Introduction

When we got the news that my cousin Y's cancer had come back a second time, it didn't cross my mind that she would die. I thought she would survive it; she was only 40 years old, but the cancer had spread all over and her condition deteriorated rapidly. She died in the night-time, holding her mother's hand. This was weeks after the country had been placed on lockdown Alert Level 5, and because we couldn't travel, my mother and I watched the funeral on Zoom. This, as the old saying goes, is how we live now.

This has been a time of unremitting grief. People have lost loved ones, homes, jobs, and suffered all kinds of setbacks, large and small. At a time like this, the promise literature holds out to us is that we're never alone. During a phone conversation in the early days of South Africa's lockdown with the writer and audio producer Catherine Boulle, one of the contributors to this book, we discovered that we'd each been turning to Svetlana Alexievich's *Chernobyl Prayer: A Chronicle of the Future* – an oral history of the nuclear disaster in the Soviet Union in 1986 – to make sense of the times. As we stared out onto the wide, empty streets from our respective homes, Alexievich's words resounded in our ears like a prophecy: 'We now find ourselves on a new page of history. The history of disasters has begun.'

In one of the essays contained in this book, the novelist Ishtiyaq Shukri remembers sitting with friends at a coffee shop in central London days before the World Health Organisation declared coronavirus a global pandemic on 11 March 2020. Echoing the misplaced optimism of those early days, Shukri writes, 'consensus around the table was that the virus would probably be under control by June [2020].' That the

number of Covid-19 deaths in South Africa, a year later, would total more than 50 000 (at the time of writing), was something that lay beyond the reach of our imaginations. Who would have foreseen that millions of us would live in a state of almost permanent low-grade anxiety and fear of contracting the virus and possibly dying from it?

While this is not a book about the pandemic, there has been no escaping its mark on our world. 'In April 2020, when my father was diagnosed with cancer and admitted to hospital, I couldn't travel home,' Mary Watson writes in the essay which opens this collection, 'Neither Here nor There'. 'Both Ireland and South Africa were in lockdown, and even if I could, it would have been irresponsible to travel ten thousand kilometres to visit a sick man in the middle of a pandemic.'

The writers in this anthology wrestle with the idea of death and dying, seldom an easy task, and I am grateful to each of the contributors. In her breath-taking memoir, *Men We Reaped*, which chronicles the deaths of five black men, including her younger brother, Jesmyn Ward writes: 'To say this is difficult is understatement; telling this story is the hardest thing I've ever done. But my ghosts were once people, and I cannot forget that.'

Ward's memoir shapes the heaviness of grief into something readers can find meaning in. This book attempts to do something similar.

In 'The Grief of Strangers', Lidudumalingani draws us into the world of *Imiphanga*, a radio show on Umhlobo Wenene that reads out death notices and that for years formed the background noise of his childhood. 'For the duration of the show,' Lidudumalingani remembers, 'it seemed as if the world outside had paused, its shutters closed, at least to my mother. She'd always sit right in front of the radio, hunched over the table, listening, holding a space for the bereaved.' Lidudumalingani's essay then leaps forward in time to our present age where 'the image of a lifeless body lying on the streets can be shared on social media even before loved ones hear of it.'

The Missing Persons Task Team is a unit in the National Prosecuting Authority set up on the recommendation of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission to trace the fate and whereabouts of those who were 'disappeared' or went missing in political circumstances between 1960 and 1994, and tries to recover their remains. 'Our cases may be decades old,' Madeleine Fullard, the head of the task team, writes in her essay, 'Investigative Pieces', 'but we are in a breathless race against time.' Then later she writes: 'Most fragile and impermanent are the human beings. It is the families themselves, especially the mothers, who wither and die in the waiting.'

Politics is what determines which lives are allowed to expire prematurely. In her essay charting the impact of the heroin trade in South Africa's urban centres, Simone Haysom ('Living as Ghosts Do') argues that the government's indifferent response has relegated heroin addicts to the realm of the living dead. 'It's maybe not too much of a stretch to say that many heroin addicts live as ghosts do – haunting the highways, the cities, the abandoned small-town high street, the suburb, their families. It's not clear what they could do if they wanted to leave their phantasmal life behind, if they wanted to develop materiality, be seen again. The state offers almost no help to anyone in their situation who wants to get clean, or even just stable.'

Elsewhere, Paula Ihozo Akugizibwe ('How to Kill a Man') writes about learning the Israeli military's street combat technique, Krav Maga. Only later in the essay does Akugizibwe reveal the tragedy propelling her obsession with self-defence. In 'The Pattern of Trees', the lone short story in this collection, Stacy Hardy explores the murder of women at the hands of men. By the time we meet Hardy's protagonist, a forensic pathologist, she's already been murdered. She lies in a shallow grave, attempting to solve her own murder.

The other contributors in this collection explore subjects as varied as the ritual bathing of the body of the deceased and the ethics of killing small animals.

What consolation can literature offer in the face of such unending grief?

One of my favourite Raymond Carver stories, 'A Small, Good Thing', is a domestic tragedy that hinges on a breakdown in communication between a well-to-do woman named Ann and a baker who works 16 hours a day to earn a living. Ann orders a cake decorated with a spaceship under a sprinkling of stars for her son's birthday party but then doesn't turn up to pay and collect. That Monday, her soon-to-be-eight-year-old son, Scotty, is the victim of a hit-and-run while walking to school. The boy is rushed to hospital with what at first appear to be minor injuries – shock, a mild concussion, some fluid in the lungs – but later prove otherwise. He falls into a coma and days later, his last breath is 'puffed through his throat and exhaled gently through the clenched teeth'.

The baker, meanwhile, mistakes Ann's silence for rudeness. He calls her home at odd hours of the night, badgering her about the cake. The story reaches its high point when, after yet another ill-tempered exchange over the phone, Ann and her husband, Howard, decide to drive to the bakery in the middle of the night. 'My son's dead,' Ann tells the baker. 'He was hit by a car on Monday morning. We've been waiting with him until he died.'

On hearing this, the baker is immediately filled with remorse. He undoes his apron and clears a space for Ann and Howard to sit at the table. 'You probably need to eat something,' he says. 'I hope you'll eat some of my hot rolls. You have to eat and keep going. Eating is a small, good thing in a time like this.'

Reading, too, is a small, good thing in a time like this.

Bongani Kona

Cape Town

The Used-Car Salesman

SINDISWA BUSUKU

1973
He sold cars, used cars, with his friend Eugene. They owned a small business near the BP garage on the corner of Umgeni Road and Argyle.
Eugene did most of the paper work from their small office.

1976
It was an aluminium trailer with a mishmash of old carpets scattered everywhere and large beige filing cabinets near his desk. There were always three or four ashtrays around the office, always full of cigarette butts and peanut shells.
Dad did most of the repairs from home and brought them in after he made sure they were roadworthy.

1985
Our house always had around six or so cars littered across the garden, most of them high up on ramps with bricks behind the back wheels. He was always working underneath them with a large blue toolbox folded out.

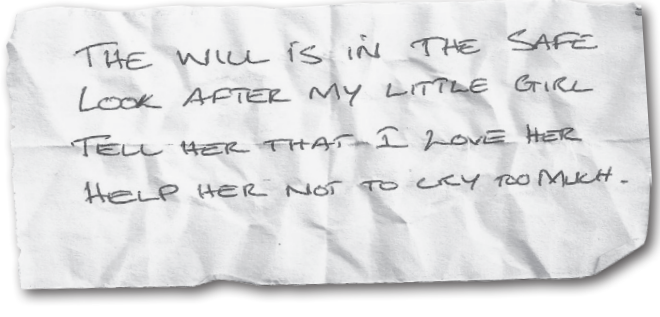
1988
The 1985 Toyota Corolla 1.6 GL had been in an accident, so he was fixing the wheel alignment. He said it was crabbing.
The needle of the speedometer in the 1988 BMW E28 wasn't moving anymore.
There was an annoying misfire from the 1973 VW Beetle 1600.
The 1985 Jaguar XJ needed a new fan belt and the 1976 Mercedes

240D had bad rust around the windscreen. It was smoking excessively, and the exhausts had two holes.

