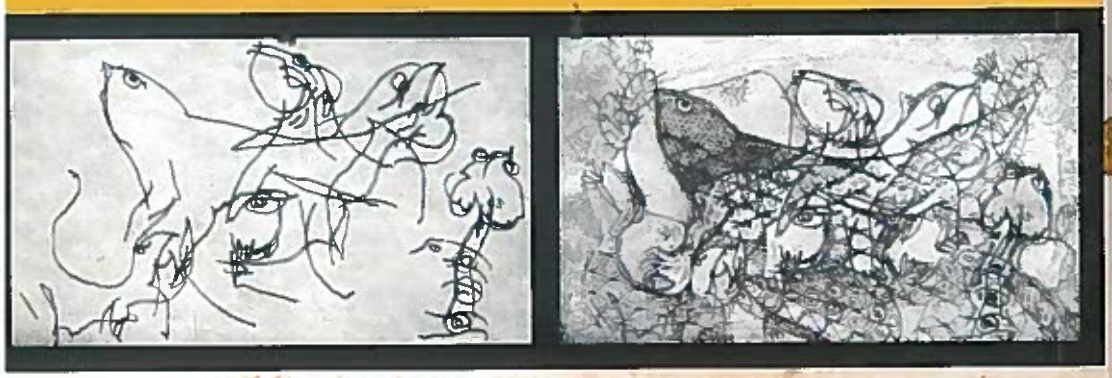

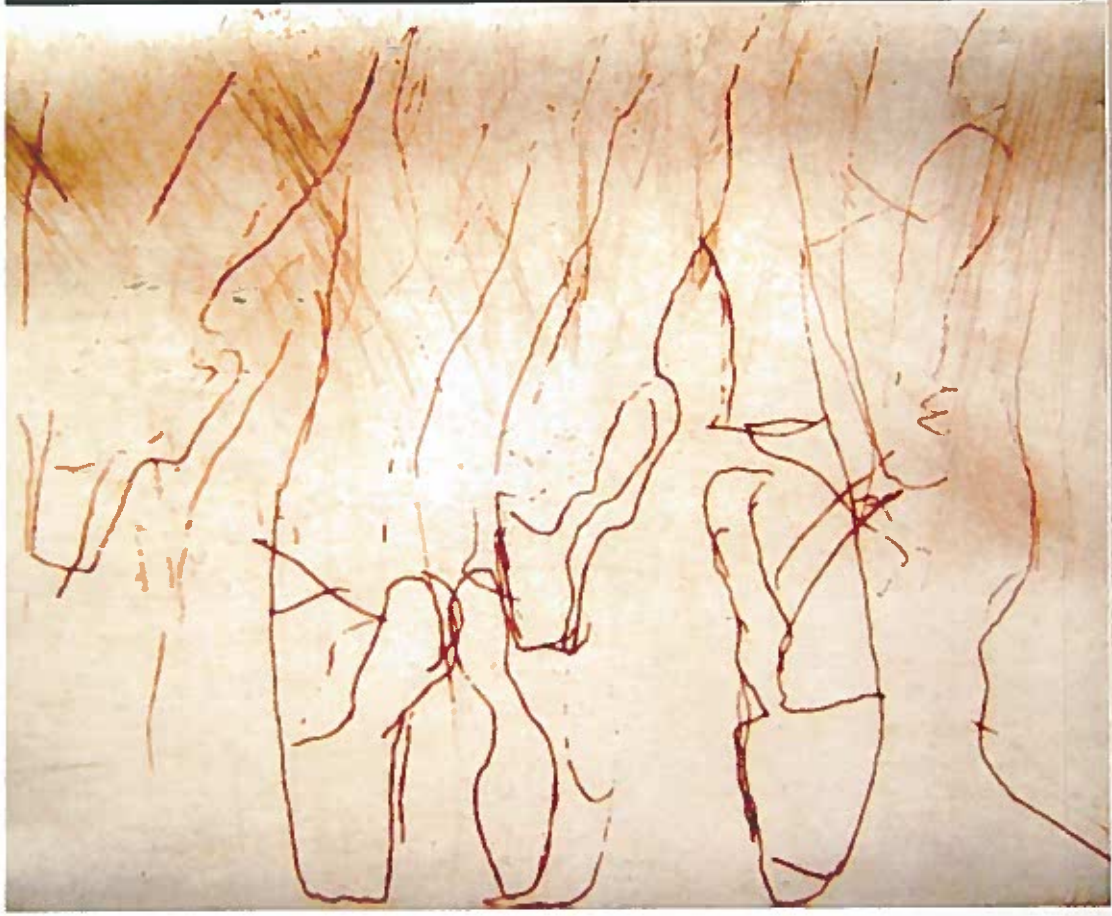

NEW CONTRAST

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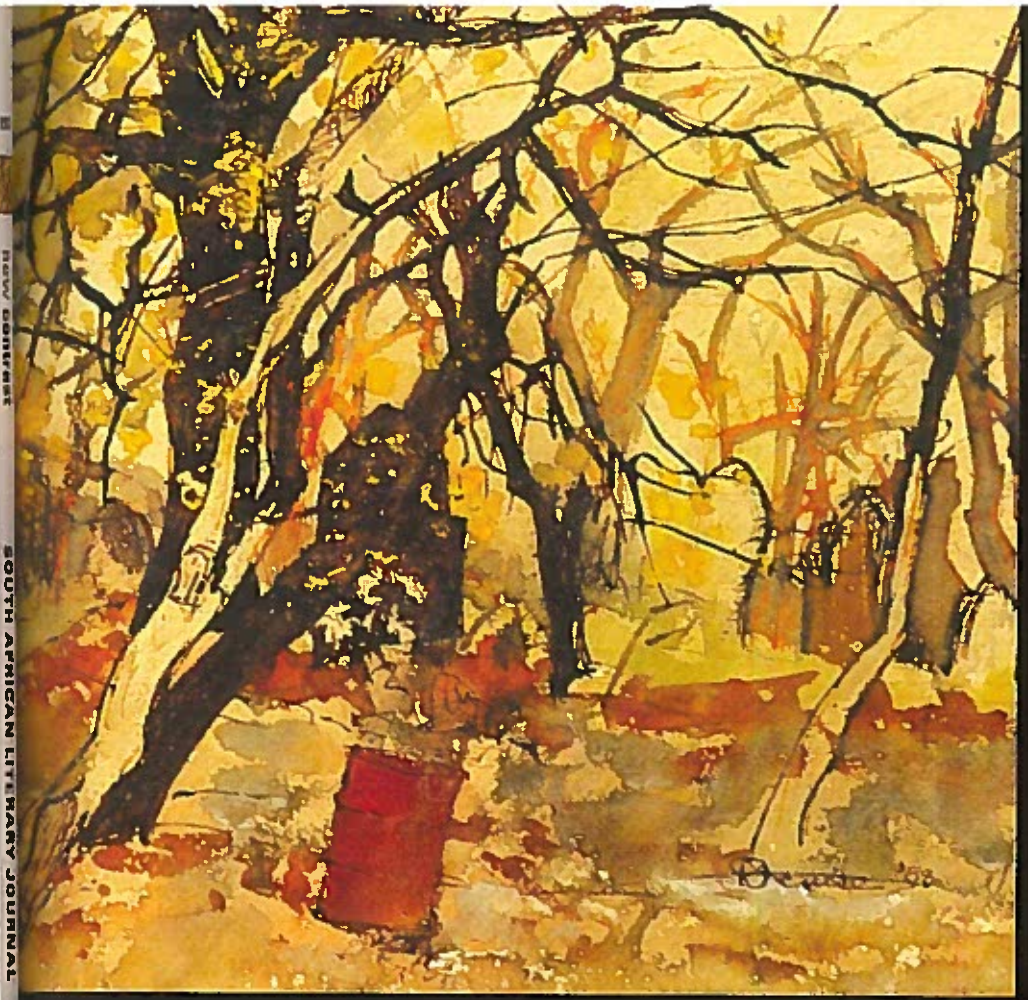

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A therapist reassured her that nobody would blame her for terminating. The therapist cautioned that the all the children would eventually have questions; and, that the truth could be traumatic. He thought she might take the therapist's advice in consideration.

She found a new therapist.

She was adamant she needed the baby – that *they* needed this baby. She repeatedly told him that this was their chance to make a horrible incident into something positive. That this was their chance to revel in the goodness that can spring from evil. That while he might not see it now, this baby was the answer to their prayers.

