

## EXAMINER'S COPY

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Telling tales: Life writing from the inner-city and a critical reflection on the ethics of non-fiction storytelling.

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## ABSTRACT:

This thesis comprises a creative component entitled *They won't come for us here*, and a reflective component which examines the ethics of non-fiction storytelling.

*They won't come for us here* is a compilation of life-writing and memoir produced and recorded during a three and a half year period spent living in the South African inner-city of Pietermaritzburg. It is a collection of lyric essays, and free-verse poetry, that investigates and narrates the lives of inner-city inhabitants, whilst reflectively interrogating the life of the narrator.

The compilation adopts a chronological approach, telling peoples' stories as the narrator meets them. This chronology is then interspersed with reflective records from the narrator's childhood in apartheid South Africa, records which attempt to explain and self-interrogate the perceived prejudiced and classist response of a white, middle-class narrator to a mixed-race, mixed-class inner-city.

The creation of *They won't come for us here* raised a number of ethical issues common to non-fiction storytelling, issues most commonly divided into the categories of privacy protection and creative license. To engage with these issues effectively the reflective component focuses on analysing the ethical decision-making of a selection of creative non-fiction writers. These writers include American essayists, such as David Sedaris and Joan Didion, and South African literary journalists, such as Antjie Krog and Jonny Steinberg.

The ethical choices that confront creative non-fiction writers range from the challenge of the unequal power balance experienced by immersion journalists to the challenge of recreation by imagination or memory experienced by most memoirists. After analysing the discussions and choices around the ethical decisions of a selection of creative non-fiction-fiction writers, the reflective component develops three frameworks that could support writers as they analyse their work: the framework of emotional truth versus factual truth, the framework of artistic clarity versus ethical clarity, and the framework of obligation to subject, topic and reader. Finally, these frameworks are used to analyse *They won't come for us here*, reflectively questioning the ethical decisions that were made in the creation of this document, decisions that range from those common to all forms of immersion storytelling to those common to the South African context, in which, predominantly, white voices record black stories.

## DECLARATION

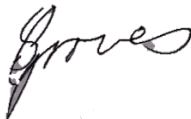
Submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Arts, in the Graduate Programme in English Studies (Creative Writing),  
University of KwaZulu-Natal, Pietermaritzburg, South Africa.

I, Sarah Groves, declare that:

1. The research reported in this thesis, except where otherwise indicated, is my original research.
2. This thesis has not been submitted for any degree or examination at any other university.
3. This thesis does not contain other persons' data, pictures, graphs or other information, unless specifically acknowledged as being sourced from other persons.
4. This thesis does not contain other persons' writing, unless specifically acknowledged as being sourced from other researchers. Where other written sources have been quoted, then:
  - i. Their words have been re-written but the general information attributed to them has been referenced
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Supervisor: Dr Claire Scott



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8<sup>th</sup> April 2020

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## **Telling Tales**

### **Part One: A critical reflection on the ethics of non-fiction storytelling**

## Chapter one: Introduction

When Tom Wolfe (1973) proposed that the novel had died, that dispassionate journalism was sick, and that both needed to move aside for the New Journalism, he was in effect kicking wide a door that had long been creaking. A steady, and growing, stream followed of what has variously been called new journalism, literary non-fiction, literary journalism and, most recently, creative non-fiction.

Joseph (2016:17) defines creative non-fiction as the umbrella term for a number of sub-genres: "true crime writing, memoir, profile, essay, literary journalism, historical non-fiction, journal writing, food writing, travel writing, found poetry (non-fiction poetry), documemoir." What all creative non-fiction has in common is that it is truth told creatively. It combines fact with literary technique, style with information. Gutkind (2005: xxvi), in his introduction to a journal collection of personal essays, highlights this combination: "These essays burst with narrative and read like fiction, yet their styles are vehicles through which ideas and information are dramatically and vividly revealed." This he argues is at the heart of creative non-fiction, which, although currently mired in controversy, is essentially an old-fashioned concept; a concept Gutkind claims was followed by the earliest journalists who didn't believe in separating story from fact. Describing the spirit of his journal, *Creative Non-fiction*, Gutkind (2005: xxviii) claims that it pursues, "good, old-fashioned reporting — facts, plus story and reflection or contemplation."

This means that creative non-fiction is by nature subjective. This is what sets it apart from other types of non-fiction, which claim to be objective. For example, Forche (2001:111) records a code of journalistic ethics and one of the journalist's obligations is to present the facts objectively. Yet creative non-fiction does not undertake to present facts without comment or reflection; it claims the right to arrange the facts into a compelling story; and it is this right that makes creative non-fiction so appealing, so able to engender sympathy, and so prone to ethical controversy.

As soon as writing moves out of the protective umbrella of fiction (none of this is true) and out of the protective umbrella of dispassionate fact (all of this is exact and verifiable), it meets controversy. This controversy covers a number of ethical issues, which are often divided into two main concerns. The first regards privacy. Within a clear journalistic interview, the subject has agreed to publicity. He can choose his words, knowing that



whatever he says can legitimately be quoted, can be held against him. But, in creative non-fiction, the writer often writes about people without their permission. She writes about her family, friends, neighbours and strangers. She records their words and actions, without them knowing. She makes their lives public, without their agreement. The second ethical concern pertains to creativity. As soon as facts are formed to make story, literary decisions need to be made. Some writers collapse time, others form composite characters; some writers recreate thought and conversation, others invent characters to further the story. As a creative non-fiction writer, I wanted to investigate and understand these ethical concerns and interrogate my own writing in light of them. Thus, I chose a thesis comprising two components – creative and reflective. The first component is *They won't come for us here*, which is a creative non-fiction collection of my life writing from the inner-city. The second component is this reflective thesis, which concludes with an analysis of my creative component. Although written in this order, it makes sense to read the first three chapters of the reflective component, which lay out my literature review and methodology, and then read the creative component, which is essentially my data, before reading the final chapter of this reflective component, which constitutes my data analysis — hence the order of this submission.

Whilst journalism traditionally had a clear set of applied ethics to guide its practitioners, creative non-fiction writers and theorists are constantly debating what writers are obligated or even allowed to do as they record their lives and the lives of others. Consequently, this reflective component will adopt a descriptive ethics approach, investigating choices made by writers in practice. I will analyse what writers and theorists feel obligated to do in various writing situations (applied ethics), and I will aim to identify the reasoning behind their moral choices (normative ethics).

Because this study is based on a descriptive ethics approach, I have surveyed a wide range of writers and theorists. South Africa has not produced any books on how to approach and how to write creative non-fiction, and so as my spine I have selected four American books<sup>1</sup> (Hemley 1994, Roorbach 1998, Perl & Schwartz 2006, Gutkind 2005). Because my creative work largely comprises essays, I will also engage with personal and lyric essayists (Didion 1990, Dillard 1987, Lopate 2003, Orwell 1946, Sedaris 2009, Miller 2009). Lastly, because I am writing in a South African context, I will engage with South

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<sup>1</sup> I have consulted other textbooks (see bibliography). However, they did not add anything distinctly different to these four.

African creative non-fiction writers and theorists (Bloom 2009, Krog 2007, Malan 2009, Nixon 2012, Roberts 2018, Steinberg 2008, Twidle 2018).<sup>2</sup>

Most writers agree that writing cannot be objective. Perl & Schwartz (2006:166) point out that, "All good writing selects and omits material to shape point of view." In a helpful interview, Krog elaborates this point:

The moment one uses something as 'unreal' as language to describe a live three-dimensional complex moment, one is already falsifying, fictionalising by deciding which angle, which words to use and what detail to leave out. So in one way I would say nothing that has been written had not already been heavily tampered with; even the simplest journalism is inadequate in giving a single fact in its complete fullness – the moment there is language, reality is already affected (Brown, D. & Krog, A. 2011:58).

However, an analysis of theorists and writers within the creative non-fiction genre reveals that individuals do make specific and varying decisions regarding creativity and privacy. Perl and Schwartz (2006) mention three principles<sup>3</sup> that writers can and do use to guide their ethical decisions. The first guiding principle (2006:166) is often articulated as a writer's commitment to emotional truth over factual truth, or vice versa. Where an individual writer lands on the spectrum of how much factual truth they are willing to compromise, in order to get to the intended meaning of someone's words and actions, or the significance of events, is an ethical choice — a choice made based on whether they view emotional truth or factual truth as primary. The second guiding principle (2006:163) examines the boundary between ethical clarity and artistic clarity. When is artistic beauty more important than factual accuracy or protection of privacy? The final principle guides ethical decisions in light of intent. Perl and Schwartz (2006:164) highlight that the creative non-fiction writer's intent must be to capture the world as it is. Within this parameter, the

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<sup>2</sup> Australian academic, Sue Joseph (2010:83) notes that New Journalism sparked the debate which led to a, "keen and more incisive regard of what creative non-fiction writers do, and how they do it, closely scrutinised, catalogued and archived by academics and practitioners themselves. But it has mostly all derived from the Northern Hemisphere."

<sup>3</sup> Perl and Schwartz mention these three points in their chapter on ethics. They don't formulate them into principles in the way that I have here. In other words, I offer these as frameworks, and I am indebted to Perl and Schwartz for the idea.

writer has an obligation to not only truthfully represent the people and the topic, but to also package this truth so that the reader will receive it.

I will argue that these principles can be used as distinct but connected frameworks to analyse decisions made by other creative non-fiction writers, and then I will use these frameworks to reflect on the decisions made in writing the creative component of this thesis, *They won't come for us here*.

As discussed above, this thesis has two components: Firstly, the creative component, which is my creative non-fiction work — a collection of essays and poems, written whilst living in a South African inner-city, telling my story and the stories of those around me; and secondly, this reflective component, which in many ways follows the standard format for academic research. In Chapter Two, the examination of creative non-fiction writers' choices comprises the literature review; in Chapter Three, the development of these choices into ethical frameworks highlights the methodology that my analysis will follow; and in Chapter Four, the application of these frameworks in a critical reflection of my creative writing constitutes the data analysis.

## **Chapter two: The ethical decision-making and ethical reasoning of a selection of creative non-fiction writers.**

It is almost certain that a writer, especially one who has made a controversial ethical decision, will claim to have acted with good intent. Thus, it is important to bear in mind George Orwell's caution in *Why I Write*. Orwell identifies four motives for writing which exist in different degrees in every writer and the first<sup>4</sup> is:

Sheer egoism. Desire to seem clever, to be talked about, to be remembered after death, to get your own back on the grown-ups who snubbed you in childhood, etc., etc. It is humbug to pretend this is not a motive, and a strong one...Serious writers, I should say, are on the whole more vain and self-centered than journalists, though less interested in money. (1946:2-3)

If Orwell is correct, then a writer will be likely to make decisions motivated by desire for fame or money, and she will be unlikely to acknowledge this. Bearing this in mind, I'd like to identify a number of writers' and theorists' decisions, their given reasoning, and at times to examine their possible unspoken reasoning. I have grouped these decisions under headings for ease of reading, but in fact much of the reasoning and decision-making is inter-connected and inseparable.

### **2.1 The protection of privacy**

Writer and teacher, Robin Hemley, devotes a chapter in his book *Turning Life into Fiction* to the legal and ethical concerns of both fiction and non-fiction. In doing so he highlights the blurry ethical lines of creative non-fiction. Hemley (1994:177) points out that, "For journalists the only absolute defense against a libel suite is that the facts stated must be provably true," whereas for fiction writers, "Your defense is that it's clearly not true, that it's fiction." This raises a difficult issue for creative non-fiction writers. What if your story is creatively told, making it not dependent on hard, verifiable facts, and thus not provably

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<sup>4</sup> The other three are more noble: Aesthetic enthusiasm for the art of writing, historical impulse to record facts, and political purpose or a desire to push society in a certain direction.

true? And yet it is close enough to a true story that it cannot be passed as fiction. In this domain the writer is not protected from a defamation case by being in either the camp of fiction, or the camp of non-fiction, and as such needs to be even more careful how they write. Throughout this chapter, Hemley (1994) refers to the *The Associated Press Stylebook and Libel Manual* (1992) as a guide to avoiding lawsuits as a writer. This guide makes much the same point as *Amlers Precedents of Pleadings* (2018) which summarises South African common law for writers. In short, a subject can sue for defamation of character if what has been written ruins their reputation. The writer's only defense would be if what she has written is provably true and in the interests of current public knowledge.

In the normal run of fiction and non-fiction, these laws are helpful guides and yet because of the subjective and often intimate nature of creative non-fiction, they are not enough. Having dealt with the legal concern over writing about others, Hemley deals with the key ethical concern of privacy: how much can a writer use other people's lives for the sake of a good story? Here Hemley (1994:185) quotes William Faulkner as saying a writer, "is completely amoral in that he will rob, borrow, beg or steal from anybody and everybody to get the work done." Joan Didion (1990: xvi) makes a similar point in her preface to *Slouching towards Bethlehem*, "...people tend to forget that my presence runs counter to their best interests. And it always does. That is one last thing to remember: writers are always selling someone out." To this concern, Hemley (1994:181,184) offers no clear guidance, besides reminding his readers that writers can be sued for a right to privacy if they dredge up details that are no longer newsworthy, and they can be sued if they publicly disclose private facts. However, he does argue that sometimes a writer needs to not fear being sued and needs to go ahead and publicly expose people. Hemley (1994:182) uses the issue of white racism, entrenched over a number of generations and acts, in a small American town, and then exposed in a fiction story that mirrored a true story, as an example of constructive exposure, "Sometimes it's the writer's job to make people uncomfortable especially if they'd rather sweep under the rug a shameful period of their history."

An interesting example of this is in Kevin Bloom's *Ways of Staying*. Bloom was sent by the editor of *The Maverick* to do an in-depth story on the murder of historian David Rattray. He stayed at Fugitives' Drift Lodge and recorded his discussions with David's colleagues. In this context, people knew they were being interviewed, or recorded, and so Bloom could quote people. They had agreed to entertain him as a journalist. He could legitimately

repeat what they said to him, or what they consciously said in his presence. But Bloom doesn't just do this, he also repeats what he overheard. When the guesthouse owner's wife complained that the interrupted electricity needed to be restored to her lodge quickly, perhaps even before it was restored to the black hospital, because she had paying guests, Bloom quotes her as an example of South African prejudice (2009:25). It's a true example, but was it ethical for him to quote her? She hadn't spoken to him, and the quote did represent her in a poor light. This is a good example of a writer breaking his subject's privacy, in order to expose his subject's prejudice.

A writer's choices, however, are not always this closely connected to justice. Some writers interfere with the privacy of family, friends, neighbours and strangers simply for the sake of telling a good story. Whilst Hemley (1994:185) notes that, "Writers unfortunately sometimes feel that their ambition justifies nearly anything", he is also honest enough to count himself as one of these writers: "My sense of ethics and fair play shift from story to story depending on how much I like the idea." Sometimes he gives up on the story; sometimes he loses the friendship because he can't give up on the story. Hemley (ibid) points out that, "It is hard to be a writer and not alienate someone along the way."

Hemley then sets up a contrast between his view and that of David Huddle in *The Writing Habit*. First Hemley quotes Huddle:

I believe the writer must do whatever he can to avoid ... trouble to keep from hurting feelings, but I believe finally he cannot allow the opinions and feelings of others to stop or to interfere with his writing. Maybe this is the ultimate selfishness to say that one's own work is more important than the feelings of family and friends. (1994:186)

Although Huddle's intention is to not harm, his higher intention is to create art. It is more important to him to tell the story than to protect relationships, and he concedes that he may have to choose between the two. Hemley (1994:187) hopes for better: "If you write the story sensitively, if you care about the subject matter, maybe you'll turn out something beautiful, a celebrating and questioning of life in all its complexity, something that you and all your crazy friends can identify with." Hemley identifies that the aim of creative non-fiction is to represent life as it is, and hopes that when this is done with commitment to the people of the story, and to the readers of the story, then neither will protest. Perhaps, he argues, the writer can tell truth in such a way that he can also keep friends.

Knowing that fear of hurting others is likely to paralyse many writers, Hemley (1994:187) advises writing the story truthfully. Then the writer can review the story and decide if it can stand as is, if details need to change to protect identity, or if the story cannot be told. Krog takes a similar approach:

Many aspiring writers tell me that they want to write a particular story, but that a person or community would be angry. So they find themselves trapped between their desire to tell and their fear for the consequences. My advice had always been: first write it. Write it as openly as you want; then go back and see how it can be changed to safeguard both you and the other person. In my many years of writing, it was seldom necessary to do much; the moment something was a text it created its own context that rendered the original links illegible. (2007:37)

Although protection of privacy is a concern, both ethically and legally, an obsession with protecting privacy can ruin the appeal of creative non-fiction. If details are changed to protect privacy, this can cause the story to have no clear root in reality. Lee Gutkind, editor of the journal *Creative Non-fiction*, explains that before publishing a particularly controversial essay, their editorial board worked with attorneys to determine what should be done to avoid litigation — what details needed to be changed, and which needed to be left out? Commenting on this process, Gutkind said, "The danger here, of course, was building such a strong wall of protection against litigation by disguising detail that the essay becomes what the writer has been trying to avoid: fiction" (2005: xxii). The appeal of creative non-fiction is that it has all the narrative elements of fiction, but it should be verifiably true. Changing details alters this characteristic of the non-fiction text, and can raise doubts in the reader's mind: If this part is changed, if this concrete fact is fudged, how can I verify what remains?

## 2.2 Creative license

Whilst Hemley's ethical concerns centre largely on privacy, Roorbach in his *Writing Life Stories*, focuses firstly on the creative choices that memoir writers make:

Every writer of memoir has his own conscience to grapple with, his own ethical stance when it comes to matters such as invented dialogue, compound characters, telescoped time. What constitutes artistic license and what constitutes lying? The border shifts writer to writer, story to story. (1998:11)

Roorbach (1998:36) uses an excerpt from Ralph Ellison's memoir to suggest that because of the large time lapse between experience and writing, Ellison must have filled in dialogue and reimagined scenes. This is a common device in memoir, for example Russel Baker (1982:11,14, 21-24) in his memoir *Growing up* places conversations in direct speech that were spoken 70 years before, and offers details and descriptions to accompany these speeches that are so specific that they must be reimagined. Roorbach (1998:162) allows that these creative choices accompany memoir because, "Memoir is a rendering of a lived life as filtered through memory and the wider net of the needs of narrative." Thus, Roorbach raises a helpful consideration that within non-fiction different sub-genres lend themselves to different ethical choices. For example, when working as a journalist, Roorbach (1998:81) quotes verbatim, but when writing as a memoirist, he gives himself more leeway, adjusting quotes, although always keeping within character. Because memoir is based on story and on memory it encourages more creativity and this allowance is implicitly understood by the reader. However, Roorbach (1998:21) cautions that although understood it must not be abused, "Memory is faulty. That's one of the tenets of memoir. And the reader comes to memoir understanding that memory is faulty...The reader also comes expecting that the writer is operating in good faith, that is, doing her best to get the facts right."

However, the issue in writing memoir or indeed any life-writing is not simply memory as often quotes are re-arranged, even if they were initially recorded verbatim; often time is telescoped on purpose and not just as a result of hazy recollection. What guides the writer here? Roorbach (1998:12) raises the question of artistic license, and argues in its favour: "To me the first goal, the first excellence is artistic. The needs of other excellencies, such as mere accuracy, must follow the needs of drama in a kind of hierarchy that helps me make decisions as I write." This concern for drama also guides Roorbach on ethics related to privacy. His practice is in the first draft to tell his story exactly and truly, and then later to adjust for privacy (Roorbach, 1998:79). However, whilst some writers change names and details and form composite characters to protect privacy, he is concerned that this would ruin the story: "Do I lie and damage my drama or do I risk hurting people?" (Roorbach,



1998:78) The creative license, used here to protect privacy, robs the story of its drama, robs the story of its claim to authenticity.

However, Roorbach is not merely concerned with artistic excellence here, but also with an obligation to the reader. He argues that each time the writer lies, she creates distance between herself and the reader (Roorbach, 1998:79,81). This is especially so if the writer is leaving out painful, private stories, and as a result creating characters who are sweet and yet unbelievable. Further, Roorbach (1998:79) argues that this type of writing is false: "You shouldn't leave out the good parts or the bad parts of your characters because the truth is the whole story, never half."

Rob Nixon (2012), in an essay discussing both American and South African creative non-fiction, argues that there are, "two vexing issues central to non-fiction as a form, two issues that lie at the heart to my essay: how much personal perspective to admit and, imaginatively, what to do with silence." Even with black participation, the act of whites telling a black story, especially if the white writers admit personal perspective and if the white writers use their imagination to fill in black silences, will offer a story that, if not paternalistic, is yet still not black. Perhaps it would be more honest if white people lived in mixed culture situations, instead of recording and then retreating from them; and if whites offered the stories of their own culture and the stories of other cultures, from a white perspective.

Nixon does not argue against offering personal perspective in non-fiction, acknowledging that it is this personal perspective that builds narrative trust in the reader, and adds to the subjective appeal of creative non-fiction; however he cautions that the reader needs to be aware that he is often receiving a white perspective on a black history: "Let's be clear: the power of the white knowledge-making industry remains resilient; it has left a deep, debilitating impress on South African historiography and literary non-fiction. In scholarship and non-fiction, the persistence of that power demands a keen vigilance" (Nixon, 2012).

### 2.3 The issue of immersion

Roorbach (1998:163) presses the concern of privacy further to deal with ethical issues of trust and relationship; issues that, although pertinent to most creative non-fiction, he deals

with in connection to literary journalism: "In the best work [of literary journalism], the writer immerses herself in the story, living with her subjects, getting to know them well, observing and even sharing in their lives, and, if she's anything like me, feeling bad later about exploiting them." This ethical issue is helpfully discussed in an interview with Johnny Steinberg, conducted by David Lehman. Lehman (2010:31) highlights that Steinberg's creative non-fiction is notably personal. Steinberg develops relationships with his subjects, who become his characters. An example is Steinberg's relationship with the shopkeeper Sizwe in the *Three letter plague*. Sizwe becomes the central character in this book, as he reveals his relatives' and friends' response to HIV and HIV testing, and ultimately his own response. Steinberg (2010:35) acknowledges that much of the impact of this book rests on this relationship: "So, writing about my relationship with Sizwe worked, I hope, because it helped to illuminate his relationship with the virus he believed was in his blood. I do not think that discussing my relationship with him would have worked if it hadn't illuminated the book's central question; it would have been a little trite."

In one sense Steinberg could be accused of using Sizwe for the sake of a good story. Quoting from *Three letter plague* Lehman (2010:34) suggests that this is similar to a concern that Sizwe raises — Sizwe imagines his friends' accusations about his relationship with Steinberg: "'You go around showing the white people our culture, but they show us none of theirs. You are giving away our secrets to put a few cents in your own pockets. But it is our secrets you are making money off of, our culture'". These words could be applied, not to Sizwe, but to Steinberg. He is making money, a career, a reputation from his characters' stories, and Steinberg (2010:32) acknowledges that if he were really counting the cost of the relationships he develops in his investigative writing he would probably not publish the stories: "I'm not sure that I really count the cost. Really counting the cost might mean abandoning the book I'm writing, and I haven't ever seriously contemplated that. One can look pretty good pretending to count the cost."

So, what does motivate Steinberg to develop personal relationships with his characters and then to exploit these relationships in order to tell a story? Perhaps his work is a good example of when a commitment to topic trumps a commitment to individual characters. The fear and reluctance surrounding HIV testing must be addressed; Steinberg uses Sizwe to serve this goal. Why will Sizwe not be tested, even though he has seen that testing leads to treatment and treatment works? Why will so many South Africans not be tested? This is an important subject to address and as Lehman (2010:33) points out the

relationship between Steinberg and Sizwe and the terms of this relationship were crucial to the book. The subject couldn't be addressed without Sizwe, without Steinberg's relationship with Sizwe. At the same time, it does put Steinberg in a position of power over Sizwe, and Steinberg (2010:36) acknowledges that the relationship between them is unequal, "I remain in control. I'm pulling the levers; I'm putting together the product. In the end, I'm more concerned for my privacy than his, if I'm honest."

Behar (2003:15-16) helpfully notes that investigative journalism (such as Steinberg's) is often a form of ethnographic writing, which in the past was both colonial and patronising, but need not be. She promotes ethnographic writing as a means of spreading cultural understanding: "in order for ethnography to survive, we must learn to produce ethnographic work that is more accessible than it has been in the past, and work that is also artistically satisfying" (2003:34). However, she suggests that intent is key, promoting, "reflexive musings of broken-hearted ethnographers", rather than the "detached voice of authority of the past" (2003:37). And she argues for a clear commitment to the subjects of the writing and the readers of the writing, noting that the readers ultimately accept the work on trust as it is based on the unique and often private interactions between the ethnographer and the subjects; thus the readers hope the ethnographer was "listening well" (2003:39).

In *Writing True: The Art and craft of creative non-fiction* (2006) Sondra Perl and Mimi Schwartz are less apologetic about the raw involvement of writer and subject. Schwartz and Perl (2006: 64) argue that this is precisely what creative non-fiction entails. Fiction writers tell their readers, 'This is not me', and journalists tell their readers, 'This is not about me', but creative non-fiction writers do neither: "Creative non-fiction writers take full responsibility for the I" (2006:64). It is this "I" that Scott (2018) argues makes South African creative non-fiction so readable. Referring to the literary journalism of Bloom, Malan and Krog she argues that they, "present narratives from which it is very difficult for the reader to escape. Their use of the first-person perspective hooks the reader into the narrative, and makes possible an emotional involvement on the part of the reader" (2018:38). In one sense these journalists are exploiting relationships in order to engage the reader, in order to sell the story. But Scott (2018:38) argues that this first-person involvement allows the reader to engage with the text, and this engagement serves the reader, helping her to process issues and explore possibilities, in the instance of these journalists, white identity and white belonging.

Perl and Schwartz (2006:69), whilst arguing for first person involvement and perspective in creative non-fiction, also highlight the need for this perspective to be honest. As an example, they quote Scott Russel Sanders who aims for his voice to be as close to who he is outside of the page as possible. This guides his writing ethics: Is he being true to what he really saw, to what he really thinks, to who he really is? Perl and Schwartz (2006:77-78) argue that this is the essence of creative non-fiction — it is democratic, because it allows everyone to tell real stories in real voices: "In creative non-fiction in particular, we are not making universal claims of truth, but rather presenting one person's truths about the non-fiction world."

The personal involvement between writer and subject is what makes creative non-fiction so appealing. It enables the reader to empathise with the subject because the writer has empathised with the subject first; it enables the reader to relate to the topic, because the writer has lived inside the topic. The reader understands more than they would from mere reportage. And yet this intimate involvement between writer and subject also raises ethical issues. Acknowledging that people are in their hands, Perl and Schwartz (2006:173) follow these guidelines as they write about family, friends and strangers: Write honestly, with respect; show a fully developed character, not a caricature; capture people with complexity and empathy. The temptation to be honest is countered with respect; the temptation to spill all is countered with empathy; working between these counterpoints, a true character should emerge from a writer's portrayal of their subject.

Whilst acknowledging that writing about non-family is often seen to be easier (names and details can be changed; identity can be kept private) Perl and Schwartz (2006:176-177) argue that in fact it is harder to write ethically about non-family because you don't know them as well and so it is harder to get them right. At the heart of creative non-fiction is the intent to get people right. This rests on time, compassion, immersion and relationship, which brings the writer full circle: The relationship is necessary to accurately represent the subject; in accurately representing the subject, the writer sells the relationship out.

#### 2.4 Tampering with the truth

Perl and Schwartz (2006:163-164) highlight three obligations when writing creative non-fiction — to the people we are writing about (the subjects), to the reader, and to the topic. Considering the first obligation is what will hopefully protect relationship, helping the writer to decide on a number of ethical issues. One interesting issue is composite character. Some writers join two or more real characters into one, often in order to protect privacy. Some critics (Perl and Schwartz 2006:171) argue that this is lying, and others argue that if two true characters are made into one true character then that is acceptable.

Nandorfy (2017:151) raises this ethical issue in her review of Sue Joseph's book, *Behind the text* (2016), which is a collection of interviews with creative non-fiction writers: "Upon discussing *Welcome to Your New Life*, about [Anna] Goldsworthy's pregnancy and birth of her son, Joseph discovers that Goldsworthy crafted composite characters and then explores the ethical question of not revealing this with a disclaimer. Joseph expresses concern but in a non-judgmental way, suggesting that 'flagging this technique with her readers before they read, would position her more strongly. Perhaps next time' (2016:231)." Nandorfy (Ibid) uses the example of Goldsworthy to highlight that writers are not always fully aware of the writing choices they have made and that dialogue with critics, theorists, other writers and readers would help workers to, "ponder different storytelling techniques and their ethical implications." Perl and Schwartz (2006:172) zone this topic in on the obligation to the reader arguing that readers don't seem to mind composite characters, if they have been flagged as such. Readers don't mind invention, but they don't want to be duped. For this reason, some writers warn their readers that they have formed composite characters or changed names or exaggerated details. Perl and Schwartz (2006:173) offer the following disclaimer as an example of a warning that could be used in a preface: "This story is true, as I remember it, but I've changed names and disguised identities to protect those who didn't ask to be in my story." The reader is assured that the details that were changed were quite specific and that the reason was good: to protect the unwitting.

In *Country of my skull* (1999), Krog invents a scene of adultery, and yet later flags the fact that this is invention, and so in this instance the reader is not deceived. What is troubling is Krog's general disclaimer at the end of the book: "I have told many lies in this book about the truth. I have exploited many lives and many texts — not least those of my mother and my family on the farm. I hope you will all understand" (1999:368). This disclaimer is broad and could leave the reader feeling that they are not sure what they can trust, which

essentially robs the reader of the appeal of creative non-fiction — that this all actually happened. There is also no clear ethic given here for this lying. Was it to protect privacy, or was it to make a good story?

In his book *The undeclared war between journalism and fiction*, Doug Underwood argues that scholars and writers, should approach hybrid forms of journalistic literature with grace and discernment, showing how previous generations of literary journalists proved their trustworthiness, not through mere factual accuracy, but through wisdom; they shaped the material they had according to higher principles, and this is what proved their trustworthiness to the reader:

[W]hen entering any discussion about the intriguing but precarious zone between factual and fictional writing, one looks for guideposts that we can trust a writer's insights—the humanity of a Defoe, the irony of a Twain, the social conscience of an Orwell, the integrity of a White, the demonstration of the principles in the works of those and other journalist-literary figures that truth in the deeper sense mattered to them more than anything else. (2013:198)

Underwood highlights here the concept of a truth beyond factual accuracy, and yet not a personal or subjective truth, but a truth that is insightful, that is trustworthy, built on standards of social conscience and integrity.

Perhaps this is what is missing from Krog's creative rearrangement of factual truth in *Country of my Skull*. It's not clear what principles Krog rests on, or whether these principles are trustworthy. In her interview with Brown, Krog argues that loyalty to art-form should guide writing ethics:

In my third volume of poetry was a poem about contemplating an abortion. Poet D. J. Opperman, one of the finest poets in Afrikaans, wrote a glowing report on the manuscript. Just before it was published I withdrew this particular poem thinking that it might one day harm my child. After the publication I was called into the office of Opperman. He held the new volume in his hands. His voice was as cold as ice: 'Where is the abortion poem?' I explained. He said: 'If this is the kind of loyalty you have towards poetry, please stop writing now!' And with clear disgust he skidded the volume over his desk. In retrospect I am glad that I didn't publish the poem

because my child would indeed have had problems with it, but Opperman made me aware that it was important to accept the ruthlessness I was trying so desperately to suppress, as part of the crucial make-up of a poet" (2007:37).

Here Krog chose to protect her family over loyalty to poetry, and yet she argues that being a poet demands ruthlessness. Her guiding principle is loyalty to the art-form; she acknowledges that art should govern choices on privacy. At another point Krog chooses to tell a story that happened to a very good friend of hers, and in the process loses the friendship. Explaining the decision, she says, "I thought I should ask her. Then I immediately knew that if she were to say no, I would go ahead anyway because I could not afford to lose the story. So I changed names, area, and character; I published and lost a friend. In my presence she has become quiet and guarded" (2007:37). Here Krog acted on her commitment to the art, over her commitment to the privacy of the friendship, and this act cost her personally.

Besides being true to the art form, Krog (2007:41) argues that she is also pursuing a deeper truth: "I would therefore say that I write fiction bordering fact but marketing it as non-fiction. I use the elements used in fictional narratives to tell what I want to tell. I use my imagination not to invent the story but to invent the way in which to tell the real story. My imagination is active in the narrative discourse and not in inventing reality." Krog argues that there is a real story behind the facts and that she uses fictional techniques to tell this story. In one sense this is what every creative non-fiction writer does: they tell true stories using fictional technique. But Krog seems to indicate that she has created fiction in order to tell the real story, whilst still calling it non-fiction. One danger in this approach is that Krog has been given the power to decide what the real story is and to present it as fact to her readers. In this sense the readers are manipulated to see reality as Krog does.

In her defense, Krog suggests that reality is not clear cut, neither is the line between real life and story:

I guess the final deurmekaar-scratching of everything for me was of course J M Coetzee who since Boyhood seems to make the point from the other side: how easy is it to detect the precise point that a novel slips from fiction into the autobiographical? Didn't he say that all fiction is autobiographical and all

autobiography is fiction? Would it therefore not be more ethical to admit: I have given up on reality? (2011:59)

But this assertion does not reassure readers, or give them a sense, as Underwood argues, that although details may have been changed they are still in good hands; they can still trust her insights as a writer. The claim to have given up on reality provides a blanket disclaimer that Krog no longer needs to defend the factual truth of her creative non-fiction: "Interviewers have called *Country of My Skull* anything from 'faction' to a 'novel', and I have never interfered with that because frankly I don't know anymore where the lines run" (2011:58).

This approach departs from traditional creative non-fiction. Thus Lee Gutkind (2012) argues that, "'Creative' doesn't mean inventing what didn't happen, reporting and describing what wasn't there. It doesn't mean that the writer has a license to lie. The cardinal rule is clear—and cannot be violated. This is the pledge the writer makes to the reader—the maxim we live by, the anchor of creative non-fiction: 'You can't make this stuff up!'"

Again, in their interview and discussion of creative non-fiction, Brown quotes Tom Wolfe's traditional definition of New Journalism:

The result is a form that is not merely like a novel. It consumes devices that happen to have originated with the novel and mixes them with every other device known to prose. And all the while, quite beyond matters of technique, it enjoys an advantage so obvious, so built-in, one almost forgets what a power it has: the simple fact that the reader knows all this actually happened. The disclaimers have been erased. The screen is gone. The writer is one step closer to the absolute involvement of the reader that Henry James and James Joyce dreamed of and never achieved. (2011:59)

The point Wolfe labours is that the power of creative non-fiction is that it reads like story, but it actually happened.

What Krog writes is different by her own admission. Thus, later in their interview, Brown (2011:64) says:



What has always seemed to me your most ambitious and definitive statement about your use of the genre of creative non-fiction is contained in *Country of My Skull*:

“Hey Antjie, but this is not quite what happened at the workshop” says Patrick.

“Yes, I know, it’s a new story that I constructed from all the other information I picked up over the months about people’s reactions and psychologists’ advice. I’m not reporting or keeping minutes. I’m telling. If I have to say every time that so-and-so said this, and then at another time so-and-so said that, it gets boring. I cut and paste the upper layer, in order to get the second layer told, which is actually the story I want to tell. I change some people’s names when I think they might be annoyed or might not understand the distortions.”

“But then you’re not busy with the truth!”

“I am busy with the truth . . . my truth. Of course, it’s quilted together from hundreds of stories that we’ve experienced or heard about in the past two years. Seen from my perspective, shaped by my state of mind at the time and now also by the audience I’m telling the story to. In every story there is hearsay, there is a grouping together of things that didn’t necessarily happen together, there are assumptions, there are exaggerations to bring home the enormities of situations, there is downplaying to confirm innocence. And all of this together makes up the country’s truth. So also the lies. And the stories that date from earlier times.” (1998: 170–71)

Here Brown points out that Krog claims to have created a new story, cut and pasted from a number of stories in order to tell the understory. This story is full of distortions, stories quilted together, composite stories, shaped by her psychology and perception of audience, based on hearsay and assumption, exaggeration and silence.

In this instance, Krog seems guided by the artistic ethic of telling a good story, and by the obligation ethic of representing the topic as she sees it, of getting it right; however it is likely that in doing this she has neglected obligation to the reader. As Wolfe points out, readers respond to true stories, well told, but this seems different to what Krog is advocating:

One of the directors of the famous Knopf publishing house said at a conference in Berlin last year that while the readership of the novel was fast declining, the readership for non-fiction and real life stories was rapidly growing. ‘Why?’ I asked

her afterwards. She said her guess was that a global postmodern world could no longer be expressed through the former genres and that she finds writers slowly working towards a completely new form—as yet without name. (2007:35)

The idea of literary journalism has long had a name, but Krog's mixture of journalism and invention is new; it is more of a collage of fiction and truth. There is no longer a claim that the story is true, and so this claim sets the literature free from the restraints of non-fiction, but then it is also set free from the genres' appeal: the simple fact that the reader knows all this actually happened.

