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effects, and it is absolutely brilliant.' *The Times*

AUTHOR OF **THE GOOD DOCTOR** AND **IN A STRANGE ROOM**,
SHORTLISTED FOR THE MAN BOOKER PRIZE

DAMON GALGUT

The Impostor

THE IMPOSTOR

Damon Galgut was born in Pretoria in 1963. He wrote his first novel, *A Sinless Season*, when he was seventeen. His other books include *Small Circle of Beings*, *The Beautiful Screaming of Pigs*, *The Quarry* and *The Good Doctor*. *The Good Doctor* was shortlisted for the Man Booker Prize, the IMPAC Dublin Award and the Commonwealth Writers' Prize. Damon Galgut lives in Cape Town.

'A riveting read, wonderfully written and haunting in its evocation of a place peopled by remnants of an unnatural and violent past.
Paul Hopkins, *Irish Independent*

'Unsettling and engaging... The prose assumes the quality of landscape painting, framed images of bold strokes and lines... Damon Galgut is a name to remember among the writers of the new South Africa.' Stephen Abell, *Daily Telegraph*

'It's a great pleasure to read a novel whose author seems to know what he is up to, but which nevertheless doesn't give the impression that everything has been pre-programmed... The narrative itself takes twists and turns. It is full of surprises, and yet the way it works out in the end seems to have been ineluctable... More gripping and persuasive the further you follow the author on his journey.' Allan Massie, *Scotsman*

'A taut, eerie, and intense tale of the dashed hopes of post-apartheid South Africa.' *Mail on Sunday*

ALSO BY DAMON GALGUT

A Sinless Season

The Quarry

Small Circle of Beings

The Beautiful Screaming of Pigs

The Good Doctor

THE IMPOSTOR

DAMON GALGUT



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AUTHOR'S NOTE

Terms like 'Coloured' or 'Bushman' are fraught with the tensions of South Africa's history. Used for a long time as slurs or for purposes of racial classification, in recent years they have to some extent been reclaimed and neutralised. It's in this spirit in which they appear here, with no intention to hurt.

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YOUR HINTERLAND IS THERE

– Inscription on a statue of Cecil John Rhodes
The Company's Garden, Cape Town

Table of Contents

Cover

Also by Glen Duncan

Title Page

Copyright

Author's Note

Acknowledgements

Dedication

Part 1

Chapter 1

Chapter 2

Chapter 3

Chapter 4

Part 2

Chapter 5

Chapter 6

Chapter 7

Chapter 8

Chapter 9

Chapter 10

Chapter 11

Chapter 12

Chapter 13

Chapter 14

Chapter 15

Chapter 16

Chapter 17

Chapter 18

Chapter 19

Chapter 20

Part 3

Chapter 21

BEFORE

The journey was almost over; they were nearly at their destination. There was a turn-off and nothing else in sight except a tree, a field of sheep and lines of heat rippling from the tar. Adam was supposed to stop, but he didn't stop, or not completely. Nothing was coming, it was safe, what he did posed no danger to anybody.

When the cop stepped out from behind the tree, it was as if he'd materialized out of nowhere. He was clean and vertical and peremptory in his uniform, like an exclamation mark. He stood in the road with his hand held up and Adam pulled over. They looked at each other through the open window.

Adam said, 'Oh, come on, you can't be serious.'

The cop was a young man, wearing dark glasses. He gave the impression, in all this dust and sun, of being impossibly cool and composed. 'There is a stop sign,' he told Adam. 'You didn't stop. The fine is one thousand rand.'

'Wow. That's a lot of money.'

He smiled and shrugged. 'Your driver's licence, please.'

'Can't you let it go? Just give me a warning or something?' He searched for the man's eyes, but all he got was dark glass.

'I have to follow the rules, sir. Do you want me to break the rules?'

'Uh, well, it would be nice if you stretched them a bit.'

The man smiled again. 'I could get into trouble for that, sir.' After a pause he added, 'You would have to make it worth my while.'

'Sorry?'

'If you want me to break the rules, you have to make it worthwhile.'

It was spoken so casually, in such a conversational way, that Adam thought he'd misheard. But now it had been said, exactly as he thought. He was stunned. He'd heard about this sort of thing, but he'd never had to deal with it himself. He sat rigidly behind the wheel, trying to think it through, his sense of time frozen in the vertical white light, while the man stalked around the car, looking at the headlamps, the tyres, the registration. When he got back to the window, the cop said, 'And I notice your licence is out of date. That would be another thousand. So, what do you think? Let's say... two hundred, and we can forget the whole thing.'

Adam was suddenly outraged. 'No,' he said.

'No?'

'Absolutely not. I'm not paying you one cent.'

The man shrugged again. The smile was still there, flickering faintly around his plump little mouth. 'Your driver's licence, please,' he said.

