

# Post-Exilic

an old South African returns to the new South Africa

**Stephen Devereux**

Student number: 3984876



**A thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Masters in Creative Writing in the Department of English Studies, University of the Western Cape.**

**Supervisor:** Prof. Kobus Moolman

**Submitted:** 10 December 2020

Citation convention used: MLA citation

<http://etd.uwc.ac.za/>

## **Abstract**

This portfolio of poems, prose poems and short fiction pieces is quasi-autobiographical and tracks the trajectory of my life, from childhood in Cape Town ('pre-exilic') to emigration abroad ('exilic') and return to Cape Town in late middle age ('post-exilic'). Themes explored include the deceptive nature of memory and the risk of imbuing a childhood recollected in later life with affective or narrative nostalgia; the psychologically dislocating nature of exile on personal identity and notions of home; and Cape Town as both an imaginary construct and a multi-layered reality: specifically, 'my' Cape Town – now as well as half a century ago – and 'other' Cape Towns, reflecting a diversity of highly unequal experiences within this city. The dominant mode of expression chosen to explore these largely personal themes is confessional.

## **Key words**

confessional poetry, exile, affective nostalgia, identity, memory, Cape Town



## Declaration

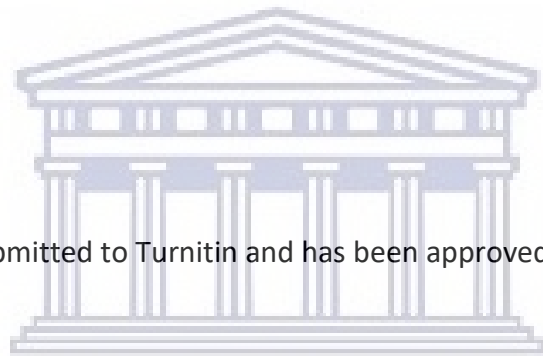
I, Stephen Devereux, declare that “Post–Exilic: an old South African returns to the new South Africa” is my own work, that it has not been submitted for any degree or examination in any other university, and that all the sources I have used or quoted have been indicated and acknowledged by complete references.



[Signature]

Date: 10 December 2020

This thesis has been submitted to Turnitin and has been approved by the supervisor.



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## Acknowledgements

I am deeply grateful to four companions on this journey. Kobus Moolman, for seeing things that I did not, and for gently pushing me in directions that have made me a better poet than I was two years ago. Colette, Barry and Sandra, for reading drafts and offering constructively critical feedback and affirmation in equal measure. Thank you.



“The period following the exile is characterized by the work of many prophets, some of whom produced writings that are preserved in the Old Testament. In general, these prophets were men of limited vision”

Charles Patterson (2003) *The Post-Exilic Prophets*

We shall not cease from exploration  
And the end of all our exploring  
Will be to arrive where we started  
And know the place for the first time

T.S. Eliot, *Four Quartets*

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## *pre-exilic*

*In Westerford's historic morn  
An outpost stood where brave souls manned  
The lonely breach 'twixt Cape of Storms  
And Afric's savage hinterland*

*But now, beneath the Devil's Peak,  
Where once that guardian fortress stood,  
Our School – a living citadel –  
Stands square against the foes of God.*

*This is her charter and her aim;  
From lively cornerstones to shape  
Adventures new – yet brave as they  
Who pioneered this Fairest Cape.*

*For now, in Westerford's high noon,  
Far subtler adversaries stand;  
But man and maid, with kindred faith,  
Still vow to serve their God and land.*

*Then let our words and deeds declare  
The earnest of our cherished aim;  
"Naught But the Best" shall be our goal –  
Our watchword pledged in Life's great Game.*

*So shall our fine traditions tell  
Of laurels won in keenest fight,  
With eyes undimmed, clean hands and heart –  
By those who dared defend the Right.*

## subtler adversaries

the house he built for them was made of  
gingerbread and desire it's like he lifted  
the roof and just dropped her in for years

she rarely left their home it was as if the doors  
and windows could not be opened from inside

it seemed like a holiday cottage at first or perhaps  
a writing retreat she meditated and lost weight  
dropped two dress sizes he approved

she wanted a family he said he was a family man  
for children he gave her kittens and pot plants

he resented her love of life found it enervating  
when he first saw her winning newcomer of the  
year he slumped in the audience not applauding

is she only three-dimensional when he watches her?  
later he told the police he was travelling for work

she wore high heels when he went away  
and danced with silent boyfriends from her  
past once she filled the kitchen sink with her hair

she dreamed of him returning as someone  
else and sculpted his fist out of candle-wax

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## a time before

his warm breath on her cunt  
she tries to attach to an emotion  
to a time when she was still  
catching feelings for men like him  
to a time when she felt  
differently about men  
a time before

now she feels nothing but shame and disgust  
and a *frisson* of fear quite different  
as he forces himself inside her  
to the *frisson* she used to feel before  
and it is only her fear that stops her  
from screaming her shame and disgust

he likes lying on top because  
he likes being on top also  
to crush her from running away  
her face is still bruised her ribs still ache  
from the first time she tried to  
on the day that ended  
the time before

her mind frees itself from this moment  
drifts up above the bed and looks down  
at him lying on top of her and thrusting  
and she wonders if it is like this for any  
other woman if it is like this for most other  
women if there is also for other women  
this time now and a time before



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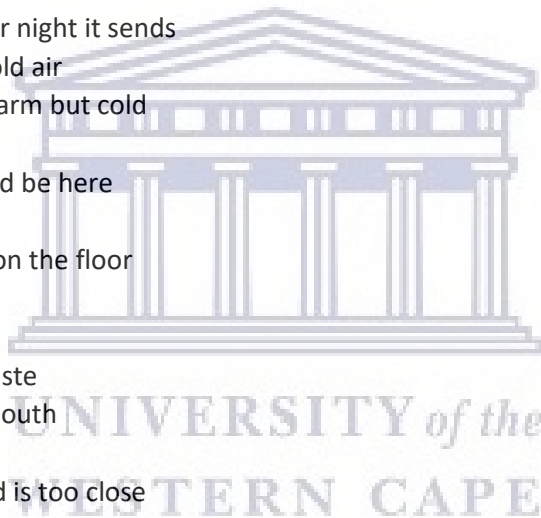
## on the edge

the boy sits on the edge  
of his mother's bed his feet  
barely touch the floor  
he stares at his mother  
his mother lies on the floor  
she is snoring softly she smells  
of something he does not recognise  
she pulled the bedspread down with her  
her body is covered her legs are bare

she has been snoring for a long time  
the boy has been staring at her  
for a long time he shivers he feels  
stupid afraid lost at home but lost  
his mother's bar heater smells acrid  
on this stormy cape winter night it sends  
warm particles into the cold air  
he swallows the air it is warm but cold

a year ago his father would be here  
and that would be better  
his mother would not be on the floor  
and that would be better  
his father would be here  
and there would be the taste  
of a different fear in his mouth

the edge of the bedspread is too close  
to the bar heater the frill sizzles  
the boy leans forward he could easily  
push the bedspread into the heater  
he drops his bare feet to the cold floor  
he pulls the bedspread towards him  
he covers his mother's bare legs



## home from home

a child draws a house  
moves his family in  
colours the front door shut

the child lifts the paper  
to check they are safe inside not  
gone where have they gone

the table shines dully at the child  
and the blank underside of paper  
where his family should be



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## nostalgia

rewrite the scene  
where the boy sits for hours at the table  
staring at his soup because his father  
won't let him go to bed  
until he finishes it  
and

rewrite the scene  
where the boy invites his friend home  
after school one afternoon and  
they find his mother on  
the kitchen floor  
and

rewrite the scenes  
where the boy hears his mother  
screaming in the night but  
he does not go to her  
not even once  
and

if this isn't nostalgia  
then what do you call it



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## **heredity**

from his father he learned  
why to read in the dark

from his mother he learned  
never to trust compassion

from his daughter he will learn  
how children survive childhood

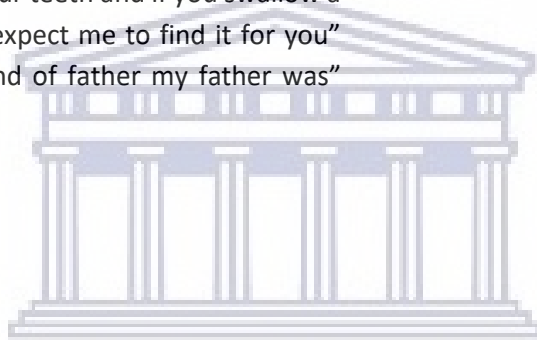


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## **the man in his life**

*“what kind of father was your father?”*

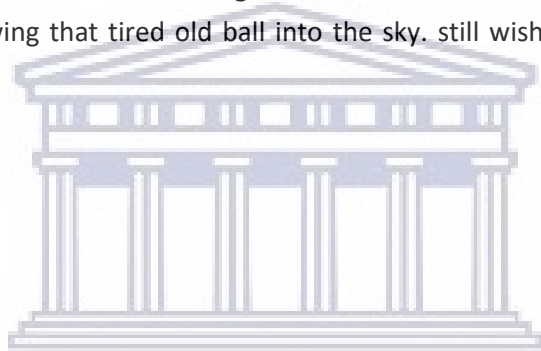
“one day the crown of his tooth broke off while he was eating but he did not notice so he swallowed it later that same evening he squatted over an empty bucket and crapped and then he made me search for it with my fingers he soaked it in vinegar overnight the next morning he took the crown to his dentist and had it repaired when he came home he smiled to show me his tooth was fixed and he gave me twenty cents to buy fritos and sherbet “but don’t buy a wilsons toffee you know it sticks to your teeth and if you swallow a tooth don’t expect me to find it for you” that’s the kind of father my father was”



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## lob

when he was a child he used to play a game called 'lob'. all you needed was a tennis ball and some boys. line up on opposite sides of a sports field. throw the tennis ball high in the air towards the other team. they try to catch it and throw it back. that's it. the secret to winning is in the catching. catch it one-handed before it bounces: 20 points. catch it with both hands before it bounces: 15 points. let it bounce before catching it with one hand: 10 points. let it bounce then catch it with both hands: 5 points. miss the ball altogether: 0 points. he used to play in the early morning, before assembly. he played during break. he was one of the best throwers and one of the best catchers. but being one of the best wasn't good enough. after school he would find an open space near his home and practice for hours, throwing and catching his tennis ball, throwing it and catching it until there was no fur left on the ball. he learned to throw the ball higher and further than anyone else. he learned to catch the ball one-handed with his eyes closed. he told himself: I won't stop until I throw this ball so high that it never comes down. half a century later and he's still throwing that tired old ball into the sky. still wishing it would disappear.



