

HOUSE OF HUNGER

Dambudzo Marechera

I got my things and left. The sun was coming up. I couldn't think where to go. I wandered towards the beer-hall but stopped at the bottle-store where I bought a beer. There were people scattered along the store's wide verandah, drinking. I sat beneath the tall msasa tree whose branches scrape the corrugated iron roofs. I was trying not to think about where I was going. I didn't feel bitter. I was glad things had happened the way they had; I couldn't have stayed on in that House of Hunger where every morsel of sanity was snatched from you the way some kinds of bird snatch food from the very mouths of babes. And the eyes of that House of Hunger lingered upon you as though some indefinable beast was about to pounce upon you. Of course there was the matter of the girl. But what else could I have done, when Peter flogged her like that day and night? Besides, my intervention had not been as disinterested as I would have liked.

Yes, the sun came up so fast it hit you between the eyes before you knew it had risen above the mountains.

I took off my coat and folded it between my thighs. The way everything had happened no one could in future blame their soul-hunger on anybody else. Mine was already hot and dusty in the morning sun and I didn't know what, if anything, I could do to appease it. But my head was clear; and when the black policemen paraded and saluted beneath the flag and the black clerk of the township sauntered casually towards the Lager trucks and a group of schoolchildren in khaki and green ran like hell towards the grey school as the bell rung I felt I was reviewing all the details of the foul turd which my life had been and was even at that moment. The policemen were dismissed. Their sergeant was a cocky six-footer, lean and hungry and sly like a chameleon stalking a fly. The House of Hunger had not as yet had much to worry about this particular chameleon. There had been unpleasantnesses though. The old man who died in that nasty train accident, he once got into trouble for begging and loitering. And then Peter got jailed for accepting a bribe from a police spy. When he came out of jail Peter could not settle down. He kept talking about the bloody whites; that phrase 'bloody whites' seemed to be roasting his mind and he got into fights which terrified everyone so much that no one in their right mind dared cross him. And Peter walked about raging and spoiling for a fight which just was not there. And because he hungered for the fight everyone saw it in his eyes and liked him for it. That made it worse for him until his woman got pregnant and the schools inspector said she couldn't teach in that state, and Peter threatened to crunch the sky into nothing and refused to marry her because he wanted to be 'free'. It was during that disgrace that father took something mildly poisonous and sickened visibly before our eyes and didn't speak a single word, though we knew he knew we knew it was all to pressure Peter into the marriage. She was after all sweet and childish and big with his sperm and we all couldn't believe Peter's luck. It was at this time my sixth form like other sixths rushed out into the streets to protest about the discriminatory wage-structure and I got arrested like everybody else for a few hours: which meant fingerprints and photographs and a few slaps on the cheek 'to have more sense', though the principal restrained his bile and only gave us a long sermon on how necessary it was to get qualified before one deigned to put up the barricades. At this time I was extremely thirsty for self-knowledge and curiously enough believed I could find that in 'political consciousness'. All the black youth was thirsty. There was not an oasis of thought

which we did not lick dry; apart from those which had been banned, whose drinking led to arrests and suchlike flea-scratchings. I had got over aching for the unattainable Julia who had been left in my charge by my best friend. I was at that point where it's no use fussing and fretting whether one could with a will find some money and dare the unknown terrors of VD—with a little help from dagga. I braved it one stormy night and survived to regret it. Peter of course understood.

'You aren't a man until you've gone through it', he said.

And I agreed and smiled ingratiatingly because he knew where the cure was—at least, how to get injections in decent secrecy. The experience left me marked by an irreverent disgust for women which has never left me. Never again would I suffer wholeheartedly for any woman.

But not everyone was scratching everyone else's back. There were arrests en masse at the university and when workers came out on strike there were more arrests. Arrests became so much a part of one's food that no one even turned a hair when two guerrillas were executed one morning and their bodies later displayed to a group of schoolchildren.

There was however an excitement of the spirit which made us all wander about in search of that unattainable elixir which our restlessness presaged. But the search was doomed from the start because the elixir seemed to be right under our noses and yet not really there. The freedom we craved for—as one craves for dagga or beer or cigarettes or the after-life—this was so alive in our breath and in our fingers that one became intoxicated by it even before one had actually found it. It was like the way a man licks his lips in his dream of a feast; the way a woman dances in her dream of a carnival; the way the old man ran like a gazelle in his yearning for the funeral games of his youth. Yet the feast, the carnival and the games were not there at all. This was the paradox whose discovery left us uneasy, sly and at best with the ache of knowing that one would never feel that way again. There were no conscious farewells to adolescence for the emptiness was deep-seated in the gut. We knew that before us lay another vast emptiness whose appetite for things living was at best wolfish. Life stretched out like a series of hunger-scoured hovels stretching endlessly towards the horizon. One's mind became the grimy rooms, the dusty cobwebs in which the minute skeletons of one's childhood were forever in the spidery grip that stretched out to include not only the very stones upon which one walked but also the stars which glittered vaguely upon the stench of our lives. Gut-rot, that was what one steadily became. And whatever insects of thought buzzed about inside the tin can of one's head as one squatted astride the pit-latrine of it, the sun still climbed as swiftly as ever and darkness fell upon the land as quickly as in the years that had gone.

The lives of small men are like spiders' webs; they are studded with minute skeletons of greatness. And the House of Hunger clung firmly to its own; after all, the skeletons in its web still had sparks of life in their minute bones. The girl, of course—and how I felt for her—clung rebelliously to her own unique spirit. The severity of the beatings could not stamp the madness out of her. And though he finally beat her until she was just a red stain I could still glimpse the pulses of her raw courage in her wide animal-like eyes. They were eyes that stung you to tears. But Peter with his great hand swinging yet again to smash—those eyes stung him to greater fury. It was all a show for me; I knew that, and that made it worse for her because she had told me she would never give that up. And Peter firmly but calmly said:

'I'll beat it out of you yet.'

At this her eyes flared up in that sad but obstinate way she has.

'Go on, then!' she cried, ducking her head onto her breast so that the blow missing her eye knocked her sideways. I heard something—a cat—scream in agony.

At that moment I could have sworn that she was putting on a show for me. I laughed. That was my first mistake. There had been other mistakes which had led up to all this, but this was the first major one. Peter glared at me, fist raised. I heard it again—a cat—in utter agony.

'And what are you sniggering about, bookshit?'

It was not a question. And as I looked at him I could have sworn that he too was laying it on thick just for me, though in a brotherly way. It almost made me laugh again. But I drew the candle closer to the book I was reading and after a moment found the passage I had reached.

But he blew out the candle, plunging the room into darkness. I could feel his stale breath clinging closely to my face. I could hear through the window children saying 'Break its neck'.

'I asked you a question, Shakespeare,' he said out of the darkness.

I said nothing; I was amazed at the swiftness of his attack.

His hands grabbed my shirtfront.

I did nothing.

He spat full into my face and shoved me backwards so that I fell with the chair, hitting my head against the wall. I heard him clattering out of the room. I lay still until I could no longer hear his footsteps. He seemed to be walking down the street, probably towards the beer-hall. It was then that I realised that the baby in the next room was hollering its head off and must have been screaming for quite some time. But neither the girl nor I moved. She was panting painfully somewhere in the dark of the room. I could only think how very young she sounded. She had a strange name. I called out to her:

'Immaculate, are you all right?'

But there was only silence.

'Why did you come back?' I asked. 'You know it's always like this.'

After another long silence she said something like sssh.

'What? I can't hear you.'

'Don't talk,' she said.

In the next room the baby continued to scream. A heavy stone rattled upon the roof: our neighbour's children were at it again. Another stone—it must have been a brick—thudded onto the roof. A shadow streaked by the open window hurling something—a furry and wet thing that struck me in the face. I had thrown it clear from me before I

realized what it was. As I dashed to get it a stone cracked where I had been lying and broke against the chair. I thrashed through my coat for matches, found them, and lit one. The light of it, flaring angrily, at once lit up her face which was swollen and streaked with blood from cuts on her lips and cheekbones. The flame burnt my fingers and I thrust the spent match out of the window and lit another. This time she was holding out a stub of a candle. When it was lit I saw she was leaning over the furry wet thing which had struck me. It was my cat. It was dead. The fur was not only spattered with blood but also half-burnt, as though our neighbour's children had even tried to burn it before flinging it through the window.

She had got up and put the candle on the table and was looking abstractedly at the overturned chair.

'Did he hurt you?' she asked.

I shook my head.

'And you?' I asked rather pointlessly.

'I'll be all right in a moment,' she said. 'The baby—he didn't touch the baby?'

'No.'

'I wanted to see you,' she said.

I couldn't think what to say. I felt vaguely scandalised. She always talked like that—as though I was someone she had dreamed up. I didn't want to scrub up the passion and the beatings of her cruel life. And yet it was I who had started it all. My disinterested intervention— that's how I had put it to myself. How was I to know she would take it into her head to take me at my word? I felt so bitter that I laughed at the cruel sarcasm that rules our lives.

The hollowness of my laughter seemed to startle her. I said hastily:

'I was just thinking what a fool he will look when he finds out.'

'A fool. . . who?'

'Why, my brother, Peter,' I replied rather foolishly.

She frowned.

And I thought happily: she has seen through me and will have nothing to do with such corruption. But I was as usual deceiving myself, for her face cleared and her tiny biscuit frown turned into a dimple as she tried to smile. The fool!

'You're such a child,' she said caressing my arm.

I pushed her away, muttering something about my dead cat which in my suppressed fury I kicked towards the door and then gave it a final hefty kick which sent it flying way out into the yard. I wished with all my soul it was her I had kicked out into the night. The grey matter of my brains was on fire with loathing for her.

The little tricks and turns of the weather not only seemed to be personally directed

against me but their venom was of such an unpredictable character that I— how long ago it is now!—made a point of ignoring their unwanted attentions. Friends who acted out of character affected me in the same way. I could not of course cut a tropical storm dead, but the ignominy of scuttling for shelter from what one felt was after all peculiarly part of oneself was an indignity I could not forgive. And I was by this creating for myself a labyrinthine personal world which would merely enmesh me within its crude mythology. That I could not bear a star, a stone, a flame, a river, or a cupful of air was purely because they all seemed to have a significance irrevocably not my own. Therefore I ignored them but recreated them with words, cadences, lights, murmurings and storms of air escaping the blast that came from 'up there'. I was all mixed up. I found the idea of humanity, the concept of a mankind, more attractive than actual beings. On a baser level I could not forgive man, myself, for being utterly and crudely there. I felt in need of forgiveness. And those unfortunate enough to come into contact with me always afterwards consoled themselves and myself by reducing it all to a 'chip on the shoulder'.

'You'll soon get over it,' they said.

Like the way babies get everything before they become immune to that strange malady, growing up.

In the House of Hunger diseases were the strange irruptions of a disturbed universe. Measles or mumps were the symptoms of a malign order. Even a common cold could become a casus belli between neighbours. And add to that the stench of our decaying family life with its perpetual headaches of gut-rot and soul-sickness and rats gnawing the cheese and me worrying it the next morning like a child gently scratching a pleasurable sore on its index finger.

How could I just get over it, for heaven's sake?

What began as a little stream of moral experiment had swelled into the huge Victoria Falls of a cancerous growth.

But I disdained to call it that. It was a sort of life, I suppose. It was me, not anyone else.

'You mean the world owes you a living?' Peter asked slyly.

I did not answer because the answer was there for anyone to see: the chill of a vicious winter night blasting through the old gate of that House of Hunger—the answer was chillingly creeping through the marrow of my bones and trickling surely into the grey matter of my brains.

My mother used to tell her friends that I had been a 'frantic' baby and that whenever anyone so much as touched me I would become apoplectic with fear. Or hysteria. But perhaps she was exaggerating, because she always mentioned this whenever she was showing off my school reports.

'You expect nothing but evil from anyone,' Peter said, yawning. It was the day after the VD injections had started to work on me and I had stopped to think of my penis as a diseased appendage.

'Any good you get from people you'll have to pay for later,' I said. I stretched out my legs and lit one of those cigarettes that seem to be made from a hotchpotch of tea

leaves rather than heart-of-the-veldt tobacco. I was not at all thinking of what I was saying or why I was saying it.

'What do you think she expects in life?' I asked absently with a sort of transparent cunning which of course Peter easily deciphered.

He even feigned ignorance.

'Who?' he asked nonchalantly.

'Immaculate.'

'What she gets,' he said and laughed like a crow that has fed well.

I felt cut to the quick by his gluttonous merriment. And I almost asked him cruelly who he thought was really the father of his baby.

At this point mother rushed in. She looked like sour milk. Peter muttered something under his breath about it being 'one of her days'. She crossed over my outstretched legs and sat down at the table. Her face was long and haggard, scarred by the many sacrifices she had taken on our behalf. She began to talk in her usual bass voice:

The old man's dead,' she said.

It sounded both cryptic and ridiculous. I laughed long and loud.

But she regarded me without the slightest interest.

'He was hit by the train at the rail-crossing,' she said. 'There was nothing left but stains.'

That hoarse bass voice of hers had not always been like that. She blamed it on the way she had 'come down in the world'; which was merely a euphemism about her excessive drinking. Drinking always made her smash up her words at one particular rail-crossing which—as had really happened with the old man—effectively crunched all meaning or significance which might be lying in ambush. She liked nothing better than to nag me about how she had not educated me to merely sit on my arse. And when nagging me her language would take on such an earthy hue it made me wonder why I ever bothered to even think about humanity. The expletives of her train of invective smashed my body in the same way as the twentieth-century train crunched the old man into a stain.

'I sent you to University,' she said. 'There must be big jobs waiting for you out there.'

'Tell that to Ian Smith,' Peter butted in maliciously. 'All you did was starve yourself to send this shit to school while Smith made sure that the kind of education he got was exactly what has made him like this.'

I did not like this so I began to whistle 'Little Jack Horner Sat in a Corner'.

Peter, as is usual when something indistinct disgusts him, farted long and loudly and spat in my general direction, and muttered something about capitalists and imperialists.

'And the bloody whites,' I added, for this trinity was for him the thing that held the House of Hunger in a stinking grip. The foul breath of our history, he said.

I threw my coat over my shoulders—not unlike the way night suddenly covers the late afternoon sky—and got up to buy another beer. It was crowded in the bottle-store but the barman, recognising me—he had done so already, it's just that he is the type of person who takes his time even when greeting his own mother-in-law—shouted:

'Terrorist! Gandanga—it's a beer, isn't it?'

My face-muscles creased into a delighted mask as I stretched out my hand over the mass of shoulders to give him the money. He laughed painfully:

'No, no. It's on me,' he said.

I took the beer, spilling a little onto wide crimson shoulders which suddenly turned angrily.

'Sorry,' I mumbled quickly and then stopped:

'Why, it's—!'

The coal-black face above the crimson jacket split into a toothy smile. It was Harry. At school he had always tortured me about my lack of 'style'—and lack of money. In the sixth form he had the cubicle next to mine and was forever recounting harrowing stories about 'where he was at with the chicks'. He knew all the city slang, all the slick scenes, and at the throw of a dice could name every name worth knowing in 'Showbiz'. But when we found out that he had been working for the Special Branch in its infiltration of student organisations we one stormy night gagged him, bound him like a crumb of stale toast, and after a rather dramatic journey out of the dormitory area beat him up so thoroughly that he took to his bed and for at least three hours did not open his mouth to boast about where he was at.

And now here he was already gripping my arm with a tongue-scalding coffee joy. I had last seen him reeling through the Student Union Xmas Ball. He slapped his thighs and laughed a whiff of crude innocence. He is one of those people who go through life with the firm belief that no one, but nobody, can help liking them in whatever circumstances. And he was right to a certain extent. Immaculate was his sister.

We came out of the bottle-store arm in arm, the way Jesus and Judas must have been when they both knew each other's secret. The sun struck gently against the swirling dust. A cloud of flies from the nearby public toilet was humming Handel's Hallelujah Chorus. It was an almost perfect photograph of the human condition.

Solomon the township photographer is now a rich man. His studio at the back of the grocer's is papered from floor to ceiling with photographs of Africans in European wigs, Africans in mini-skirts, Africans who pierce the focusing lens with a gaze of paranoia. The background of each photo is the same: waves breaking upon a virgin beach and a lone eagle swivelling like glass fracturing light towards the potent spaces of the universe. A cruel yearning that can only be realised in crude photography. The squalor of reality was obliterated in an explosion of flashbulbs and afterwards one could say 'That's me, man—me! In the city.'

Harry must have made a lot of photographers rich. Before I developed a sense of

discrimination about clothes I had always admired his loud brash colours, his toothpaste set of character, and his massive confidence in high-heeled shoes.

