

S'yavaya!

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68 Plein Street, Johannesburg, Site No. BB 18- 22,
off Park Central. MTN (Noord) Taxi Rank.

What would an aerial shot of this scene look like? A grid of tiny, highly functioning parts. Buzzing. A volcanic microcosm of life, imploding, every day.

Throngs of people swarm the streets as dawn yields to dusk. The bodies in this space are in constant motion. They have made their way from one of four cardinal points that mark the entrances here. A rambunctious choreography of feet - thousands of them shuffling about, some well-heeled, others in more pragmatic footwear.

Those struggling under the grip of homesickness linger momentarily near Siesta Butchery (now Taxi Rank Butchery) before deciding against the purchase of offal, both because of the time-consuming preparation process and the odious nature of the raw stuff, dreading the prospect of carrying it to work! Alternative cuisines cajole the senses from across the road: KFC and Chicken Licken. Each with its distinct flavour of spiced leather. A cacophony of blocked sewers battling against the homely fragrance of fresh magwinya.

There are spaces which render themselves sacred for the way they constitute ordinary existence. Hail thee, MTN Taxi Rank! This grand feature of downtown Jozi's Joubert Park, capricious portal to the soot-black dreams of urban prospectors.

There is less gold than rush here. And rush we do, speeding past virulent streets decorated with impressive heaps of litter. Their odours stew and challenge the rancour of stale urine and the allure of counterfeit designer perfume that assails habitually pinched nostrils.

There is always music here: the exaggerated modulation of a vendor announcing his wares and their 'cheap-cheap' prices juxtaposed against the riotous laughter of robust, middle-aged women revelling in bawdy humour. The incessant catcalling of elderly men jeering at women young enough to have been sired by them, with loud, uptempo gospel songs admonishing those who have strayed from the path of righteousness! This place teems with oxymorons, like drunken preachers and said-to-be-promiscuous young brides. A flaming stage for kangaroo courts.

What of the mostly unspoken solidarity among patrons? As though, each time we meet here, we have all been summoned towards some onerous joint purpose. Here, we glimpse our resilience: braving unfavourable weather conditions and substandard vehicles just to get to 'a new day'. The taxi rank is where we chant 'Better must come!' in silent unison, as we shuffle rhythmically towards the promise of tomorrow.

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Poles painted in yellow, orange and blue demarcate the playing space. Tshwane at column 9, has yellow poles, for instance. Mahlanyeng, that side!

An itinerant woman, back bent like a crowbar, limps by, pushing a noisy trolley brimming with bric-a-brac. One hand pushes the trolley, while the other clasps a brown paper bag concealing a bottle, from which she takes an occasional swig. Her brown teeth are a monument to resistance, having successfully evaded dental hygiene for years.

'Eita!' salutations cement the ties of fraternity between men, with suffixes like 'Grootman' designating seniority. Resonant and infectious, the laughter between amagrootman is easy.

A makeshift billboard advertises the hairdressing prowess of a young woman in skinny jeans and dusty pumps, her own hair an intricate labyrinth of cornrows past their sell-by date. The luminance of her gold slit almost blinds me when she smiles to lure me into procuring her services. Your decline is curt. You need to get to Midrand.

"Tomorrow, sister!" you tell your erstwhile hairdresser. She pouts and rolls her eyes animatedly. Keep moving.

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Constant movement, agility and fierce determination. That's what one needs to project to pass the scrutiny of would-be suitors, juju swindlers and muggers alike. Be unapproachable. Permeate 'kleva' energy. Street smarts. An okapi-sharp gaze. Hold eye contact. Let them drop theirs first. Establish dominance. Eat or be eaten.

Nyasha isn't at her stall. You'll get your nose ring tomorrow. Your phone's ring tone announces a text message from your partner. Ignore.

"Kipha idliso! Amafutha okhiph' idliso!" shouts the middle-aged man who has subsisted on his trade of love potion antidote since you started commuting here eight years ago. You wonder how many lives he's saved since. Your mind travels back to your lover. Could you be under a mysterious spell? Your aunt taught you that crocodile meat makes a better cure than the nondescript fat solution sold by this balding man. You're vegan, so both options make you uncomfortable.

