Under Nelson Mandela Boulevard
A Story About Cape Town’s Tanzanian Stowaways
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Cape Town city gardener Karabo Moshoeshoe’s orders were that the grass embankments around the intersection of Oswald Pirow Street and Hertzog Boulevard were to be cut again, though the routine trim wasn’t supposed to happen for another week. All litter was to be removed.

“I don’t want to see a single chip packet anywhere,” were his overseer’s words.

It had something to do with the new sign the traffic department had put up alongside the highway onramp, and covered with a black sack. The city’s new mayor, Patricia De Lille, would be coming down to the intersection to make a speech, apparently, so a tent for the VIPs was being erected by the cork oaks alongside the onramp. Nothing like this had happened in the eight years that Moshoeshoe had been tending the area. It was not a nice area, in his opinion. The room in the concrete substructure of the highway onramp, in which he kept his clothes and his tools, was an especially ugly place. There were always people sleeping around it on flattened cardboard boxes, covered in sheets of plastic. They cooked in the shelter of the bridge, blackening the concrete with smoke, and then drew everywhere using the charcoal from their fires.

“They draw ships,” Mosheshoe once told his wife, but he could not say why, nor was he particularly interested. These people, these bridge-men, made work for him, plus they were tsotsis, drug-smokers.

* * *
Michael Bakili from the Central City Improvement District’s security detail had received orders of his own: get rid of the bridge-men before the arrival of the VIPs. It would not be easy. With the sun shining for the first time in a week, the grass embankments were already populated by prostrate bodies. Sunshine in winter tended to have that effect on the bridge-men. It carried their bad habits into their brains through their blood, Bakili had always thought. The group from the traffic island between the onramp to the highway and the red tarmacadam of the Rapid Transit Route would give the most trouble. They had made their sleeping places right there in the plants, squashing the agapanthuses to a reedmat thinness. However, if anyone could get them going, it was Bakili. He could speak to them in KiSwahili, their own language, which he had learned from his father, whose people were from Arusha in Tanzania. An understanding had already been established by which Bakili left the bridge-men be as far as it was in his power to do so, and they in turn cleaned their living areas each morning, returning the boulders they used as chairs around their night fires back to the abutment walls from which they had prised them.

When Bakili arrived at the traffic island one of the men, just a boy really, wearing a red overall with reflective strips at the knees, was lying back in the warm sand between the plants. In one hand he had a Die Son news poster, with which he was shielding his face. The other arm, missing from the long sleeve lying across the boy’s chest like a flat tube, was working up and down inside the overall pants.

“Wanker,” shouted Bakili, and made as if to stamp on the boy, who laughed at the fact that his own joke prevented him from freeing his hand to defend himself. Some of the others joined in the laughter and then they picked up their personal items – torn jackets, water bottles, sun-bleached rucksacks – and wandered off into town.
Across the road, Mosheshoe was not having the same success. He had been cutting the grass with his weed-eater but was now staring gravely off in the direction of the civic centre.

“Everything OK?” Bakili shouted across to him. The old man shook his head and looked down at his feet.

“Your friends shit everywhere,” Mosheoshoe said. “Mess, man, mess.”

He’d struck a human crap with his weedeater, spraying the stuff all over his work trousers.

“Sorry baba,” Bakili said, meaning it.

By the time the mayor arrived wearing a shiny red suit everything was in order, at least it looked that way. The people seated before her in the tent were a mixture of black suits (MPs), white dog collars (faith leaders) and green, black and yellow t-shirts (African National Congress members). The mayor greeted them in English, Afrikaans and Xhosa, and said that it was a great day for the City of Cape Town. “Today,” she said, “we take a step towards making our city even more inclusive.”

From his position behind the tent Bakili noticed a group of bridge-men approaching down Oswald Pirow. They were unmistakeable in their multi-coloured overalls and woollen hats, each with a rucksack around his shoulders. He glanced nervously at his superior. The media were all over the event. This was not the time for a scene.
“The apartheid government,” the mayor was saying, “knew full well what it meant to claim ownership of our public spaces. Through a careful strategy of selective naming and selective cultural recognition, it sought to stamp its interpretation of the world on future generations.”