*

Adam managed to read the registration number of the cop's car, which was parked behind the tree, and he pulled out, and he recited it to himself as he drove on. But he didn't have a pen and paper to hand and by the time he reached the next service station, a few kilometres further, he wasn't sure any more whether the sequence of numbers was correct. Nevertheless, he wrote it down on a scrap of paper he got from the waitress in the tea-room adjoining the garage. He was repeating it, trying to match it to the memory in his head, when Gavin and Charmaine came in. They had pulled over when he was

stopped and had watched the whole scene in the rear-view mirror. 'What was all that about?' Gavin said.

'He wanted money. He just asked for it, straight out like that.'

Gavin snorted. 'How much did you give him?'

'I didn't give him anything.' Adam glanced anxiously at his brother. 'What would you have done?'

'Well...' Gavin said, moustache twitching. 'It's a lot cheaper than the fine.'

'That's not the point.'

'Okay, okay, whatever.' Gavin looked around. 'I've got another problem. I'm wondering if we're actually on the right road. I was pretty sure till the last turn-off. But all the road signs are mentioning some other place with a name I never heard of.'

'*Ja*, same place,' said the waitress, who happened to be passing. 'Just the name's changed. It's because of the new mayor. He changed it a year ago. A lot of people are upset about it.'

'I bet they are,' Gavin said. 'They're doing it everywhere. Big waste of money. Now they've got to reprint all the maps.'

Adam only half-heard this conversation. His mind was still preoccupied with the cop. No threat had been made, yet the man felt somehow threatening. He stood like a dark gate-keeper at the door of Adam's new life, blocking the path, one hungry hand extended.

As it happened, the town was only a kilometre or two further on. The road had been wandering aimlessly over the plain towards a distant line of mountains, as if trying to find a way across. But not far beyond the service station it went over a rise and on the other side was the town. It was built in a low valley, so that the landscape concealed it. There was a brief glimpse of a scattering of buildings, none more than a storey high, except for the church steeple, which rose like a strict, admonishing finger. On the far side of a river in the middle of the valley was the township, connected to the main town by a single concrete bridge. Across the top of a nearby hill the old name of the town had been spelled out in white stones, but somebody had started to rearrange them into the form of the new name and abandoned the job halfway through.

They turned off the road they were following and into the main street. The first and only stop was outside the church, where they pulled over. Some of Adam's unease, which had lingered from the encounter with the traffic cop, seemed to find a focus there. The street, with its single supermarket and bank and butchery and post-office, its beauty salon and hotel and bottle store, clenched at his heart. Although it was the end of August, there were Christmas lights hanging tiredly on the streetlamps, still left over from last year. The road, which they had been following for so long, narrowed at its end on a vista of yellow scrub, in which a drunk man fell over, got up and staggered a few steps, then fell over again.

Gavin got out and came over. 'Cheery, hey?'

'Well,' Adam said. 'It is Sunday.'

Gavin blew through his moustache and shook his head. 'Let's go take a look at the house,' he said.

The house was a shock. It was out at the edge of the white town, where the roads were untarred and the ground sloped steeply upward to the rocky crest of a ridge. It was very bare and basic, with a slanted tin roof. The windows had a blind, blank look to them. The paint was faded and peeling. The fence was overgrown with creeper, and the creeper had twined through the gate.

Gavin ripped at the creeper, clearing it. He was muttering to himself in a low, vehement voice, but he went silent as they stepped through onto an old slate path. The path ran through an orchard up to the front door, and the trees had grown out of control, their branches twisting and spreading. The walk was covered with a thick layer of rotting fruit, which gave off a haze of fermentation and flies. They picked their way, slipping and sliding, through fumes and a heady stink. Gavin took out a big iron key which looked as if it should open a medieval monastery. But it slotted easily into the lock and twisted

Adam let Gavin and Charmaine go ahead, as if they belonged here and he was the visitor. But as he stepped over the threshold he could feel the house pulling at him, drawing him in – claiming him. It was almost a physical sensation.

The air inside was dead and heavy, as if it had been breathed already. The furniture was a depressing mixture of old, clunky pieces interspersed with the tastelessly modern. The four rooms were functional and barren. There was no carpeting on the concrete floor, no picture on the walls, no softness anywhere. All of it was immured in a thick, brown pelt of dust. There was the distinct sense that time had been shut outside and was only now flowing in again behind them, through the open front door.

Gavin was furious. He stalked silently through the house, leaving his footprints marked out clearly on the floor. A bird had come in through the chimney and died and he pushed at it angrily with his toe.

‘I warned you,’ he said eventually.

‘I know.’

‘But I’ll admit, this is even worse than I thought. It’s pretty rough.’

‘It’s okay,’ Adam said bravely. ‘I’ll get it cleaned up.’

Charmaine had gone off on an exploration, opening doors, peering into cupboards. Now she came scurrying back, her voice low and breathless.

‘There are *presences* here,’ she said.

‘What?’

‘I’m a little bit psychic,’ she explained to Adam. ‘I can sense presences from the past. This house is full of them. It must be very old.’

Gavin sighed. ‘I don’t know how old it is,’ he said gruffly. ‘There’s certainly a lot of dirt present.’

‘When were you last here?’ Adam said.

‘Not sure. Years ago. Just after I bought it. To tell you the truth, I almost forgot that I own it. I don’t remember it very well, but I think it was in better shape than this. I only came here a couple of times.’