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## cape of good behaviour

“The ABC model is used to understand and modify particular behaviors, which then allows them to be addressed and changed”

*Applied Behavior Analysis: Programs Guide*

### antecedents

like all 60s first-time fathers father liked fishing and climbing Table Mountain and having lunch with his secretary and flying to business meetings overseas especially while the children were teething

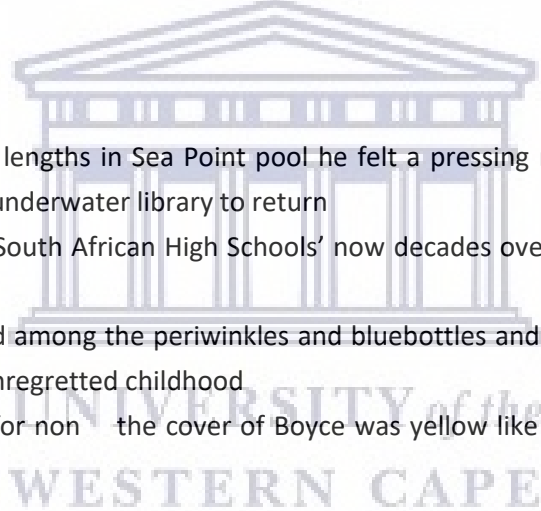
like all 60s stay-at-home mothers mother preferred to pass her days inside the house making their beds and ironing their clothes then cooking up a storm to welcome him home from the office or overseas

### behaviour

one day while swimming lengths in Sea Point pool he felt a pressing need to free-dive down to the underwater library to return A.N. Boyce’s ‘History for South African High Schools’ now decades overdue faded library cards drifted among the periwinkles and bluebottles and kelp rectangular relics of his unregretted childhood yellow for fiction, green for non-fiction the cover of Boyce was yellow like gold

### consequences

parents die fathers in a heartstop mothers piece by piece when oxygen flow to the brain is disrupted at high altitudes causing acute mountain sickness but also underwater leading to the bends among a pod of false killer whales beached on Bloubergstrand an old man was found white but blue from cold wrapped in a faded orange-blancje-blou and pronounced dead just another victim of the riptide



## not this

### genesis

“what do you want?” she asks the boy  
but the boy does not know he does not talk  
she is breastfeeding him in a dark house  
in rondebosch in the shadow of devil’s peak  
the acrid scent of pine needles fills the room

(curtains are heavy with dust a gardener  
polishes the ford anglia in the driveway  
detritus of meccano and lego on the lawn)  
years later she spoke again only once  
“where are you taking my child?”

### exodus

the man swung the boy onto his shoulders and walked  
from cape town through the karoo to louis trichardt  
while the boy pointed out things along the way  
(hex river valley freedom charter big hole sharpeville massacre  
mine-dumps rivonia trial brixton tower verwoerd assassination)

they came to a village where the man sat the boy down  
in front of the chief’s palace (it was a hut with walls  
of cow-bones a roof stitched together from animal skins  
a floor compacted from dung and ox-blood)  
“look” said the man “is this what you want?”

### revelation

they stood outside the hut until the boy grew as tall  
as the man then the boy started walking  
(zimbabwe mozambique malawi tanzania kenya  
ethiopia sudan egypt) crossed the mediterranean  
and stopped in northern europe in december

people in the streets lived inside their coats  
darkness never left the sky one day in the underground  
(holland park queensway marble arch oxford circus)  
he was weeping his neighbour a stranger asked  
“can I get you anything?” and he replied “this”



I doe truly and sincerely acknowledge, professe, testifie and declare in my conscience before God and the world, That our Sovereigne Lord King CHARLES, is lawfull King of this Realme, and of all other His Majesties Dominions and Countreys: And that the Pope neither of himselfe, nor by any Authority of the Church or See of Rome, or by an other means with any other, hath any power or Authority to depose the king, or to dispose of any of his Majesties Kingdomes or Dominions, or to Authorize any Forraigne Prince, to invade or annoy Him or His Countreys, or to discharge any of his Subjects of their Allegiance and Obedience to His Majestie, or to give licence or leave to any of them to beare Armes, raise Tumults, or to offer any violence or hurt to His Majesties Royall person, State or Government, or to any of His Majesties Subjects within His Majesties Dominions. Also I doe swear from my heart, that, notwithstanding any Declaration or Sentence of Excommunication or Deprivation made or granted, or to be made or granted, by the Pope or his Successors, or by any Authority derived, or pretended to be derived from him or his See, against the said King, His Heires or Successors, or any Absolution of the said Subjects from their Obedience; I will bear faith and true allegiance to His Majestie, His Heires and Them will defend to the uttermost of my power, against all Conspiracies and Attempts whatsoever, which shall be made against His or their Persons, their Crowne and Dignitie, by reason or colour of any such Sentence, or Declaration or otherwise, and will doe my best endeavour to disclose and make known unto his Majesty, His Heires and Successors, all Treasons and Traitorous Conspiracies which I shall know or heare of to be against Him, or any of them. And I do further swear, That I do from my heart abhor, detest and abjure as impious and Hereticall this damnable Doctrine and Position, That Princes which be Excommunicated or deprived by the Pope, may be Deposed or Murthered by their Subjects, or any other whatsoever. And I doe beleve, and in conscience am resolved, that neither the Pope, nor any person whatsoever hath power to absolve me of this Oath, or any part thereof; which I acknowledge by good and full Authority to be lawfully ministered unto me, and do renounce all Pardons and Dispensations to the contrary. And all these things I doe plainly and sincerely acknowledge and swear, according to these expresse words by me spoken, and according to the plain and common sence and understanding of the same words, without any Equivocation, or mentall evasion or secret reservation whatsoever. And I doe make this Recognition and acknowledgement heartily, willingly, and truly, upon the true Faith of a Christian. So help me GOD.

***exilic***

## allegiances

### (i) treasons and traitorous conspiracies

leave to remain applicants graduate glacially from exceptional to permanent via indefinite (asylum seekers have no time stamp or expiry date) while he waits with dulled stoicism for his overseas resettlement certificate  
*"you are not allowed to do any paid or unpaid work"*

permanent residence, how to qualify, a non-exhaustive list: ancestral circumstances / exceptional talent / spousal visa (they might check your bed-sheets) / refugee route: do you fear persecution? can you demonstrate your opposition?  
*"how do we know you're not a spy?" shrug "you don't"*

his future right of abode will be decided by tests for knowledge of life in the UK / English as mother tongue or lingua franca / and the cricket test: who will you cheer for England or the Springboks? (both is not a valid answer)  
*"you are allowed while waiting to watch daytime TV"*

grounds for not considering a person to be of good character, a non-exhaustive list: criminal convictions / terrorist tendencies / deceptive and dishonest dealings / notoriety / bogus marriage / cheering for the Springboks  
*"why do you want to come here? it can't be the weather"*

the ghosts of identities lost slump in metal chairs at Lunar House in Croydon waiting to be called by immigration officers with the power to deport / naturalisation of aliens is at the secretary of state's discretion / no leave to appeal  
*"you must disclose all treasons and traitorous conspiracies"*

years later he swears an oath of allegiance by almighty god to her majesty her majesty's dominions her heirs and successors and expunges 'Nationality Doubtful' from his UN travel document at a citizenship ceremony in Brighton Town Hall: *"God save the queen / she's not a human being"*

