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An Affair to Dismember

Binyavanga Wainaina

Binyavanga Wainaina, born in Kenya in 1971, won the third Caine Prize for African Writing for 'Discovering Home', from G21Net (2001). He

attended Mangu High School and Lenana School before studying commerce at the University of Transkei, South Africa. He then moved to Cape Town, where he worked for some years as a freelance food and travel writer. Wainaina writes a weekly interview column called 'Encounters' for the Weekend Argus in Cape Town. He also writes regularly for the Sunday Times Lifestyle magazine. His articles have appeared in the Mail and Guardian, Y magazine, SL magazine, Pforward magazine and The Top of the Times, the Cape Times' weekend supplement. He returned to Kenya in 2000 to complete his novel, Flights of my Fancy, scheduled for publication in early 2003 by Kwela Books. A number of his short stories have been published. Wainaina cites his aunt, the novelist Rebecca Njauwrote, whose work was published by Heinemann's African Writers Series in the 1960's, as a major inspiration.



Binyavanga Wainaina

There is this game I play, a game Mrs Green my former adopted mother taught me. She would fold a piece of paper, while I watched her hands, watched the piano tendons ripple, the strange blue veins. Then she would ask me to draw what pattern the paper folded into. I never failed to get it right.

Last night, dizzy with head-fuck after reading some Soyinka's play, *The Road*, I lay in bed and closed my eyes, and conjured an enormous piece of paper: and folded it this-way and that, folded it in ways I have never attempted. Then, I sprayed it with something to make it brittle. I opened my eyes, and put on some music: *Moses Mulelekwa* on piano, the piece he played at the North Sea Jazz festival in Amsterdam where he got sucked into a hurricane of his brilliance, then burst out crying after waking to find himself surrounded by a standing ovation.

I closed my eyes again, and breathed in, and let the paper open slowly. The pattern unravelled in my mind's eye: angles and triangles shining and shadowed. I laughed, and let it break in every brittle seam, and let the shards of patterns fly high like the first crescendos of the piano. Then, with ease, I made them fall into place again. I threw them high again, and lost the pattern as they came tumbling down, as Moses crouched over his piano working through something intricate, caught in the most fragile of places, trying to juggle things at the far reaches of his ability. I could almost feel his relief as he passed the threshold and mastered himself. I joined him in his giddiness, throwing the jumble of patterns up again, and marvelling at how my mind so effortlessly put the brittle paper together again. Then that crushing tearing sound of tape getting caught in the cheap tape recorder, and the song whining to a halt. I swear I heard glass break as the shards came tumbling down, tearing into me as I tumbled.

I slept with Mrs Green in my mind.

I was eight years old before she came to my school in Muranga, Kenya. I lived in a tranquil bubble, with hungers, agreed communal rumblings of belly, as normal as the surround of unripe maize plants. Coffee beans bought schoolbooks and fertilizer. I had never worn shoes.

Then she arrived, and asked me to come and live with her. My parents let me go, awed by what she offered; awed by me, now that they discovered I played with numbers and words no primary schoolteacher in the village could understand.

The magic Mrs Green brought was powerful. As we drove off, I saw the maize plants around us take off in a stomach-curling whirl; blending into the porridge I was drowning in. Dust, wind scraping against the land rover, my my first car-ride. Speeding like we did, through the dusty road, and onto the tarmac, it seemed like this car was something that defied time and space. How else to explain how, in an hour, I was further from anything I

knew than I had ever been? Safe, in a science-built place, with bricks and a microwave.

She smelt like an angel, not the slightest pungency about her, as if the person had been scrubbed away, and only something flowery remained. When she spoke it sounded like her words whistled through her nose before coming out of her mouth. When we Kikuyu people make words, we keep our nasal cavities out of the process.

She noticed my confusion, and smiled, and her mouth opened wide and scared me, it was so red inside, like a wound. Against her pale skin, her teeth seemed yellow, but she had television gentleness about her, like the mother in *Little House on the Prairie*, which we used to watch at the headmaster's house every Saturday.

'Do you want supper?'

'Haven't you ever seen a fridge?'

A mouth from heaven: jellies, cakes, doughnuts, preserves, milk and jams, all lit like an altar. I dive into the jaws of the fridge and eat. Oh, you'll be my son now, she says.

She had rented a house in a white suburb in Nairobi called Karen. For the first month she coached me at home, then made an arrangement where I attended a private school in the morning, and special music and mathematics classes in the afternoons.

