

CAPE TOWN, MY LOVE

Mark Behr

From A CITY IMAGINED, Edited by Stephen Watson

Penguin South Africa: June 2006

The seventeen-year-old blonde boy with the promise of a smile. Initially, that photograph gets me. A small-town kid from the Free State. Here to find a job. A hard-working boy, his father said. The future for him was bright. He called home every morning. First time ever the phone didn't ring his parents knew something was amiss. His body was found among others with names not their own, with years added to his age. How did the police come by this picture? I imagine a mother, fingers wrung numb, tentatively tracing the family-album's page. Which image should she extract for the messengers of state? By this, the world will remember her son.

In the night of January 20, 2003, nine males - seven male-to-male sex workers, a client and the club's owner - were murdered in a Cape Town sex club named Sizzlers. A tenth victim, with his throat slit, two bullets in his head and doused in petrol, loosened the ropes with which he had been bound and escaped. Later, he was able to identify one of the killers from a police photograph relating to a long forgotten vehicle theft. One black man and one white man were arrested. In court the survivor testified: 'I looked him in the eyes while he slit my throat.'

The accused maintained that a simple robbery had gone awry: They had not planned on killing. Only after one and then another victim resisted did they begin killing. The state countered by asking: If the murders were not premeditated, why had the killers brought with them a knife, hand guns, rope, masking tape, latex gloves, a can of petrol and balaclavas

they never bothered to put on? The surviving witness told how the accused had spoken on a cell-phone midway through the robbery. The accused invoked their right to silence. The judge pointed out that the murderers had chosen to humiliate their victims before killing them. He expressed dismay at the killers' refusal to speak and make understandable their actions to the victims' loved-ones. The accused were found guilty of nine counts of murder and one count of attempted murder. Sentence was life without parole. In his sentence the judge quoted lyrics from a song that could be heard on a video recorded by the police upon arrival at the crime scene: 'Don't be ashamed, let your conscience be your guide. But, oh, know deep inside me, I believe you love me. Forget your foolish pride.'

Questions abounded: Could a crime or drug-syndicate be behind it? Had there been a racial motive? If the objective were robbery, why not target one of the wealthier straight Sea Point sex-clubs? Was it significant that one of the killers in an early affidavit had stated that his girlfriend 'had broken my heart with another woman?' Were the murders related to the repeated bombing of city gay bars? And, I wondered: Why didn't they fight back?

The court record suggests that two of the murdered men did resist. They were the first to be killed. But there had been ten men in the club and only two armed intruders. Ten, surely, could have overpowered two? In court the lone witness said the men in Sizzlers had been 'promised by the killers' that they would not be killed. Jokes had even passed between them. Then they had allowed themselves to be tied up, hands to feet and face down on their stomachs. Did nine men and a seventeen-year-old boy reasonably believe their assailants' 'promise' that they would not be killed? No sign of resistance as they slit their throats. In a city where most people live hand to mouth it is fair to

assume any intruder is after money or something to sell. Why risk life or limb in fight or flight? Still, the question kept returning, are some men, often men who have sex with men, so accustomed to placating that even in the face of life-threatening danger they're incapable of confrontation? What, I insisted to myself, compels anyone to believe a 'promise' from armed men wearing gloves, carrying a can of petrol and not hiding their faces?

But then, perhaps their passivity had nothing to do with appeasement. Instead, it had to do with betrayal: sure they'd struck a deal, the sex-workers were certain they would not be hurt; but their assailants had lied to them. Deceived was what they were. But, can one be betrayed by people you know already disdain you?

Frowning over the details of a mass murder of gay men in the city (one masseur was said to be straight, had worked merely for the money) and baffled by one so young in the newspaper picture, other times and other voices begin to speak in me. Remembrance of war and youth. Me at eighteen already trained to be a killer. Going to fight on 'the Border.' Of first love in Angola. Pride's proximity to shame. Of me and Joe on a Sea Point balcony. How far, I wondered, were we at that age in the army, from the boy-man in the Sea Point brothel?

