason with himself. He is not trespassing. He has done no wrong. He is an adult. This is where his father lives. This is his place and his season. This is his chance to show that he is courageous and upstanding. He is allowed to sip the communal beer with the elders. He can build his own home. He

can hold his head high among his peers and attract admiring glances from the women and boys.

His eyes have adjusted to the dimness. He thought he heard an engine rumbling but all is quiet. Siya pushes against the heap of things before him, grumbling as he comes back to his full height. The boxes are sealed with tape and a word has been written across the top surface: Charlie. He wants to rip the package open and learn about his Tata but he restrains himself. This is private property, belonging to another. A man acts with decency. He will walk to the front of the house and press the bell. The old witch will not fob him off again. He will wait until his surviving parent comes home, now he is certain that Charlie lives here.

Outside, the hot air is still. Siya covers the short distance to the back of the main house and observes an open door. He does what he would never have imagined he would do, crossing the threshold without hesitation, not caring if the behaviour is appropriate or not. It is as though the spirit of a bigger being has entered his physical frame. He is filled with daring. He has stepped over an invisible line. He is committed to his actions, come what may. Siya is in a cheerful yellow kitchen with terracotta tiles and checked curtains. There is a table with a dazzling cloth and an arrangement of flowers in a jug. He presumes it is how a restaurant would be. The smell of coffee lingers in the warmth and there is a hint of toast with jam. Siya passes rows of cupboards, a shelf with cookbooks and tiers of glasses of different sizes, examining the goods with detachment. There is a rack of coloured plates and bowls. He walks quietly in his leather two-tone brogues, removing a knife from a wooden block and slipping it into his jacket pocket.

Siya pauses to listen before he turns into a carpeted passage that seems to lead him on. It is like stepping on cushioned pads. His tread is muffled. The walls are filled with framed paintings, indistinct and subdued. He does not stop. Instead he inches towards the furthest room, drawn by the scent of perfume and a wedge of sun, spilling into the cool corridor. He freezes, wishing he could retreat. It is too late.

The old woman is perched on a seat, peering into a large mirror. Her spine is towards him, knobbly and pronounced. He meets her reflected gaze. She gasps and her ribcage seems to lift in indignation. Her skin is startling and so much paler than he could have guessed. She is covering her milky-blue body with one hand, clasping at a piece of silky fabric, and she is waving at him to go with the other. Siya is surprised at how imperious she is in this no-win situation. She is glaring at him with undisguised contempt, a flash of irritation wrinkling her brow. He is about to retreat when a chunky vase goes clattering across the table. Spiky flowers are flung in different directions and water drips onto the rug. An ornament topples, scattering a dish filled with pins and other paraphernalia. Frames collide in an astonishing sequence. Siya is mesmerised by the theatrical performance. She is brandishing an ornate silver hairbrush, admonishing him with her gesture, as if to throw it if he comes any nearer.

"Where is he?" Siya shouts. "What have you done with my father?"

Now she is shrinking back, her cheeks flushed like the red circles on apples. She is about to scream. He strides towards her, placing his palm over her lips, aware of the wetness of her tongue and the points of her teeth. She is fighting against his hold and she would bite him if she could. He flinches at the disgust in her expression. Arching her back, she wriggles and writhes, not giving up. Her shoulder is cold as he grabs at it and she is stronger than he had expected, resisting his grasp. She is still trying to attack him, frenzied for all her frailty, clawing at the air and rasping for breath.

The rage roars in a red volcanic rush, funnelling him into fury. Siya will not be unmanned by this witch-like creature. The battle between opposing forces is escalating. It is beyond his control, as volatile and as violent as birth. Everything is happening too fast, with no plan. He is caught up in the throes of emotion, hitting her hard. She spins across the room. There is a dull thump as her body comes to rest against the base of the bed, crumpled at an angle. She has slumped like a sack of maize. Siya experiences the high he gets from running, the invincible feeling that takes him across boundaries and into other dimensions. He is pumped with the eerie excitement of what he has achieved. Nothing is beyond his reach.

