

JUMP

He is aware of himself in the room, behind the apartment door, at the end of a corridor, within the spaces of this destination that has the name HOTEL LEBUVU in gilt mosaic where he was brought in. The vast lobby where a plastic-upholstered sofa and matching easy chairs are stranded, the waiting elevator in its shaft that goes up floor after floor past empty halls, gleaming signs—CONFERENCE CENTRE, TROPICANA BUFFET, THE MERMAID BAR—he is aware of being finally reached within all this as in a film a series of dissolves passes the camera through walls to find a single figure, the hero, the criminal. Himself. The curtains are open upon the dark, at night. When he gets up in the morning he closes them. By now they are on fire with the sun. The day pressing to enter. But his back is turned; he is an echo in the chamber of what was once the hotel.

The chair faces the wide-screen television set they must have installed when they decided where to put him. There is nothing to match its expensive finish—the small deal table and four chairs with hard red plastic-covered seats, the hairy two-division sofa, the Formica-topped stool, the burning curtains whose circles and blotches of pattern dazzle like the flicker of flames: these would be standard for a clientele of transients who spend a night, spill beer, and put out cigarettes under a heel. The silvery convex of the TV screen reflects a dim, ballooned vision of a face, pale and full. He forgets, and passes a hand over cheek and chin, but there is no beard there —it's real that he shaved it off. And they gave him money to fit himself out with the clothes he wears now. The beard (it was dark and vigorous, unlike the fine hair of his head) and the camouflage fatigues tucked into boots that struck authoritatively with each step, the leather-bound beret; took them all off, divested himself of them. There! He must be believed, he was believed.

The face pale and sloping away into the pale flesh of the chin: his hidden self produced for them. It's there on the dead screen when he looks up.

They supplied a cassette player of good quality as well as the wide-screen television set. He is playing, so loudly it fills the room, presses counter to the day pressing against the curtains, the music track from a film about an American soldier who becomes brutalized by the atrocities he is forced to commit in Vietnam. He saw the film long ago, doesn't remember it well, and does not visualize its images. He is not listening: the swell and clash, the tympani of conflict, the brass of glory, the chords of thrilling resolve, the maudlin strings of regret, the pauses of disgust—they come from inside him. They flow from him and he sits on and does not meet the image smeared on the screen. Now and then he sees his hand. It never matched the beard, the fatigues, the beret, the orders it signed. It is a slim, white, hairless hand, almost transparent over fragile bones, as the skeleton of a gecko can be seen within its ghostly skin. The knuckles are delicately pink—clean, clean hand, scrubbed and scrubbed—but along the V between first and second fingers there is the shit-coloured stain of nicotine where the cigarette burns down. They were prepared to spend foreign currency on him. They still supply from somewhere the imported brand he prefers; packets are stacked up amply in their cellophane, within reach. And he can dial room service as indicated on the telephone that stands on the floor, and, after a long wait, someone will come and bring cold beer. He was offered whisky, anything he liked, at the beginning, and he ordered it although he had never been one to drink spirits, had made the choice, in his profession, of commanding the respect accorded the superiorly disciplined personality rather

than the kind admiringly given to the hard-living swaggerer. The whisky has stopped coming; when he orders a bottle nothing is said but it is not delivered.

As if it mattered.

Covered by the volume of the music, there is the silence. Nothing said about the house: the deal included a house, he was given to understand it would be one of the fine ones left behind and expropriated by the State in the name of the people, when the colonials fled. A house with a garden and watchman for privacy, security (in his circumstances), one of the houses he used to ride past when he was the schoolboy son of a civil servant living here in a less affluent white quarter. A house and a car. Eventually some sort of decent position. Rehabilitated. He had thought of information, public relations (with his international experience); it was too soon to say, but they didn't say no.

Everything he wanted: that was to be his reward. The television crews came—not merely the tin-pot African ones but the BBC, CBS, Antenne 2, Zweites Deutsches Fernsehen—and the foreign correspondents flew in with their tape recorders. He was produced at press conferences in the company of the Commander of the Armed Forces, the Minister of Defence, and their aides elegant as the overthrown colonial ones had been. A flower arrangement among the water carafes. Him displayed in his provided clothes, his thighs that had been imposing in fatigues too fleshy when crossed in slightly shiny tropical trousers, his chin white, soft and naked where the beard was gone, his hair barbered neat and flat with the dun fringe above the forehead, clippers run up the nape—on his big hunched body he saw in the newspaper photographs the head of a little boy with round bewildered eyes under brows drawn together and raised. He told his story. For the first few months he told his story again and again, in performance. Everyone has heard it, now. On the table with the four chairs drawn up a cold fried egg waits on a plate covered by another plate. A jug of hot water has grown tepid beside a tin of instant coffee. Someone has brought these things and gone away. Everyone has gone away. The soaring, billowing music in the room is the accompaniment the performance never had. When the tape has ended he depresses the rewind button to play it again.

They never mention the house or the car and he doesn't know how to bring up the subject—they hardly ever come to see him any more, but maybe that's natural because the debriefing is over, they're satisfied.

There's nothing more to tell the television crews and the press. There's nothing more he can think of—think back! think back!—to find to say.

They've heard about his childhood in this capital, this country to which he has been returned. That he was an ordinary colonial child of parents who'd come out from Europe to find a better life where it was warm and there were opportunities. That it was warm and there was the sea and tropical fruit, blacks to dig and haul, but the opportunity was nothing grander than the assured tenure of a white man in the lower ranks of the civil service. His parents were not interested in politics, never. They were not interested in the blacks. They didn't think the blacks would ever affect their lives and his. When the colonial war began it was away in the North; troops came from the 'mother' country to deal with it. The boy would perhaps become an accountant, certainly something one rung above his father, because each generation must better itself, as they had done by emigrating. He grew up taking for granted the activities and outlets for adventurous play that had no place in the reality of the blacks' lives, the blacks' war: as an adolescent he bonded with his peers through joining the parachute club, and he jumped—the rite of passage into manhood.

In the capital, the revolution was achieved overnight by a relinquishment of power by Europe, exacted by the indigenous people through years of war in the rural areas. A few

statues toppled in the capital's square and some shops were looted in revenge for exploitation. His parents judged their security by the uninterrupted continuance, at first, of the things that mattered to them: the garbage continued to be collected twice a week and there was fish in the market. Their modest lives would surely not be touched by black rule. He was apprenticed as draughtsman to an architect by then (more prestigious than accountancy) and his weekend hobby, in addition to jumping from the sky, was photography. He even made a bit of pocket money by selling amusing shots of animals and birds to a local paper. Then came the event that—all at once, reeled up as the tape is filling its left cylinder on rewind—the experience that explained everything he had ever done since, everything that he was to confess to, everything he was to inculcate himself for and judge himself on in his performance for the journalists under the monitoring approval of the Commander of the Armed Forces and the Minister of Defence, during the probing of debriefing, the ? and A interviews; and to himself, in fiery dimness behind the curtains' embers, facing the fish-eye of the TV screen, surrounded by the music, alone. He took a photograph of a sea-bird alighting on some sort of tower structure. Soldiers lumbered with sawn-off machine guns seized him, smashed his camera and took him to the police. He was detained for five weeks in a dirty cell the colonial regime had used for blacks. His parents were told he was an imperialist spy—their innocent boy only two years out of school! Of course, this was all in the confusion of the first days of freedom (he would explain to his audience), it was to be expected. And who was that boy to think he could photograph anything he liked, a military installation of interest to the new State's enemies? That white boy.

At this point in the telling came the confession that for the first time in his life he thought about blacks—and hated them. They had smashed his camera and locked him up like a black and he hated them and their government and everything they might do, whether it was good or bad. No—he had not then believed they could ever do anything good for the country where he was born. He was sought out by or he sought out—he was never made to be clear on this small point—white people to whom his parents had successfully appealed to get him released. They soothed him with their indignation over what had happened to him and gave him a substitute for the comradeship of the parachute club (closed down by the blacks' military security) in their secret organization to restore white rule through compliant black proxies. How it was to be done was not yet formulated, allies from neighbouring cold and hot wars had not yet been found, money from international interests wanting access to oil and mineral finds had not been supplied, sources for matériel and mercenaries to put together a rebel army in the bush were still to be investigated. He bent quietly over his drawing board and at night he went to clandestine meetings.

He felt importantly patriotic; something new, because his parents had abandoned their country, and this country in which he was born had been taken back by the blacks for themselves. His parents thanked God he was safe in good company, white like them but well off and knowledgeable about how to go on living here where it was warm, trusted to advise one if it were to be time to leave. They were proud when told their son was being sent to Europe to study; an act of philanthropy by compatriots of the country they had all once emigrated from.

Of humble beginnings, he had come into the patrimony of counter-revolution.

The telephone is not only good for house calls that summon the old black man shrunken in khaki who brings the beer, brought the egg and covered it with a second plate. He can phone long distance every day, if he wants to. There is never a bill; they pay. That was the condition understood—they would provide everything. So he phones his mother every third day in the European city to which she and his father returned when the people who knew

about these things said it was time to go. He has only to dial, and it's winter there now and the phone will ring on its crocheted mat in the living-room behind double-glazing, discovered to him (so that was where his parents came from!) when he was set up in the same European city.

They must have realized soon that he was not studying. At least not in the sense they would understand, of attending an institute and qualifying for a profession you could name. But it was obvious to them he was doing well, he was highly-thought-of by the people who had recognized the young man's qualities and taken him up after the terrible time when those blacks threw him in prison back where everything was lost, now—the civil servant's pension, the mangoes and passion fruit, the sun. He was involved in the affairs of those people of substance, international business too complicated for him to explain. And confidential. They respected that. A mother and father must never make any move that might jeopardize the opportunities they themselves have not been able to provide. He was always on his way to or from the airport—France, Germany, Switzerland, and other destinations he did not specify. Of course his gift for languages must have been invaluable to the people he worked with rather than for—that was clearly his status. He had not an apartment but a whole house purchased for him in the privacy of one of the best quarters, and his study or office there was not only lined with documents and books but equipped with the latest forms of telecommunication. Foreign associates came to stay; he had a full-time maid. His delicate, adolescent's chin disappeared in the soft flesh of good living, and then he grew the beard that came out dark and vigorous giving him the aspect of a man of power. They never saw him wearing the rest of its attributes: the bulky fatigues and the boots and the beret. He visited them in civilian clothes that had come to be his disguise.

The first time he ever used the phone on the floor was when he phoned her, his mother, to tell her he was alive and here. Where? How could she ever have supposed it—back, back in this country! The sun, the mangoes (that day there was fruit supplied on the table where the egg congeals, now), the prison a young boy had been thrown into like any black. She wept because she and his father had thought he was dead. He had disappeared two months previously. Without a word; that was one of the conditions he adhered to on his side, he couldn't tell his parents this was not a business trip from which he would return: he was giving up the house, the maid, the first-class air tickets, the important visitors, the book-lined room with the telecommunications system by which was planned the blowing up of trains, the mining of roads, and the massacre of sleeping villagers back there where he was born. It is the day to phone her. It's more and more difficult to keep up the obligation. There's nothing left to tell her, either. From weeping gratitude that he was alive, as time has gone by she has come to ask why she should be punished in this way, why he should have got mixed up in something that ended so badly.

Over the phone she says, Are you all right?

He asks after his father's health. Does it look like being a mild winter?

Already the wind from the mountains has brought a touch of rheumatism.

Do you need anything? (Money is provided for him to send to his parents, deprived of their pension; that's part of the deal.) Then there's nothing to say. She doesn't ask if he's suffering from the heat back there, although the sun banks up its fire in the closed curtains, although she knows well enough what the climate's like in summer, and he was gone seven years and cannot reacclimatize. She doesn't want to mention the heat because that is to admit he is back there, she and his father will never understand what it was all about, his life; why he got himself into the fine house, the telecommunications system, the international

connections, or why he gave it all up. She says little, in a listless voice, over the phone. But she writes. They deliver her letters, pushed under the door.

Why does God punish me? What have you and I done? It all started long ago. We were too soft with you. With that pathetic nonsense. We should never have allowed it. Giving in, letting you run wild with those toys. It started to go wrong then, we should have seen you were going to make a mess of our lives, I don't know why. You had to go jumping from

there. Do you know what I felt, seeing you fall like that, enjoying yourself frightening us to death while you fooled around with killing yourself? We should have known it. Where it would end. Why did you have to be like that? Why? Why?

First in the weeks of debriefing and then in the press conferences, he had to say.

They demanded again and again. It was their right.

How could you associate yourself with the murderous horde that burns down hospitals, cuts off the ears of villagers, blows up trains full of innocent workers going home to their huts, rapes children and forces women at gunpoint to kill their husbands and eat their flesh?

He sat there before them sane, and was confronted by the madness. As he sits in the red gloom in front of the wide-screen television set, the fuse of a cigarette between the fingers of his fine white hand and his pale blue eyes clear under puppy-like brows. Shuddering; they couldn't see it but he shuddered within every time to hear listed by them what he knew had happened. How could they come out with it, just like that?

Because horror comes slowly. It takes weeks and months, trickling, growing, mounting, rolling, swelling from the faxed codes of operation, the triumph of arms deals secretly concluded with countries who publicly condemn such transactions; from the word 'destabilization' with its image of some faulty piece of mechanism to be rocked from its base so that a sound structure may be put in its place. He sent the fax, he took the flights to campaign for support from multinational companies interested in access to the oil and minerals the blacks were giving to their rivals, he canvassed Foreign Offices interested in that other term, spheres of influence.

In the fine house where an antique clock played an air over the sudden stutterings of communications installations, the war was intelligence, the miracle of receiving the voice of a general thousands of kilometres away, on the other continent, down there in the bush. When he travelled on his European missions he himself was that fighting man: the beard, the fatigues, the beret. The people he visited saw him as straight from the universal battlefield of Right and Left; the accoutrements transformed him for himself, so it seemed he was emerged from that generic destiny known as the field of operations.

You mean to say you didn't know?

But nobody talked. A push was achieved or it wasn't. A miniature flag moved on the map. Men lost, and losses imposed on the government forces were recorded. There were some reverses. A huge airlift of supplies and matériel by the neighbouring African state allied in the cause of destabilization was successful; the rebel force would fight on for years, village by village, bridge by bridge, power stations and strategic roads gained on the map. There would be victory on the righteous side.

Nobody said how it was being done. The black government spread reports of massacres because it was losing, and of course the leftist and liberal press took up the tales.

Intelligence, tuned to the clock with its gilded cupids, filed these: under disinformation about destabilization.

Here, always, they waited for him to go on. He swallowed continually between phrases, and while he was telling they would watch him swallow.

