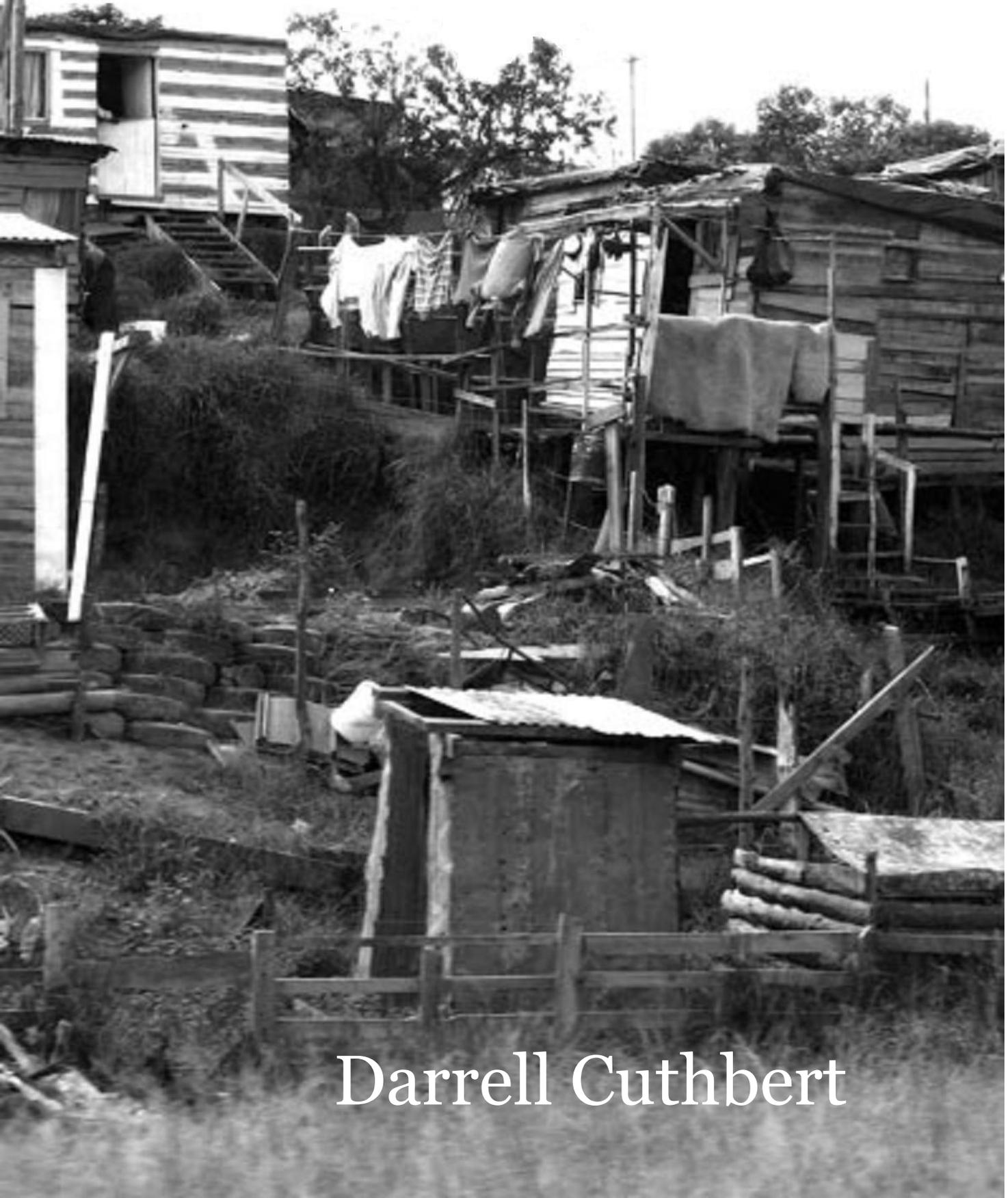


The Verbal Squatter

A Collection of South African Short Stories



Darrell Cuthbert

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Author's Note: Why the Verbal Squatter?

A squatter is one who takes possession of a place not his own, then settles and makes his home there. Sadly squatting has become an increasingly common phenomenon in South Africa in recent times, due to economic hardship, unemployment and increased urbanisation. Settlements of shacks are to be seen near many suburbs as people seek to make a home for themselves, however rudimentary.

Without making light of the suffering of the inhabitants, driving past one such settlement en route to work everyday gave me a useful analogy in a rare flash of coherent thought.