I learn to read her face: first with some fear, and later with a hidden disdain. I notice that smiling in this new world is a limited thing. One doesn't smile to one's extremities while one speaks of serious things, because just talking to people is supposed to be a happy thing. One uses the word 'one' a lot.

Mrs Green was very different from my mother who when displeased would think nothing of throwing her slipper past my ear as I made off giggling. Mrs Green's method of punishment was guilt. Her smile would slip, ever so slightly, her voice would shoot up to the maximum shrillness decorum allowed. Once or twice, the most disciplined tear in the world would swell gently in her eye, and I would wonder what it would take for it to roll down her cheek.

I became alert to everything in that house: to the whisper of her silk slippers on the stairs, allowing me to relax in sleep; to her voice ringing like merry glass when visitors came, rubbing her fingers on my head when I came to say hello, and calling me her 'son', while the visitors looked baffled.

I found her smell after a while, in the mornings before she washed, or when she was upset. It was a peculiar smell, lacking a connection to earthy things, almost the smell of clothes that have soaked for too long. It often bothered my nose in an about-to-sneeze way.

Every two weeks or so, her husband and daughter would phone. I never spoke to them, but she would always pass on my love. Her husband was a vicar, 'Sort of a sleepy priest,' she explained. To my surprise she giggled as she said this. Reverend Kipkemoi, from the local Anglican Church came to visit her sometimes, and she always turned coy when he was around

laughing too loudly, and hugging me, something which she did not normally do.

Her daughter Jemima started to write, telling me she wanted to be pen pals.

The grant that Mama Green had organised to pay my fees was cut back, and she enrolled me in a government boarding school where my accent was the source of much mirth. My skill with numbers infuriated everybody. My parents came to visit for the first time, after worrying that they hadn't received any letters from me for a while. They assumed I was still under mama Green's wing, and I did not try to tell them otherwise. I was cold with my mother, I spoke to her in English, and kept a distance, terrified I would smell like Mrs Green, and suddenly aware that my parents smelt of soil and smoke and sweat. I spent my holidays living in the Anglican mission attached to the school.

The letters from Mrs Green came every month, with photographs and vague promises.

We'll see you soon.

Waiting for the grant.

Things are so busy here.

Three years later, a week before I would be the youngest student ever to sit for the Kenyan Ordinary level exams, Reverend Green wrote me his first letter, telling me Mrs Green had died in a road accident.

Jemima continued to write, lots of hi-how-are-you saying-nothing letters. I replied, always attempting to mimic her cheer, always failing to be fluent in it. We lost touch after I left school.

I never wake up in a sweat. Not unless I have a hangover, or malaria. Generally, when I have one of those Mrs Green dreams, I wake up feeling like a rock has fallen down my gullet, and ripped right through my insides. In the morning, weaverbirds make their way down the chute and flutter about — rebuilding.

The shack is my home and business, in Mwea, on the flatlands not far from Nairobi, Kenya. I sell meat, and carcasses hang above my head when I wake up. There are five minutes of beauty in my shack every morning: light swells slowly through the many gaps in my walls; even the carcasses hanging by the windows acquire a benign gleam, as if a life-light has come to claim them. Between 6.36 and 6.45 the glow dominates every crevice. For these minutes, I feel paradise trying to squeeze itself in and carry me away, a Jesus picture from *Bible Stories*.

Then, suddenly, morning is here and I lie on my bed, surrounded by peeled, headless goats. The smell of meat is unyielding, and brings me home with relief. The donkeys start screeching at ten to seven in the morning. It is already 30 degrees outside, I long for water. There is no tap water in Mwea, though there are irrigation canals everywhere, for the rice paddies.

Ndirangu brings the water at seven. I am his last delivery. He has a new tank top, *Muscle Beach, California*. He bought it at the second-hand market in Embu Town. They have added to his Nikes

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to give him a more finished cool. If his donkey survives the month, he will have locked away his vulnerability behind this American arsenal. He tells me he has agents as far as Nairobi looking for 'Tommy Hiro-figaa'.

Ndirangu likes me. Correction: Ndirangu likes my biceps and abs. I get a prod, followed by a full examination whenever he comes round. I don't mind. Those whom he doesn't like get water that has fluffy brown flakes doing languid summersaults just below the surface. I make sure to give him a daily exercise tip, this way I get to drink the better river water. I haven't the guts to tell him that occasional sit-ups do it for me: the muscles I am interested in are in my shoulders and chest.

