

This document consists of two (2) parts:

Part A: Thesis (Creative Work)

Part B: Portfolio

Either Way, You Die:

A Collection of Short Stories

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Hypocrites

The walk from my single bedroom flat to a garage in Claim Street, Hillbrow used to take 30-minutes. Of late the sharp back pain slowed me down, increasing the time I took to walk the same distance to more than an hour. To alleviate the pain, on my way back, I rested at the bus stop. That hot Saturday morning was no exception. I threw myself on the steel bench at the bus stop, a local free newspaper firmly tucked in my hand. I tilted my head backwards with one hand holding on the lower back above the right hip.

From nowhere an old man, in torn and smelly clothes, crept towards me, placed his bag down between his legs. Rubbed his scruffy face with both hands, chewing his tongue. I inflated my tiny frame to block him from settling next to me. He looked at me under the crown of his sweat-soiled cap.

I had no intention to share the bunk with him. He stared at me with sad eyes. Embarrassed, I shifted to the end of the bench to create space for him. He immediately made himself comfortable next to me. Exhaled. His eyes focussed on the floor before he turned. “Do you think life is meant to be lived the way we lead it? Hypocritically?” His face became serious with facial muscles tightening up. He foamed at the mouth as he spoke. He talked continuously without breathing, sometimes uttering inaudible words.

I raised my hand, not in surrender to his verbal assault, but to plead with him to slow down. He ignored me and continued, “People know the truth, they know the facts, but they are too scared to stand up for what they believe in. Have you noticed what I’m talking about?”

For the first time, he stopped, waited for me to answer. I knew the answer, but swallowed my saliva in the hope he would continue talking. Instead of staring at me with those reddened sparkling eyes. At that time, no one joined us under the shelter. The other passengers stood far away from where we sat. Inviting them over was no option. The man waited with patience and looked at me deadpan.

“Answer, friend. Do you hear me?”

My lips turned pale, a hissing sound suddenly blocked my ears. Intense pressure in the chest made the perennial back pain mild and non-existent. The world around shrunk to a size of a toilet. It felt like everybody around heard the humiliating conversation between the stranger and I. I gathered my stuff: a newspaper, a plastic bag, house keys, and floated away in the direction of my flat without answering.

Are You One of Them?

One morning, I took a walk around the block to stretch my stiff back, negotiated my way among the street vendors who crowded the oily and slippery pavements of Hillbrow. Their tables overflowed with fresh and dried fish, vegetables, inhloko and more. One lady stood still next to the meat and fish table. She had a tablecloth in her hand. Every few seconds, she blew the table cloth above the meat and fish - to drive the flies away. The blue-ribboned toilet intruders did not turn off customers who eagerly queued for the delicacies on offer.

I moved on, determined to return to my flat within the set time. Whenever my eyes came into contact with the street vendors, I forced a dead smile on my face. Inside, I swore and cursed, angry that since these vendors arrived here from far-away places, the value of our properties had dropped.

Vendors threw away stale items on the doorsteps of their operations. In the first corner, I jumped over rotten tomatoes, onions and fish bones that looked like pins thrown on the pavement. "Bastards. Lazy bastards." I cursed and smiled at the same time. Down the street, I felt someone following me, the thud of his footsteps hounding me. I walked faster and breathed heavily, one hand supporting my sore back. A few steps later, he caught up with me. I turned. I did not know whether to be relieved or angry. There he was, the old man, who sat next to me at the bus stop a few days earlier. He wore the same clothes and the cap and carried a big plastic bag on his shoulder.

"Hello, friend," he said, "Have you noticed the baseness I talked about?"

My heart pushed me to sprint away, but the pain at the back urged me to calm down. I took a deep breath and opened my mouth as if to answer him. Lips trembling, I mumbled unintelligible words. Before I finished, he said, "Are you one of them?"

I stopped and stared at him. His question pierced through my heart. Now both hands on the knees and bending over, I shook my head and moved on in the same direction I had followed when the man distracted my walk.

Invisible Hands

Every afternoon Karabo caught a train from Johannesburg CBD where she attended school, and headed back home in Jabulani, Soweto. The distance from the station to her house was the length of two soccer fields, but often, she took a longer route so she could be in the eyes of other commuters.

One afternoon, she changed her route, abandoning the crowded one, for a shortcut. This meant she had to walk along a railway track that was seldom used by other commuters. Instead, she walked between the tracks, jumping over each slap as if counting them. She strutted and danced.

With a backpack strapped around her shoulders, earphones in both ears, the music buzzing in her ears, put her in a world of her own, distracted.

From a distance, she heard voices followed by sustained echoes, calling out her name. She removed the earphones, hoping to recognize the voices.

“Karaaabooo. Karaabooo. Karaabooo.”

Each call became louder but hardly a voice was recognizable. She checked her surroundings but saw no one. The voices were faraway but real and incredibly powerful. She thought she was losing her mind. In no time the voices became intense. In defiance, she put back the earphones, nonchalant.

In the midst of the music and the persistent voices, strong winds swept her into the air. She dangled in the air like a snake in an eagle’s talons. Too scared to kick or scream, and bewildered, she looked down, wondering what was happening. That is when she saw big masculine feet with toes that clung onto the ground like claws, facing her own feet. Floating in the air, a crippling fright raced through her tiny frame, making her almost lose control of her bladder. Strong hands held her arms firmly. She closed her eyes, in anticipation of anything.

Thunderous noise made her tremble in the hands of a stranger. It was the train that flew past. It blew strong winds in its wake. She opened her eyes slowly. Her body was lowered to the ground, and she landed softly. Shaken, she turned around to face and thank the person that had lifted her up, out of the train’s way. She turned full circle. Yet she saw no one.

Passengers in The Taxi

My friend told me a story about a night taxi trip from town to his village. In the taxi, he sat next to two passengers, a girl, and a boy. Every few seconds, they threw a quick look with sparkling eyes at each other and then returned to their upright positions with straight face.

A few minutes into the trip, my friend told me, he initiated a trivial talk with his fellow passengers. They simply looked at him without uttering even a word. My friend resolved to stop talking, and twisted his lips around as if rolling food in his mouth.

Later, the girl slid her right hand into the pants of the boy while he looked on. Sunk her shiny eyes in his. The boy smiled slyly in return. As if he did not want to be outdone by the girl, he pushed his right hand into her jeans.

Embarrassed, my friend looked away. When he glanced at the two through the corner of his eyes, they sat innocently with their hands clung to the back of the seat in front of them. Silent.

“This trip will be short. Or is it just me?” said my friend - to no one in particular.

No response. The boy grabbed the girl’s hand, led it into his pants where it had been before. As her hand disappeared into his trousers, my friend closed his eyes, imagined the naughty things happening underneath those tight pants, counting, 1, 2, 3, 4. Slowly, he opened his eyes, stretched his hand to touch where the two sat a few minutes earlier. The seat was empty, yet the taxi had not stopped. His voice trembling, “Driver, driver. Where are they? They sat next to me.”

“Who? I only had one passenger in the taxi. You. Uyahlanya. Your head dancing in the clouds, amaphara!”

Betrayal

If I told her, in time, I wasn't committed to the little fling we had, she wouldn't have raised her hopes as high as the sky. She imagined us married, living a happy life with our imaginary kids, Jade, the little boy who played cricket and Uthando, Jade's sister who would be a model.

Had she not invited me, I wouldn't have known about the wedding. I wouldn't have attended.

Had I stuck to my initial decision not to attend her wedding to her boyfriend of three months, whose ugliness I found intolerable, the wedding would have gone smoothly.

Had I chosen the back seat in the church hall, behind other guests, she wouldn't have noticed me. The wedding would have continued without any glitches.

If she loved him with all her heart (which I'm sure was split between me and him), she wouldn't have spent hours with me in a hotel room under the husband-to-be's nose a week before the wedding. She insisted on spending more time with me because either way, she said, that was our last time together before and after the wedding. And today, she wouldn't have winked her eye at me while clinging to her husband's innocent hand in front of the crowd that attended the ceremony.

Had I never been a part of her life, she wouldn't have abandoned the pastor, and her husband like a soiled toilet paper in the loo.

The pastor said, "Do you, Dudu, take Buza to be your ...?"

Before he finished, she turned her humble face with sleepy eyelashes, looked at me through the corner of her round eyes. I smiled. Emboldened by my reaction, she ran, leaving the confused towering husband at the podium. Her makeup changed into a mudslide that rolled down her chubby cheeks as she wailed. My first thought was to move quickly or even run towards the door. The gaze of all the guests in the hall overpowered me. With their surprise look followed her like a leopard stalking its prey, they barked, "Hhawu!" She threw herself onto my open arms. As if my hands repelled her, she retreated, but only for a step away, stood firm in front of me with the sad face. Beads of sweat stood out above her upper lip. I was stunned, but waited for her next action. She opened her white purse trimmed with gold, fumbled about, pulled out a blade and brought it towards her throat. I closed my eyes, held my breath and waited for the inevitable strike from her trembling hands. When I heard the piercing screams from the crowd, I looked up. The fresh blood was everywhere, in the

ceiling, on the floor and she slithered like an injured snake on the floor. Soaked in her own blood.

Human Bodies

My uncle was a strange man. He often said; "You must never build imaginary walls around yourself." He had extraordinary ideas about life, in general, and the capacity of his body. He believed the human body was capable of doing anything. But humans were too lazy to challenge themselves.

"You are crazy, Sam, to think that you can walk around town in reverse," his friend said.

"Listen, brother," he said, "one day I will shit with my mouth and eat with my backside."

"Shitting with your mouth is what you do every day."

"Just watch me," he warned.

A few days later, I saw him stroll down the street in reverse. Those who noticed thought he was crazy, cars hooted, others swerved to avoid hitting him, but children were fascinated by his adventure. They gathered around and cheered him on. At first, he tripped over and fell, but never gave up. Since that day, he walked and ran long distances this way. When he mastered this new skill, it was time for the next project.

He shocked us, he slept with his eyes open. We told him it was impossible, but he disregarded our advice, and soldiered on. In his sleep, his eyes are open.

He said, "See, nothing stands on the way of those who challenge themselves."

My Crazy Father

My 90-year-old father who lived alone in his flat in Utrecht developed a bizarre behaviour. He didn't want death to catch him unprepared. Whenever he took ill, he told those around the time had come for him to join his forefathers. You would think he was joking, but that was what he believed. He prepared for his death, bought a coffin which he kept in his bedroom

At night, he jumped into the coffin until he fell asleep. Every morning, he crawled out and packed it away. If he felt a strange pain during the day, he ran to the flat, wore his suit and a tie and dived into the coffin.

One day lying in the coffin, he called me. He took a long tired breath before he spoke.

"Where are you?" I asked, "Dad, is there a problem?"

"Yes."

"What is it?"

"I'm on my way."

"To where?"

"I'm dead as I'm speaking to you."

"What do you mean? Stop playing these games."

The phone went dead. Though angry at him for hurting my feelings, I rushed down the stairs of my flat and almost fell. Jumped into my car and flew to his flat in the outskirts of town. Normally, the trip was about an hour's drive, but that day, it took me half an hour. I kicked the door open. There he was, sitting at the table drinking his favourite drink, tea.

"You are lucky, my boy, he said, "The ancestors: my mum and dad sent me back for now."

Interrogation

Explain to me, how did it happen, Bulldoza?

What?

That you shot him, but the doctor blamed the blunt object for his death?

Why do you ask me?

Because you killed him.

Who said so?

I saw it.

What did you see?

You shooting him. Once. Boom.

You keep getting it wrong. I pointed the gun at him and he fell to the ground.

Yes, because you shot him.

No, because he couldn't face me, like his other men who blocked their ears and closed their eyes when he tried to shoot me.

So what killed him?

A blunt object. Not me...unless you call me a blunt object.

The Truth

Everybody harbours a desire to kill others. Not just insects like roaches, flies, and lice we think we have a right to wipe off the face of the earth. But humans too. I learned this when Tall Man died. Since then people flocked to me, wanting to know how I did it. It was weird. At first, I refused to talk. Not because I wanted to keep this story buried in the belly of my memory. I did not know how he died. How could I know how a person dies if I haven't died?

There was only one reason why people wanted to know how I killed him. To kill others. The same way they said I murdered him. No one believed my truth. Every truth or lie has more than one version. I wondered if he was dead or alive in the first place.

The Blunt Object

I walked down the path with fingers curled on a stick, my whole body almost covered by the long grass. I looked like a man from another planet - thick beard, bloodshot eyes, and the height of a 12-year old. Fools often dismissed me as a little boy who should be sitting on his mother's lap, suckling. But those who knew my fighting skills afforded me the greatest respect.

One day on the way to my shack, a small group led by Tall Man, appeared and blocked the path. Tall Man whose neck looked like that of a buffalo, fired thick phlegm in my face. It landed on my beard. His sidekicks laughed. One of them commented, "He's a coward. Give him another mouthful."

More of his men gathered around. One of them poked my forehead. I lost balance and fell on my back, rolled over, feet pointed to the sky. I stood up from the red dust, ready to flee down the sugarcane fields. Tall Man went for my neck, lifted me up. I writhed like a snake held upside down by its tail. Finally, he threw me down. I stuck my tongue out, inhaled the most precious air.

He pulled his pistol from his back pocket, pointed it between my eyes. Women screamed, "Hhayi bo!" He grinned and rounded his lips as if he was about to whistle. I waved at him with both hands, to stop the stupid thing he was about to do. I watched his finger squeezing the trigger. All I did was to lick my lips and hoped he would stop. The first bullet went into the air, the second one straight to the ground. And the last one, I won't lie, I did not see it... I was dead.

Frustrated, he threw his gun to the ground and called for another one from his henchmen.

"Bring me another pistol," he said. They did not see or hear him. They had blocked their ears with shaking hands, closed their eyes and tightened their arses.

Only then did I remember that my gun had a single bullet. I drew it with confidence.

Puckered my lips and I stepped on his toes so he could not retreat.

"You are lucky I don't have a bullet. If I had one, I would have killed you." Bang! He flew into the air before hitting the ground hard like a heavy parcel from above. I walked away, trampled on his splattered brains and blood. The smell of fresh blood made me nauseous.

In court, the judge with a long-twisted moustache presided over the case. The State invited Dr. Sivel to present the autopsy report. She cleared her throat and tossed a quick look at me.

“My Lord, I’m going to be very short.”

She pulled out a thick file from her bag, paged through it before focusing on one page.

“The deceased died from being hit by a blunt object, no traces of a bullet/bullets could be found anywhere in the body. I thank you, my Lord.” A brutally short autopsy report. Case closed.

Waving

“So, how did you sleep, Pearlie?” I asked, excited.

Pearl Zimu turned her tired head to face the direction of the question. A crippling heaviness weighed on my shoulders, making me wonder if it was necessary to pose the question in the first place. She shook her head. With a half-opened mouth, she waved her pale hand displaying crooked fingers to me.

The sight of her hand weakened me. I leaned against the wall and watched her as she writhed in bed, turning her whole body to face me. Heavy groans of pain accompanied every slow movement she made. Her eyes shone from behind the blankets. She looked more fragile than the previous week. When I visited her last week she joked and laughed about how her life had changed within a short space of time. Now her condition had deteriorated so much.

Frail and tired. Eyes had sunk into their sockets. When she spoke I realized only her voice remained strong. Determined to fight on. The body seemed weak to continue the fight, the taxing fight which had begun two years ago. Young, in her early 30s, she exhibited all the features of an elderly woman. A wrinkled face, toes that resembled claws, rusty teeth, dry cracked lips. It was clear the journey had been long and tiresome.

“How are you feeling today, Pearlie?” I probed further, hoping for an encouraging response.

“Unbearable. I wish I could rip my breast open, but it’s already open. Look! It's like a mine dump with soil turned upside down.”

Tears gathered in her eyes. Her lips vibrated as she took short, countless breaths.

“See the flies feast on me while I’m alive. Can’t repel them. What else do you wanna know, hhe?”

As she spoke, a waft of rotten human flesh lingered around the room. She noticed I blew my nose with the back of my index finger, and paused breathing for a few seconds. I was embarrassed. Flies buzzing around her. She chased them away with her tired hand. They flew away, but as far as the wall. But suddenly descended on her again. Vengeful devils.

“I feel something swimming in the belly of my breast, but it never comes out to the open.”

I wanted to tell her to shut up. Her words exposed my own weaknesses, but I was not prepared to cry in front of her. She had become part of my life since she moved to the house next door.

I ignored her, continued to sweep the floor that was last swept a few days since my last visit. The dirt on the floor had dried out. Used adult nappies, soiled toilet papers, old food with ants feasting on it, strewn all over the house. When I used the broom to lift the toilet paper on the floor, more ants and roaches ran, spreading out in all directions. Carrying with them a stale smell.

Her heavy breathing became difficult to ignore. She went quiet for some time before she pulled a long cough. I turned to check her, but she pulled the sheet to cover her face. The bed bounced up and down as she coughed.

I gathered all the rubbish by the door, fetched a cardboard piece, her dustpan. It was in the kitchen just underneath the stove. As I grabbed it, a strange movement stunned me from the darker corner of the kitchen. I straightened my back and squinted the eyes to inspect the room. Nothing appeared. I hastened back to the bedroom where I had left her.

She waved me to come closer to her with her right hand, while keeping the left one firmly on her chest. Her eyes bulged out as if she had seen something strange. They were the opposite of what I had seen before I went to the kitchen seconds ago. I held my breath again. But this time, ensured that she did not notice what I was doing. She lowered her hand, bowed her head.

Endless Wait

Pearl Zimu hoisted herself, but she felt something pulled her down. You know the feeling that forces you to sit down when your heart wants to take you somewhere else. Since she relocated to Magalies from Mpumalanga, she always took a walk up the mountain. It was part of keeping fit. Of late, she breathed as if her lungs would collapse.

At first, she thought the heavy load she carried in her chest would subside and eventually go away. Instead, it grew stronger and unbearable. The pain below the left breast, stabbed like a needle through the flesh. Apart from the short breath and sharp piercing pains, she did not notice any other changes to her skinny frame.

Over time, jogging became difficult. She observed as she peeled away. Unlike the beautiful fresh grass clothing the mountain, her hair fell off, leaving her round head looking like a desert with only patches of grass in places. The little hair left became as thin as mosquito legs and followed the direction of the wind especially when she was on top of the mountain where the wind blew strongly.

In the end, she dragged herself to the Doctor. After intense persuasion, she underwent medical tests. The results were devastating. Only a few days to live, Dr. Seedat declared with confidence. She wondered if that was meant to make her happy or better still, recover. Those days, she could hardly lift a finger. Taking her usual walks, became as rare as finding peace in wartime. Once after a few weeks, she pushed herself to climb the mountain. Whenever, up there, one idea occupied her.

On the edge of the rock where she rested, she could see far down the river where the water looked like a shiny mirror. Gaping rocks below the cliff grinned at her. Far, in the horizon, birds of prey floated, waiting patiently.

Strange Shuffling

I hear faint footsteps followed by a shuffling and a soft cough of a man outside the bedroom door of my ground floor flat. He clears his throat. As if he's dancing or dragging his feet on the floor. Through the dark, the clock on my cell phone says 23h04. Suddenly the silver doorknob turns with a slight squeak. But quickly slips back to its original position. For a few seconds there is dead silence. Could it be the strangers that often get lost and end up knocking on my flat? They come during the day. Often, they go as far as the main door before I tell them they are at the wrong address.

"Check your address properly before you disturb me," I shout and walk away from them.

I don't buy the story of being lost. I suspect they are typical Johannesburg criminals, sniffing for whatever they can lay their hands on.

Tonight the noise is not at the main door. Blood rushes through my veins. I hold my breath, but a lump in the throat tickles a soft cough. I exhale for what seems like an eternity. The entire block of flats is quiet, as if no one lives here. It's just me and the stranger outside. A few minutes ago, I moved freely around the room, but now I'm frightened and trembling.

I cast my mind back, perhaps I have forgotten to close the kitchen window. I remember I locked the outside door. Started with the burglar door, then the windows, before locking myself inside the bedroom, just as per my son's strict instructions.

When his dad, Tim was around, sometimes we never locked the doors - at all. He trusted himself to the level of stupidity. "Criminals are not suicidal," he would say. "They would not try their luck with him and our son."

Now Tim is overseas on a contract assignment, leaving me with our son who has since moved to Cape Town. My son is concerned about my safety, but could not refuse the job offer in the Mother City. Like Tim, he had joked that nobody would risk losing his life by coming into our flat uninvited.

One thing I'm sure of, whoever is outside, can't be one of my neighbours. Most of them go on a drinking spree on most weekends. Even if they were around, I don't talk to them, but one. If it's him, he would have shouted with his hoarse voice, "Jenny, it's me, John, makhi." He wouldn't creep up on me in my bedroom without announcing his presence.

"Who's that? Ubani lowo?"

The intruder does not answer. Yet outside, the shambling continues. It gets louder and louder, increasingly violent.

Then a heavy object drops on the floor. It sounds like a hammer. A cracking sound follows as the object collides with the porcelain tiles. Another quiet moment before a scratching sound across the door becomes audible again. I sit up and almost shout at the persistent intruder, but instead choose to remain calm.

The heat under a single blanket I shared with Tim intensifies. I toss it to the edge of the bed. Only my feet remain covered. I stretch the left arm in the darkness to reach for the bedside lamp on the headboard. My shaking hand tips it over, and it splinters, making the noise similar to the sound the object outside the door made earlier. I sigh and withdraw the hand.

The strange shuffle persists. By now, I can hardly breathe. I hold my breath, tremble, and keep a tight grip on the pepper spray.

Gogo's Journey

You are sleeping on a grass mat next to gogo who has been snoring and coughing. Your mama on the other side of the room, wakes up, comes to your side with her eyes half-open, calls her mama who does not respond. Your mama bends over her, shakes her, rubs her face with the back of her hand. Silence. Your mama turns and addresses you.

“Gogo is gone,” your mama says, as cool as an iceblock.

“Gone where, mama?”

She does not answer. Instead she looks at you with bloodshot hollow eyes. You think about the favourite things you do with gogo - like sharing food. She often gives you everything, cakes, sweet and coins. She cures you when you are sick. There is one thing you hate about her. Once a month she makes you drink castor oil to clean your bowel system. You have a runny tummy for the whole day while she nods with happiness, and forces you to drink tea without milk. It tastes horrible.

Mama grasps your tiny hand, politely asks you to leave the hut. She follows you as she calls Mama Shandu, your only neighbour, who arrives wailing already. As if your gogo is hers too. She finds mama in the hut, and they murmur to each other. The door to the hut where they have all gathered remains closed.

It's freezing outside, for a summer morning. But you cannot go back inside, lest you get a slap. Unlike her mother, she can be very harsh with you. When she losses it, there is one place to hide - behind gogo. Once you are in gogo's hut, she backs off, threatening and swearing.

You sit by the door like a dog, hoping someone invites you in. If gogo was not asleep, she would have called you into the house. Better still, she would have offered you tea or a sweet from the packet she keeps under her pillow.

“Don't tell your mama I have sweets,” she says, confirming our secret sweet-teeth pack.

“Thank you, gogo.”

You wonder where she's gone. She was in the room sleeping when mama asked you to leave. How can she be gone when she is inside the hut? She woke you up to pray last night before you fell asleep. She recited her favourite prayer. It is still vivid in your mind. “Dear Lord,

please protect us from evil in our sleep. Keep my grandchild safe from the troubles of this world.” She never ate without bowing her head to thank God for the food.

After a long time, the door creaks open. Mama emerges from the hut. She has words scribbled on a piece of cardboard. She tightens her lips on the edges, and calls you. You jump on your feet and peep into the hut through the door cracks. A candle is lit it is flickering slightly blown by the wind.

“Sizwe, take this note to auntie Besi. Let her read it in your presence, and then take it to all the homes next to Gudu River on the foot of Manxelekaza hill.” As she hands you the note, she says: “If people ask you, tell them gogo is gone.”

You run as quickly as you can. Otherwise you won’t reach all to the homes in good time. Auntie Besi is outside, sweeping the yard with a grass broom. You hand her the note. She throws the broom down, sits on the grass mat next to the tree. Pulls her face, seemingly battling to make sense of the words on the cardboard

“Hhe! What has taken gogo?”

You are not sure what to say, but she is not expecting an answer. She goes back to the letter again.

“When did this happen, Sizwe?”

“Angazi.”

“Tell mama I’m on my way,” she says, “Have you been to the other homes?”

“Cha.”

“Go to the Mbathas, then Nxumalos, then cross the river to those homes over there.”

She returns the letter. You take it with both hands and run to the next home. A few hours later, you have been to all the homes. In some homes adults are in the fields, yours is to follow them there. Those who cannot read ask you what is the matter. You tell them that mama sent you to report that gogo is gone. “Hhawu,” they say, clapping hands once, looking away for a second. As soon as they become aware of what has happened, they gather their hoes, and head back to their homes. You wonder why they are dropping everything they had been doing.

Within an hour or so, the fields are deserted. Elders flock to your home. They gather there, and wail to no end. When some stroll in, others leave with their heads bowed. But before midday with only a few immediate neighbours who keep you company, your mother drags herself out of the hut. Mama Shandu follows her. You are not sure if they are happy or sad.

“Gogo, is back,” Mama says, “We must call her pastor.”

Her pastor, you think. But you didn’t know she goes to church. As if mama noticed your confusion she adds, “She says she can’t leave without talking to her pastor. So you fetch him.”

How can mama allow her own mother to leave? Why should she call the pastor if that will make gogo leave?

“Please, mama don’t invite the pastor if he’s going to take her with him.” Mama wraps her arm around your shoulders while rubbing your head with her right hand. Kisses your forehead. You shake, trying to hold back tears. “Don’t let her go, ma, please.”

You push your way into the hut, and throw yourself on gogo who is on the grass mat with her legs stretched out. She leans against the mud rondavel wall. The candle has been put out. She watches you in silence. You wonder what they have done to her to be so upset. Your belief she is in the house is confirmed. Why did mama say she is gone in the first place, you wonder?

Feeling rejected, you wander towards the door. Your mama is waiting for you by the door. She has another note in her hand. Now you run to the pastor’s home on the other side of the mountain. You have never been there, but your mama tells you to ask people you meet on the way to give you directions.

“They will take you to the pastor’s home.”

She kisses you again as you turn and run.

An hour later, the pastor on horseback appears from afar. You jog on the side of the horse. From a distance only the horse and the pastor are visible. In the end, you are home.

You rush to gogo. She looks much better now. As you squat next to her, she turns and offers you, not a single sweet this time, but a packet. You stretch out your hands and take it.

“Ngiyabonga, gogo,” you say. She grins.