The cold egg won't go down. There is a thin streamer of minute ants who come up six floors through the empty foyer and the closed reception rooms and find their way along the leg of the table to food left there; he knows.

And telling, telling—telling over and over to himself, now that no one comes to ask any more, he swallows, while the ants come steadily. Go on, go on.

It wasn't until I went to the neighbouring State—it is a white state and very advanced—that provided the matériel, planes, intelligence supplied by its agents to the communications centre it set up for us in the house in Europe. There was also a base.

Go on.

A training base for our people. It was secret, no one knew it was there.

Hidden in a game reserve. I was very confident—pleased—to find myself sent not only around Europe, but chosen to go to that State. To liaise. To meet the Commander of National Security and Special Services there. See for myself the important extent of co-operation in our mutual dedication to the cause. Report back on the morale of our men being trained there in the use of advanced weapons and strategy.

Yes?

A crescendo comes in great waves from the speaker provided with the tape player: to win the war, stabilize by de-stabilization, set up a regime of peace and justice!

During press conferences, at this point an ooze of heat would rise under his skin. Their eyes on him drew it up from his tissues like a blister. And then?

There's no one in the room, the curtains are closed against everyone.

Swallow. I saw the male refugees captured at the border brought in starving.

I saw how to deal with them. They were made to join our forces or were put back over the border to die. I could see that they would die. Their villages burned, their families hacked to death—you saw in their faces and bodies how it really happened ... the disinformation. It wasn't talked about at that base, either. Our allies, at the dinners they gave—game dishes and wine, everything of the best provided, treated like a VIP—they didn't talk about these things. Well... I was shown around... everything. The secret radio station that broadcast the Voice of our organization. The latest weapons made available to us. The boots and uniforms made in their factories. (That outfit of mine must have come from there.) The planes taking off at night to fly our men, armed and equipped to do what they were trained to do. I knew, now, what that was.

Yes?

Of course, it was war... So?

... War isn't pretty. There is brutality on both sides. I had to understand.

Tried to. But planes also came back from over the border at night. Not empty. They carried what I thought were refugee children to be saved from the fighting; girls of twelve or thirteen, terrified, they had to be pulled apart from each other to get them to walk. They were brought in for the men who were receiving their military training. Men who had been without women; to satisfy them. After dinner, the Commander offered me one. He had one led in for himself. He took off her clothes to show me.

So, yes, I knew what happened to those girl children. I knew that our army had become—maybe always was—yes, what you say, a murderous horde that burned hospitals, cut off the ears of villagers, raped, blew up trains full of workers. Brought to devastation this country where I was born.

It's there, only the glowing curtains keep it out. At night, when the curtains are drawn back it is still there in the dark with the blind bulk of buildings, the traces of broken boulevards and decayed squares marked in feeble lights. Familiar to me, can't say I don't know it, can't say it

doesn't recognize me. It is there, with the sun pressing against the window, a population become beggars living in the streets, camping out in what used to be our—white people's—apartments, no electricity, no water in the tiled bathrooms, no glass in the windows, and on the fine balconies facing the sea where we used to take our aperitifs, those little open fires where they cook their scraps of food.

And that's the end.

But it's gone over again and again. No end. It's only the tape that ends.

Can't be explained how someone begins really to know. Instead of having intelligence by fax and satellite.

Back in the room in Europe with its telecommunications there was on record the whereabouts of this black regime's representatives abroad. One day he went there. In the rebel army's outfit, with the beard, so that they could shoot him if they wanted; so that they would realize who he was and what he knew. Not the atrocities. Something else; all that he could offer to efface his knowledge of the atrocities: complete information about the rebel army, its leaders, its internal feuds, its allies, its sources of supply, the exact position and function of its secret bases. Everything. Everything he was and had been, right back to the jump with the parachute and the photograph of the tower. They didn't shoot. They kept him under guard so that the people from the telecommunications headquarters in the room with the antique clock would not kill him before he could tell. They handled him carefully; himself a strange and rare species, kept captured for study. They were aware of its worth, to them.

Debriefing is like destabilization, the term doesn't describe the method and experience. Day by day, divested of the boots, fatigues, the beret and the beard, first-class flights, the house in Europe, the dinners of honour, the prestige of intelligence—his life. He has been discovered there beneath it, sitting quite still on a chair in a dark room, only a naked full neck pulsating.

In the silence after the tape ends it is possible to think there is the distinct sound of ants moving in an unwavering path.

They knew they couldn't have it for nothing—his life. They haven't provided the house with a garden that was part of the deal. Or the car. Of course, he can go out. Go where he likes, it was only for the first six months that he was restricted. Once they know they can trust him, he's not of interest to them any longer. Nothing more, now, to lead them to. Once he's told everything, once he's been displayed, what use is he to them?

They are right. Perhaps they will never come to him again.

The girl emerges from the bedroom, she sleeps late.

There is a girl. They didn't supply her. But they might have; she was there in the waiting room when he went under surveillance to a doctor. He politely let her take her turn with the doctor first, and when she came out they got talking. I don't see how I'm ever supposed to follow this diet, she said, what can you buy if you haven't got foreign currency—you know how it is, living here.

Yes—for the first time he saw it was so: he lives here. Perhaps it was possible for him to get what she needed? She didn't ask questions; access to foreign currency is not a subject to be discussed.

The girl's been in the bedroom all morning, just as if there was no one there. Now the dim room prolongs her lassitude, no break between night and day. Pink feet with hammer toes drag over the floor; she makes tasting sounds with her tongue against her palate. She takes a deep breath, holds then expels it; because he doesn't speak.

So you don't want to eat?

She has lifted the covering plate and touches the yellow mound of the yolk with her forefinger; the congealed surface dents shinily. She wipes her finger on the T-shirt that is her nightgown. A sprig of houseplant she brought and put in a glass, one day, is on the table where she set it down then; in the cloudy water, the darkened room, it has sent out one frail, floating thread of root. Ants are wavering at the rim of the glass. The thin buttermilk smell of her fluids and his semen comes to him as she bends to follow the ants' trail from the floor. After he had finished with her, last night, she said: You don't love me. He was assailed by the sight of the twelve-year-old child and the Commander. Then she heard something she couldn't believe. The man weeping. She drew away in fear and repugnance to the side of the bed. She hangs about the room behind him, this morning, knowing he's not going to speak. Why don't we go to the beach. Let's have a swim. I'd love to go and eat some prawns. We can take a bus. There's a good place ... it's cheap. And don't you feel like a swim, I'm dying to get into the water... come on. She waits patiently. Has he shaken his head—there was some slight movement. There is nothing in the room she can turn to as a pretext to keep her there, waiting to see if he accepts her forgiveness, her humble understanding of her function. After a few minutes she goes back into the bedroom and comes out dressed. I'm going. (?ualifies:) Going for a swim. This time he nods and leans to take a cigarette. She hasn't opened the door yet. She's hesitating, as if she thinks she ought to make some gesture, doesn't know what, might come over and touch his hair. She's gone. After the inhalation of the cigarette has become his breath and body, he gets up and goes to the window. He pulls aside the curtains to left and right. They are parched and faded, burned out. And now he is exposed: there is the bright stare of the beggared city, city turned inside out, no shelter there for life, the old men propped against empty façades to die, the orphaned children running in packs round the rubbish dumps, the men without ears and women with a stump where there was an arm, their clamour rising at him, rising six floors in the sun. He can't go out because they are all around him, the people. ?ump. The stunning blow of the earth as it came up to flexed knees, the parachute sinking silken. He stands, and then backs into the room. Not now; not yet.

THE ULTIMATE SAFARI

The Ultimate Safari The African Adventure Lives On... You can do it?
The ?ltime safari or ex?dition with leaders who know Africa.

—TRAVEL ADVERTISEMENT, O?server, LONDON, 27/11/88 That night our mother went to the shop and she didn't come back. Ever.

What happened? I don't know. My father also had gone away one day and never come back; but he was fighting in the war. We were in the war, too, but we were children, we were like our grandmother and grandfather, we didn't have guns. The people my father was fighting—the bandits, they are called by our government—ran all over the place and we ran away from them like chickens chased by dogs. We didn't know where to go. Our mother went to the shop because someone said you could get some oil for cooking. We were happy because we hadn't tasted oil for a long time;

perhaps she got the oil and someone knocked her down in the dark and took that oil from her. Perhaps she met the bandits. If you meet them, they will kill you. Twice they came to our village and we ran and hid in the bush and when they'd gone we came back and found they had taken everything; but the third time they came back there was nothing to take, no oil, no food, so they burned the thatch and the roofs of our houses fell in. My mother found some pieces of tin and we put those up over part of the house. We were waiting there for her that night she never came back.

We were frightened to go out, even to do our business, because the bandits did come. Not into our house—without a roof it must have looked as if there was no one in it, everything gone—but all through the village.

We heard people screaming and running. We were afraid even to run, without our mother to tell us where. I am the middle one, the girl, and my little brother clung against my stomach with his arms round my neck and his legs round my waist like a baby monkey to its mother. All night my first-born brother kept in his hand a broken piece of wood from one of our burnt house-poles. It was to save himself if the bandits found him.

We stayed there all day. Waiting for her. I don't know what day it was; there was no school, no church any more in our village, so you didn't know whether it was a Sunday or a Monday.

When the sun was going down, our grandmother and grandfather came.

Someone from our village had told them we children were alone, our mother had not come back. I say 'grandmother' before 'grandfather' because it's like that: our grandmother is big and strong, not yet old, and our grandfather is small, you don't know where he is, in his loose trousers, he smiles but he hasn't heard what you're saying, and his hair looks as if he's left it full of soap suds. Our grandmother took us—me, the baby, my first-born brother, our grandfather—back to her house and we were all afraid (except the baby, asleep on our grandmother's back) of meeting the bandits on the way. We waited a long time at our grandmother's place.

Perhaps it was a month. We were hungry. Our mother never came. While we were waiting for her to fetch us our grandmother had no food for us, no food for our grandfather and herself. A woman with milk in her breasts gave us some for my little brother, although at our house he used to eat porridge, same as we did. Our grandmother took us to look for wild spinach but everyone else in her village did the same and there wasn't a leaf left.

Our grandfather, walking a little behind some young men, went to look for our mother but didn't find her. Our grandmother cried with other women and I sang the hymns with them. They brought a little food—some beans— but after two days there was nothing again. Our grandfather used to have three sheep and a cow and a vegetable garden but the bandits had long ago taken the sheep and the cow, because they were hungry, too; and when planting time came our grandfather had no seed to plant.

So they decided—our grandmother did; our grandfather made little noises and rocked from side to side, but she took no notice—we would go away. We children were pleased. We wanted to go away from where our mother wasn't and where we were hungry. We wanted to go where there were no bandits and there was food. We were glad to think there must be such a place; away.

Our grandmother gave her church clothes to someone in exchange for some dried mealies and she boiled them and tied them in a rag. We took them with us when we went and she thought we would get water from the rivers but we didn't come to any river and we got so thirsty we had to turn back. Not all the way to our grandparents' place but to a village where there was a pump. She opened the basket where she carried some clothes and the mealies and she sold her shoes to buy a big plastic container for water. I said, Gogo, how will you go to church now even without shoes, but she said we had a long journey and too much to carry. At that village we met other people who were also going away. We joined them because they seemed to know where that was better than we did.

To get there we had to go through the Kruger Park. We knew about the Kruger Park. A kind of whole country of animals—elephants, lions, jackals, hyenas, hippos, crocodiles, all kinds of animals. We had some of them in our own country, before the war (our grandfather remembers; we children weren't born yet) but the bandits kill the elephants and sell their tusks, and the bandits and our soldiers have eaten all the buck. There was a man in our village without legs—a crocodile took them off, in our river; but all the same our country is a country of people, not animals. We knew about the Kruger Park because some of our men used to leave home to work there in the places where white people come to stay and look at the animals.

So we started to go away again. There were women and other children like me who had to carry the small ones on their backs when the women got tired. A man led us into the Kruger Park; are we there yet, are we there yet, I kept asking our grandmother. Not yet, the man said, when she asked him for me. He told us we had to take a long way to get round the fence, which he explained would kill you, roast off your skin the moment you touched it, like the wires high up on poles that give electric light in our towns. I've seen that sign of a head without eyes or skin or hair on an iron box at the mission hospital we used to have before it was blown up.

When I asked the next time, they said we'd been walking in the Kruger Park for an hour. But it looked just like the bush we'd been walking through all day, and we hadn't seen any animals except the monkeys and birds which live around us at home, and a tortoise that, of course, couldn't get away from us. My first-born brother and the other boys brought it to the man so it could be killed and we could cook and eat it. He let it go because he told us we could not make a fire; all the time we were in the Park we must not make a fire because the smoke would show we were there. Police, wardens, would come and send us back where we came from. He said we must move like animals among the animals, away from the roads, away from the white people's camps. And at that moment I heard—I'm sure I was the first to hear—cracking branches and the sound of something parting grasses and I almost squealed because I thought it was the police, wardens—the people he was telling us to look out for—who had found us already.

And it was an elephant, and another elephant, and more elephants, big blots of dark moved wherever you looked between the trees. They were curling their trunks round the red leaves of the Mopane trees and stuffing them into their mouths. The babies leant against their mothers. The almost grown-up ones wrestled like my first-born brother with his friends—only they used trunks instead of arms. I was so interested I forgot to be afraid. The man said we

should just stand still and be quiet while the elephants passed. They passed very slowly because elephants are too big to need to run from anyone.

The buck ran from us. They jumped so high they seemed to fly. The warthogs stopped dead, when they heard us, and swerved off the way a boy in our village used to zigzag on the bicycle his father had brought back from the mines. We followed the animals to where they drank. When they had gone, we went to their water-holes. We were never thirsty without finding water, but the animals ate, ate all the time. Whenever you saw them they were eating, grass, trees, roots. And there was nothing for us. The mealies were finished. The only food we could eat was what the baboons ate, dry little figs full of ants that grow along the branches of the trees at the rivers. It was hard to be like the animals.

When it was very hot during the day we would find lions lying asleep.

They were the colour of the grass and we didn't see them at first but the man did, and he led us back and a long way round where they slept. I wanted to lie down like the lions. My little brother was getting thin but he was very heavy. When our grandmother looked for me, to put him on my back, I tried not to see. My first-born brother stopped talking; and when we rested he had to be shaken to get up again, as if he was just like our grandfather, he couldn't hear. I saw flies crawling on our grandmother's face and she didn't brush them off; I was frightened. I picked a palm leaf and chased them.