'You and me,' he said drinking, 'we're civilised.'

It was for him the pinnacle of a life well lived, that word 'civilised'. I had sat down on the ground and he was looking down at me with a quizzical smile.

'Sit down,' I said.

He laughed.

'There're no chairs around, man,' he said, and stuffed a fist into his trouser pocket. He said: 'I've got to see some chick later so I mustn't mess up my clothes.'

'What chick?'

'Guess,' he winked.

I decided to brave it:

'A white chick?'

He laughed:

'What else, man?' His arm swept the panorama of barbed wire, whitewashed houses, drunks, prostitutes, the angelic choirs of god-created flies, and the dust that erupted into little clouds of divine grace wherever the golden sunlight deigned to strike. His god-like gesture stopped abruptly—pointing straight at the stinking public lavatory.

'What else is there, man?' he repeated.

I think I saw his point.

Immaculate had once asked me the same question— but with a very different emotion from that of her white-chicked brother. She and I had gone down the valley and crossed the river and walked up the ancient stone tracks that led up to the old fortifications which our warlike ancestors had used in time of war. The soft skin stretched effortlessly over the pain behind her delicate oval face. We were looking down over the valley, down upon the township in which we lived.

'What else is there?' she repeated.

And her hands were hurting me. No photograph can ever record the fire of that moment. But I—the fool!— clutched at the tiny straw of loathing for her. It was not possible that a being like her could have been conceived in the grim squalor of our history. She made me want to dream, made me believe in visions, in hope. But the rock and grit of the earth denied this.

'I can't afford it,' I said.

She looked up quickly.

'If it's money—' she began, frowning.

'Money!' I laughed bitterly like a misunderstood child.

And yet money was certainly part of it. There was no possibility of loving, eating, writing, sleeping, hating, dreaming even—no possibility without money.

But those heroes, those black heroes of our time . . .

She was looking at me anxiously, her fingers digging into the small of my back. Something in her gaze seemed to stab into me like a pitchfork, to stab and to pierce into my guts until she suddenly drew back and it seemed dragged out my entrails.

I would have fallen off that ledge had she not caught me. We both fell heavily onto the rock of certainty; we lay still. But Harry was saying:

'My white chick is full of sugar. She is a full-bodied wine with a touch of divinity, that's what she is, my chick.'

'But has she got a vagina?' I asked, puzzled.

He looked at me oddly. I hastily changed the subject:

'How did you meet her?'

That Xmas Ball, man,' Harry winked. That's where! Man, has she got it!'

'Got what?' I demanded and yawned unconvincingly.

'Everything,' he said. 'She's got everything nigger girls don't have.'

I closed my eyes. I could see the red curtains of my soul.

'Nigger girls are just meat,' Harry said. 'And I don't like my meat raw.'

And then he looked at me pointedly as he said:

'Of course it's another thing when a man is starving for pussy.'

I bit my lip irritably and muttered something obscene.

'That's it, man. Swear it out of your system. It does a man good to swear,' he said.

'Cheers!' I said, and drained my glass.

In an instant Harry had disappeared into the bottle-store. I leaned back against the msasa tree and lay still, trying not to think about the House of Hunger where the acids of gut-rot had eaten into the base metal of my brains. The House has now become my mind; and I do not like the way the roof is rattling.

I remember coming home one day. Running with glee. I forget what it was I was happy about. And though it was a rather dismal day—the sky looked as if god was wringing out his dirty underwear—I was on heat with living. I burst into the room and all at once exploded into my story, telling it restlessly and with expansive gestures, telling it to mother who was staring. A stinging slap that made my ear sing stopped me. I stared up at mother in confusion. She hit me again.

'How dare you speak in English to me,' she said crossly. 'You know I don't understand it, and if you think because you're educated . . .'

She hit me again.

'I'm not speaking in Eng—' I began, but stopped as I suddenly realised that I was talking to her in English.

I rushed out of the room and sat down heavily on a rock in the garden. I was trying not to cry. I jumped up and rushed back into the room, and dragging my box from under the bed took out my English exercise-books and began to tear them up with a great childish violence. Mother watched me in silence. When I had finished she took out my food and set it before me. I pushed it away.

'I'm not hungry any more.'

'Are you sure?' she asked.

'I'm not hungry,' I insisted, trying not to look at the food.

'Well, I am,' she said.

And she began eating it right there, with loud smacks. I watched her in silence. She made me feel so hungry I could have strung myself up from the roofbeams. When she finished she actually licked the plate with her red tongue and licked each of her fingers in turn and gave a little belch of delight. It made my soul tear suddenly like the old cloth in the Temple. And the room seemed to move—but it was me getting onto my feet. I stood up before the room turned round completely. As I did so, something chinked in my pockets. I still had some money! I threw the bits of torn exercise-books back into my box and walked out to the grocer's, where I bought three brand new exercise-books and a half-loaf of bread with a bit of butter. On my way home I passed by Harry's and he was good enough to lend me his English books so that I could copy out of them all the things I had torn up. When I got back father was eating at the table, munching slowly and thoughtfully like an old elephant. Mother was telling him about the torn exercise-books. He did not look at me. I sat on the floor as far away from them as was possible, and began to eat the bread while flicking through Harry's books. A chair, drawn back, creaked. I tensed. I stared stonily at the floor, at the books. The blow knocked my front teeth out. The blow knocked the bread clear across the room. He was rubbing his knuckles thoughtfully and looking down at me as though I was a cockroach in a delicatessen. I flung myself at him but his long arm reached out and grabbed my forehead so that my flailing hands and my kicking rage did not even brush against him. He held me like that until I was so tired I could not move. And then he pushed and I fell back into my corner onto the exercise-books. Staining them with blood.

I was nine years old then.

Harry's blood-red coat loomed before me. He gave me a beer. And he drew a red handkerchief from his pocket and blew his nose. He looked at his snot.

'She gave me that, you know,' Harry said.

'Who?'

'Who else but my white chick.'

I stretched my lips into a painful smile.

'Your lips are cracked,' Harry said frowning. 'There's blisters on them.'

I ran my tongue over them; but he shook his head:

'No,' he said, giving me a chapstick. 'Use this.'

I used it.

'You can keep it,' he said, drinking and spilling pink drops onto his red tie.

He looked at his digital watch.

I was staring at the orange-red roof of the stinking public toilet.

The bar's opening now,' he said. 'Let's go in and drink the good lord's health.'

I dusted myself the way a browbeaten mongrel performs its hasty toilet. We aimed straight for the wide and gleaming gates that lead to the muses. Harry said:

'Let's go into the lounge. The Special. The Cocktail Party. T. S. Eliot.'

Harry drew himself up like Achilles sizing up Troy.

'If it's Styx I may as well go down in style,' I mumbled thickly.

'What?'

'I said you've got style, Harry.'

'Style,' he repeated appreciatively. 'Ah, style.'

He rapped on the counter with a silver coin.

'All my life I've been in the kraal slaughtering cattle like Ajax,' I said.

'Who?'

'In Homer,' I said. 'The Iliad.'

'Ah, ancient Greece,' Harry concluded for the benefit of the barman, who was staring fixedly into my incredible face.

When the drinks were ready we lingered at the counter.

'You literary chaps are our only hope,' Harry began.

I choked politely on my drink. Then we are sunk, I thought.

I began to feel like those stale mornings when the cold wind writhes about purposelessly as if there was nothing but air in the gleaming casket of creation. The

sick juices were welling up in me, making me want to vomit. And that blasted barman was still staring with great interest into my face.

'You look well,' Harry said. 'I've never seen you look so well.'

'It's been a long time,' I mumbled.

I creased my face with the effort of fighting the sickness that was welling up and eating my insides with the corrosive acids of gut-rot. The stitches had not tightened yet.

'Yes, long time no see,' Harry agreed.

He clinked glasses with me.

'Drink up,' he ordered politely.

I did. The glasses were promptly filled up again. The barman blurted out in my face:

'Aren't you the . . .?'

But Harry, frowning heavily, cut in:

'No, he isn't. Let's find somewhere to sit.'

We did, our backs to the wall and facing the door— Harry insisted on that.

But as we sat down, something metallic clinked in the region of Harry's waist and slid into view: handcuffs. Without looking down or anything Harry shifted his body and scuffled them out of sight. I took out a cigarette and lit it slowly. The smoke made my eyes smart.

'You shouldn't smoke those, you know,' Harry said, and brought out an expensive brand. 'Put that thing out and try one of these.'

'Later,' I said absently.

'Have the packet, anyway. I've got another. Now, tell me,' Harry said, 'how is she?'

I feigned ignorance.

'Who?'

'My sister.'

'Well.'

'Not from what I heard.'

'Gossip.'

'She told me herself.'

'What about?'

'You and her and your disinterested intervention.'

The tinfoil of my soul crinkled.

'My dear fellow, what can she possibly tell you about me? She's my brother's woman,' I said, and tossed off my drink with an excessive show of worldly confidence.

He regarded me with an aluminium amazement and decided to change the conversation.

'Your reputation seems to have outstripped the facts,' he said thoughtfully. 'Did you see the adoration in that greasy barman's eyes? Look, he's still staring. There. Your poetry has mesmerised him.'

I looked up. As I did so the old cloth of my former self seemed to stretch and tear once more. The pain flashed through my head and like a cold hand squeezed my bloody lungs. (What shall I see when the cloth rips completely, laying everything bare? It is as if a crack should appear in the shell of the sky. The human face in close-up is quite incredible—Swift was right. And what of the house inside it? And the thing inside the house? And the thing inside the thing inside the thing inside the thing? I was drunk, I suppose, orbiting around myself shamelessly. I found a seed, a little seed, the smallest in the world. And its name was Hate. I buried it in my mind and watered it with tears. No seed ever had a better gardener. As it swelled and cracked into green life I felt my nation tremble, tremble in the throes of birth—and burst out bloom and branch.)

When I finished washing the blood of the cat from my hands she once more began to caress my arm. Her face had puffed out and one eye had closed up. And the holy bitch still dreamed, still hoped, still saw visions—why! I had never seen anything like it.

'Can't you see we'll all come to a sticky end if things go on like this?' I asked desperately. I could hear the baby still crying in the next room.

'I just wanted to see you again,' she said quietly. And then as an afterthought she added: 'Do you know you are—arrogant? Very.' What has that got to do with it? I thought. But that was not the time to show my sharp little teeth. Besides, death's handful of iron filings was coldly burning my brains out; some magnetic force in the air was resolutely turning and turning them through my very thoughts.

Fragment of this huge emptiness

Whose pulses sparkle in man's eyes
What excavation discovered you so
rudely into the light?

'What?' she asked.

She looked extremely puzzled.

'A poem,' I said.

But Harry leaned forward and upset my glass.

'What poem?' Harry was waiting expectantly.

'A poem I'm writing,' I said, 'I've just recited the first three lines.'

And again that oblique look:

'You did nothing of the sort. You've just been sitting there like something in a trance. What three lines, anyway?'

I could not for the life of me remember them.

Harry clucked sympathetically. He jabbed a finger into my face.

'Now, poetry,' Harry began, 'is the soul of all civilised nations. Verse. Tiger tiger burning bright. In the forest of the night. The falcon cannot hear the falconer. Things fall apart. When the stars threw down their spears what rough beast . . .'

He paused for breath; and then continued:

'I've never forgotten that poem,' he said thoughtfully.

His hot breath hissed into my face as he leaned forward confidentially.

'I've never told anyone this,' he said in a low voice, 'but I write lyrics.'

(The emphasis he put into the word 'lyrics' startled the barman who, astonished, dropped a glass which shattered behind the counter.)

I stared at Harry. I did not know whether to laugh or cry. But he deciphered my gaping look as admiration.

Thanks, old boy,' he said in a low voice. 'It's not every town that honours its own lyricist. drinks!'

And the barman danced a swift minuet.

Harry's glass clinked my glass and we drank each other's health.

I suppose I was beyond worrying about health; dead souls have no such worries. An extreme case of the left hand not caring a piss about what the right hand was doing. I was, I knew, a dead tree, dry of branch and decayed in the roots. A tree however that was still upright in the sullen spleen of wind. And caught among the gnarled branches were a page from Shakespeare's Othello and page one of the Rhodesia Herald with a picture of me glaring angrily at the camera lens.

But Harry was saying something.

'... in the evening edition,' he said. 'I couldn't believe it, but you've always been rather a closed fist.'

'No. It's just that I've no friends.'

Harry stared; wounded.

'I've always liked you, you know,' he said.

'Don't let's get personal,' I said, feeling sick. 'It might be painful.'

He cleared his throat.

'Let's get drunk instead.' He swallowed phlegm.

I laughed and said:

'That's more lethal.'

I looked up. The barman's eyes bored into mine. The laughter was hurting my gums; something was twitching uncontrollably above the barman's left eye. I got up hastily and, escaping into the toilet, just made it to the bowl where I was violently sick. As I came out, wiping my mouth with the back of my hand, I collided with two massive breasts that were straining angrily against a thin T-shirt upon which was written the legend Zimbabwe.

'You better watch where you're going, deary,' she said.

'Sorry,' I mumbled, darting past her.

But she clutched my arm.

'Or better still, buy me a drink—a brandy for Zimbabwe,' she said.

This time I scrutinised her face and—

'It can't be Julia!' I exclaimed.

'In the flesh like the Word,' she said, twinkling her eyes as though posing before an expensive camera.

My cheeks slowly sank down into my boots.

'Come and join us,' I said in a small still voice.

Julia was the girl who had been left in my charge when I was in the sixth. Now she had straightened out her hair with that damnable hot comb. Her lips were a flaming crimson, like blood. There were darkened patches around her eyes, and false lashes. The eyebrow pencil seemed to have completed the transformation of my old Julia into a beerhall doll. And she immediately clashed with Flash Harry by exclaiming:

'Isn't he the police spy whom you chaps beat up behind the dormitory?'

Harry was not at all amused.

'You're just a nigger whore,' Harry flashed, 'What do you know?'

She appealed to me.

'Yes,' I said yawning, 'it's him all right.'

'Look sonny,' Harry said, getting up.

'Why don't you run along to your goddam white chick?' I suggested.

But Harry has got style. He drew himself to his full height and was about to position his arms akimbo when —his handcuffs once more rattled into view.

There was a dead silence for exactly seven seconds.

I used the pause to savour old Julia's make-up; her massive breasts that were stamped by the gigantic legend of Zimbabwe. With weapons like that Africa could — my thoughts were shelled like groundnuts by Julia suddenly breaking out in the most scornful laughter I've ever heard. Harry cracked, and took a coal-like step towards her; but before he could actually hit her I was between them, drawing slowly upon my stub of a cigarette.

'I'll try one of your cigarettes now, Harry,' I said.

I opened the packet he had given me and lit one. It was as good as he had said. All of a sudden I was a child again, enjoying myself. Mentally dancing with glee. And Julia . . .

'A brandy is it, Julia?' I coughed smoke into Harry's face.

His Wankie face.

His eyes were glowing like live coals. He managed a little spittle of a laugh from the side of his mouth.

'Yes,' Harry said, 'I'm just going to see my white chick. But I'll be back—for you,' he added pointedly.

It flashed through my nerves:

'Harry, if you come back there'll be no more fencing,' I said.

'Are you threatening me? There are witnesses. . . .'

'Barman,' I said, 'a brandy for the lady. And a beer for myself.'

The barman winked.

When I turned round with the drinks Harry had gone. She took the drinks and put them on the table and, eyes twinkling as of old, she threw her arms around my shoulders and brought her face close enough not to touch.

'Hi,' she smiled.

'I thought you were never coming,' I said. 'I waited and waited the whole of yesterday.'

'I had to fight to get anything out of father,' she said. 'He was in one of his moods.'

You know how difficult he is when he is like that.'

'Your passport?' I whispered.

'Sssshh.' She kissed me lightly on the cheek and we sat down. She dipped her little finger into my drink and licked it quickly.

'Well, what was Harry on about?'

I hesitated.

'They must have some leads I suppose, and they've sent him to . . .'

'But we know,' she said slowly.

'That picture in the newspapers,' I reminded her without conviction.

'They probably know I'm the weakest link in the chain,' I added.

'We had to feed that to them,' she said.

I looked up sharply.

'Did you have to tell them about my being . . .'

'It was my idea,' she said.

And her eyes were sparkling. I was staring at the legend on her breast and thinking about black heroes.

'And did you have to paint yourself up like that?' I demanded weakly.

Her eyes opened wider; there were stars in them. I had to change the conversation.

'Any trouble getting through?'

She bit her lip ruefully:

'A little,' she said.

She was looking closely into my face.

'I left the House of Hunger today,' I explained vaguely.