Krog helpfully points out that as soon as a writer begins to tell a story, they shape truth to fit their viewpoint:

So the reason why one chooses to describe A and not B, mentions C and not D, is because one is busy picking out the pattern that one has discovered. But what does this do with the integrity of what is really happening? By leaving out D am I not distorting what is happening in order to make reality fit the particular pattern that I want to expose? What is the validity of my pattern then? (2011:64)

Whilst this is true, shaping a story is still different to inventing a story. In addition, out of obligation to the topic it is possible to consider other sides, other patterns, and opposing views, whilst still making the non-fiction creative and the journalism new.

In reading Krog, it seems that her greatest guiding ethic when writing creative non-fiction is the process of self-examination. If she has done this, she seems willing to proceed with the story. Thus she gives an example of self-examination to Brown:

Let me give an example of the kind of choices relating to integrity. In *A Change of Tongue* I describe the disastrous interview I had with Mandela at Qunu. Not long after that encounter I was invited with my whole family to have dinner with Mandela at his Cape Town house. So I, my husband and children then had dinner with a charming Mandela who told my children in detail what a brave and remarkable person I was. It was one of those immensely special moments of one's life. So when I write the book, the dinner could be the rectification of the way Mandela treated me at the interview. (See Chapter 11, *A Change of Tongue*.) But to write

about the dinner was not only very difficult, but for me it affected the integrity of my 'voice'. I thought long and hard about what to do. To cut the piece would affect Mandela's stature: because he wanted to 'make up' for the treatment. Now why won't I give him that? Do I sacrifice him so that I can keep my integrity? One can say, yes that is what I did. But I think I did something much more interesting than the usual Mandela story: I substituted the dinner with a frank discussion I had with somebody about him in which the exploration of him as a leader went much deeper than the other story allowed." (2011:65)

Krog's self-examination here relates to choices concerning material, and although she feels that her choice represented Mandela best, it is interesting to note that the crux of her deliberation centred on maintaining the integrity of her voice.

Again, in another forum, Krog argues that writers should have liberty in their writing as long as they self-examine:

A writer is free to write what she wants, but only constant self-inquiry and destabilisation about the how will bring some kind of integrity to the project. To write meaningfully about those whom you cannot, and, according to some pressure, may not, write about takes more than just putting a hat on your head. It requires the dedication of self-questioning and scrupulous searching." (2018:82)

Here Krog is addressing a similiar question to Nixon: how does a writer from one group, write about another group, and still get them right? Krog argues that it is through constant self-examination. This self-examination should allow the writer to hear stories from one cultural group and retell those stories such that the group would feel fairly represented. Again this concern touches on the appeal and the challenge of creative non-fiction. The personal involvement of the writer clouds the objective truth of the story, and yet this involvement is what makes the story appealing.

Krog offers self-enquiry and destabilisation, self-questioning and scrupulous searching as the protection against getting the story wrong. This is a helpful corrective as writers write with their full armour of prejudices intact, and only constant questioning of themselves and their topic would expose these prejudices and allow the real story to be told. And yet offering self-examination as the authority by which stories can be told opens up the same

concern: just because the writer has searched and self-examined doesn't mean she has stuck to her mandate in creative non-fiction — to tell true stories. Again Krog seems to depart from the traditional lines of creative non-fiction where the constraints of fact objectify the genre; she appears to advocate a more subjective approach. The final guiding principles for Krog are based on personal examination: has she been true to her art form, has she told the truth as she sees it, has she been true to her voice?

## 2.5 Flagging the genre and sub-genre

Much of the controversy surrounding the ethics of creative non-fiction grows from a lack of recognition of the genre. Perl and Schwartz (2006:67) claim that, "Creative non-fiction is less about providing answers and more about struggling with questions." If readers accept this then they will be less likely to expect a punctiliously factual report. For this reason, Perl and Schwartz argue that writers can record conversations that they obviously are unable to recall verbatim. Writers don't need the exact words because, "As writers of creative non-fiction our aim is to capture the essence of what transpired, the felt truth of what was said and heard" (2006:73). Here Perl and Schwartz quote Gay Talese, one of the journalists who spearheaded the New Journalism movement: "More important than what people say is what they think" (ibid.). This approach is often termed emotional truth versus factual truth (Perl and Schwartz 2006:166). The obvious concern here, as noted with Krog, is that the journalist is offering her version of what the subject thinks, rather than letting the reader decide from a verbatim quote.

Some theorists argue that emotional truth and factual truth gain importance according to the sub-genre of creative non-fiction. For example in memoir, writers can't claim to remember the exact words but they can, "claim to offer the truthfulness of the relationships as they remember them" (Perl and Schwartz 2006:74). In much personal writing (memoirs, essays, life-writing) there is an assumption on the part of the reader that writers are relying on a mix of imagination and memory: "Memoirists and personal essayists often recreate the past with half-remembered detail" (Perl and Schwartz 2006:74).

Brenda Miller (2009:139) argues that the lyric essay form, as a sub-genre, allows for even more artistic license within creative non-fiction: "The lyric essay, as a form, signals your reader that you are creating an artefact of your experience and shaping it in some way.

Your aim, your intention, is not to transcribe your experience in a factual manner." Thus, in her essay collections, Miller collapses time or exaggerates for humour, knowing that these creative embellishments are allowed for in the lyric essay form, the audience expects them; whereas they don't expect this in a piece of investigative journalism, even if it is creatively written.

In defending some of the embellishments in her own lyric essays, Miller (2009: 144,145) highlights two helpful concepts: story truth and happening truth. Story truth refers to the meaning of the story, and it acknowledges that the story may have more truth, or be pointing to more truth, than just recording what actually happened. Happening truth is defined as the actual events that occurred in the story, particularly events that need to be true in order for the story to have actually occurred, and in order for it to have any story truth. To illustrate, Miller (2009:144) uses her essay *How to meditate*. In this essay, Miller collapses time, forming a number of meditation retreats into one, and she argues that this recreation does not affect the truth of her story or her connection with the reader. No-one feels betrayed, in short because the events that she altered were not part of the happening truth that created the story truth. This, she points out, was not the case with James Frey's *A million little pieces*: "with the James Frey experience, people felt they were getting some kind of help with their own problems, and when they found out that his problems were not what they appeared to be on the page, they felt betrayed, because they felt like they had been given a gift that was now tainted" (2009:145). James Frey altered happening truth, which ultimately robbed his book of story truth.

Miller points out that within an essay collection there is an even greater opportunity to shape story truth. Not only are the essays crafted, but so is the compilation: "you can construct a whole different story based on what you leave in, what you leave out, what order you put the pieces in" (2009:144). The power to shape truth lies in the writer's hands and is inherent in the lyric essay form. This power gives responsibility to both the writer of the essay and the reader. Commenting on her own collection (*Season of the body*), Miller (2009:144) acknowledges tampering with factual truth, but hopes that obligation to the reader and to the story restrains her: "Well, I am a liar, and I think we all are liars. A lot of the work in *Season of the body* is embellishment — it's fantasy, it's imagination, it's creating artefact out of experience and shaping it for that purpose — and I hope in most cases it's not betraying the reader or sacrificing the truth." However, Miller goes onto place responsibility on the reader as they engage with the sub-genre of the personal essay. She

acknowledges that if the writer calls their piece non-fiction then there must be a lot of non-fiction in it, but this calls for, "a sophisticated enough reader to know when to suspend your belief about some of the things that are happening" (2009:146). Essays often rely on humour, which often relies on exaggeration; or they rely on poignancy, which often relies on embellishment, or juxtaposing one action or word with another, which may not have been juxtaposed in real life. These adjustments create artefact out of experience; they create effect out of life; they are inherent in the essay form and the discerning reader will acknowledge this.

Perl and Schwartz use an essay by Patricia Hampl (*Memory and Imagination*) to address this issue of ethical creativity based on sub-genre. Hampl argues that the sub-genre of memoir excuses itself from being fact-checked: "Memoir is a peculiarly open form, inviting broken and incomplete images, half-recollected fragments, all the mass and mess of detail. It offers to shape this confusion — and in shaping, of course, it necessarily creates a work of art, not a legal document" (Perl and Schwartz 2006:335). Hampl begins her essay by recording her memory of her first piano lesson. She then examines this memory and shows what parts of her record were invented; and then she asks herself why she invented certain details or why she remembered certain details that were not true, and she argues that in this examination she usually discovers the real meaning behind the memory, which is more important to her than the factual accuracy of the memory. Hampl uses this example to point out that memory is unreliable, and so inherent to the sub-genre of memoir is the assumption that the writer has been guided by broken details; however it is still the responsibility of the memoir writer to try and understand the story truth that these broken details point to (Perl and Schwartz 2006:335).

Hampl describes memoir as: "the intersection of narration and reflection, of story-telling and essay-writing" (Perl and Schwartz 2006:335). This definition flags the importance of sub-genre. Readers of the lyric essay or memoir expect self-reflection; they expect a personal and subjective point of view. The essay and memoir forms, by their nature, explain that what the reader is about to receive is not just a true story, but a true story full of bias and personal reflection; a story that will generally argue a point of view decided on, less by the facts, and more by the writer's thesis. This however is not the assumption in literary journalism. The reader still expects the writer to record truth, truth that can allow the reader to decide; the reader still expects to get an unbiased story, even if that story is

creatively told. Thus, out of obligation to the reader, the ethical practices that govern different sub-genres need to be upheld.<sup>5</sup>

Commenting on creative non-fiction in South Africa, Twidle (2012:7) argues that different genres rely on different contracts between reader and writer: "Instead of hinging on the tired issue of fact or fiction, a genre-based approach allows one to probe the various types of "reality effect" established by different written modes, the various kinds of contract that they posit between text and reader." Readers expect varying mixes of fact and fiction depending on the genre (fiction, non-fiction, creative non-fiction); but also depending on the creative non-fiction sub-genre (lyric essay or immersion journalism, for example).

Twidle points out that many writers or theorists are dismissive of distinctions in genres, because all fact contains fiction, and all fiction contains fact:

Writing in mind of the body of twentieth-century literary theory which shows up the tacit fictiveness, narrativity and intertextuality inherent in all kinds of discourse, there is of course the temptation to dissolve and blur the fiction/non-fiction divide in all kinds of ways, or even to regard it as hopelessly obsolete. (2012:7)

However this ignores the obligation to the reader. Depending on the genre and the sub-genre there is an implicit contract between writer and reader; and so perhaps one of the ways in which writers and publishers can uphold this ethic is through careful flagging of the genre, or sub-genre, of the published text.

## 2.6 Intimate honesty

The ethical issue of honesty, faced often by memoirists and personal essayists, relates to privacy, but with a slight nuance. This honesty often hinges on writing about intimate relationships, and the question is always, 'When have I confessed too much?' In an introduction to his collection of personal essays, Phillip Lopate (2003: ix) argues that most memoirs don't go far enough in their confessions: "... they myopically fudge the details, the

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<sup>5</sup> This is why I felt unsatisfied reading *Country of my skull*. I read it in the vein of the previous South African literary journalism I had read (by Steinberg and Malan) expecting a true story, creatively told, with a dose of personal reflection. But what I found was a mix of reporting, fiction, and intense self-reflection. Is it possible the publishers could have warned me better?

close nitty gritty of self-observation." This is perhaps less of an issue when the confession is about the writer, and not about his subjects, but Lopate (ibid.) argues for honesty in all forms of writing: "Honesty has been, for me, the one lodestar to which I never stop aspiring in print." As a writer, Lopate is noticeably honest about his thinking. For example, in the collection that follows Lopate (2003:23) shares how his dad beat his mom one night to the point in which it seemed to solve some of the underlying tensions in their family. It is almost as though Lopate is questioning whether the beating worked. As a writer he examines his thought life with unusual transparency.

The danger, however, in this sort of honest confession is firstly that it can simply become self-indulgent. Thus Dillard (1987:68) argues that, "You have to take pains in a memoir not to hang on the reader's arm like a drunk and say, 'And then I did this and it was so interesting.'" In discussing her memoir, *American Childhood*, Dillard (1987:67) makes the point that the memoir is not about the writer. The writer can be the subject of the verb without becoming the object of the verb: I discuss me, I analyse me. By this Dillard means that the memoirist is the subject, she is the author, and yet a good memoirist is not self-indulgent; she learns to tell the stories from her life that would engage readers and that would educate readers about more than just her life. Every memoir has a bigger issue it points to, larger than just one life. Dillard's memoir tells the story of her childhood and yet it also reveals the lives and attitudes of the rich Presbyterian businessmen in Pennsylvania. The personal essays of David Sedaris exemplify this approach. On one level his humorous essays are about growing up in North Carolina; on another level they are a bid at helping readers understand what it was like to grow up gay in a conservative town. They are never self-indulgent, they are always moving, and they are always using his life to tell a story that goes beyond his life.

The second danger is more of an ethical privacy issue and relates to how much you can share about intimate relationships, and your thoughts on those relationships. Whilst aspiring to honesty Dillard (1987:69) argues that writing is not the platform for addressing relationship fractures: "Writing in the first person can trap the writer into airing grievances. When I taught writing I spent a lot of time trying to convince young writers that while literature is an art, it is not a martial art." In writing her memoir, Dillard (ibid.) gave her text to her sisters and parents to read with the promise that she would take out anything that was hurtful to them. In defense of this practice and approach, Dillard (1987:70) said: "I



don't believe in a writer kicking around people who don't have access to a printing press. They can't defend themselves."

Whilst there is nothing in *American Childhood* (1989) that seems it would offend its subjects, Sedaris often records embarrassing and intimate details of his family's and friends' lives, and yet he manages to take the same approach as Dillard (allowing his family to proof-read before publishing). Thus, in an interview on *The Guardian*, Decca Aitkenhead (2009) records, "with his family, he [Sedaris] always shows them what he has written before making it public — though they have never, he says, wanted to exercise their right of veto."

With friends and acquaintances, Sedaris does not claim to allow them to proof-read, and yet he offers some guidance on how he decides what details to include. For example, in a humorous piece about his eccentric neighbour Helen, he claims to have left much detail out, "because there were certain things the reader would not have forgiven her for" (Aitkenhead 2009). This is an interesting point, because although these details would have given a more accurate sketch of Helen, they would also have turned the public against her, and Sedaris feels this is not his place: to reveal intimate details, not necessary to the story, that would have harmed his subject's reputation.

Later in the interview, Sedaris expresses regret at having left out details (in a different essay) that then misrepresented his subject:

Only once, he [Sedaris] says, has he regretted writing something because it hurt someone. It was a story that appeared in *Esquire*, when he first moved to Paris, about his French teacher, and it never occurred to him she would read it.

'Everything I'd written in the article was true, but I didn't mention that we really liked her. Yes, she threw chalk at her pupils, yes she stabbed a girl in the eye with a pencil and told her to wake up or go back to Korea - but she also did some really good things. Anyway, I left all that out, and I left it out because I was being lazy; it was too hard'. (Aitkenhead 2009)

Sedaris uses this experience as an ethic to guide his writing now. He argues that by including the positive traits of his teacher he could have avoided hurting her and delivered as humorous an essay: "It could have been a richer story. So I hurt someone by being

lazy, and I learned a lot from that. It happened 10 years ago and I think about it pretty much every time I sit down to write" (Aitkenhead 2009). The issue, then, is some personal details included would harm the subject, some excluded would misrepresent the subject, and the aim, in Sedaris's approach, is to be fair.

In his article, *A very strange relationship: Life writing, overwriting and the scandal of biography in the Gordimer-Roberts affair*, Twidle (2018) highlights the almost opposite approach that Suresh Roberts took in writing Nadine Gordimer's biography. Gordimer opened up to Roberts, giving him access to her personal documents, and extended interviews, and she did so based on the agreement that she could vet the final draft of the biography. However, when she disapproved of the draft, because of a number of personal details that she wanted to protect and because Robert's tone towards Gordimer had turned critical, Roberts went ahead and published it anyway.

Some theorists argue that this disagreement between writer and subject could make for good biography. Thus, Twidle records:

The revoking of authorisation, wrote one reviewer, had in fact placed Roberts in a remarkable position. He had 'all the privileges of Gordimer's initial cooperation, but the constraints of her authorisation had been removed,' providing what 'seems the ideal basis for a genuinely interesting biography, deeply informed but capable of sustaining a certain distance from its subject. It was an ethics of reading<sup>6</sup> that Roberts would now have to negotiate, rather than the force of any contract (expressed or implied) with Gordimer or her publishers' (Dawes 25). (2018:103)

Thus Roberts had intimate knowledge of his subject, and now needed to use his own ethics to guide how he used this knowledge to portray Gordimer.

In the accusations that followed, specifically that Roberts had abused Gordimer's trust, Roberts used this argument in his defense. Twidle (2018:97) notes that, "Roberts suggested that his loyalty was to the work rather than the person: 'To celebrate such a

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<sup>6</sup> By 'ethics of reading' I understand Twidle to mean that Roberts had to now carefully examine the material he had on Gordimer and interpret it as accurately as possible in order to portray Gordimer as fully as possible. In other words, no longer restrained by Gordimer's authority, Roberts had only his own morals to guide him: Would he work hard to understand Gordimer from the information she had given him, or would he spin his own story?

classic writer as Gordimer, one must discomfit the writer's felt sense of self', (Roberts, "Gordimer's Authentic" 31)." In other words, Roberts could use the intimacy that Gordimer had given him in order to represent her in the way that the intimate material had suggested accurate to him, even if this was not how Gordimer thought the material should represent her. And in doing this, Roberts saw himself as in fact honouring Gordimer. Moreover, Twidle (2018:103) notes that he saw this as integral to the biographer's task: "Instead of seeking friendship, Roberts continues, 'worthwhile biography seeks intimacy without loyalty, proximity laced with dissent'."

Unlike Sedaris and Dillard, Roberts has little concern to protect relationship, and Twidle (2018:103) notes that Roberts's ethics of reading, a freedom given to him by Gordimer's de-authorisation, did not restrain him into an accurate representation of her but rather skewed him towards a punitive approach: "Yet what is unsettling and difficult to capture about *No Cold Kitchen* [Roberts's biography on Gordimer] is the way that this ethics of reading mutates or erodes over the course of its seven hundred pages. The dialectic between intimacy and dissent, initially taut and revealingly critical, becomes increasingly lopsided, moving from being just on the right side to squarely the wrong side of an interpretative zone where ambivalence shades into gratuitous polemic." Initially Roberts uses his intimate access to Gordimer to provide a balance to the simplistic portrayal of Gordimer as an untarnished literary heroine, but then he moves into a type of attack that Dillard would argue writing does not allow for. Whilst Dillard and Sedaris place loyalty to subject over loyalty to art-form or topic, Roberts chooses the latter.

However, whereas Dillard and Sedaris are often writing autobiographically, Roberts argues that the biographer must be able to write without a submissive loyalty to his subject. Twidle (2018:97) records that Roberts, "told the New York Times Book Review he felt Gordimer 'was treating me like a benefactor in a certain way, as though I was a product of patronage rather than a professional doing the work I wanted to do and doing it to the best of my abilities' (Donadio)." Roberts here argues that because Gordimer offered him her personal files, he is not now bound in a relationship of patronage to her. He needs to be allowed to make his own judgements as a professional biographer. Twidle (2018:97) notes that some commentators saw Roberts's approach as typical of a writer — gaining trust and then betraying — similar to Didion's assertion that a writer is always selling someone out; however other commentators argued that Roberts had approached Gordimer as a trickster, calculating how he could dupe her into confidence; in short, conning an older

woman. In response Roberts alludes to JM Coetzee's assertion (so long as the classic needs to be protected from attack, it can never prove itself a classic) arguing that his attack on Gordimer and her work, as representative of a classic body of South African literature, should be welcomed. Twidle (2018:97) notes, "Roberts argued that the most intensive forms of criticism should properly be seen as a kind of oblique tribute to the work." In this way, Roberts argued that he was not forsaking Gordimer, but, acting without her authority, he was able to authentically celebrate her work.

An enlightening point that Twidle (2018:97) notes is that Roberts has justified his behaviour by shifting the focus from Gordimer as a human to Gordimer as a collection of literature, "Gordimer comes to signify more a posthumous body of work rather than a living person." This shift for Roberts is what allowed him to use his intimacy with Gordimer as an attack on Gordimer. Roberts was honest about Gordimer, but he was only able to be honest because she allowed him to be intimate with her. Gordimer allowed Roberts to have intimate access to her personal life and he chose to be honest about her, in a way that Gordimer saw as unethical. Roberts treated her as a body of literature, rather than as a human.

## 2.7 Arranging material for effect

In the introduction to his *Resident Alien*, Rian Malan (2009:x) raises a further ethical issue pertinent to creative non-fiction: "The facts might be correct, but the truth they embody is always a lie to someone else. My truths strike some people as racist heresies. Nadine Gordimer's strike me as distortions calculated to appeal to gormless liberals on the far side of the planet." Here Malan is suggesting that writers can use the same facts, correct facts, but use them to weave different stories, telling different truths. The issue is how much should writers allow the facts to speak and tell their own story, if they are even able to, and how much should writers use the facts to tell the story the writers want to tell — to tell the story the writers see as truth? South Africa provides non-fiction writers with so many stories to tell, but also with the ethical dilemma of how to tell them. And Malan (2009:x) suggests that if you aim merely for an unbiased factual record, you come away with a story that is right, but of no interest to the reader: "The blessing of living here is that every day presents you with material whose richness beggars the imagination of those who live in

saner places. The curse is that you can never, ever get it quite right, and if you come close, the results are usually unpublishable."<sup>7</sup>

Every non-fiction writer decides how to arrange facts, and how to arrange story, for effect. And every non-fiction reader is at the mercy of the writer's choices. In Chapter 5 of *Ways of Staying*, Bloom (2009:97-130) records his experience with his editor, Branko, at the Polokwane ANC national conference of 2007. Bloom breaks his record to weave in the story of his editor's escape from Serbia. The story reveals Branko as thoughtful and brave, hard-working and politically radical. By the time the reader gets to Branko's response to the Polokwane conference, she wants to agree with him. She is less inclined to dismiss Branko's view: that South Africa will go the way of Serbia. Bloom has purposefully arranged material to evoke a response. This is a common technique for any good non-fiction writer, but it is also a manipulation of the reader. In his reflexive essay based on *Ways of Staying* (2009), Bloom explains that he repeatedly used this technique. Because he had a clear narrative, following a 2-year time-span, he felt able to detour without losing his direction: "I could treat any self-contained unit of text as an opportunity to temporarily leave the narrative and explore a thematic or symbolic concern of a particular moment." It is often these detours that make the text richer, but it is also often how Bloom is able to guide the reader's thoughts, without warning the reader of his aim: "What I was in fact doing, at first subconsciously and later with more intent and self-assurance, was attempting to 'open pathways for the reader'. My aim throughout the book was to let the interplay between the fragments serve as the primary sites of latent meaning. I would try, even before I was fully aware of my objective, to write each chunk of text between the asterisks as a self-contained piece; where those pieces met, where the asterisk divided the end of one fragment from the beginning of another, would be where the meaning would be located" (Bloom 2009). Bloom describes this technique as the, "art of hiding things so that they may be discovered."

As noted before, as soon as something is recorded it is no longer plain fact, and in addition, non-fiction is creative because it has aesthetic concern — concern for good form and good style; nonetheless, what should guide the writer's decisions as she shapes facts for style and effect? Bloom is guided by his desire to direct the readers' thoughts, and Malan by his desire to communicate his version of truth. Dillard argues that because

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<sup>7</sup> I have assumed that by unpublishable, Malan means that the story, having been recorded in a factual and politically neutral tone, will not engage the reader.

creative non-fiction is literary, it comes with its own set of guidelines on how to be written. These guidelines are, in short, that creative non-fiction writing must form a coherent work that serves an idea: "Non-fiction works may be literary in so far as the parts of their structures cohere internally, in so far as the things are in them for the sake of the work itself, and insofar as the work itself exists in the service of idea" (1987:73). In other words, non-fiction can't be creative if it hasn't been crafted, if the facts haven't been guided and trimmed to support a structure, which in turn supports an idea. For Dillard, this means that a lot of the work of creative non-fiction comes down to two essential decisions: what to put in and what to leave out (1987:55). Hence, information that does not cohere with the rest of the story can be omitted, facts that do not serve the work do not have to stay, and the whole record must serve an idea. In short, the moment a work becomes literary, there is a license for the author to arrange material for effect, and to leave out material that, although true and even perhaps insightful, doesn't serve the story. This literary structure of creative non-fiction is what makes the writing so appealing to the reader. The reader senses she is not just being offered a record of facts, but she is being drawn into a story, into the author's version of that story. The reader can agree or disagree, but it is better to have a reader who is angry than a reader who is bored.

### **Chapter Three: Three ethical frameworks.**

The reflections, discussed above, by writers and theorists of creative non-fiction, show, not only that writers face a wide and constant barrage of ethical decisions, but also that writers desire some sort of framework to help make these decisions. Twidle points to this desire in his journal article on literary non-fiction in South Africa (2012). In discussing the conflict of novel versus history Twidle (2012:13) shows there is a wide range of creative non-fiction that wants to be acknowledged: "when history has been demythologized and revealed as a text among other texts, there exists a whole spectrum of different narratives and writings competing for legitimacy and primacy." He then argues that to stick with the old image of, "a censorious schoolmistress reading the novel against the answer script of history," does damage to the actual ethical debate for creative non-fiction writers as it doesn't, "acknowledge or allow for a common enough desire to discern some kind of limit or check to literary invention" (2012:13). Writers know they need a framework to operate within, and they want, as Twidle (2012:14) says, "to derive the law of what can or cannot be said in any given mode of writing." And this is the case even more so in South Africa: "Particularly in a context where playful, magical realist elaborations like those of Mda or André Brink were for a long time almost the default setting for the world's new fiction, an urge arises to posit a boundary to the workings of the literary imagination, however difficult and contentious this may be" (2012:14).

In the previous chapter, an analysis of theorists and writers within the creative non-fiction genre revealed that individuals make varying stands on a wide range of ethical decisions. Perl and Schwartz (2006) mention three sets of principles that writers can and do use to guide their ethical decisions. The first guiding principle is often articulated as a writer's commitment to emotional truth over factual truth, or vice versa (2006:166). The second guiding principle examines the boundary between ethical clarity and artistic clarity (2006:166). The final principle guides ethical decisions in light of intent. Perl and Schwartz (2006:164) highlight that the creative non-fiction writer's intent must be to capture the world as it is, being faithful to the subject, the topic and the reader.

Perl and Schwartz do not explicitly outline these principles as three frameworks, and so it is my intention to do that here, as these frameworks cover the wide variety of ethical

issues so far discussed. I'd like to outline these frameworks, which are based on Perl and Schwartz's suggested principles, and then point out examples of how these frameworks have guided or informed the ethical decisions of the writers so far surveyed.

### 3.1 The framework of emotional truth versus factual truth.

The theory behind this framework is that the facts may not always reveal the truth. Simply recording the facts may not get at the true story or the true experience behind the story. This framework is often used to justify creative license or invention or rearrangement of facts. All of the creative changes and additions are filtered through this question: Is this helping me to get at the emotional truth, the real story? Some writers prize emotional truth over factual, and other writers prize the opposite. Didion is often used as an example of a writer who favoured emotional truth. In her essay, 'On keeping a notebook', she says, "I tell what some would call lies" (1990:134). As an example, Didion explains that she and her family often disagree about remembered detail: she insisting something happened, they insisting it didn't. Her comment in response to this highlights her commitment to emotional truth, "Very likely they [her family] are right for not only have I always had trouble distinguishing between what happened and what merely might have happened, but I remain unconvinced that the distinction, for my purposes, matters" (1990:134). And later she clarifies: "How it felt to me: that is getting closer to the truth about a notebook" (1990:134-135.) It's important to highlight that Didion is commenting on keeping a notebook and on discussions with family over her essays, and not on her journalism. Nonetheless she is an example of a writer who points out that facts are not as essential as what the facts reveal; that memories reveal more about the writer than they do about history. Wexler (2001:27) justifies this approach in her essay 'Implementing postmodernism in creative non-fiction': "Postmodernism shows us the impossibility of the existence of one true version of anything that matters." Rather Wexler (2001:26) argues that the basic principle of postmodernism is subjectivity and that this depends on your positionality — produced by factors such as your race, class, gender and education — which affects how you see the world. Thus, different versions of the same event can reveal as much about the witnesses, or about the writer, as they can about the facts.

Krog is another example of a writer who favours emotional truth over factual truth as evidenced by her disclaimer in *Country of my Skull*: "I have told many lies in this book



about the truth" (1999:368). This is not to say that facts don't matter or that she deals lightly with them, but that she is willing to form composite testimonies and insert fictional details into her non-fiction work in order to represent the emotional truth of South Africa's history. This same argument is put forward by Brenda Miller, as noted above, using the terminology of happening truth (facts) and story truth (emotion). And keeping the tension between the two helps Miller make decisions as she writes.

Essentially all creative non-fiction writers use this framework as they are all having to work with facts in order to produce a story. However, whilst Didion and Krog emphasise emotional truth, other writers feel more constrained by factual truth. Thus Gutkind (2005:xxx-xxxii) argues that creative non-fiction writers need to police themselves and he offers a number of rules they can use in order to do this, and these rules emphasise his commitment to factual truth. First, he argues that writers must write as true to their memory as possible, as accurate, as honest, and second, that writers must distinguish between recollected conversation and invented dialogue, avoiding invented speech and thought (ibid.). Concluding his article, Gutkind states that writers should hold to the basic rules of good citizenship and that one of these is to not invent incidents and characters (2005:xxxii). In fact, Gutkind sees the emotional truth of creative non-fiction as the subjective input of the writer, and not as the subjective rearrangement of fact. Thus in his book, *Creative non-fiction: how to live and write it*, Gutkind (1997:16) argues that all the facts that can be verified should be true, but that the writer's thoughts, and how she interprets conversations and confrontations are subjective, and that this subjectivity is an integral part of creative non-fiction. Whereas, "the idea of granting 'permission to lie' or fabricate for the sake of clarity is dangerous" (Gutkind 1997:120). Thus, although Gutkind is constrained by the same tension between emotional and factual truth as other writers, his leaning is, wherever possible, to the facts.

### 3.2 The framework of ethical clarity versus artistic clarity

In response to a question about who was policing the creative license of non-fiction writers, Gutkind (2005:xxxii) replied that the moral and ethical responsibility of writers is, "to write both for art's sake and for humanity's sake. In other words we police ourselves." This approach summarises the framework of ethical versus artistic clarity. Perl and Schwartz (2006:163) identify this framework as an area of contention for all creative non-fiction writers: "Creative non-fiction writers, with the intent to write good stories that are

true, must grapple with the boundary between ethical and artistic clarity. Too much reportage and we cross into scholarship or journalism. Too much imagination and we cross into fiction." The tension within this framework is how creative can writers be in service to their art form? How much creative license can they use in order to achieve a good story?

All creative non-fiction writers meddle with accuracy in service of their art; however they differ over how much they are willing to meddle. Gutkind (1997:120) notes that: "A liberty or license that creative non-fiction writers might take is to doctor or clean up quotations to make them more readable or understandable or to fit more smoothly into a longer narrative." And he argues that a minority of journalists refuse to do this (*ibid.*). Rearranging quotes, in service of the narrative or the art-form, is acceptable practice. Yet other acts of creative liberty, Gutkind feels need to be more restrained and so as one of his good practice rules he proposes that writers mustn't compress situations or characters unnecessarily, but be guided by good narrative principle or by concern for protection of subjects (2005: xxxi). Thus Gutkind allows for artistic clarity (a good narrative principle) to direct tampering with truth (compressing situations and character), yet his tone is hesitant. He regards recreated thought as a common overindulgence, highlights the difference between recreation and fabrication, and warns that literary license can lead to litigation (1997:120). In short, he suggests that ethical clarity should be able to be achieved without compromising artistic clarity, and at most he seems to hope for a few doctored quotations.

In contrast to this Gutkind uses the example of novelist Paul West, who, in writing creative non-fiction, admits to doctoring his own thoughts and actions and to even sometimes inventing a character. In West's memoir on his mom, he invented a friend for her as he felt this invention would better reveal his mother's character (Gutkind 2005:122). In this decision West is committed to the artistic principle of rich character, and this principle allows him to lie. Yet this principle also allows him to portray what he sees as truth: a full portrait of his mother.

A number of writers surveyed above used this framework of ethical versus artistic clarity. Lopate, in the preface to his collection of personal essays, admits that he sometimes adopts a different *I persona* to what his real character is in order to accentuate a point (2003:x). In other words, he is willing to adjust the truthfulness of who he is, on the page, in order to make the story richer, to provide more contrast or poignancy. Again, Roorbach

declares himself a writer who favours artistic clarity. His writing is guided by his commitment to drama. The desire for a good story governs his decision-making and helps him to make ethical decisions related to creative license.

However, as Roorbach points out, this framework doesn't just address creative license. For example, he is willing to use his immersion journalism to sell people out in the service of a good story. Krog chose to break the privacy of her friendship, by telling her friend's story, because it was a good story that had to be told, and in so doing Krog chose art over privacy. Steinberg chooses the same in his friendship with Sizwe, knowing that the immersion was necessary for the story, and that the story was his priority. A number of writers so value the artistic principle of commitment to voice that they use it to make ethical judgements. Perl and Schwartz (2006:77-78) argue that the subjective voice is essential to creative non-fiction and use Sanders as an example of an author who makes decisions based on his commitment to an honest voice. Krog too is concerned with not compromising the integrity of her voice as she makes decisions regarding her interview with Mandela (2011:65).

In *Why I write*, Orwell (1946:2) argues that he always operates within this framework, that he can't have truth without also having art:

"What I have most wanted to do throughout the past ten years is to make political writing into an art. My starting point is always a feeling of partisanship, a sense of injustice. When I sit down to write a book, I do not say to myself, 'I am going to produce a work of art'. I write it because there is some lie that I want to expose, some fact to which I want to draw attention, and my initial concern is to get a hearing. But I could not do the work of writing a book, or even a long magazine article, if it were not also an aesthetic experience."

Orwell explains that even when he is writing propaganda, he includes much that a politician would deem irrelevant, precisely because Orwell values style in prose. And he acknowledges that these twin goals of truth and art operate in tension and that this tension: "raises problems of construction and of language, and it raises in a new way the problem of truthfulness" (ibid.).

Orwell then uses his book about the Spanish civil war, *Homage to Catalonia*, as an example in which he chose truth over art. He describes this book as, "a political book, but in the main it is written with a certain detachment and regard for form. I did try very hard in it to tell the whole truth without violating my literary instincts." However, in a bid to defend a political group he felt were being falsely accused, Orwell also included a whole chapter full of newspaper quotations, and he acknowledges that this chapter weakened the form of the book:

"A critic whom I respect read me a lecture about it. 'Why did you put in all that stuff?' he said. 'You've turned what might have been a good book into journalism.' What he said was true, but I could not have done otherwise. I happened to know, what very few people in England had been allowed to know, that innocent men were being falsely accused. If I had not been angry about that I should never have written the book" (Orwell 1946:3).

Here Orwell reveals this framework in operation. He aims to uphold his literary instincts, his commitment to art, and yet out of an ethical concern to represent his topic accurately, he includes information that weakens his story. In this instance his ethical concerns direct his artistic concerns.

### 3.3 Obligation to reader, subject and topic

In their discussion on the ethical concerns related to creative non-fiction, Perl and Schwartz (2006:163-164) highlight three obligations — to the reader, to the people who are being written about (the subjects), and to the topic. An obligation to the reader would entail certain ethical commitments such as writing truthfully, but also an artistic commitment — writing to engage. An obligation to the subject raises issues such as protection of privacy, intimate honesty, or quoting without permission. An obligation to the topic means the writer is bound to capture the truth powerfully. This may mean the writer chooses to avoid accuracy because detail clutters and robs writing of power; or they may choose to form composite characters or invented dialogue to more accurately represent the topic. Each of these obligations is held in tension within this framework, and different writers at different times choose in favour of one obligation over the other.

As discussed above, Steinberg is an example of a writer who often chooses obligation to topic over obligation to the people he is writing about. His practice of immersion, such as with Sizwe in *Three letter plague*, helped Steinberg to address the topic of HIV and the fear of testing, even though it meant he had to develop an unequal friendship with Sizwe and then use this friendship for this end. Steinberg is not unaware that he is often building confidence in order to sell people out: "I wrote the first two books [*Midlands* and *The Number*] with great trepidation, with the expectation that I would get hammered for moral compromises, for exposing people to damage" (Lehman 2010:44). And yet his commitment to the topic allows him to proceed.

Again, Dillard and Sedaris are examples of writers who choose to protect the people they write about, who choose loyalty to people over loyalty to topic. Whereas the Roberts-Gordimer affair showed Roberts as a writer who chose obligation to topic as primary. In *Inventing the truth*, Zinsser (1987) uses five memoir writers to repeatedly make the point that all writing must appeal to the reader. He suggests that obligation to the reader surpasses obligation to the facts: "Fidelity to the facts is no free pass to the reader's attention" (1987:24-25).