The group of homeless men reached the intersection and waved at Bakili, who waved both his palms at them to signal they should not come any nearer. They did not. Instead they followed one of their many paths around the bridge off-ramp, and disappeared into the amphitheatre gloom beneath the soaring overpasses. There, Bakili knew, they would start preparing lunch, probably chicken and rice, shoplifted from the Adderley Street Shoprite.

“That apartheid planning,” the mayor continued, “sought to keep us divided, even long after the apartheid government was gone. As such, we have an imbalance in our named public spaces. We recognise some histories, but not our shared history. We are changing that today.”

At this the mayor pulled on a cord and the black cover slipped from the mysterious sign. Previously it had read ‘Eastern Boulevard’. The new sign read ‘Nelson Mandela Boulevard’. The ANC men and women began chanting the iconic name as the mayor climbed into a car, which swept up the Boulevard onramp in a cavalcade of blue lights. The crowd began to disperse just as the first curlicues of smoke began to waft from the underpasses.

“Get those fucking guys out of here,” Bakili’s superior grunted, but like the other VIPs he too was on his way back to an office, and Bakili was not about to get between hungry slum dogs from Dar es Salaam and their food.

Before the sun disappeared behind Signal Hill that evening the new sign had been amended. Beneath the words Nelson Mandela Boulevard someone had written, in permanent marker, “Memory Card. I like ship, no like pussy.”
4 June 2011

David Southwood called today to tell about the community of Tanzanian stowaways living under Nelson Mandela Boulevard at the foot of Cape Town, where the high rise buildings end and the docklands begin. He explained he’d been visiting the underpasses for two years with a book of photographs in mind, and felt the time had come to begin collaborating with a writer. Was I interested?

I met him after lunch where Christian Barnard Street, named for the city’s world famous heart surgeon, slips under the foreshore freeways and comes to an end at the port’s trident-spike palisade fence. Being autumn, the hectare of landfill beneath the highway substructure had sprouted lurid green grass and oily puddles. As we clodded across it Dave pointed out a surface deposit of beer bottle shards and bone chip.

“Cow molars,” he said.

“Large groups of Tanzanians used to gather here every Sunday to boil cow heads, bought for R1 a pop from a Woodstock butchery.”

When we reached the far end Dave turned to his right and began climbing the flyover’s steep abutment wall, digging the toes of his boots into the stone facing and pointing out slogans written here and there in permanent marker and white paint.

_The power of sea forever and ever_
_Seaman life no story only action_
_Today Africa Tomorrow Eu rope_

We paused by one inscrutable message – Aver Theang Isgoabe Orite – but then noticed the three young men sitting above us on the metal barrier of the bridge, their faces deeply submerged in their hoodies. At the top we collided with their knees and then milled awkwardly around in front of them, bounded by the dizzying drop down to the start of highway on the left, the sloping wall we’d just scrambled up and the cars flying by on the bridge to the right, rushing down to join the highway. Ahead lay a 100m slice of lopsided, downward sloping land, which was grassed and broken up by three wild olives. Beneath the first of these three more men lay submerged in dirty blankets. At the sound of our voices one of the sleepers wriggled out of bed and pissed against the second tree, all the while squinting in our direction. Dave raised his hand.

“Haiyo Dave,” said the distant figure, zipping up his jeans and raising a hand in reply.

“Adam!”

“Yeah is me, Dave, I’ve been in Russia since I last saw you man, in Saint Petersburg.”

“No shit. What was it like?”

“Cold there in Russia, Dave.”

The obscure city ledge was exposed to the wind off the Atlantic and Adam, in a holey black T-shirt, was already shivering, clutching his hands together by his groin. He had a rough tattoo of a container ship all the way up his right forearm, and a much neater tattoo of a nautical wheel atop his left hand.

“You know, Dave, we beach boys call this place ‘The Freezer’ because it’s so fucking cold,” he said, a gold-plated incisor glinting in his grin.
Beach boys. Seamen. Seapower – these, I was told, were the names the bridge-dwelling Tanzanians had given themselves.

