



**Abrie Fourie**  
**Sean O'Toole**

*Ecke*, Former prison Neukölln, Berlin, Germany, 2012





Empty room view, Plein Street, Sunnyside, Pretoria, Gauteng, South Africa, 2001



Swimming pool with Kreepy Krauly, Rooiribbok Street, Pretoria, Gauteng, South Africa, 1999



Common coral tree, 476 Edmond Street, Pretoria, Gauteng, South Africa, 1999



37 van der Linde Street, Annlin, Pretoria, Gauteng, South Africa, 2011



Dianahof, Reitz Street, Sunnyside, Pretoria, Gauteng, South Africa, 2002

## **The So-Called Fruits of Lives** **By Sean O’Toole**

*This is an updated version of an essay first presented at Labor Berlin 11, Haus der Kulturen der Welt, Berlin, on 13 July 2012. The reading of this essay formed part of a storytelling session to inaugurate the opening of photographer Abrie Fourie’s exhibition *Oblique*, curated by Storm Janse van Rensburg.*

I didn’t go looking for him – and yet, somehow, he always keeps finding me. There is a date: 4 December 2002, which is not when we met, or when he found me. There is a place too: Musina, a ramshackle mining town and administrative centre on South Africa’s far northern border with Zimbabwe. On the fourth day of the last month of 2002, Musina experienced absolute night in the middle of the morning. The full solar eclipse was greeted by wild cheering from people seated in camping chairs, on rocks, in trees, on the tops of vehicles. Shortly afterwards I saw the fence. Fascinated by its brutal immutability, this nearly ten years after the lethal electrical

current that once caused it to emit a tangible heat was switched off, I contrived an excuse to go back. I would write about it, and in so doing, perhaps, understand it. Which is how I met Phillip, more or less. Playing journalist. But like I said, I didn't purposefully go to Musina looking for him. He found me.

THE FENCE #1: You forget the heat. I am back in Musina to look at a forgotten apartheid monument: a 330km electrified fence erected in two parts along South Africa's border with Zimbabwe and Mozambique. First things first: to speak of the fence as a monument is hyperbolic. Unlike the wild almond hedge grown by Dutch colonists to keep Khoikhoi out of their new settlement on the Cape peninsula in the late 1650s – a barrier system still partially visible in Kirstenbosch National Botanical Garden southeast of Cape Town's city centre – South Africa's northern border fence has not lapsed into historical fact, nor has not been assimilated by the landscape. Like an amputee who learns to walk again, it continues to function, differently it's true, but somehow the same. Camouflaged troops with automatic rifles continue to patrol it; the ceremony of military procedure and statehood endures in Musina.

It is not much to look at, at least not if you're familiar with the six-metre high razor wire fence that separates Morocco (and the rest of Africa) from Melilla, a Spanish coastal city located on mainland Africa. It is also far less resolute than the West Bank barrier, an eight-metre high concrete structure that prompted artist Tracey Rose to fly to Israel in 2005 and piss on it in protest. Compared with these two illegitimate children of the Berlin Wall, the fence that I crawled beneath with Phillip shortly after we met is peculiarly modest.

PHILLIP #1: I first met Phillip on 8 September 2003. He wore a blue-and-white check shirt and squatted among a tangle of roots from the wild fig that grew in the middle of the prison courtyard at Musina's central police station. His dark eyes were bloodshot. "I haven't eaten for two days," he told me. "They do not have food for us because we are unexpected visitors." He did not call himself a refugee, migrant or stranger – merely a visitor.

Phillip was 24 when he was arrested for illegally entering South Africa from Zimbabwe, one of many young Zimbabwean men caught doing the same, and awaiting deportation. I knew

Phillip would return after being dropped off in Beit Bridge. I told him I wanted to accompany him across the oily green Limpopo River into South Africa, via the fence. Okay, he said. Later that day we met outside the Beit Bridge Inn & Casino. Wary of the plainclothes policemen who lurked about, we decided to charter a taxi and head for the outskirts of town. It was an unnecessary tactic, I would later realise when, a month later, I returned to Beit Bridge and repeated the crossing in broad daylight with two illegal migrants, men whose name I have forgotten. But experience is knowledge, and I was inexperienced when I met Phillip. So was he, it turned out: inexperienced.