Nights in Angola, with our watch over and the next sentries on guard, Joe and I lay in our narrow trench on top of a sleeping bag's inner lining. Chest moved against chest. Our feet free of combat boots, heels against soil, toes touching toes, awkwardly and always silently fumbling, vigilant against discovery by our own - even while ours rarely were the only sounds of the night. Once we returned from the war we knew I would go to Cape Town to complete formal officer training in the navy. Joe was assigned to remain at Infantry School in Oudtshoorn. Wordless

and bare-foot on our last night together in the Charlie Company barracks, we dared not lie down on the dark shower-room cement floor to make our goodbye. Next morning, with a dozen other officer hopefuls, I boarded the train for Simon's Town. Passing mountains and vineyards, rattling through tunnels while laughing with my fellow candidate officers, I cupped my nose to relive the night.

The Cape's beauty exists outside the eyes of the stammering beholder. But, on this southern peninsula I found a city and a landscape as captivating as any I could have imagined. For me, it heralded a reprieve from the dust and ochre of our Northern war. The Cape spring was liberation from water-less patrols, ammo, webbing, rifle, army rations and the platoon's mortar pipe; Angola forever behind me. But for the separation from Joe, spring here made me feel light, as if life was breaking through for me too: to be eighteen years old and already chosen!

At Mum's request I had a portrait taken that remains framed on Dad's desk: my white shirt ironed flat and clean and hard as blank paper; on the shoulders the black epaulettes with the gold braided insignia; my short thick blonde hair is beginning to turn darker, hinting nothing of the balding to come; my wide open blue eyes confidently hold the camera and at the corners of my mouth, beneath light pink acne scars, a smile waits, held back by something unnamed. The political and ethical significance of soldiering for white South Africa, like the burden of a soldier's guilt and shame, would be a while coming. Then we were fighting communists and terrorists: on the border we kept South Africa safe. At the height of South Africa's war in Angola, forty-thousand white boys per year went into the Defence Force. During twenty years of conscription only enough to count on one hand became conscientious objectors who went to prison. Others - mostly from moneyed backgrounds -

left the country. Years passed before I myself became interested in a different grasp of white and black, of rich and poor, of Robben Island, of the beloved city's parasitic cord to the Cape Flats. Not far below my window in the Silvermine Officer's Mess I could see Pollsmoor Prison where a dissident poet, now incarcerated, once wrote that Cape Town was a 'charming arch-harlot, a slut, a hussy, a tart, a shrew ... not even a mother.' An anarchist, I believed then, without doubt deserving to be behind bars.

Views described from Table Mountain have beggared a million postcards. Up there you're under earth's widest dome. Below you the city bowl whence suburbs, townships and informal settlements fan out along roads and highways of the sandy flats to the Hottentot's-Holland mountains. Turn your head and before you the continent reaches way down to Cape Point. Oceans glisten to turquoise coves and white beaches. Every season bursts in different flower. Here, you're on top of the world.

Phone-calls to Joe on a conscript's salary were out of the question. Instead, swelled by our new status, our ability to inspire awe and even fear, we wrote letters. Of the first salute received and nonchalantly returned; of anticipating the new January intake. As we had never spoken of what we did with or felt for each other, we believed we had little reason to fear the Defence Force censors. 'Colour and water. And beautiful people. Such softness has Cape Town, Joe, after Angola.' Weekly my letters to him conjured the new place. What I could not imagine saying to him, about him or us, I said of the city: 'This place wants to be touched and tasted. Nothing as narrow as a trench or a sleeping bag in this city.' We made a date. We'd meet during his first weekend pass. He would collect me from the naval base in his battered VW. We'd spend a weekend in the Sea Point flat of a family friend.