I linger after coffee. I hate to leave the butchery. Reading *Just William* poses a risk after one of the dreams, and Stephen Fry's *Paperweight* (a delightful series of rants against all things 'twee') is reserved for my lunch break. I settle for the much-thumbed first pages of Mongo Beti's *Mission to Kala*. I stop when Medza, bubbling with superiority, is poised to enter the village like a triumphant conquistador. I am now able to leave home feeling I can paint all the shit around me with good humour.

On my way to the post office, I bump into Maina at the bus rank.

'Sasa Einstein! How is the butchery business?'

I grunt in reply. He wears a double-breasted waistcoat and his polyester tie matches his breast-pocket hankie. Yuppie: *made in China*. I was at school with Maina. He was the resident brain till I came along and yawned past everybody. His bad suit, his home, with an apple-green velvet (*deluxe*) sofa set was supposed to be my certificate to success.

I see him in the bar sometimes. He has acquired a pompous guffaw: ho ho! Another round steward! Hot-air ho! My car has sixteen valves! Look at my mobile: hollow ho ho ho ho.

The three Hippos are already seated under the tree in the middle of the Bus-Rank. They are county councillors, waiting for prey. Their grey matter devotes considerable resources to the subject of kickbacks, roast meat and beer.

Mornings for kickbacks. Afternoons for meat. Any time for beer.

This is why we have no tap water. Mwea is a boomtown sharing a border with three districts: sometimes mud and sewage; sometimes dust and plastic bags; always the slap of cement on a new, rickety, unregulated building; always talk of cash-money. It is the place young, hungry young people who cannot make it in their home districts come to seek their fortunes. They are everywhere, lean and eagle-eyed, standing where they can see newcomers, coiled to chase after any cent. They will make money out of lifting, carrying, ferrying, providing information, acting as middle-men for anything. If you stop one and say you crave a banana, they will fetch one for you, and get a commission for doing so.

The town sits next to the highway to Nairobi. Every evening, cyclists bring boxes and boxes of French beans, headed for Europe.

Somebody is calling me.

'Dooolf!'

I hate that nickname, and the action hero that inspired it. I feel like a hulk that thinks with his muscles. Still, it grates less than 'Einstein'. Karanja is calling me. He is eighteen years old, and I am sure he will be a millionaire by the time he is twenty. I generally avoid him. He talks of nothing but French-bean prices and Aristotle Onassis.

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'Hey Dooooolf! Some hot white woman is looking for you!'

I turn. A frail, dark-haired young woman is standing beside Karanja.

'Hello. You're Geoff? Geoff Mwangi? My name is Jemima, Jemima Green.'

I am surprisingly calm. Here she is, the girl who took my adopted mother away, Mama Green's real daughter.

All I can think is: *It works!* All these years I've used homemade concrete weights that have turned me into a rock, an immovable object. *I will not care!*

I see a brief submission in her eyes, deference. She didn't expect me like this. She would have remembered the stilted boy who wrote letters

straight out of *Better English*. I carefully take her hand and look at her the way I was trained to do with white people, straight in the eye. Her eyes are shaped exactly like her mother's, but possess a different energy — not fluttering about to ensure invisible boundaries are never breached. They are curious; with the naive confidence the younger white people seem to have, *'Nothing can possibly happen to me.'*

What breaches my objectivity is the smell, that white girl smell, like cobwebs in the nostrils. That smell is like a mosquito in my nose after last night's dream.

'Hello Jemima, it's a pleasure to meet you finally. How is your father?'

'Oh, hello! Dad's the same, being a busybody — writing long letters to everybody about the homeless. He's become quite a socialist — absolutely despises Blair.'

I don't know what to say about this. I have never met her father.

'Are you just passing by? Can I offer you a coke, or some tea?'

'No. I came to see you. I'm staying at the hotel — could you walk me back? Now that I've found you, I need to confirm my booking.'

Karanja is just standing there, overwhelmed by a sheepishness I didn't know was possible from him. God! He is actually doodling in the dust with his foot! Standing before me, the reason why Onassis married that Kennedy woman. My eyebrows chase him away, and we head off to Jemima's Hotel.

She talks the whole way there; filling up the nervous gaps

with questions she answers herself. I am often tempted to leak like this, but can't: even now my impassiveness is pushed to the limit by a brimming of things to say.

She stops.

'I'm talking too much aren't I? I do this when I am nervous.'

I am angry. My restraint is eternal; I cannot breach it, and it nags like a hard-on that never ends. How could she survive being bubbly having lived with Mother don't-talk-if-you-have-nothing-to-say Green? Was I so pliable?

Her chatter resumes.

