

Part A: Thesis

A Smaller Circle

Submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts in Creative Writing

Of

Rhodes University

By

Nasira Bhikha

November 2021

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Collection of Prose

By

Nasira Bhikha

Thesis Abstract

My thesis is a collection of prose forms weaving my identity as a South African woman of colour, my observations of life through personal, cultural and sociological lenses, where traditions are constantly challenged and evolving. The collection focuses on the untold and unresolved, using fiction as a tool of pushback and psychological reflection. I am motivated by writers who use what I would term reflective expressionism to evoke empathy by tapping into innate, universal emotions. In particular Tiff Holland's vivid telling of family in the novella *Betty Superman* where she navigates complex relationships, and bell hooks' memoirs *Bone Black: Memories of Girlhood* written as poetic vignettes in fluctuating points of view to draw attention to the intricacies of social structures. Joanna Walsh's *Vertigo* has strongly influenced my approach to writing through her compelling imagery and use of motif in fragmented prose that delves into the psyche of her characters. I am also inspired by Lidia Yuknavitch's visceral use of language, identifying with her invitation: "You deserve to sit at the table. The radiance falls on all of us."

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A Smaller Circle

The modesty of the Black Cube is dwarfed by luxury hotels built on the orders of oil magnates whose star-spangled boxers are barely concealed by pristine white robes. Their hands invisibly soiled with the sweat of migrant workers squatting in dormitories built where roads end and desert begins. Here, the presence of divinity fighting to remain against disparity scratches like horsehair. I feel this too. I know I make up that small percentage of people who pay exorbitant prices to be close to the Holy Mosque.

This tide of wealth, the hierarchy that exists across the human footprint, makes me question my existence. How we are born into fate's unmeasured cup, then take it on as if we deserve it. I am sitting cross-legged before the Black Cube waiting for the prayer to begin. While I wait, I murmur verses that soothe my agitation, *Glory be to God. All power and might belong to God.* I take in the gamut of faces surrounding me. We all perform the same actions, lifting our hands with open palms as we submit our supplications.

Then, a small group on the far left of the Mataaf catches my attention. A group of cleaners. The same ones who dwell in the desert dormitories. They are dressed in green two-piece uniforms working in choreographed fluidity. A troupe of skaters moving as one unit. I watch as they cordon off sections with bright orange rope, spraying disinfectant that bounces like raindrops against the glare of white marble. Then they move in with large squeegees and wipe the floor in rhythmic strokes. How many of them? Twenty? Thirty men? Cleaning this city so that people of every colour, from every country may pray. They never disrupt the worshippers nor the stream of people entering the intricate brass doors of the mosque. They are invaluable as air.

My Darling Ma,

I read a letter today and I thought about you. I had these flashbacks, and they were pink talcum powder with a cushion pad smelling of Wisteria. They were the printed lemons of the floral quilt on your bed. The one you called Eiderdown. "Cover me with the Eiderdown, my *Beti*," you would say, and Nasima and I would smile at the foreign words and for knowing you never said granddaughter in any language except Gujarati.

I wish I had taken more time to learn it, you know. From you, or my dad when he wanted to teach us the vernacular of our forefathers. But then again, we wanted to be gentrified. Trying to learn to plant our feet in a world where we presumed Western culture was better. I regret that now. I lament the fact that you had to look for words to connect us and found Afrikaans easier than English when we found our Indianness too archaic. We really couldn't understand that your feet needed to be rubbed with Vicks or that you wanted us to help you file your nails because you couldn't see too well. I can still hear you saying, "Oh my *Beti* came. Make your hands *garam*. *Ma se voete* is pain today." I hear those echoes of three languages in one sentence. It didn't even faze us.

The memories do though, when I close my eyes and smell Vicks, or the warmed coconut oil I would comb through your hair every Saturday morning. When you spoke of those days when you first came to South Africa and I could not understand any of your struggles. Because I really didn't try hard enough to learn the words of those stories. Or your love language of understanding me through it all.

Fridays with Amma

1972

Meena hopped into the bakkie alongside fryers and sieves, gingham tablecloths, serviettes and paper bags. It was Friday and she jostled with her sisters to be the first out at Amma's house.

Amma was their grandmother. A stalwart of a woman, whose auburn braid ran the length of her back, her skin still smooth at sixty-five, grey eyes luminous against her nut-brown skin. Meena thought she was one of the most beautiful women she had ever seen. Her dad was stamped with some of Amma's dye, though it fitted less well on his body, worn brittle from hard work since he was fifteen.

Meena loved spending her weekends with Amma while her parents ran their stall at the flea market in Johannesburg's East Rand. The old house, where smells of meals mingled with potpourri, and settled into the beige carpet, seemed alive. It was crowded with silver-plated goblets, doilies and silk throws worn thin from years of being washed before Eid. Meena knew that her grandmother saved every cent so that her sons could afford an education, get decent-paying jobs and build a life where they could cement their roots. Amma had sacrificed her ambitions, the possibility of moving through the ranks at the bank when she was widowed before her thirtieth birthday. She had tucked in her sari, as she always told the girls, put a stopper on her tears for the unfairness of being alone so far away from her family in India and become a stay-at-home mother, taking on alterations, or sewing clothes to make ends meet.

Amma always offered them a glass of her famous kheer before their parents said goodbye. The milk thickened with crushed almonds, sago and coconut shavings that stuck to the roof of their mouths. As soon as their parents left, Meena and her siblings would jump onto Amma's bed. Three pyjama bunnies alongside this woman who loved them as if they were the rare gems found on the shores of her motherland.

That was the subject Amma talked about most. Her motherland. Her life before she was married. Brought to the dusty town of Johannesburg where there were no lotus leaves or banana trees, and where she felt her lips would surely fall off from being so dry when she first got here at eighteen. Amma was the daughter of the richest man in their village. As a young girl, she had servants to bathe her and comb her hair with neem oil warmed in the sun. Meena could hardly believe that Amma had traded it for this new world where she was little more than a peasant. A second-grade human, cast aside because of her inferior skin colour.

In the minutes when her head began to loll off to the side and her fingers fell limp, right before her eyes closed in anticipation of their Saturday ritual of a visit to Avalon bioscope to watch the latest Indian film, Meena would ask Amma how she managed to find happiness in a life offering a pittance of joy, so different from her childhood home. Amma always stroked her forehead then, "Sleep now," she would say, "Some things are better left unsaid."

2004

Meena and Hassan are on a whirlwind visit of this modern India. Flea-market weekends and Fridays at Amma lay blurred between canvased images of living through Apartheid. These days Meena wears Gucci rich with the oily smell of leather instead of the knockoffs she once gaped at. "My roots", she thinks, playing back some of Amma's life as a young girl as she steps off the taxi and walks towards the village in Surat. Brown children, wiry as liquorice sticks, run up to hold her hand. She asks for directions, and they lead her towards the house, a double story painted in bright pink, overlooking the rest of the dwellings.

Meena is greeted by an older woman at the entrance. She offers salaam and gifts. "This was my grandmother's home," she says, "We spent our childhood immersed in the memory of the halls of this house through her eyes."

The woman is startled. She asks for Amma's name. Then she smiles and Meena notes a frown crease across her forehead. It stretches the grey hairs under her dupatta. "I remember your grandmother well, she says, "I was a young girl when she left for Africa. She was the best servant you know. My mother missed her terribly when she left."

Hard Work

Saeed

Saeed looked out the window of the combie. The skyline, hazy from the mine mountains on the city's outskirts, rose and fell as if it were alive. He was always startled by the way the weeks fell like dominoes until the years became a pile of tiles masquerading as a weary body. Friday evenings were special though. Especially since Rabiya decided to rent a stall at the Market. The additional income finally created the possibility of a holiday to Durban. Saeed had never been to the coast. In fact, he hardly ventured out of the Transvaal. All his plans of becoming a musician shelved and unrecorded when his father passed on, years before. Saeed had been thirteen or fourteen at the time. He still cherished his music, though he hardly found time to drag out the old harmonium with his days stuffed like pickle jars these days. At almost forty, his body was stamped with evidence of hard work. His mother's good looks, which he had been fortunate enough to inherit, fading with each passing year.

Another tedious week as floor manager of the textile wholesaler was finally over. Saeed looked out the window and told himself to snap out of this mood before he exited the combie and walked the three blocks home. His daughters could never see the furrows behind the smile he reserved for them. He would shout a bright Salaam saying, "Who's ready for some fun" as he walked through the front door. Then he would loosen his tie, pop the top two buttons of his shirt and kick off the patent leather Florsheims that squeezed his feet so that they were yellowed with calloused skin. Barefoot like that, Saeed would light up a Rothmans and tend to the record player. After dinner, before Rabiya urged him to begin packing the rundown Datsun they used for the market, he would turn up the volume of the latest vinyl. Saeed felt happiest in those moments. He sang his favourite Hindi songs to the girls, stretching his palms upwards and turning his wrists so that for a few minutes he was not just another brown shop boy.

Rabiya

After the long week of juggling between preparations for the market and taking care of their home while Saeed worked in Pretoria, Rabiya was knackered. But it was Friday, and she always tried harder on Fridays. She stepped out of her work kaftan, bathed and lined her lashes with mascara. Friday nights were lovemaking nights. Once the girls left for Amma, Rabiya would loosen her bun, perform her own dance in the privacy of their bedroom, and let Saeed drown in her. She loved the smell of her husband next to her, his nutmeg cologne and the whiff of Rothmans in his hair.

By Sunday evening, her lower back always burnt as if it had been rubbed with chilli powder, and the ropy veins behind her knees throbbed. But without the additional income, they could barely scrape the pile of unpaid bills, let alone think of saving towards the holiday they all dreamed about.

Rabiya's preparation for the Flea Market began earlier in the week. She would braise the mince for her samosas with painstaking care. While she cooked, she would hum along to the radio, her

thoughts sometimes drifting to a future where she could travel to all those destinations she read about in her glossy magazines. More often, her mind returned to the past and all the declined prospects of a once bright girl turned down because her family could ill afford them. She vowed it would be different for her daughters.

Waiting at a Funeral

The women sit cross-legged on the floor. They are dressed in black robes that flow around them. I am lulled by the murmuring of voices in my aunt's sitting room, a cacophony of whispers interspersed with the rustling of pages from green incantation books. Here and there, the clickety-clack of prayer beads sends good wishes to the departed. My cousins sit closest to their mother's muslin covered body. The younger of the two has her head on her sister's shoulder. Tears stream down her cheeks whilst her mouth moves in prayer. Perhaps they share unwanted goodbyes in the few remaining hours they can gaze upon the face they love most, before the pallbearing men come and carry their mom away. I cannot offer words that will console them as they shiver in their grief. The young ladies sitting next to me talk in hushed tones about my aunt's condition. Such a good woman they say, shaking their heads as they discuss her final days. I notice how they shuffle their hips away from the corpse as if death were contagious. Across from them, I overhear a mother and daughter talk about dinner. One of them offers to swing round to the butcher after the funeral. A faint voice two rows behind mentions a holiday in Dubai. We will all wait until the body is carried away. That is the right thing to do before we go about our lives. Only my cousins will remain in the room where their mother's knitting lies heaped in the corner.

The Watchman

Your mother has had another screaming match with your father. Her words hang like ice in the air. You are pierced by the word icicles but what shakes you more is that she went in with a bottle of bleach screaming that when you see her again, she will be dead. *It will be your fault*, she spits at you as she slams the door, *the whole world will know that you killed me*.

She always does this. She blames you for her unhappiness. Life with your father was sublime until she had children. So you sit outside the bathroom door pleading with your seven-year-old voice. Asking her to please, please come out. Begging, *Don't kill yourself*. This is all you say over and over again. Your siblings run outside; they play catch in the garden. You hear them laughing as they chase a chameleon posing as a twig on the azalea bush. Your father leaves, he has better things to do.

You are the watchman. You play with threads on the Persian rug, find faces in the patterns woven in scarlet and cream. You lean against the door and notice a spider's web shimmering in the crystal chandelier. Later your mother will come out. She will ignore your tear-stained cheeks. She will dress for a party and wink at your father about the matrimonial peacemaker she holds between her thighs. You do not know what she means. All you know is that you have to apologise for all the heartache you caused.

Days later when you hear the signs of another storm brewing, *I hate this life. I am water and you are oil. I did not sign up for this*, you run to the kitchen to hide the bottle of bleach.

You do not know it yet, but this is how you will be shaped. You will become the poster girl for your mother. You will wear the guilt she feeds you like a girdle around your padded waist. She will call you the fat one. You will stop eating so that your body fits in with the Persian rugs and chandeliers of the home that visitors call perfect.

When the years pass, and you are obliged to mother your elderly mother, you will finally understand that you always have. You will hold your young daughter in your arms and set her free, *Words are like bleach*, you'll say, *Poisonous when swallowed*.

Hanging in the Wind

My sister Zoey and I were on the route our parents warned us against. A rigorous adventure over climbed fences spanning three blocks, past an abandoned car lot through the foothills of the Koppies, so we could get to school fifteen minutes earlier. I was thinking about the homework I needed to copy, silently going over the six times table when I walked headfirst into the thighs of the body. It hung from one of the sturdier branches of an ancient willow at the far end of the Koppies.

It was one of those mornings where the mist obstructed your view so that you could only see as far as your fingertips. I let out a squeal when my forehead grazed scratchy fabric. My nose stinging from the faint sourness where the trousers felt wet against my face. I looked up to see the outline of a head and torso drooping towards me. A man, slightly older than our father, hung from the tree with his feet suspended mid-air. I noticed the slightest sway of his body, his bare feet. Zoey was a few steps behind me, trying to divert a stream of ants from destroying a molehill she stumbled upon, when I let out a yelp that made the birds in the willow fly off in haste. She came running over, both of us stretching our necks towards the treetops, whilst our stomachs dropped down.

We stared at the body, saying nothing for the longest time. A breeze rustled the leaves around us, carrying with it the fragrance of wild poppies and a metallic scent so slight one could almost have missed it. Reverence, pure instinct, fear – all these factors combined to precipitate our stoicism as we took in the sight before us. I was first to break the trance, stepping in front of the hanging body to investigate further.

I found a three-legged stool lying on its side just next to the man. We had a similar chair in our Wendy house back home. I studied it, perplexed. This one was painted fire-engine red with a pink heart on the flat surface of the seat. The man's shoes were placed neatly at the base of the tree trunk, his socks rolled inside the left shoe as if they still waited for his feet.

There was nothing extraordinary about the rest of him save for the grey pallor of his skin, and the slight damp that made his navy trousers cling to his legs, showing their outline. Zoey pointed towards the drops of blood from where the man's nose had bled to form rust circles on the sand and she began to cry. We both knew this was a death. But we were nine and eleven years old and could hardly process what we were witnessing.

I took Zoey's hand to stop her tears and we turned our heads back towards the sky. The man's arms dangled like floppy plastic on the sides of his body. His back was arched so that his neck turned slightly upwards as if he were being elevated toward the heavens. His eyes were closed, and his mouth had a coating of white around the edges. The expression on his face jarred in its serenity. It seemed that the branch on which he chose to tie the rope carried him to safety.

Impulse propelled me then. I ran towards a bed of wildflowers tucked beyond the willow and began plucking frantically. "Come on Zoe," I said, "we need to help him." Zoey dropped the stick she'd been using to scare off the ants and ran towards me. She crouched in the sand and picked her bunch of flowers with care. I, on the other hand, grabbed handfuls of purple and white daisies and bundled them between my arms.

We placed the flowers in a circle under the man's hanging body. Zoey whimpered, her breath making her stomach rise and fall as if she were trying to put a stopper on her fear. I began singing *The Lord's Prayer* recalling it from when our neighbour died. His wife made us learn it for the night vigil and I was thankful now that I remembered the words.

When we were done with our flower garland, I placed the man's shoes in the centre of the circle, directly under his feet. Then I stood behind his body and gave him a gentle push just under the buttocks. His body swung like a pendulum. Zoey ran to the front and caught his legs, then nudged him ever so gently back to me. We stood like that for a while, swinging the man's body to and fro, my voice carrying in the mist. *The Lord's Prayer* ringing over the hollows of the Koppies.

