

## LOW SEASON

By Bongani Kona

### 1.

This July, my mother, who immigrated to Cape Town, from our family home in Zimbabwe, in 1992, and who for the past two year has endured a period of declining health, started to complain of stomach pains. So searing, she said, it's like someone is shovelling hot coals onto my abdomen.

The pain persists until one Sunday C., my nineteen-year old cousin who arrived in South Africa this May, hoping to find a job as a waiter, calls when I'm out on an errand to say: *Brother, come*. We rush her to the hospital. By this time, the pain has spread.

My mother describes it to Dr. J, the stand in for her regular doctor, as like a burning. The whole body engulfed in fire. At first, the nurses put her in a ward on the first floor. Overlooking the visitor's parking bay through a wide set of windows. But the blood pressure reading on the monitor keeps dropping and she is transferred into ICU. The border zone between life and death.

We are an immigrant family, and in the days that follow my phone lights up with messages from friends and kin. Here and in faraway places: *Any news? How is she? How are you?* Even A., the son of a Baptist minister and my closest friend from childhood, who now works as a barkeep in Cape Town and lives in Philippi, sends a text. We were inseparable in our youth but we lost each other in South Africa. The terms of our arrival here - I on a student visa, and A. undocumented - threw us into different class positions. I have not even been to see his daughter, now seven years old. *Broda*, his message reads. Bridging all the years we have not spoken. *We are here*.

Days pass and mercifully, my mother regathers. She draws herself back from the gates. Stabilises. There are poisons in the blood, Dr. J says, and it will be two weeks before the infection clears. But two weeks stretches out into a month.

This is all to say that death, and the meaning of our lives here, was on my mind when I went there. There, being the resort town of Hermanus I travelled to intermittently this

winter while my mother lay in hospital. I had gone there because of a story I'd read in the paper. About a protest march against what was understood to be the redlining of black South African workers from the local economy.

On 3 July 2019, a community organisation, going by the name *Zwelihle Renewal*, published a list of nineteen businesses on their Facebook page. With the exception of KwikSpar, the list was made up entirely of restaurants - Lizette's Kitchen, La Pentola, Burgundy - along the coastline and in the town centre of Hermanus. All of them alleged to be colluding to hire black workers from elsewhere on the continent as kitchen and front of house staff. Among Zwelihle Renewal's set of demands was that, 'in order for there to be peace and stability in Hermanus, for xenophobia to be curbed, and for the long term sustainability and prosperity of the Overstrand region it is imperative that you employ 90% South Africans and 10% foreigners.'<sup>1</sup> A ratio later revised to 60/40.

Since this is a story about borders, 'the porous places, as Toni Morrison writes, 'the vulnerable points where the concept of home is seen as being menaced by foreigners;'<sup>2</sup> I have to tell you something about Tatenda\*. The young man who had been my guide through the township of Zwelihle that first afternoon. It had started raining when he led us into a small windowless room that he called his place. A rectangular structure built from sheets of corrugated iron. We sat on upturned beer crates, our knees almost touching, then he told me his story.

'11 February 2006,' he said. 'That was the day my mother died.'

'How did she -'

'Bad spirits,' he said, anticipating the question. 'I think it was just bad spirits. Something that had to do with the family.'

The beer crates and a single mattress were all that counted for furniture and I'd asked him - in Shona - how did you end up here, so out of the way?

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<sup>1</sup> Tariro Washinyira, 'Zwelihle Renewal demands list of names of immigrants employed in Hermanus', *Ground Up*, 18 July 2019.

<https://www.groundup.org.za/article/zwelihle-renewal-demands-lists-names-immigrants-employed-hermanus/>

<sup>2</sup> Toni Morrison, 'A Foreigner's Home', *The Origin of Others*, Harvard University Press, 2017, p.94-95

‘Back in those days,’ Tatenda said, ‘whenever we had phone calls we would always go to a neighbour’s house. We didn’t have a landline or a cell phone.’

He had grown up in a small town called Norton, forty kilometers west of Zimbabwe’s capital, Harare.

‘The neighbour’s phone,’ he said, ‘that’s how I communicated with my father.’