We walked at night as well as by day. We could see the fires where the white people were cooking in the camps and we could smell the smoke and the meat. We watched the hyenas with their backs that slope as if they're ashamed, slipping through the bush after the smell. If one turned its head, you saw it had big brown shining eyes like our own, when we looked at each other in the dark. The wind brought voices in our own language from the compounds where the people who work in the camps live. A woman among us wanted to go to them at night and ask them to help us. They can give us the food from the dustbins, she said, she started wailing and our grandmother had to grab her and put a hand over her mouth. The man who led us had told us that we must keep out of the way of our people who worked at the Kruger Park; if they helped us they would lose their work. If they saw us, all they could do was pretend we were not there; they had seen only animals.

Sometimes we stopped to sleep for a little while at night. We slept close together. I don't know which night it was—because we were walking, walking, any time, all the time—we heard the lions very near. Not groaning loudly the way they did far off. Panting, like we do when we run, but it's a different kind of panting: you can hear they're not running, they're waiting, somewhere near. We all rolled closer together, on top of each other, the ones on the edge fighting to get into the middle. I was squashed against a woman who smelled bad because she was afraid but I was glad to hold tight on to her. I prayed to God to make the lions take someone on the edge and go. I shut my eyes not to see the tree from which a lion might jump right into the middle of us, where I was. The man who led us jumped up instead, and beat on the tree with a dead branch. He had taught us never to make a sound but he shouted. He shouted at the lions like a drunk man shouting at nobody, in our village. The lions went away. We heard them groaning, shouting back at him from far off.

We were tired, so tired. My first-born brother and the man had to lift our grandfather from stone to stone where we found places to cross the rivers.

Our grandmother is strong but her feet were bleeding. We could not carry the basket on our heads any longer, we couldn't carry anything except my little brother. We left our things under a bush. As long as our bodies get there, our grandmother said. Then we ate some wild fruit we didn't know from home and our stomachs ran. We were in the grass called elephant grass because it is nearly as tall as an elephant, that day we had those pains, and

our grandfather couldn't just get down in front of people like my little brother, he went off into the grass to be on his own. We had to keep up, the man who led us always kept telling us, we must catch up, but we asked him to wait for our grandfather.

So everyone waited for our grandfather to catch up. But he didn't. It was the middle of the day; insects were singing in our ears and we couldn't hear him moving through the grass. We couldn't see him because the grass was so high and he was so small. But he must have been somewhere there inside his loose trousers and his shirt that was torn and our grandmother couldn't sew because she had no cotton. We knew he couldn't have gone far because he was weak and slow. We all went to look for him, but in groups, so we too wouldn't be hidden from each other in that grass. It got into our eyes and noses; we called him softly but the noise of the insects must have filled the little space left for hearing in his ears. We looked and looked but we couldn't find him. We stayed in that long grass all night. In my sleep I found him curled round in a place he had tramped down for himself, like the places we'd seen where the buck hide their babies.

When I woke up he still wasn't anywhere. So we looked again, and by now there were paths we'd made by going through the grass many times, it would be easy for him to find us if we couldn't find him. All that day we just sat and waited. Everything is very quiet when the sun is on your head, inside your head, even if you lie, like the animals, under the trees. I lay on my back and saw those ugly birds with hooked beaks and plucked necks flying round and round above us. We had passed them often where they were feeding on the bones of dead animals, nothing was ever left there for us to eat. Round and round, high up and then lower down and then high again. I saw their necks poking to this side and that. Flying round and round. I saw our grandmother, who sat up all the time with my little brother on her lap, was seeing them, too.

In the afternoon the man who led us came to our grandmother and told her the other people must move on. He said, If their children don't eat soon they will die.

Our grandmother said nothing.

I'll bring you water before we go, he told her.

Our grandmother looked at us, me, my first-born brother, and my little brother on her lap. We watched the other people getting up to leave. I didn't believe the grass would be empty, all around us, where they had been. That we would be alone in this place, the Kruger Park, the police or the animals would find us. Tears came out of my eyes and nose onto my hands but our grandmother took no notice. She got up, with her feet apart the way she puts them when she is going to lift firewood, at home in our village, she swung my little brother onto her back, tied him in her cloth—the top of her dress was torn and her big breasts were showing but there was nothing in them for him. She said, Come.

So we left the place with the long grass. Left behind. We went with the others and the man who led us. We started to go away, again.

There's a very big tent, bigger than a church or a school, tied down to the ground. I didn't understand that was what it would be, when we got there, away. I saw a thing like that the time our mother took us to the town because she heard our soldiers were there and she wanted to ask them if they knew where our father was. In that tent, people were praying and singing. This one is blue and white like that one but it's not for praying and singing, we live in it with other people who've come from our country.

Sister from the clinic says we're two hundred without counting the babies, and we have new babies, some were born on the way through the Kruger Park.

Inside, even when the sun is bright it's dark and there's a kind of whole village in there. Instead of houses each family has a little place closed off with sacks or cardboard from

boxes—whatever we can find—to show the other families it's yours and they shouldn't come in even though there's no door and no windows and no thatch, so that if you're standing up and you're not a small child you can see into everybody's house. Some people have even made paint from ground rocks and drawn designs on the sacks.

Of course, there really is a roof—the tent is the roof, far, high up. It's like a sky. It's like a mountain and we're inside it; through the cracks paths of dust lead down, so thick you think you could climb them. The tent keeps off the rain overhead but the water comes in at the sides and in the little streets between our places—you can only move along them one person at a time—the small kids like my little brother play in the mud. You have to step over them. My little brother doesn't play. Our grandmother takes him to the clinic when the doctor comes on Mondays. Sister says there's something wrong with his head, she thinks it's because we didn't have enough food at home. Because of the war. Because our father wasn't there. And then because he was so hungry in the Kruger Park. He likes just to lie about on our grandmother all day, on her lap or against her somewhere, and he looks at us and looks at us. He wants to ask something but you can see he can't. If I tickle him he may just smile. The clinic gives us special powder to make into porridge for him and perhaps one day he'll be all right.

When we arrived we were like him—my first-born brother and I. I can hardly remember. The people who live in the village near the tent took us to the clinic, it's where you have to sign that you've come—away, through the Kruger Park. We sat on the grass and everything was muddled. One Sister was pretty with her hair straightened and beautiful high-heeled shoes and she brought us the special powder. She said we must mix it with water and drink it slowly. We tore the packets open with our teeth and licked it all up, it stuck round my mouth and I sucked it from my lips and fingers. Some other children who had walked with us vomited. But I only felt everything in my belly moving, the stuff going down and around like a snake, and hiccups hurt me. Another Sister called us to stand in line on the verandah of the clinic but we couldn't. We sat all over the place there, falling against each other; the Sisters helped each of us up by the arm and then stuck a needle in it. Other needles drew our blood into tiny bottles. This was against sickness, but I didn't understand, every time my eyes dropped closed I thought I was walking, the grass was long, I saw the elephants, I didn't know we were away.

But our grandmother was still strong, she could still stand up, she knows how to write and she signed for us. Our grandmother got us this place in the tent against one of the sides, it's the best kind of place there because although the rain comes in, we can lift the flap when the weather is good and then the sun shines on us, the smells in the tent go out. Our grandmother knows a woman here who showed her where there is good grass for sleeping mats, and our grandmother made some for us. Once every month the food truck comes to the clinic. Our grandmother takes along one of the cards she signed and when it has been punched we get a sack of mealie meal. There are wheelbarrows to take it back to the tent; my first-born brother does this for her and then he and the other boys have races, steering the empty wheelbarrows back to the clinic. Sometimes he's lucky and a man who's bought beer in the village gives him money to deliver it— though that's not allowed, you're supposed to take that wheelbarrow straight back to the Sisters. He buys a cold drink and shares it with me if I catch him. On another day, every month, the church leaves a pile of old clothes in the clinic yard. Our grandmother has another card to get punched, and then we can choose something: I have two dresses, two pants and a jersey, so I can go to school.

The people in the village have let us join their school. I was surprised to find they speak our language; our grandmother told me, That's why they allow us to stay on their land. Long ago,

in the time of our fathers, there was no fence that kills you, there was no Kruger Park between them and us, we were the same people under our own king, right from our village we left to this place we've come to.

Now that we've been in the tent so long—I have turned eleven and my little brother is nearly three although he is so small, only his head is big, he's not come right in it yet—some people have dug up the bare ground around the tent and planted beans and mealies and cabbage. The old men weave branches to put up fences round their gardens. No one is allowed to look for work in the towns but some of the women have found work in the village and can buy things. Our grandmother, because she's still strong, finds work where people are building houses—in this village the people build nice houses with bricks and cement, not mud like we used to have at our home. Our grandmother carries bricks for these people and fetches baskets of stones on her head. And so she has money to buy sugar and tea and milk and soap. The store gave her a calendar she has hung up on our flap of the tent. I am clever at school and she collected advertising paper people throw away outside the store and covered my schoolbooks with it.

She makes my firstborn brother and me do our homework every afternoon before it gets dark because there is no room except to lie down, close together, just as we did in the Kruger Park, in our place in the tent, and candles are expensive. Our grandmother hasn't been able to buy herself a pair of shoes for church yet, but she has bought black school shoes and polish to clean them with for my first-born brother and me. Every morning, when people are getting up in the tent, the babies are crying, people are pushing each other at the taps outside and some children are already pulling the crusts of porridge off the pots we ate from last night, my first-born brother and I clean our shoes. Our grandmother makes us sit on our mats with our legs straight out so she can look carefully at our shoes to make sure we have done it properly. No other children in the tent have real school shoes. When we three look at them it's as if we are in a real house again, with no war, no away.

Some white people came to take photographs of our people living in the tent—they said they were making a film, I've never seen what that is though I know about it. A white woman squeezed into our space and asked our grandmother questions which were told to us in our language by someone who understands the white woman's.

How long have you been living like this?

She means here? our grandmother said. In this tent, two years and one month.

And what do you hope for the future?

Nothing. I'm here.

But for your children?

I want them to learn so that they can get good jobs and money.

Do you hope to go back to Mozambique—to your own country?

I will not go back.

But when the war is over—you won't be allowed to stay here? Don't you want to go home?

I didn't think our grandmother wanted to speak again. I didn't think she was going to answer the white woman. The white woman put her head on one side and smiled at us.

Our grandmother looked away from her and spoke—There is nothing.

No home.

Why does our grandmother say that? Why? I'll go back. I'll go back through that Kruger Park. After the war, if there are no bandits any more, our mother may be waiting for us. And maybe when we left our grandfather, he was only left behind, he found his way somehow, slowly, through the Kruger Park, and he'll be there. They'll be home, and I'll remember them.

SPOILS

In the warmth of the bed your own fart brings to your nostrils the smell of rotting flesh: the lamb chops you devoured last night. Seasoned with rosemary and with an undertaker's paper frill on the severed rib-bones.

Another corpse digested.

'Become a vegetarian, then.' She's heard it all too many times before;

sick of it, sick of my being sick of it. Sick of the things I say, that surface now and then.

'I want no part of it.' We are listening to the news.

'What? What are you going on about. What?' What indeed. No: which. Which is it I choose to be no part of, the boy who threw a stone at the police, had both his arms broken by them, was sodomized by prisoners into whose cell he was thrown, the kidnapped diplomat and the group (men, as I am a man, women, as she is a woman) who sent his fourth finger by mail to his family, the girl doused with petrol and burned alive as a traitor, those starved by drought or those drowned by flood, far away, the nineteen-year-old son of Mr and Mrs killed by the tremendous elemental thrill of 220 volts while using an electric spray gun on his motorbike, near by. The planned, devised, executed by people like myself, or the haphazard, the indifferent, executed senselessly by elemental forces. Senselessly. Why is there more sense in the conscious acts that make corpses? Consciousness is self-deception. Intelligence is a liar.

'You're not having great thoughts. That's life.' Her beauty-salon philosophy. Stale, animal, passive. Whether I choose or not; can't choose, can't want no ?art.

The daily necrophilia.

'Become a vegetarian, then!' Among other people no one would ever think there was anything wrong.

He is aware of that; she is aware of his being aware, taking some kind of pride in appearing exactly as they have him in their minds, contributing to their gathering exactly what his place in it expects of him. The weekend party invited to a lodge on a private game reserve will include the practical, improvising man, the clown who burns his fingers at the camp fire and gets a laugh out of it, the woman who spends her time preparing to feed everyone, the pretty girl who perks up the company sexually, the good-timer who keeps everyone drinking until late, the quiet one who sits apart contemplating the bush, one or two newcomers, for ballast, who may or may not provide a measure of serious conversation. Why not accept? No?

Well. What else has he in mind that will please him better? ?ust say.

Nothing.

There you are!

He, in contrast to the clown, is the charmer, the wit. He knows almost everyone's foibles, he sets the anecdotes flowing, he provides the gentle jibes that make people feel themselves to be characters.

Whatever their temperaments, all are nature lovers. That is nothing to be ashamed of—surely, even for him. Their love of the wild brings them together—the wealthy couple who own the reserve and lodge rather than racehorses or a yacht, the pretty girl who models or works in public relations, the good-timer director of a mining house, the adventurous stockbroker, the young doctor who works for a clerk's salary in a hospital for blacks, the

clowning antique dealer... And he has no right to feel himself superior—in seriousness, morality (he knows that)—in this company, for it includes a young man who has been in political detention.

That one is not censorious of the playground indulgences of his fellow whites, so long as the regime he has risked his freedom to destroy, will kill to destroy, lasts. That's life.

Behaving—undetected—as what is expected of one is also a protection against fear of what one really is, now. Perhaps what is seen to be, is himself, the witty charmer. How can he know? He does it so well. His wife sees him barefoot, his arms round his knees on the viewing deck from which the company watches buffalo trampling the reeds down at the river, hears the amusing asides he makes while gazing through field-glasses, notices the way he has left his shirt unbuttoned in healthy confidence of the sun-flushed manliness of his breast—is the silence, the incomprehensible statements that come from it, alone with her, a way of tormenting her? Does he do it only to annoy, to punish? And what has she done to deserve what he doesn't mete out to others? Let him keep it to himself. Take a Valium.

Anything. Become a vegetarian. In the heat of the afternoon everyone goes to their rooms or their makeshift beds on the shaded part of the deck, to sleep off the lunch-time wine. Even in the room allotted to them, he keeps up, out of sight of the company (but they are only a wall away, he knows they are there), what is expected. It is so hot he and she have stripped to their briefs. He passes a hand over her damp breasts, gives a lazy sigh, and is asleep on his back. Would he have wanted to take her nipples in his mouth, commit himself to love-making, if he hadn't fallen asleep, or was his a gesture from the wings just in case the audience might catch a glimpse of a slump to an off-stage presence?

