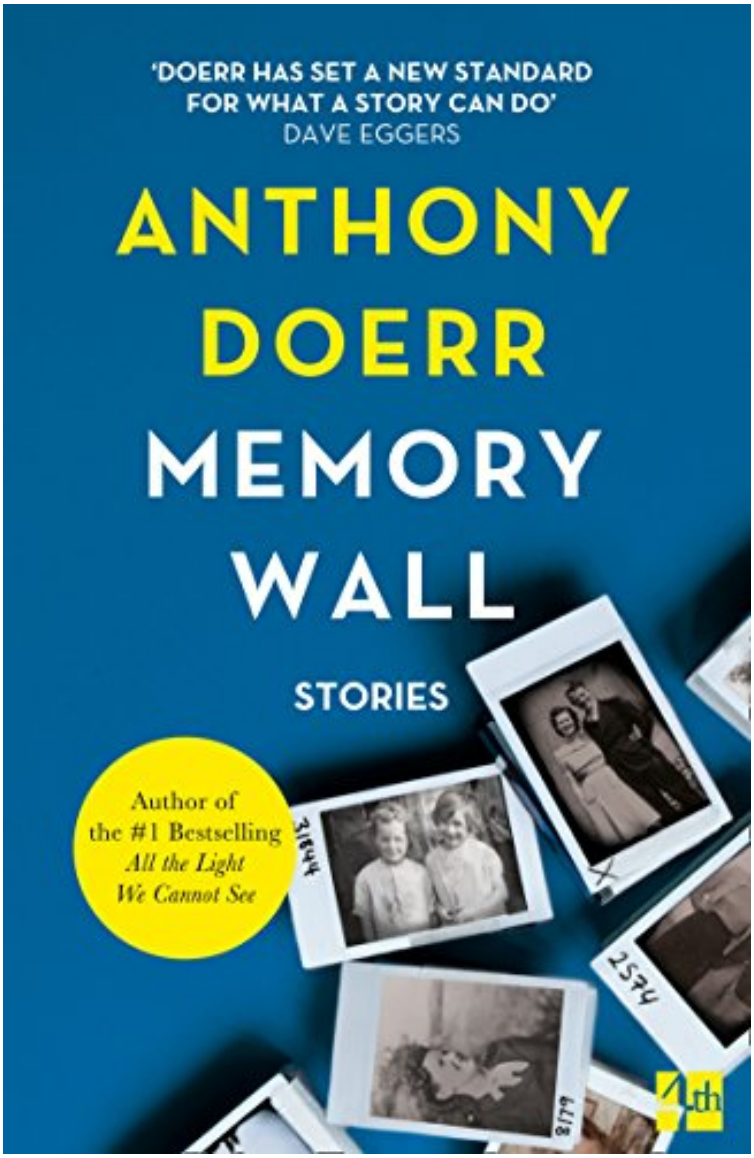
Memory Wall



Par Anthony Doerr
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Par Anthony Doerr : Memory Wall before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Memory Wall:

Description :

Prsentation de l'diteurSet on four continents, Anthony Doerr's collection of stories is about memory: the source of meaning and coherence in our lives, the fragile thread that connects us to ourselves and to others.Set on four continents, Anthony Doerr's collection of stories is about memory: the source of meaning and coherence in our lives, the fragile thread that connects us to ourselves and to others.In the luminous and beautiful title story, a young boy in South Africa comes to possess an old woman's secret, a piece of the past with the power to redeem a life. In 'The River Nemunas', a teenaged orphan moves from Kansas to Lithuania to live with her grandfather, and discovers a world in which myth becomes real. 'Village 113' is about the building of the Three Gorges Dam and the seedkeeper who guards the history of a village soon to be

submerged. And in 'Afterworld,' the radiant, cathartic final story, a woman who escaped the Holocaust is haunted by visions of her childhood friends in Germany, yet finds solace in the tender ministrations of her grandson.The stories in Memory Wall show us how we figure the world, and show Anthony Doerr to be one of the masters of the form.ExtraitMemory Wall Memory Wall TALL MAN IN THE YARD Seventy-four-year-old Alma Konachek lives in Vredehoek, a suburb above Cape Town: a place of warm rains, big-windowed lofts, and silent, predatory automobiles. Behind her garden, Table Mountain rises huge, green, and corrugated; beyond her kitchen balcony, a thousand city lights wink and gutter behind sheets of fog like candleflames. One night in November, at three in the morning, Alma wakes to hear the rape gate across her front door rattle open and someone enter her house. Her arms jerk; she spills a glass of water across the nightstand. A floorboard in the living room shrieks. She hears what might be breathing. Water drips onto the floor. Alma manages a whisper. Hello? A shadow flows across the hall. She hears the scrape of a shoe on the staircase, then nothing. Night air blows into the roomit smells of frangipani and charcoal. Alma presses a fist over her heart. Beyond the balcony windows, moonlit pieces of clouds drift over the city. Spilled water creeps toward her bedroom door. Whos there? Is someone there? The grandfather clock in the living room pounds through the seconds. Almas pulse booms in her ears. Her bedroom seems to be rotating very slowly. Harold? Alma remembers that Harold is dead but she cannot help herself. Harold? Another footstep from the second floor, another protest from a floorboard. What might be a minute passes. Maybe she hears someone descend the staircase. It takes her another full minute to summon the courage to shuffle into the living room. Her front door is wide open. The traffic light at the top of the street flashes yellow, yellow, yellow. The leaves are hushed, the houses dark. She heaves the rape gate shut, slams the door, sets the bolt, and peers out the window lattice. Within twenty seconds she is at the hall table, fumbling with a pen. A man, she writes. Tall man in the yard. MEMORY WALL Alma stands barefoot and wigless in the upstairs bedroom with a flashlight. The clock down in the living room ticks and ticks, winding up the night. A moment ago Alma was, she is certain, doing something very important. Something life-and-death. But now she cannot remember what it was. The one window is ajar. The guest bed is neatly made, the coverlet smooth. On the nightstand sits a machine the size of a microwave oven, marked Property of Cape Town Memory Research Center. Three cables spiraling off it connect to something that looks vaguely like a bicycle helmet. The wall in front of Alma is smothered with scraps of paper. Diagrams, maps, ragged sheets swarming with scribbles. Shining among the papers are hundreds of plastic cartridges, each the size of a matchbook, engraved with a four-digit number and pinned to the wall through a single hole. The beam of Almas flashlight settles on a color photograph of a man walking out of the sea. She fingers its edges. The mans pants are rolled to the knees; his expression is part grimace, part grin. Cold water. Across the photo, in handwriting she knows to be hers, is the name Harold. She knows this man. She can close her eyes and recall the pink flesh of his gums, the folds in his throat, his big-knuckled hands. He was her husband. Around the photo, the scraps of paper and plastic cartridges build outward in crowded, overlapping layers, anchored with pushpins and chewing gum and penny nails. She sees to-do lists, jottings, drawings of what might be prehistoric beasts or monsters. She reads: You can trust Pheko. And Taking Pollys Coca-Cola. A flyer says: Porter Properties. There are stranger phrases: dinocephalians, late Permian, massive vertebrate graveyard. Some sheets of paper are blank; others reveal a flurry of cross-outs and erasures. On a half-page ripped from a brochure, one phrase is shakily and repeatedly underlined: Memories are located not inside the cells but in the extracellular space. Some of the cartridges have her handwriting on them, too, printed below the numbers. Museum. Funeral. Party at Hatties. Alma blinks. She has no memory of writing on little cartridges or tearing out pages of books and tacking things to the wall. She sits on the floor in her nightgown, legs straight out. A gust rushes through the window and the scraps of paper come alive, dancing, tugging at their pins. Loose pages eddy across the carpet. The cartridges rattle lightly. Near the center of the wall, her flashlight beam again finds the photograph of a man walking out of the sea. Part grimace, part grin. Thats Harold, she thinks. He was my husband. He died. Years ago. Of course. Out the window, beyond the crowns of the palms, beyond the city lights, the ocean is washed in moonlight, then shadow. Moonlight, then shadow. A helicopter ticks past. The palms flutter. Alma looks down. There is slip of paper in her hand. A man, it says. Tall man in the yard. DR. AMNESTY Pheko is driving the Mercedes. Apartment towers reflect the morning sun. Sedans purr at stoplights. Six different times Alma squints out at the signs whisking past and asks him where they are going. Were driving to see the doctor, Mrs. Alma. The doctor? Alma rubs her eyes, unsure. She tries to fill her lungs. She fidgets with her wig. The tires squeal as the Mercedes climbs the ramps of a parking garage. Dr. Amnestys staircase is stainless steel and bordered with ferns. Heres the bulletproof door, the

street address stenciled in the corner. Its familiar to Alma in the way a house from childhood would be familiar. As if she has doubled in size in the meantime. They are buzzed into a waiting room. Pheko drums his fingertips on his knee. Four chairs down, two well-dressed women sit beside a fish tank, one a few decades younger than the other. Both have fat pearls studded through each earlobe. Alma thinks: Pheko is the only black person in the building. For a moment she cannot remember what she is doing here. But this leather on the chair, the blue gravel in the saltwater aquariumit is the memory clinic. Of course. Dr. Amnesty. In Green Point. After a few minutes Alma is escorted to a padded chair overlaid with crinkly paper. Its all familiar now: the cardboard pouch of rubber gloves, the plastic plate for her earrings, two electrodes beneath her blouse. They lift off her wig, rub a cold gel onto her scalp. The television panel shows sand dunes, then dandelions, then bamboo. Amnesty. A ridiculous surname. What does it mean? A pardon? A reprieve? But more permanent than a reprieve, isnt it? Amnesty is for wrongdoings. For someone who has done something wrong. She will ask Pheko to look it up when they get home. Or maybe she will remember to look it up herself. The nurse is talking. And the remote stimulator is working well? Do you feel any improvements? Improvements? She thinks so. Things do seem to be improving. Things are sharper, Alma says. She believes this is the sort of thing she is supposed to say. New pathways are being forged. She is remembering how to remember. This is what they want to hear. The nurse murmurs. Feet whisper across the floor. Invisible machinery hums. Alma can feel, numbly, the rubber caps being twisted out of the ports in her skull and four screws being threaded simultaneously into place. There is a note in her hand: Pheko is in the waiting room. Pheko will drive Mrs. Alma home after her session. Of course. A door with a small, circular window in it opens. A pale man in green scrubs sweeps past, smelling of chewing gum. Alma thinks: There are other padded chairs in this place, other rooms like this one, with other machines prying the lids off other addled brains. Ferreting inside them for memories, engraving those memories into little square cartridges. Attempting to fight off oblivion. Her head is locked into place. Aluminum blinds clack against the window. In the lulls between breaths, she can hear traffic sighing past. The helmet comes down. THREE YEARS BEFORE, BRIEFLY Memories arent stored as changes to molecules inside brain cells, Dr. Amnesty told Alma during her first appointment, three years ago. She had been on his waiting list for ten months. Dr. Amnesty had straw-colored hair, nearly translucent skin, and invisible eyebrows. He spoke English as if each word were a tiny egg he had to deliver carefully through his teeth. This is what they thought forever but they were wrong. The truth is that the substrate of old memories is located not inside the cells but in the extracellular space. Here at the clinic we target those spaces, stain them, and inscribe them into electronic models. In the hopes of teaching damaged neurons to make proper replacements. Forging new pathways. Re-remembering. Do you understand? Alma didnt. Not really. For months, ever since Harolds death, she had been forgetting things: forgetting to pay Pheko, forgetting to eat breakfast, forgetting what the numbers in her checkbook meant. Shed go to the garden with the pruners and arrive there a minute later without them. Shed find her hairdryer in a kitchen cupboard, car keys in the tea tin. Shed rummage through her mind for a noun and come up empty-handed: Casserole? Carpet? Cashmere? Two doctors had already diagnosed the dementia. Alma would have preferred amnesia: a quicker, less cruel erasure. This was a corrosion, a slow leak. Seven decades of stories, five decades of marriage, four decades of working for Porter Properties, too many houses and buyers and sellers to countspatulas and salad forks, novels and recipes, nightmares and daydreams, hellos and goodbyes. Could it all really be wiped away? We dont offer a cure, Dr. Amnesty was saying, but we might be able to slow it down. We might be able to give you some memories back. He set the tips of his index fingers against his nose and formed a steeple. Alma sensed a pronouncement coming. It tends to unravel very quickly, without these treatments, he said. Every day it will become harder for you to be in the world. Water in a vase, chewing away at the stems of roses. Rust colonizing the tumblers in a lock. Sugar eating at the dentin of teeth, a river eroding its banks. Alma could think of a thousand metaphors, and all of them were inadequate. She was a widow. No children, no pets. She had her Mercedes, a million and a half rand in savings, Harolds pension, and the house in Vredehoek. Dr. Amnestys procedure offered a measure of hope. She signed up. The operation was a fog. When she woke, she had a headache and her hair was gone. With her fingers she probed the four rubber caps secured into her skull. A week later Pheko drove her back to the clinic. One of Dr. Amnestys nurses escorted her to a leather chair that looked something like the ones in dental offices. The helmet was merely a vibration at the top of her scalp. They would be reclaiming memories, they said; they could not predict if the memories would be good ones or bad ones. It was painless. Alma felt as though spiders were stringing webs though her head. Two hours later Dr. Amnesty sent her home from that first session with a remote memory stimulator and nine little cartridges in