From our Simon's Town classroom you saw clear across False Bay. A particular lesson, presented with the text of *An Officer and A Gentleman* open on our desks, on the etiquette of shore-leave in female company: 'You're always on the street-side of the pavement. Your girlfriend is always protected from the traffic. You never let a woman walk on the side of the traffic.' Intoning disdain, our instructor veered to anecdote: Two male naval officers recently had been caught in a car by MP's, in flagrante delicto. They were brought onto full military parade. 'Remember, Midshipmen,' our instructor said, 'this is what happens when an officer gets homo ideas. Base commander or ship's captain marches from the dais to where the disgraced officer waits under the gaze of his entire unit. Ceremonial sword extracted from sheath, the commander uses rapid motions to slice the epaulettes from the disgraced shoulders. Members of the unit do an about-turn so their backs greet the dishonoured. Accompanied by drummers the former officer is drummed from the unit's gates to where he is awaited by civilian police. Here he is arrested and charged with the age-old civil crime of sodomy.'

With those few sentences my anticipation of seeing Joe and of displaying my hard-earned rank instantly turned on me: Unbearable - that word specifically - if anyone ever found out about him and me. I could not have lived with the shame of anyone's knowing that the avowals of rank had been placed upon the shoulders of sedition. Any word from the soldier's dictionary of homophobia spawned fear that one and all of my colleagues would register my discomfort. The only caning I have always remembered in full colour came from a schoolmaster as punishment for a playful sexual romp with other eleven-year-old boys. Sit, we barely could for a week. In the white South African Defence Force, as in the white culture of my youth, only the frequency of racist comments and jokes eclipsed our obsessive repetition of sexist and related faggot/moffie jokes. For a white boy like me, then, nothing ranked lower

than being as much as 'suspected' of being homosexual. To ensure we got our performance straight, the culture had us in precision drills, marching, no one out of step, compulsory military cadets from the moment we set foot in high school. The merging of militarisation, sexuality, self-denial and the maintenance of male privilege (white, in our case and era) had been well internalised by the time we woke in shame from our first wet dreams. Self-loathing and vigilance against ourselves did not start during our years in the army's pay, but it was often fine-tuned during that masquerade: strip them of rank and send them to jail for playing with one another's willies; bedeck their flat chests with medals for killing.

I wrote Joe that I would be unable to rendezvous at the gates of SAS Simon's Town. In a response that picked carefully at words but barely concealed its plea, he convinced me to meet him at the Sea Point flat. I recognised the VW parked roadside along the green that separates Sea Point from the ocean. I stepped from the elevator into the lyrics of Freddie Mercury's 'Bohemian Rhapsody.' Joe had set out a bottle of Tassenberg and two glasses on the balcony. In the setting sun, with the wine ignored, I strained to tell him that I was not staying. Men needn't be soldiers to deceive themselves and others the way I did when I said: 'The thing that happened between us was once off. You know, men in prison and men in the army. Men isolated or hard up will fuck a donkey.' His dark eyes brimmed. What I would not, could not even contemplate saying was: 'I would rather die than have anyone find out about us. And so, I terminate this love in remittance for respectability.'

As if sharing my thoughts - himself having long ago decoded me-him-us and what was required of our kind to survive in this world we so proudly occupied - he suggested that no-one need ever know: we could finish National Service, go to university, get married and have children and

still 'do this without anyone ever knowing.' For an instant I was ready to embrace his vision. Was this not the way everyone did it? I imagined us together forever: never having to pay the price of revelation. While the cost for wives and children never crossed my mind, I shook my head. Again I insisted that what 'had happened' had meant nothing important, that we had to move on.

He cleared his throat as I started to leave. He was looking out to Robben Island. I would remember only his profile as he smiled, saying: 'Nothing as narrow as a trench a sleeping bag here in Cape Town, eh, Mark?' That took me only months rather than years to grasp.

On the street I wondered whether he was still up on the balcony. Looking down on me. Nearing his parked car, I recognised the license plate of the small town where his parents lived. Their congregation had set up a fund to send Joe to university where he would study to become a dominee in the Dutch Reformed Church. I absurdly repeated the car's registration number for blocks as I walked away not allowing myself a glance back.