He wasn't so sure. He wasn't even sure who he was praying to anymore; never mind if anybody was listening.

Yet, he loved her. He loved how she tended to that baby in her womb. That she could be so forgiving. That she was trying to carry on. He watched her with admiration as she sang to the boy in her belly and knit tiny booties with matching itty-bitty hats. Then again, sometimes that admiration turned to disgust.

He assured her it would all be fine,' The child is a part of you; and, I love you.'

He said it every day. Every. Damn. Day.

Only a few more days left – her son (their son?) would soon be here.

The child is part of you; and, I love you.

Maybe when he witnessed the birth. When he saw the head crown and emerge from the woman he loved. Or maybe when he held the baby for the first time, against his chest and inhaled the child's breath. Or maybe when he named the boy, the name of his father , then maybe … maybe the child would be his – his son.

Maybe.

Anton Krueger

Killed

Mrs Thompson woke up every morning at six. After breakfasting on half a banana sliced into a cup of oats, she left for work; driving right along Rose Street and turning left into Beatrix as she headed towards the city centre of Pretoria. She travelled the same route every day, and whenever she stopped at a traffic light – at Prinsloo, or Visagie, or Vermeulen – she kept her eyes firmly fixed on the road ahead. Mrs Thompson had learnt to shut out any disturbance to her regular routine.

It wasn't because she was callous that Mrs Thompson ignored the people she saw along the way. She never deliberately shut them out. It was just that they had become invisible. Occasionally, a dirty beggar's face might momentarily be thrust into her private space, pleading, a faint glimmer from a world beyond her comfort zone appearing for a moment through the edifices of the etiquette she had constructed around herself. She might, for a moment, be made aware of the weight of despair behind the eyes of the person at her window; but she inevitably managed to shuffle her car into gear and move on before any discomfort set in.

Today Mrs. Thompson could not avoid looking at this boy. She vaguely recognized him as he sat staring back at her from across the court room floor. Wasn't this the kid from the corner of Hamilton and Vermeulen? The beggar had often appeared at her window – gangly adolescent elbows jutting out of a threadbare green jersey, beseeching look firmly fastened to his features. He had always seemed to Mrs Thompson to be trying almost too hard to appear pitiful, with his oh-so-sorrowful expression under a mat of deliberately unwashed, tangled hair, calculated to extract sympathy and money (for drugs, no doubt) from innocent passers-by. When she had previously passed him by, Mrs Thompson had made a point of hardly glancing at his little performance, since she felt it would only encourage him to get his hopes up. But today she could not avoid staring at the boy as he sat before her in the court house, no matter how hard she tried to turn away. This boy had killed her son.

***

The gist of Dirk Smit's horror-story childhood was familiar to the judge presiding over the brief trial at Pretoria Central. His Honour listened patiently to the almost predictable account of how Dirk had been abused and beaten as a child, and how he had finally managed to escape his traumatic circumstances in Delmas to find himself on the streets of Pretoria.

Dirk had established himself on the corner of Vermeulen Street for a few weeks before the boys from a glue gang had drifted up from their Sunnyside shelter to sniff him out. They had taken to taunting him where he worked the cars stopping at the light. 'Ja, White boy,' Lebo had said, 'You thought you were the Chiefs, but now look at you. You nothing! Ja, Mugabe – he knows what to do with you. Isifebe!'

Dirk felt himself by then almost inured to abuse, he just kept quiet and tried not to provoke Lebo and his disciples; but Dirk had never felt so alone, and he longed for company. So he slowly started trying to ingratiate himself with the group, offering Lebo a cigarette he had scored, or praising the stories he had heard about his latest exploits.

'Is it true you threw a brick at a policeman?'

Dirk was sleeping in a hide-out in the bushes of the gardens of the Union Buildings, but he would have to move to a new spot soon, before the winter frost set in. The nights were getting colder and Dirk was hoping to find out where the boys slept.

'Ja, I threw it from the roof of Sun Court. Hit him here on the neck. Didn't see fokal.'

'Really?'

'You think I'm lying?'

'No Lebo, never! Of course not.'

After a while, Lebo began to tolerate Dirk's affirmations, since they confirmed the authority he had earned surviving five years on the streets of Pretoria.

'Dirk, boitjie …'

'Ja?'

'You're wanting to be part of us?'