'What about the girl?' she insisted.

'Immaculate? With a name like that she'll survive.'

'Do you still—are you still . . .?'

'I never was. You know I can't, at least not forever. Now and then, perhaps.'

'At least that's honest,' she said. Her voice was brutally sarcastic. She said:

'You disgust me.'

My cheeks slowly rose from my boots and settled back in my face.

'Now, Julia, what have I done wrong?'

'You didn't phone like you promised. And I kicked up a fuss so fierce that father said if ever he saw you again in his house he would—congratulate you.'

'He's daft.'

'Why didn't you phone?'

'Trouble at the House,' I sighed theatrically. 'You know what that is.'

'Your disinterested intervention?'

'Yes. It backfired.'

She bit off a corner of her forefinger nail. Her eyes quickened.

She asked again:

'What about the girl?'

'She's got lots of courage. But only the kind that's the quickest way into the madhouse.'

'You are arrogant,' she said.

I lit her cigarette. I was watching a tiny spark of combustion pulsing in her eyes. I still held the flaming match, between my thumb and second finger.

'You've never forgiven me that filthy film,' she said.

She dabbed at her face, messing up some of the eyeshadow.

I did not bother to answer; after all I had also made one with a girl called Patricia.

'Then why do we always . . .?'

'Yes,' I repeated pointedly, 'why do we always quarrel?'

I still held the burning match.

Unaccountably Julia burst out laughing. Her laugh is very infectious—the barman crackled hilariously like crisp bacon frying spatteringly.

And when she raised her glass and the highlights of it flung their spears into my watery eyes my life gleamed for an instant, like a searing flash of pain.

It was Philip who had left Julia in my charge; and when we joined him at the university things had soured a little. The gist of it was Philip made a scene and declared that I was a beer-guzzling little Judas; Julia stormed out of the room to

return a few seconds later wielding a broom and scared Philip to death.

Whereupon I fled the campus and wandered about in the streets until I found a black night-club that was still open. There I drank heavily but something was wrong and I couldn't get drunk. It was the place: all garish colours and lights and a band of half-naked girls dressed up in leopard skins and gyrating out some coarse smanje-manje. The big man at the microphone was not so much singing as farting out in an unnatural bass voice. The walls were all plastered with advertisements for skin-lightening creams, afro wigs, Vaseline, Benson and Hedges. There was one in particular of a skin-lightened afro-girl who was nuzzling up to her coal-black boyfriend and recommending the Castle Lager. As the music boomed against the advertisements and the arse colours and lights flickered on and off I lost count of time and simply soaked myself with the stuff. I was no nearer to discovering the authentic black heroes who haunted my dreams in a far-off golden age of Black Arcadia. And then it was time to leave. I lurched out through the doors into the cold night-horrors. A taxi came to a halt. I stumbled into the back seat, mumbling where I was going. But someone, a very fat skin-lightened woman—one of the dancers—jumped into the car and sank against me smiling.

'You want to forget?' she whispered a gust of gin into my incredible face.

Before I could say anything she tapped the driver on the shoulder and the taxi shot off into the night. After many turns and side-turns—it seemed to me we were going round in circles—I no longer knew where on earth we were. But the taxi, slowing down, stopped before a bright blue door which was lit up by a naked light bulb. She got out first and then walked round to open my door. She paid the driver who then drove up the ill-lit street and swerved sharply out of sight. She took out a key and in a second we were taking off our coats in a narrow hallway and she was whispering something indistinct:

'. . . you must be a good boy now.'

My head hurt with the sudden glare of white light. The floor was painted charcoal black but the walls were spotless white. In the far corner an effigy of Ian Smith dangled by the neck from a large butcher's spike. She caught me smiling.

'You want to forget?' she asked.

I could not place her dialect but I understood her. I was sure now.

'No,' I said firmly.

'Good.'

The lights went out.

That night all the lights I had known flashed through my mind. The pain was the sound of slivers of glass being methodically crushed in a steel vise by a fiend whose face was very like that of my old carpentry master who is now in a madhouse. The skin-lightened dancer—she was burning, burning the madness out of me. The room had taken over my mind. My hunger had become the room. There was a thick darkness where I was going. It was a prison. It was the womb. It was blood clinging closely like a swamp in the grass-matted lowlands of my life. It was a Whites Only sign on a lavatory. It was my teeth on edge—the bitter acid of it! It was the effigy

swinging gently to and fro in the night of my mind. And the pain of it flared into flame, flickering like a match; for a moment it lit up the room, making the shadows of the naked dancer and me leap quickly across the ceiling and fuse into an embrace. Leaping like ecstasy grown sad—a violence slowly translating into gentleness.

But the match died out and history was the blackened twig of it. The fine grains of that burnt-out insurrection were the stories of those black heroes among whom my story was merely one more skin-lightening pain.

Is the pain of the mind greater than that of the body? The friends whose hurt looks have flung me back into living like this—little cubes of ice burning through my mind

...

'You're burning your finger!' Julia exclaimed.

I threw the almost burnt-out matchstick into the ashtray.

Julia had darted up to order more beer. The bitch. But I could never swear by convincement like the Quakers, though certainly a divine spark seemed to be her primum mobile. My expletives are raked out of me by a liking for blasphemy.

'I swear because of a lack of adjectives to use,' I said as she handed me a drink.

'Fuck!' she exploded casually and sat down.

For some reason I began to recount to myself trivial incidents which had left me feeling like a cat thrown without extreme unction into a deep well.

One day I had been invited to give an informal—illegal—speech to a group of vagrants. As I warmed up to my theme—I knew all the boys there, except one who throughout sat apart looking very gloomy and frowning darkly at my rhetorical effort—something clicked in my mind and I began to harangue them, trying to rouse their minds by giving them examples of heroism on the part of our nationalist guerrillas. As usual I overdid it. I realised this when I became aware of the venomous silence that had come upon my audience. The flood of political rhetoric escaped like a cloud of steam out of my crater of a mouth, leaving me dry and without words. At that point the boy who had been sitting apart stood up and advanced menacingly towards me. There was on his face no natural landmark but one twisted mark of violent intention. The boys behind him were as compact and expectant as celebrants at a particularly bloodthirsty rite. And behind them the late afternoon sky flickered and dipped, abandoning me to my unhappy fate. The rapid twilight seemed to propel the angry youth towards me. He struck me with his fists twice upon the same side of the jawbone. My spectacles, glancing off, tinkled in the grass. He struck me again, twice, on the same spot. I remember I was terrified, not so much by the pain but by the likelihood that if the Trojan traitor went on hitting me like that I would probably fall and pass out. I turned the other cheek. This time the boy was less sure of himself as he struck me again. I stared straight into his eyes and muttered something about 'calling it a day'. But that rekindled his fury—he was hitting me the way a hailstorm destroys a garden of flowers. I could feel various pains and aches all over my body. The boys, moving closer, closed in a tight circle around us. The boy had become as wild as a man who is trying to stamp out a tiny bug which he can scarcely see. At this point a low growl wheezed among my vagrant audience. The boy paused uneasily and realised as I did that the mood of the boys had swung to my side. Like me, he had overdone it. In a moment the vagrants flung me aside and jumped on his back. The

boy was instantly lost to sight in a mass of fist-flying, boot-kicking, head-butting; even his squeal of fear was rudely choked by the grunts of my saviours. The boy is now a permanent invalid; as if that was not enough, his mind from that day refused to budge in any direction and he is now also what they call an idiot. But he seems to remember the cause of his misery, because the other day he nearly beheaded my mother as she was returning from a wedding feast.

'Life is a series of minor explosions whose echo dying out settles comfortably at the back of our minds,' Peter said as he reviewed my sixth-form report.

I agreed reluctantly.

Peter was holding the offending report by the scruff of the neck and through it shaking me back and forth the more to emphasise my vagrancy.

Immaculate was thoughtlessly staring at the sock she was darning. I bowed my head in a vain attempt to strangle the laughter that was roaring at the back of my throat and cackling out through my ears.

Peter was looking at me the way an ugly boy inspects a sudden rash of pimples.

Finally he threw the offending report at my feet.

'Get out of my sight!' he shouted, like Jesus saying 'get thee behind me, Satan'.

I was about to precipitate myself out of the room when he called me back.

There was a grim silence.

But the guillotine did not fall.

I dared to look upwards at the blade.

He threw a handful of dollars at me:

'It's the best report I've ever set my eyes on,' he said. 'Go and get drunk.'

I smiled, crumpling up the tinfoil of my delight.

I returned, hours later, stone sober, with a parcel under my arm. He was screwing her underneath the table. Before I could retreat Peter said crossly:

'Come in: sit down. This is home, man. Anyone would think you'd wandered into Daniel's lions' den.'

I sat down still clutching my parcel. He looked pointedly at it.

'What's that.'

'Some books by Robert Graves,' I said.

He stared the way one does on discovering some shameful family secret; or the way one does when one finds out that one's best friend is actually a murderous lunatic who has escaped from a grim and satanic institution.

I lowered my eyes first and mumbled an apology. Immaculate, still pinned under him, said:

'Leave the boy alone, Peter.'

'He's my brother,' Peter said.

And he removed the blanket that covered them. The heavy lead of my mind sank quickly into my belly. I stared. Then, like a drunk in a daze, I got up, knocked a chair over and tottered towards the door. Before I knew what I was doing I was gleefully talking to myself over a beer in an African night-club some five miles away.

She finally tracked me down late that night and found me raving blind drunk. I woke up in some bed in the small hours and there was someone asleep in my arms. I lit a match. It flared for an instant upon Immaculate's sleeping face. A blue-grey spider lay on her exposed cheek. But when I held the match closer there was nothing there, nothing but the faint outlines of a dimple.

The match went out. The shadows closed around us with a noiseless cosmic violence. It woke her up. Her voice had an inner light stirring within it; the way clouds seem to have in their heart a trembling clarity. She spoke of many things, and fragments of things. She spoke with an intensity that seemed to refract my character the way a prism analyses clearly the light striking its surfaces. That I have no recollection of what it was she spoke about reveals much of the dirtier side of my nature. But I in turn told her about my nervous breakdown when I had become aware of persons around me whom no one else could see. They could not have been the black heroes whom I sought—or perhaps they were. I don't know. There had been four of them; three men in threadbare clothes and the woman of the faded shawl. This had happened a few weeks before my sixth-form examinations—which I then had to write with the assistance of a massive dose of white tranquillisers and pink triangular pills. At first the three men and the woman merely followed me about the school saying nothing but just being there. Crudely there. I would be talking to friends and then become intensely aware of them standing close to my friends. I would be in the history classroom listening to the history master and as usual taking notes and things when I would with a leap of the heartbeat realise that they were in the room, moving about, following the teacher, sitting down when he sat, and aping his every gesture. Or after our football practice when we were in the showers they would appear standing stiffly watching my nakedness. One day this so terrified me that I rushed stark naked out of the showers screaming my head off. Their attacks after that became more mischievous. They began to talk. I could hear them talking compulsively— even when I could not see them. My friends heard nothing, but I began to suspect everyone of trying to undermine my reason. I became rather impossible, and the psychiatrist said I must only attend classes when I 'felt like it.' I began to spend more time in the art studio, where I discovered to my consternation that I could not paint anything which did not have something sinister in it. Meanwhile the voices continued to torment me; growing not only in intensity but also in their outrageousness. I never told the psychiatrist the whole truth about what the voices were saying; but I did send off a series of hysterical missives to Peter demanding 'the truth of the matter'. He did not even bother to answer them. (I have a good mind to publish those strange letters right now.) What the voices said was something quite obscene about my mother's morals; and every day I writhed in agony over this bed of glowing coals. The air reeked of guilt. And shame. And outrage. And scandal. Mountains of argument ranged through my mind until the earthquake of those infernal voices brought them crushing down upon my toes. The absurd, the grotesque, it seemed, had come home to

stay. Where are the bloody heroes? My fear of heights had not restrained me from climbing the cliffs of my nerves. And the demons, finding the House unattended, had calmly strutted in through the open door. Had I been a good atheist, perhaps... The voices took out of my suitcase every little wrong I had done and derisively exhibited it before my eyes. Every evil thought— from lechery to vanity—was held up before my eyes, and I felt like a slimy worm. The objects, smells and presences around me seemed to contain at the centre of their lens the sharp details of those little teeth that were biting into my mind. I opened my mouth to give my defence plea but the voices had not only found me out, they had also taken over the inner chords of my own voice. I talked compulsively. My voice seemed to be contained by the refracting lattices of transparent stones. Little thrusts of swift lights, diamond sparks, spinning maddeningly, leaped through my mind until I could not bear the headache of it. My condition deteriorated: severe palpitations set in and I made it worse by reading all about heart disease in the Encyclopaedia Britannica. And I was cold; I have never been so cold in my life. The ice of it singed my very thoughts; my voice was breaking and the unusual sound of it made me jump irritably. It seemed to me something was taking over my body; the images and symbols I had for so long taken for granted had taken upon themselves a strange hue; and I was losing my grasp of simple speech. I began to ramble, incoherently, in a disconnected manner. I was being severed from my own voice. I would listen to it as to a still, small voice coming from the huge distances of the mind. It was like this: English is my second language, Shona my first. When I talked it was in the form of an interminable argument, one side of which was always expressed in English and the other side always in Shona. At the same time I would be aware of myself as something indistinct but separate from both cultures. I felt gagged by this absurd contest between Shona and English. I knew no other language: my French and Latin were enough to make me wary of conversing in them. However some nights I could feel the French and the Latin fighting it out in the shadowy background of the English and Shona. The fights completely muzzled me. The conversation, the arguments and pleas steadily asserted their own independence; and I wandered about drugged to the hilt by tranquillisers and feeling literally robbed of words. That is when they began to laugh. Their laughter was of the crudest type, obscene. It reduced my whole world to a turd. Its stench got into my food, my painting, my reading and my dreams. Everything I touched turned into a stinking horror. Julia alone made it possible for me to survive that impish laughter. Everyone at the school knew I had become a 'looney' and occasionally some of the boys, especially Harry, would play tricks on me. At one point these cruel tricks drove me out of the dormitory altogether and I was given a room at the priory where of course I accused everyone of trying to poison me. Julia, though rather maddening in those days, was the only reason for living. She knew so much more about sex that sometimes I feared for my soul.

Then one afternoon the sun had rings around it. Its light was at once sickly and remote; a sure sign that the rains were coming. That night—we were at prep; it must have been about nine-thirty—a great charge of lightning exploded, striking the humid air with a sinister violence. At once massive rocks of rain hurled themselves down upon the sleeping earth. The noise was deafening to the ear, the sight awesome to the eye, and the great torrents almost startled me into premature senility. Such a madness of the elements did not seem possible. Rude buckets of water poured over the school. It rained as though it would flood us out of our minds. It drummed on the asbestos roofs. It drummed on the window-panes. It dinned into our minds. It drummed down upon us until we could not stand it. It poured darkly; plashed; gutted; broke down upon our heads like the smack of a fist. It roared, splashed, soaked, stuttered stertorously down from the black spaces of the huge mindless universe. It rose. It swelled. It cracked its sides like a whip. Silver fish seemed to leap in frenzy by the

bucketful. The mud splash and sucking of it churned round and round in our minds. It chilled up to the shoulders of one's soul. The delirium of rain shook the school into a feverish excitement. The eruption was like a boil that bursts and splatters everything with its black acids. The angry skies drove boulders of rain against the school until we felt our very sanity was under a relentless siege. The singing fury of it stuck little needles into the matter of our brains. It boomed. It dammed up. It welled. It roared the lions out of voice. It spilled down into our minds, soaked our words, and left us open-mouthed. Mouth wet. The air reeked of nothing else. Its sweet evil tang stuck like glue to our clothes. Things floated in it and they were our former assurance. At the cemetery the cheaper graves were gutted with it and the little wooden stakes and crosses were swept away. A drunken teacher who recklessly dared it was never seen again. That rain, it knocked more than the breath out of you. That rain, it drummed the drum until the drum burst, stitching the mind with thongs of lightning. It was like a madman talking incessantly; whispering rapidly into the ear of the sky. It was like a man who, suddenly bereaved, breaks down and hurls himself at the wall. It was a great river plunging over a falls and roaring the cerebral rage that can only be broken by the rocks below. The rain, it broke down the workers' compound; it felled the huts with its brute knuckle-duster. It knocked down the mud walls and brought the flimsy roofs crushing down upon the unlucky occupants. All over the compound men women and children fought for their homes that night, building, rebuilding, groaning against its blows until once again the walls of that malice came crushing down. And still the skies dribbled compulsively upon the earth. That rain: it chattered its sharp little teeth; it foamed at the mouth against everything. The argument of it left us stunned. The words hit us again and again with each bucketful of rain. Something diseased had been unleashed among us. Its inflammation seared like a flash of pain, a bolt of intuition beating the madness out of me. It cracked the skin of our teeth. My seed-bed was utterly wrecked; there was in the rain the swollen seeds of an old feud; its raw smell had reached down into the secrets of the earth's lungs. Its muddy feet had trampled and stained everything I held dear. It soaked the memory. It held the only sun of former days prisoner to its lusts. And the colours of the mind began to run down the canvas until everything had ruined everything else. No sooner had I listened to it for what seemed five seconds—but was really twenty-five minutes, because the bell rang to end the prep period—than I realised that I could not move from my chair. I was so frightened of the prospect of running through that malign storm that I was quite prepared to stay the night in my cubicle. Harry, whose cubicle was next to mine, began to sing tragically:

Shure kwehure kunotambatamba haa! Shure kwehure
kunotambatamba haaa!

