

Rendezvous: A Fiction

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*The only hint of movement is at the edge of the frame, a blurry bus on a tarred road. The photographer has alighted from her own car, and she walks to the other side of the road, which, although stretching evenly across the photograph, is a byway. She stands facing seven dangling overalls, held by long strips of twine and tethered to narrow branches. Presences without bodies, exoskeletal men. They are hung there as if in readiness. Later, when the ghosts come, they will need to be clothed.*¹

He arrives in the town where his father was last seen.

There is a line of women in the bus terminal, sitting under canopies, selling fruits and nuts, bread and malt drinks. He approaches them, hungry for a snack. Each sees him as a potential customer, beckoning – ‘check this one’, ‘this bread is fresh’, ‘fine man look here’ – but he turns to the woman who bears the fewest goods, looks the oldest, and sits the farthest. She hadn’t called to him. Once he stands in front of her the other women return to their camaraderie, as though

he hadn’t approached or they hadn’t competed, as though by making his choice he crossed a frontier.

Between her table and the next woman’s there is more space than there is between the tables of all the other women combined. Her wares are even sparser than he had thought – four bunches of rickety bananas, a tray with groundnuts wrapped in bags as small as a child’s fist. He had moved towards her on an inarticulate, yet compelling impulse.

She says to him, ‘I know your face.’

‘Is that so?’

‘Yes. I have seen you before.’

‘Where?’

She turns away from him, fixing attention on a horizon he is unable to see. She is long enough in that state for him to feel apprehended, waiting for a detail as imprecise as the name of the first man thrown into a mass grave. She faces him. Her disposition seems more severe, and her eyes gleam with focus.

¹ *Roadside stall on the way to Vianna, 2007* (pX). The photograph is concerned with absence. In a literal sense, it is an image of what is displayed for sale. But Ractliffe, in her journey to Angola, intended to illuminate the trauma that hides in plain, urban sight. Hence this photograph becomes for me one of ‘exoskeletal men’, those who are neither here nor there, homeless in time.

Then she asks, ‘Where have you been?’

‘I don’t understand.’

‘Many many years have passed,’ she says. ‘I thought I’ll never see you again.’

‘You are mistaking me for someone else.’

‘No, you are the one. Did you think I will forget what you looked like?’

From the fold of her wrapper she pulls out a photograph, no larger than a passport photo, and holds it up to him. He stumbles backwards, dazed. Content, she places the photograph on the table. ‘Why did you come back?’ I must leave, he thinks, right now. But it is hard to summon his energy.

He decides, recovering from a daze, to provide no explanations to her, to let the mystery stand. She is without hysterics, as if, past the climactic confrontation, she has no further need of him. He walks out of the bus terminal. From that distance, safe from the drama of memory, he turns to see what has become of her. She is as erect as she had been, but now shaking her head. It seems as if he is hoisting a harness onto a horse – only he is that beast of burden, trudging to discover an indistinct yesteryear.

He walks into the town. He comes to an intersection, from where he could walk back the way the bus had come, or turn to another highway, or left, into a street. He chooses the street. It is nearly five pm, the time of day when there is a surge in collective adrenaline. He is surrounded. He wishes to observe these movements, to see if in the twitch of an eye – in the lurch of a strut or the shimmy of a hand – he might recognise the man he has been mistaken for.

*There are butts and stacks of blocks behind him. Even farther, you see the line of the horizon, untouched by desolation. Is this man desolate? He is holding a pen and paper with the poise of someone stopped mid-sentence. He has crossed his legs. He is sitting on a plastic chair. The chair is placed on a mound of earth, with enough space for a metal shelf, holding containers of gasoline across three rows. There is a short trail of footprints leading up to his elevated patch, a faux throne. And he is looking down at her, even glowering. His earth is disturbed, his peace breached. But he knows this moment well, this absence of a threshold. It is the border across which the buyer or stranger stands, seeing him as prop, noticing what he has propped. Ah well, the children play beside him. Their chatter is a small reprieve in the afternoon beat.*²