Skirting back around the knees of the three sitters Dave pointed at the alien-speak on the abutment wall --Aver Theang Isgoabe Orite.

“What does it mean?”

Adam laughed.

“Tha’s not Swahili, Dave, tha’s Bob Marley,” he said, in the tailings of what I’d have said was a Brummie accent if the likelihood of his having ever lived in Birmingham wasn’t so infinitesimally small.

“Baby don’t worry, about a thing. Because every lil thin, goabe orite,” he croaked, and the three gray sitters cracked wide grins.

While Dave and Adam caught up I absent-mindedly rolled an anvil-shaped rock under my foot, and then tipped it over. Beneath it, in a sweating plastic sleeve, were the emergency travel documents of one Kham’si Swaleh Kigomba. The ink had bled and the beach boys who gathered around to see said that Kigomba had possibly caught a ship, or had more likely been arrested and deported. Nobody could say for sure what had become of him.

“Take it, as a memory,” Adam advised, and I did want to get the find somewhere nicer, drier. In the end, though, I folded it up and put it back on the flattened yellow grass, next to a blanched snail shell, and placed the ship-shaped rock back on top.
19 June 2011

I arranged to meet Adam under the Edward VII statue at the southern end of the Grand Parade, where dozens of beach boys gather each day to play a game they call “last card”, betting with R1 coins. If Cape Town has a crucible of cultures then the Grand Parade is it. Here the Italianate City Hall overlooks a market in which francophone immigrants display rip-off handbags alongside Rastafarians in sack cloth clothes, who put out tubers harvested from the slopes of Table Mountain for the interest of the commuters going to and fro between the railway station and the inner city. It is the perfect place to hide in plain sight if you happen to be foreign-born and undocumented, and it is here that the beach boys make their living, either pushing the traders’ lockable trolleys to and from nearby warehouses for a R10 fee, or by pushing drugs behind the chip and salomie stalls at the square’s west end. Edward VII, hat in hand, a seagull almost always shitting down the imperial forehead, is something of a beach boy Christ the Redeemer, if only because the elevation of the statue’s stepped plinth makes it easy to spot police a long way off.

It was drizzling, however, and the statue steps were deserted, as was the square. I eventually found him by the toilet block at the northern end, where streams of piss crisscross the pavement, the toilet facility having been moth-balled years back. He was wearing an orange overall, and with his caramel skin, gold-plated incisors and home-made tattoos looked – on purpose, no doubt – like a prison gang general. The policeman frisking him completed the image quite nicely.

“Haiyo Sean, the police just searched me for drugs,” said Adam, sauntering over a moment later.

“I take it you’re not carrying?”
Adam opened his mouth and rolled a white plastic cube around with his tongue.

“Coke?”

“Heroin”

“Don’t swallow.”

“It’s no problem. I’ll just throw it up later.”

Adam felt like a smoke so we headed for The Freezer via the chaotic taxi deck above the railway station, where he spent more time walking backwards than forwards, cursing people at the top of his voice and making enquiries about their narcotic wares. “You got Swazi? No don’t talk to me about Swazi, don’t ever talk to me about fucking Swazi!”

Everyone seemed to be on something, or looking to get on. I’ve been up on the deck a hundred times and the people around me have always seemed like ordinary folks, on their way to jobs in Edgars, Shoprite or KFC. In Adam’s company it was an entirely different relational dimension, alive with criminal opportunity.

We descended to the foreshore, aiming at the port, and came once more below the Nelson Mandela Boulevard flyover, where he lifted a metal lid in the pavement and revealed a washing machine tumble of rags. “Tha’s my bed folded up in there. Tha’s my wardrobe.”

Up at The Freezer we ran into a 19 year old called Daniel-Peter, whose lips were so full they made his entire face look distended, until he smiled and his features claimed the golden ratio of facial beauty. Daniel-Peter had been staring intently at the harbour, and now pointed to a vessel with a flag of Jamaica painted on the smokestack. He said something to Adam in Swahili.