I have heard soldiers speak of killing less from fear of being killed themselves than from the shame of being known as a man unable to kill: as if the capacity for killing and for brutality is presupposed only in the signifier 'man' alone. When men speak thus, one may understand killing or aggression as performed most profoundly from a shame related to awareness that none of us is quite 'the man' we are supposed or meant to be. Not being tough in the army translated into being unable to have a woman (on your inside of the pavement) that collapsed further into being queer - the latter akin to but somehow lower or more dangerous than being a woman. To not be woman or woman-like ... to not betray maleness and your sex by showing yourself falling short - even as the neurotic jokes showed straight depending for its life-blood on queer. By

acting tough, we hoped against hope, believed that pretending together with privilege would ensure the promised protection.

A decade later, after other towns, teachers, countries and other texts had helped remake me, I went to live in Vredehoek on the slopes of Table Mountain. On a switchbacking path not dissimilar to the one stomped open by tens of millions of lesbians, homos, queens and transvestites the world over, I stepped out in Cape Town's newly established Gay Pride Parade. Within months South Africans voted in their first democratic election. Through lobbying, activism and moral imagination political elites were moved to overcome blind spots on sexual and gender discrimination. South Africa famously became the first country in the world to include sexual orientation with other key protections in its new constitution: some time soon men would even be able to marry men. Inconceivable! People of alternative sexualities and genders now had a legal foothold from which to extend their struggles against heterosexism and bigotry. New ways of engaging personal and political power were being realised. White Cape Town was drawn closer to the people who did most of the city's work. Treasuries that had for three and a half centuries safeguarded, nursed, fed, transported and educated only a few, were opened to begin acknowledging citizens who lived mostly beyond the city's older streets.

In those days I went to visit a friend whose home was a haven for sick gay men. I recognised Joe at once. We gave each other big hugs and he held me in his skinny and generous arms. Neither of us spoke of Sea Point. Neither of us had come out yet to our parents; I was preparing to; he doubted he would: not because of their disappointment at him having not become a dominee, but as their self-righteousness about everything from sex to the rising crime rate to Nelson Mandela's presidency had snuffed out any care he'd once had for them. I did not

say: but our actions also once upheld that man's incarceration. Instead, I asked about Joe's health: surely he would tell his parents that he was ill? Let them find out after I'm dead, he shrugged. We spoke of Namibia gaining independence and Angola haltingly coming into itself. An estimated ten-million mines remained planted there that someone would have to track and defuse. A decade after we had left Angola around one hundred and twenty people per month continued to be maimed or killed by landmines - by some we had planted. We shook our heads in disbelief, denial or self-delusion and spoke of other things.

Despite his loss of weight and the years, I found Joe beautiful. Had gauntness and age enhanced his looks, or had I in that interregnum learnt to acknowledge the beauty of men? The prospect of successful anti-retroviral treatment was still a few years off, and I couldn't but wonder how long he could live. When I returned from an annual teaching obligation in Europe, he was gone. I wondered whether I should contact his parents. If I did, what would I say to them? Your son and I knew each other for less than a year as eighteen-year-old soldiers a decade ago. We briefly were lovers. We were both closeted, but he was in a sense braver than I. We saw each other recently - once only - after a night that took place years ago on a balcony in Sea Point. He had AIDS and he was beautiful and very angry with you and with himself. Had I been as brave as he, perhaps I too would be ill. Could I say this to his family? Surely I could offer very little with integrity that they would wish to hear. None of my current friends knew Joe nor had anyone known how important he had been in my life. Like his parents, I would mourn him on my own, in my own way write my own elegy to him, to us, our time.

The mountain is a foggy blue-gray in the morning when I head through the old Company Gardens for the High Court Archives, the only place to

access the full transcript of the Sizzlers trial. The file is thicker than my forearm on the desk. What I had not anticipated are the photographs from the scene of the crime. I will have to see men tied up with their throats slit. I will have to see that blonde boy slaughtered. Do I want these images in my head? My motives for indeed turning the page I do not quite understand. But, when I do, I keep my focus to one side.

