

# Kunapipi

---

Volume 21 | Issue 3

Article 4

---

1999

## The Interpreter

Andries Walter Oliphant

Follow this and additional works at: <https://ro.uow.edu.au/kunapipi>



Part of the [Arts and Humanities Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Oliphant, Andries Walter, The Interpreter, *Kunapipi*, 21(3), 1999.  
Available at: <https://ro.uow.edu.au/kunapipi/vol21/iss3/4>

Research Online is the open access institutional repository for the University of Wollongong. For further information contact the UOW Library: [research-pubs@uow.edu.au](mailto:research-pubs@uow.edu.au)

---

## The Interpreter

### Abstract

The entries in my diary, anyone familiar with my record of the siege knows, break off on the penultimate day of the third month of the new century. This was just a day before the end of the first quarter of the new age. This time had no special meaning except that the sun, scorching the sand and stones all summer, suddenly fell further west and away from us. Autumn set in. The earth cooled but I lost none of my desire to write.

ANDRIES WALTER OLIPHANT

## The Interpreter

1

The entries in my diary, anyone familiar with my record of the siege knows, break off on the penultimate day of the third month of the new century. This was just a day before the end of the first quarter of the new age. This time had no special meaning except that the sun, scorching the sand and stones all summer, suddenly fell further west and away from us. Autumn set in. The earth cooled but I lost none of my desire to write.

At the end of March, I wrote: 'The Colonel Commanding has published a hot protest against alleged rumours by somebodies, to the effect that he delays the troops and that he starves the inhabitants, etc., in the *Mafeking Mail*. He threatens to catch those fellows when their claims ...'

There is nothing after this. Not a word. Yet the empty pages in my diary, twenty sheets to be exact, continue to produce a great deal of conjecture. I have heard many speculations. One of the wildest has it that the rest of my diary is written in invisible ink.

To confess, I have toyed with the idea of calling this story 'Invisible Ink'. But since there is nothing to decipher, I decided against it. Also, I do not want to fuel further conjecture.

This then is the story. It is not written from the shadows or the margins of time but dredged from what has been expunged from memory. It is the story I did not tell.

2

Back home after a day in the Summary Court, I sit down to record some events. Hearing what could only be the sound of feet falling on the steps leading up to the threshold, I stop writing in mid-sentence. I wait for the knock. There it is: a tentative percussion of knuckles on wood. Placing the pen next to my open diary, I rise and go to the door.

It is the boy Tshepo who works as court messenger, with a note from Morena. Before he leaves, I read the note in case I have to send a reply. It is written in code. As it turns out, I have to respond.

On a sheet of paper I write in code that I understand the message and will do as instructed. I place the paper in an envelope. After sealing it, I scribble Morena's name on the front of it and hand it to the messenger. As he turns to go, I call him back and give him a lump of jelly sweets. He

runs off into the growing darkness of the evening. Somehow he reminds me of my own son, down south with his mother in the city of diamonds. I smile and turn, not back to what I was busy with before the interruption, but to the urgent business of packing a few things.

3

So, on the second last night of that month, I move from my book-crammed house adjacent to the Chief's Residence. With everything I need in a knapsack, I lock the house and hide the key. Under the cover of darkness, I walk towards the railway lines. Once I have crossed the lines, I will leave the *stadt* and enter the white town.

A light, unseasonable downpour patters on the roofs of the houses. The water glistens on the grey boulders. The sandy ground is damp and soft and pleasant to tread on. The air is nippy.

I make a wide berth around the Chief's Residence before cutting across the veldt, passing the fort and barracks between the *stadt* and the settlement. My stocky body moves with the stealth of a *phokojwe*.

I reach the Railway Reserve. There I cut across the road leading north. Once in the area of the siding, I hop over the lines, avoiding the Prison and the Shell Factory. I wait in the shadows for the sentry guarding the Commissariat Store to pass. When darkness swallows him I enter the town at its northern limit where the grid of the settlement gives way to the sandy recreation fields.

From there, I walk across Government Square and slip into the yard behind the Court House. Skirting the main inner defence emplacements, leaping over dugouts and trenches, I reach my new quarters undetected: a disused cell behind the Court House. This is my new home.