‘What made you buy here?’ It didn’t seem like the sort of place his brother would go for.

‘God knows. It was very trendy at the time, having a little place in the Karoo. I think I had a girlfriend who wanted it. Dirt cheap, I can tell you that. Stress on dirt.’

‘I sense an old woman,’ Charmaine said. ‘Very old and very sad.’

‘Jeez, babe. Give it a rest.’

‘Mock if you want. But I do.’

‘Oh, boy,’ Gavin said. ‘Take a look at this.’

He had opened the back door out of the kitchen. There was a small cement *stoep*, from which steps led down, and then the yard stretched away. It was choked with tall brown weeds that had died long ago and set solidly in the baked ground. They were thorny, massed together into an impenetrable wall. For some reason, those weeds were overwhelming. All the neglect and abandonment took form in them. There was a tall windmill and concrete dam to one side, but they were diminished and eclipsed by the weeds.

The two brothers stood shoulder to shoulder, staring. A wind came up and hissed through the dry stalks.

‘Mother of God,’ Gavin said softly, ‘I feel so depressed.’

Some part of Adam was moving forward into the weeds. He had to shake his head, to clear it and return to where he was standing.

‘Well,’ Gavin said, clapping his hands together, trying to sound brisk. ‘We can’t stay here tonight. That’s for sure. Let’s go take a look at the hotel.’

‘Oh,’ Adam said, surprising himself, ‘I’ll stay here.’

They both blinked at him. ‘Don’t be crazy,’ Gavin said.

‘I seriously think,’ Charmaine said, ‘that you should do some sort of cleansing ritual first. Exorcise the place. I know somebody who could do it for you.’

Adam couldn’t speak; he only shook his head.

A spark jumped in Gavin’s eyes, but he spoke coolly, with a shrug. ‘Whatever,’ he said. ‘You can do what you want, you’re an adult human being.’

*

Alone in the house as night fell, he didn’t know why he’d insisted on staying. The dust and disrepair were everywhere. There was no power. He found an old candle in the kitchen cupboard, but the wavering puddle of light only amplified the darkness. The bare mattress was dirty and he couldn’t bring himself to lie down. The place was old and many different acts might have happened in the rooms. Murder and birth might have left their traces. In the daytime he was a rational and sceptical man and he didn’t believe in presences. But now, at night, with strange walls enclosing him and a strange roof creaking overhead, a lot of things seemed possible. It was as if another person, from another time, was buried under his skin. This person was squatting by a fire, with a vast darkness pressing in.

The branches of trees in the orchard rubbed against each other. Something splatted softly outside – a fruit, or a foot.

In the end he took a pillow and went out onto the back *stoep*. It was a little better here. A faint breeze moved over him, there was a brilliant frieze of stars overhead. On the far side of the valley he could see the lights of cars and trucks on the road bypassing the town, stitching back and forth with a comforting indifference. There was a larger world out there.

He woke just before dawn, his face burning and swollen with mosquito bites. He had a sense of distant and troubling dreams receding back into himself like a tide. In the first light the mountains stood out like a strip torn from the sky. He sat up slowly and all of it returned to him: the unused rooms, the twisted trees, the weeds in the back yard.

Then, for the first time, he noticed the house next door. It entered his consciousness by degrees, like a photograph developing. It was a small house, in layout and shape almost exactly the same as Gavin’s – except that it was different in every other way. It was brightly painted and neat and immaculate. The garden at the back was green and clipped, ordered into regular lines. A huge amount of toil and effort had gone into maintaining the place; and at this moment Adam saw a small human figure, turning over the soil with a spade.

His next-door neighbour was an older white man, dressed in blue overalls. More than that couldn’t be seen at this distance, except for a general air of frenzy that the man gave off. He was hurling himself at the earth with dedication or fury, talking to himself, while a cigarette glowed redly in his mouth, like the light of an engine, but suddenly he became aware of Adam and he stopped working instantly, as if he’d been switched off. His stillness was almost unnatural.

Now the two of them looked at each other across the wire fence between them, while pretending they were not. There was no reason for them not to greet each other, or wave a hand, or nod, but neither did. It was as if they were waiting for something to happen. Then the man in blue dropped his spade and ran to his back door and went inside.

*

Adam was in a frightened, irritable mood when he walked down to the hotel a little later. This was

big, blockish building opposite the church, with an imposing, balustraded façade.

In its proportions and design it resembled an old saloon in a western.

Gavin and Charmaine were at a table on the front balcony overlooking the street. A big man in an apron was serving them breakfast and Adam heard him say, as he came up, 'It was the voice of God speaking like I'm speaking to you now.'

'Amazing,' Charmaine said, shaking her head.

'This is my brother,' Gavin said. 'Adam, this is Fanie Prinsloo.'

Everything about the big man was meaty. Even his face, with its dull, minimal expression, was like a slab of steak. But the movement with which he dried his fingertips on the apron was surprisingly delicate. He repeated his name significantly, as if it should mean something, as he shook hands with Adam.