I usually find inspiration for fictional stories in somebody else's life, or an event around me. So in a sense I take someone else's story and squat on it, grabbing the original territory and building on it as I choose with words and sentences instead of wood and metal.

My hope is that you enjoy reading these stories as much as I did writing them.

Note: Translations of local / slang terms appearing in italics can be found in the glossary at the back of the book.

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The Two-Second Smile

Thabo walked down the line of cars waiting at the traffic light, trying to make eye contact with the drivers.

He found that he sold more newspapers if he could somehow connect with his potential customers. If they returned his glance he gave them one of his cheerful two-second smiles while allowing his eyes to drop towards the front-page headlines.

If the occupant of the car followed his gaze downwards he would move closer to the window to give them a better look at the news of the day. If he got this far he usually made a sale.

If they did not respond within the two seconds he moved on. He could not waste time on people who dithered. The light would change to green soon and the cars would move away to be replaced by a fresh batch of prospects.

There was not a lot of money to be made this way but it was better than begging. At least he had something to take home at the end of the day with which to buy food.

Every day he stood like this in the traffic, from the beginning of the morning rush hour to the end of the evening one.

It was that time now as the traffic began to thin out

Busted

“Arrogant idiot!” muttered James Huntingdon-Smythe to himself, “And an even bigger sycophantic idiot that published this garbage”

He threw the paper down on his mahogany desk in disgust.

“Just like the Vuvuzela to take our rejects and make a big song and dance out of it like it was their idea in the first place. Talk about blowing your own horn!”

He shoved the previous evening’s Vuvuzela along with the other rival newspapers which he checked first thing every morning to one side of his desk and flicked the intercom button.

“Tracey, get Dirk in here now please.”

“Right away sir.”

While he waited he picked up the paper again and read the article with annoyance. He had just started the last paragraph when a knock at the door disturbed him,

“Come in.”

Dirk took a deep breath and entered. His editor was known for his vacillating and sometimes stormy temper. A summons at short notice was enough to make any young journalist afraid of the reason.

“Sit!” barked James at him, “Look at this garbage!”

He tossed the paper in the general direction of Dirk, swivelled in his chair and sat glaring out of the window while Dirk read the front-page article and

Gangsters Paradise

Jeanette screamed.

“Hey, what do you think you’re doing?!”

The brown eyes met hers for a brief mocking moment and then he was off, sprinting down the driveway with her handbag held in his left hand like a baton.

He ran between the electric sliding gate and the cement pillar, disturbing the safety beam. The gate stopped its slow progress, paused for a moment as if reflecting and then trundled back the way it had come. Her shocked stare down the road was interrupted by the sound of puffing and panting. She half-turned and saw the squat, kindly frame of Petros heading towards her with difficulty.

“*Hawu* madam, this *tsotsis* are everywhere nowadays.”

“Did you see what happened?”

“Yes madam, he was hiding behind the bush outside. When you opened the gate and drove in he ran in behind the car. Then when you got out to open the garage he opened the passenger door and grabbed your handbag. I saw everything madam, but I couldn’t get off the scaffolding fast enough to grab him, I’m sorry.”

She smiled down at the man they had hired to build an extension to the house. He was a good, if unsophisticated man.

“Thanks Petros, I’m glad you tried to help. Now what? My cellphone is in my bag, and my purse,

The Weekend

"Hey Sally, where are last month's sales stats?"

"Probably on your desk Al, I gave them to you last week."

"Oh."

From the office next door came the sound of papers being shuffled.

"Got it", called Al triumphantly.

He came through the doorway. "Won't you find out from Bill's secretary what time he is going out for lunch?"

"OK." Sally made the call and then went to give the information to her boss.

"Good I'll go up and sneak the report into his in-tray while he's out."

Sally returned to her desk and wondered how someone so careless and incompetent had made it as far as Sales Manager. Perhaps the office grapevine was correct and he had only been promoted because he was married to the younger sister of one of the directors. There was speculation that he had only married her to advance his career.