The pastor whose pants are folded up to below the knees enters gogo's hut. He has tied his horse to the pole by the gate. Hums a hymn and kneels next to gogo. He prays, moves his hand above gogo's head. For the first time today, you hear her voice as she starts her favourite hymn.

“Ungumhlob wami...”

You cannot follow the rest of the hymn because the weeping buries the song almost completely. When the song ends, all the people say “Ameni” simultaneously. Like they had been practising it for a long time. The pastor stands up and addresses us.

Pastor: Bazalwane.

Bazalwane: Ameni

Pastor: Today is about our gogo.

Bazalwane: Yebo.

Pastor: We are here to pray for you gogo that God may be with you on your journey.

Bazalwane: Ameni

You stop listening to this sermon right here. The pastor talks about a journey. What journey? He should save gogo instead of wishing her well on her journey. Tears wet your shirt and shorts. You will go with her wherever she goes, you whisper. Elders sing, and one by one they stand up to talk. After praying, singing and talking the Pastor leaves. You are glad he leaves gogo behind.

In the evening, you sit next to her excited that she has not left. The warmth of her blankets make you fall asleep. In the morning, you wake up in another hut with many people around your home. You never see gogo again.

How Not to Swear at a Bad Driver on the Road?

Reckless driving is rife. Drivers drive like they are possessed. That is why we have to master the skills of not swearing at each other on the road. Next time you encounter bad driving, adhere to the guidelines below:

If a motorist disturbs you, breathe in, swallow your saliva and tighten every part of your body. Save your energy. You might need it soon, before you reach home.

Down the road a fellow motorist changes lanes without indicating, and immediately slows down once he's in front of you, pretend like you have kids in the car. You do not want your kids to know you too can be rude. Simply scream, "hhawu!" This is a neutral term. It helps you calm down your nerves.

As long as you are still on the road, you are not done. Put differently, as long as you are on the road, they are not yet done with you. A vehicle stops in the middle of the road to drop of a passenger, or to pick up a hitchhiker, and if you are not careful you will ram into its back. Do what you have to do. Swerve to avoid the collision, maybe apply brakes. But do not forget other drivers are not aware of what you are doing. Or the pain you are going through. If you are really having a bad day, someone might hit you while you are trying to avoid another accident. Double trouble.

If a taxi driver cuts you off or pushes the nose of his taxi in front of your car, don't retaliate. Because if you collide, he will not repair your car. Remember, he might be one of those like you, who, at some stage, drove without a driver's licence. The best way to get pressure off your chest, is to throw your hands into the air.

If a motorist makes a mistake, please avoid what many motorists like you tend to do. They first check who is the driver. Not because they know every driver, they want to confirm the gender of the other driver. Depending on the gender, the motorist who is the victim of bad driving might be tempted to say, "Why am I not surprised. All of them don't know how to drive."

Other motorists on the receiving end of bad driving are able to control their anger. It often depends on who metes out the bad driving. They may not exchange insults, but deep down, they swear, spitting the most horrible words. "Look at this one, he drives like a taxi driver."

How to Deal with Boredom in the Doctor's Waiting Room

You visit a doctor's room. It does not matter which doctor you visit their rooms have a lot in common. Clean, furniture pieces spread across the small floor space, a coffee table in the middle (even though you are never offered coffee or tea), and a few flowers, often not fresh. But flowers nonetheless.

Without fail, all doctor's rooms have magazines: torn, faded, and outdated. Magazines nonetheless. Sometimes you wonder where they get them. But this is not what you are here for. It would not be a doctor's room if there was no counter that separates you, the patient from the lady or two who are immersed in their work on the other side. Often, one of them smiles at you as you enter, greets, confirms your details and leaves you alone to chew your pain.

Usually, there are other patients waiting with patience. They neither greet nor talk to each other.

Many patients have found a better way of coping with this depressing environment. They just page through the magazines, pretending to be reading. If this does not work, close your eyes, as if you are asleep. Or in serious pain, until you hear a voice from one of the ladies on the other side of the counter, "Mr Zulu, please go to room 2."

Remembering to Forget

“The struggle of man against power is the struggle of memory against forgetting”

-Milan Kundera, Constitutionally Speaking.

You demand I forget the past atrocities? I wonder if you saw my house being swallowed by flames. Arson. The police looked on and laughed, clapped, lost in excitement. That night, with nothing left except a pile of ashes where our house once stood, we dragged ourselves to a church building down the road. We slept there until midnight when intruders sprayed us with bullets. We were already dead. Did you have to kill dead bodies?

One chilly night. Mourners crammed into a two-bedroomed house for a short prayer before proceeding to the church for the night vigil. This was the song we were singing when the police stormed the house:

Come help us, Jesus Christ

Come help us, Jesus Christ

Oh Son of God, Oh Son of God

Forgive us, Jesus Christ

Forgive us, Jesus Christ

Oh Son of God, Oh Son of God

We thought we suffered because we had wronged God. Cops pushed their way to the coffin placed against the wall. In it was a young man, one of many, who had been speared to death.

You kicked the coffin open, and like a mudslide he rolled to the floor. You turned and strutted away. Job well done, your handlers must have said with a big smile.

Death did not save us from your brutality. You killed us, over and over, even when we had succumbed to your power.

I tried to forget, but memories come rushing into my mind.

Twice, you locked me in a car, not my own, very keen to set it alight. I escaped, but my soul remained stuck in that incident. Even today I wake up at night screaming for help.

In 1981, very young then, you forced me to wash my uncle's tiny body riddled with bullets, shredded like paper. Intestines hanging out like tassels. Some body tissues unintentionally thrown away with the bath water. I choose not to remember this.

Every morning I trample on dead bodies on my countless job-hunting forays. They line the streets of the Northern Suburbs, where those who order me to forgive, and move on with my life, live. What life? The dead bodies bask in the sun waiting for any type of manual work to do for the day. Often they go home empty-handed.

I am emasculated. Broken in body and soul. Thanks to your relentless and inhumane interrogation. How do I forget that I am limping because you broke my knee?

Every day, I walk the barren plains of my village. Nothing grows, except death and poverty. Villagers walk slowly. You would be forgiven to think they are standing still. Rocks protrude from the ground like pimples.

Help me to forget all these.

Forgetting cannot be a matter of choice. Remembering the past is not a choice either. You want me to erase memories deeply imprinted on the brain. You expect me to pretend I don't see and feel the demons of the past that haunt me everyday. My past and I cannot be separated. And this was not my choice. It imposed itself. Blame:

"...the power of context and how it makes a person encode and remember memories more easily."

-Milafel Dacanay, Tech Times

How then do I forget the scars I bear all my life? I'm not even sure if I want to erase the past.

You say,

"Get over apartheid!" "I didn't vote for the system", and "I worked hard for what I have!"

- Anonymous Apartheid Apologist, Voices 360

At least, you worked for what you have. Even what I toiled for, was usurped from me. I'm confused. One moment you chose to work hard to be where you are today. Another you say I'm not the only one who suffered.

"Whites truly suffered under apartheid, and they are still suffering."

-Koos Kombuis, News24

“...memories of national triumph and traumas are often deployed to serve specific political purposes and are for that reason hotly contested.”

-Richard A. Schroeder, *Africa After Apartheid: South Africa, and Nation in Tanzania*

I represent no one else, not any political party, but myself. I can only attest to what I went through. I have no grounds to dispute your story, but for now, listen to mine. I stand accused of clinging to the past. You inflicted a fatal wound, but I must be quiet about it. You condemn me for not forgetting. You blame me for crying and trying to stop the bleeding from the gaping wound you inflicted. You have the audacity to say I cannot blame all my sufferings on apartheid which ended years ago. Why are you so keen to defend apartheid if it didn't benefit you?

“We can stop shouting at understandably angry people to sit down, shut up and be good. We can start to listen instead.”

-Laura Shortridge, News24

No obligation. Just listen to my story. Maybe, just maybe, true healing will be realised. Perhaps true healing culminates in forgetting.

Unresolved Mystery

This is the story comprising 8-parts, namely A, B, C, D, E, F and G. You have a choice to read all the stories following the above order. Alternatively, read A and then jump to any other story of your choice until you have read them all.

A - 07 March 1877: The Start

The night before, a falling star flashed across the heavens. It lit the tiny Ingwe village consisting of a few homesteads spread across rocky plains at the foot of Ingwe mountain. A few kilometres away, was a cliff, the natural border between the village and the river that was never short of clean water. The cliff was an open graveyard where those condemned to death by the King ended. Most of them had been accused of witchcraft. Once you were accused of witchcraft, a brutal death was certain.

Around the beginning of 1877, more people converted to christianity, thereby becoming amakholwa. In the eyes of the King and the community, amakholwa were the new crop of witches who had to be dealt with severely. To send a clear message to future converts, that the King was not prepared to tolerate the obliteration of his army and authority by missionaries. That is why they were forced to the edge of the cliff, then cruelly speared to death. The cliff echoed their frightened cries.

Initially, only women and girls joined the amakholwa set. Over time, more men also converted. The King was lenient towards women, and pretty ruthless towards men and boys who refused military conscription.

Scary stories soon circulated about ghosts around the cliff. Claims that when you walked past the cliff at night you would hear ghosts crying for help as they bled through the wounds sustained during execution. I had never seen any ghosts. No one in our village had, but everyone knew someone who claimed to have seen one.

When I saw the falling star that night, I spat like a man possessed to stop the bad luck visited upon me. We believed such a star was a sign of bad luck.

I glanced around. My bull bawled in the kraal, sending a sustained painful cry, something that never happened under normal circumstances. I fixed my eyes across the kraal. Nothing. My eyebrows shot up as I gasped. A hummer bird flew passed, settling on the pole next to the gate. Another bad omen.

I retreated to my hut, pulled my sleeping mat from the hook on the wall, and spread it across the floor. My spear and shield were neatly lined up next to me. A man had to have his weapons within reach to fend off intruders, wild animals or enemies. I rested on my back, listening to any suspicious movement outside. I heard only my own breathing, and blood pumping through the veins.

B - 08 March 1877: The Hour Is Near

Those days nothing happened by chance. Everything, whether in the atmosphere or anywhere else, had a meaning for the villagers. People read and analysed the clouds. Dense and dark clouds carried the rains. Often they boiled and rolled like a mudslide. Embedded in them was anger. Others carried the wind. The most familiar clouds, *unwele*, looked calm. Yet it was a harbinger of death in the community. Those clouds were white, they resembled a ruffled-up cotton wool distributed across the skies. With the appearance of *unwele*, we knew death was imminent.

The morning after the star, I crawled out of my sleeping mat. With eyes closed, I staggered to the door. The sun rays had entered the hut through the wall cracks. The knees could not carry my heavy frame. The previous week, the priest had given me a long shirt to wear over the loincloth as a sign of *ubukholwa*. I felt humiliated by this flappy garment. As *amakholwa*, traditional attire was a no-no. It smelt like stale meat, the priest said. I was not ready to take off the clothes I grew up wearing. To me, my heart, rather than the clothes I wore, told a story about my belief. Besides, abandoning my loincloth felt like being castrated.

Outside, I looked up in the sky. I saw black clouds that looked pregnant. They boiled and roared like a wave. I too had mastered the skill of reading the clouds. As the dark clouds rolled away, a clear sky enveloped the atmosphere. From the horizon, *unwele* snaked in. In a few moments, the sky turned white as the clouds of death grew larger. I walked back to the hut humming my favourite gospel song. I felt drained sometimes cutting words in the middle. No one could read my mood.

In the hut, I took my weapons and went back to the kraal for ritual cleansing. Sprinkled the weapons with *intelezi* before returning to the hut. I then sat on a tree stump. The thought of *unwele* lingered in my mind, causing my skin to become itchy. I prayed in silence.

“King somewhere up, please protect me from my own people. Amen.”

Down the river, somebody blew a war horn. The river echoed the sweet sad music the horn produced. The war cry confirmed my fear. The spilling of blood was upon us. Women ululated as birds chirped in unison. It was common in those days that when war was imminent, women would crisscross the homestead like worms devouring rotten meat. Often, they made provocative comments that would galvanize even the weakest men and cowards into action. No man, not even ikholwa would resist the stinging monologues of women.

“Blessed are those women who gave birth to strong men who would die fighting rather than die sleeping.”

“Real men are out there fighting to protect their women and children. What about our husbands?”

“I married another woman.”

One of my wives shouted from a hut where a thick smoke of cow dung fire came out through a tiny door. “Oh what can I say? My husband has been castrated. He now wears a shirt. He has abandoned the King and all that we value as a nation. What a shame?”

Her words left a gaping hole in my heart. She understood that no man would tolerate being humiliated in front of others. I stared at my weapons before bowing my head in embarrassment. I had vowed not to spill blood again. Not to participate in any war or battle. I focused all my energy on working for the kingdom beyond this world. In return, everybody disowned me.

As I heard the war horn, my blood began to boil. I started to breathe in and out. Cold wind blew across my face. I remained stuck in one position, as if tied down by a rope. To my relief, the war horn eventually vanished into the bushes. Not far from my homestead. That afternoon, I welcomed uninvited guests into my home.

C - 08 March 1877: Spying

Maqhekeza, a local induna, accompanied by two counsellors came to my homestead unannounced. They announced their presence, by singing my clan names endlessly as if they had rehearsed them over and over.

“Ngwane, Sothole, Mthiyane...,”

I hoisted myself from my cowhide mat. After they had finished singing the clan names, I responded.

“Come in, Ndabezitha.”

“Ngwane,” said Maqhekeza as he flipped up the back of his loincloth so he could sit on his bare bums on the tree stump chair.

At that moment I smelt blood. I wiped my nose with my bare hands. It was dry as a rock.

“What can I do for you, Ndabezitha?” I asked, “We did not expect such an unexpected visit from the King’s men.”

“Ngwane, I’m the mouth and eyes of the King. He is concerned his warriors, like you, are fast diminishing right in front of our eyes.”

“Ndabezitha,” I said to show I was listening.

“More men are defecting to those who claim that there is another king apart from His Majesty,” Maqhekeza said, pointing his eyes to the shirt I wore.

“With respect to the King,” I said.

My mouth went dry before I finished the sentence. Beads of sweat collected in the forehead.

“There’s still time for you to correct your mistake, Ngwane”

I leaned forward. He grabbed his stick and turned to his men.

“It’s time to go, madoda,” said Maqhekeza to his sidekicks.

The tension was tangible as they left. They followed each other with their heads bowed as if they had been found guilty in a court. My eyes followed them as they dragged themselves down along the river.

D – Minutes Before the Event

I did not want food that night. My senior wife brought umcaba to the hut where I rested every time I needed privacy. She realized I had not had a decent meal for almost two days. After bringing food she sat and watched me eat. This was not common. When my other wife noticed that the senior wife had joined me for supper, she invited herself into the hut.

Their presence embarrassed me. I used a wooden spoon to scoop from the clay basin, threw umcaba into the left hand and then into the mouth.

My wives sat there with their lips parted, watching me. I forced amasi down my throat.

“Why are you two watching me like that?”

“Baba, we are worried about you,” said the senior wife.

“Do you want amasi?”

“No. no. no. We have our own food waiting, Ngwane,” she replied.

“I’m beginning to suspect something. Have you added some love portion to my food?”

A burst of laughter blocked my ears.

“Why would we do that, Ngwane?”

Shook my head and dipped my spoon into the clay basin. I offered the first spoon to the senior wife and the second one to the junior wife. They swallowed without chewing, leaving their hands clean. When done they followed each other to the kitchen.

From a distance, I heard a hyena laughing. The senior wife would return to the hut because it was her turn to spend the night with me.

E- The Final Hour

I thought it was my wife’s footsteps I heard behind the hut. Got ready to play with her.

Moved to the side to create room for her to sleep.

“Come in mama,” I said.

No one responded. Instead more footsteps came closer. Whispering voices became audible. Maqhekeza with about five more warriors entered. They grabbed and dragged me out like a dead dog into the dark. One of them blocked my mouth with strong hands. My brother’s two sons, were among the warriors. One of them carried a gun on his shoulder.

A heavy storm brewed in the sky, blocking away the moon. We went as far away from my kraal as we could. The lightning struck often I could recognize the faces of all my captors. When we stopped, Maqhekeza was the first to talk.

“We’ve been begging you for too long. Now is the time for you to die.”

“Hahahahahahah...,” I laughed, “Only the body will die, Maqhekeza, not my soul.”

“We shall see. Sizobona.”

My nephew dismounted the gun from his shoulder, cocked and pointed its muzzle at me. I raised my hands as if in surrender and begged him not to pull the trigger yet. He lowered his shoulders and waited.

“Spare me a minute. I have to pray. After that, you can continue with your plan.”

I fell on my knees; closed my eyes and prayed in silence. In the end, I said, “Ameni.”

Nobody noticed I was ready because of the commotion caused by thunder.

“Maqhekeza, I’m ready, but please don’t let my nephew pull the trigger. He’s my blood. He can’t spill his own blood.”

The young man was eager to prove he could handle the gun. He fired several shots, but none of them hit me. Fearing that the gun sound would draw the attention of the community, Maqhekeza pulled out his own handgun. Fired several shots before my body collapsed. It sank between the two sharp rocks.

F - The storm

As his body convulsed, something strange happened. The rain accompanied by hail poured down. We ran back to Maqhekeza’s home for cover, leaving the body in the veld. Lightning followed us, no matter how fast we ran. We jumped to different directions, trying to avoid being struck. Water flowed as if rivers had burst their banks. The rain lashed for about thirty minutes, but its damage was beyond our understanding. We finally reached Maqhekeza’s home safe.

G - After the Storm

When the rain stopped, we sneaked out to where we had abandoned the body. We tiptoed into the night in silence. The village had turned into a lake.

We arrived at the scene. The rocks stood still, but the body was not there. The continued search yielded no results. Nothing. Empty-handed and in silence we headed back to our respective homes.

Hope fools

They came out in numbers, hoping their turn had come. They could not see where the long queue began. Because they were right at the end. Sadly, it took hundreds of years for those in front of the line to fill up their sagging pockets before they stepped aside for the hope fools. When, at last, they walked away with heavy pockets, there was nothing left for the new arrivals who then starved and fell on their faces, exposing their lean backsides.

Limping

He went into a hospital, limping, hoping to come out healed and strong. He pinned his hopes on the skills of the doctors and nurses who underwent the most advanced training on how to restore health to the weak. Two weeks later, he crawled out like a sloth. His doctor thought walking with a limp was worse than not walking at all.

A Mass Suicide

The right to vote is no different from committing mass suicide. Together, citizens vote, they suffer unemployment, diseases, poor health, poor education. Together they die for trusting those who promise everything good, but deliver the opposite. Hoping for the best, citizens rise again to commit another round of self-inflicted death – voting. Hope can kill.

Crippling Shackles

“For heaven’s sake, it’s time you moved on,” said Jan. We listened, nodded reluctantly, and soldiered on. We gathered our meagre possessions – crumbs that fell to the ground when Jan enjoyed his seven course meal, shook the shackles of poverty that dragged us back as we staggered to catch up with Jan’s children. He had spoken. For him, the days of slavery were long gone. What remained, were former sufferers who still suffered the nightmares of the past that inadvertently blinded from embracing an uncertain future.

Incurable Disease

Over the years I have learned that all people are patients, roaming around the hospital buildings with each of them trying to cope with their diseases. They crawl around with eyes wide-open in search of more food, with their ever-dry mouths ready to swallow, hands itching to dive into every pot they believe has food. It does not matter whose food it is, as long as they can lay their hands on it, it becomes theirs. When it is feeding time, you would expect them to say, “No, I have had my share.” Brushing their bulging stomachs with satisfaction, they sit with their mouths hanging, ready to swallow every bit of the food that comes their way.

While these patients present different symptoms, they suffer from one underlying incurable cause - greed. Someone suffering from greed, does not want to share anything with anyone. This incurable disease makes those infected desire more of everything, even if it means crushing to death others, who may need just a bit to survive.

Selflessness

Selflessness, you are important in my life. You make me think about others first. This is what life should be about anyway. I have so many friends around and they depend on me. I rely on them. We must stick together like hunting wild dogs. But you evade me. Like air, I feel you, but I can't catch you. Why are you so slippery? Even when I know your benefits, you run pass me.

My life is miserable without you. Greed, poverty, lack of understanding the needs of others are culprits. None is stronger than selfishness. Selfishness, is narrow minded and inward looking. The whole universe revolves around selfishness. Whenever, I get closer to you, selflessness, selfishness takes over my heart and mind. I no longer possess a heart or mind of my own. Selfishness has invaded and taken over every space I once had. All I see now is no one, but myself.

Forgiveness

Who are you not to forgive when they ask for forgiveness? Or who are you to forgive anyway? They apologised last year. They apologised this year. They will apologise next year. I wonder why they don't apologise in advance because they know they will sin again, and again. And they will crawl back to you begging for forgiveness.

Contending with Life

Read if you believe hell exists.

A. It tells you how to avoid the inferno to be faced by those who will go to hell.

If you don't believe hell exists, read.

B. It will remind you, you are already in hell, and the only way to escape hell on earth, is to die.

A: In hell there is endless wailing, sinners paying the ultimate price. The fire rages, flames leap into the air. No one can extinguish this fire. Sinners roll over like meat on a charcoal bed.

Do not despair because you can save yourself from the eternal suffering. Believe everything they tell you without questioning. Forget your cultural beliefs or simply observe your cultural rituals behind closed doors. Lie to those around you, so they believe you have abandoned your old way of life. That is what most of them do anyway. Deceive shamelessly.

Only your religion counts. All others are fake. if you follow them, you are condemned to suffer eternal death. You will be on fire - forever.

B: You are already in hell before you die. Around you, are sinners who are being poked and turned all over. All of them are in denial. They think it is impossible to be in hell while you are alive in your physical body. To them, they are still alive.

Secrets

Vusi and Thoko were married for twenty years and two months when Thoko's safely guarded secret came out. Emerged from the closet like a seedling from the soil. Secrets have a strange way of revealing themselves. Often at the oddest of times, stunning the person who holds them dearly. Thoko learned this the hard way. She was devastated.

She had vowed never to share her story with anyone - not even her husband. She knew, from the day she wrapped the secret in her heart, that if by any chance, it got revealed, it would cause irreparable harm to those who trusted her. She resolved to keep it tucked away in her chest.

The secret ate her slowly, like an ax chipping away wood. Her round cheeks, shrunk - leaving her face, potholed, sagging. Her loud voice and emotional outbursts were intact. Over time it became increasingly difficult to cope, she desperately needed new ways of lying.

Though not a heavy drinker, she often went out with her husband for a few drinks. One evening alcohol made her say things she would later regret. She cried like a baby - mucus and tears were all over her thick lips. He caressed her back, hoping that she would stop sobbing. He wrapped her around his masculine arms as if strangling her. All to no avail.

"I'm tired of this," she said.

"Of what?"

"This- load- is- too- heavy- now," she mumbled, "I- can't- do- this- anymore. I want to be free."

"Talk to me, please."

"See-years- ago, yes-it-was. I was- I was – eighteen or nineteen then. Yes, eigh-teen."

"What happened?"

"Please-promise- you- won't- judge- me."

"Really? Do you have to ask me?"

"He- came- home- late- that- night."

She could not finish the sentence, burst into tears thumped her chest with the palm of her right hand. Her piercing voice buried all the noise in the hall. Other customers turned to look at them. Upon realizing that she had caused a scene, she said, "Forget. It's nothing serious."

The following morning, she had no idea what Vusi was talking about when he asked her to continue with her confession.

"You think I have a confession to...? What confession?"

"You said you wanted to set yourself free from your dark history. It wasn't me."

"Stop it or I will pack my bags and go."

"Wo, wo, wo, honey, please."

At that moment, she shook from the suppressed anger. Panted with short breaths, and her chest heaved like that of a baby trying to stop crying.

It had been a few days now without her outbursts. But there were signs something was troubling her. Now and then she would simply be silent, Withdrawn, Sometimes she mumbled to herself, nodded, and shook her head.

One Saturday morning she went to town so she could shop while it was still relatively empty. Most people visited town around ten on weekends. A serial shoe shopper, by nine, she was waiting outside the store where she had seen her dream shoes a few days earlier.

When the shop's roller door got swallowed up into the wall as they opened, she shook her curved body and strutted to the shoe section. From a distance, she saw the pair of high heels with a red sole. Twenty minutes later, the trolley was overflowing with the goodies. As usual, she took a few items for her husband to shut him up because he complained about the shoe-buying addiction she suffered.

Back in the house, Vusi had finished mowing the overgrown grass in the yard. Refuse bags lined the street, waiting for the garbage truck to arrive. Municipal workers often refused to take overflowing bags. But he had a way of handling them - a tip to the driver made the trick. He put a few notes in his back pocket and waited for the truck. Every Saturday, it arrived at twelve o'clock and his wrist watch read twenty past ten.

He crawled to the storeroom in the back of the house. It had not been cleaned for months. Old newspapers and scrap papers collected over the years were strewn on the floor. Thoko hoarded all sorts of papers and magazines. Boxes full of books, some of which had collapsed from the water coming in under the door were stacked up against the wall. In others, were small items wrapped in newspaper. Not even Thoko could remember what was contained in those boxes. As he pulled them out, some disintegrated.

In the pile, was a brown faded envelope, sealed and kept together by rubber bands that had disintegrated from the heat exposure. He tossed the envelope aside while sorting other papers.

He sneezed repeatedly and coughed a drawn-out hissing cough from the dust that covered his beard like the grass buried under the snow. He drew out a pocket knife from his hip, wiped it clean with the overall he wore. Took the envelope he had shoved aside and sliced the rubber bands. Most of them were already broken, leaving the top of the envelope open. The envelope's glue had given up over the years. An old diary dropped to the floor and hit his right foot. Loose papers flew out. He rummaged in the envelope for more papers. Nothing. Among the papers from the diary was a letter with the letterheads of the Correctional Services Department. With his dusty hands, he straightened it out. It was addressed to the parolee Thokozile (Thoko) Shandu and signed by the Commissioner of Correctional Services and other officials. Trembling with curiosity, his heart stopped for a second. He pulled a long breath. His head spun around. Everything he looked at was bleary. Staggered to the chair next to the door and threw himself on it. As he read the letter again, Thoko appeared worn down by the parcels in both hands. She fixed her eyes on the letter in his hands. Fuck! She collapsed in the chair next to him, her lips immediately turned pale.

I was only eighteen then. Themba and I had been together for more than a year. That day, he was drunk, and he smelt of alcohol. I was used to that kind of treatment. You know that relationship when your partner bits you up and then comes back crawling and begging for forgiveness once he is sober. I was in bed, sleeping. It must have been late, around 12h00 midnight. He crept into the bed next to me. Dragged the blankets away, left me freezing.