### (ii) exile(s)

two men stand on Hampstead Heath  
feet touching, holding hands  
they lean backwards  
forming a triangle  
topped by two  
shaved  
heads

a tableau held upright  
by their clasped hands  
on outstretched arms

the man on the right  
isn't there

the man on the left

f  
a  
l  
l  
s

## fear of the dark

you might think that walking down Queens Road from Brighton station to the sea would take you straight to Brighton Pier even after living there for years but you'd be wrong again you always have to turn left at the railing on King's Road and keep walking it's not far but further than you think and the Pier itself is longer than it looks it can take you a good twenty minutes to reach the funfair rides at the end where the Crazy Mouse roller-coaster chugs you up towards the grey British sky before lurching you forward and down then hurtling you towards the green sea and twisting you around at the last second just when you are convinced you are going over the edge you are going into the water you are going to drown but at the very last second as you are gripping the handlebar knuckles white the cab twists around on itself and instead of a cold dark death you are staring wide-eyed towards Kemptown the gay capital of England so they say and the ride deposits you safely where you started and lets you get back to the light with a soft hydraulic sigh

decades before it must have been at Boswell Wilkie Circus or the Rand Easter Show or somewhere else in the dark cupboard of restless memories called childhood he had gone on the ghost train ride with his friend Malcolm who was smaller and more nervous and not even his best friend which was just as well because he died young a few years later and as they passed through the hessian curtain entrance and the first mechanical bat screeched towards them flapping its wings Malcolm screamed and grabbed his hand in the dark and all he can remember of that rattling ride all these years later as their two-person cab rattled and twisted through the gothic imagination of the ghost train designer's mind apart from the dull yellow lightbulb illuminating the inside of the skeleton's skull so it wasn't scary at all was the damp warmth of Malcolm's hand in his until suddenly they broke through the hessian curtain exit back into the afternoon sunlight with a flurry of disentangling fingers

at the same Boswell Wilkie Circus or Rand Easter Show or maybe it was the other one or maybe it was the same one but in a different year or maybe it was the very same one in the very same year because Malcolm was there again or still there and they were still friends but still not best friends and they went to see the dead whale exhibit it was a monster it took up the whole of a long trailer it was touring the country so everyone could see the biggest whale ever caught and although it was huge and would crush them as flat as a waffle at Wimpy if it rolled off the trailer on top of them what was most amazing about it was its teeth or rather the fact that it didn't have any teeth only these rows of bristles that looked like venetian blinds for catching plankton that are so tiny you can't even see them but that's what this giant from the ocean ate to survive and grow to this enormous size can you believe it but just imagine if you went swimming at Muizenberg and he was swimming along next to you looking for plankton and he swallowed you by mistake and you ended up inside his stomach Malcolm asked wide-eyed but you shrugged with schoolboy bravado and reminded him that after Jonah got swallowed by a whale he climbed right out of its mouth and survived to write a book about it in the bible so if a cousin of this whale swallowed you at Muizenberg by mistake or even on purpose you would climb out just like Jonah because when you are twelve you are not the one who dies you are the one who survives the one who survives

## south african

My visitor from Joburg sees racism everywhere.  
We went to Lewes the other day in the rain, huddled  
in the shelter until the bus arrived. I was as white  
as I always am. Portia was as black as she always is.

The driver was in a bad mood, as he always is  
on Mondays. He muttered under his breath as Portia  
counted out her coins, realised she did not have  
enough, scabbled in her purse for a note instead.

"Get a move on," the driver said, "there's passengers  
behind you getting wet, and I'm retiring next month."  
Portia shook her head and made that "tsk" noise with her  
tongue as she stepped past the prams in the aisle.

"You'd think she's never caught a bus before," he said  
as the machine printed my ticket. "Don't they have buses  
in Jamaica?" "There's no need for that," I said.  
"Go join your friend," he said. "Next!"

I followed Portia to the back of the bus, sat down.  
"It's not because you're black," I said, "it's just  
because he's grumpy. They're like that here."  
Portia's acrylic nails scratched furrows into her arm.

I opened my Argus. "*A Pennsylvania court has acquitted  
a white police officer who fatally shot an unarmed  
17-year-old black teenager in the back.*" I quickly turned  
the page. Portia stared out the window at the angry sky.

## **ex-BFF**

the night before I was due to visit my BFF in Hove  
I dreamed of arriving at his house for lunch  
he was roasting a baby hippo on a baking tray  
I was disgusted because the hippo was still alive  
we watched it lumbering around through the oven door  
you could see the blisters bubbling on its back  
the next morning I cancelled my visit  
I never spoke to my BFF again



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## marriage story

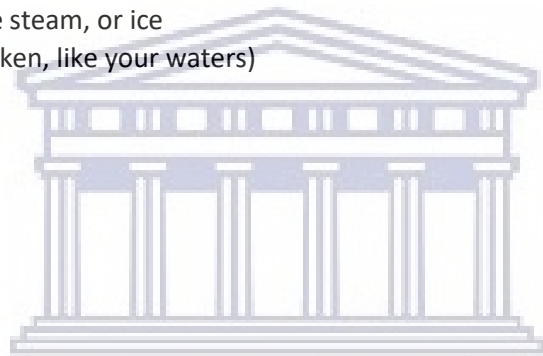
### (i) uncharted

(I want to call this love but it's not solid enough  
so I'm going to call it water instead)

our love is big enough to fill a basin, you said  
deep enough to overflow a bath and all the oceans

it's only cold until you get in and after you get out  
a silent world where nothing lives but no-one dies

(a love that could become steam, or ice  
a love uncharted and broken, like your waters)



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**(ii) elephant**

honeymoon safari in the real Africa  
potholes and piles of dung so high

the driver has to swerve to avoid them (look  
they were here they destroyed those trees)

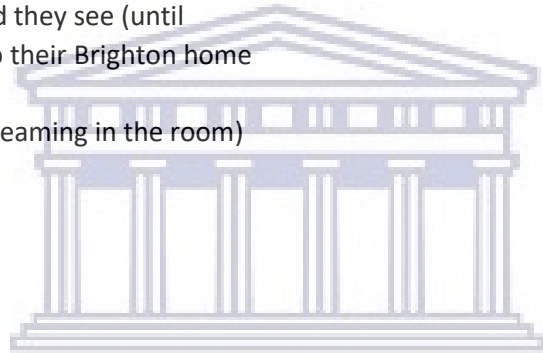
rippling reflections in the waterhole  
(a shiver of impala, a zigzag of zebra)

she wears the ivory bracelet he bought her  
by mistake (what must I do, throw it away?)

over sundowners they write postcards with the logo  
of the lodge (flapping ears, a trunk, a pair of tusks)

but no actual elephant did they see (until  
they unlocked the door to their Brighton home

and smelt the dung still steaming in the room)



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**(iii) spotless**

if she rubs the spot in the basin hard enough  
it will disappear

if she stares at the storm-clouds long enough  
they will disappear

if he introduces her to his wife  
she will disappear

if he can sleep for a week maybe  
he will disappear

it's madness to expect a change when there has been no change for years  
said the spot



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#### **(iv) emptiness**

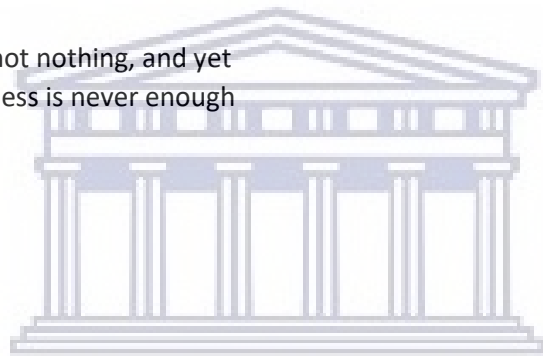
emptiness repairs clouds, drops silent  
hailstones into our honeymoon lake, melts  
the ice in Antarctica, and your margarita

emptiness filled our patio with Sunday furniture  
heavy wine barrels with the promise of lightness  
Saturday's theatre with echoes of our applause

emptiness found music inside your cello  
in the headphones we shared at work  
even in the faulty chambers of your heart

emptiness is your shadow when no-one's there  
that picture-frame, a deleted folder on my laptop  
our favourite movie that scrolls The End too soon

emptiness is everything, not nothing, and yet  
this all-consuming emptiness is never enough



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## perfectionist

the day his phone stopped ringing  
was the day he started to die

*fingers were pointed at his ambiguity*

a sealed parcel is waiting for him  
on the station platform at shoreham-by-sea

*father what have we started?*

there's no shortage of perfectionists  
waiting to out-perform him

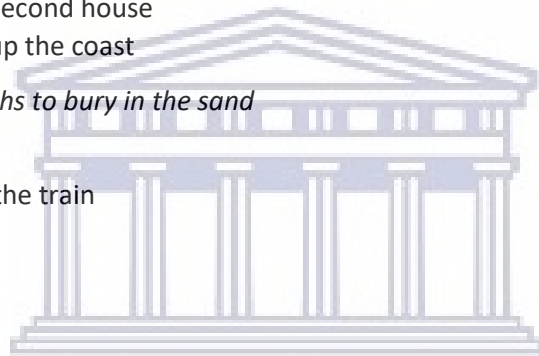
*do you welcome my assessment or do you fear it?*

it's time to board up the second house  
the one by the seashore up the coast

*I choose which photographs to bury in the sand*

it's time for him to catch the train  
time to collect that parcel

*time to look inside*



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## absent father

my dead father often asks me not to forget him  
reminding me that I haven't thought of him  
since last time how should I remember him?

my father paid for extra French lessons after school  
I exasperated my tutor because I preferred to pretend  
I knew things I didn't rather than admit that I didn't

I remember blaming my father for my hubris I got that from you  
but with him it was arrogance with me fear of failure  
failure was not allowed in his parenting plan winners breed winners

my first trip to Rome I climbed Aventino to peer through the keyhole  
at St Peter's because he had told me the view was magical it was  
my father often asks me to forgive him but it's too late



