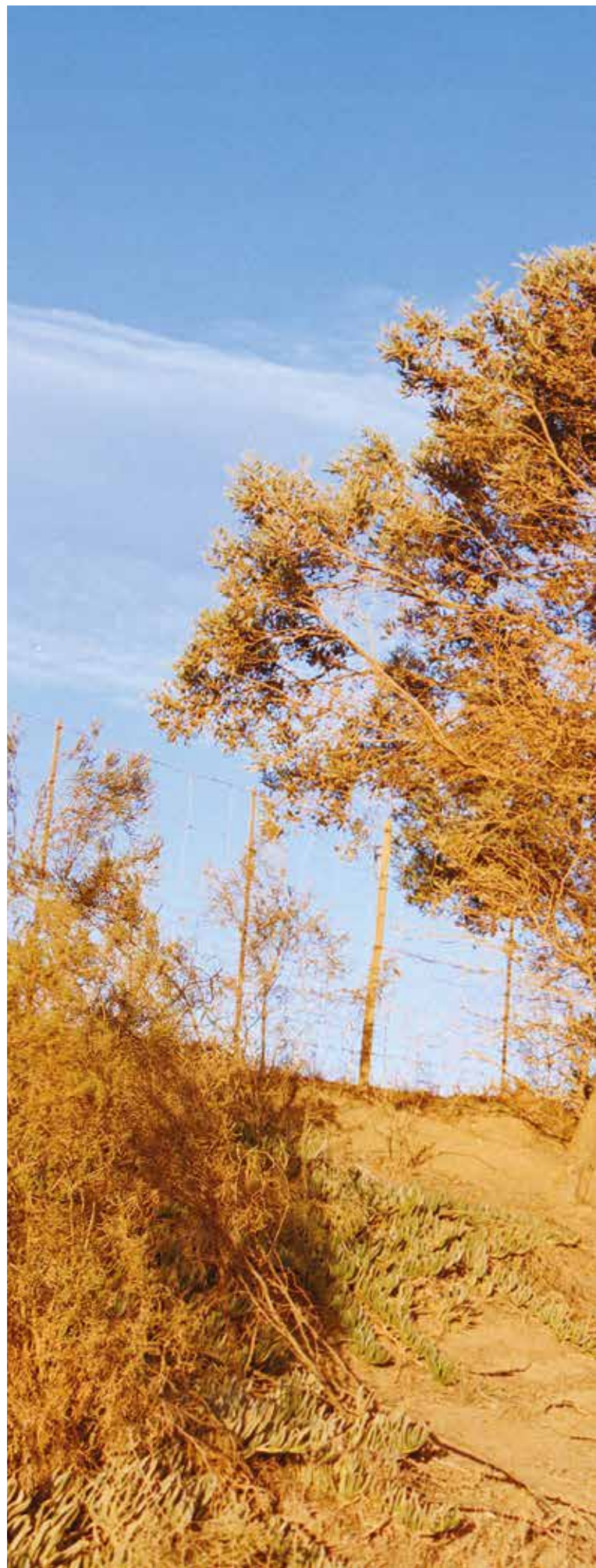


SHADOW OF A DROUGHT

During an unprecedented water shortage in Cape Town, the photographer *Kent Andreasen* documented a landscape where 'images came out of nowhere' as water levels fell. Writer *Hedley Twidle* recalls how residents reacted to living under threat of a dystopian 'Day Zero' when the taps would stop working

The drought, which began three years ago, left a coating of dust in areas of Western Cape province





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ape Town's most neglected heritage site can be found in a subterranean shopping mall near the central railway station. Tucked under an elevator between braiding salons and smartphone shops is a crumbling wall under glass: the remnants of a water reservoir built by the Dutch East India Company in the 17th century. Before the downtown district of the Foreshore was reclaimed from the sea, this spot marked the Atlantic Ocean's edge, where ships would stock up with fresh water that had been channelled down from Table Mountain.

It is a forgotten reminder of why the city exists where it does. Other bays up the west or east coasts provided better anchorage in storms; but here a steady supply of drinking water could be guaranteed all year, gushing down the mountain slopes in winter, trickling out of the sandstone in summer. Today's urban centre was once a place called Camissa - "place of sweet waters" - by the indigenous Khoikhoi herders who were gradually driven from the pastures below what they knew as "Sea Mountain". Dutch settlers laid claim to the lushness created by the mountain's rain shadow, now some of the city's richest, greenest suburbs.

If you fly into Cape Town from the right angle, you can see water infrastructure built by the next colonial presence, the British. A series of small dams are set high up into the mountain chain like shards of mirror. Walled with granite blocks hauled up by 19th-century cableway, they are beautiful "No Swimming" swimming spots, filled with cola-coloured liquid. But as the plane wheels round to land on the sandy, much drier Cape Flats, these are mere handfuls when seen against a city that has grown to some four million people, and that, after a three-year drought, recently came close to running out of water altogether.

Cape Town today is fed by a network of much bigger, 20th-century dams some 100km to the north: the subject of Kent Andreasen's wry, dust-coated images of a region needing to reimagine itself. As with many global cities, the pace of 21st-century urbanisation has outstripped infrastructure, and the climate is changing. Last winter was spent watching weather apps, as promised cold fronts were downgraded from an 80 to 20 per cent chance of rain as they approached, then to drizzle and then not even that: just an ominous steam coming in from the sea as the fronts released their contents much further south, and uselessly, into the sea.