'I believe you are coming to live here,' he said. 'Welcome!'

'Thanks.'

'I was just telling your brother how I came here three years ago. My wife and me, we were attacked in our house in George. In the middle of the night. Tied up, hit over the head. I lost a tooth – look here.' He bared a black gap in his smile. 'And while I was lying there, with the rope around my neck, thinking I was going to die, I heard a voice. Just like I'm talking to you now. 'Fanie, go live in the country.' That's what it said. 'Go live in the country.' So I came.'

'It's incredible,' Charmaine said. 'Those moments when the barriers break down.'

'I used to come here for holidays,' Fanie Prinsloo said. 'Me and the wife, in my caravan. But I never thought of moving up here. Not till that night. But I packed my bags, I sold my house. My friend, I never looked back.'

'You own this place?' Gavin said. His eyes had narrowed, becoming cold and thoughtful. 'You don't live all right up here?'

'Ja, these days. Now with the new road and the pass over the mountains, there's a lot of traffic going through. It didn't used to be like that. This used to be the end of the road. But things have changed.'

'When God speaks,' Charmaine said, 'you should always take His advice.'

The big man laughed heartily. 'Ja, it's a beautiful place,' he said. 'The mountains, the sky, just like our Heavenly Father made them. You won't be sorry, Adrian.'

'Adam.'

'And what can I get you for breakfast?'

When he'd gone lumbering off to the kitchen, Gavin said, 'Do you know who that is? Only one of the greatest forwards in the history of rugby. And he's living up here.'

The conversation had thrown Adam. He was full of insecurity about what he was doing, the who he was moving up here, the big change in his life. When he answered his brother, he spoke too vehemently. 'I don't care about rugby,' he said. There was a silence, and the mood around the table dropped.

'You've got red bumps all over your head,' Charmaine said, trying to be cheerful.

'Mosquito bites.'

'Well, you wanted to stay there,' Gavin said. 'In that dirty house.'

'It's *your* dirty house.'

'Nobody's forcing you to stay there.'

They stared off in different directions while Fanie Prinsloo brought the coffee and toast. Afterwards they ate without speaking. Both brothers were thinking about things that had happened in the past which had nothing to do with their conversation. There was a lot of friction, a lot of *stuff*, between them, which had played itself out in recent weeks. The sound of chewing and swallowing was very loud, but the antagonism slowly drained away, till only its brittle shell remained. Gavin wiped his

moustache carefully and, without looking at Adam, said, 'We shouldn't fight. It's all ancient history.'

'I agree.'

Gavin got up. 'Come on, babe. We'd better hit the road.'

Adam walked out to the car with them. But his brother had a last little speech to make. He had obviously prepared these thoughts, though the heart had gone out of them now. Looking down, his expression sulky, Gavin said that if Adam wanted to change his mind, if he wanted to come back to the city with them, now was the time to speak. There was still the offer of the job, if Adam wanted to reconsider...

'No,' Adam said. 'I want to be here.'

Since arriving the day before, he'd been unsure. He'd been wavering. But now, as he spoke, he was startled to discover that he meant it.

Gavin sucked on his moustache and glared at Adam in sad resignation. 'So you're set on being a martyr.'

'It's not like that.'

Gavin threw out his hands, palms upward, to show how helpless he was. But when he said goodbye to Adam he put his arms out and embraced him. It was out of character, a peculiar gesture for him, and despite himself Adam felt like crying. For weeks now, he'd wanted to get away from his brother. But when the red sports car had gone, he had an unsettling pang. Now he really was alone.

A set of unfortunate circumstances had led Adam to this point. In the normal course of things he wouldn't have been here at all, but his life hadn't been normal for a while. Everything had unravelled for him a few months before when two things happened at the same time to undo him. First he'd lost his job and then he'd lost his house.

He shouldn't have been surprised about the job. All the signs were there but Adam was oblivious and it was a deep, cold shock to discover that the young black intern he'd been training for the past six months was, in fact, being groomed to replace him. His boss had been apologetic, talking about racial quotas and telling him it was nothing personal. But how could it not be personal? It was he, Adam Napier, nobody else, who had to pack up his desk and take his pictures off the wall and walk through the door for the last time. Afterwards, remembering this scene, what he felt most keenly was the humiliation that he hadn't seen it coming.

The house was a different story. It had been clear for a long time how things were going. The area of Johannesburg in which he'd bought – trendy and vibrant and multi-cultural when he'd first moved in – had been sliding badly for a few years. All his friends who lived nearby had been selling up and getting out, and they'd urged Adam to do the same. But for some reason, some passivity in his character, he hadn't done anything about it. He'd just sat there, watching it all go to pieces: the gangsters taking over, the squatters moving in, the crime and drugs getting worse and worse, until it was too late. He couldn't find anybody reliable to rent the house and nobody wanted to buy it. In the end he couldn't even give the place away. The bank didn't want to repossess it and they only took it when they saw that Adam was in no position to keep up any repayments at all.

