

NEWCONTRAST

180, Volume 45, Summer 2017



Dig



Christiaan Diedericks, *Opposing Saturn*, 2011,
Mixed media drawing on Canson 300gsm paper,
55 cm diameter

YOU'RE ALWAYS GOING...

Anton Krueger

You're always going... Moving on to the next meeting, the next event. You need to get to the bus stop, the train station, catch the next flight out of here. When you stay in the same place for too long you get bored, tired, listless; and even then, you're moving in time, hurtling onwards. You can never turn around. You can never go back.

Even though you might not be one of the millions traversing the earth in search of refuge, shelter, food; even though your village might not have been destroyed; even though your children are not hungry and there's no dust on the soles of your shoes...even so, you're moving, you're still trying to get home again, back to a place you can barely remember, a place that still breathes its way into your dreams.

If you're reading this now, it's unlikely that you're homeless. It's hard to read when you're on the run, not many pages get turned when you're sleeping in the open, when you're waiting for the trucks to bring foreign water paid for by strangers.

No, that's not you. It's far more likely that you would be travelling smoothly to the airport with the windows up and the aircon on, with the electronica pulsing nice and loudly. Maybe you're cruising along to catch a flight to Beijing via Hong Kong, a ticket on your phone for that migrating metal bird that's going to carry you over the ranges and deserts and unfathomable seas to that faraway land so that you can present your research paper to a small roomful of people. Right now you're coasting along the highway at just the right temperature listening to exactly the right music and looking forward to your first Bloody Mary while you flip through the 720 channels of on-board entertainment.

As you drive along the sleek highway, you see game farms stretching out all around you. Every now and then there's a complicated wood and stone entrance to a luxury lodge.

You wonder what lies further in, further away from the highway, deeper into the country. You remember the time you got lost trying to short cut to East London when you faltered onto the raw poverty of this Eastern Cape, discovering the dust and despair of small settlements, deep dongas carved out of dirt roads. Wide eyed villagers surprised to see a car, to hear English. One tap for ten households. They're not going anywhere.

You're thinking about all of this – the Eastern Cape, China, Africa – when you see the hitch-hiker standing there at the halfway house. He's on the road

across from the rehab centre where they sell plants and worm manure, there near the turn off to Alexandria. You don't really pick up hikers anymore, not these dangerous days, so you cruise past; but then you hesitate. What is it that pulls you back? A mild guilt when considering the empty spaces in the front and back of your hired car? Something snags, but every second is carrying you further at 233 metres per minute. You could still turn around now. Or now. When will it be too late? When will you be absolved by distance? When will the soothing hand of forgetfulness ease the burden of anxiety? ...Okay, you reason, you don't need to engage. You could give the guy a ride and still keep the music playing. Just let him into this machine which happens to be going the direction he's facing. You could still do it. Now.

You break onto the shoulder of the road. Arch the car around. Go back. Stop. Unlock the door. You let the stranger in...

Gangly, straw haired, firm hand shake. Front teeth missing. Jakes. Where's he from? Where's he going? Tells you he's freshly paroled. In for? Assault. His ex, luckily no kids. Five years inside. Damn.

So you make small talk, chat politely, though really what you want is to up the volume of your chillstep. Are the prisons really as overcrowded as they say? He smiles. Nah, you're okay if you've got rank. 80 beds to a room, but the gangsters get a bunk each. You glance over, now nervous, as he rolls up his pants to show you his knees – there's a 7 tattooed on the left knee and on the right the number 2.

When you tell him that you're on your way to the PE airport, on your way to China, he laughs. Astonished. China? Never thought he'd one day be sitting in a car with somebody going to China. Never in a million years. When he grins you see again his front teeth smashed out. Entrance ticket. Price he had to pay to get into the 27s. But this dude went further than joining, he went the extra mile. Jakes lifts his thin sweater right up over his taut muscled arms to show you three stars inked into each shoulder. His mother had to pay four thousand rand for him to get transferred to Pollsmoor from Boksburg Correctional so that he could get his status formally etched into his skin.

By now, you've turned the music off, as the stories roll out of Jakes. His mother died just before he got paroled and left him two houses in Kenton, but this lawyer's been fleecing him so now he's heading down to Somerset West to lay low till the estate is settled. He thought he could stay at the rehab centre where you picked him up, but it was a mess. Rotten, infested blankets. Stinking. If you want to help people, Jakes says, you have to have the resources. Don't offer if you've got nothing to give. Shit. Anyhow, they

asked him to leave coz he wasn't a druggie, so he wasn't allowed to be in the rehab. Even though those inside are all still on the *zol* and the *tik* and the *dop*. Laughs at the irony, the gap in his teeth a blank red chasm. They've got no class, Jakes says. When they roll a BB there's just... – fingers flex exasperated upward, like a gourmand showing distaste – it's a mess, there's bits of tobacco everywhere. Jakes brushes imaginary crumbs from his lap. No style. When you make a rollie, you must do it properly, man.