Norwood, at NO. 4, comes before Randburg. You know because you recite this over and over in your mind every time you come here.

The queue marshal is in top form today. He takes pride in his work. A centipede-like formation of black bodies, young and old, braving the biting cold to get to their destinations. Isgqoko pulled to cover his eyes, peeking mysteriously beneath the rim. He tilts his head when he looks at commuters but his gaze is sharp as he registers the number and faces of people in his line, counting his sheep and stopping at 19— three above the legal limit of passengers.

Your fare is in your hand. 24 rand seems a fair price, given the fuel hikes. Though the real cost (like all Ts and Cs) is hidden...

"Waterfall le emuva, Dischem in the middle and Boulders lana," motions the taciturn old guy, a stranger you've known longer than all your Joburg exes put together.

But that's what this place does; it creates the illusion of familiarity. The truth is, we are a randomly curated selection of still images, telling our stories whilst simultaneously observing each other. At once the mosaic and the artist, coalescing together the jagged pieces to form a haphazard collage of lives that, in fleeting glimpses of synchronicity, hint at uniformity.

"Peep-peep!"

You snap out of your daze and are almost knocked over by an impatient driver.

'It be your own kind', you think.

To the left, someone's estranged husband plies a bevvie of girls with the last of his UIF payout, smiling as the acrylic-nailed hand of a sexy young thing caresses his potbelly, stopping just above his belt buckle. Two

aunties in matching bottle green St. John's Church tunics and white girdles walk past, pausing their harmonised tune to survey the scene. They decide against joining the queue and walk on.

Oledi, wearing a floral dress and a regressing perm, is not impressed and makes it known. "Ifika nin' itaxi vele?" she demands to know, having left home at 5 to stand here imitating the polling stations of 1994. The conductor shoots hers an annoyed stare, accusatory in its consternation.

A vendor, bearing a tray of sandwiches, enters the scene. He fails to entice anyone's interest, save for the carrion flies that make a mating bed of his grilled sheep's feet. Dejected, he walks on.

A lady, whose foundation is threatening to melt and reveal her true skin colour, spits in disgust.

"Hay' voetsek, oska eketsa health inspector, wena!" the vendor yells, lips curling in a sneer.

Your body stiffens, switching to a state of hypervigilance. Pulse quickening. Pupils ready to pop out of their sockets.

'Calm down,' you remind yourself, convinced that passersby can smell the apprehension crawling up your spine.

There are two types of bodies here: the body on holiday – that of the custodians of this space – the drivers, traders and other regulars who've become landmark fixtures in this space. Theirs is the relaxed body, characterised by a consistent rhythm and languid pace.

Then there is the uncertain body – that of the commuter, anxiously making her way to her column, trying her best to avoid attention which often equates to vulnerability and subsequently, danger. This body, unlike its relaxed counterpart, moves through the space in a syncopated rhythm, making sharp turns whenever paranoia – often justified – whispers of impending harm. She is always prepared to escape. Fright leaning readily towards flight.

This is what it means to be a woman here, where autonomy fuels the lustful anger of landless patriarchs, too long gone from their homelands, caught in a loop, reenacting the misogynoir they have been allowed to call culture without contestation.

How do you move through a space where the sight of your body in a miniskirt can alchemise a modest crowd into an unruly mob?

Survival instincts translate into a demure posture, averted eyes, coy giggles and a chirpy nasal voice that renders you fragile and therefore worthy of protection. How Not To Become A Statistic. Call him Baba and he will call you Sisi. Don't look him in the eye and you will earn your consideration as his daughter/ sister/ niece, like the ones left back in the village he visits each December. "What is your last name? What of your clan name? Where

do they trace their descent? Why, that's not far from his mother's people's village. Nazo ke! You are family." Your heart ululates its relief.

Channel their every feature. Wear this likeness like a costume stitched to your shadow.

The old man who sells books – along with broken technicolour television sets, gramophones, late husbands' page boy hats, Encyclopedia Britannica and other ghostly trinkets from a past Jozi – as alms to ease the apartheid guilt of ageing white housewives, stirs hopefully each time someone passes by. He politely declines Sis Ntombi's offer of amaskopas. This is their lunch hour routine.

