

**Memory of a Dead River**

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## **Abstract**

My thesis is a collection of short stories that tap into cultural, literal references, both oral and visual, and also draws on images I have seen and have struggled to get out of my head. The collection draws on Alissa Nutting's distorted realism and Noy Holland's evocative imagery to make even the most mundane things feel like something out of the ordinary. An unreal way of looking at real things. The stories are interrelated only insofar as they seek to normalise or neutralise the peculiarity of society's seemingly outdated people who come from the rural areas. Their faces, their stories, their general mannerisms. To capture the tone of their emotions, their small plights, and to give an in-depth look into how where you are affects the very shape of your face.

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## 1. The Delusional Maiden

*How can we trust you?* Were they not warned that belief is a silly thing that sometimes cannot withstand the demands of changing times? Or is it me that is silly? As I sleep, awake, and remember to forget the words, I wonder. These eyes still see.

I see glorious wedding days when our men would wrap their blankets around their waists. When they adorned their bodies and danced as if their feet were made of spinning wheels. We would all sing, tied together until synchronized. Melody and movement are whimsically blurred into one entity and we are just vessels. We watched the flesh on their backs swerving to the beckoning of our voices. It is our song that caught them when they jumped to the skies. We sang until red sweat ran down their backs and their blankets caught it and soaked it in. We inhaled the smell of their bodies, drenched in sweat as it filled the air. We watched on and clapped our hands, releasing the warmth that kept their bodies moving until dawn.

The eyes see them, joyfully replicating the movements of their cows, stretching their arms to signal the might of their horns. We all cheered them on as they worshipped their most treasured possession, ululating to indicate that we agreed. We are jovial heathens, I heard one of the voices say. There was nothing a song could not do. Dance induced a sense of oneness with how everything was. It vanquished darkness. Little girls and words and rivers and songs and dead and dance were sacred. That was life then. *How can we trust you?*

Now that I am dead, I still see them torching me with remembrance. Have I told you that two cows guide my grave? Have I told you that in death I recite the story of my day, like a candle that glimmers and refuses to be blown out? I am dead yet the song refuses to cease. Mine is a noisy death. It fills my bones with a glittering marrow that tenaciously taunts every movement I make in this limited space. Two cows were placed at the mouth of my grave to taunt me. They graze on my disgrace.

So I shall tell the story as I allow myself to remember it. The story that is heavily laden with the smell of freshness and everything, though not shiny, feels new and I was alive. I was alive when men composed poetry and recited it to their cows when they grazed. When it was the beasts that inspired their dances and cemented their noble status in society. Before all that flourished inside me withered and turned into a museum of taunts. I once had a voice. This was the time when the voice was more important than the cows. The cows knew it. They know it even now.

At the time when women kept lovers and used the open fields to play for pleasure. Still, words were more important than wealth. I remember when our men who owned dozens of wives went away, the women kept lovers of their own. Not I in particular, virginity was gold – it was the goal. So were my words, glistening and enticing. That's what I aimed for. I wanted a different power over men. Not my inner thighs but my inner truths. It is these truths that made men worship me.

It is these truths that made them take my words to bed and caress them in their sleep. They took them to their discussions, they pressed them against their chests to see if they were moist with life.

They related them until they were all they could hear. It was my words in the morning. It was my words at midday. It was my words at midnight. I cannot remember the exact words. All I hear over and over is the bellowing cattle. A cry so deep it threatens to deafen me.

So many cattle walking to their deaths. Cattle who were supposed to fetch back the dead, only nobody returned. Maybe it is the cattle that kept the dead as captives. Or the dead kept the cattle for comfort, but neither came up to the sun. Neither responded to the light of day. They sank down and stayed down and showed no interest in joining the living. We were all part of the betrayal. The cows are majestic and betrayed, the others are dead and missed. It is the cows and not my words that slipped. It is the cattle that kept the dead for themselves.

At the beginning they hissed and asked, 'Who told you the words?' They asked it over and over again, 'Whose words are tucked under your tongue?' I say, how can I know when there's too much noise? How can I know when people are asking too many questions? Besides, the bellowing cows fill the air with a sense of the end. I am standing right in the middle of shifting times. The shelter is starting to show signs of instability. The weight of the men's protruding timidity eclipses the weight of the cows. They ask again, 'Whose words are these?' and I pretend not to hear them, as I am feeding on the spectacle of our gone days. *You said we must kill all the cattle.* What did I say?

When you have been dead for more than a hundred years and there is a river named after you, yet all these men still don't know how to talk to you... They summon me over and over again to ask me the same questions over and over, hoping that I will slip. I don't remember the words. I remember the malodorous infernal flames. The cattle chucked into the flaring fires, women ululating for newness. And feasting on the roasted flesh until their bellies were too full for their bodies to carry. They rolled off their tongues any doubts of it being impossible.

Then the sun rots the flesh of the cows. We inhale a stubborn stench of dead cattle who refuse to come back with our dead. Our men's arms no longer reach for the sky, as the horns are part of the carcass of the dead cattle. They keep their arms at their sides. Our hands refuse to clap, our voices are hoarse and the tongue refuses to ululate. The eyes see blood and forsaken horns. Remnants of a premature cleansing, I heard another voice say. We looked at the piled flesh and watched the dogs feed on the rot until it became bones. We all watched the bones and thought maybe the bones would summon the other bones up. Still, not bones nor flesh came to the light.

Then, there was silence. The deafening silence. Silence as the cows stopped bellowing, and starving children didn't know how to cry their first crown of thorn. Then followed the sound of another hundred years of men shepherding their gone cows in their dreams. Then eyes see them drag their feet and accept the word, with bread as a form of defeat and a reward as they naively waited on the return of their dead. In my endless dream, the cattle and crops burn and I forget the words.

Wasn't it words that were meant to heal and guide? If not so, would I have uttered them? Wasn't it words that were meant to heal, were they not promised? What exactly did I say? *You said all our dead will return. Shush.*

It is words that were supposed to have me sung about in fond memory. Words that stood on the other side of the river and hid their face from mine. It is words I am glad to pretend to forget. Words I whispered into the men's ears when their bodies were dripping with sweat. When their arms were curved and their hands were held to the sky. With the winds I whispered the words. What did I say... what did I say? ...*How can we trust you? What did I say? Shush, sleep now child.*

## 2. Transgression Translators

When sense was slurred and words discarded and left soundless, a group of men, my forebears, stood atop rolling hills and looked down on the masters of mimicry who performed with the aim of blending in, by publicly rejecting the language that was imprisoned in their throats. They coughed it out of their mouths and pushed it off the cliffs of their minds. They mastered the ballet of the ridiculed, swiftly swaying and dipping into the habit of master-this and master-that. Hurriedly shedding the shame of being burdened with sharp clicks and obscurity, through curiosity they were assimilated into the newness of forced rebirths. Days went by and they mimicked and mimed every blessed word uttered by the master, until they sounded the same as him and there was no shame in being new.

At the turning point of history, they gabbled enticingly, hypnotizing the many eyes that stood laden with false fire like April Fools. Their language acquisition dance had them ordained as the phantoms of their former selves. The discredited onlookers stood blank and secretly inscribed them as traitors. How can a man abandon his garments? How can he take up a new name without having to serve and husband whoever the new name belonged to? Only wives were subjected to subjugation of such extremes, not men.

Men had never for any reason had to change their names. Now men lined up for new names and had their heads dipped in rivers and were encouraged to denounce their fathers' names. To an extent, those who refused to convert were amused to see prominent men treading carefully around the sanctified space that belonged to their new husband, who paid for them using cows he stole from their backyards. They were abducted into the union without the agreement of their families. The union was not blessed.

The men, whose cattle posts stood desolate and whose wives were far too weak to sweep their courtyards, dabbled clueless. Stood proudly scorched by the out of fashion red blankets they wore to defend their names from being grabbed and bagged. They looked sorrowfully at men whose loose tongues lusted over exotic and senseless tongues. They watched them gobbling it all down. They shook their heads in disagreement and refused to dismantle.

The new language strained the tongues of the converted and their haggard faces affirmed the premature giving in. They stood with crinkled faces and hollow eyes and their buttons without holes burned their palms. They watched with their stomachs slowly turning against their insides. Pretending to be oblivious of the air that was tainted with the sense of hardships and turmoil, they pretended to dance without claiming any ties to those who danced before them. They danced until their stomachs ceased growling and started vibrating with reminiscence. They danced, throwing their bodies to the stretch of rhythm, implanting them in its bareness. They threw their legs and their arms and their heads and their necks into the circumference of men no longer cushioned by cosmology. Contorted, they stood naked, trailing behind each other and trailing to the next hill for just another show off, to see just how reduced the man on the stand was, how ill-fitting his clothes

were. They went for momentary laughter that surged up from the pits of their empty stomachs. To once again feel like men who can ridicule senselessness.

They stood and watched us concealed.

They stood on top of the hills and eyed those in ill-fitting suits that were thrown down at their feet by their well-fed acquaintances. It is these men, my unconvinced forebears, who refused to conform and were pushed aside as watchers. It is their watery eyes that translated the transgression to the coming hands. They passively moved aside and translated the changing tides, suspicious of the tricksters that triggered the first wave of sound annexed for control. They went to bed on worry, with humming stomach and ink congealed in their veins.

It is they who chose to be pushed to the back of the line, counted as harmless and insignificant. They who still walked barefoot so that the soles of their feet did not forget the trail of those who walked before them. They are the ones who, even though they had no papers, carefully translated the transgressions of coming times by refusing to bend. Their eyes were filled with the hope that one day they would be unfolded, and their blanket-covered bones in unmarked graves would tell of their silent defiance.



### 3. Abducting Beauty

My Love is trapped behind a door. She screams and kicks and threatens to break it down. She was part of a group of girls that our parish's priest was alleged to have led astray. When the allegations surfaced, they sent him to a different parish.

We believe he taught them that his woundless body deserved to be pleased in worship. Under his watch, they scrubbed reason off their skins and followed him meekly. He baptized them in a pool of religious delusions, a dizzying frenzy that hypnotised and sucked them into his fiery gaze. On top of our altar, the shiny marble of compassion filled the Messiah in his flowing white robe, outstretching his wounded hands to us. We all see his wounded hands, every Sunday. The priest's woundless hands that should be nailed to concrete, were stretched out for a different reason, and locked the girls inside his embrace. They undid their garments, took off their guard and he forced his way between their thighs. They brushed dignity off the tips of their breasts. As he shoved himself into their premature affection, instead of verses he taught them lullabies to lull the need for justice, to rectify the bruises and numb their aching bodies. Whilst dressed in flowing white, covered from head to toe, they were exposed. Now they call our daughters "Marred-Mary of Magdalene". Somehow they say it was they who used the convent as a shrine for body-love experiments. It was too late when I learnt that the man of God had dipped into my daughter's pool before it was stirred. So I changed her name and called her Love.

This was entirely my fault, because when the girl was born I often found myself looking at nuns enviously. I did not have what they had; instead I had a baby. As an active choir member, I had disgraced my family and God, and I was no longer allowed into the inner circle, as I had sinned. After she was born, in my prayers I gave her over to the will of God. And that strong seed of envy grew into my very own tall sycamore tree that I climbed on to hide my shame. I imagined she would be the first of her kind in my village. Black, young, pretty but untouched, it had a ritualistic ring to it and I was going to be its mother.

"Being God's servant has no colour."

Those were Sister Mary-Jane's words, every Sunday. After ushering in many Sunday services, my baby showed an interest and I knew I was meant to be one of the 'blessed' mothers. The way in which she looked at the statue of the Virgin Mary showed that she was just as envious. When the right time came, and she was ready to officially enter the covenant, I dropped her off and left her to be His servant and live untouched. I was a proud mother.

I did not envision that any danger or harm could befall her inside the house of God. I left her under the care of the holy and capable sisters, all white and old. Sister Mary-Jane, who was originally from Britain, had visited the pope in Rome a couple of times and she was the sister in charge. A very bold and authoritative figure, she promised all of us that it was her duty to bring our daughters to their Saviour. These old ladies knew how to tame the flesh and wean it off its earthly urges. I couldn't wait for her to one day grow into a grey-haired nun, untouched and holier than most. I

obeyed His will and allowed my sin-conceived daughter to learn and master the ways of the Lord. With Mary's promise of purity on her left ring finger, she was a nun in waiting. Offering her purity to the Son, our bridge to the Father. Cleansing me of my uncleanness. Even though unmarried, I was prone to earthly urges and our church did not tolerate such tendencies. I was ecstatic to be the one who bore such holiness. I sang and sang and glorified the Lord. How great it felt to become a mother of an untouched daughter.

The entire village did not understand why my beautiful and intelligent daughter was to become a nun. I wasn't bothered by their ignorance to how deep my Catholic roots were, so I didn't really care or listen to them. Every Sunday, the frail old sisters, whose crinkled faces looked like crumbling clay, sat with blank stares mindlessly reciting the hymns, reminding us that soon our daughters will be the new holies. They were as old as the building itself and were the main inspiration behind our daughters' vow of chastity. Those tired hands were moulding our daughters into desire-proof beings.

Then I started having those recurring dreams. The rotten pears, every night they were rotting in front of my eyes, decaying and seething with worms. Then it was faeces, faeces everywhere.

Every Sunday, we all marvelled at their glowing bodies, until we learnt that their bodies were with bodies. The whole group was with child. He fathered our children's children. Children we all couldn't afford to keep. We turned our backs from our homes, as we didn't want to give anybody a chance to gloat.

My Love exists behind a door. She is not tied, yet she kicks and screams in a quest for freedom from my handless affection. Once, she tried to kill herself and I kept her locked in. I fought fiercely and skipped service for good, moving away from the rural prying eyes, who would have said it was my fault. Before I took her by force, I tore my Rosary into pieces and prayers were discarded on the floor, the same way my daughter's innocence was strewn on the priest's lap. That was the only thing I was not able to grab and take with. There was no one to tell the shame to, so we moved away, and for her own safety, I took to locking her in. In our own private convent, I coerce her to come into the light. She pushes me back, and we've been wrestling like that for years. We are both veiled and our private shames have banished us from normality. At first, she refused to wear anything that showed her legs. I was for the opposite. After all, they were her legs. I have stayed off my fleshy addictions and my eyes are on her. My vow is that of bringing her back to her body. Every day, she shows no intention of taking possession of her own body. She's possessed by the old body we should have burnt. She is detached from the new body and has no desire to acknowledge its needs. She thinks her body was meant to be occupied by something else, or someone else. I see her giving it over to new forces to possess and fill it with wholeness. She tells me that her body was never hers. That she had never planned on having to worry about its existence. It was supposed to be dead.

Our intertwined and bitter wails have become our new Hail Mary's. She screams and I lock her away. She says her flesh is taking over her mind. I lock her away. She screams. I lock her away and I feel like locking her in and walking away. But she is mine, she is my Love. She pleaded with me to let her be. She kicks and begs to stay in that house of shame. Maybe she should have stayed as my Love has changed. She craves men's attention from all directions. She says it's her sacred prayer, that in being wanted she fulfils what she was designed for. With that she re-enacts every forbidden act he had them do, she acts it out with sound and all. So the hand that used to caress the Rosary now caresses the key that keeps her safe. She pleads for me to take her back to the convent. I remind her that she was part of a scandal and they all got expelled.