*No fewer than eight boys are huddled together, readying, it seems, for a football match. They are under a patch of shade. Since most of their heads are bowed, there is an illusion in the placement of the tree that its trunks have emerged from their bodies. The shade in which where they stand, in fact, and as far as the eye can see, is the largest shade in the area. Perhaps this is the reason they have chosen it for their pre-game prayer. That cool of solemnity. The dead are here. You notice it slowly, but after a while it is all there is to this place. The graves. One, behind the boys, is seen from the rear, its paint washed-out. Others are heaps of rock; a stick juts out in place of a headstone. The nameless dead. It is a still afternoon. The boys have gathered under a mortal light.*³

For nearly half an hour he stands in front of a shopping complex, three stories high, close to the middle of the street. It is the largest building on the street and its main source of traffic. He has chosen it precisely because of that, to lose the

guise of a stranger. Until he exchanges a glance with a man who looks as young as he is. He offers a smile, and the man, heading for a shop on the ground floor, stops beside him.

‘You are new here.’

‘Is that so?’

‘I know everybody in this town. If I say you are new, then you are new.’

‘Okay.’

‘So, I am right.’

‘Maybe.’

The man chuckles and gestures for a handshake. ‘Don’t mind me. I talk too much. Are you looking for someone?’ How could he say this, that the man he sought was last seen thirty-four years ago? ‘Can you take me somewhere?’ He is suspicious of a man who – in his alertness to newcomers and overindulgence in chit-chat – could be a grifter. But what do I stand to lose? he thinks. He is thrilled by any smidgen of possibility. He has journeyed to a town in which, he hopes, every coincidence is weighty.

‘You look like a serious man.’

‘Why do you say that?’

‘I’m asking myself why I should help you.’

‘Ah.’ When he laughs the man laughs too.

‘Tell me your name.’

‘Just call me Joe.’

‘Joe.’

‘Yes.’

‘I’m looking for the old school.’

‘Which old school? There are many old places in this town.’

‘The one I’m talking about was used as a barracks during the war.’

‘That place. Hah. You want to go there?’

*The boys are seen from behind, ten in all. It is not clear how much distance they covered before they were pictured, but there is a large clearing in the foreground of the photograph. They are walking towards shrubs, some short enough for their tips to be touched after an intrepid leap. The clearing is overlaid with shards of broken rock, most of which are flat as pebbles. At the centre of the frame, two buildings stand abandoned; the shorter one is roofless. As they walk, the boys are dwarfed by the heights they approach. Since it is unclear whether they are speaking or in silence, or what their demeanour is, you could consider their gaits. None is less sprightly than another. None walks aslant. Their task is set; their pace is forward. They are walking to keep a rendezvous.*⁴

No one knows for sure what happened to his father, who was the age he is now when the war ended. He has not only come to the town with that uncertainty, but in order to test a proposition: what would it mean to visit the place where his father was allegedly seen for the last time. ‘Close to the end of the war,’ his uncle said, ‘we would see your father every month or so. Our village was being occupied by the federal army. He would come in disguise, like one of them. It was common for the rebel forces to steal uniforms when they won a battle. And he would bring us food and tell us where he was stationed, usually no more than a hundred kilometres away.’ After a brief silence, his uncle adds, ‘Your grandmother was so upset that after a few years of waiting for him to return she burnt all the photos we had of him.’

There is a commemoration ceremony slated to happen at the school. To make his guise less maddening, and bring focus to his strategy, he had asked Joe to take him there. At about this time last year he saw two photographs in a

² *Roadside gasoline station at Pangula, 2007* (pX). I am drawn to the alongside, the not-yet-there, and the meanwhile. What is seen only because one is passing through; the capaciousness of the stranger’s eye.

³ *Greeting the Dead, Pomfret cemetery, 2013* (pX). Most of all, this can be considered an encounter with ‘a fragment of unexhausted time’, as Anne Carson writes in *Economy of the Unlost*. Notice the trans-generational exchange. If the boys greet the dead, it is not, of course, in an obvious way – this is why there is the possibility that they might be preparing for a game. But, to encounter a fragment of unexhausted time is to attempt to name it: what is the significance of boys praying in a cemetery? ‘Who can name its transactions, the sense that fell through us of untouchable wind, unknown effort ...’ Carson asks.