Gutkind (2005:xxxii) argues that creative non-fiction writers need to police themselves using the basic rules of good citizenship, and that two of these rules are to not harm the innocent and to think through how the story will affect the reader. Not harming the innocent is an obligation to the subjects: they have often not asked to be written about and so need to be represented fairly. In Gutkind's words, "Treat others with courtesy and respect" (2005:xxx). In light of this, Gutkind proposes showing the subjects what the writer has written before publishing, and suggests that this interaction may lead the writer into deeper truths and insights into their subject. Gutkind's second rule raises an interesting consideration. He suggests that writing should not just be entertaining to the reader, but it should also be good for the reader; or at the very least the writer needs to have considered what the story will do to the reader: inspire or enlighten or depress.

## Chapter four: Reflective analysis of creative component

I realise these three frameworks are linked and can overlap (commitment to emotional truth could also be seen as commitment to topic, commitment to artistic clarity is also a commitment to the reader), however, I have found it helpful to keep them separate, as they emphasise different aspects of the ethical choices I have had to make in writing, *They won't come for us here*.

It was interesting to note, in surveying writers, that a number of creative non-fiction writers were able to admit that their ethics were not always clear or that they made ethical choices that they did not always feel at ease with, notably Steinberg and Roorbach. And other writers were defensive of their ethical choices, unwilling to admit possible mistakes, for example Krog and Roberts. This was helpful to acknowledge, before analysing my own work. The temptation is to defend yourself, but as Orwell (1946:5) reminds in *Why I write*, "I see that I have made it appear as though my motives in writing were wholly public-spirited. I don't want to leave that as the final impression. All writers are vain, selfish, and lazy, and at the very bottom of their motives there lies a mystery." Orwell goes on to argue that the root of writing may just be attention-seeking, but that as writers struggle against this, and as they aim to follow the motives they see as worthy, they tend to produce good writing. Thus the process of analysing your work and motives, your ethical decisions, should improve the work you have created.

For each piece of writing I produced I used the same creative process. I recorded my, or other people's, observations, comments and stories in a diary. I then added these records to a running document, in no particular order. I included as much detail as possible, and any other thoughts or comments or facts that I had come across that I thought might be linked to a particular observation or that might give insight to a particular story. I then read through the document trying to identify which parts were key to the story and which were extraneous. I then arranged the material in a shape that fits the genre — usually a lyric essay or a poem.

The two main exceptions to this process were *Sometimes there is a chasm* and *On Prejudice*. For these essays I decided the topic or thesis beforehand and I then read

through my running document and looked for stories or ideas that supported this thesis. After this I added in memories from my upbringing that I thought would support my thesis. These essays were almost more deliberately shaped by my subjective point of view, than some of the smaller stories, say of characters such as Werner or Joyce, characters that I tried to allow to tell their own story. I still crafted their characters, arranged their stories for effect, hoped their lives would point beyond their lives to a bigger story, but I wasn't using them to make a predetermined argument. These two longer essays were also different in that against my natural inclination I allowed them to meander. My normal approach is to write tight stories, that follow a clear narrative arc, without any diversions. However, with these two essays, I realised I was dealing with and exposing my own prejudice and I didn't want to try and gloss over this or pretend that I completely understood it or was comfortable with it, by forming it into a neat essay: an essay that by its form would suggest that I think the issue is simple.

For all of my writing I tried to then leave the material for at least a week, before looking at it again. At this point I would ask myself whether the piece was interesting enough to pursue. And if it was, then, before any final editing, I tried to analyse it using the following three frameworks. I would then ask others to read my pieces before submitting to journals. Often just this process of handing my piece to someone else would allow me to see my writing through a reader's eyes. I then used the feedback I received to hone the pieces, usually for clarity. Here the frameworks were helpful again in deciding which feedback to use and which not to

My aim in producing this collection was to write creative non-fiction that was artistic, that told true stories, through my subjective lens, and that pointed to the story beyond the story: that South Africa is a country to love and to fear, a country of hope and despair, a country of prejudice and yet a country that is still full of warm humanity. These frameworks allowed me to analyse and edit my work in light of this overall aim precisely because they allow for a commitment to art, to subjective truth, to people and story, and not just to fact.

In the following section I would like to highlight how I used the above three frameworks to analyse and to evaluate my own decision-making and motives whilst writing the essays and poems in *They won't come for us here*.

#### 4.1 Emotional truth versus factual truth

Understanding this framework initially worked to my disadvantage. I convinced myself that I didn't need to worry about the factual truth of my writing because my concern was emotional truth. I was telling the story as I saw it, and so facts and details weren't crucial. However, as I read Hemley, addressing the legal concerns of both fiction and non-fiction, I was challenged by the ethics behind the laws that Hemley discussed. Had I been drawn to creative non-fiction out of laziness? I don't want to make up stories, so I use true stories. But I don't want to research details, or verify facts, or think hard about what someone actually said or did or wore. So I write creatively, assuming this is a license to fudge facts. Creative non-fiction appeals because I neither have to defend it as perfectly true, or perfectly not true.

Identifying this laziness was helpful. I began to reflect on the inaccuracies in my life-writing from the inner-city — falsities that were unnecessary, inserted perhaps from laziness, and perhaps from other motives. For example, in the first draft of an essay that I finally changed into a poem, I had the following section:

*I used to roam these city lanes as a child, browsing the book shops, buying cheap art supplies, peering in at the watchmaker tinkering his watches. I remember one busy Saturday, a week before Christmas, my parents gave me ten Rand and left me in town to buy presents. Amongst the crowds that day I noticed one black man and, patting the money in my pocket, I thought, I must make sure he doesn't steal it. Today, all the people in Fraser Lane are black.*

I recorded this incident in this way because I wanted to make the point that the city had moved from white to black and that when it was white, we were suspicious of blacks. I used the record of this one black man in the crowd, to serve my point, and in so doing I lied. There was only one black man in the crowd that day, but I didn't think anything of him. He did, however, try to steal my ten Rand. This fact didn't serve the point I wanted to make and so I left it out, and I recreated thought that wasn't true. Also I left out this incident because I am often writing essays pitched at an American audience and I was concerned that with this poem, Americans would dismiss me as a white South African racist. Once I had identified these motives, I tried to rewrite this description and this incident with an emphasis on factual truth. I recorded this in the poem, *When I was ten*:



*One Saturday,  
a week before Christmas,  
my parents gave me ten Rand  
and left me in town.  
Queuing at the hotdog stand  
I felt  
a hand in my pocket  
and as I turned  
one black man in the all-white-crowd said sorry,  
and walked away.*

*Now I am forty,  
these lanes are full of hair salons,  
internet cafes, places to eat,  
tailors with peach plastic models  
modeling dresses  
which are not cheap,  
and I am the one white man.*

From this experience, I learned to rather record factual truth and then see what emotional truth it points to, instead of first deciding what truth I wanted to communicate, and then twisting facts to fit. The factual truth I have recorded in this poem still communicates emotional truth: I have become the minority, I have become the suspected. Perhaps it even communicates that there is reason to suspect me, as there was reason for me to suspect that black man thirty years ago; and there is reason for me to apologise, as there was reason for him to.

This framework also helped me to acknowledge that I often avoid emotional truth in my essays, not wishing to identify my actual thought or feelings, for fear they will ruin my reputation. When I first began writing this collection I was trying to publish each poem or essay as I wrote it and so I found that I would mould each essay to suit the target audience of the publication I was pitching. If the publication liked optimism then I could give them that, and if they liked drama or tragedy then I could give them that too. One of the

challenges in writing is that you want to earn money and you want to get recognition and sometimes these desires get in the way of being honest to what you really think; and then sometimes they encourage you to be shockingly honest because that's what sells, but it may not be honest to the story that needs to be told. I felt I needed an ethic to guide me beyond just what sells and so I found the emphasis on discovering the emotional truth of a story to be crucial to my decision-making as I wrote. I had to determine the emotional truth inherent in the story.

In this regard, I found Lopate's commendation of honesty particularly helpful, and so in analysing my essays I tried to identify if there were instances in which I had recorded factual truth, but not gotten to the emotional truth. I found an obvious example in my planning of *Sometimes there is a chasm*. This essay is a reflection on the gulf between English South African culture and Zulu culture. I wanted to be admired for my heroism in living in the inner-city, and so the structure of many of my essays was ending on an upbeat, multicultural note. But this wasn't honest. I had to acknowledge that living in the inner-city is hard, often because of cultural differences, and that I sometimes think it is not sustainable. I also had to acknowledge that my main struggle, living in the city centre, is my fear of black men. So I chose to end *Sometimes there is a chasm* with this:

*Some of what Zakes wrote confirmed my view of black men. He was unusual to be a virgin in his teens and his friends did what they could to help him, offering up their girlfriends if need be. I am amazed at how black men treat black women in the city. I have grown up being harassed by men my whole life. White men behind fences, white men in cars, calling me over to see. Indian men driving past calling, "Hey baby." Even at forty, walking in the suburbs to the grocery store, men would harass me; and then all that stopped when I moved into the city. Black men respect age. But if you are young, especially young and black, then it is extreme open season.*

*In a bid to finally cure Zakes of his virginity, his friends gang-raped a drunk village girl and then gave him the option of last turn. And he lay down on her, and told her to run.*

*Sometimes I want to run from here, from the gangs of black men that wander the streets with their leopardskin vests and beer breaths; and my two daughters blonde and fresh, looking like I looked at their age, when we lived in a nice white suburb, and fought apartheid from a distance.*

This ending is honest. Changing my planned ending does, however, raise the issue of whether this honesty is helpful for a broader audience to hear. Is this honesty constructive for reconciliation in South Africa? This I am unsure of and this question underlies the constant tension I face, not only in choosing endings, but even in the whole process of recording my inner-city life.

I found Nixon's comment, on the fact that most literary journalism in South Africa is offered by the white voice, particularly challenging and pertinent to this question of reconciliation. Is it possible that just the act of telling my story, honest to my perspective, might rob the people around me of their voice, and so frustrate reconciliation? Have I by telling my story, by making my comments, and my observations, joined the large group of white literary journalists who recreate and give voices and identities to black characters? By being one more white, writing about blacks; by offering my white voice and my white recreation of my lived experience in the City Centre, have I robbed black people of their voice and so frustrated any possible movement towards reconciliation?

When I moved into the City Centre my initial motivation and intention in writing was to give people a voice who did not have one. But as I progressed I found that I wanted to give myself a voice. I wanted to acknowledge that I thought I was able to live and think and act, free from race and class prejudice, but actually I am bound by it. I stereotype others; I create caricatures of them; and this prejudice of mine prevents me from getting to know and represent people as real characters.

Some of my prejudice is inherent to humans — we prefer people like us, they are so much easier. And sometimes my prejudice is what I was raised with — my family always spoke disparagingly of uneducated white people. But some of my prejudice is more subtle. I think because I was raised in a liberal home, a home that was committed to activism, I always saw needy or disadvantaged people as projects and not as friends. And so I think I wanted to help people in the city, and I wanted to write about them, and I wanted to have a happy picture of racial reconciliation with them. But I am not sure that I ever actually wanted to be friends. In some ways this distance helped me to write about people in the city, but in some ways this distance meant that I was always offering an outsider's perspective. As highlighted by Perl and Schwartz in the discussion above, it is easier to write about family because you actually do know them; it is harder to write about people that you don't know

intimately — the chances of getting them wrong are so much higher. I didn't get to know black men in the city; my chances of getting them wrong, of misrepresenting them, of portraying them without empathy, are so much higher. Also given my white background and my distance and my acknowledged fear of black men, it is questionable whether I am able to even have the intent to get them right. This intent is I think something that all writers of non-fiction agree to — we may not fairly represent all people, but we must intend to.

The question then remains: does my offering of a white voice on black people, fraught through with its prejudice and mixed intent, aid reconciliation? Does being honest, does offering an outsider's perspective, help whites and blacks to understand each other; does it further our reconciliation? Partly it might just upset blacks, make them question why they even bother with whites like me, who are afraid and wracked through with prejudice. But my hope is that it might also offer something else. I think that confessional writing, writing that acknowledges white prejudice without excusing it, writing that tries to explain why whites find other cultures so threatening or so difficult to relate to, might help blacks to relate with more empathy towards whites – not to condone their prejudice, but to help whites to relate, despite their prejudice. And obviously the same confessional writing from a black perspective would offer the same insight for whites. I also think this confessional writing might offer the honesty that makes creative non-fiction democratic. In my honesty I am offering a white perspective; I am not pretending to offer an objective perspective, neither am I putting words and thoughts and motives into black characters, pretending to offer a black voice. I am offering a white voice, a white version of a story, a version that owns up to my white subjective viewpoint. This gives a democratic voice to whites in South Africa who are afraid, who do have prejudice woven into their being; and it avoids the paternalism of trying to offer a black perspective from a white mouth.

I was forced to face the issue of honesty again in my first draft of *Once were white*. I had initially made the argument that the issue of black people littering was a non-issue. I argued that, just as blacks like clean clothes and clean cars, whites like clean streets. I argued that it was not a problem — we just have different values. But actually I don't believe that: I believe that South African blacks have a culture of litter that whites don't and I believe that this culture is harmful to other people. I also believe that the municipality does not have the expertise to deal systematically with the crisis, and that something does need to change for the good of all. I was encouraged to rewrite this essay, in an honest

way, by the reflections on sub-genre, particularly those raised by Hampl. As noted above, Hampl highlights that in a lyric essay the reader expects a subjective point of view. The reader doesn't expect to necessarily agree with the writer and indeed the writer may offend the reader, but the writer is doing a disservice to the sub-genre if she avoids subjectivity, if she avoids offering her own perspective, even if that perspective is not true. Blacks may not litter more than whites, blacks may be just as good at managing a municipality as whites, there may be no difference. But the truth is that I don't believe that and so I chose to be honest to this view and to end my essay in this way:

*I try tell them [whites] to give up on what they used to have, to embrace the fact that this is now an African city; with that comes some vibrant chaos, but a whole lot of life and culture too. I try tell them that the city used to be reserved for whites and all the money that didn't go on educating blacks went on cleaning the streets for whites. I try tell them that there are far fewer whites than blacks, and so an area that was built during apartheid to serve one seventh of the population is now serving seven sevenths.*

*But I don't always believe what I am saying, and sometimes I think the running of the city was given to people who don't know what they are doing, handed over before they had any understanding of how to maintain urban order. It's not that I want whites in charge again; I don't want that guilt again; I'd prefer a dictator like Paul Kagame — someone who can make the streets safe and clean, someone who can make them like they used to be.*

This ending is now honest, and I think offers a perspective that white South Africans hold that might be useful for black South Africans to understand: white South Africans long for an orderly system, and they associate disorder with black negligence. However, this honest ending does raise again the issue of reader discouragement. Am I just another complaining white, reminding and encouraging other white readers to despair over the state of South Africa? Am I ignoring the obligation to my black reader, particularly the obligation Gutkind raised that writing must be for the reader's good – does it do any good to point an accusing finger at my black reader, implicating him in the mess I see in the city? Will this piece win blacks over, further their understanding of whites, or acceptance of white culture?

This honest ending also raises the question of whether my observation is accurate. I have offered a subjective viewpoint, in line with the sub-genre, but now my readers need to ask,

as I now need to ask, is it objectively true? I have observed that in the city center black people litter and white people don't, but there are very few white people and lots of black people, so is this just a statistic? And I never did ask black people if the litter bothers them the way it bothers me because I never actually got to a friendship point with any black people in the city to ask these sorts of questions. The litter issue could be a poverty issue, and it could be a class issue or an education issue or simply a reflection of the despair that often plagued our City Centre – with refuse removal worker strikes and protests. But all of these issues I have left, I have not interrogated them, because I am operating on an assumption: blacks litter, blacks are wrong, blacks run the municipality, blacks don't know how to deal with this. So, I think the prejudice I offer in this essay might help black people gain understanding of whites. But it won't help white people gain understanding of the litter issue. I have not dug deep enough into the issue of litter to offer any new observations and I think both blacks and whites already know that it is an issue. So although I was able to be honest in this essay, I think I probably offered honesty without much further insight.

The pursuit of honesty, of aiming at the emotional truth within a story, was influential in the self-investigation I attempted whilst writing, *Sometimes there is a chasm*. In this essay, I took all the stories and snippets that I had compiled in my running document that seemed to fit broadly into the theme: What to make of black people? And, conscious of my whiteness, I tried to use these stories to analyse what I actually thought and felt about black people. One of the conclusions I came to, was that I was afraid of black men. I then had to decide if this emotional truth, this honest admission, was helpful to my reader. I decided that it might be helpful in that owning my fear of black men might help others to own their racially-based fears. Many of the suburban white women I interact with speak about black males with fear and suspicion – they seem so unknown and so threatening. But I think this type of racial fear permeates South African society. For example, I have heard black domestic workers communicate that they fear white bosses – they seem to lack understanding and empathy. And white friends who have attended soccer matches have spoken of the intimidation they have felt, simply because they are the minority; black friends at a rugby match have had a similar experience. Does it help then to get these fears out into the open? It helps me. I grew up terrified of rape. South Africa has a high rate of sexual assault, and I associate this with black men, and I am afraid. It helps me to acknowledge this because then I can begin to address it — to ask if my fears are founded and if my assumptions are true. My hope in this essay was that perhaps as I acknowledged my fears, I could be a model for other people to acknowledge their fears.

Again, in *Once were white* I hoped that acknowledging political prejudice might help address prejudice. And so, I wanted to voice the questions I was pretending not to have: Don't black people care about litter; why don't they sort it out? I wanted to raise the issue from two angles: firstly defending blacks, but ending sympathetic to whites. And I wanted this essay to prompt questions. Whites are longing for the days when it felt like South Africa was governed well — when there was no litter in the city, when there were no electric cuts, when your water bills were accurate, when you could go shopping in the City Centre at night and be safe. Blacks never experienced those days because they were kept separate from all the good parts of this South African experience through apartheid. Now blacks and whites want to share this experience, but it can't be recreated. The essay highlights this and then asks: how can we have the order that white people enjoyed under apartheid and share it around to everyone? Can white people be in charge again and govern for the good of black people this time? Is it possible that black people don't know how to govern the city? Should we have a dictator in charge to sort this mess out? As I asked these questions, I was aware of an extreme sense of guilt. How can I even be thinking these things or naming them — they are racist and simplistic and downright hurtful. Yet again the reason I chose to keep these questions honest to my inner questions, the reason I chose to keep these questions public was that I wondered if owning my prejudice could help others to dialogue about theirs. Is it possible that if we name these thoughts and if we ask these questions and if we bring our fears out into the open, and acknowledge them in a public space, then they might decrease — either through reasonable debate or just simply through being named.

This was also the reason I acknowledged prejudice towards Indians in the essay *On Prejudice*:

*I have a deep prejudice against Indian Christians. I knew this before, but moving out of a white suburb into a mixed-race inner-city, reminded me. My father once read a book on Indian ethics which explained that Indians have a set body of values, values that trump their religion, that they see as virtuous, and one of them is making money, at any cost. At least that's about how my father explained it to me; but this even is not exactly where my prejudice came from as it just reinforced what was already there: that Indians are cheap swindlers, weaving invisible cloth out of stolen gold, using Jesus to fool the emperor.*

Whilst avoiding emotional honesty that hangs on the reader's arm, as Dillard suggests, I think South African writing that acknowledges prejudice may aid reconciliation. The truth in South Africa is that whites live with a preconceived idea of what blacks and Indians and coloureds are like; and vice versa. Acknowledging these pre-conceived ideas, helps me to investigate them, and possibly to release them. The other possibility is that I realise that they are true and I accept them. Different cultural groups in South Africa have characteristics that support the common good of all South Africans. But is it possible that different cultural groups also have characteristics that work against South Africa's common good? And is it reasonable to point these distinctives out in my writing, to accept them as harmful, and in this way to encourage South Africans to know themselves better, to come closer to the reality and to the emotional truth of the country we live in?

When I first began recording our life in the City Centre my chief motive was to tell stories that had been overlooked. I wanted to observe and relate to the people of the city and make their stories known. I wanted to create a sense of empathy and to build a bridge between my readers and the people of the city. As I began to form my stories into essays or poems, however, I was troubled by how neatly I was trying to wrap things up; I wanted every ending to be positive and tidy; I was avoiding honesty. At this point my motivation in writing began to change. I wanted to tell people's stories but I also wanted to examine my own story. I wanted to acknowledge my prejudice, I wanted to examine it, and I wanted to offer it from a fresh perspective: I love a mix of cultures — this is why I moved into the city. And yet I also fear and distrust other cultures. I wanted to offer this truth and weave it into my writing because I felt this truth was fresh, a perspective that not many writer's own up to. Not many South Africans say: I live here because I want to serve people and tell their stories, but I am also aware that I am afraid and distrusting of the people I want to serve. I then found my motivation in writing began to include an attempt to offer a voice for another part of South Africa, mostly a white part, a group of people who love South Africa and fellow South Africans, but who hate to see its decline, find it hard not to blame blacks for its decline, and finally who hate to acknowledge that they even have these thoughts. It is easier to fall into a camp — racist or liberal. But what if you are both? Can I offer in my writing this perspective — that gives voice to myself and others, whilst also giving voice to the people and life of the city.

In short, as a writer I wanted to tell stories that were artistically pleasing, that represented my subjects with accuracy and compassion, but that also revealed my voice, my



perspective, my story truth. I wanted my memoir of essays and poems to point beyond the story of life in the inner-city to the bigger story of life in South Africa. I wanted my constant admission and self-examination to spur others onto admission and self-examination. I wanted to ask the question: Why, after 28 years, do we still not understand each other? And I think the answer from my life writing is: Because we are still living separate lives. As a rule, whites still don't move into black areas, into areas where they are outnumbered. And so when I, from one race and culture, chose to move into an area dominated by other races and cultures, I expected to write stories of reconciliation. But instead my stories are mostly of separation. We don't choose to live together, and when we do, it is hard to understand each other. This essentially is the emotional truth that underlies all of my essays and poems; the story truth that unites the range of experiences and observations within *They won't come for us here*.

#### 4.2 Artistic clarity versus ethical clarity

This second framework was helpful in writing a number of essays, for example: *One morning, not unlike any other*. The incident of assault recorded in this essay was observed by my husband and me. I didn't see everything of what I recorded myself as seeing — some of the details were from my husband, and some from my observation. I initially tried to write this piece accurately explaining what I had seen and what my husband had seen and the piece was clumsy and boring. It sounded like a newspaper report on an assault. I realised that for the artistic clarity of this essay, it needed to be recorded from one point of view. So I compiled my husband's facts and my facts and rewrote it as the observation of one person. I saw this as a choice in favour of artistic clarity, and yet not a false choice, not a choice that compromised the emotional or factual truth of the piece. The details happened (factual truth); I just didn't see all of them happen. The emotional truth remained the same: domestic violence happens in the city, and people don't see it.

Although, I could have analysed my decision-making in this essay using the framework of emotional truth versus factual truth I found it helpful to have this further category of an artistic ideal. I often am motivated to doctor quotes or details because of the desire for the rhythm of the writing to improve; essentially I am tempted to adjust truth in order to please my sense of style. This framework helps me to acknowledge that this is a legitimate concern, and yet needs to be kept in tension with other concerns such as capturing factual

and emotional truth. One of the unspoken contracts between readers of memoir and writers of memoir, discussed above, is that the writer can't remember all the details; she has to be able to supply details. Also that the writer is creating an artifact out of truth. I am not writing a summary of facts or a clinical report, and so there is an allowance here for me to structure and shape a piece so that it serves my sub-genre – a lyric essay. The form in which I write, a poem or a lyric essay, signals to my reader that I am shaping facts. I am creating an artistic experience for them to enjoy, and this comes with an objective: to mould and move facts around until they serve the form. How far I as a writer can go with this is contested, but the fact that I am doing it is signaled by my sub-genre.

I faced a similar decision in writing *How do you see yourself?* Initially, after John told Sabelo that he needed something to say in order to be a motivational speaker, I recorded Sabelo's response like this:

*Sabelo said that he had something to say, in fact he had three points. His first point, he explained in his worn out shoes, was that you must make the most of what you have. His second point was that you must be kind. And then he couldn't remember his third point. Rob said what about, Believe in yourself, and Sabelo thought that was a very good point, and so he said he would use it as his third.*

However, on reviewing this passage, the pacing felt wrong. The pace needed to slow down between Sabelo's answers, and make room for some further glimpse of Sabelo's character. So I added a description of Sabelo's hand signals, in between his three points, and I took out the reference to his worn out shoes. All beggars have worn out shoes, this detail does not make Sabelo's character any clearer, but not all beggars speak enthusiastically, using their hands as Sabelo does. So I rewrote the piece to read:

*Sabelo said that he had something to say, in fact he had three points. His first point, he explained, as his hands transformed themselves from friendly to preachy, was you must make the most of what you have. His second point — he held up two fingers — was you must be kind. And then ... he couldn't remember his third point. John said, What about: Believe in yourself. Sabelo thought that a very good point, and said that he would use it.*

I felt these additions were needed artistically. They slowed down the conversation so that the irony of what Sabelo was saying could be felt. They also revealed Sabelo's personality

to the reader — he was more of an enthusiastic life coach type than a washed out beggar. And yet, when John relayed this story to Sam, and Sam to me, I can't remember if either of them mentioned hand signals. But the addition seemed consistent with who Sabelo was and so I didn't feel that this artistic license robbed this piece of its story truth or emotional truth.

Moreover, I did flag to the reader that this scene was a possible recreation by noting that the story had been relayed via Sam via John. This route, a route similar to memory, necessitates some imaginative retelling. This again is part of the contract between reader and writer — that I will supply detail — as long as that detail still aims to capture Sabelo fully, as a rich character and not a caricature.

I used this same principle in *The language of love*. In my first few drafts, the moments after the climax, in which Joyce finally acknowledges Sam's ignorance, dissipated into nothing. I needed to slow the conclusion down, and so I added in some expressions and actions and rewrote the ending to read:

*And so when I finally managed to stop her, and to show her Sam's blank face, she said, "Haibo, Pasta? Greetings, Pasta? That's all?"*

*Then she clicked her tongue, shook her head at the tragedy, and, as she made her way down the passage, I heard her saying, "Ay, ay, ay."*

*The bicycle could wait for another day.*

I remember Joyce being upset, and these were her actual words, but at the time I didn't record Joyce's facial or verbal expressions, and so I had to recreate these. I had to rely on memory and imagination in order to more accurately capture the real story of Joyce. Here I felt this decision was legitimate as the recreation was helping me to get closer to the emotional truth of the piece. Without imagination I would miss the crucial point; I would not be able to emphasise the crux, which was a black maid's disappointment in just another white man who hadn't bothered to learn her language.

I made a similar decision in writing *We don't do that in Africa*. I saw the baby, but I didn't see the undertakers or their interaction with the crowd that gathered, or the crowd's interaction. All of the details in this story were related to me by Sam. All the details I

recorded were accurate, and yet I arranged them in the order that seemed to pace the story best. I'm not sure if they happened in this order, but my concern was artistic, to develop the drama, and I did not see a factual compromise as I knew the details were true. A fellow witness could possibly query my order of events, however.

This essay also raised an important aspect of my artistic power. I conclude the story of this abandoned baby by commenting on how all the bystanders condemned the mother, but none asked after the father. This comment, along with my title, furthers my thesis, which is that in Africa it still seems to be that the responsibility of loving and looking after children is the mother's. Men in Africa still seem to be able to get away with much less parental responsibility. I make this point starkly using a murdered baby. In fact I don't know that baby's story. It may have been the father that tried to protect it, and the mother that insisted on killing it. But I am using this story and my artistic arrangement and conclusion of it to make my subjective viewpoint known: I think men in South Africa, in practice, are held as being less responsible for the children they create than women, and I think men step up to this responsibility far less readily than women. This was my view before moving into the city, but it was confirmed in the city. Three fourths of our fifty flats were occupied by families with children; all of these families bar one were made up of single mums and absent dads. So in this essay I have used my artistic license to make this point, that South African men are absent as fathers. I think my point is true to daily reality in South Africa and so I hope that it sparks debate and engagement. And it would be wonderful if it sparked a counter argument, a defense of South African fathers. I don't see the subjective viewpoints that I offer in my essays as impenetrable and untouchable arguments. Rather, I don't think any discussion is sparked unless people are willing to offer subjective viewpoints. How can you argue with someone who has no opinion; how can you progress in understanding if you never acknowledge what you believe to begin with? So I offer my subjective viewpoint, hoping it will be challenged.

The three essays above provide a basic template for how I analysed my collection, using this framework. On a number of different occasions, in informal discussions about writing, with readers, I was made aware that whilst I am able to justify my decisions artistically, I am not sure that the average reader would accept these additions and alterations as readily, if they were spelt out to her. When I speak to other writers about these decisions, they are very understanding. But I have noticed in speaking to friends in science fields that they assume that what I have recorded is exactly what I have observed; in speaking to

friends in anthropological fields they assume that I have fact-checked every detail of my writing with my subjects. These conversations sometimes left me uncertain as to whether changes for artistic clarity are important enough to justify the subtle public deception that takes place with every alteration I make. However, I think much of this misunderstanding has to do with readers having entered into a contract with a writer that they are not necessarily able to verbalise. My readers may not be able to identify this contract, but inherent to the memoir is the assumption that I am filling in the blanks that my memory can't serve; inherent to the personal essay is the assumption that I will give my version and not an objective version; inherent to the lyric essay is the contractual agreement between reader and writer that I will create an essay that is aesthetically pleasing, because art and truth both have value.

My overarching motivation in writing these poems and essays was always to create art. I never wanted to publish or produce something that did not reach a standard of what I (and my trusted critics) considered to be good writing. That is not to say that I accomplished this throughout this memoir but that I did aim for it; it was my motivation as I wrote. This is because I think art has the power to make people think and feel far beyond what a set of well arranged facts could. Art has the potential to get beyond the happening story and into the real story; the story that the facts point to. I wanted to lay before the reader things that she may not have seen or heard; to open her eyes to the reality of life in the City Centre; and to do this artistically so that she could not walk away untouched by my stories and my subjects, by my enjoyment of city life and my deep fear of it.

#### 4.3 Obligation to reader, subject and topic

As noted in the previous section, both Krog and Hemley advise writing a piece, as accurately and honestly as possible, and then, only once complete, reviewing the piece and deciding what needs to be changed to protect the identity and reputation of others. Brenda Miller (2009:143) takes the same approach. She suggests first writing with denial: think to yourself no one's going to ever read this and then go ahead and just tell all. Then — only when you are actually finished and are preparing to send it out as a publishable piece — you can decide whether you need to censor it, or even to not publish it.

Initially I would censor my writing as I went, and end up with a lot of inoffensive drivel. I don't think that any of my neighbours will read what I have written about them, but if they do they will recognise themselves. Knowing this was preventing me from telling the most interesting stories. For example, although Werner is a pseudonym, the rest of the story of *Werner's Witchcraft Water* is as accurate as I can remember. But initially, in order to protect myself from Werner, I fudged his work and family details, I overlooked his racism, and I rearranged his curses and quotes, until I had a boring story. Months later I went back and tried again, making everything more true. And then I read it, pretending I was Werner, and I decided that he probably wouldn't mind. After that experience, and after reading the processes that Hemley and Krog use, I tried to write as honestly and accurately as possible on my first draft. And then, once I had the story, I tried to decide what needed to be changed in order to protect myself and the subject.

This was an interesting process for me as I realised that my sense of obligation to the subject (Werner) was exaggerated or heightened to the extent that it was interfering with my obligation to my reader (to provide an interesting story) and my obligation to my topic (to portray the inner life of poor whites in the city centre).

Werner is one of the characters that I felt I was able to develop fully; I felt I was able to portray him honestly, and not as a caricatured poor white. I think this was partly because in this essay I acknowledge that I am prejudiced against poor whites because of my upbringing, but I also acknowledge that they are in a difficult position — they didn't choose to share their lives with black people in the city, they were often forced into it because they had nowhere to move to. I think because I saw both these things – my prejudice and Werner's predicament – I was able to reach beyond myself and tell his story honestly and yet with compassion. As a result I think this story does justice both to Werner and to the reader and to the subject: South Africans find it so hard to share their lives.

Hemley's treatment of the law helped hone my understanding of this ethical framework in terms of obligation to reader and subject. Considerations of the American and South Africa law highlighted that when I record information that does ruin reputation it needs to be verifiably true and it must be in the public interest. In writing *On prejudice*, I felt that the generalisation that I was investigating (that Indians treat blacks poorly) was in the public interest of South Africa. It was a helpful generalisation to unpack as I hoped that in investigating it, issues might come to the fore, issues that need to be addressed in order to

encourage reconciliation. However, in my first draft I included a story about a married Indian visiting a prostitute, that I later took out, for two reasons: Firstly, the Indian's identity would have been easy to discover, and so the allegation could have ruined his reputation. Secondly, it was not in the public's interest to know he visited a prostitute. It did not contribute to the generalisation I was trying to unpack, nor to the prejudice within myself that I was trying to examine.

Analysing my writing around this legal point raised a larger issue for me. Shouldn't everything I record only be published if it is in the public's best interest? Could this be a larger framework that governs my decision-making? Although it is unlikely that I will face a lawsuit for my life-writing from the inner-city, I could still use these questions to assess my writing: Is it important that the public hears this story? Is it good for the public to hear this story? As Gutkind (2005:xxxii) argued: writers need to police themselves using the basic rules of good citizenship, and one of these rules is to think through how the story will affect the reader.

One tension within this framework, that I find hard to balance in life-writing, is to fulfill my obligation to my reader (to create a good story, to hold their attention) without overlooking my obligation to the topic. This concern came up in the essay, *Vulgar Languages*. I tried in this essay to represent the Pakistanis as immersed in city life during the week, and often in the coarser aspects of city life — hustling business deals, using multiple and regular prostitutes — and yet behaving differently on Sundays:

*whilst they engage with city people all week long — bribing for their patch of ground from which to sell; hustling Zulus for a life-time deal; offering the best price this side of Pakistan — they don't on Sunday. It is their sabbath break.*

I felt then that the reader needed some sort of explanation of this to be satisfied and so I suggested that the Pakistanis were coming together to cleanse themselves on Sundays, to remind themselves of who they are:

*They always play on Sundays and although many locals hang around, hoping to be invited onto a team, they always play alone — washing the dust from their blood, the city stains from their skin, remembering Pakistan.*

I am not sure this is an accurate representation of Pakistanis in the city. I am not sure that they are responding to their week with a sense of ritual cleansing, but I included it for the sake of satisfaction to the reader: it offers a good conclusion. If I was operating in an investigative journalism mode I may have come up with a different conclusion, and perhaps a better understanding of Pakistani life in the city. But one of the challenges as a writer is I love good writing. By this I mean, in regard to this essay, that I find it beautiful when stories capture your imagination, when they have an ending that links to the beginning and that leaves you pondering something that wasn't explicitly stated but was hinted at. This in essence is why writers exaggerate or adjust endings, I think, because they have a sense that the facts must remain true to their intention, true to their essential story, but they also can't just be slapped down on the page; they must be arranged in a pleasing form. And even more so when the form is a poem or a lyric essay, which demands more of a structure than, or at least a different structure to, straight non-fiction. This desire to shape facts and stories into forms that are pleasing is a constant tension – it can help the writer communicate a richer, more effective, more emotional truth, that engages both with the reader's thoughts and emotions, but then it also runs the danger of tempting the writer to shape a story that may not be true to its subjects, that may offer a truncated or biased version of their lives, because that version fits neatly into the genre.

I experienced almost the opposite thought process in writing *On Prejudice*. I wanted to give the reader historical insight into South African Indians and to use this insight to help identify some of the perceived racist behavior that I felt I had observed in my childhood and then again in my City Centre experience. In addition I wanted to use a primary source that was Indian, so that Indians were able to speak for themselves and offer their own explanation. Thus I used extracts from Gandhi's speech. But weaving Gandhi's speech into a readable form, a form that could demand attention from the reader, was difficult and I am not sure successful — obligation to the topic overshadowed obligation to the reader. This approach also raised another issue in that I had essentially decided the topic even before I began to record the story. My assumption, my underlying prejudice, helped me to interpret all my stories and my experiences of Indians. I had already decided that my thesis was that Indians were racist towards blacks and so I pieced together information that essentially added to my prepared thesis. One of the dangers here was that I was more committed to my topic than to my subjects or my readers. I started the essay under the assumption that many Indians often had a generally racist attitude towards blacks and so in essence this drove my essay, regardless of what my subjects said or did. And so



although I used Gandhi to offer an Indian voice, I also used Gandhi because I already knew that his Indian voice was prejudiced against blacks, in some ways, and so his voice fitted my thesis. In this instance I used the creative non-fiction genre in more of a persuasive essay form – I didn't allow my subjects' lives and experiences to guide the topic, rather I used the topic to guide which stories from my past and from the city I wanted to record, and which black and Indian voices I wanted to allow to speak; in short voices that served my thesis, my assumption, that Indians were generally prejudiced against blacks.