His arm is taut beneath the bent knees. The feet flop pathetically. She is as light as a child and as tiny as Makhulu. The power is vested with him. He drops her on the cover that resembles a field of wild flowers, laughing out loud, nervous and energised, spurred on to further action. The cloth she was clutching is ripped into strips, the sound harsh in the stillness. She does not stir. Siya touches the silver hair, as stringy as strands of wire. It is unlike his grandmother's, which is bushy and springy, yet something is the same. They are domineering, these steely matriarchs, always convinced they know best, clinging to the past and their narrow beliefs when he needs to invest in tomorrow and tomorrow. He ties the bony ankles together, binds the wrists. As he bends to gag her, he listens to her breathing. The inhalation is as slow and shallow as his mother's, near the end, when she was dying. He hesitates, the seething subsiding like a blaze being doused, the torn material falling in a puddle at his shoes.

A shrill whistle bursts out from the other side of the house. It is the sort of noise that draws attention, the disruptive blast of fingers in the mouth and air rushing between teeth, a hard blowing command trilling into the silence. The police respond to such calls and he has to get away. His eyes are darting. He feels his blood starting to pump. Adrenaline propels him and he knows he cannot stay but there is no road opening up before him. No strip of grey bitumen beckons him to follow. He has hit a barrier. Panicking, he blunders into a cupboard, clothes brushing against him like bats. Metal coat hangers thunder in the haze, rattling like the clash of supermarket trolleys. He trips over a mound of obstacles, grabbing at nothing, falling forwards, drawn by a faint line of light. The pounding in his temples is terrifying. He is crawling, fingers stretched before him and he gropes until he touches the solid security of wood. A concentrated floral scent is choking him. He reaches upwards and tumbles into brightness. Fingers slip on damp walls. The pungent perfume grabs at his throat, sickly sweet and feminine. It clings to the towels and the curtains. Siya grasps the bars of an open window, gasping at the warmth, free from the smell but uncertain what to do next. Outside, a plant winds like a vine over a flimsy frame beside a couch piled with pillows and a mug on a tray. The vista is as exotic and as distant as a country in Europe. There is no means of escape.

Beneath a basin, footprints are etched in a dusting of talcum powder on the tiled floor, going around in hopeless circles. He is trapped in this place, which is unlike anything he has ever encountered, with its pipes and nozzles, its knobs and taps. The giant bath rests on a rectangular stand. An oily mark forms a ring of scum along the sides and pearly soap trails from a fancy dispenser, like the slimy passage of a snail. At home, they rinse off the day's dirt in a metal tub, filled with water boiled in a large pot on the stove. Nobody in his street has a separate area for washing. He has used the communal facilities at the athletics track to scrub off his sweat after meetings. The Spartan ablution block is not like this either.

If Siya is impressed with the size, he is also astonished at the clutter and the filth. Strings of shells dangle from the ceiling beside the cobwebs. Dusty candles crowd a flat dish, clumped in clusters of colour. A girlish mermaid poses on a pink cloth, stained with brown marks. She is watched by mosaics of fish and fluttering seaweed. Lids have been removed from bottles and jars, creams and potions, and left in disarray. He sniffs the mixtures. They remind him of the mysterious ointments and pastes of a *sangoma*. He is sure the old woman has supernatural abilities. The signs are difficult to ignore.

Time has been pulsing in spurts and turns, the minutes rushing into hours and then slowing down. He blames the absence of worry on the *dagga*. It is not safe to be doing what he is doing, yet he has lost the impetus to hurry. Apathy is taking over. Nothing matters. The whistling has stopped. The unknown threat has faded. The law has not come to get him. He is safe and he is a man.

On the bed, the tied-up body is motionless and quiet. Siya inspects the adjacent rooms, hoping to find information about his father. He would like to learn about him before they meet. The absence of clues is disappointing. Everything is hidden and discreet. In frustration, he starts tearing at objects and piles of clothing, tossing them in the air and wiping the books off the shelves with his arm, overturning mattresses and opening drawers. The personal items he finds are incongruous. They all seem to belong to women. Convinced there is a safe with precious items hidden behind one of the pictures, he lifts them up and spins them around, hunting for the unknown treasure. Several of the anaemic paintings tumble to the ground. With mounting urgency, he raids cabinets and wardrobes,

growing increasingly irate. He compares this home to those in the township and the contrast makes his blood boil. There is so much stuff, an abundance of mirrors and artworks, magazines and flowers. Hate fuels his anger as the wind stirs a blaze. He is a fire flitting from one dry branch to the next, torching everything that is in his path and transforming it into a scorched wasteland.