When Zoey looked at her wristwatch, she told me to hurry. We had already missed the first bell and our mother would be furious if they made us stay in after school. I ran a few metres from the willow then turned back to the man's body. On a whim, I knelt down and pulled out the pair of socks tucked into his shoes. I shoved them in the inside pocket of my blazer right next to my chest. "Goodbye Mister," I said to the man hanging in the tree.

The day went by. I touched my blazer occasionally, felt the soft padding of the sock against my beating heart. The socks had a musty smell that made the saliva rise to the back of my throat. It made me feel as if I had swallowed an overripe peach. As the morning wore on, the waft dizzied me so that I could hardly concentrate on anything besides the bare feet of the man who had worn them not too long ago, now hanging in the wind. Zoey had not said much on our walk to school. I looked for her during the lunch break so that we could share our jam and cheese sandwiches, even though I hardly had an appetite. She normally waited for me at the entrance of the senior primary block, but she was not there that morning. When the final bell whistled through the classroom walls at the end of the day, I ran to find her. She stood with her shoulders drooped, her cheeks pale, braids dishevelled. I learnt that she had spent most of the day in Nurse's room.

That evening, our father came home in a panic saying they had found an unidentified man's body in the Koppies. "He took his life," my father said. "What a tragedy. Can you believe he made this circle of flowers around himself before he jumped? I wonder if he was part of some strange cult. Tragic I tell you."

Zoey and I looked at one another between sipping our soup and buttering rolls. Her eyes widened like orbs, and I gestured to her to be calm with a slight shift of my fingers. "You girls swear you don't walk that way to school, hey?" Mom asked. She had found out about our secret route early on, warning us never to go to the Koppies by ourselves, so Zoey and I had become extra careful about wiping our shoes and dusting the sand off our bags before we got home.

"I swear Mom," Zoey said, looking my way. I was the incorrigible one, but she was my forever Jiminy Cricket. We excused ourselves after dinner, but she did not come to my room to swap stories the way we did most evenings. When the house quietened, I sat on my bed with only the lampshade turned on. I took out the pair of socks, unrolled them, studied them. I brought them close to my nose to get a whiff of the man's feet again, which now had a faint rubbery scent of the eraser that had kept them company in my pocket. They were a decent pair of socks, black with thin white

horizontal stripes. I pictured the man taking them off before he stepped onto the stool. I thought of his body hanging in the tree, the way his hair looked tired. It lay matted against his closed eyes as if kicking the stool had been too much on the inside of his head to hold his hair in place. I rolled the pair of socks up again and returned them to my blazer.

Zoey and I did not discuss the matter further, though we took the longer route to school from that day on. A few weeks passed. The pair of socks became hot and heavy against my chest. Then one morning, when Zoey felt ill and I promised to follow our neighbour Tim to school, I found myself climbing over backyard fences and going past the car lot instead. A shiver tickled my insides as I ducked under the fence at the far end of the Koppies.

I began reciting *The Lord's Prayer* as I reached the willow. It was empty. The area had been cleaned so that only the reeds and trees knew what had happened amongst them. I dug a hole under the branch where the man had taken his life, then opened my blazer and gave the socks one final kiss before covering them with earth. I hoped they would help him walk more comfortably as he searched for the place he wanted to go.

My Dearest Sunita,

I was overwhelmed when your name appeared in my inbox yesterday. With that, a flood of memories of the two of us walking up the hill every afternoon after school, our bags heavy with books slung over shoulders still bony with youth. I reminisce how we gossiped or chatted about boys to undo the weight of yet another day's learning. Those afternoons glow in my mind, warm with the light of our younger days. Carefree days. Happy Days.

I am so pleased that life in London suits you and that you have found comfort working in Paeds at Princess Royal. I always knew you were meant for the Royal life. Remember how you always chose the crown in our pretend games of Queen and subject that year we first met in preschool. How long ago that seems. What a far cry from these past few years. But you've been so fierce. You deserve this new chapter away from the hurt he caused you and from the chaos of trying to save lives at Bara. Here we remain toy soldiers. Marching between the stabbings on Saturday nights and HIV wards brimming with ventilators now that the pandemic has turned our units into beehives.

Sometimes I wish I had fled with you. Other times I see the smiles of patients as they wave goodbye, holding on to white packets of pills and the relief that comes with stamped discharge forms. Those days, I think it's all going to be okay. I drive home and drop like a stone. My eyes frozen from the fluorescent globes of the ward where your name is still etched in permanent ink on Sister's notice board.

Pecking Order

I sat in a trustee's meeting last week. My client, a regal matriarch, had passed on a couple of weeks prior and the living room in her house overflowed with family eager to hear her will. While I waited for the relatives to gather, I perched awkwardly on an armchair in the corner. My blue folder felt like lead on my lap as I nibbled on custard pastry. My client's firstborn hovered close by. He had been the one next to her on the day she died. Around me, children and grandchildren, grizzly aunts and stray cousins made small talk while they sized up the rest of the troop. They poured coffee from the urn, wolfed down scones or tapped bright painted talons on their knees. I noticed a hooked-nosed woman with straw-coloured hair sitting hunched in the corner of the room. As I bent to pick up sprinklings of fallen pastry crumbs the musty smell of the carpet took me right back to the bush. To the day we found an elephant tangled in her limbs, her trunk bent inwards as if gravity had finally won. The rest of her herd huddled in mourning a distance away. She lay alone, that regal being, her tusks reaching the unclouded blue of an African sky while a pride of lions tore away at her flesh, their heads deep in her belly, manes coated in red. "So many pictures," I chastised. My tone curt as my husband angled his lens for the perfect shot of nature in its essence. We spent hours at that carcass during our stay at the Game Reserve, watching as the matriarch grew smaller, as the lions left sated, and the hyenas sauntered in to strip any remaining meat off the elephant's once generous frame. The vultures arrived on the day we were leaving. They had been circling, casting shadows on the bent grass with their outstretched wings. Now they held meetings on the dried branches close by. Their bald heads cocked as they complained in garbled tones that they were ready for their share.

Shannah

Shannah and I shared an office. In that confined space where the smell of our lunches mingled, the spice of my samosas running relay with her tuna sandwich, it was difficult not to share everything else. Shannah was single. She liked to refer to herself as a settled spinster who did not have to worry about the whims of a man. She rolled her eyes when my husband called like clockwork to ask what I was cooking for supper that evening. It was so much easier to go home to the quiet of a TV dinner and an orderly existence, she said.

One day Shannah called in sick. That was very uncharacteristic of her. The day turned into the remainder of the week and I became more concerned. I was not the only one. The tea lady also noticed the empty office chair where Shannah's frame had left a permanent moulding of her generous behind. I called Shannah that Friday but all she said was that she would tell me everything after the weekend. She sounded distracted and I heard voices in the background.

Shannah looked haggard when she walked into the office the following Monday. She was wearing a rumpled skirt. Her normally groaning lunch bag contained only an apple and a handful of raisins. The office remained silent most of the morning, save for the hum of the printer and the muffled voices of the young women in the office across from ours. I did not press Shannah for details when she told me she was fine. Reassuring me she had not been ill the previous week. The first hint I got that explained her obvious dishevelment was when she called the domestic worker to ask if everything was fine at home. She repeated the call every hour, looking at the clock above my desk as if she had the power to move its hands faster. Then Gaby called. Shannah's one-sided comments and her gravel tone gave me enough to fill in the blanks. I tried not to eavesdrop, but it was difficult to concentrate on the order list in front of me when I pieced together that Gaby's daughter had arrived on Shannah's doorstep. Gaby was Shannah's good for nothing sister who always solicited a couple of bucks towards the end of the month. I curled my toes inside my court shoes when I heard there was a baby involved.

When she ended the conversation, Shannah pulled her hair into a ponytail and exhaled deeply. She told me that Gaby's daughter had pitched up at her townhouse with her little boy in tow. The niece, so much like her mother, asked if they could crash there for a while. She then bathed and dressed, went out to buy some toiletries and had not returned since.

Shannah's world turned into a swirl of scribbles. Where she had never missed work before, she now had appointments, meetings and days off when the childminder was ill. She took off every sixty days to make the mandatory court appearance. Each hearing seemed to end in a stalemate, layered deep with red tape, so that Shannah's life seemed an obstacle course of stop-signs. Sure, her niece pitched up for one or two of the court dates. Her presence like a pole on those stop-signs. She set the whole process back by pleading she was a victim of circumstance, hiding behind sob stories of a difficult economy, citing traumatic stress disorder.

Shannah said she spewed the words *biological mother*. That phrase, a bullet in Shannah's heart. Her ordeal infuriated me to the point that I told her to return the boy to his mother knowing full well

that if I were in Shannah's shoes, I would not be able to do so either. Responsibility can bloom into love, I learnt. A boy left in your care could mess up your orderly life in the best way. Like fireflies on a dark night.

For the remainder of the time that Shannah and I shared that office, it could have been four or five years, I watched, listened and fumed as my spinster friend with the once ordinary life, endured a marathon of court visits, social worker interviews and arduous cat and mouse games to adopt the baby that was left in her care that June day.

Since we first began working together, Shannah's desk was adorned with merely a potted geranium and a framed picture of her late parents. Now it became a medley of photographs and hand drawings. "He has started calling me Mama, you know," she once said as we ate our lunch. We had the windows open despite the winter chill. We needed to air out the boiled egg sandwich she chose to bring that day.

I often think of Shannah as I potter about in my studio then take my sandwich alone on the veranda. We parted ways when my husband retired. I long for those days of comfortable companionship, for the way strangers often become friends through shared spaces, then move on with only memory crates stored in the mind. We do keep in touch from time to time. She sent me an email when the boy began high school. It was cordial and it could have been written to just about any person. Still, Shannah was not one to fan the flames of emotions, and I was touched that she thought of me. She wrote about work, then told me that her son was doing well. She said he was trying out for the rugby team, and they had spent their December camping in the Drakensberg.

Pottery Dates

For a time, Greg became fixated with a mother in his daughter's pottery class. He could not pinpoint the reasons, nor the moment said infatuation began. The woman was not his type. She was skinny as a tree bark, too blonde for his preference and she always had her sunglasses perched alice-band style on her head. Greg was dropping his daughter off one afternoon and he heard her laugh through the closed window of his station wagon. She was thus probably loud too. Nonetheless, that tinkle of laughter and the toss of her head as she kissed her four-year-old goodbye touched a chord that made something in Greg's insides contract. It felt as if he had re-lived his first kiss with Leigh-Ann Ackerman way back in primary school. Come to think of it, Leigh-Ann had been tall and blonde and loud too. Much to his bewilderment, Greg found himself opening his diary to drive his daughter to pottery once a week. His wife was equally surprised, though somewhat relieved that she was spared at least one extra car drive in her already tightly packed extra mural schedule.

Come every Wednesday afternoon, Greg would sit in his car, feigning disinterest whilst checking out the mother who was probably around the same age as his wife. He felt a pang of guilt when he returned home after the lesson, but it was short-lived because Greg felt that he was, in theory, not doing anything wrong. As the term gained steam, he grew bolder. He would reach for his water bottle and walk his daughter up the driveway to the studio amass with moulds of chubby handprints embedded in clay, and knick-knacks waiting to be baked in the kiln. He spent those afternoons in the garden where the pottery teacher had laid out magazines for the parents to read while they waited. Greg used the gossip pages of *You* and *People* as a stealthy shield to take in the woman's chic demeanour. The defined indent in her calf muscles as she sat with legs crossed, sharing gossip with the other young mothers. Greg never joined the conversations. He hardly knew much about the goings-on of motherhood. He preferred to nod their way, smiling and tilting his head so his strong jawline was emphasized. He was a good-looking man, though his tummy hung slightly over his trousers now that family life had ladled him up.

The woman had full breasts that peeked out of her blouses so that a milky W wobbled every time she used her hands. Back home, his wife remained blissfully oblivious to the churnings of her husband's mind. She was in fact, quite taken with the spark of fresh kindling in their lovemaking. They had been together since college, easing into middle age with the comfort of the familiar, and she was thrilled at Greg's renewed display of affection. It was uncharacteristic of him to stride over and caress her thigh while she was making dinner or gift her with a bunch of white peonies for no particular reason. Greg's wife found herself exclaiming, a loud *amen* that her commitment to speed walking and chopping her hair into a sexy bob were doing the trick.

A few months into this absurd but pleasurable jolt in Greg's otherwise eat-sleep-work-shit life, the woman walked over to Greg's car just after he arrived with his daughter. Greg's pulse raced, he looked down at his coral-coloured Polo golfer and chinos thinking that at least he looked presentable. In those few seconds, he played out their first tryst, the taste of her, the lacy thong she was probably wearing underneath her pencil skirt. The mother motioned for him to lower his window as she approached the driver's side.

“You’re Amelia’s husband, right? George, is it?”

“Yes, yes. It’s Greg. How’re you doing?” Greg wanted to kick himself for sounding like Joey from *Friends*. His face turned the colour of his T-Shirt.

“Listen, please can you tell Amelia that I totally forgot about the bake sale. It’s been a helluva week for me. My husband and I are leaving to see his folks tomorrow. There’s been a family emergency.” Greg noticed the lines under her eyes then, as if she hadn’t slept in a while. “It’s Lara by the way, Rachel’s mom,” the woman said, “Sorry, we haven’t been introduced before. By the way, it’s really sweet that you bring Natalie to pottery. Good father-daughter bonding.” With that she turned and walked away.

And that was the end of it. It was not a fly off the cliff moment. It was almost the way Greg had felt at seventeen when he woke up one morning and pulled down the Pamela Anderson poster from his bedroom wall.

In the room where I am Queen

Iqbal - how do I adequately describe this pitiful creature before me? He owns this closed-off room where paint peels like torn cuticles. This home it sits in is his. As are the yellow bricks that make it stand upright. In the world parallel to mine, where men claim possession of the material, these ragged and chipped mahogany tables, the green plastic chairs so garish they would be spewed out by even the most non-discerning of my species, belong to Iqbal. I exist between, melding with the ease of vapour into any form I desire.

I am Djinn. Smokeless as the fire that makes me. The shapeshifter created before angels, when Earth had not yet banged into being. My species is as varied as yours. Our hierarchy decisive as the feudal systems of those nations we built, then destroyed in monuments they created to preserve their immortality. We roam the soil beside you, amongst you, with you. In you. Some, like me, they call Ifreet. Banished demons who travel to seas at dusk to report our influence over your weakness. We always win. You always surrender.

Iqbal sits behind his desk on a high-backed leather chair he claims as his throne. It is mildly amusing to watch him as he recites made-up phrases under his breath. His voice a ringing nasal whine that carries to the adjacent room where unsuspecting patients wait in anticipation of the Holy One who will cure them of their physical and mental maladies. Iqbal reigning as supreme master of false prophethood.

I hear from the other Unseen that this vocation came to him when he was homeless. His only possession at that time, the shirt on his gaunt frame splotted brown from his betel nut chewing. His only shelter, a small corner of the mosque,. They say he sat in that mosque and devised this plan of delivering man from evil. His story is not unique. Charlatans are found everywhere.

Of course, there are those who have what we term the true gift. I cannot deny exorcists born to see beyond the invisible shield - Fur-clad Sangomas throwing bones, Shamans walking across dimensions in hypnotic bliss, Sheikhs who use the purity of prayer as doctors for the spiritual self. These men and women are my enemies. They feel more than just the hairs on the back of their napes stand when I am near. Their eyes like prisms refracting light to dispel us from the bodies we enter. Iqbal is not one of them.

I cannot lie, Iqbal's commitment to his showmanship intrigues me. Observing him has become my opium. I wait between the cracks, watching, learning the intricacies of his operation. He has balls, let me tell you. After he devised his great scheme, he disappeared 'overseas' to learn how to purify the soul and cure witchcraft. A ruse for a marijuana frenzy lasting two months.

Then back to South Africa where he smoothed his newly grown beard with fragrant coconut oil, slipped on the finest Kurta he could swindle out of some shopkeeper in this suburb where his mother still lived, doused himself with Attar and set up this room where he claims to see us.

And the people come in droves. He feeds them the bullshit and they swallow it whole. His operation involves a few cursory questions, followed by nods, hmmmms and ah-hahs. Then he sits cross-legged

in faux meditation. His body slipping into a trance of practiced tremors. Eventually, he finds their 'enemies', the reasons for their ill-luck. "Your boss," he'll say to the unsuspecting salesman. "Your mother-in-law has laced your food with poison," to daughters-in-law hasty to jump on the blame train. My personal favourite has got to be, "Your domestic worker sent an impure demon to your home."