City authorities explained that the water system had been "future-proofed" to take into account a one-in-50-year drought; however, we were now in a one-in-a-thousand, "unprecedented multiyear drought event". As the hot weather arrived, residents were bombarded with the threat of "Day Zero": the day when taps would stop working and everyone would have to queue ►



These photographs, taken in February and March this year, show the desert-like landscape at Theewaterskloof dam, the main Cape Town water supplier







Left and above left: people collect free water at a spring in the suburb of Newlands. Above right: a hat retrieved from the dried-up Theewaterskloof dam

◀ for their daily water ration under military guard. Though, as some pointed out, thousands of poorer residents have been living Day Zero for decades, collecting water from communal standpipes in informal settlements across the Flats.

Nonetheless, politicians and radio stations rallied around #DefeatDayZero as if it were a mythological dragon to be slain. But then it was repeatedly recalculated, moved out, postponed. Some rains have come this winter and now the slogans along the highway read “50 litres a day keeps Day Zero away”, like a bogeyman used to scare adults into opting for dusty cars or waterless hand sanitiser in perpetuity: signs of a new, drier normal.

In the wealthier suburbs, the older water system of mountain streams and springs came back to life. For some of those pictured here, queuing with plastic containers, this was a way of saving money on water tariffs. For others, it was a symbolic return to places from which their families had been forcibly removed under apartheid. Local papers monitored the mood at the spring in the suburb of Newlands – the parking infractions, the frayed tempers, but also the small kindnesses and small talk – as indications of how things might go in a dehydrated future. In one of the world’s most divided cities, a fragile sense of commonality was forged, then unravelled, then cautiously reaffirmed – depending on who you spoke to.

When functioning as intended, infrastructure tends to become invisible. We may notice pylons and flyovers and dam walls in passing, but we don’t really see them, or think of them as physical artefacts, until they stop delivering what they are expected to. As a result of the water crisis, many of us living here have found ourselves in an unexpectedly intense relationship to distant, previously ignored things and places: the pipelines and catchment areas beyond the escarpment, the many dams cupped between the mountains inland that feed the city’s water system.

Via the city’s online “water dashboard”, residents could monitor daily fluctuations in dam levels with the kind of long-term obsessiveness normally reserved for the Twitter feed of a frenemy. What are the evaporation rates? The monthly agricultural drawdown? Why hasn’t there been a bump in the water level in response to the latest rains? We are now emotionally connected to these once inert spaces on the other side of the watershed: reservoirs that have been photographed from every available angle, surveyed by drones and helicopters, snapped by passing motorists who pulled on to the verge to watch the uncanny spectacle of dust clouds roiling across the city’s main water reserve at Theewaterskloof dam. For months, the pumping towers stood like ramparts in the desert, ringed by the tiniest of moats. In shooting these ▶

For some queuing at the springs, it was a symbolic return to places their families had been forcibly removed from under apartheid





Theewaterskloof dam photographed in June, when rain began to fall and water levels started to rise

The crisis has been a crash course in water literacy. We can now talk grey water, and we have stats on the municipal water lost through leakage at our fingertips

◀ “images that came out of nowhere” as the water subsided, Andreasen stumbled across bones and a burial ground in the middle of the sands. The almost empty dam, he realised, had become a film set - though some international production companies are now relocating to other countries because of the Day Zero panic.

The crisis has also been a crash course in water literacy: a swift education in what a human life entails, hydrologically, and how little the average person knows about this. We can now talk grey water and dual reticulation systems. We have stats on the world average for municipal water lost through leakage at our fingertips (25 per cent). The madness of using drinking water to flush toilets has set in, especially when seeing drone footage of enormous sewage plumes just off some of the city’s most famous beaches.

As is often the case with environmental reporting, the temptation is to veer in one of two directions. Either we are headed for a *Mad Max*-like dystopia: a world of water barons and social meltdown. Or towards a miraculous fix of hydro-modernist geo-engineering, a utopian cure-all like the stillsuits of desert-dwellers in Frank Herbert’s *Dune*, which magically convert all urine and bodily secretions back into drinking water. The reality - and this is the harder thing to write, or to picture - is likely to be something other: a messy and overlapping series of small stories and accommodations; a mixture of slowly retro-fitting existing systems and gradually modifying what once seemed to be natural behaviours.

As the 7-Eleven down the road from me was routinely mobbed for its crates of mineral water, I took pride in never buying so much as a five-litre bottle. This was because I had a source in the water policy world who was adamant that Day Zero would never actually happen. It was a social and political fiction, he said. But, he added, it was a necessary fiction, and if too many people came to see it for what it was, then it risked becoming a reality.

This is the odd challenge of thinking ecologically, and the strange quality that environmental messaging takes on as it addresses collective action problems, or tries to make visible the slow violence of climate change. Psychologically, you experience the combination of “it will never happen” and “it is happening” - but not quite as imagined, and not quite as real. All through the drought event, the lawn in our apartment block stayed intensely, magically green, fed by some invisible underground stream, by some of the millions of litres still running under the city and out to sea each day. **FT**

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