In my sleep, I felt a heavy blow to the jaw. My saliva turned sour, and I saw stars with my closed eyes. The pain ran from the jaw to the left ear, blocking it, except for hissing sound. I became nauseous. I spat to the floor next to the bed. Blood everywhere. Up to now, I don't know what happened to one tooth. I found one on the pillow even though I lost two. That day, I decided not to keep quiet in the face of suffering. I ripped my dress hanging from the

nail on the wall. Hastened out of the door armed only with the determination to run to the police station down the road.

“Come back here,” he shouted, “Where do you think you are going?”

I banged the door as I left. He followed me, swore, called me names: slut, bitch, stinking dog.

“Your life without me is doomed. Where do you think you are going? Hhe?” he said as he staggered behind me. I became tipsy from the excessive bleeding through the mouth.

I had nothing to protect myself with. Nothing. I bled profusely, the jaw was dislocated. I was in pain in my ears, eyes, and even skull. He had caught me just as I turned the last corner before the gate to the police station.

“You see this scar. This was a stab wound. He went for the neck with a panga. I ducked, and he caught me in the shoulder. As I crouched, he lost his footing, tripped and fell to the ground. At that moment, he shrunk to a tiny dot on the ground in my eyes. I grabbed the knife from him, shut my eyes, and stabbed in the air with the hope he would not come near me. I forgot he was drunk. He walked straight into my swinging hand with a knife. I inflicted a single wound to his left armpit.

“Are you killing...me?” he said.

I still hear that fading voice every day. It induces diarrhoea in my belly.

A deep silence followed. My heart nearly stopped with his. I felt the chill rush through the stomach, and settling in the chest. I wanted to run away, but the police were quick to arrive at the scene. I was sentenced to fifteen years.

She stopped for a while to give him a chance to talk. He gave her a quick gaze. Her bra was exposed after taking off the blouse to show him the healed wound that was familiar to him. Her chest was wet from tears.

“C’mon, judge me. I was wrong to kill a man. Say it dammit! I say, pass the judgment.”

He glanced at her again. His mind was elsewhere. He stood up without uttering a single word. He blew the dust from his hands, leaving the papers scattered all over the place, took a few steps to the door.

She jumped in front of him to prevent him from leaving. He brushed her aside and she fell onto the pile of papers. His face was empty, the eyes open, but he saw nothing. He walked

like a tired man, bringing his face forward as if he was about to fall. Thoko hurried behind him to the house.

“So what are you going to do now? Leave me, coward?”

He dragged the step ladder leaning against the wall as he went into the house.

“Please, don’t do something stupid,” she begged.

Ominous air floated around. Again he said nothing, climbed the ladder, and straight into the trapdoor. In the ceiling, he turned on the cell phone torch, shuffled around for a while, disappeared for a minute or so before emerging with a parcel under his arm. Like a sloth, he crawled out. Cobwebs all over him.

He spoke for the first time since the big discovery. “Come here,” he waved her to the bedroom. Not sure what to do her first thought said, “Run.” She chose to stay. He called again before she wiped tears and followed him. In the bedroom, he threw the parcel on the bed. Forgot how dirty it was.

“Look. Open this,” he pointed to the plastic bag. With trembling hands, she untied the knot. Struggled a while before it opened. He stood there and displayed deep emotions. From the plastic bag was an old travel document. He snatched it from her, opened and held it close to his heart. He sat on the bed with both elbows resting on his thighs, and hands propping up his head. He spoke with his signature voice, soft.

“You think you have secrets? Think again.”

"This is who I am. I’m not who you think I’m. My parents did not perish in the fire during the 1980s as I claimed. On my first day in South Africa, I met a guy by the name of Vusi Ndlovu who worked for a platinum mine. He gave me food and accommodation for months. I was desperate for a job. He organized an identity document. From that day, I lost my identity. I loved him so much I adopted his name. A few months later, I found a job in one of the mines.

It was not enough that I turned my back on my country and my people, but I had to lose my identity too. So, today I have found myself. Cliff Mkandawire, the Malawian."

My Own Son

You are resting when you receive an exciting text message from your healer. You grab your mobile phone from the table, move closer to the window. You rest your left elbow on the window seal. You need more light to read the message. Your eyesight has deteriorated over the years. These days you hold the phone at arm's length - to be able to read those ant-sized letters and numbers on the tiny screen.

You suspect the message must be from your brother, Saul who relocated his family far away from you. He often sends you his well wishes even though you never bother to respond. You hate him. He's a witch. His evil powers are the reason you only have one child. He bewitched your wife to suffer multiple miscarriages. Doctors inform you, your wife suffers from an incurable disease which makes it difficult to bear more children. You do not believe them. Instead, you sought the help of a healer. During your consultation with him, he says your brother buried a strong umuthi, a red candle with needles, in your yard. Whenever she conceives a baby, umuthi underground invades her body through her feet and settles in her womb. It then untangles the little baby forming in there. She starts to bleed. You refuse to take her to the hospital, insisting, izinto zabantu lezi. The endless bleeding leads to miscarriage. You have lost count of the miscarriages.

Like many other community members in this rural settlement, your brother's kids are unemployed. But recently, his son, Sizwe got a part-time job at a hospital in Johannesburg. You are angry that this might improve your brother's dire economic status. Every day, you wish your nephew loses his job.

"My brother's children are pretty much dead," you say to your wife.

Your wife is offended. She threatens to tell your brother.

"I will tell him."

"Go ahead."

There's widespread unhappiness in the extended family because of the sour relationship you have with your little brother.

By the window, the SMS becomes clearer to read.

"Your brother's son, Sizwe died today in an accident at Amajuba on his way home from Johannesburg," the SMS from your healer who lives a few rivers from your brother reads.

You giggle in excitement, pacing around the house. God has answered your prayers, at last.

Eager to break the news to your wife who's out in the fields.

"Now we'll see what they'll do to survive," you whisper as you nod slowly.

It's already too late for you to go to comfort your brother's family. There is no transport to his village this time of the day. Cell phone network there, is very poor. The best option is to catch a taxi in the morning.

You call your only son, Siza to find out if he's aware of the news. His phone is off. He's coming home tomorrow afternoon.

When your wife arrives back home, you break the news to her. She wails uncontrollably, as you comfort her.

"God knows why he has done this. At least my brother still has nine children left. What about us?" you say with little emotions.

She stares at you in disbelief. Blows her nose and wipes tears with the torn apron she's wears. Her chest heaves.

"He's my son too," she whispers.

Tonight you retreat to bed early so you can catch the first taxi to your brother's homestead in the morning. If you miss it, you will have to wait for the nine o'clock bus or 11 o'clock taxi. It would be too late.

At night, you have a weird dream. You kick and scream until your wife wakes you up. In the dream, you are in a grass-thatched rondavel. The grass is ruffled like uncombed hair. You see the stars through the roof. Somebody snatches your torn blankets, leaving you naked. It's freezing cold. You tremble. You fall asleep again. The dream continues. This time the roof caves in. Your wife is dressed in a black apron, a sign of mourning. In the end, you drift into a deep sleep until your cell phone alarm buzzes in your ears at five.

Your wife is still sobbing. Her eyes are puffy and she speaks in a whisper. There is no time to heat up the bathing water. You take a cold bath.

An hour later, you are in a taxi. The dust twists into the taxi through the cracks on the floor. Passengers moan that they are traveling in a coffin as they cover their faces from the dust. The driver overhears them and brings the taxi to an abrupt stop, forcing the passengers to

cling to the naked metal seats. The engine goes dead, while he turns his head to face the complaining passengers sitting at the backseat. His eyes dwell on the lady in a red t-shirt. She's not the only one moaning, but he targets her.

“Sisi in the red t-shirt, get out of my taxi, now! Tsek.”

Nobody moves. Passengers gaze at each other in shock. The lady in the red t-shirt shudders and puckers her lips. Her eyes plead innocence.

“Do you want me to drag you out? You must tell your husband to buy you a car. This one is mine.”

You think about brokering peace between the driver and the targeted passenger. Instead, you keep quiet. The passenger remains rooted in her seat.

“So you won’t leave? This car is going nowhere,” says the driver as he fiddles with his seat, finally, reclining it.

Other passengers grumble, but none of what they say makes sense. A young man at the back seat turns and addresses the lady who refuses to leave the taxi, “Hey, Sisi, I’m getting late for work.”

She shuffles her stuff. Stares at the man, talking and then at the other passengers. No one comes to her rescue.

“Bring back my money then,” she protests to no one in particular.

“What money? Get out! Tsek. Clever.” the driver says as he jumps out of the taxi and walks around to open the passenger door.

“We’re running late. Please, don’t delay us,” other passengers say in a chorus.

She leaves silently. Then the taxi roars in agony as it crawls up the hill, leaving her covered in a cloud of dust.

An hour later, it drops you off not far from your brother’s home. As you approach the homestead, you notice the police van parked outside. Two policemen and your brother are standing next to the vehicle. One policeman has a brown file under his arm. They are talking to your brother who has his arms folded across his chest. His eyes are focussed on the long grass under his feet.

You bow your head as a sign of respect for the fallen nephew. You greet your brother and the police. Your brother's eyes are red from crying. He gives you a long and hearty hug while the police look on. He turns to the police.

"This is my brother you are looking for. He lives far away from here."

The policeman with a file stretches his right hand to greet you. Turns to your brother and says, "Can we find a place to sit, baba?" Once you are all seated, he opens the docket. He takes out a blood-stained ID document. Flips it open. It's Siza's, your own son.

"I'm sorry about your loss, baba?" he says.

You look at him with your mouth open.

Goodbye

A human anatomy picture hangs on the wall. Nora imagined what her body parts would look like when she releases her last breath. They would freeze, shrink and change colour from red to blue. At that moment she forgets about the intense pains ravaging her. She shifts her eyes to the clean and shiny table in the doctor's room. It has not been used for the whole day, she concludes. Now she moves her head around the room. Only now she realises she's been waiting in the doctor's room for an hour. She has been to the toilet twice. Lately, this is how she measures time. Every 30 minutes she relieves herself.

A young man in blue jeans and a white t-shirt finally walk in. The stethoscope around his neck, confirms he is the doctor. He sits on the comfortable chair opposite her. He exhales as if he is whistling. She grins at him though he is not paying attention. Without a single word, he flips the file open and slowly shakes his head. Continues to read while biting his lower lip.

Her lungs huff. The hissing sound rests in her ears, blocking them. The smell of medicine, methylated spirit, and other disinfectants waft around. She inhales the air, relieving herself from the stabbing chest pains.

Her mind wanders, she shakes her head intermittently. Over time the sour smell that lingers in her mouth replaces the distinct hospital odour. She rubs her cheek with the palm of her hand and parts her lips. Her breath spews out and fills the room.

Since falling ill, her body has been on a downward spiral. Her lifeless eyes have turned dull grey. After a while, she winks once. Yellow and green pus from the eyes trickles down her face.

She can't take a single step without leaning against the wall. Now and then, she rubs her dry hands against her bony frame. Feels the hip bones that protrude on her side. She pulls her face and closes her eyes in pain.

Except the hissing sound her chest makes when she coughs, there is silence in the room. To reduce pains, she bends over forward before she coughs.

At last, the doctor turns his attention to her. Her heart jumps and pounds her ribs. She calms herself down, brings her legs together. Her hands cling to each other and rest on her lap. The lazy eyes dart all over the room in quick succession. The room feels like a cage to her – she's trapped.

For the first time since he walked in, Dr. Fayyat opens his mouth. “We’ll have to do further tests to check the source of your infection, sisi,” he says scribbling in the file.

Nora nods but shows no interest in what the Dr. has said. Her head throbs. The thought of others in her village around the power station, who never survived the sickness similar to hers induces a runny tummy. She shivers.

Without any further explanation, the doctor bids her goodbye. With shaking knees, she pulls herself up. She stares at the doctor already inviting another patient who is coughing as if he will stop breathing anytime.

A day after, she wakes up as the sun rises. With hollow lungs, she clears her throat. She opens her eyes and squints in the sunshine streaming through the tiny window. Closes one eye as if it’s painful to gaze at the sun. Pulls the blanket over her head and rests.

Lost for Words

I return to work after three weeks of leave. Not much has changed with my demanding job. If anything, it has become worse. Now we work for two weeks and get one day off. I take a strain. My wife has become a monster. She screams and shouts at the least provocation. I wish I could leave her with the house. Since we got married four years ago, spending quality time together has become impossible with pressure at work taking a strain on me. If I'm not at work, I'm on the phone, answering work-related queries. Often the food gets cold while arguing with my cheeky boss over why I have missed sales targets or what to do to turn things around. Every month I fish for the reason for my failure. He does not trust me anymore.

"So, why have you not achieved your target this month? Tell me another story, Mr Jara," he says, knocking the back of his cigarette on the palm of his left hand.

It's a big joke to him - especially when fellow employees are around. He talks aloud, everybody hears him. They laugh and fall over their chairs. From the beginning, they never accepted me as their Sales Manager. Nobody sought their opinion, but they felt they should have been consulted. I'm caught between two devastating situations. The work pressure and the wife at home who is close to driving me mad.

On my return from leave, I notice a change around our office block in Wadeville. Celeste, a new marketing manager assumed her duties in my absence. I meet her in the corridor outside her office. Our eyes meet. She stops and inhales a long breath. She notices my shock, too. She quickly stretches her masculine hand to shake mine. Her stocky legs are hairy, but she is shaven.

"Hello. My name is Celeste. We haven't met, right?"

"Hi, I'm Mike."

My hand is sweaty. She ignores the sweat.

"Nice to meet you, Mike," she says and swings her figure up the passage towards the corner office where our boss grinds us for not delivering the results. We call his office a dentist's room. When you come out of it, you feel emasculated and bruised.

“As a sales manager, I sold tonnes of razor blades. What has changed? Or do we have the wrong people in the sales department?” he says to make us feel useless.

When you explain he says, “Another excuse. For f*’s sake just go out and sell.”

At home I disembark from the car, my backpack strapped around the shoulders. It’s only around 21h00, yet the lights in the house are off. My wife usually turns the lights on very early because of her poor eyesight. At the door, I turn the doorknob. It’s locked, forcing me to search my pockets for the keys. Before I find the keys I call softly.

“Judy! Where are you? Please open the door I’m freezing.”

No answer. I pull the bunch of keys out of the laptop bag and fiddle around for the right one. The second one does the trick. I tiptoe in. The cloud of smoke from the burning food on the stove blocks my view, triggering a painful cough. I dash to the stove, careful not to fall. Grab the pots that are almost twisted like a coil from excessive heat and throw them outside the kitchen. Strange the kitchen door is not locked. I run to the bedroom. Climbing the stairs feels like swimming against the ever rising tide. I swing the door open. There she is on the bed lying on her stomach.

“Honey! What’s wrong? Back to this kind of life again? How dare you?”

She turns slowly to face my direction. With a slurred voice, she says, “Leave me alone. Aren’t you married to your job?”

The monster she was before she admitted herself into the rehab is back. She slides back into her sleep. I feel I’m in that state of drunkenness with her. My head pounds and I smell blood. She has let me down by her relapse. At first I don’t see the evidence, but it’s right next to me. A half-empty whiskey bottle is wrapped in her warm arms as if it’s a tiny baby.

I stagger to each bedroom to open the windows. Smoke spews out. I’m not hungry anymore. A terrible headache threatens to split my skull into two. I’m tired but the persistent, hammering headache keeps me awake while Judy snores like a tractor next to me. She is

unaware of my presence. She throws her arms in all directions, often striking me across the face. I don't know how long this episode lasts because I drift into a deep asleep.

In the morning, she is embarrassed to talk except complaining about the heavy headache that's turned her eyes red. I leave for work, hoping she recovers from her condition.

In the office, Celeste arrives immediately after me. Today she's dressed in beautiful colourful clothes. The colours have blended together so well you would think she has someone advising her on how to dress. She comes straight to my office and closes the door behind. I offer her a seat. I notice she has a smooth spotless face skin and she wears a makeup matching her clothes.

"Thanks for blessing my office with your visit."

"You're welcome, Mike. I thought I should cheer you up early in the morning."

"I'm honoured."

I run out of words to keep the conversation flowing. She realizes this and initiates more trivial discussions. In the end, she talks about her family and her few months' experience in the new job.

"But what did your husband say when you left home this morning?"

"About what? Sorry, what did you say?" she grimaces.

My mouth turns dry as I ponder what to say. Stupid me, I think. My stomach turns. She puts both hands on the table. A diamond ring that matches her earrings draws my attention. She folds her thick soft lips into the tiny mouth that looks like a dot on her face. I pretend to be concentrating on my laptop. With shaking fingers, I can't tap the keyboard. She gathers her emotions and shudders her shoulders.

"My partner...? Is no more."

Relieved to realize, the way she reacts to the question has been triggered by that she's still dealing with her loss. She wipes tears gently with the back of the hand before she reaches for a tissue in the side pocket of her jacket. She smiles and opens her arms to invite me for a hug. I walk around the table to reach out to her. We embrace for a few seconds as I whisper, "I'm sorry to hear about your loss." Nodding, she displays a sly smile and walks out of the door.

"Celeste, you are always welcome to talk to me if you need company," I say as she disappears into the passage.

Down the passage, she meets other workers who have since arrived. Most of them are not aware of our presence because we kept the door closed. I sit back, rest my head on the back of the chair. I'm tempted to put my feet on the table, but I choose not to. My boss could strut in anytime. He doesn't knock before he pushes his sagging stomach into my office. The way things are, I don't see myself in this company in the next six months. Of late, he has slowed down on exerting unreasonable pressure on me.

The work pressure and the lifestyle my wife lives are taking a toll on my health. I'm dazed at work. These days I'm less productive, making it more difficult to drive my sales team. It doesn't matter the time of the day, I'm tired and fall asleep on my desk. Perhaps I should resign before he pushes me. If I resign, I will walk away with my confidence and dignity intact. But if they fire me, I will be defeated.

I push on for days without doing much. Almost every day, at lunch, Celeste strolls into my office. She begs me to tell her a story. The whole exercise has turned out to be childish.

"Tell you, what, Cece?"

"Anything. Just anything, Mike. That makes me sleep peacefully tonight."

She sticks her silly tongue out as she giggles.

"Once, upon a time there was a man who loved a beautiful woman, but was shit scared to tell her. They both worked for the same company. One day he..."

"Hold it. You did not name them."

"Ok, ok, ok, on a serious note, please be honest. How would you deal with the challenge I'm facing in my house?"

"What?" she pulls her face.

"About six months ago, my wife admitted herself to the rehab. She had a drinking problem and sadly, I'm partly to blame."

"Why? What did you do to drive her into that state of life?"

"I've ignored her, concentrating on my work, forgetting about her."

"I'm sorry to hear that."

"She completed her time, but she's relapsing. Can you believe it?"

"Oh no," she says, covering her mouth with both hands, "you don't deserve that."

She is less concerned about Judy and more worried about me. Her comments leave me baffled about her intentions. Could she be throwing herself at me or is she an honest sympathizer? Again, I blame myself for volunteering personal problems to a relatively new person. I close the laptop and head for my car. She walks me out of the office and bids me goodbye.

One morning, I find her car already parked in her clearly-marked parking bay. I climb the stairs confused. Judy's situation is getting out of hand. Now she drinks every day and the rehab is the only option left. If I leave my job, there will be no money to pay for her treatment. Celeste's right to say I don't deserve this.

These days, my confidence is back. Being a joke among other workers has subsided since Celeste's arrival. At this point the load I have been carrying is lifted. I nod in excitement. The office is now my refuge and I cannot wait to go to the office. At work I curse the end of the day, wishing I could stay in the office overnight.

At home things get more complex. The stuffy smell of alcohol drives me mad. Everyday Judy becomes a witch I cannot stand.

Back in the office Celeste hears my footsteps, opens the door to check who is coming up the passage. Our eyes meet and she brightens up. She invites me into her office. She shuts the door behind and throws her arms around me, pressing me hard to her flat chest. I wrap my one arm around the waist and the other around her neck. She whispers, "I hope you'll return the favour one day. Brothers must help each other."

"Brothers? I did not see this one coming," I say silently.

Either Way, You Die

It is my first day in Hlobane, a mining town outside Vryheid, with red iron rooftops, trees that did not grow to be tall enough. Dusty streets everywhere, heaps of sand, some bare, others with patches of tall grass - a testimony to the damage the land had suffered over the years. In the village back home we respect the land a lot. We never dug holes deeper than a grave. But here, the earth was stirred like umngqusho. Mine dumps, dark monstrosities resembling graves where there once was fertile and arable land. Dry tree stumps scattered all over, waiting to be uprooted. I looked for life in the graveyard.

My grandfather often said, "Working on the mines is a death wish, Xola." Death lingered like a hungry beast - ready to strike at any moment. It could be a rock-fall, flattening its victim or an agonizing death from the diseases that slowly sucked life out of the infected workers, leaving them as thin as air.

Every year workers got infected by diseases – TB, AIDS, asthma. Once diagnosed, the mine sent them back home to die without pension, without any medical support, without anything. So was life for the mine volunteers. It's called volunteering in order to make miners think they were in control. Those who stayed at home died of hunger. Those who joined the mines met their fate too.

On arrival at the mine, we underwent a pre-employment examination. Forty of us streamed into a smelly hall for medical check-ups.

"Kumula zonke ngubo kawena. Take off your clothes. Throw them to the corner," a mine official commanded.

We squeezed against each other along the flaking wall.

"I want to check your stinking balls and zinqa," the official continued.

He must be joking, I thought. The hall was stuffy. The smell of armpits, boots, and mouths last washed a few days earlier spewed out. The man next to me was the first to loosen the old tie he used as a belt.

I stood motionless. The official sunk his eyes into me. "Do you want to volunteer or not?"

Trembling, I took off my one piece overall, unbuttoned the few buttons still in place. Pulled one arm out, and then another. Other men had already stripped naked. I had never seen so

many naked men under one roof. They all had their hands cupped around their genitals. Protecting the only dignity, they still had.

A burst of huge laughter exploded. I didn't know why. "Look at this one – he's wears an overall only, no trousers or underwear. Nothing," The official pointed at me.

"No wonder mfana kayena khulile to be so long, it grows freely without being inhibited by short pants," he continued, strutting towards me, "bani gama kawena?"

"Xola Mfunwa," I said with a wavering voice.

"Susa lozandla kawena from mfana kawena," pointing at my genitals.

His eyes focussed on my penis. At first I thought he would poke me with the stick. Instead, he used it to lift my genitals, first pushing my penis sideways as you would do when turning over a dead snake. He then went for my balls. He shook his bald head. My heart pumped so hard I could hear, "Duf duf duf."

"Beka lo donga and vula lozinqa kawena. Face the wall and open your arse."

My heart sunk in the belly of my chest. I felt violated and humiliated. Intense anger took over, leaving me unable to talk or think straight.

"Good you have no syphilis. Stand this side," he pointed to one corner of the hall.

"Syphilis? What's that? Does it matter, anyway?"

We went through the same process. Each time a man opened his backside, I felt a piece of me being ripped off. That ordeal took almost the whole day. Those who failed the medicals headed to their villages, empty-handed.

From that hall, one after the other, we flocked to the hostel. It looked abandoned with dusty iron roofs, broken windows, and eroded gardens. Sewerage and water sapped through the cracked walls of the bathrooms. Blocked toilets. Human faeces-stained newspapers floated around like stench. We jumped from one dry spot to another to avoid trampling on the boiling sewage, overflowing from the broken pipes.

Three years later, we embarked on a work stoppage. It lasted three weeks before the mine acceded to our demands.

A few days after the strike, I worked a 2h00 pm to 10h00 pm shift. We knocked off and waited for the bus to pick us up to the hostel. It never arrived. We walked to the hostel, tired, but inflated by the achievements of the strike.

A chilly winter night stung like unomeva. Armed with our voices, we sang and stomped the ground. Always next to me, Nqobani and Zila, my trusted men. We chanted slogans.

Leader: Ufil' umuntu

Group: Ubulwe ubani?

Leader: Imayini. X4

I led from the front, stamping our boots as we clapped.

It was dark that night, the moon flickered behind the dark clouds that hung over us. Familiar with the terrain, we quickened our pace. We often walked to the hostel when our bus was late or had broken down.

As we crossed the sleeping stream, a few metres from the hostel, the rattling sounds of guns stunned us. Like prolonged thunder, they roared. There was no time to retreat. We stumbled on each other as men wielding spears, axes, and machetes cornered us.

Every few seconds, I heard long breaths followed by silence. Axes and machetes flashed as more of my brothers let go of their soul.

I'm lying squashed under the two brothers who have collapsed over me. They press me hard against the protruding rocks. I hold back a persistent cough to convince the killers I'm dead. My heart throbs, making hammering sound. Streams of light from the single street light shine on us. With one eye half opened, I see the killers hacking miners, most of whom are already dead, I suspect. Chunks of flesh and smudge of blood fly in the air each time an ax strikes. A few attackers have spears. One of them stabs the man next to me. The victim stretches his legs as he releases a heavy breath. His body relaxes. I tense up, lock my jaws and close my eyes. Wait for a strike that never came.

A man on top of me convulses. The killer thinks there is still life left in his shutting down body. He chops the man's neck, almost severing the head from his cold body. My blood deafens me as it rushes through the veins to the head. The man's hands rise halfway to the air before bouncing back on the ground again.

“This one is still alive,” a voice says, pointing to another man.

The whole ordeal took no more than ten minutes, but it felt like hours.

Suddenly, it's quiet. The killers left without announcing.

I stumbled out of my hiding place, crept into the veld, crawling. My right leg was numb.

Death gazed me in the eyes. Time passed slowly as I clung to life. I stretched myself, face down.

A month later, I woke up in the hospital having had my right leg amputated. Indeed, either way, you in the mines.

So he told you that?

Oupa's nerves got the better of him as he peered through the window of the late Sunday bus he was travelled in. It had come to a stop in Orlando West, Soweto. He grabbed his almost empty bag and staggered in the aisle towards the door. His right hand clung to the overhead rail to balance his weight. He checked through the window again to make sure he was at the right bus stop. The few passengers in the bus minded their own business, yapping on their cell phones, smiling to jokes not everyone could hear. He tightened his lips and dragged his bag to the door.

"This is the price I have to pay for having abandoned my family," he said to himself. Nine years away, he left his parents to fend for themselves was a long time. No one knew what happened between himself and his father the night he disappeared. When he never returned, his father was not worried, told his mother the stubborn boy would eventually come back one day. Indeed, here he was way back home.

