

“INDISPUTABLE EVIDENCE THAT THE TRIP WAS MADE”
EKPHRASTIC POETRY AND AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL
FIDELITY

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Photographs by Gisela Ullyatt unless otherwise noted

*Poets in many eras and many cultures have cultivated the illusion
of a sincere voice revealing its intimate secrets.*
David Graham & Kate Sontag

1. Beginning

When I started writing ekphrastic poems, I didn't know that that was what I was doing. I knew nothing about its millenia-old tradition, its theoretical debates, or its creative potential. I had no idea that *ekphrasis* was the label attached to poems about artworks; the academic flood on the subject was not yet in full spate.

In those first poems, published in the mid-1970s, I was doing no more than putting on record my responses to my first encounters with works by the South African artists Judith Mason and Alexis Preller, with a single international nod to Picasso's *Don Quixote*, unaware that such responses had become one of the main functions of modern ekphrasis. At that juncture, the “voice” of the poem was autobiographically mine as far as I could make it.

It was 1989 before I wrote another ekphrastic piece, followed by two more eight years later; all of them based on photographs of one sort or another. (In some circles, photographs were not yet included as artworks. Nowadays, the definition is rather more accommodating.) Thereafter, nothing until 2011. In fact, I published no poetry of any sort between 2001 and 2011. That hiatus was the outcome of a need for time and space to discover another voice, another *modus operandi*. I had nothing to say and no satisfactory means of saying it. Silence was inevitable.

The decade-long silence came to an end in 2011, when my wife (a poet writing in Afrikaans) and I were invited to join Marjorie Human, the artist, in the *Allooi* 2011 Poetry/Art Exhibition as part of the *Volksblad* annual Arts Festival in Bloemfontein in South Africa's Free State province. The project sought to blend art and poetry in whatever creative ways the poets and the artists thought fit. The project focused our creative attention on what I was now coming to understand as ekphrasis.

Then, when ARAS Connections opened its Poetry Portal in 2012, I decided to risk a submission. I have been writing ekphrastic poetry steadily since then.

2. Autobiography and ekphrasis

Predictably, modern ekphrasis has been fraught with critical debates and academic skirmishes on the subject. However, as a poet and translator, I was less interested in theory and rather more concerned with the relationship between autobiography and ekphrasis as a practice. I'm one of those who believe that an individual's written output, in whatever genre, is always autobiographical to some extent. I mention this because it exemplifies the so-called "reveal vs. conceal" dilemma that poets face frequently, a dilemma made more complex by any intimate materials that they might want to explore poetically. Putting one's private life into a public arena, even the small one of poetry readership, is a matter of subtlety and caution rather than the in-your-face and stuff-the-consequences approach of some contemporary poets. Perhaps such writers have no wish to compromise their truth, no matter how brash or hurtful, for any sort of harmony, domestic or otherwise. Nonetheless, I feel that writers have an ethical responsibility not to malign those with whom they have shared private lives at one time or another.

Readers may recall the controversy surrounding Robert Lowell's volume, *The Dolphin* (1973). It earned a good deal of negative criticism, not only because he had quoted from his ex-wife's private letters, which critics regarded as a questionable practice in itself, but also because he had actually *altered* their content. In a letter to him, his friend, Elizabeth Bishop, called it "infinite mischief", asking if he wasn't "violating a trust". She states unequivocally: "*art just isn't worth that much.*" And many agreed with her.

In an essay titled “Self-Pity”, which appears in Kate Sontag and David Graham’s wonderful book of essays, *After Confession: Poetry as Autobiography*, Carol Frost argues that “All poetry is autobiographical in its revelations of the motions a mind makes. The hesitations, detours, innuendos, spirals of lies and truths, as a person remembers or invents, are as essentially personal as the face of that person’s life” (Sontag & Graham 2001:172). It follows then that even a lie is autobiographically true.