The people go home with prayer salts in brown bags or talismans of paper wrapped in black cloth on which are written Iqbal's gibberish of made-up prayers. They will wear these lucky charms close to their hearts for months, years perhaps. Ever so often, Iqbal will have some fun and instruct some imbecile to follow deranged instructions to quell his wretchedness. "Cut a rooster," he will advise. "Spill the blood and let out the blackness within you." His tone sombre enough to mislead the Pope.

The superstitious pay handsomely for all this exorcising and curse-curing. They offer rolled notes of cash, cars, land, even daughters once or twice. Iqbal's mother's once dilapidated council house here in Lenasia has grown fat with these favours. It puffs out. A walrus amongst the seals of similar asbestos homes in the neighbourhood. It groans from the weight of rooms added to its skinny frame.

It has been months since I first took up this post to observe the wretched Iqbal. More of my kind now fill the spaces in the empty chairs that he laid out to deceive his patients. I watch in fascination as he bows, then signals to unsuspecting fools to, "Pay respects to the ancestors." He straightens the chairs, smug in his cunning. Now the chairs are filled with us, the Unseen. He remains oblivious as he goes about his charade. Iqbal caning the possessed, murmuring about curses and evil spells. Iqbal caressing soft thighs of women who believe this is the process of healing.

A few weeks back, he put his mouth over the budding breast of a delicate sixteen-year girl. This got old Shaafi next to me riled up. His face burning such an ashen grey, it resembled the caves from whence he comes. I held him back, "Patience, old Genie, ripened fruit tastes sweeter."

Tonight though, as the moon closed her shroud and completed another cycle, Iqbal looked my way. He inhaled sharply as he caught a hint of the slits of red that make my sight. I noted the alarm set in on his beak-like features when he realised he was not alone. It creased across his forehead so that his eyes almost merged. He even lifted his nostrils to smell the air. I had not planned to act so soon, but I suppose I am as ready as I need to be. "Enough," I say to the others, "Our time has come. Did the fallen amongst us not foresee the foolishness of these clay creatures?"

My comrades and I stand to form. We shake off our transparency, lift the chairs in unison, make them dance in this room suffocating with fraud. We use our breath to create wind and fire, then air cold as the gas that we are made from. Everything spins. The room moves as it squeezes with realms colliding. I sail towards Iqbal. Close enough that our forms touch. I smell the lamb and garlic on his breath, his body sour with sweat. Then I take the shape of a nymph from the underworld, grab his member and squeeze. He squeals, the sound of a piglet dragged to slaughter.

My throat roars with laughter that makes Iqbal's legs quiver. I change form. I am the shapeshifter now and I feel a sexual stirring at Iqbal's look of surprise when I, when We, all the Djinn in this room, make our presence visible. Iqbal's head lolls back, a ragged doll whose eyeballs retreat so far back in their sockets they become glowing spheres in the darkness of the room. Then I speak. We speak. Our language ancient as our kin. We chant in octaves higher than operettas. Our voices trill the night. The windows in the room beyond burst. I hear glass shattering into hundreds of pieces. When we are sated, we reveal our true forms. The room aglow with the shapes of beasts from the first spark of creation. Raw and proud.

The witching hour slips into white. Morning has come, and with it, silence. Iqbal lies on the row of empty chairs. Soon he will rise. His body will bathe and eat and give his wife a sloppy kiss. The first patient will arrive. Iqbal will sit on his throne, reciting new words. They are not gibberish any longer. He will remain composed. He is the healer after all. I clasp his fingers around the oiled beard, trying to smooth my way into this new form. It feels strange. I have never possessed a man before. But there is always time for a first. Here in this room where I am Queen.

Saving Grace

The taxi ride that morning was very much like the hundreds before. A medley of children were picked up from street corners of the township. They fidgeted as they waited for the school transport, blowing into cold palms or rubbing their hands to warm their bodies. Their faces shone from morning scrubs with terry washrags and Nivea cream. A few of my kin nodded as Grace walked in with me resting on her shoulders. All of us invisible giants of light sitting with our heads bowed as the tinkle of innocent voices carried laughter and chit-chat that bounced off the rickety twenty-seater. Only we knew what lay ahead and how helpless we were to test fate. All of us merely guardians who filled the spaces between knobby shoulders and the roof of the taxi. Our wings caught between school satchel straps and crisp white shirts.

I am Grace's keeper. An epaulette of light resting between her neck and clavicle. I see her thoughts, hear her whispers. I travel into her mind when she needs a nudge that will make her glow, steering her to lend or share, halting deleterious spots that swirl, dousing undesirable notions before they materialise into action. I lead Grace to the path of virtuosity. My twin, on the other hand, holds firm on to her left shoulder. He is one of those free spirits. Slovenly enough to watch her go about as she pleases. The shadow of me who feeds her childhood whimsicalities. "Do your thing," he tells her. "Slip and fall." Whilst I scramble to catch her with unseeable palms outstretched.

Not that day. That morning I felt a shiver when she opened her eyes. I blew against the mole that dotted her top lip like the smudge of a felt-tipped pen, trying to frame the memory of seeing it for the first time. The night she squeezed her way through the stars to fill her small space on Earth. That tiny dot was as much a part of her as me. It shifted up and down when she gurgled at six months and moved in rhythm to her voice when she learnt to speak or chewed and swallowed spaghetti. One long swoosh. The way she smiled so that her lips closed to form a half-moon pink with dew or kissed her shoulders as she opened her eyes each day turning her head from right to left. Greeting me, as if she could reach across and pick me off her shoulders.

The leaves that housed each person born to Earth, shook with the wind that morning. Then the wind swirled through multitudes of skies, parting layers of clouds. It pushed apart the curtains in Grace's room. I felt it as the fabric blew and I hissed. I am meant to be impartial, an indifferent servant serving. It was not my place to grow attached. But I hated the call of that wind and instinctively acted against the divine. I broke every rule when I slipped between Grace's muscle fibres and twisted her intestines so that her tummy ached. I made her spill her tea so that her checkered green school skirt needed to be changed. Anything to make her late. Clutching at straws so she wouldn't get on to that taxi and go to school.

Her mom was putting clothes in the dryer as we stepped out. I wished I could have made her turn around. I kept signalling to her guardians to make her stop, thinking how one day, she would wish that she had turned and looked at Grace. That she would long with every sinew in her being to return to that moment when she could have captured the image of her daughter's silhouette against the light of the door frame instead of a cursory wave of "Goodbye Sweetie-Pie," as she concentrated on separating whites and colours.

The ride to school was arduous. Walking through the school gates even worse. I watched the clock shifting its hands throughout the morning, stealing looks at my twin on Grace's left shoulder to see if he felt as niggly as I did. Between learning about Napoleon and integers, I tickled her bladder, made her ask for, "Permission to leave the room Ma'am."

My timing was dismal. Grace was the first one he met in the hallway, the sixteen-year-old whose life had taken too many wrong turns since his grandmother passed away. He found the gun in his older brother's jacket he would later exclaim. He knew his brother strapped it against his breast when he scoped the streets looking for cars. He had not intended to use it, he just wanted to scare Mrs. Peters into changing his Mathematics mark. Grace gave him a shock he would say in the weeks to come. She was running towards the door of the girls' bathroom, and he lifted the gun instinctively. His clumsy fingers pulled against his frame so that he shook almost as much as she did when the bullet sailed towards that mole on her lip before the stream of blood splattered across the board where her name had been engraved barely six months prior. *Buhle Grace Mbele, Grade Seven, Valedictorian.*

I shall be given a new ward in time. Another lifelong assignment to watch over a soul whose time has come to squeeze into its mould of clay. Although Grace's fallen leaf made me experience a shadow in my light that I still cannot comprehend.

Taming Mustangs

It was an ordinary day when her father picked up his keys. He sauntered toward his Mustang, winked and put on his Ray-Bans. They had mirrored lenses where she could see her reflection waving back at him. The engine roared in that quiet lane where elm trees bent to hear whispers. Her father never returned.

They heard rumours of his life at the coast. A new family that came with a matching car. Some sort of station wagon that tamed him. She did not know it then, but she hated her mother for not taking the Mustang out of him. How was she to know aged seven, eight, nine.

Her mother came to her room some nights. The need for human touch, she said. They would lie counting stars through the square paned windows. A yearning was filled. Not hers. She would lie awake long after her mother fell asleep, gazing beyond the yawning walls as the night cast shadows on the long chin breathing next to her. Her mother fragile as the robins nesting in those bent trees. Muttering misgivings between clenched jaws of interrupted sleep patterns.

Aged ten, her mother gave her a necklace. A birthday gift of gold strings double-twined so that they looked like a rope. At the end of the necklace lay a pendant pressed thin as paper with two half-moons that fitted together to make a circle. A nine-carat yellow gold puzzle of love bought with hard-earned savings. She cherished that necklace; promised to wear it close to her heart. Mother and daughter linked in that life where Mustangs drove away and left empty streets of bowing elms. They got by. Shelving unsung melodies of *Daddy Cool* who put on shades and revved goodbye.

Aged thirteen, she cut her hair short, traded her ballet pumps – those suffocating pink sausages, for Doc Martens and combat pants. Her period came. The blood seemed out of place. She tried putting her hand into her vagina to seal it off. Dreamed of cutting off her clitoris. Her mother stiffened at this denial of womanhood. She asked whether something was the matter. She could not even acknowledge that question. Their hearts linked through loneliness while lost Mustangs became packhorses for other families.

Aged fifteen, she tried to make out with boys behind the school hall. One had mirrored sunglasses where she saw the reflection of the necklace that burned against her skin. Boys tasted of loss. She would let them feel her up then go home and bind her breasts to stop them from growing.

Aged seventeen, home smelled of a mother working as a cashier. Home looked like the red of a mother's blood when she bit her tongue too hard when she could not ask where her daughter had been. Home sounded like doors slamming shut. She met Sasha. Brigitte. Sarah. Fatima. Girls who knew and taught her what she needed to learn. Fingers of pleasure. Girls tasted of candy melting before it hit your throat.

Aged nineteen, she worked out six days a week so the curves of her waistline would slide into a man's Levis. Steroids straightened her out. They stopped that damned reminder called a period. Two strangers and two ghosts lived in that house on a street lined with trees. The ghost of a father gone and a girl who had shed her skin filled the spaces between mother and child.

Aged twenty-one, her mother's breath made patterns on the square paned window, eyes peeling an empty street, waiting for a daughter to return home. She had found Jesus in the years since the Mustang revved away. Now she asked him to keep her daughter alive. Perhaps Jesus knew better.

A young man left home aged twenty-one. He left without a Mustang. Just a duffel bag filled with the need to get away and a necklace grazing his collar bone.

The Year of Renovation

It is a year to the day, and I am lying in bed. I turn to my husband whose face is lined with the creases of his pillow. He knows what day it is, and he has no idea how I am going to react. I notice a shift in his body. We've been together so long I can almost read his thoughts in that subtle change of position. My heart lurches as I take in his look of concern. The gravity of all he has been through with me. I want to open his arm where it is bent at the elbow, slip my head in the space just under his bicep. The place I've always felt safe. I want to thank him and tell him he is one of the reasons I am still here. I will. But not today.

Today is a flannel nightgown and duvet kind of day. Twenty-four hours where tectonic plates shift to reveal the cracks I can barely hold together. The before and after. I do not know how others cope. Truth be told, I hardly care. My therapist says we all wear different T-Shirts once we've crossed the finish line.

"It's fine, my love. Stay in bed as long as you need." My husband says this as he caresses my arm where it is still bruised from one too many drips. He stretches and gets out of bed. I hear him in the bathroom. Soon he'll wake the children, make sure they have their school bags and lunches. Check their socks and blazers. Daily matters carry so much weight these days. All the mundane acts I once took for granted, now cherished for the sake of being. My husband has become quite adept at these tasks since he was forced to step into my shoes. The children hardly ask for me any longer. Not even Sofi who is only six. She slept in our bed until I couldn't take looking at myself. Could hardly fathom what my bare head and my eyes sallow without eyelashes must look like to her.

It is a year to the day that I became a statistic. This time last year I would have rushed to fling the curtains open, slip into my floral skirt that always flattered my calves and rush off to do all those things that defined women my age as productive. These days productive is hoping my drawn eyebrows stay in place long enough for a visit to the shops.

Lying here with the bedsheets wrapped around me so that I am shrouded in my woes, I breathe so that my chest expands beyond my ribcage. I need to still my mind. Funny how some things disappear in an instant. Like what we had for supper last night. But some days, like the day your world stood on a precipice and you fell off the wrong side, play back over and over. It was a layered day that 1st October. Not in the parfait, gooey kind of layering though. This was closer to the layering of an onion, where the smell becomes thicker and stings your eyes the further inwards you peel.

We had just had a bond approved by the bank and finetuned the architect's drawings that would transform the neglected house we scrimmaged to buy in a neighbourhood lined with trees into our family home, when I went for a routine check-up that turned into a somewhat concerned suggestion to remove a cyst under my arm. "A blocked sweat gland," the doctor assured me. That was layer one.

A few whirlwind weeks later, I lay in bed recovering. I had just changed the dressing under my arm and sat down with a welcomed cup of tea to ease the wooziness from all the painkillers, when Leon, our architect, called from the new house. "There's a building inspector and a couple of other men

here.” Leon said, “they say they have some documents for you. Can you come? I know you went in for that procedure, but I think this is a matter of urgency.” Onion layer two.

Layer three came as the gate of our new home swung open. I wished I had sent my husband alone as my underarm was throbbing, my head clammy. Leon’s easy charm seemed dulled by the three men waiting with him. One of them was our not so brown-friendly neighbour, chairman of the heritage association. He stood in our driveway wearing smug contempt as if it were an army jacket. In his hand, a stamped document that halted all our plans with one vengeful signature.

My husband was trying to reason with him, pleading for understanding from his posse of conspirators whilst calling to Leon for the council approved drawings, when his phone cracked through the tense conversation. He gestured for us to continue, stepping away from the small group to take the call. “The doctor’s rooms,” he said, looking puzzled. “It’s probably about the bill.”. “Hello. Yes, this is him.” I heard him say, “I’m sorry, she must have left her phone at home. I’m with her right now. May I help you?”

What followed was a scene of madness. The neighbour continued ranting about how he would ensure the building would never materialise, Leon and I implored him to look at the plans as we asked how all of this was remotely possible. All those layers unpeeled as my husband looked my way with the colour draining from his face. He walked over and handed me his phone.

The day I was diagnosed with cancer. The beginning of my life after, when simple things like hair and breathing took on a whole new meaning. Where floral dresses lay forgotten, half renovated houses went to sleep, stamped shut under paperwork that hardly mattered. Mere battles in the war where life was the ultimate victory.

My friend Bernice says the anniversary of a death is called Yahrtzeit in Yiddish. A manner of expressing one's respectful feelings for a loss. I mentioned it to the doctor’s receptionist at my appointment last week, but she said that sounded too morbid. Told me it’s known as a Cancerversary. A day of hope.

The fact that I survived, that my body is brittle, pumped with metallic tasting medicine. How to lift off from Cancerversaries? I turn toward the window, sighing as I catch a glimpse of the first purple buds on the Jacaranda trees. Just then, my little Sofi runs into the room. Her legs, two brown toothpicks under the navy skirt, school satchel so big against her frame, it seems she will topple over.

“Daddy says to give you this, mummy,” she says. I open the letter and inhale when I see the court approval for our renovation. A little note at the bottom in my husband’s handwriting. “For you. Because we always live in hope for the things that matter. Today does not have to mark a death.”

Sofi is looking at me. Her nose scrunched with the concern she’s shown this past year. “I’m going to school now. I love you.” She waves as she turns to walk away, looks back as she reaches the door. Then she smiles and whispers, “Your curls are growing back. You look pretty Mom.”