His mother searched for him tirelessly, even soliciting the services of friends and the police. Anxiety was killing her. Perhaps he had been dumped into an unused mine or the police had kidnapped him. Why would they do that because he was not involved in any subversive activities? All search missions came back empty-handed.

Oupa jumped off the bus and staggered to the pavement. He placed his bag on the pavement and straightened his back. Cars dashed in opposite directions. The area was unfamiliar: new houses, tarred roads, different buses that had dedicated lanes and the township was wholly electrified. With the help of the street lights and a single eye, he checked the number of the house next to the bus station. If he could determine his exact location, finding the way home would be easier. The number on the wall had faded away and was unreadable.

After a few seconds, he lifted the bag, rested it on his shoulder as he followed the bus roaring up the hill. Up the road, he turned the corner before he reached the school on the right-hand side of the main road the bus was traveling on. It did not take him long to recognize a house that resembled their neighbour's. It had blocks and tyres on the roof with a sparkling stoop and an old car on the bricks.

His home stood glaringly right opposite the soccer field. He galloped as if the house was about to drift away from him. The light flickered in the house that displayed signs of neglect. The fence had fallen over and metal poles that once supported it were missing. He stood at

the gate, hesitated, wondering if the door would not be slammed in his face. In the end, he pushed the gate open and pulled himself into the yard.

His hand was ready to knock when the questions he always brushed aside, invaded his head. What if his parents were dead and new people had taken over their house? What if his father had killed his mother as he beat her almost every day when he was drunk? He looked around and recognise familiar landmarks: flowers on each side of the door, one big tree where his dad sat and enjoyed his beer every day. Something was missing – the evergreen vegetable garden his dad was passionate about. Long grass had grown where it once stood.

He pulled back his trembling hand for a while. Leaned forward and placed his ear to the keyhole. He heard no movement at all. Finally, he knocked softly. His heart thumped against his chest.

“*Ubani lowo?*”

“It’s me, Oupa.”

“Oupa? Hhe?”

Before he answered the door creaked open. A rather old woman stood firm in the middle of the door. She squinted, displaying a deep shock. Then retreated to the side of the house to allow him to enter. Her lips shook and eyes seemed to look past him. Tears rolled down and got stuck in the wrinkles that crisscrossed her face. At last, she hugged him while she trembled deep down her belly. She wept silently and with crooked fingers, she wiped tears from her face.

“Thank you, *mntanami* I never thought, I would ever see you again.”

He grinned sheepishly, pulled himself into the house where he grew up. Bowed his head and concealed his eyes.

He took a seat on the bench. There was no sign of another person in this one-bedroom house. She took a deep breath and said, "I wonder what your father would have said now that you are a man. It feels like he would walk in right now. May his soul rest in peace" She stopped and looked down at her feet with twisted toes.

Not much had changed in the house. The coal Welcome Dover stove sat in the corner where it was placed when they first moved into the house. A bench often used by his mother on freezing cold days stood on the side of the stove close to the window, allowing her to keep

up-to-date with township mgosi while cooking. Yellowish kitchen cabinets had partly lost their colour, rust visible on the edges especially the parts that came into contact with the floor.

At the mention of his father, he lifted his head, cocked his neck to check the darker corners of the house. The argument with his father played back in his mind as he looked at his mother whose doek almost covered half of her face.

His father called him names when the mother was not around. On the day of their quarrel, Oupa was sorting his school uniform in the house when his father asked him to prepare the soil in the garden. His father fumed from being ignored. He tiptoed into the house, locked the door behind and blurted, “How many times must I tell you to go and work in the garden, vezandlebe?”

“Sorry, Timer I was still polishing my school shoes for tomorrow.”

“I’m not your, Timer. I never give birth to a stubborn and stupid child like you.”

Those words pierced through Oupa’s heart. He reeled as if he had taken a killer blow to the jaw and sobbed uncontrollably.

His father struck him across the face with a belt. Oupa ran to the locked door. At that moment, the father was armed with a knobkerrie. The father swore to kill him if he continued to stay under his roof. After throwing a few more blows, he opened the door and threw Oupa’s belongings outside.

His last words were, “You continue to invade my space I kill you. Go and find your father, I will kill him, too nja. You are not our child. That must get into your big empty head.” Those words were followed by a persistent hiccup which always attacked him when he was drunk.

On noticing that Oupa’s mind was lost, his mother continued with the conversation.

“Hear me well, Pa. I’m excited to see you, but what brought you here after such a long time?”

“More than a month ago I was attacked and lost an eye in the fight. I spent two weeks in a Malelane hospital. Among the nurses who attended to me was a lady from Soweto. She told me about dad’s and your poor state of health. Since then the thought of losing you, in particular, haunted me.”

“Why did you turn your back on us, just like that, Pa, hhe?”

He looked at his mother and said, “I’m sorry, mum. It was just too much for me. Father called me names: ivezandlebe, isilima, isidwedwe, but that day he went too far when he threatened to kill me because I invaded his space. I was scarred he would kill you if I told you. He told me to go and find my father.”

“So he told you...that?”

The Woman in the Green Dress

The Winterveldt Social Grant Office was a massive building with pitched roof in the middle of one of the roughest townships in Pretoria. The building was modified to shut out criminals, windows welded to the frames, security bars installed, but only after the criminals had helped themselves on fans and other items. Employees refused to do the bare minimum, often came late to work or not come at all, neglecting the mothers who waited in the snaking queues. On this fateful day, temperatures hovered around 40-degrees Celsius and soaring. As if there was open fire in the hall, the heat rose. Customers sweated and waved hands against their faces, hoping to get fresh air. The heatwave escalated and threatened to suffocate everyone in the hall to death. Rusty fans hung from the roof, but only one with a squealing sound was in good working condition.

A woman in a soiled green dress battled to keep her skinny baby boy calm. No one called her by name here. Once she entered the hall, she lost her identity. She got a new name based on the clothes she wore. The boy was restless and the mother pulled him back to where she stood.

Mothers held on to their spots in the slow moving queue. Often calmed down babies whose cries pierced through the ears. Everywhere you turned babies made one form of noise or another. Some cried, others giggled and a few had succumbed to their sleep. The lack of air circulation made the thick smell, a combination of sweat and any other things linger around.

Some mothers who had been standing for some time could not stand anymore. Their swollen feet and sore ankles gave in. The lucky ones found open spaces on the floor, bare cement floor, to sit. Often they stretched their swollen legs while rocking the moaning babies to sleep. They brought the babies along because authorities had to verify the particulars of the little ones to reduce corruption. Levels of corruption were high, even the biggest perpetrators, like some of the clerks behind the counter, wanted to appear to be fighting graft. If they did not stop corruption, there would be nothing left for them to loot.

“Mama, with a red doek move!” a security guard called out to a woman who was too tired to move forward. The security guard had mastered all sorts of insults. The suppressed laughter from the women who had embraced insults as normal emboldened her.

The woman in the green dress struggled with her baby boy who freed himself from her grip. He staggered, like a penguin across the hall, screaming. “Water, water, waterrrr....” The heat and thirst drained him. His mother limped behind him. Snatched him by his tiny arm and together they strolled back to where she stood. As soon as they got to their spot, the little boy slid away and cried for water again.

Water dispensers had dried up like a rock in the sun. Only the clerks had bottled water, and they were not prepared to share it with anyone. Most of them got the water from the waiting mothers who bought their way to the front of the queue. Those who could not bribe their way to the front of the line would be the last to be served, if at all.

After waiting for over two hours, the woman in a green dress flailed her arms, threw her hands into the air. Nearly hitting the lady next to her. She had been standing for some time when a young mother offered her a sitting spot on the bare floor. “At least there are some good people in this hell,” she said as she searched her dress pockets for something to return the favour. That was how things were done here. People did not just do good for the sake of it, without expecting something in return, she thought.

By now the hall was foggy. The smell had blended in so well with the stuffy air, you could no longer smell it. Several clerks behind the counter abandoned their workstations and gathered at one corner. They watched a video on a mobile-phone, intermittently laughed and clapped hands in excitement.

Mothers waited. Any display of unhappiness was met with expulsion from the Social Welfare Office. Expulsion meant going for days without food as no money could be dispensed to beneficiaries without the documents they had come to the office for. Worst still, a monetary fine could be imposed by the clerks on the ‘clever’ mothers if they still wanted to be served.

The woman in the green dress took a deep breath as she stretched her legs out on the floor. Her little boy had fallen asleep while leaning against her legs. She grabbed him and placed him on her lap. He opened his sleepy eyes and kept his lips parted as if he wanted to say something or cry. He drifted into a deep sleep again. Other children around snored.

Apart from the squealing and snoring children in the hall, silence descended. Even those mothers who kept their spirit high by talking and laughing ran out of steam. Mothers and babies looked like dead bodies strewn all over.

Then there was a sudden wailing from the woman in the green dress. She jumped up, her eyes wide open as if she had seen a monster. Gripping and rocking the baby, she cried out for help. “Oh, help me, please!” Other women gathered around her like elephants mourning the death of one of their own. The baby’s body passed from one woman to another.

Undiagnosed

1

No one expected you, when you bulldozed your way in. Mama embraced the unexpected gift. Something was strange about your arrival. At 44, she was too old to bear a child. At birth you weighted a paltry four kilograms. A miracle child destined to demolish everything on her path. I wondered what went on in your bold head on that cold day in 1980 when you were born.

After isolating mum in the rondavel, the local midwife finally opened the door. In hindsight, I imagine mum pushing and screaming for you to enter this world. The popular local midwife delivered many children. She walked like a rhino. That day a slimy substance covered her hands, a sign that you had landed.

2

A month later, mama drifted away from you. She did not abandon you. She loved you so much, to idle while you shrunk into a skeleton in front of her eyes. She moved to a far-away place to earn a living to support you. After a month of absence, she returned and warmly held you in her arms. At first, you whined, but later smiled a confused smile.

3

You were three years old when measles invaded your frail frame. You groaned as we all looked on helplessly. We were young. Your skin lifted up as if separating from the rest of your flesh. You cried a weak dragged out cry. Your tongue hung over your tiny lips like a tie. Your chest heaved as you pulled and released short breaths. I accepted you were on your way out. I was wrong for you bounced back.

4

Mama left her job to nurse you. Before long, it was time for you to join other little ones at a local school. I remember the first day at school. You wore a faded tunic one of our neighbours donated. Barefooted, you ran to school with your newly found friends. Happy as always and stammering like a broken record. You raced through high school and your stutter did not prevent you from chasing your dream.

Time was against you. At sixteen, you were diagnosed with a bad disease. I will not remind you of what it was. I'm sure you recall this very well. We had buried mama a few months

earlier when you took ill. We had no idea what the problem was as you continued to evaporate. I thought somebody had poisoned you. I did not know who it was. In our community, there was nothing called natural death. People died because they had been bewitched. Witches were all over. Some lost their lives as punishment.

You spent three weeks in the hospital. We, me, your nephews, your nieces, your sisters frequented the hospital. Often, we drove to the hospital only to return without tiptoeing into the ward where you slept with pipes hanging all over like dreadlocks. In many instances, you displayed no signs of life except the irregular snoring and twitching. You scared us. Again, you fought back and won. Fighter.

5

They knew you at university. After all, you attended classes before registering as a student. University officials confronted you, but you declared “I want to study, but I don’t have money.” They laughed out loud, shocked by your madness. Or by their own madness as you soon proved them dumb. One afternoon you proceeded to the principal’s office. His secretary asked if you had an appointment and you lied in affirmation. She asked you to leave. A few minutes later, the principal with glasses resting over his nose bridge appeared from the office. He invited you in. In celebration, you punched the air, and in shock, he shook his head. You smiled as you walked past the embarrassed secretary. From that day, you registered as a student without paying a cent.

“What does money have to offer in this world anyway except inflating one’s ego?” you said.

During the first year at university, part-time job opportunities rained on you. You studied and worked at the same time. The disease ravaged you like wildfire. You laughed, giving us hope you would come first and the disease second. Your situation deteriorated. Often, strangers informed us you had collapsed. In many cases, you emerged stronger, telling everybody who cared to listen, “I’m not the dying type.”

Your university life ended as you started working. You worked for several employers. Opened your heart to those who needed help. Money continued to be of no value to you. Everyone had a share of your salary. You supported everyone but yourself. Others saw the opportunity to milk you dry. You obligingly appeased them. We made sure you had it all though you gladly gave everything away.

6

Twenty-six years later, the disease took its toll on you. Your knees wobbled, forcing you to stagger like a newly born calf. On certain days, you went to bed strong, but could not lift your head the following morning. Ambulances fought over you. Your skin became so thin it could tear. Dry and cracked lips disfigured your face. Hair fell one by one. Over time, your legs became sticks wrapped in brownish thin skin. Your mouth turned purple. Only eyes remained defiant like you.

One Thursday in 2006 you stared us in the eyes, and lowered your head. We got to be familiar with your stunts. Nothing looked unfamiliar, we gathered around you to pledge our support. My body trembled, becoming heavy for my knees. A strange dream I had had a few days earlier, flashed across my mind. I forgot to swallow my own saliva.

In the dream I woke up from a deep sleep in a grass-thatched hut with a shiny floor from cow dung polish. The hut had caught fire. I entered the smouldering hut, covering my face with bare hands in a frantic search for you. The neighbours joined in the rescue operation. You had burned to death. We found nothing except your ashes which we gathered and placed in a calabash. On our way out of the burning hut, we saw your body disappearing into the heavens.

As I press your picture against my heart, I hear your stammering throughout the house.

Howling Sheep

Once there was a wolf that lived in the mountains surrounded by fertile plains that attracted different types of animals and birds. He ate all various types of meat. On certain days he ate a deer, and on others days a hare, a beaver or a bird, and rats. For him, the food was available in abundance. One day he woke up worried that food would not last him his lifetime.

He wagged his bushy tail as he pondered his future. Eating less was not a good option, he thought. Accumulating more food was the right thing to do.

“I have to find more food to survive,” he said, resting on the rock and yawning.

He needed extra food to hoard for the future though there was no sign food would be depleted. He became so unhappy with his surroundings he started wandering around, blazing through the forests in search of extra food.

He climbed mountains and crossed rivers. Other animals attacked him on the way, but he soldiered on. In the process, he invaded other animals’ territories. His lips pulled backward, showing his teeth and panting.

After traveling for days, his paws became sore. Luckily, he found a beautiful land far away from where he came. It was green and full of animals that he had never seen before. Those animals had thick and shiny fur. They lived in peace with each other. On hot days they came together and lowered their heads as if in prayer. They spoke the language the wolf did not understand.

“Meh meh,” they cried.

The wolf had become very hungry. His saliva dripped from his lips. Though unhappy with the unity and peace among his new neighbours, the sheep, he settled in that land. Whenever he approached the sheep they ran, leaving him sad and dejected.

They always walked together to the veld. The sheep did not trust the wolf.

“Let’s work together,” he begged.

He howled as he spoke. More sheep got scarred. They drifted away from him. The wolf was isolated.

The wolf loathed the unity among the sheep. Many times he drooled for the soft tasty lambs’ flesh. Their mothers and fathers were always around. He was frustrated.

“I must find a way to be part of the sheep community. If they trust me, I’ll have a chance to get what I want.”

To be part of the community, he taught the sheep to howl. The sheep especially the lambs were instructed to stop bleating. They began to howl like the wolf. But their howling was not good enough because they could not project their nose like the wolf. This did not discourage the wolf.

To sustain himself, for days the wolf hunted smaller creatures like rats and birds. He hunted when the sheep were not close by. He did not want the sheep to see his ways.

Over time the sheep began to believe what the wolf taught them.

“I’m your friend.”

The sheep had over the past few days learned the language of the wolf.

He continued, “I’m here to protect you from wild animals like lions. To be able to better protect you, you must speak my language and you have to live in small packs like us, wolves.”

Over time some sheep started befriending the wolf. Then he shared his own good ways of life with the converted sheep. He convinced them, sometimes they needed to spend time on their own without other sheep. Lambs must be set free to roam the veld.

“With me around, you must not worry about the safety of the lambs,” he proclaimed.

The sheep believed him. The communal spirit that existed among them before the arrival of the wolf disintegrated. They never bothered about other members of the community. And one by one, the lambs disappeared. Only individual mothers noticed. In the end, sheep lost everything they were once proud of: their language, unity, and communal life.

The wolf kept its language and even today it still howls.

Cleansing

When evil spirits took over Lingiwe's life her gogo, like other locals, believed there was one way to exorcise the curse. She had to consult Mkhulu, a local inyanga who lived behind Okhukho mountains near Ondini. Any delays in her ritual cleansing, could worsen the situation. Mkhulu was famous for performing miracles, this encouraged the locals to pin their hopes on him.

He had powers to manipulate the heavens. By his command, the rain fell. Locals knew him as a baby factory. Women who could not bear children solicited his intervention and conceived immediately thereafter. Gogo's late daughter was no exception. When her marriage was on the verge to collapse, she paid him a visit for one night. He did not disappoint. Lingiwe was born, but no other child ever came after her.

Gogo's daughter fell sick after Lingiwe's birth and later died, leaving her in gogo's care. She grew up a decent girl, who respected her body and remained a virgin while other girls of her age fell on the wayside. She left home to go to school, to fetch water from the river or to gather firewood from the forest. Whenever boys approached her, she abandoned everything and ran straight home.

To gogo, this was a sign of a curse to her granddaughter. At 12, she was too old to run away from boys. Her age mates had boyfriends, others kids.

The imminent visit to inyanga gave her a runny stomach, her lips quivered as she suppressed anger. She did not like the idea of visiting inyanga, but could not tell gogo. Confronting the elders was viewed as disrespect. She swallowed her anger.

Deep down, she knew consulting the healer would not end well. Those who had been to Mkhulu's hut told her it was like an abandoned nest, ruffled up and always in the dark. His consultations occurred at night. A cold fear sped down her spine.

One Friday afternoon, gogo prepared umphako for the journey. Walking from the village to Okhukho could take a few hours, but it took the whole day because gogo stopped to talk to everyone they met. All her discussions with strangers centred around two topics: the changing behavior of children and the land that was taken away from the local people. Newly arrived farmers forced people out of the land of their ancestors.

They climbed the mountains, snaking between the bushes, arriving at Mkhulu's home as the sun disappeared behind the hills, on time before he locked the wooden gate.

Thwasa, a trainee sangoma, wrapped in red kanga greeted them as they stepped into the yard. Thwasa's body smelt of herbs, inyongo, and umhlwehle she wore on her head. She led Lingiwe and gogo to the hut of the ancestors reserved for the healing.

Incense filled the hut, its smoke twisting like a coil into the grass thatch. Animal carcasses: snakes, lizards, frogs were strewn everywhere. A coiled horn smeared with a dark mixture of herbs and fats lay on the floor. A humble razor blade and needles rested on a plate carved out of wood. Lingiwe felt a lump of fear flying in her stomach, resting in the chest. In the end she mumbled, with the greatest respect.

"But gogo..."

"Shhhhh. The ancestors will curse you further."

"I'm not sick."

"Wazini? You must be cleansed of bad luck."

"No, gog..."

"Can't you shut up? Other girls of your age have boyfriends. And you...?"

"Am still at school."

"School? The school teaches you to disrespect the elders? Thula!"

The door creaked open. Thwasa crept up to the dark corner. She bent over as she placed a bucket full of freshly mixed herbs on the floor. She leaned her head to the side, clenched her hands as if she was about to clap. As she entered, her body odour dived in like a whirlwind.

"Makhosi," Gogo said, displaying her two remaining front teeth stumps on the lower jaw.

Lingiwe wondered how she had quickly learned to handle herself in front of isangoma.

"Makhosi," said Thwasa, clapping hands softly, "Mkhulu will see you later."

Thwasa blew her nose, firing lumps of black mucus mixed with snuff and pressed them down with her crooked thumb across the shiny floor. Then she rubbed hands against each other.

"Take off your clothes and wash before Mkhulu comes here," said Thwasa.

With her mouth half-opened, her heart sank in the chest. At first, she wanted to blurt, but gogo's teachings prevailed. She threw an angry stare at gogo who was humming some

strange tune. Thwasa looked lost, thrust her eyes on Lingiwe's short skirt. Lingiwe clutched her soiled red skirt with both hands.

"Take it off," burst gogo.

She removed the skirt and the t-shirt while Thwasa watched on. Under the skirt were sticky thighs with scars sustained as a little girl playing in the thorny bushes. Her panties had dark ring marks, traces of urine droplets that looked like an old map.

She sat down next to the bowl with her legs pulled together, shivering from the cold. Into the calabash, Thwasa dipped a wooden stick which came out with some fats dripping down.

"Apply this onto your body before you wash with this muthi," said Thwasa, as she writhed the stick onto cupped Lingiwe's hands.

Lingiwe nodded, rubbed her hands together, and applied the fats over her tiny body: legs, thighs, arms, armpits, and breasts. Her pointed breasts bounced to their original position each time her hands grazed on them.

She rinsed herself with the water and herbs from the bowl. She grabbed her skirt and a top. Waited for Mkhulu. It was already dark by now.

Mkhulu slithered in an hour later. He explained the healing process in detail.

The lamp will be off. This gives me powers to cure any disease my patients suffer. No-one may talk, scream or even cry while I'm busy. Once the light is off, it never comes on until sunrise the following day. After the healing process, patients are allowed to sleep. They leave at dawn without saying anything to me. While the healing continues, the patient and the family keep their eyes closed. Any deviations from this will bring more curse to the patient and the family.

He blew off the lamp. Gogo squatted on the floor, clapped as per Mkhulu's instructions. As a patient, I leaned against the pillar pole at the centre of the hut.

Incense smoke boiled in the dark. Its inhalation triggered a cough. I held on to the pillar pole with all my might, trembling from unimaginable fear. No streak of light entered the hut.

Mkhulu lifted my skirt. Suddenly, a horn played around the area below my buttocks. It pushed its way into my private parts. It dazed me. His hands pushed my upper body to bend

over, forcing my back to push against his stomach. I tensed. I held tight to the pole scared that I would fall over. The firmer I stood, the harder he pushed.

My left hand sniffed around for gogo. I could not reach her. She hummed a sangoma song. It went something like:

Phila mzu...kulu

Ph...phila, Ntombi

Ungakhali

Lokhu kuzokuphilisa.

I wanted to scream for help, but instead took a long breather.

His nails sank into my stomach, leaving deep scratches. I screamed, only for him to harshly reprimand me.

“Please light the lamp, Mkhulu,” I begged.

He put his hand over my mouth. When I thought I was free to sleep, he grabbed my skirt and snatched me back to him. His rough sweating hands ran all over me. The sweat found its way into scars he had inflicted. I locked my jaws.

After a long time, he dragged me to the corner where I would sleep. I threw myself next to dry carcasses of animals. He whispered to gogo, “Go to sleep.” I heard her respond, “Makhosi.”

I never fell asleep, sobbed endlessly, eager, to leave the cursed hut. At four, we packed our belongings, in silence. I rolled away the rock that had kept the door closed throughout the night. Fresh air greeted us as we rushed into the night.

Three months later, my stomach bulged. Mkhulu’s miracle cure had delivered the results.

Weapons of War

Tunki was snatched by unknown men from his residence at Roma University. His body was found two days later, floating on the Caledon River. Tiza was no exception, men in plain clothes handcuffed him at the border and was never seen again. In all these and more cases, Joe, my roommate was suspected of being ingede. No one provided any evidence to support this allegation, but everybody accepted that Joe could not be trusted.

On the night before I returned home for school holidays, I had been alone in the room for a larger part of the day and night when Joe, returned before midnight, tipsy, staggering, and humming struggle songs, one after the other. He floated in, glanced briefly at us, and walked straight to his bed on the opposite side of the room.

On the chair next to my study desk sat Tau, a local student who had become a trusted friend of ours. We were sifting through copies of the banned South African newspaper, New Nation. As always, Tau was spitting politics through his mouth, nose, ears and other openings. He spoke with a lisp, firing, well thought out and clearly articulated arguments. This was not a day of politicking, but as students, politics was our life. He shifted on his chair and grabbed a faded copy of the New Nation newspaper from the pile on my desk. Shook his head with hair receding from the forehead. Scrutinized the holes where I had cut out interesting articles.

“You are cutting out certain pieces?” he said, “Basically you are digging your own grave.”

“No, no, no. I can’t carry these bulky newspapers home,” I said.

“What’s your criteria for deciding which article to cut out?”

“Only political ones. For example, this headline, “New Nation May Get State Warning.”

He whistled in shock. Nodded. His long fingers dug up more copies from the pile. Look at me as if to assess the level of my madness.

“Those folks, at the border will have you for breakfast. You are leaving tomorrow morning, right?”

“Yes, to leaving tomorrow, but no to being breakfast.”

“You won’t reach home, Pinochet,” he teased me, “I promise you are dead meat.”

“C’mon. Look, I can’t leave my articles and the books.”

I took a glance at the abridged versions of Steve Biko's *I Write What I Like* and Nelson Mandela's *A Long Walk to Freedom*. I cannot remember the third one.

Joe became restless, paced up and down the room. He disappeared for another hour that night. On his return, he headed for the bookshelf, pulled out the books he intended to smuggle into the country the following day. Joe and I were travelling together.

Tau gave him a cold look. With a serious face and lips folded into his mouth, he said, "Rather take a few newspapers so if you are caught, you can argue you did not think it was a problem to bring the newspapers into the country. If you choose politically sensitive articles the police will celebrate the arrest of another terrorist. As for the books, I'm afraid, the risk of being caught is even higher."

A ball of anger bounced around my chest and nearly throttled me. I was breathing heavily.

In the end, I took Tau's advice, threw away all the cuttings and kept full newspapers. But, I was not leaving the books behind. I stacked them up next to my caving in bed, ready to shove them around my ankles under the socks before crossing the border.

A deadly risk I was prepared to take. Police agents roamed around like marauding lions under the cover of darkness, snatched those they considered a serious threat to the apartheid government. A few lucky ones came back with broken limbs.

After helping to select the best newspaper copies, Tau left our room around 3 am. My mind wandered instead of sleeping. What if I was caught and sent to jail? What if this was the last time I slept on a relatively comfortable university bed? I shifted a bit in bed. Listened to my own breathing and the hissing sound that nearly blocked my ears. From a distance a wolf howled, forcing me to turn over with the hope of blocking out fears of what awaited me at the border that morning. My blood boiled, hands and feet sweat. I imagined myself in detention interrogated, and later my cold body bundled into a black garbage bag ready to be disposed of.

"What's your name, terrorist?"

"Muziwamadoda Sibeko, my Baas."

"What? Mzuziwe..." he slurred my name.