1992
For years he bled brakes, flushed fluid out of master-brake cylinders, brake lines and calipers, fixing starters and alternators and replacing CV joints.

After almost six years together, dad was dying in hospital. The business shut down, the cars were sold off, but the Corolla was the last to remain. A buyer was going to come around at 5 pm to look at the car. While we hosed it down, dried it off with the chamois and vacuumed inside, I opened the cubbyhole to make sure it was empty, and there it sat.

The torn piece of paper reads:



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All the Dead

LUCIENNE BESTALL

To begin with the liturgy of death, here intoned in Latin: *pallor mortis*, *algor mortis*, *rigor mortis*, *livor mortis*. To begin at the end. To begin with the deep blue marks of lividity blooming against pale skin.

An object lesson (the object a corpse): Regardless of how you die or when or under what circumstances, your body will conform to the same processes, follow the same order of events, begin to decay in much the same way as every other body. Death seldom deviates from its course. Once the heart fails to beat, once circulation ceases entirely, blood follows the course of gravity downwards, collecting in dark pools at the body's lowest points. Although lividity begins at the moment life ends, it is only clearly perceptible an hour or two after death, appearing as a spreading, tenebrous bruise.

Lividity is assigned the fourth stage of death, where the first stage describes the pallor of the recently deceased, the second the body's cooling to the ambient temperature, and the third the chemical changes in the body that cause it to stiffen. One, two, three, four. In that order and never otherwise. Death is pedantic.

Pallor mortis, *algor mortis*, *rigor mortis*, *livor mortis*, *ad infinitum*, *amen*.

While I am interested in lividity, even morbidly so, I find the topic of rigor mortis distasteful; too like an animal, the family pet found dead. But then, in the end, I am less intrigued by the mechanics of death than by its more elusive qualities, particularly those pertaining to the slippery matter of the soul. And by the fate of lifeless bodies in the short time they are permitted to live among us.

The lesson continues to the last stage of death, a stage that has

fallen out of favour among the living. Without euphemism, and now no longer in Latin: *decomposition*. It is only the bodies that go undiscovered that are allowed to arrive at this final stage above ground level. The forgotten bodies – overlooked and unobserved.

Left untouched, unembalmed and unburied, a lifeless body begins to disintegrate from the moment of death. *These changes in the first hours occur so slowly and take place with such inexorability that there is something almost ritualistic about them, as though life capitulates according to specific rules, a kind of gentleman's agreement to which the representatives of death also adhere*. Within a day, membrane cells in soft tissues start to break down in a process called 'autolysis', where the body's bacteria, still very much alive, turn against their now inert host. Within the next two days, the body bloats. The corpse grows increasingly malodorous, a smell at once fetid and strangely sweet. Putrefaction begins, and blood-streaked foam spills from mouth and nose. In the following week, active decay takes hold, and within a month, the body begins to liquefy. Later the flesh falls away from the bones, and, long after, the bones too begin to decay. *Dust to dust*, the priest recites, *ashes to ashes*.

Karl Ove Knausgaard 1968 –

How ungrateful we are for the lessons of decay; the perfect teachings that this body we are born with is constantly aging and must someday be left behind to rot. A strange privilege, to decompose.

Stephen and Ondrea Levine 1937 – 2016 unknown –

We do not leave bodies where they fall. The undertaker is called. The coroner. The cleaners, if needed. Together we perform the *collective act of repression symbolized by the concealment of our dead*. Even before the body can be removed from the place of death, it is hidden from view, beneath a sheet or under a makeshift cloth. At the very least, the eyes are closed, lest they are watching the living from the other side of that dark river.

Karl Ove Knausgaard 1968 –

The scene of death is tidied, the body, for what it's worth, rearranged and covered before it can be removed to the hospital morgue or funeral home. To some place cool and out of the way, a place low down and close to the ground.

Stephen and Ondrea Levine
1937 – 2016
unknown –

More often than not, rot and decay are disallowed. For *even in death, death is denied*. The mortician, when called on, goes to work colouring and shaping, *stuffing cotton in the pale cheeks of the dead man to make him look robust, stitching a contented smile on his face, all in the attempt to make death appear as if it were going to a party*. But rouged cheeks cannot wake him, and even an embalmed corpse will soon begin to smell. Yet still, we preserve the bodies of our dead, for a short time at least, cooled in mortuary fridges or tightly sealed in coffins, before they are at last consigned to the crematorium's flames or six feet down under the dark, loamy earth.

A photograph in black and white portrays a corpse with empty eyes and soft blonde hair, her face obscured by spiderwebs. Most chilling, the corpse's shoulder, her skin darkened by the sun and weathered like old, unoiled leather. In another photograph, this one in colour, a body lies face down on a bed of brilliant orange leaves, a hand stretched out behind, back towards the camera. The arm is blood red, the bones beginning to show, the sinews, yet the hand appears untouched by decay, bright white against those autumn leaves.

Collected under the title *What Remains* (2003), Sally Mann's studies of corpses are hard to look at and not easily forgotten. All were photographed at the University of Tennessee's anthropological facility, where human decomposition is observed in variable environments – buried, unburied, submerged underwater, even locked in the boot of a car. 'The smell didn't bother me,' Mann said of her decaying subjects. 'And you should see the colours – they're really beautiful. Nature doesn't spare on the aesthetics.'

But what does remain? Besides the colours of decay. Besides these empty carapaces, left to rot in the forest that lies within the confines of Knoxville's body farm. Mann's photographs, for all their artistry, cannot disguise the decomposition that so disgusts the living. The rotting body is intricately fraught, a dangerous territory best avoided. Perhaps it is our fear of contamination and contagion that triggers our repulsion. Or perhaps it is the singular threat that death poses to the psyche, the knowledge of life's precariousness and our desire to deny the inevitable.

Look, Mann's photographs urge the viewer. See how the skin turns brown and brittle under the sun. Consider how the stomach spills out of a ruptured abdomen and onto the soil. Look here, how this figure's limbs are so strangely bent. Observe this blood-stained shirt. Count the shades of red. Look at what's left behind. All that life and now this. A series of organic processes, a slow *unbecoming*.

Mann's photographs at once disgust and morbidly fascinate. And how could they not? How many rotting corpses have I encountered? How many have you? None, not one. And so I find myself returning to look at her photographs, daring myself to. Staring again at that white hand against the leaves. Those empty eyes. Trying to decipher what these corpses might tell me about death, and even, perhaps, about life. *Mortui vivos docent*. The dead teach the living.

Mann has since donated her body to the facility. In time, it too will be left to decay, half-hidden under a bush or slumped against a boundary fence.

I have only ever seen one dead body.

My grandfather died early one summer's morning and the sky was only a pale grey when my grandmother called to wake my parents. He had died sitting on the couch, where he was still sitting when we arrived. Two daughters, a son-in-law and three grandchildren.

The kettle had boiled, a teapot had been filled. Later the teapot was filled again. We sat around him as the sun came up, visited with him, communed with him. Witnessed the new stillness of his lifeless state. Drank tea from floral-patterned china. Watched his face begin to smoothen, his sunspots fade, the ruddiness of his complexion turn to an alabaster white. The blood was running away from his head and towards the carpet, only I knew nothing of lividity then. His feet, no doubt beginning to bruise, were hidden by old-man slippers, his legs by striped, old-man pyjamas.