We drove east out of town in a sky-blue Datsun 120Y. “If you are a passenger don’t be a problem,” read a sticker inside the taxi. The landscape along the dirt road was arid and overgrazed. The sun was just setting when we stopped near a large baobab. Guided by moonlight we started walking, following the footpaths – or desire lines as architects and artists call them – carved into the dry earth by cigarette smugglers and locals wishing to bypass the congested border administration at Beit Bridge.

Our destination was the bubble of light on the horizon: Musina, South Africa.

We talked about many things during the six or so hours we walked towards the light: family, politics, the crocodiles potentially waiting for us up ahead, the electric fence (which we would later crawl beneath on our bellies, like warthogs), interracial sex, the untimely death of Orlando Pirates striker Lesley “Slow Poison” Manyathela, and Hustler magazine. Phillip said the first thing he would do when he got to Johannesburg – he was still working as a diesel mechanic, he claimed, in Thohoyandou – would be to buy a copy of this porn mag. I still haven’t asked Phillip if he has seen a white woman naked.

THE FENCE #2: South Africa’s elaborate border fence system delineates the country’s political boundary with Zimbabwe and Mozambique. The fence network of pretty much looks the same along its entire length. Measuring roughly five metres in width, the fence system comprises an electrified pyramidal core flanked by two barrier fences, which are roughly three-metres tall, to prevent wildlife from touching its electrified centre.

Erected in the mid-1980s, the 62-kilometre Mozambican fence runs from Komatipoort, at the Kruger Park border, to Jeppe's Reef near Swaziland.

The Zimbabwean fence is four times longer. Originating on a farm known as Eendvogelpan, 20 kilometres west of the Pontdrift border post on the Botswana border, it meanders in a westerly direction for 268 kilometres, to the northern Kruger Park border with Zimbabwe.

Inspired by Vito Acconci's cryptic walks and Bas Jan Ader's quixotic (and fatal, let's not forget) search for the miraculous, I spent a whole afternoon looking for the western origin of the Zimbabwe fence – because looking is proof, and finding something with your eyes very often contradicts what you are told. It was evening when I eventually found the underwhelming origin of the Zimbabwean fence. It begins (or ends, you decide) at a place between two small outcrops, very close to the Limpopo River, or rather near enough for you to hear it gurgle, the sound an invisible proof of life.

PHILLIP #2: The rules are simple: he phones me. Whenever I reciprocate, which is rare, the number I have for Phillip will be

out of service, defunct. Or a stranger's voice will tell that he is not Phillip, nor has he ever heard of him. Currently I have four numbers on my phone for Phillip. When I first wrote this piece in 2011, it was two. Had I kept all the numbers Phillip has used to contact me, the list would run to – oh, I don't know – maybe twenty, twenty-five, possibly more. Phillip usually calls at night, or on weekends; actually, there is no pattern. He calls when he feels like it. "It's me Phillip," he will say. Mostly he phones just to say hello. "How is Grahamstown," he recently asked. "I live in Cape Town, Phillip!" Oh, he will say and hurriedly ask how I am, how Paul and Marc are, two photographers I introduced to Phillip during my long years of not writing his biography, but merely reporting on his being. Sometimes he'll press me for money, or for some form of assistance, a job even. "I am writer," I tell him. "I don't employ people." I take from them, recycling their circumstances into a story.

Once, I can't remember when, Phillip called to say he'd read a piece I'd written about the musician Lucky Dube, who was shot and killed in 2007. Initial news reports suggested that the perpetrators were Mozambicans. In fact, only one of the three accused, Ludwa Gxowa, was Mozambican; Dube's killer

was in fact a South African, Sifiso Mhlanga. This is the life of the stranger, which is how I have come to think of Phillip, a stranger, not a refugee. In May 2008, during the height of the xenophobic violence that swept across South Africa, Phillip called again. His tone was urgent this time. People, he said, Zimbabweans and other foreigners living on the East Rand, were being butchered. He told me he loved me, adding that he didn't know what to do. Neither did I.