Throughout the creation of the creative component I struggled with obligation to my subjects. I was aware that my primary obligation was to present my subjects as full characters and not just to reduce them to caricatures. I knew that the nature of creative non-fiction was that I would provide biased and personal sketches of the people around me; that I would interpret and present them through my filters, but that I would still try present real people that readers could love and laugh and engage with. And yet I still felt uncomfortable. These essays tell the stories of people's lives, none of whom I have asked to write about or gained permission to quote. I have tried to accurately and sympathetically represent them, nonetheless they don't always appear in a positive light — if not negative then definitely humorous. I constantly queried myself: was it okay to tell their stories without their permission? There was no option to get their permission. Often conversations were held in passing. And the people I wrote about would not have seen the humour in the way I did — Werner and his Witchcraft water, Mrs Naidoo and her obsessive protection of the flat. So instead I changed the name of the apartment block we live in, and I changed the names of people who would possibly object to their stories being told in the way I told them. After that I used a tension between obligation to topic and obligation to subjects to help me decide if my motives were good in publishing. For example, in *Pastors in the city*, I quoted a private conversation Mrs Naidoo had with Sam:

*"Then," Mrs Naidoo continued, "the pastor said, 'This is the year of debt cancellation. If you are unemployed give R7, if employed R77, and if you have a mortgage R777. Give, and then watch God work.'"*

*"Debt cancellation for the church, then?"*

*Mrs Naidoo ignored Sam. "I gave them my whole pension. And my son," she leaned in closer, "is bringing up R777, when he comes to visit."*

I realise this conversation mocks Mrs Naidoo, portraying her as gullible, quoting her without permission and without chance of defence, and yet I decided to include it because it addresses a topical concern: Church ministers in African culture hold power, and often use that power for financial gain.

In the same essay, I included observations of the pastor who lived in the slum across the road, and who sent his wife out to sell hotdogs on dangerous streets each night, and I offered this criticism of him, that he pretended to be rich: *so that the folk back home could see he was a real pastor.*

I acknowledge the issue of immersion here. I have authorial power, observing people's lives, noting their hypocrisies and recording them for others to note. I was observing Mrs Naidoo and the pastor across the street; I was recording their stories without their permission; they were laid bare to me, in all their hypocrisy and I was able to write about them. I have hypocrisies, and I have exhibited many whilst living in the city, but the people I am surrounded by cannot record them in return. Which gives me an unequal power. I can record and present these characters as I please. I can even exercise my subjective view of them, I can record what I choose and omit what I choose, to suit my story. In this sense I have power over them; power they have not chosen to give me. And yet I still decided it was right to use my authorial power to record this story. My commitment here was to addressing a topic that I saw as valuable for the reader: challenging the African concept of pastor. From my observation, the people of the city thought that Pastors must be rich, and if they're not they must pretend to be. I wanted to mock this view, and I used my authorial power to do it, because I think this view puts financial pressure on churches and congregations and I think it puts social pressure on pastors – pressure to keep up an appearance.

Often the tension in using this framework developed between a commitment to topic and a commitment to reader. In two essays (*Once were white* and *When the white men were in charge*) I ask if the present government can manage running the country, and if the apartheid government was better for the masses? I feared the effect on my reputation, in asking this. The respected South African literary journalists do not seem to ask these questions; the assumption seems to be that if you are a good and trustworthy literary journalist then you will continue to try and represent the black voice, defend the black experience. Criticism of white culture seems more acceptable than criticism of black

culture. I definitely felt more comfortable writing the poem, *Whites are rude* (which critiques whites) than I did writing the essay *When the white man was in charge* (which potentially promotes whites). My perception from reading literary magazines and journalists is that the first poem would have a willing audience, whereas the second essay would have an uncomfortable audience. The history of South Africa's white paternalism has created this unease, and so it is natural that I am aware of it, and concerned that offering my democratic perspective, uncovering my prejudice, would diminish my readership, or even prevent me from being published. This concern was framed by a desire to be true to my topic, but it then also clashed with the concern to do good to my reader. Would offering these perspectives simply confirm whites in their prejudice? Would it help whites to find a voice for their racism, to condone it; would it enable them to rest in their prejudice, rather than interrogate it? And would it alienate black readers? Do I represent the white concern in a way that might evoke empathy and understanding amongst black people or do I simply confirm the idea that whites are by nature complainers, a remnant from apartheid days, who want things nice and tidy and white again.

In the end I decided to let the essays stand. I thought it was true to the honesty that creative non-fiction demands — to acknowledge that I am wondering if aspects of the apartheid government served the country better. In addition I thought that the point these essays suggest or raise: that a post-apartheid government is not delivering the common good that it promised — could serve to place pressure on the present government. And this in turn serves my obligation to the reader: that writing should work for the reader's benefit. In short, could my writing that acknowledges misgovernment place pressure on the present government to act for the good of the community. Could my honesty achieve practical good for the reader.

Throughout this analysis the most helpful perspective I gained was that although I as the writer needed to be effaced, my subjective viewpoint did not. By this I mean that I did not need to be at the centre of all my stories; I did not want the stories to be self-promoting or self-indulgent, nor an opportunity to paint myself as a hero or to constantly complain about my inner-city challenges. And yet I couldn't and shouldn't keep myself out of them. The stories gain interest and impact because they are told subjectively. I found the stories because I chose to live and engage as a white woman in a mixed-race inner-city; and I told the stories, not objectively, but constantly tainted by the prejudice and sympathy and opinion of a white, who both loves and fears South Africa. I have decided which version of

the story my readers will get; I have exercised the democratic voice of creative non-fiction — a voice that has hopefully been filtered, honed and restrained through these frameworks, so that it can tell stories with good intent, with the intent to get myself and my city right.

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## **Chapter five: Conclusion**

After acknowledging that his motives as a writer are never pure, Orwell commends self-examination, "Writing a book is a horrible, exhausting struggle, like a long bout of some painful illness. One would never undertake such a thing if one were not driven on by some demon whom one can neither resist nor understand. For all one knows that demon is simply the same instinct that makes a baby squall for attention. And yet it is also true that one can write nothing readable unless one constantly struggles to efface one's own personality." (1946:5-6).

The writer, Orwell argues, needs to acknowledge that she is likely driven by attention-seeking, and yet as she effaces herself, as she analyses her motives, and as she works hard to follow the deserving motives, she produces not only writing of moral worth but of artistic worth too: "I cannot say with certainty which of my motives are the strongest, but I know which of them deserve to be followed. And looking back through my work, I see that it is invariably where I lacked a political purpose that I wrote lifeless books and was betrayed into purple passages, sentences without meaning, decorative adjectives and humbug generally" (1946:6). I find this point particularly striking as I felt that I initially lacked purpose in my writing. As a result I was producing essays that were trite; I was writing sentences without meaning, because I was afraid to offer my subjective viewpoint. I began writing this collection with what I think Orwell perceptively describes as unworthy motives. My desire was to be paid and to be published, and so I was willing to adapt my message to the publication, to temper my writing in order to sell it. I knew lots of publications wanted upbeat stories about racial reconciliation in South Africa so I tried to find these stories from the inner-city; I knew newspapers and magazines wanted stories that were sympathetic to the black cause and critical of apartheid and so I initially looked for and wrote these sorts of essays.

Orwell identifies money and fame as strong motives in writing, and I think connected to fame is the desire to be thought well of. I don't want to be known as racist, as complaining, as fearful; I want to be the hero of my own story, the white who actually made a difference, who actually chose to share her life with the rest of South Africa. But I am not, and pretending to be in key essays was betraying me into lifeless writing. And it was at this

point that I found these frameworks so helpful. They gave me the reason to be honest to my own point of view, to my own story. The framework of emotional truth helped me to push beyond the image I wanted to portray and to reach the real picture of what I had seen and felt; the framework of artistic clarity gave me the courage to make choices in favour of the art form; the framework of obligation helped me to balance what I offered: my honesty and my subjectivity must still offer a good read that is fair both to my readers, my thesis and the people of the inner-city.

In examining my own work, I have found these three ethical frameworks supportive and comprehensive. Whilst exploring ethics in writing I came across Tullis's chapter in *The Handbook of auto-ethnography* on the ethics of auto-ethnography. The type of cross-cultural life writing I have produced in *They won't come for us here* has been classified by anthropologists as auto-ethnography (Besemeres, 2010) and so I was interested to see if auto-ethnographers raised ethical considerations that other non-fiction writers hadn't, or offered a framework more fitting than the three I have offered.

Whilst Tullis raises many similar considerations, such as protecting the privacy of your subjects and acting in beneficence towards them (2013:250) and de-identifying data by forming composite character or changing details of age or sex or even adding fictional narratives to create distance between character and reader (2013:250), the greatest emphasis within the ethics of auto-ethnography as a research discipline is that the writer must protect the subject. This was based on the code of ethics for research: informed consent, prohibition of deception, privacy and confidentiality, accuracy (2013:246). Tullis points out that authors have authorial power over their subjects and as such have a greater responsibility to do them good (2013:246) and so Tullis suggests that auto-ethnographers should be guided by the following ethical framework:

Auto-ethnographers should use, rather than resist, the Code of Ethics (e.g., informed consent, accuracy, deception, confidentiality, and privacy) and the moral standards for research involving human subjects as established by the Belmont Report (e.g., autonomy, beneficence, and justice; see Christians, 2005) to establish and enact practices that focus on and respect the interests of others as well as themselves. (2013:258).

Tullis suggests this ethical framework for all auto-ethnography, not just that which is offered as research, and yet I found this framework to be wanting for the auto-ethnographic writer. I value the concern raised for the subjects of auto-ethnography (2013:250), and also for the concern to act in beneficence towards the audience of auto-ethnographic performance or writing (2013:250). However, this code of ethics ignores the literary aspect of creative non-fiction, and it ignores the value and claim of the topic. At times a creative non-fiction writer will decide that the art-form and the story, or the topic and the idea, are in fact more important than the subjects' protection. Perhaps one of the major contrasts here is that creative non-fiction is an art form; it has genre rules. As such it is important that a story gets told in a way that is beautiful, in a way that points beyond itself; as Dillard says: the story is always pointing to another story. And inherent in the art form is the idea that we are not just arranging facts, but we are creating an artifact out of the subjects' lives, to point to a bigger story — the story behind their little stories.

Thus, I have found the combination of these three frameworks (rather than an auto-ethnographic framework) to most helpfully raise the range of considerations that face a creative non-fiction writer. The concern for emotional truth pushes the writer towards honesty, and yet holding this in tension with factual truth, allowing emotional truth to develop from factual truth, produces authentic work, work that should show real characters, that should intend to get people right, and not just offer simplistic portrayals. The framework of artistic clarity helps the writer to accept that artistic concern for the creative non-fiction genre is legitimate, that pursuing artistic excellence is necessary, and it allows for techniques such as creative retelling, collapsed time and composite character. This framework supports the genre and sub-genre and validates them – they are important enough to allow for creative retelling and reshaping as long as this creativity still has the intent to get people right, still points to the story behind the story. But perhaps the most comprehensive framework is that of intent. As a guiding principle, creative non-fiction writers do intend to capture the world as it is, although always through their eyes, with subjectivity. I am telling the stories from the City Centre, but I am telling them in my words through my eyes, acknowledging my prejudices and fears. These stories would be different in someone else's writing and so they should be, because the stories I tell reveal me, as much as they do my subjects and my topic. They are subjective. But in order to offer this subjectivity with good intent, I and other writers need to move between the tensions of understanding and fairly representing our subjects, illuminating our topic, and then packaging our story so that readers will want to hear and will be moved to understand.

In analysing this range of creative non-fiction writers, both American and South African, essayists and journalists, it was interesting to note the spread of ethical concerns that creative non-fiction writers face. I initially thought all decisions would be covered by the topics of privacy and creativity, and yet these two categories needed to be subdivided. For example, the issue of combining testimony or inventing characters (tampering with truth) is different to the issue of adding in gestures that the character probably had, but I can't quite remember (creative retelling). And the issue of writing about people without their permission (protection of privacy) is different to writing with permission and yet from a position of unequal power (issue of immersion). And yet the broad concerns are essentially still based on two questions: How much can I create — creative license, tampering with truth, arranging for effect, flagging the genre? And how much can I tell — protection of privacy, intimate honesty, the issue of immersion? It was between these two questions that I constantly moved, that I found myself pushed to examine my work, to aim for moral worth but also artistic worth in my writing.

This has been a brief survey of ethical concerns, and there are more and wider ranging concerns that could have been raised, and yet these surveyed concerns highlighted the issues pertinent to life-writing from the inner-city, and in combination with the three frameworks enabled me to critically reflect on my creative component. I feel these frameworks helped me to go beyond my original intention of just telling stories from the inner-city. They pushed me to discover the truth I was actually communicating; the truth that was embedded into the stories: that South Africa is light and dark, goodness and brokenness; that I both love and fear the heart of this country; that this country is worthy of both my love and my fear.

Lastly, I gained interesting insight into the value of self-examination, as I critically reflected on the creative component. I had more sympathy for other writers after analysing my own work. For example, I criticised Krog for compiling different testimonies into one, in her work of *Country of my Skull*. And yet this was the approach I took in writing up the essay on the assault (*One morning, not unlike any other*). I hadn't acknowledged this approach until I used the framework to analyse this essay. I hadn't seen the need to acknowledge this approach, because, like Krog, I believed that what I had produced was true. Here, this framework helped me to know myself, to identify that I was doing what other writers do; it helped me to query myself, to efface my own personality.



The frameworks were critical in allowing me to bend ethical lines, to defend the ethical choices I made, and yet they were also helpful because they forced me to acknowledge what I had done, and to examine whether the reasoning behind it was sound. The overarching principle in creative non-fiction can't just be honesty, because honesty doesn't always help or move the reader; the main motive can't just be art because art without a message is trite; the chief purpose can't just be to protect your subjects because then nothing of consequence is recorded and engaged with. There must be a bigger reason to write and I think this reason is summed up by Underwood as he reflects on the commitment that creative non-fiction writers of the past had. They were convinced, "that truth in the deeper sense mattered more than anything else" (2013:198).

It was this truth that I felt these frameworks and this analysis helped me to unearth. The truth of my inner-city experience, acknowledged and recorded, hopefully artistically and hopefully with good intent: we are a people who both fear and love each other, who reject and need each other, who can't live together, and yet who are desperate to avoid having to ever live apart.

## **Telling Tales**

**Part Two: They won't come for us here - Life writing from the inner-city.**

*I grew up in a liberal home under apartheid, and I lived my adult life in a protected white suburb, post-apartheid. But in my forties I decided I wanted to experience living in the real South Africa — the rainbow nation South Africa, where whites were no longer protected or in charge. So I moved into the inner-city, to live and to write. I enjoy telling true stories but I wanted to tell true stories as an insider, to write about the people of the city as a neighbour. I wanted to place myself as a middle-class white woman amongst a community that was mixed race and mixed class. And I wanted to write both about what I saw around me, and what I saw inside of me — even when what I saw was what I had hoped I wouldn't, my own heart of darkness.*

***They won't come for us here** is a record of the time I spent living in the South African inner-city of Pietermaritzburg. I have changed names to protect the identity of my subjects. Some of these pieces have been published in the *Christian Science Monitor* and *The Smart Set*. Each piece was written to stand alone, but together they tell a story.*

## Bond-free

On the first of December 2015, my husband and I hired a flat-bed truck, and with the help of some friends, moved our family of seven out of a white South African suburb and into a black South African inner-city. Out of a house and into a flat.

South Africa's inner cities are dirty, deprived and dangerous. Whites don't live there by choice. But Sam and I had been unsettled for a while, talking this move through for at least a year, with a growing sense of unease, and perhaps even boredom, with our white privilege. We wanted to serve the poor and the vulnerable. Not through handouts, but through shared lives. We wanted to provide a model of a family that could live simply, without luxury, and yet still value education and progress; we wanted to model relationships in which women and girls were protected and yet were still powerful; we wanted to share our money and our education and our contacts, all of our privileged inheritance with our neighbours. And we wanted to live in an area that was racially and culturally mixed; to enjoy the richness of other languages and customs and worldviews; to enter into the real South Africa. And it seemed that the best place for both of these goals was the inner-city. I think these were my real motives in moving, but I don't think they were my only motive. I also wanted something else, something more. I wanted a rest.

Sam and I had lived our whole lives in the South African suburbs, and the past five years in a four-bed-roomed home with two lounges and a study, two garages and a workshop, an outdoor braai on a large verandah, a garden and a pool. And we were tired. Tired of mowing lawns, cleaning gutters, pruning trees, and mopping up pool-feet. So when Sam suggested buying a flat in Pietermaritzburg inner-city, I saw the adventure and I saw the service but more than that I saw it as an invitation to rest — to own something small, something manageable, something clean.

I think our friends and family saw it as exchanging the South African dream for the South African nightmare, but what we saw was that the dream had become exhausting. In South Africa it is more than just the burden of all the work and money that is needed to keep the dream going; it is also the burden of using all your work and money to keep a dream going that someone could violently pluck from your hands at any moment. Every rape, every armed robbery, every mention of nationalisation, or threat of a landgrab, makes us hunker down even harder, even tighter, even tenser, to keep the dream going. And sometimes it just feels easier to let a dream go, before someone takes it from you.

I met a boy once who was so afraid of being hurt at school that he would run into any fight he could find. He couldn't bear the anticipation of it maybe happening, so he would make it happen straight away. Maybe that's why we moved. Whoever is going to come for us, whichever dark nameless mass it is, they won't come for us here, in this black inner-city, because we won't have anything left to come for. Here we won't look rich and white and privileged; here we won't look like the kind of people that should be punished for this country's sins.

Either way Sam and I can talk ourselves into anything when we want to and we had talked ourselves into this and I was excited with a sense of relief and a sense of purpose that I hadn't felt for a long time, and so in the face of all our friends' and families' sometimes-concern and sometimes-admiration, we barreled along until here we were.

During the move, I stayed home to pack, and after every trip, I asked our friends, "How's the flat? Nice and neat? Good condition?" I'd seen it of course, but somehow I'd recreated it in my mind as a New York City apartment — glossy and white and chic.

At around 6pm we did our last trip, and as we drove into town, dark clouds descended and with them my spirits. It seemed that the streets were overflowing with drunk men and litter. The streets were overflowing with drunk men and litter. My life is about to change forever, I thought. And I've bought this life, bond free. I have paid cash. Couldn't I have had the sense to rent it for a while?

*They won't come for us here* is a collection of stories, essays and poems from the almost four years we spent in the South African inner-city.

## When I was ten

I used to roam these city streets,  
especially the lanes.  
This was where you came  
for thick cream paper  
and trays of pastels,  
where you stood on the steps of shops  
and smelt waxed wood,  
where you watched a watchmaker  
fixing watches and placing new ones,  
golden in his window.

But the best was the bookstore  
where the book lady looked  
like a Tussaud model of a woman.  
She was an Africana expert,  
who slept in caves, but at work wore  
ankle-length, neck-frilled dresses.  
She knew the right books on flowers  
the best books on bees  
and she had piles of magazines,  
of bloody unsolved mysteries.

One Saturday,  
a week before Christmas,  
my parents gave me ten Rand  
and left me in town.  
Queuing at the hotdog stand  
I felt  
a hand in my pocket  
and as I turned  
one black man in the all-white-crowd said sorry,  
and walked away.

Now I am forty,  
these lanes are full of hair salons,  
internet cafes, places to eat,  
tailors with peach plastic models  
modeling dresses  
which are not cheap.

## A garland of grass

We are sitting beside each other on the stairs. Behind us is the rounded wall of a thatch hut. I think it belongs to him. I have clean blonde hair, and am squatting in a stiff African dress, but he is dusty, shirts and shorts no longer a colour. He has plaited a garland of grass, that cut his hands as he worked, and now he puts it over my head. I am his two-year-old god. He has worshipped me with his craft, and I reward him by kissing his dry brown cheek.

There are adults. Some belong to him and some to me. My mom has a smile that says, I should be fine with you doing that and wish I were. The adults know better than us and think we are sweet for not knowing what we are doing. But I know exactly what I am doing. I am dropping dainties at my dog's feet.

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My mom holds strong views on being available for your children, which is why she takes me to work, so she needn't stop breastfeeding. But it is Busi who walks me from work to school, singing Thula Thu, Thula Baba, Thula Sana, her strong round legs in a polyester pencil skirt, my hand still white and thin in hers.

Busi is my mother's assistant at the African Art Centre. Together they sell beaded love necklaces and grass mats made by ladies from Rorkes Drift. Every few weeks we drive out to the drift, and lean on the creosoted cattle gate. The ladies gather with their woven grass circles and squares, fashionable mats in white homes. I sneeze my way through childhood because of the power of these mats to gather dust and pollen. My mom does not barter in these rural areas. She takes whatever cash she has and buys as many mats as she can, at least one from each family, always more than she can sell.

The Art Centre supports activists, who paint and sculpt to get money for their politics, and a drunk called Amos who carves wooden animals and men, in varying shades of brown, to pay for his beer. Lots of white folk buy these wooden men, not many buy the lithographic prints of naked black women, behind clipped glass.

Busi is never late dropping me at school. It is here that I learn I must brush my teeth twice a day, and then again if I eat sweets. I am crushed by this added life burden. It is here that I wrap a broken pink purse for my friend's birthday, pretending it is new, horrified to see how old it looks when she opens it on the playground. It is here that I have a school-wide moment of glory. It is dress-up day. I am Lady Di at her wedding, my short blonde hair flicked just right, and one little boy who forgot to dress up gets to walk behind me, lifting my train.

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My room is diagonally halved by a platform, with a ladder, where my sister sleeps. My father built this platform because my sister couldn't bear another night in the same room as me. Now she is out of sight but listening and when I swear she calls through the open door to the rest of

the house for my mother, "Mom, she said the F-Word again. I didn't do anything; she just said it."

I am lying in bed with my best friend and we are asking each other whispered questions to avoid the sound traveling to the platform above. I feel dirty saying it, but I have to know. "Would you rather kiss a girl, or a black? Uuuurgh, disgusting!"

My mother refers to my friend as, "This-girl-what-will-we-do-with-her." She specializes in letting me down, making places to meet in town, and then not arriving, or phoning. Each time it happens I free-fall, a hole opens below me and I cannot recover. And then I do, and we talk again, like now.

I want to know the answer, but I can't remember what she says.

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My mother is sometimes late. Some days she forgets me at school altogether and I walk home, once wetting my school dress on the last stretch of road because I couldn't keep it in any longer. Other days I wait till she gets home, till she sees I'm not there, and then comes to fetch me. This day she is on time. There are big coloured posters lining the street outside our school. The Progressive Federal Party are red and white and blue; The National Party, orange and blue; The Conservative Party, yellow. Who are they? I ask.

My mother explains they are parties for white people. Only white people can vote, and they can only vote for themselves. We are the only country in Africa still doing this. Of the parties that white people can vote for, there is the PFP who want to look after blacks, the NP who want to keep blacks separate, and the CP who hate blacks.

The next day at school we discuss who to vote for. Michelle is the only girl in our class who will vote CP. Her dad does. I am the only girl who will vote PFP. My mom does. The rest are all NP.

I am enraged and instantly politicized. How can we keep blacks separate? How can we be the only country in the world still doing this? I learn that blacks can't live with us, or school with us. What about Indians? The same. I will work for the PFP when I grow up. My mother is my hero.

That afternoon she is on time again. We drive home, talking politics, my green belted dress pressed tight against my tummy. The boys in my class call me brontosaurus. I would rather look like anything except this. Even like the girl who has dead straight legs, the same width at the top of her thigh as the bottom of her ankle.

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My dad is crafting with us today. He takes us to the park and we collect Jacaranda pods, with round jointed open mouths. Then we collect twigs that have two arms, two legs and a tail. We



take them home and glue pods to twigs making leering crocodiles which we arrange in aggressive positions on the lawn. My sister has the idea to stick red and black seeds on for eyes and display them on the mantel piece.

There is a record player at my father's and he is always playing Bruce Springsteen in his blue jeans and tight vest and muscly arms, or Simon and Garfunkel. They were no good after they broke up, he says, putting on their concert in Central Park. Their stories ingrain in the creases of my brain — the has-been boxer, the sounds of nothing under a lamppost, and Joe DiMaggio, a nation turns its lonely eyes to you.

My mom plays Ipi Tombi on her record player; rows of bare-breasted dancers and harmless warriors jiggle on the cover. She does her marking from school as they sing, but my dad always sits, empty-handed, to listen.

My father does not fight apartheid. He makes me six-minute soft-boiled eggs, instead.

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Some days the house grows dark without my mother and I go next door to wait. She is dead, I tell myself, and nothing will ever be the same again. We play Checkers and then Monopoly. The neighbours' children let me win. She is definitely dead. Then my sister comes running. Mom is home. I am saved from the orphanage, from living with my grandmother, and eating barley soup for lunch.

My mother says she once received a death threat, handed to her in a folded note. And sometimes someone phones and keeps quiet. Some days she takes a different route home, from the black township school where she works, in her old white beetle, in case she is being trailed.

I know my mom is important because one day a black church leader I have seen on TV comes to stay. He is nice, except when I walk into his room and he is on his knees by the bed, he doesn't say don't worry; he stares till I back out the door. My mom is also friends with a black journalist, and an exile who will soon be returning, and the chief of a tribe.

She is at a meeting with this chief in a hotel in Ulundi. My sister and I are also there. We wake to discover the room empty and walk the corridors in pajamas till we find our mother in a big room, round a big table. The chief stands to greet me. He shakes my hand and says, Yebo Mafutha (yes, fatty). I know this is not an insult in Zulu culture, but it is in mine, and since he is the adult I think he should know better and I don't smile.

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One of the artists from the Art Centre is in trouble. I think he left an envelope bomb in a public toilet, up near the chain of the cistern. Now the police are after him. He is one of the artists I like. He dresses in white — white slacks and a crisp cotton v-neck shirt. He has a very black beard and a sharp face and he talks to me as though I am an adult. His name is Sam Thulani

Johnson and he thinks I should have a Zulu name, the way he has an English one, so he calls me something in Zulu which means pretty. I like his art. It is full of orange shapes of flowing women. I don't like his poetry. I know things are bad for black people in South Africa but when they write it down it comes out wrong. They should stick to singing.

After school I climb to the second level of the Art Centre building. From here I can lie and watch the artists below, without being seen. One day Sam will be an important man. When he is in trouble he does not come to my mom for help. But Amos will end his days carving wooden leopards, burning spots with a blow torch, cigarette hanging from mouth.

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My Mother wants to send me to boarding school. It's not that I'm a problem; it's that she likes the school. It has a quarter of each race group living together, even though the group areas act doesn't let us. At assembly, the pupils sing Nkosi Sikelele Afrika, and the school song is Whitney Houston's, Greatest Love of All. It is expensive but they offer bursaries based on what your parents earn. There are children of important people going — exiles from Swaziland, Hlubi Chiefs, small-time Kings.

I am totally out of my depth when I arrive. I am placed in a dormitory called Luthuli House and I am the only white girl; the rest are all Zulu.

I horrify them with my lack of hygiene. I do not shower every morning and wash every night. I sometimes wear the same clothes two days in a row. I don't make my bed; at home my maid does that. I don't know how to fold my clothes or separate them into piles. I don't know how to use a washing machine or dryer. I load clothes up in the corner, wearing them in rotation, until midterm.

I, in turn, can't bear their melodrama. I like their loud voices and singing, but one afternoon a girl gets her period and wails the whole night through crying, Ah Wema. A few days later a different girl hears that her cousin's cousin has died, in a car accident, and a few girls gather to weep in her room. It is a very distant relative and I don't think they need to cry.

There is one girl in my dorm that I really like. She is very funny and I hope to be her friend. I have never had a black person my age to be friends with. These girls are not political — they know less than me — but many of their parents are. My mother is often making connections. That is the daughter of...

I am moved to tears when we sing our school song: I believe the children are our future, Teach them well and let them lead the way, Show them all the beauty they possess inside. Whitney Houston is beautiful. I wish I was black. Pale black with a small bum.

I like the feel of being here — fighting the system, showing the country it can work; washing our dishes after supper, eating *pap* and *maas* for breakfast, learning in Comparative Religion that all faiths teach the same thing and shouldn't be taken seriously. I start listening to Bob Marley and UB40. Then I discover the protest songs of U2 and nothing can stop me. I buy a T-

shirt that says Marvin, Malcolm, Martin, Mandela and Me. I wear it at home among my white friends when we go to The Royal Agricultural Show. I dress in black jeans, and steel-toe-capped construction boots. We dance to Midnight Oil who have recently confessed to giving money to the ANC. That's illegal. I wish I liked their music.

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I haven't managed to make a black friend because they don't want to talk politics, but I have made friends with an Indian. Her father is the editor of a Durban newspaper and their family supports the ANC in exile. I spend weekends at her house. I eat their mango atchar for breakfast. I meet her friends from her old school. They hate blacks. This is the first time I realise that some blacks hate other blacks. And some people with black skin don't see themselves as black. And some blacks find mag wheels more interesting than justice.

Rosha doesn't. We have long hair and we wear flowing Indian-print dresses. I introduce her to Peter Gabriel and we croon, Oh Biko, Biko, Bikoooooh Biko. Tears are in our eyes. The longing is stronger than the coming.

Rosha's house is funny, even though her family is radical. It is full of suede couches covered in plastic, arranged around a TV which is always on. The table is pine, covered in a white crocheted table cloth with yellow curry stains. The sliding doors open to a squatter camp and highway. White liberals live in houses in Hillcrest with tennis courts. They don't watch TV, they read Alan Paton. Their gardens are terraced, their tables covered in *shweshwe*, their walls in masks from Ghana. They eat fruit compote and yoghurt, not oily curry, and definitely not oily curry for breakfast. I wonder if we will be friends when the fight is over.

One day at Rosha's the TV is on. In fact, this day I have come home with her because the TV is on. Black cars gather by a wire fence. A crowd starts to sing. A beautiful proud lady, dressed in black, moves forward and then Mandela steps into view. It is the day of his release. This is history and I am watching it. I am overcome. Sitting in that dark living room, I have prepared the way for him. I was part of non-racial South Africa long before he was.

That night we go out. This time we are dressed in tailored black shifts and pumps. We are celebrating.

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I have had enough of boarding school. I want to lie around drawing wispy female figures. I want to make up dances that teach deep things: Geniuses are Close to Mad; District Six Destroyed Us. I want to write essays that end mysteriously, and still get a red-penned mark in the nineties.

I am being stifled. I insist on leaving immediately. I cannot make it to the end of term.

The school I join back home is white. I had forgotten about this detail. The rest of South Africa is still living separately. I have to wear second-hand checked-blue uniforms. I am so bored.

More than that, I am so sticking out. My skirt is too long. It should lie just above the knee, but it flutters around mid-calf. I don't know how to roll my socks so my ankles show. The only place I hoped to shine I am not. Someone has a better cockney accent than me. I am in the B-class for English because this school is not so sure about the educational standards of my old school. I am a dramatic and creative writing failure. I only stand out enough to fit in nowhere.

There are prefects at my new school who shout when you cut corners on the grassed quad; there are certain things you don't pack for lunch like your mother's leftover vegetarian stew; at break there are circles of girls and boys, and if you can't find a circle to join, you eat your sandwiches alone in the classroom. I find one — a girl who will go onto be a gay Mormon, a boy who will fail as a punk bass drummer.

I am there the morning the first black arrives. I go to him overjoyed: he has made history; he has broken down barriers; he has burst out of the old South Africa.

His father is a human resources manager; he wants to keep his head down and get an education. He is rounded on all his edges.

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The day comes to vote as citizens of the New South Africa. I was overseas when Hani died; I have come back for this. I am living in the bush but I travel to the town of my mother. I want to vote with her. We were in this together. I decide to vote ANC nationally because I want to mention this to my black workers. Marvin, Martin, Mandela, Me. Then I vote Inkatha locally because I feel loyal to my mother's friends. We stand in a long line of people. I have not been so outnumbered since boarding school. I tell people who I am voting for. My mother laughs nervously. Then it is all over. I am humming Whitney Houston; no one else is singing.

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I have been on the wrong side, all this time. My mother does have letters from important people; she did have secret meetings; but always with the blacks who are now accused of fighting for the white man all along. This is so disappointing. Nothing is named after her.

My mother doesn't mind; she starts a school for alternative education. My father moves to the Karoo.

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I go back to being who I was before boarding school, and yet I can't. I find someone who went to the same school and marry him and we both go back to being who we were before that school — living in white suburbs, having white friends, who drive white cars — and we both can't. We move into the inner-city. It is black now. The names of the roads are named after people who were on the right side of the struggle; but none of those people live in these streets and none of their relatives do either. They live in the suburbs where the street names stay the same.

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We are walking in the park, just down from our apartment in the city. A *para* comes out of the bushes. This is the Zulu name for people who live on the streets. It is short for parasite. He tells us he has his grade 8. He tells us it is bad with Zuma in charge. We say it will be better with Cyril. He says it was better when the white man was in charge. This is a line I often hear, from old white liberals quoting their maids to prove that the days when they still had a cause were better than the days are now. It usually makes me angry, but now I am embarrassed. He thinks this is what I want to hear. Me in my African dress; he in his shorts no longer a colour; this is his garland of grass.

## In this country

In the second week in our city-centre flat, I looked over the balcony and saw a man rummaging in the garden below. He pulled out a few meters of cardboard, some blankets and a tog-bag. Then he walked down the road and set up camp for the night. It was twilight and as I looked out I saw this happening all over the city. A few men I expected, but our streets are full of men, women, gangs. At dusk they make their way to where they've stashed camp — between buildings, under hedges. Some own just cardboard, while others I've seen in blue, striped, thermal pajamas, brushing their teeth with Colgate.

Along our road, four men sleep outside a curtain shop, leaving long streams of urine, from their beds to the gutters. They sleep late, and if you go shopping early they glare at you as though they wouldn't gatecrash your bedroom? Further along, an entirely different group sleeps near the central police station. They look like your sons, skittish, well-dressed, afraid of something bigger than the law.

There are, of course, also your common or garden drunks — mostly they are what we used to call poor whites, but they just got poorer. Because our family ride bicycles, they tend to make conversation with us, rather than beg.

"Nice helmet. Bell? I used to have one when I rode motorbikes."

"Riding with your daughter today? Why don't you get a tandem? That's what me and my wife used to ride."

But when a car pulls up their faces go leathery, and their hands limp. They must earn enough because when we ride home in the afternoon they are stretched out four meters from the robot with two bottles of white Perle wine. I also recently discovered that one of these men owns a car. It is missing a front window that has been taped up by hard plastic but it is still a VW panel van, a later model than we used to own. He drives this van to his robot on West and Jabu Ndlovu, and then drives it home, so he can now drink his Perle in peace.

My children have taken to speculating why people live on the streets and their favourite theories centre on a cheerful man with a misplaced toe. The offending toe sticks straight up, from the middle of his foot, with a nail like an eagle's, and my sons cannot pass him without counting, recounting and re-recounting. "I think his mom was afraid of him," my five-year-old son explained one day, which possibly holds some truth.

But sometimes people are on the streets for a very short time because they have nowhere else to go and one of the things that always surprises me is that we have no safety net in Pietermaritzburg for these people. No shelters, no refugee centers, no safe-houses. Koni lives a few flats above us, now. He made his way from the Congo, mostly by foot, and when he arrived in Pietermaritzburg, he lived with a friend. He would buy clothes here, send them home for his sister to sell at double the price, and between them they lived off the profits. But the business ran into trouble, his friend grew bitter, and so, until he could get a job peeling potatoes at Honchos for R30 per day, he lived on the streets.

How was it? Sam asked.

Koni took a minute, finding the words, compressing the experience, and then he said, "In this country when you suffer, you suffer 100 percent."

## Sometimes there is a chasm

Pietermaritzburg is a city in a valley, and it was only after moving out of the white suburbs and into the black inner-city that I realized I had been living on the sides of the valley all along. And now I was in the pit — a pit that served up fumes and heat in equal measure.

The sweet relief of our first city summer was the public swimming pool. It was open from 10 till 6. Technically. On Fridays it closed early because the staff needed time to buy beer and Kentucky Fried Chicken. And if the weather was bad it closed, or if too much chlorine had been added to the pool, or too much acid. Or if the municipality were striking, or the pump was broken. But as Meshack, the lifeguard, told us, "Working for the Municipality is the best job in the world. You get paid well and you don't have to do anything. Not like in private — there if it's quiet they'll get you painting."

At first Meshack made a show of watching us in the pool. He'd move his chair from the street to the water and glance over his Samsung in our direction. But this didn't last long. As soon as he saw we weren't poor whites, he didn't waste his energy on us. But, if any black person moved towards the halfway line, he shouted, "Suka," which roughly translates to, "Beat it." There were often reports of drownings at other public pools, but never at Meshack's. Here a notice informed that you couldn't drink, run, do tricks, eat, pee or wipe snot in the pool. To this list of written rules, Meshack added that you couldn't raise your voice, swim in your brassiere and panties, or go into the deep end unless he knew you. Which was why this pool was always safe, and mostly empty.

Each day Sam would swim at Meshack's pool. Sam had a lovely style and if he was alone in the pool, Meshack would stay watching the street instead. One day as Sam left Meshack said, "You. You are still here?"

"I could have been drowning back there," Sam replied, "and you were ..." Just then Meshack shouted a long line of appreciative Zulu to a slim, tightly-clad girl. "And you were watching the ladies," Sam finished.

Sam liked Meshack and Meshack liked Sam. After a few months of getting to know each other, Meshack offered to take Sam on a night out in the local township, Imbali. He promised Sam would have a good time and meet some nice ladies. This last part he emphasised by cupping his hands to his chest, as though they were lady's breasts.

A few months later, Sam invited Meshack to a jazz evening. Meshack said, Thanks, he'd see him, and he'd bring his wife.

