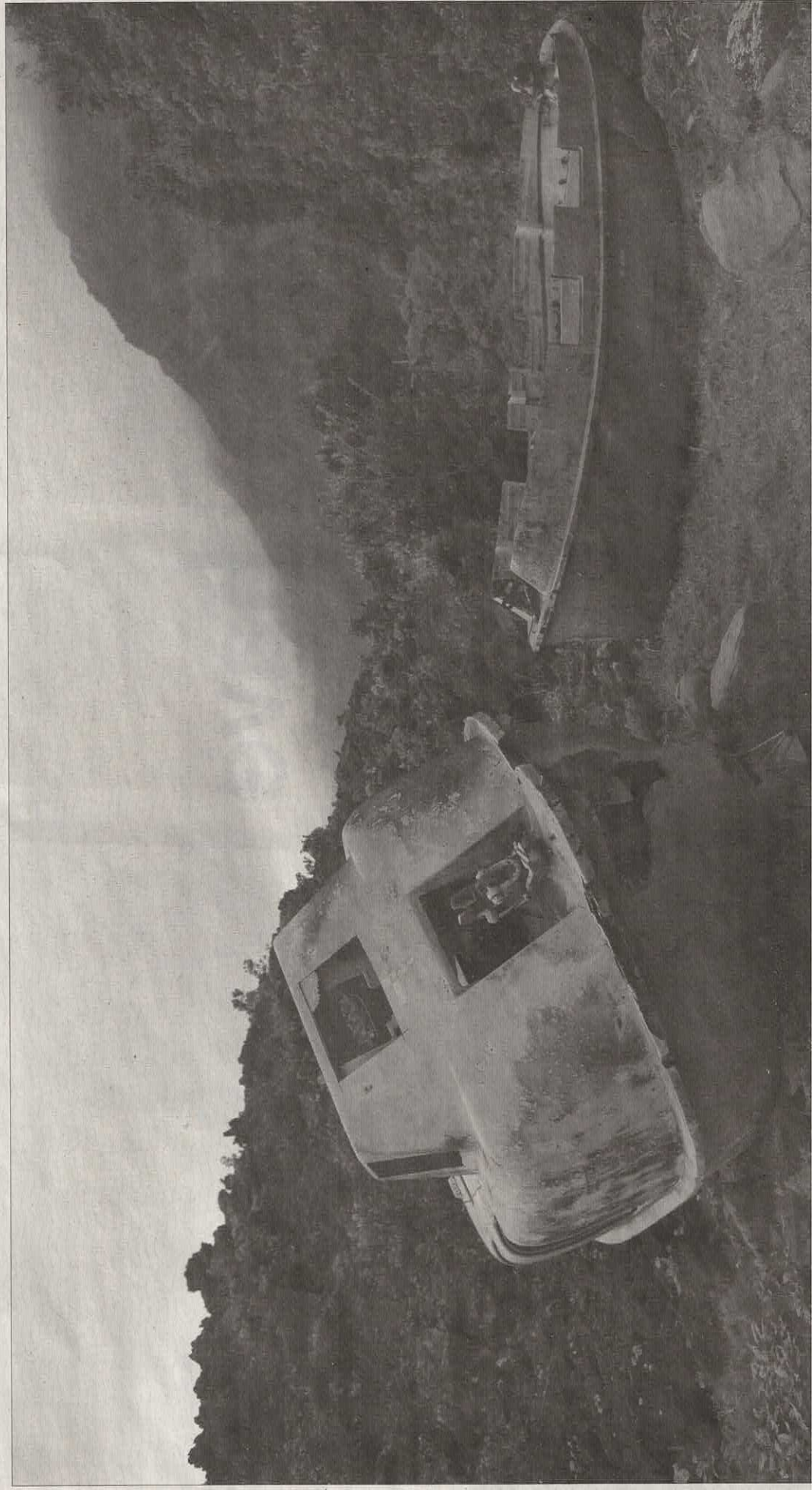


I'm not in danger of drowning

Sarah van Sonsbeeck, 2017



You're wandering through a church, where rescue blankets separate your feet from the gravestones underneath and all of a sudden you come across a large iron gong. What? you think. What does this have to do with the blankets the floor is covered with? This is a story that begins with the sea and how it hid itself in my body.

In 2016 I travelled for six days across the ocean from Cape Town to the island of Tristan da Cunha, the most remote inhabited place on the planet, situated between South Africa and South America. For six days your view consists of nothing but spume and waves. I'll never forget how towards the end of the voyage, even before breakfast, the Tristanians were already waiting neatly in line on the foredeck with their suitcases. As soon as land was spotted they wanted to get off that rocking boat.

Once on land you're still not rid of the sea, as it's settled in your legs. You mainly notice it when you walk past a wall or lie down on your bed, when

everything undulates. After a couple of days the sea has worked its way out of your body. If you then walk along Tristan's black lava beach you will see all kinds of washed-up things that have been rendered well-nigh unrecognizable by the water. A tree like a chiselled sculpture, bleached tubes of toothpaste, a shirt that seems to be woven from seaweed.

With equal ease a whole drilling platform drifted ashore here 11 years ago. The platform was as large as two football pitches and four storeys high: taller than the tallest house on the island. Only then do you grasp the sea's might, how much violence it is capable of, and how in the end it will always be more than a match for humankind.

When the Tristanians went to have a look on board the platform, the tables were still set for a meal. As if the crew had dissolved into thin air in the middle of breakfast. One of the platform's lifeboats had gone adrift and been destroyed by the sea and the rocky coast. The islanders dragged this boat onto

the beach. If you live on Tristan then you're happy with everything the sea brings you. It is difficult and expensive to order materials and why would you if you can make everything yourself? The island is the drainage sump of the ocean. Trash is intercepted and given a new lease of life here.

The lifeboat contained oxygen cylinders: these were originally intended to keep the people rescued from drowning alive if the boat had to be sealed against the metres-high swell and oxygen was running low. The islanders used one of these tanks to make a gong. On the island the gong serves two purposes: as a call to indicate when it's safe to go out fishing and as an alarm if there's a fire. The gong alerts people to life and to death.

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I'm not in danger of drowning, but I'm constantly seeing photos of people swathed in glittering blankets in the newspapers. At that moment they become both refugee and an abstract image. I think about everything that we do with gold. It's usually associated with festivities: we crown champions and seal marriages with it. This is an indescribably stark contrast with what the people rescued from drowning in these photos have endured. But just like everything that washes up on Tristan's beaches, they have the right to a new life. Just like the gong that stands in this church.

The gong isn't human, of course; it's made of steel. Now it's rather rusty and dented by the rigours it has undergone. Perhaps it's no longer usable as an oxygen tank, but it's an excellent gong. The Tristanians don't see something for what it's said to be, but for everything it could become. We could learn something from this. With regard to things. And to people.