Jakes is intense. Passionate. His mother smoked, but never in front of him. She said he must give one of the houses to the church. There's four million rands still coming. The executor who drove him from PE to Kenton phoned twice a day, gave him drinks and set him up at the B&B, but he didn't realise he was being invoiced for everything. The *alky* receptionist at the B&B, she's the one who told him that every time the fucker phones it's a consultation. She's a good person. Charmaine. Okay, she drinks too much and her boyfriend beats her, but she gave him his last cup of coffee free before he hitched to the halfway house. All she needs is a place to live, and food, that's all. When the inheritance comes in he's going to give her the granny flat. But this lawyer. Jakes shakes his head. Can't trust anyone. Fucking thief. No way. He'll stay with his uncle in Somerset West till it's settled. Lay low till it all comes through. The houses, the cars, the cash.

Where can you drop him? He says you can leave him at the Humewood police station, Mitchell Street and Lea. He can stay there for the night. Jakes knows each town by its police stations and prisons, it's the shape of the web he's cast out into the world. Pretoria? Ja, he knows the city, the big prison there in Bosman street. Half wistfully, Jakes says he could get back inside – no problem – break a window, get back in. There's food, a bed, he's somebody. Respected. But before she died his ma said please don't ever hurt anyone again. Don't go back in. And he'll stay outside for her, even if he's got nowhere to go. But ja.

On and on you ride down the sleek highway. What's next? Passport, check in, flying free? Good deed in the bag? A man redeemed, stretching his wings to escape his past? How will this story end?

Well, the story could end with you dropping Jakes off somewhere at an intersection in Summerstrand or on Jacob Zuma Drive, and then getting to the airport with some time to spare you get distracted by the pretty girl selling face creams who flirts you into putting something on your card that you don't really want.

Or, it could have ended with Jakes asking you to pull the car over so that

he could take a leak, and your feeling the blunt edge of a homemade knife to your throat and a swift pain at the back of your head before finding your face pressed into sharp grass and smelling mud and bush and hearing the roar of the hired car's tyres finding their track back onto the highway.

Or the story could have ended with the stranger telling you that as he stood and waited on the side of the road outside the rehab centre halfway house at the turn off to Alexandria he'd all the time been twirling a small red seed in his mouth. He shows it to you now, the seed. He tells you that as you drove past him, he was twirling it around in his mouth and willing you to turn around and come back and get him. So when you gravitated, swayed, and turned, it wasn't because you felt bad or good, or any of that. It was the magical work of that small red seed swirling around Jakes' slippery tongue...

The story could have ended with your taking Jakes to the bus station and buying him a ticket to Cape Town and giving him your last fifty bucks and seeing his hardened gangster body leaning over, tats trembling, as he wiped tears from his eyes saying he'd given up on people, didn't believe there were any good ones left anymore. It could have ended with you caring, with your giving another human being a flicker of hope, and feeling good about this as you soared through the stratosphere, the clouds so far below, with that Bloody Mary finally on your tray (Worcestershire sauce, lemon, chilli, salt, pepper) while watching the fourth season of *Louis*. It could have ended with your feeling free, your life packed tight into 20 kg nestling in the hold while your mind buzzed pleasantly from the alcohol as you relaxed to the soothing smiles of the air stewardesses.

But let's take it further. Let's rather see the story through to a few weeks later when you're travelling back from Beijing via Shanghai, Xining, Rebgong, Qinghai; returning after two weeks in that immense land where internal migrations during Golden Week bring the whole vast country to a standstill as hundreds of millions working far from home stand days on end awaiting trains to take them home for just one night with their families...Okay, but that's another story...in this one, you find yourself delighted at being bumped up to First Class.

And in this story you find yourself unsure of how to behave amongst the truly rich. Should you make it plain that you'd been given a lucky break, or pretend that First Class was where you belonged? As if the world you lived in valued knowledge more than matter. Would they buy it? Or would they perceive your glee and see the hole in your shoe? Should you act naturally, or immediately confess that this was all new? You glance at the menu as you

finish your champagne...which sequence of starters and main might reveal your breeding? ... Surely wine rather than beer with the meal...Keep calm, stop smiling...While you scrutinise the options trying to configure the correct combinations, your cheery red faced neighbour hands back his menu without opening it...Duck for starter, duck for main. Two Castles. Welcome back, smiles the stewardess.