The funny thing about South Africa is you can go about your daily life telling yourself that nothing separates you from each other except a bit of melanin, that genetically you are closer to other races than strands of your own, that race is a social construct, and then you make friends with Meshack and realise you are living on different planets, one Western, one not. The divide is not always over colour but the divide is real, and the reason academics and scientists don't see it is because they are good at not making friends.



A few years ago I attended a training day for Bible teachers in Kwazulu-Natal. I sat down at a table with a big Zulu man, ready for a hard morning of cross-cultural effort. "Hi," he said in a North London accent, extending his hand, "I'm Ray Smith." I sank with relief. There would be no hard work. We shared a language, an inherited culture, a set of beliefs.

"Oh," I said, "So you're not Zulu then?"

"Bingo," he replied.

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One Friday night, which is our night for a festive family meal and wine, there was a knock on the door. Sam answers all the door knocks and phones in our city home, but this time he called me, "It's for you."

The girl was sitting at our table when I went into the lounge, and she stood up and hugged me. I had seen her on the stairs and at the washing lines, always with a fat toddler. I thought the toddler was hers but it turned out to belong to her boss — the lady she worked for and lived with. There were a few of these situations in our apartment block: the domestic worker shared the room with the boss's child, working as a full-time nanny and cleaner, eating and living for free. Only this time round there was no eating.

"I just need food," she said. She was crying, her black hair sticking out at angles and her face all muddy. I had made a rich beef stew with dumplings, and I dished up large amounts with rice and bread, and brought it through to her to eat. She said she hadn't eaten for two days. She hadn't been paid and there was no food in the house. That night her boss had brought home two packets of noodles, cooked both up and eaten both in front of her.

I kept asking questions — how much did she earn, what was her boss like? She didn't answer, she just said this had happened before. I wanted to give her bread, or jam sandwiches, in case it happened again, but she wouldn't take anything; she said her boss would be angry.

These were two black women. I don't know if they were different cultures; they were both South African; they were definitely different classes. The boss was educated and well dressed and beautiful, whilst the maid could hardly speak English, and was from the farmlands of Tugela Ferry. Every few months she would get a weekend off, and go home to see her own children. I thought, How can a woman treat another woman like this? How can a mother treat a mother this way?

When she finished eating she hugged me and left.

Sam said, That's the beginning of the end. She's going to be knocking on our door every night now; we're going to have the whole block of flats hearing that this is where you come if you need help. But she never came again. She didn't want to talk, she didn't want help, she was just hungry, once off, and she knew that we might have food.

Also, given the choice, I think she preferred her own cooking: the dumplings were left behind.

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Every time I walk in the city, a man will hand me a pamphlet. It is usually covered in small type, fading from blue through purple to pink, interspersed with images, which when you look closer, you wish you hadn't. The writing promises that for R100 Doctor Omar and Mama Sarah can ensure good exam results and multiple pregnancies, win back lost lovers and court cases, cure symptoms of HIV, and enlarge certain body parts. These pamphlets line the pavements and walls of our streets; they are the signposts of this city and what always astounds me is not their magnitude of cheap promises, but their choice of body parts to enlarge. "Hips and bums," I say to my teenage daughter, "these pamphlets are not aimed at us."

Moving from the suburbs to the city was like moving to Africa, for the first time. My ancestors had moved from Holland and England to Pietermaritzburg, a few hundred years ago, but it felt like I hadn't really moved until now. I thought I had seen my cultural blindness before coming here, but our first communal braai taught me how hard it is to see. We had received an invite to join our block to celebrate the lift — it had been broken for four years, and was now fixed. As the evening drew nearer, I kept asking Sam what we should bring to the braai and eventually he said, "Let's just bring what we used to in the suburbs: our own meat, drinks and a salad to share."

The day arrived and at 4pm a group of teenagers set up the sound system in a garage. It took two boys, three trips upstairs to bring down the speakers required. At 5, three men lit fires. At 6, three ladies laid tables. And then I arrived with my small packet of meat, my homemade relish and bread, my Woolworths fizzy juice; and it was all received in a polite puzzle.

Blacks do not bring and share. If you're invited to a braai, you bring your dancing shoes and that's it. A few ladies had spent the whole day making curried beans, carrot salad and creamy potatoes in big metal pots. Heaps of crusty sausages smoked on the braai, 30 litres of fizzy drink covered the plastic table, and the whole block arrived. We ate; we listened to speeches on how the lift was fixed, how we were a family at Gaydon, how we needed to come to the body corporate with all our problems; we danced to teenage Zulu hits in tight circles, pushing each other in for a short solo, whether you were a kid or a granny. And then at 9am exactly, the music skidded to a halt, Mafikizolo sang their last Ndihamba Nawe, and a resident pastor called us into a circle. Shoulder to shoulder, he began to pray, "We cast out the demon of brokenness that has plagued this lift. We bind the devil who wants to break this lift again. We speak Jesus' name over this lift. May darkness have no part in it, may Satan flee, may God reign, now and forever." And then the dad who had invited Sam to share a prostitute one night, the dope-smoking mom, the PhD science student, the Muslim businessman and the church deacon - joined hands and sang, "God is so good, God is so good, God is so good, He's so good to me."

Everyone is a Christian in the city centre, but I think no-one is. I admire how residents integrate worship songs with wild parties, but I don't see that integration in the rest of their lives. There seems to be no connect between worship and justice. The governors of our flat, who open and close meetings in prayer and attend church religiously, do not pay their staff a

minimum wage. The pastor of the church across the road, after a petty thief made it out of their service with nothing, said to Sam, Let me just catch him once and he'll never do it again.

But am I just coming up against an African version of God, compared to my Western version? We are both claiming the Bible as our source. It's easy for me to read the Bible through my lenses, but I think the weight of the Bible topples towards justice no matter what spectacles you wear.

The other day Sam told me that in his reading he came across the rallying political cry of fourth century Athens: Redistribute land, Cancel debt. Then he said that the problem is worldwide and history-wide, but Old Testament Israel never had it. Written into their law was that every seven years everyone's debt was cancelled, and every fifty years the land returned to its original owners.

I've read the Old Testament so many times but my Western mind has nicely skimmed these passages. Now suddenly I am horrified. How can I work a piece of land, improve it, make it fruitful, build a water system, fertilize the soil and fence it, knowing all along that it will pass back to its original owner and not stay in my greedy little hands? I can't; everything about it smacks of our black president's suggestion to re-appropriate land for blacks without compensation; everything about it smacks of being sacrificially serving of the poor, of deliberately working for my own short term benefit and other's long term. It's so just that I can't come to terms with it. How can I lend money to someone, the money I have been saving since I first started waitressing, that I built up through not eating meat and not buying Levi jeans, piling it up in bank accounts, moving it to equity and then to index tracker funds when I realized how much commission the active managers were taking? And then how can I say, You don't need to pay interest on my loan, and what is outstanding will be canceled in seven years.

It's only now as I argue with myself on paper that I realise there is as much disconnect between my suburban Western mind and the city centre's African mind, as we try and obey the Bible. So much of what troubles me is my white sensibility.

In the centre, city pastors wear suits with shiny shoes, and dress suits with shiny shoes. Their signs flash in neon on blue church buildings: Pastors Themba and Sheila Zondi, Pastors Amos and Ruth Shezi, Pastors Ray and Fay Mkhize. Pastors always come in pairs. City pastors drive, mostly Mercedes Benz. They don't walk, they certainly don't ride bicycles. They step from their big car, carrying a big Bible — bound in leather, stuffed full of papers — and once in their church, city pastors shout. They shout, and then they shout into a microphone, connected to four sub-woofers — two face the congregation and the other two are on the pavement outside. "I cast out the Spirit of Depression," the pastor, opposite our apartment, shouted. "Go! Go! Be goooooone! And I cast out the spirit of HIV. Go! Go! Be goooooone."

White people don't like black people shouting and they don't like black people thinking that God can work miracles. And black people don't know that we are like this.

Sinhle had spent a lot of time with Sam, discussing Xhosas and Zulus and how their cultures differed; talking government health care and the need to monitor private. Then one day as Sam stood by the garages she came listing to starboard in a shiny Toyota Corolla.

"This is my new car," she said to Sam as she danced from the front seat around the car, and then returned to the front seat, dancing.

Sam admired the car, and then turned to go inside his apartment.

"Noo, no, no," Sinhle smiled, white teeth flashing in her warm brown mouth, "Now, you must bless my car."

At that point the other car door opened and Sinhle's friend emerged. "Mustn't he?" She turned to her. "It's a new car, and he is a pastor, and he must bless it." They both agreed. And so dressed in their flamboyant African dresses and headdresses and glasses, they placed their hands on the car and bowed their heads.

"Er," Sam said, "Um...please, Lord, keep the driver of this car safe." On his first lunch with Sinhle she had pointed out a scar on her cheek from a car accident, about which she remembered nothing, except that she was driving. "Please keep the other drivers on the road safe," Sam continued, "and the pedestrians, and cyclists also. And," Sam paused, "please may this car be used to serve needy people. Amen."

The two friends kept their eyes closed. It was quiet for a few minutes before they looked up. Sam smiled at both of them and said, "Alright then."

The ladies looked at each other, and then they looked at their brightly beaded sandals, and then they looked back at Sam. "Oooh, ehe, hmm ... thank you," they said.

"I translated that roughly," Sam said to me later, "as: What kind of sorry excuse for a prayer was that?"

Sam had no authority. He didn't understand that he was the one that had to tell the car what to do in Jesus' name. And what the car had to do in Jesus' name was not get stolen and not get into an accident.

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My children can not bear to look at these gaudy pamphlets promising magic, but I like to study them — to investigate the specimen that rolled off the table from another world — and what I have learnt from all this study is that some blacks still think whites are in charge; they still think whites hold power. The pamphlet I have at the moment was given to me at a traffic light. It is designed as a business card and the address is in Montrose, a suburb I still see as white and wealthy. The pictures on this card, and on all the pamphlets I've studied, are of white people, even though these cards are not aimed at white people. The well-tanned six-pack above white underpants, the very long donkey penis, the loving couple rolling on a king size bed beneath billowing sheets — these are all photos of whites.

I have also learnt that some blacks still think magic can cure disease. The promise has always been for HIV and TB but this latest card includes diabetes: "Special ointment for diabetic men,

don't let your partner cheat on you come for help," it reads. For a long while I didn't get the connection, and then I assumed it was a comma that should have been a period.

And I have learnt that some blacks are willing to cover whatever spiritual bases they need in order to get help. This card starts with the heading: Umthandazi — The spell caster. The heading is flanked on the left by a photo of a Zulu man in leopard skins, seated in the doorway of a grass rondawel treehouse; and on the right by a painting of a Zulu warrior in full running attack. When I turn over, the pamphlet ends with: "Come for prayers in the comfort of my home."

And lastly I have learnt that some blacks have simple desires. This Umthandazi does not promise meaning, enlightenment, a sense of purpose, or anything our western witch doctors would. He promises a magic ring to win gambling, or the lotto. He sells Sandawana, which is money power oil. "This is available," the card reads, "to make you richer than ever, you apply it every day it will attract all rich people to you so that you can do business with them." And he helps men with sexual problems: "increase in size, get power for more rounds, low libido."

So simple, but it's all we all want: a happy marriage, just a bit more money, a successful career and, for one moment, that feeling of health again.

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The church across the road from our apartment block has a full-time security guard and two years ago his name was Gift. Sam gave him a bicycle to ride 40 kms to work each day. He then gave him a cycling top and a helmet, and Gift would have almost looked respectable if he hadn't been neglected as a child. His body was dark brown, ripped and glistening, but he had the mouth of an old man — gums exposed, three cracked yellow teeth staring out at angles, a big abscess in his cheek, pushing out the size of a golf ball from a fourth tooth gone wrong, and, with that abscess, pungent breath you had to step back from.

His wife was the relief guard when he was not on duty. We first heard about her because Sam took Gift some cake each night and each night he said, "Thank you. I am going to take it home for my wife; she loves cake." I hadn't pictured someone, with such bad teeth, loving a wife. I formed in my mind a large, cake-eating woman, and when she arrived the next week for work I was wrong. She was short and wiry and had a black-belt in karate. She was certified to carry a fire-arm and was very pretty. Her front tooth was gold. Why would someone so beautiful, thin and well-trained — a good earner — love Gift? Had they grown up in the same area, been promised to each other? Or was it that for all his bad breath, he was kind; he took cake home to her each day.

I was captured by Gift and his wife. I don't see other spouses laughing together, or talking together, or keeping cake for each other in the city. Sometimes Gift's wife would show up to work in his place. He hadn't come home and she didn't want him to lose his job and so she covered for him. Sometimes he came to work after a day of drinking Black Label beer, sobering

up as he dressed into his light blue uniform. Once she kicked him out of home for drinking his daily R100 and then she came to work in his place so he didn't lose his job.

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I've been reading Zakes Mda's memoir: *Sometimes there is a void*. I grew up feeling sorry for black people and feeling proud I had black friends and that I could say my mom fought apartheid, but I never really saw blacks as people who could love what I love. And I realised this whilst reading Zakes because I was surprised by him, and I was embarrassed to say what surprised me. I never expected to like a black South African's writing style, and I liked his. He is funny, and he laughs at himself, and his writing is full of interesting details. In 1964, whilst in exile in Lesotho, he browsed a catalogue of online mail order muthis: perfumes that will make girls love you and not another; creams that will fill girls with such joy in your presence they will laugh; bracelets that, when jingled, will make girls forget other boys. He remembers how in Durban, a shop called Mahomedy's sold cheap clothes and trinkets that were charmed. And he remembers apothecaries — part Zulu-owned, part Indian — because together these two tribes could work deep magic.

And, I was surprised by the breadth and volume of black thinkers in the 1960's, of blacks who loved education, not for getting a job, but for pleasure. They read *Treasure Island* for fun; and named their favourite soccer team *Pirates*.

And, I was surprised there were people in his village who kept dogs, and loved them.

A family lives on our corner, in a Gothic style, multilevel building, that used to belong to a white university lecturer who would host parties on his deck overlooking the park and river. This family is from Congo and they rent this house which is slowly cracking under shifting foundations; the once neat lawns now mud, which slowly mud up the whole house. A few families live here, actually, with a few children each and the children greet us as we walk our neighbour's dogs. Once I was picking up rubbish in the area and the twelve-year-old boy said to me, "Why are you picking up rubbish? You are a mother." I had been wondering why his mother didn't take him out for walks; he had been wondering why I could not behave like a real mother. Every day they stand behind bars as we pass, finding something to throw onto the stairs for fun, and their names are Blessing, Victory, Fortune.

One day they called Sam over. "Uncle Sam," they said, "Come look." We peered in at the gate, and behind the little boys with no pants, were two puppies — pale fur, pink-ringed eyes, clean noses — chained to a post. And that's how they stayed each day, while everyone was at work and school and home, chained to a post.

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Some of what Zakes wrote confirmed my view of black men. He was unusual to be a virgin in his teens and his friends did what they could to help him, offering up their girlfriends if need be. I am amazed at how black men treat black women in the city. I have grown up being harassed by men my whole life. White men behind fences, white men in cars, calling me over

to see. Indian men driving past calling, "Hey baby." Even at forty, walking in the suburbs to the grocery store, men would harass me; and then all that stopped when I moved into the city. Black men respect age. But if you are young, especially young and black, then it is extreme open season.

In a bid to finally cure Zakes of his virginity, his friends gang-raped a drunk village girl and then gave him the option of last turn. And he lay down on her, and told her to run.

Sometimes I want to run from here, from the gangs of black men that wander the streets with their leopardskin vests and beer breaths; and my two daughters blonde and fresh, looking like I looked at their age, when we lived in a nice white suburb, and fought apartheid from a distance.

## Making up for the past

When we first moved out of our white suburb  
and into this black inner-city  
I would do my morning laundry  
hang it on the wash-line  
return to my apartment  
and from my kitchen window  
watch it flapping in the breeze.

Looking out that window  
I always knew something was wrong  
but it took me months to realize  
that next to everyone else's  
my washing was dirty.

My T-shirts had oil stains,  
my linen was yellow,  
my drying cloths looked like they weren't fit to dry.

Most of the city washes by hand  
and most of the washing is done by kids  
and yet,  
their pink baby clothes have no crawling knee marks  
their men's work shirts have no armpit stains.

When I was thirteen  
and we were deep in the separated eighties,  
I moved from a white school  
to a mixed race private school,  
but my boarding house was black, and it wasn't months before they said  
my washing and I were dirty.

They rinsed in the morning and showered at night.  
I took a bath  
every other day.  
I re-used clothes on rotation until mid-term.  
They wore dresses once,  
scrubbed them by hand,  
hung them to dry.  
Each day they had a clean set of panties.

I tried but I could never conjure  
their obsession with taking care,  
putting the best foot forward,



looking and smelling good.

Eventually there was nothing to do but ask someone to hang me a washing line inside.

## Eric was here

I never knew Eric, he was always Sam's friend, but like many people in our city, I knew who he was. Riding a bicycle down Langalibalele Street, heading towards the city centre of Pietermaritzburg, it was hard to miss his double bed jammed into the double doorway of the old and abandoned St. Anne's hospital. It wasn't just a double bed in width, but in height, with two bases and two mattresses, giving the impression that this was how the princess and her pea would live, if she were homeless.

Sam first noticed the hospital, before he noticed Eric, and he loved it, with its tangled garden and hanging shutters and star-cracked windows. A few meters from Eric's bed an embroidered heart flapped in the wind, given as a red get-well-gift, now grey. And behind his bed a chain padlocked the double doors. I pictured: one day the floors shiny, disinfected, the corridors bustling with soft-shoed nurses and the next day the superintendent pulling the double doors to, winding the chain, clicking the lock, saying, "Well that's all folks. Thanks for everything."

And then, who knows when and who knows from where, Eric moved in. He assembled his bed, he hung his facecloth from the brass door handles, and he began to sweep. The 2 by 3 meter pavement in front of his doorway became his verandah. It was now private property, and he would keep it pristine.

It wasn't long before Sam began to notice not just the hospital, but Eric too. He often rode that route for errands and on return would tell me about Eric. Some days he was lying on his bed, legs spread, pillows fluffed, one arm behind his head, reading. Other days he was shouting, shaking his fists at the man on the street who had dropped a chip packet on his porch, or at the man in his mind who had dropped all the balls he was juggling. One day he was smiling at the heavens, arms raised and swaying like a Southern Baptist choir; the next day he was growling at the Angels and Demons to come down and face him like a man.

The only other place Sam had ever seen Eric was heading down Chief Albert Luthuli drive, through the former white suburbs, en route to a protected tributary of the Umsunduzi River. Once, while we still lived in these suburbs, Sam apprehended Eric. We were part of the neighbourhood watch and had to report suspicious activity which usually meant saying if we saw any BM's (text speak for *suspicious black males*). Every day at the same time, Eric hurried down our road with a black tog bag, looking behind him as he walked. One day Sam rode next to him and asked what was in his bag, and what he was doing, and why he was doing it in our nice white suburb?

In one hand Eric held his wet underpants, in the other a bar of green Sunlight Soap, and as Sam questioned him he carried on hurrying, carried on looking behind. Each day he would walk from his double bed in the city, to the river in the suburbs to wash his clothes. Then while they lay on the rocks to dry he would scrub his entire body, lathering and splashing, even in winter. The only time Eric ever asked for anything was when he ran out of Sunlight Soap to wash his clothes. He rang on our doorbell, apologetic. He wanted to buy soap but was short some coins.

We offered a bottle of Super-Concentrated Bio-Washing Liquid but he, disappointed we had no proper soap, insisted on just one squeeze.

It was only after we moved into the city centre, into Eric's street, that Sam connected the river-washing-Eric to the double-bed-Eric and stopped to introduce himself. Eric was reading a black Bible, open at the Old Testament book of Leviticus, and as Sam moved to shake hands he saw large parts of the text crossed out in black pen. When Sam asked why he had done this, Eric beat the book and said, "This is God's word, but these parts are wrong." It was an English Bible and the parts crossed out were full of complicated words.

After this meeting, Sam often stopped to speak with Eric. Sometimes he would interrupt their conversation to pick up leaves that had fallen and marred the clean surface of his porch. Sometimes he would end their discussion mid-sentence, turn his back and sweep. He was always cleaning. One day, at the time Eric usually washed in the Umsunduzi, Sam found him in bed. He'd heard a group of men wanted to steal his home, and he was guarding it. The washing could wait. He held a broom in one hand, and an iron rod in the other.

Other days Eric was calm and full of stories. He'd grown up with parents in a local township. At some point, whilst living at home, he'd had an accident. It wasn't clear what type, but the Road Accident Fund had paid him R80000. "I had lots of friends then," Eric said. "I'd give this one R50, and that one R50. Then it was all gone. I had R100 left, and I had to leave." We never understood if the accident had made him crazy and his family had asked him to leave, or if his family had asked him to leave because he'd run out of money. Either way, he now had no money, and no family.

Besides his ostentatious bed and his obsessive cleanliness and his distressing relationship with God, this was what set Eric apart. He was all alone. At night, our city streets are full of homeless people. As the sun goes down they gather up their folded homes — layers of cardboard boxes and old duvets — and then they find their gang. Sometimes the gang is a nuclear family, sometimes it's all men; some gangs are mixed through with women, and some look like adolescent boys who've been booted by their mums for the night. They sleep by the police station and, after a few nights of free love, usually go home. But everyone sleeps in groups. You need defenders on the street, and defenders are numbers, and Eric had none.

I once saw a lone chicken in the city centre. I looked up as it was running across four lanes of traffic. It had come from an alley, guarded by a gate and, after looking left and right, had panicked. Now within arms reach, the chicken eyed me sideways. I was sitting on the only patch of grass on the block, and it was wondering if we could share. Dirty-white, red-eyed, its neck was bald, as though someone had tried to wring it, and only wrung feathers. "Oh Chicken," I said, "this is not the place for you. You cannot survive on your own here. If the cars don't get you, the diseases will; if the diseases don't get you, the people will." The chicken lowered its naked neck and pecked.

In my two years of living in this city I've seen two other people sleep alone on these streets. The one was Itchy Man. He walked with wide apart legs so his sores wouldn't touch. During the day he sat and scratched, and passersby would skirt him. Sometimes when he'd had it with

scratching he'd unzip his pants and pull wide his underpants and, after inspection, lean in deep, pulling out something only he could see, holding it up to the light, clasped between finger and thumb, as though it was suddenly crucial it be identified. Men would look twice, ladies would look the other way. And then one day Itchy Man was gone.

The other was a lady. She sat outside a parking lot by day, back upright, legs stretched before her, covered with a blanket from Lesotho. She would smile as we passed, greeting in Zulu, and then at our defenseless backs she'd fling a long line of educated, angry English. I often wondered at the stories of these street people. Sometimes they were told by the plastic milk bottles, half filled with poster glue, sucked and discarded, or the smell of cheap white wine. When I mentioned this lady to a Zulu friend, he said it was Witchcraft, for sure. "You'll find she was rich, clever, married, and then her husband paid a *sangoma* to put a spell on her, and now here she is, on the streets, and mad, with very good English." Whatever her story, she was alone; and then she was also gone.

I knew that the chicken's days were numbered, but Eric went first. Sam knew him for two years, and his name in our home became triple barrel: Sam's-friend-Eric. Then one Saturday, walking to the top of Langalibalele, I noticed Eric's mattress was gone. The base was there and through the springs I could see traces of his life — a torn page from the Bible, a flat shaving of green soap. I thought perhaps he was airing his mattress, somewhere in the sun, and reminded myself to do the same when I got home.

But the next day, walking back from sport, we saw the front garden of the hospital had been cleared — weeded, mown, black-bagged.

It cheered us. This city is full of greasy, flaking, once-lovely buildings. But someone had seen the potential of this block and was willing to halt the decay; to turn it into a government office or a students' residency or even a music school.

And then a few days later Sam rode past the front of Eric's home and it was empty. No mattresses, no bases, no fragments of a life left flapping. Perhaps someone had brought the building, and was serious about restoring its beauty, turning it into a real home; and Eric was a smudge on the plans.

That was the last we saw or heard of Eric. We could not imagine how we would begin to trace him, or to find out what happened.

A few days ago, I read a story in the newspaper about a ten-year-old girl whose village in Congo was attacked. In the crossfire she was separated from her mother and father, and was hidden in the bushes by a group of villagers. She wanted to go back to find her parents — the dad who had caught fresh fish for her, the mom who had made her maize porridge — but the group said it was not safe. When night came, the village was level and smoking, and the girl and her group started walking. They walked 2000km's until they arrived in Pietermaritzburg. One of the village ladies, who had escorted the girl as they walked, left her in the parking lot of a shopping centre, saying she'd be right back. It got dark and the girl was hungry and tired. A man walked past and, in Swahili, asked what she was doing. She said she was waiting for her group, and he, being from Burundi, recognised her story, and invited her home to live with his family.

I know this girl; I have for three years. I see her once a week; she is friends with my children. She is in a good school now, she is in a loving home, and until today I never knew she might still have parents in the Congo. How would they ever begin to find her? How would she ever begin to find them? Why has no-one ever begun?

Four months have passed since Eric disappeared. The shutters at the old and abandoned Saint Anne's hospital are still hanging, the weeds have grown back; and the two by three meter section of pavement that used to be so clean is littered now, filled with the flapping of empty packets, smeared with the desperate stains of our city.

## Keeping Satan out

When we first moved into Gaydon, our block of flats, the lift was broken and tired professionals, having walked home with a few bags of shopping each, had to now also lug them up a few flights of stairs. But after a month of living there, work began on the lift. It had been broken for four years, while the body corporate saved enough money to fix it. And now in fact it wasn't even getting fixed. The old lift was being dismantled and stored in a garage, while the new parts were slowly brought in by large trucks, and an entirely new lift was rebuilt in to the old frame, with shiny greased pistons and pulleys and platforms.

It took six months and, when it was done, the body corporate held a party. It was a braai in our driveway, with a sound system in the garages, playing Zulu hits. The residents danced and ate smoky sausages and crunchy salads and crispy rolls. And then at 9pm exactly, everyone gathered in a circle and the pastor, who has lived here for almost thirty years, prayed: Jesus guard this lift, and keep Satan from breaking it again.

A few weeks later, the lift stopped working. And because we had all grown used to the stairs, when the floor lights didn't respond and the doors didn't ping, half us residents simply walked, hoping the body corporate would one day sort it all out again. The other half clucked in despair — broken for four years fixed for one month and now broken again — as they lugged their packets upstairs.

Then one day, after two weeks of no lift, Simon from the Schindler lift company arrived. He looked at the lift, pressed a few buttons, and then, on his way out, informed Sam that the lift was fine, it had just been locked. By Mrs Naidoo. She thought it needed a rest.

After the first big fixing, Mrs Naidoo had been given a key to lock the lift, which could essentially disable the lift when necessary. She is the only resident at home all day, and so it made sense for her to safeguard the key. Panicking over her only pension investment, her flat, and what another broken lift would do to that investment, and how much of her levies would have to go into fixing it this time, Mrs Naidoo regarded the lift as a fragile work of Swiss Engineering.

Not having grown up on Heidi or Frankenstein, she did not know what the Swiss could do. So Mrs Naidoo began to lock the lift, as she deemed fit. She locked it when she saw someone packing, or when a delivery van arrived, in case a grubby worker tried to put something heavy in her lift, like a chair. And after looking in vain for who might help, the movers would carry the fridge and stove and King-size bed, up five flights of stairs. And then she would lock the lift on wash days, when the little Zulu girls did their laundry in tubs, and carried them dripping down the passage to the lift, hoping for a rest as they descended the stairs to the wash lines. This in case the water damage the lift. And then she locked it sometimes, just when it needed a rest.

And so it was that Mrs Naidoo managed to keep Jesus in the lift, and Satan out.

## Painting walls white

At 3pm each afternoon Thabo knocks to ask when our kids can play. He leaves to school from an empty house and returns from school to an empty house, always with a packet of Twiggles chips and two round suckers. By the time he knocks, his fingers are bright red and I can never concentrate on what he is saying, I am so worried he might step into the house and smear my white walls with chip grease.

I want our kids to play with Thabo. He draws a crowd and can soon have a full soccer match, unfolding in front of the garages, that sometimes extends into rush hour traffic as kids retrieve misfired goals. But a new rule was made, shortly after we moved in, declaring that all communal kids-play required adult supervision. I once tried to supervise from my balcony, in between sanding parquet floors, running out to check no child was swinging on the wash-line or recreating goals from pot-plants; but Mrs Naidoo said she wanted to see me while I supervised, sitting downstairs with my full attention on the game, otherwise it didn't count as supervision, and that seemed like such a waste of time when I could have been painting walls white, that I ended up keeping my children inside.

Mrs Naidoo hates Thabo. He is loud, and he hides when she comes because the lift was broken and she is large and always needs a little boy to run up stairs for her, or to carry her parcels. Also he loses his magnetic security tag and when no one is looking he bump- forces the security gate open. Mrs Naidoo has to get the gate fixed every few months, knowing it is him, never able to catch him.

This apartment block is full of untended children. Children who make their own breakfast, wash their own dishes, leave for school with a key around their necks, crossing rush hour roads alone, as young as six. I admire them and I wish my children were as independent, as street-wise, as clever in relating to older people, as good at avoiding harm. But I also look into their flats on winter evenings at half past five when the sun is leaving and the gloom is coming and they have not yet been allowed to turn on the lights and they are buttering thick slabs of Rama bread for supper, and they are doing this alone or with a toddler for company; while Thabo plays soccer, long into the dark, long after I have left.

There is a warm open-faced Zulu lady who lives on the second floor. Her husband operates a taxi business, and although he could afford a large sprawling house and garden, he lives here rather because there is a taxi war in South Africa and it is hard to shoot a taxi boss who lives amongst so many witnesses. She is a teacher and one day she called me from way down the road and ran to catch me up and to stop me and say, "I see your family together all the time, going for walks, playing soccer, riding bikes, but how do you do this? How do you get your children away from the TV; how do you get them outside; how can I do it too?"

I explained about the field down the road and the museum across the road and the public library on the next block and for a few weeks I saw her outside — watching her kids kick a ball, and running with them on the field, and setting off with them in the direction of the library, and smiling at us as we went past, following us down the road with her greedy eyes.

I never asked her to join us. I had pictured friendships here in the city, I had pictured sharing my life, but I don't think I ever had the strength to do it. I find the start-up of all friendships tiring, I always wish I was already two years down the road, but cross-cultural friendships just seemed one rung higher, one notch harder, five years instead of two. I wanted my family to share their lives here, but I soon realized that I didn't want to have to share mine. I liked the jobs, the painting, the cleaning, the ordering of all our experiences into tidy words, but I didn't want to be the one having the experience.

And so now her children are inside again. It is hard for me to step outside of my white painted walls.



## Settled

We met Len soon after moving into the city center of Pietermaritzburg. His house was opposite our apartment balcony and one day, as his gate was opening, he drove his car into it, knocking the slide from its track. He was old and white and all our protective instincts came rushing. Go help him, I told Sam.

Sam crossed the road and lifted the gate back into place, but we needn't have bothered. Len looked lost, wobbling on his bowed arthritic knees, dressed in tweeds and a macintosh, but he wasn't. He'd lived in his house for 40 years and, after apartheid had ended and the city had slowly turned black and crumbling around him, he'd stayed.

I took a while to peg Len. He was one of those poor whites — insecure, raving, but determined to protect his investment in the city? He was an extreme liberal, an anti-apartheid activist, one that was willing to stay after the battle was won and fight for the cause of blacks? He was completely naive and hadn't noticed the city had become dirty and dangerous?

It turned out he was none of these. He had been a court reporter most of his life and knew what was happening in South Africa. He worked for the court two days a week when we met him. He was educated, disparaging of the ANC government, but not racist in the usual way whites are when they are alone with other whites. He supplied the neighbourhood with avocados and pecan nuts and gave money to whoever knocked on his door. When I had to decide why he had stayed, when all the other whites that could afford to had left, I decided he liked it here. He liked his house, red brick and dark and rambling. He liked being surrounded by people who used his house; he liked being surrounded by people who used him.

In an old age home he would've been lonely and bored. Here he could practise fly fishing at the field, and talk to the security guards as they harvested his figs, and observe whatever new business his tenants were trying. One day the Zimbabwean family who rented the flat beneath his studio slaughtered twenty chickens on his lawn. The youngest son took a chicken from the cage, the eldest son stood on each wing, lifted its head and sawed its neck off with a bread knife, the mother held the body up, legs still twitching, and then dumped it in a bucket of boiling water, where the chicken waited to be plucked. We were offered free-range chickens at a good price that day, but where had they been free-ranging? Len watched as his wife's lawn became sticky with blood and feathers.

Later that year the family who rented Len's front cottage began running a laundromat. They had been running it in the business district of town but reasoned that Len being old wouldn't notice if they ran it on his front verandah. The greatest cost of a laundromat was the water, and now this cost was no longer — their rent at Len's was fixed, regardless of water use. Our balcony faced their verandah and we wondered if we should let Len know; but we didn't need to.

Len had a funny way of dealing with abuse. We learnt from him a gesture that we began to practice in our own lives. You start with your hands facing forward and limp like a zombie,

then you spin them out like you're going to toss something over each shoulder and then you stop dead. It means I care about this, it makes me limp, but there is nothing I can do, so I am going to chuck the issue out of sight. That was what he did when we discussed the economic state of the country, or when he first saw his new water bill. And then sometimes Len acted, and so a few months later we saw the tenants reloading their three washing machines and two tumble dryers on their truck and moving business.

Every day Len would pick up the litter outside his house. Once he had closed his gate and so told Sam just to get the few items of litter on the road and to pass them to him. Sam hates germs. He uses his knuckles on ATM's and will wait in a public space for someone else to open the door, so he can keep it open with his feet until he needs to leave. He picked up the juice bottle and the chip packet, but ignored the used wet wipe. Len wouldn't let him go. Please pass that to me, he said.

What? Sam said.

Len pointed and said, That.

Sam laughed and changed the subject. Eventually Len opened the gate and did it himself.

The litter in the city centre of Pietermaritzburg is unbelievable. It's as though someone pours rubbish bins into the road daily; the streets are rubbery under dirt, and urine, and grease. When we first got to know Len he was running daily on a sports field, just down from his house, with his dogs, but soon after his knees became weak and he asked if we could walk his dogs for him — two dogs, one three-legged, possibly from a train accident — and so each day we would fetch them and head to the field via the stairs of despair. There is another route, down a lovely red-brick-road, but Len's dogs run into traffic and so he insisted we use the stairs. Used purple condoms line these stairs and, on either side, like distance markers, are deposits of coiled human poop, the size you'd expect from a sumo-wrestler, not from the emaciated vagrants who leave them there. The dogs would always find something here to eat, like moldy fish, and then they'd come and lick Sam's legs. He liked them, but at this he would kick them away.

But Len on his wobbly legs picked up every bit of rubbish he saw, teetering from the stairs to the road to his gutters, he could not overcome his childhood — this was his home, the streets must be clean, he had settled like the Jews were meant to in Babylon.

## Knocks on the door

There were a number of people, besides Thabo, who knocked on our door in the first year, but mostly the knocks were for Sam — for Sam who liked people, more than he liked white walls — could he join the body corporate? Sell a pressure cleaner they had bought by mistake? Lend some paint to touch up a door? Mount some curtain rails and a flatscreen TV? Fix a DB board? Ride around the block looking for three stolen wheelie bins?

Mrs Naidoo came to see Sam as her personal boy — she sent him to the shops for hardware or to hand in her coins for cash, she called him to empty the rubbish bins or to give them a hose-pipe rinse, she told him to hurry or he'd miss the truck, and if anything needed a bit of hammering she'd say to a passing kid, "Call the Pastor."

I liked how she saw him as inferior. He was a church minister, doing a Masters in Classics, which to her meant he had no real job. She had been in charge of stock supply at a large grocery store. Now that was proper work, work of concrete worth.

No one ever knocked on the door for me. A few months into life in the city, the gap between what I thought my life would be like, and what it was like, had widened and I was struggling to straddle it. The flat was dingy and I needed it to be beautiful, fast — I needed it to be orderly, if I was going to make it, living in a city that wasn't orderly.

And my eldest daughter wasn't happy. She had just turned 13 and she missed her pretty room and her swimming pool and her garden; she missed her privacy; she wanted to be free, but here she felt watched and afraid; here she felt that she couldn't walk alone.

And so I began to get busy with making a home, and with making lives that could work for us. I began to avoid eye contact and to walk fast and to make it clear that my door could not be knocked on. I was only asked for help three times in the city, by three Zimbabwean women, and each time it was paid help. Would I consider running a crèche, teaching English, and doing extra lessons in the school holidays?

The knocks on the door weren't always for help, though. They were often for gifts — gifts given for no reason, and with no explanation, and with no sense of anything being out of place — a 10kg frozen fish by a policeman who worked at the harbour, a box of marshmallow eggs to be rationed out each night leading up to Easter, some fresh masala and curry leaves, and twice, a two hundred Rand note folded, pressed and delivered with a squeeze, in a downturned palm by a smiling night-shift nurse, who said, "God bless you, you and your family."

## Life slips in

I was afraid of being afraid in the city. I was afraid of being at the mercy of a culture I didn't share. I was afraid of being the minority. I had been the minority at boarding school, and when I studied youth care at Durban Tech, but those were protected environments. This was not. For twenty years I had lived in white suburbs where black people excused their existence, now I would be excusing mine.