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## **a walk on a bridge**

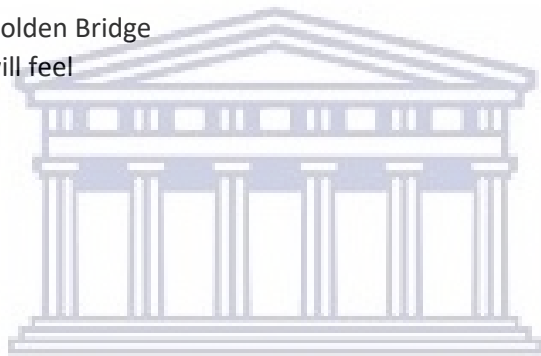
the walk is 150 metres long  
an easy 10-minute stroll

the journey to the bridge takes  
17 hours to Da Nang via Hanoi  
45 minutes to Bā Nā Hills and  
20 minutes up the cable-car

the bridge is golden and runs  
between 2 giant concrete hands

the architect wants me to feel I am  
“walking along a thread stretching  
through the hands of God”

I have never walked the Golden Bridge  
but if I ever do I know it will feel  
just like that



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## disquiet

tuning forks and acupuncture, another body  
washed up on the shore, anxiety caused by  
your words, anxiety caused by your silence  
the winds are our home, or the waves  
when can we expect to see a change?

after all your life is older now than mine  
no-one is bulletproof, least of all cathedrals  
even a bookcase is its own sonic landscape  
in the Livraria Lello I read "my past is everything I failed  
to be" to a cat called Salazar that sidles into my dreams

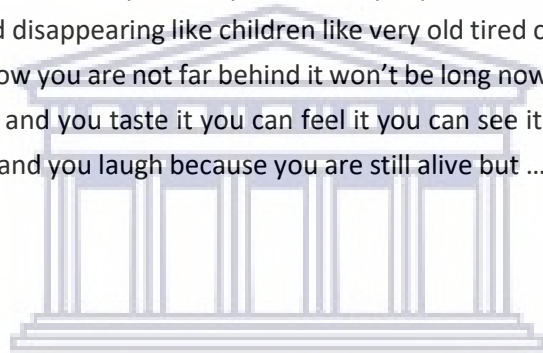
I have tuning forks in both ears and acupuncture needles  
in my back, so I let your camera tell us where we are  
someone else built my city, someone more organised than me  
a dissonance of architects dandling storage tubes on their knees  
what do you think I should do? what would Pessoa do?

I called but you had already left to tell you there is a constellation  
that looks exactly like you above the skies of Portugal near Porto  
a box of *pastéis de nata* drops from a tram onto the cobbled streets  
a sulky teenager crawls into her rucksack, zips it closed behind her and  
catches a ride to Casa da Mariquinhas, where she will sing *fado* tonight

is this a New Testament parable? they crossed the Douro on a *rabelo*  
and climbed the hill to an olive grove, but when they reached the top  
she was no longer beside him, when he came down three days later  
he was more famous than three days before, tourists had gathered  
near the Igreja de Ildefonso to praise him, or to watch the sunset

## **sense de la route**

it's like going to a museum you didn't want to go to well you did in advance or you wouldn't have gone you chose it after all but when you get there the exhibits you thought would be interesting bore you and now you are being channelled from room to room following the arrows surrounded by people who are visibly ageing most of whom you don't want to be with each with their own reactions to the displays some are excitedly chattering and pointing others are quiet and morose one in the corner near a historical exhibit even seems to be crying and you lift your legs that are getting heavier all the time because you are climbing stairs or no you are walking up a ramp it's circular it's like the Guggenheim in New York you are walking round and round and up and up from floor to floor and you feel soft rain on your receding hair and you turn your face up to the light through the open ceiling and the rain tracks the creases on your face and up above you see the people ahead of you stepping off the ramp and disappearing like children like very old tired children into the light and you know you are not far behind it won't be long now and your smile catches the rain and you taste it you can feel it you can see it you can hear it you can smell it and you laugh because you are still alive but ... it's that feeling



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*“Away from Cape Town I live in exile. I fell under the spell of Cape Town soon after I became conscious of this world. Most of this century I have lived within sight of Table Mountain. For me it would be an evil turn of life’s wheel if I were forced to end my days elsewhere. Have you ever felt nostalgia? The dictionary defines it as “home-sickness as a disease”. Often in my life I have struggled against that restless complaint. It has come over me mercilessly in London and New York, where I was alone. At times during the exile of two wars I have seen others in the grip of the same melancholy. For me there is no real cure but a return, or the promise of a swift return, to the old “Tavern of the Seas”. I have never solved the mystery of **post-exilic** my nostalgia and now the causes have gone beyond my grasp. Though I am always ready to pack for a journey, I insist that Cape Town shall be at the end of it. That is all I have to confess, and this is the Cape Town I know. It is the Cape Town of south-easters and snoek; the city which is so close to the sea where I live that the salt breath always comes through my windows. Cape Town holds me in spite of its faults. So I have always been thankful on the days of my return from exile to Table Mountain.”*

## graduation

“Chancellor, I request you to confer the degree *cum laude* on the following...”

accidental orphans	emerging accountability	mercantile protocols
affective justice	emotional pharmaceuticals	Mozart management
aftercare abuse	fatal adolescents	non-perennial associations
algae co-supervisors	federal immunisation	other universes
alternative farmworkers	food alleviation	Plain poverty
balanced executives	gender-based males	predator ecology
Benghazi drift	hybrid Sudan	provincial immigrants
charismatic grasshoppers	inorganic coal	raspberry pollution
classical categories	intelligent laundering	reproductive isolation
competitive curricula	invasive potential	Sunday pharmacies
correctional leadership	jaundiced populations	tertiary undergraduates
digital livestock	juvenile pirates	thin films
drone optimisation	King Deuteronomy	Zimbabwean dancehall



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## architect

he is an architect of museums and low-cost housing in reclaimed cities  
he sketches designs with natural light for circulation and women's safety  
he condemns single-use plastics because he loves hiking in Newlands forest  
he has a preference for local quarry stone to connect with local geohistory  
he lisps when interviewed and shapes buildings in the air with his hands  
his finger traces his signature in wet concrete on every foundation stone



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## picking up stompies

### (i) at the CTICC

“In other news, I told her I’m thinking of taking the job...”

“And what did she say to that?”

“Not a lot. To be honest, she was quite shocked, I think.”

“Why would she be shocked?”

“You know, I guess she was weirded out, just a bit.”

“But why would she be weirded out?”

“Maybe because she might never see me again.

I mean, I will be halfway round the world.

Don’t you think that would weird her out?”

“Dunno. I don’t know your relationship, do I?”

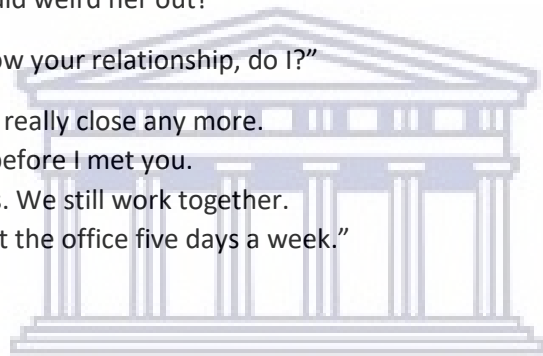
“Well of course we aren’t really close any more.

Not like we used to be, before I met you.

But we’re still colleagues. We still work together.

We still see each other at the office five days a week.”

“Yeah. I know.”



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**(ii) at Mugg & Bean**

“So I booked massages for us at My Thai on Saturday.”

“For you and me?”

“Of course for you and me. You and who else? Me and who else?”

“So it will be a couple’s massage?”

“Yeah. Isn’t that what you wanted for your birthday?”

“And who’s gonna massage us?”

“I don’t know, do I? Two women from Thailand, I suppose.”

“So they’ll both be women?”

“I hope so...”

“Why? Why can’t it be a woman and a man?”

“Because I don’t want to get half-naked and be rubbed down by a bloke, do I?”

“No, I mean if you have a woman why can’t I have a man?”

“Because I don’t want you to get half-naked and be rubbed down by a bloke, do I?”

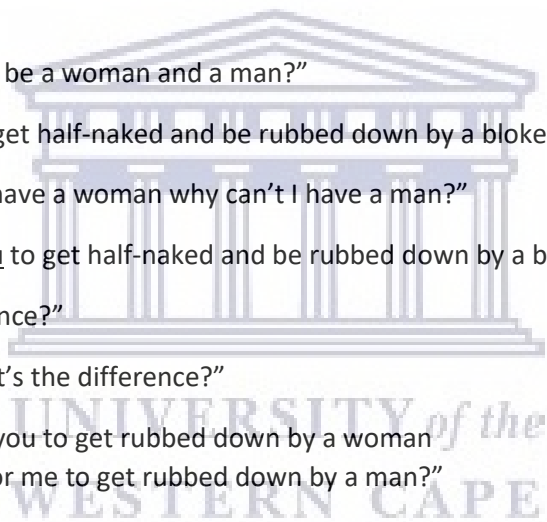
“What’s the difference?”

“What do you mean, what’s the difference?”

“Why is it okay for you to get rubbed down by a woman  
but it’s not okay for me to get rubbed down by a man?”

“Let’s just change the subject, can we?”

Do you want another red cappuccino?”



### **(iii) at the Spur**

He looks as if he is about to speak, clears his throat, harumphs, changes his mind, nods unhappily instead. So she keeps talking.

“They’ve got DStv, the full bouquet, and Netflix, wifi of course, all that stuff that people want these days, I don’t know why. I thought the point of going on holiday was to get away from your normal routine and do something new, not stay indoors sitting on your bum watching TV like any other day. Anyway.”

