







IV

HARRY KALMER

# LUMINOSITY

STEIDL

THE WALTHER COLLECTION





‘There were lions in the streets of Johannesburg when I was a child. A pride. Two males, a female and three cubs. The one male flicked the tip of his tail all the time.’

The Italian didn’t smile. Haasbroek wondered how much English the older man understood. He lit a cigarette and topped up both their glasses with dry white wine. They were the only two patrons left in the restaurant.

‘But they’re gone now, like all the other impressive signs. The tall stacked lights of the picture palaces in Commissioner Street, the Colosseum...’

‘Colosseum?’ the Italian said.

‘Only the name was Roman,’ Haasbroek said with a grin. ‘The facade was Egyptian and the auditorium was medieval European. The ceiling was covered in electric stars and projections of floating clouds. His Majesty’s next door had an Imperial State Crown on its roof, a three-dimensional electric sign in white and red. Across the street was The Empire built for the 1936 Empire Exhibition.’

Haasbroek fell silent. He’d had too much too drink, he was nervous and he desperately wanted to impress Italo Calvino. He took another sip of wine. The Italian didn’t say anything.

Haasbroek was disappointed but unsurprised that his joke had got lost. The other man’s English seemed to consist of incomplete sentences, which he brushed away with vague hand gestures. ‘Johannesburg she has beauty that you have to look...’ ‘Sometimes the problem is...’ ‘As a matter of fact all things considered...’ These sentences were intriguing at first, because of all the possible endings and the variations in hand movement, but soon they started to irritate Haasbroek.

‘The lions were neon lights... advertising Lion Lager,’ he tried to explain his joke.

The word ‘neon’ made the other man’s face light up. ‘Neon light top of Ponte City, yes... Coca-Cola... big neon light, very big... world class, world class...’ The sentence dissolved into a word that could have been statuesque, statutory or stationary.

Haasbroek leaned forward. Despite the fact that it was incomplete, he understood this sentence. For the first time that night, he grasped something fully. Italo Calvino was in Johannesburg to write about the new neon sign on top of Ponte City. It made sense.





After all, he was the author of a story whose narrator, while observing a galaxy one hundred million light-years away, had noticed a sign that said I SAW YOU and started to worry about it.

Haasbroek wished he could explain to Calvino that the huge Coke sign was on top of a building where a lot of Johannesburg's cocaine dealers lived. But he knew that words would fail him.

'Luminosity...' The Italian raised his glass in a toast.

'Luminosity,' Haasbroek nodded.

They drained their glasses. Haasbroek reached for the bottle in the metal stand next to their table and filled them up again.

'Enlightenment,' Haasbroek lifted his glass in another toast.

'Enlightenment,' his companion beamed. Wine ran down his chin as he drank.

Later, Haasbroek realised that if they had stuck to the basics like 'What is the time?' or 'What is your name?' or 'February is the hottest month in Johannesburg' the evening would have ended differently. But he had no desire to stick to simple sentences while talking to Italo Calvino. The conversation continued in half-sentences, hand gestures, flashes of irritation, shared cigarettes and laughter.

By the time Sarie said she was ready to lock up, Calvino and Haasbroek were halfway through their third bottle of wine. The Italian wanted Sarie to call him a taxi, but she offered to drive him back to his hotel instead.

Sarie brought the bill and the Italian placed his credit card on the white saucer. In the dim light of the restaurant, Haasbroek read the embossed letters 'I. Calvino' and the idea that they were here at the same table made him laugh.

Then Haasbroek and Calvino staggered to the door and Sarie locked up behind them. Her car was a VW Beetle. Haasbroek flipped the driver's seat forward and got into the back. Calvino got into the passenger seat and Sarie started the engine.

'Look, look,' Calvino pointed when they stopped at the traffic lights at the end of Raleigh Street.

They looked. To their left Ponte City with its Coca-Cola sign towered over Berea.