When we first began riding into the city, it was always on weekdays and it was always bustling and warm. Then we began riding in on weekends. I am sure these big groups of drunken, white-vested, too-old-for-school-but-still-at-school boys were always here, but the city empties out after 1pm on Saturday, and suddenly all you notice are these threatening mobs. They are no longer diluted. One day one boy called out, "Hey baby, come over here," to our blossoming teenage daughter, as she was riding past with Sam, and Sam stopped to shout into his face for so long that we were in danger of becoming not just that weird white family that rides everywhere, but also that family with the crazy father.

It's hard to make a decision, that looks like a three-point turn on a highway, and not feel guilty about what it might do to your children. When I knocked on the door of flat 6, to check if it was for sale, the woman that opened wanted to know who was asking. I said Me, and she said, "Oh, that's interesting. Everyone else wants to leave the city, and you want to move in." I felt proud at the time. I was taking my stand for multi-racialism. I was refusing white privilege, and living like the rest of South Africa. It drove me crazy that all the white liberals, the anti-apartheid activists my mom had hung out with, all the Black Sash members and Institute for Race Relations directors now lived in the white enclave of Hilton.

But pride doesn't sustain you for long and once we moved in I worried I had made a decision that would scar my children. They began to reminisce on the suburban house we'd left, our beautiful garden, the tarmac on which they could hit a tennis ball, the slide into their pool, how they would have lunch and spend the afternoon lying in the sun. Had I given that all up, all the natural goodness of childhood, for smog and soot and litter?

Six months after we moved in all of this guilt bubbled up over Anna. She probably would have had the accident even if we'd stayed in the suburbs, but she wouldn't have had the accident if we hadn't sold our car, and that was connected to living in the city, and so in my mind it all became messy. We had been invited for Sunday lunch and were halfway there.

At the top of the hill, Sam had told her to put her head down and go as fast as she could. That way she'd be halfway up the next hill before needing to pedal. And so as he headed off, she flew down the hill behind him, so far behind him that he didn't see her wobble, didn't see her bounce, didn't see the car swerve. He was at the top of the hill by the time she stood up, sprinkled in blood, limping to me, not crying till she licked her teeth and felt the dangling nerves, snipped in half.

When Anna was six, I took her for a walk, and as a couple passed us the woman exclaimed, "What a beautiful child." I hadn't realized until then that Anna was unusual — blonde, blue-eyed, striking. Now here she was before me, three years later, ruined. Tar etched into her face. Six teeth shorn in more than half. Not by her choice, but by mine.

When we had sold our car, and decided our family of seven would walk or ride wherever we went, there had been so many good reasons. It would help us save money, it would keep us all fit. It would slow us down — it's hard to rush from one meeting to the next if your only way of rushing is a bike. And it would help our kids fight a sense of entitlement — they could arrange play dates, as long as they were willing to ride to them.

I always knew it could go wrong, though. And now here it had.

Sam turned round to see why we weren't following. The bicycles were spread over the road, I was asking Annie if they were adult teeth, knowing they were, pretending they weren't, when Sam made it back to us and crouched before her. "Oh, no, Annie," he said.

A truck stopped then and picked us up and drove us the rest of the way. The driver said he'd seen our column around town, we stood out because no-one else rides with children. He said he had grandchildren, about the age of Anna. And then he kept quiet.

Our doctor arrived, soon after we did. He wondered if Anna needed a skin graft; he decided not. Anna lay down on the couch, her bright red wounds washed, and asked him if her teeth would grow back. Later when our dentist came Anna wanted to know if she had to have fake teeth, because she'd seen them before on old men, and they were always yellow.

This was her distress, not the pain, but the loss of a body part, like a toe or a hand, snapped off when it should have been young and fresh and growing. The dentist described the new teeth as fillings. Anna turned her face to the wall.

For days after the accident, I'd wake from sleep heavy, searching my consciousness for what had gone wrong, until I remembered: Anna. Anna dabbing her tongue on her teeth, trying to lie so the sores didn't stick, saying sorry when her pus messed the sheets. Anna reassuring me she liked the time off school, liked the soft food. Anna struggling to get to sleep, and then waking at night with a yelp. Anna staying home while the others went out.

When I was Anna's age, my parents gave me a bicycle, explained the route to school, and if I didn't want to walk I knew where my wheels were. At our school there were rows of bicycle racks; my parents were not uncommon. Some kids took the bus, some walked, but it was unusual to arrive in a car.

I was ten years old, on the way home from school, when a white car pulled up next to me. The man called me over for directions. I moved closer to point the way and saw in his lap a bulging rod of purple-veined flesh, covered only by his hand that went up and down, up and down.

He laughed; I woke at night yelping.

In the months that followed, when I thought back on what had happened to Anna, I sometimes comforted myself with that man. The decision my parents made, let life slip in on me, like our decision had for Anna. Life does find a way in.

## Pastors in the city

A few months after Sam and I moved into the city, Mrs Naidoo arrived at our door with a broken plywood table. Sam was to cut it in half, attach new legs and so make two speaker stands, which he was to then set up with her speakers, so she could listen to Hillsong Praise. I liked the way Mrs Naidoo treated Sam. I was afraid that city folk would treat us differently because we were educated and white, but she simply saw us as her workers. She reminded Sam the next day at 8 o'clock, and the next day at 7. The day after, he went to her apartment.

It was a Saturday, and as he worked, she talked.

"We need Bibles, King James Version Bibles, Sam. Today our pastor said to the teenagers, 'Hold up your phones.' All the hands went up. Then he said, 'Hold up your Bibles.' No hands."

"Perhaps they have Bible apps on their phones," Sam said.

"No, Sam," Mrs Naidoo cut in, "they are ashamed. They mustn't hide. They must walk around with their Bible. A big one, in their hands, so everyone can see." She looked meaningfully at Sam. Sam began cutting the table in half.

"Then," Mrs Naidoo continued, "the pastor said, 'This is the year of debt cancellation. If you are unemployed give R7, if employed R77, and if you have a mortgage R777. Give, and then watch God work.'"

"Debt cancellation for the church, then?"

Mrs Naidoo ignored Sam. "I gave them my whole pension. And my son," she leaned in closer, "is bringing up R777, when he comes to visit."

Sam was almost done glueing.

"But Sam, not all of my family is with God. My niece," Mrs Naidoo's eyes stretched wide, "she smokes, but she's a deacon at her church, and she serves communion. The pastor knows. But he says nothing."

Sam assembled the speakers and plugged them in. Had Mrs Naidoo been watching him, noting his faded clothing, his phone, the strands of tobacco that sometimes lined his bin?

Sam is a church minister and when we first moved into the city, people called him Pastor. But after a few weeks, when they saw that he cycled and walked most places, and wore high-tops and overalls most days, it changed to Pastor Sam, and now, after three years, it is mostly Sam. I was surprised by how intimidated I was, by this African view of Pastor and, by extension, Pastor's Wife — (the lady in the mustard skirt-suit, smiling out from shiny photos, just beside and behind her husband, armed with a clip-board of rules and regulations).

Pastors can get away with a lot in Africa, they can be dictators of countries and instigators of civil wars, but they must look smart, and they mustn't smoke or drink, and Sam did both, on occasion. In our early twenties we had listened to a talk on How to be a Puritan Yahoo, and it had explained that the Puritans loved their God and all of his good creation, including tobacco

and wine, and we had gladly adopted this view not realising we would one day be living in an African inner-city teaching our children to smuggle beer bottles, in bags of library books, past Mrs Naidoo's hawk eyes.

There is another pastor who lives across the road from us. He is a refugee from the war in Congo and he lives in a slum house — muddied sagging walls, children naked from the waist down outnumbering adults — and on Sundays he hosts a church service that does a lot of clapping and chanting and it is small and he has no money. In the afternoons his wife pushes a stolen grocery trolley, maybe from Checkers or Game, to an alley in town where a few Chinese run a Zulu nightclub. After a good few hours of drinking the Zulu men come out hungry and this Congolese pastor's wife has a fire going on the street, cooking sausages and rolls, and this is how she makes them a bit of money. And then at 3am she walks herself home, pockets full of change, to her little slum across the road from us. There is nothing I am more afraid of than facing a crowd of drunk men, and walking home unarmed and alone through these streets, but she has come from a war in Congo where soldiers rape as a sign of victory and she shows no fear.

Sam connected with her pastor husband on Facebook. In his profile photo he was in a very smart suit. The mayor of Pietermaritzburg parks his car on the pavement in the city centre, outside the city hall, which is a beautiful red brick building, with the largest pipe organ in the Southern hemisphere, and four of the mayor's colleagues park their cars there too and this pastor was posing in front of one — a black Mercedes I think — pretending it was his, so that the folk back home could see he was a real pastor.



## Glory church worship leader

The hem of Sam's t-shirt had curled loose  
like days' old lettuce,  
his shorts were dribbled in baby-spit paint,  
and in his hand a plastic bag, torn by the weight,  
of his camera, looked  
from where the owner stood,  
like a fat bottle of beer.

Are you renting this lot? Sam asked.  
I'm a pastor and I need  
a parking zone for church.

The owner laughed and drove away  
in a black SUV,  
with *Glory Church Worship Leader*,  
printed on the back.

The next day,  
Sam tried again.

He put on  
his Sergeant Pepper boots,  
his Levi jeans  
and his Millionaire scent and  
he was asked into the office.

## One morning, not unlike any other

I looked out my bedroom window one morning and saw a white VW Golf, and in the front seat a lady, round and warm and mama-like, wearing a pastel flowered fleece, and in the driving seat a man, with his hands around her neck.

The man squeezed until the woman fainted, and then he pressed his electric control and rolled her window half-way down and waited for her to come to. And when she did, she put up her hands, as though to catch his hands, or swat them away, as though all he was doing was pinching her, or tickling, but the tickle was like when you're a kid and your cousin's hands are in your shirt, and you're laughing but you're afraid.

And then she hit out at him, head down like a boxer, wrestling into his middle-aged stomach, just as some girls walked past and looked in the window and laughed — at last, a woman fighting back, and a young one at that — and then as the girls kept moving, the driver reached over, and pressed his hands to the passenger's neck, and squeezed until she fainted. And then he opened the window again.

A man on the street looked in and started back and wondered if he should say something, before she came to, and the window went up, and the man on the street kept moving.

And this time the passenger didn't fight back. She used the hood of the fleece to wipe tears from her cheeks and to cover her face as she cried, and then the driver reached over to strangle again and that was when the police arrived. Two ladies, and they pulled up next to the driver and said, We have had a report of assault, happening in this street, in a white Golf. And he said, From whom? The police officers pointed to the people and buildings around them, looking down on them, leering in on them, and the man said, I don't know what you're talking about, or where that assailant might be.

So the two officers turned to their car and, as they walked back to it, the man hit his woman again, and again, and again. And then, as the police drove off, he took the long knife, that had been lying on his back seat, and he put it in his cubby, and he also drove off.

The police phoned my husband then, and said they had dispatched a van, but the officers couldn't find the assault, and my husband said, Oh just forget about it.

Maybe we'd made it worse for her, phoning the police; maybe she was with him because he'd kill her if she wasn't; maybe she liked being strangled and then slowly coming to as the fresh city wind blew life into her face. But it is hard to know what to do or not do, when you look out your window one morning, just wondering if you should wear long pants or a skirt.

## Vulgar Languages

I hadn't taken note of Pakistanis, in the South African inner-city, until Sam came home with a story from Mrs Naidoo.

"Sam," she had stopped him as he headed for his apartment, "I'm exhausted. I've been up since 3am. A Pakistani man, in his underpants, with three ladies — one behind the gate, two locked out trying to get in. And Sam," Mrs Naidoo is a serious church-goer, "the vulgar languages!"

I pictured maroon underpants and it was hard for me to erase that image for quite some time: the black metal gate, some slightly yellow, hairy legs dancing behind it, two unwanted ladies, and, volleying between them, vulgar languages.

After that I saw Pakistanis everywhere. They are short and designed to blend into a crowd, with their grey kurtas and name brand trainers called Ekin or Adids, but down the main shopping street in town, on one day and in a 100m stretch, I counted four Pakistani men. Each had a plastic cloth, smoothed before a store front, and on it either cellphone covers or watches. To both sides of the cloth lay piles of city rubbish, but all four men had feather dusters, and they dusted each item before laying it out, and they dusted the area around the cloth too.

In one part of the inner-city, where whites don't go, I went into a shop looking for an item of clothing I couldn't find anywhere else, and I noticed the shop was owned by a Pakistani man and his son. Neither could speak English but they were both fluent in isiZulu. Their Zulu cashier had to translate for me as I asked about the latest Fourth Patrol Scout uniform? Size 13?

And only then, after I'd formed a new group in my city brain — white, Zulu, Indian and Pakistani — did I start seeing them at our apartment block. Here, if the recyclers don't go through your bins and show all the world you have a problem with drink, neatly stacking your beer bottles on the pavement for sorting, then the security guards ask you to sign your visitors in, showing all the world you have a problem with sex. The security company in charge of our block thought one way of slowing criminals down was to get them to sign a visitors' book, and so every night from 6 till 6 visitors record their cellphone number and reason for visit. And every night Sam hangs out with security and watches who is signing in. And almost every night the Pakistani men sign in young Zulu ladies. Usually a few at a time.

The good thing about the city is it blows wide all your notions on religious folk. In the suburbs a church deacon can smile sweetly and drive into his high-walled property for the night and drive out the next morning and I would know nothing except that he is a dear old Christian soul. But not in the city. Here we all know the man who goes to church each night and then stays up till 1am so no-one can see him letting in his girlfriend; and the Seventh Day Adventist who tells us the real sabbath is on Saturday and that we are all missing the point and then on Friday leaves his office at 10am to buy some Black Label whiskey to drink from the bottle in the park; and the rich stories they must have about me, as I have about them, those celibate Muslim folk, who come in most nights with ladies to share.

One resident, who has just returned from Pakistan because the hair implants there cost 15000 ZAR and here they are 60000, pays for his ladies to be brought to his flat in a metered taxi. This is a safe, but expensive, means of transport. He meets his ladies at the taxi door, with his full head of hair, pays the driver and then escorts them to our security gate, as though they are celebrities, having arrived in town for Grammys. And here he has the unfortunate task of signing them in — reason for visit:visit — which means that security, and whoever is talking to security, knows if there is one lady at a time or three. Two Pakistanis share a one-roomed apartment, and their ladies overlap, and the rest of us residents can't figure out who does what and where, but one thing we do know: every lady signs in as Sindi. Why is this the name of choice? The Pakistani activity slows down over Ramadan and there are not three ladies per night, but perhaps one each alternate night, and although I sound like I am mocking, in fact I am not, because we all have our addictions to fight, and our longings to be good at spiritually significant moments.

The other place I see Pakistanis is, on Sunday afternoons, on the Maritzburg college sports fields, or what we call 'our park'. It's an unusual area. The steps leading from the city are slimed with fake hair and chip packets and poop and just as you think you cannot stand the stench you step on to an immaculate field. The grass is green and short, the plain trees are planted in rows, one hundred years old, the white boundary lines are thick and clear and there is no rubbish, not even a sweet wrapper. Used by the Maritzburg college rugby team in winter and cricket team in summer and the rest of town the rest of time. Zulus play soccer, foreign Africans run and Pakistanis play cricket. They bring their own broom to sweep the protective sawdust from the pitch, and whilst they engage with city people all week long — bribing for their patch of ground from which to sell; hustling Zulus for a life-time deal; offering the best price this side of Pakistan — they don't on Sunday. It is their sabbath break.

The cricketers are usually dressed in proper cricket kit — shiny nylon, purple or green, with their black hair slicked back. Their bowling and batting show definite skill, training from a young age, perhaps the hope of making it into The Shaheens; but the game is lost or won on the fielding, and this is where their city bodies drop them. Weighed down by paunches and double chins, they chase each four in vain, followed by their team-mates' vulgar languages. They always have an umpire, to break up the fights, and to make decisions for them to dispute. They shout, they throw their bats, they come face-to-face spit flying, and they set a time to do it again next week. They always play on Sundays and although many locals hang around, hoping to be invited onto a team, they always play alone — washing the dust from their blood, the city stains from their skin, remembering Pakistan.

## On prejudice

Most days Raj parks his truck on the hill outside our balcony, to run start it, and so it is from here that I first hear wind-borne snatches of his conversations:

"I have too much for her ... I'm a human being also ... I have blood ... I hurt."

"I don't tell lies, that Hindu man tells lies."

"Buying her dog food ... her new boyfriend ... he can help her now."

From these, I assume Raj is mired in relationships, but in fact he has only a wife and an adult daughter. I see the daughter often, still attractive with youth, long shiny black hair waving round her round body, in polka-dot onesies and fluffy slippers, crossing the city roads with a friend in her pajamas too. His wife works, although I am not sure when or where, but he drives her there. She is dressed like a secretary when I see her — glasses, neat shoes, flicked hair — and she looks like a headmistress, mouth set in a line of discontent. Out of their family, Raj alone greets us, and when Sam eventually asks what work he does, with his flat bed truck and rattling tools, he says, "Mister, I'm in Ministry."

I have a prejudice against Indian Christians. I knew this before, but moving out of a white suburb into a mixed-race inner-city, reminded me. My father once read a book on Indian ethics which explained that Indians have a set body of values, values that trump their religion, that they see as virtuous, and one of them is making money. At least that's about how my father explained it to me; but this even is not exactly where my prejudice came from as it just reinforced what I already thought: that Indians are swindlers, weaving invisible cloth out of stolen gold, using Jesus to fool the emperor.

We first met Vikesh on our walk from the park to our apartment. We had paused on the stairs because Sam had seen two young men pretending to look for something in the grass while they waited for us to pass. We had decided to turn to avoid the confrontation when Vikesh leaned out the window and said, "Keep going. I'm watching you. And I've got a gun."

We turned in any case because there were other routes and as we did so, Vikesh kept talking. He was an ex-marine. (This troubled me at the time — did South Africa even have marines? Did he mean he owned a boat?) But now he was in some sort of righteous pickle that I couldn't follow — the police wanted him for killing a criminal in self-defense? He had information on a criminal and was under police protection? It was something like that, but either way he was now in a completely new line of work. He ran a ministry for school kids called Soldiers for Christ. He was built like a soldier and when he greeted you he did it with a salute not a handshake. "I know he's quirky," Sam said, "but I wish I had the courage to do that. I hate touching peoples' hands."

I later put together that this was the man I had heard about, who was adding haphazardly to his property, without building plans, causing storm water trouble for the rest of the street, because he felt called by God to provide a boarding house for rural children who wanted to school in town. He owned a bright green military vehicle and a bus — one of those old school buses that you no longer see, with *Fighters for Christ* on the side. When I first heard about Vikesh, I never thought perhaps he was serving rural kids; I always thought he was by-passing the plans, to

make the bucks, out of those poor rural mamas who would cash in their monthly grants and pensions to make sure their kids learnt English in the city.

What Vikesh thinks of us on our daily walks I don't know, but each time we approach the steps, his lace curtains rustle. He is watching. He is watching with his gun and if anyone tries to mug us he will shoot.

Raj by turn made his thoughts on us known, becoming slowly cold, cataloging us before we could him. When we first moved into this apartment block he said, "Come for tea" and "I'd like to have you for supper." One day he said to me, "I'd like to come in and look at your flat, okay?" I said, "No," and he said, "Oh, I'm just interested. I used to come in all the time when the white doctor lived here. It's huge, the levy must be expensive."

"It is," I said.

Even so, even after my lack of hospitality, Raj would still hold the gate for me when my hands were full of shopping; he would still greet all of our kids by the wrong names. But then one day he asked Sam for help and Sam said No, he was too busy. "It's for a ministry," Raj said. "I want to help people get work." And when Sam still said no, Raj became distant, no longer waiting for us to get through the gate first. Had he just been hanging on to his friendliness, thinking we might be of use to him, when his family in the first week had decided we were not?

Months later, as a sign of this coolness, Raj took a spade of ours. Sam was working on the steps from our apartment to the park, pulling down balloon vine that was choking jacarandas, slashing the red weed Rwandans harvest as spinach but that left untended covers the ground with thick stalks. He wanted to plant grass that could be mowed, and so he needed a spade to take grass from the soccer field to the newly cleared banks by the stairs, and he needed a sharp spade so he bought a new one for R200 and stored it in the caretaker's room. And then, when he went for it one day, the caretaker said Raj had it. The caretaker had told Raj not to take it, but Raj had insisted.

"Be careful how you ask for it back," I said. (All the vicious vengeance crimes, I'd heard growing up, had been by Indians — little tiffs that had exploded into extravagant killings.) Sam simply asked for the spade to be returned and a week later when it wasn't he asked again and a week later when it wasn't he asked again and then it was. And now Raj does not talk to us.

Growing up under apartheid, in a liberal family, I used to say, "I'm not racist against blacks, it's the Indians I struggle with." As a teenager, I thought this was a particularly cool thing to say because the real persecution was against blacks and I was opposed to that, but I didn't feel Indians were persecuted and so I felt free to joke about what I didn't like about them.

In the 1980's, at the height of the township wars between the United Democratic Front and Inkatha, when bands of schoolboys welded pipes into shotguns and fought hand to hand with axes, my mother taught at Amakholwa High School. Each day she would drive her fragile white beetle into the township, and each day we hoped she would drive it out again. During this time she was often in important meetings, or opening her home to important people and so when Nisha and Dev started parking their Mercedes in our garden, a few times a week, I thought they were just another group of anti-apartheid activists having a clandestine meeting. They always

gave us large trays of sweetmeats as thanks — red squares of fudge, green condensed milk drops, yellow butter biscuits, the colours of Christmas all year long — and so I never thought to ask if they were with The Black Sash or The Institute of Race Relations or the underground ANC?

"No," my mom explained, "Nisha is in an unhappy marriage. Her husband is harsh on her. She wants to have a friendship with Dev. And they have no place to meet. So I said they could come here."

They never got out of the car, although the windows did mist up. Nisha was always dressed in a sari, her bare fifty-year-old tummy bulging softly from the side, red dot on her forehead, silver bangles jangling, golden tooth flashing. And Dev was young, black hair, dressed in a suit. They were an unlikely couple and that was why I never thought they were a couple. For a long time I'd see that blue Mercedes parked under our guava tree and I'd think we were doing our bit to fight the system, to overthrow apartheid, to liberate Azania; whilst Dev and Nisha were having sex.

I know now that Indians fought in the liberation struggle, but then I thought they were just pretending to. At twelve my mom sent me to a mixed race boarding school. It was 1988 and the New Era Schools Trust initiated about three schools around the country that were committed to racial integration. Private schools had allowed black kids in during apartheid, but the quota had to be very low, I think under 10%. NEST's idea was if they offered bursaries based on parent income and if they aimed for exactly one fourth of each race group (white, black, coloured, Indian), and if the children lived and studied and played together, then they could spearhead transition in South Africa. Except, to me it felt that there were always hardly any Indians. Those that came were top of the class and perhaps that was why they didn't come. The school was experimental, if you had the money and education to consider it you would probably put your child into an established private school or even a good Indian school. Because this is the other thing about Indians in South Africa: they are determined to get ahead.

It was at this school that I made friends with the only Indian I have ever been friends with — Rosha. She was skinny, with curly black hair, and she wore a black top-hat. I had long blonde hair and wore a bandanna, and together on her narrow dorm bed we would fling our hair around crooning, "Oh oh oh oh sweet child of myeeyiyeyine." We were Axl and Slash; we were Guns 'n Roses.

Rosha was two years older than me and besides Guns 'n Roses and oily Green Mango Atchar, we had little in common, but for my first year at the school I regarded her as my best friend. Her father was a journalist which made her different in my eyes: she was fighting the system, not using it to get ahead; she listened to hard white rock, not Quincy Jones. It was at her house one weekend that I first discovered that Indians were racist against blacks. We were walking to a mall, with some of her old school friends and one of them said to me, "How can you go to school with all those peckie ous?" I can't remember my answer but I remember a new category opened up in my brain: while we are fighting apartheid, Indians are making love; while we are fighting apartheid, Indians are enjoying it.

Sam and I spent our first married years in Durban, which has more Indians than any other city outside of India. Sam worked as a mechanic with Indians and would come home with lots of wonderful phrases: "I have a poking pain in my heart" (instead of a stabbing pain), "the surf is boiling" (instead of the surf is cooking), and "my animals are grazing" (instead of my black workers are on lunch break). We shook our heads at this last one. In my mind if you want to get paid and treated poorly as a black person in South Africa then go work for an Indian. I know this is not always true because any racial statement is a generalisation, but is it mostly true? I have examples of it, but are they just being added to some base beliefs that I picked up as a child, or are they heavy enough proof to make a conclusive statement like what I am making in my head all the time?

There is Blaise. He came to Pietermaritzburg from Burundi, with his four children and wife, as a political refugee. He has not yet received his paperwork as an official refugee and so he legally cannot work. But South Africa has no net for people like him so he must work. He is a qualified primary school teacher with 20 years' experience. He found a job in a photocopy shop, for six days a week, R2000 per month, almost half the minimum wage. It's illegal pay, but he cannot complain because he is an illegal worker. The shop is owned by Indians.

A friend doing her post-doc research, into the relationship between madams and maids in South Africa, says she hasn't come across any positive reports of Indian madams. Sometimes they pay their maids 50 Rand per day; sometimes they pay in food parcels.

Sam was in Naicker's Bikes recently. Naicker stood behind the counter with his one index finger on a newspaper and his other index finger poking the air as he shouted some instructions to his staff. When Sam came in he used both index fingers to underline the words of a story, "Look at this, Sam. Look what this man is doing. He'll drive us all into the sea." Sam looked. The story reported that Julius Malema, leader of the Economic Freedom Front, whilst addressing a crowd in Durban at Curries Fountain said: "They [Indians] are ill-treating our people. They are worse than Afrikaners were. This is not an anti-Indian statement, it's the truth. Indians who own shops don't pay our people, but they give them food parcels."

Naicker put down the paper. His wife joined him at his side like a boxing coach. "Can you believe it?" they said. Sam laughed, and asked if they had any 26-inch wheels in stock? He could believe it, but he hadn't the courage to say so. In 2004 the playwright Mbongeni Ngema wrote a song called amaNdiya, "Oh brothers, Oh my fellow brothers. We need strong and brave men to confront Indians," it says. "Indians have conquered Durban, we are poor because all things have been taken by Indians."

The Indian Historian Ashwin Desai wrote in a 2010 study that although the majority of Indian South Africans have indentured roots, "the stereotype of the exploitative trader remains strong."

If you have an opinion and want to gather facts, you can find as many as you need. But does that mean your opinion is true, or that you are a good fact gatherer?



Whilst I was busy writing this piece I took my children to swimming lessons and began a conversation with an old white lady. I soon became aware of an Indian woman. She had seen me come in and had smiled at me and had come over to the bench and sat down next to me. I find strangers tiring so I turned my back to her a bit and leaned forward but she joined herself into the conversation, Hm-mm-ing at answers, laughing lightly at jokes until I had to lean back to include her.

She was strong and homely, with even rounded teeth and wavy black hair pulled loosely. Her breath was close and had a familiar smell, not of food but of biological processes, not unpleasant. She had a stronger accent than normal and I asked where she was from. She was from Delhi and had moved here thirteen years ago to marry her husband who is South African.

"But where did you meet him?" I asked.

"I didn't meet him," she said. "His dad travels a lot to India; my dad is a travel agent in India. One day his dad said, We want someone from your family for my son to marry. My dad said, My daughter is almost finished school. And so I finished school and came here and got married."

I have never met anyone with an arranged narrative and my western sensibilities were arcing.

"Are you happy?"

"Yes. Sometimes it works to not know the person, and then to accept them, and then to love them."

"But didn't you want to study, or have a career?"

"I joined my husband's family business. I was never alone. I was never bored."

"Are you Muslim?"

"No, I'm Hindu and I speak Hindi to my children so they can visit their grandparents in India and still speak to them."

Everything about her was soft. She loved her husband, she loved his family, she loved her vocation, she loved her own family, she rounded her words at the front and the back, eliding harsh sounds as she went. She had sought me out, and had given me a picture, rubbing her kids with a fluffy towel, ordering a chicken mayo sandwich at the shop. I think she knew what I was up to, and had come to argue, "You say you are generalising, but in your mind you aren't. In your mind there are no exceptions."

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Our road in the city is two blocks away from a bronze and pigeon-pooped statue of Mahatma Gandhi. Archbishop Desmond Tutu unveiled the statue in 1993 marking the centenary since a white official threw Gandhi from a train: he was asked to move out of his first-class compartment so that white people could occupy it and he refused. Gandhi was posthumously granted Freedom of the City of Pietermaritzburg in 1997 and President Nelson Mandela gave a speech saying: "Today we are righting a century-old wrong."

A century before, Gandhi had addressed a meeting in the city of Madras, South India, appealing to the leaders of India to defend the rights of South African Indians. In 1860 indentured Indians were brought to the self-governing British colony of Natal to save the sugar industry; free

Indian traders followed and according to Gandhi "found a very valuable customer in the native of South Africa, called Zulu or Kaffir"; and soon the number of Indians (51000) topped the number of Europeans in Natal.

Gandhi's first concern and point of address was the popular ill feeling against Indians: "We are the 'Asian dirt' to be 'heartily cursed', we are 'chockfull of vice' and we 'live upon rice', we are 'stinking coolie' living on 'the smell of an oiled rag', we are 'the black vermin', we are described in the Statute books as 'semi-barbarous Asiatics, or persons belonging to the uncivilized races of Asia'. We 'breed like rabbits' and a gentleman at a meeting lately held in Durban said he was sorry we could not be shot like them."

Gandhi's second concern was the legal disabilities placed on Indians. In 1894, the Natal Legislature passed a Bill disenfranchising Asiatics by name. Gandhi felt these laws were: "In strict accordance with the policy of degrading the Indian to the level of a raw Kaffir."

Gandhi's third concern was the quality of life of South African Indians. Many indentured servants were treated poorly and, unable to escape this treatment, committed suicide. Indians who were freed from indenture still had to obey a curfew, and a law of registration: "There is a bye-law in Durban which requires registration of coloured servants. This rule may be, and perhaps is, necessary for the Kaffirs who would not work, but absolutely useless with regard to the Indians. But the policy is to class the Indian with the Kaffir whenever possible."

Gandhi had previously addressed these concerns with British governors. Their response had been that indentured labourers wouldn't stay on if life wasn't good for them in Natal. To this Gandhi says, "who are these people who, instead of returning to India, settle in the Colony? They are the Indians drawn from the poorest classes and from the most thickly populated districts, possibly living in a state of semi-starvation in India".

Gandhi's main argument, for the rights of Indians, was based on British citizenship. "We belong to the Imperial family and are children, adopted it may be, of the same august mother, having the same rights and privileges guaranteed to us as to the European children." Although he pointed out that other parts of South Africa, had made "the British Indian an impossibility by simply classifying him with the Kaffir", he hoped for better things from Natal.

Gandhi believed the British wanted to keep Indians and blacks in the same subservient category because they were jealous of the Indians' trading success. Here he quotes from a favourite Cape Times journalist to make his point: "The very reason that they [Indians] have been so successful against the dominant race [blacks] is sufficient to raise them above that degrading level."

Gandhi then concludes his Madras address with a picture: "Wherever the Indian goes he is the same useful, well-doing man, law-abiding under whatever form of Government he may find himself, frugal in his wants and industrious in his habits."

I like reading Gandhi because he is unaware of the picture we have of him, 100 years later, and so he simply says what he thinks and sees: South African Indians are equal to whites, but

superior to blacks; they came from a deprived background, and they worked very hard to get out of it; the world was against them, and they stuck together.

Considering our brains store memory, without us asking them to, in places where reason cannot enter; and considering our bodies store information, and pass it onto the next generation, without our permission; it must be hard to un-become what our forefathers have been.

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It is a daily challenge to get from my apartment, through the security gate, and out into the city without at some point passing Mrs Naidoo and being seconded into one of her urgent errands, but this time I knew I was safe because she was with Divesh, and their full concentration was on the work of three workers. Mansfield Electrical, a white-owned and white-run company, was fitting security lights to the courtyard of Gaydon, our inner-city apartment block. This was unusual. The body corporate doesn't use white people because white people are expensive. There were three black workers, one on a ladder fitting the light, and Mrs Naidoo and Divesh were trying to get them to do something. I couldn't hear what; I could only hear the pawing of their words: Can you do this, can you do that? How about this, how about that? And the two workers on the ground looked away while the workman was shaking his head, turning to his job, turning back to say no again and then finally as I passed he got down from his ladder and said, "This is all I'm doing. This is a quoted job."

The first person I met at Gaydon was Mrs Naidoo. She wears her hair limp against her head unless she is going to church, and she walks around our apartment block in a vest and shorts even though her retired body leaks sideways from the cotton, and she smells of Mother-in-law Masala. I didn't see her on the day we moved in, but in one sense I did meet her. We had just pulled up in a flat-bed truck — the last trip of a full day, moving belongings from our four-bedroomed, two-lounged, one-studied house into a three-bedroomed flat — and on this load was all that we couldn't bear to part with from our double garage and double workshop.

We were wheeling the third bike into the garage when she leaned over and baritoned, "You can't store bikes in the garredge, right. You can't store nothing. Only cars." I couldn't bear to look up. My only hope in moving out of our fresh green, oak-wooded home was that this flat would be clean and easy to maintain; and now I was being told that our seven bikes, one bicycle trailer, two panniers, and cross section of power tools, a BMX ramp, wheelie bin and silver-mirrored disco ball had to be stored in our new flat.

The caretaker walked past. He wasn't sure if Mrs Naidoo's law was in Gaydon's rules of conduct, but he wasn't willing to ask. It was clear that rules had no power in the presence of Mrs Naidoo. We stepped outside of her range of vision, to make crazy faces and loopy hands, and just when we thought we'd have to return after dark, we were rescued by a young Zulu man. He had dropped his cigarette butt on the floor and was moving to twist it under his boot when Mrs Naidoo's baritone riffed to a soprano: "Hey, you! You pick that up."

"Acha, you're crazy," he replied.

Mrs Naidoo heaved her bosom over the railing and spat with her eyes: "You calling me a stupid?"

The nice young Zulu man did reply, but by then, she was making to come down, he was making to get out of there, and we had just enough time, beyond her gaze, to wheel the contents of the flatbed truck into our new narrow garage.

We heard Mrs Naidoo from morning to night at Gaydon. She was as constant as the morning traffic, as steady as the evening birds. She patrolled the passageways, the stairs; she watched from her balcony and over the railings; and when the lift was broken for a few years and she couldn't patrol the courtyard by foot, she did it with her eyes. "Stop kicking the ball against the wall, don't run in the passages, don't stand talking on the stairs, whose car is that, who left this bucket here, who hung this rug on the washing line, it's too heavy and will break." We all hid from her; we all pretended we had a meeting to get to as we rushed by; we all programmed our cellphones to ring. And yet, she was the reason that this apartment block had not become a slum, like the other city blocks.

One day, soon after arriving, Mrs Naidoo called me up to her balcony. She wanted to know if one of the other tenants could park their car in our garage. I said I would ask Sam, and then we carried on talking.

She told me she had moved to these flats from the Indian suburb of Eastwood. She had owned a nice big house there, but twice it had been broken into while she was out and they had taken every electrical item she had — her flat screen TV, her kettle. After the last time she decided to sell but the area had been overrun by gangsters and no one wanted to live in fear, so eventually she had to settle for one fourth of the value of her home. (All of her years of arriving early at work and leaving late, of cooking from scratch not eating out, of buying in bulk and using with care — frugal in her wants and industrious in her work — had ended in this: one fourth of a lifetime of sacrifice.)

Then, with the help of family, she brought an excellent investment: a two-bedroomed flat at Gaydon. When apartheid ended, the white people that could afford to moved out of the city centre. I always saw it as stepping down when we moved in. It had never occurred to me that for Mrs Naidoo it was stepping up. It was a safer, cleaner, more solid financial brick to build on. And she was determined it wouldn't crumble.

When black people wander onto the premises of Gaydon, Mrs Naidoo hawks them out and squeezes till they leave. A smart black couple came looking for a flat to rent, and she told them there was nothing available. (I've also heard her say, You can't afford it here.) The next day a faded, shifty-eyed Indian came looking, and she escorted him around the block, pointing out night security, spacious garages, and newly painted silver rails. I had always wondered why she did this, and here she was telling me.

"This is my investment now, Sarah," she squeezed me against her cotton-soft body, "And I won't lose it again.

## Werner's witchcraft water

Werner was short and thin like a street dog, and when he came to our door to borrow paint for his bathroom, or a grinder to cut his metal, he wore school-boy issue shorts, one size too small.

I don't know when he moved to these inner-city flats we now shared, but here Werner was, and here it seemed he had always been. Thirty years ago, Jacaranda flowers would've purpled his streets, planted by the British to make it feel like home, now there were only plastic chip packets, and tufts of fake black hair.

When apartheid ended in 1990, and races no longer had to keep to certain areas, the blacks that could afford to moved from township to city centre, and the whites that could afford to moved from city centre to suburb.

The reason for this was partly fear — the suburbs became areas that whites could protect, whilst the city centre attracted illegal immigrants, illegal sex-workers, and a range of violent criminals with undercover trades. But it was also partly status. Three years ago, when I told a Zulu friend our family was moving into the city, because we wanted to live in a mix of cultures, she laughed. "You know," she said, "what the Zulus will think when they see you: 'Shame, there go those *poor whites*.'"