4

On my second foray out in the field we capture Mafura Motswalle. He is one of the two men from the *stadt* who recently lured twenty-five cattle raiders, sent by the Colonel Commanding to replenish the beef stocks of the town, into a trap. They were decimated by maxims hidden among the reeds of the Molopo River. We catch him as he crosses the river on his way to the encampments of the enemy. I have to restrain Mgugu from killing him.

'Kill the dog!'

'No! Not me,' Mafura slobbers as the tip of the rifle grazes his head.

'Yes, you. *Ntswa!*' Mgugu swears, thrusting the barrel of his gun into the chest of the captured man.

'We were fishing. Only fishing. They were hiding in the reeds. Someone shouted ... there were shots ... I can't remember,' Mafura pleads as he is kicked.

'Traitor!' Mgugu sneers.

'Shoot him and get done with it,' Mara, the woman in our unit, eggs him on.

'Killing is not justice,' I say in a ridiculous court-like tone to distract them.

'Justice? My arse,' Mara laughs.

'Yes, the law.'

'Masepa! This is war,' Rajane sniggers.

'He's our prisoner,' I say feebly.

'Shoot the shit!' they shout in turns.

Mgugu leans forward. He presses the nozzle of his rifle hard into the captive's chest. He pulls the trigger. The gun barks. As he lunges to one side to evade the shot, the bullet rips into Mafura's left shoulder, hurling him to the ground.

'Are you mad!' I shout, pushing Mgugu aside.

They back off. I raise the wounded man onto my horse. I ride into town after dark, the others straggling behind in silent disapproval, reach the prison and ask the guard to call the captain.

'What is this?' the captain points at the bleeding man.

'A traitor, one of those who lured the raiders to their deaths,' Mgugu explains.

'Aha, I see. But why bring him here? What must I do with a wounded man?'

'Ask him,' Mgugu says, pointing at me.

'He can only die here,' the captain says but nevertheless calls for assistance.

'Get someone to look at his wound. When he is fit, he will go on trial,' I say as if I have the authority to instruct the prison captain in such matters.

'Only to face the firing squad,' he laughs as the wounded man is carried off.

I greet the other men. We go our separate ways. I know where to find them. Where I live, is a secret.

Mounting my horse, I head in the direction of my house in the *stadt*. There I leave the horse in the stable and walk back to the town.

5

I stop at Morena's house and deliver my intelligence reports. We greet each other without shaking hands, then I hand him some sheets of paper. He will read them and in turn pass them on to the Colonel Commanding.

'You look the worse for wear,' he remarks drily.

'I need a rest,' I mutter and shrug my shoulders.

'What are you waiting for?' he grins.

I leave with a feeling that things are starting to get at me. After a quiet beginning to the month, matters have taken a turn for the worse. The siege, no doubt, is coming to a head.

6

I am on horseback all day long, gathering surplus people: refugees and other foreigners. The Colonel Commander wants them out of here. They are parasites, he writes. They feed on the precious food stores of the siege like locusts. They must leave or starve to death.

Ferrying them through the lines while armed detachments from the Black Watch open gaps in the circle of guns thrown around the town, we manage to get more than a thousand out in a matter of a few days. How many reach safety? No one knows.

This is what the Colonel Commander wants. It is the only way to save the townspeople and those who rightfully belong in the *stadt* from starving, he announces. He brooks no dissent and in earnest we obey. Not to do so would be a crime.

On the last census I conducted for Morena with Philemon and Gates, about a month ago, there were just over five-and-a-half-thousand people in the *stadt*. That was after four months into the siege when almost half the population had left. Now, early April, I estimate that two-thirds of the population have gone.

The siege drags on. The tension, like the death tolls, mounts. The *stadt* is a cemetery.

7

We expected it to be over before the end of summer, that the Imperial troops would arrive from the south at the beginning of January. The only relief that came were the summer rains. The showers now are only a memory. The dry season is here. We are still waiting.

The casualties grow. The toll is heaviest among the people in the *stadt*. Nobody but I bothers to keep count. Sketchy as they are, my own figures suggest that, between the victims of war and starvation, many more have died to keep the townspeople fat than the official figures show.