Kanandazofa ndinokuchengetera nzvimbo haa! Kanandazofa
ndinokuchengetera nzvimbo haa!

People were moving about the room. Edmund farted and Stephen shouted something about Kwame Nkru-mah. The girls had already gone. Most of the boys soon left. Something fell onto the open pages of my book; I choked back my scream when I realised what it was and swivelled round in anger. Tricks again! Harry was laughing sympathetically.

'It won't tempt you. It's not real, man,' Harry said.

And he reached forward to retrieve his rubber snake.

I was too mad for words. I had struck him down in an instant and before I knew what I was at I had smashed my chair over his back, once, twice. I flung the chair

away and, more frightened at what was changing inside me than whether Harry was all right, looked out into the clashes of light, out there in the storm, flickering through my mind. I think I knew then what was in store for me. But I felt elated, as though the worst had already been. This was an illusion—and yet a step in the right direction. Something resolute. Something sure. As I read it, lightning stabbed the air and as it thundered I swung round quickly enough to dodge most of the blow of the chair which Harry had flung at my head. The blow knocked me sideways. Before I could recover, Harry had dashed out into the storm. I was after him in an instant— picking up the rubber snake and stuffing it into my pocket. The storm grabbed me around the body and hurled me after Harry. Utter blackness alternated with flickerings of eel-like lightning. The rocks of rain had immediately drenched me to the marrow. And then something jumped upon my back and I fell face flat in the churning mud of the night. Something was trampling me into the sticky mess of mud. I grabbed for a leg and twisted. Harry cursed as he fell. And then we went for each other like madmen. But neither gained any advantage. We fought and plastered ourselves with mud and blood while the massive rocks of rain hurled themselves down upon our bare heads. We fought until we were so tired that our blows could not have flattened ice-cream; indeed, our blows seemed like a lover's teasing and our struggles had become embraces. Our kicks were mere coquetry. And then something supremely white, blindingly so, erupted at the heart of the storm, striking us down in a heap in all that mud. I began to laugh, Harry began to laugh. We were both as helpless as if the laughter was the final say of the storm. It was a new clarity—the kind of madness that overcomes Pauline travellers on the road to Damascus. We shed our clothes as we laughed and began to paint each other's bodies with handfuls of mud. Earth to earth. We were so engrossed in this that we did not notice that not only were we standing in the middle of the gravel road but also a car with its headlights full upon us had stopped and its driver was blaring his horn repeatedly. We must have looked worse than ghosts. It was Harry's idea to scare the poor chap out of his wits; which we did only too well. He was our history master, and he never recovered from the experience. He began to have fits; and had to be replaced because they found him one night raving on the roof of his house and shouting that he was Elijah the Prophet. When Harry and I returned to the dormitories we went to the showers and there the miracle happened—I almost cried with glee. They had gone! I could feel it. They had erased themselves into the invisible airs of the storm. The daemon had been exorcised and gone into the Gadarene swine. For the first time in my life I felt completely alone. Totally on my own. It is as if a storm should rage in one's mind and no one else has the faintest experience of it. It frightened me a little. I was learning to keep my claws sheathed.

'What do you make of it?' I asked.

She said nothing.

She had fallen asleep while I was telling her about it.

Her father was a priest in the Roman Catholic Church. But fortune had not always smiled on him. He had started life just like any other half-starved homeless vagrant. A 'lucky' chance—an encounter with a racist but benevolent white priest—pushed his foot up onto the first rung: he became a catechist, bullying old and young alike and accusing women—those who repulsed his advances—of witchcraft and sorcery. He won his Standard Six certificate, and soon afterwards became a deacon and then a priest. What more could a man want? A wife and children—that he already had. And from chimney to pulpit he began to denounce all African customs; from desk to dustbin he carted out all manner of filthy traditions which in reality were the only

strengths still in the minds of his own people. And then when Immaculate—it was he who gave her that ridiculous name—became pregnant, he became like a fierce bull that is conscious of being trifled with by a ninny of a matador. He saw red; and with one dust-snuffling toss of his massive horns he cast her out. From then on he turned his attention to politics—and to Harry. He came to address our sixth form twice and on both occasions found reason to rebuke my disrespect for the cloth: the second time was during my nervous breakdown, when I shouted 'It's people like you who're driving us mad!' I wanted to say more, but I began to stammer and he took advantage of that to say 'It's the ape in you, young man, the heart of darkness.'

He went on:

'Humility is the gateway to the halls of government. The humility I mean is this: you had nothing but the ape-man in you. Then Jesus Christ came . . .'

My inkwell missed his head by a breath and smashed into the wall behind him. But he shouted all the louder:

'You had nothing but the ape-grin in your brains. And the white man came. Look around you. Surely the industry and progress . . .'

A large lump of sadza hit him squarely in the face.

But he seemed to draw strength from it and to drag it full-blast out of his lungs of the earth:

'Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's. St. Paul himself, in . . .'

Three lumps of sadza flung from different points of the room scored direct hits on his grey head.

But with a resolute shake of his stooping shoulders he cried out triumphantly:

'... in the Epistle to the Romans specifically says that loyalty rather than insurrection is the supreme Christian virtue.'

There was dead silence as he lowered his voice dramatically and continued in a more confidential tone:

'I was also, like you, restless and impatient. Listen, I never had the chance—which you have now—of a formal education. My youth was a hungry and impatient one; but my hunger was not for the things of this world. My impatience was for the coming of a greater reality. Those of you who know me well know that I was a homeless orphan: without shelter, without food, without a father, without a mother, without brothers or sisters, without the comfort of friends. There was a great void in my heart. That vast emptiness was the horror of the heart of darkness.'

('The horror—the horror!' Edmund mimicked unconvincingly. Joseph Conrad was one of our set authors then.)

At this point the door was flung open and Father Johnson entered in great agitation. He took one look at our handiwork (the ink, the mess of sadza) and as usual looked so shocked that no one dared breathe lest our breath knocked him down. Finally he took the priest by the arm and led him out of the room. As the door closed gently behind

them Edmund whispered loudly 'Ready, steady, go!' and the room resounded with catcalls, hoots, howls, ululations, screeches, whistles and the mind-bending agony of tables being drummed black and blue.

'Bloody missionaries!'

'Bloody whites!'

'They had the Bible!'

'We had the land!'

'Now they have the land!'

'And we have the Bible!'

'Bloody sell-outs!'

(Harry looked as though he had just been swallowed alive by Jonah's whale.)

'And what about Tangwena!'

'And where is Nkomo!'

'Sithole!'

'Magandanga edau!'

(Harry in confusion had within the whale begun to sing loudly and discordantly:

Shure kwehure kunotambatamba haa! Shure kwehure kunotambatamba
haaa! Kanandazofa ndinokuchengetera nzvimbo!)

Someone mistook Harry's song for a political one; and began to join in with:

Tsuro tsuro woye ndapera basa! Tsuro tsuro woye
naNkomo!

I do not quite know what happened next. Something seemed to split my mind open. The floor rushed rapidly upwards to meet me; out of the corner of my eye I saw Harry rushing anxiously towards me. I opened my mouth to say something. There was this dark pit. I was falling gently into it. A tiny star erupted and the flying sparks of its minute explosion and the overpowering smell of blood woke me hours later. My head seemed encased in a fiendish ice-hold; but when I explored with my hand, ripping off the bandages and feeling around the wet stinging wound, it was only the cold cold stitches they had used on the gash. Stitches enough to weave webs from the one wall of my mind to the wall of the House of Hunger.

And the mind slowly became the room. And the room —floor, roof, walls—was boxed in by other rooms. There were posters on the walls; faded posters peeling off the egg-cracks in the walls of my mind. Of the room. One said Earth. One said Fire. One said Water. One said Air. One said I am Stone. And they were all contained within each other, papering over the cracks. Another was a bushman painting: a series of lines tracing out exactly the instant of the killing of a gazelle. The inner lens of the

artist had captured in those few deft lines the incredible face of human existence. Another was a toothy photograph of a black man, ankle over knee, grinning, holding in each hand a cheap cigar and a rolled cigarette. A price-tag pinned to his cheek read: 'Fugard'. A tiny badge like a star on his cream lapel punched upwards leaping into my magnifying lens; it screamed quietly 'I am me'. The gold pin on his pastel tie depicted the private parts of a bisexual being.

The ceiling was pasted over with the crinkled fragments of a sky that had been cut up recklessly with an old razor. In the centre of them, written in minute letters the colour of dawn, was the legend civilization. But some enterprising vandal had scrawled over it the two words black is.

The floor was a mirror reflecting in reverse the parable of the ceiling. The same vandal—possibly Edmund—had painted on it in red letters: art is fart.

I had only been in the room for a few seconds when I began to hear the tiny maddening sound. I shifted my weight, listening. It was the sound of distant footsteps coming and going in all the other rooms that pressed against my room. Feet exactly taking step in time with each other; coming and going. Trudging and turning just behind a point midway between my eyes:

There was this window.

I walked towards it and stuck my head out.

There were thousands of windows out there and there were heads sticking out of them. Heads black like me.

I drew back staring at the window itself.

It was a mirror.

I stuck my head out through it again.

Thousands of black heads were sticking out of thousands of windows.

A tiny explosion erupted and streaked through my head like the sparking trail of a falling star. It multiplied into millions of glowing fireflies.

Flame-lilies.

Something fighting floated down from a pale blue sky. As it floated down to my level I saw that it was a black man and a white man locked in the embraces of struggle.

A split second later the thing splintered into the room, knocking me clear across the floor. The fighting thing exploded into a tremendous din, sparks flying.

The heat sucked the oxygen out of my brain.

The blow rang angrily, roaring in my ears.

I looked.

The thing was gone.

But there was on the floor a star cut out of toilet paper. Soft toilet paper.

I groped towards it and blew.

Ppffffphhp.

It flew upwards. It hovered unsteadily. It floundered. It sailed straight for the window. On its underside was written the legend zimbabwe.

Those black heroes . . .

I stuck my head out of the window.

The star shot upwards until it was no more than a glint upon the retina of the sky.

Somewhere a toilet flushed; and drowned the room.

My thoughts chalked themselves on the black page of a dreamless sleep. In the morning there was not a single space left on that page: the story was complete. As I read it every single word erased itself into my mind. Afterwards they came to take out the stitches from the wound of it. And I was whole again. The stitches were published. The reviewers made obscene noises. It is now out of print.

But those stitches, those poems . . .

The sunlight singled out the grim dirt that had formed on the whitewashed wall. Flies buzzed out hallelujahs. A furry spider drew in its eight legs and studied me cautiously. A chameleon etched delicately against the stains of dirt on the wall, sucked its lips and swivelled its old eye towards the pimple on my cheek. A wisp of cloud drifting contentedly across the sun cast upon me a whimsical shadow of a look. The variegated weeds at my feet conversed gently to and fro, pausing again to chide my clumsy shoes. A floating seed rocked itself quizzically on my scarred wrist and, dissatisfied, slowly took off into the air. A crow hovered in mid-flight and slowly contemplated the top of my head; a liquid bomb plashing on my prematurely grey hair was that sage's assessment of my character . . .

But those stitches . . .

A heap of soiled dishes scolded and squabbled on the grease-strewn table. An unruly crowd of empty beer-bottles had gathered in the shadows of the grimy wash-basin. The robot cupboard had exposed its privates: a troop of salt and pepper tins reinforced by a bloody ketchup character whose ominous look drove me hurriedly into the bathroom.

The toilet bowl did not flinch when I sat on him. The paper protested crisply but I did not show any mercy. When I shook his arm gratefully he flushed, roaring immovably as I pulled up my sullen trousers.

Yes, those stitches, those poems . . .

The grains of the gravel walk gritted their teeth beneath my clumsy shoes. The night sky squinted through its lunar monocle and leaned over to regard the eclipse of

my iron soul. A cold breath of air blew gently against the back of my neck and whispered inaudibly of skulls staring upwards through six feet of dirt.

The pane misted soothingly against my lips. I could see in the Great Hall thousands of heads opening and shutting against great glasses of secretive beer. On the platform were five heads; one was opening and shutting against an offended microphone. Three were furiously scratching the bellies of itchy guitars. The fifth head, tightly locked within itself, was butting against the stretched skin of drums that no longer knew pain. In the space directly beneath the platform there was a scarred head dancing clumsily with a haughty chair.

These, too, were the stitches.

How many sheep did you wear last winter?

Those who have climbed the highest Everest of pain have stuck their flag upon it. The rest of us may as well—

'Publish the stitches?'

'No.'

The stitches run like the great dyke across the country. A little blood still seeps through; it is like red ink on a child's teeth. The bloodstains on my plate accuse the appetite that goes into eating. The stains on the sheet when she left the next morning refused to be laundered away. In the sky, God's stains are beautiful to see from down below or from up above.

Those who eat brains only . . .

'Fuck!' Julia exploded.

'What's wrong now?' I asked, feigning innocence.

'You.'

'Sorry.'

She snorted. Her painted fingernails gleamed like claws around her cigarette. She was probably thinking I would be easy prey; it saddened me a little to think that she had become one of those persons who depend for their sanity solely on the measure of their claws. The measure of the stains left behind. Stains! The barman impressed by her massive breasts, was thoughtfully reducing her to a stain on a sheet. A true hero of our time. Reducing everything to shit.

'What is Philip doing now?' she asked.

'Advertising. He's thinking of switching to RTV.'

She was staring. I knew what was coming. Drink affected her that way. The way she stared—I looked hastily to see if my fly was open. It wasn't. I said:

'There was this magazine Philip and I were going to bring out. Poetry and short stories. We wanted to do something of what Lermontov did. Two chaps, Doug and

Citre, who worked with him were going to join us. White youngsters. But Doug got busted for drugs. Citre fled the country to escape the military dragnet. And my uncle turned me out of the house because the police kept checking up on me. The magazine never materialised. And Philip was lucky not to get the sack.'

I stopped.

She was still dissecting me with her oblique scalpel look.

A glass of clear water, knocked sideways, and frozen in mid-toppling: that's how I felt.

I went on rather desperately:

'It was a bad patch for Philip. I was just getting into dagga. And liking it. Of course he did not fully trust me any more because of a certain woman. I mean he kept talking in parables about a certain Judas figure. The chap who betrayed Troy Incanor, was it? Imagine the human body having within itself a built-in Trojan Horse. And saying there was nothing finer in the world than the figures on a Greek vase. Ode to a Grecian Urn and all that. All rot, of course. But our meetings were like that. It was the dagga. I suppose. Boredom had lit up our brains. That there is a divine spark in a human being, however low. The limitations of reason. And something about the Yahoos and those horses. Do you remember Lobengula's letter to the Queen? "Some time ago a party of men came into my country, the principal being a man named Rudd. They asked me for a place to dig gold and said that they would give me certain things for the right to do so. I told them to bring what they would give, and I would show them what I would give. A document was written and presented to me for signature. I asked what it contained, and was told that in it were my words and the words of those men. I put my hand to it. About three months afterwards I heard from other sources that I had given, by that document, the right to all the minerals in my country. I called a meeting of my indunas, and also of the white men, and demanded a copy of that document. It was proved to me that I had signed away the mineral rights of my whole country to Rudd and his friends." Poor chap. I don't like to blame him though, for making us all like this. Of course he was rather silly. Poking his head into a Pandora's box. Deserved what he got. Like a baboon poking his hand into a gourd-trap. Of course you and I would be amahole, slaves, if the poor chap had survived. Chief Moghabi refused to submit to authority and was killed. Chief Ngomo did the same and he and his people were killed with a seven-pounder and a Maxim gun. We did not I suppose want to be slaves of either the heroic Nde-bele or the Lendy-Jameson gang. Jameson said: "Ma-shonas are servants of white men". Mtshete said: "To whom do the Mashona belong if they do not belong to the king?" Of course the understatement of the year came from Lobengula, who said of white men: "You people must want something from me." '

'And then,' I said, 'War. Of a sort. The Maxim and other guns began to speak and within a quarter of an hour the surrounding country was strewn with dead and wounded. This was at Shangani. At Membezi the Maxims also spoke; within half an hour a thousand Ndebele had fallen. Lobengula fled Bulawayo. And after crossing the Shangani admitted defeat. He said: "They have beaten my regiments, killed my people, burnt my kraals, captured my cattle, and I want peace." The one thing that bugs me about the man is that he even loved white men. That he killed my people like cattle, the way Germans killed Jews. And he loved white men. Even trusted them. And then he wanted to know if Queen Victoria really existed. Wives and all that. What I mean is: is this all there is to our history? There is a stinking deceit at the heart of it. Petty intrigues. White hoboos. Bloody missionaries singing Onward

Christian Soldiers. Where are the bloody heroes? Do you remember the words of that dying warrior at Mbembezi: "Wau! To think the Imbezu regiments were defeated by a lot of beardless boys!" After all, even the goddamn Rudd concession almost got lost in the Kalahari desert when that chap got lost in it and all he had was gold and champagne and brandy and stout: and when he couldn't hope any more he buried the blasted concession in, of all places, an ant-bear hole and the stupid bushmen helped him, and so here we are all sticky with the stinking stains of history. Smouldering and farting . . .'