The Safety of Clouds

I take in the faces, the busy arms and chatter of insistent parents who hover and fuss over little ones in this Grade R classroom. Pigeonholes have been wiped down, sanded and given a fresh lick of paint to erase sticky fingerprints of grown-up boys and girls who have moved to the formal section of the school, regal in its century-old red-brick facade. I notice the ladybird that marks my daughter's cubicle. Here she is not only mine. Here she shares her space with astronauts and hippos and starfish stickers on square wooden boxes made for children who cannot yet read their names. All around me are posters of the alphabet with curly cats, jumping Jacks and racing rabbits flanked by cut-out sunflowers with buttons stuck down for eyes and broad ice-cream stick lips to make up grinning mouths.

Glitter stars hang from the ceiling. Potato prints in colours bright as rainbows show off smiling families and shapes and numbers. A safe place I think right before the shrill of the ancient school bell pierces through the morning air. My belly sinks as I note my baby girl's panic when I turn to walk away. I let go of my husband's hand, ignore his warning not to baby her and turn back. I kneel before her, tell her to feel in here, and I tap her little chest and tell her to hang on to the clouds of pink I'll send throughout the day, every day as long as I live. 'Love clouds' I call them. Sent with an exhale of breath to make her fierce as the hyenas she says are her best. Mothers can do that I say. Mothers have ways to send clouds through sunbeams.

Ten years, a whole generation of songs and trends. A decade since I took that stance to climb off the hamster ladder and join the jean-clad mom club. I had reached the cusp, worked like a demon to get to partner, then chose breastfeeding and nappies and playdates instead. My sister never fails to remind me that I can have it all these days. Why settle for those granny pants with the elastic at the back, she admonishes, or the mop of unkempt hair fraying in horror from lack of attention.

My sister does have it all - the little roadster, the work ensemble of knee-length pencil skirts and tailored blazers that tuck in at the waist. I chose the sensible SUV whilst she opted for after work drinks at restaurants with names out of the Yuppie dictionary. I would not trade this though. Making play dough, and watching little eyes widen in wonder when ballerina Elsa twirls in *Disney on Ice*. It does not matter that I may be the chipmunk trying to heave her way back to the Hamster wheel when my children don't need me as much a few years from now. I'm not even sure if I will have the nerve to heave my body, softened with middle age, back onto the corporate ladder.

All I know is that I have this sliver of a window period for selflessness. Motherhood. The messiness of it. The handprints on walls once filled with blueprints of the buildings I designed a lifetime ago now splashed with dough from yesterday's cookies and home-printed photos of when two became three, then four, then five. My living room is an obstacle course of train sets lying on their side and Lego bricks toppled over during makeshift concerts of *The Nutcracker Prince*.

Months pass and the first day of school becomes a memory stored on my iPad. My daughter's smile grows as her limbs lengthen. I burst with pride when she makes friends all by herself. Samantha, Aliya and Zanele. I go to play dates at these strangers' homes. Try to make small talk with their

mothers over cheese sticks and boxed grape juice while the children take turns pretending to be princesses in tulle tutus or emptying closets to build tents out of blankets that will have to be refolded later. I bake muffins and gingerbread men decorated with jelly tots and water icing for the bake sale.

She is a person now. Not an extension of me any longer. She mentions the safety clouds less and less. It fills me with a sense of pride and an emptiness that closes me in.

Year of the School Play

Midnight deadlines loomed. The office was quiet save for the orchestra of the printer and coffee machine, the letterpress coming in with a deep bass occasionally. Gershwin always felt a rush in the few hours before they went to print.

He was almost done proofreading. Only the classifieds and announcements needed a once-over. Gershwin generally browsed through these sections, which would already have been meticulously edited by his astute junior writer, Terence. Sporting a mass of curly hair that could not be tamed, jeans and printed sweatshirts to get through the work week, Terence reminded Gershwin of himself at that age. He possessed the same hunger for a better life, the same drive to pursue dreams just out of reach. Gershwin's eyes began drooping as he skimmed through Terence's neatly typed rows of names and numbers of people looking to be employed, others desperate to dispose of washing machines and curios taking space in their garages. He rubbed his temples to stay focused, fingers on the ready to save and send to print, when his eyes fell on a name from long ago.

A retirement announcement from The Leadership College in Athlone. Gershwin smiled as he read the notice. It seemed Mrs. Jacobs, his drama teacher from high school, would finally have her chance to take up the sculpturing she always talked about. Her retirement sobered him. In his mind, she was always in her mid-thirties, an elegant woman with a polished refinement. The person who changed the coordinates of his life map. Gershwin made a note of the day and time of the appreciation assembly the school planned to host. He had to go, if only to say goodbye. He had not seen Mrs. Jacobs since he matriculated.

Mrs. Jacobs stood outside the school hall the afternoon they met. She was waiting for the English teacher, Mr. Albertyn, to officially call the names of everyone auditioning for the school play. Gershwin was not amongst them. He found that teachers generally nominated candidates when it came to concerts and events where the school's reputation was at stake. He did not fit that profile. Gershwin was one of the bursary kids. Smart enough to be accepted to the school, but otherwise lacking in all the background credentials that could make him a poster boy for The Leadership College. He would never have auditioned for the annual play if Caroline Jacobs had not spotted him.

She worked at the school part-time in those days, devoting her free time to the children of Athlone. Gershwin knew she did this voluntarily. Even then, when he hardly knew much about social tiers and terms such as Living Standard Measure, he could tell that her coat and the finesse of her haircut, the brown boots that came up to her knees, were all fine quality.

He never knew how he caught Mrs. Jacobs' attention. Sure, he was boisterous. He recalls that he was breakdancing that day. Gershwin was a fantastic dancer when he was younger. He had learned early on that it was always safer to claim the title of chief entertainer amongst his peers. That way there was little room for personal interaction.

So, there he was, twisted in the Jackhammer, turning on his head to show the girls how he could turtle to Chaka Khan's *Ain't No Stoppin' Us*, when Mrs. Jacobs walked over and cleared her throat. "Young man," she said, "I think you should audition for the school play."

She cast him in the role of distraught father and Gershwin soared. He astounded even himself when he could go from beatboxing outside the hall one moment, to crying for the daughter that had left home the very next. That was a turning point for him. He stepped out of the rebel group and made friends outside his normal circle. Mrs. Jacobs pushed him with every rehearsal. She gave him exercises to help him enunciate his words, taught him about projection and timing, learning to take cues from body language. Magic, Gershwin learnt, began when the stage lights flickered.

Everyone at school thought he lived with his uncle on 1st Avenue. That was what Gershwin had them believe. It was not a complete lie. He often spent afternoons at his Uncle Eddy's house while his mother worked as a domestic in Rondebosch. She rarely came home before sunset. Gershwin and his sisters would walk home before the streets became shadowy. They took turns to make supper waiting for their mother to return to the Cape Flats after she bathed the Gordon children and made sure their dishes were washed, their beds turned down.

Gershwin knew how much his mother sacrificed to keep them above water. They always had meat in the freezer, their clothes were laundered and pressed so they looked pristine. Some days she would bring home a chocolate cake or a pair of perfectly good takkies from the Salvation Army. Gershwin's best was when she surprised them with a cassette tape of their favourite songs. She had asked the driver who chauffeured Mr. Gordon to make the recording for Gershwin and his sisters. The three of them took turns practising the moonwalk, rewinding and fast-forwarding Michael Jackson's *Thriller* until the tape got stuck in the cassette player and had to be rolled with the back of a pencil.

His mother was laid off a few weeks into play rehearsals. The Gordons decided to move to Australia when fear erupted into a mass exodus during the state of emergency. He knew his mother tried her best to find another job. Mrs. Gordon helped too. She placed an advert in the classifieds and arranged for interviews but there was no work for a tired forty-five-year-old wanting to race home to her children. Gershwin remembers how they endured the thin strings of that time. How he learnt to light paraffin lamps so they could keep warm, and the way their mother would mix boiled potatoes with maize meal to stretch the bonus the Gordons paid her. It was not enough. They were evicted before long. His mother too proud to tell Uncle Eddy of the situation she found herself in.

That was when they moved into Mrs. Felton's yard out on the borders of Mitchell's Plain. Mrs. Felton had put up a Tetris-like ensemble of makeshift houses for the families who could not catch a break. They arrived at her place with their entire belongings rolled up in blankets. His sisters dragged him along to scavenge the scrapyard at the far end of Portland Rd. There they found car seats that were about to be torn apart and dragged them back to the shelter to avoid sleeping on the dirt floor.

At school, Gershwin tucked the details of his home life behind cool dance moves and a broad smile. He never stayed absent, he did not miss play practice and he walked to Uncle Eddy every afternoon so that his new friends would not get a whiff of a life so different to theirs. It all came crashing down on the day of final rehearsals.

Gershwin had packed his gym bag with all the outfits Mrs. Jacobs handed to him after practise one afternoon. He washed up in Mrs. Felton's outdoor bathroom and was just about to take the twenty-minute walk to Athlone when they heard the gunshots. Men fierce with rage, fighting turf battles and drug wars turned the sky into a firework display that Saturday morning. Everyone in the neighbourhood knew no good would come from stepping outside. They held hands in their shelters, fearing the familiar grumbles of revving engines, the *pah-pah-pah* of pistols followed by long pauses that made the silences even more terrifying. Gershwin's mother held them close. She ordered him to *sit put* and stay in.

Gershwin never knew how Mrs. Jacobs found their makeshift home squished all the way back in Mrs. Felton's backyard, nor how she had navigated her way through streets where gangs claimed their thrones. She just arrived. Drove into the yard where the wheels of her car created a dust storm in the dirt driveway. His family was still huddled in the bedroom when she walked in calm as ever, her jeans tucked neatly into her brown boots as if she were a cowgirl navigating the wild. She shuffled them all into her car, not taking no from his mother who insisted she did not fit in with the parents of Leadership College.

Gershwin can no longer recall where they slept for the week the play ran. Mrs. Jacobs simply opened the front door to a house, then unpacked an armful of groceries from the boot of her car. She had a cup of tea with them, reassuring them that they could go home once things settled. Young Gershwin was a star that week. He brought the house down with his performances and got his picture taken for the local Gazette.

He often wondered whether Mrs. Jacobs was responsible for the university scholarship he was offered soon after. He tried asking her when she congratulated him at the Matric awards ceremony a year after that season of that school play but all she said was, "Make a better life for yourself Gershwin."

At the Factory

The factory workers punch their log cards to mark their escape from the drudgery of another day of manual labour. They line up in separate queues waiting to pass through the turnstile where their bags are checked. I hear the flutter of their chattering, some teasing, a random Haibo. I hardly recognize some of the workers with whom I have spent the past eight hours now that their hair has sprung to freedom without the confines of mesh hairnets. Their button-down coveralls and blue nylon shoe covers shed. They are birds ready to fly to their nests.

I grew up in this factory, the boss's daughter now joined the ranks of white-collar workers sitting behind computers and boardroom desks. Though it is the heart of the factory that grips me. Here machines churn out thousands of pills per second. Large vats of cough mixture lie waiting like pools of brown sludge. Beautiful people, some of them twice my age, manage production and coating, lab tests and packing so that medicine may be delivered to hospitals across the country. They all respect my father. "He is fair and diplomatic," I overhear them say. "He always helps when we are short come month-end. Mr. B greets us by name, asks about our families." The same cannot be said about some of the other members of staff sitting up here on the top floor. It irks me, how we sit in our glass-walled offices paying little mind to the floor workers standing on their feet for hours on end.

They take the time to know about our lives. The shop stewards put together a collection for my wedding, and the women from dispatch brought a bunch of carnations when Mrs. Dreyer's husband passed away in November. Small kindnesses from big hearts. Jeanette, the runner between orders and dispatch, is my only connection to the after-hour lives of the floor workers. I look forward to her visits. She is chatty and forthcoming, bouncing on her heels whilst she waits for me to give the quality assurance go-ahead with a kiss of my red stamp. My block of ink cementing her department's day of work.

A while back, she told me that Eric from granulation was completing his degree. I have known Eric since I was a teenager. He was the one who taught me how to coat tablets so that they shone without showing so much as a hairline crack. I walked through the factory after Jeanette shared this titbit of information. Past registration where I had served my internship, down towards the hot ovens where he worked.

"Hey Uncle Eric," I said, "I heard about the studies. Let me know if you need anything." Eric turned to me, wiping the sweat off his forehead with the back of his sleeves. His smile radiant against the blue epoxy walls of the sauna like cubicle where he worked. He seemed startled to see me there, donned in my white coat and hairnet. A look of trepidation grazed his face for a fraction of a second.

"It's nothing Ms. B," he answered as I took in the fine yellow dust of the tablets that coated his mouth and lashes, "I'm studying just a smidgeon. But I've never missed a day of work. It's not a problem. I swear I can manage both." I high fived him as I headed back upstairs, my heart clenching as I pondered on the fact that even the wings to fly were contained in that granulation department that paid next month's rent.

Mrs. Seth

Tuesday

Mrs. Seth did her break of day breathing exercises whilst she massaged her hands over knees and wrists, trying to warm her joints with arnica oil. These days her body felt laden with mortar as she dragged herself out of bed, but she was never one to press the snooze button. As she opened curtains and made her way towards the kitchen, she ran a mental checklist of her tasks for the day. It was Tuesday. Mrs. Seth called her children every Tuesday, always at a predetermined time so as not to disturb their schedules. Mrs. Seth was all about equality. She even called Arlene who popped around at least twice a week and insisted the calls were unnecessary.

Mrs. Seth gave her children enough affection to show she cared, but not so much that they saw her as needy. Her mind wandered to Reuben while the kettle chugged its way to the boil, living his by-the-book lifestyle. Reuben who checked all the right boxes so that he was almost invisible in the population group marked 'normality'. Mrs. Seth was delighted that he had recently become a father.

Then there was Avril. Mrs. Seth let out a sigh at the thought of her middle child. Avril defied the norms where Reuben lay sideways to fit into them. She infuriated Mrs. Seth, but also filled her with pride. Avril would have been called a tough cookie back in Mrs. Seths' day but preferred to call herself *a badass-bitch* in twenty-first-century terms. She lived for her work and the perks that came with being at the top of her game. Flying first class, wearing watches that cost more than most people's cars. Mrs. Seth made a mental note to ask Avril to donate to the ladies' group's annual fundraiser when they spoke later that day.

Only Arlene still lived close to their family home in Umhlanga. She managed to spend time with her parents despite being a mother of three and the owner of an online boutique. Mrs. Seth knew that Arlene had seen her wince in pain at intervals that were beginning to resemble birthing contractions. She was always relieved when her daughter did not mention her failing body. Sympathy was not a trait she invited, especially from her family.

Rather, Arlene made herself useful by helping with their shopping and driving Mr. Seth to his doctor's appointments. Last week, she taught him how to withdraw money from the ATM at the mall. Mr. Seth had never resorted to life's mundanities until he retired. As director of his construction firm, he always had a secretary or foreman to run his errands. Mr. Seth said retirement was the worst thing that ever happened to him. From being the undisputed chairman to becoming another geriatric statistic.

Mrs. Seth was almost done stirring the oats. She added a tiny bit of butter and honey for taste. Their doctor always warned them about hidden fats and sugars that played havoc with their diabetes, but she thought that if they were going to die anyway, it may as well be with the memory of a meal that left you satisfied. Mrs. Seth was not into all the Keto and low-carb fads that some of her friends had fallen victim to.

Her husband of fifty-three years would come down for breakfast in a few minutes, dressed in his striped shirt and navy pants. The only item Mr. Seth had removed from his work attire was his tie. Trackpants and sweats were a sign of giving up is what he always said.

On that Tuesday, the phone rang as she stood up to brew their morning coffee in the French press. Mr. Seth had just entered the kitchen and she motioned for him to answer the phone from its place on the entrance hall server. "What in God's name Bea?" he complained, "It must be one of those darned life insurance salesmen again. Who else would call at this time of day?"

Mrs. Seth hardly gave him a glance. She had other things on her mind; the Philippa Gregory book she needed to get through for her book club meet on Friday and feeding the parrots in their aviary; so she did not notice when her husband gestured frantically because he could not speak to the person on the other end.

That was when they found out that Reuben was missing. That was when the sum of their seven decades bore the enormity of seven hundred. Mrs. Seth caught snippets of Avril's frantic voice. She pulled the handpiece from her husband. The phone trembled in his fingers as if it were a baby's rattle. Mrs. Seth listened as her daughter spoke. The blood drained from her face but all she said was, "We'll be there as soon as possible." She barely had time to return the telephone to its cradle when the garage motor hummed. Arlene had heard the news before them.