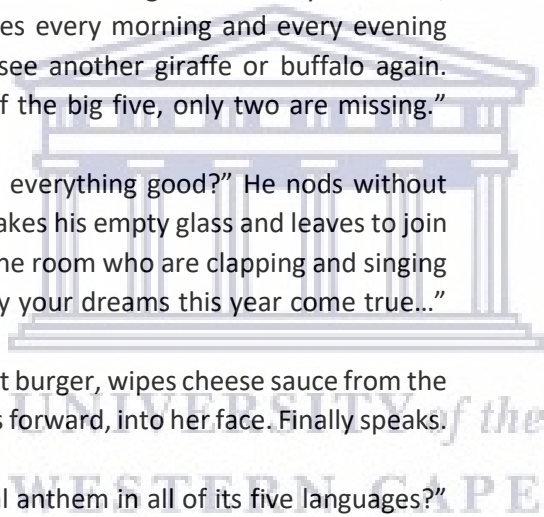
He chews chips while staring at her. Sips his Coke. Crunches ice.

“They say this place is fabulous, only one hour from Cape Town, close to Tulbagh but you have stunning views from your chalet, you can go on game drives every morning and every evening until you never want to see another giraffe or buffalo again. They’ve even got three of the big five, only two are missing.”

Their waitress hovers. “Is everything good?” He nods without looking up. The waitress takes his empty glass and leaves to join five black waiters across the room who are clapping and singing to a small white girl. “May your dreams this year come true...”

He finishes his Cheddamelet burger, wipes cheese sauce from the corner of his mouth. Leans forward, into her face. Finally speaks.

“Can you sing the national anthem in all of its five languages?”



**(iv) at the School of Practical Philosophy**

“Must I carry on being a  
Christian and living my life  
in the Christian way

just because I always have  
and never gave it a thought  
until my daughter died?

Or should I become  
an atheist because  
maybe God doesn't

even exist so  
it doesn't matter what  
I believe and anyway

I don't want to live  
my life according to  
other people's ideas

of what I should  
believe and how  
I should behave?”



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“Thank you for sharing.  
Does anyone else  
have anything else  
they want to share?

If not let's move on.”

## catch of the day

Today's catch is still swimming in the kitchen sink, thrashing its tail, bumping its mouth against the silver sides. Is that fear or confusion in its glassy eyes? She wipes her hands on her apron. She has put on weight in recent years. Parts of her that once curved in now curve out. She worries that she has passed the size and age where her husband still desires her. She worries about Sophie, his latest assistant at the office. The fish floats inert in the water, dazed or exhausted. She grasps it by the tail, lifts it up and lays it flat on the chopping-board in one practised motion. Severs its head while the body convulses. She could lose weight but she cannot lose age. She uses the hatchet to fillet the trout, a technique her mother taught her that looks clumsy but is as precise as the work of a piano-tuner. She took piano lessons up to grade 6, when she was 12 or 13, long before she started fretting about her weight and her age, or even about boys and their roving eyes. The severed trout head stares at her without blinking. Do fish blink? She tosses the head and skeleton through the kitchen window for the neighbour's cat, places the fish neatly in a frying pan on the stove and wipes the chopping-board clean. The girls at her boarding school teased her because she was a late bloomer. "Two peas on a chopping-board!" they laughed, poking fingers at her ambitious bra. She takes a packet of peas from the freezer and potatoes from the vegetable rack, peels and prepares them for mashing. He used to talk about Sophie all the time when she started, now he never mentions her. Soon he will be home from his work, where he has been busy designing a bespoke extension to the Waterfront since she started spring-cleaning the house at 9am. He probably hasn't given a second thought to his weight or his age all day long. Or his wife. She picks up the frozen peas, smashes them against her forehead, again and again. Cuts the packet open, pours the peas into a saucepan of water on the stove. Washes the blood off the empty packet before dropping it into the pedal-bin. The potatoes and the fish both need butter. As she opens the fridge her husband opens the front door. "Honey, I'm home!" he calls, as he always does. "Where's my catch of the day?" He laughs the laugh of a contented man. She slams the fridge door shut. Wipes her forehead with a dishcloth as he enters the kitchen. "How's my favourite smallmouth trout?" he asks, as if he's still proud that he hooked her, as indeed he was, all those years ago. She stares at the two halves of the gutted trout, lying side by side in the frying pan, the flesh as white as innocence. They look identical, but she can always tell which portion is larger, always gives it to him. He clasps her shoulders and spins her around to face him. He stares at her and gasps. "What happened to your face?" She shrugs and forces a smile. "Nothing happened to me. Nothing at all. But how was your day? How is Sophie?" He frowns, puzzled. "Sophie? Oh, you mean Sophie Khumalo? She didn't make it through probation, left after a few weeks. Why do you ask?" "Sophie Khumalo?" she echoes. "Sophie *Khumalo!*" She laughs as she turns away from him, sees the fish on the stove, impulsively flips one half over so the skin is facing up. Two halves: one white, one black. She points to the frying pan. "Look!" she says. She can't stop laughing. She doesn't want to stop. What will happen next, after she stops? She does not know. She does not know if she is laughing out of relief or shame.

## his mother's red ferrari

his mother opens her front door and shuffles back to her sofa  
pushing her walker that she calls her red ferrari sits down with a wince  
and asks him how his week has been she is scared of everything  
and everyone his mother's memories are of someone he never knew

I always preferred to have other people do things for me she says  
I never liked to drive but I was very happy to have someone drive me  
I loved being on boats but only if other people were doing the rowing  
my friends said I was lazy I said I needed to focus on the experience

when I was young I was very trusting once I sat on the back of a motorbike  
with a man I only met the day before and he drove us through the karoo  
at 80 miles an hour I was terrified I held onto his leather jacket  
for dear life I shouted in his ear "slow down! no no go faster faster!"



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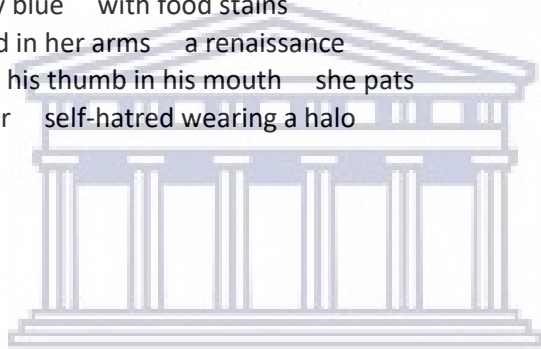
## madonna con bambino

his mother's silhouette opaque behind frosted  
glass shimmers towards the door time to decide  
the handle clicks down inviting him in  
he decides today he loves her

she sits down by pushing her walker away  
and falling onto her sofa with a sigh he sits  
down next to her her small dog jumps  
onto her lap stares at him accusingly

he gets up makes them coffee she has run out  
of sweetener tough week nothing he can tell her about  
she rotates her unspoken complaints like rosary beads  
why did you never give me grandchildren?

her cardigan is virgin mary blue with food stains  
he imagines himself curled in her arms a renaissance  
bambino slowly he puts his thumb in his mouth she pats  
his knee he smiles at her self-hatred wearing a halo



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## the man in the doorway

the man in the doorway  
always speaks his mind  
it's what landed him here  
"I am off *tik* almost two years  
ek weet nie waar is my kinders"

he holds four fingers to his mouth  
the other hand orbits his stomach  
"can't you borrow me R10? I will give you back  
meneer weet jy kan my trust you pass every day  
jy weet ek is altyd hier I'm going nowhere"

he smiles a sly toothless grin  
"I got better stories of my life amper like yours  
if god was coloured  
you would be sleeping here  
ek sou jy wees"



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## Greenmarket Square, Saturday morning

Hi am Andile  
I aM ashamed  
but Hungry  
Pleaz Help  
God BLESsed

I's not asking for money just ten rand for a stukkie brood or a hot chocolate.

Ek vra mos. I'm not going to rob you, I'm only asking.

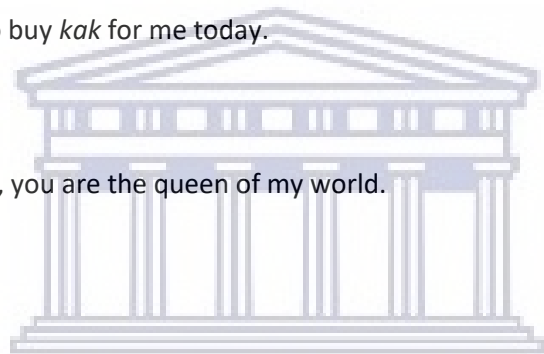
Why does everybody say no today?

Dit lyk my julle mense het jou *ubuntu* by die huis vergeet vanoggend.

Even God doesn't want to buy *kak* for me today.

Dis mos maar net so.

Hey CASH FOR GOLD lady, you are the queen of my world.