'Everywhere you look, you see...' Calvino waved both his hands.

'Like the sign in your story,' said Haasbroek.





## LUMINOSITY

Calvino was still looking at the light.  
 'I wonder from how far away you can see it?' Sarie said.  
 'Let's go and see,' Haasbroek said.  
 Behind them a car hooted.  
 'What do you say, Signor Calvino?' Sarie grinned. 'Drive?'  
 'Sì.'  
 'Far?'  
 'Sì.'

\*

They drove north on the N1 highway. Near Halfway House the tall building and its neon top disappeared from the rear-view mirror. They turned around and headed back to the city. The neon light became visible again.

'Sign... 15 metre high,' Calvino said.

'15 metres?' Sarie changed gears.

'Sì, 15 metres high and 151 metres long. Exactly 20.7 kilometres of glass pipes. Different gases in glass pipes make different colours. Helium make white. Red come from the neon gas.' The Italian had stopped talking in half-sentences. 'Sign take 2 400 hours to make.'

'Many hands make light work?' Sarie changed lanes.

'Sì, 2 400 hours and 21.2 kilometres of electric wires.'

They came to the N3 highway and drove towards the airport. Ponte City disappeared from sight again. They passed Alexandra township. The tall building and neon light were hidden behind the koppies of Linksfield Ridge. They left the highway and bought cold drinks at an all-night garage shop and drove through deserted suburban streets to the airport. There they turned back towards the city. The tall building and the red neon sign with its white writing and fizzing Coke bottles were back in sight. They drove past Eastgate shopping mall and turned south on Heidelberg Road until Ponte City disappeared behind the mine dumps. They stopped at the flower market for coffee but the café was still closed. Calvino bought Sarie a bunch of sunflowers.

'*Girasole...*' The Italian turned his hand like a flower following





## LUMINOSITY

the sun. ‘*Girare... turn... and sole... sun.*’

The sun was rising when they stopped outside a face-brick shopping centre in an old suburb. Ponte City was no more than two kilometres away and clearly visible from the parking lot. They had Mozambican beers and English breakfasts in a Portuguese coffee shop. The three of them were the only patrons not wearing overalls. Sarie took a small camera from her handbag and asked the manageress to take a photograph of the three of them.

They dropped the Italian at the Holiday Inn in Milner Park. At home Sarie made coffee. They smoked cigarettes and laughed a lot and listened to the morning traffic. Then they made love. At half past eight Haasbroek phoned the office and told his boss he was ill.

\*

It was dark when Haasbroek woke up again. Through the lace curtains of the bedroom window he could see Ponte City and its Coca-Cola crown. It felt as if the neon light was watching him. He got up and went to the bathroom. A lot had happened since Sarie phoned him the night before to tell him that Italo Calvino was at the restaurant.

‘Why not?’ she said when Haasbroek laughed. ‘He made a reservation and arrived ten minutes ago. If this place is good enough for Mick Jagger, it’s good enough for Italo Calvino.’