"Vele uyisilima," I said in IsiZulu "Muziwamadoda."

“Wat doen jy in Lesotho?”

“Studying, at Roma.”

“Are you a member of Umkonto WeSizwe?”

“Ag nee, my Baas. Wat is dit nou? Ek is net ‘n student.”

“Studying politics?”

“Theology and History.”

“Who do you think you are fooling? You’ll be dead if you continue to lie to us. Do you understand?”

I grinned, pretending to be friendly and unmoved. In the process, I ensured there was enough space between the aggressive cop and I. I removed the leather cap from my head and twisted it with both hands into a small coil. I did all I could to convince the police that I was no threat to them.

A heavy fist hit me on the left jaw. A tooth flew to the bloody floor as if I spat it. Blood drew a straight vertical line on the wall. I jumped to my feet and screamed through the roof, disturbing Joe who snored like a bike on his creaking bed.

“What’s fucken wrong with you? I want to sleep,” said Joe.

“Sorry, mfo. Just thinking about how I will deal with the police if they catch me. I’m not asleep.”

“Please, don’t disturb me I want to rest,” he said with a hiccup, “You think you can dodge the police, think again, my man.”

After that, a cold breeze blew across the room even though it was a hot night. I turned over to sleep on the side to face the wall and never responded to Joe. A mosquito hovered around, singing a well-polished tune. Each time it buzzed around, I tried to crush it but ended up slapping my face. I wondered why it continued to bite because it had already caused considerable damage to my skin. I finally drifted off to sleep.

It was seven o’clock when Joe woke me up from my deep sleep. He was ready to leave.

I stumbled out of the bed, heavy headed and dizzy. With a towel on my shoulder, I strolled down the alley into the communal showers. I was careful not to trample on the mucus, spit

and semen on the shower floor. Some students did all sorts of silly things in the showers. I hardly spent five minutes in there. Fuck, I was leaving all the subversive documents behind, I thought as I walked back to the room. Trying to smuggle the books felt like jumping into a deep dam hoping that God would keep you afloat. Plain stupidity.

As soon as I entered the room, I had a sudden change of mind. It took me days to plan this operation. I was not about to change my mind. I packed the clean and ironed clothes in the big luggage bag. Underneath the clothes, were a few selected newspapers. I stuffed the books in a separate plastic bag.

We were the first in the taxi and we chose the backseat. A strategic choice that would enable us to hide our books.

The taxi snaked around the narrow road, leaving mountains on each side of the road. Joe and I kept quiet. Other passengers talked freely, shouting to the top of their voices.

“Masianokeng, ntate,” said the passenger sitting next to me in the back seat. The taxi had to come to a complete stop before he drew his stick under the seat and adjusted his blanket on the shoulder properly. It took almost three minutes for him to exit the taxi. When outside, he hurried to the driver’s side while fishing for the money in his trousers’ pockets. Combed all the pockets before he realized the money was in his hand. Paid the fares and waited for the change. The driver did not have enough loose change. As if he had the whole day, he ask us to pay before depositing a few coins into the cupped hands of the passenger waiting patiently next to the door. The passenger thanked the driver and disappeared into a stream on the side of the road. The whole process took about ten minutes.

By now, my heart throbbed as if it would jump out of my mouth. I shook my head in anger before I noticed a woman in the seat before ours staring at me with disapproval. I faked a smile.

We had crawled for no more than a kilometre when another voice from the second passenger said, “At that bridge, ntate.”

Joe took a glance at me. I was accustomed to the slowness of the people of my adopted country. That day, my frustration was uncontrollable. The second passenger went around to the driver’s side. He thanked him for the safe journey. The driver nodded with pride.

After almost two hours from Roma, a distance of no more than 34km, Maseru Border Gate beckoned. My blood froze. I dropped the plastic to the floor and picked it up with shaking hands. It was Joe and I at the backseat after the third passenger had shifted to an empty seat vacated by the gentleman we dropped off next to the stream. My heart thumped under the shirt. It felt like everybody in the taxi knew what was in the plastic bag. You know that feeling when everybody looks at you, but no one actually recognises your presence.

A few metres from the border gate, the police swarmed out of the offices into the parking lot along the walls of the building. I craned my neck to see what was happening. As the taxi slowed down, Joe whispered, “The police are everywhere.” Before he finished, our taxi had pulled over to the narrow parking bay. He sprinted for the exit with his books in his leather jacket’s inner pockets. The police let him to pass. He ran to the public toilets. I hastened right behind him, but a policeman pushed me back to the taxi.

“Can I go to the toilet, please?”

“No you can’t,” he said sinking his eyes in me. Other passengers streamed out without problems until I was alone in the taxi like a lost soul.

I prayed silently, appealed to my ancestors to take over. I invited my late grandfather, grandmother, uncles, and many others I could not mention by name to protect their grandson from the enemies of the people. Whispered, ensuring no one heard my prayer.

Mbizekhewu yakwaMaMthembu

Phulukundlu makholwa phuman’ emaLomini KwaSathane

Sbhuzikazi esimaqolo

Makati niyahlupha ngokuhla esithumbanjeni

Siyangena siyaninyathela

After this prayer, I was confident my forefathers had descended on the border.

The world around shrunk as I planned my next move. More police surrounded the taxi, some in uniform, others in plain clothes, dogs sniffed and barked violently. The end of my life was imminent, I thought.

“Come out,” said one cop who seemed to command respect from his colleagues.

He led me to the boot of the taxi where only two bags were abandoned, mine and Joe’s.

“Which of these two is your?”

“That’s Joe’s?” I said with the humblest of voices.

“I asked for yours. Not Joe’s. Who’s Joe, anyway?” he asked winking an eye to his friend.

“This is mine.”

He pushed me aside and clutched my suitcase, dragged it on the rough surface to the shade under the tree. He hurled a quick cruel glance to warn me against interfering with his job. His moustache moved up and down as he twisted his cracked mouth sideways. He was agitated. I looked around for some brave individuals who could negotiate my freedom. Many passing travellers avoided eye contact with me. A few university students looked on and shook their heads in sympathy. They continued with their journeys, leaving me surrounded by the police like a cornered warthog. I never saw Joe again that day.

My penis winced, almost disappeared completely beneath the scrotum. A slow rumble in the belly triggered diarrhoea. I pulled the legs together, unintentionally forcing the books buried in the socks under the faded jeans to shift from their original position. One book on the right leg ended up leaning against the trouser. Any careful individual would have noticed something was not right with my leg. The police were keenly drawn into the newspapers they had extracted from the luggage bag.

More police descended on me. The barking dogs worsened my running stomach. Other police stared at me with excitement. The one who had taken my bag from the boot snatched each item out one by one as if he was counting. A pile of clothes I had ironed and packed properly lay on the dusty ground as if on a jumble sale.

“Ja, wat is dit?” said one police as he restrained his dog.

“What?”

“Answer me, bastard!”

“Oh, that? It’s a newspaper,” I said calmly.

“Why are you bringing it here?”

“To kak on it.”

“What?”

“It is a toilet paper at home.”

“Fuck. Do you think I’m playing here? Ek sal jou moer.”

“Nee, my Baas. What have I done now?”

He stopped the search and looked directly into my face. His last words before walking briskly into the office were, “I’ll kill this terrorist.”

He had not reached the office door when a younger policeman crept closer to me. I waited for a punch from him. When close enough, he asked where I was going.

“Home. In Vryheid.”

“Oh, we’re neighbours. I’m Constable Van Vuuren from Eshowe,” he said, stretching his right hand to shake mine.

I ignored him and displayed little emotion. Big mistake, I made. His anger was palpable. He sunk his fingers into my shoulder and it felt like being in the jaws of a lion. His blue eyes glittered. His mouth spewed out a smell of death. Remains of old food almost completely buried his yellow teeth.

“Are you trying to be clever?” he asked, keeping his jaws locked together.

“No, Sir. I’m very clever, but I’m telling the truth.”

He ordered me to raise my hands. He did a body search three or more times. Each time, his hands grazed on my upper body and down to the knees. Vicious dogs barked. I remained calm. He took a few steps back, looked me in the eyes. He came back and searched me further. Again, he did not check my legs. I wore a dead smile. Other policemen did not seem to like what he was doing.

“Let this man go. You’ve searched him. What did you find, nothing, boet?” one policeman said.

Constable Van Vuuren ignored him.

“I don’t have time for this shit,” he said embarrassed, “Waar is Kaptein, Smit?”

No one answered. The policemen whispered, softly among themselves.

“Don’t let this terrorist go. I’ll be back now,” Constable Van Vuuren said to no one in particular. Some cops giggled, embarrassing him further. He strutted away and disappeared into the stone-built offices. When he closed the office door behind, one sympathetic cop said, “Take your stuff and go now.” The others echoed.

I gathered my clothes around and threw them into the suitcase. Walked dragging my feet pretending to be struggling with the heavy suitcase. Once on the South African soil, I took a deep breath and I pondered what to do next before Constable Van Vuuren caught up with me if he could.

The Last Lap

As the train whistled to a stop at Bua Station, in Germiston, east of Johannesburg, Lenah Kulu's blood boiled like that of a warrior before a decisive battle. A cunning warrior in her own right, who went all out to find an intelligent way of winning. Those who grew up with her in Nongoma understood that once you crossed her, she never stopped until she won. Often she emerged stronger against her opponents because they relied on their physical strengths she on her brains. Some blamed her low level of education as the reason why she did not do well in her life. At 13, she left school when her dad it was a waste to educate a girl because she would get married.

Not so long ago, it was at this station where a thug attacked her in front of the other commuters. And for that, he would pay a heavy price.

From a distance, the station resembled a ghost town. Dilapidated buildings with paint peeling off, stood tall in the sea of neglect on each side of the station. Trees had turned into dry stumps. Potholes covered the gaping grounds as far as the eye could see. The stench from the blocked toilets welcomed passengers as they came out of the train. Sadly, commuters could not reach their respective destinations without passing through this station.

She stared around with piercing eyes, hoping to recognize the tall attacker among the boys who floated around. She could not recognise him, but going back without carrying out her mission was out of the question. To her, all those who roamed the station were criminals like the tall attacker who left her with a scar across her chin.

A few metres from the platform, she came to a stop. The attempted robbery flashed back in her mind as if it happened yesterday, fuelling the anger that throttled her.

As a domestic worker I always got a few hours off in the afternoon if I had finished my work. That afternoon, by 15h00 I had cleaned the house, done the ironing and cooked the dinner. I got permission to leave early. I joined other domestic workers on their way home. We caught a 17h15 train, and fifteen minutes later we arrived at Bua Station. When we jumped off the train, boys descended on us like vultures on a corpse. One tall boy targeted me. I evaded him, but his eyes followed me. He asked for money.

“Awenz’ i-one tiger lapho, sister, can I have R10, my sister?” he said in isiZulu.

“Anginamali, Sorry, I don’t have...,” I replied clinging to my purse.

“Vula ngibone la, open the bag. I want to see what’s in there,” he said aggressively.

He stood firm on my way. Though I’m almost a metre and half tall, I felt like a dwarf to him. He looked down on me as alcohol smell rained from his mouth. My knees shook and rubbed against each other. I should have brought my cayenne pepper.

None of my companions got involved in the fight. They vanished. As I turned to face the towering monster, he dived for my purse. I pulled it back with all my strength. He lost his footing, nearly fell, but he regained his balance. I ran toward the gate where a security guard stood, pretending to be busy with something. Before I reached the gate, I tripped over and fell on my stomach. We fought over the bag. I fought back with my teeth and nails like a cat. In the end, he let go of my bag and walked away licking his wounds. The security guard, overburdened by his sagging stomach, staggered toward where I sat with my legs stretched out on the ground.

“What happened, sister?”

I kept quiet, but my lips trembled. He offered his hand and lifted me up.

I wished I could vanish from the face of the earth. My heart throbbed as I brushed off the dust from my dress. Not a single word came out of my mouth.

In the scuffle she sustained a scar across her chin. His smell, a mixture of sweat, the glue he smoked and a chemical she could not recognize stayed in her clothes long after the attack. She sneezed, and her head spun.

The rumour had it that the boys carried a powdery drug they blew toward their victim. Once you inhaled it, you lost consciousness. The lucky ones suffered from a heavy headache. The weak lost their mind for a few hours. It is the same powder criminals put their victims to sleep with at night before they invaded their private homes to steal.

Lenah Kulu was not going to let her attacker go without putting up a fight.

Now that she was ready to avenge her attack, growing up in the rural parts of the country, came in handy for her plan. Life in the village taught her to fight her battles. Because her round strong legs, rough and masculine hands were not strong enough to enable her to engage in physical fights, she resorted to other tricks under the sun. Often she knew the phobias of people she grew up with. She kept her own fears confidential. When someone who was

scared of snakes upset her, she retaliated by exposing them to snakes. Other girls wondered how she caught poisonous snakes.

As she looked around for her would-be victim, she spat in her right fist, a sign of being ready for a fight. As a young girl, that was what she did before she embarked on her retaliatory tricks. Girls knew her as *iqili*, the most cunning woman. Boys had a fair share of her cruelty.

Since she moved to Magaliesburg with her snake capturer uncle, she slowed down on her behaviour. Life in the city was different from back home. Around here, differences were resolved with knives and guns. For that, she no longer engaged in any form of fights unless she was pushed to a tight corner like that day.

Her uncle had built snake cages in the backyard where he kept snakes while awaiting the authorities to remove them. The cages stood empty except on days when he caught a snake or two. She knew different types of snakes.

Though off duty for the day, here she was on the train to the Bua Station. She had a score to settle with her attacker. She licked her lips and took a long breath. Between her legs under the train seat, she pulled out a bag, held it close to her chest while keeping it closed. Hesitated. She was not about to spoil her plan right in the end. She breathed heavily, as she thought about her unique gift in the fake gold-trimmed bag with handles covered in the puff adder skin. It moved a little when she shook the bag.

The station was a playground for thugs. No one, not even the police could contain the escalating crime. Criminals, nyaope addicts in the main, had taken over the station, robbing people, particularly women at will. They snatched weaves from women's heads and ear rings from their ears. All the station management did was to put up notices, warning the commuters of the crime at the station.

NOTICE TO ALL COMMUTERS

From: Management

It has come to the attention of Management that some criminals around the station rob passengers of their valuables. While the staff and Management will do the best they can to provide security, it is up to the passengers to ensure they leave their valuables at home.

By Order: Station Management

Lenah Kulu wondered if this was a joke. How do you allow criminals to take over your operation and still be brave to write such a sad notice? She twisted her mouth sideways as she stopped for a few seconds to read the notice again.

Many train commuters stopped using the train, leaving those who had no alternative contend with the criminals. It did not matter the time, criminals were everywhere like air.

The time was 18h00, exactly eight days today since the attempted robbery and the groups of young men had taken their positions. Some leaned against large tree trunks nearby. Others shared a smoke, while on the lookout for any possible danger. Their eyes glittered with fire.

With the bag in her hand she took the first step towards the door. Her feet felt heavy as if she dragged an imaginary object. In seconds, she disembarked from the train and found herself on the platform. Everybody seemed to know what she was up to. It seemed other passengers drifted away, leaving her deserted. She panicked and almost dropped the bag on the floor, but the security guard at the gate seemed to be checking each step she took.

“Do it Lenah Kulu, do it! This is your last chance,” she mumbled.

“If any of those boys thought of snatching her bag, he was in for a big surprise,” she thought. This year, alone, she had lost two bags. Not stolen while unattended, but seized from her hands. The recent incidence was the last straw.

As soon as she strolled down the platform towards the small gate, leaving most of the boys behind, one of them turned and shouted, “Hello, my punu punu, my beautiful little thing.” Her stomach rumbled. She ignored him and clung to her parcel. “Fuck! You are so beautiful. I wish you were mine. I would lick you like an ice cream cone, mntwana.” A burst of laughter ensued from the other boys.

Her legs became cold and she almost fell. Embarking on this dangerous project was not a wise decision, she thought. She should have accepted her fate and moved on with her life. She should have been satisfied that she was lucky to be alive after the attack.

She thought of running, but that would draw the attention of other thugs around. Instead, she sped up in case the boy pursued her. She pretended to be hurrying towards the security guard at the gate. The bag slipped out of her sweating hand and fell to the ground. She nearly slumped on her shaking knees as she picked up the bag. Relieved to see that no one was paying attention.

A few yards from the station, a rough hand grabbed the nape of her neck. A drop of urine escaped, wetting herself. She turned to face the attacker who flung her to the rocky surface. The abandoned buildings echoed her screams. In no time, her bag was gone. The snatcher disappeared into the dark like a speeding train. It dawned on her this time, she had messed up. How was she going to face her uncle?

She shook her head as her bag took a corner, never to be seen again. The security guard looked away as always. When the boy was gone, he approached Lenah Kulu. "He's lucky I didn't see what he did to you, my sister. I would have smashed his head with my knobkerrie."

She kept quiet. Embarrassed, he stretched his hand to help her up.

"Son of a bitch," she murmured, "this might be your last lap."

She silently prayed, "If only the black mamba in the bag could do the job perfectly, there would be one less criminal in our midst." The reality became clearer that she had committed serious crimes. First she allowed the snake that had just been captured by her uncle to slither out of the cage into her bag. Second, the snake could attack innocent people and her uncle was not going to be impressed with the current state of affairs. Her uncle would have to go on a mission to recapture the snake.

Captured

Not all the dead were in the grave or in the morgue awaiting their burial. Some walked with their hollow chests protruding and heads pointing into the sky like an antenna. They thought they were in control. Fools simply fooling themselves. Their hearts were my playground though in denial like all ghosts. They cannot be in control with me around.

I ruled their lives if they had any. I told them what to do; what to say; and when to say it.

Some were nostalgic. Liars. What did they know? Naked lies. I drilled into their heads, no one mattered but themselves. I made them believe they were the best thing that ever happened to this world, better than all others around.

You're better than everyone else, I said, don't you know?

They agreed rather silently.

There was no way they were like those people who lived in the shacks, who worked in the rubbish dumps, scavenging like stray dogs, I said.

I convinced the ghosts they were unique. They believed everything I said. No one questioned my authority.

A few of them said, no, but we are equal.

Bullshit, I said, who told you that lie?

You are special, I reinforced.

I loved it when they practised their stupidity. In the eyes of outsiders, they presented a united front but somewhere within reposed the true me that controlled them. No one recognized my powers buried in the bellies of their hearts.

Not so long ago I laughed and applauded as one of them became shaky when the results of my work unfolded in front of his blind eyes. The bloody hypocrite who went around preaching love and unity exhibited hatred when he had to practice his teachings. He remained silent when the marauding gangs that ruled the city of the dead ripped the schoolboy apart. Blood flew into the air like a jet of water from a fountain. The gangs cornered the schoolboy on his way to school. In full uniform. Everybody noticed he was a child. Even children are not safe in this cemetery. If he had money it would have been a lousy pocket money.

He has money and a cell phone, go for him, I said.

They glanced around to assess the situation. When they noticed only Sim, they pounced on the boy. One of them wrapped his stinking arm like a noose around the boy's neck while others perforated his tiny frame with knives. The boy writhed like a snake held by its tail. His eyes popped out and turned white and surrendered to the attackers. He kicked the air once or twice, mouth open, but his power and voice let him down. At that moment, Sim appeared, jogging as he did in the morning before heading for the northern suburbs where he worked. He believed it was important to keep his body in good shape at his age. It was important for him to die his second death fit.

I stood back, marvelled at the gangs' bravery, especially as they grabbed the boy by his throat like a cheetah choking its prey.

Look what they'll do to you if you don't mind your own business, I warned Sim.

He stopped in his tracks, debated whether to intervene or to walk away. Walking away was the natural option for a man under my spell. He was not going to get involved in risky situations. How could he?

He hesitated for a moment, jumped up and down, but moving nowhere like his own life. At that moment, his ass breathed fear. Beads of sweat not from jogging rolled down into his eyes, blinding him further.

Don't you dare, I said, imagine these guys turning on you.

Like an embarrassed dog shoving its tail between its legs, he strolled away pretending to be blind to the violation of the young man. To retain his impaired dignity, he clapped hands as you would do when flexing your arms after a workout.

As for the boy, it was not Sim's problem that he lay on the pavement, convulsing. Flies flew in and out of his mouth. Everybody else abandoned him except the flies. Blood drew a mark on the dusty pavement to mark the end of the boy's short spell in the world of the dead.

I wondered what kind of a man Sim was. He was just like the rest of them. I meant those who could fill the soccer stadium but ended up lined up by two criminals who robbed them of their valuables. The only sensible thing they thought of doing was to squeal like piglets headed into an abattoir.

Sometimes I laughed at Sim and his friends. They were painfully rich. Do not ask me how they got their wealth. Wealth that rained out of their ears, nose, mouth, but they were poor in

their spirit just like all other ghosts. Like his friends, Sim had everything, but absolutely nothing in reality. He was so scared of dying his second death he would give you everything he owned as long as you would spare his life.

I whispered to his ear, you could die, leaving your family, your expensive house with two swimming pools, a jacuzzi, the fleet of expensive cars, eight of them even though only you and your wife can drive and he believed every word I uttered.

You know you bought all these assets, I said, tell them, Sim, tell them you worked hard for these cars.

Competition was intense between Sim and his compatriots. They competed and bragged about who had thrown the most expensive party.

To challenge his competition, he once threw a party for his five-year-old daughter, Charmaine. Although she was of sober habits, she served the most expensive whiskey at her party. Photos of adults drinking their lives away were all over the social media where other ghosts lived. Sim's visitors parked their cars on the road, blockading the neighbours from accessing their homes. Private protectors roamed the streets brandishing guns and driving passers-by as far away from the party as it was possible.

Those ghosts learned from the experts who used all the tricks under the sun to hold on to the excessive everything they claimed to own.

Those hypocrites loved their family but hated those they perceived to be different from them. Their fellow ghosts slept in the streets down the road. When they past the street people they closed windows to protect themselves from the robbers.

To deal with their guilty conscience, the rich said they did not understand what the fuss was about. The country was rich and could support all of us. They meant it could support only them.

I am sorry that I emerged victorious whenever I instructed ghosts what to say. Those that claimed to live a holy life were mine too. Check how they walked, with their heads bowed to show respect to the place of worship. They were a good example of how to love someone without really loving them. The world was full of wrong people, they said, only us were good.

Not a single one of them lived the kind of life they encouraged others to lead. I loved it. Did you think they would love you? All other material possessions were more important to them. If they had to kill so they could lay their hands on the material stuff they did not hesitate. I told them nothing is as important as being recognized as the best in everything.

What they considered their actions, were mine. This was what happened when I had captured everybody.

Invasion

Zandi has been in bed for a few hours when someone creeps up to her. She has wrapped herself in three thin blankets. The cold wind outside her shack in Section 7, a shanty town with metal shacks built so close to each other you would not know where one shack begins and ends, whistles like a flute, keeping her half asleep

Dizzy from the sleep, she rubs her eyes, she cannot see. It is too dark in the room with only a streak of light entering through the spaces between the iron sheets of the roof. She pushes her hand and feels the stranger who has found his way into her bed. He blows his warm breath against her face.

With a freezing leg he prises her legs from each other. His grassy beard scrapes against her face. She turns away, avoiding to collide with him in the dark. He wraps his arms around her, caresses her breasts with cold hands.

His breath, carrying the smell of cheap alcohol, cigarette and days of unwashed teeth envelopes her. The more she retreats, the tighter he grips. He groans as she suffocates from his tight grip.

She jumps out, but the rough hands pull her back, almost rip her arm out of its socket. Excruciating pain runs through the arm like an electric shock and rests somewhere under her left breast. She bows her head and ponders her next move. She might sustain serious injuries in the dark room.

She wants to scream, but only the tired sound comes out.

“Wehh wehh wehh,” she cries.

“Shut up, bitch,” he says.

“Let me go.”

“Tsek...”

“Leave me alone, mani,” she says, pushing and kicking.

“Open. Open your stupid legs, slut.”

“No.”

“Open or I’ll kill you.”

He presses her down to the pillow.

“Hhey, tsek, wena.”

“Mmhu! Mmhu! Mmhu!”

She trembles and her heart jumps, forcing the blood to rush to the head and block the ears.

Now his hand covers her mouth and nose.

As he begs her, he presses his sharp knee against her chest. Her rib cage caves in. His hands run all over her. She pushes him back and he screams like a child. She realizes, she has punched his genitals. She locks her jaws and waits for a blow from the man. Nothing comes of it.

“You’re hurting me, nja...,” he says.

She regrets why she has not grabbed his private parts with all her might. He squeals like a piglet. She gets a chance to breathe as he retreats from her painful hands. She takes a long breath, it might be the last one anyway.

She gathers the bull’s strength. He feels so light on top of her. Her body relaxes as if giving in before she releases the killer blow. She goes for his balls hanging loose between his legs. In one hand, she squeezes, flattening them out like a stress ball.

“Stop... stop... stop... please...” he wails.

He lets go of his grip on her and his helpless screams encourage her to press on. He huffs and surrenders. The screaming dissipates.

She flings him into the floor, and a weak cough follows. When she turns on the light, he lies on the floor motionless.

Disappointed

As he opened the door an unfamiliar perfume rushed in first. She lifted her head to face him. He stopped for a moment before entering. He threw his car keys and cell phones on the coffee table. Brushing his hands against each other, he forced a fake smile on his face.

Her suspicions were about to be confirmed. The strange perfume had lifted a lid on his secret affairs. She sat on the sofa, rolling her brown round eyes while her husband picked up one of his cell phones from the table.

They always celebrated their marriage anniversary together, at home or at a picnic spot or somewhere where nothing would disturb them. In all occasions, Joe was the organiser. He joked it was time to propose love to her again. But this year he had not said anything about their anniversary.

Today Joe, came home before sunset, something he was no longer good at. Without saying anything, he strutted across the room and disappeared into the bedroom. She debated whether to say anything about the imminent special day. She decided to be keep quiet.

Back in the lounge, she grabbed the cell phone on the coffee table, turned it over. It was password protected. Without hesitation, she threw it back to its original position convinced that her husband had an affair.

She remembered how she first met Joe one night at a local bar three years ago. He had been in the bar for the whole afternoon. Staggering out of the toilet, he nearly collided with her. She was on her way to the bathroom too. He opened his bulky arms to grab her. They hugged for a few seconds. Her boyfriend, at the time, was dozing after he had taken more than he could handle. Emboldened by alcohol, they exchanged contact numbers and a few kisses in the dark. And now they were a married.

Among those who attended their wedding was Sheila, the soft spoken model with a v-shaped smooth face. On the day Noli met Joe, Sheila was at the bar. Since then Sheila had become hooked to this couple.