'Uh …'

'But first you must show me you're a man.'

'Okay, man. I am, of course. Sure.'

'Ja, you say so, but I'm not respecting you until you show me you are strong.'

'But … how …?'

'I'm wanting you to kill someone for me.'

'What?'

'An Umlungu.'

'But –?'

'If you can't then you must maar fok off back to where you come from.'

'But why Lebo? Why must I –'

'You want to argue with me?'

'No –'.

'Then just do it.'

Lebo spat at Dirk's bare feet.

And so Dirk took the bread knife he had stolen from Checkers, and half-wild with cold fright he'd waited with the rag tag glue gang in a side street of Riviera on that bitter Sunday morning. When Mrs Thompson's son walked past on his way to the café on Soutpansberg Road to buy the *Sunday Independent*, he hardly noticed the straggle of street kids sprawled underneath the old jacaranda tree. By the time that Dirk, fuelled by dagga and glue, leapt howling at him, it was too late. Amok with fear and hunger and despair, Dirk had blindly lashed out, stabbing and slashing the body long after it had stopped struggling. By the time the police arrived they had to drag him from the corpse.

Now here he sat facing the mother of the man he had senselessly murdered for no other reason than that he wanted to belong. During the whole trial, Mrs. Thompson sat silently watching Dirk. She had the saddest face on her that he had ever seen, scarcely breathing. She seemed to be studying him.

The trial ended and the verdict was passed. Dirk would have to serve his adolescence out in a reformatory. On the last day in court, as he was being led away, they passed right in front of Mrs Thompson. She stood up slowly and caught his eye. He didn't want to look at her, but he couldn't help himself. Then he heard her saying in a very quiet, very firm voice: 'I'm going to kill you'.

***

Dirk was taken to the juvenile detention centre in Hillcrest. He sank into his dorm with a sense of relief. The walls keeping him in afforded more safety than the hedge where he'd been sheltering, and the three meals a day helped him to regain some of the weight he'd lost while living on the street. But none of the other boys spoke Afrikaans, and his conversations with them were stilted and confusing.

Most of the other boys had visitors, but nobody ever came to see Dirk. His parents hadn't even bothered to drive in from Delmas for the trial, they wanted nothing to do with him. As the days passed, his loneliness once again became unbearable. Then, one Sunday afternoon, he was called from his room with the news that he had a visitor. 'Vir my?' Who could it be? He felt curiously excited, but as he turned the corner to the visitor's room a cold hand clamped around his heart.

Dirk wanted to turn around, to run back to his room; but she had already seen him. So he numbly walked the remaining distance towards Mrs Thompson and sat down. For a long time neither of them said a word. Finally, the grey-haired woman, speaking as slowly and deliberately as she had that day in court, quietly asked him how he was being treated. His mumbled reply was barely audible. As if she had memorized exactly what she was going to say, Mrs Thompson asked a series of questions in a calm, methodical manner: what was the food like? How were the other boys treating him? When would he be due for parole? His monosyllabic responses did not seem to discourage her, and when she left she slipped him three bananas and a brown R20 note. 'For … cigarettes?' she whispered, and left.

The next month, Mrs Thompson was back. Still, he couldn't look her in the eye. Again, she proceeded through her prepared sequence of questions, exactly the same as the time before, and, again, she left him a R20.00 note when she left.

And so it went on, month after month, and then week after week: the same questions, the same answers. One day Dirk couldn't hold it in any longer and, forgetting his fear, he began to speak. He started telling Mrs Thompson what it was really like at the detention centre. He told her how cruel the wardens could be. He told her how they strapped an

elastic band around his wrist and made him punish himself by pulling and snapping it back every time he wanted to swear or steal or thought of anything bad. He told her of the days on which his wrist burnt red and how ashamed he was to hold up his arm for inspection.

Mrs Thompson listened quietly. She didn't interrupt. It was the first time in his life that anybody had really listened to what he was saying, so Dirk began to speak and speak. When she had to go, there were still so many things he wanted to say, so she told him to write his thoughts down in a letter.

The weeks and months turned into years, and Mrs Thompson encouraged Dirk to finish his Grade Twelve, offering to pay for a correspondence course through Allenby. He didn't want to disappoint her, and it felt as though he finally had a reason to try to succeed. In all those Sunday afternoons they had never spoken about what had happened, about what he had done to her son. There came a time when he had almost forgotten who she was. She had simply become 'Mrs T'.