We are fast running out of supplies. The sorghum, barley and oats are low. We are supplementing whatever meat we have with the flesh of horses. In the *stadt* dog meat sustains many. Those who will not eat dog or horse flesh live off the bark of fern trees. Wherever one turns a starveling totters. One dreads to look for fear of seeing another 'fall over backwards with a dead thud', as I write in my diary on March the 21st.

We whisper in the *stadt* that the settlers and the merchants are hoarding grain and other food. The merchants and the inhabitants of the settlement go about openly accusing the people of the *stadt* of concealing their harvests. Such are the recriminations of people facing starvation. It poisons the air with suspicion. I, who live on the rations allotted to the town, am in the middle of all this. Many envy me. Others resent my privileges. Some insinuate I have forgotten my own people.

In this matter no one mentions the name of the Colonel Commanding nor that of Morena. He, Morena, issues Soven Passes to the most destitute. We report to him, he reports to the Colonel. The Colonel Commanding knows everything. Why doesn't he instruct Morena to put out these smouldering fires?

The Colonel Commanding, instead, issues eloquent but sinister proclamations. He demands Obedience, Unity of Purpose, and Harmony. Anyone who Shames the Fame of the Heroic Defence of the Siege, he threatens with Stringent Measures.

To me, an interpreter, this is a strange form of speech. The words, drained of meaning, are recharged with the emphatic tones of power. This is enough to silence even the most outspoken among us.

8

I escape from the choking atmosphere in the besieged town and from the walking skeletons of the *stadt* when I am on spying expeditions. The veldt between the investments of the enemy and the plains behind their lines is, at times, so tranquil, it is difficult to believe that the country is at war.

I sleep under the stars of the autumn sky. Lying on my back in a hollow between the rocks, I gaze up into the heavens where the galaxies wheel above me. The earth rolls through the sparkling skies.

During the day, I gaze with the eyes of a raptor out over the veldt. At every opportunity I peer into the laager of the enemy. Pale, stout and bearded, they are a rough, uncivilized people. They are stuffed with meat, their encampments dens of smoke. If they overrun the town, we will, if not taken into slavery, become pariahs in our own land. Their greed for land and servants knows no limit.

My main task is to compile intelligence reports on their activities. I watch where they position their artillery. I assess the strength of the commandos. From Morena's comments and the favours bestowed on me, I deduce that these have served the defence of this outpost of the Empire well. The Colonel Commanding bases a great deal of his strategy on my reports. How he does this, is not entirely clear to me, but this does not matter, I do my work.

Sharp as my eyes are, how I miss my field-glasses. If caught with them by the enemy, they would be the end of me, so reluctantly I leave them in my quarters.

I live on the small things I can catch. Creatures within the grasp of a spy who must go about his work with stealth: *mmutla wa sekgoa*, francolin, sparrows, and whatever I can trap or shoot during the exchanges of fire between the warring forces. Most days the fare is locusts, *mokgatitswane*, worms, wild spinach, berries or *noga*.

It is a furtive life. But subterfuge has its own exhilaration and rewards. The money I complained about in my letters to Morena and others a few

months ago, seems so trivial now. The pressing demands of action outweigh the calculations of career and cash. How anyone can become rich from war, escapes me.

9

I am part of a unit, the Jackal Scouts. No one but Morena and the Colonel Commanding knows of our existence. He, the Colonel Commanding, conceived us.

Only the most able and trusted are part of it. Counting not more than the fingers of one hand, each one of us has a purpose. We are no motley band of raiders but part of the new science of war.

On missions I operate independently. I make sure the most vital information reaches them. I keep abreast of the enemy's movements and try to divine their plans. I sleep away from the rest, in case the unit is surprised at night. This is the art of reconnaissance. I am the eyes and ears of the unit.

If you look at it dispassionately, it is no different from my job as interpreter. I read the signs of war and write reports for those entrusted with the destiny of the Empire. I do my bit for freedom and progress.

He, the Colonel Commanding, never leaves his Headquarters. He is stationed in a storied building adjacent to the market square. From his observation post he has a view of the entire settlement and well beyond it. This includes the *stadt*. His view takes in the veldt, the *rantjies* and the river. His eyes, day and night, sweep over the world in all the directions of the compass.

Linked to telephones, mirrors, field radios, despatches, runners, flags, forts, and trenches – his eyes and his words, his decisions and his very wishes, reach into places no mortal confined to one space ever can. It is a marvel. No one, not even Morena, can divine his thoughts.