'Oh, my friend Dora, she's from the West Indies, she says that in Trinidad everybody talks like this! From the heart! Oh wow, look at those gorgeous tomatoes? They're never this red in England!'

She dances, and dances around the core, never once dipping her toe in to test the heat: 'Oh! Ah! Bugger that! Shit! Bollocks! Really? Wow!'

Shut up!

I tune out. Last month my dad wrote me a letter: he is happy in Muranga, making good money from horticulture. He misses his first-born. His new wife is not like my real mother, who died a year after I finished High school. She is flighty, wants to return to school or some such nonsense. He is getting old, and curses the day he allowed that white woman to take me away.

'Come grow Carnations,' Dad says. 'Let's make money! Come be with us again!'

Jemima is staying at the White Lion, an old colonial hotel that smells of stale polish and decaying upholstery. There is a group of Nairobi sales-people sitting on one corner, laughing loudly, huddled around their wit as if it is the only thing that will keep them alive in this place. Mr Henderson, the old man who lives here is in his usual seat at the corner of the bar, the skin on his face cracking, as if death is about to burst out of it. Every few years, a member of his family comes to beg him to leave and go back to England, but he refuses. He is still waiting for the Ministry of Lands to return his farm, which was taken by a well-known politician's family twenty years ago.

We sit at the other side of the bar. She disarms me, persuading me to have a beer, then another. Her smell fades by default, and I am able to see her with a friendlier eye. Her face in repose droops downward, with an almost Jewish melancholy. The far ends of her eyes slide down, like a welling tear. Below them, twin lines etch a continuing descent; and below that, her mouth, a thin line, faces downwards like eyes averted.

But, her repose is rare. The lines find endless arrangements of expression, giving her face a rubbery mobility and lending a comic element to her melancholy. Her hair is nondescript brown. Yet somehow, her face and her body language are lifted to vitality by a pale, gleaming skin, like porcelain with a dim light behind it.

'It's so bloody hot. I never thought it would be. I really can't

picture mother in a place this hot.'

'Karen is milder, that's where we lived mostly.'

She inhales deeply and exhales into someone different, somebody with an eggshell of a voice.

'Look, I came here because we have issues to deal with. I've hated you too long; I can't shake it off. I'm getting married next month, so I need to get clear of this shit.'

I am surprised. When we were pen pals, she was full of sunshine and bubble. I imagined her to be a terribly happy person, glowing behind the rounded script paper, and prancing around in a country garden like the jolly cartoon animals did on her writing paper.

'Why did you hate me?'

'Because you were the one who made her good. She drove us crazy! Dad and I were relieved when she came to Kee-nya – Sorry, you call it Ke-nya don't you? – Then she became another person; a mother who wrote letters asking me how I felt. How I felt! Then there were the endless letters about you: What a genius you were! Reading at age two! Writing at three! Prizes, awards – and black too, so I couldn't even really hate you! Oh shit – now I'm crying!'

I laugh. I was in such awe of her, it never occurred to me at the time to be jealous.

'Your mother was never a nice person. I was simply the lever on her pedestal: *Missionary Adopts Destitute Prodigy!* That so-called genius was never mine; she discovered it, owned it, and managed it. Sometimes I think she left with it too. If anything made her a better mother it was the fact that she was an angel from a distance. You should read the letters she wrote from the Vicarage! "Darling" this, "angel" that! I only heard that from her when there were guests.'

The barman is staring at me. I realise my accent has changed: it mirrors hers, down to the intonation. This unconscious betrayal irritates me, but I can't seem to find entry to my usual accent. 'Why did she run off?'

'Don't you know? She was having a fling with Reverend Kipkemoi. Then she lost her grant so the plans to open a school for "gifted" children fell through'

'Really? Mother? An affair? Not that old...'

'I caught them once. He had parked his car in Ngong forest. I used to go there to collect butterflies.'

Jemima bursts out laughing. 'You should have seen dad's face fall when the taxi came through the gate! Did you go back to your family?'

'No.'

'Didn't they want you back?'

'They did, but I didn't want to go back. How could I? I went to boarding school and rented a room in the holidays. I thought she would come back, if only to visit.'

'So do you see your parents?'

'I visit sometimes. I haven't seen my father since my mum died.'

'I'm sorry. You must regret ever tangling with mum.'

A mosquito coil ignites in my stomach and begins its slow burn fuelled by the panic inside me. Conscious of the ambiguous place I am in without my usual accent, I feel queasy, wide open.

My laugh is stones rattling on a corrugated iron roof.