“The boy says it’s a good ship because it’s low in the water. That means it’s loaded and ready to go,” Adam explained.

“We’re going to try to stow that ship tonight, me and this boy. I love this boy,” he said paternally. “He’s not scared of anything. He’s a little boxer from Keko in Dar es Salaam. All these Keko boys are little boxers.”

Notebook against a knee, pen poised, I asked Adam for a short summary of his career as a stowaway.

He finished mulling his weed and quickly rolled a joint, which he lit and puffed on a few times before beginning theatrically in the third person:

“Adam is a outcast boy from Tanzania. His daddy, who he never knew, is from Greece. His poor mummy is a black girl from a place called Mbwera, where the people are all witches.”

My immediate thought was that I was being fobbed off by a canny wide boy, my over-eager pen fed a meaningless blend of myth and stereotype. But if it was Adam’s intention to hide himself behind the general he had not factored in his side-kick’s eagerness to please.

“His name is Memory Card,” Daniel-Peter broke in. “That is what we call him.”

The legend himself, Kilroy of the underpasses. Memory Card. I like ship, no like pussy
Adam sighed, “that’s right”, and like a family pariah playing for the hero-worship of younger cousins pulled off his shirt and pointed out where he’d had the nickname tattooed on a pectoral in crack-cocaine font.

“They call me Memory Card because I always remind the boys what is good and what is bad behaviour. I’m a peacemaker. I don’t like to see people fighting.”

“Who is Aniya?” I asked, pointing at a tattoo on his shoulder.

“Princess Aniya is me daughter,” he said, pronouncing it door-ah and putting the provenance of his accent – Birmingham – beyond doubt. He went on to relate the story of his passage to England, how he had entered through the Port of Hull in 2003 concealed in a Maltese bulk carrier called Global Victory, which he had boarded in the Port of Richard’s Bay on South Africa’s north coast. In his first months in the UK he had lived in Sheffield with a benevolent Cameroonian before bussing to Birmingham, where the Jamaican gangsters around Handsworth had permitted him to hustle small amounts of marijuana. Aniya’s mother, a second generation Jamaican immigrant, had tried to save him from the streets by convincing her own mother to take him in, but with no other way of making money Adam continued to hustle by day and was eventually done for dealing. He met Aniya for the first time in the visitors’ room in Winson Greene prison. Two months later he was put on a flight to Dar es Salaam.

I scratched it all down.

“Tell them,” said Adam, “that I’m fucken West Brom for life. Up the Baggies, yeah!”

The football hooligan in him receded behind plumes of blue smoke and we talked about the thrill of stepping out into the unknown. I regaled him with short biographies for Ibn Battuta, Wilfred Thesiger, David Livingstone, and he said, “Tha’ Dave had the heart of a seaman, man.” Then he became broody.

“You know we rob the new boys, Sean? We do. We bring them some place like this and ask them questions. Where you from? What you doin here? Where’s your money? Then we search the guy. In ‘99 this Tanzanian boy came here, about Daniel-Peter’s age. Nobody knew him from before, so we took his clothes, his phone and his shoes. That night the guy stowed a ship. Three other guys stowed in the engine room of the same ship. The crew found those three guys after a few days but they only found the other guy when they opened the hold at the next port. The captain called those three guys and said ‘we have a dead body here, do you know him?’ The guys said they did not know him but then the one guy started to cry. You see Sean, that night when they stole the boy’s things, this one guy felt bad and took the clothes back to him. The dead person was wearing those clothes so he knew it was the same boy.”

I asked if he was the person who felt bad and he shook his head. “No, that was another guy.”

23 September 2011

Bumped into Daniel-Peter, whose once tiny English vocabulary (which had nevertheless contained the words “anchorage”, “fibreglass”, “first mate” and “consulate”) now enables unmediated conversation. It was an unplanned meeting, so the story he told about his life went down on the inside of a KFC burger box, the contents of which we’d just eaten sitting up at The Freezer.