⁴ *The mill, Pomfret Asbestos Mine, 2013* (pX). See 3 above.

newspaper, published side by side, accompanying an op-ed.⁵ ‘Memory is master of death, the chink in its armor of conceit,’ the writer’s epigraph read, quoting a character in Wole Soyinka’s *Death and the King’s Horseman*. He found the quote invigorating, but not in the same way as the photographs. Here were his clues, if he could look deep into a gallery of unknowns – the faces of nearly a hundred men, standing with sombre attention, a few holding out their right hands in salute, and one raising a flag. Each is wearing a suit, some ties, most hats, dressed in as much formality as their wardrobes can generate. The average age must be sixty. Men in the October of their lives, as impatient with the present as they are nostalgic about the past. ‘What are they showing us in this grand ceremony of commemoration?’ the writer of the op-ed asks. ‘Is it the frontier through which their fallen comrades might return? And yet like a day cleared of mist, the past folds back into the atmosphere, a blanket of memory being returned to the storeroom.’

When he and Joe enter the school, the ceremony is yet to begin, and it is not clear, from the sparseness of the crowd, if there’ll be one. The school, as a place where learning takes place, is nothing but a row of classrooms. But as a place of charm, it seems as attractive to him now as it must have been forty years earlier – a wide field at the edge of which there is a short hill, one you see and at once imagine a pleasurable climb. And how fitting was it, he wonders, as an encampment of soldiers in training. Did they perform drills under the harshness of the sun, testing their abstemiousness? Those who now sit waiting seem equally forbearing. There is a single tarp canopy under which they are gathered, some with a look of idle indifference, some inclined towards their neighbors in a conspiratorial tilt, as if to pass the gist of a rumour. Men, and women as old as the men. Joe leads him towards them.

‘This is the school. You see, there is nothing here.’
 ‘Isn’t there a ceremony supposed to happen?’
 ‘Is that why you came?’

The pitch of Joe’s voice has dropped, as alto turns to baritone. Their hour of camaraderie might have passed. This is doubtless. For then they see a man standing with his back to them, resting an arm on a white Volkswagen. He is dressed in a dark, striped suit, well-ironed gray trousers, and a bowler hat.⁶ He is speaking to no one. Even with his natty attire, he seems as lacking in style as the dead, as unyielding. ‘That’s my father,’ Joe says, pointing to the man. ‘He can tell you everything about this school. I am tired of hearing him talk about the war.’

In the way he stands, facing fourteen people, he is precisely as alone as when a man is withdrawn from a group. There is a trick of light, or even a conceit of shadows: he is standing in shade, they are gathered in shade, and a paseo of sunlight runs between them. One might imagine what is not visible, that perhaps with his back to us we cannot see that he is speaking to someone else who, like him, is waiting. But he is not animated. He is at the edge of the frame, occupying no more than a fourth of the picture. Yet being in the foreground it is as though he has taken the first bit of a direct fire; he is the man we must watch for clues, the man who, by forming the shape of an R with his poise, has sussed out the rhythm of the landscape.⁷

There is another man, seen from the side. He is sitting in front of or beside a shack; it is hard to tell if what he sits on is a stool or a bucket turned over. The place smacks of privation, the air is of disregard: a cup lies on its side, two grimy jerry-cans are hidden in a corner, stained bags bang from the wall of metal sheets, and an old drum rises as high as the man’s head. He

⁵ See *31/201 Battalion Commemoration Service, Platfontein, 2012* (pX). Nelly Sachs ended all but one section of *Glowing Enigmas*, her book-length poem, with an em dash. ‘Always empty time / is hungry / for the inscription of transitoriness –’ I consider what is implied in this photograph, the unfinished business between the Platfontein Battalion and the past. Sachs continues in that poem: ‘... and from the bridges of sighs of our speech / we hear the secret roar of the deeps –’

⁶ *Raising the flag, Riemvasmaak, 2013* (pX).