a paperboard box. Each cartridge was stamped from the same beige polymer, with a four-digit number engraved into the top. She eyed the remote player for two days before taking it up to the upstairs bedroom one windy noon when Pheko was out buying groceries. She plugged it in and inserted a cartridge at random. A low shudder rose through the vertebrae of her neck, and then the room fell away in layers. The walls dissolved. Through rifts in the ceiling, the sky rippled like a flag. Then Almas vision snuffed out, as if the fabric of her house had been yanked downward through a drain, and a prior world rematerialized. She was in a museum: high ceiling, poor lighting, a smell like old magazines. The South African Museum. Harold was beside her, leaning over a glass-fronted display, excited, his eyes shininglook at him! So young! His khakis were too short, black socks showed above his shoes. How long had she known him? Maybe six months? She had worn the wrong shoes: tight, too rigid. The weather had been perfect that day and Alma would have preferred to sit in the Company Gardens under the trees with this tall new boyfriend. But the museum was what Harold wanted and she wanted to be with him. Soon they were in a fossil room, a couple dozen skeletons on podiums, some as big as rhinos, some with yardlong fangs, all with massive, eyeless skulls. One hundred and eighty million years older than the dinosaurs, hey? Harold whispered. Nearby, schoolgirls chewed gum. Alma watched the tallest of them spit slowly into a porcelain drinking fountain, then suck the spit back into her mouth. A sign labeled the fountain For Use by White Persons in careful calligraphy. Alma felt as if her feet were being crushed in vises. Just another minute, Harold said. Seventy-one-year-old Alma watched everything through twenty-four-year-old Alma. She was twenty-four-year-old Alma! Her palms were damp and her feet were aching and she was on a date with a living Harold! A young, skinny Harold! He raved about the skeletons; they looked like animals mixed with animals, he said. Reptile heads on dog bodies. Eagle heads on hippo bodies. I never get tired of seeing them, young Harold was telling young Alma, a boyish luster in his face. Two hundred and fifty million years ago, he said, these creatures died in the mud, their bones compressed slowly into stone. Now someone had hacked them out; now they were reassembled in the light. These were our ancestors, too, Harold whispered. Alma could hardly bear to look at them: They were eyeless, fleshless, murderous; they seemed engineered only to tear one another apart. She wanted to take this tall boy out to the gardens and sit hip-to-hip with him on a bench and take off her shoes. But Harold pulled her along. Heres the gorgonopsian. A gorgon. Big as a tiger. Two, three hundred kilograms. From the Permian. Thats only the second complete skeleton ever found. Not so far from where I grew up, you know. He squeezed Almas hand. Alma felt dizzy. The monster had short, powerful legs, fist-size eyeholes, and a mouth full of fangs. Says they hunted in packs, whispered Harold. Imagine running into six of those in the bush? In the memory twenty-four-year-old Alma shuddered. We think were supposed to be here, he continued, but its all just dumb luck, isnt it? He turned to her, about to explain, and as he did shadows rushed in from the edges like ink, flowering over the entire scene, blotting the vaulted ceiling, and the schoolgirl whod been spitting into the fountain, and finally young Harold himself in his too small khakis. The remote device whined; the cartridge ejected; the memory crumpled in on itself. Alma blinked and found herself clutching the footboard of her guest bed, out of breath, three miles and five decades away. She unscrewed the headgear. Out the window a thrush sang chee-chweeeoo. Pain swung through the roots of Almas teeth. My god, she said. THE ACCOUNTANT That was three years ago. Now a half dozen doctors in Cape Town are harvesting memories from wealthy people and printing them on cartridges, and occasionally the cartridges are traded on the streets. Old-timers in nursing homes, its been reported, are using memory machines like drugs, feeding the same ratty cartridges into their remote machines: wedding night, spring afternoon, bike-ride-along-the-cape. The little plastic squares smooth and shiny from the insistence of old fingers. Pheko drives Alma home from the clinic with fifteen new cartridges in a paperboard box. She does not want to nap. She does not want the triangles of toast Pheko sets on a tray beside her chair. She wants only to sit in the upstairs bedroom, hunched mute and sagging in her armchair with the headgear of the remote device screwed into the ports in her head and occasional strands of drool leaking out of her mouth. Living less in this world than in some synthesized Technicolor past where forgotten moments come trundling up through cables. Every half hour or so, Pheko wipes her chin and slips one of the new cartridges into the machine. He enters the code and watches her eyes roll back. There are almost a thousand cartridges pinned to the wall in front of her; hundreds more lie in piles across the carpet. Around four the accountants BMW pulls up to the house. He enters without knocking, calls Pheko up the stairs. When Pheko comes down the accountant already has his briefcase open on the kitchen table and is writing something in a file folder. Hes wearing loafers without socks and a peacock-blue sweater that looks abundantly soft. His pen is silver. He says hello without looking up. Pheko greets him and puts on the coffeepot and stands away from

the countertop, hands behind his back. Trying not to bend his neck in a show of sycophancy. The accountants pen whispers across the paper. Out the window mauve-colored clouds reef over the Atlantic. When the coffee is ready Pheko fills a mug and sets it beside the mans briefcase. He continues to stand. The accountant writes for another minute. His breath whistles through his nose. Finally he looks up and says, Is she upstairs? Pheko nods. Right. Look. Pheko. I got a call from that... physician today. He gives Pheko a pained look and taps his pen against the table. Tap. Tap. Tap. Three years. And not a lot of progress. Doc says we merely caught it too late. He says maybe we forestalled some of the decay, but now its over. The boulders too big to put brakes on it now, he said. Upstairs Alma is quiet. Pheko looks at his shoetops. In his mind he sees a boulder crashing through trees. He sees his five-year-old son, Temba, at Miss Amandas school, ten miles away. What is Temba doing at this instant? Eating, perhaps. Playing soccer. Wearing his eyeglasses. Mrs. Konachek requires twenty-four-hour care, the accountant says. Its long overdue. You had to see this coming, Pheko. Pheko clears his throat. I take care of her. I come here seven days a week. Sunup to sundown. Many times I stay later. I cook, clean, do the shopping. Shes no trouble. The accountant raises his eyebrows. Shes plenty of trouble, Pheko, you know that. And you do a fine job. Fine job. But our times up. You saw her at the boma last month. Doc says shell forget how to eat. Shell forget how to smile, how to speak, how to go to the toilet. Eventually shell probably forget how to swallow. Fucking terrible fate if you ask me. Who deserves that? The wind in the palms in the garden makes a sound like rain. There is a creak from upstairs. Pheko fights to keep his hands motionless behind his back. He thinks: If only Mr. Konachek were here. Hed walk in from his study in a dusty canvas shirt, safety goggles pushed up over his forehead, his face looking like it had been boiled. Hed drink straight from the coffeepot and hang his big arm around Phekos shoulders and say, You cant fire Pheko! Phekos been with us for fifteen years! He has a little boy now! Come on now, hey? Winks all around. Maybe a clap on the accountants back. But the study is dark. Harold Konachek has been dead for more than four years. Mrs. Alma is upstairs, hooked into her machine. The accountant slips his pen into a pocket and buckles the latches on his briefcase. I could stay in the house, with my son, tries Pheko. We could sleep here. Even to his own ears, the plea sounds small and hopeless. The accountant stands and flicks something invisible off the sleeve of his sweater. The house goes on the market tomorrow, he says. Ill deliver Mrs. Konachek to Suffolk Home next week. No need to pack things up while shes still here; itll only frighten her. You can stay on till next Monday. Then he takes his briefcase and leaves. Pheko listens to his car glide away. Alma starts calling from upstairs. The accountants coffee mug steams untouched. TREASURE ISLAND At sunset Pheko poaches a chicken breast and lays a stack of green beans beside it. Out the window flotillas of rainclouds gather over the Atlantic. Alma stares into her plate as if at some incomprehensible puzzle. Pheko says, Doctor find some good ones this morning, Mrs. Alma? Good ones? She blinks. The grandfather clock in the living room ticks. The room flickers with a rich, silvery light. Pheko is a pair of eyeballs, a smell like soap. Old ones, Alma says. He helps her into her nightgown and squirts a cylinder of toothpaste onto her toothbrush. Then her pills. Two white. Two gold. Alma clambers into bed muttering questions. Wind-borne rain starts a gentle patter on the windows. Okay, Mrs. Alma, Pheko says. He pulls the quilt up to her throat. I got to go home. His hand is on the lamp. His telephone is vibrating in his pocket. Harold, Alma says. Read to me. Im Pheko, Mrs. Alma. Alma shakes her head. Goddammit. Youve torn your book all apart, Mrs. Alma. I have? I have not. Someone else did that. A breath. A sigh. On the dresser, three lustrous wigs sit atop featureless porcelain heads. Ten minutes, Pheko says. Alma lays back, bald, glazed, a withered child. Pheko sits in the bedside chair and takes Treasure Island off the nightstand. Pages fall out when he opens it. He reads the first paragraphs from memory. I remember him as if it were yesterday, as he came plodding to the inn door, his sea chest following behind him in a hand-barrow; a tall, strong, heavy, nut-brown man... One more page and Alma is asleep. B478A Pheko catches the 9:20 Golden Arrow to Khayelitsha. He is a little man in black trousers and a red cable-knit sweater. In the bus seat, his shoes barely touch the floor. Gated compounds and walls of bougainvillea and little bistros lit with colored bulbs slide past. At Hanny Street the bus pauses outside Virgin Active Fitness, where three indoor pools smolder with aquamarine light, a last few swimmers toiling through the lanes, an elephantine waterslide disgorging water in the corner. The bus fills with township girls: office cleaners, waitresses, laundresses, women who go by one name in Cape Town and another in the townships, housekeepers called Sylvia or Alice about to become mothers called Malili or Momtolo. Drizzle streaks the windows. Voices murmur in Xhosa, Sotho, Tswana. The gaps between streetlights lengthen; soon Pheko can see only the upflung cones of billboard spotlights here and there in the dark. Drink Opa. Report Cable Thieves. Wear a Condom. Khayelitsha is thirty square miles of shanties made of aluminum and cinder

blocks and sackcloth and car doors. At the centurys turn it was home to half a million peoplenow its four times bigger. War refugees, water refugees, HIV refugees. Unemployment might be as high as sixty percent. A thousand haphazard light towers stand over the shacks like limbless trees. Women carry babies or plastic bags or vegetables or ten-gallon water jugs along the roadsides. Men wobble past on bicycles. Dogs wander. Pheko gets off at Site C and hurries along a line of shanties in the rain. Windchimes tinkle. A goat picks its way through puddles. Torpid men perch on fenders of gutted taxis or upended fruit crates or beneath ragged tarps. Someone a few alleys over lights a firework and it blooms and fades over the rooftops. B478A is a pale green shed with a sandy floor and a light blue door. Three treadless tires hold the roof in place. Bars seal off the two windows. Temba is inside, still awake, animated, whispering, nearly jumping up and down in place. He wears a T-shirt several sizes too large; his little eyeglasses bounce on his nose. Paps, he says, Paps, youre twenty-one minutes late! Paps, Boginkosi caught three cats today, can you believe it? Paps, can you make paraffin from plastic bags? Pheko sits on the bed and waits for his vision to adjust to the dimness. The walls are papered with faded supermarket circulars. Dish soap for R1.99. Juice two for one. Yesterdays laundry hangs from the ceiling. A rust-red stove stands propped on bricks in the corner. Two metal-and-plastic folding chairs complete the furniture. Outside the rain sifts down through the vapor lights and makes a slow, lulling clatter on the roof. Insects creep in, seeking refuge; gnats and millipedes and big, glistening flies. Twin veins of ants flow across the floor and braid into channels under the stove. Moths flutter at the window screens. Pheko hears the accountants voice in his ear: You had to see this coming. He sees his silver pen flashing in the light of Almas kitchen. Did you eat, Temba? I dont remember. You dont remember? No, I ate! I ate! Miss Amanda had samp and beans. And did you wear your glasses today? I wore them. Temba. I wore them, Paps. See? He points with two fingers to his face. Pheko slips off his shoes. Okay, little lamb. I believe you. Now choose a hand. He holds out two fists. Temba stands barefoot in his overlarge jersey, blinking his brown eyes behind his glasses. Eventually he chooses left. Pheko shakes his head and smiles and reveals an empty palm. Nothing. Next time, says Pheko. Temba coughs, wipes his nose. He seems to swallow back a familiar disappointment. Now take off your glasses and give me one of your barnacle attacks, says Pheko, and Temba stows his glasses atop the stove and leaps onto his father, wrapping his legs around Phekos ribs. They roll across the bed. Temba squeezes his father around the neck and back. Pheko rears up, makes exaggerated strides around the little shed while the boy clings to him. Paps, Temba says, talking into his fathers chest. What was in the other hand? What did you have this time? Cant tell you, says Pheko. He pretends to try to shake off the boys grip. You got to guess right next time. Pheko stomps around the house. The boy hangs on. His forehead is a stone against Phekos sternum. His hair smells like dust, pencil shavings, and smoke. Rain murmurs against the roof. TALL MAN IN THE YARD Monday night Roger Tshoni brings the quiet little memory-tapper named Luvo with him up into the posh suburb of Vredehoek and breaks, for the twelfth time, into Alma Konacheks house. Roger has white hair and a white beard and a nose like a large brown gourd. His teeth are orange. He gives off a reek of cheap tobacco. The band of his straw hat has Ma Horse printed three times around the circumference. Each time Roger has picked the lock on the rape gate, Alma has woken up. He thinks it might have to do with an alarm but he has not seen any alarms inside the house. Roger has given up trying to hide anyway. Tonight he hardly bothers to keep quiet. He waits in the doorway, counting to fifteen, then leads the boy inside. Sometimes she threatens to call the police. Sometimes she calls him Harold. Sometimes something worse: boy. Or kaffir. Or darkie. As in, Get to work, boy. Or: Goddammit, boy. Sometimes she stares right through him with her empty eyes as if he were made of smoke. If he frightens her he simply walks away and smokes a cigarette in the garden and breaks back in through the kitchen door. Tonight Roger and Luvo stand in the living room a moment, both of them wet with rain, looking out at the city through the glass balcony doors, a few red lights blinking among ten thousand amber ones. They wipe their shoes; they listen as Alma mutters to herself in the bedroom down the hall. The ocean beyond the waterfront is an invisible blackness in the rain. Like an owl, this lady, whispers Roger. The boy named Luvo takes off his wool cap and scratches between the four ports installed in his head and climbs the stairs. Roger crosses into the kitchen, takes three eggs from the refrigerator, and sets them in a pot to boil. Before long Alma comes shambling out from the bedroom, barefoot, bald, no bigger than a girl. Rogers hands whisper across his shirtfront, find an unlit cigarette tucked into his hatband, and return to his pockets. Its his hands, he has learned, more than anything else, that terrify her. Long hands. Brown hands. Youre hisses Alma. Roger. You call me Harold sometimes. She drags a wrist across her nose. I have a gun. You dont. You couldnt shoot me anyway. Come, sit. Alma looks at him, confounded. But after a moment she sits. The blue ring of flame on her cooktop casts the only light. Down in