His father, a boilermaker, had left the family in 2000 and settled in Johannesburg. Until then, South Africa had not been a real place, with coordinates he could locate on a map.

‘My father would call two, or three times a month,’ Tatenda said and ‘he would send goods on long distance buses.’

‘He came back for my mother’s funeral,’ Tatenda said. The first time he’d seen his father in years. After they had put his mother into the earth, and before he returned to Johannesburg, Tatenda’s father told him: ‘I’m looking for a way forward to take you out of this situation.’

Months passed. Three, maybe four, he doesn’t quite recall. But one Saturday his Uncle took him to Road Port. The transnational bus terminal in the capital. On the corner of Robert Mugabe Road and Fifth Street.

‘I’ve done my part,’ his uncle said. ‘It’s time for you to go and find your father.’

Tatenda is twenty-three now, when he tells me his story, but he was ten years old that Saturday.

‘I don’t want to lie to you,’ Tatenda said, ‘I didn’t have documents and all that.’ But his father had spoken to the drivers beforehand and money had been exchanged.

A short distance before the Beitbridge Border Post, the bus driver steered the vehicle to the side of the road. Then, the driver and another man gathered all the children, seven in total, and told them to sit in the luggage compartment. Like stowaways on a ship.

When the bus arrived at the border post, Tatenda said: ‘we could actually see the dogs and we could hear the guards talking. That was scarier because they were speaking in a language we did not understand.’

‘We sat there quietly,’ Tatenda said, ‘because we all knew that if one of us squeaked, or if one of us farted, even the smallest noise, that would be the end of us.’

In Musina, at a service station, the children were let out of the hold and the driver rearranged the seating. Everyone with passports, Tatenda said, ‘they actually sat in front and us without passports, we sat at the back.’ If they got stopped at a roadblock, the passengers seated at the front would show their passports and it would appear to the policemen as if everyone on the bus had the correct documents.

Tatenda fell into a deep sleep afterward, peeling his open eyes to a view of the Johannesburg skyline, as the bus rumbled into Park Station.

‘My dad was still at work and he wasn’t able to come and fetch me. So the bus driver, of his own accord, took me to the taxi rank and he told me, the place you’re going to is called Benoni. When you get to Benoni, call your father.’

‘Those days,’ Tatenda said, ‘you still had pay phones. I got to Benoni station and I called my dad. He told me, look: you go this way, you go that way, you go this way and you’ll get to the place I call home. I’ll meet you there after work.’

Later that evening, Tatenda and his father shook hands, embraced. But it wouldn’t be long before his father abandoned him a second time.

‘My father told me, look: I’m going to introduce you to this new lady and she’s going to become your mother for now. Just make sure you do what she tells you and you must cooperate.’

Rujeko was the name of the woman, also from Zimbabwe, and she, too, had a child. A daughter, Patience, a year younger than Tatenda. And when the relationship with Tatenda's father started to fray, Rujeko moved both children to Butterworth in the Eastern Cape. 'I'm going to raise these two children as my own,' she said.

Years passed. After Butterworth, came Grahamstown, then Stellenbosch, and now a shack in Zwelihle for which Tatenda pays an elderly Xhosa woman R300 each month. The same woman, a mother of seven in her late fifties, would later tell me that this place, pointing to the shacks in her backyard, was once full of amaXhosa. 'Now, my place is full of Shangaans.'

In March 2019, Tatenda said he'd been let go from his job as a waiter, a job that paid R3 100 a month, because he didn't have the right papers. Some of his other friends and acquaintances he had introduced me that afternoon were in the same precarious position. Everywhere the same story. Home Affairs. Department of Labour. Papers. I can't even afford a proper meal now', Tatenda said, reaching into the pocket of his shirt front for a loose cigarette. A stuyvie red.

We both fell silent after he'd said that and we sat there, watching the smoke curl upward.