She pleads like an addict and recites The Lord is My Shepherd and sings like an angel too. I am haunted. We both go from fear to fire, and we're blazing in our different, but connected hells. She kicks at my wooden door. I am not moved.

I am afraid that I cannot be her door keeper for all lifetimes. One day, I could drop dead in front of the door. But it has to be done. One has to be locked in and one has to guard the door. I try to make her aware that the flesh on her bones and the body she carries is hers to possess.

"If your body is too imperfect for God to possess, then give it to me."

The crab nature in me is quick to surface. I walk sideways but I have always expected my daughter to walk straight. I was expelled too. I give her straight-walking lessons. How to put one foot before the other and walk in a straight line, and every day she gets the walking wrong and I get furious. I don't understand why she is slanting sideways. I don't see that she is simply copying how I walk. She listens and says,

"Let me go back to them. Let me beg them to take me back. Purity is not the only requirement. They'll see my devotion." The longing in her voice is like hot flashes.

"I don't have anywhere else to go. Let me beg them."

The intensity of her words chokes my throat. For a moment I almost cry, but I remember I have forgotten how to cry. I continue to say,

"You were banned from that house. They said you made it up. They said it was your fault that he did it. They sent him to a different parish. Besides, it's just four walls like the ones we have. What's so special about sleeping on the floor? I am picking you off that floor. I am gathering you up again. They don't want you there. You tarnished the name of the church."

She does not seem able to register what I say. She does not seem able to take anything in these days. She longs for the home of her body. She hums her prayers. I inhale until I feel my lungs flooded with smoke. I let it out and a smoky cloud dangles before my eyes, reaches for something to cling to before dissipating into nothing. Inside the room I feel her fingers going over the beads of her disbanded Rosary. I focus on the new foggy assemblage spun together by my breath. She

continues to hum the prayers. I continue to smoke. The smoke slides down my throat and evacuates to accompany the words I spill. It dances briefly and fades.

“Love, I am keeping you for the aesthetics, a reminder of how you used to be, before I packaged your innocence and gave it away. You exist as a reminder of what purity used to look like.”

I feel her listening, so I carry on. “I will continue keeping you for beauty. I will keep you to remind myself of fragile love, as you are no good as a sacrifice to God.”

During such times, my Love exists and screams. I hide her away unchained. Every time she bangs the door, I say “See who you are in the dark”. Even though I don’t tell her, I blame the priest. I blame the parish, I blame the convent. I blame Sister Mary-Jane for not sending the letter. I blame the Bishop for not receiving the letter. I blame the pope. I blame Rome.

#### 4. The Keepers

Dorcas has been dancing with the dead for a while now. It is not the impulsive dance of the living, where limbs dictate and direct the next move. It is the theatre of silence where luminous walls of mirrored memories refuse to fade. Here, if you don't glide, you may cause a scene as shadows move in throngs and tones could torment. Those who are of this path tread lightly, careful not to disturb the order, as there's a standing order in the dispute between wills. There are slaves and masters, finders and keepers.

As for the ones who need the keeping, theirs is an unintentional fall, as they too want to go, and already have their suitcases lined up for the journey. But something within refuses them the leap. Some have gone beyond a hundred years, yet the bony hand of death refuses to brush their backs and grant them their earned rest. If not sharp, they become victims to keepers who keep them for different reasons. For some, their will is strong and they live on. They live on in abandoned mud houses, where embers glow fiercer than fire as a symbol of their existence. Their children and grandchildren take their defiance as intentional, and distance themselves as defence. After their nursed-dry bodies take the form of logs and their faces become vacant of any expression, they still defiantly breathe. They breathe after the whispered prayers and confessed sins. After the consecrated bread, they still refuse to rest in the dust. Their grey hair refuses to wane. They live on and their finders become their masters.

Their dance revolves around the heavily salted sea waters, as it is salt that binds all good things together and extracts all the unnecessary evil that taints anything good. Red, blue, yellow and white candles sustain the adrenaline. Great-grandmother always had white candles burning next to her sunken bed. She always said that not all that have eyes can see. That those who did not have eyes followed not just any light, but the bright light of the glowing candles. It is great-grandmother who now can no longer sleep in the dark. Half the floor of her room is covered with dead white candles with black wicks sprouting defiantly. She says the dim light of the candles has dignity for the dead.

Hers is a different dance, as she was once the hand that held the whip. Her dance is that of moving feet. She ducks and hides from the prowling shadows of her gone captives, which grandmother set free from her wardrobes.

Grandmother says great-grandmother was freeloading off the gullibility and docility of those who, instead of dying, slept. She says this whilst knitting black winter socks for great-grandmother, whose feet have gotten colder as she got older, as if they died a long time ago. They both know many who close their eyes and pretend to be resting peacefully to be spared from being labelled the living dead. They hold their breaths until they say, 'dust to dust' and earth is piled upon their flesh. Only then do they start to exhale. They start to breathe in and out and we receive them with open arms.

Dorcas says that those who defy death are sceptical of the new heavens and are addicted to earth. Their addiction to the old keeps them coming back for more.

Great-grandmother first saw them when she was a young widow stuck with mud houses to plaster, and a lot of land, and a sickly daughter to look after. She saw them then, fresh from their holes, timid and willing. She saw them when they were supposed to be unseen. With guidance from her candles and sea water, she mastered the art of keeping the flesh when the soul evaporated, or the soul when the flesh crumbled and the soul persisted. She taught the dead hands how to touch living things, by encouraging them to look for contours in all things. She taught them that all living and non-living things were connected by invisible lines. That if you could identify their outlines, whether it be a cup or love, if you can see the lines that hold it all together, then you can handle it. And they did. So in different lifetimes, they have enjoyed the art for different reasons. Great-grandmother enjoyed it simply for seeing the unseen and taking possession of the unclaimed. She was once a master.

Master of those she found standing by the side of the road, or simply watching the proceedings of their own funerals. It could be a blanket-wrapped old man who was once a master of traditional dance, or a young newlywed with a black doek over her eyes, who was just given a new name. Who dies right after having a name change, when she has already speared the grounds and claimed her spot? Great-grandmother sat in on the emotional wakes and listened to the families describe the short lives of their departed. She watched them purging their grief and joined as well. During those times, her mud houses were known to be a hive of activity right after midnight. Even though she did not have daughter-in-laws, her mud houses were always perfectly plastered with fresh cow dung. Her firewood piled up, and at midnight it was not wise to cross the pathway that went across or past her home. People walked as far from her house as they could. They couldn't tell what was repelling them. Her lands were ploughed to perfection. She harvested more than households that had sons. People knew she had the dead. What they couldn't tell was whether or not she kept them by force, or if it was their will, as they did not know how the minds of the dead worked.

The variety of the dead she kept showed in how her house was kept. Some emerged from sunken ships and worked tirelessly, trying to forget drowning twice. Once in water and once in land, their drizzling wet eyes as watery as the skies above their heads. Some emerged from mines that had collapsed with faces as hard as rock and eyes as black as coal. Some came back from unknown wars and hoarded unresolved woes. They always came to see her, for they could see that she could see them too.

When grandmother too could see them, she started teaching them how to die. This was without great-grandmother's knowledge. Whenever she could, she marked the mounds of all her successful students with beautifully striking hibiscuses, marking the season of the death of each of the sceptical undead. Unlike great-grandmother, she did not keep them for labour, nor did she tie them to our house. She told them to roam until the light fades, until their eyes die too. After many graduates, the house and the land showed the missing hands. Grandmother took to adorning the dead. She frequented the graveyard to listen to the peaceful silence of the dead and gather clues for those who still struggled to die. Their names and the seasons of their births helped her figure out why they still lived beyond their burial dates. Her obsession made many uncomfortable, as it

was all done during the day. She could be seen inspecting the graves and scooping up soil samples from the mounds, or lightly sprinkling salt water on them. The forthcoming nature of daylight betrayed her, as all the eyes that saw her were uncomfortable. Everybody said she was too careless to be a witch and too brave to not be one. Sometimes fear breeds bravery. They were witches and they had to go. So fuelled by fear, the people banned them from their village.

Then people dreaded witches, so much so that not a single one wanted to lift a finger but instead respectfully asked them to leave. The colourful graves remained, but they had to move. Moving out of their land and houses meant being stuck in a small, derelict mud house where their hands had to work. They both dreaded their sight and ignored the dead. Without knowing, grandmother was heavy with my mother.

When my mother was born, she had a strange obsession with shadows. The shadows under her bed. The thick shadows that crawled up the walls on rainy days. Or the three shadows accompanying a girl whose face was a cloud. Unlike great-grandmother and more like grandmother, she felt the dead had something to teach her. She followed them around and studied the shapes of their shadows (or lack of shadows). She observed the way they moved about during the day, or how they dashed and dived from the human gaze. How easy it was to see them and not to see them again. How they sat next to their grieving wives or tormented husbands. How they sat as if they had lost the human language and their eyes now held their words and their mouths in their sight. They opened their mouths to see and whispered with their eyes.

It was whilst mother was stalking the dead that great-grandmother went blind. She murmured the curses of having given birth to a weak daughter who couldn't control what was hers to keep. She cursed her for driving away her strong hands. She blamed her foolishness and fragility as a direct cause for their banishment. She scolded her for birthing a child who was not being chased by, but was chasing the dead. It was during this time that my father materialized from the ground beneath our feet.

One night, when thunder growled aggressively and lightning crackled and flashed across the sky, it flooded great-grandmother's dim room with unwanted flashes, illuminating it and leaving it aglow and accessible to bigger eyes. My mother crouched next to the fireplace, immobilized not by fear, but by what the ground was heavy with. She felt it coming to the surface, and its gaze gripped her from beneath. The light made great-grandmother roll over her sunken bed. Her fragile eyes couldn't take the light. She said the gods could be selfishly loud at times. After grandmother carefully placed the broom in the middle of the door, the thunder became gentle and I was already there. I have always been there. I was the eyes.

This was before the loud boom that stole great-grandmother's second sight. Now she couldn't see during both day and night. She did not see father climbing up the dust. She could not see any of them. She did not see the glimmer of her candles. When great-grandmother was hysterical over the loss of her sight. When she twisted and turned and said she was trapped in the dark. When the thunder rumbled again. My father crawled out of his grave and his eyes were fixed on mother, who

was still crouched on the ground and they were each reaching into the other's stares. For a while, my mother wanted to see what her connection to the dead was. When they held on to each other's gaze, my great-grandmother knew we had an intruder. She knew something would change. In her darkness, something told her it would only get darker. From outside, his body had hauled itself up from the ground and my mother ran to welcome him. My grandmother followed closely, and on her sunken bed my great-grandmother cursed the darkness.

It is her. It is Dorcas my mother who first spotted the soul that outlived both her mother and grandmother. My mother is the one who was joined to the restless dead man who was already my father. My grandmother tried to help him find his way, but whenever she thought he had found a place to rest his head, he came back like the lightning that crackled the day he grew out of the ground, and his eyes were pools of fire. He claimed that it was either too hot or too cold. Sometimes, he claimed his grave was too noisy for him to rest his head down to sleep. Or the road was too murky. So he kept coming back to those he could talk to, and they kept trying to get him to cross over.

He was the only dead who did not like to talk about how he lived, or even how he died, the open wound on the side of his head the only indication of his violent death. Instead, he entertained the idea of living on. He walked as far away from his grave as possible and occasionally walked into great-grandmother's room, mimicked how she tossed and twisted with her body itching with memory. She did not see him.

The dead man with pools of fire for eyes proved that some dead were not dead enough to cross over. He was there when great-grandmother died. She being the first of our kind, the first one who was able to tell when the two worlds collided. Before she died, she could tell that he had somehow managed to touch one of her girls. Just before she died, she saw it all in his eyes. They were familiar eyes.

When great-grandmother died, she refused to have her body sunk to the ground, so she kept walking on. They looked for her shadow for days and they never found it. A living who had mastered the art of bullying the dead, was surely not destined to be buried in the same ground as the rest. It was only when he started to see with her eyes and talk with her voice that they realized that he had hidden or devoured her, that she was somehow inside him. That she was the shadow that followed him around and blinked and talked for him. They did not know that he had come back to enslave her and that he had brought back his body in a different form. He was now the new master and they all had to bow.

I was born of my mother, but I exist behind his eyes.



## 5. The Trails

They were plucking sorrow off the edges of the dusty road. They plucked it with caution, careful not to cut off its roots or bruise the soil around its stem. They believed that just because pain has once blossomed, it doesn't mean that one day joy could not bloom from the same spot. That way they took their dead home with them. They took them off the side of the road and kept them in their yards. The people of Ekukhanyeni revered the dead, for them they were as good as the breathing. People spent time with their dead, they made plans around them. Mothers still sang haunting lullabies to their dead babies. Through rituals, wives gave homage to their dead husbands. Every living being owed the dead respect.

The road dragged on and on and there were always feet smoothing and flattening its surface. Feet rushing to see a loved one or to get to the far-off homes that were buried behind the green hills. The aged walked the same road as well. They walked gracefully, careful not to overburden their knees. This is precisely the same road that their children stumbled on and bruised their knees when they were fleeing for the city. The same road that will be covered by thick clouds of dust when they are rushed back to their homes for their burials. The road goes on and on and so do the faces.

The neighbours are a little hostile towards each other now, because the children are not only dying young, they are leaving younger. The finger points at the old and quarrels are prevalent. With their funerals come stranger faces with patronising eyes who patrol the space in disbelief, giggling and asking each other, 'How can they live here?' At the back of the tent, the old husbandless ladies sit with their great grandsons tied to their aprons on their laps. They watch as the city folks take over the vigils. With their keyboards and microphones and eulogies lengthier than the lost lives. They talk of how hard working and popular the dead were, and they plant them in the ground after eating and laughing at the top their voices. The suited masses with sunglasses to keep the dust off their eyes go back to the bustling city. This is not before they express shock at how anybody could live like this, with faces decorated with mud and elaborate headdresses, folded legs and long pipes.

The apron strings untangle and little feet crawl towards the end of the dusty road. Their grandmothers stand at the end of the road and watch them cross over. They watch their impatient daughters commanding the little legs to keep up. They watch them drag their little feet in an effort not to miss the bus, with their bags piled on their heads.

The old people no longer understand the function of schools. The more successful ones prefer the fancy city cemeteries, and some are even burnt to ashes. For such, no dust-hauling cars ever came to report their demise. Even though they lived in the cities, the rumoured witchcraft of their mothers bars them from instant success, and when they do find success they vow to never come back. Even in their dreams, such mothers never get to see their children again. Such accusations create walls against communication. After the funerals of such, the others come to inquire if the mother has seen the dead son yet. The grieving mother shakes her head. Even in death, the indifferences carry on.

The quarrels continue. Only a witch can have difficulty communicating with the dead, but the mother's eyes tell a different story. The quarrel is aborted. They look at each other and they repeat what they've heard many times, "How can we live like this?" Their tobacco-jammed chests heave.

The sons of their sons return to be hidden from their gruesome crimes, released due to pending dockets. They too, under their drunken breaths, ask them, "How can you live like this?" These are the ones who are not afraid to lift their hands and uplift their skirts. These are the ones who make them ask themselves, "Where can I live now?" When the sons come to collect their sons, they miss the bruises and cuts on their mothers' skins. They hurriedly collect their sons and trample on the dusty road.