The house party is like the fire the servant makes at dusk within the reed stockade beside the lodge. One never knows when a fire outdoors will smoke or take flame cleanly and make a grand blaze, as this one does. One never knows when a small gathering will remain disparate, unresponsive, or when, as this time, men and women will ignite and make a bright company.

The ceremony of the evening meal was a bit ridiculous, but perhaps intended as such, and fun. A parody of old colonial times: the stockade against the wild beasts, the black man beating a drum to announce the meal, the chairs placed carefully by him in a missionary prayer-meeting circle well away from the fire, the whisky and wine set out, the smell of charred flesh from the cooking grids. Look up: the first star in the haze is the mast-light of a ship moving out, slipping moorings, breaking with this world.

Look down: the blue flames are nothing but burning fat, there are gnawed bones on the swept earth. He's been drinking a lot—she noticed: so that he could stomach it all, no doubt he tells himself.

The fire twitches under ash and the dinner orchestra of insects whose string instruments are their own bodies, legs scraping against legs, wings scraping against carapace, has been silenced by the rising of the moon. But laughter continues. In the huge night, not reduced to scale by buildings, tangled by no pylons and wires, hollowed out by no street- and window-lights into habitable enclosures, the laughter, the voices are vagrant sound that one moment flies right up boldly into space, the next makes a wave so faint it dies out almost as it leaves the lips. Everyone interrupts everyone else, argues, teases. There are moments of acerbity; the grapes they are eating pop into sharp juice as they are bitten. One of the quiet guests has become communicative as will the kind who never risk ideas or opinions of their own but can reproduce, when a subject brings the opportunity, information they have read and stored. Bats; the twirling rags darker against the dark—someone suggested, as a woman cowered, that fear of them comes from the fact that they can't be heard approaching.

'If your eyes are closed, and a bird flies overhead, you'll hear the resistance of air to its wings.' 'And also, you can't make out what a bat's like, where its head is—just a thing, ugh!' The quiet guest was already explaining, no, bats will not bump into you, but not, as this is popularly believed, because they have an inbuilt radar system; their system is sonar, or echolocation— '—I wear a leopard skin coat!' The defiant soprano statement from a sub-conversation breaks through his monologue and loses him attention.

It is the pretty girl; she has greased her face against the day's exposure to the sun and her bone-structure elegantly reflects the frail light coming from the half moon, the occasional waver of flame roused in the fire, or the halo of a cigarette lighter. She is almost beautiful. '—D'you hear that!' 'Glynis, where did you find this girl?' 'Shall we put her out to be eaten by her prey, expose her on a rock?' 'No leopards here, unfortunately.' 'The coat would look much better on the leopard than on you.' The wit did not live up to his reputation, merely repeated in sharper, more personal paraphrase what had been well said no one remembered by whom. He spoke directly to the girl, whereas the others were playfully half-indignant around her presence. But the inference, neither entirely conservationist nor aesthetic, seemed to excite the girl's interest in this man. She was aware of him, in the real sense, for the first time.

'Wait till you see me in it.' ?ust the right touch of independence, hostility.

'That could be arranged.' This was a sub-exchange, now, under the talk of the others; he was doing the right thing, responding with the innuendo by which men and women acknowledge chemical correspondences stirring between them. And then she said it, was guided to it like a bat, by echolocation or whatever-it-is, something vibrating from the disgusts in him. 'Would you prefer me to wear a sheepskin one? You eat lamb, I suppose?' It is easy to lose her in the crisscross of talk and laughter, to enter it at some other level and let fall the one on which she took him up. He is drawn elsewhere—there is refuge, maybe, rock to touch in the ex-political prisoner. The prisoner holds the hand of his pale girl with her big nervously-exposed teeth; no beauty, all love. The last place to look for love is in beauty, beauty is only a skin, the creature's own or that of another animal, over what decays. Love is found in prison, this no-beauty has loved him while his body was not present; and he has loved his brothers—he's talking about them, not using the word, but the sense is there so strongly— although they live shut in with their own pails of dirt, he loves even the murderers whose night-long death songs he heard before they were taken to be hanged in the morning. 'Common criminals? In this country? Under laws like ours?' 'Oh yes, we politicals were kept apart, but with time (I was there ten months) we managed to communicate. (There are so many ways you don't think of, outside, when you don't need to.) One of them—young, my age— he was already declared a habitual criminal, inside for an indeterminate sentence. Detention's also an indeterminate sentence, in a way, so I could have some idea...' 'You hadn't killed, robbed—he must have done that over and over.' 'Oh he had. But I hadn't been born the bastard of a kitchen maid who had no home but her room in a white woman's back yard, I hadn't been sent to a "homeland" where the woman who was supposed to take care of me was starving and followed her man to a squatter camp in Cape Town to look for work. I hadn't begged in the streets, stolen what I needed to eat, sniffed glue for comfort. He had his first new clothes, his first real bed when he joined a gang of car thieves. Common lot; common criminal.' Common sob story.

'If he had met you outside prison he would have knifed you for your watch.' 'Possibly! Can you say "That's mine" to people whose land was taken from them by conquest, a gigantic hold-up at the point of imperial guns?' And the bombs in the streets, in the cars, in the supermarkets, that kill with a moral, necessary end, not criminal intent (yes, to be criminal is

to kill for self-gain)—these don't confuse him, make carrion of brotherhood. He's brave enough to swallow it. No gagging.

Voices and laughter are cut off. You don't come to the bush to talk politics. It is one of the alert silences called for now and then by someone who's heard, beyond human voices, a cry. Shhhhh ... Once it was the mean complaining of jackals, and—nearer—a nasal howl from a hyena, that creature of big nostrils made to scent spilt blood. Then a squeal no one could identify: a hare pounced on by a wheeling owl? A warthog attacked by—whom? What's going on, among them, that other order, of the beasts, in their night? 'They live twenty-four hours, we waste the dark.' 'Norbert— you used to be such a nightclub bird!' And the young doctor offers: 'They hunt for their living in shifts, just like us. Some sleep during the day.' 'Oh but they're designed as different species, in order to use actively all twenty-four hours. We are one species, designed for daylight only. It's not so many generations since—pre-industrial times, that's all—we went to bed at nightfall. If the world's energy supplies should run out, we'd be back to that. No electricity. No night shifts. There isn't a variety in our species that has night vision.' The bat expert takes up this new cue. 'There are experiments with devices that may provide night vision, they're based on —' 'Shhhhh...' Laughter like the small explosion of a glass dropped.

'Shut up, Claire!' All listen, with a glisten of eye movements alone, dead still.

It is difficult for them to decide on what it is they are eavesdropping. A straining that barely becomes a grunt. A belching stir; scuffling, scuffling— but it could be a breeze in dead leaves, it is not the straw crepitation of the reeds at the river, it comes from the other direction, behind the lodge. There is a gathering, another gathering somewhere there. There is communication their ears are not tuned to, their comprehension cannot decode; some event outside theirs. Even the ex—political prisoner does not know what he hears; he who has heard through prison walls, he who has comprehended and decoded so much the others have not. His is only human knowledge, after all; he is not a twenty-four-hour creature, either.

Into this subdued hush breaks the black man jangling a tray of glasses he has washed. The host signals: be quiet, go away, stop fussing among dirty plates. He comes over with the smile of one who knows he has something to offer. 'Lions. They kill one, two maybe. Zebras.' Everyone bursts the silence like schoolchildren let out of class.

'Where?' 'How does he know?' 'What's he say?' He keeps them waiting a moment, his hand is raised, palm up, pink from immersion in the washing-up. He is wiping it on his apron. 'My wives hear it, there in my house. Zebra, and now they eating. That side, there, behind.' The black man's name is too unfamiliar to pronounce. But he is no longer nameless, he is the organizer of an expedition; they pick up a shortened version of the name from their host. Siza has brought the old truck, four-wheel drive, adapted as a large station wagon, from out of its shed next to his house. Everybody is game, this is part of the entertainment the host hoped but certainly could not promise to be lucky enough to provide; all troop by torchlight the hundred yards from the lodge, under the Mopane trees, past the bed of cannas outlined with whitewashed stones (the host never has had the heart to tell Siza this kind of white man's house does not need a white man's kind of garden) to Siza's wives' pumpkin and tomato patch. Siza is repairing a door-handle of the vehicle with a piece of wire, commanding, in his own language, this and that from his family standing by. A little boy gets underfoot and he lifts and dumps him out of the way. Two women wear traditional turbans but the one has a T-shirt with an advertising logo; girl children hang on their arms, jabbering. Boys are quietly jumping with excitement.

Siza's status in this situation is clear when the two wives and children do not see the white party off but climb into the vehicle among them, the dry-soled hard little feet of the children nimbly finding space among the guests' shoes, their knobbly heads with knitted capping of hair unfamiliar to the touch, flesh to flesh, into which all in the vehicle are crowded. Beside the girl with her oiled face and hard slender body perfumed to smell like a lily there is the soft bulk of one of the wives, smelling of woodsmoke.

'Everybody in? Everybody okay?' No, no, wait—someone has gone back for a forgotten flash-bulb. Siza has started up the engine; the whole vehicle jerks and shakes.

Wit is not called for, nor flirtation. He does what is expected: runs to the lodge to fetch a sweater, in case his wife gets chilly. There is barely room for him to squeeze by; she attempts to take a black child on her lap, but the child is too shy. He lowers himself somehow into what space there is. The vehicle moves, all bodies, familiar and unfamiliar, are pressed together, swaying, congealed, breathing in contact. She smiles at him, dipping her head sideways, commenting lightly on the human press, as if he were someone else: 'In for the kill.' It is not possible to get out.

Everyone will be quite safe if they stay in the car and please roll up the windows, says the host. The headlights of the old vehicle have shown Siza trees like other trees, bushes like other bushes that are, to him, signposts.

The blundering of the vehicle through bush and over tree-stumps, anthills, and dongas has been along his highway; he has stopped suddenly, and there they are, shadow-shapes and sudden phosphorescent slits in the dim arch of trees that the limit of the headlights' reach only just creates, as a candle, held up, feebly makes a cave of its own aura. Siza drives with slow-motion rocking and heaving of the human load, steadily nearer. Four shapes come forward along the beams; and stop. He stops. Motes of dust, scraps of leaf and bark knocked off the vegetation float blurring the beams surrounding four lionesses who stand, not ten yards away. Their eyes are wide, now, gem-yellow, expanded by the glare they face, and never blink. Their jaws hang open and their heads shake with panting, their bodies are bellows expanding and contracting between stiff-hipped haunches and heavy narrow shoulders that support the heads. Their tongues lie exposed, the edges rucked up on either side, like red cloth, by long white incisors.

They are dirtied with blood and to human eyes de-sexed, their kind of femaleness without femininity, their kind of threat and strength out of place, associated with the male. They have no beauty except in the almighty purpose of their stance. There is nothing else in their gaunt faces: nothing but the fact, behind them, of half-grown and younger cubs in the rib-cage of a zebra, pulling and sucking at bloody scraps.

The legs and head are intact in dandyish dress of black and white. The beast has been, is being eaten out. Its innards are missing; the half-digested grasses that were in its stomach have been emptied on the ground, they can be seen—someone points this out in a whisper. But even the undertone is a transgression. The lionesses don't give forth the roar that would make their menace recognizable, something to deal with. Utterances are not the medium for this confrontation. Watching. That is all. The breathing mass, the beating hearts in the vehicle—watching the cubs jostling for places within the cadaver; the breathing mass, the beating hearts in the vehicle— being watched by the lionesses. The beasts have no time, it will be measured by their fill. For the others, time suddenly begins again when the young doctor's girl-friend begins to cry soundlessly and the black children look away from the scene and see the tears shining on her cheeks, and stare at her fear. The young doctor asks to be taken back to the lodge; the compact is broken, people protest, why, oh no, they want to stay and see what happens, one of the lionesses has broken ranks and turns on a greedy cub,

cuffing it out of the gouged prey. Quite safe; the car is perfectly safe, don't open a window to photograph. But the doctor is insistent: 'This old truck's chassis is cracked right through, we're overloaded, we could be stuck here all night.' 'Unreal.' Back in the room, the wife comes out with one of the catch-alls that have been emptied of dictionary meaning so that they may fit any experience the speaker won't take the trouble to define. When he doesn't respond she stands a moment, in the doorway, her bedclothes in her arms, smiling, gives her head a little shake to show how overwhelming her impression has been.

Oh well. What can she expect. Why come, anyway? Should have stayed at home. So he doesn't want to sleep in the open, on the deck. Under the stars. All right. No stars, then. He lies alone and the mosquitoes are waiting for his blood, upside-down on the white board ceiling.

No. Real. Real. Alone, he can keep it intact, exactly that: the stasis, the existence without time and without time there is no connection, the state in which he really need have, has no part, could have no part, there in the eyes of the lionesses. Between the beasts and the human load, the void. It is more desired and awful than could ever be conceived; he does not know whether he is sleeping, or dead.

There is still Sunday. The entertainment is not over. Someone has heard lions round the lodge in the middle of the night. The scepticism with which this claim is greeted is quickly disproved when distinct pugs are found in the dust that surrounds the small swimming-pool which, like amniotic fluid, steeps the guests at their own body temperature. The host is not surprised; it has happened before: the lionesses must have come down to quench the thirst their feasting had given them. And the scent of humans, sleeping so near, up on the deck, the sweat of humans in the humid night, their sighs and sleep-noises? Their pleasure- and anxiety-emanating dreams?

'As far as the lions are concerned, we didn't exist.' From the pretty girl, the remark is a half-question that trails off.

'When your stomach is full you don't smell blood.' The ex-prisoner is perhaps extrapolating into the class war?—the wit puts in, and the ex-prisoner himself is the one who is most appreciatively amused.

After the mosquitoes had had their fill sleep came as indifferently as those other bodily states, hunger and thirst. A good appetite for fresh pawpaw and bacon, boerewors and eggs. Hungry, like everybody else. His wife offers him a second helping, perhaps he needs feeding up, there is a theory that all morbid symptoms are in fact of physical origin. Obsession with injustice—what's wrong with the world is a disease you, an individual, can't cure, that's life. The one who went to prison may be suffering from a lack of something—amino acids, vitamins; or an excess of something, overfeeding when a child or hyperactive thyroid gland. Research is being done.

Siza confirms that the lionesses came to drink. They passed his house; he heard them. He tells this with the dry, knowing smile of one who is aware of a secret to-and-fro between bedrooms. After breakfast he is going to take the party to see in daylight where the kill took place last night.

'But is there anything to see?' Siza is patient. 'They not eat all. Is too much. So they leave some, tonight they come back for eat finish.' 'No thanks! I don't think we should disturb them again.' But nobody wants the young doctor and his girl-friend to come, anyway, and spoil the outing.

