

Erin Jones

Cape Town, South Africa

GOOD MORNING

It starts with a hot sun ray oozing languidly over my face.

I open my eyes, an awakening, and take note of my failure last night to pull the heavy blue curtains all the way across the windows which occupy an entire wall of my room. I view my alarm clock; the face is partially obscured by a black digital liquid which follows the cracks that appeared last week when I dropped it violently (and accidentally) on the hard wooden tile floor. I see that the hour is 7, and the minute begins with something that has an L-shaped bottom left corner.

I have time, all of it. This alarm clock situation is freeing, my new-agey self thinks philosophically. A broken alarm clock reminds me that clocks do not embody time, but merely describe it; time does not, in fact, exist. The clock is useful because it tells me the hour but refrains from impolitely troubling me with the minute.

I won't fix it.

I can hear, from my bed, the street five stories below: the heavy, out-of-breath diesel buses which pass my *res* (dorm) en-route to downtown from the townships, the private cars which I cannot see from here but which I know are small and European- and Asian-made, and the minibus taxis honking at potential customers on the sidewalk as their front-seat passengers screech destinations: *Mowbray, Wynberg, Waterfront*. I hear also people, and I know that the teenagers are walking to (public) school in blue or green uniforms: sensible shoes, button-down shirts, vests, blazers, sweaters, berets, knee-length skirts for girls and crisply ironed pants for boys.

A month ago this cacophony would have been merely that, an indistinguishable wall of African city sound. Now, though, it is navigable, identifiable, almost friendly and familiar.

I want to tell you every detail, but I don't know how.

I don't know how to tell you that I dress in cotton skirts because in this heat denim sticks to your skin like a sweaty hand, and yet by evening I am shivering for want of a sweater. I don't know how to tell you that I haven't seen my whole body all at once in weeks, since the mirror in our bathroom shows only my face and part of my shoulders, with rust spots obscuring my chin. I don't know how to tell you outside my bedroom window I see only the balcony with stained tile and paint-chipped metal rails, and beyond that the sky, which at 7:00 am is already thoroughly ablaze with sun.

I don't know how to tell you about the people. I never know how to tell you about the people who are able to view my skin from the red underside. But the others: the professor whose father died before he found the cure for an illness no one's ever heard of, the township secondary-school kid who knows more about American politics than most Americans, the girl you sit next to on the bus who tells you about her struggles with religion versus spirituality.

These people, too, are seeping through to wherever it is inside of me that good people go.

And then there is everything else.

There is the beige institutional metal condom dispenser in every thinkable and unthinkable location inside campus buildings, especially *res*: on stair landings, in bathrooms, in the laundry room. There is the anonymous government HIV test in class with accompanying survey, testing the prevalence and knowledge of the disease in universities. There is the rumor that somewhere in rural places there is cholera, TB, and sick, poor people I have never seen.

There is Zimbabwe.

There is the broken alarm clock which is like the broken elevator and the cracked tile and the missing bricks and the gate that needs oil. Things do not get fixed, and people seem unperturbed. Meals last hours, and people seem unperturbed. When the elevator is broken you take the stairs, two at a time. When the bricks are missing you skip over them. When the gate creaks you know the bus is here. When the food is slow in coming you drink wine and you talk about souls.

When your alarm clock breaks you don't fix it because if you did, the elevator might work and the bricks might return and the gate might go silent and the food might come quickly. Then your legs would be weak and your agility would be compromised and you would miss the bus and you would never talk about souls.

There is life and there is Africa, all on the same plane, and there at their intersection is a broken clock.