The total lack of respect and caring with which he spoke to his wife seemed to support this gossip, Sally had been appalled on the few occasions she had overheard him on the telephone with her. How any woman could stay married to that pig she didn't know. In addition to his incompetence, for which she often had to cover up, he was always hitting on her. Talk in the ladies bathroom indicated that she was not

Kidnapped

“...and what was the reaction from our saviour and king brothers and sisters. Did he condemn? Did he accuse? Did he rage? No, he silently reached down towards the ground. Many watching may have assumed he was feeling for a stone with which to begin the punishment. Instead brothers and sisters, he pointed his forefinger and wrote, yes wrote in the sand. What he wrote we will never know in this life, maybe never in eternity. Then he told the Pharisees that the law did indeed decree that the woman caught in adultery should be stoned to death, but that the one amongst them who had no sin in his own life would have to throw the first stone. This surprised them, shocked them, angered them, but they said nothing and quietly left. Maybe they grumbled amongst themselves, but still they left. The woman was as shocked as they and may have wondered if Jesus was planning to enforce judgement on her all on his own. Instead of judgement he gave her forgiveness, but also a stern warning to sin no more. The truth we learn here is this, the law is the law, but grace can overcome the law.”

During this last sentence *Dominee* Douw Pieterse came out from behind the pulpit which he had a paragraph ago thumped with the palm of his hand to emphasise the tension of the scene described. Behind the pulpit he represented the law, but out in the open with his hands spread wide and a benevolent smile on his face he represented grace. Slightly theatrical it

Murder on the Platteland Express

Sir Horace Philby squinted at the newspaper spread open before him. A headline proclaiming, *Horse and Trailer Overturn on Busy Freeway*, was the subject of his scrutiny. He looked up at his granddaughter Anne with a question mark shaped frown,

“For goodness sake, why do they allow animals on the freeway in the first place? No wonder there are so many road accidents in South Africa.”

Anne turned from the view of Krugersdorp passing by outside and explained, as patiently as she could, that it was not actually a horse that had overturned. It was a truck, also called a mechanical horse. Sir Horace looked at his youngest grandchild with a puzzled look that revealed his still shaky understanding. Anne responded with a half-smile, mentally shaking her head and telling herself that the old boy was really losing it.

Why he had insisted on riding the train to Cape Town instead of flying she really could not fathom. He seemed to be caught up in a world of his own where he believed that trains were romantic and planes just a modern nuisance. Anne much preferred the speed and convenience of flying. As a busy urbanite businesswoman from northern Johannesburg she did not list 26 hours of rattle and shake in a small compartment among her favourite pastimes. They were less than an hour into the journey and she feared it would be a long trip indeed. Still, she shouldn't

The Tall One

Jane stood nervously on the edge and gazed down at the majestic Howick Falls, Nogqaza the Zulu call it - The Tall One. She looked over the lip at the kilolitres of water plummeting down into the abysmal pool below, a river plucked from meandering by gravity and hurled, boiling and frothing, over the cliff.

Standing on the rocky parapet Jane sensed the phenomenon that made some people feel compelled to throw themselves over the edge of a cliff. Perhaps the accident that had claimed the ferryman's son all those years ago had not been so accidental after all. Perhaps the young man had felt compelled to release the bridle, slip off his mount and drift with the current over the edge. Maybe the subject of the first recorded death at the falls actually wanted to fly from the cliff and leave the world behind.

Looking into the large pool at the base of the falls surrounded by a myriad of lesser minions, she reflected how cool and inviting the water looked.

Jane resisted the urge to leap and instead retraced her steps to the car park, knowing that she would return soon. The majesty and mystery of the place had struck a hook deep into her soul. Howick is by no means the greatest of the country's falls, but few others are as steeped in lore and legend. From rumours and legends of fearsome reptilian inhabitants to new-age assertions of convergent ley lines, the place has a slightly ethereal quality that belies its close proximity to the national route from Durban to

Aliens

“Miss Voyant, welcome. We’ve heard a lot about you and are delighted to have you here with us.”

“Thank you very much, but please call me Claire.”

The lodge manager smiled at the young woman. He had initially had some reservations about taking a booking for a paranormal convention, especially on the same weekend as a prominent bank’s annual conference. He had half-expected the convention organiser to be an old hag in a black cape, possibly with a pet bat or something. The thought of some freaky witch-types mixing with a collection of conservative bankers was a little disturbing.

To his surprise Claire seemed very normal and sweet. Hopefully the rest of the delegates were as nice. She was a minor local celebrity after helping the police solve some high-profile murder and kidnapping cases. Having her host a convention at the lodge was good publicity.

He surveyed the reception area that was filled with a mixed and milling group of people that seemed to swell by the minute. Paranormal delegates, bankers and local tourists up for the weekend all blended into an excited chattering troop. The sight of several game-viewing vehicles outside and the notice near the door advertising lion feeding created an expectant atmosphere amongst the guests, many of whom were hoping to see lots of game up close during their stay. The private game reserve and lodge was a popular destination for locals and foreign tourists alike,

Jackpot

Six million. Six Million!

Tom could not get the number out of his head.