The quarrels linger for longer. The people of Ekukhanyeni respected the dead. Until old ladies with folded skins and chapped hands tied their necks to the pillars and their bodies dangled from their roofs. Their sons never come to see where they are buried. The quarrels intensify and the image of the dangling bodies and good memories dwindle, it becomes difficult to tell them apart. As their daughters come with vans overfilled with alcohol to sell, and the grandchildren return to buy the booze and the sons' sons come back to touch their husbandless bodies, they say, "At least we could all live here now". They say it is starting to look familiar now. Then the dusty road chokes their city throats and the granddaughters miss their many lovers. They stagger out of the dust and cross over again. The old ladies stay behind and reminisce of the world without their babies. They watch some of the muddy houses collapse to the ground and are reduced to wooden skeletons. They watch some of the sons and daughters coming back in big lorries to gather up all that remains of their gone parents, whose funerals they were too drunk to remember.

The old wait on the other side of the fence. They wait for them to cross over and exchange greetings. But their city minds reckon it's suspicious and witchy for such old people to demand that much attention. They say they could learn a thing or two from where they come from, as they burn such witches with petrol and tyres. The old conceal their outstretched arms in embarrassment.

When the children come again to collect the little that was left behind by their parents, the old stand behind their curtains. When they feel their gaze, they say it's witchy for them to watch us behind the curtains. They cross over to the other side. The silence they live behind bothers the ailing. They know their memory will follow them to their graves. No one will remember the path their bare feet smoothed into existence.

They walk on the dusty road and stamp their feet to leave marks. They move briskly and sometimes they move slowly and it looks like they might fall. They have somehow become one with the cloud of dust that gets lifted into the air. They walk because home has to be reached. As they trample on, they beg the road to never forget them. That their footsteps could be the bridge that one day brings their children home.

## **6. The Beauty of Ornaments**

Xili should have known better than to pray to a stone god. A figurine whose buttocks looked ridiculously big, with a bulging belly. It was grotesque to look at. He should have known better. Still, it could be said that the prayer was the aimless rambling of a man who was not used to being heard. A man whose words were weightless and didn't command any respect or response from the ears they fell upon. He had a permissive demeanour, which allowed even his wife to gather logs at other men's homesteads. People said it was due to this lack of control that even when the two copulated, they couldn't summon two eyes and two legs. It was due to this very reason that Xili, whose thirst and guilt could no longer be filled by beer, went from one village to the next, looking for someone to tell him what he should do differently. To tell him discretely, without dissecting and skinning his private business for everybody's indulgence.

He became a man filled with resentment toward those with sharp and careless tongues, because they were quick to add stitches and yards to another man's pain. This saw him cease going to the overnight celebrations, the ululations and dances that felt like a mockery of his shortcomings. When other men inquired about his peculiar and regular wanderings, he told them that his mother in law was ailing. The saga of his 'out of the village' in-laws was a sour point, as there was once a long queue of unmarried and eligible young women, who had plaited their hair and scrubbed their cracked heels clean. Some even went so far as cleaning their teeth with red stone. They did all this because he was a known old- young man eligible to marry. Yet to everyone's surprise, he chose to wander off and bring back a strange wife, one who behaved and spoke differently. No wonder two eyes and two legs were hidden from them. So whenever he mentioned his in-laws, people showed no interest in his stories. It was on one of these wanderings that he was brought to a stone god and told to confess his heart's desires. Even for him, this came across as peculiar. He couldn't get over how naïve people were becoming. But as a sign of respect, he went to the stone god and whispered his innermost desire: the two eyes and two legs.

Xili was not a man of many words. He was also not skilled in making the few that he possessed sensational. He tried to serve them in little morsels, here and there. His wife often showed a disinterest in most of his brief soliloquies. So talking to the stone was as safe as talking to himself, as he fancied himself a thinker. He thought that the times were changing. Fate had a new face, and as a man, he also had to have new ideas. In the presence of the stone god, he thought of how having sons was slowly going out of fashion. It was starting to become a discomfort, as they all went to Joburg to die. He needed daughters, and not just any daughters but beautiful and displayable daughters. He wished it, and went back to his village.

Within no time, Xili had the most gorgeous daughters. It was rumoured that the feel of their skin was as smooth as porcelain. It was their parents' due to keep their skin shiny and clean. Theirs was a new type of beauty, one that looked lifeless but fed on life. It was the type that enticed and brought to a halt anything that passed by.

Keeping them meant serving them, polishing them and hiding them away, like fine china for Christmas. Xili was very careful with his daughters; he did not want to break them. This exempted

them from being taught the most menial of house chores. They watched other young girls passing by with water calabashes planted on their heads. Sometimes it was cow dung. They looked on at these duty-bound girls, who wobbled under the weight of the loads they carried. Still, their heads carried the loads gracefully and their necks refused to be downed to the ground by the illusion of dead trees, stretched out and lain on their heads. The prettified ones sat on display and watched young girls reciprocating to life's demands. They sat and took all the life that they could get, as feeding on affection made them grow fairer and fairer each day. Their allure beckoned strangers and forced them to stare into their icy beauty. Men came in droves to see the pleasing looks of Xili's daughters. They came to watch them not cook. They watched them not make fires. They watched them not sweep. They watched them not gather cow dung. They watched them folding their delicate hands on their laps. They came from far to watch them be.

Even those who vowed to never get back to the dusty dongas, came back to watch them be. They secretly desired to touch their black and shiny skins. The girls sat seeping fragility. It puddled around their long skirts and covered them in neediness. Their brittle glow ushered strangers, and strayed them inside the muddle of their thorny, yet aesthetically mastered sight. Without doors, it kept them locked in. Without shackles, it had them enslaved. Without whips, their backs obeyed. It was enduring.

This is how they forgot to teach them how to gather water from the river. Why they didn't get around to teaching them how to gather firewood. It is why they never got to learn how to make fire, lest it harmed their glassy eyes and they went blind. Their mother worked herself to death. Xili didn't even notice that she was dead and was now slowly fading away. Under the spell of his daughters, he couldn't see anything but them.

He noticed that there was no water for them to drink. He noticed that there was no fire to keep them warm. He couldn't help but notice that there was no food to feed them with. He didn't notice the decomposing bundle of his wife's body, quietly crumbling itself back to dust. Without a sound or smell to awake any senses, she was dissipating. Xili rolled up his blanket and forgot about his pipe. He took to speaking to himself even more, to distract himself from the coldness of the beauty that filled his home.

He had to make sure that the beautiful ones were fed. He worked hard and the more he fed into their affection, the more they needed. They took without giving. They never asked if he was tired or needed to rest. So his body too started to disintegrate whilst he was still breathing. Little pieces of his flesh started falling off his body, and every day he tried to patch them back on. The girls didn't even notice.

They sat and soaked themselves in the abundant affection that oozed from every man that crossed their path. Because time is not gentle to dust, Xili too, died. He was standing when this happened. They did not know where the water that they drank came from. They had no idea of how the fire that kept them warm came to be. So they sat and waited. It was only when they started to gather dust that people decided there was something unsettling about their type of beauty. It was only

when they started to show cracks and their faces looked gloomy. They laughed nervously when the men came to watch them as was usual, for they felt the heavy dust clinging to their cheeks.

Whenever they laughed, deep cracks showed on their faces. One day, their eyes looked just like pebbles. The mood around them felt infernal and people started to avoid them. Still, some people were amazed at their unusual beauty, but nobody dared to touch them. Theirs was a beauty only for the eye to behold.

## 7. The Sound of Defeat

Earlier he had stood with blue overalls and a bleeding ear, hit by a misdirected stone. He insisted he was fine. With her brisk voice and sharp eyes, she gave him a look that said, “Man up”. He didn’t get it. He wasn’t the type to get hyped up over unimportant things. The boys did apologize for pitching him and not the pigeon they were aiming for.

The skimpy silk gown held her stomach tight and was tearing at the seam. It was midday but she only bathed in the afternoon, when the sun was not as intense. She was preparing for the midweek alcoholics. Her razor-sharp eyes did not slice through his façade of a man in control; instead they looked at him sympathetically and wondered why that same misdirected stone had hit him three times in a row. She both admired and loathed his meek nature, as it made him a soft target for the Location’s gangster wannabes. She dragged her feet from the other side of the counter and whispered at her dogs to teach the boys a lesson on respecting their elders. It was supposed to be innocent and decent, like they did in the gone days, when neighbours whipped each other’s children and discipline was a shared responsibility. That is the message she was aiming for, for them to know that they were too young to wrestle with the big boys.

They seem to have forgotten that the times were changing. She got the boys whipped and her tough chaps masqueraded them around for all to see. People had to know not to mess with her man. The message was sent and it was very clear: don’t mess with Mother Pleases-me’s property. Not that he was ever her property. He was a man who had a mind of his own and was not afraid to use it, which is why he was brave enough to move in and play house with a shebeen queen. He did this despite being mocked and ridiculed by other men, who wished they were the ones kept behind the mesh that hid the spirits. It was unimaginable for a man who didn’t drink to be taken with the seller of liquor. He was the only man who had stayed with her longer than a year. The only man who cheated on her and yet received a blind eye. The only one she did not chase around with broken bottles. She respected him, and in his way he respected her as well. The shebeen was their home and he worked as a wash boy at a laundry in town.

When the toughies carried out the order, we were a laughing mob, witnessing corrective measures at play. Under our breaths we said, “Good, they’ll remember that the game of taking could result in losing a hand”. These gangster wannabes were the worst, stoning and stabbing people for no good reason. They were still kids, so we spared their hands and all their fingers were intact. It was not too bad. At Cometodie we were decent like that. Bricks and pangas were always a last resort. Spilling blood is not easy and they were young. We did them a bit and exposed their bums for the little ones to see and be amused, and we left it at that. Mother Pleases-me was for all of us, and all her battles were our battles. She was the only one who could write you up in her book for a glass of beer. So with my protruding belly, I too was part of the laughing crowd that undressed the cool boys. She gave me a polite glance. I was not sure whether to be grateful or worried that she was

over me. She was over what Mongezi and I did, but it had not even begun. It was brisk and bruising. Now it was on its way and whenever I could, I pushed my stomach out for her to see and be tormented.

*The mother of the unborn:*

My mission was to eye Mongezi and see if my powers as a temptress had subsided, and whether or not Mother Pleases-me's spell had him bound to her for all times. Judging by his jovial mood, he was fine. I saw the flash of his teeth and in my mind I scouted for another male victim that could take his place in her mattress and drive him mad. I couldn't pick up a single suitable candidate. They were not like him, and Mongezi had a way of making whatever he touched stick to him. He was not loud and controlling, but his mild nature made it easy to respect and obey him. That was one of the reasons I kept him. I placed my hands on my waist to make him see his work. He notices for a moment and then his attention falters. I wanted to make him stare for longer, but his eyes engaged with other faces as he quietly declared the spectacle as unnecessary. Just like the day he came to get his trousers and socks, he didn't look at me for long. He kept his eyes to the ground. He was not a man of many words. He did what he wanted to do, and all one had to do was follow his movement or be left discarded. His rural conduct made him an ideal candidate for playing father of the house with. Though he moved to the city a long time ago, he still embodied the effortless dignity of the originals. Through how he wore his clothes, or took off his hat as a sign of respect, he sounded and looked like a father. If he was aligned to any other female, it would have been easy to stand one's ground and fight to keep him, but this female was the ferocious fighter who fought even men, and she did find him first. Baby or no baby, he was hers to keep.

*The Queen:*

When she first caught them, she klapped her so hard she fell to the floor and half of her face stung for the whole week, so she had no choice but to respect her. The opponent was thick, with rough hands and sagging lips and a comfy bed. So she had no choice but to stand aside and watch him leave. Her sister couldn't believe that during the day, in her absence, instead of looking after her girls she was keeping older men warm. She was so furious she drew spit from the back of her throat and splatted it on her face. She was shamed and humiliated. The only reason she didn't chase her out was because there was no one else to look after her kids when she went to work. After that, everybody went home.

Night time came. We called all the children away from hide and seek, and their dance of circling under the starry skies. The sister left her two brats under the younger sister's care. The other was heavy with the unexpected baby on its way. She had to oblige and become the diligent sister who did as she was told. When her voice was gruff and neither of the girls responded to her call, she took to the streets to look for them and caught him staring at her. It was intentional. They were smoking and playing cards. She passed by and pretended not to see it.

When they were all engulfed and swamped in total darkness, their minds gave in to the idea of being numb. It is in the darkness that the boys crept into the house. They went back to restore the dignity that was shredded and pissed on in front of the little children. They turned into slippery silhouettes and slipped in unnoticed, armed with pillows and cold steel. When they got in and found them numbed by sleep, they re-enacted a silent assemblage of the humiliation they went through. She slept with her mouth half open and her arms fell on the sides of her comfy bed. Mongezi's thin, black body stretched out and stuffed against the pink pepper-plastered wall. They watched them briefly, looking at their quiet bodies that would soon be deflated of life. They came with bullets to burn and opened fire on them, fired until their bodies looked like torn old rags. It was at close range but strangely enough, we heard no sound. Their guns did not emit the usual shuddering bangs. They tore them to pieces in silence. They died in agonizing silence.

*The mother of the one who was almost born:*

Six days later, my breasts turned into bricks and the baby felt loose. Silently it bled out of my body, a dainty little thing too fragile to be solid. As quiet as its father, it melted away. In my sister's bed, I watched myself bleed. I watched on to remind myself that I was alive. My feet were caught on the bed springs and the metal felt cold. I was alive. My sister said we do not grieve that which was not born, so I couldn't cry. I couldn't cry because it wasn't right. Mongezi was buried seven days later. The shebeen was officially closed that Saturday. The righteous and haughty sister of Mother Pleases-me gave all the alcohol for free, and we applauded her for not wasting. She too was thick, but church softened her features, and though she also had a sharp tongue, it was not as lethal as her dead sister's. She said it was due to the fermented alcohol that her sister was dead. We all knew better and kept the corners of our eyes fixed on the boys. We saw their gaits widening and their shoulders bulging. We all knew that for the proud, spilling blood turns them pompous. We knew it was our hands that would have to eventually milk their bodies dry of blood. If not, we would all be lying on the silent harshness of their bullets. To respect the dead, we allowed them to prance around bragging, whilst we privately sized up their bodies to determine the width of their graves.

On the day of the burial, people threw concerned glances my way, as if they could see that the nest was empty. I was empty, but I now had something else that filled me inside. Not a baby but a craving to crush bones and end life. Right after the burial, before washing our hands and eating, we all went to a nearby shebeen, whose existence was dwarfed by Mother Pleases-me's once lively establishment. We found them sitting unsuspectingly and drinking to cement their consciences. We did not pounce on them. The violence that followed was slow and planned. There was no dragging and shuffling, no struggling and cursing. It was smooth and easy. We simply carried their bodies to a clearing and doused them in petrol. There was no singing, just the sad and slow business of taking back what was taken.