A few days ago, Sheila gave Joe a call, his wife answered the phone. That did not go down well with the wife. He was supposed to be at work on the day, but for some reason he had come home earlier. Sheila knew about the strain in their relationship. When Joe walked out of

the shower she decided to pick up a fight with him. Then she thought about something that was sure to upset him.

She looked him in the eyes and said, “Your Sheila called.”

“Who? Why? Since when is she mine?” he asked lifting both index fingers to make a sign of inverted commas.

“If she’s my friend she would’ve called me, not you.”

“Oh.”

“She would call again anyway. Enjoy the chat.”

Joe was no longer the same man she married. She feared, he may have relapsed to being a womaniser. As if Joe could read her mind, he burst out laughing.

“It’s Sheila again. She’s so funny, love,” said Joe.

“Why?”

“Will tell you later, honey.”

“Ok, then. Why did I bother, anyway?” she said, as she paged through the magazine in her hands.

“Sorry, Noli,” he said, “Have to rush to town.”

“Tell me more.”

“Will talk later, babes, please.”

“Whatever.”

He reversed and almost hit a tree next to the drive way. Splashing the muddy water, he accelerated his Citi Chico down the road. The darkness descending on the town swallowed him.

Lying on her back in the main bedroom, Noli sobbed. The special make-up turned into a mudslide as it got washed into her mouth.

Only late into the night she fell asleep, leaving the main door wide open.

Later, Joe tiptoed into the house. Avoiding to disturb her, he slid into the blankets next to her. The only time they spoke was in the morning of the special day. The first time ever he went to work on their wedding commemoration.

The movie of Joe with another woman played out in her head. One afternoon Noli's friend saw Joe with unfamiliar men at the local restaurant. And as late as on the anniversary somebody saw Joe parking his car behind a restaurant frequented by local high class people.

The news of her husband spending time in strange places drove her mad. She reached for her hand bag and dug for the car keys.

"If I let this go unchallenged, I would be stupid," she said.

Her aim was to catch Joe in the act.

"How could he do this on such a day?" she thought.

She zoomed through the only set of robots in town and reached the exit of town where a dirt road began.

"Stupid, useless municipality," she swore, negotiating her way through the gaping potholes, "Why can't they maintain roads?"

Her car was covered in the mud from the water patches on the road.

In no time, she pulled up in front of the restaurant where Joe hid his car behind the building. She nearly drove into the wall. She galloped to the entrance, kicked the door open. A bouncer tried to stop her, but she slipped through. The entrance hall was deserted, and four or five cubicles doors were open, but one. She hastened to the closed door. Before she touched the door handle, a half-naked man opened the door from inside. In the cubicle Joe was naked in bed with another man. Joe's eyes caught hers. With parted lips, not a single word escaped his mouth.

"What do you think you are doing?" she said.

My Initiation

My relationship with mama Maziya started as an employer-employee kind of relationship. It blossomed into something I did not anticipate. The Maziyas lived in Midrand and I lived in Ivory Park, Tembisa. I was their general worker, a gardener mainly. Over time the family embraced me as their adopted son, exposing me to all sorts of privileges normally reserved for the employer's children. I thought they loved but in hindsight, I was wrong.

I looked forward to weekends and school holidays. When baba was around, I even went on holiday with them. She had this special bond with me. Even when there was no work to do, she still fetched me from home. Asked me to wash a fleet of her cars. And for that, she rewarded me handsomely with money and other goodies a boy of seventeen appreciated. Sometimes, I would be busy washing cars and she would invite me to accompany her to town, making me leave my job to spend time with her.

“Freddie, I’m going to town today. Do you want to come with me?” she would say.

She wore short skirts or dresses. Her body bulged out as if it would explode. She walked like a peahen, displaying her train. When sitting down she shifted her legs, straddling them.

I often accompanied her everywhere she went including visiting her favourite upmarket restaurant that politicians’ wives frequented. We ate and washed the food down with some expensive drinks sodas for me and wine for her. Once she had taken a few sips from her glass, she bragged about her wealth. But she moaned endlessly, about her husband who never was at home.

“I wonder what he’s busy doing in Cape Town right now?” she said, talking to herself.

I kept quiet, not sure what to say. Previously I offered a piece of childish advice that was met with boiling anger. That day, I retreated to the corner of the kitchen like an orphaned child. Her eyes glittered with anger. She hastened to the bedroom and locked herself in until I knocked to inform her I was going home. She told me to wait. After a couple of minutes, she emerged from the bedroom. She gave me money and thanked me for being a good child.

The next day, he fetched me from home and asked me to accompany her to town. She was always scared to drive around on her own. As always, after shopping, we headed to our favourite restaurant. She liked this place because it offered nice food and friends, but she never stopped complaining about her husband who focussed on his job at her expense.

I could not keep quiet anymore.

“Don’t worry, mama. Things will be okay one day,” I said. She stared at me in anger. I was not sure what had upset her.

“Baba will return one day, mama,” I said.

“Don’t mama me, Freddie, please.”

A young man whose sagging trousers exposed his boxer undies strolled past our table. She waved to greet him. He waved back with a smile and a quick wink. Her eyes brightened up.

He took a table far from ours, waited for his companion because he kept glancing at the door. A few minutes later, mama walked over to him, sat on the chair opposite him. They talked, laughed and soon parted ways.

As she meandered back to our table, the young man’s eyes followed her until she reached the table.

On our way back home she was bubbly. She preached about the importance of happiness and making the right choices in life.

“See, Freddie, happiness is a choice. And I choose to be happy. Maziya can continue with his politics, and I will continue with my life.”

She was a complete opposite of her morning version that had been howling about the absent lover.

The following day, I was cleaning the yard when she invited me into the house. I ran to the kitchen. She was not there.

“Mum, where are you?”

“Here. Come this side quickly. Come in.”

I opened the bedroom door slowly. This was the first time I found myself in the bedroom.

“C’mon in. What’s your problem?”

When I stepped in, she locked the door. I thought I had done something wrong. That was how my mum lured me into the house whenever I had broken some house rules. There were many of them, and it was difficult not to break at least one in a month.

That day I was sure, I had not done anything wrong. She stood up and tiptoed softly toward, stopping about a metre away. I was ready for a quick slap across the face. Instead she calmed down and spoke with a soft voice, almost a whisper.

“Freddie, you know I trust you? And everything that happens today must end here. Right. Do not share it with your mum or your friends, ok. If you keep it to yourself, gifts and even money will come your way.

I nodded nervously, as she spoke. After explaining everything, she moved back to sit on the edge of the bed, but not before she offered me a drink. I had never tasted alcohol and I was not about to do it. I resolved that if she forced me to drink, I would rather leave and lose my job. The half full glass stood on the small table.

We looked at each other without saying anything. She went for drinks several times. She offered the half-full glass to me again. I shook my head in disapproval. She ignored my objection, instead she pushed the glass to my mouth, with jaws locked together. The glass rubbed against my teeth and I finally gave in, opening my mouth partly to allow a sip or two to go down my throat for the first time in my life.

“You see, it doesn't kill.”

By now she was tipsy and her voice had become louder. I saw her changing right in front of my eyes.

“Love you too, my angel.”

I thought I was dying from the wine. My head was heavy I bowed it, but it got worse. I wanted to talk, but not a single word escaped my open mouth. My heart pumped so hard I thought it would stop. My bladder almost gave in. I leaned against the wall, but the room continued to swing, forcing me to sit on the floor with my legs spread out.

An hour later, I woke up and mama was fast asleep and the bottle of wine lay on the floor empty. Since then, I have refused to go back to work for her or to touch any alcoholic drink.

Instinct

Her instinct told her to stay in doors that evening, but she ignored it, the decision she regretted all her life. She was very tired but her determination to stick to her jogging schedule pushed her. She lowered her head and looked down at her torn floor carpet. It had holes that seemed to have been cut out deliberately. She straightened her back, pushed her head backward and finally rested it on the back of the red couch that had scratch marks all over. She breathed with her nose and rubbed her soft hands against each other.

She rolled her eyes to check the time from the clock on the wall. It was 18h00, still early to jog around the block of flats that displayed a severe state of decay downtown Johannesburg. She dragged herself to the mirror. "I'm not going anywhere today," she said to herself. Her round face and pointed nose made her appreciate her appearance. She reversed to the sofa and threw herself on it as she stretched her arms out.

It was not long before she changed her mind. Skipping a day without jogging was similar to cheating. She was not about to break her vow, to run Monday to Friday every week. The results of her commitment were visible to everyone who cared to see. Her body had been trimmed to a size she was comfortable with. Her once chubby cheeks had sunk in, leaving her sharp nose dominant. That was the appearance she strived for.

In the end she decided to take a single lap that evening. She ran a few metres down the street, dodging vendors crowding the pavement and careful not to trample on the fruit stalls and pavement hair salons. She panted. She licked her thick lips and swallowed her saliva. Thirsty, she had forgotten her water bottle, but going back to the sixth floor was out of the question.

She stopped for a moment to gather her strength, the decision she lived to regret for the rest of her life. A watery substance rained all over the top of her head and a few drops on the shoulders. The cap she wore shrank and she tossed it away, exposing her skull and shoulders to the burning water that fried and melted her skin like plastic on the fire. As she screamed and wiped off the liquid, her hands got burnt too. The charcoal smell of burning flesh filled the street. Other people ran for cover, leaving her screaming on the ground. The rest of the liquid rolled down the back of her legs, causing irreparable damage and altering her gait forever.

The next day, she woke up tied to a steel bed; hands wrapped in white cloth; her face almost completely covered with only the eyes and nose exposed. The ceiling above and a small TV

screen protruding, looked unfamiliar. The smell of methylated spirit triggered the thought that she was in hospital. How she got there was to be revealed a few weeks later.

A month later she was discharged. Before she left the hospital she went to the mirror.

Nothing could have prepared her for what she saw. She checked her face, twisted it to all directions. Deep scars criss-crossed her face and her once well-rounded legs had black marks and scars that looked like swollen veins

Cornered

At night darkness descends quickly as if the sun is in a hurry to disappear behind the mountains, leaving a trail of chilly winds in its wake. Mama has retired into the house a lot earlier today. I feel irritable. From far small fires, the remains of tires burnt by the community, flicker, injecting a glimmer of light to the rather dull neighbourhood of Duduza. Same size houses, most of which are one-bedroom stand close to each other, look like termite mounds. I dare not walk out of the yard at night after refusing to participate in the protest earlier.

How stupid can I be? Looking for freshness in the midst of rot, blood, violence, and death. After sunset, we lock doors to keep out trouble. I step outside, stand under the lemon tree, and toss my eyes into the sky blocked off by the smoke.

My body twitches and a cold feeling rushes through the spine and exits through the feet. It's not long somebody grabs me from behind, pressing down the boil. "Nja! Who do you think must protest for you?" I recognize Scotch's hoarse voice. A self-appointed community leader. Everybody takes him seriously around here.

A heavy bony punch lands on my face. I stagger, hit my head against the wall of our house. Flakes of grey paint peel off and fall like rain on me as I pull my jaws sideways. Spit fills my mouth. Dizzy, I hoist myself to prepare for a sprint. Scotch is not alone. More people pounce, sinking their claws into my flesh. Two of them one on each side lift me high up, suspend my body in the air, and allow only my toes to slightly touching the ground. The third one blocks my mouth with his hand. Darkness falls on me as they drag me down the street.

With the power outage, the township has become a sea of blackness.

No one explains what crime I have committed. I know my time has come. Once Scotch and his gang target you, negotiating your way out of his grip is impossible.

Before the necklace killing became fashionable, he used salt, cayenne pepper, and a razor blade as tools of torture. He cut a deep incision on his victim's flesh, poured salt and cayenne pepper into the wound. Victims screamed for help which often never came because no one, in their right mind, would confront Scotch.

A few meters into the street full of rocks bulging like pimples, they tip me over. One of them grabs my right leg while the other goes for the left. They float down towards the exit of the

township. My head hammers the dirt road, as they turn through the dark streets. The few spooky trees lining the road amplify the faster they fly.

The night becomes darker. I see the shadows that drag me. From the noise, I can tell that more and more people of different ages join, children in torn clothes, mothers with aprons showing their hanging breasts, men smelling of cheap home-brewed beer, stray dogs. They spread around me, forming a semi-circle like wild dogs cornering their prey.

Alongside my upended body, a boy rolls down an old tyre. Small upside down ghost huts float along with me. Everything moves when you run on your head. After dragging me for a long distance, I can no longer see, but only imagine the ghosts dancing around. The fresh blood overflows through my mouth, nose, and eyes. I'm numb.

I am worried about dying. I shiver from the idea.

At the exit of the township they come to an abrupt stop, force me to sit upright. The smell of decomposing corpse probably a dog, becomes stronger. No one from the crowd seems bothered by the smell. Scotch stands over me. A faint light, from his phone, makes his bloodshot eyes shine through the black balaclava he wears. From time to time, he flies away and returns.

I cough a long throaty cough. The black dust has filled my eyes and lungs. Only then do I realize I still have clothes on, though torn. When they dragged me down the road I felt naked. I feel no pain anymore except the strange heat on the upper back of my body that has been rubbing against the ground. The skin must have peeled off in places, leaving naked flesh. Black trees provide a darker background behind the wall of the crowd. They have blended in perfectly into the darkness.

"It's getting late," Scotch says. "We still have work to do."

"Yes," others respond.

"We will smoke his ashes," they say with pride, "Soon you will stink like that dog, with maggots feasting on you."

I shake like a tree in the wind. Swallow my muddy saliva. Tears roll down my cracked face. I do not wipe them off. Again, I spit the mixture of blood, saliva, and dust on the ground.

I am certain of what awaits me. Either way, you die. You are either stoned, and then set alight. Or set alight first, and then stoned later. You have two options: die crying or fight to

the bitter end. I choose none of these. Instead, I find a small opening, squeeze through their legs and dash to the nearby thick bush.

Like lions pursuing prey, they run after me, throwing stones, sticks and other objects. I slip into the thickest part of the forest. I get a warm hug from the grass and trees. With my thin body frame, I slide like a needle through a garment.

My chest burns, wheezes, threatening to burst out. I glance around. It's pitch black. I cannot see my own hands. Frogs and crickets sing their usual tunes. I run out of steam, lean against the tree trunk like a lizard. I am breathless.

With injured hands, I check the surroundings. I clear a tiny space closest to the tree and collapse into the clearing. Except for the rattling crickets and frogs and humming grass and trees, there is no movement around. A hyena howls from a distance. My heart throbs.

The wind blows even faster and trees hum as they dance to the wind. I feel their movement from where I squat.

I feel a strong urge to run further, but the forest is too dark. Someone approaches in the dark. I hold my breath waiting for a big blow similar or worse than the one Scotch inflicted earlier. But the dark figure floats pass.

I throw my head backward, relieved to see the blue light lighting up the sky.

Trapped

Nothing is safe here, lives, places of worship, schools, and cemeteries have been overturned. A few survivors trapped in the village are forced to spend what remains of their life behind walls. Sad walls of partly destroyed houses, a sign of what this village was like before the war we have no say in.

Cold malevolent air sweeps through the streets. Drawn-out raspy music comes from the birds that have taken over the village. Vultures stagger, opening their broad wings to balance their weight while the wind howls past them. They rip apart the remains of those that have succumbed to the brutality of the war, leaving a trail of dry bones behind. Now and then a cloud of red earth whirls around disrupting their feeding spree.

It has been more than five hours since the last bomb rumbled like a bloated stomach. Like a lizard, I lean against the wall of our half-destroyed house. Vibrations shake the earth under my feet. Perhaps a landmine is readying itself. But nothing comes of it. It's dangerous to venture outside. A few minutes ago I peeped and not a single fighter was in sight.

A boy of about 13-years old disappeared last week. I can't recall his name. It does not matter now. His family members scattered when the bombardment intensified, leaving him behind. Stranded, he closed his eyes as he fired a sharp scream into the dusty air, crying for help. The gaping ruins and dry rivers echoed his voice. Explosives hammer the village. I ran back to my hiding corner pleased that I survived another day. I've not heard from him since then.

Emboldened by hunger, I venture out. I take a step or two before bombs rain down from the sky. This time I'm not spared. The force of explosion throws me into the ditch on my back.

The dust finds its way into my lungs. I cough, blowing more dust away. Rubble closes open spaces left around my squashed body. I elevate my battered frame, only the upper part moves. It's like somebody has stumped the soil, trapping me further. Unrelenting hiss blocks my ears. I turn my neck slightly, and it hurts.

The whole body, up to just below the chest, is firmly buried under the rubble. Every few seconds a stabbing pain races through my twisted left arm stuck under the debris. A deep silence follows. I close my eyes and scream but no voice comes out.

Suddenly the high-pitched chirping of birds flying over me to safety breaks the silence. When the noise subsides, I lift the head, move my jaws sideways. A fresh smell of blood fills the air.

PORTFOLIO

Submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of

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of

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by

Lucas Sipho Sithole

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Introduction

The story of the journey I travelled in the past two years is reflected in the journals I kept when I started with this course, MACW in February 2018. To borrow from Brandi Reissenweber (The Writer: 2019), “(I) was learning every time (I) read thoughtfully, write, revise, give feedback and consider feedback about (my) own work with an open mind.” Over two years, I accumulated so much information and putting it together in a coherent way has been a mammoth task. However, it is my strongest belief that the reader will follow the steps I took in an attempt to reach my destination. If for some reason the reader gets lost in this piece it would be because this report is a true reflection of how I got lost in the MACW jungle. Often, I stood back and wondered how I found myself in this course in the first place.

The report begins with the essay piece, my reflections on the contact weeks, the book reviews and research journals, my invaluable interaction with my supervisor, Stacy Hardy and my engagement with the Reader Report. From the contact weeks to the research journals my focus is to share how these activities impacted on me as a writer.

Poetics and Narrativity: Essay

Poetry and Narrative: Whose Interpretation Prevails, the Writer’s or the Reader’s?

My first encounter with poetry was at home during weddings, funerals and other traditional dances. The kind of poetry shared in those events was, in the main, oral poetry in the form of self-praise. Self-praise entails an individual singing own praises based on achievements or embarrassing moments in his life in front of the crowd. Depending on the type of event, self-praise starts with the dancer dancing to the tune sung by those around. He would then dance and chant his praises to the ululation and clapping of the crowd.

As members of the community, my family and friends participated in these festivities. Did their participation make them poets? If the answer to this question is yes, then every person in my village is a poet. I run the risk of sounding arrogant and insensitive, but the point I’m making is, “There are a great many kinds of poetry” (Wei T’ai). Lesego Rampolokeng articulates this point so well when he says some poets who kept poetry alive in our

communities did not even see themselves as such. They never engaged in mainstream poetic activity though they played an important role in popularising the poetic art.

Over the years, the practice of self-praise has slowly diminished. Instead, traditional functions go on without this practice, or with some half-hearted kind of dance and poetry. Even among non-mainstream poetry, poetic audiences are diminishing fast even though “oral poetry has been a mediating instrument for the black shamans (Phillip Zhuwao, 1996:3). It is replaced by recorded music which is played even at funerals. This brief background lays the foundation of how I was first exposed to poetry.

For generations, poets of almost all religious and cultural backgrounds have been writing, reading or reciting poems. The poet “is the salvation of humanity, one man unites the human flowering with universal flowering...”, (Aime Cesaire, xviii).

Charles Olson (3), defines “*a poem as energy transferred from where the poet got it ...by way of the poem itself to, all the way over to, the reader.*” This includes sophisticated and popular poets.

Sadly, Christopher Ingraham shows (Washington Post 24 April 2015), that in 20 years, 1992 to 2012, the percentage of Americans who had read a work of poetry at least once in the past year dropped from 17% to 6.7%. Whether South Africa follows similar trends or not, is not the subject of this piece.

How relevant is the poetry in modern society? Does poetic audience decline imply the irrelevance of poetry to modern society? The answer is a big no. Poetry continues and will continue to play a significant role in society. It still enables us to cope with the pressures of life.

Towards the end of his life around the early 60s William Carlos Williams says, “... poetry should be brought back into the world where we live and not be so recondite, so removed from the people.”

Craig Santos Perez (255) says “poetry is an integral, everyday part of ancestral ceremonial activities.” He (256) prefers poetry that “...asserts indigenous survival and presence in all our complexity.”

It's almost impossible to reduce the reasons why poets write poems to one or two. They are motivated by different factors. Once the reader is exposed to my prose, I expect him/her to have a feeling that the piece was about them. The reader must see himself as the person being addressed in the piece. Lydia Yuknavitch (344), says she knows she has succeeded as a writer if the reader feels something in their body after reading her writings.

I want to write poetry and prose that leaves a mark on the reader. The piece that's memorable, leaving the reader feeling respected and taken seriously. It may not be in the way that Lydia Yuknavitch describes, but somehow my poetry must give satisfaction to its reader.

Literary studies have shown that although writers do their best to present their poetics and narrativity, the power to interpret the text remains the province of the reader. It's readers who, based on their experiences of the context, fill the gaps that the text may have left unfilled. As readers engage the piece they, do not only comprehend what the writer is conveying, but they also attach their meaning and interpretation. At this stage, the writer is out of the picture. It's only the text and the reader.

Different readers may read the same text, but their final interpretation is never the same. Even if, as a writer, I intend to achieve a particular goal with my writing I have no chance to tell the reader that. Many scholars have expressed their views around what impact they expect their work to have on readers. Others show how, as a result of a particular style of writing, things have gone wrong in society. There seems to be a clear trend of blaming or applauding the writer for a position the reader takes after being exposed to a particular writing.

For me, Njabulo Ndebele (2006) has succeeded in expressing his frustration with the protest literature of the 70s and 80s. In his essay, *Recovery of the Ordinary*, Ndebele argues that protest literature did not deliver the intended results. He describes protest literature "*as literature that refuses to be enjoyed precisely because it challenges "conventional" methods of literary representation, and that it painfully shows up the ogre to himself.*" Later on in the same essay he adds protest literature: "*(It) documents, it indicts, implicitly; it is demonstrative, preferring exteriority to interiority; it keeps the larger issues of society in our minds, obliterating the details, it provokes identification through recognition and feeling rather than through observation and analytical thought; it calls for emotion rather than*

conviction; it establishes a vast sense of presence without offering intimate knowledge, it confirms without necessarily offering a challenge.”

Though Ndebele talks about protest literature, his views can apply to any other form of writing. He posits that our writing operates within the realities of society. As such, literature must go beyond just telling us what we already know (expository), but rather convey an empowering message that reveals to the reader that he or she has the power to transform their situation (transformative).

Ndebele characterizes the expository style of writing as primarily descriptive. It's rooted in realism because it depicts the facts and details of the situation and ends there. But the transformative realm, which he argues, all writing should aspire for, does not only reveal the ills in society but empowers the readers to take action against the system.

Perhaps, in line with what Ndebele says, Tamiko Beyer (246) has this to say about race that *“poetry names and gives voice to experiences and realities that are silenced in white supremacist society.”* Poetry has the power to name and demolish racism.

Referring to expository writing Kathy Acker (17) says, *“If I'm going to tell you what the real is by mirroring it, by telling you a story that expresses reality, I'm attempting to tell you how things are.”* The problem with this approach is that the victim remains disempowered.

The transformative realm, on the other hand, does not only portray the realities, it goes as far as proposing possible solutions to the problem. It is empowering. For example, stories in Altmann's *Tongue* were *“meant to function beyond their initial reading, in the way readers choose over time to process the reading experience and supply their moral response to the absence of a response within the text proper.”*

I have no doubt the benefits derived from transformative writing far outweigh exposing the situation. I'm not implying that the former is, therefore, more important. Ndebele's essay and he is not alone in this, suggests that what the writer presents in the form of writing will ultimately be processed and interpreted by the reader as such, that is, as the writer intended it to be construed. If the writer's poem is aimed at informing the reader that there is nothing the

latter can do about the situation that is what the reader will also understand the poem to mean.

But the study conducted by Victoria Kurtz and Michael F. Schober (2011:139), indicates that readers do not arrive at the same meaning of stories or poems. The results “strongly suggested that themes do not reside in texts in any obvious way, but are constructed by readers.” The writer can do the best to narrate a story, but the meaning of the narrative or the poem does not happen during the comprehension of the story. It emanates from the interpretation the reader attaches to the text. It’s the reader, who may be armed with the experiences of the context, that pieces together the meaning of the story

John Lye (1996) echoes the power that the reader wields when it comes to interpreting the work of art. He says, “meaning exists only insofar as it means to someone, and art is composed to evoke sets of responses in the reader...”

Back to my essay. It attempts to understand whether, as a writer, I should pay attention to under which category my poetic or narrative - expository or transformative, falls. Putting it differently whether I should prescribe how the reader interprets my writing. The question is prompted by the concern raised by Ndebele’s essay which criticizes protest literature for being expository at the expense of transformative.

I view Ndebele’s essay as implying that the writer’s task is not only to reveal the problem in detail but also to suggest some form of solutions. The central argument of Ndebele’s essay is that expository literary is not good enough and all literary work must strive for transformative engagement. He advocates for work that will leave the reader empowered.

My aim is not to look at the merits or demerits of what Ndebele says. I intend to investigate whether the writer needs to determine the paradigm he will follow with his writing. Does it matter whether the reader interprets the work by what the writer intended to achieve with his work? Or is it mandatory for the writer to choose between expository and transformative writing? This last question is the main subject of this essay.

What he says makes me think about how I operate in my space as a writer. Since I started writing I have always wondered what my role is in society? At the beginning of my career, I

derived satisfaction from writing what I thought was good work of poetry or narrative. But now I'm pulled apart by what is happening in society. Perhaps what I feel comes from my narrow understanding of what the writer is supposed to do.

Lionel Bopage said in 2011, *"Literature is not a way to merrily spend one's time, a way to awaken society. Writers have a social responsibility, to tell the truth, that may help the progression of society."*

As a writer, I'm obligated to take the community into my confidence by supplying poetry and narrative that take their thinking to another level. My understanding of this assertion is that writers are a social activist. How must they fulfil this role and where does this leave the writer?

My role, as a writer, resides somewhere outside myself – in the community. I conceive the ideas of what to write about, but I also have to think about what that writing will achieve in the lives of my readers. But I'm not in a position to prescribe the interpretation to my readers nor can any writer tell me how to interpret their writing.

The general rule is that writers expect their writing to shake the status quo, but it is up to the reader how. Writing is not just limited to content or meaning or what is defined as realism which Kathy Acker, refers to as a control method as those who practice it wants to limit their readers' perceptions.