My mother I like too much. Ma, she like me too much. Father made wrong, father no good. I have sister. Sister is die. Ma she sick, one month she never talk. She need blood so I make out blood. One day she look me, sit up and take me (grabs his shirt lapels in his fists), pull me down. I do like this (forcefully opens the fingers of one fist with the fingers of his other hand) and she die like that. I left Tanzania.
The story of his subsequent journey to South Africa had an adventure book quality, which I found dubious: lions at night with eyes like torches gorging on hapless fellow travellers in the wilds of northern Mozambique, and so forth. I steered the conversation back to the ships. Where had he hidden on the vessels he’d boarded? Daniel-Peter waggled a mini-loaf in the direction of a cargo ship in the Duncan Dock, clearly struggling for the right words. Then he had an idea. Reaching into a small blue rucksack he pulled out a large blue faux-leather 2010 diary, the corners of which had swollen and burst. This he opened first at the pastel-coloured continental maps that large diaries have at front and back, where he pointed out Dakar, Jakarta, Singapore, Dubai – some of the cities he had travelled to. On almost every other page he had drawn cargo and container ships in pencil and pen. He began jabbing at them with his callused fighters’ fingers, pointing out the engine room, the lifeboats, the tonnage hatches, even the bulbed area above the rudder – all established beach boy hiding places. Lastly he pointed out the portal to the anchor chain locker, and waved his hand to indicate danger.

“Fire.”

“Fire?”

“Anchor out, fire in,” he clarified, and to demonstrate what a gigantic anchor chain rapidly paying out through a small portal would do to a human body caught up in the action he scooped up a handful of dirt from between his feet, and threw it out over the N1.

3 January 2012

Not all the beach boys welcome our interest in their business, and some, like the crew that have made their beds among the restios on the Herzog Boulevard traffic island, are nakedly hostile.

The friendlier beach boys repeatedly insist there are no leaders in the community. Without doubt, though, the dominant member of the Hertzog Boulevard crew is Juma, a broad-nosed man in his late 20s, whose matted dreadlocks glint with colourful beads. Juma is as common a Tanzanian name as Dave is an English one, but the relationship that developed between Juma the seaman and Dave the photographer is fairly unique. They first met in the winter of 2011. Driving rain had forced the island boys to join the general population under Nelson Mandela Boulevard. Temporarily de-territorialised, Juma was chattier that day than he has been since. Without being asked to, he expounded on the dangers inherent in the beach boy life, foremost amongst which, he said, were the Chinese.

“Not Hong Kong Chinese, Mainland Chinese,” he clarified.

“If the ship crew is all Mainland China you have a problem because they might throw you overboard. On other ships there is a mixed crew – India, Greek-y, Korea – so this is not possible.”

Juma said that a beach boy who had spent time in Cape Town had been thrown overboard by a Chinese captain off the coast of Tanzania.

“He has become our hero because he survived and reported that ship. The captain was given his whole life in jail and the crew were given 20 years. You can still see the story on the internet,” he said, at which point he hauled off his jacket and his hoodie, and several more subsidiary layers, and presented us with the dolphin he’d had tattooed on a shoulder blade. It was, he said, his protection against drowning.

No doubt encouraged by his forthrightness Dave asked Juma if he would mind posing for a photograph. Juma nodded, pulled his layers back on, and smiled for the camera. After taking his portrait...
Dave asked if he could photograph the protective charm. Without hesitation, Juma asked for money, and just as reflexively Dave refused. Dave and Juma have bumped into each other a dozen times since. On each occasion, Dave has asked Juma if he wouldn’t mind taking his shirt off and just as reliably, Juma has grinned and asked for money. For R50, possibly R20, Juma would happily expose his shoulder to the lens, but Cecil Rhodes will return to govern the cape before either man – the beach boy from Dar es Salaam or the photographer from Pietermaritzburg – will back off a principle.

8 June 2012

Adam called to say he had seen a ship he liked the look of in the Ben Schoeman Dock, and that he would probably be gone before the end of the day. We met at The Freezer, where he smoked the usual series of joints and unpacked his travel bag at my request.

Of the two 2l coke bottles of cloudy water that emerged first he said, “The glucose makes it like that. You must have glucose to survive.” Two packets of tennis biscuits followed some Jungle Oats yoghurt bars, and that was it for food and drink.