It was a real mess, a real stroke of bad luck. In just a few months he'd found himself stranded alone and futureless in the middle of his life. Eventually he'd had to turn to his brother for help. Gavin was three years younger than Adam and had always done things in a very different way. He was down in Cape Town, at the other end of the country, and they had stayed only tangentially in touch over the years. But since Adam had got into trouble, Gavin had been calling a lot, affecting serious concern.

'Why don't you move down here?' he said now. 'You could take your time, stay with us till you find your feet.'

'I'll think about it,' Adam said. But he didn't have to think for too long. He'd been hoping, in fact, that Gavin would make the offer. He was tired of Johannesburg, tired of his life up there. The idea of a big move, a completely fresh start, was appealing.

It was amazing, when he packed up his life, how little there was. The bank had taken all the furniture along with the house. He was left with his clothes, a few household implements, some boxes of books. All of it fitted into his car.

*

As a young man, Gavin had been muscular and powerful, but he was running to fat these days. He had an affluent, satisfied look to him. He wore expensive clothes and jewellery and he had cultivated a smug little moustache. He'd recently moved into a huge penthouse apartment on the top floor of a fancy block of flats that he owned.

From Adam's bedroom window there was a spectacular view of Table Mountain and Lion's Head. A certain unreality attached to this vista, which reflected the unreality of Adam's position. Here he was

without prospects or cash, living like a king.

Gavin rubbed it in. 'Relax, no hurry,' he told Adam. 'I can afford to look after you, until you get things worked out.'

There was irony in this. Until just a few years ago, Adam had been the staid, dependable, predictable one, while Gavin was financially straitened and directionless. Now they seemed to have changed places. But the history went back further and deeper than that and it didn't take long for Adam to sense that Gavin was using his weakened state to try to settle some obscure moral score. He was constantly on his case, wearing him down. 'You've got to pull yourself together,' he told Adam just a day or two after he arrived. 'Look at you, you're a wreck. There are food stains on your shirt.'

'Who cares? Oh, all right, I'll change the shirt.'

'The shirt's not the point here, Ad. It's you. You're letting yourself go, you're collapsing. Why don't you fight back? You can't just give up. So you lost your job, big deal. Get another one.'

He made it sound so easy. That was the way Gavin thought: you side-stepped bad luck, you rolled with the punches. And maybe he was right – maybe Adam was indulging himself, giving in to self-pity. In his place, Gavin wouldn't be folding up like this; he had proved it before. He had changed jobs a few times already, without suffering the slightest self-doubt. He had been through two marriages, both ending in ugly divorces, but the experience hadn't stopped him from getting involved with a series of unlikely women, the newest of whom was hanging on his arm now, chewing gum and staring at Adam. Her name was Charmaine.

'I've got a friend who's lonely too,' she put in. 'I could introduce you.'

'I'm not lonely.'

'That's your problem right there,' Gavin said. 'Denial. You've got to confront this thing. Get up, get out. Don't lie around, staring at the ceiling.'

'I'm different to you, Gavin. I reflect on things. I'm Hamlet to your Laertes.'

'What? What are you talking about? All I'm saying, get out and socialize a bit. Why don't you come out with us tonight? We're meeting some of my buddies for drinks.'

'No, thanks.'

He'd met some of Gavin's friends already. A bunch of them had come over for a *braai* in the garden downstairs a few nights before – big, boozy men with simpering wives, who talked about business deals and cars and insurance, and made jokes about blondes and blowjobs. One of them had asked Adam what line of work he was in, and when he'd answered that he was unemployed, a hot, scratchy silence had fallen.

As they got up to go, Charmaine said to Adam, 'I can read auras. Your aura is very dark.'

'Jeez, babe,' Gavin said. 'Leave my brother alone.'

'I'm just observing. You need to clear yourself,' she told Adam. 'You need to change your life.'

He thought about that the whole evening. He didn't know about the aura, but she was right about the rest of it. He did need to clear himself, he did need to change his life.

*

This idea was still on his mind a few days later when Gavin took him to visit a building site. It was a scene of frenzied activity. Hundreds of men were toiling with machines to raise a massive concrete structure from the ground. It was while they were up on the top floor, both wearing hard-hats, Adam beset by vertigo, that Gavin offered him a job.

'Nothing too big or high-powered, obviously,' he said. 'You're not qualified. But you could come and work at the office. I need an assistant. I could train you, show you the ropes. No, don't answer

now, just think about it for a few days, all right?’

Gavin had made a fortune in just a few years out of property development. He’d started out up the west coast, getting involved in a marina and surf resort that had destroyed a wetlands conservation site. These days his energies were mostly focused on Cape Town. He was teamed up with people who were buying old buildings and gutting them or ripping them down and putting up shiny modern apartment blocks in their place. Some of these deals were unscrupulous and Gavin had pointed out proudly to Adam that one of their company directors was a black man who was paid a healthy retainer just to stay at home in Gugulethu while his name on the letterhead brought in legitimacy and investment. The sums of money involved were staggering.