the city the pinpoints of automobile lights dilate and dissolve as they travel between raindrops on the windowglass. The house feels close around Roger tonight, with its ratcheting grandfather clock and spotless sofas and the big display cabinet in the study. He wants desperately to light his cigarette. You got some new cartridges today from your doctor, didnt you, Alma? I saw that little houseboy of yours drive you down to Green Point. Alma keeps silent. The eggs rattle in their pot. She looks as if time has stopped inside her: rope-veined, birdlike, expressionless. A single blue artery pulses crosswise above her right ear. The four rubber caps are seated tightly against her scalp. She frowns slightly. Who are you? Roger doesnt answer. He shuts off the burner and lifts out the three steaming eggs with a slotted spoon. I am Alma, Alma says. I know it, Roger says. I know what youre doing. Do you? He places the eggs on a dishtowel in front of her. A dozen times now over the past month theyve done this, sat at her kitchen table in the middle of the night, Roger and Alma, tall black man, elderly white woman, the lights of Trafalgar Park and the railway yards and the waterfront strewn below. A tableau not quite of this world. What does it mean, Roger wonders distantly, that the countless failures of his life have funneled him into this exact circumstance? Eat up now, he says. Alma gives him a dubious look. But moments later she takes an egg and cracks it on the surface of the table and begins to peel it. THE ORDER OF THINGS Things dont run in order. There is no A to B to C to D. All the cartridges are the same size, the same redundant beige. Yet some take place decades ago and others take place last year. They vary in intensity, too: Some pull Luvo into them and hold him for fifteen or twenty seconds; others wrench him into Almas past and keep him there for half an hour. Moments stretch; months vanish during a breath. He comes up gasping, as if he has been submerged underwater; he feels catapulted back into his own mind. Sometimes, when Luvo comes back into himself, Roger is standing beside him, an unlit cigarette fixed in the vertex of his lips, staring into Almas cryptic wall of papers and postcards and cartridges as if waiting for some essential explanation to rise up out of it. Other times the house is noiseless, and theres only the wind sighing through the open window, and the papers fluttering on the wall, and a hundred questions winding through Luvos head. Luvo believes he is somewhere around fifteen years old. He has very few memories of his own: none of his parents, no sense of who might have installed four ports in his skull and set him adrift among the ten thousand orphans of Cape Town. No memories of how or why. He knows how to read; he can speak English and Xhosa; he knows Cape Town summers are hot and windy and winters are cool and blue. But he cannot say how he might have learned such things. His recent history is one of pain: headaches, backaches, bone aches. Twinges fire deep inside his neck; migraines blow in like storms. The holes in his scalp itch and leak a clear fluid; they are not nearly as symmetrical as the ports he has seen on Alma Konacheks head. Roger says he found Luvo in the Company Gardens, though Luvo has no memory of this. Lately he sleeps in Rogers apartment. A dozen times now, the older man has kicked Luvo awake in the middle of the night; he hustles Luvo into a taxi and they climb from the waterfront into Vredehoek and Roger picks two locks and lets them into the elegant white house on the hill. Luvo is working from left to right across the upstairs bedroom, from the stairwell toward the window. By now, over a dozen nights, he has eavesdropped on perhaps five hundred of Almas memories. There are hundreds more cartridges to go, some standing in towers on the carpet, far more pinned to the wall. The numbers engraved into their ends correspond with no chronology Luvo can discover. But he feels as if he is working gradually, clumsily, toward the center of something. Or, if not toward, then away, as if he is stepping inch by inch away from a painting made of thousands of tiny dots. Any day now the picture will resolve itself; any day now some fundamental truth of Almas life will come into focus. Already he knows plenty. He knows that Alma as a girl was obsessed with islands: mutineers, shipwrecks, the last members of tribes, castaways fixing their eyes on empty horizons. He knows that she and Harold worked in the same property office for decades, and that she has owned three silver Mercedes sedans, each one for twelve years. He knows Alma designed this house with an architect from Johannesburg, chose paint colors and doorknobs and faucets from catalogs, hung prints with a level and a tape measure. He knows she and Harold went to concerts, bought clothes at Gardens Centre, traveled to a city called Venice. He knows that the day after Harold retired he bought a used Land Cruiser and a nine-millimeter Crusader handgun and started driving out on fossil-hunting trips into a huge, arid region east of Cape Town called the Great Karoo. He also knows Alma is not especially kind to her houseman Pheko. He knows that Pheko has a little son named Temba, and that Almas husband paid for an eye operation the boy needed when he was born, and that Alma got very angry about this when she found out. On cartridge 5015 a seven-year-old Alma demands that her nanny hand over a newly opened bottle of Coca-Cola. When the nanny hesitates, grimacing, Alma threatens to have her fired. The nanny hands over the bottle. A moment later Almas mother appears, furious, dragging Alma into the

corner of a bedroom. Never, ever drink from anything one of the servants has put her lips on first! Almas mother shouts. Her face contorts; her little teeth flash. Luvo can feel his stomach twist. On cartridge 9136 seventy-year-old Alma attends her husbands funeral service. A few dozen white-skinned people stand beneath chandeliers, engulfing roasted apricot halves. Almas meticulous little houseman Pheko picks his way through them wearing a white shirt and black tie. He has a toddler in eyeglasses with him; the child winds himself around the mans left leg like a vine. Pheko presents Alma with a jar of honey, a single blue bow tied around the lid. Im sorry, he says, and he looks it. Alma holds up the honey. The lights of a chandelier are momentarily trapped inside. You didnt need to come, she says, and sets the jar down on a table. Luvo can smell the nauseating thickness of perfume in the funeral home, can see the anxiety in Phekos eyes, can feel Almas unsteadiness in his own legs. Then he is snatched out of the scene, as if by invisible cords, and he becomes himself again, shivering lightly, a low ache draining through his jaw, sitting on the edge of the bed in Almas guest room. Soon its the hour before dawn. The rain has let up. Roger is standing beside him, exhaling cigarette smoke out the open bedroom window, gazing down into the backyard garden. Anything? Luvo shakes his head. His brain feels heavy, explosive. The lifespan for a memory-tapper, Luvo has heard, is one or two years. Infections, convulsions, seizures. Some days he can feel blood vessels warping around the columns installed in his brain, can feel the neurons tearing and biting as they try to weave through the obstructions. Roger looks gray, almost sick. He runs a shaky hand across the front pockets of his shirt. Nothing in the desert? Nothing in a Land Cruiser with her husband? Youre sure? Again Luvo shakes his head. He asks, Is she sleeping? Finally. They file downstairs. Memories twist slowly through Luvos thoughts: Alma as a six-year-old, a dining room, linen tablecloths, the laughter of grown-ups, the soft hush of servants in white shirts bringing in food. Alma sheathing the body of an earthworm over the point of a fishhook. A faintly glowing churchyard, and Almas mothers bony fingers wrapped around a steering wheel. Bulldozers and rattling buses and gaps in the security fences around the suburbs where she grew up. Buying a backlot brandy called white lightning from Xhosa kids half her age. By the time he reaches the living room, Luvo is close to fainting. The two armchairs and the lamp and the glass balcony doors and the massive grandfather clock with its scrollwork and brass pendulum and heavy mahogany feet all seem to pulse in the dimness. His headache is advancing, irrepressible; it is an orange flame licking at the edges of everything. Each beat of his heart sends his brain reverberating off the walls of his skull. Any moment his field of vision will ignite. Roger tugs the boys wool cap over his head for him, loops a long arm under his armpit, and helps Luvo out the door as the first strands of daylight break over Table Mountain. TUESDAY MORNING Pheko arrives just after dawn to the faint odor of tobacco in the house. Three fewer eggs in the refrigerator. He stands a minute, puzzling over it. Nothing else seems disturbed. Alma sleeps a deep sleep. The estate agent is coming this morning. Pheko vacuums, washes the balcony windows, polishes the countertops until they shine a foot deep. Pure white light, rinsed by last nights rain, pours through the windows. The ocean is a gleaming plate of pewter. At ten Pheko drinks a cup of coffee in the kitchen. Two tea towels, crisp and white, are folded over the oven handle. The floors are scrubbed, the dishwasher empty, the grandfather clock wound. Everything in its place. It occurs to Pheko that he could steal things. He could take the kitchen television and some of Harolds books and Almas music player. Jewelry. Coats. The matching pea-green bicycles in the garagehow many times has Alma ridden hers? Once? Who even knows those bicycles are here? Pheko could call a taxi right now and load it with suitcases and take them into Khayelitsha and before nightfall a hundred things Alma didnt know she had could be turned into cash. Who would know? Not the accountant. Not Alma. Only Pheko. Only God. Alma wakes at ten thirty, groggy, muddled. He dresses her, escorts her to the breakfast table. She sits in her chair, tea untouched, hands quivering, strands of her wig stuck in her eyelashes. I used to come here, Alma mutters. Before. You dont want your tea, Mrs. Alma? Alma gives him a bewildered look. Upstairs the memory wall ruffles in the wind. The estate agents sedan glides into the driveway at 11:00, precisely on time. THE SOUTH AFRICAN MUSEUM Luvo wakes in the afternoon in Rogers one-room apartment in the Cape Flats. Beside him is a table and two chairs. Pans in a cupboard, a paraffin stove, a row of books on a shelf. Not much more than a prison cell. Rogers one window reveals the bottom corner of a billboard, perhaps twenty feet away. On the billboard a white woman in a whiter bikini reclines on a beach holding a bottle of Crown Beer. From where he lies Luvo can see the lower half of her legs, her ankles crossed, the pale bottoms of her bare feet flecked with sand. Through the walls and ceiling ride the racket of the Cape Flats, laughter, babies, squabbles, sex, the rumbles of engines and fans. Six or seven times, in the month or so Luvo can remember sleeping here, he has heard the drumbeat of gunfire. Women with glossy nails and chokers around their throats drift through

the open hallways; every evening someone comes past the door whispering, Mandrax, Mandrax. Roger is out. Probably following around Alma. Luvo sits at the table and eats a stack of saltines and reads one of Rogers books. It is an adventure novel about men in the Arctic. The adventurers are out of food and hunting seals and the ice is thin and it seems any moment someone will break through and fall into freezing water. After an hour or so Roger is still not back. Luvo takes two coins from a drawer and scrubs his face and hands in the sink and runs a wet paper towel over the toe of each sneaker. He fixes his watchcap over the ports in his head and rides a bus to the Company Gardens. He enters the South African Museum around 4 p.m. and steps past the distrustful looks of two warders and into the paleontology gallery. Hundreds of fossils are locked in glass cases, specimens from all over southern Africa: shells and worms and nautiluses and seed ferns and trilobites, and minerals, too; yellow-green crystals and gleaming clusters of quartz; mosquitoes in drops of amber; scheelite, wulfenite. In the reflections in the glass it is as if Luvo can see the papers and cartridges pinned to Almas wall floating in the dimness above the stones. Bones, teeth, footprints, fishes, the warped ribs of ancient reptilesin Almas memories Luvo has watched Harold return from the Karoo boiling with ardor, enthusing about dolerite and siltstone, bonebeds and trackways. The big man would chisel away at rocks in the garage, show Alma whole amphibians, a footlong dragonfly embedded in limestone, little worm tracks in hardened mud. Hed come into the kitchen, flushed, animated, smelling of dust and heat and rocks, safety goggles pushed up over his forehead, waving a walking stick hed picked up somewhere, nearly as tall as he was, made of ebony, wrapped with red beads on the handle and with an elephant carved on the top. The whole thing infuriated Alma: the safari-tourists walking stick, the goggles, Harolds boyish avidity. Forty-five years of marriage, Alma would announce, and now he had decided to become a lunatic rockhound? What about their friends, what about going for walks together, what about joining the Mediterranean Cruise Club? Retirees, Alma would yell, were supposed to move toward comforts, not away from them. Here is what Luvo knows: Inside Rogers frayed, beaten wallet is a four-year-old newspaper obituary. The headline reads Real Estate Ace Turned Dinosaur Hunter. Below it is a grainy black-and-white of Harold Konachek. Luvo has asked to see the obituary enough times that he has memorized it. A sixty-eight-year-old Cape Town retiree, driving with his wife on backveld roads in the Karoo, had stopped to look for fossils at a roadcut when he had a fatal heart attack. According to the mans wife, just before he died he had made a significant find, a rare Permian fossil. Extensive searches in the area turned up nothing. Roger, with his straw hat and white beard and tombstone teeth, has told Luvo he went out to the desert with dozens of other fossil hunters, even with a group from the university. He says several paleontologists went to Almas house and asked her what shed seen. She said she couldnt remember. Said the Karoo was huge and all the hills looked the same. Interest slackened. People assumed the fossil was unrecoverable. Then, several years later, Roger saw Alma Konachek leaving a memory clinic in Green Point with her houseboy. And he started following them around town. Gorgonops longifrons, Roger told Luvo a month ago, on the first night he brought the boy to Almas house. Luvo has engraved the name into his memory. A big, nasty predator from the Permian. If its a complete skeleton, its worth forty or fifty million rand. Worlds gone crazy for this stuff. Movie stars, financiers. Last year a triceratops skull sold to some Chinaman at an auction for thirty-four million American dollars. Luvo looks up from the display case. Footfalls echo through the gallery. Knots of tourists mill here and there. The gorgon skeleton the museum has on a granite pedestal is the same one Harold showed Alma fifty years before. Its head is flat-sided; its jaw brims with teeth. Its claws look capable of great violence. The plaque below the gorgon reads Great Karoo, Upper Permian, 260 million years ago. Luvo stands in front of the skeleton a long time. He hears Harolds voice, whispering to Alma through the dark hallways of her memory: These were our ancestors, too. Luvo thinks: We are all intermediaries. He thinks: So this is what Roger is after. This incomprehensibly old thing. WEDNESDAY NIGHT, THURSDAY NIGHT When Luvo wakes, Roger is standing over him. Its after midnight and he is back inside Rogers apartment. The shock of coming into his own, tampered head is searing. Roger squats on his haunches, inhales from a cigarette, and glances at his watch with a displeased expression. You went out. I went to the museum. I fell asleep. Am I going to have to start locking you in? Locking me in? Roger sits on the chair above Luvo, sets his hat on table, and looks at his half-smoked cigarette with a displeased expression. Someone put a realty sign in front of her house today. Luvo presses his fingertips into his temples. Theyre selling the old ladys house. Why? Why? Cause shes lost her mind. Spotlights shine on the tanned legs of the Crown Beer woman. Below her leaves blot and unblot the cadmium-colored lights of the Cape Flats. Dim figures move now and then through the trees. The neighborhood seethes. The tip of Rogers cigarette flares and fades. So were done? Were done going over there? Roger looks at him. Done? No. Not

yet. Weve got to hurry up. Again he glances at his wristwatch. An hour later theyre back inside Alma Konacheks house. Luvo sits on the bed in Almas upstairs bedroom and studies the wall in front of him and tries to concentrate. In the center, a young man walks out of the sea, trousers rolled to his knees. Around the man orbit lines from books, postcards, photos, misspelled names, grocery lists underscored with a dozen hesitant pencil strokes. Trips. Company parties. Treasure Island. Each cartridge on Almas wall becomes a little brazier, burning in the darkness. Luvo wanders between them, gradually exploring the labyrinth of her history. Maybe, he thinks, at the beginning, before the disease had done its worst, the wall offered Alma a measure of control over what was happening to her. Maybe she could hang a cartridge on a nail and find it a day or two later and feel her brain successfully recall the same memory againa new pathway forged through the dusklight. When it worked, it must have been like descending into a pitch-black cellar for a jar of preserves, and finding the jar waiting there, cool and heavy, so she could bring it up the bowed and dusty stairs into the light of the kitchen. For a while it must have worked for Alma, anyway; it must have helped her believe she could fend off her inevitable erasure. It has not worked as well for Roger and Luvo. Luvo does not know how to turn the wall to his ends; it will only show him Almas life as it wishes. The cartridges veer toward and away from his goal without ever quite reaching it; he founders inside a past and a mind over which he has no control. On cartridge 6786 Harold tells Alma he is reclaiming something vital, finally trying to learn about the places hed grown up, grappling with his own infinitesimal place in time. He was learning to see, he said, what once was: storms, monsters, fifty million years of Permian protomammals. Here he was, sixty-some years old, still limber enough to wander around in the richest fossil beds outside of Antarctica. To walk among the stones, to use his eyes and fingers, to find the impressions of animals that had lived such an incomprehensibly long time ago! It was enough, he told Alma, to make him want to kneel down. Kneel down? Alma rages. Kneel down? To who? To what? Please, Harold asks Alma on cartridge 1204. Im still the same man Ive always been. Let me have this. Youre out of your tree, Alma tells him. On cartridge after cartridge Luvo feels himself drawn to Harold: the mans wide, red face, a soft curiosity glowing in his eyes. Even his silly ebony walking stick and big pieces of rocks in the garage are endearing. On the cartridges in which Harold appears, Luvo can feel himself beneath Alma, around her, and he wants to linger where she wants to leave; he wants to learn from Harold, see what the man is dragging out of the back of his Land Cruiser and scraping at with dental tools in the study. He wants to go out to the Karoo with him to prowl riverbeds and mountain passes and roadcutsand is disappointed when he cannot. And all those books in that white mans study! As many books as Luvo can remember seeing in his life. Luvo is even beginning to learn the names of the fossils in Harolds display cabinet downstairs: sea snail, tusk shell, ammonite. He wants to spread them across the desk when he and Roger arrive; he wants to run his fingers over them. On cartridge 6567, Alma weeps. Harold is off somewhere, hunting fossils probably, and it is a long, gray evening in the house with no concerts, no invitations, nobody ringing on the telephone, and Alma eats roasted potatoes alone at the table with a detective show mumbling on the kitchen television. The faces on the screen blur and stray, and the city lights out the balcony windows look to Luvo like the portholes of a distant cruiseliner, golden and warm and far away. Alma thinks of her girlhood, how she used to stare at photographs of islands. She thinks of Billy Bones, Long John Silver, a castaway on a desert beach. The device whines; the cartridge ejects. Luvo closes his eyes. The plates of his skull throb; he can feel the threads of the helmet shifting against the tissues of his brain. From downstairs comes Rogers low voice, talking to Alma. FRIDAY MORNING An infection creeps through Site C, waylaying children shanty by shanty. One hour radio commentators say its passed through saliva; the next they say its commuted through the air. No, township dogs carry it; no, its the drinking water; no, its a conspiracy of Western pharmaceutical companies. It could be meningitis, another flu pandemic, some new child-plague. No one seems to know anything. There is talk of public antibiotic dispensaries. There is talk of quarantine. Friday morning Pheko wakes at four thirty as always and takes the enameled washbasin to the spigot six sheds away. He lays out his razor and soap and washcloth on a towel and squats on his heels, shaving alone and without a mirror in the cool darkness. The sodium lights are off, and a few stars show here and there between clouds. Two house crows watch him in silence from a neighbors eave. When hes done he scrubs his arms and face and empties the washbasin into the street. At five Pheko carries Temba down the lane to Miss Amandas and knocks lightly before entering. Amanda pushes herself up on her elbows from the bed and gives him a groggy smile. He sets still-sleeping Temba on her couch and the boys eyeglasses on the table beside him. On the walk to the Site C station Pheko sees a line of schoolgirls in navy-and-white uniforms, queuing to climb onto a white bus. Each wears a paper mask over her nose and mouth. He climbs the ramp and waits. Down in the grassy field below them