'Education the way I got it doesn't leave much room for that kind of regret. Where I come from, there isn't a single person who doesn't consider me lucky.'

'So why did you become a butcher, live in this dump?' My voice is surprisingly calm, 'I became a butcher because there is money in it, and because I can't bear to work for anyone. I'm not good with people.'

A mosquito coil ignites in my stomach and begins its slow burn fuelled by the panic inside me. Conscious of the ambiguous place I am in without my usual accent, I feel queasy, wide open. She is in charge now. She can afford to display herself without fear, and lend me a face full of pity.

'Silly bitch! She lied to me! She said you refused to come with her, that you... Oh, never mind.'

I am going to fuck her. I will watch those eyes flutter in a drowning panic below me. I will watch them shrink away from the hanging goatskin, wrinkle at the smell of old burnt meat. I will not have her come here, and leave sneer marks like snail trails where I live.

My hand reaches for her cheek, my voice falls to a murmur, and I notice my accent again with surprise, 'I lied, she didn't leave because of the affair. She left because she realised that her life was you, the Vicarage and English gooseberries, she never stopped talking about bloody English gooseberries!'

We laugh, and her talk slips into intimacy. My voice simply glides alongside; gravely soft where hers is whisper soft. I say nothing that makes me feel. She opens up completely and starts to give her words to me before testing them out. I can't believe how easy it is.

I am on my third beer when the migraine attacks like a poisonous wart on my temple. I visualize it oozing a toxic green sap into my head. I can't help but be black next to Jemima; I can't just be Geoff Mbiyu, on a Biggles adventure. I can't even be Jean-Marie Medza, a nerdy conquistador.

'Are you okay? You've gone a bit grey.'

'I'm sorry. It's my head. I've got to go to the butchery. I'll catch up with you in the afternoon.'

On my way out, Mr Henderson turns to me and says hello, an expression of distaste in his face.

'One of the Oxfam people is she?' he asks.

'No, she's my sister.'

I don't wait to see his face change.

The kitten that adopted me is waiting at the door. I call her Karen Blixen, and frequently wish she would get out of Africa. While I gather charcoal and light the stove, she maintains a persistent plea: Feed me! Feed me! I mix tripe and buttermilk in a bowl. The damn thing still can't trust me enough for me to come near her. I head to the bathroom with my bucket of water. I can hear her, her meows charged with question marks:

'Miaw? Miaw? Aw? Raaaouw?' (Are you far enough away? Can

I eat now?)

The first touch of hot water on my head multiplies the throb. I lie down on a mat under the flame tree in the courtyard. I want to dry slowly, savour the cool. In the pause between throbs, I set out beacons. I mark a new territory with slow deliberation:

Cool, Highland cool...

No faceless hordes of mindless darkies. *No Conrad? said Mrs Green, You must read Conrad, he really was on your side.* I let numbers run through me. I am still digesting *A Brief History of Time*, a book I memorised in two sittings. Ideas turn in my brain, until cascades of number-songs calm my mind. I still can't get myself to doubt what Hawkins says, or to try and challenge it. I don't have the confidence. I just accept them and dance with the ideas from time to time.

Is this an African thing? To worship understanding? To put our education on the mantelpiece, and spend our lives admiring the fact that we managed to understand, because to challenge these things is to risk failing?

Do Not Deface Your Passport.

Whenever I turn on the mat, the throbbing accelerates. I include them in the waterfall of numbers where they become a potentiality with no mass, no time. Each throb is now a synapse, asking to blow into existence.

I sleep, staccato with the subsiding knock-knocks. Sleep spits and hisses — my selves mixing like hot fat and water.

Jemima comes at dusk and announces herself by rubbing her face feathers on my cheeks. I wake up abruptly, and pull her down next to me. At first I seek submission, but the pounding nearly splits my head open. She is crying. I slow myself down, and follow her flavours, from crotch to armpit. My senses are closed to all, her breathing seems very loud. I follow the rhythm of her breath, and soon it is as if I am her, white and writhing on a mat under a Flame tree. My headache oozes away diluting its sap in our pleasures.

We part and lie on our backs, and discover that all this time a whole motion picture is above us. We watch the sun-glowing clouds battle the dark. The clouds seem unreal, moving slowly across the sky, un-oiled and effortless. All this was happening while we ground each other to submission.