The stubborn smell of burning stuck in our nostrils and stayed there for years. When the fire extinguished movement from their limbs, and its warmth busted their skulls and their skins were as black as coal, it is then that we moved away from our furnace. Their silence told us that it was alright to turn our backs from their burning bodies. Even though we did not haul their bodies on our backs. Even though we did not tie their hands or bind their feet. Even though we stood at a distance and did not directly pour petrol on their bodies, we stood behind our men and walled them in the comfort of knowing that we were all there. We killed them with our eyes. We killed them when we didn't wait to alert anyone. Somehow, our anger muffled their cries. We were all there.

When we got to Mother Please-me's place, the sky was starting to disperse darkness. We almost passed by her house, but we noticed that the washbasins were still lined up outside her yard and towels still dangled from her fence. It is then that we knew that we all burnt the boys. That we all went from the graveyard to the clearing. We all silently washed our hands and wiped them with the towels. The ladies who stood next to the serving stations seemed to know where we'd been. We all ate in silence, until Mother Pleases-me's sister emerged from the house with more drums filled with spirits. We all laughed aloud. Some of us laughed until tears ran down our cheeks. We laughed because for a moment, we were deaf and couldn't hear the four boys begging to be spared.

We laughed at the nervousness of the eyes that served us the food, as they kept shifting from one face to the other. We laughed because we were able to do what had to be done. It was not just the men who burnt bodies, it was all of us. Alcohol loosened our joints and for the first time, we were able to look into the outlines of each other's faces. We did not stare for too long, for the fear that we could see things about each other that were too palpable to dismiss. Instead, we danced on and became the torching mob that burnt into ashes anything that threatened our bodies. We did the same ritual for years. We torched up bodies for different reasons, washed our hands, dried them and drank the bad feeling away.

When we were done moving to the silent music of our consciousness, we all went back to our houses without saying a word. I was surprised to see my sister in the crowd, and even more surprised to see my nieces cheerfully hopscotching from the crowd and into our yard. For the first time at Cometodie, it was not just the men who took a life. It was the wives, the mothers, the children and even the unborn that witnessed us justifying taking a life.

## 8. The Dearly Departed

“Don’t disrespect the departed”. The school teachers at Ezofuka were always obsessed with death and the dead, and it was always part of the assembly talk. So much so that even the children were starting to show a significant amount of respect for the dead. They stopped peeing on the graves. They did not play ‘erase the last letter on the nameplates of the dead’, which always ended up being all the letters. The teachers were very aware of this wicked game too. So, for a change, the dead of Zokufa rested in peace, as young ones stopped raiding their graves.

For them, there was something empowering about peeing on the grave of one who could have easily urinated on your head, that’s how ridiculous grown-ups at Zokufa sometimes were. However, now the children were filled with a new admiration for the dead. There must be something special about them if their Headmaster was willing to squeeze them into his lengthy monologues, right after threatening to cut unwashed and knotty hair with steel combs, and peel skin off unwashed bodies with a pumice stone. Though children would be shaken (as whatever was said at the assembly was an order and now there was a new order out - respect the dead!), they always felt that the educated were very calculating in their admiration, so there must be something about the dead for them to feature in assembly talks.

One teacher in particular became the face of the ‘respect the dead’ campaign. It was the middle-aged Mr Mazawuka, who had always made sure to tell the children that “the black man will never come right”. This was a very big part of his history lessons, though his intoxication always made it difficult for him to teach everything in the syllabus. Every section reminded him of somebody he knew, a traitor, a communist or a plain terrorist. For him, the entire textbook needed rewriting, so much so that his entire textbook was written in red. The textbook was one of those items the leaners had to hide away when the officials came to visit the school.

Mr Mazawuka had a problem with everything black, so much so that the fearless standard 10 boys called him “White sheep”, since black sheep was one of his contested terms. His behaviour confused the children and they wondered why their parents wanted them to be teachers, when people like Mr Mazawuka were teachers. In spite of all such displays of mental instability, Mr Mazawuka was respected by the pupils at Ezofuka High and due to his experience, he was promoted to school principal. The former school principal was an enigma who came to school and locked himself in his office with strict instructions not to be disturbed, even if the school should catch fire. He locked himself in with a chosen female teacher for the day. The only time he would ever come out of the office from the heavy filing with the female teacher was when one of the classes didn’t get ‘dog houses’ for their end of the year report cards. Any teacher who refused to generously give the deserving student their ‘A’ would be publicly ridiculed and called a white government spy without black interests at heart. Even though the children had no idea what most of their exams required of them, they passed with ‘A’s.

For this reason, most officials wanted to invigilate such schools. They were remote and not easy to get to. The principal would be the first one to see the cars when an official was brave enough to

face the turns and twists of the gravelled road, and all the necessary drills and shuffles would be done before the official could get any closer to the school. Even then, the official would still have to wait outside the heavily padlocked gate, as the children's safety came first at Zokufa High.

After a while, when all the female teachers had to leave the school because they were pregnant, the principal left in search of streetwise female teachers. Ones who would know that not every encounter should be cemented with a baby. So he left Zokufa High and only Mr Mazawuka felt that being a principal at the school was a privilege, as all the other teachers refused the honour.

During his tenure, Mr Mazawuka's obsession with the dead increased, and soon the real reason behind the obsession was revealed. Every Friday, the new principal demanded 50c from the leaners, to appease their dead. Failure to contribute to this fund meant being caned until it was difficult to put one's bums on the wooden chairs. Within no time, everybody played along. After the collection, the necessary ingredients would be bought for umqombothi for all. Mr Mazawuka would drink until he shrank into a little boy. He always stressed that, "Boys, you cannot give to your ancestors what you have not tasted first". Drool would be coming down his mouth and he would fall flat on his face.

Every Friday, the children came home just as drunk. The parents did not necessarily agree with this new tactic of the educated, but since they were supposed to know better, they turned a blind eye and pretended not to see. There were only the casual sighs of the old, "Oh these learned of today are showing us flames". Even such comments would be met with resistance from the younger ones, who would politely request that those who had never set foot in a school should refrain from commenting about issues too deep for their unschooled minds to comprehend. So "Maza", as the children were starting to affectionately call him, turned the school into a brew house. He even sold some of the brew to the parents. This was until after the long holidays, when he was found dead in his office.

After a long time of moaning and staying off school (as Fridays were not the same), the children decided to honour their departed principal. Their common ancestor, who was now the thirstiest of all the dead. The school was used to hosting these honour rituals, which were now more jovial than the ones hosted by the late principal, with music and all. When the officials came, they were surprised to find even the old amongst the attendees. When they reprimanded them, reminding them that it was an embarrassment for people of their age to not stand their ground, the old were quick to remind them that, "It is the school and the learned that have the privilege of the last word. Ours are just words". They spewed the words without removing their lips from the brew. The children brewed as a way to thank and pay homage to their dead ancestor, whose thirst needed to be quenched. They made it a point that they were drunk enough to hear what he was saying, all the way down there.

## 9. My Mother's Way

The spirits announced their visit long before they came and she felt them stuck in her head. They were the shadows that lurked, waiting for just the right time to claim her as theirs. She had no idea she was moving between their bounds, trapped in their need to be remembered. They barricaded all the paths that led her to other channels of self-indulgence and they kept her from self-realisation. Without her knowledge, they took over her senses and toyed with her sanity when she refused to allow them to land in her. Through dreams they gave her clues and cues, showing her that they indeed existed. It was hard for her to hand over her mind willingly without having her sanity tampered with. It is due to her stubbornness that she was pursued and the pursuit would continue until she understood that one could never outrun the seekers. If she understood, then she would know that there was no escape. All the escape routes will lead her to nowhere. There's no escaping when the spirits seek a soul. They exist as the severed roots that bloomed into underground trees, thriving in the endless darkness under the soles of our feet. Beneath river waters, they soak the names of those who will become their lips and eyes. So they come at dawn.

They being a multitude that share a single eye, theirs is to come. They'll alter moments and manipulate encounters. They'll even distort reality to get the name that is theirs to continue breathing. The sickness was in her blood. It was her blood and there was nothing she could do about it. The only way she could cheat her fate was through death. For as long as she was alive, the spirits persisted in their pursuit, until all the control she had dissipated and she became a worn-out body, with no choice but to surrender and lay down her head on ukhuko and listen to the whispers and chants from the fertile land beneath her feet. After surrendering, all the spirits dived into her body. Her skin felt the sensations, of old and new merged into one, and it trembled. Tremor would be the body's first response, but it will slowly ingest and carry the spirits as one. Their voices will sink into her ears and alter her face. They will come, they will come at dawn.

When she was 18 years old, she was accepted for a teaching Diploma at a teachers' college. She suffered. Her legs turned floppy as if something ate the bones and what was left was only muscle. Because the bones were there, it was difficult to tell the course for such and there was no one who was able to help her. An old uncle came and took her to the centre of the kraal and spoke on her behalf. Suddenly the bones balanced and she left the kraal on her two feet. The old uncle left the following day.

Then she lost a lot of weight, but she complained that she felt like she was carrying a thousand dead bodies. Her skeletal frame seemed to really be trapped by this invisible weight. She was gaunt and her face was haunted. She walked the street looking like she too should be lain in a bed and nursed to death. What was puzzling was that she was stronger than most.

The year was 1995 and most of her peers lay helplessly in their death beds, without any control over their bowel movements. They lay with their bodies decaying whilst they still breathed, their families overwhelmed by private, yet prominent, condemnation by pretentious neighbours, who came solely to see what death by a sex disease looked like. They wanted to see how the same bed that held the body down and cushioned it in moments of pure pleasure, now sunk its bones in shame. They came to see how bony they looked, as they lay detained and dying. She too suddenly looked like walking bones. The ancient conferred that her stubbornness would be left intact, as the stubborn entertained them the most. The skeleton walked on and they were amused. Until shame kept her in the house as well, and the HIV test results came back negative. The old uncle was long dead, but he was also entertained by her stubbornness. Somebody said, "Maybe we should speak on her behalf, tell them she is a child". An old family friend said, "They've come for her and they only leave once they've gotten her". She was also aware of who they were and would not entertain such a hostile takeover of her body. So she resisted.

The neighbours got hold of her diagnosis. Suddenly the scenario of sex disease-licked bones was more understandable than her self-inflicted demise. Why was she stubborn? Did she think she was above the dead? The neighbours whispered from the other side of their fences whilst they hung their bed-ridden children's sheets. Others said they would trade their sons' and daughters' shame with hers any given day. She was silly for thinking she could undo what was done before she was even born. They flooded into her mother's dining room to watch her sit, secretly trying to compare and contrast her demise with that of their sons, (how stick-thin the body had become) in hope that their sons too had this shameful honour. They were watching the shameless demise of a stubborn vessel. After comparing and contrasting the shapes, some were convinced that their children had it too, and it was not shameful. Sympathy is a last resort and an aloof gesture that people sometimes use when there's nothing else left. There were still other people who said, "It is the disease and this was a clever cover up, but at least unlike our children, she is not beneath the ground". The sprits will come. They will come at dawn, and they came for her. That year, the cause of many deaths suddenly became, "Not answering their call".

Some doctors said it was psychosomatic. That was before they materialized, before they left her clues and showed that they had arrived. The song played in her head over and over again. The others said the song is synonymous with letting go and letting be. The other mothers were starting to show genuine concern. They said, "Listen to what they are saying". This time it was genuine, "It is more shameful to bury a body you brought up, fed and loved as a bag of weightless bones and questioning eyes". She listened. On the other side, they convened regularly as they saw she was giving in and they said, "Plaster flesh back on her bones". And it was done. When they all came at dawn, she said yes, and her body suddenly expanded and the bones were plastered with flesh and fat.

Then the flogging began. They came and they flogged her into submission immediately. As her door was opened, they were not part of her, she was part of them. They wanted to see how resilient the stubborn body was. This became her way. Her hands and legs and eyes and mouth were not entirely hers. She was flogged by an invisible whip of submission that had her submerged in the world of night terrors and daily torments. People stood and watched it all go down, trying not to get too close, lest it was contagious. They saw her plunged into a hysteria so deep that she seemed to sink under a current of illusive submission that had no end. It was not the drowning that allowed the lifeless body to float. This was the one that allowed it to drown. Most of the time she was underwater, battling to breathe.

The neighbours called the remaining uncles. She was crawling on the floor, screaming. She screamed as if to beg them to stay at bay, to notify them that she had changed her mind. She was trying to run away. She started to moan and groan. She groaned as if there was something inside she was ashamed to let out. She tried to keep it in, but the time to let it out had come. She punched the floor and tried to dig out whatever else was in there, telling her what to do. I don't know what madness looks like, but when she started to bang the walls with her bare hands, the scream was still somewhere at the back of my mind. I hid my eyes not to remember the episode. My mind was already dreading darkness. I wasn't sure if I was comfortable with spending night time with someone who could do such things. She was still banging and tearing at things when the uncles came and said, "Now we really need to send her away. They won't leave just because you are stubborn".

When the punching intensified, I dashed outside. Outside was a different, calm and normal space and everything was as it should be. But inside the house, my mother was bawling. I wanted to come in and say something, but my mother was not the talking type, and her eyes were not hers. I came in to become one of the pillars, to watch but not in any way interact with the scene. So I was a pillar. The form on the floor resembled my mother, but it was not my mother. Whatever it was, it was tired of being restrained or buried away. My mother had to give in. It was her time to give in. Those who came reminded her that when she was younger, they came and almost took her, but she had asked for more time. She was granted more time and they had eased their grip when she accepted them, but now it was time for her to live with them. They were coming for a forced co-existence. They had given her the time.

My mother was trying to conceal the emerging cracks from her sanity; she didn't want to give in. But she was already drowning and submission was the only thing that was left for her to do. So she stopped wrestling. The uncles said it was time for her to go into what she said yes to. She lay on the floor defeated. They took her away. She dreaded the unannounced takeovers that seemed to come at the most awkward times. The entire family knew of the animals that were the mediums that mediated between us and the spirits. So in prayerful recital they called on the sacred animals buried within the trail of our totems, hoping the spirits would hear and be appeased. Maybe that's

why my mother roared and moaned. As within her, surfaced an irreversible release of a world beneath us that suddenly pranced about and took over her soul.

That day, my mother released her tight grip on her sanity, and insanely fumbled into a new land. My uncles sent her off to appease our ancestors. They apologized for forgetting the pledge. I stood and watched them giving her over to them. When they are meant to come, they'll come. The spirits will come at dawn. Now my mother has her ears attached to the soil.

## 10. Moon Street

They grew up at a time when parents tied their children so tightly to their chests that they gagged and breathed in moans. During this time, people moved in masses, prompted by a sudden discomfort that was heightened by the hypnotizing fluorescence of city lights. And so the masses marched towards the safety offered by this flood of light. Even though there was not enough space to travel with their kids in the overfilled train carriages, they still went with them. The children felt the warmth of their skins grazing theirs, as the mothers and sometimes fathers moved. Those left behind could see little legs dangling and kicking the air, little babies with their bodies mashed against bosoms. Everybody was going somewhere. The only children that were left behind were those whose parents never returned from the city. Such children were left behind for their aged grandparents.