THE FENCE #3: Various known as the “kaftan”, “nabob” and “Norex” fence, and reportedly once nicknamed “snake of fire” by Mozambicans, South Africa’s border fence was the product of the security innovations and general culture of fear that characterised apartheid’s last decade. In 1980, responding to sabotage operations by the African National Congress, and enabled by the new Key Points Act – security legislation aimed at protecting strategic state assets – the power utility Eskom developed and installed 30 kilometres of lethal electrified fences at various facilities.

Initially all the hardware (poles, insulators and barbed wire coils) came from France, but as demand grew Eskom refined

a locally manufactured alternative. In an unpublished 1992 masters thesis archived in the library at the University of South Africa in Pretoria, business economics student Brian Barnes records the existence of 14 government-administered lethal electrical systems, 91 systems operated by state-owned corporations, and one large system in use at an unnamed private industrial concern. Asked about their objections to the use of these radical security systems, the majority of respondents told Barnes that their main concerns related to safety and legal considerations. Ethical considerations were described as “less important”.

PHILLIP #3: Phillip believes I have the power to help him. I doubt his faith. Recently he sent me a handwritten note. Transcribed in neat all-capitals script, it represents the first thirteen pages of his autobiography. “When we are born,” it begins, “everybody’s thought is to be free and happy during our term of living. We expect to enjoy the so-called fruits of lives.” Phillip wants me to find a TV producer who will turn his life story into a moving image. It has grim potential. Frustrated by the lack of opportunity in Zimbabwe and the routine beatings

administered by ZANU-PF thugs in the “rural area” where he spent his adolescence, he decided to head for South Africa. Along the way he met a group of six other young travellers. Arriving at Beit Bridge, these “partners in crime”, four of them women, hired a guide to show them how to get across the border illegally. “We couldn’t suspect something might be wrong with the guy who was supposed to take us into South Africa,” writes Phillip. After a three-kilometre walk, which included his first river crossing, he heard a loud whistle. Two men joined them.

“We kept on going and not far from us appeared what seems to be about twenty something men wearing in junk clothes and holding sharp pangas and sjamboks. We could feel we were in danger. We were told to strip everything we were wearing and surrender everything we were in possession of. Guma guma they were.” Confidence tricksters whose courtesies often belie darker motives. Outlaws. “They took everything we had and told us to go and work in South Africa and buy other clothes and cellphones. That was really bad experience even to notice the girls we were with being raped in full view of ourself.” South African police arrested the group of ragged travellers in Musina the following day. This is not when I met Phillip.

THE FENCE #4: In 1993, South Africa’s two border fences, which caused 89 deaths in a three-year period ending August 1989 – 47 deaths less than the total number of fatalities linked to the Berlin Wall between 1961 and 1989 – were switched to non-lethal alarm-mode. They are now entirely lacking current.

PHILLIP #4: He looks older. I didn’t recognise him seated by the roadside with his brother, outside the new City Lodge hotel, opposite the Pick ‘n Pay, waiting for me. “You look like a man now,” I say. We last met five, possibly six years ago.

“Of course, I am a man,” replies Phillip, smiling. He is wearing a sport coat, fashionably distressed blue denims, sneakers; his hair is cropped short. His brother, Wellington, also wears a branded sweater, taps on his Nokia phone, places it against his ear, which has a fake diamond stud in it. I suggest lunch. Phillip seems hesitant. He is worried who will foot the bill. Me, I say. We stand in front of the take-out counter at McDonald’s, but still he hesitates.

“Anywhere is fine,” I say. Phillip prefers Wimpy. He says he wants a dagwood.

“Where is my cellphone?” he asks.