Wednesday

Mr. and Mrs. Seth are eating boxed cereal in their son's house. Mrs. Seth's joints have not ached since they arrived, despite forgetting to pack the arnica when they flung clothes into their bags the previous day. Mr. Seth has not smoothed down his white hair and it stands up like paintbrushes that were washed and left in the sun to dry. He is wearing Reuben's sweatshirt over his navy pants because they did not realise that the cold of Johannesburg would be so severe this time of May.

To the untrained eye, the elderly couple are composed by manner of receiving news of their son's disappearance. Only Arlene, who took the flight with them the previous afternoon, knows their fear. She takes in their nervous chatter, the out-of-place clothing, the bags under their eyes. Arlene knows that they are thinking what she is thinking. Nothing added up.

Fiona says that she and Reuben had been arguing. A new baby would do that. Reuben had been online the past three days trying to recover some of his clients' investments gone asunder since the markets crashed. Yes, he was stressed. No, not so much that he seemed any different. Yes, he was aloof. He was always aloof. They all knew that.

They had arrived amidst policemen and investigators. Friends coming over. Work colleagues calling frantically. Now the putty-stretched night has faded into morning. They sit, pretending to eat breakfast. The rasp in their voices and the insistent questions of, "Did you?" "Have they?" play a background chorus that leaves them no closer to the truth.

Arlene asks Fiona to recount the events of Monday evening. She comforts her sister-in-law and tries to manage the stream of people who have taken over her brother's home like an unwanted fungus. She has been trying to call Avril to find out when she will be there. Arlene feels as if she is a wound-up toy whose springs are about to pop. The strain of keeping it together whilst watching over their parents as they walked around as if the house had been sucked of oxygen, fielding incessant calls from her children who kept enquiring when she would be back, trying to help Fiona with the baby, her brother, missing. Gone. It was all too much.

Arlene gazes at baby Charlotte sucking with delight on a biscuit in her highchair. She takes in her sister-in-law, Fiona who tries to compose herself between sobs and sputters. Arlene prays for Reuben's safety. She needs Avril to come soon. Surely work could not be more important than family right now.

Nothing added up. The fact that Reuben left without his cell phone. The fact that there were no signs of a scuffle on his running route. His mysterious deleted email address. There was no body to be found despite the extensive search. The sergeant looked uncomfortable when he said that this could be a good or a terrible sign. Fiona whimpered when she heard his statement, her hands scrunching into her temples.

Saturday

Mrs. Seth is in the study looking through Reuben's albums. She touches her chest where it constricts as she takes in the life of a stranger chronicled between the sheets of cellophane. She thinks back on Reuben's younger days. His quiet presence that always brought calm to their home. How could four decades have blurred into obligated calls and annual visits?

There has been no news since Wednesday. Each day has become twenty-four hours of nervous twitching, eating for the sake of it, exploring leads, crawling down every clue in a feeble attempt to make headway. Every minute is a step further away. Mrs. Seth wishes she could go for a walk, but the streets here do not feel safe. She has not slept in days. Her son's townhouse seems empty, despite the fact that they are all cramped now that Fiona's parents have arrived.

She looks at her husband. His face a mirror of her feelings. Mr. Seth has spent the past few days trying to navigate Reuben's computer. Sitting by helplessly would surely stop his already fragile heart. They are both trapped between angst and the need to flee. The investigators tell them that finding a missing person becomes more difficult after seventy-two hours, but Mrs. Seth holds on to the strength of her persistence now. She goes so far as to tell Arlene to return home. "Your children need you. Your father and I will be here until Reuben's return."

"Let's not give up." She says to anyone who will listen. Mrs. Seth knows Fiona grows edgy when she uses this school Ma'am voice. Now she fidgets with the albums, moving evidence of Reuben's adult life in the hopes of drawing him closer. It is almost midday when the sentiment settles over her. A steadfastness she cannot articulate, but her bones know. The pesky arthritis comes in handy for once. Mellowed autumn sun streams through the wooden blinds in the study, basking the room in

inexplicable radiance. Mrs. Seth could almost describe this moment as peaceful. She walks over to Mr. Seth and takes his hand in hers. They have not stood that way in years.

Tuesday

Fiona insists they hold a Wake for Reuben even though Mrs. Seth is against it. She sits through the service with her eyes focused on the bench in front of her. She cannot understand her husband's tears, nor her daughters' resigned expressions when people offer their condolences. Mrs. Seth tries to tell them that Reuben's body has not yet been found.

"I am sure he will return once he sorts out his affairs," she says to Mr. Seth when they are on the flight back home later that evening. She will wait close to the phone every Tuesday until he does.

Legacy

My daughter, my other daughter who has just turned thirteen, is sitting on my lap. She is heavy now that puberty has started fiddling with her bones, yet I hold on to her.

I know this is not fair to her, but she plugs the holes in this silent room.

It seems a lifetime ago, though it was just last Thursday when she sat with me, recoiling from the flaming word balls that escaped her older sister's lips.

I tell my daughter, the one sitting on my lap, that I was only trying to protect her sister from a broken heart.

Even so, I wonder how many of the labels have stuck to her young frame – bigot, hypocrite, prejudice. Will she too lay me down in a coffin of labels as I did to my own mother so many years ago?

For the moment she is mourning with me, looking at the empty cupboards unpacked with the fury of storms. We sit like that, in that room screaming with stillness, and I think about her sister.

My daughter who walked away.

The way that she played with a tendril of her hair, looped it around her index finger or placed the edges in her mouth and sucked on it like sherbet. It isn't as if the bigger details linger much. It's in the fragmentary reasons she chose to take her belongings and leave.

Small thorns prick harder because you can't take them out.

I remember the way her cheeks shone after a hockey match and the way she rocked on her ankles in the dress I sewed for her first school dance. I think back to that day at the grocery store when she was ten, still buttery with childhood. The smile she offered when she parted with her last bit of allowance so that the old man counting his change could pay for his half-loaf of white bread and carton of milk.

All the kindnesses she pulled out of her heart from the time she was a little girl barely old enough to peer over the kitchen counter to help while I cooked dinner.

I tell my daughter, the one sitting on my lap, "Your sister will be home soon."

I bring her pillow close to my nose and inhale her scent lingering on the linen. There, on the floor, a pair of slippers still indented with the shape of her toes.

The Dancer

Meghan maintained her weight at forty-eight kilograms, perfect for her height of one point six metres. Her diet was controlled with military precision. Only lean protein trimmed of extra fat and strictly green, red and yellow vegetables. Discipline. Some nights when she was out partying and the dizzying city lights thrummed in her brain, Meghan's guard slipped and she got drunk on the beer her friends managed to hustle off their older brothers. Those nights she would swallow what the boys gave her, a cupcake in three bites or close her eyes as the fudgy goo of a brownie slid down her throat. Later those nights she would flip her brown curls over the toilet bowl and stick her fingers deep into the back of her mouth to expel the gracelessness. By morning her daily weigh-ins hardly showed indiscretion.

She put on her first tutu when she was barely out of diapers. Even at that age, with her skin folding over chubby toddler thighs, Meghan stood to form, twirled with the fluidity of water. Her mother beamed when she arched her back and her neck bowed, long and delicate. What luck that her nose was narrow, her forehead sculpted with the grace of Nefertiti. Meghan's name would surely glow in lights.

Meghan's mother had been a dancer too, once upon a lifetime ago. A natural talent people say. One who promised to make lead dancer before her lights dimmed on the night she stripped for the married pianist and lay her body over the lacquered piano, unclasped her bra and shimmied out of her virginity. The young woman whose corset pulled together her barely-out-of-teenage frame, thin enough to pirouette and plié and fly, left pregnant and alone at barely seventeen.

They survived. The mother restricting herself to life as a receptionist when her family threw her out. Her years of dance practice proved to be a great asset then. She married well. Home executive to the divorced director caught cheating with the personal assistant- an ex-dancer apparently. He was a decent bloke. Took care of the baby like one of his own, bought them the three-bedroom townhouse near a local private school. A cherry red Mini Copper to keep her occupied. The mother said they lucked out. "Make your own way baby. Life doesn't wait for runts." That was what she said when the girl asked who her real dad was.

Meghan learnt to pirouette when she was four. Her mother became the attentive stay-at-home helicopter who drove her only daughter from one activity to another or spent the afternoons drinking wine with other women whose executive husbands were busy closing deals. Model homemakers who swiped their cards at the local smoothie bar and walked around in gym tights to show off their lithe bodies. They hovered over children allergic to nuts and wheat and lactose. All of them believing their child was talented enough to join the national cricket team or become the next lead dancer in *The National Ballet*.

In her teen years, Meghan's body narrowed and curved to the dancer's scalpel. Her mother's features giving her an edge with the boys. "She's hot baby," was something the boys agreed upon with overwhelming consensus. On stage, why on stage, she became fire. Her legs lifted so that she

could almost take off in defined arabesque. She always landed in perfect fourth position in Chassé, her arched back emitting hypnotic energy that had onlookers transfixed. Most fathers took time off their schedules to attend school concerts when she was on the program. Her mother beamed at the girl modelled on her dreams.

She was golden then. An all-round shining star. She practiced with the diligence of someone schooled in martial arts. It pulled at her. When she was alone and had to bandage her feet, take an Advil to numb the throbbing of her bleeding heels. Meghan, top of her class. Meghan, school prefect. Meghan, who still found time for weekend parties where they snuck in beer and boys and weed. She danced, ate the measured meals, threw her head over the toilet bowl to stay on her A-game.

Order of His World

Dimitri stands at the window looking out onto lights that signal the end of day in nameless buildings across the city. A horn honks. Somewhere an irate driver shouts obscenities. The ebb and flow of normality is a reminder of his two worlds set apart. Here in this darkened room the only thing that matters is the pursuit of desire. No more a transaction than any other he would make in business. The exchange of money for services rendered.

Making love is a term he reserves for his wife. She is the one he shares more than just his body with. In this room devoid of character, she does not exist. In this place it is only the darkness that soothes him. Sometimes you don't want the light, because the light shows you things you don't want to see. He takes a drag of his cigarette, exhales and watches as the outline of smoke disappears into the shadows. Soon the man would come. The thought makes him hard.

He pays for sex. This act of sex. He does not have the time nor the inclination to deal with forming a relationship for this part of himself nor the mess that comes with it. The instructions are clear.
Young man. Good looking. Race irrelevant. Face unshaven. Lean. Thursday evenings at 19h00 sharp. One hour.

Everything about Dimitri Cirillo is calculated. From the calories he consumes each day, to the types of cars he drives. Bentley Coupe for meetings, Range Rover for family. His tailor-made suits for work. Armani, black only, for events. Hilfiger chinos on Sundays. He knows he yields power. Money buys control. Looks cement said control. He is tall and muscular, with a jaw set just hard enough for men to take him seriously. When he smiles, his dimples crease like fingerprints of the Gods, showing off cheekbones that make women instantly drop their guard, their eyes glazing over. Dimitri uses this presence to command. The same way he does in this room each Thursday.

A knock at the door breaks the silence. Silas, his trusted chauffeur and bodyguard for over twenty years, would have patted him down and checked him out by now. He sometimes wonders what Silas thinks about these trysts. He knows he would have the discretion not to ask.

A man, just shedding the roundness of boyhood enters the room. He is exquisite. Dimitri notes the moment of hesitation as his eyes adjust to the dimmed light before he glimpses the figure now seated in the armchair. Dimitri sits with his legs crossed, arms draped languidly across the backrest.

"Umm Good Evening Sir."

Dimitri tips his head and stands up, noting with satisfaction that he is at least a head taller than the escort.

"Take off your clothes. Then take off mine." His voice is soft, playful in this moment. The young man undresses with deliberate movements. His eyes meet Dimitri's through hooded lashes. He bites his lower lip as he unbuttons his jeans, hips rotating in a move he hasn't quite mastered. A sudden pause as he checks himself. Naked now, the young man walks towards him. He has a fluidity, a felineness about him. Dimitri thinks of a leopard whose shoulder blades break through taut muscle.

He takes in the hard buttocks, clenching to a concave just above the young man's lower back, lifting slightly with each stride. Hip-bones rounded just enough to accentuate the 'V' leading down to the kind of dick that you wanted to put in your mouth.

The room is charged, electric. Dimitri slips off the masks of husband, father, brother, businessman to become his essence – the unwanted remains of a pimple-faced teenager, scrawny and afraid, staring at the hair in his uncle's armpits as he was forced to bend over, fucked until his anus felt pricked by a thousand needles.

He could not say when the obsession, the hard-on for that armpit smelling of deodorant and sweat became a raw sexual need. All he knows is that he feeds off it to function, so that he can go home and make love to his wife, kiss her mouth, drown in her breasts and put together the order of his world.

The young man stands close to him now. He can smell his cologne; the breath mint he must have popped just before he came in. He allows himself to be undressed. To have his skin tasted by a tongue practised in the art of fucking- twirling- licking. Feline indeed. He holds the young man at the waist, pushing him to his knees. Moans as fingers, hands, mouth are around his dick, his testicles, the vein between. The urgency grows. Dimitri is almost rough when he leads them towards the bed. "On your back" he growls, his voice unfamiliar to his ears. There are condoms on the bedside table and the escort reaches for one. "That won't be necessary. Trust me." The young man stiffens, caught between fear and duty. For an instant, Dimitri hates himself.

Gentler now, he strokes the young body from foot to torso, then lifts the boy's arm. He bends his face deep into skin glistening in the dark room and inhales deeply. The earth-scented musk of armpit fur fills his nostrils. He opens his mouth, licks the hollow between the young man's pecs and biceps. A familiar heat blazes in his groin as he shifts into place. He wedges his dick deep into that welcome cave closing the man's arm over it with one sweeping movement. He thrusts hard. The armpit is just moist enough not to need any lube. Eyes closed, Dimitri tilts his head, back arching in want. He clenches, pushing back, growing harder with each plunge until he feels that desperate surge of cum.

A look of bewilderment flickers through the young man's brown eyes for a fraction of a second before it is replaced by blank composure. Dimitri takes in the hair knotted with semen. A dribble of sticky cum drops onto the bed sheet below.

Looking Back

I bore my secret through music accolades. The white kids would never know of a father's love shared between two families nor our mother's unfailing compliance to Shari'ah law. At social gatherings of brown people like us, who understood but did not quite accept, ours was the family who won weekly awards of pitiful glances from aunties searching for gossip. Having a father copied and pasted between two wives when you are the one living between Western and Indian culture is like trying to use a fine-tooth comb through waves amidst colliding oceans.

Sharing a father means vying for attention. Dinner becomes a brick in your throat every other evening, wondering what he is eating with his new family. Worse still, was the taste of grit left in your mouth on the nights he spent at your house. Bricks heavy and indigestible when he caressed your mother's shoulder as if he had not just split your world in two with another ring on his married finger.

My brother was older than me by a few years. We would sit in our rooms with ears burning as we heard our mother muffle her tears with a pillowcase on those nights our father spent at the second wife's house. Other times, we'd share glances as she sat for hours watching reality shows, eating popcorn or slabs of chocolate and salted chips to disguise the bitter taste of rejection. We sometimes joked about having a roster father. It was one of those cover-your-deep-gash-with-an-Elastoplast kind of jokes. The pus still filled under the bandage.

We pretended not to see the effort my mother made when our father visited. We pumped up the volume of our Rap or Trap or Dub to close off parents who shut the bedroom door. Truth be told, we despised it when he was there. My brother, the soldier. I, the Muslim girl who wore pain like the mantle of the flowing cloaks that covered her curves. Team Brother and Sister who sealed off the pain of a home turned inside out.

My brother was my rock. He filled the void at piano concerts when the second wife had a birthday, and our father was, yet again, "unable to attend". He was the one who held me when I turned my face towards the sun looking for unanswered prayers and found shadows instead. My brother was my person.

I cannot recollect when, during that time of being family number one and slowly wilting into yesterday's salad, things began to fall apart. I hardly recall when I drew the girl mantle more securely as my armour and failed to notice the slide of my brother's soldier uniform. He was one of those all-rounders. Captain of every sports team. Voted most likely to succeed. He had these broad shoulders and chiselled features that were just settling into manhood. In my memories, he always wears a lopsided smile. The kind that made people fall over themselves to please him.