Sometimes thin mattresses would be laid on the floor for many children, but in the morning they'd wake and find a third of them gone. Nobody would say anything, as they knew that the children were not lost entirely. Even though they were lost to them, they were not lost to those who came for them. Those who took them to cities, took them to leave them behind at sunrise and penetrate the darkness designated for their one-roomed shacks. Still, they boasted of owning the light that was hoarded by the spruce streets of their work zones. They crept out at sunrise and went to work as tea 'girls', garden 'boys', coffee brewers and general mood enhancers for their madams who knew they should pay for deeds with coins. Those that left the kids when they fled came back and clutched them tightly under faithful silence of night. The Moon Street that once bustled with crowds of game inventors, little curious eyes who were the limbs of the old. All the children skipped, hid, ducked, sought, fought, swam, stole, stared, told and moulded with their bare hands. Moon Street was mainly for children. When they all left, it was occupied by emptiness that seemed to fill it with a longing for the noise. The silly noise that belonged to those with small ears that were not afraid to eavesdrop and laughed and cried and lied. Those were their childhood games. Now Moon Street stands desolated. It feels like an aftermath of a war, only this war was a war of limbs and wills. The old people look at the spot constantly, as if the ghosts of their grandchildren would emerge from its dust.

Even though the little ones lied, everybody knew that mischief is the share of the young, as it looked foolish on the elderly. Though they lied and slinked into houses that had the juiciest figs and the sweetest grapes. Sometimes the old pretended not to see them trying to squeeze into their broken fences. The children were the street. Without their noise and without the adults shouting at the top of their voices that they get off the streets, and come and light the lamps. And the inadmissible provocation from those who are too young to understand the authority of the old ends in impromptu cat and mouse chase. The Street taught those whose ears were not sharp enough to receive the sharp calls from inside dim houses and react immediately, as failing to react in time had consequences.



The same Street taught others to reciprocate care in gestures and pledges, as all the theatrical unfolded in the Street. The old continued wasting their time trying to make the young take them seriously. So when the streets were empty and there was suddenly nobody to call in and nobody to reprimand, the street ceased to pulsate with the intense energy of the young that it once owned. Though the older boys and girls still had endless things to say to each other, as sometimes even night time could not get them off the Street. Even when dim Street lights announced the arrival of complete darkness, the boys and girls flocked to the darker side of the Street, escaping the unclear halo of the dim Street lights. Sometimes those who did not understanding the type of news that seemed to be new every day, abandoned their games and threw stones at the conversers to torment them, to remind them that lamps needed to be lit. This was until they started to pay them for silence; they became the only users of the Street.

The remnants tried to resist and take back to the Street, and whenever they could they went back to the Street to trace the steps of their missing playmates. Whenever they could, they tried to squeeze into broken fences to steal apricots and figs. And somehow the old were always too busy to take note, too busy to even attempt catching them. Too busy doing the work of the young, running to the shops, attending to livestock, and simply had no time to keep track of what their trees produced. Being few meant stealing from one or two households was enough and was not met with the hysterical cursing and threatening to tell the grandparents. Without the unintentional involvement of the old, the game was dull. The trees continued producing and with the assistance of the sun, consumed what they produced and nobody seemed to mind any of it. In time, some of the trees were chopped to the ground as they reminded grandparents of grandchildren who were no longer there. The value of some of the lessons the street taught them seemed not to hold, as those that the lessons were intended for were not part of the street.

Other things closed down when the large group of children left with their strong parents. The cheese factory closed down. There were not enough young people to offer work to and the old complained of wobbly knees. The saddest part was watching their Street abandoned and devoid of noise and laughter. For many times, those who were left behind tried to play, but it was not the same. Too many people were not there and many of the games required crowds and the crowds were gone. The noise was not the same. Even the old ones stopped watching them play, as it made them remember their gone children and their children. It became increasingly torturous for them to watch, so instead of stopping the children or chasing them off the street, they took to taking their chairs inside whenever little feet trampled on the dust of Moon Street. It was as if they too were like the ripe fruit that lay rotting on the floor of their gardens.

There was not enough sweetness to make them want to sit and engage with life. There was not enough energy to embark on the mission and develop new games, with songs that made getting inside to light the lamp a bit difficult. The elders cleaned for longer and cooked often and the merry sound of clueless conversation and sincere laughter left, all feeling a loneliness so deep that nothing could fill it. Whenever a new parent returned, everybody knew that meant losing one more child, and the little ones tried to save some of their friends from the city rapture. But in the morning, they

were all gone. Even those who were too young to block the gap wished they had done something. So sleeping with one eye open became a thing. But this was infectious, as many were also starting to dream of the big lights of the city and they slept with their torn sandals tucked under their heads as pillows, hoping that someone would come for them as well. As the silence of Moon Street was haunting to all, it was a reminder of things they didn't have and things they'll never have. So people continue to leave and some were left behind with no one to get away with. Over time, people stopped trying to stop them. It was no longer necessary to sneak out with kids under the darkness of night. Now parents took their children under the light of day and after such an exodus, some grandparents who were not brave enough to fill the gap went to their beds and dreamt of their deaths.

The abandoned young felt lacking, and wondered if they were not strong enough for the city. They wondered if they were destined to be stuck as part of the clueless rural population. So even though they stayed, they were filled with resentment and eventually some left on their own. In some households, the grandparents died quickly and the children were left under the care of the malumes. The malumes that were left behind were always the youngest of their siblings, whose love for the uncomplicated land didn't allow them to leave. Theirs was a self-imposed imprisonment, as their masculinity guaranteed them space in the city. The young ones didn't give up on devising new games to make the Street smile once more. Whilst they were busy coming up with ways to make the street smile, others were thinking up ways to follow their parents. Some of the malumes too were planning an escape plan, as the scenery that used to make them calm now filled them with nausea, and they felt trapped.

They went around with paranoia stuck on their faces and many brushed it off as uncles being uncles. Even when they drank more than they normally drank and talked of ending their lives, nobody thought too much of it. It was alcohol speaking through them, they were merely moving their lips. This was even after some people saw the uncles nervously tying ostrich feet on gates of their homes for protection. Nobody thought too much of it, they were just being the typical lastborn. Everybody said they were being home keepers. Only home keepers worried about such. Nobody noticed how paranoid living in the small spaces was starting to make them feel, but the children did. Shortly after hanging the ostrich feet, they too disappeared. Those who left under the darkness of night never returned. The uncles never returned. The few children with no desire to go still tried to bribe it with sweeter songs, for it to take them back into its addictive, mysterious merriment and accept them as a remnant with a right to continue playing on its back, even if they are three, as Moon Street is just for playing.

## 11. My Lover's Gig

We've been rehearsing. We've rehearsed and rehearsed for days. We've got our actions just right, and all the backsliders will sense our loyalty to the cross. Our boastful processions leave all of them jealous of our God and his Son. Sitting under their grape vines, shiny faces wet with sweat, we feel their stares. They peep through their windows, wishing they were under the umbrella of his love. They hope they were the lamb on His shoulders. But it is us who are on His shoulders. With our white doeks tied just right and our hats starched and bright. Our song will stretch the merciful arms of our Saviour to their reach. Our verses will usher them in still. After the big split we had a few years ago, we prefer them to ogle from their yards whilst waiting on us to serve salvation to them on their laps, as some sinners just don't know how to behave. So our verses have changed, and we quote for them that, "You can carry Him in your heart. Carry Him where you sit. Even inside your yard, His grace is not far". So they stare and keep away from our parade. He who resides in the heavens says we must allow them to come closer. Sinners are tricky, so we let them be. Hoping that He who is busy preparing for us whiter garments and stronger doeks will accommodate these logs for Lucifer's fire. In unison we say, *we can't help it if He loved us with love this big*. Our stockings are silkier than usual and pulled just right. The hats and collars are starched and pressed to impress, and the shoes are shining. It is our duty to shame the sinners.

It is good that for a change there would be no corpse to carry or walk behind. No dead to have to look aggrieved for. People die even when they are far from His grace. We keep burying them with smuggled goodwill. This procession is not for a funeral, it is for us to show His love. On this occasion, there will be no reason for reciting 'Blessed are those who die in the Lord'. The excruciating, 'forgiveness of sins' won't be recited by our lips. Even the evangelist, our leader, my lover, won't have to wield hell, his favourite weapon, as we'll be giving them heaven for free. Whenever we give heaven for free to one of the spectators, we purify ourselves by cleansing each other with water, ashes and Sunlight green bar soap (no other soap will do!). We try not to take any darkness from the dead.

Some of them won't be there with us, they'll be on the other side, separated by a thin wall. Then the processions will be bolder and brighter, as He'll be part of it as well. This will be whilst the sinners line up for their turn to be tossed into fire. We all feel sorry for the sinners. We all know that we are all headed for different destinations. We'll be His lambs for all times, his meek and faithful lambs, while the goats will be fed to the everlasting fire. He loved us with love this big.

His cobalt blue robe has three stars, and a lopsided crescent moon, true symbols of God's chosen one. His holy and anointed rope is different from all of ours. His is a mixture of red, white, green, yellow and blue. He always has his white socks on. He never takes them off. We've rehearsed for days for the Day of Purification, when we each hold a candle and proceed to the mountains to pray and abandon our sins under the darkness of night. To prepare for the do, we cleanse ourselves by being genuine before the Lord for the whole week. Before the spectacle of the Act, we go to the normal church service on Sunday.

On the Sunday, the corrugated iron roof sweats profusely and so do we. Our damp bodies abrasively brush against each other as the room is too small for us all. We are like giants chasing each other's shadows and the room watches and gets smaller with every move. Matthew 5 takes us into his presence. The evangelist goes around in large circles, twirling his robe whilst whirring like a spinning fan and the robe rotates with a life of its own. The cobalt colour bores other shades of blue, as he spins and spins. He moves and completely surrenders himself to the spirit. He is in the spirit. I spin around too sometimes, when there's room enough for all of us, and the spirit says so. At times, I too feel the spirit burning me from within. It says, "Stretch out your body". It says, "Throw yourself down, but be strategic in how you land. It mustn't be too far from your lover, the evangelist". We all feel the spirit. Until his flowing robe slightly kisses my lower leg and I blush with condemned ecstasy.

His wife is on her knees, her hands are covered with candle wax. Her eyes are tightly shut and she chants, "Amen... may the peace of the lord be with you...", and we all respond by saying, "Peace I live with you, my peace I give unto you". We all swarm in the pull of his love, her voice does that to us. On her knees she is praying for the three daughters we all kneel to. She prays every Sunday that their feet won't slip, unlike mine. At his corner, my lover the evangelist is seething with awe for the man who tucked us inside his wounded body. Sometimes he pretends he is Him - not the father, the son.

Once he poured oil over my head and when some of it graced my breast, I felt a physical hand touch me in a spiritual way. Girdled by the tendency to submit to a high will, we both sank, locked in the maze of selfish indulgences. Sometimes, the oil gets mingled with his sweet sweat. I look around. Everyone is going around in mini circles, each trapped in a trance and appeasing His holy name. My eyes are wide open. Afraid of condemnation, I quickly close them again, hoping that the good Lord will not condemn me. His wife is surfing the climax of our combined energies. She's still on her knees, praying to the three candles that provide us with light. The three candles that stand for the three prayers we pray every Sunday. I stopped praying the day we became lovers, when the cold sweat from my body did not come from going round and round. Prayer felt like telling.

His wife is still kneeling. The candle is starting to burn her hand, yet she doesn't seem to mind or even feel it. She calls on the Messiah of Sabbath, shouting at him and apologizing for talking to him as if he's deaf. My lover hollers and throws himself on the floor. It is a perfect landing. He shouts, "Oh holy trinity!" The old man who refuses to die stamps on some of the children's toes. Suppressed laughter trickles out of their mouths and they keep their eyes down. I am now feeling cold, too cold to join in. I stand on the side and watch them spinning and spinning and spinning.

## 12. Nobody's Father

He died on his way to becoming 'a good man'. These are words that pestered him and were becoming a nuisance to his inner ear. He couldn't understand how his mother, who existed outside the fringes of his manhood, could haunt and dominate his thoughts long after she was part of the morning dew. He tucked his dead hand under his bright blue t-shirt. Even though he hid it, resentment gave it a life of its own. In death it found a way to be more conspicuous, as if it conspired to have him declared less of a man. Immediately when the light made its existence known, he raised his head to meet it. It was an old habit that even his new physical constraints couldn't get rid of.

His whole life had been a litany of 'do it manly', 'do it harshly'. It revolved mostly around how much his masculinity could serve him, how many bricks he could haul up, or how many bags of sand he could carry with his bare hands. His body gave him advantages and made him rule over a lot of things, especially people. This could be traced back to his childhood. Even when he was a little boy and his definition of power was lopsided, he could always tell that power was the sport of the physically fit. Muscles gave him power and superiority over those of his mates who could not match his physical strength. It was due to such that he was the leader they all answered to. They listened to his instructions without questioning him, the same stance he took when he had to take a wife. He handpicked a wife who would contrast his manliness, a wife who could quickly become a backdrop to his dominant nature, and she married him because she felt compelled to be his wife and be owned. When she first came to live with him, he used his strength to show her what her role in their home was. He used his hand to strike compelling blows that quickly designated for her a limited role in their union. She was not allowed to do anything without his permission. The striking was not necessarily corrective, as she was compliant by nature and her lack of retaliation made him dislike her even more. Even when she cried, it was not enough to wake the neighbours. It was not strong enough to evoke in him compassion. He thought that it was the type of cry echoed by those who should have died as babies. She was weak and easy to control and her barrenness made him even more impatient with her. Sometimes he'd come from the tavern and alcohol would distort his outlook even more, and he'd be heard shouting at the top of his voice for all open ears to receive. He'd shout before even entering his yard, "Mother of those who will never come!", after which he'd chuckle mischievously.

This was an insult she accepted obediently. She didn't bother to argue with it, she took it like a new name. Surrendering completely to his control meant that she was no longer able to regulate her own responses. He bridled her. On such days, whenever she'd open the door for her drunken husband, she would be met with unexplained, weak but focused blows from him. She showed no signs of resistance and would dutifully warm up his food and dish up for him without any thoughts of meanness.

During such episodes, she'd drag her doek down her forehead to conceal her tearful eyes, as they only made him angrier. She did her duty as a wife without asking for anything in return. She was

the last of her kind, obliging and diligent for a man who, instead of giving her children, infested her body with wounds and bruises and a deep longing to be reborn.

When half of his body was deadweight that pulled him down, she pulled him out of the hole of shame he was sinking into. She carried him on her back, which suddenly became firmer and stronger than his had ever been, and she no longer had reason to hide her eyes. Now her eyes too had the right to look and be seen, and she looked at his eyes without flinching. For the first time, without the obstruction of his body, she was able to see his face. She was able to see his caged eyes that were walled and swelling with deceit. When he first came back with half of his body drifting down, she was the one who carried him through. This was after she saw the true colours of his eyes. Yet she still washed his body and wiped drool off his chin. The more he diminished, the more prominent she became. Every time she bathed him, she sang the song of a liberated woman who no longer had time to grieve for a dying but stubborn husband. *"We were bound together by fate. In death I'll be free of you. In death no two bodies are tied as one."*

She sang it before it dawned and after it darkened, so much that it became an anthem for his mouth as well. It was something he unconsciously sang along to, and the shackles that bound them together were slowly coming off. Her mood lightened up. She was flourishing and in her a new strength was born, where she was previously submissive and apologetic. The way she had formerly lived overshadowed her personality. For the first time ever, she experienced a variety of moods. Sometimes she was sad and morbid and sometimes she was cheerful and celebratory. She got her voice back and she decided it was not for crying, but for finding that which made her happy and whole.