His problems were over. He could settle all of his debt, buy a new house and car and invest the rest.

They would never have to struggle financially ever again. They could have a lifestyle they had only ever dreamed of.

But his problems were not over, they were only beginning. Now he faced the problem of how to tell his wife. Jenny had made it abundantly clear on many occasions that she did not approve of the lottery. She regarded it as a state sponsored way to rip off poor and struggling people.

Sporadic press articles reporting how little of the money collected was actually finding its way to the supposed charitable beneficiaries rather than administrators and politicians with deep pockets only served to reinforce her opposition.

Whenever Tom mused out loud how nice it would be to win a lot of money Jenny was quick to voice her opinion that money not earned through hard work was not worth having. She was always pointing out that wealth gained suddenly would not make him happy.

Secretly Tom thought that being poor was not a guaranteed pathway to happiness either. Besides if he were going to be unhappy, he would rather be rich and unhappy than poor and unhappy. His current life was not exactly filled with ecstasy.

Winding his way home Tom still could not decide

Suspicious Behaviour

“What’s that?”

“Where?”

“Over there. There’s some sort of flashing light. May be a signal to somebody.”

Lieutenant Johnny Delport, Alpha Team leader, looked again through his binoculars to verify his first impression. Satisfied that it was not just his imagination he said,

“Take a line from us to John Ross House, there’s a long low block of flats about 500 metres to the left. Second window from the left side, I’d say fourth or fifth floor.”

“Got it”, confirmed Bernie Williams. As the senior customs agent on the joint police / customs task unit that was currently investigating the entry of suspected contraband cigarettes to South Africa via Durban Harbour he worked very closely with Johnny. Their intelligence so far indicated that the cigarettes were of Zimbabwean origin and were being moved overland through Mozambique to the coast north-east of the South African border. From there they suspected that the contraband was being sneaked in via fishing boats that regularly entered and exited the harbour, often in the middle of the night.

Pirating of big international brands with cheaply and illegally produced cigarettes made from local tobacco was becoming commonplace and a headache for both law enforcement agencies and the health authorities. The finished product was increasingly to

The Plot

"Oh no", thought Ken, "There's that motor-mouth Clive."

Clive was one of the few colleagues with whom Ken did not get along well. His sheer arrogance and relentless sales pitching, even when away from the office, were overpowering. Silently hoping that Clive would not notice him Ken slipped into one of the folding chairs near the back of the room.

He was disappointed. Clive stood on one side of the room, rotating slowly and looking up and down the rows of chairs. His gaze landed on Ken he so he grinned and called out,

"Kenny, Howzit." He swaggered across the room and hurled himself into the empty chair next to Ken.

"Mind if I sit here?" he asked, rhetorically since he was already seated.

Actually Ken did mind. He minded having his personal space invaded, he minded being forced to spend time with Clive and most of all, he minded being called "Kenny".

He would much rather have been left alone to concentrate on the development launch due to start in a few minutes. However he was not the type to complain or be rude. He merely acknowledged Clive vaguely and concentrated on reading the promotional material that he had been handed at the door.

A man, who appeared to be in charge of the launch, stepped up to the lectern at the front of the room, switched on the microphone and began

Glossary of Local and Slang Terms:

<i>ATM</i>	Auto Teller Machine (cash point)
<i>Apartheid</i>	Policy of racial segregation practiced in South Africa from 1948 to 1994
<i>Bakkie</i>	Light pick-up truck
<i>Bliksem</i>	Rascal
<i>Bru</i>	Literally, brother. Used as a generic form of casual address
<i>East Rand</i>	Area on the eastern side of Greater Johannesburg. Predominantly workingclass / industrial
<i>Dof</i>	Dull / Stupid
<i>Dominee</i>	Minister (religious, in the main/traditional Afrikaans churches)
<i>Dop</i>	Alcohol
<i>Dronk</i>	Drunk (Afrikaans)
<i>Hawu</i>	General term of amazement / exclamation (Zulu).
<i>Ja</i>	Yes (Afrikaans)
<i>Lekker</i>	Nice
<i>Lightie</i>	Small boy / youngster
<i>Pap</i>	Stiff cooked maize meal
<i>Platteland</i>	Rural area (Lit. flat land. So used due to most of South Africa's rural farming areas lying on the flat plateau-like hinterland.)
<i>Skelm</i>	Crook / criminal
<i>Tsotsi</i>	Young gangster
<i>Umngqusho</i>	Samp and beans
<i>Veld</i>	Open land or bush
<i>Verkrampste</i>	Narrow minded / intolerant