How quickly he had faded from being my grandfather, very much alive, even outrageously so, to an object among many others, at one with paisley curtains and cross-stitched pillows, and the couch on which he sat. How quickly death, which had always frightened me in the abstract, showed itself to be largely unremarkable; a door slamming closed in the wind, the filament of a lightbulb burning out, *a jacket that slips off a clothes hanger and falls to the floor.*

Karl Ove Knausgaard 1968 –

It was a short death, a benign death. Neither my grandfather nor my grandmother had understood the fatal cadence of his coughing. There was no fear, only the ordinary devotion of a married couple alone in the early morning and in a suburban sitting room. The cause of death was unextraordinary, expected. His weak heart could no longer keep his lungs from filling with fluid. He had drowned on the couch.

I later overheard my mother explain that heart failure creates pressure in the pleural space, which I misheard as 'plural space'. And took to mean a place of multiplicity, the bardo, an in-betweenness, a becoming. That heart failure had taken my grandfather from one place, this place, and into another.

I excused myself when the undertakers arrived and waited in the garden for them to leave with my grandfather. I didn't want to see the rigidity that had slipped into his body soon after life slipped out.

Where did all of that *him-ness* go? The figure on the couch held my grandfather's likeness and yet was no longer he. *It was not [he], and yet it was no one else*. Still, he felt nearby and close at hand, even after the body had been taken away. *Death is nothing at all,* the priest insists, *It does not count / I have only slipped away into the next room.* Just past the doorway and down the hall, the plural space, perhaps.

Roland Barthes
1915 – 1980

Henry Scott Holland
1847 – 1918

No funeral was held. My grandfather's body was cremated, and his ashes scattered at sea.

I return to the refrain: We do not leave bodies where they fall. The undertaker is called. The coroner. The cleaners, if needed. Once removed from the scene, the body is prepared – hurriedly, again – for burial or cremation. Prepared to be *forever out of sight*. Funerals are arranged, memorial programmes printed. The sooner the body can be disposed of, the sooner the living can get on with the work of mourning. But why all this haste? What could be more decent than to allow the dead to live among us, for a short while at least?

We should spend more time among the dead; to be still beside their stillness, to study their faces, to share their silence. To become familiar with death, and what death looks like, if not in life, then in images.

Here, a sepia photograph of a young woman, sitting with her hands crossed in her lap, her head tilted to one side, eyes looking past the camera. On either side of the woman stand her mother and father, each placing a hand on her shoulders as if to comfort her. Their faces are blurred and unfocused, their expressions oddly alarmed. Standing above the sitting figure, they appear as two uncertain spirits. Only they are alive, and the young woman dead, which accounts for their spectral appearance and her perfect sharpness.

No caption accompanies this photograph. It is neither dated nor labelled. The young woman and her parents remain nameless, frozen

in this strange scene. The only certainty: everyone in this photograph is now dead, inevitably and irrevocably.

In the mid-1800s, the introduction and accessibility of daguerreotypes sparked a curious vogue among Europe's middle classes for photographing the dead. In many of these mourning portraits, the dead subject is presented as alive; the body posed for the camera, more often sitting, less often standing, alone or in a family tableau with the living. In some photographs, eyes were painted onto closed eyelids after the silver plate was developed; in others, the subject arranged to look as if they were only sleeping. *She dreams a little, and she feels the dark / Encroachment of that old catastrophe*. The camera's shutter snaps open.

Wallace Stevens
1879 – 1955

Even in picturing death, people felt compelled to disguise it. Propped up their loved ones' bodies like stringless puppets; painted rosy cheeks onto the photographs. Denied death for a moment in time and forever in an image. For while *one can't possess reality, one can possess (and be possessed by) images*. The photographer slides the shutter back in place. The plate is taken to a dark room, and the lifeless body to another.

Susan Sontag
1933 – 2004

The dead are no longer photographed for mourning portraits, only for pathology reports and police files. Such images are not hung about the sitting room or kept on bedside tables, but confined to folders and filing cabinets. Now the deceased are remembered only as they were in life, and never how they were in death – cold like cement and just as grey.

Photography and death have always been curiously entangled, the dead being among photography's first subjects; the only figures that could remain entirely unmoving for the long exposure times required. Yet the spectre of death hangs over every other photographic portrait too, even now, and even of the living.

'In front of the photograph of my mother as a child, I tell myself:

she is going to die: I shudder … over a catastrophe which has already occurred. Whether or not the subject is already dead, every photograph is this catastrophe.'

Roland Barthes
1915 – 1980

Written two months before his death in 1980, Roland Barthes's *Camera Lucida* offers a lyrical meditation on the photograph as mourning and memory object. As an indexical recording, the photograph, Barthes suggests, is transparent; it is perceived not as an image of the subject, but as the subject itself. The photograph is the assertion of something *having been*, and conversely that same thing's *no-longer-being*.

'The photograph is literally an emanation of the referent,' Barthes writes. 'From a real body, which was there, proceed radiations which ultimately touch me, who am here; the duration of the transmission is insignificant; the photograph of the missing being, as Sontag says, will touch me like the delayed rays of a star.'

Photography is haunted by this contradiction: that it *produces Death while trying to preserve life*. To photograph is to archive, and to archive is to concede to the impermanence of the subject. What is will soon no longer be. And so the photograph is *always already mourning*, already anticipating the disappearance of the photographed being. One cannot archive against loss. Such is photography's catastrophe.

Roland Barthes
1915 – 1980

Jacques Derrida
1930 – 2004

My mother tells me I have misremembered my grandfather's death. That he was wearing a silk dressing gown and not striped pyjamas. That he never wore slippers. That I did not see his livid bruises because I did not know to look for them. That my grandfather's coughing had caused great distress and my grandmother called for an ambulance before she phoned her children. The paramedics arrived too late, and just as well. They left with an empty stretcher, drove back to the

hospital with sirens silent and lights no longer flashing.

Strange, how differently I remember the story of that death. How my mind has nullified the panic of the event, dressed my grandfather as an old man, any old man. I cannot for the life of me, for the death of my grandfather, remember his dressing gown. His mouth hung open, I remember that. And his head was tilted back. And his hands were in his lap (this I remember because his small dog sat beside him, licking his unresponsive fingers).

My mother also tells me that when my grandmother returned to the living room after calling for the ambulance, my grandfather was no longer coughing.

'I was told people die when you step out of the room,' the artist Sophie Calle recalls. Concerned her ailing mother might pass away in her absence, Calle filmed the last hundred hours of her life. But she needn't have worried. Her mother died with both her daughter and attendant nurses at her side. Calle's video work *Pas pu saisir la mort* (*Couldn't Capture Death,* 2007) follows not the hours leading to her mother's death but rather 11 strange minutes during which Calle and the nurses are unsure whether or not her mother is still alive. The film shows neither the instant of death nor her mother's final breath. The moment when life ends goes unseen – despite Calle's best efforts – and death arrives, unnoticed.

There was only a single moment of doubt, sometime after my grandfather's death. My mother, following a curious impulse (one of disbelief or of her medical training), shone a torch into my grandfather's eyes. Her left hand was placed against his forehead like a blessing, her thumb lifting his right eyelid. The beam of torchlight illuminated the darkness of his unseeing pupil. Mistaking a moving shadow for a last reflex, she gasped and stepped back. And everyone gasped too. Set down their teacups, stood up from their chairs. For a moment, Grandfather almost woke, if only in our minds. In our minds, he paused to look

back towards the riverbank he had only just left.

In Calle's film too, hands keep reaching into the frame to feel for a pulse, to rest on the patient's shoulders, to rearrange the sheets. The figure of Calle's mother lies completely still, her head propped up on a pillow, the calm centre of a restless uncertainty.