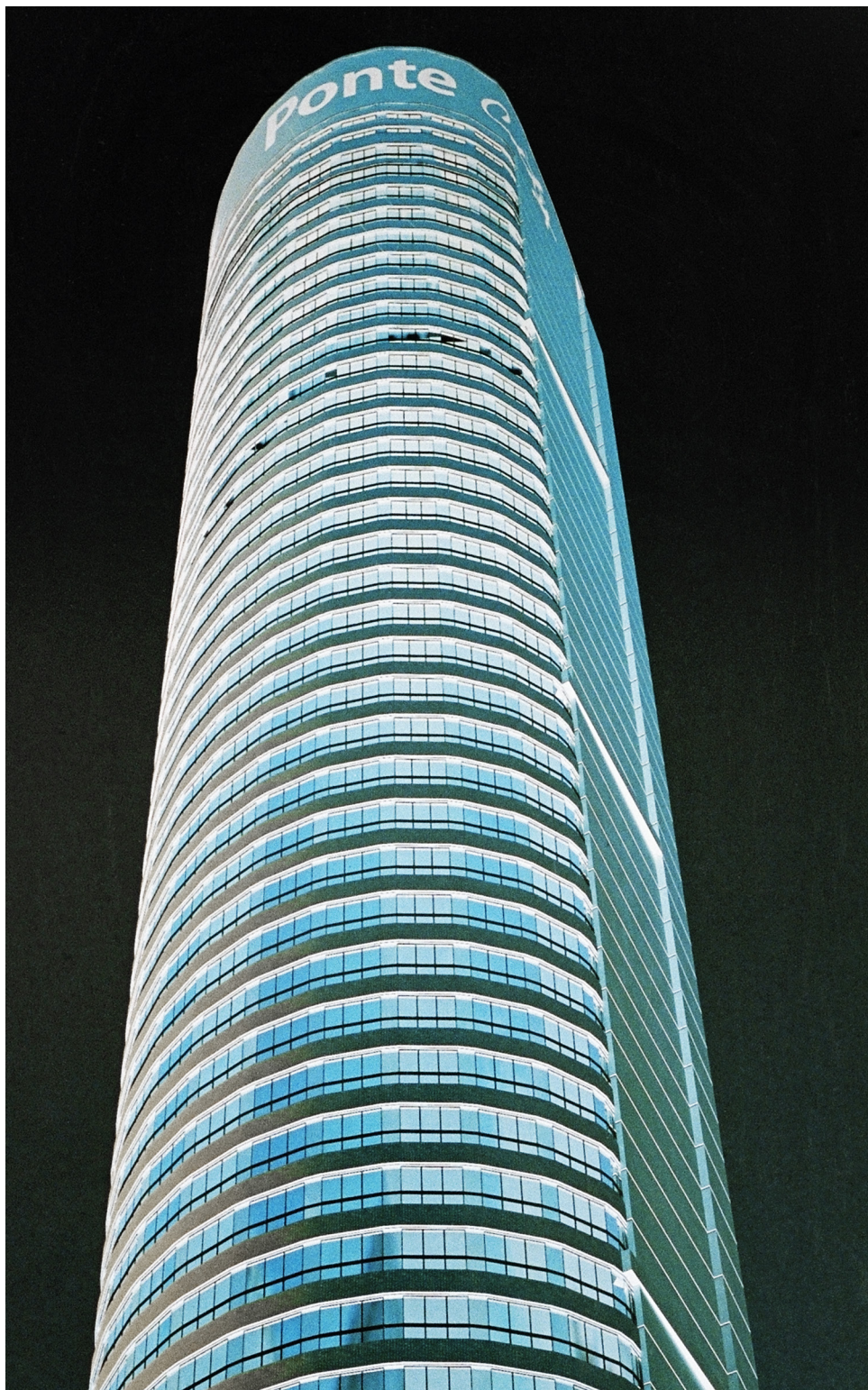
That was almost twenty-four hours ago. Now Sarie was back at the restaurant and Haasbroek was alone at home.

He took a tin of dog food from the refrigerator and went outside to feed the dog. Ponte City was five or six blocks away, but the trees and shrubs in the small garden seemed to be changing colour along with the bright neon light on top of the building. The feeling that the sign was watching him was even stronger than before.

He filled the water bowl and listened to the dog slurping. He thought that the walls of the house were changing colour, from white to pink and back to white again, but he knew he was imagining things.