That brother got lost. I do not know when he melted nor why I always assumed he would never let go of the chance to hold our father's law firm in his hands. All I know is that being caught midway between cultures is like trying to create the perfect Liger or Dolly the Sheep. Coding often gets jilted in the fiddling, and a boy may find himself on the streets, sitting amongst curls of smoke, playing with the forgotten ones.

Amongst the stoned, there is no tug where cultural norms make shared fathers acceptable. There is no snap of heartstrings pulled too taut. Between the spaces, tremors take over and reality shifts. The brother you once loved more than anything in the world lies shot up, sniffed in, sinking under. He takes shelter in a corrugated house where the wind makes music with the sheets that hold his belongings together.

I recall that our father beat him to stay home, then dragged him to rehab when we found him in a police cell one Saturday night. My brother returned from rehab looking emaciated, his arms and legs withered as if the drugs were sucking the marrow out of them. That was when the open war against my father began. All those years of turning the bottle cap finally imploded one evening when their splittle-flying rages shook the walls of our house. My mother and I pleaded with him as he grabbed his coat and walked through the door. Only I could see the invisible sign that read 'casualty of shared family'. It was pasted on his back as he walked into the night.

Mother searched for him through the yellowed city streets hoping to find him beyond the smog. She would drive night after night, her hands clenched around the steering wheel, murmuring all those prayers that were normally shelved in the cupboard and taken out during Ramadhan, I sometimes went with, often in pyjamas with my normally slick hair dishevelled. On those futile searches, I would try to forget that home sat smug in suburbs so unlike the inner city where young men, my brother amongst them, trolled the pavements like ghosts. Mother would stop the car once in a while. She would fling her door open and accost young men with legs slender as rain in the hopes they belonged to the face we loved. We played that game for years. Game. Set. Game. Set. Until all of us lost the match.

I was leaving Starbucks with a group of friends a while back when I heard a voice. It felt like an echo from long ago. He asked for small change and I dropped my head before our eyes could meet. I stole a glance at him though. His once beautiful body, now wasted. Pallid skin painted over features that once imprinted our genes. My friends told him to "Fuck Off" as we strolled toward the mall.

An invisible string pulled my head back a few steps later. I remember that his gaze burned a yellow flame in my throat. He winked at me then, lifted his hand as if trying to shield the sun. Then he turned and walked away.

The Proposition

A clear sky belies the winter chill that makes Natasha shiver. She opens her car window, exhales and watches the smoke from her cigarette disappear. A dense puff of white at first, then spreading its fingers to become one with the air. It makes her reminisce about her childhood when dreams were so real, she could reach out and touch them. Long before the magic fanned out and withered away to adulthood with all its complexities. She could hardly face the day ahead.

Natasha takes another long drag then stubs out the Marlboro. She grabs her bag and locks the new car. Another gift she could not refuse due to its usefulness. She whispers a silent affirmation about being strong enough before she enters the office, greeting Kiara with an expressionless hello. Kiara raises her eyebrows, giving Natasha the side-eye, slowing her incessant bubble-gum chewing as if her unspoken words were having a battle between her brain and articulation. It was hard to keep a secret at the office and Natasha knew they had all found out over the weekend. She steels herself. If Kiara, with the streaks of purple in her hair, was surprised by anything, then the rest of them would be merciless.

As it happens, the common area, normally abuzz with fingers tapping on keyboards and phones chirping, people swivelling on chairs or scrolling across smartphones pretending to be engrossed in spreadsheets, is empty. *Crap, it's worse than I thought*, Natasha admonishes herself as she walks to her desk and takes in the canopy of trees in the road beyond.

If they were to film a documentary on the office, Natasha would describe herself as the non-descript extra. She is comfortable that her looks would not win any modelling contract. Then again, every once in a while, fate pokes a finger and fiddles with the lives of even the most ordinary of people. In Natasha's case, a few months was all it took. A simple transaction that bumped her up from wilting wallflower to lead actress in the office script.

Beyond her cubicle, her co-workers start filing in. Most of them are looking straight ahead as if making eye contact would make them complicit in the deed. Sandra sits down first. She shakes her head and lets out an audible grunt through her nose. Her fingers begin tapping at the keyboard in front of her with a ferocity that matches her already bulbous features. Then Khadija and Seema, Kelvin and Pam walk in. None of them greet or acknowledge her. She should have known this would happen. Natasha wishes she could walk over to them, spin their rotating chairs and beg for an audience. She was normally the peacemaker of their department, but this time every finger pointed in her direction. Was it that unthinkable? To be faced with a new possibility and take it? *Thank goodness we aren't in sales* she thinks as she feels the energy in the room become weighted with unspoken accusations. *Those guys would have shredded me by now.*

She rubs at the acne spots that have flared up these past few weeks. Her thoughts a volley that tangles at the base of her skull, making her head throb. Try as she might to make sense of her decision, Natasha knows the brazenness of the consequences would be loathsome to most. The young girl with puffed dreams who would never have foreseen becoming wife number two. An accomplice to polygamy in a world so far removed from the twenty-first-century feminist she

considered herself before everything fell apart. She could hardly believe it herself, the reasons she agreed to marry Mr. Sadek.

The unfolding happened before she could catch herself. Mr. Sadek was there when the letters arrived from the lawyers. As her employer, he agreed to look over the folder of Natasha's unfortunate circumstances. Legal documents in yellow and red that oozed out the bulging file like a sore turned septic. The possibility of losing everything. Dignity becomes a small price to pay when you are under water.

Mr. Sadek had been kind during that time. He even tried to help her get legal aid – a wasted exercise. Then, when they were working on the year-end financials late one evening, he looked her way and asked if things were better at home. Her drawn cheeks and the frown lines permanently furrowed on the sides of her brow were enough of an answer. That was when he came up with the proposition. He said he had given it a great deal of thought, but his tone remained as checked as another line in the ledgers strewn on the worktable. "She says I can take another wife. Someone who will not upstage her. I don't want to be unfaithful, you know. But perhaps this will serve both of us." Natasha felt the edges of the boardroom move closer, the walls shrieking as if they could not believe what they had heard.

Mr. Sadek was older than her father. With his thick, hairy forearms and sack-of-oranges belly that hung over the front of his polyester pants, he was definitely not the suave type of boss who would get a lead role if they were to film a documentary on their office. Although, as one of the head accountants, Natasha knew that serious money often came disguised in paper bags.

His wife was crippled with multiple sclerosis he said, leaning forward to look at Natasha so that their elbows grazed. Mr. Sadek spoke about his loneliness now that his children had emigrated. The pressures of taking care of a business and caring for a partner fading as the disease turned her muscles to putty. "Give it some thought Natasha. There's no pressure, but I think this could be a solution for both of us. Besides, you could have a life of comfort you know. I don't expect more than companionship, but I shall take care of you, I promise you that." Natasha remembers she stared ahead, wondering how her life seemed so filled with meandering paths.

In her part of town, houses stood separated by low precast walls that looked like wagon wheels, and children sat snotty nosed on dirt lawns. Natasha's mother lay sinking underneath a pile of bills and legal notices after her father's estate revealed he had made one too many fruitless investments during his life of get rich quick schemes. The fatal one being the night he looked towards the horizon and kicked the chair in his bathroom. As if freedom could be found between the glass cubicle of the shower and the basin where he left his cowardly note.

At the time of Mr. Sadek's proposition, Natasha had hurried out of the boardroom to throw up. She felt certain she would resign but the incessant calls from lawyers, more yellow stamped bills with notices of companies her father had registered in hers and her mother's names, increased in fervour. It was not those mounting debts nor the prospect of moving in with Aunt Julie and her tobacco-smelling home that made her knock at Mr. Sadek's office door. Rather, Natasha had one too many sleepless nights wondering what the cost of survival was, and anything was better than going

to jail. In that corner office, where Mr. Sadek swivelled his leather chair and smiled at her kindly from behind his oak desk, Natasha nodded her head in agreement and watched the life she once envisioned seep into the air, out under Mr. Sadek's office door.

A flurry of email notifications brings her back to the moment. She takes in her co-workers, the familiar sound of the generator humming in tune to the daily sounds of the office. If they were to film a documentary, Sandra's not-so-quiet whispers would definitely be caught on camera. Followed by Kelvin's "Um-Humm's". Kelvin always did have the juiciest squeeze of office gossip. When she first started, Natasha enjoyed hearing his running commentary on Khadija's ex-boyfriend who turned out to be a drug pusher and Kiara's battles with online porn. She was no longer one of them. How foolish to have come today. A frugal grappling at a sense of normality after her hasty nikah the Friday before. That was what Mr. Sadek called the marriage ceremony. He said she would have to learn about Islam now that she was his wife. She was surprised by this, though he barely noticed as he welcomed her to his bed.

Natasha turns to her computer one final time. A loving goodbye before she begins her life as second wife. She opens her mail, trying to prioritise folders so that her replacement will find all the necessary accounts. Then, as if she realises that when puffs of smoke dissipate, they also let you see more of the sky, she searches for the pictures from the estate agent. Natasha confirms that she will be at the townhouse the following day. Mr. Sadek, Ahmed, as he insists Natasha call him, graciously put the title deed in her name. He had settled some of her debts, and paid her mother's rent for the next six months without so much as flinching. Natasha knows she will have to honour her side of the transaction by attending to his wife's weekly shopping and grooming. All decent propositions were only valued by their return on investment.

The Incubus Effect

She wants this journey. Needs it to escape the cataclysmic meeting of carnality and spirit that consume her. Hers is a life where realms collide. Separated by fractures so fine a hair could barely pass through. She has tried weed, ecstasy, shrooms, teetering on the borders of release until she felt she would become a junkie. Now this.

The Wiccans promise to free the mind and the body from past trauma. How their hand-drawn leaflet popped up in her mailbox she would never know. Perhaps she sent off a trippy vibe on wavelengths that reached them. It could be that the one who visited her, visited them too. Her life has shown her that anything - everything is possible.

On the day of her supposed curing, the oldest of the three Wiccans, with folds of skin not quite fitting her rounded face, leads her towards the place of ritual. White painted rocks are laid out in a circle. All around them candle flames cast dancing shadows on the trees beyond. She sits cross-legged, enveloped in a cocoon of sandalwood and myrrh. The wind beckons to the coming night.

The women bring out a hollow drum. They beat to a rhythm matching her heartbeat, building gradually to a chant. A hum of slow, long vowels in tongues ancient as grain. They wave at her to join in. Encourage her to settle the nerves that are fighting desperately to hold her being in place. He is near. She can feel his presence.

Someone hands her the vial of Ayahuasca. Her trip to what? Absolution? Healing? The thick brown liquid burns her tongue. At once bitter, strong, salty, yeasty. It reminds her of whiskey left too long in the sun. She gags as a rush of saliva springs from the back of her mouth.

"Hold it in," one of the Wiccans says, rubbing the back of her hand, giving the knuckles a calm squeeze. "Let it be." She shakes her head from side to side, but the taste is too vile. Thick bile escapes her throat forming a pool of vomit on the ground next to her. She tries again. This time the liquid goes down. One sip. Two. A second cup in one quick gulp. The world turns into a Fibonacci spiral spinning towards the ether.

A step further and she is standing in the shadows of a mountain. The air about her crisp with the smell of sea salt. It prickles at her nose, her skin. She drifts between dimensions. Her hearing heightened. The crackle of leaves becomes a deafening roar. As if footsteps have crushed them when they were meant to rest. Her breathing grows rapid. The trees call her name. She turns toward them. The landscape changes, dissolving like smudged watercolour that disappears into her mouth. It tastes of sticky mud. She closes her eyes and falls further.

Now she is sixteen again, standing alone in fields on the farm. Golden wheat stretches as far as she can see. To her right the horses are skittish. They neigh in mourning as her grandfather is led to the hospital to die. She can smell the olive soap in her hair just as it was that day. Her womanhood still new, untouched, bursts through a summer dress sizes too small and a thigh-length too short.

Time shifts. The hallucinogen scratches deeper and she is back in the present. She smells him as she did all those years ago when she was left alone on the farm and he came to her. The scent of rawness. Musk that has become her fix through the years. Today, he takes his human form. A male specimen put together in artful precision. She pulls at the tendrils of her mind to run back to the safety of the Wiccans even as her feet step towards him.

He draws her into his arms. Runs borrowed fingers through her hair, down her back, up again to cusp her breast. His eyes so blue they burn like gas flames in this human form. So different from the nights where he sees beyond her, when his pupils disappear, and the white sockets reflect the emptiness within. She sees those eyes in every man she uses to forget her need for him.

He leans in and puts his mouth on hers. His mouth should taste of the darkness, of the place where he exists, but it is grass and salt and air. She is drowning, searching for his tongue, pulls it in as she surrenders to the freedom beyond. He rips the tiny buttons of her dress. Now his tongue moves down, slow, sensual. Past her neck, past the bone at her clavicle towards the hardened nipple. He tugs hard, teeth grazing, feeding until her pain bursts with desire. His hands caress her legs. Up from her thighs to the wetness between. He probes with his fingers while his tongue plays across her skin finding her waist, her belly button. She cries out as a tremor runs through her.

The sound is primal. It speaks of the collision of planets, times, forms. She reaches for him, closes her hand over the hardness that pushes through blue jeans he may have worn hundreds of years ago. When it is over, he looks at her as if he alone knows what she is. Then, with the slightest of nods, he retreats to the beyond.

My Husband's Daughter

My husband has turned to stone. He is as inanimate as the couch he is currently occupying. These past few weeks we've been doing the polite stranger tango. One step aside every time our paths cross. It's no wonder that the ovulation tracker on my phone has resigned itself to a flatline come day twenty-eight of my cycle. I cannot understand where this statue that has replaced the man I know so well comes from.

We're sitting on separate sofas and one of those art movies that we watch every Friday is flicking by. "I've always wanted a daughter," the woman on the screen says. I steal a glance at him. This is his cue. We have been trying for a few months now that the boys have reached the fairly easy stage between childhood and adolescence. I believe someone coined the phrase 'tweens'. Aside from our sons, the mortgage is finally sailing in calm waters and we are both secure enough in our professions after years of working end to end. The woman on the screen is at the airport, she is going to save the world and adopt a little girl. My desire for a daughter seems so insignificant by comparison. Not that I am concentrating on the movie. My focus is still on the man I married a lifetime ago. He has not moved. I think how some movies take women to places men cannot follow.

"Do you want to talk about anything?" I ask him. "You've been so distant lately."

My husband exhales and makes eye contact. I know that look. It is the magnetic field of souls connecting. He wore it on the day we said our vows and when I had the car accident that left me in a cast for over six months.

"She's fifteen," he says. "My daughter. Her name's Leah." He does not flinch when he says this. He simply states it in the same matter-of-fact tone he would use for something like, "I'm having chicken salad." I do not know if it is this reserve, or the sledgehammer that has just pounded a gaping hole in my atmosphere, but I feel the room spin.

Our film, the one playing in real-time, pauses. On the screen, the woman staves off an army. I don't know why I make a mental note to remember the name of the movie, *Woman at War*. I am sure I shall never know how it ends. We sit like this for what seems an eternity. My writer's mind is hit by a hurricane. I have images of chapters being ripped out, sheets of paper flying in the wind, lies twirling so that they fly off the pages. Until there is nothing left except blank canvas.

My husband is first to break our shield of silence. "It was just before you and I met. Yasmin never told me. I found out from her mother a few weeks after the funeral." He sighs then, runs his fingers through his hair as he sometimes does when he's nervous. "Apparently Yasmin didn't want me to know. All those years. How could she have kept my daughter away from me for fifteen fucking years?"

I am blinded in that moment. The images on the television become jagged flashes of light and sound. "What? How? Where is the child now?" I ask, then stop and swallow the surreal news that hits me. It seems a slap in the face that my longing for a daughter would be given to my husband by his first love. I steel myself, trying to phrase my barrage of questions in a way that does not show my frenzy.

“How did her mother tell you? Did Yasmin remarry? How come your mother never found out? None of this makes sense.”

My husband winces. He sits down. Puts his head in his hands.