I paused because there were glittering gems crystallising out of the brine of her large clear eyes. And a stiffening of limbs. Those are pearls that were his eyes, said Shakespeare. Pearls are the lucid translation of agony into refracting lattices. I could not stand the light of them. I shook my head—my mind was now just a cloud of alcohol. No wonder I was rambling like this. What, with an education like . . .

'Some bastard,' I said, 'some bastard beat up Philip's sister. Anne, that's her name, she was beaten black and blue. Raped her out of her mind too. But we found him—I did. He thought he could skulk behind Nestar's skirts. But I found him. And phoned Philip, who crunched into him the way a pickaxe smacks into a wedding cake.'

Julia smiled a tiny star.

'How can a black person be beaten black and blue?' she demanded.

She had latched onto the one subject with which she could browbeat me the way a cruel boy once tormented Lucius the Golden Ass by beating him on the same spot. The same inflamed raw spot—beating Lucius there with a great stick.

'It's just an expression,' I said wearily.

She did not want to know about Anne. One learns a lot about people by merely studying what they do not want to know. Everybody doesn't want to know something or other. I did not want to know what I really felt about mother, about Immaculate. And about—but Julia was getting on to that.

'It's not,' she retorted. 'You are awfully mixed up.'

Most educated Africans like the word 'awfully', the word 'actually', the phrase 'Is it not?' They are the open-sesame to success. Actually, class-consciousness and the conservative snobbery that goes with it are deeply rooted in the African elite, who are in the same breath able to shout liberation, polygamy without feeling that something is unhinged. It's awfully trying. I have, of course, my own pet words and allusions which reveal to the eager listener just what kind of a bastard I am. Harry has got style; I too have got . . . But Julia was already unwrapping the ghastly business.

'I know,' I said quickly.

'No, you don't know. It's the way you . . . talk sometimes. Your moods. And the way you never actually seem to look at things.'

Her painted claws reached out and closed over my fist. The hyena, the wild dog, the vulture had finally seen that I could not defend myself because the lions before her had already picked my bones clean. I have always wondered how people know that their victim has been cowed enough to submit to being eaten. They know intuitively,

instinctively, Stephen once said as he licked his chops over Edmund's physical weakness. Lobengula finally agreed to be eaten by Rhodes. My generation had all but been consumed by gut-rot; it is as if there was a tiny drill burring inside one's brains. Now masturbation—

Her sharp little teeth gleamed. Something tiny erupted in the sky of her eyes.

'You hate being black,' she said.

My discoloured teeth ached. Here we go again, I thought. Can a hollow decayed soul be filled in, the way dentists do it to a mess of teeth? Did she want me to flaunt my horns and hooves? If teething is natural in babies, why not in new wine? Harry's toothpaste character. Me and my dentures. Lightning stitching the air.

I swallowed. My voice had become rather hoarse. My gums were aching as if the Second Coming was around the corner, after more than eighty years of gut-rot.

'Take a close look at me,' I said, 'And then see if you can repeat what you've just said.'

She took a long detailed look at my incredible face.

And she burst out laughing.

My voice grew small and remote, the way it does when impotent anger spreads and paralyzes my faculty for logical thought. I talked rapidly in that small-toothed voice. I could feel inside my head a fine handsaw gnawing swiftly, gnawing maddeningly. And something was twitching in the barman's face. And, outside, thousands of flies, whipped up into a frenzy by their invisible conductor, buzzed a crescendo of Handel's Hallelujah Chorus, while the thin sunlight-foil glistened and flashed with the crinkled delight of it all.

—The old man died beneath the wheels of the twentieth century. There was nothing left but stains, bloodstains and fragments of flesh, when the whole length of it was through with eating him. And the same thing is happening to my generation. No, I don't hate being black. I'm just tired of saying it's beautiful. No, I don't hate myself. I'm just tired of people bruising their knuckles on my jaw. I'm tired of racking my brains in the doorway. I don't know. Nothing turns out as exactly intended. A cruel sarcasm rules our lives. Sometimes freedom's opportunity is a wide waistline. The bulldozers have been and gone and where once our heroes danced there is nothing but a hideous stain. They stretched the wings of our race, stretched them out against the candle-flame. There was nothing left but the genitals of senile gods. My life—my life is a spider's web; it is studded with minute skeletons of genius—My life—

'O shit!' she muttered, as though she had forgotten something.

'My life . . .'

I was sweating from the rush of words.

She deftly licked the rim of her glass with a quick red tongue.

'You don't have to take that line with me,' she said.

I took a deep breath.

'You like to worry my old sore, don't you?' I asked.

'To bring you out of yourself,' she said.

'There's nothing to bring out.'

Her nails dug into my wrist.

'There's always the old semen,' she said.

Once more my cheeks—though more slowly this time —sank into my boots. I held my breath.

'Tubes,' she said. 'That's what being human means. Insides. Entrails. All twisted up in a knot. A red knot.'

'The augury of life-steaming entrails,' I mumbled.

'When I was young,' she said, 'I wanted to look at my insides. Rip them inside out and see what I really was like.'

I had retreated behind my drink.

'How is the old lubrication?' she persisted.

'Weird.'

'Today I woke up feeling all arse,' she said.

Something stirred in my nether regions, turning her into a mere receptacle for the stains that had made everything nasty.

'I'm still feeling that way,' she said. 'I could do one more of those films with that chap—what was his name—he screwed very well, as though he was drawing circles with his loins. What was his name?'

'Citre.'

'Do you think white girls are any better in bed? That Patricia, for instance.'

'The weather was rather humid. Sort of sticky and stuffy, you couldn't keep it in without slipping and falling to the rocks below.'

She looked shocked.

'I didn't quite catch that,' she said.

'It must have been crushed on the rocks then.'

The claws relaxed their grip on my wrist. But she put on her armour again and with the speed of greased lightning promptly dispatched Hector:

'You wrote verses to Patricia, didn't you? The way you two carried on you'd think . . .'

'All right, all right. I plead guilty to every charge you're going to move against me. And what's more, I still think a lot about her.'

'The campus was up to its ears about your sordid goings on,' she said. 'How did you reconcile your politics with your sexual adventures?'

I sighed.

'I admit there were certain persons who made certain derogatory remarks about it. For instance, Harry . . .'

'What?'

'He said she looked like the back of a bus and he wanted to know how on earth I mounted it.'

Once more my cheeks were gradually creeping up my legs and my trunk.

'But what's the point of all this, Julia?'

She said nothing.

'I mean, you ought to know me better than that.'

She gritted her small sharp teeth and the sound made me wince. I knew that the moment had come to keep my mouth shut. I closed my eyes and watched the curtained insides of my eyelids. But the voice persisted:

'You disgust me!'

A spot of her spittled words stung into my left cheek. A tiny star collapsed into itself in my chest. When I coughed I had to swallow a lot of phlegm. The pain of it dragged my cheeks back into my face.

She shifted her chair so that no one but me could see what she was doing. Her hand, those painted claws, had closed tightly around my privates. I decided there and then that enough was enough. In a deliberately loud voice, so that heads turned, I said:

'Julia, take your hand off my penis!'

When I was four years old I used to sleep in the cramped space between the wall and my parents' bed. And eight nights a week the maniacal symphonies of their screwing dinned into my mind. Then for one whole week father did not come home and I slept in the bed with mother. The following week father had still not come home. One night I had just about drifted off to sleep when I woke up screaming that there was a man at the window. But she hushed me and opened the window and let him in. He instantly jumped into the bed on top of her while I reluctantly eased down onto the cold cement floor. Soon there were tremendous groans and grunts erupting from that bed and the energy of it was like god's fist shaking satan's shirtfront. The avalanche of it was even enough to wake Peter, who usually slept like a boa constrictor that has swallowed an elephant. He at a glance sized up the situation; like a bat out of hell he flung himself

at the man who, however—without even pausing in his screwing of mother—knocked him out cold with a backhander. Father came back three days later. I said nothing. Peter grimly said nothing. And mother looked like she was not thinking about anything at all.

My street education was no less explicit. The advent of pubic hairs and unmanly breasts (you were supposed to squeeze them, or to pick up an angry ant and let it bite the nipple) was brought to my gang quite graphically by Peter. He was the first to have pubic hairs worth exposing. He was the first to actually induce Nestar to take down her knickers and bend over. And one thick summer night the boys came from all over the township and gathered round to watch a demonstration Peter had promised. He was going to prove to us infants that he had actually become capable of making girls—any girls—pregnant. It was a solemn occasion. We were going to see the thing that divided the men from the boys. Peter stripped. He had bathed and oiled himself all over. He was lean and strong and handsome. The size of his organ astonished us. It was stiff and huge and its mouth was tense. He quite casually cradled it in his right-hand fingers and began to masturbate. We watched him with mounting eagerness. Above us white termites flashed and spurted about the naked light bulb of the solitary street-light. I began to sweat. He groaned, and—moved. He was losing control. We could see a great happening taking over his soul. It was in his spine, arching him backward, and yet lifting him gradually. It was as if he stood between two magnets, and the iron filings of his nerves were being tortured into a pattern. The taut cloth of his being, unable to bear the strain, tore. And, moaning like something out of this world, he came and came and came like new wine that cannot be contained within old cloth. The gang drew closer and closer and sighed. I swallowed thickly, but my mouth was dry. And my mouth, it seems, has been dry ever since.

These discoveries made us bolder. There was in the township a large floating population of prostitutes. (Nestar was to become a queen among them.) Most of them had nowhere secret to take their numerous clients. They used the bush instead. The countryside, up to then, had left me cold and indifferent; later a hasty affair with Wordsworth's Prelude swung me to the opposite extreme. Anyway, I and the gang used to take our lives into our hands and follow the prostitutes and their clients into the heart of the bush, where it seemed the heart of the matter was daily revealing itself to the world. I did have a good pair of running legs and could jump over or through thorn hedges. One day we followed a woman back into the township. There was nothing particularly interesting about her. It's just that we could see on the gravel road splotches and stains of semen that were dripping down her as she walked. Years later I was to write a story using her as a symbol of Rhodesia.

The girls were also learning. Once every month a girl would be expelled from the school because she had become pregnant. One of them—Nestar—caused me much discouragement. She got pregnant, was cast out of school and home and church and is now one of the more famous whores in the whole country.

The older generation too was learning. It still believed that if one did not beat up one's wife it meant that one did not love her at all. These beatings (not entirely one-sided, because the man next door tried it and was smashed into the Africans Only hospital by his up to then submissive wife) were always salted and peppered by the outrageous statements of the participants about the morals of either party. The most lively of them ended with the husband actually fucking—raping—his wife right there in the thick of the excited crowd. He was cursing all women to hell as he did so. And he seemed to screw her forever—he went on and on and on and on until she looked like death. When at last—the crowd licked its lips and swallowed—when at last he

pulled his penis out of her raw thing and stuffed it back into his trousers, I think she seemed to move a finger, which made us all wonder how she could have survived such a determined assault.

But the best lessons we had in hardihood were not from the example of the males. There were more male than female lunatics; more male than female beggars; more male than female alcoholics ... And they seemed to know that the upraised black fist of power would fill up more lunatic asylums than it would swell the numbers of our political martyrs. And when the Pill fell like manna from god's bounty—

But the young woman's life is not at all an easy one; the black young woman's. She is bombarded daily by a TV network that assumes that black women are not only ugly but also they do not exist unless they take in laundry, scrub lavatories, polish staircases, and drudge around in a nanny's uniform. She is mugged every day by magazines that pressure her into buying European beauty; and the advice columns have such nuggets like 'Understanding is the best thing in the world, therefore be more cheerful when he comes home looking like thunder.' And the only time the Herald mentions her is when she has—as in 1896/7—led an uprising against the State and been safely cheered by the firing squad or when she is caught for the umpteenth time soliciting in Vice Mile.

When Nestar (what kind of a father would give his child a name like that?) was cast out she knew nothing about survival in the streets. The married man who had made her pregnant beat her up when she went to him for help. She was twelve then. She slept in waiting rooms and lavatories at the bus station and at the railway station. I don't know what she ate to keep herself going. Later when I asked her if she had thought of suicide she almost bit my head off.

'Suicide!' she scoffed. That's for educated lunatics like you.'

She gave birth to a son in the bush. When I later asked her where she said abstractedly:

'At the head of the stream. There was blood everywhere but he looked like a new smooth stone when I washed him.'

I did not want to talk about him because of what Philip and I were going to do to him.

The pain, blood and emptiness of that birth made her there and then decide to 'fight into the thick of the money'. Money, she said, was power. There is nothing worth while that has no gold in it, she said.

I looked around the room: she had certainly found the pot of gold and stolen it from the Rainbow-Serpent.

'White men have a thing about black women, you know,' she confided. 'And there was nothing I wouldn't do. Most wouldn't even touch me. They'd just make me do things and they'd watch with their eyeballs sticking out. And masturbate like hell. But there was one who always had the same old thing. I would suck his balls and he would come off into my hair. He would really grease my hair with the stuff. Rubbing it in like a bishop laying on hands, while I licked the rest of the drops from his stick. Then he would make me stick my arse right out into the sky of his face with my head between my knees and he would breathe it in like god accepting incense and then the

baptism would come when he'd sort of writhe and cry for me to fart and urinate into his face. Like rain. A sort of storm scene. And then there was Billy.'

She wrinkled her brow with the effort to remember.

My writing pad was on the fur rug: I had long stopped taking notes.

She went on.

'Billy knew all there was to know about orgasms. He'd simply explode into a long hysterical one just at the sight of my body. And he couldn't stick it in enough. He'd sort of crumble up like a biscuit and cry as though he just couldn't believe it. And he always called me Mother. He'd just tense up. And slowly break up like the little dry twig of god's still, small voice. And swearing with glee like a schoolboy. He liked to fuck me to the sound of Shostakovitch's Leningrad Symphony.'

She paused to look at the expensive rings on her fingers. I looked around the room. An elegant TV nestled in the corner, by a marble statue of Venus. A bowl of apples—like a discrete symbol—nested on a lovely pastel patchwork. My clumsy shoes were safely hidden in the thick rich carpet. And on the wall facing me was a calligraphic sketch; in charcoal and ink. She noticed me staring foolishly at it.

'Bill did that,' she said.

It hit me in the guts.

'But that's a—Petyt surely. William Petyt!'

'It's Billy all right,' she said with a certain satisfaction.

Petyt had been one of the few whites to 'promote' black sculpture in the country. He is now safely dead and buried in his Canada.

She stroked ash from her cigarette; her fingernails were neither long nor painted. She had become the kind of person who has no need of claws. She said:

'His friend Mike was weird, though. Not utterly. He made me stand naked and astride a sort of bull's-eye thing and he would throw all kinds of jellies right at my hole, you know. And while aiming and all he would chant a thing about the Congo, the Mau Mau, Algeria, and one of our leaders who shall remain nameless.'

I stared.

She shook her head, and stubbed out her cigarette. She yawned.

'Do you want to know about the others?'

I nodded.

'Then ask me another time,' she said leaning back into her chair and crossing her legs rather loosely. At that moment she looked like the old Nestar for whom I had pined in primary school. I was then so smitten by her that, until one painful day when the teacher compared my handwriting with the handwriting in her book, I did all her homework and was prepared to consign the universe into a flushing toilet.