'The lions they sleeping now. They gone away. Come back tonight. Is not there now.' The wife is watching to see if she and her husband are going along. Yes, he's climbing, limber,

into the old vehicle with the cracked chassis, he's giving a hand up to the hostess, he's said something that makes her laugh and purse her mouth.

The black women are thumping washing at an outdoor tub. Neither they nor their children come on this expedition. There is room to breathe without contact, this time. Everything is different in daylight. It is true that the lionesses are absent; the state that he achieved last night is absent in the same way, like them, drugged down by daylight.

Not a lion to be seen. Siza has stopped the vehicle, got out, but waved the passengers to stay put. The scrub forest is quiet, fragile pods that burst and sow their seed by wind-dispersion spiral slowly. Everybody chatters.

The stockbroker leaves the vehicle and everybody shouts at him. All right.

All right. Taking his time, to show his lack of fear, he climbs aboard. 'Lions are not bulls and bears, Fred.' They laugh at this mild jeer which is the kind expected to sustain the wit's image—all are amused except the stockbroker himself, who knows the remark, in turn, refers to his image of himself as one whom no one would guess to be a stockbroker.

Siza comes back and beckons. The vehicle is quickly quit. And now the emptiness of the scrub forest is untrustworthy, all around, you can't see what's behind dead brush, fallen logs and the screens of layered branches that confine vision to ten feet. They talk only softly, in the sense of being stalked. The black man is leading them along what looks almost like a swept path; but it has been swept by a large body being dragged through dust and dead leaves: there is the carcass of the zebra, half-hidden in a thicket.

'No tyre-tracks, we didn't drive right into here! This can't be the place.' 'They pull him here for when they come back tonight.' 'What! To keep the meat fresh?' 'For the birds mustn't see.' Siza gives a name in his language.

'He means vultures. Vultures, eh, Siza.' A mime of the vultures' hunched posture.

'Yes, those big birds. Come look here—' The tour continues, he takes them a few paces from the carcass and stands beside a mound over which earth has been scratched or kicked. Flies whose backs spark tinny green and gold are settled on it. The black man has his audience: taking up a stick, he prods the mound and it stirs under dust like flour-coated meat moved by a fork.

'Christ, the intestines! Look at the size of that liver or spleen!' 'You mean lions can do that? Store things covered? How do they do it, just with their paws?' 'It's exactly the way my cat covers its business in the garden, scratches up earth. They're cats, too.' The young jailbird and his girl and the antique dealer have made a discovery for themselves, having, in the confidence of excitement, retraced for a short distance the way along which the kill was approached. They have found the very pile of the contents of the zebra's stomach that someone noticed last night.

It is another mound. He has come over from the mound of guts they are marvelling at. There is nothing to watch in dead flesh, it is prodded and it falls back and is still. But this mound of steaming grass that smells sweetly of cud (it has been heated by the sun as it was once heated by the body that contained it) is not dead to human perception. What's going on here is a visible transformation of an inert mass. It is literally being carried away by distinctly different species of beetles who know how to live by decay, the waste of the digestive tract. The scarabs with their armoured heads burrow right into the base of the mound, and come out backwards, rolling their ball of dung between their strong, tined legs. The tunnels they have mined collapse and spread the mound more thinly on its periphery; smaller beetles are flying in steadily to settle there, where their lighter equipment can function. They fly away carrying their appropriate load in a sac—or between their front legs, he can't quite make out. A third species, middle-sized but with a noisy buzz, function like helicopters, hovering and

scooping off the top of the mound. They are flattening it perfectly evenly, who can say how or why they bother with form? That's life. If every beetle has its place, how is refusal possible. And if refusal is possible, what place is there. No question mark. These are statements. That is why there is no point in making them to anyone. There is no possible response.

The mound is slowly going to disappear; maybe the vehicle is about to take the party back to the lodge, the weekend is going to be over. He is walking back to the rest of the party, still gathered round the carcass and the black man. For the space of a few yards he is alone, for a few seconds he is equidistant between those at the dung mound and those up ahead, part of neither one nor the other. A sensation that can't be held long; now he is with the group at the kill, again. There is some special stir of attentiveness in them, they crowd round and then herd back a step, where Siza, the black man, is crouched on his hunkers. He is business-like, concentrated, not taking any notice of them. He has given them all he could; now he has the air of being for himself. He has a knife in his hand and the white man who has just joined the group recognizes it, it is the knife that is everywhere, nowhere without the knife, on the news, at the dark street-corners, under the light that the warders never turn out. The black man has thrust, made his incision, sliced back the black-and-white smooth pelt on the dead beast's uppermost hind leg and now is cutting a piece of the plump rump. It is not a chunk or hunk, but neatly butchered, prime—a portion.

They laugh, wondering at the skill, curious. As if they can't guess, as if they've never sunk their teeth into a steak in their lives. 'What're you going to do with that, Siza?' Ah yes, put it in a doggy bag, take it home when you've already stuffed your own guts, taken the land (as the jailbird would say).

The black man is trimming it. Along with the knife, he has brought a sheet of newspaper. 'For me. Eat it at my house. For my house.' 'Is it good meat?' 'Yes, it's good.' One of the men chides, man to man. 'But why not take the whole haunch—the whole leg, Siza. Why such a small piece?' The black man is wrapping the portion in newspaper, he knows he mustn't let it drip blood on the white people.

He does it to his satisfaction in his own time and looks up at them. 'The lions, they know I must take a piece for me because I find where their meat is. They know it. It's all right. But if I take too much, they know it also.

Then they will take one of my children.'

SAFE HOUSES

He's one of those dark-haired men whose beards grow out rusty-red. He could have dyed his hair to match—more or less—but a beard is the first thing they'd expect to find you behind. He's lived like this several times before; the only difference is that this time he came back into the country legally, came home—so much for the indemnity promised to exiles, so much for the changed era there, now bans on his kind of politics were supposed to be a thing of the past, he was supposed to be—free? He knows how their minds work—not much

imagination, reliance on an Identikit compilation of how political subversives look and behave Underground.

Underground: this time, as at other times, he's aware of how unsuitably abstract a term that is. To hide away, you have to be out in the open of life;

too soon and easily run to ground, holed up somewhere. Best safety lies in crowds.

Selective crowds; he goes to football matches with beer in a knapsack, and a cap with a plastic eyeshade over his sunglasses, but not to pop concerts, where the police keep an eye on young leftists whose democratic recreation this is. He goes to the movies but not to concerts although he longs for the company of strings and brass; someone among his intellectual buddies from long ago would be bound to gaze at him, reaching back for recognition. Small gatherings where everyone can be trusted are traps; glowing with the distinction of the secret encounter with a real revolutionary, someone will not be able to resist boasting to another, in strictest confidence, and that other will pass on the luminous dusting of danger.

The good friends who provide a bed sometimes offer the use of a car as well, but driving alone is another sure way to be traced and picked up. He walks, and takes buses among ordinary workers and students. He's a little too forty-five-ish, thickened around the jowl and diaphragm, to pass as a student but with his cravat of tangled black hair showing in the neck of a sweat shirt and his observance of the uniform jogging shoes with soles cushioned like tyres, he could be anyone among the passengers—the white artisans, railway and post office employees, even policemen. Reading a newspaper with its daily account of the proceedings at the group trial where he is a missing accused, worrying about these comrades in arms, he tries not to feel self-congratulatory at his escape of arrest, a form of complacency dangerous to one in his position, sitting there in a bus among people he knows would be glad to hand him over to the law; but he can't suppress a little thrill, a sort of inner giggle. Perhaps this is freedom? Something secret, internal, after all? But philosophizing is another danger, in his situation, undermining the concept of freedom for which he has risked discovery and imprisonment yet again.

One afternoon in the city he was gazing inattentively out of the window waiting for the bus to set off when he became aware of the presence just seating itself beside him. Aware like an animal: scenting something different in the bus's familiar sun-fug of sweat and deodorants, fruit-skins and feet. Perfume. Real perfume, at the price of a month's wages of the other passengers. And a sound, a sound of silk as a leg crossed the knee of another leg. He straightened away from the window, looked ahead for a decent interval and then slowly turned, as if merely fidgeting because the bus was taking too long to leave.

A woman, of course—he'd scented that. Grey silk pants or some sort of fashionable skirt divided like pants, with an arched instep showing in a pastel sandal. Below the neckline of a loose blouse, silk slopes shining—breasts rising and falling. Out of breath. Or exasperated. He moved a little to give her more room. She nodded in acknowledgement without looking at him; she didn't see him, she was going through some sort of dialogue or more likely monologue in her head, annoyance, exasperation twitched her lips.

Schoolgirls tramped onto the bus with their adolescent female odours and the pop of gum blown between their lips like the text balloons in comics. An old woman opened a bag of vinegary chips. The bus filled but the driver was absent.

This misplaced person, this pampered almost-beauty (he saw as she turned, throwing back her long, tiger-streaked hair cut in a parrot-poll over the forehead, and smiling on perfectly conformed teeth) had now accepted where she found herself. She indicated the driver's seat.

— What d'you think's happened to him?— Taking a leak.—Having a cup of coffee, I suppose.—They shared the polite moment of tolerance.

—I thought they had a strict timetable. Oh well. D'you know if this takes us along Sylvia Pass?— —Pretty near the top of the Pass.— She pulled a face and blinked her thick-lashed eyes in resigned dismay.

Secretive, glossy eyes, knowing how to please, and folding at the outer corners an attractive, experienced fan of faint lines.

—Where do you want to get off?— —That's the problem—at the bottom of the Pass. I suppose I should have taken some other bus... I don't know why taxis don't cruise in this town as they do in any other civilized place! I've been looking for one for half an hour, traipsing...— —There should have been taxis for tourists at any hotel.— —No, no, I live here, but this just isn't my day... my car's stuck in a parking garage. Underground. Infuriating. Battery dead or something. I couldn't find a telephone booth where the receiver hadn't been torn out... this town! I had to ask a shopkeeper to let me phone for a mechanic... anyway, I couldn't wait any longer, I've left the keys with the attendant.— She felt better now that she had told someone, anyone. He was anyone.

When the driver appeared and fares were to be paid of course she had neither season card nor change for a ticket. While she scrabbled in her bag, gold chains on her wrists sliding, he gave the conductor two tickets.

—Oh you are kind...—She was suddenly embarrassed by her privileged life, by her inability to cope with what for all the people surrounding her on the bus was daily routine. In their ignoring of her she felt a reproach that she had never travelled on the bus before, perhaps not this bus or any bus, at least since she was a schoolchild. He was no longer anyone; somehow an ally, although from his appearance he probably could ill afford to waste a bus ticket on a stranger. Yet there was something in his self-assurance, the amusement in his regard, that suggested he was not merely one of the other passengers. Unsure of this, in a habit of patronage—she was the kind who would treat her servants generously but send her children to segregated schools—she chattered to him to show she considered him an equal.—You make the journey every day? Isn't it always bliss to get home, out of this town?— —Every day, no. But what's wrong with the city?—Too full of blacks for you, now, lady, blacks selling fruit and cheap jewellery and knitted caps, dirtying the streets, too full of men without work for whom you see your bracelets and that swish Italian suède bag as something to be taken from you.

She shifted to safe generalization.—Oh I'm no city girl. Not anywhere.

— —But you live in one?— —Well, you'd hardly know it was there, from my house. Luckily. It's an old suburb ... the trees—that's one thing about Johannesburg, isn't it, you can hide yourself in trees, just the highways humming, well out of sight!— —Really?—He suddenly gave way in a great, open smile like the yawn of a predator.

She had the instinct to withdraw.—You don't live here?— —Oh yes, I'm living here.— She suppressed her casual curiosity as unwise encouragement.—Could you tell me when to get off? The nearest stop to Sylvia Pass.— She did not know if she imagined a pause.

—I'll be getting off there.— He stood behind her as she stepped down from the bus. They began to descend the steep and winding road. There was no distance between them but an aura which established they were not together, merely taking the same route.—Thank God it's down and not up. My heels are not exactly appropriate for this.— —Take them off. It's safer. The surface is very smooth.— —But it's hot! I'll burn my feet.— She clattered along awkwardly, amused at her own manner of progress.

—Isn't it typical? I've been jogging around here every morning for years and I've never come down the Pass before.— —It would be up the Pass, wouldn't it—if you live at the bottom. Quite a strenuous jog.—An observation rather than a correction. And then:— Typical of what?— None of his business! Who was he to quiz a manner of speaking, as if to find out if it had some significance in her life.

Yet she attempted an answer.—Oh... habit, I suppose ... doing what you've become used to, not noticing... where you really are— And wondering, now, no doubt, whether it was possible that this man off the bus really could be living in the suburb of large houses hidden by trees where she lived, or whether he had left the bus to follow her, and was to be feared, although he was white, in this city where so much was to be feared.

It was true that he had picked one of his maze of trails about the city and suburbs in order to walk with her—an impulse like any of the impulses with which he had to fill in the days of his disconnection from consecutive action. The unexpected was his means of survival. To be Underground is to have a go at living without consequences. The corrupt little wriggle of freedom—there it was again. Shameful but enjoyable.

—Here's my corner.—She bent to pull the slipped strap of her sandal back over her heel and looked up ingratiatingly to soften dismissal.

—Goodbye then.—Again, that greedy warrior's smile, contradicting the humble appearance. As he turned his back she suddenly called as she might have remembered an instruction for some tradesman—Have you far to go—that was such a hot trek—would you like to come in for something cool to drink?— This time she was not mistaken; there was a pause, still with his back to her.—I know I'm dying of thirst and you must be!— So she drew him round, and murmuring casual thanks, he joined her.

Now they were walking together. At one of the pillared entrances in white battlements topped with black iron spikes she pressed the button of an intercom panel and spoke. The flats of a stage set, the wide polished wooden gates slid back electronically. Trees, her trees led up to and overflowed the roof of the spread wings of the house. Small dogs jumped about her. Sprinklers arched rainbows over lawns. She called out in the joyous soprano used to summon faithful servants, and ice and fruit juice were brought onto a shaded terrace. Behind him the colours of Persian carpets, paintings and bowls of flowers blurred in the deep perspective of one of those huge rooms used for parties.

—You have a lovely home.—He said what was blandly expected of him as he drank juice in return for a bus ticket.

She came back with what was expected of her.—But too big. My sons are at boarding school. For two people... too much.— —But the garden, the privacy.— She was embarrassed to think how he must be envying her.—Oh yes.