“It lasts me maybe ten days.”

He also had a torch, a short length of tubular metal and five or six empty plastic packets.

“The best place to hide is inside the cargo hold,” he explained.

“The only problem is they lock the hatch and don’t open it again. It’s dark down there so you need a light.”

The length of metal had a more vital function.

“When your food and water run out you need to use a small iron like this to hit the hatch, so that the sailors can hear and let you out. Otherwise you die.”

I had been under the impression that the beach boys aimed to remain hidden for the duration of their sea voyages.

“Never,” Adam corrected.

“That ship can be at sea for 30 days. You can’t carry that much food and water.”

He explained that any beach boy who successfully secretes himself onboard an outgoing ship will aim to remain hidden only until the ship is beyond the reach of the national coast guard before coming out into the open. It is at this point, he said, that the really difficult part of being a stowaway begins.

“The first thing the crew will do is report you to the Captain, and the first thing the captain will ask is ‘where did you shit in my ship?’ That is why I have these,” said Adam, holding an empty plastic bag up in each hand and flashing his wide boy grin, much the way he would, I imagined, when presenting a week’s worth of shit to some unfortunate ship master.
9 June 2012

Woken by a text message at 5:46am.

“Yoh i m going last night i jup on ship name bluu sky. pls keep on touch with me family. fhone my daughter mum pls. pls tell her what is hapen. Memory Card. sea power.”

Five minutes later the phone went again.

“Sean can feel the ship is moven braa sound so nice. alone this time and have no food. i have only wotar but still me go make.”

13 July 2012

Winter seems to draw out with Adam gone, and whenever I go driving on Nelson Mandela Boulevard, when clouds like giant box jellyfish drag skirts of rain across Table Bay, I can’t help but think of the beach boys below, huddled around their fires cooking rice in blackened pots, and of Adam, presumed dead by some of his friends. In fact, the whole seaward view has been permanently changed for me. Where before the light playing off the Atlantic tended to turn the flyovers, cranes and ships into an oil painting, now I see only cracks and chinks: bent palisade struts, tunnels, portals, hatches – not just flaws in a postcard perfect view but rents in a great system of human controls. And I see the human nobodies crawling through them, or lying curled up in dark spaces. Some lines from a poem by the late Stephen Watson keep playing in my head. In Definitions of a City, Watson’s imagination walks an old path on the face of Table Mountain. He fancies that the path pre-dates human settlement, and it then occurs to the poet that the paths he is walking do not end where the city begins,

that…should you follow these footpaths really not
That much further, they soon become streets,
Granite kerbs, electric lights. These streets soon
Grow to highways, to dockyards, shipping lanes.
You’ll see how it is – how these paths were only
An older version of streets; that the latter, in turn,
Continue the highways, and the quays of the harbour,
And even, eventually, the whale-roads of the sea.

I find myself missing Stephen, who was a friend and mentor until his sudden death from cancer last April. And I worry about Adam, my guide in inner city matters, a man whose experiences outreach even the poetic imagination.
The sun appeared without warning today and lashed the peninsula with the sort of heat-bearing rays that unseal, lift and give voltage to the smell of every urine stain and beetle carcass on the city floor. It was a perfect day for lifting beach boy graffiti from the highway substructure because the Hertzog Boulevard boys who guard the entrance to the underpasses would be too busy washing themselves out of 25l paint drums to mind our snooping. Down under Nelson Mandela Boulevard Dave and I skirted a tree which had been turned into an eerie mobile of home-made coat hangers, and began transcribing slogans as defiant and crude as the men soaping their genitals on the island, at eye level with the passing vehicles.