forgotten concrete culverts lie here and there like fallen pillars from some foregone civilization, spray-painted with signs: Exacta and Fuck and Blind 43. Rich Get Richer. Jamakota dies please help. Trains shuttle to and fro like rattling beasts. Pheko thinks, Three more days. CARTRIDGE 4510 Alma seems more tired than ever. Pheko helps her climb out of bed at 11:30. A clear liquid seeps from her left eye. She stares into nothingness. This morning she lets Pheko dress her but will not eat. Twice an agent comes to show the house and Pheko has to shuttle Alma out to the yard and sit with her in the lounge chairs, holding her hand, while a young couple tools through the rooms and admires the views and leaves tracks across the carpets. Around two Pheko sighs, gives up. He sits Alma on the upstairs bed and screws her into the remote device and lets her watch cartridge 4510, the one he keeps in the drawer beside the dishwasher so he can find it when he needs it. When she needs it. Almas neck sags; her knees drift apart. Pheko goes downstairs to eat a slice of bread. Wind begins thrashing through the palms in the garden. Southeaster coming, says the kitchen television. Then ads flicker past. A tall white woman runs through an airport. A yardlong sandwich scrolls across the screen. Pheko closes his eyes and imagines the wind reaching Khayelitsha, boxes cartwheeling past spaza shops, plastic bags slithering across roads, slapping into fences. People at the station will be pulling their collars over their mouths against the dust. After a few more minutes, he can hear Alma calling. He walks upstairs, sits her back down, and pushes in the same cartridge again. CHEFE CARPENTER Friday Roger shepherds Luvo up a sidewalk in front of a different house than Alma Konacheks, on the opposite side of the city. The house is wrapped by a twelve-foot stucco wall with broken bottles embedded in the top. Nine or ten eucalyptus trees stand waving above it. Roger carries a plastic sack in one hand with something heavy inside. At a gate he looks up at a security camera in a tinted bubble and holds up the sack. After perhaps ten minutes a woman shows them through without a word. Two perfumed collies trot behind her. The house is small and walled with glass. The woman seats them in an open room with a large fireplace. Above the fireplace is a fossil of what looks like a smashed, winged crocodile spiraling out of a piece of polished slate. All around the room, Luvo realizes, are dozens more fossils, hung from pillars, on pedestals, arrayed in a backlit case. Some of them are massive. He can see a coiled shell as big as a manhole cover, and a cross-section of petrified wood mounted on a door, and what looks like an elephant tusk cradled in golden braces. A moment later a man comes in and leans over the collies and scratches them behind the ears. Roger and Luvo stand. The man is barefoot and wears slacks rolled up to the ankles and a soft-looking shirt that is unbuttoned. A great upfold of fat is piled up against the back of his skull and a single gold bracelet is looped around his right wrist. His fingernails gleam as if polished. He looks up from the dogs and sits in a leather armchair and yawns hugely. Hello, he says, and nods at them both. This is Chefe Carpenter, Roger says, though its not clear if he is saying this to Luvo or not. Nobody shakes hands. Roger and Luvo sit. Your son? Roger shakes his head. The woman reappears with a black mug and Chefe takes it and does not offer Luvo or Roger anything. Chefe drinks the contents of the mug in three swallows, then sets the mug down and grimaces and cracks some bones in his back and rolls his neck and finally says, You have something? To Luvos surprise Roger produces from the plastic sack a fossil Luvo recognizes. Roger has taken it from Harolds cabinet. This one contains the impressions of a seed fern, three fronds pressed almost parallel into it, nearly white against the darker stone. Looking at it in Rogers hands makes Luvo want to run his hands across the leaves. Chefe Carpenter looks at it for perhaps four or five seconds but does not get up from his armchair or reach out to take it. I can give you five hundred rand. Roger lets out a forced, unctuous laugh. Come now, Chefe says. In the sunroom right now I have a hundred of these. What can I sell these for? What else do you have? Nothing right now. But where is this big one youre working on? Its coming. Chefe reaches down for his mug and peers inside and sets it back on the floor. You owe money, dont you? Men are coming to collect money from you, arent they? He glances over with a soft look at Luvo, then looks back. You have a long way to go to repay your debt, dont you? Roger says, Im working on the big one. Five hundred rand, Chefe says. Roger gives a defeated nod. Now, Chefe says, and stands up, and his big, shiny face brightens, as if a cloud has moved away from the sun. Shall I show the boy the collection? UPSTAIRS There are blanks on Almas wall, Luvo is learning, omissions and gaps. Even if he reorganized her whole project, arranged her life in a chronological line, first memory to last, Almas history running in a little beige file down the stairs and around the living room, what would he learn? Thered still be breaks in time, failure in his understanding, months beyond his reach. Who is to say a cartridge even exists that contains the moments before Harolds death? Friday night he decides to abandon his left-to-right method. Whatever order once existed in the arrangement of these cartridges has since been shuffled out of it. Its a museum arranged by a madwoman. He starts watching any cartridge that for some unnameable reason stands out to him from

the disarray pinned to the wall. On one cartridge nine- or ten-year-old Alma lies back in a bed full of pillows while her father reads her a chapter from Treasure Island; on another a doctor tells a much older Alma that she probably will not be able to have children. On a third Alma has written Harold and Pheko. Luvo runs it through the remote device twice. In the memory Alma asks Pheko to move several crates of books into Harolds study and arrange them alphabetically on his shelves. By author, she says. Pheko is very young; he must be newly hired. He looks as if he is barely older than Luvo is now. He wears an ironed white shirt and his eyes seem to fill with dread as he concentrates on her instructions. Yes, madam, he says several times. Alma disappears. When she returns, what might be an hour later, Harold in tow, Pheko has put practically every book on the shelves in Harolds office upside-down. Alma walks very close to the shelves. She tilts a couple of titles toward her, then sets them back down. Well, these arent in any kind of order at all, she says. Confusion ripples through Phekos face. Harold laughs. Alma looks back to the bookshelves. The boy cant read, she says. Luvo cannot turn Almas head to look at Pheko; Pheko is a ghost, a smudge outside her field of vision. But he can hear Harold behind her, his voice still smiling. He says, Not to worry, Pheko. Everything can be learned. Youll do fine here. The memory dims; Luvo unscrews the headgear and hangs the little beige cartridge back on the nail from which he plucked it. Out in the garden the palms clatter in the wind. Soon the house will be sold, Luvo thinks, and the cartridges will be returned to the doctors office, or sent along with Alma to whatever place theyre consigning her to, and this strange assortment of papers will be folded into a trash bag. The books and appliances and furniture will be sold off. Pheko will be sent home to his son. Luvo shivers. He thinks of Harolds fossils downstairs, waiting in their cabinet. He can hear Chefe Carpenters voice as he showed Luvo several smooth, heavy teeth that he said belonged to a mosasaur, hacked out of a chalk pit in Holland. Science, Chefe had said, is always concerned with context. But what about beauty? What about love? What about feeling a deep humility at our place in time? Wheres the room for that? You find what youre looking for, Chefe had said to them before they left, you know where to bring it. Hope, belief. Failure or success. As soon as they stepped outside Chefes gate, Roger had lit a cigarette and started taking shaky, hungry pulls. Luvo stands in Almas upstairs bedroom in the middle of the night and hears Harold Konachek whispering as if from the grave: We all swirl slowly down into the muck. We all go back to the mud. Until we rise again in ribbons of light. This wind, Luvo realizes, right now careering around Almas garden, has come to Cape Town every November that he can remember, and every November Alma can remember, and it will come next November, too, and the next, and on and on, for centuries to come, until everyone they have ever known and everyone they ever will know is gone. DOWNSTAIRS Three eggs steam on a towel in front of Alma. She cracks one open. Out the window the sky and ocean are very dark. The tall man with the huge hands is waving his fingers around in her kitchen. Running out of time, he says. You and me together, old lady. He begins stalking the kitchen, pacing back and forth. The balcony rails moan in the wind, or else its the wind moaning, or the wind and railing together, her ears unable to unbraid the two. The tall man raises a hand to the cigarette in his hatband and puts it between his lips, unlit. You probably think youre a hero, he says. Up there waving your sword against a big old army. Roger waves an imaginary sword, slashing it through the air. Alma tries to ignore him, tries to focus on the warm egg in her fingers. She wishes she had some salt but does not see a shaker anywhere. But you losing. You losing bad. You losing and you going to end up just like all them other old, rich junkiesyou going to blitz out, zone out, drift away, feed yourself a steady stream of those memories. Until theres nothing left of you at all. Arent you? Youre just a tube now, hey, Alma? Just a bleeding tube. Put something in the top and it drops right out the bottom. In Almas hand is an egg she has evidently just peeled. She eats it slowly. In the face of the man in front of her something suppressed is flickering and showing itself, an anger, a lifelong contempt. Without turning her head she has the sense that out there in the darkness beyond her kitchen windows something terrible is advancing toward her. And what about the houseboy? the tall man is saying. She wishes he would stop talking. From one angle it probably has the look of sacrifice. Oh, a good boy, fit, speaks English, disease-free, got himself a little piccanin, rides ten miles each way on the bus from the townships to the suburbs to make tea, water the garden, comb out her wigs. Fill the refrigerator. Clip her fingernails. Fold her old-lady underthings. Apartheids over and hes doing womens work. A saint. A servant. Am I right? Two more eggs sit in front of Alma. Her heart is opening and closing very quickly in her chest. The tall black man is wearing his hat indoors. A sentence from Treasure Island comes back to her, as if from nowhere: Their eyes burned in their heads; their feet grew speedier and lighter; their whole soul was bound up in that fortune, that whole lifetime of extravagance and pleasure, that lay waiting there for each of them. Roger is tapping his temple with one finger. His eyes are whirlpools into which she must not look. I am not

here, Alma thinks. But from another angle what does it look like? the man is saying. Houseboy lets himself in the gate, through the door, watches you dodder about, moves beyond the edges of your memory. Lined up for his inheritance, surely. Fingers in the till. He eats the sausages, too, doesnt he? Probably pays the bills. He knows the kind of money youre spending with that doctor. Stop talking, says Alma. She thinks, I am not here. I am not anywhere. I did it to the boy, he says. I can tell you, you dont even know what Im saying. I found him in the Company Gardens and who was he? Just an orphan. I paid for the operation. I fed him, I took care of him. I brought him back. I keep him healthy, dont I? I let him wander around. The headlights of a passing car swing through the yard, drain through the trees. Almas fear rises into her throat. The headlights fade. The wind flies over the house. Stop talking right now, she says. You eat now, says Roger. You eat and Ill stop talking and the boy upstairs will find what Im looking for and then you can go die in peace. She blinks. For a moment the man in her kitchen has transformed into a demon: imperious, towering; he peers down at her from beneath a limestone brow. He is waving his terrible hands. We all have a gorgon in here, the demon says. He points to his chest. I know who you are. She says this quietly and with great intensity. I see you for what you are. I bet you do, says Roger. NIGHTMARE In a nightmare Alma finds herself in the fossil exhibit she went to with Harold fifty years before. All the gallerys overhead lights have been switched off. The only illumination comes from sweeping, powder-blue beams that slice through the room, catching each skeleton in turn and leaving it again in darkness, as if strange beacons are revolving in the lawns outside the high windows. The gorgon Harold was so excited about is no longer there. The iron brace that supported the skeleton remains, and a silhouette of dust marks where it stood. But the gorgon is gone. Almas heart quickens; her breath catches. Her hands are at her sides, but in the dream she can feel herself clawing at her own throat. A column of blue light, swinging through the arcade of museum windows, shows cobwebs, shows the skeletal monsters in their various postures, shows the empty pedestal, shows Alma. Shadows rear up and are sucked back into darkness. The roof above her makes oceanic groans. The purpose of her errand veers past her, there, then gone. Then she sees. In the window looms a demon. Nostrils, a jaw, a face chalked white with dry skin, and two yellow canine incisors, each as long as her forearms, extend from a scaly pink gum. It exhales through its wet, reptilian nose; twin ovals of vapor cloud the window. Saliva hangs from its lower jaw in pendulous bobs. The light veers past; the beast ducks lower. Its pleated throat convulses; it peers at her with one eye, spider-webbed with filigrees of blood vessels, whole tiny river systems trundling blood deeper and deeper into the yellow of its eyeball, unknowable, terrible, wetit is a demon dredged up from some black corner of memory; even from across the gallery, she can see into the crypt of its eye, huge and unblinking, and she can smell it, too; the creature smells like a swamp, riparian, of mire and ooze, and a thought, a scrap, a line from a book, rises to her from some abscess of memory and she wakes with a sentence on her lips: They are coming. They are coming and they dont mean well. SATURDAY The southeaster throws a thick sheet of fog over Table Mountain. In Vredehoek everything looks hazy and tenuous. Cars loom up out of the white and disappear again. Alma sleeps till noon. When she wakes she comes tottering out with her wig in proper alignment, her eyes bright. Good morning, she says. Pheko is startled. Good morning, Mrs. Alma. He serves her oatmeal, raisins, and tea. Pheko, she says, enunciating his name as if tasting it. Youre Pheko. She says his name several more times. Would you like to sit indoors today, Mrs. Alma? Its awfully damp out there. Yes, Ill stay inside. Thank you. They sit in the kitchen. Alma shovels big spoonfuls of oatmeal into her mouth. The television burbles out news about rising tensions, farm attacks, violence outside a health clinic. Now my husband, Alma says suddenly, not quite speaking to Pheko but to the kitchen at large, his passion was always rocks. Rocks and the dead things in them. Always off to do, as he put it, some grave-robbing. Mine was less obvious. I did care about houses. I was an estate agent before many women were estate agents. Pheko sets a hand on top of his head. Except for a mild unsteadiness in her voice, Alma sounds much as she did a decade ago. The television drones. Fog presses against the balcony windows. There were times when I was happy and times when I was not, continues Alma. Like anyone. To say a person is a happy person or an unhappy person is ridiculous. We are a thousand different kinds of people every hour. She looks at Pheko then, though not quite directly at him. As if a guest floats behind him and to his left. Fog seeps through the garden. The trees disappear. The lounge chairs disappear. Dont you think? Pheko closes his eyes, opens them. Are you happy? Me, Mrs. Alma? You should have a family. I do have a family. Remember? I have a son. He is five years old now. Five years old, says Alma. His name is Temba. I see. She drives her spoon into whats left of the oatmeal and lets go and watches its handle slowly fall down to touch the rim of the bowl. Come with me. Pheko follows her up the stairs into the guest bedroom. For a full minute she stands beside him, both of them facing her wall of papers