I turned sharply.

The doorhandle was turning slowly, noiselessly. The door opened. A tall youth who wore his body the way a traveller lugs a heavy trunk walked in. He looked as though nails had been driven into his palms and into his feet. He planted himself directly before me.

'What do you want with my mother, munt? Begging for arse? You fucking stinking nigger . . .'

I slid my hand into my coat and casually brought out an evil-looking Okapi. Nestar sat up staring. I did not even look at him. Knives were not that strange to me.

'What was that you said?'

He seemed to lick his lips with a swallowing noise like a flying fish splashing clumsily back into the sea. I could feel him sizing me up; weighing his chances. I decided to haul my fish out of the water. I had recognised him as soon as he came into the room. I looked up at him.

He half-turned towards Nestar.

'Ma . . .'

But she shrugged her hands of the whole question. I panned the Okapi point over the area of his belly. I must confess I felt like a tainted, sullied black hero.

'Remember a girl called Anne?' I asked.

He stiffened.

Nestar raked him with her impassive brown eyes. I said:

'She is my best friend's sister. And she's still in hospital. I don't want to know why you did it.'

Nestar contemplated a spot somewhere behind my right shoulder.

'What happened?' she asked.

'He beat her up and screwed her while she was senseless or something.'

I knew she had instantly come over to my side. But she obviously did not like doing so.

I backed towards the phone. I dialled.

My dialling finger was stained with the ink from the pen I had used to jot down Nestar's story.

'Philip? I've found the bastard. Come over right now and we'll get it over with.'

I gave him the address. I added:

'That means we're quits about Julia, aren't we?'

His reply to that was correctly indistinct.

Ten minutes later Philip bounded into the room. There was no baggage of fat on his person; indeed he looked very fit. As if there was a spark within him which constantly maddened him into a reluctant inertia.

'Him? This kid? This boy? This half and half? This rum and milk character?'

I nodded.

Philip strode right up to him and said:

T want to hear it from your own lips. Did you do it?'

The boy's eyes rolled the way God, when he had become flesh, could not change himself back into the original Word. Finally the boy said:

'Yes. But I had taken dagga. I was . . .'

But Philip had turned to Nestar.

'Who are you?'

Nestar, shaking out a cigarette from her gold packet, smiled:

'His mother.'

And Philip leaned over her and lit her cigarette.

'How come,' he asked, 'how come you bring your son up wrong?'

Her smile widened until it swallowed the room.

'It's none of your business, is it?' she said.

He swivelled, crouching and kneeling the boy in one smooth action.

The boy doubled up; mouth open like a fish, the hands folded over the pain. A precise blow to the jaw threw the boy clear across the room and he fell crushing onto the Venus statue which broke into pieces.

Nestar gathered in her legs from the mess.

'Not in here, if you please. The basement is the best place,' she said.

We left her picking up the ruins of Venus.

In the basement Philip said:

'Put that knife away. This is no gangster novel. And this . . . !'

The blow smashed into the boy like a pickaxe crushing into a wedding cake.

I slid my knife back into my coat and walked upstairs, leaving Philip to smash the boy into a stain. Stains! Love or even hate or the desire for revenge are just so many stains on a sheet, on a wall, on a page even. This page. Growing up involves this. And Philip was crunching it into him.

Nestar was still picking up the fragments of her divinity. She looked up.

'I could kill you,' she said smiling.

She handed me the statue's crotch.

'You've always wanted that from me,' she said. 'There it is, then.'

I stared at it for a long moment. Was this all there was, then?

Her voice, laughing, brought me back into the room.

'Yes, it's about time you learnt that, isn't it?' she was saying.

'God help us all,' I muttered.

Philip came in. His hands looked like Macbeth's after the murder of Duncan. But when he came closer I saw that those hands were really spotless, clean. He held out his hand to Nestar:

'It's been nice meeting you . . .' Philip began.

A stinging slap stopped him, brought the tears into his eyes. She rubbed the deadly palm on her cream gown as though his cheek had dirtied it. She turned to me, with fingers held out for a farewell greeting. I had no sooner taken her hand than I somersaulted through the air and landed heavily at her feet. I was too surprised for words.

'Hey!' Philip exclaimed.

An uppercut threw him brutally against the wall. The impact brought the heavily framed Petyt drawing crashing onto his head.

'Now, get out both of you,' she said helping him to his feet.

'Get out.'

We could not get out fast enough. Ah, heroes, black heroes . . .

Sunlight bounced off a grimy phone booth and noiselessly splintered into the glass front of a drowsy coffee shop. I rapped on the counter with a coin—the way Harry does. A white old age pensioner's face slowly rotated into view. It stared hard at us as if we were something shameful like doubtful foreign coins. The pink mouth embedded in meagre strings of pink fat twitched, sticking with saliva like stalagmites and stalactites. It said:

'Kaffirs at the back. Kaffirs . . .'

A globule of saliva oozed gently down onto the khaki safari jacket and broke into

tiny diamond rivulets which slithered and settled onto the great paunch of belly. The red eyes regarded us without the slightest interest; a lifeless kind of boredom. A fat black fly retched on a cream bun, washed its hands, and flew with a great laziness onto the sweating pink brow.

Philip leaned over the counter and spat into the aged pink face. But the fat black fly merely continued its business—its own business—in the salt of the old sweat. And the slow red eyes had closed in upon themselves. The mouth, showing an obscene toothless razor wound, spluttered with spittle; mumbled:

'Kaffirs

The oily white-hot sunlight streamed its asphalt-melting energy, casting razor-sharp beams of highlights in the windows. A fat bulldog, tongue stretched out onto the shaded pavement, lazily scanned us with one beady eye. A livid white ring seemed to radiate vividly around the sun. It made me think of the white down on a white dove's breast. Swan-white. And Leda when Zeus transfixed her in mid-air. It made me think of Harry's rubber snake. The white underbelly of a stinking reptile. The stench of it gave the sun a nauseous hue. And it was touching everything. Pushing me into the room and my teeth ached like the chatterclutter of a typewriter. The handcuffs were too tight.

'Another one of them, Sergeant.'

'Communist.'

A little blood trickled down from my wrists.

'Terrorist, huh?'

'Says he's a student at the University.'

'Ach!'

And then up and down into and out of corridors and, I don't know, deep down or high up into a small room. There was only a bench in it. And with the questions and the questions and the questions and the blows, the bench began to grow and grow with my life and my bruises, with my breath and the stains of my blood. Something had gone out of me and into the bench which had come alive with it. Someone was saying 'Leave me with the fucking cunt for five minutes and he'll talk like never-never.' Something exploded inside my head.

They were looking down at me when I came to. A black plainclothes policeman was saying something and pointing with his finger down at me. There was a minute crack on his fingernail.

'... just five minutes,' he was saying.

They left me with him.

'I will not bother asking you questions,' he said. 'You know what we want. So, name names. Starting now.'

The bench was a dull ache at the back of my mind.

He took off his coat slowly. He unbuttoned his shirtsleeves and folded them back up to his upper arms. As I watched him come for me, in the instant his fist swung, Julia's face, transfixed by the spikes of a blinding white light, flared inside my mind. Inside the bench. Inside the room. Anaesthetising my soul. An eternity later, when he could no longer find any spot on my body to hurt and I was still conscious but dead to every blow he could think of, the door opened and the white officers came in. They took one look at me and dragged him off. And the corridor came and stone steps cut into me grazing my knuckles and knees and a foot kicking me tore through the faded cloth of my sanity and they took one hand each and they dragged the endless stone steps into the stains that had once been my raging brains.

The sunlight had imperceptibly grown weaker— there was a brittle tang in the air. The attendant greeted Philip. In the lift I studied my face and with the same old horror stared at my prematurely grey hair. Philip's office was as usual up to its neck with newspapers and magazines. He threw himself into the leather chair behind the desk. I leaned back in the soft visitors' chair. He picked up the phone and told the receptionist that he was now in. I was studying the titles of the books on his desk: Aime Cesaire, Leroy Jones, James Baldwin, Senghor, and a well-thumbed copy of Christopher Okigbo's poems. He shoved a light blue folder towards me. I began to leaf through it.

There were fifteen poems in all; his own. They expressed forms of discontent, disillusionment and outrage. Clarity, it seemed, had been sacrificed for ugly mood. Even the praises of 'Blackness' had a sour note in them. One felt live coals hissing in a sea of paranoia. Gloomy nights stitched by needles of existentialism. Black despair lit up by suicidal vision. The false dawn, charcoal black, trembling in the after-echoes of passion. And songs of a golden age of black heroes; of myths and legends and sprites. And ghouls. These were the exposed veins dripping through the body of the poems. One of them was about Julia and myself; it was entitled 'Something Rotten'. It reminded me of the time when I was writing an article about shantytown and while inspecting the pit-latrines there I fell into the filthy hole. I am still not quite recovered from the experience. It was in a way a necessary baptism.

' "Baptism" is the title of them all,' Philip said.

'A sort of E. R. Brathwaite rites of passage?'

'Uhuh.'

He looked at me as though I had said something indecent. He said:

'There is nothing to make one particularly glad one is a human being and not a horse, or a lion, or a jackal, or come to think of it a snake. Snakes. There's just dirt and shit and urine and blood and smashed brains. There's dust and fleas and bloody whites and roaches and dogs trained to bite black people in the arse. There's venereal disease and beer and lunacy and just causes. There's technology to drop on your head wherever you stop to take a leak. There's white shit in our leaders and white shit in our dreams and white shit in our history and white shit on our hands in anything we build or pray for. Even if that was okay there's still sell-outs and informers and stuck-up students and get-rich-fast bastards and live-now-think-later punks who are just as bad, man. Just as bad as white shit. There's a lot of these bastards hanging around in London waiting to come back here and become cabinet ministers. The only cabinet they'll be in is a coffin. Don't get me wrong. I'm a pessimist, but I still add two and two and walk to the seven, smiling. You find friends and things happen to them, and

the thunderstorm in their minds is staring incredibly out of their eyes. You mind your own business and the business springs up and hits you right between the eyes. You bang your head on the wall and the wall crumbles and there's another wall and you wake up with the whole Earth one big headache inside your head. You tuck your tail between your legs and some enterprising vandal sets fire to your fur, as you streak through the dry grass of your fears. And when you stop by that wall to figure out the next poem some character empties a heavy chamberpot of slogans right on top of your head. There's a lot of anger gets you nowhere. There's heaps of consideration gets you nowhere too. It's just tickets to nowhere, everything is. There's big men now. There'll be big men always to dig pit-latrines for you and your children to fall in. I don't give no heat to any lecherous system. I just fuck and screw myself in a quiet green place and load my balls onto my shoulders for the big trip beyond the grave. There's hungry people out there. There's homeless people out there. There's many going about in the rags of their birthday suit. And they's all mad. They's all got designs. You've got designs. I've got designs. But we're all designing in a sea full of shit. There's clouds of flies everywhere you go, flies eating our dead. There's armies of worms slithering in our history. And there's squadrons of mosquitoes homing down onto the cradle of our future. What do we do? Clutch and drown each other, that's what, and if we can't do ourselves in properly there's congregations of missionaries and shrinks to do it and they have on their side cops and soldiers and Australia and New Zealand and Britain and China and the USA and France and the bloody Germans. The poor are not the only ones who've got designs!

He took a deep breath. And sinking back into his chair he placed an ankle over a knee and began to light a cheap cigar. I almost asked him where the rolled cigarette was. I couldn't even laugh; it was too chilling.

'Nothing lasts long enough to make any sense,' I said.

I said it without conviction. I went on:

'There are fragments and snatches of fragments. The momentary fingerings of a guitar. Things as they are— but not really in the Wallace Stevens manner. The way things have always been. A torn bit of newspaper whose words have neither beginning nor end but the words upon it. A splinter of melody piercing the ear with a brittle note. Nothing lasts long enough to have been. These fragments of everything descend upon us haphazardly. Only rarely do we see the imminence of wholes. And that is the beginning of art.'

He had been holding his breath; now he breathed out, seeming to contract into the leather of his chair. He regarded me with the eye of a fly that, floating in a bowl of soup, looks up straight into the diner's soul. Finally he threw a newspaper into my lap. He had marked out with red ink an article about a battle between Smith's security forces and the guerrillas; two large pictures accompanied it. The photographs showed twenty-two dead guerrillas laid out for display and in the centre of them stood the 'prisoner', a dead-looking youth staring morosely at the camera. He had, it said, been captured during the fierce engagement. There was something about him which I felt I ought to—

'Remember him?' Philip asked quietly.

It hit me like a spring in the box. I remembered that¹ brutally scarred face. The captured guerrilla was Edmund. At school he had been small, undernourished, and extremely poor. Everyone, including myself, had always been nasty to him because he

refused to have anything to do with our student armchair politics. He had been utterly lonely; everyone was simply rude to him. But he would lock himself in the boxroom and study all night every week. In class he sat in the corner at the back writing voluminous notes which in reality were mere transcripts of almost every book in the library. But every term he would be at the bottom of the class. He did not take part in any games. His father, a primary school teacher, had died of alcoholic poisoning after a fantastic night out on the town with my father. His mother, a nurse, had been unable to cope and suddenly took to her bed and repulsed violently all attempts to coax her from it. But destitution knocked on her door and so frightened her that she, one morning, put on her best dress, straightened her hair, painted her face, and made a bee-line to the nearest beerhall where her figure aroused some interest. It was she who had coached Nestar.

I stared hard at the photographs; the corpses looked as if they had been dead for quite a while. One face seemed to be nothing but a mass of flies. And Edmund stood morosely erect among them. Sole survivor. At school he had stood among us in such a manner and had, it seemed, doggedly lived out his tortured dreams in the face of humiliation. I do not know why he liked me—but he did. He could not read enough of Gogol; he even tried to teach himself Russian so that he could read him in the original. He was the only one in the class who knew that Yevtushenko really existed. Dostoevsky, Chekhov, Turgenev, Pushkin, Gorky—he read them all. But he thought Gogol the best of them. And he would set off the tiny firecrackers of his laughter as he read *The Government Inspector*. He regarded Shostakovitch as the best of composers; and thought Moussorgsky 'good'. Among painters, Edmund had long singled out Hieronymus Bosch as his master. When I asked him what he would do when school and university were over he said that he wanted to write. He had actually written dozens of novels (all unfinished) and short stories (all unfinished) whose plots alternated between the painstaking exploration of the effects of poverty and destitution on the 'psyche' and the higher themes of grand dramas and heroic epics that would be concerned with something of what Gogol tried to do for the Russian character. In our first year his bed was next to mine in Dormitory Four. His locker was lavishly decorated with reproductions of portraits of the Devil and with enlarged texts of Satan's speeches culled from Milton's *Paradise Lost*.

The first night in the dormitory Edmund entertained us with a species of farting which by midnight made it necessary to ventilate the room by opening all the windows even though the night was extremely chilly. The noise of it disturbed Jet, the assistant boarding master who we knew was entertaining the cook's wife in the flat attached to our dormitory.

Jet strutted into our dormitory just as our prefect was about to lecture Edmund on the uses and abuses of breaking wind. His torch flashed into my nearsighted eyes and then veered onto Edmund's face.

'You again!' Jet remonstrated.

He had caught Edmund spitting about in the dining room, that afternoon.

'Where do you come from?'

Jet was using his special voice, one specifically cultivated for talking to idiots.

Edmund told him.

'Did they teach you there to gas people to death?'

'No.'

'What is your totem?'

'Nguruwe.'

'Very appropriate,' Jet agreed with sarcasm.

Jet was a well-built coal-black character of average height whose favourite gesture was cracking his finger joints in the most striking manner, especially when the schoolgirls were anywhere within twenty miles of his person. He invariably dressed in flower-printed shirts, with a handkerchief neatly strangling his neck, and purple trousers. Purple was his colour—not anyone else's; and all newcomers learnt this quickly and kissed their purple things, especially underwear, goodbye.

Now he danced slowly to and fro and cracked his fingers absently.

'Most appropriate indeed,' he repeated.

He was later to be sacked for 'carrying on' with one of the African nuns who were attached to the mission.

'You will report to me at nine o'clock tomorrow morning,' he said.

He was clipping the words like a gardener snipping the last touches to the hedge of Life.

The prefect at last intervened:

'The boy deserves another chance, sir. After all, the first day is always rather . . .'

He never finished his sentence because at that moment Edmund who could no longer contain his gut leaned over to one side and let out right in my face a painfully devastating fart. I'm now quite recovered.

'Who would have thought it of Edmund?' Philip coughed and racked phlegm down his throat.

'I would; don't you remember his fight with Stephen?'

Philip nodded ambiguously.