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## unfinished bridge

I call him Triple H for short: **Homeliss Hungry Pleas Help**. He worked the intersection of Buitengracht and Helen Suzman Boulevard, down by the unfinished bridge where the robots take forever to change. On mornings when the lights turned red before the car in front got through he had me. If there was no car I jumped the robots just to avoid him. Capetonians jump a lot of red robots for this reason. Then he walked restlessly from car to car, scanning. Once he was selling pens, 4 for R20, those crappy Bic ballpoints from school days that come in black and blue and red and green. I shook my head when he stopped at my window. Picked up my laptop from the passenger seat to show him I don't write with pens any more, haven't done for years. I didn't think he understood, but then he did an extraordinary thing. Put his cardboard placard face down on my bonnet and wrote on the back with one of his Bics. Held it up against my windscreen: **THATS NOT THE (BALL) POINT** and walked on. The next few days I got through the robots, jumped the red so late I nearly caused a collision. But one morning I was in a traffic sandwich behind three cars. Triple H was selling joke books called 'Funny Money'. I rolled my window down and he read me a joke: "Money talks, but all mine ever says is goodbye!" Laughed and laughed. I shook my head. "Not funny, no money." He jumped onto my car, stomped on the roof. "You want me to get down?" he yelled. "Then take me for breakfast." Cars behind were hooting. "All right," I shrugged. "Get in. Let's go." I tried to ignore the stench of him as we drove to the nearest Wimpy, left my window open. He had the full Executive Brekkie – two fried eggs with bacon, boerewors, extra toast. "What do you do?" he asked, so I told him. "Take me to your work. Teach me." I stared at him. When I was a child we had an old 'garden boy' called Amos. I often complained to Amos about having to go to school when I would rather help him in the garden. Amos smiled and shook his head. "But you are just playing, *kleinbaas*. You must go to school, it will let you do anything you want in your life. Don't forget, it is only because you are white that you will never become a gardener like me." So every morning I picked up Triple H at the intersection and drove him to my office, mentored him and left him to make his own way home. As the weeks went by we upgraded from Wimpy to Mugg & Bean, then Vida and – when he got an Apple Mac – to Bootleggers. I got him placed as an intern in the firm. Gave him one of my old suits. It was too big for him but he soon grew into it after he started joining me for business lunches and dinners with clients at the Test Kitchen and La Colombe. He learnt fast, worked hard, quickly got promoted. After three years he became CEO, it was a BEE scorecard fast-track thing. First thing he did was fire me. I lost everything – my job, home, car, wife. Now I sleep in Cardboard City under the unfinished bridge and I stand all day at the intersection of Buitengracht and Helen Suzman. Triple H passes me in his Beemer most mornings. He always waves me over when the robot catches him, asks how I'm doing. Gives me R5 from a Berocca tube filled with coins he keeps by his gear stick. Yesterday he gave me one of his Bic pens: "Remember these?" and an instruction: "Write your story."

## **a simple request**

*“Lwandle shack fire leaves four dead”*

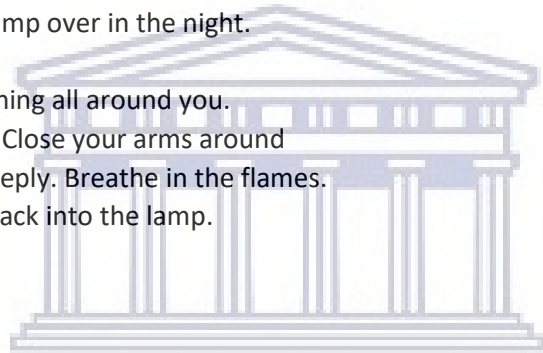
I am your neighbour in Vulindlela Street,  
here in Lwandle. You know me. It is so cold,  
here in Lwandle. You know this. Last night

it was too cold. Your paraffin lamp fell over,  
spreading heat and flames through your shack  
and mine, warming your family and mine.

I have a simple request.

Fill your buckets with water at night. Don't sleep  
with your blanket so close to the lamp. Don't  
toss and turn in your restless sleep, dreaming  
your fear, and kick your lamp over in the night.

Wake up. Look at the burning all around you.  
Hold your arms out wide. Close your arms around  
the flames. Breathe in, deeply. Breathe in the flames.  
Carefully exhale the fire back into the lamp.



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## shadowless

I bend down to grab my shadow  
just as death tugs it out from under me

I stumble and fall into the hole in the ground  
where my shadow had been

death wraps my shadow around his neck  
like a scarf

turns and strides towards the sunset  
casting no shadow



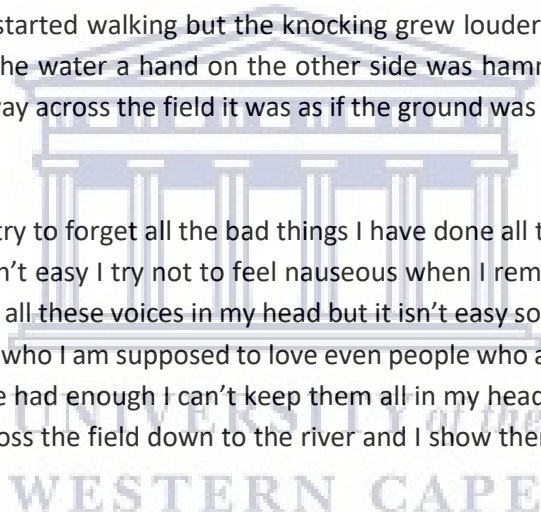
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## the door in the water

so she said to me let's push it together harder so we pushed and pushed but it wouldn't budge it was under the water you see it was wedged between rocks with the river flowing over it with one side facing the murky riverbed and the other side staring at the empty sky until suddenly it creaked open and the water circled it cautiously like a bath plug before gurgling down in a whirlpool into the blackness beneath and she looked at me and asked are you coming then but I shook my head so she shrugged her shoulders and slipped the ring off her finger and gave it to me before easing herself into the icy river where the whirlpool caught her and swirled her round and round the open door then sent her spinning out of sight into the darkness beneath

I reached down and somehow found the handle under the water somehow pulled it towards me until the whirlpool subsided to a trickle somehow shut the door tight so the river resumed its normal downstream course and the door lay once again flat on the riverbed wedged between rocks among the reeds as if nothing had happened nothing at all as I stood up to leave I heard a knocking on the door I started walking but the knocking grew louder so I turned back to see the door was shaking in the water a hand on the other side was hammering on the door and as I turned and walked away across the field it was as if the ground was shivering under my feet

I try not to have regrets I try to forget all the bad things I have done all the bad things that have been done to me but it isn't easy I try not to feel nauseous when I remember all the dark stuff in my life I try to get rid of all these voices in my head but it isn't easy sometimes people get too much for me even people who I am supposed to love even people who are supposed to love me now and then I realise I've had enough I can't keep them all in my head so I take my memories for a walk I take them across the field down to the river and I show them the door in the water



## 2019

was the year when covid-19 arrived  
in Huanan seafood market  
while a Chinese watercolour artist  
painted rice paper flowers onto canvas

*(petals floating in mid-air  
falling from autumn trees)*

was the year when Jessica Nabongo  
became the first black woman  
to visit every country in the world  
ending in October in the Seychelles

*(droplets exhaled into the air  
waiting for the next to inhale)*

was the year before international  
airborne travel was banned because  
fear makes us stay at home but  
loneliness makes us change countries

*(and the last painted petal  
is still falling, catching particles)*



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## 2020

Imagine a town you've never visited  
a town you would never want to re-visit  
a town filled with all the sickness of the world.  
When we were young we did not travel to this town  
but in 2020 it visited us all, and sent us home.

A quarantine boundary runs through the central reservation  
like a fault-line. The country is in lock-down. No antidote  
except self-isolation. Fresh air is limited, airtime is running out.  
In the main square a defiant artist works intently on a still-life  
until a water-cannon dissolves her water-colours with purple rain.

I broke the curfew, wandered through deserted back-streets  
taking photographs of windows, silhouettes behind curtains.  
Chimneys billowed smoke signals, some white, some black.  
I returned once more to the mass grave behind the mosque  
with its mounds of white lime, dazzling and visible from space.

I came to a street where everyone was online and tear-stained,  
their faces lit up by computer screens and tablets and smart-phones.  
In the next street neighbours wearing face-masks played board games  
with latex gloves, balancing sanitised chess-pieces on garden walls.  
Behind them, orphans swam in hopeless circles in paddling pools.

Surveillance cameras were everywhere. A drone hovered above my car  
until I parked and it followed me as I crossed the road to a coffee-shop.  
The last waitron brought me a pint of vintage blood from the top shelf.  
"What's wrong with you?" he asked, more accusing than concerned.  
"I'm not better," I replied. "I wanted to be better than I am."

I slumped in my seat, Google-mapping a route out of this town,  
now that I have lost my career to social distancing. At least I had  
freed the past. The waitron and I bumped elbows, then the drone  
led me back to my car and I sped towards the deserted airport,  
staring wide-eyed in the rear-view mirror at all I had left behind.



## Notes

All poems included in this portfolio were written between November 2019 and November 2020.

### PRE-EXILIC

“In Westerford’s historic morn...” are the lyrics of the school song of Westerford High School, Cape Town in the 1970s, when I attended Westerford. The phrase “Afric’s savage hinterland” has since been changed to “Africa’s rugged hinterland”.

**subtler adversaries** was published under the title ‘Family Man’ in *New Contrast*, 48(191): 17; 2020.

### EXILIC

“I doe truely and sincerely acknowledge...” is an oath of allegiance sworn to King Charles II by inhabitants of New England Colonies in 1679. [Source: Charles Evans (2016), ‘Oaths of Allegiance in Colonial New England’, Project Gutenberg eBook, [www.gutenberg.org/files/53843/53843-0.txt](http://www.gutenberg.org/files/53843/53843-0.txt) [accessed 6 December 2020].]

**allegiances:** “God save the queen / she’s not a human being” are two lines from ‘God Save the Queen’, a 1977 song by the Sex Pistols. [Source: [www.lyrics.com/lyric/24920352/The+Sex+Pistols/God+Save+the+Queen](http://www.lyrics.com/lyric/24920352/The+Sex+Pistols/God+Save+the+Queen) [accessed 6 December 2020].]