When Calle first set up the camera beside the hospital bed, her mother said, 'At last.' It was the first time Calle's mother would be a living subject in her daughter's art. And it was, of course, the last. In the film, a woman's voice reads extracts from Calle's mother's diaries, notating a life that seems unconcerned with the motionless figure to whom it belongs.

Watching Calle's *Pas pu saisir la mort,* I was reminded of a note from Roland Barthes's *Mourning Diary* (1977), written shortly after his own mother's death. It speaks of a mournful knowledge and uneasy intimacy:

– You have never known a Woman's body!
– I have known the body of my mother, sick and then dying.

I never knew my dying grandfather. He was alive one day and dead the next. His death was not a slow unwinding, but a sudden stillness. He was not frail in life, nor was he sick towards its end. He was, I suppose, lucky. It was a lucky death.

I now wish that we had photographed the scene, that I might not misremember it as I have done. Grandfather in his dressing gown, surrounded by his family and the soft morning light, looking for all the world as if he'd just dropped off to sleep.

Where do the dead go? Do they think of us or only we of them? Unquiet ghosts that whisper to the grieving, as Winnicott's infant to the mother, *I forget you, but you remember me.* When, I wonder, do the drifting souls of our dead turn

Maggie Nelson
1973 –

away from the living and withdraw to some other place?

Death is the very definition of the definitive. It is unambiguous, final. A full stop pressed into the page. There is nothing you can do, nothing to be done. Death is the last step in a series of steps, the only possible ending. And perhaps the poets are right, *and to die is different from what anyone supposed, and luckier.* In the end – at the end –

Walt Whitman
1819 – 1892

we are all
the dead, I am not apart from you,
for long, except for breath, except for
everything.

Sharon Olds
1942 –

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Ferryman

SUDIRMAN ADI MAKMUR

Would you believe it if I told you that I travel with the dead? No, really, it's actually a business. I work for a firm that is in this business and it is sometimes necessary to have somebody accompany the casket in transit: by law – being the statute of the country that the casket is travelling from or its destination; by request – at the behest of the family or of some other party or body; or because of the body, who it belonged to, how it died – the circumstances of the death itself.

You would think it would be a simple matter, that the deceased would have fewer demands than the living. This is never the case. The dead have their own demands: a death certificate and a letter of permission from the Ministry of Health to transport the body; a letter confirming the authorisation of whoever is collecting the body as acting on behalf of the closest living relative; a letter from the Foreign Affairs Ministry providing permission for the body to enter the country of destination.

There are also rules regulating the body. The dead must be: (a) properly embalmed and placed in the casket; (b) cremated; or (c) accompanied by a permit issued by the funeral director. The casket itself comes with its own set of laws: airtight, impervious to external influence. Some countries require metal-to-metal solder – everything hermetically sealed and ready for transport – to prevent re-entry of micro-organisms or other forms of contamination. In reality, all materials are permeable, hence specifications define acceptable levels of hermeticity and these, too, differ from country to country. Borders are always too porous or too open, too easy to cross or too resistant, closed off or impossible to escape. What is sealed in one

place may be wide open in another context.

Sometimes all these arrangements amount to nothing. The deceased carry their own baggage: a complex set of morals, values and relationships; various relations between different individuals and bodies, between disorderly bodies and disciplinary regimes, between communities, governments and industries. Global lives are fragmented; souls are split open.

In some cases, the country of departure won't release the body. Or entry is refused. There are delays in identifying bodies and conducting autopsies. The body is a threat; it can testify – the skin, the hair, the blood, all tell a story. It must be contained, isolated to avoid the spread of insurgencies, incursion or intrusion, infiltration and infestation of other bodies or the larger body politic. I spend endless hours alone, in embassies, airports, morgues, on metros, escalators and in Starbucks coffeehouses, waiting for the go-ahead.

This time, the call comes and 14 hours and a few time zones later, I am barrelling through barren desert. The weather is stained brown. The morgue in Zeinhom, Cairo, stands apart, on the outskirts, cool blue basement dust drifting streaks on the walls, the grey smell of institutional spaces.

The body is that of a Sudanese refugee, one of six killed, it is alleged, by Egyptian security forces. Why does not concern me. The less I know the better. My focus is on the paperwork. All the necessary documents are in my possession: death certificate (with no cause of death listed); a letter of permission from the Ministry of Health to transport the body to Sudan and a letter from the Foreign Affairs Ministry sent from Khartoum via the Sudanese Embassy in Cairo; a document from the Ministry of Justice confirming my authorisation.

I am here on behalf of a foreign agency representing the families of the deceased: AMERA Egypt, a refugee legal-aid NGO operating as a branch of the AMERA UK charity. I know nothing of their work. Their motives are not of interest to me. They pay upfront, that is

all that is required. Money is the lubricant in this world. Death is always an economy. Value is always expressed as cost: the value of a life as displayed in the mourning of its death; the lengths the family is prepared to go to; the will of the deceased and the willpower of their nearest relatives; and arrangements made on their behalf, through the estate or the trust executor, or by other means.

The situation is complex. Events are always double-sided, above and underground. Life and death are separated across this y-axis. For every barrier on the surface there is a subterranean fix or detour. At every step you have to cough up money and pay bribes. I have already met and paid off representatives from both the Sudanese embassy and the Egyptian government. I have booked the flight and greased the palms of representatives of the airline's cargo department.

In the morning I enlist the services of a local undertaker, a small man, who ushers me in. The room is clean, spartan – with only a washbasin and a table. He is discreet, suited to my requirements. He nods, expresses regret at the circumstances and steers clear of the politics. He sticks to the task at hand, preparation techniques as per international regulations, the transport requirements. 'Everything will be prepared,' he assures me.

We are already en route to the airport – in a black and nondescript van as per my specifications – when the call comes. The driver slows when my phone rings as though he anticipated it. 'Yes,' I say, hearing the detachment in my voice. The call comes from a three-star police officer based in Zeinhom. I am to return immediately with the body. His tone is apologetic; the order has been received 'from above'.

The details are unique, but in many ways representative: the orders always come from above, from some higher authority – the police, government, from the powers that be, from tradition, from God, Allah. Often these are in conflict with each other. Where government and tradition fail, religion might offer some respite, an alternative rite that provides a soft landing for the family against

self-recrimination. The body will be housed in a vault and buried in Zeinhom before sundown the next day according to Islamic custom. I am to make the arrangements, pay the funeral costs, enlist an imam to lead the prayers and confirm these details to the morgue authorities.

I myself do not believe in any god. It is better that way, no religion to interfere with making decisions on how best to execute preparations for burial or for travel – according to the law and/or specific beliefs, traditions, and religions, as specified by the will of the deceased or the next of kin representing them.

I dress in a clean black linen suit, my shirt is white, pressed – the uniform of international business. I take my seat near the rear of the plane, an aisle seat rather than one at the window – I have long tired of the view from above. I prefer the international movie channel, select 'Action' and order a single glass of wine with my dinner. I am just another passenger; there is no way to know my profession, to know that I do not travel alone.

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How to Kill a Man

PAULA IHOZO AKUGIZIBWE

THIS IS HOW YOU LEARN how to kill a man: in broad daylight, flanked by flowerbeds on a farm on the outskirts of the city, under the instruction of a militiaman who seems as dangerous as I'd like to become.

A few weeks earlier, my internet search for martial arts classes led to Krav Maga, the Israeli military's street combat technique. It is not a sport, practitioners stress, but a survival toolkit for a brutal world. The first rule of Krav Maga is to avoid conflict – but if you cannot, the second rule is maximum aggression, targeting your opponent's most vulnerable spots with a merciless cocktail of offensive and defensive manoeuvres. There are no games here, only the goal of disabling as efficiently as possible. Kill or be killed.