## 2.

In Cape Town, my mother drifted in and out of a fog of pain medication. I did tell her about my travels to Hermanus, during the lucid hours, but her mind was attuned to the past. Both her parents, Patrick and Agnes, were the children of immigrants. AmaMfengu from Pondoland. They had crossed the Tuli River in the late 1800s; as petty labourers attached to the Pioneer Column. The band of mercenaries gathered together by Cecil John Rhodes and the British South Africa Company for the purposes of annexing the territory north of the Limpopo river and south of Kariba. What later became Southern Rhodesia and is today Zimbabwe. Each of the white mercenaries were rewarded with three thousand acres of land and fifteen mining claims. The AmaMfengu, she said, were allotted a portion of land in Mbembesi, in the north east of the country where they settled.

We were children of promise, she said to me. Sons and daughters born after midnight: the guerrilla war which ushered in independence in 1980. My grandmother, Agnes, was a war widow. She fled from the countryside in 1979, the morning her husband, Simon, an English teacher, had been abducted. Six weeks later she returned to bury his bones. He had been shot in the head.

We were children of promise, she said. Born after the violence of white nationalism and what was promised is that the land would not be so bitter.

### 3.

I have to tell you something of Hermanus, and how a border line ‘runs through the land/the mind, the skin.’<sup>3</sup> The resort town began as a small fishing and agricultural village and until 1902, when the postmaster Mr. Gift, took the decision to shorten the name to eight letters, the village was known as Hermanuspietersfontein. The name belonging to an itinerant Dutch school teacher<sup>4</sup> credited with discovering the place even though the Khoi used to graze their cattle there.

The town has always played host to white holiday makers, waited on by black labourers, and today some of the wealthiest South Africans own holiday homes there. ‘We entered through a kitchen filled with slaves,’ Lady Anne Barnard wrote in her journal upon visiting a nearby farmhouse in 1798 with her husband and Secretary to the Cape Colony, Mr. Andrew Barnard.

Many also believed that the air there possess healing properties. This is one of the reasons why the town today has a large elderly, affluent, white population and so many retirement homes. In 1896, Dr. Joshua Hoffman, brother-in-law to Jan Smuts, built the Sanatorium. A health resort for rest and recuperation. At around this time, according to a local historian, Dr. Robin Lee, the hotelier Walter MacFarlane ‘noticed that more and more people were passing through Hermanus.’ And in response, ‘MacFarlane began

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<sup>3</sup> Gabeba Baderoon, ‘I Saw You Walk Toward Something’, *The History of Intimacy*, (Kwela Books, 2018) p. 62

<sup>4</sup> According to local historian SJ du Toit, ‘Pieters came to South Africa at a time when Dutch-speaking farmers were unhappy about English as a medium of instruction in government schools. They consequently imported their own teachers.’

letting out rooms at his own residence,<sup>5</sup> and subsequently built the first hotel in the area, named after Queen Victoria. Since then, tourism and hospitality have been woven into the fabric of the town's economy.

You can only travel there by road. In the early 1900s, Sir. William Hoy, the then General Manager of Cape Government Railways, halted the construction of a railway track that would cut through the town. Hoy was so taken by Hermanus that he wanted it to remain as it was, small and sequestered. The railway master's shadow looms over the hitchhikers and outstretched thumbs that line the R43 and the N2.

It was days after the march in July when I went there the first time. I had gone to see the place for myself, to gather impressions, and I had promised to be back by nightfall, in time for the hospital's evening visiting hours. I drove in mild traffic along the N2, through Sir Lowry's and later, Houw Hoek mountain pass.

A short distance after you peel off the N2 and onto R43 to Hermanus, there is a point when the road rises then slopes along the banks of the Botrivier Lagoon. I steered the vehicle to the shoulder here and stood by the roadside, letting my eyes glide across the water's creased surface. Listening to the distant bird cry of seagulls.

I recalled many years ago reading an essay by Njabulo Ndebele, 'A home for Intimacy,' where he'd written that in apartheid South Africa, 'tourism was something white people did<sup>6</sup>.' Only white people could travel such vast distances at leisure. Stopping along the way to 'view endless vistas of physical beauty.'<sup>7</sup> Curtailed by a labyrinth of unjust laws and a set of internal borders, everyone else, the majority, could not move so freely.