Translation of Back Cover Latin Quote:

Ex Africa semper aliquid novi – Always something new out of (from) Africa

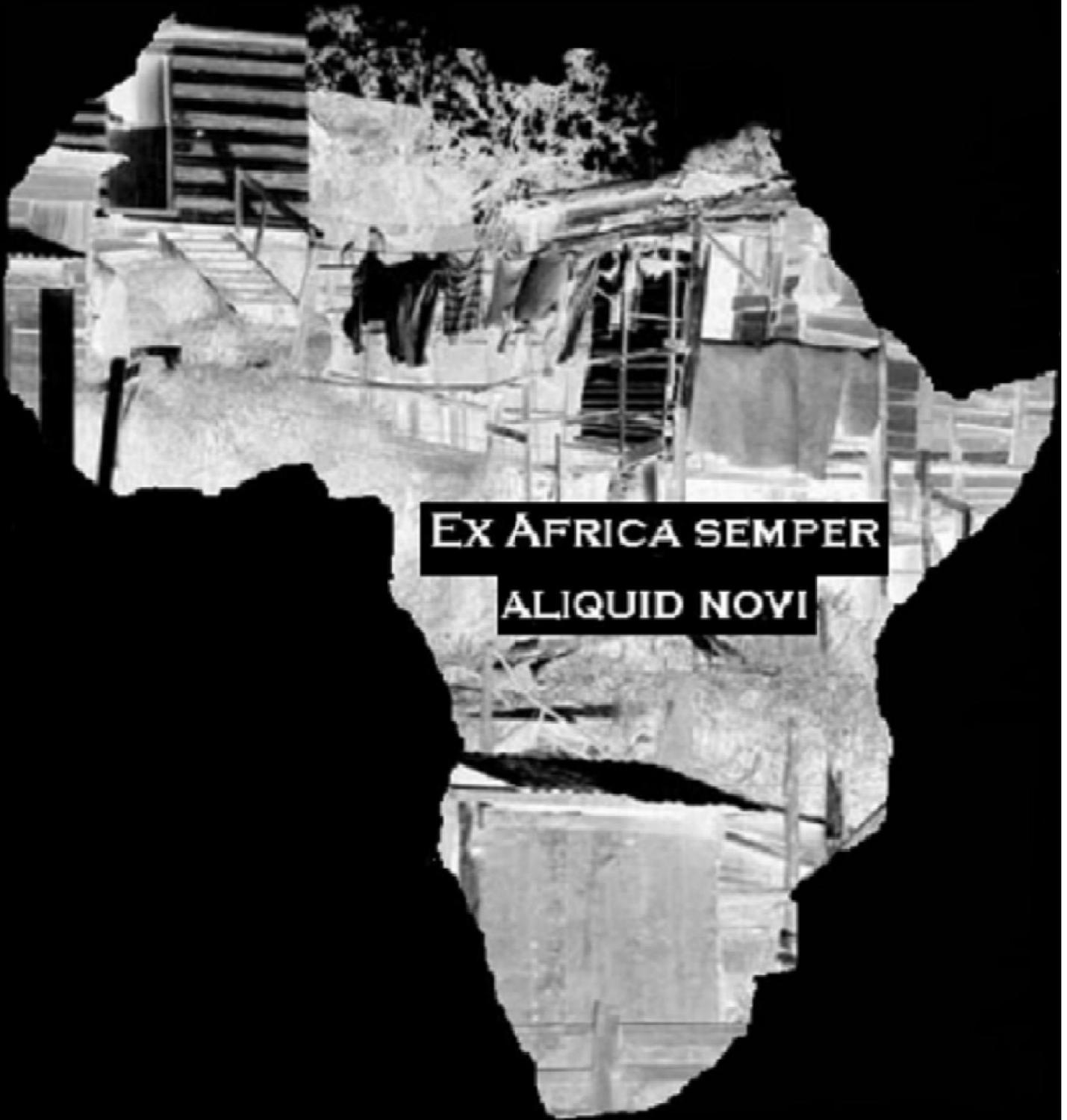
About the Author

Darrell Cuthbert has been writing fiction for as long as he can remember. At school essays were his favourite part of the work.

This interest continued into adulthood, leading to a passion for reading, studying and writing short stories.

Darrell currently lives in Johannesburg, South Africa, with his wife and two children.

**A fresh collection of original short stories
from the pen (or should that be keyboard?)
of South African Writer Darrell Cuthbert**



**EX AFRICA SEMPER
ALIQUID NOVI**