**South African:** “A Pennsylvania court...” is the lead paragraph of an online BBC article ‘Policeman Michael Rosfeld acquitted of killing black teen’ (23 March 2019). [Source: [www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-47681253](http://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-47681253) [accessed 6 December 2020].]

**a walk on a bridge:** Walking the Golden Bridge near Da Nang in Vietnam is on my bucket list. The quote “walking along a thread stretching through the hands of God” is by the architect, Vu Viet Anh, explaining the sensation he aimed to achieve. [Source: *Sawubona* (South African Airways in-flight magazine) January 2020, p136. <https://saasawubona.com/the-reward-golden-bridge-da-nang/> [accessed 6 December 2020].]



**disquiet:** Livraria Lello is a bookshop in Porto; “my past is everything I failed to be” is a quotation from Fernando Pessoa’s ‘The Book of Disquiet’; Salazar was a Portuguese dictator; *pastéis de nata* are Portuguese custard tarts; Casa da Mariquinhas is a *fado* venue in Porto; the Douro river flows through Porto; a *rabelo* is a traditional Portuguese cargo boat; Igreja de Ildefonso is a Catholic church in Porto.

### POST-EXILIC

“Away from Cape Town I live in exile...” is an excerpt from Lawrence Green’s ‘Tavern of the Seas’, a memoir of Cape Town first published in 1947.

**graduation:** All words and phrases were found in the University of the Western Cape graduation ceremony handbook for 11 December 2019.

**picking up stompies:** a South African colloquialism, meaning to join a conversation late.

**a simple request:** ‘Lwandle shack fire leaves four dead’ is a headline in the Cape Argus (1 September 2019). [www.iol.co.za/capeargus/news/lwandle-shack-fire-leaves-four-dead](http://www.iol.co.za/capeargus/news/lwandle-shack-fire-leaves-four-dead) [accessed 23 June 2020].

## Reflective Essay: An old South African returns to the new South Africa

### 1. Context

'Post-Exilic' is a collection of 41 poems, prose poems and flash fiction pieces, structured around three phases of my life: childhood in Cape Town ('pre-exilic'), exile abroad ('exilic') and return to Cape Town ('post-exilic'). The title references the Biblical 'post-exilic prophets' (Patterson, 2003). The word appealed to me because I found returning to South Africa after having lived half my life as a political refugee in the UK more problematic than I had anticipated. South Africa had changed in the interim, as had I. Instead of a 'homecoming', this psychological state feels more accurately characterised as 'post-exile'.

This reflective essay starts with a discussion of my chosen writing style in my portfolio, which is mainly confessional, because this mode of expression is best suited to the quasi-autobiographical nature of my subject matter. Then I introduce the themes that inform the three sections of my portfolio, which are organised chronologically. 'Pre-exilic' explores themes related to childhood, but also including 'fabricated selves' and affective nostalgia. 'Exilic' explores issues of identity, both as a white South African and as an exile. 'Post-exilic' is grounded in my return to Cape Town, a city that is simultaneously real and imagined.

### 2. Style: Confessional

The phrase 'confessional poetry' was coined in my birth-year, 1959, by M.L. Rosenthal in his review of Robert Lowell's 'Life Studies'. Other writers who were subsequently labelled 'confessional poets' include Anne Sexton, John Berryman and Sylvia Plath. The defining characteristic of confessional poetry is its autobiographical content and intimately personal tone. It places "the sensitivity of the poet at the centre of concern" (Molesworth, 1976: 163); it is "poetry focused on the 'I'" (Nichols, 2018). Confessional poets write about actual events and real persons; they reveal details about their (inner) lives that are more often confided to psychotherapists or priests.

Confessional poetry has been applauded for its honesty and authenticity. "It is raw, fearless, emotive, and unflinching" (Nichols, 2018). Like most movements, it reacted against the status quo: the intention was to challenge the "fraudulent objectivity" and impersonality that characterised Modernist poetry (Nelson, 2013: 32). Confessional poets "embrace emotional extremity and intensity" (Takolander, 2017: 375). On the other hand, confessional poetry has been criticised for being self-indulgent, even solipsistic – poetry as therapy – looking inwards rather than engaging with the world. The heavy reliance on autobiographical content was even regarded by some critics as "sordid ... egotistical self-absorption" (Byrne, 2003: 2).

Another penetrating critique questions how truthful confessional poetry actually is. What proportion of an apparently 'autobiographical' poem is fact and what proportion is fiction? How much is objective and how much is subjective? Can self-reported memory, published in journals for public consumption to promote the reputation of the poet, ever be relied upon to be 100% accurate? Berryman conceded that there was an element of deception in his own poetry. "I have been pretending that "I" is the poet" (quoted in Hoffman, 1978: 694). Critics pointed out that it is impossible to tell whether a confessional poem that "carries the appearance of truth [is] at best partial truth [or] complete fabrication" (Byrne, 2003: 4).

When Sylvia Plath writes, in her poem 'Daddy', "I was ten when they buried you./ At twenty I tried to die/ And get back, back, back to you", these lines feel authentic and true. But the reader has no way of knowing if the 'I' is Plath herself, writing about her actual relationship with her father, or a fictitious persona – or something in between, extrapolated from partial memories and embellished with her unique creative imagination. We do know that Plath's father died when she was eight (not ten) and that she made her first suicide attempt aged twenty. But can we trust the reason she offers her readers for attempting suicide? Holbrook (1976) labels Plath's pseudo-autobiographical technique "The fabrication of false selves".

A more pertinent criticism in the South African context is that confessional poetry is politically disengaged, and therefore not only narcissistic but trivial (Nelson, 2013). This complaint against any poetry that is not socially engaged was potent during the *apartheid* era (Sole, 1998), but "the poetry/politics question" (Chapman, 2009: 182) remains contested and unresolved even today (Moolman, 2017). Do all poets have a duty to serve as social commentators, or is the aesthetic pursuit of private truths equally legitimate? This question has always troubled me. I started writing poetry in my teens, as my political consciousness was starting to develop. Immediately and ever since I faced a tension between my predilection for introspective reflection versus a moral pressure, based on my economically and educationally privileged positionality, to engage with the social injustice that surrounded me. To borrow from Karl Marx's famous observation about philosophers, poets can interpret the world, "the point, however, is to change it".

My portfolio makes no claim to be overtly political. It is confessional in that it draws on memories and experiences and ideas that have accompanied me throughout my life and continue to preoccupy me. The poems in 'pre-exilic' are set in an intimate domestic space; they are written from the imagined perspective of my parents ('subtler adversaries', 'a time before'), or from recollections of an "unregretted childhood" ('on the edge', 'nostalgia', 'lob', 'cape of good behaviour'). This child has no engagement with the wider world; he is fully engaged in the business of trying "to survive childhood" ('heredity'). Only in the 'exilic' and 'post-exilic' sections does the child-now-adult narrator observe and comment on the sociopolitical context around him ('south african', 'the man in the doorway', 'unfinished bridge', 'a simple request').

Adrienne Rich wrote: "We also go to poetry to receive the experience of the *not me*" (Rich, 1993: 85). In partial defence of my predominantly apolitical poetry, I would argue that relevance is not necessarily only political. Any poem that moves a reader who is "not me" has transcended the personal and confessional. Resonance is relevance.

### **3. Pre-Exilic: Childhoods, fabricated selves, affective nostalgia**

"Confessional poets ... used images that reflected intense psychological experiences, often culled from childhood" (Poetry Foundation, 2020). The contemporary South African poet Kobus Moolman often chooses the third-person pronoun 'he' for his protagonist, which raises the question: how much of 'he' is Kobus? 'A Book of Rooms' is an evocation of a South African boyhood, so richly detailed that it seems a high proportion of the text must surely be based on memory – but does that make it autobiographical? "At the/ back of a house in Greyling Street there is a room that comes in/ and out of focus/ [...] Through the wide window he watches his father drive off every Friday night in his brown Ford Cortina".

Did young Kobus live in a Greyling Street? Did his father drive a Cortina? Or is some (or all) of this a "fabrication of false selves"? Does it even matter? By making the boy someone else – 'he', not 'I' – the poet gives himself licence to blend memory and fantasy, fact and fiction. If this is autobiography, then it is confessional poetry with a distancing technique: the poetry of 'I' becomes the poetry of 'he'. I asked Kobus recently: "So the 'he' in your poems is both you and not you?" "Yes. But I insist on the 'not me'."

In my recent writing I have experimented with using both the first-person and third-person perspective, sometimes switching from one to the other between first draft and final draft. There are pros and cons to each. The poetry of the ‘I’ stakes a claim to authenticity and truth, but can seem so personal that it shuts the reader out, like a private diary entry rather than a relatable insight on the human condition. Using ‘he’ releases my poetic imagination and encourages the reader to identify with the protagonist and his situation, but also reduces credibility and depersonalises the poem, dampening its emotional impact. To illustrate this point, I can reveal that the incidents described in some of my poems (e.g. ‘nostalgia’) did actually happen, but those described in others (e.g. ‘the man in his life’) did not.

‘On the edge’ in my portfolio starts with a (true) memory from my childhood, but ends by attributing a (false) thought process to “the boy” that my younger self did not have. Which persona works better? I choose the third-person, partly because the first-person isn’t 100% ‘truth’. Also, I wrote the third-person version in the present tense, which gives it an immediacy and a sense of dramatic tension that is lost when I recount the incident in the past tense, as an historical narrative.