More than anything, it was the idea of the money that swayed Adam. He’d never been serious poor before and it wasn’t nice. In recent years there had appeared a new phenomenon in Johannesburg: white people at the traffic lights, wearing old clothes and a hopeless air, begging. He wasn’t anywhere near that state himself, but the possibility of it pulled at him with a powerful gravity. Losing everything, having nothing – the notion stirred contradictory feelings of panic and excitement.

So he did think about Gavin’s offer. It was tempting. Later he would realize that Gavin had chosen his moment carefully: the view from the top of the construction site was heady, full of the promise of industry and power. It was only when they were back down at ground level that the real world returned. While they were walking to the car he heard his brother having a vehement conversation on his mobile phone. ‘Rip it all out,’ Gavin was saying. ‘All the old fittings... *ja, ja*, I’ve got a buyer for the stuff... no, we’ll put in copper... the cheapest, I told you, it’s got to look good, that’s the point... I know a guy, he’ll handle it... take out the silver, put copper in...’

A blue melancholy rolled down over Adam. Cheap fittings. Copper instead of silver. No, he couldn’t do it.

Although he’d agreed to think about it for a few days, he spoke to Gavin that night. It was better to talk while the urgency was there. He felt full of moral clarity, a sense of freedom and release. ‘I want to make a contribution,’ he said, ‘not a fast buck.’

Gavin was instantly set bristling. ‘What, I’m not contributing?’

‘Well, how?’

‘I employ hundreds of people. Construction work – that’s a lot of jobs. It’s good for bosses and workers, it’s good for everybody. And it’s all part of opening up the country. Where’s the problem?’

It was a difficult argument to answer. But Adam remembered that, in the years leading up to South Africa’s big change, Gavin had been gloomy and frightened. He’d even spoken about emigrating. Adam had been the positive one, full of hope for the future. It didn’t seem right that it should have worked out like this: with Adam unemployed and homeless, and his brother talking loudly about opening up the country.

‘The way I see it,’ Gavin finished angrily, ‘you’re not in any position to refuse.’

‘I’m grateful for the offer. Really. But it’s a matter of principle.’

‘Oh, right. It’s like that. Great to keep your principles while other people are looking after you.’

‘You offered,’ Adam said. ‘I didn’t force you.’

‘Out of interest, what will your principles allow you to do?’

He hesitated, but then he answered. ‘I want to write poetry,’ he said.

As a very young man, Adam had published a book of poems. The collection had been called *THE FLAMING SWORD*, a title he had taken from Genesis. It had been a small local publication and had sold only a few hundred copies, but it had attracted some attention, mostly because of his age. The poems were about the natural world, ardent and intense and romantic, and he felt quite embarrassed by them now. He had never written or published anything since, but he had always – secretly, inside himself – thought of himself as a poet. It had felt more like a condition than a vocation, especially

while he was holding down another, ordinary job, trying to make his way in the world.

Now that the other job and life had fallen away, the poet in him felt renewed. It seemed to him that he'd returned to his true calling. Accordingly, he'd started to conceive of this crisis he was going through as something he'd willed upon himself. He hadn't lost his job; he had given it up. He hadn't lost his house; he was shedding his possessions. He was paring his life to the core.

Till now, he hadn't voiced these thoughts to anybody. He had barely acknowledged them to himself. But Gavin's offer of a job, and his reaction to it, had brought the whole issue into focus. He had reached a moment of truth.

'*Poetry*,' Gavin said. He made it sound like a perversion.

Adam blushed. 'Yes,' he said, feeling more certain than ever. He resolved that from this moment he would declare it to anybody who asked: that was what he was – a poet.

Charmaine was nodding at him. 'I think that's so amazing,' she breathed.

'Maybe it's amazing,' Gavin said, 'but it doesn't pay the rent.'

'The rent isn't important.'

'It is, if you don't have it.' Gavin glared at his brother. 'Look,' he said, 'things are good at the moment. The country's rolling along. There's a lot of money flowing, if you just know where to look. You've had a bit of bad luck, that's all. But there's no excuse for a white man to go starving here whatever anybody says.'

'I'm sure that's all true,' Adam said. 'But I'm not after money. I'm after something else.'

'What?'

How could he explain? His brother would never understand. For Gavin, the goal in life was money and power, and he judged everybody by that standard. He assumed that everyone shared his aim, but of course that wasn't true. Adam believed in beauty for its own sake: Beauty with a capital B. He couldn't talk to Gavin about Beauty, but he saw his way forward clearly in that moment. He was penniless poet, with nothing to offer anybody except words, but he was the real soul of the country. He was at the centre of things.

His feeling of exultant certainty lasted the rest of the day. In his room that evening, he studied himself in the mirror. He had a theory, which was that people's faces gradually became set around one overriding expression. There were satisfied faces, angry faces, sad faces. His own expression, he realized, was one of disappointment: it seemed to be the dominant theme of his life. But now, as he gazed at his image in the glass, he imagined he could see a transformation in his face. The little defeats, the compromises, had burned away. What remained was his essential self.