But most of the time I don't use the rest of the place (a gesture to the room behind), I have my own little quarters on the other side of the house. My husband's away such a lot on business—?apan, at the moment. That's why I couldn't even get anyone to come and fetch me from that wretched garage... his secretary's such an idiot, she's let his driver go. I always tell him, he's drained her of all initiative, she's so used to being ordered about. I can't stand subservient people, can you—I mean, I want to shake them and get them to stand ??— —I don't think I know any.— —Ah, that shows you move in the right circles!—They both laughed.— But what do you do? Your profession, your work, I mean.—Careful to show that 'work' might be just as worthy as a profession.

Without realizing he could think so quickly, he began inventing one—a profession combined with 'work'—that would fit his appearance, he began telling like a fairy tale, a bedtime story, it flowed from him taking turns and details as if it could be true, as if he were making an

alternative life for himself.—I'm in construction. Construction engineer—that's where I was today, on some sites. Things go wrong... when you're talking about stress in a twenty-storey building— —Oh if it were to fall! I often look up and marvel how such piles hold together, in fact I don't have much faith they will, I never walk under those pavement shelters you people erect for pedestrians while you're building, I always walk in the street, I'd rather get run over, any time— —Standards are pretty high, here; safety margins. You don't have to worry. In some of the countries I've worked, it's rather different. And one has always to think of how a construction will behave in an earthquake, how do you build over a fault in the earth, Mexico City, San Francisco— —So you travel around, too. But not selling; building.— —Sometimes pulling down. Preparing to rebuild. Destroying old structures.—No—he must resist the devilry of amusing himself by planting, in his fairy tale, symbols from his real life. As in all fairy tales, there were enough improbabilities his listener would have to pass over if not swallow.

It surely must occur to her that a construction engineer would be unlikely not to utilize his own car, even if his working garb was appropriate to inspection of building sites.—Have you travelled much with your husband?

Go along with him?—Best to know where she had been before elaborating on projects in Sri Lanka, Thailand, North Africa. No, she liked to go to Europe but hot places, crowded places, dirty places—no.

So he was free to transform his experience of guerrilla training camps in Tanzania and Libya, his presence in the offices of an exiled High Command in cities deadened by northern snows or tropical heat, to provide exotic backdrops for his skyscrapers. Anecdotes of bar encounters in such places —he merely changed the subjects discussed, not the characters— entertained her. He was at ease in his invented persona; what would a woman know about engineering? She said it was time for a real drink; ice was brought again, a trolley was wheeled out in which bottles were slotted, a manservant appeared with a dish of snacks decorated with radish roses.

—I don't allow myself to drink on my own.— —Why not?—He accepted the glass of whisky and ice she had prepared for him.

At first she seemed not to hear the personal question, busying herself at the trolley. She sat down on a swinging sofa, holding her drink, and let the sandals drop from her feet.—Afraid.— —Of being alone?— —No. Of carrying on with it. Yes, of being alone. Isn't that why people drink—I mean really drink. But I suppose you're often alone.— —What makes you think that?— But now it was he who need not be afraid: she had no inkling of anything real behind his fairy tales.—Well, the nature of your work— always moving around, no time for roots.— —No trees.—He lifted his shoulders, culpable.—What about family...— Should he have a family?—Dispersed. I don't have what you'd call a family, really.— —Your wife? No children?— —I had one once—a wife. I have a grown-up daughter—in Canada. A doctor, a paediatrician, bright girl.— That was a mistake.—Oh where? I have a brother who emigrated to Canada, he's a doctor too, also a paediatrician, in Toronto.— —Vancouver. She's the other side of the country.— —They might have met at some conference. Doctors are always holding conferences. What's her name—She held out her hand to take his glass for a refill, gesturing him to be at ease.—Good lord, I haven't asked you yours— I'm, well, I'm Sylvie, Sylvie— —That's enough. I'm Harry.— —Well, maybe you're right—that's enough.—For someone met on a bus, when you haven't travelled on a bus for, say, thirty years; she laughed with the acknowledgement to herself.

—I'll leave you my card if you wish.—(His card!) They were both laughing.

—I'm unlikely to need the services of a construction engineer.— —Your husband might.—He was enjoying his recklessness, teasing himself.

She put down her drink, crossed her arms and began to swing, like a child wanting to go higher and higher. The couch squeaked and she frowned sideways, comically. The whisky made her lips fuller and polished her eyes.

—And how would I explain I got to know you, may I ask.— Re-establishing reserve, almost prim, he ended the repartee. When he had emptied his glass he rose to leave.—I've imposed upon you too long... — —No... no...—She stood up, hands dangling at her sides, bracelets slipping.—I hope you're refreshed... I certainly am.—She pressed the button that opened her fortress and saw him to the gates.—Maybe—I don't know, if you're not too busy—maybe you'd like to come round sometime.

Lunch, or a swim. I could ring you— —Thank you.— —When my husband is back.— She gazed straight at him; as if he were an inferior reminded of his manners he produced a thank you, once more.

—Where can I reach you? Your phone— He, who could pass a police station without crossing to the other side of the street, tingled all the way up from his feet. Caught.—Well, it's awkward... messages... I'm hardly ever in— Her gaze changed; now she was the one who was put in her place.—Oh.

Well drop by sometime. Anyway, it was nice meeting you. You might as well take my number— He could not refuse. He found a ballpoint in his trouser pocket but no paper. He turned his left hand palm up and wrote the seven digits across the veins showing on the vulnerable inner side of his wrist.

The number was a frivolous travesty of the brand concentration-camp survivors keep of their persecution; he noticed that when he got back to the house that was sheltering him at the time. He washed off her identification;

it required the use of his hosts' nailbrush. The Movement wanted him to slip out of the country but he resisted the pressures that reached him. He had been in exile too long to go back to that state of being, once he had come home. Home? Yes, even sleeping on the floor in somebody's kitchen (his standard of shelter was extremely varied), going to football matches, banal movies, wandering the streets among the people to whom he knew he belonged, unrecognized, unacknowledged—that was home. He read every newspaper and had the rare events of carefully-arranged clandestine meetings with people in the Movement, but these were too risky for both himself and them for this to happen often. He thought of writing something;

he actually had been an academic once, long ago, another life, teaching the laws that he despised. But it was unwise to have bits of paper around you, anything written down was evidence of your existence, and his whole strategy was not to exist, for the time being, in any persona of his past or present. For the first time in his life he was bored. He ate peanuts, biscuits, biltong, buying these small sealed packets and tearing them open, tossing the contents from his palm into his mouth before he'd even left the shop, as he had done when he was an overweight schoolboy. Although he walked the streets, he had thickened, rounding into that mound under the diaphragm. Whatever he thought of to fill the days and nights, he stopped short of doing; either it would involve people who would be afraid to associate with him, or would endanger those who would risk it. Oddly, after more than a week the phone number came back to him at the sight of his own inner wrist as he fastened his watchstrap. Sylvie—what was her name?

Sylvie. ?ust that. Sylvie, Sylvia Pass. Perhaps the name was also the invention of the moment, out of caution, self-protection, as his 'Harry' had been. May I s?eak to Sylvie?

Who? I'm afraid you've got the wrong number—it would be the husband's voice. And so she never had done anything stupid like picking up a man on a bus.

But from the point of view of his situation if anyone was safe this 'Sylvie' was. He went to the telephone in the silent empty house, his present precarious shelter, from which everyone else had gone to work for the day. She herself answered. She did not sound surprised; he asked if he might take up her offer of a swim.—But of course. After work?—Of course —after he'd left the dust and heat of the building sites.

She was dressed to swim, the strap of a two-piece suit showing above the neck of some loose-flowing robe, and the ridge of the bikini pants outlined under the cloth somewhere below where her navel must be. But she did not swim; she sat smiling, with the thigh-high split in the robe tucked closed round her leg and watched him as he emerged from the chintzy rustic change-room (my god, what luxury compared with his present sleeping quarters) and stalked down to the pool holding in his belly and conscious that this effort—with that diaphragm bulge—made him strut like a randy pigeon. She gave encouraging cries when he dived, he felt she was counting the lengths he did, backstroke, butterfly, crawl. He was irritated and broke water right at her bare feet with his greedy grin of a man snatching life on the run. He must not let that grin escape him too often. She wiggled her toes as water flew from him, his dripping pelt of chest hair, the runnels off his strong legs, splattering her feet. A towel big as a sheet provided a toga for him; wrapped in his chair, he was modestly protected as she was, whether or not she had sized him up like a haunch in a butcher's shop.

The whisky and ice were wheeled out. The kitchen was forewarned this time; there were olives and salami, linen napkins.—Am I going to meet your husband before I go?—The man surely would be driving up any minute. It would be best for 'Harry' to get out of the towel and into his clothes in order to seem the stranger he was. He wanted to ask how she had decided to explain his presence, since she must, indeed, have so decided.

The question was in his face although he didn't come out with it. It suddenly seemed impatiently simple to him. Why not just say they'd met in a bus, what was there to hide—or were the circumstances of the casual acquaintance indeed too proletarian for the gentleman, beneath his wife's dignity! If only they'd met in the Members' Pavilion at the races, now! —Not here.—It was brusque.—It was necessary to go to Hong Kong after Japan. Apparently opportunities are opening up there... I don't know what it's all about. And then to Australia.—Quite a trip.— —So long as he's back by the time the boys come home for the holidays at the end of next month. They expect to do things together with him.

Fishing trips. Things I'm no good at. You've got a daughter—lucky. I go along, but just for the ride.— —Well, I'm sorry— —Another time. But you're not going... you'll stay for dinner. Just something light, out here, such a lovely evening.— —But haven't you other plans I'd be disturbing, friends coming?—Harry cannot attend dinner parties, thank you.

—Nothing. Not-a-thing. I'm planning an early night, I've been gadding too much. You know how friends imagine, when you're alone, you can't be left to yourself for a single evening. I'm sick of them.— —Then I should push off and leave you in peace.— —No, just a salad, whatever they've got—you'll share pot luck— Sick of them. A cure for boredom: hers. The paradox, rather than her company, was his enjoyment. He accepted the role so wide of his range; he opened the bottles of white wine—dry with the fish mousse, a Sauternes with the strawberries—in place of the man of the house.

Her fascination with their encounter rose to the surface in the ease over food and drink.—How many years is it since you met anyone you were not introduced to—can you remember? I certainly can't. It's a chain, isn't it, it's like Auld Lang Syne all the year, every

year, it just goes on and on, a hand on this side taken by a hand on that side... it's never broken into, always friends of friends, acquaintances of acquaintances, whether they're from Japan or Taiwan or London, down the road or god knows where.— —Good friends. They're necessary.—He was careful.

—But don't you find that? Particularly for people like you and him—my husband—I mean, the circle of people who have particular business interests, a profession. Round and round... But I suppose it's natural for us because we have things in common. I thought, that other day—when my car broke down, you know—I never walk around the streets like this, what have all these people to do with me— It was coming now, of course, the guilt of her class in a wail of self-accusation of uselessness, of not belonging to real life. Hadn't she shown a hint of it in the bus? But he was wrong and, in his turn, fascinated by the overturning of his kind of conventional assumption.

—They're unreal to me. I don't just mean because most of them are black. That's obvious, that we have nothing in common. I wish them well, they ought to have a better life... conditions ... I suppose it's good that things are changing for them... but I'm not involved, how could I be, we give money for their schools and housing and so on—my husband's firm does, like everybody else... I suppose you too ... I don't know what your views are— —I'm no armchair politician.— —I thought not. But the others—what have I in common with those whites, either... I don't count in their life, and they don't count in mine.

And the few who might—who're hidden away in the crowd in those streets (why is this town so ugly and dirty), it's unlikely I'd recognize them.—She really was quite attractive, unaware of a crumb at the side of her mouth.— Even sitting next to me in a bus.— They laughed and she made the move to clink glasses.

A black man in white uniform and cotton gloves hung about wearily; her guest was conscious of this witness to everything that went on in whites' houses, but for once felt that his own whiteness guaranteed anonymity. She told the servant he could leave the table and clear it in the morning. Frog bassoons and fluting crickets filled comfortable silences.—I must go.—He spoke, not moving.

—What about a quick dip first. One for the road.—Although he had dressed, she had eaten dinner in her robe.

He was not eager to get into water again but it was a way of rounding off the evening and he felt there was a need for doing this definitively, for himself. There were too few safe subjects between them—she was more right than she knew—they had too little in common, the acquaintance had come to the end of its possibilities. He went to the change-room again.

The water crept like a cool hand over his genitals; she was already swimming. She doubled up and went under with a porpoise flip, and the light from the terrace streamed off her firm backside and thighs. She kept her distance in the water, they circled one another. Hitching herself out on long arms, she sat on the side of the pool and, again, he was aware of her watching him. He surfaced below where she sat, and suddenly, for a moment only, closed his hand on her wrist before leaving the pool, shaking himself like a dog, scrubbing at his arms and chest with the big towel.— Cold, cold.— She repeated with a mock shiver:—Cold, cold.— They stood up, in accord to get dressed.

The ring of water in his ears jinglyingly mingled with the sound of the frogs. He put his arms round her and in a rush of heat, as if all the blood in his chilled body had retreated to engorge there, pressed his genitals tightly against her. He felt an enormous thrill and a fiercely crashing desire, all the abstinence of a planned nonexistence imploded like the destruction of one of his imaginary twenty-storeys that she feared might fall on her head. She held him as he held her. There was no kiss. She broke away neatly and ran indoors. He

dressed, raged against by his roused body, among the chintz drapings in the change-room. When he came out the water in the pool was black, with the reflection of stars thrown there like dying matches. She had turned off the terrace lights and was standing in the dark.

—Good night. I apologize.— —I hope your car hasn't been pinched. Should have brought it into the drive.— —There is no car.— He was too tired and dispirited to lie. Yet he must summon some slapdash resource of protection.—Friends were coming this way, they dropped me. I said I'd call a taxi to take me back.— The dark and the cover of chanting frogs hid whatever she might be thinking.

—Stay.—She turned, and he followed her into the house, that he had not before entered. They began again, the right way, with kisses and caresses. A woman his own age, who knew how to make love, who both responded and initiated, knowing what they wanted; in common. On this territory between them, there was even a kind of unexpected bluntness. Gently pinching his nipples before the second intercourse, she said—You're not Aids positive, are you.

— He put a hand over the delight of her fingers on him.—A bit late to ask... Not so far as I know. And I've no reason to believe otherwise.— —But you've no wife.— —Yes, but I'm rather a constant character—despite my nomadic profession.— —How will you explain you didn't come home.— He laughed.—Who to?— —The first day you were here... 'awkward', you said, for me to phone you.— —There's no one. There's no woman I'm accountable to at present.— —You understand, it's none of my business. But we don't want to make things difficult for either of us.— The husband.—Of course, I understand, don't worry. You're a lovely— preposterous!—woman.—And he began to kiss her as if he were a cannibal tasting flesh.