**On the edge** [*third-person*]

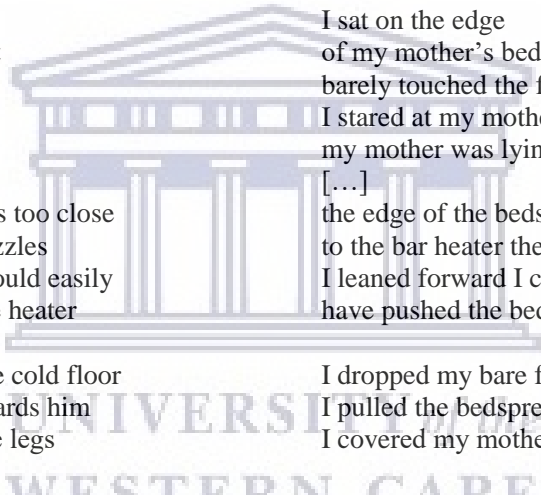
the boy sits on the edge  
of his mother’s bed his feet  
barely touch the floor  
he stares at his mother  
his mother lies on the floor  
[...]  
the edge of the bedspread is too close  
to the bar heater the frill sizzles  
the boy leans forward he could easily  
push the bedspread into the heater

he drops his bare feet to the cold floor  
he pulls the bedspread towards him  
he covers his mother’s bare legs

**On the edge** [*first-person*]

I sat on the edge  
of my mother’s bed my feet  
barely touched the floor  
I stared at my mother  
my mother was lying on the floor  
[...]  
the edge of the bedspread was too close  
to the bar heater the frill sizzled  
I leaned forward I could easily  
have pushed the bedspread into the heater

I dropped my bare feet to the cold floor  
I pulled the bedspread towards me  
I covered my mother’s bare legs



I grew up in the 1960s and 1970s. My childhood was unique, as is everybody’s, but it was also generic – shared by thousands of white South African children of that generation. Denis Hirson’s two book-length prose poem memoirs, ‘I Remember King Kong (the Boxer)’ and the much darker ‘We Walk Straight So You Better Get Out the Way’, both name-check the familiar details of a white South African childhood in the *apartheid* years – Chappies bubble-gum, Cobra floor-polish, Springbok Radio, drive-in cinemas – but also Sharpeville, Verwoerd, B.J. Vorster, the ‘pencil test’, enamel mugs for ‘maids’ and ‘garden boys’.

Yet, as Lombard (2016: 1) notes, in South Africa “whiteness and nostalgia were, and continue to be, problematically entwined”. The reason is that fond memories of an idyllic childhood during the *apartheid* era are possible for white South Africans only because of the systematic oppression and exploitation of black South Africans. One was the mirror of the other. Whether you were Afrikaans- or English-speaking, whether your parents voted for the National Party or not, all white South African children benefited from discriminatory laws and policies in every sphere of economic, political and social life that made white lives relatively easy and black lives impossibly hard.

Lombard (2016) argues that Hirson’s ‘King Kong’ is so powerful and evocative because it evokes nostalgia at three levels: *affective* (a transient feeling of longing, often triggered by a sensory stimulation); *narrative* (signifying the desire to return to the past – invoking the ‘good old days’); and *represented* (which

commodifies nostalgia by exploiting the past for commercial or political purposes – as in Donald Trump’s covertly racist slogan ‘Make America Great Again’). Nostalgia intermediates between personal and collective memory. It can be critiqued for reconstructing an imagined past that is shared by one group but not by others, because by evoking a collective identity shared only by a minority it discounts or annihilates the memories and experiences of other groups. Even worse, the popularity of ‘nostalgia writing’ among white middle-class South African readers post-1994 could be seen as reflecting their/our anxiety about potentially losing their/our privileges following loss of political power, reinforcing ‘us and them’ divisions and legitimising the perpetuation of *apartheid*-created inequalities.

Despite drawing heavily on memories from my childhood in my portfolio, I have tried to avoid writing with narrative or represented nostalgia. When I name-check my high school song (“Afric’s savage hinterland”) or Boyce’s ‘History for South African High Schools’, for instance, my intention is overtly ironic.

#### **4. Exilic: Exile as physical relocation, exile as psychological dislocation**

Ambiguous identity is a persistent theme in white South African poetry. Chapman (2018: 484) identifies “the settler’s need to take root in Africa” as an “enduring theme” of white South African poetry. Are South Africans of European descent Africans, or Europeans in exile? Although my early years were grounded in the southern suburbs of Cape Town, I gradually became conscious of several dialectical contradictions: being born with ascribed privilege and power but into a demographic minority, being a white boy of British descent in a country then run by white men of Dutch descent... I developed a sense of alienation that informed my decision to ‘return’ to my ancestral roots in Scotland (maternal) and England (paternal).

I was among a large exodus of white South Africans in the 1980s. I quickly learned that emigrating ‘overseas’ creates a kind of double exile: first you leave your home and country of birth behind, then you find yourself in a society and culture that isn’t yours and never fully accepts you. What happens to the psyches of white South Africans who retain some race memory or subliminal nostalgia for the Europe we left behind? Do we absorb and become part of “this hybrid culture”, or are we destined – because of our history as colonisers – to be permanently dislocated from both Africa and Europe, “dangling on the fringe” of both?<sup>1</sup> When white South Africans emigrate to Europe are they going into exile, or returning to the ‘motherland’?

For many white South Africans who chose to emigrate after Soweto in 1976, or to avoid conscription (war resister or deserter?) the effort to assert a new identity by reclaiming an ancestral one was confounded by a sense of guilt about what we had left behind, and why: “renegotiating exile they face/ privately the force of their desertion” (Stephen Gray, ‘Returnees’). Patrick Cullinan reflected on the politics of carrying a divided psyche, straddling two cultures, in his poem ‘Exiles’: “We shall try not to remember/ The political [...] Can any race have two/ Personalities? [...] We thought we were exiles,/ We are certainly exiles now.”<sup>2</sup>

I try to capture these ambivalences and ambiguities in poems like ‘not this’ and ‘allegiances’. Nonetheless, writing now in hindsight about my years abroad, my preoccupations with my inner life and my intimate relationships continue to dominate, as in the sequence ‘marriage story’ and ‘ex-BFF’, which allegorises an incident when I fell out with my Best Friend Forever over a spurious grievance (that had nothing to do with a hippopotamus). And my father even pursued me posthumously to Rome (‘absent father’).

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<sup>1</sup> Both quotes are from James A. Harrison’s poem ‘Homecoming’, in de Kock and Tromp (1996: 158–159).

<sup>2</sup> In Gray (1976: 35–36).

## 5. Post-Exilic: Cape Town as an imaginary, Cape Town as multiple realities

*"I have Cape Town in my bones. Long Street runs down my spine."*  
Breyten Breytenbach, *The True Confessions of an Albino Terrorist*

In the third section of my portfolio I return to Cape Town, to new relationships with the city and with my family who remained behind, quite different to those of my earlier adult-as-child protagonist. No city epitomises "the crises of inequality and difference that persist, and have even enlarged" (Moolman, 2017: 1) in post-*apartheid* South Africa more than Cape Town.

It is easy to romanticise Cape Town, impossible not to be overawed by its natural splendour. "I am driving home on the coastal road/ the most beautiful road in the world" (Finuala Dowling, 'Riches'). But there are other, darker Cape Towns. "This city on a peninsula, between the mountain and the sea [...] its great dualities, divided peoples [...] a crime in it that could never be denied" (Stephen Watson, 'Coda'). There is another Cape Town, beyond the leafy suburbs – the townships and shanty-towns of the Cape Flats. More Capetonians live on the Cape Flats than in the shadow of Table Mountain. Very few of them are white.

In found poems (like 'graduation') and scraps of overheard conversations (the 'picking up stompies' sequence) I learn how Cape Town has changed, and how it has not. But I feel more of an outsider than ever. Even white Capetonians are foreigners to me now.

Only one poem in this section ('a simple request') is narrated with the voice of an 'other' – the victim of a shack fire. Other poems and prose pieces that try to capture the deeply troubling experiences of "inequality and difference" that characterise contemporary Cape Town are written in my voice, from within my white skin ('the man in the doorway', 'Greenmarket Square, Saturday morning', 'unfinished bridge'). I should note that the use of quotation marks in these and other poems does not imply that these words were actually spoken by people I observed or interacted with. One of my favourite lines in this section ("Dit lyk my julle mense het jou *ubuntu* by die huis vergeet vanoggend") came to me while I was sitting at a coffee-shop in Greenmarket Square watching a beggar hustle passers-by. Only these words on the cardboard placard he was holding ("I am ashamed/ but Hungry") are factually 'true'.

## 6. Conclusion

Writing this collection during an extraordinary year (cf. '2019', '2020') when I have barely left my desk in Cape Town, has given me a unique opportunity to revisit and process my own story, to understand better how I came to be who and where I am in this world. I am grateful that I embarked on this journey. It has not always been easy, either creatively or emotionally. The childhood ('pre-exilic') poems were painful but deeply grooved into my psyche. But in poems like 'his mother's red ferrari' and 'madonna con bambino', I find myself coming to terms with the fact that after 23 years apart my mother had become someone I barely knew – not least because I had also become someone neither of us recognised – evoking feelings and insights within me that I am still afraid to fully acknowledge or confront.

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