Adam was still a good-looking man. He didn't have the lush handsomeness of his early years, it was true, with his wild locks and saturnine stare; he had really looked the part of a poet back then. His hair had greyed and thinned, he had put on a bit of weight, there were creases next to his eyes. But the basic outline, the shape, was still in place. His intrinsic nature showed through, his creative, bohemian spirit. The young man had matured into something less dramatic, but he was still pleasing on the eye.

He fell asleep that night secure in his conviction. But he woke in the small hours into doubt. He lay there for a long time, with the lights of the city spread out below the window, corroded by questions. What was he playing at? Who did he think he was? Thank God he hadn't used that line on Gavin about being the real soul of the country. It didn't feel true any more. Of the two of them, perhaps it was Gavin who stood closer to the core of things. Maybe the soul of South Africa wasn't a poet, maybe it was a crooked property developer, obsessed with cheap fittings.

'I've got an idea to put to you,' Gavin said. 'No, no, not the job. Something different.'

This was a few days later. Adam had lapsed into a more normal state meanwhile, neither triumphant nor despairing. He knew what he wanted, but he wasn't sure he was right. In this cautious frame of mind, he paid attention to his brother, and the proposal he was listening to gradually took hold of him.

A few years before, Gavin said, he'd bought a house in a tiny Karoo town, about eight hours away. He'd meant to fix it up, to use as a place for long weekends and holidays, but somehow he'd never got around to it. So the house was just standing there, empty and unused, slowly going to pieces.

'You could go and stay there, if you like. I bought it complete, with all the furniture and everything. It wouldn't cost you much – just the electricity and water. You say you want to write poetry. Well, that could be the perfect spot for you.'

When he'd finished speaking, Gavin watched Adam with a little smirk on his face. There seemed to be some challenge in the look. It was only afterwards that Adam understood: Gavin was throwing down the gauntlet. In his mind, it was a crazy proposal. He was saying, in effect, 'you talk about writing poems. Well, let's see how badly you want to do that.'

Adam saw himself sitting at a window, a vista of rolling hills and fields outside, words proceeding from his pen in a long, unbroken flow, and it was exactly where he wanted to be. 'Yes!' he said. 'I'll do it.'

Gavin's face fell and almost immediately he tried to persuade his brother why it was a really terrible idea. But every argument that he put forward – that the place was rough and old, that he hadn't been up there in years, that it was miles from anybody he knew – only made Adam more determined to go. It felt to him that his life had narrowed in on a tiny point of fate, on the other side of which lay regeneration and renewal. He had been worshipping false gods, but all the old idols were broken now. What would take their place was unknown, but it was almost in his grasp.

Which was how, not long afterwards, he came to find himself driving into the countryside on a Sunday morning in his old Fiat, following behind Gavin and Charmaine, who were speeding along in Gavin's red sports car. Once he was out of the city, he felt that he could breathe. He opened all the windows to let air into the car and it was like a new, fierce wind blowing through his life. He felt lighter than he had in years, as if he was leaving all his old, cumbersome baggage behind. He was sloughing off his previous life, like a skin that didn't fit him any more. His few remaining possessions, piled on the back seat, and even the car itself, didn't matter to him – he could let it all go.

Like a physical symbol of this change, the landscape they were driving through resembled nothing that he knew. He had seen the Karoo before, of course, but always in passing, on his way to Cape Town or back to Jo'burg. He had never given it his full attention till now. There were sun-blasted stretches of plain, then sudden eruptions of oddly-shaped hills. The emptiness was powerful and strange. It had the feel mostly of desert, but it was springtime and in certain fertile valleys, where there was water, the green was vivid and intense. Sometimes there would be a farm-house, with a scattering of buildings, a few stick-like human figures. And sometimes there was a tiny dwelling, no bigger than a room or two, in the middle of a huge desolation. It didn't seem possible that anybody could live there.

He had even begun tentatively to consider the poems that he might write. His early work, from his first collection, had been rooted in a very different landscape. Those were African poems: hymns to the bushveld. The stark, stripped-down countryside he was passing through now was of a different order entirely. It wasn't African; not in any conventional way. It was more like the surface of some arid, airless planet, or perhaps it was the bottom of the sea. But still, he could imagine that one might come to love all this vast vacancy. One might respond to the hugeness of the sky, or the brilliance that a blossom took on against the pale severity of the scrub. Up close, it was probably teeming with its own versions of life and vitality. Its beauty would be more valuable for having to be learned. No doubt

the enormous spaces would fold the spirit inwards, on some core of contemplation and insight. Yes, was a religious sort of landscape; and he felt a corresponding rhetoric stirring in him.

He was actually on the verge of a promising phrase, something he could build a stanza around though its full cadence remained just out of reach, when the cop stepped out into the road.

He started by cleaning out the house. It was a big labour. He hadn't been this industrious in months washing things and setting them in place, then changing his mind and moving them again. It seemed important to arrange the furniture in a new configuration. He took the curtains down and washed them in the bath. The bed-linen and the table-cloth too. He got down on his knees and scoured the floors. As he wiped and brushed, old colours emerged that had been dimmed under dirt. It was satisfying to push the dust back outside from where it had invaded, grain by grain.