Joost is the only local instructor whose contact details I could find. There isn't much information about him online, just an obscure website listing and his public Facebook profile, which includes a brief professional bio and a few personal posts. A security consultant whose work experience reads like a tour of conflict zones around the continent, Joost has a penchant for Afrikaans ballads and assault weapons. In his most recent photo, taken in the Central African Republic, he is a pale hulk of sunburn in the centre of a few black soldiers, all of them wearing combat gear, heavily muscled and armed to the teeth.

That image keeps returning to my mind as Joost shows us how to break an arm, how to smash a nose, how to flip over an attacker who seizes you from behind – this is the most common angle of attack, he says, and I think he must be speaking about stranger attacks, not those from people you know, who can strike from any angle.

Eight years earlier, I was fast asleep when Melo died. When the knock on my door came at 2 am, I assumed someone had locked themselves out of their room. As 'head student' of the residence, an elected position that before that night had largely consisted of frivolous social duties, I had a master key in case of emergencies.

So did Melo, one of the senior students contracted to assist with residence management: a vivacious, forthright 22-year-old in the final year of her finance degree. She loved football, which is how we had become friends the previous year. I did not follow the beautiful game, but the communal lounge where Melo watched it also had a piano that I enjoyed playing in the evenings.

'*Ag* please, Mozart, can't you finish playing later? The game is about to start.' The moment it did, Melo would be lost in the screen, scolding incessantly: 'Stop sleeping! … Are you serious right now? … *Faka* pressure!' She would jump off the sofa one moment, curl up into a ball the next, her forgotten noodles gone cold in the microwave.

Her theatrics made me laugh. I told her about my mother, also a fervent football fan, whose team allegiance shifted every season depending on which players' personal stories she found most compelling. That season it was Chelsea, much to Melo's dismay. 'Your mother likes the Blues? Shame, we can't be friends.'

That's how we became friends. When the World Cup started that year, I was drawn into the excitement and joined her to watch the African teams' matches. In the intermissions we got to chatting about our families, classes, the petty dramas of our university town, her then boyfriend.

He was in my class: a small cohort that spent eight hours a day, five days a week together in lectures and labs. Despite this proximity, I barely knew Chris. I had exchanged words with his best friend, a smooth talker with little respect for personal boundaries. But Chris was quiet, so when Melo asked what I thought of him, I vaguely remarked that he

seemed nice. I had no particular reason to believe that he was not.

I was fast asleep down the hall when he drove a pair of scissors into her body repeatedly until she lay lifeless. Even then he was quiet.

It was past midnight when a student noticed that the outer gate to our women-only residence had not been locked as it usually was at 11 pm, when the subwarden on duty would check the mandatory log of male guests to ensure that all men had left the building. But that night Melo was on duty, and according to the log there was still one man left inside – the ex-boyfriend whom she had signed in hours earlier. When they knocked on her door, she did not answer. Only then did they look for the master key, but by that time she was gone.

Several hours later I set off for classes like normal, ignoring my friends' appeals to take the day off, desperate for distraction. Later I attended a meeting with the university administration, a thinly veiled public relations briefing prefaced with perfunctory condolences. Don't speak to the media, they urged us, seemingly unaware that we could barely speak at all.

I met a counsellor who walked me through a cardboard cut-out of the cycle of grief. Her rote phrases floated around me like meaningless noise. Then we had a vigil and then we wrote platitudes on a card that would accompany Melo's body across the country back to her mother, who had staunchly refused to believe the news, and then we organised the memorial, and only then, as we sang the closing song,

Make me a channel of your peace,
Where there is hatred, let me bring your love

Only then, in the rawness of stillness, did sorrow rip through my shock. I sank onto the pew and cried as the piano kept playing.

PAULA IHOZO AKUGIZIBWE is a Rwandan-Ugandan writer. After spending the larger part of her life in South Africa, she is now based in Kigali.

A Man, a Fire, a Corpse

ROFHIWA MANETA

A MAN WALKS UP AND DOWN our street in an Adidas top, black tracksuit pants and suede Carvela loafers. He sees me peering through the blinds in the kitchen. He hesitates at the gate, before opening and closing it in one clean motion. I wipe my hands and meet him beside our patio's awning.

'Is your father here?' he asks, blowing tufts of cigarette smoke in my direction.

'No, he's at work.'

His eyes dart behind me, towards the kitchen door.

'I see. Your mother? Is she here?'

'It's just me and my brothers. Would you like me to take a message?'

'No, just tell him Thabang was here.'

'From?'

Another moment of hesitation: 'Thabang from Zola. He'll know who I am.'

Not long after Thabang's visit, the walls in our yard grow taller. The rituals aimed at ensuring our safety grow more numerous and elaborate. We are to keep the gate locked if we are all in the house and we are told to be home by sunset. If someone – anyone – we are unfamiliar with knocks at the gate and asks for our parents, our instructions are to tell them to phone or come back later if they're not at home. We are told never to allow strangers into the yard. Before long we have an electric fence, remote-controlled gates and cameras mounted around the yard.

On average, 160 police officers are killed each year. The fact that more than half of the police officials who have the air ripped from their lungs are killed off-duty is never too far away from my

father's mind. So, when our house became a fortress, none of us should have been too surprised. But in my childhood and early adolescence, my brothers and I were always taken aback by our father's almost manic preoccupation with safety: the service pistol permanently attached to his hip, half-concealed and half in the open; the near constant vigilance regarding who was allowed into our yard and at what time.

At first, the alarms did nothing but heighten everyone's anxiety. Occasionally, a rat would run past the outside sensors, activating the loud siren of the alarm; momentarily inviting the thought that our many layers of security had been breached. After a few seconds, Dad would emerge from the darkness of his room, having already surveyed the security cameras for signs of an intruder. He would key in the alarm, return to his room and, with one eye open, wait for sleep to wash over his body. If any of us emerged from our rooms, the conversation always took on the same routine.

'You okay?' we'd ask.

'I'm fine. You should go back to sleep.'

'Do you think that thing is faulty? It goes off every other day.'

'It works fine. It's just sensitive to movement. It's how I prefer it. You should go back to bed.'

A flickering of the light, a turning of keys and within minutes everyone would be back in their rooms, the fear of an intruding threat ebbing away like the moonlight peeking through the curtains.

On 30 October 2008, *Drum* runs a three-page profile about Dad with the headline: 'Watch out, here's supercop.' A collage of some of his most high-profile cases occupies the width of the bottom of the first page: stories of ritual murders, repeat killers and a man who blinded an ex-lover when he shot her in the face.

Toward the middle of the story, he characteristically shoos away questions about his family:

> Amos is married and the father of three boys – twins born in 1991 and another son born in 1993. But there's a reason he'd rather not talk about his family.
>
> 'Many people love me for the work I do for the community but there are those who hate me,' he says. 'Every time you go to work as a policeman, you roll the dice. You're on the frontline and the people who make a living from fighting on the other side will kill to protect their livelihood. I don't want to expose my family to evil forces.'

Dad often makes mention of the fact that the eighties, when he joined the South African Police (SAP), were the worst times to be a police official. In the *Drum* interview he says:

'Back then, the country was in the grip of a state of emergency. Everything was burning. Police officers were hunted down and shot because they were seen as part of the apartheid system. My parents and brother, Eric, were against me becoming a cop but I defied them.'

He omits to tell a story he often tells my brother and me from his time in police college. Back then, home was Nancefield Hostel (a hostel in Moroka whose mention in the media is always followed by words like 'mob', 'murder' or 'shootout'). It was not ideal, but it was close enough to the college that he could travel to and from with relative ease. One day, he was walking under the glare of Johannesburg's sun – in plain clothes – when a pair of men behind him started arguing.