While in the main I concur with this, I have distinct reservations about some contemporary “confessional” poetry that resorts to expressing or, in some cases, overworking the grinding banality of human existence. Sometimes, I am left wondering if there has been that much more to say after Henry David Thoreau’s “Most men lead lives of quiet desperation and go to the grave with the song still in them.” Even with the song liberated, the pervasiveness of this desperation, whether quiet or raucous, often remains.

Another piece in Sontag and Graham’s collection is “My Grandfather’s Tackle Box” by Billy Collins. This is the second sentence: “As far as I know, my grandfather never had a tackle box, and if he did, somebody must have thrown it out.” Towards the end of his essay, Collins reports on events at a workshop he “oversaw.” This extract is singularly insightful, and characteristic of Collins’s inimitable style:

... a loose discussion of memory and poetry arrived at a sound but familiar conclusion: poetry is not bound by ties of historical truth; it must be true only to its own aesthetic integrity. As long as a poem is a good poem, what’s the difference if it is true to fact or not? And, yes, the lowest defence for a poem is that it actually happened. Lots of nodding round the table. But then I asked the group how they would feel if I told them that Sharon Olds’ father was not really dead. True, she had devoted an entire collection (*The Father*) to her father’s dying and death. True, the book is a startling series of poems that pushes the elegy into new psychic territory. But in fact, her father is living in Phoenix where he plays golf three or four times a week with his buddies. Mr. Olds, I happened to know, was a 17 handicap. Even though I presented this as pure hypothesis, I could feel a sudden drop in the room temperature, a barometric shift. The students were more than a little stunned even to consider such a possibility. My inner elf urged me to continue. What if I told you – I told them – that Philip Levine, so widely and justifiably celebrated for addressing working-class life in poetry – was not raised in Detroit at all but in Beverly Hills, the son of a wealthy orthodontist no less – make that the orthodontist to the stars! The students begged me to stop. Even on this level of fancy, they felt a sense of betrayal.

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Towards the end of Collins' piece, he notes that students “agreed that Olds’ and Levine’s poems would be just as powerful if invention were their only mother, but they were now forced to admit that they also wanted the poems to be true in some reliable and ingenuous sense. When all the chips were pushed into the center of the table, they didn’t want to hear about ‘the speaker’ or ‘textual distance.’ They wanted to believe in a real Sharon, a real Phil – a human source” (Sontag & Graham 2001: 90).

On occasion, I have found monitoring student examinations to be a curiously creative time. Some years ago, I was doing the usual eagle-eyed checking for cheaters and their ilk when a short imagist-like poem, uninvited, came to my mind. I jotted it on the classroom whiteboard while I could remember it, and, after the exam was done, copied it onto a scrap of paper. It is about my dead brother. The few people to whom I have shown it find it quite moving, and are deeply sympathetic about my loss, noting that they have never actually heard me mention my brother before, presuming that I preferred not to speak about it while they decided, courteously, not to enquire. The truth is: I am an only child. When told this, they then ask the question: “So how can you write about something you’ve had no experience of?” Their tone varies from “How is that possible?” to an overt “How dare you?” Whatever their tone, I suspect that they felt a sense of betrayal similar to that experienced by Billy Collins’s students. And yet, at the beginning of the discussion of his workshop, we learn that “... a loose discussion of memory and poetry arrived at a sound but familiar conclusion: poetry is not bound by ties of historical truth”.

Then whence their sense of betrayal?

Also in this same collection of essays, another writer, Ted Kooser argues that, as far as he is concerned, “It is despicable to exploit the trust the reader has in the truth of lyric poetry in order to gather undeserved sympathy to oneself” (Sontag & Graham 2001:161). Is truth an integral part of what Helen Dubrow has called the generic contract between writer and reader? Why does Kooser insist that a book of lyric poems not only ought to, but *must*, contain a significant measure of honesty or trust, fact or truth? Whence Kooser’s assumption that readers are, or should feel, entitled

to “the truth” in lyric poetry? Of course, truth is not necessarily a synonym for fact. (In passing, the phrase, “alternative facts”, has been adopted very quickly here in South Africa, especially when issues of corruption are raised.)