***

All too soon, the thirteen-year-old murderer who had entered the juvenile detention centre had become an eighteen-year-old on the verge of being paroled into an adult world. But where would he live once released? What would he do? Dirkie confided his fears to Mrs T, and in her calm, patient manner, she explained to him that she had been trying to find something for him, and that her brother had agreed to take him on at his garage on Voortrekker Road. If he behaved himself he might eventually be taken on as an apprentice mechanic. The best news of all was that there was a small room available at the back of the garage where he could stay. A room. His own room. Dirkie had never felt so … the emotions were new, he didn't know what to call them. He was going to work so hard! He was going to show her what he could do.

The big day finally arrived and they let him go. Mrs T. drove Dirk to her old house in Riviera. She allowed him to unpack his few belongings and to take a shower while she prepared a banana sandwich for him. After he had eaten she invited him into the living room and in her slowly deliberate manner she asked him to sit down.

'Do you remember, Dirkie, what I said to you on the last day of that trial', she said, 'just before they took you away?'

A sudden fear squeezed Dirk. He was trapped. She hadn't forgotten. It had all been a careful plan, a plot. Mrs Thompson's acts of kindness had manipulated him, and he had walked right into it. Of course it had all been too good to be true. How stupid. And now? Now he was helpless. He could do nothing to stop whatever it was that was going to happen. It had to take its course.

'Of course, Mrs T … of course I remember …', he stumbled, 'I'll never forget … never … but … but … I thought …'

The house fell back into silence. He heard his breathing, his heart, and the antique clock clicking away on the mantelpiece.

'Well,' she said slowly, 'I did, didn't I?'

'What … do you mean?'

'I couldn't allow that boy to go on living. And now he's gone,' she said, 'You're not that boy anymore, are you? Let's bury that boy you used to be. We killed him.'

Mrs Thompson took a measured sip of tea and wiped her mouth with a napkin.

GLOSSARY

isifebe (Xhosa) white trash … lit. someone who sleeps around.
boitjie (Afrikaans) diminutive of 'boy'.
maar fok off (Afrikaans) just fuck off
umlungu (Zulu) white man, European
café (orig. French) slang … 'mom and pop store'… i.e. an independent general dealer, common in South Africa
dagga (Afrikaans/Khoikhoi) marijuana
vir my (Afrikaans) for me

NOTE: The premise of this story is based on something I once heard on the radio which may actually have happened in New York city; but the context, characters and action are entirely fictional.

Rachel Paton

Beetroots and Carvings

The wooden carvings were pretty; everyone who saw them said so. But Benjamin guarded his gifts jealously. He didn't want unworthy people gazing down at his soul, judging it, scrutinizing it – because they were little shards of himself, these sculptures. They were not delicate. By no means were they delicate. But they were, in essence, what he was: a little rough around the edges, but with a visible beauty. They, like him, had a recognizable animation about them – pleasing yet slightly sinister. He prided himself on being balanced. A little bit of light, a dash of darkness; a being with the capacity for both hedonism and monk-like chastity.

He was the only carpenter in his small village. He wore the same simple tunics as those worn by everyone else. His parents had a house further down along the sandy track, which wound its way patiently through the centre of their small community. Half of a day's walk over the scrub-covered hillocks behind his home was the forest. It was from there that Benjamin got his timber. Having the ability to imbue his distinctive carpentry work with his own creativity, he had no lack of customers, some of whom travelled from as far away as the city. His life was a simple one, and he was content. Slowly, imperceptibly, Benjamin grew bored, and a restlessness came over him. His carvings took up more of his time, and he created less and less furniture, until his customers shrugged their shoulders and sought out other men to buy furniture from. This gradual process of disintegration took place over nine hundred days. By the time that Benjamin noticed he couldn't afford to buy his weekly groceries down by the market, it was already too late. His carvings had taken over.

His house was full of them, as was his workroom. They varied in size, each one different, each one progressively more detailed. If you looked at one from a certain angle, you would swear it was avian. Squint and turn your head to the side, and it became suggestive of a female nude. They were all like this; indistinct, but alive. Detailed, yet rough. He could stand for hours, running his hands over his creations, then standing back to stare at them in awe.