'I'm telling you … he is.'

'Leave it, *sbali*. He isn't. Just let it go.'

As Dad tells it, back then police officials were identified by their clean-shaven heads (a requirement for attending college). But also, there was apparently a certain way policemen walked: a near robotic one-two, one-two rhythm inherited from the daily drills they did in college.

Dad increased his pace.

'I'm telling you: *iphoyisa le ndoda*. I can see it in his walk.'

'Look at his walk, his head. That guy is a –'

Dad decided not to wait for them to figure it out. As soon as he turned the corner, he ran off. The men gave chase, but he had gained too much ground on them. They shouted, gestured, swore, but ultimately they could not get hold of him.

A Denel Z88 pistol was the standard service pistol of the SAPS from 1989 to 2007. A short recoil semi-automatic weapon that fits 15 rounds into its magazine, the Z88 is a copy of the popular Italian Beretta 92F.

Dad tells me that in his 34 years of service – he completed his training and was hired by the SAP as a constable in '86 – he's never had to discharge his firearm at a suspect. There have been many occasions when it would have been appropriate: when Jacob More – a rapist and murderer – tried to charge at him when he was being arrested. When Sizwe Gwala (a man who was accused of murdering three people) went back to the scene of the shooting, threatening Dad's life and urging the victim's family to 'call Maneta so he can come arrest me'.

Where I see an incredible streak of luck, Dad sees something bigger, more awe-inspiring: grace.

'What else could it be?' he says, without the question mark. 'Working a job like this for *this* long without once having to discharge my gun. It's only by God's grace.'

On one of those fog-drenched Johannesburg mornings, when it seemed like Soweto was covered by an impenetrable iron curtain, I sat in the passenger seat of Dad's car and listened as he told me the story of his first dead body.

'It happened right there,' he said, pointing to Reverend Modise Drive – a long, stretching arterial road leading out of Meadowlands Zone 11 into Orlando West. On the left side of the road lay

Meadowlands Zone 11 hostel – an apartheid hangover with tyre smoke billowing out of it almost 24/7 and raw sewage running in between the different hostels. He walked into the hostel, bought some matches and a newspaper, and waited next to the corpse.

The year was 1986.

'It was a motorbike accident,' he deadpanned. 'The guy fell off his bike and onto the tarmac … died almost instantly. It was night-time and there were no streetlights, so I had to burn a newspaper and make sure no one contaminated the scene. It was hours before an ambulance showed up. I just sat there next to the body, the entire time.'

A man, a fire, a corpse.

In 2003 Anthony Minnaar, a professor of Criminal Justice Studies at the University of South Africa, published a paper on the murder of South African police officials. The paper looked to understand *why* police officials were killed with such regularity in South Africa and whether there were any preventative measures that could be put in place to reduce the murders. Minnaar drew his findings from two focus groups. The first was made up of police officers who had been attacked or knew a colleague who had been attacked or murdered while performing their duties. The second was made up of convicted murderers who had killed police officials in Gauteng.

The findings revealed that 'the greatest cause of death was from gunshot wounds (almost 80%) with knife stabs and assaults … a distant second.' The study also found that police officials were killed because 'criminal syndicates hire hitmen or put up a reward for the killing of a selected police officer'.

Another contributing factor, Minnaar's study found, is the lack of trust between communities and the police.

> Another element is the respect or lack thereof in the relationship between communities and the police. To earn this respect it

> was emphasised repeatedly in the focus-group interviews that police must act professionally and improve their delivery of service to the communities they are supposed to serve. In terms of service delivery and professional conduct of police members concerns were expressed that many policemen are either careless (negligent) while performing their duties, too aggressive, macho or do not wait for backup to arrive (reckless and not careful enough) when approaching a crime scene or making an arrest or are unaware of the potential dangers in a situation (not security conscious of the dangers inherent in certain situations). All these aspects of performance can lead to a police member being attacked or killed.

In 1998, Dad arrested a man named Barney Kwati. He didn't know it at the time but, had Kwati gotten his way, Dad's life would have ended that August.

In comparison to the criminals Dad would arrest much later in his career, Barney Kwati was small fry; a regional criminal known in Naledi in the late 1990s for running with a gang that committed robberies around the train station. But that is not to say Kwati wasn't dangerous. His anger was known to turn deadly when things didn't go his way. In 1996, a case of murder and attempted murder was opened against him. Two years later, Dad arrested him on another attempted murder charge. This one looked like it was going to stick. But while Dad was going about his police work, Kwati was allegedly plotting against him from inside Sun City.

As far as contract killings go, my dad's would've been a relatively easy to execute. He always used the same route to and from work, and the plan, Dad was later told, was to wait for him to make the trip to Naledi as he always did in the morning. When he turned at *draaihoek* – a popular four-way stop near Naledi Police Station – he'd find his executioners waiting.

But there was something wrong with the car, a chrome-coloured BMW 325is.

Dad turns the key once, twice, a third time but the car doesn't come to life. He walks back into his house and calls Percy, a friend of his, to ask for a lift to Naledi. When Percy arrives, they use a different route. Dad usually drives up our street, takes a right into Zola and makes his way to Naledi. Percy uses the opposite route, driving to the other side of our street, turning into Green Village and then driving down the long stretch of road into Naledi.

Dad thanks him, closes the door and makes his way to his office.

Not long after, a group of burly, armed police officials walk into Dad's office, guns drawn.

'Are you Maneta?' they ask.

'I am … what's all of this about?'

'We've gotten word that you were going to be killed on your way to work today.'

As it turns out: two things saved Dad's life that day. The first was his car's mechanical failure. The second was a man he'd only met once – an associate of Kwati's called Madubula who'd been commissioned to carry out the hit. When he heard it was Dad he was meant to kill, he allegedly responded: '*Mara, ngiyayicava leya grootman. Ayinankinga mos?*' (I like that old man. To me he's not a problem.) Maybe he was burdened by guilt or something else entirely, but on the day Dad was meant to be killed, Madubula went to Protea Glen's Police Station and reported that there was a hit that was about to be carried out on my father.

Dad did not die, something he ascribes to his faith.

'Jesus is a fire,' he says.

ROFHIWA MANETA is a Johannesburg-based writer and photographer whose work has appeared in the *Sunday Times*, *Mail & Guardian*, *City Press* and *Johannesburg Review of Books*.

What the Township Did to Us

MUSAWENKOSI KHANYILE

My neighbour, stabbed in the neck with a knife,
died wearing his white All Stars,
his body covered with a blanket outside the bar.
The girl with a beautiful round face, my first crush,
who thought her beauty would see her out of the township,
now avoids my eyes in the supermarket that always runs
out of plastic bags.

On a Thursday afternoon at the taxi rank,
I hear a familiar voice calling out a cheat
within a circle of men bent over dice.
When he – this guy I once shared a desk with – looks up,
I immediately throw my eyes away,
afraid to see what the township has done to him.

Living as Ghosts Do

SIMONE HAYSOM

To make my point, I say that it is sold in twists, in pinches, in tadpole-shaped beats, in straws. In heat-sealed plastic pillows. That it is mixed with dagga and packed into matchboxes. Ground between tiles and tied into bundles with a black garbage bag. Mechanically sheathed in capsules, thousands by the hour. It is spiked underneath the highway, smoked behind the post office, in the railway reservation, the taxi rank. That if you can't stop smoking it, you might become *unga* boys, *nyaope* boys or *amaphara*, and then you'll push supermarket trolleys, flatbed trailers, handcarts, and collect glass bottles, copper wire, aluminium, cardboard.

