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# Rian Malan - The information.

*"I'm gonna tune you, because I know these things, because I memorize them, because I'm a hack."*

Rian Malan is easy to lunch with. He is not easy to write about. I can sit at my desk and listen to the tape I made during the meal and understand. I am listening to a South African, a Johannesburger a Linden/Greenside boy. And more. Someone for whom the late James Phillips is a more authentic voice than Nadine Gordimer. This is important. It makes Rian Malan part of a very small and specific tribe. It has no name, this tribe, but it's members recognize each other when they meet. In the bad times, during the stonings and emergencies, these people were in exile. Sometimes the exile was local, and then the place, like the tribe, is difficult to name. My friend, painter and song writer, Carl Becker, came the closest. He called it, "Zurich by the Gold Mines."

But Rian Malan understands more than that interior exile. When faced with the crucial rite-of-passage question of the South African fifties-born male: what do I do about the army, Rian Malan actually left. He went to America with some small experience as a court reporter and recreated himself (it took seven years) as an Los Angeles based *writer*. With an agent. The only *writer* since Tom Wolfe, grand master of the new journalism, to be on the cover of Esquire.

Seven years is a long stretch. By the time Esquire printed their cover story, Rian had learnt some tricks of the trade. He had been what he calls "a wetback" long enough. Now it was time to consolidate some gelt. He sold a book idea to a publisher. It was to be a history of the Malan family from its Huguenot beginnings to the present, exploring the fact that many branches of the family were black. The book deal had a television series attached. It was really going to set him up. Just the advance was \$80 000. Rian was planning to come back to the country, do a quick hit, and duck. He'd write the book and retire to a fine apartment in New York.

It is an aspect of those who knew exile in Zurich by the Goldmines that at some stage we tried to hide our honour from ourselves. When

I entered the army I thought I had given up all pretensions to ethical behaviour. Halfway through I came to my senses and ran away to Swaziland. It was not long before South Africa brought Rian to his senses also. He abandoned the book deal, losing the balance of his advance (\$50 000) and the television series. Then he started to write the book South Africa wanted him to write. The book about how and why and where we kill each other: *My Traitor's Heart*.

Rian's first real work, by no major intention of his own, was crime reporting. Mother Africa presented to him the cruelest of all her faces: the murders; the mechanisms of carnage; the detail. If he was to write about his country, he would do it in blood. Steel yourself, says *My Traitors Heart*, because what is to be known is hideous. This does not mean, however, that its author lacks humour. As he surveyed the calamari in the Melville cafe where we met, he commented:

"This is not Basmati rice. *Ons is alweer verneuk.*" (Once more we are cheated.)

We were sitting outside on a day so hot it seemed to herald the start of El Nino's drought. White wine was disappearing like the Okavango into the desert. We were having fun. We only staggered out of there when the sun went down.

We were on our second bottle of wine by the time we got into the area that really fascinated me. How he became a writer. How he wrote the book. It emerged, he told me, out of a psychic battle which offered him an impossible choice: he must fight, either for Apartheid, or against it. In the eighties there was no longer any middle ground. I understood. In 1980 in Ward 5 of Bloemfontein Military Hospital I had told the shrinks that if I had to fight in this war, I'd rather do it for the other side.

The book was a struggle. The issues he had to confront were terrifying. And they were new. They did not appear in the pages of Andre Brink or Nadine Gordimer. Even the newspapers hid from them. Ten pages before the end he sent the manuscript to his publishers. It just wouldn't get finished and he was hoping they'd send some more money. He was kind of at the end of his tether, expecting them to trash him for his iconoclasm. Instead he got a phone call from a friend whose fax he'd left as a contact number. "So I go around to his place in West Hollywood and his fucking fax machine is calving. Fucking, like reams of paper are coming out. Every great writer in America is tuning this is a really great book. Even though it didn't have an ending." And that he says, "is when I became a writer." And then he adds, "and ever since then my life has been bullshit."

He means, I think, that the whole idea of being a *writer*, a South Africa guru for the international media, is bullshit. In fact, he prefers the word *typist*. *My Traitors Heart* has become an international icon

like, *Death and the Maiden* or Milan Kundera's *Book of Laughter and Forgetting*. For a time it's writer ceased to be human, he became a prophet, the dark truth-teller from the south, glowering from the pages of the international magazines, a model on his arm. Now, however, he makes no pretence to be anything other than what he is: a South African who used, as a teenager, to smoke dope under the blue gums in Pirate's Park. Someone who hated apartheid, and who hated, equally, the lies of those who were against it.

Earlier in the conversation he had told me:

"I'm a *kak* (shit) writer and a bad human being, man, but I'm a really good rhythm guitarist. I'm really, really, really good. For a white man I've got a truly astonishing sense of rhythm."

Indeed, I had had the pleasure of seeing him rehearse some songs with some friends of mine, including Carl Becker and actor, Ian Roberts, only a couple of weeks before. I'm a musical illiterate, but they tell me Rian is pretty hot. They did a cover-version of an old country song about a pistol being the devil's right hand that is still jangling around my head.

The mythologist, Joseph Campbell, has a theory that there is only one story. It goes like this: The community, the "ordinary world", is out of balance. This imbalance constitutes a call to adventure. A hero accepts the call, crossing a threshold into an "extra-ordinary" world. He is tested by event and fate, encountering enemies and allies, learning the nature of the evil. He journeys to a cavern. By entering, he gambles his life on the possibility of psychic rebirth. Overcoming ultimate peril, he pulls a sword from the stone or wins the grail. Pursued, he returns to the ordinary world. He brings with him something that will help balance his community. Is this the story of Rian Malan?

There is still a fierce anger in the man. The same anger that flows through the book. The anger that says: "Listen, white man, you don't know Africa. You cannot know Africa because you fear it."

Sometimes this anger makes his discourse an icy torrent. Its sound is so low that you have to lean forward to catch it. Then it sucks you in. It is a glacial river. Its origin is Everest roaring in the jet stream - the sound of chaos.

On the other hand, when I suggested that he had created meaning for himself in an absurd world by making the book, he offered a much gentler vision. Meaning he said, was in community; in planting trees in you garden, and lending the mower to your neighbour. He spoke of the funerals of black journalists that he knew during his days at the Star. They were guys well knitted to their communities; their funerals were well attended; they were loved. That, if anything, was meaning.

This is why he has come back to live in Johannesburg again, within

walking distance of the Blue Gums in Pirate's Park. He has come back as himself, a Linden/Greenside boy, scruffy, disaffected and patriotic; as fiercely angry about our present imperfections as he was about our past; referring to himself as a reactionary; piling up the contradictions and paradoxes and knocking them over; re-arranging our psychic landscape. God bless him. If we want our children to know where we come from, what made us; if we want Africa's cruel aberrations and vast mothering love to be clear to them; let them read Rian Malan. Frightening though he may be in the intensity of his anger, he is always honest. Rian Malan is a guardian of what Martin Amis calls "the information." We should put him on the syllabus.

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