“I forgot it in Cape Town.” It is the same answer I gave him on the phone yesterday. But still he came from Bela Bela, north of Pretoria – perhaps to see me, but also to tell me how hard things are, how after eight years he cannot get ahead. There is an implied solicitation in this sharing, a transferral of onus. I ask for a table for three. Phillip disappears. Toilet, his brother says. Fiona, our waitress, shows us to a booth with a red vinyl banquette. I offer to buy drinks. Coke, says Wellington, but when Fiona returns he changes the order to a Hunters Dry (for him) and Amstel (for Phillip, who has to settle for a substitute order of Windhoek). Pretoria Boys is playing KES on the television. Rugby. The real game is happening about two or three kilometres from where we are seated. Phillip asks who is paying for the beer? Me, I say. He keeps repeating himself, like he is nervous, or drunk, or mentally handicapped. Even his brother winces.

“She’s 65,” Wellington says, shaking his head when Phillip asks my mother’s age again.

There is no coherence to what we speak about, no narrative arc that goes from A to B to C.

“I love life,” he says. “I want to be somebody. But I am being held back.” He repeats this constantly. “I love you,” he adds. He has a girlfriend, he says. She is large.

“Over 100kg,” his brother says.

I point to a full-bodied woman walking past in tight tracksuit pants.

“Bigger,” his brother estimates.

“How many children do you have?” Phillip asks.

None.

“Why?” His laughter is an indictment. He has two, his son named Stanley, in memory of his older brother who “passed away”. He asks Wellington a question in his native Shona.

“TB,” translates Wellington.

Phillip tells me about his ambitions: he wants to be a truck driver, but he needs a Code 14 license. If he had R1500, he says, he could “organise one”.

“Why doesn’t your employer sponsor you?” I ask.

“They are afraid I will run away afterwards.”

Why doesn’t he get a license legally, I press him.

Because it costs three or four times the price of an illegal one.

But, he emphasises, he already knows how to drive a truck.

Although only a loader, he sometimes drives the large truck he works on when the driver wants to sleep.

“I want to be somebody. But I am being held back.”

I ask about his South African passport; he once told me that he had one. No, he responds, he has an asylum permit. “Ass-lum,” he pronounces the word.

Our conversation comes full circle. I have to go, I say. He wants a lift to Sunnyside. I stop outside a church closed off from the street by palisade fencing, give him a heavy jacket that once belonged to my grandfather, two fleece sweaters and a black jersey I bought in Treviso, Italy. Leftovers. He accepts them without thanks, asks if I have a plastic bag. He enquires after the phone. Will I send it to him? He also asks for money.

“You’re bleeding me dry,” I say, handing Phillip the last 70 rand in my wallet.

POSTSCRIPT: I have written about Phillip many times, again last year. My essay was published in a local newspaper. The piece quoted a well-known photographer who said that refugees are captured in limbo outside of time. Mostly, though, I wrote about Phillip, his statements, thoughts, speculations,

hopes, gestures, regrets and frustrations. He asked me to post him a copy of the article. My package with the newspaper and copies of Abrie Fourie’s book – featuring an earlier version of this essay – were returned undelivered a few months later. This disconnect is not unusual. I know Phillip will find me. And I will continue to write about him.

*Sandsteinbruch*, Steinbächle, Ilshofen, Baden-Württemberg, Germany, 2010





Hillcrest Swimming Pool, standard olympic pool, Hatfield, Pretoria, Gauteng, South Africa, 2007



Cinema theatre, Soweto, Gauteng, South Africa, 1995



Greenwich Street, Tribeca, New York, United States of America, 1999



Voortrekker Monument silhouette viewed from Nama Waru, Sunnyside, Pretoria, South Africa, 2000



Air Force Gymnasium, Valhalla, Pretoria, Gauteng, South Africa, 1999



Informal settlement, Olievenhoutbosch, Centurion, Tshwane, Gauteng, South Africa, 2002



Newtown, Johannesburg, Gauteng, South Africa, 2001



*Sporthalle*, Herrenhaus Lübbenow, Brandenburg, Germany, 2010



Johannesburg Art Gallery sign, King George Avenue, Johannesburg, Gauteng, South Africa, 2001



Along the R55, Olievenhoutbosch, Centurion, Tshwane, Gauteng, South Africa, 2003



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