We don't know how many people in South Africa smoke or inject heroin, because the government has never thought to count. What you measure matters, and when people don't matter, they aren't measured. Official figures are based on old studies by universities, looking at tiny samples, or the admission rates of fee-charging 'rehab' facilities, which becomes a meaningless metric when most addicted users are unemployed and come from poor families. So instead I have to cast around for illustrative details, for scope by way of accumulated anecdotes. I'll say that the heroin subculture is so vast that it has created words, glossed whole new vocabularies, and perhaps planted the seeds of a creole.

I say that all around the country right now there are people huddled into *lekkerhuisies* and smoking until they get *tinga-tinga*, until they go *parra*. That to get the money to smoke, they hustle, they *zula*, they *skoffel*, they *skarrel*, they puzzle, they *panda*, they *panza*. When they hustle, they hustle themselves into skin and bone; they flee water and soap and don't do wage work. They walk down

Wynberg Main Road with burgers they've begged off strangers, trying to sell them before they get cold.

That if things get really bad, they roam, eyes peeling the street for recyclables, re-sellables, pick-pocketables. They do 'wrong things'. They con, they scam, they steal, all of it generally small fry, because what everyone on the street will tell you about an *unga* addict or a *nyaope* boy, is that they can't carry out plans that take longer than a few hours; that their days are perpetually hemmed in by preparing for and addressing withdrawal. That the women, and sometimes the men, said they would never stand on the side of the road and then they stand on the side of the road. The drug numbs them, it doesn't rev them up; it makes them slow, sleepy, peaceful, then anxious, awake. It's not for people sharpening themselves up to fight (there are other drugs for that). This is an addiction for people tapping out of the world in – believe it or not – the politest way they know how.

I have been trying to understand the heroin trade in South Africa and the countries that fall along what is sometimes called the 'Swahili Coast' – Mozambique, Tanzania and Kenya – for the past few years of my life, as part of my job researching organised crime and corruption.

As a result, I'm often asked to comment for the relentless churn of South African talk radio when drugs enter the news cycle: SAA attendants arrested in Hong Kong, a truck loaded with heroin bricks bust on the N2, a flare-up of gang violence across the Cape Flats. A lot of the shows that call me up are late-night shows, after most people have had dinner or even gone to bed. It's hard to imagine who listens to talk radio at this time: I can only imagine long-distance truck drivers, or people doing mindless, repetitive work through the night (a fair number of them probably on meth) listening to me stumbling my way through.

Often (always), the late-night hosts haven't really read my reports

and I get blasted with questions that I can't answer as honestly as I'd like because, well, it's important to be polite. I try to explain things as clearly as I can, try to be balanced, informative and not to get myself riled.

They want me to talk about overdoses, about needles and AIDS, about the targeting of children, about, as one journalist – breathless with excitement – put it, 'drug-addicted ten-year-olds.' They want me to say that addiction is automatic, inevitable and fatal. They want me to emphasise borders (porous, breached), and foreigners (illegal), and they want me to say that the most important thing being broken is the law, so that the most important thing needed to heal is law enforcement. At its extremes, the threat is always external (the foreigners crossing poorly enforced borders) and the weakness always internal to the ordinary citizen (divorce, despair, godlessness).

The queries also come from the morning shows, where the hosts are usually informed and ask good questions. I know that my parents' friends will be listening and that they will WhatsApp me afterwards. But even here, the request is implicit: really, they all want me to talk about drugs and drug addiction in a way that makes it sound final, fatal and inevitable – that means the conversation never strays too far from death.

Instead, I try to deflect. I try to talk about how many people use heroin. This is another way of saying 'this is serious'. Because to talk about scale you have to explain how far this chemical compound has infiltrated our cities, our towns, our homes, which isn't a *good* thing. In more ways than one, they are bound up together: my reluctance on death, my insistence on scale.

Because we don't have official – realistic – numbers for how many people use heroin, the extent of it is oddly blatant, but also invisible. It is concentrated in poor neighbourhoods, which means the middle class has no obvious reason to care. It is hidden by criminality, which makes it awkward, even dangerous, to ask for help, and

obscured by synonyms. *Unga*, *whoonga*, sugars, *nyaope* – many people do not realise they are all powered by the same thing, Afghan heroin. Stigma bears down with enormous pressure, compacting the problem so that it can take up less and less space in the minds of the general population. If a family is able or willing to live with a drug-dependent son or daughter, they are often hidden away.

In every city and town I've visited there has been a population of homeless people, many of whom smoke or inject heroin. Charities that provide services – food, somewhere to shower, medical attention – say that the homelessness generally comes first and then the heroin helps people cope with the street. But it's not easy to live with an addict and sometimes it's the heroin use that precipitates losing shelter. In Manenberg, a pensioner showed me her only pot, lent to her by her sister, which she guards from her children and her grandchildren, saying, 'You can't leave anything in this house. *Hulle vat alles* (they take everything).'

Whether inside or outside of familial protection (if that's what it is), heroin users live in a world that wants to make their lives as precarious as possible. Because they are afraid of how the staff will treat them and don't know what they'll do if they suffer through withdrawal in the ward, heroin users avoid going to hospital when they need to. Because passers-by spit on them and kick them when they are spaced out from smoking or injecting, they seek out out-of-the-way, almost-out-of-sight spaces, skinny, dirty places – next to railways, behind malls, under bridges. In Phoenix and Chatsworth, the drug-dependent homeless are called 'outters' and they squat in verdant valleys that run through the suburb, camping out in ditches. In central Durban, they lived for a time behind the port, and congregated near storm drains where they could scatter if the police descended.

It's maybe not too much of a stretch to say that many heroin addicts live as ghosts do – haunting the highways, the cities, the abandoned

small-town high street, the suburb, their families. It's not clear what they could do if they wanted to leave their phantasmal life behind, if they wanted to develop materiality, be seen again. The state offers almost no help to anyone in their situation who wants to get clean, or even just stable.

The defining feature of this world is the way it lies in between things, particularly between life and death. In *Necropolitics* Achille Mbembe speaks about in-betweenness. His concept of 'necropolitics' holds that even the democracies of the world use their power to create 'zones of exception' where superfluous populations are contained, delicately balanced between life and death.

Mbembe applies his analysis particularly to the politics of terrorism and counterterrorism, war, migration and environmental destruction, but he also writes about 'small doses' of death. It is these 'small doses' of death that drug prohibition in South Africa is so good at. According to Mbembe these 'small doses' reduce people to states of total vulnerability: 'in the power to manufacture an entire crowd of people who specifically live at the edge of life, or even on its outer edge – people for whom living means continually standing up to death … Nobody even bears the slightest feelings of responsibility or justice towards this sort of life or, rather, death.'

There are, of course, also large doses of death associated with the drug trade. In Cape Town, this happens on the Cape Flats, as gangs compete for 'turf' from which to sell drugs. They wage wars – fuelled by illegal guns sold to them by the police – which claim the lives of probably hundreds every year. In October 2019, when a particularly bad spate of gang massacres put this situation on the front pages, there was a public outcry for army deployment. A year later the situation is neither much better nor much worse, and the murders continue at an unbearable, yet consistently borne, pace.

If I won't say 'it's about death', it isn't because this isn't a bleak picture. It's because looking at the final outcomes obscures the fact

that to some extent this desperate situation is iatrogenic. When I insist on scale, it's because there is so much territory to conquer for better ideas about the drug trade.

What makes this situation so much more about life than death, is that so many of these *better* ideas come from people in the midst of these consequences. For many years there was a rumour swirling among heroin users in Tshwane about a woman called Sophie from Shoshanguve, who ran an orphanage and would also take in heroin users, one at a time. Sophie was not a nurse, but she had been driven into this unusual hobby by the memory of her son. He had been a heroin user too and was caught smashing a car window to steal some item on the seat. A police officer, catching him in the act, shot him dead in the street. Sophie tried to give the strangers she took in opioid-substitution therapy – currently the gold standard for medical treatment of heroin dependency. That means she gave them regular doses of methadone, bought through private channels, fed and cared for them, and told them they deserved to live as part of a community.