⁷ Ibid. This reminds me of the word ‘limicole’. In a literal sense, as suggested by a standard dictionary, it refers to a worm. Take that further and, since worms classified Oligochaeta live in mud, you might consider ‘a limicole realm’, where water and land meet. Even further, you arrive at the word ‘limen’, a threshold. And past that, ‘liminal’. I identify most with the specific gravity of the man’s apartness, and the ‘paseo of sunlight’ that seems like a zone across which sentiments might pass.

is pictured above it all, a man who may never be accused of affectation. His demeanour, depending on bias or context, can be registered as stoic or monastic. He is reading a Bible, open to the New Testament, judging from the number of pages left. Say, the book of Luke. ‘Many have undertaken to draw up an account of the things that have been fulfilled among us, just as they were handed down to us by those who from the first were eyewitnesses and servants of the word.’ This is how the book begins.⁸

And so, he is left with Joe’s father. Joe introduces him as ‘a friend’, ‘visiting from abroad’. ‘He came to talk about the war.’ Joe’s father – a man whose small, stern eyes are set in his head like ovoid pebbles, but whose jowly face could manage a boyish smile – says, ‘Everyone calls me Papa Joe.’ The phrase rings familiar, this declaration of what is spoken or implied by all.

‘You say you are here to talk about the war?’
 ‘Something like that.’
 ‘Something like what? Young man, are you serious or not?’
 ‘I am serious.’
 ‘Then be serious. I am not here to play.’
 ‘Are you waiting for the ceremony?’
 ‘No. There is only one reason I come every year.’
 ‘Why?’
 ‘I’ll take you there.’
 ‘But wait,’ Papa Joe says. ‘What is your connection to the war?’
 ‘My father ...’
 ‘Hmm.’

Unfinished sentences, tentative pauses. How is it, he wonders, as they walk towards the foot of the hill, that it has taken minimal effort to find a man eager to discuss the

⁸ *Petrus Jacobus (‘Piet’) Basson reading the book of Luke, Vredesvallei, 2013* (pX). Anne Michaels, in *Infinite Gradation*, her only book of nonfiction, writes about Eva Hesse. ‘When we consider the details of an artist’s life in relation to her art, it must not be with the presumption of solving a mystery, but in order to place one mystery next to another. Comparison is a blunt instrument, connection is not. Biography is an iceberg; a life is mostly submerged beyond our knowing.’ I recalled that quote once I saw this photograph.

war? In a matter of hours, he has learnt what is necessary to know: it is a place sprayed with residua of the past, evenly distributed across the town. This is worn like the tear in a shirt, beneath which a corpuscle of scar is seen.

The stones were gathered long ago. If a man tried, he could calculate their width by spreading his hands. But if two men tried, they could never tell by looking how much depth the stones are meant to cover. Nothing suggests, in this span of grasses, trees, and stones, how things might be measured or enumerated. Each element, made from the earth or returning to it, eludes specificity, and has become as universal as the ground beneath all feet. And yet there is always something that places a human hold on the agnostic earth. In this instance it is a large star, made of cloth or paper or metal, placed against the rock. Someone is attending to this wild place, as if memory is a meteor taken from the sky.⁹

They are here, after making a turn around the hill. Papa Joe, unspeaking, holds out his hands as far apart as he can manage. Not to possess or compress, but in the manner of one attempting to comprehend.

He makes a similar gesture as Papa Joe. While he’s at it, the face the woman held up to him returns unbidden. It was the first time he’d ever been shown a photograph of his father.

⁹ *Unmarked mass grave on the outskirts of Cuito Cuanavale, 2009* (pX). How do we speak of a mass grave with specificity, acknowledging the individuality of those that lie buried? (When looking at landscape, the eye journeys only as far as it can. A place might be limitless, but what we see of it isn’t. The ramifications of our gaze are subjective; that is, subject to a limitation of perspective. Only as far as. The photographed landscape is a permanent indication of what the eye saw, in part. In a photograph, the delimited gaze is doubly delimited.)