One day, as they sat outside in the sun, feeding on the promise of its warmth, he glanced at his wife who was aglow with life and radiance that overshadowed his existence. Even though she still looked human, there was something new about how she held herself. Even though she did not raise her voice or her hand to him, something was defiantly raised. They sat silently reminiscing of their past roles, and they both unconsciously fed on the residue of bitterness that once abounded. As they sat, he saw his dead mother walking past them into the house. He could tell by the urgency of her steps that she was not pleased. He tried to follow her with his eyes, but his body got in the way. When he looked at his wife, he could see that she did not see her, so he dismissed it as delusion. When it was dusk, and she carried him inside, he was so shocked that he urinated on himself, seeing his mother carefully perched on a chair like a lifeless rag doll. She sat unmoved by his colourful display.

She sat with her hands folded on her lap, and her head on her hands. He could tell, this was his mother. He was not sure of the form that she now existed in, but his wife's inability to see her confirmed that the visit was mainly for him. She sat like that for three days without moving or making any indications that she would move at any point, and somehow his wife did not go anywhere near the chair that she sat on. On the third day, his mother opened her mouth to speak. It was sudden and startling.

“I had told you that goodness is the true definition of manhood.”

He was frightened at first, but had expected her to say something like that after sitting with her head on her hands for three days. Still the walls inside him would not allow him to crumble in the presence of women, though he sensed that his mother expected that of him. As if she could read his thought process, she continued.

“You are the reason she’s the mother of those who will never be. You are not man enough to be anybody’s father.” Though her face was not raised, it was poised in a way that made it seem like from her lap she could clearly see his face. She advised him wisely and said, “To redeem yourself you have three days, and for the next three days this is what will happen. At midnight, your body will be restored, and your wife will sleep like the dead. Every night until dawn, you’ll sew a beautiful baby into her womb. You will use your body to restore the body you broke. Your work will end after three days. If you do this successfully, on the fourth day I will come and get you”. After that, she left a needle and a thread on his lap and vanished.

At midnight, when his wife slept like the dead, the man felt his lifeless arms and legs filled with life. A part of him wanted to use them to run away, but he remembered his mother’s words. He got up from the bed, took the needle and thread and started sewing a baby into his wife’s womb. On the first night, he thought to himself that his wife deserved to have a kind child, a child who would treat her with kindness at all times. On the second night, whilst he was busy putting together the baby, he thought to himself that his wife deserved a loving child, someone to love her unconditionally. On the third night, whilst he laboured and stitched together limbs for his wife’s baby, he thought to himself that his wife deserved an obedient child, who would allow her to teach it how to live. He was surprised that physical strength and dominance did not make his list. On the fourth day, his mother reappeared and her face was not bowed down. She offered him her hand. When the wife woke up, the husband was not there, but she was not left alone. A baby was blossoming in her womb.

### 13. Don't Tell Nonibe

We say that even though Noni is blind, she can see. Even though she claims to be deaf, she hears it all. The young ones ignore us and entertain her self-manufactured ailment. We say she's not blind nor is she deaf, she is just being Nonibe. This is when everything gets distorted, for when Noni is convinced five is ten and ten is twenty, not much gets done around here, not until she fumbles off to some corner and convinces herself otherwise. Only then can the festivities begin. Only then can the bubbly beer touch people's lips. We don't really mind, as we don't often go out. We attend these gatherings for the sake of being neighbourly. The three of us sit and stare at her in awe. We watch her being clumsy and secretly hope that it was that easy for us to move in the presence of the mortals. Our sister is the most human-like of us. She used reasons and emotions to solve most dilemmas that the young one brought to her attention. Her intuition makes it possible for her to navigate and bond with the mortals. Unlike us, as when we come to such gatherings we never come empty handed. We come with wonders and tricks to entertain our hosts, as we each possess little wonders of our own. This is excluding Noni, who is still looking for her speciality but somehow is always the main attraction in all our public appearances. We all reckon that once she finds what she was created for, we will all be altered, so we are in no hurry for her to find herself. Her awkwardness never fails to entertain us, and fills us with admiration that one of us can live as a god with human abilities, fumbling and falling and waiting upon the unexpected.

We are four sisters. Nombitha reigns over all forms of life that reside inside all our rivers. She carries our rivers, and all the people of the river are under her command. Nonqubo controls continuity. She stores away unfinished conversations or words unsaid and distributes them back to those that they belong to, but in different forms. She is the only one of us who is able to rewind and fast-forward time. I am Naniya. I am the rain queen, or the rain is my queen, but there's an understanding between the two of us. We grew up knowing that we were found. The Originals narrate the tale as follows.

*"Those days, we were experiencing lengthy periods of drought. We watched the young ones die like flies. We were all starting to think the gods wanted all of us to starve to death. So it was not strange for men to wander in groups, in search for something to eat or for a god to appease. You can imagine how strange it was to find four healthy babies in the midst of a drought. Such a sight caused divisions amongst us. One faction said kill them and bring something to eat for those dying of hunger. The other side strongly believed that you were the children of a god who died because of the prolonged droughts, and this was their test to see whether or not we would do the right thing. You see, the drought came just after a war we had with our brothers from the North. After defeating them, we went to their homes, raped their daughters and kept their limbs as bounty. We didn't spare their mothers. We killed them and shamed their lifeless bodies by stripping their corpses of clothes. We wanted to send terror into the hearts of all our future opponents. They had to know that we are merciless. Then, after so many moons, we were enveloped with a sombre mood. Even when we drank beer, we couldn't be merry. Even when made love to our wives, fulfilment was not enough to awaken us. The faces of the dead haunted us endlessly. In the form of*



*our wives and children, they started piling up on our roads as well. Yet we were all too hungry and all too tired to bury our dead. It felt like the dead of our enemies were mocking us. It felt like the sky was mourning a loss so heavy that it forgot that we were down here. So no rain came. For the longest time, no rain came.”*

The Originals said that, to prove that they had goodness in them, they spared us and fed the frail sisters roots that they were supposed to feed to their dying children. They say that even before they returned to their homes, the sky had a new face and it was no longer sombre. Sheets overlapping sheets of rain fell down from the sky, and filled every dry inch of the ground with water. Birds flew up from previously invisible trees and decorated the skies with moving life. The Originals said they too wished they could grow wings and join the birds in thanking the gods. So we were revered, and when new babies were born, the story of our existence was the lullaby their mothers sang for them.

*Oh the four girls  
Oh the four girls of imbalela  
Gifted to us by chance  
One wrestles with time  
One fills all our rivers with life  
One is the guardian of life that fuels all life  
One is... oh she just is!  
Never forget to glorify them*

All those eyes that found us in the bush have since perished, and those babies are starting to crawl to their graves, while our graves are still empty. Since we are not able to speak for ourselves, or explain what we are, with each generation it is becoming more and more difficult to prove that ours is a harmless longevity. At some point, we were accused of feeding off other people's lives. When they tried to harm us with fire, it did nothing to us. This was because of the seed that was planted by some of the Originals, but those who believed in our purity turned their bodies into strong towers that kept the fire from us. We made sure that they were not in any way harmed. The new ones still have to learn that there is no sense in conquering first and learning later, but we must all learn first and see if conquering would still be necessary later. It is easy to uproot that which you don't know.

It took a lot of detours, frightened stares, creeping to a point of crawling. Some confused us with gods, so we moved farther away into the heart of the forest. This did not keep the great grandchildren of the Originals from inviting us to their homes. Not only do they often invite us to their celebrations, they seem to be fascinated with the idea of locating us. This is even more so for young men who proposed marriage. Some even offered to be our slaves. If it wasn't for Nombitha, whose physical strength has provided for us over the years, maybe we could have given in to some of the advances. But that's not the only reason they come by our compound. Sometimes they come by to complain that the rain is too much. I am the rain mistress, so I regulate whenever the need

for such arises. With our skin that refuses to age, we grace with our presence weddings and big celebrations, and Nonibe would be fumbling in search of something to make her not just be.

It was on our way back from such celebrations that one day she happily told us that she had found it. We laughed and said she should show it to us. With a miserable face she said, “Tomorrow”. We woke wrapped in a bubble of invisibility. When we looked for her, we couldn’t find her. She was the bubble that wrapped us. Outside the bubble, we saw multitudes gathered in search of us. They all said we were once there. Some camped on the spot for months and years, until they were convinced that we were gone. They had no idea that we were still there, four girls living in the heart of the forest and watching them live.

## 14. The Story of Nobhelese

Once, Nobhelese's legs led her astray. They walked on and on and on and even though she was lost, they refused to stop. They walked on. They walked on and pretended not to see the sun exchanging greetings with the moon. Those stubborn feet walked on. They walked on past humidity, crawling towards dead leaves. They forgot the days were getting shorter and they insisted that they were actually longer and the sun would still dawdle. They walked on and then stopped suddenly. It had become too dark to see. Moon was aloof and selective when she had to shed her light. She only filtered through certain leaves, through certain shades. She is not as generous as her lover, the sun. So it was dark and the feet stopped. They stopped outside Dog's house.

Dog asked, *who is standing outside my door?* She responded, *it's me Nobhelese.* Dog asked again, *why are you standing outside my door?* She answered, *I think I am lost.* Dog kept quiet for a while and then asked, *are you a human?* This kind of question made Nobhelese a bit annoyed. Dog assured her that the question indeed needed an answer, reminding her that he was Dog. *Hoof, hoof, I'll bite you if you don't answer my question. Are you a human?* At this point, Nobhelese was a bit frightened. She answered, *please don't bite me, yes I am a human.* This made Dog growl a bit. He rested his head on his paws as if contemplating whether or not to open for her. He started to lick his paws and sighed. He licked his paws again and thought and thought and thought. *So you say your name is Nobhelese right?* Nobhelese had forgotten that she was talking with Dog and was standing outside his door. Her eyes wandered off to the sky in search of geometric shapes hidden somewhere in its abundance. Dog said, *hoof, hoof, I am talking to you.* Nobhelese said, *oh I was distracted by the crescent moon. What did you say again?* Dog replied, *I said are you human? And is your name Nobhelese?* Without thinking about it, Nobhelese said, *Jah* and she rolled her eyes.

This made Dog think and think and think some more and he went on to say, *I had a platonic friendship with a human named Alice once. I lost her in Wonderland before I got a chance to tell her how I felt. I've never had a relationship with someone named Nobhelese before. I think at this age that's something I should look into.* Dog went on and on, *which part of the world are you coming from?* he asked. Nobhelese was getting tired of the string of questions Dog asked her without any indication that he was going to open his door, so she said, *I am from the river, okay. And it's too dark for a girl to stand outside Dog's house alone.* Dog growled and made an effort to get to the door. He opened the door and looked at her from bottom to top and said, *hoof hoof turn around.* Because she was tired, she did not think too much of this request and did as she was told. Dog went on to say, *not bad, not bad at all. I think you'll make a good wife.*

Nobhelese was rather shocked at this remark. She tried to rebel and told Dog that she did not graduate from college just to become Dog's wife. Dog gave her a warning with a, *hoof, hoof don't make me mad!* He went on to tell her that for the first time his dream was coming true, as it is every dog's dream to live a man's life and own a wife.

After that, Dog told her that he was tired of talking and had an early morning shift. He said, *for tonight you can use the guest bedroom, but tomorrow night you are sleeping with me.* He told her this without looking into her eyes and he went to his room and slept on his bed. In the other room, Nobhelese cried, confused at how her beloved feet could turn on her just like that, whilst she was crying and cursing. Her spiteful feet said, *you know we could leave your braids behind to act as Dog's lover. I think he would appreciate even that.* Nobhelese had beautiful braids that went down as far as her ankles. Nobhelese loved her hair and her feet knew, so she cried and cursed her feet for being selfish and mean.

Still her feet said, *I'll let you think about it, it's you or the damn hair. This is a fair trade, so do it or be Dog's wife. I am sure Dog would love braids for a wife.* The feet went to sleep. Early in the morning, Dog ordered Nobhelese to wake up and warm his water and prepare his lunch. When she refused Dog said, *hoof, hoof, I'll bite you, I'll bite you all over* and he gave her the look. The look made her sick. Whilst Dog was busy enjoying the warm bath prepared by his wife-to-be, Nobhelese conjured up her ancestors, who were all busy playing the game of if-we-could-do-it-all-over. They were just about to do it all over when Nobhelese connected the string of beads with all their names and summoned them in the dark room. Within no time, they were in the room with her. This seemed to make them mad and they said, *Nobhelese please tell us you did not just summon us? Nobhelese, let us be. We were just about to win. Didn't your feet lead you here?* Before Nobhelese could answer, they went on to say, *then listen to your feet. And close the curtain so we can go.* Nobhelese asked *what curtain is that?* and one of her ancestors answered by saying, *nevermind, she's a slow learner this one. Who walks into Dog's house at night?* They all laughed and disappeared. Nobhelese was left even more confused, now that she knew her ancestors were morons.

## 15. Coming of Age

Not so long ago, she stood with her white dress all baggy and bloody around her body. She seemed to bleed rather profusely every day. The red blood clung to the dress like ladybugs, but it looked very unladylike. She was such a lovely, ugly child. That's what everybody who saw her said, though not to her face. They said it surreptitiously, careful not to awaken her ears. After all, her grandmother was the greatest witch. Actually, there was no other witch to compare her to, so people kept quiet. Even when the blood coagulated all over her granddaughter's sticky legs like bloody moles, nobody said anything. They said it's the dress, it's the bleeding dress. But even that was whispered, as they also said that witches invented language, and it's safer to use eyes and gestures when they're around.

The people took comfort in knowing that the witch had no control over her ugly teenage daughter, whose breasts suffocated her chest and threatened to throw themselves to the ground. Still the elders begged to differ. They disregarded the old adage about witches and language and publicly showed their disdain by proclaiming that, "This child is a prostitute. She needs to be hanged. They must return the noose, for she's too loose". Unfortunately, she heard what they said and decided to flee to rural Transkei. This is where the base for all witches was rumoured to be. She wanted to see with her own eyes the huge house made of human bones, a place where it was rumoured that only women ruled. "There's not a single man in gwadana", that's what the senile old people said when they thought she was not listening. So she wanted to see this strong monument of women's power.

Her grandmother, with a stingy face that hoarded even the most minimal of affections, stood with her stone face on top of the gate and shouted, "You come back here or I'll bewitch you!". The child did not give a single ear to the emotionally ambiguous grandmother. The grandmother, who already knew where her granddaughter was going, whispered under her breath, "I wish they cook you". This was an unintentional reflex of an old witch, who from day one wanted to cook her granddaughter but was commanded otherwise. The house stated that if all the little ones were grilled and not groomed, then witchcraft would have no future.

Since the order was bigger than she was, she obliged. Even though she thought the only befitting punishment for a teenage girl was a burning furnace, she held her horses and played Makhulu. Whilst she was still deep in thought, a man passed by and grinned at the witch. She did not care. She wanted to eat him too, but that was also not allowed. Witches needed random babies for stews and soups. So he too, just like his granddaughter, was spared. They were all safe, until a warrant for their demise was issued. Then no babies or 'future of witchcraft' stories would stand in her way. So she had good reasons for the stony face, unlike her raging teenage daughter, who threatened to cut off the arms of cute boys who didn't ask for her name, or cut off the noses of all the beautiful girls out of spite. Nobody bothered to distract her from her job.