Yasmin was my husband’s first serious relationship. I found out years after we met that they were almost engaged. Almost. They were the kind of couple one would find in those “Who’s who” sections of the tabloids. My mother-in-law says Yasmin’s name with the same reverence she holds for Lady Di That always twists a nail in my heel, the fact that I was neither as glamorous nor refined in the old woman’s opinion. Though, after all these years of being a devoted wife to her son, we have reached an amicable middle ground. I have come to learn that reliability generally bodes well for long term stability. “Toyota’s do not depreciate as quickly,” I tell my sister when we bring up our husbands’ single days.

When my husband and I first met, my insecurities about Yasmin felt like running the hundred-metre hurdle, and I have never been a sportswoman. I had sleepless nights trying to imagine how my body compared to hers. She was plastered over so many magazine spreads that it was difficult not to make that comparison. Then she disappeared. There were rumours she had moved to be with her latest lover, a photojournalist like my husband. Though one who had made front-page news through a series of images taken in Rwanda.

How long ago that seems. We are different people now. The headlights from our mid-twenties, dimming to low as we drive down the quiet lane of domesticity. We heard Yasmin had returned earlier in the year. I hardly gave her a second thought when I first heard the news. A month ago though, my husband received a call from one of their mutual acquaintances. Yasmin had contracted Tuberculosis. It was diagnosed too late. I encouraged him to pay his respects at the funeral. I suppose an innate part of me hoped that his saying goodbye would close the doors to my insecurities. In hindsight, I should have let him stay home

My husband is standing now. He walks to the kitchen. I hear the clink of glasses and the tap running as he pours a glass of water. When he returns to the living room, his face and hair are splashed. He offers me a sip of water before taking a seat next to me. His smell, the feel of his body’s warmth next to mine are as familiar to me as my own limbs, but I have never felt this removed from him. I keep recalling this image I once saw. It was early on in our relationship, and I found a photograph tucked under the glass top of my mother-in-law’s dresser. In the picture, Yasmin and my husband are frozen in time. His arm is placed around her shoulder and they are both smiling into the camera. Yasmin’s hair blowing to one side, her skirt catching the reflection of the sun so that it is slightly transparent.

“Yasmin and I didn’t end things well. I wasn’t ready to settle down then. I swear I had no idea. I mean I’m furious that she kept her away from me all these years. The worst is that I’ll never know why she chose not to let me share in my daughter’s life. It all feels so unfair.”

He talks then, tells me that Yasmin's mother, Julie had asked to meet him. The girl was with her for the moment. She told him that Yasmin had been an excellent mother. She had raised the child alone. My husband chokes on his words when he said that the girl thought her father was dead.

"Have you seen her?" I ask my husband. "The girl. Does your mother know? What happened to Adrian? Did she not marry him when he returned from Rwanda?"

My questions are becoming a zipper shutting us in. He shakes his head. "I asked to meet, but Julie says it's too soon. I mean the girl, my daughter, has just lost her mother. I have to respect that" He turns to look at me. I notice how the red veins in his eyes look like rivers of sadness against his brown pupils. "I think things with Adrian ended quite soon after Yasmin moved. Hardly anyone knows what she'd been doing all these years. I've called Julie so many times, but she keeps putting me off. Tell me what to do Fay." My husband's voice is pinched, rising as his emotions get the better of him.

I reach for the remote and turn off the television. When it comes to important decisions, I always take the lead. I refuse to do so now. "Why didn't you tell me?"

"I wanted to. I swear. I tried so many times. It's just that this could change everything Fay. I can't lose you. I can't lose the boys. But she is my blood. It's just that, I feel she is my daughter you know."

And I did know. I did not like it, but I understood. I wonder if the girl looks like her mother. It dawns on me that my husband has to relearn a new set of rules. Perhaps it would have been different if Yasmin were alive. She isn't though, and I find myself saying the unthinkable. "I think you should meet her as soon as possible. In fact, we could all meet her when she's ready."

With that, I leave my place on the couch and walk to our bedroom to look for the birth control pills.

Hail the Strong

My youngest years are jumbled in my mind. I know I had rheumatic fever. I am told I was almost dead. I remember dimmed rooms and hushed voices. My parents blamed my sister Shirley for my illness. Shirley had a solid hand fuelled by a lightning temper and I was often her target. Truth be told, the illness was most likely caused by the conditions in Sophiatown at the time. We lived like stacked bricks in those dusty streets at the hems of Johannesburg and a streptococcus infection of the throat, left to fester, would probably have gone unnoticed. Much the way our teeth decayed, and our bellies screamed of hunger.

That fever, with its blazing joints. Its fire that mapped plum rivers on my skin, made my nose drip with sticky copper blood. My mother once told me that as my body was ravaged, my mind became my getaway. I gobbled books honeyed with tales of talking lions and chocolate factories. When there was nothing to read, I penned nonsensical stories in the rickety bed I shared with Shirley. Words I managed to catch between my fingers so that they filled the spaces on the sheets my mother tried to disinfect with blue soap.

Nature is a keen mistress. She lingered and whispered in the shadows of *Old Strep* until I bore the resemblance of a runt next to Shirley's roundness. Then my father died. My father who was also my person. He would sponge me during nights of sweat delirium, sing and play his Chuck Berry or Elvis records to distract me. His voice, a clean baritone. I wished he had taken me with him, but nature had other plans. She seemed to have taken her fill at our home. Without signal she relented. I lived.

I turned fifteen in 1968. People started calling me pretty and I liked it. Once the rheumatic fever was doused, my body began a new spring. My legs lengthened to those of a gazelle, accentuating blossoming hips and a tummy caved between a slender waist. My breasts rounded towards nipples that blushed through the crimplene dresses we wore to the bioscope.

1968 was also the year that my older sister Grace, gifted with a beauty that made men weak and women green, had her first baby. My mother asked Shirley and me to go and live with her for her confinement. Shirley, in her ever Shirley way, flat out refused. She was not going to play nurse when she had all the boys in the neighbourhood nursing on her. I recall she was into Damien or was it Paul or David at that time. Shirley gave it good, and they took it whenever they could. Her solid hand of childhood had turned into a concrete resolve in her teen years, so I went alone. Ever the obedient girl.

Unlike Shirley and I, Grace's fate was measured in cups that equalled her fine features. My mother sheltered her as if she were a rare gem. Beauty, it seemed, was the prize to our family's rising out of poorness. She was married off to Graeme at eighteen.

Smooth Graeme, the star of our community. The books in which I lost myself featured his kind. I could never understand how everyone bent to his will. Bowed to the abracadabra he showed them through a quick play of the tongue. A flash of his cash.

Grace and I bathed little Sue the first night I stayed over. We had the radio switched on, and I sang along. The Beatles' *Hey Jude* pulsed in my head. Paul McCartney crooning not to be afraid. I still recall the glow that descended around mum and baby as they settled down, the room perfumed with powder and breast milk.

I went to bed thinking of all the boys who made my eyes dance. My hands instinctively touching the flatness of my tummy in wonder of what could grow inside one day. I lay in the spare room, dreaming of my future, humming *Hey Jude* until sleep came.

It was in those hours between stillness and light when the door yawned a creak. I sat up with a start, my vision unaccustomed to the strange bedroom. I heard him exhale before I saw the silhouette of his shoulders, broad against the doorframe. All I caught was a glimmer of his eyes as the light from a gap in the curtain made them spark like a flashlight as he stepped into my room. "Is Gracie okay?" I asked, whilst every nerve ending in my body shrieked.

"Shhh..." he whispered. His shadow putting its weight on the bed. "My sweet little Elaine. Beautiful girl. I am in agony. You know I need you, right?" His voice had an edge to it. He sounded nothing like the Graeme who wooed my mother with niceties dripping syrup. I gulped. My heartbeat thundered in my chest as I shifted back into the pillow. I heard myself inhale so my breath would stay within me, then wrapped my arms across my chest. My childish instinct scrambled frantically to create feeble armour. Graeme laughed at the gesture. A brief 'hah' that stung worse than the heat I could feel as he edged his body closer to mine. He turned back the blanket, pulled me out of the place where sleep keeps one safe. His breathing became hoarse then, his fingers like spiders on my legs. I heard him mutter words I have long banished to the recesses of my mind. Then he pulled me, yanked my nightdress and warned me to be still. "Don't dare move. And don't you dare make a sound," he hissed as he covered my mouth, his words barely audible. I closed my legs, clenching the muscles between. A small whimper escaped my throat.

"It's okay. It's okay. You'll love this," The room seemed to spin, and I with it. Instinct surged and I shook my head from side to side whilst I fought to push his weight off me. That stoked his fury. His hands rose up to my head yanking my hair so that I lay cemented. "Shut Up," he warned, his voice a razor in my ear, his body lead. I stepped out of my body then, the need for survival kicking in. I lay still. A corpse with tears streaming down the sides of its cheeks.

I remember sitting in the bathtub after, looking from afar as red tendrils, fine as ink, spread out my vagina and disappeared into the water. The sponge bobbed up and down, tired of being scrubbed until the flesh Graeme had touched was grated off the broken me.

The minute you let her under your skin/ then you'll begin/ to make it better. I thought of *Hey Jude* and the lies The Beatles sold us.

Graeme raped me almost every night during the six weeks I lived in his house. I became skittish, a mouse ready to flee at the slightest noise. Silenced, terrified that I had brought shame upon myself, I played sister and aunt by day whilst every sense turned to ash by night. During one of her visits, my mother noticed how gaunt I appeared and she asked whether I felt ill. She stopped me mid-sentence

when I mentioned Graeme's name, wagged her finger and warned me to stop being a vicious girl. The set of her mouth told me she knew.

Years later I would find out that Shirley was almost his victim too. I could almost picture how she grabbed his arm before it found its target. Shirley told me she twisted his wrist until he winced, saying she would feed his balls to darling Goodness Grace. My brave Shirley. All her punch art sure did come in handy.

I went home that December and submerged myself into my studies. "Such a serious girl," people said of me. They did not know how I spent my nights reframing the terror of sleep. When the time came, I married because it was expected. Graeme found him suitable. The noble older brother taking care of the clan.

The years passed in subdued existence. Chapters closed. Some were even beautiful. Adam and I began with the well-intended naivety of the young. Then waivered and faltered, plateauing on a distant medium of courtesy between cold sex and hot slaps. He found comfort in his secretaries, our child-minder, colleagues at the school. Anyone who could take away from the reality of his broken wife. I found respite in my role as a mother where I played all the tapes of my own mother backwards. We avoided all talk of him with the skittishness of the many kittens I chose to adopt. I turned down invites to family functions as far as possible. The story of Graeme was a chapter that ran through the undercurrent of every other.

I watched as Grace lost her beauty to faux ignorance. It made me shudder when her daughters reached that fragile age between budding and bloom. When each of them lost their vibrance to that pinhole look I have worn since 1968. I am as guilty as the rest in my silence, wearing my humiliation like a tattoo seen only under ultraviolet light. We all do. The girls Graeme tore apart.

I see him now, lying between the dead and the living. It is hard to believe that the decaying mass before me once shook a room. Almost half a century has passed since Graeme turned my world into a pinhole. I look his way, then nod my head towards my sister.

This hospital room, wan in the approaching dusk hue, is filled with the women in his life. Grace eaten by cancer that probably festered from the burden of guilt. Their daughters, Sue and then Shane and Sandra, rolling between addictions and dysfunction. Obesity and abuse the only discernible scars of their turmoil within. Only my sister Shirley spewed out the poison and moved away. "Hail the strong," I say out loud.

Everyone turns to look my way and I force a smile, hoping the mask will stay in place. We are all actors here. Voicing prayers for Graeme's health whilst coveting his departure. "Thank you for coming Sis," Grace is ever polite. "It's been too long since we visited, but family needs to be together in these times." I do not reply, though my head swims with a thousand responses.

I turn to leave, leaning my hip against the cane I use these days. The rheumatic fever has come back to anchor in my joints now that age has mapped plum rivers on my skin. My daughter reaches for my free hand. I squeeze hers in return.

Contracts on Creased Paper

Day 1

We have these conversations You and I. Words that cut across chasms. Six billion voices coming to You at once and you hear them all on separate waves. Though I've been told You're everywhere. "Closer to me than my jugular vein." I am relatively sure I quote You correctly here.

Perhaps writing this letter is not necessary. You who know all. I am doing it to close my own holes. Submit. Humour me for I shall send this on the tail-end of falling stars.

It is hard to believe that I was playing dress-up and having tea with her and Teddy just a week ago. I know You and I have always been friendly but distant. But look at me now, talking exclusively to You between the pauses and the pulses. Scribbling these thoughts as if I have some control in the bargaining. I guess I'm saying, "I need to get this in writing Pal."

This is my attempt at potential energy.

Day 2

Is this working for You? My words oozing onto creased paper. I like that it gives me something to do between staring at the dinosaur plastic curtain and colourful chairs. I was wondering if concepts such as Newton's Law and Aristotle's potential energy that I wrote about yesterday make you laugh. Are you saying, "Eureka! hey they figured it out? Or are You shaking your head in the way that fathers do when they humour their children, thinking, "Totally off the mark you dumbasses. It took you forever to figure Pluto out," or "What exactly is this atom shit you made up?"

She always revelled in a good joke too. "Knock-Knock-Who's There-Orange-Orange Who?- Orange you glad to see me." Remember how she would crinkle her nose and laugh at herself as if she had just brought a rainbow down. She did. She does. She always made me laugh with her.

These days, it seems all I do is sit and stare at the windows that gape their despair.

Day 3

I close my eyes and imagine I see a light. I wonder if these are the angels You send to guide. I hope they are. Otherwise, it's just my overactive imagination trying to climb the stairway to Heaven. Today my tears reached the ground and made a circle on the linoleum floor when I tried to talk to You. I wonder if circles of tears reach You amidst the six billion voices travelling on the divine Highway. Do you call it 'Route 777'?

A janitor walked in while I was murmuring. He mopped the floor and stared at my face puffed from pressing tissues into my eye creases. He left midway through his task and came back with a cup of tea sweetened with spoonfuls of sugar in those Styrofoam cups they leave in the hallway. As he handed the cup to me, he brushed a tendril of stray hair off my cheek and whispered, "God knows." I told him I hoped so because I was just writing to You. Do look out for a blue overall in the angel's laundry basket tomorrow morning. If not, there may be hope that some of Your shadow remains in us fallen apple eaters after all.

I peeked through the dinosaur curtain when the janitor left. I swear I noticed a flicker. It was so slight, a smidgen. A shift of a baby toe. I blew bubbles on those feet just last week, remember? It was after dinner and we were playing on the dining room floor. Her building blocks scattered across the wooden floorboards with the casual ease of happy families. That little toe all pink, uncreased by wear, surrounded by fat padding that still has miles to go.

The nurses say I imagined it.

Day 4

My husband joined me today. We both knelt and whispered to you in unison. I told him that choruses make a louder noise. They move faster on sound waves. Greater kinetic energy and so forth. He laughed then. It's been so long since I saw his lips move in any other way than round grief and down despair. I told him about our contract. He said I always was a lousy lawyer. My pain contracted then. It's true I hated the courtroom.

What I did love were mother-of-pearls buttons on a cotton jumper. I loved the potential energy of my stomach holding new life that You breathed into me and cries soft as cats mewling or gurgles at the sight of me every time I stepped in the front door after plodding through a workday. When I went to the house to shower and change this morning, all I longed for was the joy of that exhale at the sight of me. One syllable, "Mom".

I sat on her bed where just last week, I admonished her for doodling on the sheets.

Day 5

The dinosaur curtain has been touched by thousands of pleading hands. I feel them as I peek past the machines, towards her bed barricaded by bars. How many hushed voices have you heard from this ward God? How many sweaty fingers holding onto life they have brought into the world? Now marked by the incessant beeping of heart monitors.

I spoke to you outside today. Took my prayer mat and laid it on the tar in the parking lot. The gravel felt like velvet under my bare feet. I cannot bear the strained chairs of that closed-in ward filled with quiet children. Parents exchanging courteous 'hellos' as they hold on to hope wrapped in clingfilm.

The wait is closing in. I sign these words on a slip from the coffee shop downstairs. A declaration of the words I cannot say out loud.

I was a terrible lawyer. I thought I was a better mother.

Day 6

This should be an easy task for You. I cannot bend and kneel five times a day for much longer. I cannot whisper her name above the beeping machines that measure the strength of her beating heart. It was just one moment. A split second of turning my head. Letting all her potential energy turn to kinetic. She slipped God. I saw her mouth 'mom' as she sucked in all that water. Eyes frozen in surprise as the pool water swallowed her. Her hair spread around her as if it were a halo.