Information and cunning, not bravery, are the keys to success in war. His axioms are knowledge and calculation. This is what the few who have contact with him say counts in his estimation. His estimation, everyone in the settlement and the *stadt* knows, counts for everything.

His desires are passed on to us in whispers. The defence of the town, and how we will be relieved, is his precious knowledge. I am a small but vital part of it. What else but brutality is there beyond this?

10

It is night. The boulders are dark ruminating elephants. I meet with my unit in the blue darkness below a rock. I brief them on the movements of the enemy. Dealing in truth, I underplay the risks I take. I amplify what is in their safety. They listen, their eyes shining like planets in the dark.

When it is their turn to brief me on their activities, there is silence.



Someone coughs.

'It is not the brave who succumb in war but the foolish,' Surrbuss Setehabi, speaking through a tight throat, remarks like a ventriloquist.

We laugh. His utterance has a ring of truth to it, though it is difficult to see what he means. It is a relief to hear it from him and not from some slouch-capped loafer in the garrison. This, I suppose, is what makes it so funny.

'You look strange,' Mathakgong, staring at me, says.

What? I want to ask but the others laugh and I choke on the question.

'That's right,' Mara, dressed in the clothes of a man, responds to my puzzlement.

'You have two faces,' Rajane adds.

'What?' I exclaim, finally getting the word out.

They laugh, falling about in the dark. I wait for them to answer but they lose interest.

'I am hungry and tired,' Rajane yawns.

For days I ponder the meaning of their remarks. How should I interpret them? I forget them for a while only to return as to one's shadow at sunrise.

I look at myself in my field mirror. I can see no change in my face. It is a shade darker from the sun. The pools of my eyes are not as untroubled as they were before the war. There is nothing strange about this.

Two faces? What was he hinting at? Is it some kind of joke? I resolve to banish it from my mind.

11

I quench my thirst from a hidden loop of the Molopo. At midday, I scoop the blue sky from the stream running over the smooth stones below the canopy of reeds.

At night, I drink the stars sparkling in the water cupped in my hands. The smoky taste of water drunk in the dark lingers in my mouth. I sleep with one eye shut and both ears open.

With the passing days I drink deep from the waters of this new time. I have never felt better in my life. This war, to be sure, will change our fortunes, and not only mine and those of us engaged in it. It will touch all our people. It will change things forever.

More than most, I greeted the outbreak of hostilities with a sense of expectation that somehow our freedom was at hand. The first skirmishes with the enemy held the promise that when the last shot was fired we who have fought on the side of the righteous, will take our place among the civilized and the just.

Now, several months into the siege, I am beginning to have doubts. I thought the war would pass but it hasn't. I must nevertheless see this through to the end.

12

Back in my quarters behind the Court House I feel I need a bath. My body reeks of smoke, grass, sweat, and death. I scoop water from the barrel in the corner of the room and pour it into the kettle.

There is much to do before I turn in. I must fix something to eat. I must write down what is not in the reports I handed over to Morena. I must do some reading. There is a passage in Shakespeare about spying which I must look up. I must prepare myself for the trial of Mafura. They will patch him up and haul him into court tomorrow. My testimony will be needed.

How I long to hear some music. All my gramophone needles are so blunt, they scratch the grooves of the recordings. My favourite record by the Jubilee Singers is virtually destroyed. It is impossible to get a replacement now.

I sit by the fire slicing a pumpkin. When done, I clean the chaff from a small heap of sorghum. I place it in a saucepan and add a few grains of coarse salt. I take what is left of the rabbit I shot a day or so ago from my knapsack and season it.

A sliced onion braises in some lard in a pan on the fire. I place the pieces of rabbit, ribs, and half a rump into it. My mouth waters.

When the water boils, I pour some on to the grain. A bit more goes into another saucepan with the pumpkin. The rest goes into the tub on the floor half-filled with icy water. In twenty minutes supper will be ready, I think, reminding myself of my good fortune in these hard times. With the low supplies and the high prices of food, I have done better than most.

13

Now I strip and get into the warm water for a scrub. I work up a lather from a chip of blue soap and rub the soapy water into my skin. I am rinsing the suds from my body when suddenly there is a violent knock at the door.