"You remind me of my wife when we were younger, dancing to penny whistle tunes in Kofifi," he tells her. She finds this preposterous and he knows it. The girl could never replace Agnes. That one was a makoya matara!

Mapholoba's taxi grumbles and limps its way in the direction of the queue. The woman in his passenger seat leans towards him, planting a kiss on his grizzly face before pulling the makeshift coat hanger door handle outwards until it nearly unhinges itself, swinging open and narrowly missing a male bystander. Her carelessness is met with derision. Women suck their teeth, frowning and shaking their heads at the sight of her dishevelled curly weave and raccoon eyes bleeding last night's 'face beat'. Self-conscious, she tugs at the liberal hemline of her red bodycon dress, ineffective in covering the parts of her body they opine as private. She clutches onto the few sweaty hundred rand notes in her hand, bites her lower lip and trains her gaze on the distance, wishing their stares away as she staggers home in rickety stilettos.

With a dreamy smile, Mapholoba sprays lavender air freshener to mask the scent of his earlier extracurricular activities, evidenced by the lipstick stains on his white golf shirt. His usual passengers greet him with a combination of encouraging thumbs-up signs, wagging index fingers and Bible verses about infidelity, all of which he ignores indiscriminately.

The queue marshal tilts his head sideways and signals to the first batch of nineteen to board the vehicle. The last passenger slams the door shut. Rumbling like a famished wild cat, the jalopy steals off, spurting toxic fumes into the atmosphere. A coughing contest ensues, some chests wheezing to highlight their superior musicality.

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A blood-curdling scream. Commotion. Chorused chants of 'Vimba!' An adroit-limbed, scraggly-haired chap, sprinting without relent. "Isela!" shouts a woman, too fatigued from cleaning iskobho to give chase. Instead, she accosts him with a litany of colourful expletives more purple than both this prose and the bruises set to colour his body in the next seven minutes.

The court scene plays out near column 13. Alex, famed for its nefarious rats. EGomora.

The victim of the crime stands with her hands on her head, despairing her loss and dreading the retribution to follow. In the distance, the young man's emaciated limbs are xylophones orchestrated by the mallet feet of his self-appointed executioners.

"U-si-jwa-yel-a-ma-si-mba!-we-na-sa-ni!" they unanimously pronounce with every bludgeoning kick, the cracking sound of bone harmonising perfectly with his wretched screams for mercy.

The half-breathing lump is brought before the tribunal. Magesh is the presiding judge. Trembling. Stuttering. The troop of bottle flies encircling his butt – bees to honey – broadcast the sweet dung-like stench. "O tlo nyela, sanie!" laughs Tabang, the queue marshal at column 12.

Captive audience that they are, the crowd deny their role in the drama. They are witness to the crime, but blindness and amnesia will befall them when the cops eventually show up. Until then, they demand the spectacle they've been promised. The stage is charged and they're hungry for tragedy. Give us today, our daily Kota. Baying for the man-child's blood, convinced that he is more animal than man, his bloodshot eyes sufficient evidence, they scream "Mshaye!" Makhathini raises his sjambok skyward. Its whipping sound raises the dust, fashioning his face into a Janus mask. The crowd applauds. Nobody notices the boy's lungs collapsing as air escapes them for the last time.

The copper fragrance of the thief's blood, now coagulated on the asphalt, weds itself to the aroma of amakip-kip grilling nearby. The stain will bear testimony to the transience of life in this place. But like all exhibitions, the installation will be taken down soon enough. People will forget and hanker for the next sensation. A more riveting performance. Full house, tickets sold out on opening night. Rave reviews. But the nomination won't come. It seldom does.

"No comment", says your rumbling belly, and later, on the evening news, the minister of police.

Thus a third type of body is born in this space: a dead body (rendered a 'no body', witnessed by nobody).

Backs turned from the corpse, you have satiated your cravings for gore. Slowly, you sneak back into your columns like primary school children upon hearing the sound of their teacher's advancing court shoes. A knee-jerk response to the mayhem. Collective amnesia. Baba hails the incoming taxi towards your queue. The curtain is drawn.

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