Growing up under apartheid, that was a terrifying insult. A *poor white* wasn't a noble poor — they were privileged, yet still a failure. The apartheid government had given them the best — education reserved for whites, jobs reserved for whites, homes reserved for whites, and they still couldn't make it. If it meant moving out of the city to prove you weren't one of them, then that's what you did.

Unless you couldn't afford to.

I first saw Werner from my balcony. His pension was small, and by year getting smaller, so each day he walked the length of our road, rifling through rubbish bins, dumping tins and bottles in his boot. The fifty free newspapers delivered to our block were left for an hour for residents to read and then they were also recycled. And if his boot was still not full he went through our apartment bins, through the sucked chicken bones and wet dental floss, to find plastic and cardboard. I once asked him where I should leave my recycling and he looked at me, confused by my middle-class sensibilities, and said, "In the rubbish bin."

One night, a few months after we'd moved here, Werner came to our door shaking. "Sam," he said, "Sam ... Ag, just come look."

Werner wasn't sure what to make of Sam but he was determined to make something of him because, besides Werner, Sam was the only other white man in our block.

So Sam followed Werner up five flights of stairs to his apartment and when they arrived Werner pointed and said, "There, Sam. It's Witchcraft Water."

Just to the left of Werner's front door was a small puddle of water, slightly flecked in grey. "It comes every night at the same time," Werner spoke slowly, laying his charge. "I know who does it. I'll sort them out. I just called you as witness."

Our apartment block sits on the corner of two main city streets. Off these streets run alleys, and down each alley is the magic mind of Africa. Men, handing out purple printed leaflets, advertise the services of Dr Abib or Mama Sarah, both of whom can enlarge your butt and breasts, and cure you of the symptoms of HIV. Nearby are shopping trolleys, filled with medicine *muthi*. Bunches of herbs hang from their sides; small gin bottles line their base; each mixture can accomplish a miracle.

I know magic is big industry in South Africa. Entire markets are devoted to selling mixtures made from plants and animals that can solve your spiritual and physical problems, supernaturally. And the city centre is scattered with make-shift offices, where healers charge R100 per consultation, and much more after success — after they have won back your lost lover and helped you triumph over your enemies in court. And yet, I am always surprised by how large a shadow this magic casts. From street-sweepers to post-graduate students, Zulus live in fear of a disgruntled family member paying for a curse. Foreign Africans also fear this magic, South African Indians too, but I had never met a white man who believed in Zulu *muthi* until now.

The next morning Mrs Naidoo knocked on our door. "Sam," she said, "come see." This time, Sam walked up four flights of stairs, and outside her front door were three cracked eggs. "Now," Mrs Naidoo said, "who would do this?"

Sam had a vague suspicion. From Werner's balcony to Mrs Naidoo's door, was a nicely angled throw. Mrs Naidoo was big and warm and religious. "I went to church yesterday, Sam, and Pastor said you must love your enemy, but, if I find out who did this..."

That evening, Werner called Sam, and our block's security guard, to observe the witchcraft water.

It was a mystery in one sense. It appeared in the same place, at the same time, every night. It seemed reasonable to assume that someone *was* pouring it there, but no-one was ever seen pouring it there. I know Zulu men and women do use liquid *muthi*, our block was mostly Zulu, and none of them were on friendly terms with Werner. He kept his best Afrikaans words for them. "These people that run the country now," he was careful to speak to me in politer terms because one of my sons is black, "they cut off my electricity, and when I go complain, they are friendly to their own kind, but with me they turn into snails, their fingers fall asleep on the computer." There were a lot of people in our block, and in our city, who had reason to get a mixture, from Dr Abib, specially brewed for Werner.

But Werner thought it was someone else.

The next morning, Mrs Naidoo called. "Every one of my toiletries, Sam, is on the floor. Now who would do this?"

Anyone could have reached into her window and swept those toiletries onto the floor; but no-one else would have.

That night, the water appeared.

The next morning, Mrs Naidoo's postbox was broken, ripped off its hinges, the only one out of 50.

"I know we must forgive, Sam," Mrs Naidoo said, "but I'll ..."

The following evening, when the block's cleaner rounded up all the packets of garbage to take to the 200-liter black wheelie bins, stored in the basement, he couldn't find a single bin. He called security. Security did a search and then called Sam: "You have a problem on your hands."

Sam walked up 5 flights of stairs. At one end of the passage, three bins were tied with wire; at the other end, another three. No one could enter, or leave their floor. And no-one could reach Werner's apartment to spill water. On his window Werner had hung a cardboard sign, covered in blue koki pen: "Hey waterthrower take note. You are a dumb stupid mad psycho p\*\*s!" When Sam arrived, the chairperson of the body corporate was already negotiating. "You don't need to be afraid, Werner. Witchcraft can't hurt you; you are safe in Jesus' name."

The wheelie bins were returned; and the next morning, Werner was in the courtyard when we woke. His bald patch showing, his hair forgetting its place, he cornered Sam by the garages: "I need to ask you, Sam, do you think Satan is real? Do you think Jesus *can* protect me?" His street dog body was suddenly smaller, his blue shorts and khaki top thinner, as though life was wearing him threadbare.

That evening, Sam did an experiment with security. At 5pm they checked Werner's apartment — no puddle. At 6pm, Mrs Naidoo went to her church meeting — still no puddle. At 7pm, nothing. At 8pm, a small puddle appeared; and by 9pm it was bigger. Only then did Mrs Naidoo come home. So, finally, she was in the clear.

But still, there was the puddle. Sam stared at it. Then Sam inspected the wall behind it. He traced his fingers along the pipes — dry. He traced his fingers along the brick — dry. He traced his fingers along the cement, and finally, they showed — damp. It could hardly be seen, but it could be felt, a slow line of damp, seeping through the outside wall, from the inside bathroom, imperceptibly grouping into a puddle in the passageway, just to the left of Werner's door. A puddle that smelt like sweat and shampoo.

The next day, Sam knocked at Werner's apartment door. "I've solved the mystery," Sam said. Werner cocked the catch on his eyes.

This was not going to be easy, but Sam went on, "Does someone in your home bath each night?"

"Yes," Werner said, "my wife does."

"And does she bath any other time of day?" Sam asked.

"No."

"And does anyone else bath?"

"No."

"And when your wife went away," (Werner's wife had just spent a week with family), "did you notice any witchcraft water then?"

"Hmm...err...No."

"Then, I know what's been causing the puddle," Sam said. "There's a small leak through your wall, as the bath water is draining, and it's coming out onto your passage. It's not witchcraft water at all!"

Sam waited for relief to seep into Werner's face; for the great realization to dawn that he wasn't up against the Dark Lord.

"Rubbish," Werner said, barreling his brow, "Kak!"

"No really," Sam said. And he called security, and they traced the line, and they traced the wet, and they explained about Mrs Naidoo, and how she had an alibi, and how they'd watched her, and how they were sure; and Werner believed none of it.

The next day, Werner knocked on our door, "Sam, everything you said last night, I don't take it. Bath water. Ha!" He snorted and left.

A few months later, Werner moved to Cape Town, where the mayor speaks his language, and the previous mayor was white. He wanted to live where the streets are clean, where the parks smell of flowers not urine, where *these people* are not in charge.



## How do you see yourself?

Sabelo stands at the traffic lights, on the corner of Albert Luthuli and Alex, and as you pass he smiles and waves, in a way that really means it. People give him money, although he never asks. This corner is outside our city's business district, and so when our friend John asked him why he chose to work there, where there is less traffic and so less chance of money, Sabelo explained that the city corners were taken, that corners couldn't be shared, and that their owners would hurt him if he tried.

John likes to talk to people who live on the street. He moves kind of slow, like a pale praying mantis, whereas Sabelo moves fast. He has one crooked leg which makes him dip like a broken toy as he clock-works left and right, smiling and waving with a half hand from his hip, asking how you are and saying he is fine.

One day, stopping for a chat, John asked Sabelo how he saw himself, and what he'd like to do with his life? I laughed, when John repeated this question to Sam, and Sam repeated this question to me. But Sabelo didn't. Sabelo said that he saw himself as a motivational speaker.

John explained that then Sabelo needed something to say. And Sabelo said that he had something to say, in fact he had three points. His first point, he explained, as his one hand transformed itself from friendly to preachy, was: You must make the most of what you have. His second point — he held up two fingers — was: You must be kind. And then ... he couldn't remember his third point. John said, What about: Believe in yourself. Sabelo thought that a very good point, and said that he would use it.

One Sunday, not long after this conversation, Sabelo came to Sam's church. He greeted everyone with a hip-level wave, and the parishioners tilted away, because beggars often come to church, asking for money, and getting angry if the church asks for something in return. But Sabelo didn't want money. He took his seat, and he sang the first song, and then he went to sleep, and woke again to sing the last song.

On the way out, he waved and smiled and thanked us for a great service, and then he went back to his job at the corner of Alex and Albert Luthuli. Perhaps he now sees himself as a beggar.

## Once were white

At some point in our second year of living in the city, the recyclers on the streets changed from respectable-looking moms to oily-looking whoonga smokers. Whilst the older women used to dress in skirts and hats and carry canvas bags to sort rubbish, these young men have a particular sliding walk, in their strung-on shoes and pants falling down their bums to reveal more pants beneath. They drag large plastic bread-delivery crates, and sometimes, when their crates are full, they occupy a lane of traffic. Cars slow down or pass, but the crates are regarded as legitimate vehicles and the crate drivers obey the rules of the road. In South African suburbs, the traffic-light rule is wait for the green man, but we soon learnt that in the city it is wait for the green man, count three more cars, and then cross. Except for the whoonga smokers; they never jump the red light, they always indicate before turning.

Soon after the appearance of these crate recyclers, Pietermaritzburg's local newspaper ran a story hailing them as heroes. They were finally earning an honest wage — collecting rubbish for paid recycling — and they were saving the world; otherwise they would be doing crime and causing the demise of the planet.

It was a story aimed at reassuring us that the city wasn't going to pot, that any moment now it would turn a corner, with reformed recyclers leading the way, but you need only live here a few months to pick up the backstory. At 7:00 am city residents place their neatly tied rubbish bags out for collection. At 7:05 am recyclers tear the bags, take what will pay, and leave the used nappies and squashed bananas to filter down the sidewalk. If they discover something they would like to take a bit more time over, the recyclers carry the bags to the steps that lead to the park. Here they can litter in private, and they can strip electrical goods, leaving behind plastic and rubber that look too much like the original item — a TV, a PlayStation, a car radio — hiding the lucrative copper wires beneath the cardboard in their crates. Here too they can smoke their whoonga, the drug cocktail that was once thought to be a mixture of heroine, cannabis and state-supplied anti-retro-viral drugs. This smoking does not in itself disqualify them as heroes of the green movement, but it was omitted from the newspaper article.

When we first moved into the city center of Pietermaritzburg we did not own a car and we walked and cycled wherever we went. One day, Sam walked past a man who had a black bag full of tins and a black bag full of general rubbish. He was squashing the tins with a brick to place in a bag to take for paid recycling. But just before he squashed the tin he took an item of rubbish from the other bag, and pushed it into the tin. A tin, a banana peel, and then the brick; a tin, an apple core, and then the brick. Every aluminum tin had now mysteriously doubled in weight. On another walk, we passed a pick-up, parked next to the Umsunduzi River. Two men were filling buckets of water, pouring them into the back of their truck, pausing and then going back for more. As we moved closer we saw that the back of their truck was full of cardboard boxes, retrieved from around the city, being made just a little bit heavier before they were weighed at the recycling depot.

Rubbish cuts a fault line across South Africa, and while black people seem to approach it pragmatically, white people approach it with passion. Sam and I wanted to live in a mix of

cultures, and so we moved into the city centre by choice. (I tend to bring this point up in most conversations as the other white people in the city, the ones that are stuck here, rouge their cheeks and paint their eyelids blue and I need to make sure no one thinks I am them.) A few months into the move a friend from the suburbs asked how it was going and I said, "There are some hard things. For one it is disgusting." I watch where my feet land each time I step out for a walk. I have pictures in my head of Dickens's London and this is what Pietermaritzburg is like. Vagrants line the street with skin infections; puddles of wee and poop and disease cover the pavements; rats and cock-roaches breed like rats and cock-roaches, delighting in the piles of rubbish; litter flutters where once there were butterflies, and condoms, wet and spent, cover everything, discarded like the women they were used on.

White South Africans complain all the time about this. When apartheid ended, the blacks that could afford to moved into the city centre and the whites that could afford to moved out and so the degradation of our city is a wonderful bonding point for white South Africans: "Look what happens when you put *these people* in charge." Whites remember how Pietermaritzburg used to be, with its high concentration of Victorian buildings, its wide clean streets, its neatly pruned trees. And they can't forget.

I try tell them to give up on what they used to have, to embrace the fact that this is now an African city, with that comes some vibrant chaos, but a whole lot of life and culture too. I try tell them that the city used to be reserved for whites and all the money that didn't go on educating blacks went on cleaning the streets for whites. I try tell them that there are far fewer whites than blacks, and so an area that was built during apartheid to serve one seventh of the population is now serving seven sevenths.

But I don't always believe what I am saying, and sometimes I think the running of the city was given to people who don't know what they are doing, handed over before they had any understanding of how to maintain urban order. It's not that I want whites in charge again; I'd prefer a dictator like Paul Kagame — someone who can make the streets safe and clean, someone who can make them like they used to be.

## Gawie

After Werner left only one other white man lived on our city block, and cycling past his flats Sam and I noticed his street was immaculate, always. It didn't smell of urine. The lamp-posts weren't covered in bright posters offering cheap and quick abortions. Chip packets didn't clog the weeds in the gutters. In fact there were no weeds in the gutters; because the white man, Gawie, was constantly out, with his wife, picking up litter.

The first few times we rode past Gawie he shouted at us in a loud gruff voice, words too blurred to understand. And we ignored him. We were already aware of sticking out in the city — a white family, with five kids, on bicycles — and we didn't want to draw any extra attention to ourselves. More importantly, we didn't want to associate ourselves with the handful of other white people in the city — whites who had stayed long after their former white areas had been invaded by blacks, whites who had hung onto their investments in the city even after apartheid had ended, whites who didn't like blacks, hated them in fact, but hated giving up even more. And so for a long time we ignored Gawie. Until one day we broke down outside his apartment and couldn't ignore him anymore.

By broke down I mean got such a flat tire that we had to stop, all seven of us, find fences and walls to lean our bikes against, take up perches on the side of the road, and watch Sam as he slipped the tube and then pumped and listened and pumped and listened, trying to find the leak. Gawie came over to us as soon as we stopped and after the first few minutes of trying to brush him off — looking away and politely smiling and finding something interesting in the bushes — we all gave up. He was big and loud and friendly; and it was so, so hot. He offered us something to drink and a place to sit in the shade. He brought a bucket of water for Sam to plunge the bicycle tube into, to find the leak, and then he stayed. And he spoke while Sam sandpapered the hole, and cut the patch. And he spoke while Sam applied the glue and waited for it to dry. And he spoke while Sam lit the glue with a match to speed up the drying. And then Gawie finished up just as Sam did too, and so we began remounting our bikes and saying goodbye and thanking him for all his help, and I suppose, in short, that's what started what came close to a friendship with Gawie.

After that we didn't ignore Gawie and we didn't want to. Almost every day, riding past his apartment, we would greet him, as he hung out his window, shouting something he found funny, "Faster, faster, you're losing. Oh now it's the Tour de City. Are we having a race? Can't you keep up, little one? Getting slow, hey Mama; they're beating you."

And then, while we still hoped to keep riding or at least to get somewhere on time, Gawie tried to make sure we stopped. If he was already out on the road sweeping, he would show us all the weeds he'd pulled and grass he'd cut, and rubbish from torn-open rubbish bags he had fished off the street, bit by bit. And then after talking about himself for a while he would usually ask after us — after our apartment block and our apartment block's finances, after the body corporate and the repairs to the leaky roof, after the last white family who had just moved out of what was formerly an all-white block. And then all that asking would get him going on the old days, reminiscing, remembering how good our street used to be, before you-know-what ended.

If we were walking around the block, and not riding, Gawie's wife would stop us too, and tell long stories about other families we needed to meet, and about how she had been in an accident and was paid out a decent sum of money, pointing to her facial scars as proof, and about how she owned her apartment, and wasn't just renting it, shacked up with Gawie. And then she would pause and stare at us, and keep staring, as though she was hoping we would tell her where she was going with all this. And although I never could I began to feel toward her and toward Gawie something more than just pity. Something I never thought I'd feel about poor whites.

And Gawie is quintessential poor white — long hair at the back but not the front, what I thought was a strong Afrikaans accent but turned out to be a hearing problem. His wife has dyed blonde hair and very bright rouged cheeks with blue eyeliner covering the whole eyelid. She wears cropped culotte jeans, fake leather hiking boots and pink golf shirts. And her eyes say, "I am not here." And then sometimes they say, "Why am I here?"

And yet the more we rode or walked down Gawie's street the more I wondered if Gawie and his wife fitted this stereotype of poor white. The streets surrounding theirs are plastered in the stains and grease of the city, but their street has been cleaned and then cleaned again. Thirty years ago their neighbourhood would have been white and tidy, now it was black and messy; but they had not given up. This didn't fit my picture of poor white, the picture fixed in my brain from childhood — of people uneducated, inbred, racist; anorexic-thin or super-obese; thickly made-up with jewelry and high heels; pregnant chain-smokers, pregnant brandy-drinkers, pregnant teens; people who hang out in DVD shops all day and spend their savings on Coke.

And so, perhaps because Gawie and his wife did break this type, and perhaps because they were so determined to get to know us, to call our children nearly by their names, to share in the daily niceties that all neighbours should share, I developed an affinity, close to an affection, for both of them.

Then one day, a year after meeting Gawie and his wife, I drove to the suburbs to shop, to the mall I used to frequent when I lived in the suburbs. We had moved out of the suburbs and into the inner-city, because we wanted to live in a mixed-race area; but the inner-city is also a dysfunctional area. I try not shop in the suburbs anymore, because the sense of freedom makes me giddy, and tempts me to leave our crime-ridden city. But this time I went, and I walked around with my wallet and cellphone bulging carelessly from my pockets, in shoes without holes and in smart jeans, showing off my wealth, breezing past the neat shop windows, into a sparkling chemist that, instead of promoting cheap abortions, was selling pregnancy vitamins. And there, entirely out of place, was Gawie.

I felt such a spontaneous warmth, seeing him in this unlikely setting, with his mullet splaying out, and his mustache growing into his mouth, and his bleach-blond wife pottering around the aisles. I felt like I was seeing an old friend, a comrade, a fellow soldier — like we were in the trenches together and had somehow managed to come up at the same time for a smoke

break — and so I greeted him loudly, for all the middle-class whites to hear. It was a statement: I, educated well-dressed wealthy me, am friends with this lower-class white.

And he obviously felt the same spontaneous affection, because he greeted me loudly, and in his hard-of-hearing voice asked after the family and where my bicycle was, and what I needed from the chemist; all this whilst standing in the long checkout queue to pay. And then, whilst pointing to the price tag on a tube of cream, he said, in a louder voice, so all could hear his joke: "The prices are going up, but the women's panties are not coming down."

Now how does one respond to a statement like this? I think this is what all the nice white suburban folk were thinking as they turned to look at me in the queue; as they put back the lipstick and skin-toners and first-aid kits they had been considering; as they broke off their conversations, rotated their heels, took their hands from their wallets, stopped off their signing, their punching of credit cards, and turned to see who had said this, and to whom; and to see what the whom was going to say in return.

And, as I was trying to figure out Gawie's joke — does he mean the more I pay as a man to cover our household expenses, the more my wife should have sex with me — I was also thinking, Why on earth did he think he could say this to me, and, Why did he think I would find that funny? And at the same time as thinking this, I was trying to figure out what I should do next. And at the same time as figuring this out, I did next what I always do when I am entirely nervous — I laughed.

And so did Gawie. Congratulating himself on his good joke, and that his good joke had tickled my sense of humour, he turned back to the counter, paid for his cream, said, "Okay. See you back in town," and left.

## **We don't do that in Africa**

There is a path that runs from our home in the city to the Umsunduzi River. We walk this path each day with five children and a dog, and later Sam would say that when he dug back into our week's worth of walks, down the stairs to the park, taking care to avoid the fresh deposits of human poop, frantically swatting flies that moved from poop to us, he did know it was there. He tracked the movement of it from the bin, to the stairs, to just off to the left of the stairs.

In the end it wasn't my husband or any of my children who found it, but Melvin, the park gardener.

Sam doesn't like to take phone calls and then take questions. He likes to walk out the door without anyone asking where he is going; he likes to act and speak later. But this time he put down the phone and looked for me: "Melvin found a baby on the stairs."

It was in a crisp Johnson Workwear packet, swarming with flies. Inside the packet was a black bag that Melvin had laid open and on the black bag, curled up, face down, nuzzling for comfort was a complete and full-term baby. It was in a late stage of decomposition, its back and buttocks a plum skin purple, its face made soft by maggots.

When I saw it I realised I had been smelling it for days, just as I passed the bin, a thick smog of humanity, and then, as my mind tried to place it, to rifle through memory and find a file that fitted, it would abort, and pass on to the soldiers of weeds, thumbing their noses in occupied lands.

"It's been dead for two weeks," the detective said, when the police came.

"You must get this all the time," Sam said to the detective.

"No, we don't," he replied. "Probably one other case the whole of last year. This is the worst thing my men have had to deal with, all week."

In the end they didn't deal with it, the undertakers did. They arrived in a car, a Toyota Corolla maybe, or a Ford Fiesta, one of those cars you don't notice for being so boring. They pulled up onto the curb, two young men, and hopped out, shaking hands, apologising, asking where it was, as though they were lost and late for a party.

Sam pointed and, instead of going down, the undertakers returned to the car. One opened the boot, checked all his pockets, and then shut the boot. The other ran his hands around the cubby and side pocket of each door, frisking the car for something he believed it to be carrying. He found tissues and waved them at his friend. Then he broke open the Kleenex Pocket Pack, pulled out two man-tissues, and attached them to his friend's ears. His friend did the same for him. And then, in their flapping white elephant-ear disguise, they walked over to Sam. "Eish," they looked at each other, "We have come ill prepared for this."

Sam gave them gloves, white nurse gloves he uses to pick up litter on the stairs. They pulled them on, stretching each arm for the performance. Then, delicately breaking more tissue they

pushed it up their nostrils, closing the holes where flies might land, and went down to the baby. They stood a while, two white-gloved actors decked out in tissue ears and fake tissue snot, and then they walked back up to Sam: "Er, maybe, maybe you have a shekas?"

When I first began learning isiZulu, I wanted to know how to ask for a plastic packet at the grocery checkout. A friend said to say, "Ngicela ishekas." I knew *ngicela* was *please* and so I figured *ishekas* was *plastic bag*. It took a bit of rolling around on my tongue before I realised that Shekas was short for Checkers and that you asked for a Checkers, even if you were in Spar, Woolworths, or Pick 'n Pay. By now a crowd had gathered and Sam went to ask some medium-heeled legal secretaries if they had a Checkers.

"Do you mean a packet?" they frowned like school nurses, "Surely not just a grocery packet?"

The legal secretaries went inside and came out with a Tuffy — a strong black bag, an expensive one. The undertakers lifted half the baby into the Tuffy. Then they scraped the other half in. The remains of the baby, like chicken skin stuck to the roasting bag, were wrapped up in the White Johnson packet and placed back into the bin. And so the smell remained. The smell of one little life rotting away, of one creation, held onto for so long when there was no apparent need to keep holding — abortions are free and legal in South Africa until 12 weeks, until 20 if you have good reason, until as long as you want if you have a bit of money — and then let go.

Had it come out dead and been wept over and in the despair of loss and labour for nothing been lovingly laid in a workwear bag and placed in a tombstone bin? Had it come out alive because granny had insisted it come out alive and then as it reached for that warm milky breast been given a cold packet instead, sealed, running out of air, as its family waited for the cries to dull to whimpers, and for a day no-one was around to carry it thudding in a backpack to our stairs? Had it been long waited and loved for, the hope and pride of a generation, and then come out as a witch, missing something crucial like a hand or foot?

There is a man on our city streets, with four normal toes, but the fifth is in the centre of his foot, midway to the ankle, pointing to the sky like a sundial. He sits in front of Pick 'n Pay, displaying his feet. The other tramps wear mismatched sneakers but he makes sure that however he is sitting, his foot is on display. My children cannot make it past without rushed examinations of this foot.

"He's got six toes."

"No, he doesn't, he's got four."

"No, he doesn't, he's got five, but one is right in the middle of his foot, and he doesn't cut his toenails."

"I think he came out like that and his mom said, 'Urgh, I can't keep this.'"

The baby drove away in the boot of the car. The detective explained that nothing could be done to track the family, or solve the mystery.

Perhaps it would be piled on a metal tray with other still-borns and abandons; perhaps it would slowly decompose in a power-failing fridge, or be given a pauper's funeral; perhaps, it would



one day make it out of its black bag. I think though, that the only memorial it would ever have, was happening on the stairs, with the little crowd we had gathered.

"How could a mother do that?"

"She is a demon."

"She is cursed."

One man said, "May God have mercy on her," but no-one mentioned the father.

## Why can't you speak it like me?

I spoke to a man from Zimbabwe who said after almost 40 years of independence Harare is still separated into different living areas — mixed-race, black, white — but now the separation rests on money, not race.

"Who are the rich people?" I asked.

He was mixed-race and he said the rich people were still white; that it was generational wealth. He said ten percent of the rich are blacks and they drive around in Jaguars, with leopards in studded collars on their front seats, but the rest are white.

So I said, "With the most extreme land reform and decolonization program in the world, Mugabe did not manage to change Zimbabwe?"

"No," he said, "but Mugabe did make it worse for the poor blacks."

One of the reasons we moved into the city was when South Africa acts on economic transformation — using radical policies I used to think would work, but now think will probably just entrench white wealth — I don't think anyone will come for us here. I don't think they will fight us for this ratty, cockroachy flat. I think we have already given up what might be taken away. (And I am hoping that by living here, that the 'they' can become 'we'; that the 'they' can dissolve and separate into faces of humanity.)

The Zimbabwean man was a tennis coach for rich white South Africans, so I thought I'd test his ideas on another Zimbabwean, one who had married a Rwandan refugee and had five children, and she said that sounded pretty much right. But she wanted me to know that in Zimbabwe she never felt racial tension like in South Africa. I asked why, and she pursed her black-lined eyebrows and chewed her lipsticked lips and said, "Hmmm, how can I say it? The whites are chilled. They are not aggressive. They are more British. They have kept those influences."

Some of the worst racists in South Africa are ex-Rhodesians and Brits, but perhaps they were hoping for a better life and are bitter they did not get it, whereas the whites that stayed in Zimbabwe are enlightened: they really do like black people. Her answer struck me because she thought South African whites could do with a few fresh breaths from the West, but also because she, being black, framed her answer in terms of whites, while I was framing mine in terms of blacks: "I think it's education. When I speak to a Zimbabwean black, they are fluent in English, they've completed their Cambridge exams, they are looking down on me from the height of three A-levels. And I feel that the gulf between us has a bridge."

## **The empire in me**

The most annoying thing,  
my Xhosa friend said,  
is when old white ladies  
say to me,  
“Oohooh dearie,  
You speak such good  
English!”

## Whites are rude

Whites are rude  
because they ask blacks for help  
before asking how they are.

Whites must learn to say  
first, I see you  
second, are you well  
third, are you here, did you show up, did you make it  
fourth, does this shop  
stock Levi jeans?

In the suburbs  
blacks will play the white game  
but not in the city.  
Here, you have chosen  
to live under their rules  
and you must.

I have become  
so used to it now  
(long bubblegum-stretching minutes as I make it through all the preliminaries  
hoping I will not burst)  
that I sometimes ask my daughter's old white swim-coach  
how he is  
before I remember  
I am wasting his time.

## The language of love

Precious is a cleaner at our apartment block. Although most of her work should technically be indoors, I mostly see her outdoors, walking quickly between washing line and balcony and window; and so it was only a matter of time before she met Sam, who, although most of his work should technically be indoors, likes to sit in one place in the sun. Precious was so impressed with Sam's warm Zulu greetings — he even had the right accent, placing pressure on the second to last vowel, elongating it, turning his K into a slight G — that she believed him to be fluent, one of those whites that hadn't just mastered the *fanagalo* of half-English-half-Zulu, putting an ee-sound on the beginning and end of words: bring me the ee-vacuum-cleaner-ee.

After a few weeks of greetings, Precious discovered that Sam was a church minister, and so at the end of each warm Zulu greeting she now affixed his title: The Pasta. Around the same time she also discovered that Sam ran an organisation matching bicycles to owners and so, having asked the caretaker to ask Sam to find a bike for her grandson, and Sam having found one, Precious arrived at our door one morning to make plans to get it home.

I'm always taken aback by the make-up on Precious's face — black, Egyptian-thick eyeliner, red cheeks of circled lipstick, glittering silver lips. A friend did her PhD thesis on the relationship between madam and maid in the new South Africa, interviewing six pairs of madams and maids, analyzing their spoken words and their silences, and she said that an unspoken fear of madams is that their maids might take their place. Some madams won't let their maids make the bed, or tidy their husband's cupboards, or prepare the evening meal, because these are little acts of a faithful wife and they fear the husband might love the maid instead, if the maid begins to do them. It strikes me that perhaps this is also why madams buy their maids standard drab uniforms in South Africa — oversized, matronly, baby-pink or baby-blue uniforms, sold in grocery stores, to cover over any curves or attractive clothing. Precious wears one of these, but from beneath she breaks free at every angle — leg warmers (the type worn in Footloose), black pumps, golden loop earrings, Lady Di hair, jangling plastic bangles — as though she is saying, "You can clothe me in your uniform, but I am woman."

Black maids are still obsequious in South Africa. The relationship between madam and maid has not changed; they still do not eat together; they still have separate tin-maid-mugs and tin-maid-plates; they still communicate in the madam's language, or not at all. But Precious is not like this. She came to our door with a long string of fast Zulu, complaining about the public transport, concerned that her minibus taxi wouldn't allow the bike in, wondering if Sam could walk with her to the bus-stop so that she wouldn't get mugged. And Sam understood nothing.

I understood snippets and tried to explain to Sam what was going on, as Precious kept going. She would not stop, and it didn't matter how many times Sam replied in English, she finished his sentences in Zulu. She had heard Sam greeting her frequently in a proper Zulu accent. Once she had even made a joke with other Zulu maids, and Sam had laughed and said, "Yebo." She knew he could speak Zulu; she absolutely knew he had gone beyond just mastering some niceties, and had made the effort to bridge the long lonely road between whites and blacks in South Africa; she knew he was an ally and she would not give up on him so easily.

And so when I finally managed to stop her, and to show her Sam's blank face, she said, "Haibo, Pasta? Greetings, Pasta? That's all?"

Then she clicked her tongue, shook her head at the tragedy, and, as she made her way down the passage, I heard her saying, "Ay, ay, ay."

The bicycle could wait for another day.

## Mob justice

I didn't hear the screaming at first. I was doing Maths with my son and my focus was on determining  $\chi$  when the background wail reached a height I couldn't ignore. I had in fact been hearing, and filing, the wail for the past minute. *That is a drama student practicing a part*, I thought. *A prostitute arguing her price? A drunkard ululating? That is a man so distressed*, I suddenly realised, *that his voice has risen an octave*.

I moved to the edge of our lounge. Through the blinds I saw two municipal workers, tall and neat in blue uniforms with yellow reflector pads to keep them safe, and strung between them was a wailing gollywog. His hair matted, his face blue-black, his lips red and covering half his face in a jagged, dripping shape; and as he hung, the workers took turns to kick him in the mouth with their steel-capped boots, spreading his lips even further.

Then they stopped, carried him to the stairs and a third worker, picking up a 1.5 Liter glass bottle, smashing the end on the tar so it jagged, joined them.

"Don't go," I said to Sam, "just call the police."

As the men disappeared into the bush, the police answered the phone. Sam described the workers, the victim, the streets and the park; he said it was an emergency and that someone would die unless the police come. Then he went out onto the street. Mrs Naidoo and Mrs Zondi were there. They asked what the screaming was. Sam explained what he saw. Good, they both said, he's done something wrong and now he's going to pay.

An hour later, the police had not arrived. This is not our experience with the police in the city. From our balcony we see a lot of crime and we report it all and we usually have the flying squad within minutes. But this day no one arrived and I think they knew that the workers were busy with a form of Justice and whoever was on the other side of the call line happened to agree with it.

The fifty free newspapers that get deposited at the entrance to our flats each day once held a front page story of a mob that had killed a petty thief. He had stolen a cell phone to buy whoonga. But his victim had gone home, roused a crowd, and finding him happily tripping the streets had kicked him till he could no longer move. And so there he was, forever lifeless before us, on blurry newsprint.

Len once discovered a corpse at the bottom of the stairs. On investigating he found that the corpse was a municipal worker who had owed his fellow workers money. They had punished him for not taking his debt seriously.

Friday nights in town are rowdy and after payday like Armageddon. One Friday sitting on the balcony I saw a man run up our road in slow motion, every leg was slow, the pavement was quicksand to him. Then when he reached the top he turned to run down again. Two men were circling him, both on their phones. One came closer, and emptied his pockets. The drunk man

said, Why do you want to kill me? Then a car pulled up and under the streetlamp the two men tried to force him into the car, but he pushed his way out. He said again, Why do you want to kill me? They forced him in this time and then another car full of men joined them, but at the robot, this car cut out. So everyone got out of the car to help push and then they jumped back in, with the drunk man still asking, in a dead pan voice, Why are you going to kill me? It was so slow and cool before our eyes, like nothing really could be done about it. This man was going to die, even if he didn't seem to think there was much of a reason for it; his killers were in no rush, they had time to help their friends push start a car.

A few days later we heard the story from the municipal workers' side. A park worker had been raking leaves when a gang had confronted him, sliced him open with a knife and then taken his cellphone. The other workers had heard the scream, chased the gang and found only this one man. In the meantime, the worker was in hospital, fighting for his life, all for a cellphone.



## The city chicken

The chicken came off the back of a truck stopped outside our apartment.

An old man sat in the bin, drunk weary, surrounded by feathers,  
and as the truck slipped its clutch,  
he and three hens fell off.

The chickens were in a box,  
which cracked like an egg on the road,  
letting the three go free.

Two scurried under the truck and the old man scurried after them,  
but the third got away.

Head first, legs splayed, it pushed its nose into an arrow,  
dodged the five o' clock traffic,  
crossed to the other side and then,  
with a shake of its coat,  
stepped behind an iron grid, into a dark alley,  
leaving forever its life of security,  
and certain death.

By now the traffic lights had changed, and the old man wobbled back to the truck,  
while the pedestrians roared with happiness,  
for the rush hour passion.

## The budgie

It was family night when the budgie came knocking. I'm used to ignoring the front door, but she caught me off guard, rapping on the window. I looked out, and seeing no one, looked down. Our inner-city apartment block is grubby brown and faded orange. Against this she stood — blue, crisp, spotty, and, in a Mary Poppins kind of way, agitated.

"There's a bird at our window," I called to my husband. "The kind of bird that should be in a cage."

Sam opened the door to investigate and, as he walked out, the bird walked in. Quickstepping past our children, she made her way to the dining room table, and, with a few deft movements, cleaned up the crumbs from supper.

"Over here, little guy," Sam said, reaching to deposit her outside again.

But she was not going. With some dignified hops, she evaded him — having answered the advert, she would not be bullied by a Mr Banks type.

It was then that our youngest daughter spoke up: "Since the bird is already in our house, shouldn't we keep her?" Anna was ten and had wanted a pet since two. Even when we'd lived in the suburbs, with a garden and pool, she'd wanted one — attracting stray cats, secretly feeding them, patting passing dogs, luring them inside. But when we'd moved to an inner-city flat and had placed her dream forever out of reach, she had given up asking.

Sam went to call security. Budgies can't fly far, he reasoned. She must be from one of the apartments.

"No," the guard said, "no-one keeps birds."

Then from the block opposite?

"No. No one there has birds either. This bird must have worked to get here. Why don't you keep it?" The guard said if we wanted, we could use the spare bird cage in the caretaker's storeroom.

What kind of caretaker keeps a bird cage, grubby yellow with three perches, just in case?

Sam brought the cage to our apartment, and placed it under the dining-room table. The budgie hopped inside, nestled her beak in her back, and went to sleep.

The next day, no one claimed her. And the next. By the end of the week we could no longer avoid Anna's question.

Sam was willing to keep the bird if Anna cleaned her cage. I was willing to keep the bird if she didn't cost us money. For a few days, Anna tried out different names: Mrs Blue, Mr Blue, Blue-Blue ... and then she settled on Budget. It went with the bird's character.

Nothing about Budget turned out to be budgie-like. Budgies enjoy a range of grains, seeds and fruit. Budget ate corn-meal. Budgies are curious and playful. Budget sat on her perch, ignoring her rotating mirror and her string of gaudy beads.

Budgies love to sing, whistle and chatter. Budget had one voice — a scolding screech — reserved for visitors who came too near her cage.