Certainly I did not write “To my dead brother” to gather undeserved sympathy for myself, nor to betray a reader’s trust, nor to tamper with anyone’s sensibilities, delicate or otherwise. I committed it to paper as a record of a rare and startling creative experience that took place in a classroom one day when a brief poem came into my consciousness whole, intact, and unsought. Does that make me despicable and untrustworthy as a poet, and, if so, why? I construed the experience as perhaps reflecting what Jung has to say about the creative process when he writes: “The creative process, so far as we are able to follow it at all, consists in the unconscious activation of an archetypal image, and in elaborating and shaping this image into the finished work” (Jung, CW volume 15). Was it a manifestation of an unconscious and unfulfilled need, as an only child, to have a brother?

It has also crossed my mind that in his argument Kooser might be advocating a modest form of censorship. Consequently, I thought it might be quite informative to work through an ekphrastic poem in some detail, to illustrate how autobiography (as part of a response to an artwork) might be interwoven into the ekphrastic process.

3. Autobiography in the making of an ekphrastic poem

Many years ago, I wrote a poem, entitled rather unimaginatively, “Photograph taken on the road from Beaufort West”*. I make no claims for its quality now--it was written more than three decades ago when my writing and I were in a different place -- but it serves as a useful example.

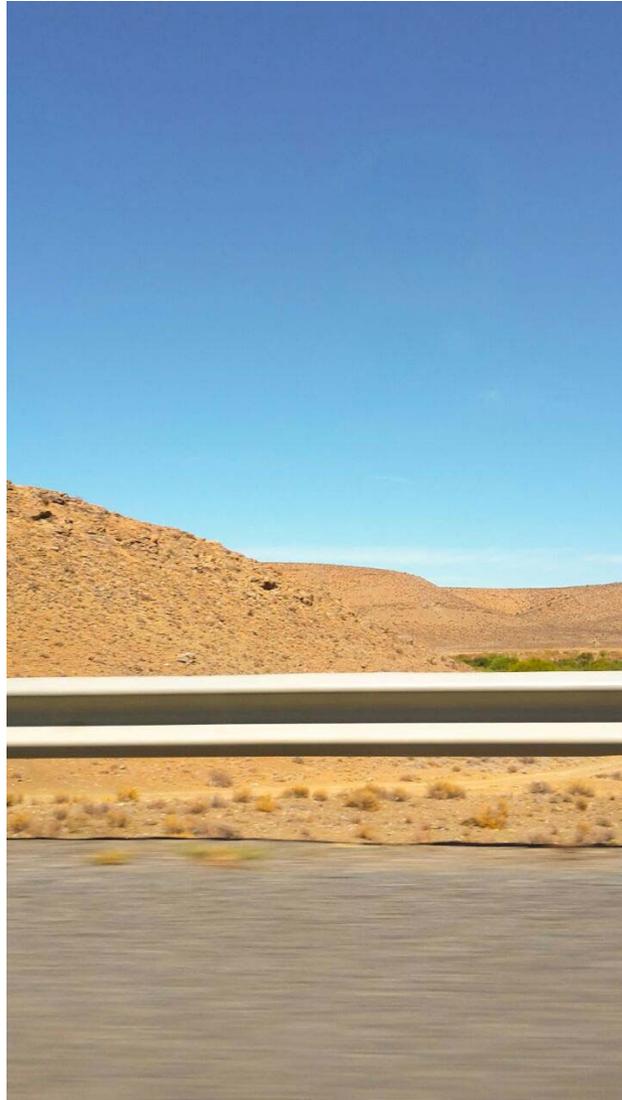
* Beaufort West is the largest town in the South African Great Karoo plateau, although it has a population of only 30,000 or so. It is the centre of a vast sheep-farming district, and suffers extremes of summer heat and winter cold. The road referred to cuts diagonally across South Africa in a south-west/north-east direction for more than 1600 kilometres, from Cape Town in the south via [Bloemfontein](#), [Johannesburg](#), [Pretoria](#), and [Polokwane](#) to [Beit Bridge](#) on the [Zimbabwean](#) border in the north.