Behind the last closed door he discovers an unfinished puzzle on a desk. The jigsaw visage of a beautiful sorceress grabs his attention, the whole broken into irregular bits as if it has cracked. Pieces are missing. The general impression is of pain and loveliness. Her hair flows in wisps of scarlet, curling like burning scarves, merging with tongues of flame rising from her tethered calves. She is a martyr, sacrificed at the stake. He feels a reverence that surprises him although he dismisses it at once, upending the pagan image, flinging the parts in assorted directions. A rocking chair gets in his path and he knocks it flying. He riffles through endless files of photographs, the plastic-coated pages sticky and repetitive. They are filled with three children, caught at the different stages of their privileged lives. Shadowy images of domestic workers emerge on the edges of the family portraits.

"Fuck!" Siya lets out a furious shout and dashes the elaborate albums against the closest wall. "Fuck!"

He stops screaming. He has to stay calm. He does a few stretches, winding down in his usual fashion after exertion. It is as if he is dreaming, carrying out these everyday activities in an extraordinary setting. He is in the wonderful kitchen, the back entrance still ajar. So much has changed since he stepped across the threshold. Siya inspects the pantry, astonished at the amount of cans and boxes of goods that are being stored. He finds a packet of fresh buns and chews one at his leisure. A box of chocolates is open, a rare treat, and he shoves handfuls of the foil-coated sweets into his pockets. It gives him pleasure and his father will not mind. Siya sorts through the items in the fridge, drinking a litre of milk from the carton and gobbling cold meats. He finds a fruitcake and breaks off chunks. As he saunters into a formal dining room, he snatches a peach from an elegant bowl. When he was little, he and his friends always stole the delicious fruit from

other people's trees. They ate while they sat among the leaves, juice dribbling down their chins, pleased with their efforts.

Siya inspects the objects beside a laptop computer on a table. He picks up a pack of tarot cards which he puts down fast, as if he has been scalded. The deck spills onto a chart with lines reaching out like the rays of the sun, intersecting in angles. Thick wads of dried-out herbs lie in a row like over-sized cigars in a case. A notebook, filled with weird symbols and diagrams, appears to be written in code. It is covered in stars, moons and the planets of outer space. Siya is agitated.

There is a curious image in the corner, beneath the big window that looks towards the buildings out the back. The print is the shade of oxen's blood, spilt during the reverential sacrifices to the ancestors. Four books have been placed on the corners, as if to keep it from moving. Siya is fascinated by the pinpoint dots bursting yellow, beige and black. Lizards, snakes and worms creep and slither across a backdrop of petals and loops. The design is comforting, sucking him in with its motifs and bends. Looking at it is as soothing as gazing into a blaze at night. He is sinking into the neon lines which become streamers of light, flashing against the blackness before sparking up and dying down again.

The adjoining lounge is decorated with reminders of Christmas. A pine tree leans from a pail, spilling its needles. Siya catches the sharp whiff of a forest on a hot summer's day. Greetings have been pegged to strings and the messages are interspersed with flags in red and green. He thinks of the humble holiday he spent with his sisters, brother and grandmother. Makhulu's pension money had not gone far. There were few gifts but they rested and rejoiced in the birth of baby Jesus. The Songongo family had dressed in their best clothes to attend church in the imposing brick building beside the charred husk of a school in the Fingo Village. Siya thinks of the large figure on the cross, suspended above the pews. From the last of the magnificent stained glass windows, light filtered down in rainbow hues as the hymns carried on the morning. They missed the accompaniment of Mama's strong voice. Siya prays to the Lord, asking for his mercy and protection.

He sniffs at the hearth but it lacks the reassuring smokiness of charcoal and burnt wood. Siya recalls the crackling of the *Amaboma*, igniting behind him. Shrouded in a new blanket, he was prevented from looking back in error at the makeshift shack as it went up in flames. He could not see the clouds of black fog billowing but he knew they were there. The hissing and popping sounds of the lodges being consumed were drowned out by the racket of the men's triumphant cheers. Siya felt as if he was emerging from a battle, the victory songs ringing in his ears. It was the final day of his initiation, the things of his youth disappearing on the pyre behind him.

"*Ndiyindoda*." The chant echoes in his head. "I am a man."