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Memory Card Me Like Ship No Like Pussy
Easy to Die tough to Get
Opportunity Never Come Twise
God Yucken Bless Mi
Don’t West Your Time
Sea never dry
Escape from cape
Nothing is tough accept tough is yourself
No pain to spain
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Our next destination was the Lower Church Street bridge over the N1 highway, an area the beach boys call “Vietnam” on account of the number of palm trees growing from the verges there. The green embankments were abloom with drying clothes – exploded views, when seen from the elevation of the bridge, of the beach boys’ winter uniform: Peruvian beanie, hoodie, overshirt, second overshirt, undershirt, second undershirt, pair of baggy jeans, fingerless gloves and the notable absence of underpants and socks. In a rare sonic lull between passing vehicles we heard strains of reggae, and followed these beneath the bridge to find Rashidi Mwanza and his friend Ngaribo Masters wedged like overgrown pigeons up where the abutment wall met the underside of the bridge. They had just smoked a joint, and giggled uncontrollably when we spotted them. When we explained we were there for the graffiti they almost fell off their perch they laughed so hard, though they both agreed to look at our transcriptions once we were done.

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TMK
CTR/018729/03
Junior No More
Some Win some Lost Some die
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Looking over the slogans, the beachboys became serious.
“TMK is for Temeke in Dar es Salaam, where we are both from, and this number is a permit number. We write out permit numbers on the walls so that we don’t lose them,” Rashidi began.

“Who is Junior?” I asked, and Ngaribo, who had taught himself to make Rastafarian amulets out of beads and fishing gut, rubbed his hands together worriedly.

“Junior no more,” he said.

“He means Junior is dead,” Rashidi clarified.

“He was crushed last year by a truck, crossing by the highway to The Freezer. He was Ngaribo’s main man,” he added. Ngaribo looked away and for the first time I noticed his tattoo: three tears spilt from the corner of his right eye.

“Some lost, some win, some die. It’s no fucking joke,” said Rashidi.

28 June 2013

The Friday before the Obama visit, and what with the shuddering of Chinook rotors on test runs to the city from the US destroyer at anchor in False Bay, and the constant wailing of ‘blue-light brigades’ on the city’s highways, even documented, paid-up citizens are starting to feel a little hunted, a little ring-fenced.

I ventured down to the Grand Parade on the Friday afternoon before the vaunted visit and found it unusually devoid of beach boys, no doubt because the place was crawling with cops and security guards. By the Golden Arrow bus shelters at the northern end of the Parade I spied gap-toothed Suleiman Wadfa, more commonly called Senegal, on account of his dark skin. He was hurrying away from the fixed food stalls, looking concerned.

“The police are arresting everybody. Everybody. It’s because Obama is coming. There are already 50 or 60 beach boys in Caledon (police station),” he said, not stopping to talk.

The holding cells at Caledon Police Station are often crammed to capacity when dignitaries visit. Using a city vagrancy by-law the city’s Displaced Persons Unit rounds up as many undocumented immigrants as they can lay their hands on, only releasing them when the event or visit has passed. Senegal was on his way out of the city at the double step.

“The bridges are no good, the police are coming there too,” he said.

“I’m going to ‘the Kitchen’, nobody comes there.”

I’d often heard Adam talk about The Kitchen and knew it was somewhere between the N1 highway and the railways lines heading into the city, at the far end of the Culembourg industrial site. Try as I might, though, I’d never been able to find it.

“I’ll drive you,” I told Senegal, an offer I knew he wouldn’t refuse. He directed me down Main Road into Woodstock, and then down Beach Road in Woodstock’s industria to Tide Street, so-named because the sea had lapped there prior to the land re claimations of the 1940s. We came to rest beside a dumpster in the yard of an oil-recycling company.
“Through here,” said Senegal, working his broad chest through a slender gap between two bent palisade struts. We crossed the railway lines, which were overgrown with Purple Loosestrife, and came before two railway tunnels under the N1, running to the Duncan Dock. The graffiti on the visible tunnel walls was so dense it looked several inches thick. Beyond a few metres we couldn’t see. Smoke was billowing out of the nearest mouth.

When we were about 20m away Senegal said, “Wait here,” and continued in alone.

A Chinook thundered by overhead, followed by another, and when I looked down Senegal was walking towards me, accompanied by a slender, lighter-skinned person, who raised a hand in greeting.

“Haiyo Sean,” he said, grinning his golden grin.

“Haiyo Adam,” I said back.