A quotation from Susan Sontag serves as an epigraph: “Photographs will offer indisputable evidence that the trip was made” (1982:9). In a certain way, a photograph raises questions about the re-presentation of what we call the reality phase of the ekphrastic process (or to what Siglind Bruhn calls “a primary representation of [the real world] in visual form) --as a painting, drawing, photograph, carving, sculpture, etc-- or, for that matter, in film or dance ... i.e. in any mode that reaches us primarily through our visual perception.” (It is important to remember that, when this poem was written, the age of digital photography had not yet arrived in this part of the world.) The second ekphrastic re-presentation phase focuses on the translation or transformation of the visual, the artwork into the verbal, the ekphrastic poem.

My poem's opening lines attempt to evoke the summer's relentless ferocity in that part of South Africa; they are essentially descriptive:

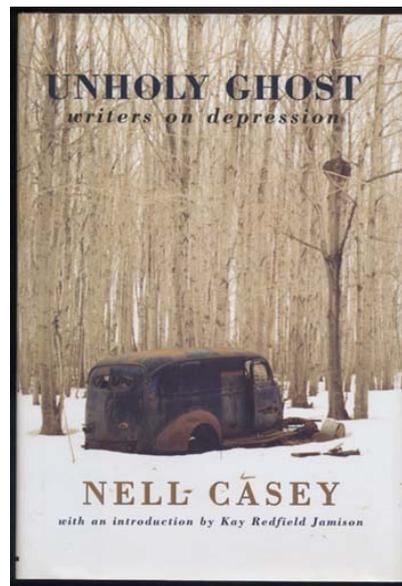
The sun is always too generous here,
knowing nothing of moderation's ways
or the manner of temperate regions.



A quick perusal of an annual temperature chart will confirm the fact of that reality. In addition to the pervasive, persistent heat of the Karoo at that time of year, distances between its sparsely-scattered small towns are often quite substantial, a fact apparent in lines 4-6:

Fifty or sixty kilometres out
of Richmond on the road from Beaufort West:
the remnants of a double-decker bus.

The presence of an abandoned double-decker bus at the side of the road in mid-Karoo struck me as distinctly anomalous, not least because the old-fashioned double-decker buses (similar to those found in London at the time) were not used on long-distance routes in this part of the world. By the 1970s, the double-decker bus with the open rear-platform had, to all intents and purposes, ceased to operate, even in urban South Africa. The bus's presence was as evocative and troubling as a Joel Sternfeld photograph such as this:



The skeletal body of the bus had no glass, no tires, no seats, and was already rusted quite extensively. It had obviously been there for a good while. Its location in the poem--inexact to within ten kilometres from Richmond--was intended as no more than a reminder of approximately where I had noticed the vehicle (a) for my creative purposes later, and (b) for readers who, travelling that road, might also notice it, and be struck by its incongruity.

Now, with the benefit of hindsight, it seems significant that I chose to omit in the poem my place of departure. It was more an unconscious decision than a deliberate one, although future events (associated with this journey) would, had they been included, probably explain that omission symbolically or psychologically. The image of the desolate, abandoned vehicle evoked deep-seated psychological resonances in

me at the time, but those circumstances seemed inappropriate to the poem. I was unwilling to put my private life “out there” as doing so might betray deeply personal matters. So, despite the strength and immediacy of those emotions, I chose to suppress them. I mention this to show how the poem might have been entirely different. So, instead a confessional stance, I sought explanations in other, less intimate possibilities:

Lacking evidence of any mishap,
it appears to have come to a standstill
according to some new law of motion
and rest, a physics of fortuity.