Siya examines hundreds of books, arranged in blocks of colour rather than by alphabet. They stretch up to the roof. The smells of leather and age make him think of the public library where he used to study after classes, shielded from the whims of the weather. A poster informed him that he could travel if he could read. He was riding on words and flying on images. Although he has never been further than Ibhayi or Peddie, in his mind he has meandered through England and Scotland. He cannot recall the confusing soliloquies he had been instructed to memorise. Siya searches in vain for his high school text, *Macbeth*. He does not recognise any of the titles before him. Art and architecture seem to be the dominant subjects.

In the hallway, Siya glances at three envelopes, addressed to Ms Ruth Blake. He picks up a postcard of what he guesses is an abstract quilt and flips it over. The caption tells him it is an aerial view of Lake Lefroy in Western Australia. Siya is poring over the untidy scrawl when he hears a distant groan. He rushes past a rack of straw hats, rubber boots, shopping bags and umbrellas, almost knocking a telephone off its stand. The woman is rolling on the covers, looking dazed. There are cuts and bruises on her milky skin. Her eyes widen as she sees him. She squeals. He picks up the cloth to gag her and she whimpers. Her plea is almost inaudible.

"No, I beg you, no. I have asthma. I won't be able to breathe. Dear God, please." As if to illustrate what she says, at the end of the sentence she wheezes.

"Then you must keep quiet, if you know what is good for you. There shall be no talking, except if you are answering me. Do you understand?"

She nods assent.

"When is Mr Charlie Blake expected to return to this house? It is important that I know this thing. There must be no equivocating." Siya thinks of his former English teacher as he utters the last word with emphasis.

"He won't be back." The woman is whispering. "We've divorced. He lives in the UK."

"What?"

She does not repeat it. He supposes she knows that he has heard her. Siya feels as though he has hit the distance athlete's dreaded wall, his energy depleted. Hope is dimming, as if a fire is about to go out.

"Is there no picture of him anywhere in this house? I have been searching and searching."

She gestures towards the dressing table. Siya moves with great effort. This is the way he gets when he runs for too long. He is burnt out and broken. His muscles have gone limp before the race has been won. He studies the faces. The three sisters grin at him, frozen in their frames. A few heavy photographs have fallen to the carpet. He lifts one up and stares straight into his own eyes, meeting the gaze of his father. It is him, without a doubt, at his wedding ceremony, standing beside his blonde bride with her puffy veil. He needs a few seconds to figure out the connection but it is enough to identify the old woman in her youth. She is not as frail as she is now. There is vitality in her bearing and trust in her smile. Siya sighs and clasps his hands, wringing them together. This is not right. The plot has gone awry. He has harmed his Tata's ex-wife, trespassing and trashing her home. Like Macbeth, he is doomed. His charmed life has been an illusion. It is all wrong, as if he has been tricked or is in a trance. The events seem to have occurred without his full awareness. Chance has not been kind to him.

"*Ndiyindoda*." The marijuana high has gone and the words sound hollow.

"Why do you want to meet him?"

Her voice is gentle. He is about to answer when he stops, aghast at a black and white image, tucked into the top corner of the youngest daughter's portrait. He is confronted with his Mama, who is standing behind a little girl with cheeks inflated, preparing to blow out the candles on a cake. She seems misplaced and yet filled with pride, hovering on the periphery of a birthday party in suburbia, like a bird that has ventured from its comfortable nest. Siya takes in the implications of the starched uniform, the apron and the *doek*.

"This is my mother." He holds up the snapshot. "Look."

"Ah, it's the pretty one."

They are silent. He sits beside her on the bed with its fields of flowers. At first she seems incredulous, emotions flickering over her face like the uncertain glow from a candle. After several minutes, she sighs.

"Yes, of course. It all makes sense. Not Serena but Grace."

"Cikiswa Songongo. She was my Mama."

The room is growing darker yet the woman seems to be illuminated. They hear the first faint rumblings of thunder. Siya stares at the window, looking for the forked bolt in the grey. The sky is the entrails of birds. He imagines his mother's funeral service, the heap of soil to bury her and the white dog lying near the grave.

"Would you like to write to him perhaps or send him an email? I could give you his contact details."

"I don't know."

Siya remembers the print with its squiggles of worms, lizards and snakes. They are crawling across a dried-up expanse and he is with them, lost in a nightmare that stretches like a desert of flames. It is similar to Macbeth's landscape, his sea of blood. Siya has come to the point where it is irrelevant which way he turns or which route he chooses.

"What is that picture on the table near the kitchen?"

