

Rumori da Monumenti

Text by Ivan Vladislavić from "Portrait with Keys"

1.

5

I live on an island, an accidental island, made by geography and the town planners who laid out these city streets. ... When I am driven to walk, which is often, only the long way round, following this shore – Blenheim, Roberts, Juno, Kitchener – will bring me back to the beginning. Johannesburg surges and recedes like a tide. I come home with my shoes full of sand, empty my pockets at the kitchen table and pick through the findings. The roar in the air is the absence of water.

2.

39

Commissioner Street, the backbone of Johannesburg, follows the old wagon track between two of the first mining camps, from Jeppestown in the east to Ferreirasdorp in the west. So the city's spine was fused to the gold-bearing reef that called it into life. Today, going down Commissioner into the high-rise heart of the city, I am reminded that here we are all still prospectors, with a digger's claim on the earth beneath our feet. Where Commissioner passes the Fairview Fire Station, cracks have appeared in the tar, long, ragged creases following the curve of the road. Here and there chunks of tar have broken loose and rusted steel glimmers in the roadbed. The tramlines, tarred over in the fifties, are coming back to the surface.

3.

131

Johannesburg is a frontier city, a place of contested boundaries. Territory must be secured and defended or it will be lost. Today the contest is fierce and so the defences multiply. Walls replace fences, high walls replace low ones, even the highest walls acquire electrified wires and spikes. In the wealthier suburbs the pattern is to knock things flat and start all over. Around here people must make the most of what they've already got, and therefore the walls tend to grow by increments. A stone wall is heightened with prefab panels, a prefab wall is heightened with steel palisades, the palisades are topped with razor wire. Wooden pickets on top of brick, ornate wrought-iron panels on top of plaster, blade wire on top of split poles. These piggyback walls (my own included) are nearly always ugly. But sometimes the whole ensemble achieves a degree of elaboration that becomes beautiful again, like a page in the *Homemaker's Fair* catalogue.

4.

43

Handwritten (Roll 2)

The township is written in longhand across the printed page of the white city, in felt tip, in chalk, in gaudy heeltaps of enamel. The new services: Dokotela, Pan-African Financial Systems, Siyathuthuka Tavern Ngubane. White eyes appraise these declarations on flaking facades, accompanied by crude drawings of stethoscopes and knives and forks, and put the premises and

proprietors in inverted commas: 'Herbalist', 'Moneylender', 'Eating house' ...

The white city is made of steel and glass, illuminated from within. It is printed on aluminium hoardings and perspex sheeting. It is bolted down, recessed and double-glazed, framed and sealed, it is double-sided and laminated, it is revolving in the wind on a well-greased axle.

The township is made of cardboard and hardboard, buckling in the sunlight. It is handpainted on unprimed plaster, scribbled on the undersides of things, on the blank reverses, unjustified, in alphabets with an African sense of personal space, smudged. Tied to a fence with string, leaning against a yield sign, propped up by a brick, secured with a twist of wire, nailed to a tree trunk.

5.

28

My people are islanders. I am happy enough on the edge of the city, combing its long shores while the weather drives currents through the veld. My English blood makes me go clockwise, the rest urges me the other way around.

6.

27

Homemade (Roll 1)

a brazier. a 25-litre drum – BEETLE RESIN – with triangular holes punched through it (the tines of a garden fork?). an aureole of ash and cinders on the pavement, when the brazier has been carried away. a black sun of burnt grass on the yellow verge. a cob with blackened kernels caught in its teeth. stainless-steel shelving from gutted fridges, planks from construction sites encrusted with dried cement, splintered chipboard, printed metal sheets from bus shelters – 'It's a pleasure dealing with the professionals' – estate agents' placards, lengths of angle-iron chained to a no-parking sign. an apple box full of the green spearheads of mielie leaves and the golden shag of their plucked beards. a wire fence brown with rust, wavy as fishnet. a grey-paper shopping bag with the stars and stripes on it. rows of plastic plates arranged on paving stones like counters in a board game. the broken propellor of a banana skin. a canvas awning with its aluminium legs moored to rocks. exhaust pipes and baffles dangling like the day's catch on a line strung between two bluegums. a flattened cardboard carton – FIVE ROSES QUALITY TEA. a window pane glazed with twentieth-century news. the driver's seat of a car standing on its metal runners like a sleigh. a silver bucket with a rag wrung hard as a root in its bottom. a white plastic milk crate like an architect's model in a drift of red sand. a green plastic garden chair, with one leg missing, propped on a paint tin – WALL & ALL. a greasy mattress with a trumpet flower fallen upon it like an omen – 'It's starting to look like a township around here.' cardboard fruit trays stacked into spirals like gigantic snail shells. two gigantic snail shells in the fists of a black woman. a black woman. a brazier

7.

68

In Johannesburg, the Venice of the South, the backdrop is always a man-made one. We have planted a forest the birds endorse. For hills, we have mine dumps covered with grass. We do not wait for time and the elements to weather us, we change the scenery ourselves, to suit our moods. Nature is for other people, in other places. We are happy taking the air on the Randburg Waterfront, with its pasteboard wharves and masts, or watching the plastic ducks bob in the stream at Montecasino, or

eating our surf 'n turf on Cleopatra's Barge in the middle of Caesar's.