This satisfaction was most complete in the evening as it started to get dark. He had been to the municipality to get the power connected and he switched on every light. The warm yellow glow renewed the little rooms. He walked through the house, exhausted but triumphant, and sat down on the back steps. At the edge of the light he could see the front line of the weeds, massed like a besieging army in the yard. There was still that enemy to overcome.

But he knew how much hard work was involved in a project like that. It wasn't easy to subdue the natural world. His neighbour, the man in the blue overalls, spent hours and hours outside each day hacking and digging and pruning. Over the next week or two, Adam observed him as he toiled in solitary fervour. There was never a repeat of that strange incident from the first morning, when the man had gone rushing inside. But there was a mutually suspicious awareness between Adam and his neighbour, which grew more complex as the days went by.

They were always watching each other, in a sneaky sort of way. And one evening, as he sat out on his *stoep*, Adam noticed the man standing outside his back door, smoking a cigarette. There was a splash of light from inside the house and it caught the brooding presence of him, so silent and intense there on the grass, the red glow of the cigarette going agitatedly back and forth. It was twilight, the end of the day: a natural moment for reverie. But Adam felt uneasy – as if the man was waiting for something; wanting something from him – and this time it was he who jumped up and hurried inside.

After that, they avoided each other. When the man was outside in his garden, Adam stayed indoors spying on him from behind the curtains. But there wasn't much to see. The blue man – which was how Adam thought of him – was always working, always anxious and frenetic. On the rare occasions when he was standing still, he would be puffing on a cigarette. Nobody ever came to visit him; he appeared to be as lonely and singular as Adam himself.

Although he slaved away furiously in his garden, he had another job too – or perhaps it was a hobby. He did metal-work. There was a small shed behind the house and for hours every day a horrible noise of screeching and welding came out of it. When he worked at night, Adam could see a spray of fire inside, like the glow of some infernal industry. The blue man was making burglar bars and security gates. They were often propped up outside for the paint to dry. Later he would load them up on his *bakkie* and drive off to deliver them.

*

The poems didn't come. Or not yet. There was a big window in the lounge with the view that he had imagined: rolling fields and hills, the dark bar of mountains in the distance. But in the foreground was the windmill, towering over his psyche, making thumping, threatening noises as the blades turned in the wind. It was broken, he could see; the water it fetched up blurted out in jets from a missing section.

of pipe. When he'd set up a desk in front of the window, with his notebook and pen on top of it, all he could see and hear was the windmill, churning uselessly against the sky. It stood between him and the poems, which stirred invisibly beyond it, out of reach.

He told himself he needed time. He'd had a major upheaval, a big shift in the foundations. He had to take it easy, allow himself to adjust. In a couple of weeks the windmill would recede into the background and the poems would take its place.

Meanwhile he tried to settle into this new life of his. He took himself off on walks to explore the town. But the heart of it was really that one main street. And whenever he walked down its length popping into the shops, trying to make friendly conversation with the locals, the same feeling from that first day rose up in him again: that he was trapped somewhere that was nowhere, in which the light was too blindingly stark, and in which it was always Sunday afternoon.

What he felt – it came to him after a week or two – was the absence of history. There was the sense of a white deadness before the lightning strikes. In this electric lull, the hands of the clock didn't move. There was only the land, rolling and vast and elemental, in which time was measured out in the shadows of clouds passing over, or the minute scabbling of a beetle among grains of sand. Human events were elsewhere. In Johannesburg or Cape Town, there was a sense of turmoil and ferment. South Africa's big change was evident and tangible. But not here. Here the way things were seemed inevitable and natural, as preordained as the weather. There was the old racial division, all the whites on one side of the river, in their spacious and expensive properties, and all the coloureds on the other side, in the township, in their crowded little houses between pot-holed, neglected streets. Two or three times a day there would be a knock on Adam's front door and it would be somebody looking for work. There was deference and desperation in the way they appealed to him, the men holding their hats over their hands and the women avoiding his eyes. He felt a curious mixture of pity and anger towards them. Couldn't they see that he had nothing to offer, that he had lost control of his own destiny to fate, that his future was up to fate?

*

One night he went down to the hotel in town, the place where Gavin and Charmaine had stayed. He had seen the bar in passing and remembered it, and now the thought had come to him that he might go down there, have a beer, maybe chat to a couple of people.

It was almost empty. Five or six customers at most, not counting Fanie Prinsloo. The meaty ex-rugby player welcomed Adam loudly. But his heartiness was close to aggression, and the assortment of rugby jerseys hanging on the wall, amongst tarnished trophies and faded team photographs, were like the flags of a club that had refused membership to Adam.

After he'd set down his beer, Fanie Prinsloo said, 'So, Alan. What is it you do?'

'Adam.'

'Sorry?'

'My name is Adam. I write poetry.'

A gaunt older woman with a leathery face leaned towards him. 'I didn't catch that. You do pottery?'

'No, no. Poems. I write poems.'

Silence descended on the room, while Fanie Prinsloo flipped through channels on the television at the corner.

A thin man with glasses asked, 'You make a good living out of that?'

'Um, no, not really.'

'Didn't think so,' the man said.

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