Ex Africa semper aliquid novi? * Perhaps there was a sense that my life at that time, caught up in “some new law of motion / and rest”, was coming to a similar, incongruous standstill.

Could the riffling grass be its intended
destination or merely one deserved?

Breaking the line after the word “intended” created a temporary ambiguity - resolved by the first word of the next line - about the eventual marriage of disintegrating wreck and nature, a *coniunctio* of sorts, the masculinity of the bus forcing itself upon nature’s femininity. And why would the bus’s stopping-place be deserved? Did it point to something, perhaps unconscious, that I deserved? The questions were not unanswerable, I knew, but they remained unanswered. I tried another line of enquiry, hoping that route might yield results, but it didn’t.

The bus bears no myth or local legend:
no one remembers its arriving
though everyone recalls its being here.

[*Always something new out of Africa]



Myths and archetypes have long been integral to my academic and creative work, but, in this instance, proved a cul-de-sac. The preceding lines imply that I sought out local inhabitants for answers to those elusive questions. That is a fabrication necessary for the poem. I did no such thing.

The text's focus then tightens onto what might be construed as the central image:

A child standing beside the squatting wreck
 holds a flower bouqueted with wild grasses;
 she is waiting for no one to arrive;
 tousled by the wind, she hears the spirits
 sighing and soughing as they meander
 through obdurate steel and glassless windows.

So is the child a fiction, too? On the contrary, the first two lines of this extract are as factual as memory allows, apart from the flower. There was no flower, only wild grasses. Then fact and fiction interweave. She was tousled by the wind - a fact - but whether her waiting was aimless as the image suggests, I had no way of knowing. It was an attribution that seemed congruent with the magnificent emptiness and ancient solitude of the place. The local people might well be waiting for someone to

come to alleviate the barrenness, but why would anyone stop at that bleak inhospitable place, anyway? The paradox was epitomised by my own presence.

Of course, I had no way of knowing if she heard, or was hearing, the spirits. What spirits might they be? I have had a vague, nebulous awareness of a *genius loci* in various places over the years, but wondered if it might be a projection of my own experience in that specific place.



Perhaps it was wish fulfilment on my part. Perhaps it was a psychological need to feel at one with the place and the moment. Even so, I was equally aware of a deep-seated feeling of being what Wallace Stevens calls “a most inappropriate man / In a most unpropitious place”. The feeling Stevens’s words capture so impeccably has been recurrent throughout my life, because of the peripatetic life I have lived since childhood: India, Sudan, Kenya, Swaziland, New Zealand, Zimbabwe, and South Africa; my life’s foundations shifting constantly. I have always been the outsider,

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l'étranger, the Other as far as local populations and local languages were concerned. This is a situation Peter Bland captures succinctly in the opening lines of his poem, “Advice to Immigrants”:

For the rest of your life
 there'll be two sets of voices –
 those in the street
 and those in your head.
 When they meet
 then you'll be 'at home'.