In the same essay Ndebele argues that apartheid, as a system of governance, was marked by the demolition of homes, and 'people moved to strange places.'<sup>8</sup> The promise of April 1994 then, given this context, of a 'shared experience of homelessness'<sup>9</sup> is that

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<sup>5</sup> Personal correspondence

<sup>6</sup> Njabulo Ndebele, 'A Home for Intimacy', published in the *Mail & Guardian*, April 26 1996.

<sup>7</sup> *ibid*

<sup>8</sup> *ibid*

<sup>9</sup> *ibid*

‘home became the experience of the reality of national boundaries.<sup>10</sup> Home became the entire geographical expanse of South Africa. I am not so sure.

The Group Areas Act came into effect in Hermanus in the early 1960s, although plans for the segregation of the town had been outlined as early as 1951. Hermanus was declared ‘white’ and in many respects, it has remained so ever since. According to census data from StatsSA, the Overstrand Municipality, where Hermanus is located, is the most segregated municipality in South Africa.

The ‘coloured’ inhabitants of the town were moved to Mount Pleasant; a set of houses along the R43 which call to mind the Malay Quarter in Cape Town, Bo-Kaap. Hawston, an outlying fishing village, was also declared a ‘coloured’ area. Zwelihle, where a significant portion of the town’s labour force is quartered, was once a Milkwood forest, earmarked as the site for a ‘new Native location.’<sup>11</sup> In 1963, when Zwelihle was officially established, ‘it consisted of forty-two roomed houses and a ‘hostel’ in the traditional mining industry style. This accommodation was for forty single males only. No families were permitted.<sup>12</sup>

The street names in the newer parts of Zwelihle, a roll call of South Africa’s liberation heroes - Mbeki, Sisulu, Zuma - point to the township’s continued expansion. Or, you could say, these streets represent the normalisation of the worst of South Africa’s history.

There are only two primary schools in the area and one high school and until very recently, with the establishment of Hermanus Varsity, the closest tertiary institution was an FET college in Caledon, forty kilometers away. Consequently, according to census data polled in 2011, only three percent of the predominantly Xhosa population in Zwelihle held a tertiary qualification and only a quarter had completed secondary school.

The science fiction writer William Gibson once said, ‘the future is already here, it’s just not evenly distributed.’ The same thing could be said about South Africa’s past. If the

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<sup>10</sup>ibid

<sup>11</sup> *Hermanus News*, 14 June 1958 cited in Dr. Robin Lee’s draft paper, ‘Hermanus and the Group Areas Act’.

<sup>12</sup> ibid

end of apartheid is not a singular event but a process, as some have proposed, then it must be noted how dissonantly spread that process is. We're not all living in the same time. 'We're still in 1995,' D. a waiter I met said to me. 'We're still living in that era.'

Later, after walking through the town and along the rugged coastline, I sat down in an empty restaurant with Italian styled red and white checkered print tablecloths. 'You know [what] the problem is my friend?' the short blond woman behind the cash register said. I'd asked her what she thought about the recent protest march. 'It's got nothing to do with your skin colour. It's if you are attending [to] your job like you should. This is what they don't understand. They only see a specific place, and there's maybe a Zimbabwean or a whatever working there, but...they are not there on a Monday morning and they are not writing me a letter or a WhatsApp to say I'm sorry I can't make it.'

'We've only just got Khoza ladies in our kitchen,' she said, pointing back to the women hidden behind a partition. 'Got no men. And we got that for a reason [...] because Sunday night is the big party night in the location. Monday morning the okes can't get up. Can't come and work.'

Notice how she uses the word: *They*.

#### 4.

On subsequent visits to Hermanus, it became apparent that whatever delicate set of arrangements had once held this town together were no longer in place. Something had shifted. Tense is the word most people gravitated towards to describe the present mood. 'It is actually a very unhealthy situation,' Brigadier Donovan Heilbron, the cluster commander of the Overstrand, said to me. 'Because there is no peace accord. Everyone is watching one another and the foreign nationals are just roaming in the middle.'

The view in everyone's mind was that the list of the nineteen businesses, published on Zwelihle Renewal's Facebook page, was only the latest iteration in an unfolding drama. A drama in which struggles over land, housing, and unemployment have become conjoined. As the population in Zwelihle continued to grow so did the demand for land and housing and in March 2018, the first in a string of protests erupted over a sea-facing

plot called Schulphoek, in the vicinity of Zwelihle, which had been sold to a private developer.