She was a practical woman, too. Some time in the early hours he stirred with a grunt and found a strange woman standing over him in dawn shadows—oh yes, 'Sylvie'. So that's where, waking often in unfamiliar rooms, he was this time. He had learnt to be quick to adjust his sense of place.

—Come. There's another bed.—He wandered behind her down a passage. She had made up a big bed in a guestroom; he stumbled into it and slept again.

In the morning at breakfast on her terrace she gaily greeted the black man who served them.—Mr Harry is a friend of the master, I asked him to stay the night with us.— So she, too, had the skills of vigilance, making safe for herself.

Harry went back every night that week. Harry really existed, now, out of the nonexistence of himself. Harry the construction engineer, a successful, highly-paid, professionally well-regarded man of the world, with a passing fancy, a mistress not young but beautiful, a creature lavished by the perfumed unguents of care from the poll of curly tendrils he would lift to expose her forehead, to the painted nails of her pedicured toes. Like him, she had her erratic moments of anguish, caused by conflict with the assertion of reality—her reality—rising within her to spoil an episode outside her life, a state without consequences. These moments found their expression as non sequitur remarks or more often as gestures, the inner scuffle breaking through in some odd physical manifestation. One night she squatted naked on the bed with her arms round her knees, clasping her curled feet tight in either hand. He was disturbed, and suppressed the reason that was sending a sucker from the root of his life: after interrogation in detention he had sat on the floor of his cell holding his feet like that, still rigid with his resistance against pain. A sear of resentment: she—she was only interrogating herself. Yet of course he had feeling for her—hadn't he just made love to her, and she to him, as she did so generously—he should not let himself dismiss the

relative sufferings of people like her as entirely trivial because it was on behalf of nothing larger than themselves.

—A long phone call from Australia... and all I could think about while we were talking was how when we're alone in here at night he never closes the bathroom door while he pees. I hear him, like a horse letting go in the street. Never closes the door. And sometimes there's a loud fart as well. He never stops to think that I can hear, that I'm lying here. And that's all I could think about while he's talking to me, that's all.— He smiled at her almost fondly.—Well, we're pretty crude, we men... but oh come on, you're not squeamish—you're a very physical lady— —About love-making, yes ... you think, because of the things I do, with you. But that's different, that's love-making, it's got nothing to do with what I'm talking about.— —If sex doesn't disgust you as a function of the body, then why so fastidious about its other functions? You accept a lover's body or you don't.

— —Would you still accept your lover's body if she had, say, a breast off?

— He lay down beside her with a hand on the dune of her curved smooth back.—How do I know? What woman? When? It would depend on many things, wouldn't it? I can say now, yes, just to say the right thing, if you want— —That's it! That's what's good! You don't say the right thing, like other people.— —Oh I do, I do. I'm very careful, I have a wary nature, I assure you.— —Well, I don't know you.—She let go of her feet and pulled the bow of her body back, under his palm. Restlessly she swiveled round to him pushing the fingers of her two hands up through the poll on her forehead, holding the hair dragged away.—Why do I let that bloody pansy hairdresser do this to me... I look common. Cheap, common.— He murmured intimately.—I didn't think so.— On the bus, yes.—Maybe you wouldn't have got off if I hadn't looked like this. Where were you really going, I wonder.—But it was not a question; she was satisfied she wouldn't get an answer, he wouldn't come out with the right thing. She was not asking, just as she never questioned that he appeared as out of nowhere, every night, apparently dropped by taxi somewhere out of sight of the house. And he did not ask when the husband would come home; there would be a sign he would read for himself. Stretched out, she quietly took the hand that had been on her back and placed it between her thighs.

There was no sign, but at the end of that week he knew he would not go back again.

Enough. It was time. He left as he had followed her, without explanation. Using the same trail for more than a week, he might have made a path for himself by which he could be followed. He moved from where he had been staying, to be taken in at another house. This was the family of a plumber, a friend of the Movement, not quite white, but too ambiguous of pigment for classification, so that the itinerant lodger could pass for a lighter relative. One of the youngsters gave up his bed; the lodger shared the room with three other children. Every day of the trial, new evidence brought by the Prosecutor's state witnesses involved his name. It claimed him from every newspaper, citing several aliases under which he had been active. But not 'Harry'.

He was making his way back to the plumber's house one afternoon when the youngster, on roller skates, zigzagged up the street. The boy staggered to a halt, almost knocking him down, and he struck out playfully at him.

But the boy was panting.—My dad says don't come. I been waiting to tell you and my brother's there at the other end of the street in case you take that way. Dad send us. They come this morning and went all over the house, only Auntie was there, Ma was also at work already. Looking for you. With dogs and everything. He say don't worry for your things, he's going to bring them where you can pick them up—he didn't tell me nothing, not where, but that you know— A cold jump of fear under his pectorals. He let it pass, and concentrated on

getting out of the area. He took a bus, and another bus. He went into a cinema and sat through some film about three men bringing up a baby.

When he came out of the cinema's eternal dusk, the street was dark.

Somewhere to go for the night: he had to have that, to decide where to go tomorrow, which hide on the list in his mind it was possible to use again.

Likely that the list was not in his mind alone; nothing on it was left that could be counted on as safe, now.

He got out of the taxi a block away. He pressed the intercom button at the wide teak gates.

There was the manservant's accented voice on the other end.

—It's Mr Harry.— —?ust push, Mr Harry.—There was a buzz.

Her trees, the swimming-pool; he stood in the large room that was always waiting for a party to fill it. On low tables were the toys such people give each other: metal balls that (as he set them in motion with a flick) click together in illustration of some mathematical or physical principle, god knows what... Click-clack; a metronome of trivial time. She was there, in the doorway, in rumpled white trousers, barefoot, a woman who expected no one or perhaps was about to choose what she would wear for an evening out.—Hul-lo.—Raised eyebrows.

—I had to go away unexpectedly—trouble with the foundations on one of our sites in Natal. I meant to phone— —But phoning's awkward.—She recalled, but quite serenely, only half-wishing to score against him.

—I'm not disturbing you...— —No, no. I've just been tidying up... some cupboards ... I get very careless— When alone: so the husband wasn't back yet.—Could I ask for a drink— I've had a heavy day.— She opened her palms, away from her body: as if he need ask; and, indeed, the servant appeared with the trolley.—I put it outside, madam?— ?uite like coming home; the two of them settled back on the terrace, as before.—I thought it would be so nice to see you.— She had dropped ice in his drink and was handing it to him.—It is nice.

— He closed his fingers round hers, on the glass.

After they had eaten, she asked—Are you going to stay? ?ust for tonight.

— They were silent a few moments, to the accompaniment of those same frogs.—I feel I'd like to very much.—It was sincere, strangely; he was aware of a tender desire for her, pushing out of mind fear that this, too, was an old trail that might be followed, and awareness that his presence was just a pause in which tomorrow's decision must be made.—And what about you.— —Yes, I'd like you to. D'you want to swim— —Not much.— —Well it's maybe a bit chilly.— When the servant came to clear the table she gave an order.—Ask Leah please to make up the bed in the first guest-room, will you. For Mr Harry.— Lying side by side on long chairs in the dark, he stroked her arm and drew back her hair from her shoulder to kiss her neck. She stood up and, taking his hand, led him indeed to that room and not her own. So that was how it was to be; he said nothing, kissed her on the forehead in acceptance that this was the appropriate way for him to be dismissed with a polite good night. But after he had got naked into bed she came in, naked, drew back the curtains and opened the windows so that the fresh night blew in upon them, and lay down beside him. Their flesh crept deliciously under the double contact of the breeze and each other's warmth. There was great tenderness, which perhaps prompted her to remark, with languid frankness, on a contrast:—You know you were awful, that first day, the way you just thrust yourself against me. Not a touch, not a kiss.—Now between a sudden change to wild kisses he challenged her knowingly.—And you, you, you didn't mind, ay, you showed no objection... You were not insulted! But was I really so crude—did I really... ?— —You certainly did. And no other man I know— —And any other woman would have pushed me into the swimming-pool.— They embraced joyously again and again; she could feel that he had not been with 'any other

woman', wherever it was he had disappeared to after last week. In the middle of the night, each knew the other had wakened and was looking at the blur of sinking stars through the open windows. He was sure, for no logical reason, that he was safe, this night, that no one would know, ever, that he was here. She suddenly raised herself on one elbow, turning to him although she certainly could not read his face in the faint powdering of light from the sky.—Who are you?— But he wasn't found out, he wasn't run to ground. It wasn't suspicion founded on any knowledge relevant to his real identity; she knew nothing of the clandestine world of revolution, when she walked in the streets of the dirty city among the angry, the poor and the unemployed they had 'nothing to do' with her—she'd said it. Who he was didn't exist for her; he was safe.

She could seek only to place him intriguingly within the alternatives she knew of—was there some financial scandal behind his anonymity, was there a marriage he was running away from—these were the calamities of her orbit. Never in her wildest imagination could she divine what he was doing, there in her bed.

And then it struck him that this was not her bed: this time she had not taken him into the bed she shared with the husband. Not in those sheets; ah, he understood this was the sign he knew he would divine, when the time came. Clean sheets on that bed, not to be violated. The husband was coming home tomorrow. Just for tonight.

He left early. She did not urge him to stay for breakfast on the terrace.

He must get back to bath and change... She nodded as if she knew what was coming.—Before getting to the site.—She waved to him as to a friend, down there at the gates, for the eyes of the manservant and a gardener who was singing a hymn while mowing the lawn. He had made a decision, in the respite she granted him. He would take a chance of leaving the city and going to a small town where there was an old contact, dropped out of activity long ago, who might be prevailed upon to revive old loyalties and take him in. It was perhaps a mistake; who knows. Best safety lies in crowds. The town was too small to get lost in. After three days when the old contact reluctantly kept him in an outhouse in the company of a discarded sewing machine, stained mattresses and mouse droppings, he went out for air one early morning in his host's jogging outfit looking exactly like all the other overweight men toiling along the streets, and was soon aware that a car was following. There was nothing to do but keep jogging; at a traffic light the car drew up beside him and two plain-clothes men ordered him to come to the police station with them. He had a fake document with him, which he presented with the indignation of a good citizen, but at the station they had a dossier that established his identity. He was taken into custody and escorted back to Johannesburg, where he was detained in prison. He was produced at the trial for which he had been the missing accused and the press published photographs of him from their files. With and without a beard; close-cropped and curly-headed; the voracious, confident smile was the constant in these personae. His successful evasion of the police for many months made a sensational story certain to bring grudging admiration even from his enemies.

In his cell, he wondered—an aside from his preoccupation with the trial, and the exhilaration, after all, of being once again with his comrades, the fellow accused—he wondered whether she had recognized him. But it was unlikely she would follow reports of political trials. Come to think of it, there were no newspapers to be seen around her house, that house where she thought herself safe among trees, safe from the threat of him and his kind, safe from the present.

KEEPING FIT

Breathe.

Breath. A baby, a chicken hatching—the first imperative is to breathe.

Breathless.

Breathe! Out of this concentration, in which he forgets even the rhythm of his feet, is a bellows pumped by the command, the admonition, the slap on the bottom that shocks the baby into inhalation—comes his second wind.

Unless you go out like this, morning and evening, you never know what no one can remember, that first discovery of independent life: I can breathe.

It came after twenty minutes or so, when he had left behind houses he had never entered but knew because they were occupied by people like himself, passed the aggressive monitoring of dogs who were at their customary gateposts, the shuttered take-away, ?regorolls & j?m?o ??rgers, and the bristling security cage of the electricity sub-station. These were his pedometer: three kilometres. Here where the grid of his familiar streets came up short against the main road was the point of no return. Sometimes he took a circuitous route back but this was the outward limit. Not quite a highway, the road divided the territory of Alicewood, named for the daughter of a real estate developer, from Enterprise Park, the landscaped industrial buffer between the suburb and the black township whose identity was long overwhelmed by a squatter camp which had spread to the boundary of the industries and, where there was vacant ground, dragged through these interstices its detritus of tin and sacking, abutting on the highway. Someone—the municipality—had put up a high corrugated metal fence to shield passing traffic from the sight.

At six o'clock on a Sunday morning the four-lane road is deserted. A wavering of smoke from last night's cooking fires hangs peacefully, away on the other side, the sign of existence there. In the house he has left, a woman, three children, sleep on unaware that he has risen from her bed, passed their doors, as if he has left his body in its shape impressed beside her and moved out of himself on silent running shoes. The exhausted tarmac gives off a bitumen scent that is lost in carbon monoxide fumes during the week; he is quietly attracted, at his turning point, to mark time a few paces out on the road, having the pounded surface all to himself. It is pleasant as a worn rubber mat underfoot.

He began to run steadily along it. Now no landmarks of distance; instead, memory in a twin stream started to flow in its own progression, the pumping of his heart sending blood to open up where in his brain cells flashes of feeling and images from boyhood were stored at one with the play of fragments from the past week. Tadpoles wriggling in his pocket on his way home from school and the expression of irritation round his accountant's mouth when he disputed some calculation, the change in the curve of a girl's buttocks as she shifted her weight from one leg to another standing in front of him in a bank queue on Friday and the sudden surfacing of his father's figure bending about in a vegetable garden, looming, seen at the height of a child who has done wrong (run away, was it?); the same figure and not the same, with an arthritic leg laid out like a wooden one and the abstracted glance of someone able now only to move towards death, the scent of the girl in the bank as her sharp exhalation of impatience sent the message of her body to his—all this smoothly breathed, in and out. In the flowing together of contexts the crow of a cock in the city does not come incongruously but is more of a heraldic announcement: day,

today, time for ghosts to fade, time to return. The cock-crow sounds from over there behind the fence, a place which itself has come about defying context, plan, definition, confusing the peasant's farmyard awakening with the labourer's clock-in at the industries close by.

Of course, they kept chickens among whatever dirt and degradation was behind that fence. He must have done another couple of kilometres; there were no more factory buildings but the shanties occupied the land all along the other side of the road. Here in places the metal fence had collapsed under the pressure of shelters that leant against it and sections had been filched to roof other shacks, yet the life in there was not exposed to the road because the jumbled crowding of makeshift board and planks, bits of wrecked vehicles, cardboard and plastic sheeting closed off from view how far back the swarm of habitation extended. But as he turned to go home—it burst open, revealing itself.

Men came flying at him. The assault exaggerated their faces like close-ups in film; for a vivid second he saw rather than felt through the rictus of his mouth and cheek muscles the instant gaping fear that must have opened his mouth and stretched his cheeks like a rubber mask.

They rushed over him colliding with him, swerving against him, battering him. But in their passage: they were carrying him along with them. They were not after him.