Against a wall is a set of cheap bunk beds where they slept when they were not working. A book lies open. A novel maybe, whose title I cannot make out. There are clothes that have been dropped to wear again tomorrow. I allow my gaze the slightest inward shift. In some pictures the bodies are almost neatly in a row. A few bodies are on their sides, some with their chests to the carpet, ankles tied behind their backs to their wrists. Like quails prepared for the roast. They are dressed in jeans. Some shirts are unbuttoned. Every body looks like that of a teenaged boy, yet most of them were in their twenties. Here is a sparse trail of hair up to a navel. I strain to keep my eyes off their faces. It is the youthfulness of the bodies, the taut skin that strikes me, over and over. The blonde boy could be any one of these bodies. How terribly thin are these arms? How defenceless these fingertips? This man, this boy too, somehow wrestled himself onto his side. The vulnerability of their hands and their feet tied back is overwhelming. Still I keep my eyes from venturing to their faces and necks. Who is boy and who is man I cannot say. Which one are you? Not the blood on the ceiling or the brutalization of the twisted bodies and limbs, nothing of what is gruesome catches me. Not the empty cartridges flung onto the carpet. Instead, it is how utterly and despairingly frail these men look. For an instant, images of other bodies disremembered drift into memory. But, here, now, the carpet beneath the blood-painted white bodies is red, patterned with squares of white and gray. Now my eyes go

further back over the frayed carpet: someone must have used that bottle of tomato sauce for dinner; there is a small box of Smarties open; a crumpled Liquifruit container, apricot flavour, with its straw still protruding. Was this what you were drinking when they came in? I imagine your fear. Your panic. My eyes catch sight of a flip-flop still held between the toes of one skinny upturned foot.

Unbearable.

I leave the basement archives and climb back to street level. With the note-pad still in hand I walk back into the gardens. Here slaves mostly from the East once cultivated fruit and vegetables for the Dutch East India Company. On Parliament Avenue the statue of Cecil John Rhodes still has an arm raised to the North above the inscription: Your hinterland is there. There is the Tuinhuis, city home to successive Prime Ministers and Presidents. Is it too soon to guess at ironic inscriptions beneath future statues to President Thabo Mbeki, the current occupant of that house? The oaks, leafless now, colossal trunks disappearing beneath the earth, were brought in from Europe centuries ago. The Camellia Japonicas are in full, dust-red bloom. Black and white children in the same primary-school uniforms dash after a squirrel, crash through a patch of seeding clivias and disappear trailing laughter. And then I remember the black bodies.

Between the South African Museum and the National Gallery I find a bench in the sun. The sky is bright now; the mountain a grey mammoth against blue. I write: The last images I have of Cape Town boys spread out in death - not on carpeting, but on tarmac and dust - are from a Truth and Reconciliation Commission hearing not far from here. The images were shown during an amnesty application by one white and one black policeman for their parts in the murder of the Gugulethu Seven. Mothers of the

seven murdered boys came to hear what had been done to their sons. Astonished in grief, these women watched a video of their children's bodies and then faced their children's killers. Arbitrarily chosen black boys - sons of migrant men and women in search of work in the city - had been framed by the state. Picked up off the street they were told they were being trained for the struggle. Instead, at a moment when the minority government required anti-terrorist propaganda to justify its 'total strategy', the boys were gunned down - by the very people that had trained them. I recall video footage of young bodies angled for maximum effect. Feet-first to the cameras. Their feet are made to look too big. Weapons have been conspicuously placed near their brown fingertips. Ropes are used dramatically to turn over and drag lifeless young bodies for the camera and the world to better see. Their faces, all shades of brown, are somehow all erased.

The murders were executed in the late nineteen eighties. Was it '86, or '87? The time when white conscripts like Joe and I and the rest of Charlie Company were withdrawn from Angola to be deployed in this city's townships. 'Where is the border now?' - demanded graffiti from the under-pass on Buitenkant Street.

We could have been there, Joe, you and I. We were so good with guns. But, could we have fought back? Could our soldiering have spelt salvation or merely more deception? Would shame, an impulse to appease, a knife or our terror of drummers on parade have united us again to allow ourselves to be tied up? From those trenches, could I have found a voice to say: I looked my killer in the eyes while he slit my throat. Back then I'd rather kill than have anyone find out about us. My love, were feet ever as vulnerable as when we were officers and gentlemen, trained as killers and so very proud of it?