and cartridges. She crouches, moving here and there along the wall. Her lips move silently. On the wall in front of Pheko is a postcard of a little island ringed by a turquoise sea. Two years ago Alma worked every day on this wall, posting things, concentrating. How many meals did Pheko bring her up in this room? She reaches for the photo of Harold and fingers its corner a moment. Sometimes, she says, I have trouble remembering things. Behind her, out the window, the fog cycles and cycles. The sky is invisible. The neighbors rooftops are gone. The garden is gone. Everything is white. I know, Mrs. Alma, Pheko says. VAPOR LIGHTS Its 9:30 p.m. and the wind is shrieking against the ten thousand haphazard houses in Site C. As soon as he walks in the door, Pheko can tell by the way Miss Amanda has her lips pinched under her teeth that Temba has become ill. A foot away, he can feel the heat radiating off the boys body. Little lamb, whispers Pheko. The queue at the twenty-four-hour clinic is already long, longer than Pheko has ever seen it. Mothers and children sit on upturned onion crates or sleep on blankets. Behind them a bus-length mural depicts Jesus stretching supernaturally long arms across a wall. Dried leaves and plastic bags scuttle down the road. Two separate times over the next few hours Pheko has to get out of line because Temba has soiled his clothes. He cleans his son, wraps him in a towel, and returns to wait outside the clinic. The vapor lights on their towers above Site C rock back and forth like some aggregation of distant moons. Scraps of paper and skeins of dust fly through the air beneath them. By 2 a.m. Pheko and Temba are still nowhere near the front of the line. Every hour or so a bleary nurse walks up and down the queue and says, in Xhosa, how grateful she is for everybodys patience. The clinic, she says, is waiting for antibiotics. Pheko can feel Tembas sweat soaking through the towel around him. The boys cheeks are the color of dishwater. Temba, Pheko whispers. Once the boy raises his face weakly and Pheko can see the wobbling pinpoints of the light towers reflected in the sheen of his eyes. THAT SAME HOUR Roger and Luvo enter Alma Konacheks house in the earliest hours of Sunday morning. Alma doesnt wake. Her breathing sounds steadily from the bedroom. Roger wonders if perhaps the houseboy has given her a sedative. Luvo tromps upstairs. Roger opens the refrigerator and closes it; he contemplates stepping out into the garden to smoke a cigarette. He feels, very keenly tonight, that he is almost out of time. Down below the balcony, somewhere past the fog, Cape Town sleeps. Absently, for no reason, Roger opens the drawer beside the dishwasher. He has stood in this kitchen on seventeen different nights but has never before opened this drawer. Inside Roger can see butane lighters, coins, a box of staples. And a single beige polymer cartridge, identical to the hundreds upstairs. Roger picks up the cartridge and holds it to the window. Number 4510. Kid, Roger calls, raising his voice to the ceiling. Kid. Luvo does not reply. Roger walks upstairs and waits. The boy is hooked into the machine. His torso seems to vibrate lightly. After another minute the machine sighs, and Luvos eyes flit open. The boy sits back and grinds his palms into his eyesockets. Roger holds up the new cartridge. Look at this. There is a shakiness in Rogers voice that surprises them both. Luvo reaches and takes it. Have I seen this before? CARTRIDGE 4510 Alma is in a movie theater with Harold. They are perhaps thirty years old. The movie is about scuba divers. Onscreen, white birds with forked tails soar above a beach. Light touches the tops of breaking waves. Alma and Harold sit side by side, Alma in a bright green dress, green shoes, green plastic earrings, Harold in an expensive brown shirt. The side of Harolds knee presses against the side of Almas. Luvo can feel a dim electricity traveling between them. Now the camera slips underwater. Rainbows of fish flit across the screen. Reefs scroll past. Almas heart does its steady work. The memory jerks forward; Alma and Harold are in a cab, Almas camera bag on the bench seat between them. They travel through a place that looks to Luvo like Camps Bay. Everything out the windows is vague; it is as if, for Alma, there is nothing to look at all. There is only feeling, only anticipation, only her young husband beside her. In another breath they are climbing the steps of a regal, cream-colored hotel, backed by moonlit cliffs. Gulls soar everywhere. A little gold-lettered sign reads Twelve Apostles Hotel. Inside the lobby a willowy woman in a white shirt and white pants with a gold belt buckle gives them a key on a brass chain; they pad down a series of hallways. In the hotel room Alma lets out a succession of bright, genuine laughs. She gulps wine. Everything is pristine; two spotless windows, a wide white bed, richly ruffled lampshades. Harold switches on a music player and takes off his shoes and dances clumsily in his socks. Out the windows, range after range of spotlit waves fold over onto a beach. After what might be a few minutes Harold leaps the balcony railing and takes off his shirt and socks. Come with me, he calls, and Alma takes her camera bag and follows him down onto the beach. Alma laughs as Harold charges into the wave-break. He splashes around a bit, grinning hugely. Freezing! he shouts. As he walks out of the water, Alma raises her camera, and takes a photograph. If they say anything more to one another, it is not remembered, not recorded on the cartridge. In the memory Harold makes love to Alma twice. Luvo feels he should leave, should yank out the

cartridge, send himself back into Almas house in Vredehoek, but the room is so clean, the sheets are so cool beneath Almas back. Everything is soft; everything seems to vibrate with possibility. Alma tastes the sea on Harolds skin. She feels his big-knuckled hands hold onto her ribs, his fingertips touch the knobs of her spine. Near the end of the memory Alma closes her eyes and seems to slip underwater, as if back into the film at the moviehouse, watching a huge black urchin wave its spines, noticing how the water is not silent but full of soft clicks, and soon the pastels of coral are scrolling past her vision, and little slashes of needlefish are dodging her fingers, and Harolds body seems not to be on top of hers at all, but drifting instead beside her; they are swimming together, floating slowly away from the reef toward a place where the sea floor falls away and the bottom is too far away to see, and there is only light filtering into deep water, bottomless water, and Almas blood seems to swell out to the very edges of her skin. SUNDAY, 4 A.M. Alma sits up in bed. From the ceiling comes the unmistakable sounds of footfalls. On her nightstand there is a glass of water, its bottom daubed with miniature bubbles. Beside it is a hardcover book. Though its jacket is missing and half the binding is torn away, the title appears sparkling and whole in her mind. Treasure Island. Of course. From the ceiling comes another creak. Someone is in my house, Alma thinks, and then some still-functional junction in her brain coughs up an image of a man. His teeth are orange. His nose looks like a small brown gourd. His trousers are khaki and stained and a tear in the left shoulder of his shirt shows his darker skin beneath. A faded jaguar winds up the underside of his wrist. Alma jerks herself onto her feet. A demon, she thinks, a burglar, a tall man in the yard. She hurries across the kitchen into the study and opens the heavy, two-handled drawer at the bottom of Harolds fossil cabinet. A drawer she has not opened in years. Toward the bottom, beneath a stack of paleontology magazines, is a cigar box upholstered with pale orange linen. Even before she finds it, she is certain it is there. Indeed, her mind feels particularly clear. Oiled. Operable. You are Alma, she thinks. I am Alma. She retrieves the box, sets it on the desk that once was Harolds and opens it. Inside is a nine-millimeter handgun. She stares at it a moment before picking it up. Blunt and colorless and new-looking. Harold used to carry it in his glove compartment. She does not know how to tell if it is loaded. Alma carries the gun in her left hand through the kitchen to the living room and sits in the silver armchair that offers her a view up the stairwell. She does not turn on any lights. Her heart flutters in her chest like a moth. From upstairs winds a thin strand of cigarette smoke. The pendulum in the grandfather clock swings back and forth. Out the windows there is only a dim whiteness: fog. Everything seems irradiated with a meaning she is only now recognizing. My house, she thinks. I love my house. If Alma keeps her eyes straight ahead, and does not look to her right or left, it is possible to believe Harold is about to settle into the matching chair beside her, the lamp and table between them. She can just sense the weight of his body shifting over there, can smell something like rock powder in his clothes, can perceive the scarcely perceptible gravitational tug one body exerts upon another. She has so much to say to him. She sits. She waits. She tries to remember. LEAVING THE QUEUE At 4:30 a.m. Pheko and Temba are still twenty or so people from the clinic entrance. Temba is sleeping steadily now, his arms and legs limp, his big eyelids sealing him off from the world. The wind has settled down. Clouds of gnats materialize above the shacks. Pheko squats against the wall with his son in his lap. The boy looks emptied out, his cheeks depressed, the tendons in his throat showing. Above them the painted Jesus stretches his implausibly long arms. The light towers have been switched off and a dull orange glow reflects off the undersides of the clouds. My last day of work, Pheko thinks. Today the accountant will pay me. A second thought succeeds that one: Mrs. Alma has antibiotics. He is surprised he did not think of this sooner. She has piles of them. How many times has Pheko refreshed the little army of orange pill bottles standing in her bathroom cupboard? Bats cut silent loops above the shanty rooftops. A little girl beside them unleashes a chain of coughs. Pheko can feel the dust on his face, can taste the earth in his molars. After another minute he lifts his sleeping son and abandons their place in the queue and carries the boy down through the noiseless streets to the bus station. HAROLD Maybe its something the houseboy didnt want her to see? murmurs Roger. Something that made her upset? Luvo waits for the memory to fade. He studies Almas wall in the dimness. Treasure Island. Gorgonops longifrons. Porter Properties. Thats not it, he says. On the wall in front of them float countless iterations of Alma Konachek: a seven-year-old sitting cross-legged on the floor; a brisk, thirty-year-old estate agent; a bald old lady. An entitled woman, a lover, a wife. And in the center Harold walks perpetually out of the sea. His name printed below it in shaky handwriting. A photograph taken on the very night when Harold and Alma seemed to reach the peak of everything they could be. Alma had placed that picture in the center on purpose, Luvo is sure of it, before her endless rearranging had defaced the original logic of her project. The one thing she wouldnt move. The photograph is faded, slightly curled at the edges. It must be forty years old,

thinks Luvo. He reaches out and takes it from the wall. Before he feels it, he knows it will be there. The photograph is slightly heavier than it should be. Two strips of tape cross over its back; something has been fixed underneath. Whats that? asks Roger. Luvo carefully lifts away the tape so as not to tear the photograph. Beneath is a cartridge. It looks like the others, except it has a black X drawn across it. He and Roger stare at it a moment. Then Luvo slides it into the machine. The house peels away in slow, deciduous waves. Alma is riding beside Harold in a dusty truck: Harolds Land Cruiser. Harold holds the steering wheel with his left hand, his face sunburned red, his right hand trailing out the open window. The road is untarred and rough. On both sides grassy fields sweep upward into crumbled mountainsides. Harold is talking, his words washing in and out of Almas attention. Whats the one permanent thing in the world? hes saying now. Change! Incessant and relentless change. All these slopes, all this screesee that huge slide there?theyre all records of calamities. Our lives are like a fingersnap in all this. Harold shakes his head in genuine wonderment. He swoops his hand back and forth in the air out the window. Inside Almas memory a thought rises so clearly its as if Luvo can see the sentence printed in the air in front of the windshield. She thinks: Our marriage is ending and all you can talk about is rocks. Occasional farm cottages rush past, white walls with red roofs; derelict windpumps; sun-ravaged sheep pens; everything tiny against the backdrop of the peaks growing ever larger beyond the hood ornament. The sky is a swirl of cloud and light. Time compresses; Luvo feels jolted forward. One moment a rampart of cliffs ahead glows chalk-white, flickering lightly as if composed of flames. A moment later Alma and Harold are in among the rocks, the Land Cruiser ascending long switchbacks. The road is composed of rust-colored gravel, bordered now and then by uneven walls of rock. Sheer drops open off the left, then right sides. A sign reads, Swartbergpas. Inside Alma, Luvo can feel something large coming to a head. Its rising, frothing inside her. Heat prickles her under her blouse; Harold downshifts as the truck climbs through a nearly impossible series of hairpin turns. The valley floor with its quilting of farm fields looks a thousand miles below. At some point Harold stops at a pullout surrounded by rockfall. He produces sandwiches from an aluminum cooler. He eats ravenously; Almas sandwich sits untouched on the dash. Just going to have a poke around, Harold says, and does not wait for a reply. From the back of the Land Cruiser he takes a jug of water and his ebony walking stick with the elephant on the handle and climbs over the drystone retaining wall and disappears. Alma sits, bites back anger. Wind plays in the grasses on both sides of the road. Clouds drag across the ridgetops. No cars pass. Shed tried. Hadnt she? Shed tried to get excited about fossils. Shed just spent three days with Harold in a game lodge outside Beaufort West: a cramped row of rooms encircled by rocks and wind, ticks on her pant legs, a lone ant paddling slow circles atop her tea. Lightning storms scoured the horizon. Scorpions patrolled the kitchenette. Harold would leave at dawn and Alma would sit in a fold-up chair outside their room with a mystery novel in her lap and the desolation of the Karoo shimmering in all directions. A glitter, a madness. The Big Empty, people in Cape Town called the Karoo, and now she saw why. She and Harold had not been talking, not sleeping in the same bed. Now they were driving over this pass toward the coast to spend a night in a real hotel, a place with air-conditioning and white wine in silver buckets. She would tell him how she felt. She would tell him she had reached a certain threshold. The prospect of it made her feel simultaneously lethargic and exhilarated. The sun lapses across the ridgelines. Shadows swing across the road. Time skids and ripples. Luvo begins to feel nauseous, as if he and Alma and the Land Cruiser are teetering on the edge of a cliff, as if the whole road is about to slough off the mountain and plunge into oblivion. Alma whispers to herself about snakes, about lions. She whispers, Hurry up, goddamn it, Harold. But he does not come back. Another hour passes. Not a single car comes over the pass in either direction. Almas sandwich disappears. She urinates beside the Land Cruiser. Its nearly dusk before Harold clambers back over the wall. Something is wrong with his face. His forehead is crimson. His words come fast, quick convoluted strings of them, as if he is hacking them out. Alma, Alma, Alma, hes saying. Spittle flies from his lips. He has found, he said, the remains of a Gorgonops longifrons on a ledge halfway down the escarpment. It is toothy, bent, big as a lion. Its long, curved claws are still in place; its entire skull is present, its skeleton fully articulated. It is, he believes, the biggest fossilized gorgon ever found. The holotype. His breathing seems only to pick up pace. Are you okay? asks Alma, and Harold says, No, and a second later, I just need to sit for a moment. Then he wraps his arms across his chest, leans against the side of the Land Cruiser, and slides into the dust. Harold? shrieks Alma. A slick of foamy, blood-flecked saliva spills down the side of her husbands throat. Already dust begins to cling to the wet surfaces of his eyeballs. The light is low, golden, and merciless. On the veld far below, the zinc rooftops of distant farmhouses reflect back the dying sun. Every shadow of every pebble seems impossibly stark. A tiny rockslide starts beneath Almas ribs. She turns Harold over; she opens