The contestation over Schulphoek hadn't reached its denouement but the land is now occupied by what many of the white inhabitants of Hermanus describe as an 'influx of refugees' from the Eastern Cape. A phrase once used by the former Western Cape Premier Helen Zille, and which evokes the barbarous history of legislation governing the movement of black people into urban areas.

In the year and half or more since the first protests erupted, three principal actors emerged onto the political arena and all three had begun as Facebook groups. There is the Whale Coast Business and Community Forum, a conglomeration of white business owners, which had started as the Concerned Citizen's Forum. Then there is Overstrand Unite, an informal civic group of Overstrand residents, that is allied with Zwelihle Renewal, an organisation which seems to have arisen out of a sense of abandonment by the democratic state. To complete the picture, the founder of Zwelihle Renewal, Gcobani Ndzongana, subsequently became the leader of the Land Party which contested the last local elections in Hermanus. Vanessa Swanepoel, the founder of Overstrand Unite, is a member of the party's central committee.

Following a brief exchange of text messages, Gcobani and I agreed to meet at a franchise coffee shop inside the Whale Coast Mall. The location is important for the sole reason that this one of the few public places we could meet and we were the only three black customers that afternoon. Gcobani said he is persona non grata in large swathes of Hermanus.

The protests about land and housing, in which he played a pivotal role, reached the midpoint of a scream in July 2018, after a fence was erected between Zwelihle and neighboring Sandbaai, a white area. The fence was torn down and the earth trembled.

Gcobani was arrested for malicious damage to property and incitement to violence. 'After they [the police] scooped me up, then things turned to violence,' Gcobani said. 'The most historical violent fourteen days in our town.' In those fourteen days, he said,

‘police were injured. I think one of them was hit by an axe. One of the peaceful protesters was shot in the eyes. A lot of police were disarmed and beaten.’

In the stories people told me, the whole of Zwelihle was under a constant, heavy cloud of teargas and three toddlers are alleged to have died from inhaling the poisonous fumes.

A shop owner named Simbarashe, a stout, muscular man, who used to box in his youth, said people were not allowed to go to work during those two weeks. ‘If you were caught going to work, they would beat you up or chase you with stones [...] They were pointing fingers at us, foreigners. Some people said its xenophobia but they would say it’s not. But that’s where everything was headed. They broke into my shop that Monday. They broke in and took everything. From that day on, when they would call a meeting, they would point fingers at us, accusing us of going to work. They would say we’re not cooperating.’

‘There’s this other lady,’ Maria, a Zambian woman who works as a waiter later told me, ‘she’s from Malawi. The woman had gone to work at dawn and when later it was discovered that she had not stayed at home: they burnt like about R30 000. She had saved money and she was keeping it in the house...Some of the people they wanted to take the money, but they said no, we’re not here to take anyone’s things. We’re just burning them. They must just learn their lesson that when we say something they must obey and follow. This is our land.’

## 6.

Since the first wave of protests hit the town in 2018, several of the businesses in Hermanus, according Gcobani, have ‘embroiled themselves within the political space,’ under the banner of the Whale Coast Business and Community Forum. ‘They say to themselves that our businesses are suffering because of this guy. We’re losing money because of this guy. Other businesses are shutting down because of this particular individual. So they decided to join politics and decided to fight me.’

The list of nineteen businesses, he said, emerged out of this conflict. ‘If they are fighting me,’ Gcobani told me, ‘they are also fighting South Africans because they will say if you are black South African staying in this community [Zwelihle] you are a member of

Gcobani. You support Gcobani so let's get rid of you at work. Then they chase away all locals from work. Then they decided to employ foreign nationals.'

According to Gcobani this started during the protest shutdowns in 2018. Things got so severe that according to Brigadier Donovan Heilbron, some of the business owners wanted to employ a private security firm to patrol the R43 in order to prevent protesters from blocking the town's main thoroughfare.