We open up:

'You know, people keep talking about Green. How beautiful it is to sit in a field of

green. I hate green, the strong chlorophyll smell of it. When I was a kid, the hungriest time was when the maize was taller than me and we were surrounded by *that smell*; it would coil into our stomachs, and they would churn it like a meal and fill us with the taste of bile. I much prefer the colour of dry; stalks tied together, and mounds and mounds of golden maize-cobs heaped by the side. Now *that* is bounty.'

'I feel that if I lived here, I would be strong. England is so *tame*. Everything has been so *done!* I can be what I want to be here. I hated it when mother came here — I thought Africa was

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mine. I loved Karen Blixen! Wasn't she just divine?'

'I've been saving up to travel in the UK. I hope they give me a visa this time. I would love to attend the Edinburgh Arts Festival, and buy books and books in London.'

She giggles.

'You could put up a play at the festival, you, a conductor, playing your symphony to an audience of headless goats.'

We trade images, each revealing more, each disappointing more. Night drops like a hot damp towel and clouds block the stars. I hit bottom: my head starts to throb, and I feel raw and bruised. We smell stale, and grit-laden draughts are making their way through the gates.

We start to collect the bits of ourselves hanging loose, then, gathered together we notice our goose bumps: vulnerable! Yikes! Fortifications are built: our joint gears dislodge, and start to grate on each other.

'So what does your fiancé do?' I ask.

'We..eell, since you asked, your sweat is pungent, more sharp than musky-like *Detto!*, only sort of muskier.' She says.

'Will you tell your fiancé?'

'Of course I like your smell — it's just, different somehow. Oh, don't sulk! On second thoughts, I do like the smell. I feel like you're human now, not just a tight-arsed paragon. Your letters could have been written by *R-Too-D-Too*. By the way, do you say *Kee-nya*? I thought Kenyans call it *Ke-nya*.'

My eyebrows rise, then drop like an eagle after prey.

'What Anthropological expertise! Are you ready to write a travel book yet? Or did you read that in *The Rough Guide*? Did they also tell you how to teach me to be a Kenyan? How to pronounce my country? You could start an NGO, you know, use that expertise.'

'Fuck you.'

She wants to leave, and has summoned enough ire to send a rocket to the moon. She is back in a few seconds. I laugh. She heard bullets from the video-show next-door: *Universal Soldier*. I laugh, and tell her this. She gets angry, starts to cry, then gets angrier.

I laugh to myself. There's nothing as scary as being beyond *The Lonely Planet*. I escort her to the hotel. She sulks and sniffles

all the way back. I leave her simmering over a warm beer at the bar. As I walk out, I see Mr Henderson making a creaky beeline for her.

As I leave I see in my mind the old man patting her hand, his enormous hankie floating around her face, held by his Old Africa Hand, with shuddering fingers, and blue veins that will clench to attention when talking about bleeding hearts, and left-wing newspapers, and London perverted. She will tell him about her mother, and he will say sadly, 'She couldn't know.'

Jemima will come to tears when he tells her about his dogs, whose progeny appear in dustbins nearby, bearing bits of the familiar, sometimes just the eyes. They are now wild, wounded and malnourished, sometimes

their teats hang, naked and sagging.

In this dark bar, with shadows dancing, he will talk of the dark outside, scrambling to get in, looking for a crack of light to take your last shoe, your last cent, your daughter, your property. You will wake up to hear donkeys screaming, whips slapping. Can't leave clothes on the wash line. Twenty years this town can't dig a bloody borehole.

She will huff, as he speaks, puff as he speaks, each huff, each puff blowing me darker amongst the shadows.

What was: he will paint-brush the air again, this time drawing lions in bathtubs and leopards as pets. Eyes will open wide as she hears of dalliances with *The Delamares*, and lounging with *Lord Errol*, hunting with *Hemingway*, getting bombed with *Blixen*. By the time he fades into a long monologue about the war, she will be thinking, 'Poor Mum'.

I walk back, mumbling shadows following me everywhere, an embarrassing new respect. I hear *Karanja* shout out 'O-He! Van *Damme mwenyewe!*' *Van Damme Himself*.

A new name. I'm sure I will be the first to get clean water in the morning.

No matter, there is a song in my mind:

She says Ke-nya, and I say Keenya

Keenya, Ke-nya; Ke-nya, Keenya, let's call the whole thing off...

I feel good. I will go to bed: untangle the *Moses Mulelekwa* tape, close my eyes, and let shards of brittle paper fall into place. There is always a new way to fold the paper, and it always falls into place.

Eyes will open wide as she hears of dalliances with The Delamares, and lounging with Lord Errol, hunting with Hemingway, getting bombed with Blixen.