On her way up to Transkei, the granddaughter decided to hitch a loaf, a type of automobile used by her grandmother's kind. Even though she hated the rattling noise it made in the sky, which

made her think that maybe she could swim to Transkei. But the weather disagreed. It said 'no' and started raining heavily. So, the loaf it was. As she stood waiting for it, she felt angry that those withering, hearing aid-aided old men who played drafts all day and exchanged dentures with their wives banished her from the township. She had a habit of making other people responsible for her actions. She was saying it out loud over and over again, how angry they all made her. This is when the warthog tried to get her to take off her clothes. She was not interested, even though he tried to honey-talk her and promised to pay her back in kindness, she still refused. Her grandmother, if she was still looking, would be proud. She too admired good principles in a little girl. But the grandmother was not looking, she was busy brewing poisoned beer. The girl was happy that she was street smart, and street smart girls only become prostitutes. They only take their clothes off for strangers.

When the ladies arrived, their eyes were too tired from focusing throughout the night, and so they tied them around their necks for rest. The granddaughter was impressed, even though she thought this was an unnecessary cruelty to the eyes. Before the loaf could climb into the waist of the sky, the ladies examined her sticky legs and said, "No, no can do". They shook their heads off their necks. "We are used to bones. You are too heavy... you must fall. You must just fall". And that's how she got to Transkei.

## 16. Rising With The Sun

She was hoarding the sun for herself. She kept it hidden inside her body and everybody complained and frowned on such selfishness. How could one little woman keep the sun to herself? They didn't understand the extent of her powers that allowed her to tame and keep the sun as if it was a pet. Every man lusted for such power, but all they could control was the wind, rain and thunder. They took turns in manipulating and controlling the three. The control was not complete, as the forces did not always agree. Under their orders, the sky sometimes refused to be moved, and the rain refused to pour and the wind held her breath. Theirs was a reserve of authority that the forces kept for themselves. Hence, it rained when it was supposed to rain, the wind blew when she felt like blowing and the thunder would rage when he felt like raging. This left disdain on the faces of those who wanted to have complete control over the forces.

The only force of nature that was entirely dependent on one little woman's command was the sun. She decided when to take it out and let it graze in the skies. Sometimes she would let the sun out in the middle of the night, and darkness would flee to make more room for the light. This really angered the residents and became one of the reasons that they used in the bid to overthrow her and take full control of the sun. But they did not notice that even her eyes were of the sun. That the sun was her and she lived in it - the two were inseparable. The sun kept her skin together with a radiance that made her glow as she walked on the dusty streets, to the irritation of those who envied her and wanted to dispose of her power.

It became crucial to bring the matter to the attention of the Time Keeper, so that he could clearly voice his irritation with the little old woman's disregard for the order of things. How she would sometimes let the sun out in the middle of the heavy rains, and the rain would make way even though the sun knew it was not its turn, but that of the rain or the wind or thunder. All the Controllers said that the little old woman showed a blatant disregard for their territories. That their displays that saw lightning stripes pinned to the skies and thunder roaring behind, such displays when the men would be engrossed in creating fierce and frightening sounds, right in the middle of those, the little old woman would flush their displays off the skies and hang up the sun. This would be to the relief of the young ones, who would be hiding somewhere under their fathers' cows, patiently waiting for the displays to end. When the sun graced the skies, they would be relieved and come out to play. But this angered the Controllers even more, and they were even more determined to bring the little old woman to justice for interfering with their display and emasculating them in front of young eyes.

By bribing the Time Keeper with spiced-up words, they convinced him to convince The Keeper of Order to stand with them in demanding that the old woman gave over her power over the sun for all to control and manipulate, just like the other forces. With motivation from a mug of beer, The Keeper of Order agreed to accompany the Time Keeper to the old little woman, who was hoarding the sun as if it was her father's.

The little old lady welcomed them warmly and offered them each their favourite delicacies. Spiced-up words for The Keeper of Order and something cooked in beer for The Time Keeper. When the two men arrived, they marvelled at her radiance and they forgot what the visit was for. It was only when the old little lady asked them what the reason was for a visit from the land's most revered individuals. They were too embarrassed to tell her that they wanted her to give over her control of the sun. It felt wrong to ask the sun to not have control over itself. Even though the sun sat on the other side of the room and didn't seem to mind the visitors, to the eyes of the visitors, it felt like it was part of the little old woman, as whenever she moved to this side of the room or that, the sun would follow her with its eyes and it held on to each and every little word that fell off her mouth.

The two respected people were not sure of what to make of the connection between them, as they were both sure that the sun was no longer a pet but a lover to the little old woman. They were without any doubt convinced that the reason behind the old woman's power over the sun was due to them being romantically involved. On their way out, they wondered how they would break the news to those who wanted her to let go of the sun. Can lovers be separated just like that? They asked each other at the same time.

After they departed, the sun ordered the little old lady to sit next to her and made her promise to never leave. When the revered reached the Controllers, they did not reveal all. They just said maybe it was time to take the matter to higher powers. This made the Controllers uncomfortable, as the higher powers always demanded that they should stop toying with what was not theirs to toy with in the first place. In noticing the men's frustration and discouragement, the two respected individuals divulged that even though it was not confirmed, when they went to the old woman's house, they picked up that the lady sun and the little old lady were lovers. This explained the radiance on the old woman's part and the lingering looks from the sun.

The Controllers asked why the respected men did not divulge such important news immediately. Why wait for them to drown in self-pity before telling them? Still, the mood was jovial and more crispy words and beer were served, as the Controllers now actually had something to give to the high court. This was because an Immorality Act had just been passed, and the two were not just different but they were both women. It was a double disregard of the law of the land.

When the Controllers first came to the high court, nobody really had time to listen to what they had to say. They had visited the court numerous times, complaining about weather frequency, regulations and controls of the weather and demanding names of all the individuals that had total control of the certain patterns. It was through this prying and nagging that they were able to know that the little old woman had full ownership of the sun and that the high court did not possess enough authority to dispose of the little old woman's power. This was the answer they got whenever they went to the high court to complain of her misconduct. But now they had something different to offer the authority, so much that they did not force their way to the front of the queue. They queued like all the others who were there to report different misconducts from across the



land. Everybody was quite amazed and intrigued by the sudden conformity of the Controllers, so much that it made them curious as to what they were bringing to the court.

They even offered them their places at the front of the queue, but the Controllers refused and stated that being upright citizens meant that they were not allowed to jump queues and get into fist fights over who was there first. So they were willing to wait like other law-abiding citizens. This only made everybody even more curious, so they each suddenly had skins to hang, meat to dry, bread to bake and hair to groom.

Within no time, the Controllers were the only ones left in the queue. Even though the bodies of those who suddenly had to bake bread had left, their ears were plastered on the walls of the building to listen carefully to what accusations made the Controllers so confident. Because everybody that had queued in the line before them left abruptly, the Controllers were first in the queue, but even then they did not rush in. They felt that maybe the other guys went to relieve themselves. This was until they were summoned inside the court. When they got inside, they first expressed their sadness at being the bearers of such bad news, news of the highest form of disregard for the laws of the land. In viewing the judge's disinterest in their ramblings, they quickly revealed the reason for the visit. The little old lady had somehow violated the trust that was given to her as the guardian of the sun. They wondered if the person who gave her the authority in the first place was credible, as not only was this a definite disregard for the newly passed law, but the little old lady was also way older than the sun. This was all wrong.

For the first time, the judge's face turned navy. This was contemptuous and that not-so-little old lady needed to be taught a lesson. With the others who had come back to get their eyes for feedback, the judge went with the Controllers to the old lady's house. The old lady was ordered to come outside, but then the wind started blowing uncontrollably and the rain came too. The judge ordered the Controllers to for gods' sake control the forces, but on that day the forces did not listen to any of them. So whilst there was mayhem, with people blown in mid-air and the rains and thunder competing with each other all at the same time, the little old lady was able to escape with the sun to the heart of the sky. It was only then that the forces let go of their hold over the people. The Controllers were humiliated and they vowed that one day the sun and the not-so-little old lady would be forced to come back to earth. Only then would justice prevail. But ever since then, the sun and the little old woman moved in as lovers.

## 17. Monkey-nanny

Docket number: Baobab Tree 664/-

Complainant: The negligent mother

The Accused: The monkey-nanny

Witnesses: All the monkeys in Forest 0066. They claim to have seen it all unfold.

Monkeys are quite alert. This could easily be confused with violence, but their record with the kids has proven otherwise. Therefore, you cannot at any point direct your fingers at the monkey in question {whose name shall not be divulged, obviously for security purposes and the Bureau's reputation}. You cannot accuse the monkey of abducting the child in question – that seems rather immature and biased. Nevertheless, it can be said that this was pure negligence... not on the monkey-nanny's side, surely, but from the infant's mother's side, as she has on several instances displayed incompetency, especially when the baby was involved. Beyond doubt, her actions painted a canvas of someone who lacked maternal instinct, so much so that I doubt she should be called a mother.

Oh excuse me for my lack of good manners. Oh you are from the District University? Please sit down. This will take a little while... Oh... I also think we are ready to close the case... yes. You see, we are swamped with these cases of 'Corrective Retelling' ...yes we need to address some of these tales once and for all. Hence we've been going through all the submissions that the Bureau has received so far and this one has grabbed my attention, as I come from a long line of Monkey-nannies. You'll never find a nanny as diligent and as loving as a monkey-nanny. It breaks my heart that years later, my people's legacy is being defaced at this level. Yes... yes, I am not a nanny myself, as you can see I work for the Bureau, but once upon a time we were only good for looking after babies. Oh pardon me for saying, 'Once upon a time' at midday! I know you young ones think it's superstitious, but one day when you grow horns after saying such, you'll know better than to utter such sacred words at midday.

This particular case... oh yes, the reasons for the Bureau... The main aim behind these submissions is that that we need to readdress that which is true and that which is utter nonsense. So, I have to briefly take you through the woman's claims.

Firstly, let's establish the time-frame... Oh, actually our archaeologist failed to use the (MI) or Momenta Intensity to take us back to the actual year on which this catastrophe occurred, but one person was very sure that the occurrence happened during the 'late morning' and we all agreed. Oh... you want to question how legit the process is? Oh... okay... that will be a different one to address. You see... that body is self-regulatory, so we can't really interfere. We don't really want to interfere. No, we cannot disregard such reports as they are based on extensive research that goes as far back as we can think to. Even if we wanted to, it's a lot of unnecessary paperwork, so we won't.

Let's get back to the injustices we should be addressing. Some say that the woman was seen walking aimlessly through the forest with a baby strapped on her back. What she does next makes it apparent that the whole time, she was looking for a monkey-nanny. Soon enough, she met a group of jovial monkeys engrossed in a game of dice with mice. She cleared her throat and the sound made the poor mice shudder and brought the game to a halt. All the parties involved were too disgruntled and dismayed to use language with her. Their stares told her to talk, and she did. And since they had previously encountered many nanny seekers in that part of the forest, they gave her constipated glares and nodded in the direction of the nannies. All this happened during that late morning, in that year we're not sure of. The monkey-nannies were all gathered in the sun, trying to eat the discomfort off the bodies of their daughters, nephews, nieces and many unknown others. When they spotted her, in an instant they were all huddled around her. Not in a forceful manner - it was in a bid to be chosen for the gig, as was customary then. Alright, they all threw themselves at her, and it must be noted that this was not at any point violent.

Now we've established two reasons for this female person to wander through the forest:

1. This is not a good woman
2. She is looking for a nanny, but not just any nanny, a monkey-nanny.

There could have been a lot of reasons for this preference, but one that stands out for me is the cheap labour... Yeah... everybody knows being a monkey has not always been easy. To add to that, during that period the monkeys did not really understand the currency. So they paid them peanuts! We could say this woman had exploitation in mind. Still, that's not what I am gearing towards.

Then the two women drew up a contract and, as part of the contract, whenever the woman wanted her child from the monkey-nanny, she stood outside the forest and sang the following words loudly:

Mfene! Mfene weeoohhhh  
Zis' umtwanam ndimncancise  
Sendibona abafazi bencancisa

If you are a native speaker of the language, don't be tricked into thinking that the woman in question was taking a break from cultivating her fields. Our intelligence has provided us with enough information to make us think otherwise. Unfortunately, I am barred from sharing some of the shameless activities that this woman was involved in. Through this cry, she was merely mimicking other hard-working women who genuinely wanted assistance.

Upon hearing the sacred words of a mother requesting to breastfeed her child, no matter how far or how preoccupied the monkey-nanny is, she had to drop everything and bring the child to the mother. So she had to open her ears at all times. Everybody saw the two talk to each other and obviously an agreement was reached. So the monkey-nanny took care of the woman's child. We

do not hear of the woman doing extensive enquiry on her nanny. Not that there was anything wrong with the monkey-nanny, but a new mother should still ask. She did not bother to ask the old monkeys who sat in large groups, with their wrinkled breasts plastered in cabbage leaves for re-lactation purposes. These ladies were called milk monkeys, as they were too weak to handle the energetic toddlers and demanding new-borns, and they only charged a small fee for their breast milk.

So she didn't ask them anything.

Now since the woman established her part of the deal, the monkey-nanny too had to bring something to the table, and this she brought through coming up with her very own response to the mother's call: wogagagagagaga-ina ke ma! {Young monkey, I hope this part is making your blood boil. One of your ancestors uttered these sacred words!}

So it was agreed that the call and response would happen until the mother had the child safely in her arms, which is after the monkey-nanny reaches her. And that's how they did it for a while. Then the monkey noticed some peculiarity in how the mother conducted herself. For instance, the child slept with the nanny throughout the week and the weekends as well. Not only did the child sleep with the monkey-nanny, the mother was always in a hurry to get somewhere. To fit this and that dress and to look prettier and slimmer. She also seemed less and less interested in bonding with the child. She did not even attempt to teach the child her language, and the longer the monkey-nanny kept the child, the more the child became like her.

The child started bonding with the nanny. This was at a concerning and terrifying rate, so much so that the child suddenly had a simian face and behaviour. You couldn't tell the two apart. Even the child's first words were in monkey language. Still, the biological mother was not bothered. This however, bothered the monkey-nanny, as she was a new nanny. The older nannies assured her that this was PND and after a while, the mother would get over it. The mother did not change, instead she became more detached and colder, and treated the child more like a stone than a soul. So much so that the monkey-nanny dreaded the call and answer sessions, as the child would cringe whenever it felt the mother's aura around it, preferring to latch onto the monkey-nanny's milk-less breasts. Sometimes, just her bare chest was enough!

Let me once again go over what we know for sure about this woman:

1. She is still not a good woman.
2. She is looking specifically for a monkey-nanny (we sadly know the reasons for that).
3. She didn't ask.

After many play dates and awkwardly brief encounters between the nanny and the mother, the monkey one day decided not to answer her call. The woman sang, she sang loudly in her horrendous voice, but monkey-nanny did not come. At first, the woman was not bothered at all. Until one day, she just planted her feet outside the forest and didn't move. Even during the harshest of rains she sang loudly: "Mfene! Mfene! Zis' umtwanam!"