So, the writer can't do his/her artistic work so well without invoking or evoking some form of reaction from the reader. Is it even possible to write, poetic or narrative that is above politics and social challenges? As a product of the community where I operate, I can't divorce myself from social ills that ravage my community.

An article posted in 2005 by poets.org, underlines the role of artists in society. It says, *"Artists are more capable than theorists or pundits in representing the consciousness of the people because the language of art is a language of immediacy, of spirit, and the transporting analogy."*

How do I write?

Before I delve into what other writers of poetry and prose expect from their writing, I must give you my position about the subject of this essay. My position is that whether I expose the facts or suggest solutions in my writing, I still fulfil my social responsibility which entails moving society forward. Perhaps at the back of my mind, I have accepted that the reader is king when it comes to attaching meaning to my writing.

When I write, I seldom ponder which realm to stick with. All my work has as its foundation the social realities of what I'm writing about. I'm fascinated that all the work of art at the disposal of readers can reflect and transform the world around. The impact of my work and nothing else is what drives my desire to write.

Most of what I write, is a way of communicating and expressing my feelings and thoughts. My writing moves between the two paradigms – expository and transformative. The shift between the two is never intentional. All I want to achieve with my writing is that it is accessible – readers will understand what I'm putting across so they can formulate their interpretation and draw their conclusions.

Like Rampolokeng, I don't write for a specific audience. My audience is broadly defined. It consists of all those who will read my work. For that matter, my audience could be those whose course I support or those that I criticize.

Once the reader is exposed to my poem or narrative, I expect it to invoke and evoke some form of emotional reaction (expository or transformative). Like Lara Glenum (2010:252) sometimes, I use the "I-narrator which "does not confess a self" in the poem. The first person narrator takes me to the place that is the subject of the poem. It makes me part of the action even though the scenario may only be based on my wild imaginations. Anyway, "Poetry has nothing to do with truth (Lara Glenum, 2010:252).

The power that the reader has to process and interpret literary work is also supported by Basil Bunting (1977) when he says, "Poetry lies dead on the page until some voice brings it to life, just as music on the stave, is no more than instructions to the player."

I agree with Njabulo Ndebele (2006:40) when he says, "...the class position of most of the writers, the publications in which their writings appeared, the levels of literacy in English

among African population would objectively point towards a white audience: An English speaking liberal one at that. But that audience, schooled under a Eurocentric literary tradition, was in turn, schooled to reject this literature. They rejected both the methods of representation as well as the content.”

Other writers are also driven by certain principles in their writing. I can't confirm whether they, intentionally write to expose social ills or they write to transform their societies. Writers always have certain agendas that motivate them to write. Below are some of the views expressed by several writers on the question of why they write or on the purpose of their writing.

Talking about his writing Brian Evenson (74) says, *“I’ve always thought of good writing in general, and my writing in particular, as meant to disrupt the smooth surface of things. I mean that at a number of levels: one having to do with the status quo and social conventions, another having to do with our notions of what it means to be unified self, a third having to do with the idea of language as a potential transmittal of meaning; a forth having to do with the contingent nature of the fabric of reality itself.”* The writer's duty ceases to be just an artist that artistically presents the work, he becomes a custodian of the social agenda.

According to the Altmann's Tongue Stories (271) writer, *“...ultimately I was less interested in depicting violence than I was in wanting readers to apprehend a sensation, to engage in a path along a certain emotional vector of their own.”*

Camile Roy says that “Genre fiction is not about representing experience but producing and organizing feeling – sexual excitement, horror, mystery, fear.”

Reginald Betts (2015:236) states that *“...for me, the truth of it is that writers imagine a world, imaginary worlds, and in breathing life into them set the stage for the readers to discuss what they want to discuss.”*

Reginald Betts in agreement with Njabulo Ndebele (2006) argues that *“Literature cannot give us lessons, but can only provide a very compelling context to examine an infinite number of ethical issues which have a bearing on the sensitization of people towards the development of the entire range of culture.”*

While other writers' focus on an audience, Phillip Zhuwao (1996) says his poetry has nothing to do with the ordinary man in the street and further acknowledges that "*most African poets write for the people. For ideologies. For government. For tribes.*" His writing expresses his suffering. The writing seems to ignore other people ultimately impacts on the reader.

Asked why he was not appreciated in his community, Rampolokeng (1999) lamented the killing of poetry by those who decided to throw in politics and the politicization of poetry in the name of fighting a cause.

Mxolisi Nyezwa (2014) argues that poetry that does not reflect the streets and that does not add value to the lives of the poor must be suffocated. Poetry that does not illuminate the realities of the people does not deserve a second chance. He is one of the writers who advocates for the work of art that must bring change to the community.

Linh Dinh (252) says, "Poetry should astound and frighten..."

Each of the writers above has said something about what he/she expects his/her work to achieve or to do to the reader. But whether this pipedream is realized is not clear. The reader is in control. His interpretation of the work is his or hers and not the writers.

The question is whether the writer must choose between exposing the facts or suggesting possible action plans? Should I be worried that if my work is expository I'm perpetuating the injustices in society? Does it mean only transformative work has a place in the literary space? I don't think writers have the power to influence how readers react to their work. Writers use language and words to communicate their thoughts, mental state, perception, and feelings. In return readers, empowered by their experiences of the context interpret the work at their disposal. I can only tell the story the best I can, but I cannot guarantee how my story will be construed by the reader. Writing is capable of impacting on how the readers interpret and articulate their experiences. It carries in it the power to empower or disempower its consumers. But in the end, it is the reader who attaches a certain subjective interpretation of the poem or narrative.

In conclusion, does it matter whether the work is expository or transformative? I ask this question because the interpretation of poetry or narrative depends on the experiences of the reader. I'm tempted to refer to Basil Bunting who in 1977 said, "*Poetry is seeking to make no meaning, but beauty; or if you insist on misusing words, its "meaning" is of another kind, and lies in the relation to one another of line and patterns of sound, perhaps harmonious, perhaps contrasting and clashing, which the hearer feels rather than understands, lines of sound drawn in the air which stir deep emotions which have not even a name in prose.*" The interpretation of the text based on meaning or form lies with the reader. Besides, meaning and interpretation are subjective in the work of art. It's for this reason that more than one meaning can be derived from the same poetry or narrative.

For me, I'll write what I'm inspired to write (expository or transformative) and will be satisfied with the interpretation the reader attaches to my work.

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Book Reviews

Ghosts by Cesar Aira

Ghosts is a slim 144-page novel, about the immigrant worker's family squatting in a construction site haunted by the ghosts. I strongly recommend it for its uniqueness in form, style, and setting. It is presented as just one chapter, and it takes place in a space of one day on the 31st of December. The novel has collective protagonists: the apartment owners, the ghosts and the Viñas family. The book is very impactful because of its form, the choice of the protagonist which is a collective and the time setting (single day). It can be read in one sitting, leaving the reader satisfied with very strong imagery that breathes life into the story.

Blindness by Jose Saramago

Blindness is a novel about a motorist who becomes blind while standing at the robot. Other motorists come to his rescue, but one man even offers to take the now blind man to his house. When he gets to his house the good samaritan asks if he can keep the blind man company

until his wife comes back. The blind man turns down the offer only for the stranger to take the blind man's car keys with him.

More and more people get affected by the blindness referred to as white evil. To slow down the spread of the disease, those affected are rounded up and taken to a mental hospital managed like a military base with intense security arrangement.

Blindness is written in a unique style, unusual punctuation: commas used instead of full stops, no question marks at the end of the question. Some sentences are fifteen lines or more long while paragraphs are one page or more. Anyone who wants to explore experimentalism would enjoy this book. Though written in this style it is still an easy read accessible to an average reader.

Probably the writer chose this style to show that white evil was strange and it was spreading endlessly. So, the writer could not follow the norm as the subject he was dealing with was out of the ordinary.

A Walk in the Night by Alex La Guma

A Walk in the Night, the novella by Alex La Guma is a must-read for all readers. It tells a story of life in District Six characterized by violence, casual sex, filth, violence, discrimination, abuse, society at war, not only with its enemies but with itself, rot and disintegration. The local people are scarred both physically and emotionally. There are gangs, but even the police who are tasked to protect the residents are the one who abuses the community.

By reading this book one learns from La Guma's outstanding descriptive style and colourful dialogue. He also employs local lingo to tell the story, making the book authentic. His descriptive language allows the reader to visualize the scenes in the novella.

We Killed Mangy-Dog by Luis Bernardo Howana

We killed Mangy-Dog by Luis Bernardo Honwana was first published in Portuguese and later translated into English. From the beginning, the reader is encouraged to read on to find out

what happens to Mangy-Dog that had blue eyes that made people sick. The suspense was tormenting. Even after the boys had taken the dog to the bush to kill it, they still argue and fight among themselves instead of doing what they are there to do. At times, I felt the writer overstretched the suspense making the story drag on.

The writer experiments with punctuation, ending some sentences with three dots and employing capital letters in the middle of the text, perhaps to emphasize or draw the reader's attention to a particular point. One sentence is repeated throughout the story, "... those eyes were so big, and looking at me like someone asking for something without wanting to say it."

While the story is interesting I found it to be dragging for too long.

it all begins: poems from postliberation South Africa edited by Robert Berold

Some poems I enjoyed in this anthology included a poem by Jeremy Cronin titled *Even the dead*. This poem is written in a narrative form with quotation marks and extracts from publications such as Engineering News. The poem is six pages long, but reading it hooks the reader as it is written in a rather unusual style.

Another poem is "We jive like this" by Siphiwe ka Ngwenya. The poem has eight stanzas that have "we jive like this" repeated three times in each of the stanzas. The poem makes you imagine the dance that the people are engaged in.

The anthology exposes the reader to different poets in just one book. So many poems are written in unique style and I would advise any reader to dive into this anthology.

Contact Week One: 12 – 16 February 2018

I went into the MA in Creative Writing course armed with one weapon, the passion and the determination to be the writer. The contact week, was an opportunity to understand the journey I had embarked on and to meet other stakeholders, students and teachers.

When Paul Wessels and other teachers informed us that no one would stand in front and teach us how to write, I thought I was in for a big surprise. With each day passing, it became

clearer that there was logic in the way the course was presented. The course allows students to learn from one another and other writers through reading, writing, and reflection. Learning to read to improve my writing was a difficult shift at the beginning. I worked hard to embrace the new approach.

I realized that other writers write in unfamiliar and unique styles. Often a writer changes the form to suit the material at hand. During the contact week I encountered new forms of poetry (prose poetry) I had never come across.

I saw myself transforming. Reading to the class was a first for me, I had to adapt or die. Most materials did not make sense, but I was quick to learn to stand back and enjoy the beauty and the musicality of the piece even if I could not grasp the content.

The first novel I read for the course was *Ghost*, by Cesar Aira, a novelist from Argentina, translated by Chris Andrews. It takes place in a space of one day on the 31st of December. Identifying a single protagonist in this novel is almost impossible. To this, Natasha Wimmer puts it correctly when in her review of the novel she says, “the real protagonists of Aira’s novel are collective (the apartment owners, the ghosts and the Viñas family). The collective protagonist and the time setting (single day and strong images) were some of the outstanding lessons for me from this novel.

Feedback groups taught me to be ruthless when I edit and revise my work. It does not matter how good you think your writing is, there is always a way of improving it.

Poetics and Politics of Punctuation by Stacy Hardy

The seminar analyzed and stressed the role punctuation plays in writing. Punctuation may be used to accelerate or decelerate the story.

It is not just about being creative with your punctuation, but there must be justification for every decision you make. Even if I did not grasp the meaning of the piece, I commented on punctuation and why it had been used in a particular piece.

A lot came out of the seminar, Politics and Poetics, but I cannot forget “compositional toolbox he (Gordon Lish) called consecution, a writing process of “going forwards by looking backwards.” Decoded, consecution means moving forward in a story while keeping in mind what has gone before through the use of repetition.” When Lish describes consecution he adds: “When you fashion each sentence to consume the previous sentence, each sentence, in a way, becomes the first, the attack sentence. The sentence I’m putting down must contend with the prior sentence.”

I was lost but I decided to hang in there. This concept has become clearer as I read more material.

For the assignment, we were required to take an own piece (a poem in my case) and revise it to create movement, utilizing punctuation. And indeed the revised piece looked, felt and sounded different from the original one. At first, I was scared to write in a way that was not familiar.

The second part of the assignment was to write a prose piece and create movement. I used short and punchy sentences to create a quick movement. With my short story *Invasion*, I learned to trust my reader to fill in the gaps of what is left unsaid.

Own research reading added a noticeable value to my development as a writer. I read *We killed Mangy-Dog*, a novel by Luis Bernardo Honwana. A beautiful piece, but at times the story sounded dragged for too long, risking losing the reader. One sentence is repeated throughout the story, “... those eyes were so big, and looking at me like someone asking for something without wanting to say it.”

What I learned from this story is that one should not unnecessarily draw out the story.

Samuel Beckett by Paul Mason

Just after Poetics and Politics of Punctuation, Paul Mason introduced us to Samuel Beckett, making my journey around the MACW jungle a bit uncomfortable. When he told us about how he had used a conventional structure of a narrative as part of the seminar, he heightened

my hopes, that the narrative more familiar was on its way to us. I was wrong. The next thing he threw us into Beckett's den.

"I would like to present you with... Beckett extracts with the hope that it will help you to access his words more easily, if not understand them, or stand under them. That is, I want to offer a few clues as to how to suffer Beckett's words productively, how to develop ways of absorbing what he is doing with words," Masson said.

Indeed, I suffered under Beckett's words, but I enjoyed it. It was good that Beckett came very early in the course, making me expect the course to be as challenging as Beckett. One thing I gained was that writers must be prepared to explore material that is outside their interest.

Creative Process by Ronelda S. Kamfer and Nathan Trantraal

Nathan Trantraal, the poet, essayist and cartoonist) and Ronelda S. Kamfer, the poet focussed on creative processes they follow in their writing career.

Nathan's advice was that writers must remember the impact of their emotions as they write. They need to be prepared to write at all times whenever they are called upon to do so. Ronelda said at the beginning, she could not write without having immersed herself in the feelings of what she intended to write. It was good that she discovered very early that this was not sustainable.

For the assignment, I wrote a prose piece, *In the Wild* set in a single place. It taught me it is possible to write a story set in one place, taking me out of my comfort zone. It was not easy at the beginning, but I have embraced this element of creative writing.

Of the pieces we read for the reading groups, *New York/Whirlwind Romance* by Karen Lillis stood out. Written in a dialogue form, a monologue of a speaker pouring out his heart, the writer said the piece was based on what he overheard people talking. Eavesdropping can be a source of a story.

I have a special love for books that have powerful descriptions. *A Walk in the Night* by Alex La Guma is one of them. It tells a story of life characterized by violence, casual sex, filth, violence, discrimination, abuse, society at war, not only with its enemies but with itself, rot

and disintegration in District Six. La Guma employs the local lingo, making the novella very authentic.

I enjoy exaggerated reality hence; I could not put down *Blindness* by Jose Saramago. This novel set the tone for some of the stories I wrote later on in the course. It talks about a strange disease, white evil, that made people blind. It spread like wildfire.

Saramago suspends punctuation rules, but the novel is still easy to read. At the end of the sentence, he uses a comma instead of a full stop.

He chose this style to show that white evil wreaked havoc in society.

Desire/ Eros by Kerry Hammerton

Kerry Hammerton's seminar, "desire/ eros" was an eye-opener. It was about desiring something and what stands between you and achieving the desire. It went further to cover finding the edge which is a situation where the desired object or outcome is achieved and what happens once the boundaries are dissolved. In other words, how does one feel when this is achieved.

Even now I'm not sure if I grasped what this seminar set out to teach. For the assignment, I wrote more than five pieces of flash fiction but finally settled for four poems. The class dissected my poems. I was challenged to come up with fresh images to enhance my pieces. This, on its own, was learning because I had to sit back and think about how to replace certain metaphors with the new and stronger ones.

I learned two important lessons from this session – one that clichés can kill a beautiful piece. Two, that as writers we must know when to end the piece otherwise there is a temptation to drag it on unnecessarily.

For my research reading, I came across an anthology of short-short stories and fragments, *Short: Short: An Anthology of Five Centuries of Short-Short Stories, Prose Poems, Brief Essays and other short prose form* edited by Alan Ziegler. I chose an interactive piece titled *A Story of Your Own*. This story confirmed my fear that the course was not taking

the direction I expected, that is, a short story as taught at school. However, the experimental form of the pieces in the collection opened my mind to all possibilities.

I further read the prose poem, *Even The Dead* by Jeremy Cronin which turned out to be a piece I had never seen before. It is made up of extracts from publications such as Martin Creamer's Engineering News. Again a typical experimental poem that shows the opportunities brought about by experimentalism.

Poetics and Narrativity by Paul Wessels

Poetics and Narrativity, "introduce(d) (us) to the reality that we belong to the heterogeneous and ancient community of writers." It exposed us, through essays, to what other members of the writing community have said about writing.

The seminar took place over four days, two days per week. Reading material was divided into primary and supplementary categories. Some essays dealt with poetics, others covered narrativity. Some of the articles or extracts were: "A slanty kind of raciali(zed) Poetics by Tamiko Beyer; "Writing about Race" by Bettina Judd; "I Heard Rhythms"- an excerpt from MACW Dissertation by Mxolisi Nyezwa; "The Poem as a Field of Action" by William Carlos Williams and "Theory and function of the Duende" by Federico Garcia Lorca. Beyer's (p.246) says that she is interested in examining how languages are complicit in sustaining racism and how the same languages can be used to dismantle it. She further states that poetry's role is naming and deconstructing racism.

On race and writing, Judd (p266) argues that "I write about race rather than how is race implicit in my work..."

Nyezwa (2015 MACW dissertation) quotes Noluthando Mpola doctoral thesis (2007) where she says music and poetry have a social role to play.

Lidia Yuknavitch (p. 344) says that her mission is to bring language and the body back into some form of relationship with one another and this resonated with me. Referring to Maskandi artists who also incorporate poetry in their lyrics Nyezwa (2015) says, "They craft their lyrics and use the language fully conscious of this rich tapestry of idiomatic phrases..."

Dihn (2010:252) says that “Poetry should astound and frighten, not make you giggle for two seconds.” On the other hand, Glennum (2010:252) views “Language as the site of our collective infection (and) Poems (as) medical waste.”

These essays challenged me to think hard about being a writer and what writers do in their lives. The seminar also opened up avenues to future research.

For the assignment, I wrote a piece titled *Poetry and Narrative: Whose Interpretation Prevails, the Writer's or the Reader's?* It inspired by Prof Njabulo Ndebele's essay on the protest literature of the 70s and 80s. His argument that literature must go beyond just telling us about what we already know (expository), but rather convey an empowering message that reveals to the reader that he or she has the power to transform their situation (transformative).

My essay argues that the expository or transformative nature of a piece lies with the reader, and as a writer, I present the material and then reader interprets it.

In the novel, *The Voice* by Gabriel Akara the writer has succeeded to twist the English language to suit his Ijaw language needs. He employs strong African metaphors such as “the night was black as the back of a cooking pot. A good story can be written without adhering to the conventional use of syntax (Lauterbach, 2010).

Sensory Writing by Mishka Hoosen

How on earth am I supposed to feel through the body was the question that lingered in my mind as Mishka Hoosen unpacked the importance of senses in creative writing or what she called ‘sensory awareness or sensory vulnerability’. As if the complexity of the seminar was not enough, she asked us to produce a sensory prose piece or a poem based on ‘a moment in your life when you were outdone by something’. The first step was to do freewriting expressing one's experiences through one's body.

I wrote about my childhood experience which led to the piece titled, *Separation*. While I engaged all the senses, for this piece my focus was on the sense of smell.

I read *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*, a novel by Ayi Kwei Armah, a Ghanaian writer and *Poems of Black Africa* edited by Wole Soyinka. In my writing, I try to be as descriptive

as Armar. He gives detailed descriptions of everything, enabling the reader to imagine the scene being described. The power of description is what I took out of this novel.

The first poem, *Passerby* by Oswald Mbuyiseni Mtshali which exposed me to the importance of effective diction and metaphors in making the poem strong and powerful.

Western Civilisation, by Agostino Neto, former President of Angola describes the living conditions under the so-called western civilization. The main lesson from this poem was the effectiveness of repetition and contrast to make a point.

Psychology of Writing by Mmatshilo Motsei

Psychology of Writing presented by Mmatshilo Motsei, a published writer and healer revealed the therapeutic nature of writing. I wrote a piece, *When A Man Nearly Cries*, a cry for help after I lost my mother twenty years ago. After publishing *The Kanga* and *The Kangaroo Court*, she felt her voice was being muffled and her response was to enrol for MACW, “To reclaim her voice as a writer.” She believes writing is a form of healing. The stories we write do not only impact the reader but the writer as well.

The assignment had two parts. First, freewriting over four days, writing about my deepest emotions and thoughts about an emotional upheaval that has been influencing my life the most. Then on the work of the past four consecutive days, I wrote about the chosen emotional upheaval which entailed writing about the feelings and emotions I went through in the process of writing.

The assignment was a form of therapy and comments from the group confirmed that I achieved my goal. One such comment was by Graham Dukas, “But I’m reminded that personal suffering is owned by the individual.”

My short story *Unresolved Mystery* was directly inspired by experimental stories I read from *an Anthology of Five Centuries of Short-Short Stories, Prose Poems, Brief Essays and other short prose form* edited by Alan Ziegler

What We Lose by Zinzi Clemmons, answered my life long question of whether one can use one's own life story to write a work of fiction. Though this is a work of fiction, the story is based on the life story of the writer.

Innovation and Experimentalism by Chwayita Ngamlana

Innovation and experimentalism taught me that writers must push boundaries and experiment with language, style, content, form and other elements. Chwayita Ngamlana stated that her book was forty percent fiction and sixty percent her real life. She added that writing does not have to follow established principles. However, experimenting must add value to the piece. My story, *Patriotism*, is a letter addressed to my mother-in-law. I experimented with language – using IsiZulu in parts, turning English words into IsiZulu as I had learned from Akara, with punctuation, replacing full-stops with commas. I don't think experimenting with punctuation worked for me. Interestingly, several pieces such as "Contending with Life" that I wrote earlier were later revisited.

My experimentation with punctuation slowed down the pace of the story while other components of my experimentation were effective.

Reading the novel, *Mission to Kala* by Mongo Beti, exposed me to a writer who uses italics to stress certain points. I have tried this with some of my stories.

From the *Poems of Black Africa anthology*, I chose a six stanza poem under *Ancestors and Gods* category in the book. It is titled 'If' by Fared Angira. Each tells a story. The first stanza says, "(If) a squirrel crosses my way / while on a trip / then luck is mine / but when it's cheetah / or wild cat that crosses there / I turn and go back." The poem is beautifully written in simple language, something I strive for in my writing.

Contact Week 2: 9 – 13 July 2018

Contact Week 2 was a festival of artists Nkunz'emdaka, a maskandi artist, and scholars like Alan Ziegler, Tinashe Mushkavanhu, Efemia Chela, Hleze Kunju, Stacy Hardy and the publisher, Collen Higgs.

Ziegler's talk titled *Short Prose Forms: Straddling Boundaries*. Ziegler planted the seed for the love of short-short fiction and fragments. I find this form powerful and punchy. It forces the writer to express everything in a few words.

Collen Higgs' talk on Publishing in South Africa covered various topics: publishing costs, editing, copyright.

Tinashe Mushkavanhu on *Be your Own Best Editor*. Editing is a process that starts with every writer editing his/her work on spelling, word order, paragraph order, tenses to mention a few. The MACW is not very strong on empowering writers to edit their own work.

Efemia Chela spoke about *The art of Short Stories* and to illustrate her point she chose a "Husband Stitch". This is a classic short story whose strength lies in its content.

I learned how to write a proposal for my MACW's thesis from the video Stacy Hardy played and the talk delivered by Dr Hleze Kunju.

From the feedback sessions, I picked up that my writing tends to over-explain, not trusting my readers to fill in what is left unsaid.

All teachers played their roles effectively from interpreting Nkunz'emdaka's work and talk by Hleze to chairing the talks by Paul Wessels and active participation by Paul Mason, Mxolisi Nyezwa, and Manga Buzani.

During the week preceding the contact week, we had online reading groups. I read an excerpt from a novel *The Ones with Purpose* by Nozizwe Cynthia Jele. I chose this piece because of the writer's ability to write the body. For example, the 'I' narrator says, "*A turbulent motion rose through my cheeks, settling behind my eyelids, hot and wet. I swallowed my saliva.*" I want to be able to write like this author.

Fullblood Arabian, short-short stories by Osama Alomar, a Syrian born writer who lives in the USA had a great impact on my short-short fiction. Lydia Davies, in the introduction to the above collection, writes, "*While some of the stories are explicitly angry or bitter, others are ironically detached, and still others make their point with a piece of sly wit...*"

Writing the Body by Stacy Hardy

Writing the Body changed the way I write. It taught me how to write the feelings of the body, not about the feelings. I learned to stand aside and listen to each part of the body expressing itself. Writing the body entails describing the feelings that the body goes through. To illustrate the lesson, we read excerpts from the writers who had written the body before. Theresa Hak Kyung Cha's work, "*The entire lower lip would lift upwards then sink back to its original place. She would then gather both lips and protrude them in a pout taking in the breath that might utter something.*"

The seminar inspired *Goodbye* a short story about Nora who suffers from an undiagnosed disease. In writing this piece, I observed my own body and other bodies around. The elements of this seminar found their way into my stories like, *How to Deal with Boredom in the Doctor's Room*.

Describing the feelings is not an easy exercise, but if done well it gives the writer a wonderful feeling of satisfaction.

Synchronous Writing by Paul Wessels

From the most challenging seminar, Synchronous Writing, I grew immensely. I got a grasp of this abstract concept, synchronous writing. Lyn Hejinian views this concept as "a plane extending over the full expanse of the moment...characterized by existential density in which present relationship and differentiation, to the extent that we can take them in, or are the essential activity." She adds that synchronous writing "is characterized by parallelism." The chosen pieces by Laura Watermeyer's *Bardo* and Noy Holland's *Rooster, Pollard, Cricket, Goose* did not help.

For the assignment, I wrote a piece titled *Transition*, predominantly using repetition, rhythm, and parallelism to tell the story.