'Coming,' I shout, taking my gown from the hook behind the door. When I turn, barefoot on the stone floor, the door opens. Who but Morena walks into my abode? He has never done this before.

'You must keep your door locked, you ...' he says without completing his sentence.

'I have no enemies. Not here in town nor in the *stadt*,' I say, unable to make sense of the incredulous expression on his face.

'What on earth is the matter with you?' he snarls.

'Back from another excursion,' I explain.

'I know. I saw you earlier this evening when you delivered your reports,' he says tonelessly and pulls in his angular chin.

'Good,' I say, and add to flatter, 'You've already read them?'

'That's what I came to see you about,' he is unable to mask the irritation in his voice.

'Oh ...?'

'Come down to the Prison. Right away,' he turns to leave.

'Yes sir,' I say, watching him go to the door.

'And for God's sake lock your doors,' he bellows before the night closes round him.

I rinse my face and leave. I turn the key and place it in my pocket.

14

Leaving the shadows of the back yard, I walk around the Court House on to Market Square from where I have a view of the Colonel Commanding's Headquarters. The double-storied building is in darkness. This makes me wonder whether there is any truth to the legend that he never sleeps.

It is said that after midnight his favourite Imperial Officers from the Regiment of the Protectorate have lunch with him until day-break. He does everything in reverse. He has breakfast at sunset; lunch at midnight; dinner before sunrise. These are the habits of a hyena.

Looking at the dark quarters, I cannot help but wonder why, if the Colonel Commanding is omniscient, he values my reports as much as I am led to believe. Is it a case of the hyena guided to carrion by vultures? If so, who guides the hyena at night? A shot rings out and disturbs my train of thought.

Crossing the railway lines I reach the entrance of the Prison. I identify myself. The sentries, one on each side of the gate, are nonchalant. I hand over my rifle. One frisks me. He finds the key of a prison door in my pocket and holds it up in the dark shaking his head before returning it. The other one watches but without following this silent exchange in the dark. They let me in.

There are two more sentries on the inside. I am asked to wait. One tugs at a rope dangling from the wall: once, twice, pauses, and tugs again. A bell chimes within the Prison building.

Two soldiers stride across the grass towards us. Without a word they turn, waiting for me to step into the space between them. In silence we walk across the sandy inner court to a large wooden door leading to the cells. The grass I saw a moment ago, except for a few dried and stubby clumps, is gone. Sand crunches under our feet.

Someone opens the door from the inside and lets us in. We walk along a dark passage, one soldier ahead of me, one behind me. I am out of step with their measured footfalls.

At the end of the passage I am shown into a large bare room. The soldiers turn and leave.

15

I am alone in a space where the glow of the night-sky falls through a high

barred window. It casts a strange grey light over the floor and against the opposite wall.

When my eyes eventually adjust to the dimness, I see that there is no place to sit. Standing in the middle of the bare space, it strikes me how different the place feels compared to the holding cell behind the Court House in which I now stay. The single cell in the Court House is comfortable if somewhat crammed. This large empty space, a group cell no doubt, holds a strange feeling of extreme constriction.

Stories told to me about the Prison have it that the place is overcrowded. It should be. Everyday in the Summary Courts, not counting those fined, in one session after another, legions are sent here and only a few to execution by firing squad.

All this is done with the utmost civility. Not a trace of savagery is to be found even in the executions. It is not a flawless procedure but its objectives are, as far as I can see, governed by justice and above reproach.

16

About prison I know nothing, really. It is after all a place behind walls. I have listened ruefully to the stories told me. A grunt of pity, a grimace of dismay at the vision of broken bodies piled upon each other, what more can I offer?

How then is this place empty? The muted moans rising from somewhere within the thick-walled body of the building, are so faint, they seem no more than sounds issuing from my imagination.

A door opens. No one calls me, no gesture beckons. Still I walk towards the open door. I hesitate for a moment, then enter.

'Why have you taken so long to get here?' a voice I have never heard before but with the same measured intonation of Morena's, asks tersely.

I see four figures. The hands of one concealed behind his back, two standing erect, a fourth prostrate on the floor. In the dark space of the cell their bodies are blurred like charcoal sketches.

'Black bastard, take off your bloody hat. Who the hell do you think you are?' Another, even stranger voice spits out the words I have heard so often all over the colony and in the republics.