"It's Aboriginal art, from Australia, a gift from my daughter's boyfriend. It's not an original, just a copy. Would you like to have it?"

He nods, dumbfounded.

"It's yours if you want it." She raises her bound wrists, as if offering forgiveness.

"Thank you. I should like to remove the ties."

"No. Keep away." She cringes as he moves towards her, shaking. "It's alright. Just don't touch me. Please."

"I am apologising for doing this to you. I am sorry for the violence and also the damage."

The buzz of the doorbell cuts into the silence. As if in answer, there is the clap of thunder and a gust of wind stirs the curtain.

"They have come to fetch my painting. You must go before somebody finds you here. That door leads up to the studio and the toolshed. There is a section where the fence is quite low. You should be able to climb over it. Go. You can come back another day, to pick up the print and Charlie's information."

Siya nods, not wanting to leave. She motions to the exit with her eyes. He retrieves his *intonga* and bows in her direction.

"Goodbye."

Now he is cutting across the courtyard, passing the couch with the heaps of cushions and the trellis of pale-throated plants. As he quickens his steps through the orchard, warm drops of rain fall on his cheekbones of ochre. He finds the spot behind the outbuildings, inserts a shoe into the space between the bricks and clambers over the wall. The *veld* is before him, a rough path leading between the tangle of bushes and trees. He has moved into another realm, where the

familiar and the foreign are the same. A man is meant to be dignified, yet he finds himself caught between old customs and new influences.

Siya picks up his stick and his fallen cap. He runs.

GLOSSARY

Abakhwetha: initiates

Ag: oh

Aikona: Never; no way

Amaboma: lodges

Amakrwala: newly circumcised men

Amasi: fermented milk

Bakkie: small pick-up truck

Bhuti: Brother

Boer: farmer; has become a general term for white people, especially with right wing leanings

Boerewors: Type of spiced sausage (literally, farmer's sausage)

Braai: South African barbecue, usually over open coals

Dagga: marijuana

Die baas: the boss

Die nooi: the missus

Doek: scarf

Dominee: a minister of religion

Dorp: small town

eGazini: a place of blood

Eish: expression of surprise, disbelief, frustration or exasperation

eRhini: Grahamstown

Gogo: Grandmother or elderly woman (isiZulu)

Howzit: a greeting (How is it?)

Ibhayi: Port Elizabeth

Iboma: lodge

Ikrwala: a new man

Ingcibi: traditional surgeon

Intonga: stick

Inambezulu Inyushu: a tree snake or *boomslang* (Afrikaans)

Izichwe: traditional plant with antibiotic properties

Ja: yes

KwaNdancama: an informal settlement in Grahamstown's Fingo Village. The name means "the place where I give up".

Kwela-kwela: township slang for police van (means "get up")

Laaitie: younger person (slang)

Laat lammetjie: (literally, a little late lamb) a child born much later than his or her siblings

Lobola: bride price

Makhulu: Grandmother

Mama: Mother

Mealies: maize, corn

Molo: Hello (singular)

Molweni: Hello (plural or to show respect)

Muti: Traditional African medicine

Ndiyindoda: "I am a man"

Niemand: Nobody

Oppas: Watch out; beware

Ou: Old; guy

Rooibos: a type of tea (literally, red bush)

Sangoma: traditional healer or diviner

Shebeen: Township tavern

Shweshwe: German printed fabric

Skop, skiet en donder: (informal South African) violent action in a film (literally means "kick, shoot and thunder")

Soutpiel or Soutie: salty penis (derogatory term for English person in South Africa)

Spaza shop: informal shop in township, often run from a home

Stille waters, diepe grond, onder draai die duiwel rond: (Afrikaans saying, literally meaning "still waters, deep ground, underneath the devil turns around".) There is more to somebody than you think.

Tata: Father

Tatomkhulu: Grandfather

Tik: crystal methamphetamine

Tokoloshe: an evil spirit

Toyi-toyi: a dance expressing protest and defiance

Tsotsi: thug, gangster

Tweetalig: bilingual

Ukuthwala: practice of abducting young girls and forcing them into marriage

Umkhwetha: initiate

Umphokoqo: porridge

Umqombothi: traditional Xhosa beer made from maize

Ute: utility vehicle

Veld: open, uncultivated country or grassland in southern Africa

Voortrekker: Pioneers (literally, those pulling at the front)

Vygies: small flowers, like pig face

Zol: marijuana joint