



THE GARDEN OF MELANCHOLIA AND BOREDOM

*I envisioned all sorts of dramatic deaths:
a woman strangling herself to death after being overwhelmed by hot flashes
in one of the kerosene lamp-lit tunnels of the asylum;
another one drowning in her night sweat;
a man standing for hours on end against the wall in another tunnel
masturbating himself to death;
men and women writhing on the sprawling lawns dying from melancholia
– Zakes Mda, Cion*

*Alarmingly green lawn, cunningly mown
– Ivan Vladislavić, The Restless Supermarket*

I have had the sense, which I have been pursuing for a while now as part of a larger study, that lawns are not happy things. I have suggested that because they are ubiquitous – and, let's face it, pretty boring – they have survived largely unseen and unread as the terrains of anxiety and violence. Their brutality as both visual surfaces and sites is worth unpacking. For over 800 years, technical literature and DIY gardening books have described a remarkably consistent picture: of control, order, peace and cleanliness. In Africa the English lawn has been overwhelmingly adopted and perpetuated (perpetrated?) by every political regime: did we see any triumphant party tearing up the Union Building lawns to plant an indigenous garden? Indeed one can stand on the well-kept lawns, inside the laager of the Voortrekker Monument – which was in many ways sited in posture against the Union Buildings – and see Freedom Park's newly planted, green and healthy lawns.

One of the few clearly articulated political re-assessments of the lawn that I have encountered is in the Orania garden of Carel Boshoff IV. As a matter of principle the Orania ideologues removed their grass and planted edible gardens. Part of this decision has to do with *selfwerksaamheid* – which insists that residents make no use of help from outside – especially black labour – and also because there is something deeply non-functional, anti-modern, about lawns. (That Orania is obviously a desert is perhaps part of this explanation, but I can take you to many drier little towns that are very proud of their well-watered bowling greens.)

The critique of the lawn in the Boshoff garden is not that of Anton Kannemeyer's in his new painting *Splendid Dwelling* (2012). I put my ideas to the artist, expecting incredulity, like from those for whom the tick, tick, tick of the sprinkler holds only the dearest memories of heteronormative vitality: "I've often used the lawn as a symbol of suburban misery – of course, on the one hand, lawns are calm and beautiful, on the other hand it takes lots of hard work and rigour to get them like that. I like to think of the fascist beauty of lawns ..."

In *Splendid Dwelling* the 'garden boy' mows a lawn in some nondescript working-class garden, while the caption asks: HOW CAN ANYONE BE UNHAPPY WHO LIVES IN SUCH A SPLENDID DWELLING? This is the kind of dull white domesticity that Wopko Jensma rejected: "i don't want that suburban house/i don't want a second car/a swimming pool/a lawn/a boring Sunday".

Kannemeyer's lawn is not the lawn of threat in Jane Alexander's installation *Security*. For the 27th São Paulo Biennale (2006) a bird-like figure was ensconced in green wheatgrass and encircled by a double-fence perimeter, security guards and machetes. Standing as the viewer on the concrete floor of the exhibition, it was not clear who was being protected from whom. When the work was re-sited at the Nirox Foundation in 2011 the viewer now stood on the same grass as the bird and a new reading was opened. This is the garden of gated communities, and looking at it, we are unclear whether to be afraid of what is inside or without. Kannemeyer's is not the lawn of sensual tension

in Trevor Makhoba's 1995 *Great Temptation in the Garden*, which depicts the 'madam' squatting and showing her panties to the 'garden boy' (there it is again). It is also not the lawn referenced in Nadine Gordimer's *Occasion for Loving* where Jessie Stillwell remembers "the young black man with a bare chest, mowing the lawn. The bare legs and the strong arms that carried things for us, moved furniture. The black man that I must never be left alone with in the house."

This is not what Kannemeyer's painting is about. His labourer is not a sensual object or a criminal running over the lawn to kill 'your' family. He is



HOW CAN ANYONE BE UNHAPPY WHO LIVES IN SUCH A SPLENDID DWELLING?

a figure of invisibility described by J.M. Coetzee in *White Writing*: "If the work of hands on a particular patch of earth, digging, ploughing, planting, building, is what inscribes it as the property of its occupiers *by right*, then the hands of black serfs doing the work had better not be seen. Blindness to the colour black is built into the South African pastoral."

Splendid Dwelling is a dark-side-of-the-landscape landscape, a landscape of despair. In Ivan Vladislavić's short story, 'The Tuba', a man, who after mowing the lawn and washing the car, is humiliated, shamed when the R20 he was promised for his work, is withheld by Cliffie in front of his snickering, braaing friends. Vladislavić tells us that, "this one saw the joke immediately and began to weep, resolutely, in a language we did not understand."

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FACING PAGE Jane Alexander, *Security*, (detail) 2006/7, 2009, 2011/12, diamond mesh, razor wire, earth, germinating/growing/dying wheat, 1000 machetes, 1000 sickles and 1000 used South African worker's gloves, dimensions variable; with *Bird*, 2006, oil-painted fibreglass. Photo: J. Alexander

ABOVE Anton Kannemeyer, *Splendid Dwelling*, 2012, acrylic on canvas, 120 x 160 cm. © Anton Kannemeyer and courtesy Stevenson Cape Town and Johannesburg