He went into the house and turned on the TV. There was





## LUMINOSITY

nothing to watch. In the bedroom he picked up his clothes from the floor. The business card the Italian had given him in the parking lot of the Holiday Inn was in his shirt pocket. He read it again:

*Isidoro Calvino, Ingegnere Elettrico*  
*Floriano Neon (SRL)*  
*Via Trieste, 11*  
*Milano*



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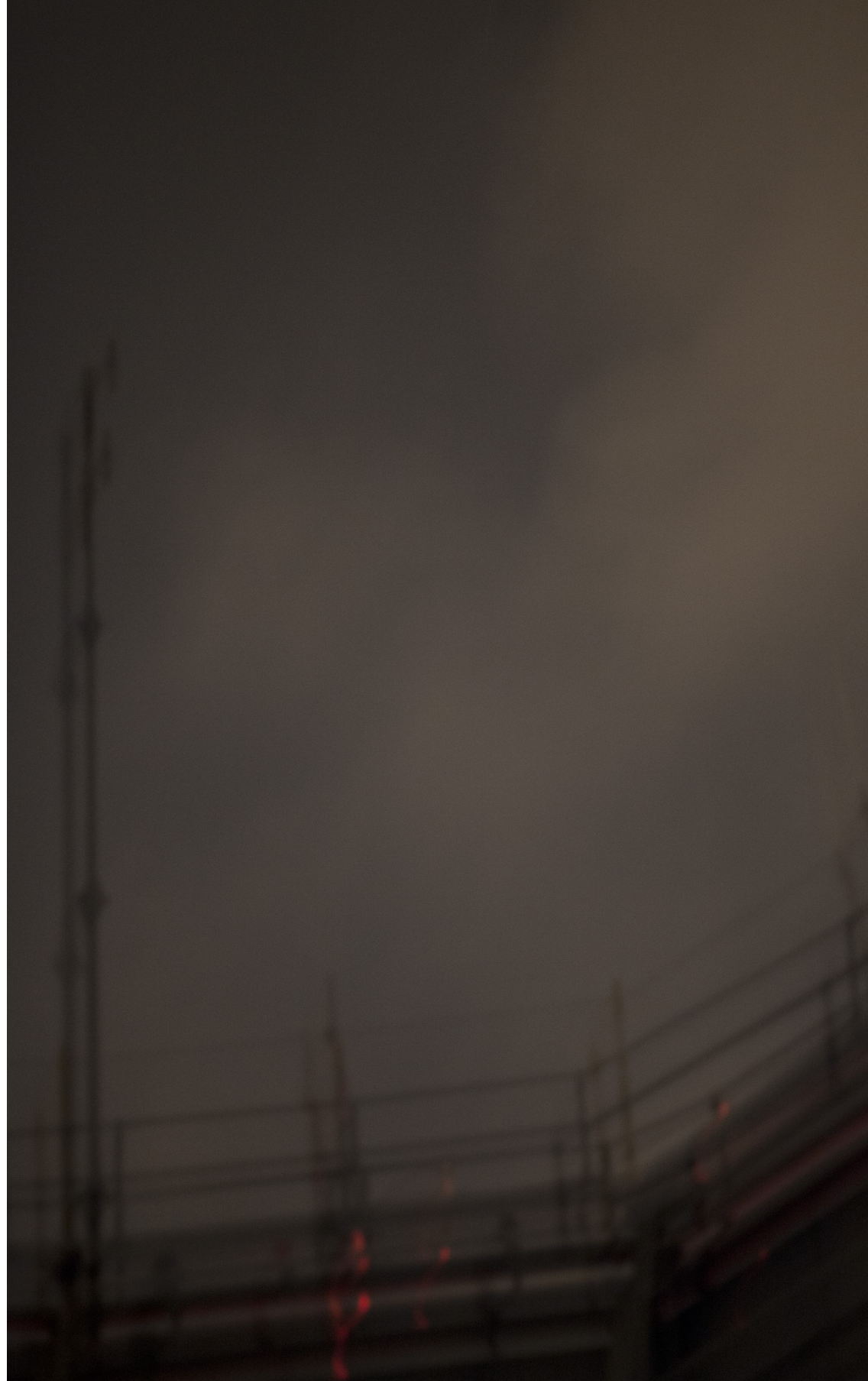
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