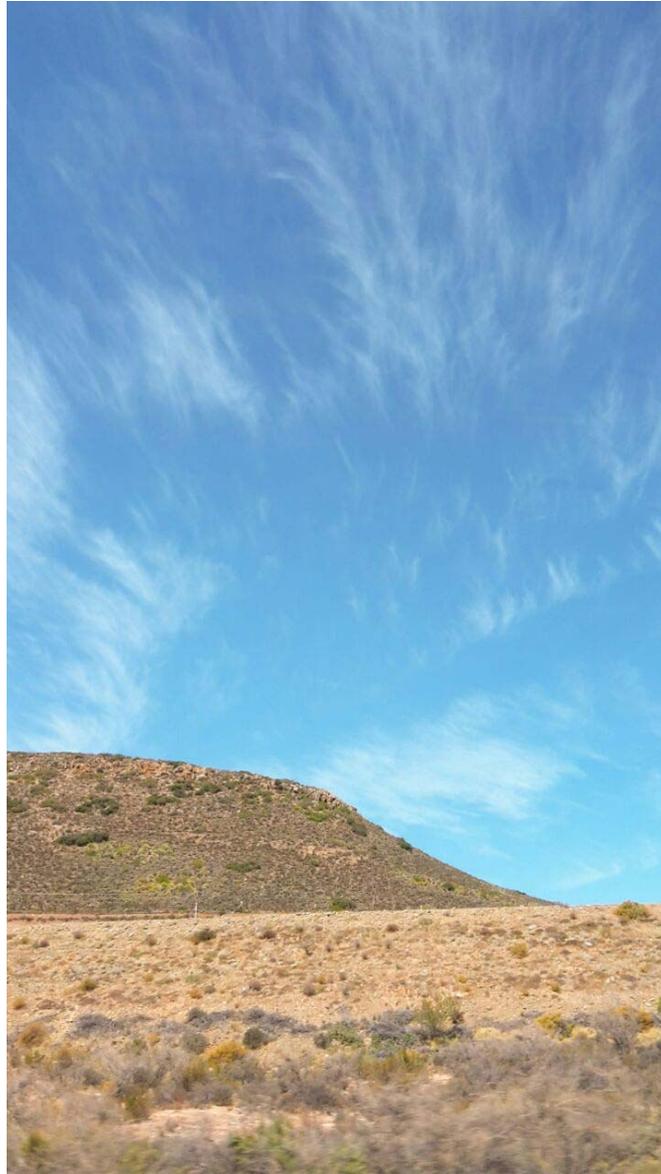
The last two lines of this stanza (and, most specifically, in the word “When” rather than “If”) assume that those two voices will indeed meet. But what if they never do? Is a sense of perpetual deracination the inevitable consequence?

The dilapidated bus also evoked the birth-life-death cycle we are all caught up in, here captured in nature's inexorable onslaught:

Observe the quite exquisite refinement
 of nature's alchemy indulging in
 the miraculous turn of gross matter
 to pure beauty: neat flowers, their petals
 ablaze clinging to the degenerate rust.

I wanted to express my own delight in nature's powerful processes, so I deployed words like “exquisite refinement” and the “miraculous turn”, as they triumphed over man-made “gross matter” and “degenerate rust”. In addition, and in a more general, abstract way, I also wanted to tie this image to other strange but provocative vignettes I had experienced in Africa. Hence the next two lines, another nod at the notion of archetypes, perhaps.

the textures of Africa engender
 their own particular surrealism.



Ex Africa again?

The African-ness of the landscape is sustained briefly in the metonymy of the word, “kopje” in the next lines:

Nearby, a kopje* bulges big-bellied
from the hot ground’s undulating brownness.