So you start to chat over some initial drinks and discover he's just returning from selling off his gold mine to the finance minister of China. One billion rand, give or take. When he hears what you do, he says his daughter's interested in that sort of thing. Kayleigh. You wonder if she's named after the 1982 hit by the neo-prog Brit band Marillion, and his face lights up. How did you know? Nobody's heard of them! He travels everywhere with their complete works. By now you've moved onto the wine (red) and he hands you his Bose headphones and treats you to the highest quality version of *Misplaced Childhood* you've ever heard. (Up in First Class nobody bothers with the on-board entertainment, they've all brought their own super-thin next-level Apples linked to powerful little amplifiers and fancy noise-cancelling headphones.) By the time you're on the single malts you're singing "dawn escapes from moon-washed college halls" together.

After wiping the tears from the corners of his eyes he tilts back and, as you settle over a Cointreau on ice, he tells you more about how deals are done in China. You eat and you drink together, he says. Mostly you drink. That's how you do business, you become friends.

So you drink and you drink. Southern Comfort. Baileys. Amarula. You understand the camaraderie drink brings, that feeling of warmth and celebration. You feel closer. If you had a million dollars, why wouldn't you also want to work like this? It feels good. Maybe you wouldn't have ordered them to seal up your mine to trap the illegal miners in, sure; but you also want to enjoy life. With another Amaretto and an unopened Amstel in the wings. With the finest headphones in the world. With all your teeth intact.

But here in First Class you're the hiker, aren't you? Hitching a free ride with your research funds, boosted up from cattle class. He was onto you from the start. Of course he was. Amused.

Maybe it's better to end the story while you wait at the airport for your domestic flight, after having awkwardly avoided eye contact with the billionaire (after a brief initial eyebrow raise) as the row at passport control snaked back and forth on itself the next morning. Yes, maybe you should end your story at the airport itself, the vast cathedral with its impossibly

high ceiling. In Delhi, Dubai and Helsinki, from Schiphol to Simón Bolívar International, all these airports look like Star Wars versions of the Gothic cathedral. Places of worship, sacred shrines to the sky. How to symbolise the horizon? How to show freedom, that feeling of placelessness, spacelessness. Sitting there at the airport after your latest adventure, you might have been nursing another black coffee as you wondered about the story you could write about these two people: the gangster and the former owner of a gold mine.

On the way to China you threw a couple of copper coins out to help a con get home. It was a fun ride and it gave you a kick to intervene. It was pretty cool to hear his story and to realise how incomprehensible your lives were to each other. You think about these things as you jot down these notes. You think about the homeless dude who appeared at your office the week before and offered you another view of your little town: a view of dangerous streets, of *skelms* with switchblades eager to burst open a vein for a twenty. You realised how vulnerable it must be to live out there without a home. He also cried when you slipped him a blue note, had been so beaten down that even this small act of kindness cracked his armour wide. Feels good to help. Feels warm.

You think of the three stars emblazoned onto each of Jakes' shoulders, proof of his place in the chain of command, proof of his resolve. Tell you what, you wouldn't mind having that brother on your side in a fight. If ever swords were drawn, you'd want Jakes in your corner rather than a soft First Class executive with a penchant for Marillion.

When you were entering your pin at the bus station getting Jakes his ticket home, he made a resolute show of turning away. Principle, pride, loyalty. He was showing you he's on your side. He wouldn't hurt whoever helped him out, even though the dude's a 27, an executioner who rights wrongs. Look, you don't know what he's done, you don't know if his stories were all true – why did he ask for a ticket to Cape Town if he said he was going to Somerset West? – but you respect him. The dude had sobriety. Clarity. Integrity. You feel almost proud to have given him a ride. Here's a man who struggled to make something of his circumstances. He came out on top of the system he was in.

So many worlds out there. All those travellers roaming. In the streets, under the bridges of highway overpasses. Stuck in cement prison blocks. Stuck in First Class from Beijing. What did you learn from all those beautifully ugly smoggy cities ruled over by our new emperors, the new rulers of the world? What did you learn about the new capital mechanising the masses making our iPhones, the millions fertilising pears by hand because all the bees have flown away or died? Far flung, worldwide, with the weight of millennia inside them,

the bearers of an ancient kingdom which centuries ago sent scholars out to the continents but called them home when they realised nobody wanted to learn.

You're always going and coming back. There's always another meeting, someone to see, to message, to mail, always another post to like, a thread to comment on while you wait for the bus, the train, the next flight out of here. When you stay in the same place for too long you get bored, tired, listless; and even then, you're moving in time, hurtling onwards. You can never get back.