But still, Anna tended her. She cleaned Budget's cage, changed her water, made her toys, and spoke slowly on repeat: "Hello, my darling. Who's a pretty bird?" She whistled tunes to Budget, and called us to listen to Budget's replies. She put her fingers through the door to stroke Budget's feathers, and she took Budget's nips without complaining. She carefully closed the apartment windows when Budget came out the cage — having finally gained a pet she planned to never lose it. And she reassured us all that Budget was actually sweet, but had just had a hard life.

That year, Anna had been in a bicycle accident. She had broken six of her front adult teeth, and they were still being rebuilt. She understood hard lives and was willing to overlook Budget's failings. Or maybe just willing to understand that something had made this budgie, different to any other budgie. And something had made this budgie come for her.

## The greatest living writer

About the same time  
We moved into the city  
I decided to become  
The greatest living writer  
South Africa had seen.

I woke each morning at four  
and wrote  
At lunchtime again  
Again at night

I wrote and wrote and wrote and wrote  
And after two years and no success  
I decided to become  
Something else.

*Don't give up just yet,*  
my dad, who is a writer, cried.  
*But I don't even like*  
*people,* I replied.  
I moved here to tell their stories  
But sometimes there are just  
too many people  
And not enough stories  
Or stories that come out too slow  
Too slow.

*Don't give up just yet,*  
again my father cried,  
*Somerset Maugham would send his partner out:*  
*to all the pubs and hovels,*  
*down all the broken lives and streets,*  
*among the happy places,*  
*to meet the people, and get their stories*  
*While Maugham stayed home to write.*

Now that sounded more like

something I could do,  
or perhaps I was,  
already doing.

(I've since searched and searched  
and have never been able to find,  
That Somerset Maugham said  
anything of the kind.)

My dad was describing me.

## It is only a pigeon

"Don't answer it," I said to Sam. Our door in the inner-city is constantly knocked on; our previous door in the suburbs had never felt human hands, blocked from view by a high brick wall and warning signs of armed response. Sam has a fulltime job and cannot spend his days answering requests to fix leaking baths and carry cash to the bank. Sam opened the door.

Mervin shuffled on his feet. He likes to stare just to the left of your face as he talks, passing his hand over his brow and then resting it on his small paunch protruding through his pale blue shirt. "There's a bird on second floor," he said. We'd moved to this apartment block two years ago and since then had taken in two stray budgies. "It's in trouble."

Sam followed Mervin up a flight of stairs. At the top Mervin pointed, passed his hand over his brow and turned away to let Sam look. It was a pigeon, the most common of all birds, the bird most likely to let loose a string of runny poop all over your newly washed car or suit. And it wasn't flying away. It was stomping in compass circles, one foot clacking on the grey cement, the other foot all scurrying claw. Sam bent to look at the stump and as he did Mervin coughed, "Number two."

Sam hadn't heard and asked him to repeat. "Number two," Mervin told the left space above Sam's head. "The pigeon has been sitting in his own number two and now it's stuck to his foot."

It had been raining for five days, and the bird was young. It could have been sheltering in a wet nest of its own poop, which had then dried to a stump on its foot, preventing it from flying away. The pigeon clacked a few more circles. Sam bent to take another look, and Mervin said, "Alright then," and walked away.

"Why does everyone think you must solve the problems round here?" I said to Sam when he returned with his story. "It's a bird, just leave it on the stairs and let nature take its course."

Sam agreed. Then he went to the garage, emptied the cardboard box containing our imported Thermarest camping mats, and made a nest.

He returned with a photo of a soft grey pigeon, nestling in his old T-shirt. He showed this photo to our children, and they decided to keep the bird.

One Friday night, not long after moving out of the suburbs where we had never owned pets, and into the inner-city where we could never own pets, a budgie came knocking at our window, and when we opened the door to investigate, it scurried inside our home. It's still here. I am opposed to pets on the grounds of mess and cost. "Keep the door closed," I said after that. To survive in an African city, you must keep the door closed.

The next budgie came in on Sam's shoulder. "Where are all these budgies coming from?" I said. "And how do they know to come here?" How do they know I live with suckers? A second bird cage, with room to flutter and play, was set up in our small kitchen.

"We are not keeping a pigeon," I said. They are very stupid birds. They are the under life, only good for picking up the scraps of the city.

Sam was on Facebook, typing his story. The responses came in a few minutes later, mostly from grannies: Take it to the Society for Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, call a veterinary surgeon, soak its foot in a warm water bath to remove the dried poop. What kind of bird kicks back with its feet in a warm water bath?

Sam went to the garage to survey the bird. A neighbour passed and Sam called him in to see. "You must soak its foot in a warm water bath," the neighbour said, and reached into the box. The pigeon panicked and in a bomb of feathers began flying into garage walls, settling at last in a far dark corner.

"Some people want to help and by helping make things worse," Sam said to me when he came in from the garage. "They are kind souls; but they should keep their kindness to themselves." He had decided to return the pigeon to the steps. "It is only a pigeon. It is not an eagle."

When I went to find Sam later he had coaxed the pigeon back into its box-nest and had placed it in the car. Three years ago we sold our family car and decided to commute by bicycle. It was a public decision we were lauded for: Our commitment to environment, our model of simple living. Then my father grew old and left his car in our garage and we faced a crisis. We decided we'd keep the car but only use it in extreme circumstances — taking children to hospital in the middle of the night with bursting appendices or broken arms. The pigeon was in the front seat, safely strapped in, nestled in my husband's T-shirt, refusing to look up at my face in the window. "You can't think like that: it's only a pigeon," Sam said. "It's like thinking: he's only a vagrant."

I don't know why our family chose the term *vagrant*, out of so many others — drifters, derelicts, itinerants, rovers, vagabonds, transients, knights of the road, rolling stones — to describe the hundreds of people that wander and live off our city streets. And who do their big number twos on our stairs that lead from the city to the park. Our block's security guard calls them *maparas*, which is short and Zulu for parasites.

"I have decided to take the pigeon to the Society," Sam shouted to me through the firmly closed window. "They will know what to do."

"Tell them I want my box back," I shouted in return. "It is the only box that fits our mats."

The lady at the society looked at the pigeon, and then at Sam. She listened as he explained about the rainy days, the smallness of the pigeon, and the high likelihood that it had cast its own foot in a plaster of number two. "Okay, bring it this way," she said. They walked down a long linoleum passage as she reassured Sam: The staff would soak the foot in a warm water bath; they knew how to do it. They would get the pigeon rehydrated; they would feed it with a dropper.

When Sam arrived home, he took a kitchen cloth, wiped out the feathers and smells and wet, and replaced our imported camping mats in their neat box.

It was only months later, when I was unsure of the term *vagrant* and wanted to check it wasn't derogatory, that I discovered it was also a birding term — a word used to describe a bird that has strayed, or been blown from its usual range or migratory route. "Most birders are hoping," the dictionary said, "to find the wind-blown vagrants of migration."



## The BMX track

The BMX track, just off from the city centre park, is technically the responsibility of the Municipality, but it was so rundown that a private club took it over, built some more humps, added a special drop down starter ramp and bandstands, and now the track is world-class, a host site for the South African championships, and entirely open and accessible to any form of public. This of course brought with it its own set of problems — vandalism, vagrants, rubbish, weeds, theft — and so to the side of the track the club dropped a cart in which they could store stuff and in which Sajen could sleep for free in exchange for picking up litter, driving off vagrants, and clearing weeds.

Sajen was a genuine down and out Indian, something I never see in Pietermaritzburg because the Indian community is so strong that someone will always look after you, but he had obviously done something to deem himself unworthy of any extended family's care or community support. To help Sajen get back on whichever track he'd fallen off, the club said that he also could charge people who weren't part of the club ten Rand to ride on the track, — although as he explained to Sam all seven of our family could ride for free because Sam was a pastor — and this was Sajen's additional payment for weeding the verge and for clearing the litter and generally warding off trouble.

Over our weeks of riding, we began to see that more and more people were staying in the crate. Each time we came. We noticed one prostitute from town, a very attractive woman who was mentally retarded but friendly. And then a Congolese couple who had been living on the streets but were educated and often drunk. And then sometimes a white guy — a white guy who wanted to talk to us and tell us how he used to fix his own punctures when he had a bmx.

And so one day Sam, interested in all these people, said to Sajen, "Do other people sleep here?" And Sajen said, "Yes, they sleep all fucking day and all fucking night." And then he said, "Ooops", because he remembered Sam is a pastor.

...

One Saturday we were at the BMX track, when nine young boys arrived, aged between 7 and 11. Their bikes were a motley assortment of thick tires and wide handlebars and long front forks. The boys looked rough, and I was just wondering if we needed to leave when Sam said to them, "Let's race."

They said to him, "Unamanga." It was so strange to them that a 43-year-old white man would want to spend time with them that they thought he was lying. But when he said it again, they all lined up, and began fighting to see who would go first. Sam explained that ten people can race at a time, because around the bends some would slip ahead, and there would be space for all of them on the narrow track. Then he said, "On your marks, get set, go."

On the first race, Sam won by far, and they hooted with pleasure that an old man could beat them. Then they lined up again. Sam let them off in batches, leaving last, and he won again.

The boys went wild. "They are very easy to please," Sam said to me. Then Sam showed the boys how to ride the chicken bumps without pedaling, how to bend their legs, and push and pull on their arms, how to ride high on the bends. By the time we left they were looking more like BMXers on their patched-up array of bikes.

"It kills me," Sam said, "these boys with their father-hungry eyes. They are so independent, but so impoverished. If that was your son," Sam said, "he'd have a backpack, packed by his mum, with a jersey and some bran muffins, and he wouldn't last long. They will last long, but it will be a washed out lasting."

"We'll see you next Saturday," the boys said as we left, and we said, "We don't always come."

...

Sam met Vusi at the BMX track. Vusi had an Australian cowboy hat on, dressed like a crocodile catcher with eyes sunken so deep you couldn't see his eyeballs and a bike with a motorbike mudguard, and a spoon, levered in just below the seat. And when Sam asked what the spoon was for, Vusi said to hold the mudguard on, as though that was standard practise in crocodile catching country. Vusi said he was actually a very good rider and that he could win many world class races, but he was lacking a team that could support him, so if sam could just provide the team? And Sam said he didn't know of any teams that were waiting to find a lead rider to support.

Vusi said he lived nearby and he rode around the city looking for bits of metal to scrap and when he found enough for the day he would go and cash it in and go home because he only collected what he needed for the day. Like the Israelites and the manna, he knew sufficient to the day were the provisions thereof, and he knew not to worry about tomorrow.

...

Sam was speaking to a young dude at the BMX track, who was listening to homeboy music and dressed with his pants hanging halfway down his butt. He kept reminding Sam that he was a pro-rider, and he did ride well, but technically pro just means that you aren't making your money from anything else, and not necessarily that you are making money from riding. Then he told Sam that he had done a race here at this track this past weekend and Sam said, "How did you fare?"

And he said, "It was ten Rand."

## On understanding

Until the late seventies the South African apartheid government held a state monopoly on public transport, and anything operating outside of this was illegal. Growing pushback resulted in the 1988 Transport Deregulation act, which essentially gave us the minibus taxi industry: South Africa's unofficial public transport system, ruled by a number of jealous and violent mob bosses, operated by lawless and aggressive drivers, used by 70 % of the population in their daily commute.

The difference between a taxi and a bus is the bus has a set number of passengers it can take, whilst the taxi takes as many passengers as the driver is willing to squeeze. The bus is cheaper, but less frequent, whilst the taxi goes everywhere, all day long. The bus operates on routes with routine bus stops, whilst the taxi stops wherever the passengers are, or wherever the passengers want to be.

In our third year of living in the city centre, Sam walked out one night to deliver coffee to security. A truck with the horse and no trailer had stalled at the robots and Sam got talking to the driver. This man used to be a truck driver, and was driving this truck home for a friend who had brought it to transport large loads from *Build It* to areas around Pietermaritzburg. He gave up truck driving because all you did was drive. You earned 9000 ZAR and you slept in the truck and ate in the truck and drove night and day. Now he earns 9000 ZAR, and he sleeps in his own bed each night, working as a taxi driver — the enemy, in our hands, for a few minutes.

It would be nice, in moments like these, if Sam could have a hidden microphone, and lean in closer, asking the taxi driver to speak up, specifically into Sam's collar, but since he doesn't, I record here in general what the taxi driver said, hoping that it opens up your world, as it has mine:

*Drivers get paid on how many trips they do. They can't cheat the taxi boss because their boss, especially if they were once a taxi driver, knows how much money they should bring in – about ZAR 1500 per day. But of course, drivers earn more if they transport more, so they have to get to the taxi rank quick, else they will lose customers, who will go with whichever taxi is there first.*

*But drivers also have pressure from passengers. The old ladies in the back say, "Go faster, or next time we will take another taxi." So he has sometimes reached 120, down the main streets of the city — Boom and Burger and Hoosen Haffejee. (These are the streets we ride on, trying to stay alive on our bicycles. This man is probably one of the taxi drivers Sam has shaken his fists at.) He said the roads would be safe if there was a separate lane for taxis, because they do have their own rules, and they all understand them, and they never break them. It is the lady drivers who are dangerous. They cause accidents.*

*The conductor (the man hanging out the door shouting, "One more, One more, Market") gets given 15 ZAR for breakfast, 50 ZAR for lunch, and then the takings from the last trip of the day. If he can pack in 20, then at 10 Rand each he earns 200 ZAR, but mostly he earns 250.*

(This is good pay for unskilled labour.) *The conductor's job is to get customers, to control the passengers, to deal with their complaints about being too squashed and to take their money. The conductor robs the taxi driver, because the driver can't keep track of how many passengers there are. But just like the boss, the driver knows about how much the money should be. So the conductor can't rob the driver by much and the driver can't rob the boss by much.*

*The Traffic Department is clamping down on taxis, however. And any fine must be paid from the driver's earnings. But there are no traffic light cameras in Pietermaritzburg, which is why taxis jump the robots.* (I have noticed, since hearing this, that I now speed up on the Red, instead of slowing down on the Orange.)

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A taxi boss lives in our block. He owns six taxis. He leaves at 6, comes back at 9, and then goes out later to collect his days' earnings. I know his wife, but I didn't even know she had a husband. He says it's safer to live here than the township or the suburbs. (Sihle, a security guard from Elandskop, says a taxi boss was shot in his area this week, over competition for customers. He moved into a circle that wasn't his.)

Our apartment's security guard keeps telling our resident taxi boss not to walk around with his fat wallet bulging in his pants and his big flat phone in his hand, when he arrives home late at night, after collecting the cash takings from the driver's day, but the boss only laughs. He has no fear here. His fear is of a sniper, another taxi boss taking him out, and here there are too many witnesses.

My daughter Lael says, "Oh great! Besides having to worry about getting mugged, and getting harassed by men, I also have to worry about getting in the line of fire of a sniper."

Sam says, "If you see a man coming through the front gate, with shades and a trombone case, don't ask him what grade he's doing, or which music exam board he has chosen to use. Just look the other way."

## When the white man was in charge

One of the many ways in which a South African inner-city is not like London or New York or Hong Kong is that it has no parks — no parks which are safe, clean and green — and, after a few months of living in the inner-city of Pietermaritzburg, Sam set out to change that.

Our apartment overlooks stairs, which lead down to sports fields and a large green section on the Umsunduzi River. Conservationists described this river as a sewerage line for the township of Edendale — during apartheid, the National Party government did not make provision for adequate sewerage systems in black areas and so now broken and over-used pipes simply flowed into the river. The greenery alongside the stairs was alien and invasive; the trees had been strangled by parasitic vines that formed curtains to hide the muggers and prostitutes. Residents said the area had been neglected for 24 years, and been used as a dumping ground for just as long. The black rubbish bags were so deep the un-compostable had begun to decompose.

Sam began by pulling down vines. Then he cut and pruned trees, cleared and burnt rubbish, and along the way a number of conservation organisations joined him, until the area became cleaner and greener and almost nice. And then one day, while Sam was down at his park, enjoying the view, a jogger, a Zulu man in his late fifties, stopped to ask him: "Did you win the tender for this park?"

In South Africa, winning a bid to fulfill a government project is what makes or breaks so many start-ups. The tenders usually go to black businesses, or white businesses with black front men, and so I am sure this man was thinking that Sam was just another window-behind-a-black-empowerment-dressing, when Sam said, "No. I'm doing this work as a volunteer."

The Zulu man looked at Sam for a few minutes and then he said, "That is the difference with you white men. You do work because it's good, and not just for money. Surely you are God's chosen race."

Not expecting this, Sam quickly tried to think what to say, to stop the dangerous route this conversation was suddenly taking, when the man carried on, "You won't find white people jumping over your wall at night to steal from you."

Not following the logic, Sam managed to open his mouth, determined to get out the beginning of a response, when the Zulu man delivered the rest of his speech in one stream of consciousness bubble: "When the National Party was in charge, I used to walk up and down these steps and they were clean — no litter, no poop, no pee. When the white man was in charge we had to clear the streets by a certain time and if people were walking around after dark the police would come with their sjamboks<sup>8</sup> and get them into their homes. There was no crime then. And when the white man was in charge, if you peed on the side of the street, you'd spend a night in Loop Street jail."

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<sup>8</sup>Traditional African whips

And then the Zulu man finished off right where he started: "You white people are really God's people."

Now what do you do as a white man, when a black man gives you this — what he thinks will be a precious gift?

Well, firstly you get embarrassed, because he's trying to compliment you, but his compliments are based on a racist regime, that you think you were never a part of, and that you'd really like to not mention anymore.

And then you think, but it's not true because Europe has lots of crime, and they're white, so there must be whites going over walls at night.

And then you think, but what he is describing is the human rights abuses of apartheid. Blacks had to carry identification passes, they had a curfew, they had no public toilets to use in town, but were imprisoned for peeing in desperation beside the wall of a taxi rank.

And then you think, and you don't want to, but you do: is there anyway he is right? Was it better for more people when the white man was in charge?

## Sergeant Khan

There is a policeman who walks around our inner-city park, down the stairs, along the path, over the 100-year-old Macfarlane bridge, and back again. This area is throbbing with prostitutes and drug dealers and skinny muggers with long knives, desperate for their next whoonga fix, and so it was always reassuring to see this lone policeman striding around this area, in total confidence.

He is tall and thin and he walks stooped forward, always looking straight ahead, with real purpose. Whilst working to clean up the area, Sam saw him often, and they began to greet each other in passing, and learn each other's names. His was Mr Khan. Over his dark blue police uniform, he wore a bullet proof vest and a gun. In one hand he held a truncheon, on his hip was a pepper spray, and on his back a police-issue backpack.

One day, a day a bit hotter than the rest, Sergeant Khan walked past, and this time he walked a bit slower, looking at Sam a bit longer, and not straining to get ahead as usual; and then he stopped and said to Sam, "How are you?" And after Sam said, "I am fine. How are you?" he said, "I am confused."

Of course, Sam asked why and Sergeant Khan replied, "They don't want me to work nightshift." Sam assumed the 'they' were the other police officers, and so again Sam asked why? And after that, Sergeant Khan spoke, and he spoke for thirty minutes, and this, in summary, is what he said:

*It has to do with the three kings, who are ruling this city, and the two hunters, one of which is ready. The boy has been training for 18 years and now the boy is 39. There is a big cross in this city. A train of foreign nationals is coming and there is a bomb. Then they will see. The hunters will win. The Maharajas hate the Khans, you see. But on the 29th of October, they will see."*

Sergeant Khan went on like this, but in circles, and for longer, the circles growing loopier as they went. He had made us feel safe — in his neat-pressed uniform and shiny-metal weapons — until we spoke to him. One of our block's security guards had even said that he really liked Sergeant Khan, because he could see Sergeant Khan meant business. But after this I said to Sam, "If you are down there alone, and you see him coming, hide with the muggers."

What really surprised me, in the weeks following this conversation, as we saw Sergeant Khan patrolling, was why the police kept him on? He really was a sergeant. He really was employed by the peace-keeping, crime fighting force of our country. Were they retaining him because they were too afraid to let him go, afraid he would do something worse than talk crazy; or did they not know he was crazy, did he save that for white men in the park? Some of what Sergeant Khan said intersected with reality — there really has been a feud between the Maharajas and the Khans in Pietermaritzburg; he looked about 39 and he could have been the boy who was finally ready; foreign nationals have faced violence in South Africa. But put all together, in spiraling circles, it added up to psychosis.

And in those following weeks I also wondered, if we were the only people who knew about Sergeant Khan if it wasn't up to us to do something, to speak to someone about it. And so one day at a party, chancing across another policeman, I tried out the story of Sergeant Kahn on him, to see if the cop would believe it.

And he didn't even laugh. He simply said that there were a few crazy policemen, seeing out their days in the force, biding their time in jobs where they mostly couldn't cause any trouble. One policeman he knew had gone crazy, during the stress of apartheid; another had had to gather up the bodies of children, blown apart by land mines, in the border war with Angola. How do you come back to your day job after that?

And so time passed and we didn't do anything about Sergeant Khan. From a distance it was easy to believe he was just a diligent policeman, patrolling his beat, and, keeping our distance, I almost began to forget about his angst and anger and prophetic fears. Until today.

Sam had told me about Sergeant Khan six months ago, and at the time I had recorded all the details in my notebook. And then a week ago I had fished the notebook out, and begun to reread Sergeant Kahn's story, composing it in my mind, lying on my bed. But it is only now, today, that I have finished typing it up. And only now that I realise it is October 29.

And mostly I want to laugh, "October 29? Who chooses October 29 as their day of doom? It doesn't even have an ominous ring." But then, under all that laughing, a tiny little part of me wants to run for the bomb shelter, afraid of what might actually happen here, today, in Pietermaritzburg. What might the cross be, and the train, and the bomb; who is the hunter and the boy and the king; how can I avoid meeting all of them?

And then as that little part of me gains a hearing, clears its throat, speaks up a bit, and drowns out the voices of reason and love, I see how easy it must be to let go, to give into all your fears; how easy to become a life unhinged, patrolling the park, the path, the bridge; how close it is to all of us.



## Scraps of my life

We are thinking of leaving,  
Not only this place  
But also the land  
that bore us  
that bore with us  
All these forty long years.

For forty  
and more months,  
we have taken each night  
home-brewed coffee  
and home-baked cake  
to the guards that guard this road.

For forty and more months  
we have made Sunday lunches  
not roasts  
but curries  
as the back door blew people  
and the front door noise and dust  
all through my clean white flat.

For forty and more months  
I have made my way  
between garage and line  
back-patting  
ladies  
and babies as I go.

For forty and more months  
we have walked this block  
trampled this city  
that smells of fried dough  
and clean clean clothes.

And now I find,

that my pain over leaving  
begins with the people  
the guards and the maids  
the shoppers and the friends  
the people we'd be losing

And letting down.

The scraps of my life that I shared.

But it ends with the question  
that harries me  
all night  
and sometimes all day:  
Whatever will everyone think?

Whatever will they think?

## A scrapbook of her life

When my mother's breast sprouted like a purple cauliflower, and she could no longer work, we moved her out of her grandly crumbling five-bedroom-home. As my brother stripped the bedding, he discovered her mattress, lumpy and thin, like a poorly stuffed sack, dropped on the planks of a bed.

Of the three siblings, I was the only one who had known. Two years before, lying in hospital, third baby by my side, she came to visit and mentioned a sensation, "somewhere here". She smoothed her shirt by her armpit, skirting her breast, not touching. She believed all that prodding caused cancer — that and refusing to breastfeed — and she wasn't going to do it. "I'll treat it with good thinking," she said.

Good thinking was how my mother treated most things. "Isn't this lovely?" she'd say at supper. "Look how green the spinach is, grown in our garden, rich in iron." My skin turned a lighter shade of green, as a teenager, from all that loveliness. Spinach season gave way to guava season and our tongues became furry from stewed fruit and milk for breakfast and dessert. "So rich in Vitamin C," my mother would say. And so it went — her married season gave way to her divorced season, her job to her joblessness, her toddlers to her children leaving home, and to all of them she said, "So rich."

"You should have told us," my brother-in-law said. He was the first to examine the breast, to see the growth clawing at her t-shirt, catching on nylon threads. "We could have put her onto private care, before it came to this. Now we will have to use state."

The next day I fetched my mother from my sister's home, and drove to the Cancer ward. The queue was a room of rippling black and we were the white full stop at the end. She settled her thin bones on the school classroom seat. Beside us a fat lady, wrapped in black, played with her bracelets of calf skin, protection from her ancestors, in case the medicine didn't work. "I do want to live," my mother smiled at me. "I want to do a retreat at Findhorn; it's such a spiritual place. And I think I must teach English in Hong Kong."

I wanted to know what she would be willing to do for life.

"Not chemo, definitely not. But a small cut maybe, or a little operation?"

By the time the tide heaved us onto the counter, her face was soft and floury. They led us into a room, to a cream plastic bed, where the nurse raised my mother's shirt and then gently lowered it. "Eish," she said, wiping her round forehead, "Hmm, maybe you can try chemo, but eish, with this one, I don't think so."

My mother joined the Black Sash before I was born. She worked part time for the Institute of Race Relations, full time for the African Art Centre; she ran as a rep for the Progressive Federal Party, and when apartheid finally ended, she turned her attention to education. She started an integrated learning program in her local high school and an alternative school in her home; and when the authorities objected she turned to healing. She ran meditation classes, yoga classes and a health centre, devoted to clean food and wholeness by herbs. Trying was what she did best.

The next day we returned to hospital. She would try the chemotherapy. Her lace legs hung from the fake leather chair; I had never seen her in tubes before, I had never seen her still. She sat up then, pushing on her arms, wanting deep fried chips with vinegar and salt. My mother had never wondered about money. She gave me whenever I asked, and she found it whenever she needed. One day she asked to borrow from me to pay her electricity. I was an adult and said, No, she needed to be more responsible, to get jobs that paid, to do a monthly shop so she didn't run out of food and have to eat from the garden. And then I apologised for treating her like a child.

I went to the car and found change in the cubby, and I went to the hospital shop and found greasy chips, and she ate all of them lying back in her chair.

When the day came to check her Cancer count, she needled her way from the parking lot to the lift, to the waiting room to the clinic, and then, after passing a stool in the prefabricated toilet, she fainted. "Ohh," she said, shuddering, leaning on me, bone to flesh.

"Don't bring your mother back," the nurse said, as though I was trying to resurrect her, to pull out her last shot of life and spin it into an unending thread. "We don't need to see her again."

After that, she stayed in my sister's kids' room; the kids moved in with my sister; I lived across town. During the week, my sister fed her Rose's Lime cordial, and finely chopped olives. She washed my mother's creases and changed her nappies and fluffed her pillows, as my mother descended into death, her mouth now a beak, her hands brittle claws.

My job was to sort out her five-bedroom-house. My mother had kept everything. Our school photos -- I looked out of cardboard frames now fat and blue-eyed, now dressed in black with a fringe. My great grandmother's sheet music that my mother put together, right hand then left -- *My Bonnie lies over the ocean, A Bicycle Made for Two*, on thick yellowed paper. She loved the idea of classical music, but her real heart was in the pops. And my mother's unfinished arts -- sketched outlines, shaded drawings, models cast for the final bronze.

I gathered it all up, and put it on the road in black bags.

The cupboards in her bedroom took longer. They were full of papers, carefully shoved into messy piles. Letters from politicians; these I kept. Letters from lovers; these I began to read. My mother brought home one boyfriend after my dad left. His name was Ivan. He tried to kiss my sister and me goodnight with big wet lips and a mustache, and we squealed and hid under covers. After that my mother kept the others a secret.

"I want to know his name," I said one holiday when the schedule of boredom stretched before me.

"He's a very well-known man, I can't."

"Please, Mom."

"We can't let anyone know." She was crumbling and I wouldn't let her go. "His name is by the phone."

I could just read, and I searched the names at the phone, on the pad where numbers were scratched. I found a man's name, a famous man's name, but I wasn't interested in him, it was always her. With all her evening meetings, her weekends given to the cause, with all the days we came home and the house grew dark without her, how could she make space for him.

My hands were dusty by the time I found the diaries. Mostly they were full of reminders to think positively, to move slower, to take better care; one with an entry, "Spent the day at home with Sarah, pottering in the garden. She is a very dear daughter."

My other job was to visit on Sundays, so my sister and family could go out. I'd arrive at 12, hungry. I'd offer my mother food, morsels on a plate, held at eye-level. I would eat in the kitchen, reading the papers, and then I would sit by her bed. She would ask after my children, and my work. She would tell about the mystic who had been to visit and rubbed her with scented oil, and a warm wooden cross; about the Christian Scientists who still believed she'd be healed; about the good lady who runs a charity for pregnant girls and yet still made time to sit by her bed and talk. I wanted to talk also, to tell her about the letters, to ask about the lovers, to say I'd read the diary. Time was running out, mercilessly pushing its grains through the bottleneck funnel; I wanted to seize her last breaths and pour them over our affection, ignite it again like I had that one day in the garden.

But I was so tired. She'd lie back on her bed, mouth dry, lips wet. I'd go into the lounge and doze on a couch; and now and then she would call from the room to see if I was there.

Growing up, I never saw my mother cry. Not when her mother died, not when my father left her, not when my brother was called to the bush war that drove young men crazy. Every few days I would tell her I loved her, sometimes it was hourly, and I'd ask if she loved me too. I'd sleep in her bed, I'd fake bad dreams, I'd try fit into the curve of her sleep, find her feet to squeeze between mine.

My last job was to arrange the funeral. It needed to be grand, in a national park with white chairs. This was one topic we always had time to discuss on Sundays, in between lunch and naps. I should invite her former institutes, and her former schools. It would be nice to have a scrapbook of her life work, or a display, and the speakers should not just be family. I promised to do all of it, and not to burden my sister with this, my mother's last project.

Then one morning my brother-in-law phoned. "I think she's close to going," his voice was soft like a naturalist, hoping to avoid the startle, the frantic scurrying paws. "Your sister said not to worry you, but I thought you'd want to know. I thought you'd want to say goodbye."

I put down the phone. My children were sleeping. They were young to wake without me. I set out their clothes, I made their tea, I heated some porridge, and laid it in the warming drawer. By the time I arrived she was dead.

It wasn't peaceful, my sister said. She had grasped at the air with her beak mouth desperate to hold on, clinging, catching, trying. In life, my mother had told us, she had no regrets; but in death it seemed she had found one.

I went in to see her, lying on the bed, mouth sharp open, eyes wide. Should I have been here; was she trying to spit out something she'd wished she'd said long ago, before it settled down and died with her?

My brother sat at the end of the bed with his hand on her white foot. "Hey Sarah," he said. "Well that's it, hey?" He worked overseas and had flown out just in time, to be at her side when she died.

I sat next to my mother and touched her chest, then I put my hand in my lap. "I think we should aim to have the memorial before the weekend."

I looked at my brother. He looked at my mother. "I do need to get back," he said.

I knew what he was thinking. The thought was in me and in my sister and would later be asked by our children, Why do I not feel what I should? Why can I still picture my diary for today, that 10am meeting, the need to edit that newsletter before I press send? Why has grief not saved me from all my responsibilities and swept me away in its warm stream?

"I'll put a notice in the paper. It will be enough time," I assured my brother. "I'll book the venue, and order glasses and wine. I'll arrange the tables, the speeches, the snacks. I'll manage it all," I said.

I was on the phone when the undertakers came; when they sheet-wrapped her body and rolled it onto the trolley, when they wheeled her to the car and slid her stretcher through the boot till it pressed the back of the chair, when they turned the ignition and edged out the driveway and down the steep road that leads into the center of our city.

"I'll take ten platters," I was saying, as my mother drove away forever.

## One fine morning, when this life is over

After almost four years of living in the South African city centre, we are moving to Cambridge.

I made it through and I didn't unhinge, and neither did my family. But some of us came closer to seeing how fragile life is, how thin the veil into despair, how weak the walls holding up our lives. South Africa is angry and drunk and unkind to women and it is hard to see that all day and to hear that all night. South Africa is also funny and generous, pressing 200 Rand notes into your hand, mistaking shampoo for muthi.

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When we first moved into the city centre we thought we would live and work and eventually retire there. It was the first property that we had owned and lived in and that was a statement: we have come home. So many parts of city life felt like that for us. Soon after moving in, Sam said, "I love it here, I always felt lonely in the suburbs." Here there were always people on the streets, and always people that you hadn't spoken to before, always someone, from a different walk of life, to kick wide your assumptions and entitlements.

And I loved it because I love the feeling of happy. I love the feeling I get when I remember school, all the different races happy together, singing *We are the future*. I felt at home in the city, surrounded by different cultures, even if I preferred to smile rather than talk, I still liked to walk through the city streets and round our city block, and be able to wave and smile and be at peace, even if we couldn't be friends. So why could we not stay?

Some of it is who we are: always looking for a new adventure. How many other families move to the second most expensive part of England with no jobs, and no prospects of jobs either.

But there is more, because the decision to leave South Africa is so hard, that it takes more than just restlessness. Six months into life in Cambridge I was commenting at the dinner table that it's weird how people can emigrate from America to England with no guilt, but none of us can leave South Africa without guilt, and a fellow guest said, "Well that is because America is not a struggling nation." And that is where the guilt lies. You feel you might have made it worse by leaving.

I don't think our family did all we could have in the city centre. (Half-way into our time there I heard about a white family who had moved into Hillbrow, thrown themselves into city life, and then burnt out and left. And what I said to myself is, Keep it low-key, don't try to do too much, and then you will be able to live here forever, and be of genuine help). And so we kept it low-key — but still, I think we did help. Sam spent hours every day talking to people, and sometimes all those hours meant was that we gained insight into lives, into how taxi wars work or how marriages don't work; but sometimes those hours had more concrete results: Sam connected his white media company friends with a diligent but uneducated security guard and they trained the guard up and he progressed through the company. We did clean up the park and people could walk their dogs there without stepping on human faeces, and it was now

harder to get mugged. We connected secondhand bicycles to many people who were walking each day for hours to avoid taxi fares. We were a white family and white faces every day at the washing line and the corner shop and the city streets. We were smiling and friendly and greeting people — we knew so many names and so many stories — the barber, the lifeguard, the cell phone repairman.

I found I couldn't offer friendship, but I could offer friendliness. And just the act of being white and friendly feels like it helps. Just after leaving South Africa, the *I'm Staying* campaign began on Facebook, and I found it hard to look at, from pangs of guilty love for South Africa, but I also found it irritating. Our family had also said we were staying, we had also said we would be the last to leave. A friend from church had said to me, "When I heard that you were leaving, I felt really discouraged. You. Who had actually chosen to immerse yourself in the real South Africa. I thought you would be the last to leave." So how can so much change in three years?

I don't know. I find I can list all my motives in leaving:

Sam and I wanted career changes, and it's hard to find other work options in South Africa.

I wanted to send my kids to school and I like the British education system.

I wanted our kids to study at British universities.

We thought that our kids could make a go of any career in England, with far less options in South Africa.

We wanted to travel.

I felt like Pietermaritzburg was a cultural backwater, like I was stuck in a dying town with no music, art or verve!

But I don't think these motives are the sum of it. I think what tipped us was seeing the angry heart of Africa. We wanted to be at the centre, but the center was more than we could manage.

When we first moved into the city, we spent our Saturdays walking the streets, eating magwinya at Promise Takeaway, watching the reggae street-buskers in the old pavilions, buying sweets at the corner shop. Our children played tennis in the courtyard and soccer each night, we rode with the local gang of boys to the BMX track, played hide and seek, into the dark. And then as months passed this decreased. We began to drive more. We found a swimming club, mostly white, and we stayed indoors in the morning, and drove to the club each night. We still had people over, and we still shared our lives, but a lot less than I had pictured. I think in many ways, Sam continued to share his life, and I began to hunker down, to protect — giving into the fear that we had deprived our children beyond what was good for them to thrive, that our girls in particular would always lead stunted lives.

Friends asked if we would have left if we hadn't just stayed put in the suburbs, where we belonged. I don't know. Perhaps all those other points would have still been enough. But I can't answer that question because once you have seen the centre, it is hard to live behind walls again.

The future of this country is a big bomb of young men who are drunk and who carry knives, who break open doors and show you guns when you follow them, who shout at ladies in the street, who look at you with cold eyes. And perhaps in the suburbs you might see one of these



bombs a day, but in the city they surround you, and when the good people go home for the day, or back into their flats, then they are still there.

We have had decades of violence and anger to each other and to women and it used to be contained in the townships and now it has spread but it is big and bubbling and only something you can avoid by choosing to live in certain safe areas and I don't think any policy or politician can undo what is going on here - was it apartheid, is it a violent culture, is it a weak police force, or our gun laws?

I am taken aback by very small things in the UK: women walking alone at ten at night, teenage girls cycling after dark, my little kids making their own way to school and back, the absolute assumption and assurance that women do not and will not be treated any differently to men, moms my age riding hands free on bicycles, and texting while they go.

I know that you can see South Africa through many lenses: a rainbow nation, a miracle, a land of natural beauty and splendor, with people who live by the spirit of Ubuntu. And I suppose the people that leave are the people that have seen more of the other side, or the people who are just more afraid of the other side. And the people that leave and come back are the people who can move between the two, who can see what they want to see.

I don't know which ones we are yet. If this flat is for sale, or just for rent?

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