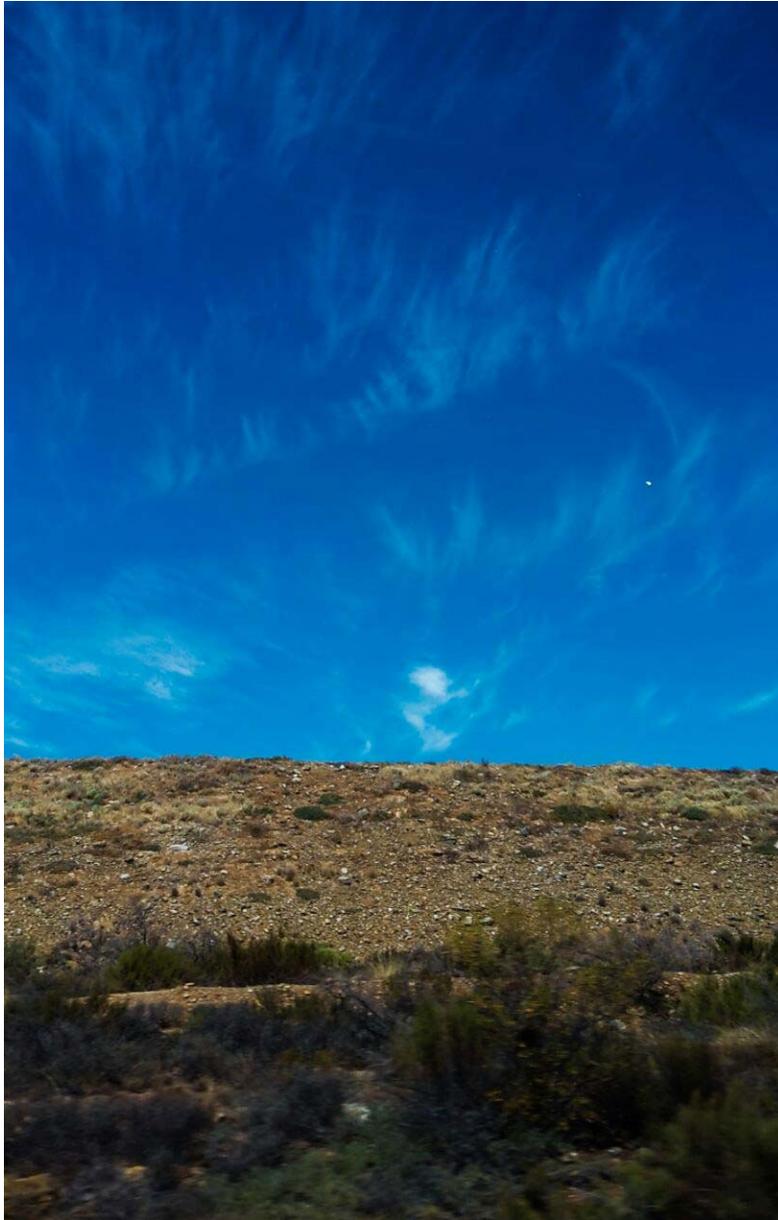
*[a small rocky hill rising abruptly from a plain]

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Evening's onset presented an end to the day's journey as well as a feasible conclusion to the poem:

Surly with reluctance, the day's remnants
loiter awhile then move on quietly
at dusk's insistence. Stragglers to the west,
a few skeins of grey cloud draw night over.



Obviously, I did not loiter there at the side of the road watching dusk arrive; I had miles to go before I slept, the unforgiving heat notwithstanding. By the time I noticed the skeins of grey cloud in the early evening sky, I was close to the Trompsburg off-ramp, three or four hundred kilometres away from the bus.

Autobiographically speaking, everything I included in the poem has happened to me, at some time or another during my life, but not necessarily on this occasion. For example, I have indeed stopped and made enquiries of the local people on occasion,

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but that has been in other places and/or at other times. So: these events in this poem are historically factual in the sense they are part of my lived experience, but they are fictional because they are not historically true about the precise events of that moment on my journey. I have spliced in images drawn from other journeys when they seemed apposite to the poem's subject. For me, the issue of autobiography in poetry, whether ekphrastic or otherwise, is less about facts, accuracy, and historical verifiability, and more about a sense of authenticity through which the poet adds something genuine and, in some way, familiar (even if imagined) to the boundless reservoir of human experience.



Two closing comments about the poem are necessary now. Travelling that road again in November 2015, I noticed that neither the bus nor any remnants of it were visible. Apparently, after three decades, nature has had her way. Consequently, it is no longer possible to offer any tangible evidence of the bus's existence. So how might that fact bring the autobiographical dimension of the text into question? Might that

trouble readers in search of truth or verification? Perhaps, as Susan Sontag suggests, “Photographs will offer indisputable evidence that the trip was made.”

Earlier, I mentioned Billy Collins’s essay in which he suggests that “the lowest defence for a poem is that it actually happened.” So here is my poem’s defence. I did drive the Beaufort-Richmond road in the 1980s; there was a ruined bus; there was a girl beside it; there was, and still is, a kopje; and the Karoo weather remains merciless. But there never was a photograph.