the rear door. She screams her husbands name over and over. When the memory stimulator finally spits out the cartridge, Luvo feels as if he has been gone for days. Patches of rust-colored light float through his vision. He can still feel the monotonous, back-and-forth motion of the Land Cruiser in his body. He can still hear the wind, see the silhouettes of ridgelines in his peripheral vision, feel the gravity of the heights. Roger looks at him; he flicks a cigarette out the open window into the garden. Strands of fog pull through the backyard trees. Well? he says. Luvo tries to raise his head but it feels as if his skull will shatter. That was it, he says. The one youve been looking for. TALL MAN IN THE YARD Alma is thirsty. She would like someone to bring her some orange juice. She runs her tongue across the backs of her teeth. Harold is here. Isnt Harold in the chair beside her? Cant she hear his breathing on the other side of the lamp? There are footfalls on the stairs. Alma raises her eyes. She is almost giddy with fear. The gun in her left hand smells faintly of oil. Birds are passing over the house now, a great flock, harrying across the sky like souls. She can hear the beating of their wings. The pendulum in the grandfather clock swings left, swings right. The traffic light at the top of the street sends its serial glow through the windows. The fog splits. City lights wink between the garden palms. The ocean beyond is a vast, curved shield. It seems to boom outward toward her like a loudspeaker, a great loudspeaker of reflected starlight. First there is the mans right shoe: laceless, a narrow maw between the toe and sole. Then the left shoe. Dark socks. Unhemmed trouser legs. Alma tries to scream but only a faint, animal sound comes out of her mouth. A man who is not Harold is coming down the stairs and his shoes are dirty and his hands are out and he is opening his mouth to speak in one of those languages she never needed to learn. His hands are huge and terrible. His beard is white. His teeth are the color of autumn leaves. His hat says Ma Horse, Ma Horse, Ma Horse. VIRGIN ACTIVE FITNESS The bus grinds to a halt in Claremont and Temba sits up and looks out bleary-eyed and silent at Virgin Active Fitness, not yet open for the day. His gaze tracks the still-lit, unpopulated swimming pools through his eyeglasses. Submerged lights radiating out through green water. The bus lurches forward again. Looking up through the window, the boy watches the darkness drain out of the sky. The first rays of sun break the horizon and flow across the east-facing valleys of Table Mountain. Fat tufts of fog slide down from the summit. A woman in the aisle stands with her back very straight and peers down into a paperback book. Paps? Temba says. My body feels loose. His fathers arm closes around his shoulders. Loose? The boys eyes shut. Loose, he murmurs. Were going to get you some medicine, Pheko says. You just rest. You just hang on, little lamb. DAWN Luvo is detaching himself from the remote device when he hears Roger say, from the stairwell, Now, wait one minute. Then something explodes downstairs. Every molecule in the upstairs bedroom feels as if it has been jolted awake. The windows rattle. The cartridges on the wall quiver. In the shuddering concussion afterward Luvo hears Roger fall down the stairs and exhale a single sob, as if expelling all of his remaining breath at once. Luvo sits paralyzed on the edge of the bed. The grandfather clock resumes its metronomic advance. Someone downstairs says something so quietly that Luvo cannot hear it. His gaze catches on a small, inexplicable watercolor of an airborne boat among the hundreds of papers on the wall in front of him, a sailboat gliding through clouds. He has seen it a hundred times before but has never actually looked at it. Sails straining, clouds floating happily past. Gradually the molecules in the air around Luvo seem to return to their former states. He hears no more from downstairs except the grandfather clock, banging away in the living room. Roger has been shot, he thinks. Someone has shot Roger. And Roger has the cartridge with the X on it in his shirt pocket. A low breeze drifts through the open window. The pages on Almas wall fan out in front of him like a flower, like a mind turned inside out. Luvo listens to the clock, counts to a hundred. He can still see Harold in the gravel beside the Land Cruiser, his face a mask, dust stuck to his eyes, saliva gleaming on his chin and throat. Eventually Luvo crawls across the floor and peers down the stairwell. Rogers tall body is at the bottom, slumped over onto itself, folded almost in half. His hat is still on. His arms are crimped underneath him. A portion of his face is gone. A halo of blood has pooled around his head on the tile. Luvo lies back on the carpet, sees Almas immaculate room at the Twelve Apostles Hotel, sees a mountain range rush past the dusty windscreen of a truck. Sees Harolds legs twitching beneath him in the gravel. What is there in Luvos life that makes sense? Dusk in the Karoo becomes dawn in Cape Town. What happened four years ago is relived twenty minutes ago. An old womans life becomes a young mans. Memory-watcher meets memory-keeper. Luvo stands. He plucks cartridges off the wall and sticks them in his pockets. Forty, fifty of them. Once his pockets are full he moves toward the stairwell, but pauses and looks back. The little room, the spotless carpet, the washed window. On the bedspread a thousand identical roses intertwine. He takes the photograph of Harold walking out of the sea and slips it inside his shirt. He sets Cartridge 4510 in the center of the coverlet where someone might find it.

Then he stands at the top of the stairwell, collecting himself. From the living roomfrom Rogerrises a smell of blood and gunpowder. An odor more grim and nauseating than Luvo expected. Luvo is about to walk down the stairs when the rape gate rattles and he hears a key slip into the deadbolt of the front door. CLOCK Perhaps the last thing in the world Pheko is prepared to see is a man facedown at the bottom of Almas stainless steel staircase lying in a puddle of blood. Temba is asleep again, a hot weight across his fathers back. Pheko is out of breath and sweating from carrying the boy up the hill. He sees the dead man first and then the blood but still it takes him several more seconds to absorb it all. Parallelograms of morning light fall through the balcony doors. Down the hallway, in the kitchen, Alma is sitting at the kitchen table, steadily turning the pages of a magazine. She is barefoot. The questions come too quickly to sort out. How did this man get in? Was he killed with a gun? Did Mrs. Alma do the killing? Where is the gun? Pheko feels the heat radiating off his son into his back. He wants suddenly for everything to go away. The whole world to go away. I should run, he thinks. I should not be here. Instead he carries his son over the body, stepping over the blood, past Alma in the kitchen. He continues out the back door of the kitchen and into the garden and sets the boy in a lounge chair and returns inside to retrieve the white chenille blanket off the foot of Almas bed and wraps the boy in it. Then inside again for Almas pill bottles. His hands shake as he tries to read the labels. He ends up choosing two types of antibiotic of which there are full bottles and crushing them together into a spoonful of honey. Alma does not look up from the pages as she turns them, one, then the next, then the next, her stare lost and unknowable and reptilian. Thirsty, she says. Just a moment, Mrs. Alma, says Pheko. In the garden he sticks the spoon in Tembas mouth and makes sure the boy swallows it down and then he goes back into the kitchen and pockets the antibiotics and listens to Alma snap the pages forward awhile, and puts on the coffeepot, and when he is sure he will be able to speak clearly he pulls his telephone from his pocket and calls the police. BOY FALLING FROM THE SKY Temba is looking into the shifting, inarticulate shapes of Almas backyard leaves when a boy falls from the sky. He crashes into some hedges and clambers out onto the grass and places his head in the center of the morning sun and peers down at Temba with a corona of light spilling out around his head. Temba? the silhouette says. His voice is hoarse and unsteady. His ears glow pink where the sunlight passes through them. He speaks in English. Are you Temba? My glasses, says Temba. The garden is a sea of black and white. The face in front of him shifts and a sudden avalanche of light pierces Tembas eyes. Something bubbles inside his gut. His tongue tastes of the sweet, sticky medicine his father spooned into his mouth. Now hands are putting on Tembas glasses for him. Temba squints up, blinking. My paps works here. I know. The boy is whispering. Fear travels through his voice. Temba tries whispering, too. Im not supposed to be here. Me either. Tembas eyesight comes back to him. Big palms and rosebushes and a cabbage tree loom against the garden wall. He tries to make out the boy standing over him against the backdrop of the sun. He has smooth brown skin and a wool cap over his lightly felted head. He reaches down and tugs the blanket up around Tembas shoulders. My body is sick, says Temba. Shhh, whispers the boy. He takes off his hat and presses three fingers against his temple as if reining in a headache. Temba glimpses strange outlines on the boys scalp, but then the boy puts his cap back on and sniffs and glances nervously toward the house. Im Temba. I live at B478A, Site C, Khayelitsha. Okay, Temba. You should rest now. Temba looks toward the house. Its sleek profile looms up above the hedges, cut with silver windowframes and chrome balcony railings. Ill rest now, he says. Good, whispers the boy with the smooth skin and the glowing ears. Then he takes five quick steps across the backyard and leaps up between the trunks of two palms and scales the garden wall and is gone. THE DAYS FOLLOWING Harolds dying face, Rogers crumpled frame, and the filmy eyes of Temba all rotate through Luvos thoughts like some appalling picture show. Death succeeding death in relentless concatenation. He spends the rest of Sunday hiding inside the labyrinthine paths of the Company Gardens, crouched among the leaves. Squirrels run here and there; city workers string Christmas lights through a lane of oaks. Are people looking for him? Are the police? Monday Luvo crouches in the alley outside a chophouse watching the news on a bar television through an open window. It takes several hours before he sees it: An elderly woman has shot an intruder in Vredehoek. A reporter stands on Almas street, a few houses away, and talks into a microphone. In the background a stripe of red-and-yellow police tape stretches across the road. The reporter says nothing about Almas dementia, nothing about Pheko or Temba, nothing about accomplices. The whole report lasts perhaps twenty-five seconds. He does not return to Rogers apartment. No one comes for him. No Roger shaking him awake in the night, hustling him into a taxi. No Pheko come to demand answers. No ghosts of Harold or Alma. Tuesday morning Luvo rides a bus up to Derry Street and walks up onto the slopes of Table Mountain, through the sleek, hushed houses of Vredehoek. There is a blue van in front of Almas house and

the garage door is open. The garage is absolutely empty. No Mercedes, no realty sign. No lights. The police tape is still there. As he stands beside the gutter a moment a dark-skinned woman passes behind a window pushing a vacuum cleaner. That afternoon he sells Almas memory cartridges to a trader named Cabbage. Cabbage calls a red-eyed teenager out from the trees to run them through a ramshackle memory machine. The transaction takes more than two hours. They real, affirms the teenager finally, and Cabbage looks Luvo up and down before offering him 3,300 rand for the whole batch. Luvo studies the cartridges in the bottom of his backpack. Sixty-one of them. Pinpoints of a life. He asks the trader if he can buy the remote device, with its dirty-looking, warped headgear, but Cabbage only grins and shakes his head. Costs more than youll ever have, he says, and snaps his bag shut. Afterward Luvo walks back up through the Company Gardens to the South African Museum and stands in the fossil room with his money in his pocket. He gazes into every display case. Brachiopod, paper mussel, marsh clam. Horsetail, liverwort, seed fern. Outside a light rain starts to fall. A warder ambles through, announces to no one in particular that its closing time. Two tourists come through the door, glance about, and leave. Soon the room is empty. Luvo stands in front of the gorgon a long time. Its a slender-headed skeleton, stalking something on its long legs, its huge canine incisors showing. At the street market in Greenmarket Square Luvo buys the following things: a kelly green duffel bag, nine loaves of white bread, a paint scraper, a hammer, a sack of oranges, four two-liter bottles of water, a polyester sleeping bag, and a puffy red parka that says Kansas City Chiefs across the back. When hes done, he has 900 rand in his pocket, all the money left him in the world. B478A Pheko gazes up into the darkness of his little house and listens to the rain rattle on the roof. Beside him Temba blinks his big eyes, waiting for sleep to fall away. The boys fever has broken; he is slowly coming back into himself. Pheko is thinking about his cousin who says he might be able to find him work loading powdered cement into bags for shipping. Hes thinking about the fur of dead insects on the window screens, the tracks of ants marching along the floor. And hes thinking about Alma. For six hours the police asked Pheko questions. He did not know where Temba had been taken; he hardly knew where he was. Then they released him. They let him keep the antibiotics, they even paid his train fare. After leaving her kitchen that morning with the police, Alma still turning the pages of that thick, five-year-old fashion magazine, he has not seen Alma again. All around the little house are things he has been given by Harold and Alma over the years, castoffs and hand-me-downs: a dented soup pot, a plastic comb, an enameled mug that says Porter Properties Summer Picnic. A dish towel, a plastic colander, a thermometer. How many hours had Pheko spent with Alma over the past twenty years? She is engraved into him; she is part of him. I saw a boy, Temba says. He looked like an angel from church. In your dream? Maybe, says Temba. Maybe it was a dream. SWARTBERG PASS On the morning bus heading east from Cape Town theres the impossible straightness of the N1 cutting across the desert all the way to the horizon. The road is swallowed by the buss big tinted windscreen like an infinite black ribbon. On either side of the N1, dry grasslands run away from the highways edges into sheaves of brown mountains. Everywhere there is light and stone and unimaginable distance. Luvo feels simultaneously frightened and awed. As far as he can remember, he has never been outside of Cape Town, though he has Almas memories riding along inside him, the bright blue coves of Mozambique, rain in Venice, a line of travelers in suits standing in a first-class queue in a Johannesburg train station. He pulls the photograph of Harold from his backpack. Harold, half-grinning, half-grimacing, walking out of the sea. He thinks of Roger, lying dead on the floor of Almas living room. He hears Chefe Carpenter say, You owe money, dont you? Its afternoon when Luvo clambers off at the intersection for Prince Albert Road. A gas station and a few aluminum trailers huddle under a brass-colored sun. Black eagles trace slow ovals a half-mile above the road. Three friendly-looking women sit beneath a vinyl umbrella and sell cheese and marmalade and sticky rolls. Its warm, they tease. Take off your hat. Luvo shakes his head. He chews a roll and waits with his duffel bag. Its nearly dusk before a Bantu sales representative in a rented Honda slows for him. Where you going? The Swartberg. You mean over the Swartberg? Yes, sir. The driver reaches across and pushes the door open. Luvo climbs in. They turn southeast. The sun goes down in a wash of orange and moonlight spills onto the Karoo. The pavement ends. The man drives the last hour through the badlands in silence, with the startled eyes of bat-eared foxes reflecting now and then in the high beams and a vast spread of stars keeping pace above and curtains of dust floating up behind the rear tires. The car vibrates beneath them. Soon there is no traffic in either direction. Great walls of stone rear up, darker than the sky. They come around a turn and a rectangular brown sign, its top half pocked from a shotgun blast, reads Swartbergpas. Luvo thinks: Harold and Alma saw this same sign. Before Harold died they drove right past this spot. Fifteen minutes later the Honda is climbing past one of the roads countless switchbacks when Luvo says, Please stop