The telephone shrilled. As he spoke into the long black shape, I let my eyes rove once more around the office. This was what mother had always wanted me to become. My eyes lit on *To the Point*, a stupid Boer magazine on African current affairs.

The Edmund-Stephen fight was the most talked-about event the year it happened. It even outclassed Smith's UDI. This is how it happened. Stephen was older, bigger and broader than anyone else in the first form. Stephen was mean, a bully; a typical African bully in an ordinary African school. He had appropriated for his own specific use such notable figures as Nkrumah, Kaunda, Che, Castro, Stalin, Mao, Kennedy,

Nyerere and, for that matter, everyone else who could be dragged into an after-hours dormitory argument. Stephen genuinely loathed Edmund; it was like a rat and a cat, or a cat and a dog, or a dog and a crocodile or a crocodile and the Tarzan we saw twice a term in the Great Hall. Stephen detested 'classical' music. And for some reason Stephen thought that Gogol was the one great enemy of Africa who had to be stamped out at all cost. Stephen was an avid reader of the Heineman African Writers Series. He firmly believed that there was something peculiarly African in anything written by an African and said that therefore European tools of criticism should not be used in the analysis of 'African literature'. He had also gleaned a few nuggets of thought from E. Mphahlele's *The African Image*. And he had a life style to go with it: he was nearly expelled for refusing to go to mass and to prayers—he said 'Christianity is nothing but a lie; seek ye the political kingdom and everything else will follow'; he was always taking the geography master to task about his ironic comments about the primitive state of Africa's roads; he was always petitioning for African history to be taught—the only history we were taught was British and European, with the United States for dessert. He took dagga; he believed that there is a part of man which is permanently stoned and that this was beautiful. He said that there is a part of man which never ages—and that this part of the human make-up does not move with things but moves them, transcends them and best manifests itself only when the things that move are on the brink of stillness. Stephen also had nightmares, great bouts of them; and he was ashamed of this one 'weakness'. His fearful screams could be heard almost every night; and he would try not to sleep by provoking endless discussion on almost everything under the sun. One day he let it be known that Edmund's mother was a 'common drunken whore' and that he, Stephen, had screwed her nuts and she had certainly used some of the money to pay for Edmund's fees. I knew there was some truth in Stephen's unexpected announcement. The dormitory was stunned, not so much by the news as by the weight of ill-feeling behind it. Even Stephen seemed to be aware that he had irrevocably broken things that should never be broken: except at a heavy price.

Edmund, in a surprisingly calm voice, broke the silence.

He challenged Stephen to a fight.

The dormitory laughed. I laughed, too.

Stephen laughed.

I tugged at Edmund's pyjama-sleeve, warningly. But he brushed me aside and said out loud:

'Then you must take back everything you said and apologise to me before the whole dormitory.'

The dormitory tittered. Uneasily.

Stephen, now aware that his design was about to be fulfilled, said:

'You've all heard what the Pig has said. He is farting in our faces again. I've never refused a challenge; Africa always rises up to every new challenge, as Nkrumah said. Even the challenge of immorality, and snivelling tsotsis like this semen-drop of a bastard.'

He calmly walked up to Edmund and hit him contemptuously with the back of his

hand; Edmund's head snapped back, knocking against the locker.

I gripped Edmund's arm.

'For God's sake, this is not a Petersburg story. He's for real. A brute. He'll simply thrash you.'

But Edmund had set his face towards Jerusalem; his eyes were red, smarting from the sting of Stephen's blow. A strange fatalism seemed to have suddenly aged him.

'What else is there?' he asked me quietly.

Even the prefect tried to intervene—I think he liked Edmund the way a village is jealous of its local eccentric. But Edmund only said:

'What else is there?'

The fight took place the next day, a Saturday, in the clearing where the Boy Scouts and the Girl Guides usually paraded.

I did not go to watch.

It seemed hours before everyone returned; everyone, that is, except Edmund. Their silence alarmed me. But a small hairy boy whom I was later to know as Philip rushed up to me and said hoarsely:

'He won't let anyone help him; but I know he'll listen to you. You're friends, aren't you? He's just lying there in his blood. What remains of him. He's stark staring mad. Not raving, no. Just wallowing in his own blood

Stephen came out of the bathroom wiping his hands and staring ruefully at his bruised knuckles. There was blood on his shirt; a rather large stain which seemed in outline to be a map of Rhodesia. Where was Edmund? Philip saw him too and stopped talking. I ran blindly to the scout clearing where they had left him.

He was on his hands and knees in a pool of blood. His face was unrecognisable. And he was whining; jabbering distractedly like an animal. I almost cried when I finally understood what it was he was saying; he was saying over and over 'I'm a monkey, I'm a baboon, I'm a monkey, I'm a baboon.' Most of his front teeth had gone and his jaw seemed to be hanging on by a thread. Great scabs of blood were forming all over his eyes, nose, mouth, and cheeks. I picked him up in my arms and carried him straight to the clinic. He was not heavy. And his thin broken voice saying over and over 'I'm a monkey, I'm a baboon, I'm a baboon,' this too was not heavy. I understood it only too well. Sister Catherine took one look at him and said:

'He'll have to go to the hospital.' And she picked up the phone to call the principal's office.

When the school lorry drove off taking Edmund to the hospital in Umtali the principal asked me who had done it.

I shook my head.

'He'll tell you himself when he is well,' I said. 'If he wants to,' I added.

I was tired. My mind was numb. I began to pick at my lips.

They wired his jaw. They used a lot of stitches to save something of that crushed-in face. Yards of stitches. The term was almost over when he came back to the school. He said nothing; not a word about Stephen. His scarred face had become more pronounced in its moroseness; its particular features seemed to have been stitched together by a fatalistic self-disgust. Smith announced his unilateral declaration of independence. I wrote a short story based on the fight but, as soon as I finished it, tore it up in disgust when I saw Edmund's stitched-together warthog face. There, in the photograph.

I returned the newspaper to Philip.

He lit a cigarette.

'You can cut the picture out if you like,' he said.

Why not? I wondered.

I picked up the tiny scissors.

Doug and Citre came in. Faded jeans. Denim shirts. Citre had studied English Literature at Durban and was now worried about being drafted into the army. Doug had, after art school in London, tried making films and had ended up in the advertising racket. Doug was a windbreaker, very earnest, with a long angular face and low but wide shoulders that had around them the unwashed elegance of uncompromising youth. Citre, taller, leaner, had the unease of a shambling giraffe that is learning to walk, all legs and neck; seriously doubtful; and given to putting his points sheepishly—altogether a likeable, clumsy youth.

Doug drove us all to Citre's house. While we waited for the other guests to arrive we shared pipes of dagga and sampled Doug's marijuana biscuits. Citre as usual stammered something political by way of putting Philip and I at our ease.

'Politics is shit,' Doug said thoughtfully.

I agreed.

'White people are shit,' Doug added with closed eyes.

I agreed.

'And black people are shit,' Doug blew cinders and ash from his shirtfront.

Before I could agree again Philip interrupted:

'Everybody human shits, that's the trouble.'

I nodded, watching my mind explode deliciously.

There was this mirror and I was watching my head nodding in slow motion. It seemed I could go on nodding and agreeing forever. It was so sweet I could not bear it.

'Do you like the music?' Citre asked.

I had to make an effort to stop myself looking clean through the clear crystals of his words.

'What music?' I asked.

I was a big bird high up in God's own spaces where the music of the spheres is so still that all man's ordinary delight becomes nothing. I was a lone eagle, hovering, swivelling tautly on the golden axis of a heady sunset. In one of Solomon's photographs. Christ!

'You're nodding to it,' Citre said and raised the volume a little.

I said, 'O!'

Then Doug turned off the lights and switched on a cine projector onto a white canvas hanging down on the far wall. The first film was of an old black man, rags tucked in, cycling into town. Thin stringy hands gripping ice-cold handlebars. Bare feet pedalling mechanically on and on and on. And tired owl eyes that stared straight into the spying lens. The second film was a ruthless close-up shot—five minutes long—of a black woman nestling and hushing a white baby to sleep. The baby's satiated pink moonface puffed in and out slowly and its small blue eyes sleepily contemplated a single long hair on the black woman's chin. The third film was of five people, three men and two women in a lift forever going upwards—or had the lift stopped, or was it going downwards?—and all self-consciously staring at the numbers which were flickering randomly on and off. The fourth film was made from newspaper cuttings. It began with the camera lens exactly scanning a ten-minute list of Births and Marriages and then shifted abruptly to focus on the black and white pictures. Of the pictures shown there were many of traffic snarl-ups and ghastly road accidents (one of the victims was the old man cycling in the first film). Close-ups of violent rugby scenes. A firing squad shooting the woman who led the 1896/7 uprising—she looked like the woman in the second film. Excerpts from industrial accidents; and then a fifteen-minute-long section of the unending Deaths and Funerals classified ads. Doug shot onto this strips of public figures making private speeches. Finally a baby painstakingly spelling with its bricks the end. The fifth was the one I had been waiting for. Doug had shot Patricia and I in the throes of rather violent intercourse. I had not seen the film because of a little trouble with the police. The sixth was of Julia being screwed by Citre. I had seen it before but had not appreciated its finer points. Doug interposed upon it a strip of Ian Smith declaring UDI. And the last film was of a ballpoint drawing a series of question marks.

'And that, gentlemen, is my novel,' Doug laughed as he switched on the lights. I looked around at the others who had arrived during the films. They were casually scattered about the room in a landscape of blood-red gawdy poufs and cushions. In the far corner Patricia was peering nearsightedly at the jacket of Vivaldi's Four Seasons. John, a mathematician who had lent me his old battered typewriter the day before, was delivering an unconvincing argument for elitist government.

His audience was a pimply youth who played drums for a local jazz band. And languidly lounging on the wine-dark bed were three girls, triplets, quite identical, who were sipping Bristol Cream; they were all studying anthropology but seemed not to have been amused after sampling Malinovsky, Radcliffe-Brown and Evans-Pritchard. Their tiny pink mouths seemed to be perpetually contracting into some

inward amusement.

And seated Buddha-like in the centre of the room was Richter, a student of something mystic and obscure whose word-drawings had become fashionable just then. I had met Richter by chance. He was, like me, a solitary drinker. In the Union he always sat apart at the far end of the verandah drinking strong and strange mixtures of pure spirit. Then the military got hold of him, and when the whole length of it was through with him, there was almost nothing left but locust-like raspings of wings in his mind. He had become one of those characters upon whom silence rather than intellect bestows a certain transcendental dignity. At times, however, he meticulously dissected that silence for us, scal-pelling it to its very entrails and with a sterile pin pointing out to us organs of interest. These were invariably harrowing accounts of atrocities he had either witnessed or taken part in, in the operational area.

Richter died recently. He was crunched to a stain by a train as he wandered about in the early hours through the town in a drugged and drunken stupor. But there he was, now. Cold, white, as though already dead; wrapped up in a membrane of silence, and sitting still as though studying the abyss into which he must fall.

Richter would not be Richter without the staining of those baptismal scars, I thought, watching him.

At this point Athena strolled in quite casually in the shape of Ada, Nestar's daughter. Like Nestar, she has the resilience and cutting edge of a diamond. She dressed in nothing but light shades of brown and chocolate. A long necklace of polished agates drooped over her uplifted breasts. She sank into a cushion beside Philip.

She smiled quite disarmingly.

'I hear you've been doing things to my brother,' she said, revealing a gold tooth.

Concerned, Philip looked pained.

'How is he?' he asked.

But she smiled the room into her mind:

'How is your sister?' she asked.

'Mending well.'

'And so is he,' she said, freezing up.

The glint of her large silver-plated ear-rings pulsed like a distant star sending out signals to the last man on Earth. We were so many light-years from each other it frightened me a little. But the fact of contact itself held out hope—if not an open door. There would be gatherings such as these; of memories and of the dead who have never been gone. And those to come who have always been here. But it is as if it was God's wound and we were the maggots slithering in it. And, satiated with the great purposelessness of it, we gently belched nerve gases into the next generation. Ada was one of those who walk the tightrope smiling a scathing scorn at the blind reverses of chance; neither looking up nor looking down—just walking calmly into the crocodile's jaws. Richter passed the peace-pipe to her. The twittering triplets were

unconcernedly listening to Robert's fragmentary account of his band's tour of South Africa. Patricia fingered a silver flute and blew an indistinctly sweet note; and then, frowning, she peered into the mouthpiece and after shaking it began to play to herself. I sat down on a cushion facing her.

She had dropped out of the university and without a word disappeared from view. She had done this after she and I had been beaten up by some right-wing demonstrators. Her parents then hired a private detective to search for her. He found her six months later living in a shantytown outside Cape Town. She exhibited her paintings and batiks and got good reviews. But she disappeared again soon after the exhibition. They found her in a sort of opium den in the Chinese quarter. She made a terrible scene and things could not be kept out of the newspapers. But the air soon cleared and she was left to her own devices. She painted furiously. When she put on another exhibition the police confiscated several of her drawings and paintings and there was talk of a subversion-of-morals charge. She could not stand it: she tore down the rest, slashed them to pieces and danced on them like someone dancing on a loved one's grave. It was now difficult to disappear anywhere in Southern Africa. Malawi, perhaps. Ada gave her the name of a Greek person who quickly obliged after the payment of an undisclosed sum. She disappeared for the third time. Those who knew said she was roaming through Africa with nothing but a cheap camera and pencils and sketchbooks. I worried and Harry sharpened his sarcasm at my expense.

She returned half-blind, feverish, and with her voice gone. She was in hospital for weeks and they would not let me see her because it was a whites-only hospital. They managed to save her sight. But she would never be able to talk again.

She passed the peace-pipe to me and began to rifle through her canvas bag. She took out a book and handed it to me. There was a tiny burning in her eyes; a fierce tenderness I had never seen before. No, I had seen it before—in Immaculate. I leafed through the book.

It slowly paralysed my face.

I hugged her awkwardly like a pessimist who will not believe either his senses or his mind: they had published her notebooks that very day! She reached out for my face and kissed me till I was breathless and full of belief.

Patricia is five feet two. Green eyes. Light sandy hair piled loosely back down to her waist. Though certainly plain, as Harry had said, meaning to wound me, and, when feeling lazy, rather dowdy, Patricia is one of those disturbingly concise and adult youths whom our country either breaks or confines in prisons and lunatic asylums. We were watching the right-wing demonstration (demanding the racial segregation of the halls of residence) when she just said:

'I've got to get out of this!'

I was lying flat on my belly watching the defiant placards (Blacks Out! Whites In!! Segregation Is Honest Integration!!!) and she was kneeling and her lips seemed to have worried themselves to a decision. She wrung my hand:

'Let's both get out of this.'

But I—the fool!—shook my head sadly and told her parrot-fashion all the good reasons for my not 'getting out of this'. But she persisted:

'It's easy,' she said. 'We'll just walk off campus and never come back and just keep trying to get out of this wretched country. We'll run to Botswana. And from Gaborone's fly to London. I'll paint and you'll write. There'll be . . .'

One of the demonstrators had come up; and was staring with venom at her. He began to curse:

'You bitch. Kaffir-lover. Kaffirboetie. You cunt. You . . .'

I got up slowly. He swung:

'And you—!'

I ducked beneath the wild blow, grabbed his head from behind, and straightening abruptly, butted him making his jaws crack. Behind him the other demonstrators were massing up, looking ugly. I hurled her up onto her feet:

'Run!'

Punched another down and followed her.

They were after us in an instant. We did not stand a chance, she and I; no one would intervene to try to help us because she and I had dared to flaunt our horns and hooves to our respective racial groups. She could not run much because of her club-foot. I could hear her gasping with pain. The sky spun around her crazily.

Out of the corner of my eye I saw running shapes converging madly towards us. I almost blundered into her body as she fell. There were white faces all around us. Full of blood. The pink flesh peeled back over the teeth. Those claws! In that moment—the half-second before the blows began to fly—I studied each particular white face intimately; noting a pimple here, a hairlip there, shining eyes, furry nostrils, dark circles around blue eyes, a tousled face, a hamslab of a face, a skeletal face—

The impact of my fist on the hairlip jolted through my knuckles to my gut. Patricia was trying to get up, scratching a face, bashing the pimple with her little fists. The person of the skeletal face had thrown his foot to kick her in the stomach when I turned lashing out at his flying foot with my own: as he somersaulted into the air I crouched beneath him and heaved. He crashed into five of his friends. A massive rock of a fist—it was the character with the hamslab of a face—crushed half my face and I began to bleed. Becoming a stain. Stains! I punched and at the same time kicked him hard on the shin and as he leaned forward I snapped his head back with my left. Patricia was again down there in the mass of kicking feet.