For my research, I read Lidia Yuknavitch and Osama Alomar who formed the basis of my other stories in the MACW course. From Yuknavitch's novel *The Small Backs of Children* I was exposed to her ability to write the body, sex, and sexuality. In my story *Gogo's Journey* I

incorporated the hybrid form (a scene presented as a drama script, for example) of writing that I came across in Yaknavitch's novel. She says, "*What I need, what I live for, what I write for, is this: that moment when the reader is holding an actual book in their hands and they can feel their skin differently. Their heart beating. Their torso, their face, the place where their sex sits.*" This is how I would like to write. I want my reader to sit back and say, "*This is true, but what a way of describing it; naked, crude, but so real.*"

Osama Alomar's satirical short-short stories, often written as fables and allegories and are inspired by his political convictions influenced my short stories in form and content.

Non-Fiction Writing: Memoir, Autobiography, Autofiction, Autobiography by Stacy Hardy

No seminar left an indelible mark in my writing like non-fiction writing: a memoir, autobiography, autofiction, autobiography. Opening the seminar, Stacy emphasized the importance of memory. Writers would write every bit of what they can remember with the help of memory. However, the flip side of remembering is forgetting. The question is how do we close the gaps left by what we forget? While we will remember the facts, chances are we forget some. So, what do we do to close the gap left by forgetting was the focus of the seminar.

This dilemma highlights the difficulty of writing a complete life story without any element of fiction. Even a true-life story, is embellished with some fiction. History which is supposed to be the true reflection of what happened is sprinkled with fiction. Hence, Stacy says, "History (is) a fiction constructed by whoever (is) in power."

Commenting on his choice of form, Eduardo Galeano says, "I am always trying to look at the universe through the little puddles in the streets." In that small puddle, depending on how you look at it you are capable of seeing so many images.

I wrote a piece *Her World Curved in* based on my life as a boy growing up in the north of KZN. I used two narrators, my mum and I to tell the story I have always toiled with the idea of a memoir told through certain characters that have insight into my life story. So, this assignment was some form of rehearsal.

Feedback praised the innovation around two narrators.

Asked whether all fiction should have a moral lesson, Paul Wessel, said that not all writing should strive to convey a moral lesson. The story must be told as it was conceived or as it comes without running around trying to incorporate a moral lesson.

Stacey Levine's novel, *Frances Johnson* writes concisely, even describing what you would consider insignificant like insects and snail. The style I would like to emulate in my writing.

Writing in The Community

'Writing in the Community' answered what may seem simple for other writers, that is, how to teach others to write? I could not imagine myself standing in front of aspiring writers. At least, this seminar did not require me to do that. Besides, Robert Berold's Notes on Freewriting, a step by step guide to freewriting came in handy. He says, "The theory is that the physical act of keeping writing overrides the thought processes and doubts that often block people's writing [similar to the Buddhist/mindfulness idea of returning to the breath as a ground in meditation]." And since my exposure to this document, I live by it even for my writing.

Vonani Bila's "Running a Workshop" document taught me, in point form, how to run a writing workshop in the community. Armed with this document I organized and ran my workshop smoothly.

I noted that even with a well-organized writing workshop, things can go wrong. Participants may hide their true feelings and simply agree with the workshop facilitator.

My Writing in Community workshop took place in February 2019 Apostolic Faith Mission Youth Desk in Kliptown Soweto. Attended by eleven youth members, two of them are full time employed, two are Grade 11 and 12 learners and the rest are at college. Those who agreed to participate were encouraged to participate in the second part of the workshop as well, but this was not a requirement for being in the first part.

I read my stories *Her World Curved In* and *At Last*. After reading the first story, participants commented and asked questions. Questions were around the content with only a few on styles.

One gentleman said, “Why *At Last* sounds like a poem?” I honestly did not know what to say except to plagiarise someone's words and “say if it sounds like a poem, then it is.”

Participants preferred the shorter stories. Though my writing is simple the vocabulary was not easily accessible to some participants.

A week later, the second part of the workshop occurred in the same venue with the same participants. The second phase was free writing. I issued three writing prompts, one at a time. In three minutes, each participant came up with a story. The group was split into two, with each participant reading the piece he/she had written. Two participants decided not to read their pieces citing personal reasons. The first prompt seemed to be difficult for the participants. The second and third pieces were out of this world. The participants suggested we consider turning their group into a book club.

My reading of the introduction to Tiff Holland's *Betty Superman*, titled *Written in Stone* blew me away. It clarified that the subject dictates the narrative form. Holland says, “I embraced ambiguity in thinking and writing and hence I stayed away from traditional narrative and its demand for clarity.” The introduction prepared me for what was to follow in the flashes in this book. For my thesis, I also wrote pieces of flash fiction such as *Strange Shuffling* because of Holland's influence.

On writing flash and novella, Holland says, “Writing flash and novella together reminds me of something I read once about sculpting, that a sculptor can see the sculpture in rock and simply chips away until the form emerges,” (2014: 9). Her stories *Hot Work* and *First Husband* taught me the importance of using words sparingly and the crafting of stories that do not adhere to the traditional story structure. ‘

At the SA Book Fair (7 – 9 September 2018, in Johannesburg) I learned that writers believe their writing must somehow guide society and mould human behaviour. Peter Harris made a bold statement, “Good writing must move you from one point to another.”

Digging/Writing by Stacy Hardy

On digging and writing or more specifically on rethinking or relooking at sources outside of ourselves, I grasped that there are all sorts of material that writers can use to trigger story ideas. The seminar showed how material outside ourselves can work as prompts that trigger story ideas. Such sources include history, art, film, other fiction stories.

Svetlana Alexievich in the absence of records about the emotional history of individuals in the Soviet and post-Soviet period, went out to interview people. Heimrad Backer, a Nazi fighter used existing records: letters, medical certificates to expose what came to be referred to as ‘banality of evil’. The challenge of using these materials is how one weaves them into the story. It is not a matter of taking the whole source and plant it in the novel. Craftsmanship is around integrating the material to the story.

My short story, *Remembering to Forget* was based on newspapers, magazines, and other secondary sources. The story tackles the debate that victims of apartheid cling to the past and continue to view themselves as victims. Is forgetting a choice or it comes naturally without the victim deciding to forget?

My story interwove quotes from newspapers and interviews. It had elements of hybrid writing in that a song was part of the narration. It is easy to fall into the trap of being preachy in writing. The criticism of the piece included the view that it displayed elements of lyrical indignant.

From *Collected Stories* by Gabriel Garcia Marquez. I read *The Woman Who Came at Six O'clock* and *The Night of the Curlews*. Both stories revealed an excellent coherent dialogue that flows and sounds natural, using strong words, and keeping the story simple and employing powerful images that make the reader see every action as if it is unfolding right in front of their eyes.

Franz Kafka’s stories: *The Vulture* and *New Lamps* that are short, incomplete and fragmentary, made me wonder how he succeeded in writing clear and real characters. The important lesson from Kafka is his unique ability to clearly describe the movement and gestures of his characters. For example, in *New Lamps* he wrote, “*knocked and entered, nodded excessively, had to crane his neck and turn his face upon him, Squinting up at the ceiling.*” A number of my stories were influenced by this writer.

Thesis Writing and Research

I'm not sure how I felt when the seminars ended. I was happy to start working on the thesis but felt isolated from the group I had spent almost twelve months with. In our first skype meeting with Stacy, we agreed I would continue with the routine of submitting a story every second week while I devoured the books she sent me. It was partly these books that encouraged me to attempt different styles of writing. The research journals that follow reflect some highlights of the writing process of the thesis and own research reading that accompanied it. It is not exhaustive.

Research Journal Week 45: 05 Nov. 2018

For the thesis, I wrote a short story titled *The Woman in A Green Dress*. The story was inspired by an event which happened in one of the Social Welfare Department's offices. Apart from the idea of the story, everything else is fiction.

The purpose for writing this piece was to practice writing intense descriptive scenes, to write a story that would make the reader sit back and say, "Is this how people are treated at the hands of those that are mandated to help them?"

Stacy Hardy's feedback was encouraging. She said, "This story made me cry. It's incredibly powerful. Devastating. You use the short form very effectively here - with setting the scene moving on to small details then the tragedy of the final passage. You also perfectly balance an unemotive tone with a deep sense of empathy."

On the other hand, I read Franz Kafka's stories, *Judgement* and *Unhappiness*.

While I admire Kafka's long sentences, I wouldn't even try to write like him in this respect. Kafka's imagery is strong and takes the reader to where the action is taking place. This is one feature of his writing that I want to emulate.

Many characters, including the protagonist, are not nameless in *Judgement*. I decided to experiment with this in some of my stories. From *Unhappiness*, I learned how to write a long and sustained dialogue that sounds authentic and real.

Research Journal Week 47: 19 Nov. 2018

Trapped, a short story inspired by a newspaper article I read recently tells a story of Abba, trapped in the war zone. Bombardments have flattened the whole village and the birds of prey have taken over the place.

My intention with this story was to paint a picture with words. With my focus on descriptive writing, I compromised tension. In her feedback, Stacy requested more tension. I sat back and figured out how to create tension.

I read a novel titled *Hunger* by Knut Hamsun, a Norwegian writer who lived around the mid-1800. Reading this novel was long overdue. It is a pot of boiling images and metaphors that leave the reader stunned. I cannot remember reading a novel so detailed and yet so gripping throughout. I aspire to be like Hamsun in many respects. He avoids using everyday words but goes all out to find the most suitable yet simple word.

Research Journal Week 49: 03 Dec. 2018

‘Cleansing’, a story about power or abuse. Its idea was triggered by a story I heard as a boy. The first part of the story is told in third person POV and the second part is a flashback narrated in first person POV.

I read a novel titled *A Curse of Dostoevsky* by Atiq Rahimi a novelist from Afghanistan who fled to France in 1984. It is set in Afghanistan. Rassoul, the protagonist has murdered Nana Allia with an ax. He runs away from the crime scene and only to return to it later.

I find it difficult to employ the flashback technique in my writing. However, after reading this novel, I tried the flashback technique again and it worked.

Rahimi put me off with the use of dreams in the novel. I do not always enjoy dreams in fiction.

The use of a book *Crime and Punishment* in the novel as a character was a brilliant idea I would consider for my writing. The suspense in the story threatened to kill me. I was there with Rassoul throughout his ordeal. This is how I would like my readers to feel with the characters I create.

Research Journal Week 51: 17 Dec. 2018

I wrote a short story titled, *Either Way, You Die* inspired by an incident that took place in one of the coal mines in northern KZN. The story was my way of practicing a flashback technique and writing a familiar story, but with details that would stun the reader.

Stacy's comments were around the pace of the story. "Some of the violent scenes seemed to have been rushed through," she said. I find striking a balance between giving too many details and slowing down difficult.

A moving and powerful short story I read was *My Parents' Bedroom* by Uwen Akpan, a Catholic Priest Father who was born in Ikot Akpan Eda in southern Nigeria. The story is about the Rwandan genocide, depicting how the Tutsis and Hutus massacred each other for reasons that are yet to be determined. From this story, I took out the ability of the writer to master the child's voice. The story is narrated by Monique, a 9-years old girl who is born to a Tutsi mother and a Hutu father.

When asked by Sandile Ngidi, in an interview for the Baobab Journal, how his editors responded to the pain and horror he captures in his book *Say You Are One Them*, Akpan said, "There comes a time when you are forced to over dilute the honesty of the language, because they won't understand it anymore and you have to please the powerful. I made it known to my publishers that I'm not going to dilute anymore."

The intense tension and suspense did not give the impression that Akpan dragged the story unnecessarily. Every scene in the story was relevant and had to be included.

Research Journal Week 2: 7 Jan. 2019

Howling Sheep is a fable I wrote as a way of practice after reading a collection of oral tales, *Cowries and Kobos, the West African Oral and Short Story* and Osama Alomar's satirical stories written as fables and allegories inspired my story. It's about a wolf and the sheep. The greed drives the wolf from his territory forcing it to wander around looking for extra food to hoard. This story is my first fable.

Stacy's feedback encouraged me to try more fables. She liked the creativity behind the story. Some stories I read from *Cowries and Kobos the West African Oral Tales and Short Story*, were *The Python and the Etebo* as narrated by Handson Udo. *The King and his Seven Wives* as narrated by Akunne Okafor. I enjoyed the power of the second person POV that I previously avoided.

Moreover, the anthology has a very informative chapter which outlines the characteristics of an oral tale. Oral stories are brief with few characters, episodic plot, and action. They aim to entertain, but also to educate man about his environment and nature.

Research Journal Week 4: 21 Jan. 2019

The short story *My Own Son* is written in second person POV and is based on a family conflict whose source is nothing but hatred or sibling rivalry.

After reading the story Stacy said, "The story works as is, but there's also an opportunity to go a tiny bit further in letting the reader really feel the resentment. At the moment you keep us at a slight distance while inviting us in via the second person. I would love to get slightly closer and more inside the narrator's head."

Research Journal Week 6: 4 Feb 2019

Secrets is my short story about a woman who has been keeping a secret from her husband for a long time. One day the husband disposes of piles of papers she hoards in the storeroom. Among the papers, he finds out his wife's secret. In turn, he reveals his own secret to the wife.

This was one of my longish stories. My supervisor felt the ending needed revisiting to make it punchy. Up to now, I do not think I like the long pieces.

I also read a short novel *Revulsion: Thomas Bernhard in San Salvador* by Horacio Castellanos Moya, an El Salvadoran writer. It laments the irreparable breakdown of El Salvador's social, cultural, economic and political fabric.

He eschews paragraph breaks, but the reader does not get lost on the way. The lack of paragraph breaks symbolizes the endlessness of Vega's thoughts and attacks on his country. This slowed my reading down as I had to adjust to Moya's style. The repetition makes the monologue sound very authentic.

Research Journal Week 8: 18 Feb. 19

My Initiation is a longer piece that deals with power dynamics. It is told in first-person POV to bring characters closer to the situation.

My supervisor's overall comments included, "Brilliant story. You build the tension here so effectively and it is full of strange and wonderful images and the ending is powerful."

Freshwater, a novel by a Nigerian writer Akwaeke Emezi tells a story of Ada, born to a middle-class family, a Catholic father, and a mother who is a nurse, Ada is a spirit child – or a child in whose body lived the gods.

Apart from the creative way of infusing so many voices in one book, I found long sentences very intense and I had to read the first two chapters twice because they did not make sense in the beginning. I would not want my readers to struggle with my stories.

Each chapter begins with a paragraph or a sentence that sets the scene for the chapter which directs the reader to think about these few opening lines.

Research Journal Week 10: 04 Mar. 19

For the thesis, I wrote a short story *Weapons of War* based on my thoughts about life in exile. Muziwamadoda Sibeko, the protagonist tries to smuggle copies of the banned New Nation

newspaper into South Africa but is almost arrested at the border between South Africa and Lesotho.

Writing this story was difficult because I was tempted to incorporate true stories, yet this was a fiction piece. Guarding against narrating episodes of true nature, posed a serious challenge. The story became too long, forcing me to edit out important scenes. This led to some scenes to be rushed through which the supervisor pointed out.

Research Journal Week 12: 18 March 2019

Writing my short story titled *Captured* was the most difficult task I ever tried. The high levels of selfishness, I observe among people of all races inspired the story.

Experiment with different voices became a challenge. An unnamed character that resides inside all of us narrates the story. He controls humans. Using this inner voice caused confusion to the reader/ supervisor and I had to guard against this.

Research Journal Week 14: 01 April 2019

Undiagnosed is a short story inspired by an incident that happened about twenty years ago. A young girl died of an undiagnosed disease. The story is pure fiction except for the core idea. Its short paragraphs are numbered each paragraph is a complete story in itself. The story is a journey that the girl travelled before she succumbed to the undiagnosed sickness.

The story is told in both second person singular You and plural We to convey the message that even though, she is gone she still lives on in the narrator's memory.

The supervisor was happy with the form and she further advised me to search for the stronger images.

My own reading focussed on a collection of short stories, *This Is How You Lose Her* by Junot Diaz. The collection has nine linked stories. The stories revolve around a dysfunctional relationship. Almost all women characters of Dominican origin in these stories fall in love with men who cheat on them.

Diaz writes in a conversational manner, employing characters that are weak and unable to control their feelings and desires. His character's resort to insults whenever they see the need. From this collection of short stories, I learned that it is possible to write several linked stories. Diaz experimented with punctuation as well. The dialogue was without quotation marks, but this did not negatively impact the flow of the story. A good example is,

Research Journal Week 16: 15 April 2019

Unresolved Mystery is an interactive story of martyrdom that took place in 1877 in KwaZulu. The story was the incorporation of historical facts into fiction. Sections of the story are written as stand-alone stories with instructions to the reader on how to read the story.

Experimenting with the form is so fulfilling because it encourages the reader to be involved with the story.

I read *About Writing: Seven Essays, Four Letters and Five Interviews* by Samuel R. Delany, the renowned writer, who summarises his insight accumulated over the years, about writing. Its form is attractive and reading it feels like listening to the writer talking.

The most interesting lesson I have taken out of this book revolves around the differences between good writing and talented writing. It further explores the role inspiration plays in what Delany refers to as "creative personality."

Research Journal Week 18 Contact Week 3: 29 April 2019

I did not expect much from the last contact week held from 22 - 26 April 2019. After the first day, I realized how important it was. The week consisted of students reading their own pieces to participants, students, and teachers. I found the reading feedback to be robust, brutally honest and constructive, but also discouraging. I guess we had grown as writers.

More than anything, a large variety of voices from different writers was a distinct feature of the contact week. I came out excited that I had learned from everyone. I noted the following points from the readings: setting the tone, crafting the story well, specificity, the use of the

appropriate language for the piece; ensuring that each scene is linked to others, ending the story in a way that satisfies the reader.

Research Journal Week 20: 13 May 2019

I came across a story written by Deena Padayachee titled *A Letter to the Mayor* published in the 1990 *Staffrider*. What caught my eye in this story was experimentalism on the form. The story is about an anonymous letter typed, printed and sent from one of the Mayor's computers. The title of the letter is, 'Wouldn't It Be Wonderful?' It explores fifteen scenarios, and one of them is, "Wouldn't it be wonderful if all Mayors of Tegwhite had to live in non-white suburbs like Colourstan or Fenix?"

In other parts of the story, the dialogue is written in the drama format. This takes the reader into the action as if the scene is acted outlive.

I wrote several pieces because of what I learned from this story. One of them was flash fiction titled *Strange Shuffling*.

Stacy's feedback challenged me to rework *Strange Shuffling* because she felt the story lacked the necessary details that flash fiction should have. The exciting thing is that writing flash fiction is now second nature to me.

Research Journal Week 23: 3 June 2019

The short story collection *Jokes for The Gunmen* by Mazen Maarouf, a Palestinian-Icelandic poet and journalist portrayed the absurdity and the bizarre nature of the war in Lebanon. Stories: *The Pepper Plant*, *The Grasshopper*, *The Sahlab Seller*, and *A Cardboard Box* had a huge influence on my stories *Strange Shuffling*, *The Last Lap* and *So He Told You That*. The unique voice of a child in these stories depicted the feeling of the children's innocence during the war.

I learned the skill of using a child narrator without making him sound childish.

From the feedback, I learned that flash fiction must leave the reader wondering what happens next. To quote Stacy, "flash fiction works when it has an abrupt unresolved ending because it

forces the reader to end it themselves... to choose and imagine an ending... to ask: what could happen?"

Research Journal Week 25: 17 June 2019

It is sad that it took me the past two years to discover my passion, surrealism. Reading Etgar Keret, an Israeli writer, short stories in the collection, *The Girl on the Fridge* exposed me to stories that have influenced my thesis. *Crazy Glue*, *Interview A* and *Interview B*, *Loquat*, *No Politics* had a direct influence on my stories such as *Interrogation*, *Are You One of Them?* *Endless Wait*, *Demoncracy* and *Hope fools*. These stories are funny, short and simply beyond what one expects in real life.

My reason for writing short-short pieces was to explore the idea of ending the stories with no clear ending to allow the reader to draw their own conclusions. Writing these stories was difficult because I had to ensure the balance between giving too much and giving too little.

Research Journal Week 29: 15 July 2019

During this week I wrote several short-short stories: *Passengers in The Taxi*, *Betrayal*, *Human Bodies*, *My Crazy Father* and more. I had completely fallen in love with the short form. In fact, Stacy revealed to me a number of writers (Julio Cortazar, Etgar Keret, and Raúl Flores Iriarte) who have perfected this form and I felt it was time I wrote these stories.

While I accept that mastering this form of writing takes time I was cheered on by support and constructive criticism that the supervisor dished out. On the feedback to these stories, she said, "... you are a master of the short form in all these pieces. I'm blown away. Brilliant brilliant! Go celebrate."

Research Journal Week 31: 29 July 2019

Raul Flores Iriarte's short stories, *Nazi* and *Dead Horse* were beyond reality. In the "Nazi, the narrator is sitting at home, but under the table, is a dead Nazi. He cannot eat because of the

dead Nazi in the house. He thinks of different ways of disposing of the Nazi's body but he is scared of the consequences if he is caught with a dead Nazi in the house.

"Dead horse" is another strange but interesting story. The narrator moves into the dead horse and leaves there peacefully until his wife decides to join him. He does not require food because he lives on the horse's rotten organs. The horse swells and this helps to create a bigger space for the narrator who now has large enough space to throw a party in there.

The lesson from both stories is the high levels of imagination the writer displays. The stories are out of the ordinary, things that cannot happen in real life but are very possible in Iriarte's mind. The amount of details is also interesting because the reader does not have to imagine some of the things as they are clearly described.

I have tried several short-short stories that were inspired by Iriarte's stories. I wrote several short stories. The short-form stories that challenge the imagination by exaggerating reality and leaving the reader thinking, "What was that?" I wish I had more time to write.

Engagement of Reader Report on, *Either Way, You Die* by Sipho Sithole

Reading the reader's report on my writing felt like being stripped naked in the privacy of my room, no one else sees me except the perpetrator. I gathered that indeed the reader has a final say on my work, especially because I'm not there to justify the way I write. In this report, I do not think there is anything of substance that I disagree with. The points raised can only make my writing better. My engagement with the report focusses on making sense of the suggestions and comments of the reader. The report addresses both the strengths and weaknesses of my collection. However, my aim is to highlight what I will use to close the gaps identified.

I was not sure that the reader would grasp what I wanted to achieve with these stories. The MACW course exposed me to a group of specialist writers and my worry was that the readers who have not undergone this course would be found wanting. Unnecessary worries because the course coordinator is more than equipped to identify the right readers. My overall impression with the report is that the reader read all or most of the stories in the collection.

The reader covered aspects of my writing that require special attention. The specific points raised can be applied to all the stories and my writing going forward.

The first weakness of my writing is that it is too wordy. “English (language) lends itself to wordiness,” says Gail Radley. As the above writer puts it, I have to learn that “... a little dab will do.” The report shows that I have not completely shed the shortcoming of using more words where a few could have sufficed. This reality confirms what I already know. My supervisor has pointed this out in more than one occasion. I have been taking these comments into consideration whenever I revised my work, but the report indicates that there is still room for improvement. I will incorporate the reader’s feedback on my final thesis.

Commenting on how a short story should write, the reader writes, “The writing must be crisp. Sharp. Language must be distilled.” Whichever way one looks at this comment, it means one thing, that my work is overweight with unnecessary fats. Their removal will lead to sharp and lean writing. I totally accept this observation especially because it has been raised before. Throughout this course, I have worked hard towards dealing with the practice of over-explaining. Sometimes the flabby prose finds its way into my writing even when I’m vigilant. In the days before I submitted my thesis, I removed big chunks of what I considered to be excessive words that weighted down my work, but the reader feedback confirms that I still have work to do.

Editing my work before I sent it in was a painful exercise. It entailed letting go of what I thought was good writing. I was ruthless with subject delayers, unnecessary adjectives, adjectives, unnecessarily wordy phrases, repetition. I think my challenge has been the temptation to state the obvious which is what the reader referred to as overwriting.

“The beginning of every story needs to be crafted to sow interest that compels the reader to continue reading,” the report says. Who can dispute this? Writing a collection of short stories is a long journey for a new writer. While immersed in the process, there is room to overlook the obvious. When I read this sentence from *Hypocrite, I rested at the bus stop shelter after a long walk from a garage in Claim Street, Hillbrow*, it sounds so flat I’m asking myself how it found its way into this piece, one of my favourite stories.

Why is the protagonist coming from the garage? The question in the same short piece appears innocent but reminds me that every action a character engages in must have justification. If the action is left without the purpose, the writing has gaps. Part of revising stories before the final submission will entail closing these gaps wherever they rear their ugly head.

The longer stories are likely to get the chop because they deal with the “tried and tested themes” handled in a traditional way. Dealing with a common theme requires an element of freshness that justifies the story. The report points out that these stories suffer “a little cliché.” While I accept this point, I thought stories like *Secrets We Keep* were handled in a different way compared to *Lost for Words*, for instance. The former is based on the revelation of the wife’s secret that leads to the exposure of the husband’s, but *Lost for Words* is pure love story where the main character ends up in the arms of the colleague because of what is happening at home. With most of my stories, I would like the readers to come up with their own ending. I accept that I may have fallen short on my longer stories. The bottom line is that my longer stories are weak and something must be done about them. Most importantly, this point addresses the need to inject freshness to these stories if they are to be kept in the collection.

The measurement of time in the collection is another element that demands attention. Some of the stories are confusing in this respect. I have observed that I did not effectively handle the measures of time. To illustrate the concerns around the measure of time, the following example is quoted, ‘In *Trapped*, there is a line: *It has been more than five hours since the last bomb rumbled like a bloated stomach. The next paragraph starts with ‘Not so long ago, a 13-year[s] old boy disappeared.’* The lesson from the report is that if time is not measured correctly, confusion creeps in, making the writing amateurish.

Some words have been overused in the stories. Float and meander (ing) are some examples. I have realized that float has been my favourite word because of the nature of the stories in the collection. I associate ghosts, spinelessness and smell with floating. The problem is not the word itself, but the abuse thereof. The lesson from this is, I must find stronger and more accurate words to strengthen the stories. I will also eliminate other words that appear too often. The same applies to the most difficult parts of the English language, prepositions.

I always try to avoid imposing the writer’s voice in my stories. Like engaging the wrong lingo in a story, the writer’s voice spoils the scene. Indeed, in *Gogo’s Journey* and possibly

other stories the writer's voice jumps in, causing irreparable damage to the story. The reader correctly highlights this weakness. “*It is a sign of respect for the departed that no one works in the fields while a neighbour is mourning the death of a family member.*’

Reading List

A Curse of Dostoevsky by Atiq Rahimi

A Walk in the Night by Alex La Guma

About Writing: Seven Essays, Four Letters and Five Interviews by Samuel R. Delany,

Blindness by Jose Saramago

Brandi Reissenweber, *The Writer* an online literary journal, 2019

Collected Stories by Gabriel Garcia Marquez.

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