If Sophie isn't a myth – I've not been able to track her down – she's evidence that ideas can be smuggled, like contraband, into the heart of hostile civilisations. As heroin use skyrocketed across the country, people looking for help to deal with heroin dependency were offered little by the state, which, in practice if not in official policy, largely refused to engage with the evidence about heroin treatment. State facilities, which offered woefully few beds in the first place, would give 'detoxing' patients Panado, vitamins and vague instructions to pray. In many of the private 'rehabs' around the country things were much worse. People were being chained up, beaten and put to work digging up trees, killing pigs and scrubbing pots under the instruction that – as I was told by one young man – 'we were scrubbing away the stain on our lives'.

The same day I heard about Sophie, I met Marco, who worked

for an NGO, HarmLess. They distributed free clean needles out of a mobile clinic to people injecting heroin around Tshwane. Marco, who used to live on the street and by then had a job and a flat and a half-marathon personal best, held out his weekly supply of methadone saying, 'This is a heroin junkie's divine intervention.'

People seemed to emerge out of nowhere. From behind bushes, from footpaths you'd never notice that lead from the underpass of a bridge to the verge of the road, a tunnel whose entrance lies behind a chicken and pap van, from the alleyways next to malls. Clutching fistfuls of used needles or tidy packets of them, dirty and ragged or dressed in workwear, friendly or matter-of-fact. In a parking lot next to a mall, they gave clean needles to car guards in high-vis jackets, and in the last location, in Wonderboom, next to a train station, to one 'client' in a classic car with leather seats. Sometimes the transactions were quick and efficient. Sometimes the HarmLess staff provided advice and referrals, and took down details of people who would like HIV or other tests. If certain people didn't turn up, they asked after them or tried to track them down.

If South Africa's response to drug markets is often marked by death, it is also populated by people who preach an international gospel about care and repair – two 'ethics' which Mbembe puts forward as the progressive response to 'necropolitics'. HarmLess operates alongside COSUP, a programme led by the city of Tshwane and the University of Pretoria. It is now the country's largest opioid-substitution therapy programme and has provided methadone and other services to drug users since 2016. In Durban the Urban Futures Centre, based at the Durban University of Technology, has waged a long battle to win the city over to providing opioid-substitution therapy, safe injecting spaces and clean needles. Monique Marks, the force behind the centre, has explicitly said that their aim is to improve 'the quality of life of people' and to serve as an 'imaginary lens into city living' – it is not a programme to prevent death.

Both Tshwane and Durban are cities with profound heroin dependency problems affecting many people ('many' – you see the familiar problem here?) and it led them to act in the absence of real national direction. National action, however, also appears to be manifesting slowly. A new National Drug Master Plan adopted in 2019 features more robust language about human rights and a harm-reduction approach – linguistic weather vanes for deeper ideological shifts.

It's an interesting moment for global drug policy. In Singapore, if you are found selling cannabis, the state can put you to death. In several states in the US, if you sell cannabis you're an emerging entrepreneur and the state requires you to file a tax return. This is all the more surprising because for several decades few areas of global governance had the kind of legal and ideological homogeneity as drug policy did from the 1950s onwards. But the legalisation of cannabis – tied too closely to promises of fiscal windfalls – has had more of a rapid and widespread uptake than predicted and with it, basic premises are being questioned. Now the question of drug prohibition is no longer settled and the system that promoted it is scrambling for coherence.

This flux is creating space for countries to chart their own response to the hard problems posed by the drug trade. Some are doubling down on drugs as a moral threat, drug use as unacceptable and law enforcement as the only answer. Others are cashing in or opening themselves up to ideas like decriminalisation and more holistic responses to gang recruitment.

Countries like South Africa – strong on democracy, weak on state capacity – are struggling with these questions. Some seem to be slowly finding their way on questions of treatment and health. But there are additional, even more difficult questions about how to fix violence and corruption which have expanded with drug markets, for which there is no widely accepted set of policy prescriptions.

What a country does about heroin is a question that implies at least a dozen other questions, and the farther you follow them, the more fundamental they get. What makes a drug dangerous and why do humans want it? What should the police be used for and what is it about democracies that makes them so vulnerable to the worst consequences of the drug war? What should be measured and what should matter? Questions about whether, in the harsh thoughts that arise late at night, you think the popularity of a soporific painkiller can only mean death, or if you think, instead, it can open up questions about how people are made to live.

SIMONE HAYSOM is a South African writer living in Geneva and the author of *The Last Words of Rowan du Preez*, a book of narrative nonfiction. Through essays, fiction, reporting and analysis her work frequently turns to the topic of justice and remedy.

Kukithi La:
This House Is Not for Sale

THATO MONARE

Kukithi La: This House is not for sale is an extract from a work-in-progress, a project that came to me when I wasn't looking. The houses I later set out to document had been there all along; I just hadn't been paying attention. Then one day as I was riding my bicycle, I saw three of them in a single street in Diepkloof Zone 2. The houses angrily announced to the world at large: *This house is not for sale!*

Once my eyes had been opened, I saw the defaced houses everywhere, in my neighbourhood, Orlando East, and elsewhere around Soweto. Later, when I dug deeper, I found out that the trouble usually begins with the death of an elder who is the title deed holder and legal owner of the property. The absence of a will (or even in some cases the presence of a disputed one) precipitates a bitter family feud that can sometimes go on for years. Some family members will try to sell the house before the dispute has been resolved. The graffiti scrawled on these properties is an outward manifestation of this conflict.

When I started documenting these houses, actively seeking them out, I was sometimes confronted with threats of physical violence. 'I wish the owner of this house would come out and kick your ass and throw that camera far away,' one guy said to me in Senaoane, deep Soweto. In Dube, these two teenage boys who saw me shooting a neighbour's house called out to him and said, 'Come, let's fight this intruder. He is taking photographs of your house!'

I quickly got back on my bicycle and left. But that moment was

also when I knew that I was onto something. As a photographer, I value work that makes you uncomfortable; that leaves you, perhaps like the houses themselves, feeling unsettled.

THATO MONARE is a Johannesburg-based documentary photographer. He studied at the Market Photo Workshop and he is interested in documenting multiple aspects of social life in Soweto and creating archives for the future. Monare also runs Ha Mangwane, a live music venue in Orlando East.


THIS HOUSE IS
NOT FOR SALE
THIS HOUSE IS
NOT FOR SALE


NOT SALE
4
FAMILY
HOUSE


DIS HOUSE IS
NOT 4 SALE
GOGO PLS!!!
LIVE
DIS HOUSE


NOT 4 SALE
IS A FAMILY HOUSE


THIS HOUSE is NOT FOR
SALE NOTE STILL UNDER
COURT CASE # FAMILY HOUSE #Ø

I Forget to Look

GABEBA BADEROON

The photograph of my mother at her desk in the fifties
has been in my purse for twenty years,
its paper faded, browning,
the scalloped edge bent then straightened.

The collar of her dress folds discreetly.
The angle of her neck looks as though
someone has called her from far away.

She was the first in her family
to take the bus from Claremont
up the hill to the university.

At one point during the lectures at medical school,
black students had to pack their notes, get up and walk
past the ascending rows of desks out of the theatre.

Behind the closed door, in an autopsy
black students were not meant to see,
the uncovering and cutting of white skin.

Under the knife, the skin,
the mystery of sameness.

In a world that defined how black and white
could look at each other, touch each other,
my mother looks back, her poise unmarred.

Every time I open my purse,
she is there, so familiar I forget
to look at her.