Maddened by desperation I began to fight like a lunatic around her. I punched, jabbed, hooked, smote the bloody Philistines. I smashed, swiped and drove into them. She was screaming painfully, being trampled. I pelted them with the hailstones of desperation. I stoned them with the rocks of fear. I tore into them. They were tiring me out. I scratched, mauled, flailed, and threshed into those too many white faces. But they hammered into me until I had lost so much blood that I wondered I was still alive. They slammed into me, banged me where it hurt, and kept knocking me from every direction. I did not—must not—dare fall and cover my face with my hands; they would simply plough into me. I smacked them right back, buffeted them down, thumped them back, whacked them down, as they pummelled and pounded and battered into me. I kicked, booted, kneed, and cudgelled into them as they bulldozed

into me and pile-drove me into one lump of pain. I clubbed, coshed, slugged, whipped, flogged and bashed into them as they sledge-hammered into me. She was down there, not moving, her shirt ripped to reveal a dirty bra. I slammed out with an uppercut and the last thing I saw was a cold white face paralysed by a massive rush of blood. And then I crashed out across her body . . .

Those stitches. Those stitches, each one exactly biting after the needle's penetration; each one a little stained with blood; they have nipped me maddeningly.

My earliest memory is of the skies swinging askew, and I falling out of an apple tree. The fall merely bruised my hands and knees. Mother washed them with hot salted water and I remember her cunning face peering down anxiously into the cot where I lay contemplating my first encounter with the real world. And then I had eye trouble; my eyes stinging painfully through clear globules of spinning sunlight. And my first fever which neither aspirins nor Cafenol could abate; this was when I learnt to be wary of my own imagination and of my mind. I still do not quite know whether the flood was rising or whether it was my body that was gradually falling into that great fright of waters. Afterwards the door had to be securely locked and barred against my sleep-walking. The nganga was called. He made half-inch incisions all over my body and rubbed a black powder into the tiny wounds. A pot of something like porridge was cooked and as it boiled furiously he made me lean over it breathing in the steam and he threw a blanket over me as I did so.

The other thing I remember clearly from my childhood is a huge dog staring at me from the enclosed back seat of a car. My parents had taken me to visit someone in the African hospital and I had somehow wandered into the car park; and stopped to gape at the shaggy beast in one of the cars. Its eyes were black and clear. It was a clearness without any depth to it and this made me automatically trust it. Its nose was soft and black, its ears neatly wadded down to cover massive jaws. I felt that beast in me keenly. And as it pressed against the window and let its great eyes pierce into me I irresistibly put out my hand to open the door for it to be free. The instant the door noiselessly clicked the beast, growling, rushed its massive weight against the door and was upon me with its bared fangs.

There are flies squashed to the memory. Congregations spinning out webs of prayers to catch the minute nuggets of revelation. Inkstains, watercolours, chalk, pastel drawings, tearstains, bloodstains, time charts, posters of the life cycle of fleas and once more inkstains ... Dirty fingers scratching into obscure orifices; blurred images sneaking deeper into the flea-crevices of the mind. And what once was our parents now rotted and stank beneath the lime of the twentieth century. An iron net had been thrown over the skies, quietly. Now it, tightening, bit sharply into the tenderer meat of our brains. The hard knocks it gave to our heads made us strange, even to ourselves. And beneath it all our minds festered; gangrenous. Gangsterish. The underwear of our souls was full of holes and the crotch it hid was infested with lice. We were whores; eaten to the core by the syphilis of the white man's coming. Masturbating onto a Playboy centrefold; screaming abuse at a solitary but defiant racist; baring our arse to the yawning pit-latrine; writing angry 'black' poetry; screwing pussy as though out to prove that white men do not in reality exist—this was all contained within the circumvention of our gut-rot.

Those stitches like a net cast up into the sky tightened around the mind, and with the needle bit sharply into the tenderer parts of the brain.

I saw Philip safely home; he was in worse shape than I was. We had said our farewells to Doug and Citre and Richter and Patricia and Ada and the twittering

chorus of triplets. I staggered home.

Two shadows detached themselves from the dark. I did not know them. They stood blocking my way.

'We've been looking for you,' the shorter one said.

They had drawn nearer.

'You beat up our friend bad, man. You beat up Leslie, man. Nobody beats up Leslie, didn't you know that?' he said.

Leslie was Nestar's son.

I took a step backwards. My palms were sweating. The tall one spat:

'Fuck shit!'

and caught me solidly on the jaw. I heard my dentures crack beneath the impact. I turned to run but the shorter one stuck out his foot and I fell heavily onto the paved path. They were kicking at my head. I was trying to spit out the fragments of my dentures. I realised I was screaming for help. I tore away. I was thinking: There goes my shoe! Only the tall one came after me, kicking out wide to trip me. He was too close for me to dart into one of the doorways and rouse somebody in the houses sweeping by. I fell too quickly for him and he toppled over me. I was up and into a doorway in an instant, my hands about to bang on the door when he grabbed me and yanked me hard against the low brick garden wall and began to smash my head into it. I screamed louder, hoping someone in the house would hear. With an effort I broke away, kicked out with the shoeless foot and desperately jumped at a window, hollering. I smashed a fist through the window, cutting my wrist badly and howled for help through the great hole. His hand clamped over my mouth and he dragged me from the window and through the open gate into the paved pathway where he thrashed me so much I blacked out, speechless.

I came to slowly. I was alone on that stretch of road. And rather surprised that I was still alive. I had not known that the body could bear so much pain. I dragged myself up, limped through the gate, and began knocking on the door again. There was not a sound, not a light within; not a single sign to say there was anything human living there.

I turned the door handle. The door immediately opened. I walked in. There were no curtains on the windows; and the wind and light streaming through the broken one showed me that this was a big black empty room. There was nothing in it; no furniture, nothing; nothing at all. My mind felt like nothing. My face certainly felt broken in. A doorway yawned blankly into me: it led to a smaller room: numb, dark and also utterly empty. I could not bring myself to touch the walls to prove that they were really there. After all, the window certainly had been there and had smashed quite conclusively. For some reason I began to wonder if/ was really in there; perhaps I was a mere creation of the rooms themselves. Another doorway brooded just ahead of me. It led onto a tiny verandah that looked out over an overgrown wilderness of garden into the starry dark-blue immensity of the night. Was there then nothing here also? Had I called out for nothing? I took a step down from the verandah and as I did so something big and sly slouched suddenly through that wilderness of weeds and maize stalks and disappeared through a hole in the far garden wall. My hand

involuntarily rose to my head: the sudden pain had been as though a sliver of the grey matter of my brains had been plucked cleanly with a pair of tweezers.

I ran from that house like a madman who has seen the inside of his own ravings. Somehow I got to a phone and surprised an ambulance which actually turned up and drove me to the African hospital. The doctor sewed up my wrist and took X-rays of my head. And a tetanus injection. But he let me see the X-rays on an illuminated screen. The sight of my bones chilled me. I laughed uneasily. There was nothing to my mind, to my head, but a skull that had some of its grinning teeth missing. That broken grin, I have never been able to erase it out of my mind. And the picture of my skull has since blended into the memory of that empty but strangely terrifying house which—when I called—merely maintained an indistinct silence.

It was the House of Hunger that first made me discontented with things. I knew my father only as the character who occasionally screwed mother and who paid the rent, beat me up, and was cuckolded on the sly by various persons. He drove huge cargo lorries, transporting groundnut oil to Zambia and Zaire and Malawi. I knew that he was despised because of mother, and because he always wore khaki overalls, even on Sundays, and because he was quite generous with money to friends and enemies alike. The only thing was that he was an alcoholic.

He once got Peter and I so drunk that mother thrashed the three of us and then shoved him out of the house for the night. The only time he came close to hitting mother was when she discovered in his travelling bag a quite elaborate set of anti-VD paraphernalia: injections, pills, penicillin, which she threw out into the dustbin. One night the ambulance came and he was in it and they wanted someone to go with him. 'What's wrong with him?' she asked. 'He's been stabbed.' And she got in and it drove off leaving me and Peter to fend for ourselves. I found out later that he had been stabbed by the up to then harmless township idiot. Father was never himself after that: he turned to meths. And some nights he would have the trembling fits and not know what he was doing or what he was saying, while his hands shook and twitched uncontrollably. He would not know where he was, or who he was, or who we were, or where the toilet was. And he would talk about the 'flies'. Apparently when he was in that state he would be tormented by the Furies, who would come to him in the form of a dense cloud of houseflies all humming and singing Handel's Hallelujah Chorus.

But mother was more feared than respected. She was a hard worker in screwing, running a home, and maintaining a seemingly tight rein over her husband; she was good in fights, and verbal sallies, never losing face; and, more important for me, she had nothing better to do than to throw her children into the lion's den of things white. Peter took after her, while I was more my father. Certainly father could never control Peter—only mother could do that; and therefore father handled me severely.

Peter, of course, early became the enemy of all fathers and mothers who had daughters. He and mother gave to the House a whiff of scandal strong enough to be detected throughout the whole region. When Peter became twenty-one father gave him, for a present, a new anti-VD set. Mother merely warned Peter not to get involved with married women. And I—rather grudgingly, for I was extremely jealous—gave him my dubious blessing.

I was by then more experienced in books and masturbation than in girls and street-fights and throwing dice. Whenever mother took away my sheets to wash them she would make me explain every single stain on them. Since they were invariably stained with semen she would contemptuously give me a long sermon about how girls

are 'easy' and 'why don't you get on with laying one or two?' Or three. Or four. Or five. 'There is nothing to it,' she said. 'You stick it in the hole between the water and the earth, it's easy. She splays out her legs and you bunch your pelvis between her thighs and Strike! right there between her water and her earth. You strike like a fire and she'll take you and your balls all in. Right? Up to your neck. When you come you'll see it misting her eyes. Don't stop; go on digging. Digging. And she'll heave you in up to the hairs on your head. See? Now. Why don't you get on with laying one and stop messing my sheets? You were late in getting off my breast; you were late in getting out of bedwetting. Now you're late jerking off into some bitch. You make me sick up to here, do you understand? Up to here. It must be those stupid books you're reading—what do you want to read books for when you've finished with the university? Yes, up to here.'

But the old man was my friend. He simply wandered into the House one day out of the rain, dragging himself on his knobby walking stick. And he stayed. His face was like a mesh of copper wire; his wrists, strings of muscle; and his broken body looked so brittle and insubstantial that a strong wind or an expletive would probably have blown him right back into the rain. His broken teeth, tobacco-stained, were those of an ancient horse which even the boiler of glue would reject. But his deep-set eyes, the colour of fire reflected in water, were as full of stories as his tongue was quick to tell them. He would sun himself in the happy company of the local chorus of flies and choke on some secret chuckle. He would take out his tobacco pouch and slowly roll a cigarette, using strips of the Herald. What he loved best was for me to listen attentively while he told stories that were oblique, rambling, and fragmentary. His transparent, cunning look, his eager chuckle, his wheezing cough, and something of the earth, gravel-like, in his voice—these gave body to the fragments of things which he casually threw in my direction. He would begin suddenly:

'A hunter of women. Now to hunt something in yourself is foolish. Because. He screamed in his sleep on the fire of the hunt. When he finally woke up he was up there in the eye of the sky. Fiercely on fire. The sun.

' . . . cast out of village, town and country. Cast out of womb, home, family. A veritable desert. Of all the grains of despair. He fed on his discontent; but it did not fill up his belly. He fed on his hatred of all things; but that did not quench his thirst. And then he fed on dreams, all kinds, of vengeance, of forgiveness, of self-mutilation, of the love that is in all things. But even that did not quench his thirst, neither did it fill his hunger. For it was a strange thirst. An unknown hunger. Which had driven him from himself, from his friends, from his family, from the things of his first world. He wandered alone and bareheaded under the sun. He fed on exhaustion of mind and body, but the brain only dies at its own behest and the body is a precious thing which, fading and knotting within itself, generates a new being who shimmers around the old body and does not die unless the great star comes down. And so exhaustion did not slake his thirst and weariness, did not stop the gnawing of hunger in his belly. He came to a great city, but when he tried to enter, the guard at the gates laughed a great laugh and the whole thing faded into nothing but sand-dunes. It may not even have been there. There were great beautiful birds in his vision, but when he called out to them they turned into vultures and squawked awkwardly out of his sight. It was like a sudden irritation. In fact he actually scratched himself tenderly between his legs. That's when he said: "I will live at the heart of a grain of sand." And he also said: "I will light a match: when it flares I will jump straight into the dark heart of its flame-seed." But as he listened to himself, to the thirst and to the hunger, he suddenly said in words of gold: "I will live at the head of the stream where all of man's questions begin." '

The old man took out his pouch and in silence rolled a cigarette. His face—that tight mesh of copper wire—stretched a little, smiling in every stitch. He said:

There was a race of men in Africa whose women were bottles. And in every bottle there was a ship. Now the men valued the ships highly, but did not think much of the women themselves. After all, what is a ship in a bottle? Now these bottles were unbreakable. And the men could not break their women to get to the ships . . .'

The old man lit his cigarette with a stick from the fire. I turned the roasting maize over: it was turning into a delicious yellow like the heart of an over-powering sunset. He said:

'A man wakes up in a huge night and goes out to make water and is never seen again.'

He wheezed and choked on his cigarette; between gasps he told me the following:

'A man found a little egg in a small hole beside which was a massive tree shattered by lightning. When he returned home he gave the egg to his newly married wife, who loved eggs the way plants like moisture and water. She cooked and ate it. That night there was a storm. But the good couple went to bed early to make their own love-storm. Afterwards they slept in each other's arms. Then lightning spattered and stitched the black night, and as its great thunderous drum dinned upon that house, the husband dropped from the bed with a crash. The woman had also awakened. "You pushed me!" he said crossly, trying to get into the bed. "Move over!" he said more softly. "But I'm over here at this far end," she replied truthfully. He tried again. But there was something there and he couldn't get in. He became very angry, for it was cold and chilly. "I'll settle this once and for all!" he said, and lit a candle. And pushed back the blankets. There was a huge bloodstained egg there; it was still tender, as though newly laid. The woman, gaping, pushed away the rest of the bedclothes and looked down at herself: she was stretched and bloody like one who has just given birth. The man was staring like one who is listening to the wings of a curse flying overhead. And as they looked they became aware that the storm outside had come down quietly and had tiptoed into the room to listen to them.'

The old man stopped. He took a puff at his long-ashed cigarette. I drew the roasted maize from the fire, and blew the ash from them and put them in a plate to cool them a little.

'A writer drew a circle in the sand and stepping into it said "This is my novel," but the circle, leaping, cut him clean through,' he said.

And he picked up his maize and began to eat. I quickly followed his example for I love roast maize. The old man chewed slowly, savouring every droplet of sweetness. He swallowed regretfully and said:

'An angry youth chose a spot on this little ball of Earth. And he stayed on that little spot for a long time. Waiting, I suppose; but he did not even think he was waiting. Did not believe in living long enough in one place to grow roots from his angry brains and sprout leaves from his angry mind. No. No, he just stayed there on that tiny spot. Till his eyesight cracked like a little twig and his life, withering greatly, began to glow around his remains. Years passed. The four winds howled about that spot. Lightning stitched the air. Underneath, the Earth moved as it has always moved.'

He cast at me a quick but shrewd glance.

'Don't take these things too seriously. They are the ramblings of a tramp. Just bits and pieces I picked up and pocketed.'

He said:

'A man to whom everything under the sun had really happened was walking home when he met a green dwarf who looked up at him scornfully, sneeringly.

"Why do you walk with a crutch?" the dwarf asked with contempt. The man held out his hands and stamped his legs on the gravel road and said:

"Can't you see I have no crutch? Indeed, I have no need of it."

But the dwarf spat onto a passing chameleon and said to the man:

"You have the biggest crutch I have ever seen a cripple use."

The man, astonished, and perhaps a little angry, demanded:

"What crutch?"

And the dwarf, spitting again at the skulking chameleon, said:

"Why, your mind."

And with that they parted. Now that road is between the water and the earth and many have grown old and died journeying upon it. And because all men use it, that road is greatly frequented by beggars like me. One day I too chose my spot and sat upon it, waiting for the travellers to pass me by. It was Sunday and early. Soon a solid youth in a crimson jacket strolled up to me and asked if I knew where he could buy white chicken. Do you know where I sent him? To the white soldiers' whorehouse: they beat him to a pulp. Or into a paste, I'm not sure. No one else came, and I became bored and began to scratch and look around. That is when I found this little package. That crimson-jacket character must have dropped it. There are photographs of you and your friends and little notes about what you do. Take them ... I think Trouble is knocking impatiently on our door.'