the car here. The man slows. Stop? Yes, sir. You sick? No, sir. The little car shudders as it idles. Luvo unclips his seat belt. The man blinks at him in the darkness. Youre getting out here? Yes, sir. Just below the top. Youre joking. No, sir. Ag, it gets cold up here. It snows up here. You ever seen snow? No, sir. Snow is terrible cold. The man tugs at his collar. He seems about to asphyxiate with the strangeness of Luvos request. Yes, sir. I cant let you out here. Luvo stays silent. Any chance I can talk you out of this? No, sir. Luvo takes his big duffel and four bottles of water from the backseat and steps out into the darkness. The man looks at him a full half-minute before pulling off. Its warm in the moonlight but Luvo stands shivering for a moment, holding his things, and then walks to the edge of the road and peers over the retaining wall into the shadows below. He finds a thin path, cut into the slope, and hikes maybe two hundred meters north of the road, pausing every now and then to watch the twin red taillights of the salesmans Honda as it eases up the switchbacks high above him toward the top of the pass. Luvo finds a lumpy, level area of dry grass and rocks roughly the size of Alma Konacheks upstairs bedroom. He unrolls his sleeping bag and urinates and looks out over the starlit talus below, running mile after mile down onto the plains of the Karoo far beneath him. He takes a drink of water and climbs into his sleeping bag and tries to swallow back his fear. The rocks on the ground are still warm from the sun. The stars are bright and impossibly numerous. The longer he looks into a patch of sky, the more stars emerge within it. Range upon range of suns burning out beyond the power of his vision. No cars show themselves on the road. No airplanes cross the sky. The wind makes the only sound. Whats out here? Millipedes. Buzzards. Snakes. Warthogs, ostriches, bushbuck. Farther off, on the northern tablelands: jackals, wild dogs, leopards. A last few rhinos. FIRST DAY Dawn finds Luvo warm and bareheaded inside his sleeping bag with a breeze washing over the ports in his scalp. A truck grinds up the switchbacks of the road in the distance, Happy Chips painted across its side. He sits up. Around his sleeping bag are rocks, and beyond his little level spot of grasses are more rocks. The slopes below him and above him are littered with rocks in every size, pressed half into the earth like grave markers. Beyond them cliffs have calved off slabs the size of houses. Indeed, there seem to be sandstone and limestone blocks everywhere, an infinity of rocks. The Happy Chips truck disappears around another hairpin. No souls, only a few spindly treesonly boulders and distances. On its pedestal at the museum, the gorgon had seemed huge, big as a dinosaur, but out here the scale of things feels new. What was a dinosaur compared to cliffs like these? Without turning his head Luvo can see ten thousand rocks in which a gorgon might be hidden. Why did he think he could find a fossil out here? A fifteen-year-old boy who knows only adventure novels and an old womans memories? Who has never found a fossil in his life? Luvo eats two pieces of bread and walks slow circles around his sleeping bag, turning over stones with his toes. Splotches of lichen grow on some, pale oranges and grays, and the rocks include grains of color, too, striations of black, flecks of silver. They are lovely but they contain nothing that looks like the fossils in the museum, in Harolds cabinet, in Almas memories. All that first day Luvo makes wider and wider circles around his little camp, carrying a bottle of water, watching his shadow slip across the hillsides. Clouds drift above the mountain range at the horizon and their shadows drag across the farms far below. Luvo remembers Harold talking to Alma about time. Younger was higher in the rocks. Things that were old were deep. But what is higher and lower here? This is a wilderness of rocks. And every single stone Luvo turns over is plain and carries no trace of bone. Maybe one car comes over the pass every two hours. Three eagles soar over him in the evening, calling to one another, never once flapping their wings as they float over the ridge. THE GREAT KAROO In dreams Luvo is Alma: a white-skinned estate agent, pain-free, well-fed. He strides through the Gardens Centre; clerks rush to help him. Everywhere circular racks gleam with clothes. Air-conditioning, perfumes, escalators. Clerks open their bright, clean faces to him. His headaches seem to be intensifying. He has a sense that his skull is slowly being crushed, and that the metallic taste seeping into his mouth is whatever is being squeezed out. On his second day up on Swartberg Pass, ants chew a hole through one of his bread bags. The sun roasts his arms and neck. Lying there at night Luvo feels as if the gorgon is at the hub of a wheel out of which innumerable spokes rotate. Here comes Luvo on one spoke, and Roger on another, and Temba on the next, and Pheko and Harold and Alma after that. Everything coursing past in the night, revolving hugely, almost unfathomably, like the wheel of the Milky Way above. Only the center remains in darkness, only the gorgon. From his memory Luvo tries to summon images of the gorgon at the museum, tries to imagine what one might look like out here, in the rocks. But his mind continually returns to Alma Konacheks house. Roger is dead. Harold is dead. Alma is either in jail or tucked into a home for the rich and white-skinned. If theres anything left of who she was, its a scrap, a shred, some scribbled note that a cleaner or Pheko has guiltily unpinned from her wall and thrown into the trash. And how much longer can

Luvo be any better off, with these ports throbbing in his skull? A few more months? Here is the surprise: Luvo likes the strange, soothing work of looking into the rocks. He feels a certain peace, clinging to the side of Swartberg Pass: The clouds are like huge silver battleships, the dusks like golden liquidsthe Karoo is a place of raw light and monumental skies and relentless silence. But beneath the silence, hes learning, beneath the grinding wind, there is always noise: the sound of grass hissing on the cliffsides and the clattering of witgat trees tucked here and there into clefts. As he lies in his sleeping bag on his third night he can hear an almost imperceptible rustling: night flowers unveiling their petals to the moon. When he is very quiet, and his mind has stilled the chewing and whirling and sucking of his fears, he imagines he can hear the coursing of water deep beneath the mountains, and the movements of the roots of the plants as they dive toward itit sounds like the voices of men, singing softly to one another. And beyond thatif only he could listen even more closely!there was so much more to hear: the supersonic screams of bats, and, on the most distant tablelands, the subsonic conversations of elephants in the game reserves, grunts and moans so deep they carry between animals miles apart, forced into a few isolated reserves, like castaways on distant islands, their calls passing through the mountains and then shuttling back. That night he wakes to the quivering steps of six big antelope, shy and jittery, the keratin of their hooves clacking against the rocks, the vapor of their breath showing in the moonlight as they file past his sleeping bag, not fifty feet away. On Luvos fourth morning, wandering below the pass, perhaps a half mile from the road, he turns over a rock the size of his hand and finds pressed into its underside the clear white outline of what looks like a clam shell. The shell is lighter than the stone around it and scalloped at the edges. The name of the fossil rises from some corner of his brain: brachiopod. He sits in the sun and runs the tips of his fingers over the dozens of grooves in the stone. An animal that lived and died eons ago, when this mountainside was a seabed, and galaxies of clams flapped their shells at the sun. Luvo hears Harold Konacheks big, enthusiastic voice: Two hundred fifty million years ago this place was lush, filled with ferns and rivers and mud. Flesh washing away, minerals penetrating bones, the weight of millennia piling up, bodies becoming rock. And now this one little creature had risen to the surface, as the earth was weathered away by wind and rain, in the way a long-frozen corpse sometimes bobs to the surface of a glacier, after being mulled over in the lightless depths for centuries. WHAT ENDURES? His dreams stray farther and farther from his reality, dreams that feel as if they emerge not from his own forgotten childhood but from lives that have been passed to him through his blood. Dreams of ancestors, dreams of long ago men who dragged their own aching heads through this arid place, centuries of nations pursuing herds across the sands, whole bands passing in the haze with ocher on their faces and spears in their fists and great ragged tents folded and strapped to their backs, the long poles nodding as they marched, dogs trotting at their feet, tongues lolling. Thick-bodied herds, rain-animals and handprints, lines of dots descending from a sky and plugging into a rhinoceros horn. Men with antelope heads. Fish with the faces of men. Women dissolving into mists of red. The fifth morning on Swartberg Pass finds Luvo exhausted and hollow and in too much pain to rise from his sleeping bag. He pulls the curled photograph of Harold from his duffel and studies it, running his fingers over the mans features. Pinpoints of sky show through the little holes in each corner. Luvo tries to cut through his headache, tries to coax his memory back toward the moments before Harolds death. Harold was talking about geology, about death. Whats the permanent thing in the world? Change! Windpumps, sheep pens, a sign that reads Swartbergpas. Luvo remembers Almas sandwich on the dashboard, the wind in the grass beside the road, Harold finally returning over the apron of the road, staggering as he muttered Almas name. Pink foam coming out of his mouth. Alma punching telephone buttons in vain. Gravel pushed into Harolds cheek and dust on his eyeballs. Luvo stares at the photograph of Harold. He has begun to feel as if Almas wall of papers and cartridges has been reiterated out here a hundredfold on the mountainside, these legions of stones like identical beige cartridges, each pressed out of the same material. And here he is doomed to repeat the same project over and over, hunting among a thousand things for a pattern, searching a convoluted landscape for the remains of one thing that has come before. Dr. Amnestys cartridges, the South African Museum, Harolds fossils, Chefe Carpenters collection, Almas memory wallwerent they all ways of trying to defy erasure? What is memory anyway? How can it be such a frail, perishable thing? The shadows turn, shorten; the sun swings up over a ridge. Luvo remembers for the first time something Dr. Amnesty told Alma on one of the cartridges. Memory builds itself without any clean or objective logic: a dot here, another dot here, and plenty of dark spaces in between. What we know is always evolving, always subdividing. Remember a memory often enough and you can create a new memory, the memory of remembering. Remember a memory often enough, Luvo thinks. Maybe it takes over. Maybe the memory becomes new again. In Luvos own memory a

gun explodes. Roger slumps down the stairs and lets out a last breath. A five-year-old boy sits in a lounge chair wrapped in a blanket blinking up at the sky. Alma tears out a page of Treasure Island and nails it to a wall. Everything happens over and over and over. A body, Harold told Alma once, vanishes quickly enough to take your breath away. As a boy, he said, his father would put a dead ewe on the side of the road and in three days the jackals would have reduced it to bones and wool. After a week, even the bones would be gone. Nothing lasts, Harold would say. For a fossil to happen is a miracle. One in fifty million. The rest of us? We disappear into the grass, into beetles, into worms. Into ribbons of light. Its the rarest thing, Luvo thinks, that gets preserved, that does not get erased, broken down, transformed. Luvo turns the photograph in his hands and a new thought rises: When Harold was leaning against the Land Cruiser, clutching his chest, his breath coming faster and faster, his heart stopping in his chest, he was not holding his walking stick. The tacky ebony walking stick with the elephant on top. The stick that used to drive Alma mad. When Harold left the Land Cruiser, he took his walking stick from the back of the truck. And when he returned, a couple of hours later, he no longer had it. Maybe hed dropped it on the way back to the Land Cruiser. Or maybe hed left it in the rocks to mark the gorgons location. Four years had passed and the walking stick could have been picked up, or washed over a cliff in a storm, or Luvo could be remembering things wrong, but he realizes it had been here once, on the north side of Swartberg Pass, somewhere below the road. Near where Luvo is camped. And it might be here still. Luvo wants to find the gorgon, needs to find it, for himself, for Alma, for Pheko, for Roger, for Harold. If the walking stick is still here, he thinks, it will not be too hard to find. There are no trees up here so big, no branches nearly as long as that walking stick. No wood as dark as ebony. Its a small thing, perhaps, but its enough to get Luvo on his feet, and start him searching again. THE GORGON For that whole day and the next, Luvo walks the sea of stones. He has only one two-liter bottle of water left and he rations it carefully. He works in circles, in rectangles, in triangles. Belts and swaths and carpets of stones. He looks now for something dark, bleached by sun perhaps, a few red beads strung around its handle, the wooden elephant carved on top. Such staffs he has seen sold by children along the airport road and at tourist shops and in Greenmarket Square. The sixth evening it starts to rain and Luvo drapes his sleeping bag over a bush and crawls beneath it and sleeps a dreamless sleep and around him spiders draw their webs between the branches. When he wakes, the sky is pale. He stands, shakes the water drops off his sleeping bag. His head feels surprisingly light, almost painless. Its morning, Luvo thinks. I slept through an entire rainstorm. He climbs perhaps fifty feet onto a flat, smooth rock and sits chewing a slice of bread and then sees it. Harolds walking stick is sticking up from between two boulders two hundred meters away. Even from where he sits Luvo can see the hole almost near the top, a tiny space carved between the elephants legs and its torso. Every second, walking those two hundred meters, is like leaping into very cold water, in that first instant when the body goes into shock, and everything you are, everything you call your life, disintegrates for an instant, and all you have around you is the water and the cold, your heart trying to send splinters through a block of ice. The walking stick is sun-bleached and the beads are no longer on the handle but its still standing upright. As if Harold has left it there for Luvo to find. He stares at it awhile, afraid to touch it. The morning light is sweet and clear. The hillside trickles quietly around him with last nights rain. There is a carefully stacked pile of stones right beside it and even after Luvo has clawed most of them away, it takes him a few minutes to realize he is looking down at a fossil. The gorgon is white against the grayer limestone and the outline of the animal inside seems interrupted in places. But eventually he can make out its form from one foreleg to the tip of its tail: It is the size of a crocodile, tilted onto its side, and sunk as if into an enormous bathtub of cement. Its big, curved claws are still in place. And its skull sits separate from the rest of the stone entirely, as if it has been set there by the recession of a flood. It is big. Bigger, he thinks, than the one at the museum. Luvo lifts away more rocks, sweeps away gravel and dust with his hands. The skeleton is fully articulated, looped into the stone. It is perhaps ten feet long. His heart skids. With the hammer it takes Luvo only about two hours to break the skull free. Little chips of darker rock fly off as he strikes it and he hopes he is not damaging the thing he has come to find. As big as an old box-television, made entirely of stone, even once its free of the matrix surrounding it, the skull seems impossible for him to lift. Even the eyeholes and nostrils are filled with rock, a lighter color than the surrounding skull. Luvo thinks: I wont be able to move it by myself. But he does. He unzips the sleeping bag and folds it over the skull, padding it over on all sides, and using the walking stick as a lever, begins to roll the skull, inches at a time, toward the road. Its dark and Luvo is out of water before he gets the skull to the bottom of the retaining wall. Then he goes back to the rest of the skeleton, covers it again with rocks and gravel, marks it with the walking stick, and brings his camp up to the road. His legs ache; his fingers are cut. Rings of starlight