8.

58

Excess (Roll 3)

the shoes, the socks, the button-down collars, the corduroy jackets. the tables, the chairs. the pavements, the grass on the verges, the flower beds, the impatiens, the Barberton daisies. the street names on the kerbstones, the white lines, the street lights, the bulbs in the sockets. the buckets, the spades. the cars, the caravans, the motorboats. the sheepskin seat covers, the halogen spotlights, the retractable aerials, the loudspeakers, the rubber mats. the driving, the parking, the driving back. the money in the parking meters. the walking in the parks, the drinking in the bars, the talking, the laughing, the eating in the restaurants, the glasses, the wine in the glasses, the knives, the forks, the plates, the food on the plates, the baby potatoes, the stuffed trout, the chocolate mousse, the brandy snifters. the reading, the writing. the paper, the pen, the ink in the pen. the books, the books, the books

9.

135

The weather's thumb crushes stone to gravel and rubs wood down to the grain. What comes to the surface is stubborn. Our meanings are tender sheaths, but the heart of things is fibre and flint, and will not yield to the hand or the eye.

A hand slipped here. This pane is spattered with paint from the bristles of a brush. The glass whispers its secrets to my fingertips, tells them the colour of a wall that cannot be seen. But here a hand meant to leave a mark. On this pane, in a moment of anger, idleness or delight (who can say), fingers toothed with a coin or a key scratched out the view.

Where am I? Another window stops me in my tracks. But the eye goes on ahead, it plunges through glass, between bars, through cracks into the other room. The other room is almost there, a trick of light and shadow. The eye explores its sudden edges and returns with a warning: the wide world is at your back.

10.

116

The entrance to the Joburg Metro ... A corrugated afdak with a lazy slant rests on black-wattle posts, roughly dressed and creosoted, rooted in low white walls freckled with mosaic. The Metro-Net logo is picked out in ox-blood and mercury on the lintel. You enter the cage and it drops into the gloom. Light your lamp. You pass through lava and sediment into prehistory, falling back in time towards the pyritic ores of the Main Reef. At last, in the neighbourhood of hell, as you imagine it, the cage shudders to a halt and the doors open. Mind the gap. But you cannot step out at all because the opening is blocked by a sheet of rock. You lean towards this rich confection, a blue conglomerate studded with almond-quartz, and press your tongue to it. The smoky pebbles taste of salt. Swallowing sand, you remember the sign in the window of the ticket booth. Take your pick.

11.

78

The plane takes off. I am looking forward to seeing Joburg from the air. It is always surprising to discover how huge and scintillating the city is, that it is one place, beaded together with lights. As the aircraft lifts you out of it, above it, it becomes, for a moment, comfortingly explicable. ... But we have hardly lifted into air when the plane banks to the left and the lights dip below the horizon of the window ledge. It is sudden enough to be alarming, this lurch and slide, but I am merely annoyed. ... Through the other windows I catch the briefest sparkles and flares. ... We are going to spiral out of here, I can just see it, rising like a leaf in a whirlwind until the entire city has been lost in the darkness below. Disappointment wells up in me, disproportionate and childishly ominous. ... And then just as suddenly the plane levels out and the city rises in the window, as I knew it would, a web of light on the veld, impossibly vast and unnaturally beautiful.

Coda

5

For a moment the shell of the city was pressed to my ear.

NOTES ON SECOND DRAFT

My 2nd version has 11 sections and a coda. I cut the theme of leaving Joburg (except for #11, the flight, although it now has a different purpose). Instead the focus is on the nature and materiality of the city. The 'historical' sections are still closer to the beginning and the more lyrical sections towards the end.

This version is more strictly symmetrical than the first one. The sections are grouped in pairs around the central section (#6). These pairs are linked thematically. If you imagine them listed one below the other, and then joined in pairs by a bracket or semicircular line, you would have a shell-like structure, made of layers around the central section.

The pairs work something like this:

1, 11

Two ways of moving around the city: circling a small area on the ground, seeing small things from close up; or spiralling up into the air to see the whole city from a distance.

2, 10

Two sections on mining. In the beginning, the movement is along the surface of the earth, following the underground Reef; at the end, the movement is vertically down into the earth. This traces the change in mining from working near the surface to working at great depths. The downward movement in #10 is also counter to the upward flight in #11.

3,9

Two sections about frontiers or barriers. In #3 the focus is on defended, impermeable frontiers; in #9 it is on passing through barriers imaginatively to find the 'wide world'.

4,8

Two sections on materiality and excess. The three "rolls" - 4,6,8 - are also a symmetrical set.

5,7

Two more or less ironic sections on Johannesburg as an island or city of water (when it is actually a landlocked place with very little natural water).

6

The central roll of images.

Coda (The shell of the city)

A simple image for the structure and themes of the whole piece.

If you're happy with the structure, I will refine it further. A few sections might be more effective if they were trimmed. I think #6 could be cut a bit without losing its effect.

For brevity, it would also be possible to cut #11 (The flight) and replace it with what is now the Coda (The shell of the city); i.e. the shell image would also work as a pair with #1.