'I don't have a hat on,' I reply and turn to see if there isn't another person behind me.

Looking over my shoulder, I see the door swing on its hinges. It shuts without making a sound.

17

After what seems a lifetime, I emerge from the Prison like from a lair into the dead of the night. The guns are silent, yet it feels as if some vast yet obscure activity is going on everywhere in the opaque night.

I walk in the direction of my residence in the *stadt*. Moving along the track, I realize that I am right below the Headquarters of the Colonel Commanding. I look up on to the roof from which I and so many have diverted our gazes, observing the saying: he who even once looks into the eye of the sun shall have no eyes to look again.

In the starry darkness a shape looms above the gables. I peer up into the dark but can't fix a clear image to it. Where I thought the head was I see eyes, large and round, glowing like polished glass.

Then suddenly, from the south-east where the enemy have constructed a fort, the ninety-four pounder flashes, lighting up the sky. In the second between the illumination and the boom that follows it, I see into the night.

I see the figure of a person, its head small and shaped like that of a hyena, its face cadaverous as if powdered with ash. A fabric coloured dull-yellow and smudged dark-brown, flutters like a flag draped over the erect figure. It is like a cloak worn in the manner of warriors draping themselves in the skins of leopards.

As the shell whooshes harmlessly over head I retreat. I fall into a trench behind me. Dazed and witless, I crawl out of the hole and stagger home.

18

I reach the house, feel for the key hidden in the doorpost groove and stumble in. I sink into the couch in the living-room. Slowly I regain my senses. I light a lamp. It burns for a while, flickers and dies.

While it burnt, I saw that the house was covered in the fine red dust of the desert. Whatever I touched, my hands were printed in the dust.

I find a candle and I light it. I rummage in the drawers looking for my diary. It is gone. The drawers are filled with sand. Surely I did not take it with me to my new quarters? Or did I? Definitely not.

I find some paper. Clean folio sheets: Irish feint without margins. The dry fragrance of paper is like the scent of some desert flower. The thick dark blood of the ink appals me.

Sitting down I dip my pen into the ink-pot. Turning the shaft as I lift it, I take care to drain the nip and so avoid blotting the page. I raise my pen over the paper and begin to write. My hand moves over the sheet, swift and deliberate. The subtle captivating screech of inked steel pressing gently against the delicate fabric of paper is a cry which does not carry further than my ears where I stoop close to the page in the dim light.

19

I pause to look at what I have written. Where there should be words, the image of the town with its roads and the inner circle of trenches and defence positions is spread across the page. The fort and garrison of the Regiment of the Protectorate, situated between the town and the *stadt*, all

are in place.

On the edge of the desert, the besieged city is an image of enclosure. Buttressed by the Black Watch in trenches dug by the dead, by the Cape Corps in the Brick Fields, spattered in blood, by the Mfengu Raiders crawling along the greasy banks of the Molopo disguised in the feathers of ostriches, the starved stagger across the veldt armed with nothing but their own bones.

The outer defence positions around the divided settlements are tracings of fire in the landscape. The air here is a sulphurous glue of boiling horsemeat. The earth stinks.

Further afield, in a laager drawn like a diamond around the two settlements, the *stadt* and the white town, is the investment of the enemy: forts, blockhouses, encampments, roaring guns. Behind it, in every direction, a myth burns.

20

The sun rolls like a burning stone in the autumn sky. The Colonel Commanding stands smiling beside a ruminating ox. It is a gift from the Royal Family. His eyes glow with the sky's fire. With his officer's staff he lightly taps the uppers of his shining black boots.

Listening I try to interpret his message without thinking of a hyena snapping its jaws. Involuntarily I remember my first day in the Magistrate Court. I had just done my first clerical task. It was a summons to the father of the traitor we took as a prisoner on my second expedition.

The ink was hardly dry when a hand silently returned the page to me. I looked up. It was a messenger. His expression, in which I saw another face, left no doubt that whoever had read it wanted me to redo it. I could not see what was amiss but tore the paper up and rewrote the summons, changing every single word. Then I signed my name, Sol T. Plaatje, in the summons log book and turned to attend to some other work.



Indian lookout, probably 'Mr Singh', at the siege of Ladysmith, 1899