A member of the Whale Coast Business and Community Forum said the businesses started pushing back against the protest shutdowns by withholding wages. One man I spoke to in Zwelihle, who has worked as a waiter in Hermanus since 2014, said that 'the problem is they [the business owners] like to blame us [the people in Zwelihle]. They think maybe we're doing those kinds of things.'

As the job losses mounted, Gcobani said, 'people wanted to get rid of foreigners in our township. I have to come in and say, guys, [...] let's not wage war on the wrong people. Rather, let's approach the people who are the cause of this. That's where we decided to march to the businesses.'

Initially, the protests were set to go on for four days this year, from 9 to 12 July. But following a round of negotiations involving the municipality, Whale Coast Business and Community Forum, the Hermanus Business Chamber, Department of Labour and the Department of Home Affairs, the march was soon called off. But tempers flared once again when the Whale Coast Business and Community Forum took out a court interdict prohibiting the protesters from coming within a fifty-meter radius of each of the listed entities.

This in turn led to the protests being called back on. The march took place on a Saturday under police guard. But each of the businesses refused to accept the memorandum.

'All these businesses, they don't comply,' Gcobani said, 'the majority of them, they employ foreigners not locals. We are now engaging with Department of Labour and the

Hermanus Business Forum. We're also engaging with home affairs. We are convinced,' he said, 'that we will win this battle.'

All of the business owners I spoke to held the view that the march was nothing more than a populist attempt by Zwelihle Renewal/Land Party to garner favour with the electorate in the lead up to the 2021 local elections.

'They gave a notice on Facebook and it went viral on WhatsApp and stuff, saying listen these are the businesses and we feel they are employing illegals,' one of the businesses owners said. We sat in a white carpeted room that gazed out at the seafront. 'They targeted nineteen businesses, personally. I own one of those I've got one Zimbabwean worker. That's legal. The rest of my staff,' he said, 'all South African.'

'So the whole thing, behind it is actually not the nineteen businesses,' he said. 'It is creating the hype that we are trying to get you jobs. Please vote for me in 2021. It's actually as simple as that. There is no xenophobia.'

## 7.

Reading over the pages I've written, I realise that I'm trying to hide behind journalistic precepts of impartiality. This happened, the that happened. He said, she said. It's not possible to write violence impartially. At such a remove. We're in a time of crisis and words must say more.

I undertook these journeys to Hermanus at a time when I was in a state of preemptive grief. Bracing myself for the possible loss of my mother. But since I am writing this all down now as much for you — I'm saying — as for me, I'll tell you that I was also grieving the idea of South Africa. A country that came alive for me in the CDs and cassettes my mother would bring back home for Christmas: Abdullah, Miriam, Brenda. And in black and white photographs: Mandela at the Grand Parade. The humanity that shone through after so many years of all that is contrary. We heard the call and left left our homes for that country.

Hermanus was hit with an explosion of rage. And in her essay of grief and rage, Judith Butler asks us to consider how rage carries sorrow. Carries grief. 'The grief is unbearable

and from that unbearability one kills, a killing that produces more grief...Perhaps that destructive act is a way of announcing that what is unbearable is now someone else's problem, Here: you take this unbearable thing, now it belongs to you. But,' she asks, 'has anyone ever stopped grieving by devastating another's life?'

On my last trip to Hermanus, I had parked my car behind the United Church on Royal Street. A foot bridge adjoined to the parking lot leads to Hoy's Koppie. The bones of Sir. William Hoy are buried there and this where the 'coloured' inhabitants of the town buried their dead. Then, in the early 1950's, with apartheid in full effect, 'it was decided that..the cemetery behind Hoy's Koppie should be commandeered for the purpose of expansion.<sup>13</sup>' The authorities set about exhuming all the bones of the dead, 'destroying their tombstones and reburying them in an unmarked mass grave, the whereabouts of which is still unknown.<sup>14</sup>'

As I stood there, I recalled a line from Stacy Hardy: 'We build our lives here on the deaths of others.' As long as this is how we live, peace will only ever be a temporary state and history will continue to break our hearts.

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<sup>13</sup> Elaine Davie, 'People are living there - a story of resilience', p.5, *The Village News*, 28 August 2018. The story is drawn from on oral history project by Kathie Buley and Angela Heslop.

<sup>14</sup> *ibid*