It is apparent that the main reason why the woman was suddenly wounded with longing for her baby was because soon the baby was to turn a year old and the father would demand to see its face. During those days, the face of a child that made it to 12 months was surely worth seeing! This is the main reason why he was not able to notice that his wife had been carrying a rock on her back for a whole year!

Oh... what, is that a question? Again? Is the mother a victim? Oh... is the monkey a villain? Are you serious? At this point, I am quite disappointed that you should ask such a question... I hope the next group they send will show more interest and passion. Since you are still not satisfied, let's quickly wrap it up.

Years later, when the husband left her because she lost the child and one of us was a suspect, she moved away. Our intelligence has proof that she moved to the dense shacks of Zokufa, and when she got there, she did the same thing. She had another child and in order to provide for the child, she had to regularly look for piece jobs in the suburbs. To ensure the child's safety, or as a sign of being disconnected, she often locked the child in. One day in her absence, fire prevailed and the boy was stuck in its blazing mouth, and its breath shrunk his bones to sand and blew him into the wind.

Where were the monkeys then?

Can we then say that woman was a victim? If you think otherwise and have enough evidence that could propel us to open the case again, don't hesitate to communicate this intention to us via post at:

365 Monkey Headquarters  
0066 Forest  
I am not sure of the area code

But for now, the case is closed and not a single monkey should be implicated in this jive!

## 18. Almost Model Parents

We have said, “Come Monday, we will love him unconditionally”. It was words that spoke themselves off our lips. They slipped from a space of normal attachment tendencies, something we previously had no idea we possessed. Still the mood was unsettling, so we left it undone. This unconditional loving haunted us for weeks, until we were weak and contemplated surrendering – which we almost did. You were not entirely deserted. At 7:30, a wanted person’s profile fitted your description, but we were still recovering from that guilt, so to be discreet we said we would pass. We were too deep in guilt to even move. Besides, the voice said Monday, not Saturday. Since it was a Sunday, we sat and watched on. When we were about to eat, your father cut an onion into two equal halves and greased the rust-punctured braai stand. A few neighbours came over. We had a braai.

In passing, they mentioned hearing something about you on the radio. We almost listened, but there was no time, as we were jazzing and sweating and all speaking at once. We all said we would sit and discuss you right after the number that had our heels bursting the floor. After all that jazzing, we all said we were too tired to talk. Until your voice crept from the radio and filled our living room with dread. You were so well-spoken, we almost listened. Then our minds wandered off. We suddenly felt angry. We remembered that we were angered beyond the point of return by the state of things in this country.

Your country. Your father said it was our duty to worry about this country on your behalf. After all, you were expelled for a makeshift bomb. From a prestigious school. Who knows, with the way things are going you could be the next prominent leader of a big party. Stranger things have happened. Besides, you are black yet your accent makes even us forget you are black. Those are the guys to look out for, the next big things. We are not phased, it is not our place to judge.

From the other room, your sister lingered and almost said something, but you know how word-stingy your sister can be. She almost mouthed something, but she quickly dashed back to her room to play with her razors. We’ve often said to her, “Not our ceiling, nor on our beds, whatever you do please keep it neat”. We’ve come to an understanding that none of you are ours. That you are loaned to us.

We were on our way to loving you when you decided to bleed yourself dry with all those superficial devotions to all things young and unthinking. We had to pay for each and every reprimand. We paid in sneakers and jeans. We paid in cell phones and earphones. So we kept quiet to avoid the cost of speaking up. You are not in any way your father’s dream of a son. Nor are you in any way mine. I only just breastfed you because you were very weak as an infant. They said, “You may have to breastfeed this one for a full six months!”, which I did.

When you turned four, you refused to talk. My husband, your father, said, “He will take his own life someday”. I couldn’t object to that. Privileged kids are prone to such tendencies. So I said something less sinister, “By sixteen he will desert us for the streets”. We made a bet. Every time

your sister lingers, I wish she could be done with it already. As I was saying, we were about to give you some loving when you were released on a bail we did not provide. It was a Sunday. The day your sister almost said half a sentence in response, but we were in a hurry to find you and love you unconditionally. Then we remembered that church was waiting too. On Monday, we deserted the idea altogether, as you have always dodged the bullet of our free affection. We almost did it though. We almost showed you old-fashioned affection. By the time we got there, you were already headed for the street. It was before Monday.

## 19. The Waiting Game

It was I who came with suitcases filled with the bald heads of my ex-lovers. Lovers whose heads I couldn't lay to rest. Inconspicuously, I hid them inside my bosom. They blab and beg of me to let them rest. Whilst I blossom in their weakness and melt into laughter every time, I think of how much they begged to be spared and left to rest. I've always made sure that I compressed the little sympathy I felt somewhere inside my chest into numb nothingness. These heads are a reminder that if and when a man gives you his neck, don't forget to take his head. My lovers are my souvenirs. Some gutless girls think I am mad. Well, they do not really intimidate me. It takes true courage to immerse oneself completely in the task of not being forgettable. I am an artist. My art is in keeping and being kept.

Unlike other ladies, I do not hide my bounty. Instead I show it off to mark my journey. Not all men I've loved end up in my suitcases. There've been a few who sensed my intentions and pulled away before my claws turned into prison gates. Their incivility set them free. If a gentleman is not chivalrous enough to lay his head on your knees and sleep, then such heads are not worth the keeping. Rude men will go as far as prying your hands open to disarm you of any scissors. They refuse to be kept as mementos and mounted on the walls of failed acquaintanceships.

My husband says I am a show off. I say I am practical. I tell him that the difference between him and my lovers is that he stayed and I am no longer intrigued by the art of taxidermy. Besides, my husband's head is too good to be hidden away, and imagining his eyes dull and dead frightens me. Nothing is more embarrassing for a woman than a man who is trying to run away. Yes, that's the word. All these men awoke love and refused it sustenance. They don't know that surrendering feeds love. My husband too had quite an extensive collection of could-have-beens in his wardrobe. They still called and texted him. They still begged him to take them as armpit lovers. They said, "If you allow us, we could love you on the side". Unlike me, he was very modest about it all. I have always kept my exes' heads and travelled with them to rather remind myself of why I left and kept them in the first place.

Even though my current English-speaking side lover makes me nauseous, the suitcases no longer have space. So he too gets to keep his head. He too gets to be spared. So I have two breathing and loving heads and for as long as I stay, my poor husband gets to keep his head. His head is on my knees. Every time I catch him with glee overshadowing his face I tell him, "I hope it's my face that's making you beam". He responds by saying I mustn't fill his head with nonsense, that I should stay out of it.

Over the years, he's come to call my threats a bluff. He goes on Facebook and updates his status to, "I married a control freak". His obsession with telling about us leaves me baffled. Even for him, my womb has a 'keep out' sign. It despises good men. But what can I do? Seriously, what can I do? Women have been keeping them for centuries. I too need to own one that breaths as well.



## **20. Ndudumo From The Heavens**

As a young boy, Ndudumo showed an interest in all earthly things, particularly the fragile maidens. This was even though his father reprimanded and scolded him often for it. He just couldn't help but watch and this activity took up a lot of his time. The Immortal girls dreaded going on dates with him, as he'd spend most of the time looking down on earth, and would even comment on how graceful the girls down there were. It was difficult for Ndudumo to feel for the Immortals of the First Heaven, even though they possessed good looks. Their masculine bodies were too much for his liking. To add to that, they were forward too. Feminism was already part of their DNA. Ndudumo was concerned with their tendency to outshine the men of the First Heaven, and this made them less desirable for him. At the First Heaven, women already had equal rights and were part of the rulers. They were even voting! They were everywhere, talking when they should really be listening.

However, down on Earth, girls displayed extreme dependence on their male counterparts. They were carried around on men's shoulders. They stayed home whilst men went to hunt and they made babies and spent an awful lot of time trying to look beautiful for their men. This was something that the girls at First Heaven had no time for. As a result, some of them were starting to be confused with men. During times of war, the earthly men would hide their wives. Even their enemies respected the female species, as no matter how much an enemy wanted to harm the other, the children and the females were off-limits. To Ndudumo, this was ideal, as it was unlike the forward female species of the First Heavens, who often took up arms and fought alongside the males in the many wars to invade the Seventh Heaven that the Immortals were mostly engaged in. This is one of the many reasons he often cited for why he didn't like the vigorous girls of the heavens. He doubted he'd ever like them.

He spent a lot of time playfully throwing lightning bolts at the girls on earth, just to see how these delicate ones would react, to see their fragility at play. He liked how dainty and easy to bruise they seemed. The earthly did not begrudge him as such, for his impolite gestures; they knew that being of the heavens where the grass is gold must surely be harrowing, so they allowed him to play at their discomfort. The men knew this too, yet they just didn't understand his obsession, as they often dreamt of having women who could fight alongside them in their meaningless wars. Such women were abundant in the First Heaven, so if chance allowed it, many earthly men would have easily traded places with Ndudumo from the Heavens.

The earthly girls put up with his shows because they thought his different upbringing was to blame. They thought that maybe they had different social manners and rules up there. Maybe fathers at the First Heaven were too busy to teach their sons manners. The fathers at the First Heaven did however, take time to teach their children the desired social norms, and frightening earthly girls was not one of them. They had a bigger enemy. The thoughtless and self-centred Mdali, who created the earth and moved to the Seventh Heaven when it didn't come out the way he imagined it would. He was their biggest enemy and all the children of the First Heaven had to vow to take

him down or participate in the act of taking him down at some point in their lives. It's a known fact that teaching children hate takes a whole lot of time, so the fathers up there were very busy. Tracking Mdali would mean they could finally be free of having to look after the self-righteous (for this they blame Mdali!) and pompous beings on earth.

Ndudumo's fascination with the girls continued unabated. He threw his sticks around and the girls knew he meant no harm, yet they screamed and acted scared to entertain him. Earth girls know how to tame unearthly beings. Somehow Ndudumo could feel that these girls were not genuinely scared of his bolts, and would sometimes abandon his weapon of terror to listen to his father going on and on about how the world was formed and how to take down Mdali and get rid of the earth once and for all. His father pretended to be oblivious of his son's habit and often spoke of it in hushed tones with his wife at night. He was concerned that the time for Ndudumo to get married was getting nearer, yet he showed no interest in one of their society's most treasured rites, which made him extremely worried and nervous. Therefore, the mission to invade the Seventh Heaven was now a necessity, as his son was showing signs of being a weakling, and he had to find a way to stop it. They thought to themselves that if they struggled to fight the Seventh Heaven, maybe they could simply get rid of the earth themselves. So a congress was called with all the powerful men and women of the First Heaven to deliberate what would be the best way forward. Ndudumo's father told them that taking down the creator was an emergency, as earth was starting to infect some of the young people of the First Heaven with frivolous longings and desires. Everybody knew exactly whom he was referring to, as before Ndudumo there had never been an Immortal who showed an interest in the mortals. Everybody agreed that they would all try to find the Seventh Heaven and get the imbecile that painted the earth to come down and erase it. Erasing earth would mean that they could exist in peace, as they were now faced with a crisis. A potential ruler of the First Heaven was showing signs of being under the spell of the biggest illusion of all, which is the earth.

After the meeting, all the necessary arrangements were made and everybody was on board. They would find the creator, and if he didn't resist too much, they would ask him to erase his illusion. If he erased his creation without any resistance or tricks, they would send him back to the Seventh Heaven unharmed. Maybe they could even move in with him, as being on the First Heaven would remind them that the black sheet below them was once earth. After hearing the meeting resolutions, Ndudumo was worried about the fate of the maidens of the earth and he begged his father to reconsider, even promising him that he would stop entertaining himself with the earthly. But his father's mind was already made up and he refused to listen to what his son was saying. They all went ahead with the mission of tracking down the illusionist who was responsible for earth. Ndudumo refused to be part of this group and his father knew that his presence would make no difference, as he was not a skilled fighter.

At this point, Ndudumo had fallen in love with one particular earthly woman whose mannerisms and boldness made him want to witness her existence for all times, so much so that he started to

follow her with his eyes, even to her bed so he could watch her sleep. There was something about this girl that made him to want to look at her at all times.

The girl was an orphan and unlike the other girls who were carried around on shoulders and carriages, she carried herself and looked after herself without any assistance from men. Ndudumo quickly forgot about all the other girls and started following her around all day. She was able to tell when he was around, as lightning was not the only force at his disposal and he used many other forces to try and communicate with her. But darkness was his favourite concealment and at night when all the other girls were sleeping, Ndudumo would come down and use the darkness to disguise himself as he spoke with his girl of choice.

To his surprise, he had a lot in common with this earthly girl, so much that he hated the light, as it meant he had to go back to the First Heaven. He felt that earth was not an illusion, and that earth beings were breakable gods. Ndudumo's father had no idea that his son had found a way to get closer to one of the earthly girls. The mission to invade the Seventh Heaven was going on and they had conquered the Second, Third, Fourth, Fifth and Sixth Heavens, and were now trying to force their way into the gates of the Seventh, where the artist was rumoured to be. When they finally managed to break through the gates of the Seventh Heaven, they were saddened to find that the painter who was responsible for earth was a drunkard who had no idea how to erase it.

He told them that earth was now pulsating with a life of its own, which had nothing to do with his brush strokes. He told them that he was however, working on painting more sisters and brothers for earth, which could conceal and camouflage the existence of the seven heavens above it. Though the artist's tattered clothes gave him the appearance of a mad person, his paintings made sense. They were big balls that would indeed be able to hide the heavens, and everyone who was part of the mission agreed that this plan was credible. They couldn't wait for him to enact it, as the sooner the face of the earth was concealed from them, the better it would be for everyone involved.

When they got back home, they looked for Ndudumo all over, but he was not there. Until one of the young ones noticed a peculiar energy circling the face of the earth and showed it to the elders. They all agreed that it was not previously there and yet it felt like something Immortal. Ndudumo's father and the other men looked for Ndudumo all over, but they couldn't find him and they were starting to think that his energy was what was circling around the face of the earth. When they went to check the room that stored the Immortal powers that were only used when there's an emergency, lightning was not there.

They all knew what that meant. The more they looked at it, the more it looked like the energy was flowing towards a particular part of the world. In anger, Ndudumo's father called for him to come back to the Heavens. Every time he called it thundered and Ndudumo responded with lightning bolts, to tell his father that he wouldn't be going back to the First Heaven as he was now part of the earth and would not leave his chosen wife for anything.

Even though Ndudumo always answered his father the same way, to this day his father still tries to get him to come back home. Ndudumo reminds him that he is still enjoying his wife and if he goes back to the First Heaven, earth would be concealed from his eyes. The other planets now function as camouflage for the Heavens to exist concealed from earth.

The girls from the First Heaven got their revenge on the docile girls of the earth, by teaching them to be just like them, making sure that they also had rights to vote and that feminism was part of their DNA. This way, the girls of the First Heaven made sure that what happened to Ndudumo would not happen to any of the young men of the First Heaven, as now the girls on earth are the same as the girls of the First Heaven.

As for Ndudumo, even his wife has never seen his face. All year round they get to talk and bond with each other, especially during winter, as the nights are longer and Ndudumo and his bride are discussing what to eat for supper. His father still calls him and he still responds, even though he has no desire whatsoever to go back home.