expand out over the ridgeline. The insects in the grass around him exult in their nighttime chorus. Luvo sits down on his duffel bag with the last of his oranges in his lap and the skull waiting six feet below, wrapped in a sleeping bag. He puts on his bright red parka. He waits. The moon swings gently up over the mountains, huge, green, aswarm with craters. RETURN Three English-speaking Finnish women stop for Luvo after midnight. Two are named Paula. They seem mildly drunk. They ask shockingly few questions about how ragged Luvo looks or how long he has been sitting on the side of one of the most remote roads in Africa. He keeps his hat on, tells them he has been fossil hunting, asks them to help him with the skull. Okay, they say, and work together, pausing now and then to pass around a bottle of Cabernet, and in fifteen minutes have heaved the skull over the wall and made room for it in the back of their van. They are traveling across South Africa. One of them has recently turned forty and the others are here to celebrate with her. The floor of their camper van is knee-deep with food wrappers and maps and plastic bottles. They pass around a thick, half-hacked-apart shank of cheese; one of the Paulas cuts wedges of it and stacks them on crackers. Luvo eats slowly, looking at his torn fingernails and wondering how he must smell. And yet, there is reggae music washing out of the dashboard, there is the largeness of these womens laughter. What an adventure! they say, and he thinks of his paperbacks sitting in the bottom of his duffel. When they stop at the top of the pass and pile out and ask Luvo to take their photograph beside the beaten brown sign that reads Die Top, Luvo feels as if perhaps they have been sent to him as angels. Dawn finds them eating scrambled eggs and chopped tomatoes in the rickety and deserted dining room of the Queens Hotel in a highway town called Matjiesfontein. Luvo drinks an ice-cold Fanta and watches the women eat. Their trip is ending and they show each other photos on the cameras screen. Ostriches, wineries, nightclubs. When hes done with the first Fanta Luvo drinks another one, the slow fans turning above, and the kind, sweaty smiles of the three women turn on him now and then, as if in their worlds black and white are one and the same, as if the differences between people didnt matter so much anymore, and then they get up and pile into the van for the drive back to Cape Town. One of the Paulas drives; the other two women sleep. Out the windows communication wires sling past in shallow parabolas from pole to pole. The road is relentlessly straight. Paula-the-driver looks back now and then at Luvo in the backseat. Headache? Luvo nods. What kind of fossil is it? Maybe something called a gorgon. Gorgon? Like the Medusa? Snakes for hair, all that? Im not sure. Well, those are the gorgons all right. Medusa and her sisters. Turn you to stone if you look them in the eyes. Really? Really, says forty-year-old Finnish Paula. This gorgon is very old, says Luvo. From when this whole desert was a swamp, and big rivers ran all through it. I see, says Paula. She drives awhile, tapping her thumb on the wheel in time with the music. You like that, Luvo? Going out and digging up old things? Luvo looks out the window. Out there, beyond the fence-lines, beneath the starlit, flat-topped hills, beneath the veld, beneath the dwarf scrub, beneath the endless running wind of the Karoo, what else remains locked away? Yes, he says. I like it. THE TWELVE APOSTLES HOTEL Paula parks the van outside Chefe Carpenters stucco wall and the four of them get out and Luvo waves at the security camera but nothing seems to happen so they sit on the curb waiting. Not ten minutes later Chefe in his robe comes up the street walking his two collies. He regards Luvo and then the women with their matted hair and wrinkled shirts and when they open the back of the van and lift away the shredded remains of Luvos sleeping bag, he looks at the fossil for a full minute without saying anything. His eyes seem both incredulous and dreamy, as if he is not entirely sure that what is happening is real. With his trembling lip and soft eyes he looks to Luvo as if he is about to cry. Twenty minutes later they stand in Chefes spotless garage drinking coffee with the skull sitting naked on the painted floor. This one huge head retrieved from the past and stripped from its context. Chefe makes a call and an Indian man comes over and looks at the skull with his hand on his chin and then makes several more telephone calls. His excitement is obvious. Within an hour three more men come in to look at the skull and the three yawning Finnish women and the strange boy in the wool cap. Eventually Chefe disappears into the house and reemerges dressed in a trim blue suit. He says he can offer 1.4 million rand. The jaws of the Finnish women drop simultaneously. They thump Luvo on the back. They shriek and jump around the garage. Luvo asks what he can give him now and Chefe says, Now? As in today? Thats what he said, says one of the Paulas. After another half hour of waiting Chefe gives Luvo 30,000 rand in cash. There is enough money that he has to give it to Luvo in a paper shopping bag. Luvo asks that the remainder be sent in a complete sum to Pheko Garrett, B478A, Site C, Khayelitsha. All of it? Chefe asks and Luvo says, All of it. How do we know youll do that? asks Paula, and Chefe Carpenter looks up at all three of them, taking his eyes off the skull for the first time in several minutes, as if he is not sure who has spoken. He blinks his eyes once. You can go now, he says. Three blocks away Luvo says goodbye to the Finnish women, who hug him

each in turn and give him their email addresses on little white cards, and one of the Paulas is crying softly to herself as they watch Luvo climb out of their rented camper van. Near the entrance to the Company Gardens is a little English bookshop. Luvo walks inside with his paper shopping bag full of money. He finds a paperback of Treasure Island and pays for it with a 1,000-rand note. Then he flags down a waterfront cab and tells the driver to take him to the Twelve Apostles Hotel. The driver gives him a look, and the woman at the desk at the hotel gives him the same look, but Luvo has cash and once he has paid she leads him down a hundred-meter-long cream-colored runner of carpet to a black door with the number 7 on it. The room is as clean and white as it was in Almas memory. Off the balcony jade-colored waves break onto a golden beach. In the bathroom tiny white tiles line the floor in diamond shapes. Crisp white towels hang on nickel-plated rods. Theres a big, spotless, white toilet. White fluffy bathmats sit on the floor. A single white orchid blooms in a rectangular vase on the toilet tank. Luvo takes a forty-five-minute shower. He is somewhere around fifteen years old and he has perhaps six months left to live. After his shower he lies on the perfect white sheets of the bed and watches the huge afternoon sky flow like liquid out the window. Rafts of gulls sail above the beach. He thinks of Almas memories, both those carried inside his head and the ones somewhere out in the cityCabbage will have traded them away by now. He thinks of Almas memory of this place, of the movie about the fish, gliding out into the great blue. He sleeps. When he wakes, hours later, he stares awhile into cobalt squares of night out the windows and then he turns on his lamp and opens Treasure Island. I remember him as if it were yesterday, he reads, as he came plodding to the inn door, his sea chest following behind him in a hand-barrow; a tall, strong, heavy, nut-brown man... THE GORGON It takes six weeks for a crew of six men to excavate the skeleton. They work in daylight only and park their cars two bends away from the easiest route and when they have to bring in the crane they do it at night. They bring it back to Cape Town in an unmarked truck. The dealer who buys it from Chefe Carpenter brings it to a blackmarket auction house in London. In London it is cleaned and prepared and varnished and mounted on a titanium brace. It sells at an anonymous cloak-and-dagger auction for 4.5 million dollars, the fourth-highest sum anyone has ever paid for a fossil. The skeleton travels from London on a container ship through the Mediterranean and the Suez Canal and across the Indian Ocean to Shanghai. A week later it is installed by trained preparators on a pedestal in the lobby of a fifty-eight-story hotel. No fake vegetation, no color, just a polyvinyl acetate sprayed along the joints and a Plexiglas cube lowered down over it. Someone sets two big potted palms on either side but two days later the hotels owner asks for them to be taken away. PHEKO In late February Pheko goes to the post office behind the spaza shop and in his mailbox is a single envelope with his name on it. Inside is a check for almost 1.4 million rand. Pheko looks up. He can hear, all of a sudden, the blood trundling through his head. The ground swivels out from underneath him. Madame Gecelo, behind the counter, looks over at him and looks back at whatever form she is filling out. A bus with no windows passes. Dust rides up over the little post office. No one is looking. The floor steadies. Pheko peeks again into the envelope and reads the amount. He looks up. He looks back down. On the subject line the check says, Fossil Sale. Pheko locks his post office box and hangs his key around his neck and stands with his eyes closed awhile. When he gets home he shows Temba his two fists. Temba looks at him through his little eyeglasses, then looks back at the fists. He waits, thinking hard, then taps the right fist. Pheko smiles. Try the other one. The other one? Pheko nods. You never say to try the other one. This time I say try the other one. This isnt a trick? Not a trick. Temba taps the left hand. Pheko opens it. Your bus card? says Temba. Pheko nods. Your bus card? repeats Temba. They stop in the market on the way to the station and buy swimming shorts, red for Pheko and light blue for Temba. Then they ride the Golden Arrow toward the city. Pheko carries the plastic shopping bag containing the swimming trunks in his right hand but will not let Temba see inside. It is a warm March day and the edges of Table Mountain are impossibly vivid against the sky. Pheko and Temba disembark at the Claremont stop and walk two blocks holding hands and enter a branch of the Standard Bank of South Africa two storefronts down from Virgin Active Fitness. Pheko opens an account and shows his identification and the clerk spends ten minutes typing various things into his computer and then he asks for an initial deposit. Pheko slides the check across. A manager shows up thirty seconds later and looks at the check and takes it back behind a glass-walled office. He speaks into a phone for maybe ten minutes. What are we doing? whispers Temba. Were hoping, whispers Pheko. After what seems like an hour the manager comes back and smiles at Pheko and the bank deposits the check. Ten minutes later Temba and Pheko stand in the glaring, cloudless sunlight in front of the glass walls of Virgin Active Fitness. Above them they can see people on treadmills, toiling away, and straight ahead, down through the walls, through their own reflections, they can see the three indoor pools, swimmers toiling through lanes, lifeguards in

chairs, and children shooting through the channels of the twisting green waterslide. At the entry Pheko gives the attendant a 1,000-rand note and she grumbles for a minute about change but passes some over and Pheko fills out a form on a clipboard and then they walk into a big locker room, lined with mahogany-fronted lockers, a few men here and there shaving or lacing tennis shoes or knotting ties and here comes Pheko with Temba trotting behind, adjusting his little eyeglasses with a happy incredulousness, and Temba chooses locker number 55 and they pull on their brand-new swim trunks, red for Pheko and light blue for Temba. Then they pass through a tile hallway lined with dripping showers and descend twelve steps and step through a glass door and into the roiling, chlorinated air of the indoor pools. Temba whispers something to himself that Pheko cannot hear. Lifeguards in red polo shirts sit in chairs. The slide gushes; the shouts of children echo off the ceiling. Pheko leads Temba up the long waterslide staircase, holding his little hand, the pools below growing smaller, the pink backs of the children in front of them wet with drops of water. Toward the top there is a short wait, each person in front of them climbing into place, then releasing, shooting down the slide, sweeping through the turns, and within a minute Pheko and Temba have climbed the last few steps and they stand together at the top of the waterslide. Pheko sits in the slide and lifts his son and sets him between his legs. Warm water rushes through their trunks and races down the slide and disappears beyond the first turn. Pheko takes off his sons glasses and holds them in his fist. Temba looks back at him, his eyes naked. It looks very fast, Paps. It sure does. Pheko looks down the steep channel into the first turn and then over the wall to where the pool looks very, very far below, the swimmers like little drowsy bees, the pure sunlight pouring through the windows, the traffic gliding noiselessly past. He says, Ready? Ready, says Temba. ALMA Alma sits in the community dining room in a yellow armchair. Her hair is short and silver and stiff. The clothes she is wearing are not hers; clothing seems to get mixed up in this place. Out the window to her left she can see a concrete wall, the top half of a flagpole, and a polygon of sky. The air smells of cooked cabbage. Fluorescent lights buzz softly in the ceiling. Nearby two women are trying to play rummy but they keep dropping the cards. Somewhere else in the building, perhaps the basement, someone might be howling. Its hard to say. Maybe its only the air, whistling out of heating ducts. A ghost of a memory flits past Alma: there, then gone. A television at the front of the room shows a man with a microphone, shows a spinning wheel, shows an audience clapping. Through the door walks a big woman in a white tank top and white jeans. In the light of the entryway her dark skin is almost invisible to Alma, so that it looks as if a white outfit has become animated and is walking toward her, white pants and a white top and white eyeballs floating. She walks straight toward Alma and begins emptying boxes onto the long table beside her. A nurse in a flowered smock behind Alma claps her hands together. Time for fine arts class, everyone, she says. Anyone who would like to work with Miss Stigers can come over. Several people start toward the table, one pushing a walker on wheels. The woman in white clothes is setting out buckets, plates, paints. She opens a big Tupperware bin. She looks over at Alma. Hi, sweetheart, she says. Alma turns her head away. She keeps quiet. A few minutes later some others are laughing, holding up plaster-coated hands. The woman in white clothing sings quietly to herself as she tends to the residents various projects. Her voice rides beneath the din. Alma sits in her chair very stiffly. She is wearing a red sweater with a reindeer on it. She does not recognize it. Her hands, motionless on her lap, are cold and look to her like claws. As if they, too, might have once belonged to someone else. The woman sings in Xhosa. The song is sweet and slow. In a back room across town, inside a memory clinic in Green Point, a thousand cartridges containing Almas memories sit gathering dust. In her bedside drawer, among earplugs and vitamins and crumpled tissues, is the cartridge Pheko gave her when he came to see her, Cartridge 4510. Alma no longer remembers what it is or what it contains or even that it belongs to her. When the song is done a man at the table in a blue sweater breaks into applause with his plaster-coated hands. The piece of sky out Almas window is warm and purple. A jetliner tracks across it, winking a golden light. When Alma looks back, the woman in white is standing closer to her. Cmon, sweetheart, she says with that voice. A voice like warm oil. Give this a try. Youll like it. The woman places a foil pie plate in front of Alma. There is newspaper over the tablecloth, Alma sees, and paint and silk flowers and little wooden hearts and snowmen scattered here and there in plastic bowls. The singing woman pours smooth, white plaster of Paris out of her Tupperware and into Almas pie plate, wiping it clean with a Popsicle stick. The plaster of Paris possesses a beautiful, creamy texture. One of the residents has spread it all over the tablecloth. Another has some in her hair. The woman in white has started a second song. Or perhaps she is singing the first song again, Alma cannot be sure. Kuzo inzingo zalomhlaba, she sings. Amanda noxolo, uxolo kuwe. Alma raises her left hand. The plaster is wet and waiting. Okay, she whispers. Okay. She thinks: I had somebody. But he left me here all by myself. Kuzo

inzingo zalomhlaba. Amanda noxolo, uxolo kuwe, sings the woman. Alma sinks her hand into the plaster.Revue de presseMemory Wall not only captivates from start to finish, it is the kind of book likely to restore your faith in the pleasures of storytelling. Its rare to encounter a writer who is able to make us see the world around us in new ways. And yet Doerr does so on every page.Boston Globe"It's fair to say that Anthony Doerr is doing things with the short story that have rarely been attempted and seldom achieved. The stories in Memory Wall have such scope and depth that they hit as hard as novels three times their length. Doerr has set a new standard, I think, for what a story can do." -- Dave Eggers, author of Zeitoun and What Is the WhatWhen I finished the last page of Anthony Doerrs Memory Wall, I sat stunned and blinking, unable to leave the strange and vivid and utterly believable world hed created. Read this bookit will change how you think about memory, time, love, and the way we record and try to keep the things we cant live without.Maile Meloy, Both Ways Is the Only Way I Want ItEverywhere in Tony Doerr's work, there's light and stone and unimaginable distance, while our hearts go on about their steady work. His subject is what we would hear on the most macrocosmic and intimate levels, if only we were to listen more closely. I love Memory Wall for the empathetic reach of its imagination, for the intelligence of its meditation on the consolations of memory, and especially for the tenderness and care with which it presents the ongoing miracle of humanity's daily interaction with the world. These are beautiful and moving stories.Jim Shepard, author of Like Youd Understand, AnywayBeautiful passages and vivid imagery . . . Readers hungry for unconventional narratives and lovers of fine writing will find much to savor in this impressive collection.--Booklist