Fuses were blowing in the panic impulses along the paths of his brain, he received incoherently the realization that he was something in their path—a box they tripped over, an abandoned tyre-tube bowling as they kicked past it—swept into their pursuit. What had seemed to be one of them was the man they were after, and that man's terror and their rage were a single fury in which he hadn't distinguished one from the other. The man's shirt was ripped down the back, another hobbled wildly with one shoe lost, some wore red rags tied pirate-style round their heads, knobbed clubs swung above them, long pieces of wire strong and sharp enough to skewer a man armed them, one loped with a sledge-hammer over his shoulder, there were cleavers, and a butcher's knife ground to sword-point and dangling from a bracelet of plaited red plastic. They were bellowing in a language he didn't need to understand in order to understand, the stink of adrenaline sweat was coming from the furnace within them. The victim's knees pumped up almost to his chin, he zigzagged about the road, the road that was never to be crossed, and the tight mob raced with him, hampered and terrible with their weaponry, and he who had blundered into the chase was whirled along as if caught up by some carnival crowd in which, this time, the presence of death was not fancy dress.

The race of pursued and pursuers broke suddenly from one side of the road to the other, he was thrust to the edge of the wild press and saw his chance.

Out.

The fence was down. The squatter shacks: he was on the wrong side.

The road was no longer the sure boundary between that place and his suburb. It was the barrier that prevented him from getting away from the wrong side. In the empty road (wo?ld no one come, wo?ld no one sto? it) the man went down under chants and the blows of a club with a gnarled knob as big as a child's head, the butcher's knife plunged, the pointed wires dug, the body writhed away like a chopped worm. On the oil stains of the tarmac blood was superimposing another spill.

He fled down among the shacks. Two bare-arsed children squatting to pee jumped up and bounded from him like rats. A man lifted the sack over an aperture in tin and quickly let it fall. There were cooking pots and ashes and a tethered donkey, the scabby body of a car like the eviscerated shell of a giant beetle, lamed supermarket trolleys, mud walls, beer cans; silence.

Desertion; or the vacuum created by people left behind by the passage of violence, keeping out of it, holding breath. The haphazard strips of muddy passage between whatever passed for walls were so narrow he seemed to have entered a single habitation where, unseen, people all around followed him—his breathing, his panting breath—from room to room. A white man!

He felt himself only to be a white man, no other identity, no other way to be known: to pull aside a sack and say, I'm in brokerage, give his name, his bona fide address—that was nothing, these qualifications of his existence meant nothing. And then a woman appeared out of a shack that had a door.

—Get inside. It's dangerous.—A firm grip, a big butterscotch-coloured upper arm in a tight-filled short sleeve, yellow- and pink-flowered. He ducked into her doorway with a push from her in his back.

—They terrible, those people, they'll kill anybody. They will.—She had the strict face formed by respectability, a black woman churchgoer's face, her eyes distant and narrowed behind butterfly-shaped spectacle frames with gilt scrolls. Other people in dimness were staring. A piece of canvas hung over what must be a square of window. Light came only from the gaps between tin walls and the roof low on his head.—You see, I run... I was just on the other side of the road, out for a run ...— A young man who was turned away from this apparition, paring his nails, children, a stooping man in pyjama trousers and a pullover, a girl with a blanket wrapped round her body below naked shoulders, doek awry from sleep.

He had a momentary loss of control, wanting to collapse against the woman, clutch her used big body under her apron and take the shield of her warmth against his trembling.—What's happening—who was it—he's dead there, in the road.— She spoke for everyone.—From the hostel. They come from the hostel, they come in here and kill us.— —I read about it.—His head wagged like a puppet's, down, down to his chest.

—You read about it!—She gave a short slap of a laugh.—Every night, we don't know. They come or they don't come— —Who are they?— —The police send them.— He could not say to this woman, That's not what I read.

—Tomorrow it can be him.—The woman uncrossed her fine arms and presented the profile of the young man.

—Him?— —Yes, my son. Come and knock on the wall shouting it's all right, call him comrade so he'll believe, and if he doesn't go out, break in and beat my husband, there, you see him, he's an old man already—take my son and kill him.— Nothing moves a man on behalf of others so surely as danger to himself.

—It was wonderful of you to open your door like that. I mean, for me. I don't know what to say. Why him? What would make them come for your son?— The young man shifted abruptly, turning still more pointedly away from the apparition his mother had brought in among them.

—My son's in the Youth—the street committee.— The kind who burned government appointees' houses, stoned buses, boycotted schools. And lived here—slowly he was making out of the dimness and his own shock what this habitation was. Its intimacy pressed around him, a mould in which his own dimensions were redefined. He took up space where the space allowed each resident must be scrupulously confined and observed. The space itself was divided in two by curtains which stretched across it, not quite drawn closed, so that he could see the double bed with a flounced green satin cover which filled one half. A table with pots and a spirit stove, a dresser with crockery, a sagging armchair into which the old man sank, a chromium-shiny radio cassette player, a girlie calendar, Good Shepherd ?esus, framed, with a gold tinsel halo, the droop of clothes hanging from nails, vague darkness of

folded blankets—that was the second half. He saw now there were three children as well as the grown daughter and son; seven people lived here.

The woman had lit the spirit stove and she gave an order, in their language, to the girl. Holding the blanket in one hand and shuffling with her knees together in modesty, the girl fetched a cup and saucer from the dresser, wiped them with a rag, put a spoon of powdered milk in the cup and, chivvied again by her mother, a spoon of tea in a jug. Like a sleep-walker. No one spoke except the woman. But he felt their awareness of him:

the old man bewildered as at a visitor he hadn't been told to expect, the children in unblinking curiosity, the young man hostile, the girl—the girl wanting to sink through the earth that was the shack's floor; as if he were the threat, and not the marauders whose gales of anger blew about from the road, rising and fading as a wind would gust against the tin walls. The old man suddenly got up and signalled him to take the armchair.

—Please—stay where you are, I don't need— The woman brought him the cup of tea, carrying a small tin of sugar.— No, no, sit, sit. You see what this place is like, the rain pours in, you see how we have to try and stuff around the tin with plastic, but we can still greet with a chair.— While he drank the paraffin-tasting tea she stood above him admonishingly.—You must keep away from here.— —I don't usually come so far, it was just only this morning, and I was right on the other side of the main road, there was no one... it happened, I got in the way.— She pinched her lips between her teeth and shook her head at foolishness.—What do you want to come near this place for.— Don't take any chances kee? away from the main road— his wife, when he ran sometimes before going to bed at night, possessive, not wanting him to do anything that excluded her.

—I can rather go to my home there in Lebowa, but how can we go, he's got a job in town, he's the attendant at underground parking, you'll see him there by the chain where the cars come in to go down under the building.

He's too old to stay here now alone.— The baying from the road swerved away out of hearing. Morning sounds, of coughing, wailing babies, and the drumming of water on tin containers, were released. He stood up and put the cup down carefully on the table.

—Wait.—She turned and said something to the young man. He answered with the smouldering obstinacy of adolescence. She spoke once more, and he put his head out of the door. All held the exact position in which the narrow stream of morning sunlight found them; the boy slipped out and closed them into dimness behind him. The woman did not speak while he was away. Darkness danced with the after-vision of the boy's profile against glare; the waiting was the first atmosphere shared with the one to whom refuge had been given. He could hear them breathing as he breathed.

The son came back surly and said nothing. His mother went up to challenge him face to face. And he answered in monosyllables she drew from him.

—It's all right now. But you like to run, so run.—He felt she was teasing him, in the relief of tension. But she would not presume to laugh with a white man, her matronly dignity was remote as ever.

He shook hands with the old man, thanking him, thanking them all, awkwardly, effusively—no response, as he included the children, the son and daughter—hearing his own voice as if he were talking to himself.

He opened the door. With crossed arms, she contemplated him.—God bless you.— The telling of it welled up in his mouth like saliva; he was on the right side, running home to tell what had happened to him. He swallowed and swallowed in urgency, unable to get there fast enough. Now and then his head tossed as he ran; in disbelief. All so quick. A good pace, quiet and even on the soft tarmac, not a soul in sight, and before you have the time to take

breath—to prepare, to decide what to do—it happens. Suddenly, this was sensational. That's how it will happen, always happens everywhere!

Keep away. They came over, at him, not after him, no, but making him join them. At first he didn't know it, but he was racing with them after blood, after the one who was to lie dying in the road. That's what it really means to be caught up, not to know what you are doing, not to be able to stop, say no!—that awful unimagined state that has been with you all the time. And he had nothing to give the woman, the old man; when he ran, he kept on him only a few silver coins along with his house key in the minute pocket which, like the cushioned pump action of their soles, was a feature of his shoes. Could hardly tip her coins. But if he went back, another time, with say, a hundred rands, fifty rands, would he ever find the shack among so many? Should have asked her where she worked, obviously she must be a domestic or something like that, so that he could have rewarded her properly, found her at her place of employment. Where was it the husband held one of those chains you see before the ramp of a firm's underground car park? Had she named the street? How shit-scared he must have been (he jeered) not to take in properly what the woman said! She probably saved his life; he felt the euphoria of survival. It lasted through the pacing of half a block. A car with men in golf caps, going to tee off early, passed him, and several joggers, just up, approached and went by with a comradely lift of the hand; he felt that his experience must blaze in his face if only they had known how to look, if only they had learnt.

But don't exaggerate.

Had his life really been in danger? He could have been killed by a blow to get him out of the way, yes, that sledgehammer—it might have struck a glancing blow. The butcher's knife, cleaver, whatever the horrible thing was with its sword-point and that woven bracelet like the pretty mats they make and sell on the streets, it could scalp you, open your throat with one swing.

But they didn't even seem to see him. They saw only the one they were after, and it wasn't him. Under the rise and fall of his feet on the grassy suburban pavement blood drew its pattern on tarmac.

Who knew whether she was telling the truth when she said it was the police who sent them to make trouble?

He read the papers, for all he knew it could have been Inkatha murdering someone from the ANC, it could have been people from the street committees she said the boy belonged to, out to get a local councillor regarded as a government stooge, it could have been ANC people avenging themselves on a police informer. He didn't know how to read the signs of their particular cause as someone like her would from the rags they had tied round their heads or the kind of weapons they'd improvised for themselves, the cries they chanted. He had to believe her, whatever she'd chosen to tell him. Whatever side she was on—god knows, did she know herself, shut in that hovel, trying to stay alive—she had opened her door and taken him in.

Why?

Why should she have?

God ?less yo?.

Out of Christian caritas? Love—that variety? But he was not welcome in the hovel, she had kept the distaste, the resentment, the unease at his invasion at bay, but herself had little time for his foolish blundering. What do yo? want to come near this ?lace for. He heard something else: Is there nowhere yo? think yo? can't go, does even this r???ish d?m? ?elong to yo? if yo? need to come hiding here, saving yo?'r skin. And he had shamefully wanted to fling himself upon her, safe, safe, reassured, hidden from the sound and sight of blows and blood

as he could be only by one who belonged to the people who produced the murderers and was not a murderer.

As he came level with the security cage of the electricity sub-station, the take-away, and then the garage and the houses prefiguring his own, the need to tell began to subside inside him with the slowing of his heartbeat. He heard himself describing his amazement, his shock, even (disarmingly honest confession) his shit-scaredness, enjoying the tears (dread of loss) in the eyes of his wife, recounting the humble goodness of the unknown woman who had put out her round butterscotch-coloured arm and pulled him from danger, heard himself describing the crowded deprivation of the shack where too few possessions were too many for it to hold, the bed curtained for some attempt at the altar of privacy; the piously sentimental conclusion of the blessing, as he was restored to come home for breakfast. The urge to tell buried itself where no one could get it out of him because he would never understand how to tell; how to get it all straight.

—A bit excessive, isn't it? Exhausting yourself—His wife was half-reproachful, half-amused at the sight of shining runnels on his face and his mouth parted the better to breathe. But she was trailing her dressing-gown, barefoot, only just out of bed and she certainly had no idea how early he had left or how long he had been absent while the house slept. Over her cereal his daughter was murmuring to a paper doll in one of the imaginary exchanges of childhood, he could hear the boys racing about in the garden; each day without fingerprints, for them.

He drank a glass of juice, and another, of water.—I'll eat later.— —I should think so! Go and lie down for a while. Are you trying to give yourself a heart attack? What kind of marathon is this. How far have you been today, anyway?— —I don't keep track.— —Yes, that's evident, my darling! You don't.— In the bedroom the exercise bicycle, going nowhere.

In brokerage, her darling, resident at this address. He took off his running shoes and threw his shirt on the carpet. He stank of the same sweat as those he was caught up among within a pursuit he did not understand.

The unmade bed was blissful. Her lilac-patterned blue silk curtains were still drawn shut but the windows were open and the cloth undulated with a breeze that touched his moist breast-hair with a light hand. He closed his eyes. Some extremely faint, high-pitched, minute sound made timid entry at the edge of darkness; he rubbed his ear, but it did not cease. Longing to sleep, he tried to let the sound sink away into the tide of his blood, his breath. If he opened his eyes and was distracted by the impressions of the room—the dressing-table with the painted porcelain hand where her necklaces and ear-rings hung, the open wardrobe with his ties dangling thick on a rack, a red rose tripled in the angle of mirrors, his briefcase abandoned for the weekend on the chaise-longue, the exercise bicycle—he heard the sound only by straining to. But the moment he was in darkness it was there again: plaintive, feeble, finger-nail scratch of sound. He staggered up and went slowly about the room in search of the source like a blind man relying on one sense alone. It was behind a wall somewhere, penetrating the closed space of his head from some other closed space. A bird. A trapped bird. He narrowed the source; the cheeping came from a drain-pipe outside the window. His bare feet slapping flat-footed with fatigue, he slumped back to the breakfast table.—There's a bird trapped in the drain-pipe outside the bedroom.— —So the kids told me.— —Well let them take the ladder and get it out.— —It must be a chick from the nest those mynahs built under the eaves.

Fell into the gutter and then down the pipe, so it's stuck—what can the boys do?— —So what's to be done about it?— —Can't exactly call the fire brigade. Poor little thing. ?ust wait for it to die.— Back in the room, on the bed, he listened. Eyes closed. Every time the sound

paused he had to wait for it to begin again. Die. It would not die. In another darkness the most insignificant of fragments of life cried out, kept crying out. He jumped from the bed and burst through the house, going after her, bellowing, his hands palsied with rage.—Get the bloody thing out, can't you! Push up a pole, take the ladder, pull down the drain-pipe, for Christ' sake!— She stared at him, distancing herself from this exhibition.

—What do you expect of little boys? I won't have them break their necks. Do it then! Yo? do it. Do it if you can. You're so athletic.—