The Craft of Haute Couture

Step 1 of Haute Couture - "The tailor's work is defined by masterful calculation. The perfect roll of fabric is lifted from the shelf. Run your hands over the surface to remove any dust. Unroll your chosen piece onto the counter with care. Inspect your fabric. Be certain it has the weft and stretch to suit the tailor's vision."

I first met Xee when I was working on a clothing line. I walked into her fabric store in my standard uniform of blue jeans and white T, Converse All-Stars so that I could run between the workshop and school lifts. She stood behind the counter surrounded by the finest French lace and raw silk. Rolls and rolls of magnificent fabric stacked on tiers of mahogany shelving.

The shop sang. Glass cabinets bathed in yellow light bounced off buttons and trimmings woven with the intricacy of spiders. I breathed in the scent of textiles raw off the loom infused with incense smoking on the rows of countertops. Xee stood with the might of a queen, resplendent in curls that most likely took hours to set. Her make-up contoured and highlighted to show off high cheekbones and red lips. I always have that snapshot of her in my mind, wrapped in black silk embossed with pink roses the size of palms. Larger than life.

I was hand dismissed by her on the first few visits. She would signal to one of the young assistants to help me whilst she 'Oooh Dahlinged' designers in harem pants and trendsetting flamboyance. That suited me fine. Truth be told, I was intimidated by her. Me with my face naked, black hair pulled back in a ponytail that I held in place with a smudge of mousse. I always wonder when it was that I piqued her interest. Was it on the day she read my name on my black card? Or when I stood in a family photo that made the local papers. Some or other charity that our family sponsored. Semantics I suppose. The reality is that on one ordinary Wednesday, she sauntered from her throne behind the cash register, smiled and offered to assist me personally.

"You have to be there, Dahling. It's just an intimate lunch with close friends. We rarely let outsiders in, but you are so talented Dahling. You have such a good soul. Everyone would love to meet you."

The strangest thing is that a part of me felt validated by this invitation. My world had remained closed off for most of my life, my family clinging to privacy like a sheet of aluminium foil. It never occurred to me that Xee would have no freaking idea on the state of my soul. Fashion designers sometimes miss the designs of other tailors.

Step 2 of Haute Couture - "Mark your desired pattern on the length of fabric with washable tailor's chalk. Take care to leave some room for the seams."

The stitching together began with that casual acknowledgement. A week later, I found myself sitting in a bougie coffee shop with ceilings high enough to hold the egos of its patrons. Ladies tottered in one by one, dressed in some or other designer brand complete with heels that made their ankles wobble. They were fashionably late. It must take a while to be pressed, curled and painted in all that glitter. Louis Vuitton handbags draped their forearms like slings worn by soldiers. I looked down at my sensible black tailored pants and white button-down shirt that were a huge step up from my

everyday jeans. The twist in my gut made me shuffle in the leather dining chair. Never mind the subtle horse insignia of Ralph Lauren that grazed my left breast, I pretty much blended in with the ensemble of waiters that fussed around us offering croissants and pink glazed petit fours.

I was no stranger to the diamonds of society. My mother had always been one of them herself, though her standing long surpassed the need to impress. That left me with no fox instinct to sniff out nouveau riche women who marry well and spend their days pretending to eat salmon and cream cheese bagels with little spring onion bows on uneventful weekday mornings. “Just a peck Dahling. My pilates instructor will kill me for scoffing down all these carbs.”

I sat on that patio of the Four Seasons Hotel looking out across the heads of trees bowing in the spring breeze whilst the city below thrummed with the grey of grind. My instinct failed to sense the Louis Vuitton bait in that coffee shop of air kisses where women ruffled and preened and clucked. Their outer shells pausing the signs of ageing with pricks of Botox and Restylane fillers. I was fascinated by the smiles and curious glances worn with the same expression of surprise in the same way that a cat follows a piece of string. I had no idea whether they actually cared for “Harry who didn’t win the scholarship” or “Poor Betty’s *ahwful* skit with lupus.”

It gave me no compass to hold on to, but I was drawn to some sense of sisterhood. I squeezed into the coop. I cannot lie, for a time I swallowed that narrative.

Step 3 of Haute Couture - “Use the sharpest of scissors to cut across the marked fabric. Sleeves. Bodice. Collar. Do not forget to mark the bust seam. Use pins to position in place.”

A visit to the recommended hairdresser. “Your eyes will pop with some highlights in your dark hair, Dahling.” Then a pair of heels that earned a side glance from my husband. I was added to a Whatsapp group. I felt an inexplicable sense of comfort when they sent me follow requests on Instagram. Bloggers that once made me gag suddenly became my gurus.” So that is how you draw in the perfect eyeliner.” When you are on the designer’s table you don’t know that you are becoming the garment.

That was how I found myself agreeing to host Xee’s daughter’s bridal shower a couple of months later. “What an honour for you Dahling. To show off your incredible home to the cream of society.” The aluminium foil of my family was peeling.

Step 4 of Haute Couture - “Put your fabric in place. Drop the foot of the sewing machine. Make sure the threads match well. Stitch along the seam line.”

The master tailor does not pucker seams. Fabric glides under hands that lead. A selected sewing needle moves around an armhole without so much as a skipped stitch. I sensed the threads pulling tighter. I did not know how to unpick them. My brothers witnessed all of this with mild amusement at first, then crinkled their brows when I bought a Louis Vuitton bag on a whim. Money was never the issue. It was always the principle.

Highlighter fades, red lips smudge. Makeup loses lustre in natural light. I first noticed these cracks between being coaxed into throwing Xee's fiftieth birthday party and her asking for some much-needed cash- seven million freaking Rands to build the house of her dreams.

My loved ones held an urgent meeting. They closed off the aluminium foil of our privacy, tucked me in so that I could go back to living under the radar.

Step 5 of Haute Couture –“Be sure to have a fitting of your chosen model. She may not be the size you envisioned, thus unravelling your tailor's craft by bursting the seams you stitched.”

Crossing the Divide

Once, in a time before the world that is now, Yusuf chose her picture from a pile sent to his mother. Her friends scoffed that she agreed to an arranged marriage. *"How archaic! Girl please!"* She retaliated with a swish of the hip. Hers was always an iron resolve. Did they not know? She would have done anything to move away from the fishbowl life of Durban.

London beckoned with arms outstretched waving magic black umbrellas under Hemingway skies. Caught in the whirlwind, she flew across the continent where she said her *'I do's'* and became wife to the English gentleman. Love would come like budding flowers planted out of respect.

Sauvé and sophisticated Yusuf. It took all of one month to realize that she was his peace ticket to respectability in that suffocating British community where expats clutched even tighter than where she came from. Her new husband's family found them a place to stay in the city. When Yusuf first opened the front door to the apartment with its greying walls and its mould-infested ceilings, where rats scurried in the old fireplace trying harder than them to stay out of the cold, she was winded by the mis-rooted promises of foreign lands.

The first crossing happened soon after. She was overwhelmed by Yusuf's undefined callousness, stunned the first time he locked her in. He looked her in the eye on that day, just once. The second time, he looked away. He had just taken her an hour before. Perhaps he felt guilty. He did not so much as glance back the third time he closed the apartment door and slipped the keys into the pockets of his Armani suit. He simply whistled as he turned away. She stared at the chipped front door, beyond comprehension that he had left her alone.

Yusuf did visit once a week, armed with groceries and even a surprise box of Lindt chocolate on one occasion. He took her to visit his parents with respectful diligence befitting the best of sons. How she cringed when he showed off the new bride with her flat accent, *"Come all the way from Africa Mate. Yeah, Desi-African gal Mate."* He made her understand how lucky she was to be out of her shit-hole country. It made her swallow the secret life of being locked in.

On those evenings with Yusuf's family, the awkward glances from his sisters and conversations cut mid-sentence piqued her curiosity. It was only later that she found out he was married to the Serbian waitress. She only ever saw that *other woman* that his family hid so well when his phone lay on the table. That waitress who lived with him every other day of the week, all pixelated broad smiles and luscious breasts. Milk skin haloed by platinum curls. A Slavian first prize in comparison to her olive ordinariness, reminding her that she was the obligatory second wife. How cocksure Yusuf was. *"Stay indoors gal. You 'ear me."*

Her only comfort during those air-swallowed months was the Kenyan muezzin living in the apartment directly below. Day after slow day, she would wait and watch this familiar stranger as he left the building and crossed the road to the mosque. In that dingy quarter of Southall where foreigners like them bubbled on the pavements, she followed his graceful strides, peeking through murky windows longing for African skies.

Muezzin walked to lead the prayers five times each day. He became the timepiece by which she marked the hours. She longed to clutch his hand, knowing that it would feel like the safety of home. That regal African in his embroidered linen Thobe flowing like water around tree limbs. He walked with his head held high, so tall she could imagine him seeing all of the Serengeti.

After prayers, she would wait, chewing on her lower lip, scratching at the furniture or the little patch of angry eczema blooming on her neck, listening for his return to the apartment below. Separated only by thinned floors as old as the city, she welcomed the sounds of life as Muezzin went about his day. Pots and pans kissing gas flames. Water running through frosted pipes causing the innards of the building to tremble as he cooked and bathed and cleaned. He was her reminder of living, of being. She would release the breath she did not know she was holding when she heard the melodic soprano of his voice as he spoke to his family. A voice echoing with the richness of hollowed reeds that timbered deeper as he recited his Qur'an.

'Allahu-Akbar Allahu-Akbar Ar-Rahman Ar Rahiem - God is Great God is Great Oh Merciful Gracious God'. Sitting cross-legged on the floor, she would sway from side to side, chanting with him until her smallness sank. Until her body tore down and her thoughts scratched the wooden floors.

That year of closed in. How she lied to her mother when they spoke. "London is lovely. Yes, I saw the Queen Mama. Yusuf is fine. The pregnancy is good Mama."

Angel wings fluttered on the night her baby was born. It was a sticky July and London was finally beginning to warm. She returned from the hospital carrying the pink-swaddled infant with measured, birth-aching steps up the four flights of stairs to her apartment. What a joy it was when she bumped into Muezzin on the landing of the third floor. His face shone with a smile that crinkled to his eyes. "Peace my sister" was all he said. It was all he needed to say. She heard that he moved a week or two later. "To comfort others in prayer," Yusuf said when he came by. It did not matter. She was not alone anymore. Motherhood had filled a space in that gaping loneliness.

Until that morning when fever burned through the baby. It became an angry fire that rose and spread, leaving her helpless. Until she paced the apartment waiting for daybreak. Until Yusuf stopped coming altogether. Cursory messages saying he had not asked for a family chosen from a photograph. Until her breasts became a cactus of desert milk and baby's wails, shrills for mercy. Until they were swallowed by the claustrophobia, rocking and cradling, cradling and rocking with no release. She lifted the blanket to stop the wails, moaning as she wrapped. Tighter so that their hurt was enveloped. The world descended and only the faint reminders of the Muezzin's songs could be heard through the floorboards. *Allahu Akbar. God is Great.*

It could have been seconds or hours. She had no idea for time now dragged across dimensions. She unstrapped her bra and put baby to the nipple. There they lay, kidney-beaned foetuses under knotted blankets. Three days of mourning while she swam with the iridescent moon. Long strides of freestyle. Swimming in black skies.

There were gasps of horror from neighbours and family when they found them like that. Her mother had called and called. She took the flight across the ocean to find a stranger in place of the young girl

with the swishing hips that swayed to dreams. Her mother's agony at the contorted bodies was captured in the Daily Mirror. Her face, frozen in eternal dismay as she took in the scratch marks on chairs and filth-strewn rooms. The empty pantry and soiled diapers that lay scattered across that tomb of an apartment reeking of vomit and faeces.

They cannot understand when Swahili escapes her lips in the deepest soprano. They pray over her. Perform test after test. They numb her mind. Shut her body down so the drugs can fix her. They egg wash the deed by all manner of medical terms.

Son,

We sat in the first row of the school hall and you were the only one I looked at in the collage of painted fairies and pirates and trees and angels standing on the stage. Your eyes searched the hall, squinting as the incandescent lights flickered on and off. I saw that scrunched look of concentration as you bit your lower lip. Then you caught a glimpse of me standing in my seat with my arms stretched out of the coat I called your lucky charm. And you waved, the tiniest of waves. Your face shone as it broke into an apple-cheeked smile showing a sliver of black where your front tooth was missing. My chest fell to my ribs in that moment.

I sat in that first row of the school hall and your voice was the only one I heard. Even though the stage was an orchestra of fidgety children trying so hard to remember their words and move their hands while they too searched for loved ones in the crowd.

In that light of the hall, when you held your place in the world, singing *Silent Night* as if it were a love song, I held on to an invisible umbilical cord. Certain that for all your days and all of mine, your face would be bathed in gold.

When Her Body Folded

My mother is animated when she tells the nurse of her fourteen grandchildren. The nurse is attentive, so my mother recites a poem my father wrote on their wedding day. A fleeting look as she blinks my way, searching for shreds of a once sharp mind.

Another visit, the doctor's diary is filled like a jam doughnut, so we wait in the room crammed with walkers and wheelchairs. The nurse recognizes my mother and strolls over for a chat. My mother tells the nurse how too much ginger ruins a curry. She sways when she recalls her dance on the QE2, sweeps her hands across her lap, dancing to echoes of a once diamond life.

The chemical smell of the hospital's corridors becomes less pungent as the months wear on. Appointments catch less at the base of my throat. My mother is fidgety today. She sees the nurse come toward her and inhales as if her lungs need to be sufficiently fuelled to recall all the memories she stores.

The doctor calls her name before she can begin. My mother shuts her eyes, willing the instinct that will help her to stand up. Pale knuckles clutch the edge of her chair, pleading to the body folding in on itself.

Possession

She is with me all the time. I spy her with her hair wrapped in rollers, hear the endless whining and verbal tirade of her woes, her loves, her losses. Sometimes she has others with her. She once brought her sister and they danced to *Mama Mia*, both of them twirling their hips so that their knock-off fringed waistcoats became an eddy of ribbons above flared jeans. I cannot get through any of my pressing tasks without the woman making an appearance. Once or twice, I saw her tapping her fingernails on the bedside table while my husband and I were making love. I failed to orgasm on those nights.

The woman becomes increasingly insistent, tugging me so that I am trapped between two worlds. Some of my phrases have even begun to take on her intonation. I find myself saying, “freakin’ dust balls” when I have never, not in my everyday language anyway, used such an absurd phrase. So I sit down and reach for pen and paper. The woman looks over my shoulder, she chats as much as the parakeets in my bedroom. Once in a while, she agrees with me, other times she wags her finger pacing the room. She is a tiger. I hear her side commentary. “That sounds highly unbelievable,” or “I would never.”

I need to free myself of this possession. I grow closer to the woman as I examine the way she crosses her arms, takes a drag of her cigarette and exhales rings into the room. I learn from her, doodle a likeness of her square jaw and place the drawing on the edge of my desk so that I do not miss even the minutest detail. The jagged tattoo on her collarbone, and the criss-cross lines on her wrist that dried to white pencil-thin scars after they pulled her out of the bathroom. We live like this for almost a year. Me and the wild woman who never leaves my side. Then, as suddenly as she appears, silence. No sappy goodbye, just two three-letter words and I am alone. My world becomes claustrophobic in the openness. I paint to pass the time, waiting for someone else to make their presence known now that the woman has crystallised into a multitude of sentences.

The Weightlessness of Kites

On the day the young girl bleeds, the women turn to look at her with an interest that unsettles her. Until yesterday, she was playing hopscotch in the garden, drawing lines with a stick to mark blocks in the sand. Just last week, she had lifted her skirts and tucked them into her cotton briefs with the Princess prints so that she could help her brother run fast enough to catch the wind. She was always the best kite builder on their block. Now she has bled. She cannot understand why the cronies descend upon her like pigeons. Cooing and flapping their hooked noses, their arms stretching toward her out of stooped shoulders. Her mother tells her it is because she was born with the sight. The midwives have been waiting for this day. They are certain she has been chosen as the next healer.

"How can this be?" she asks. "I am sure Sarah would be more suitable for this. You know Sarah is more responsible, Mother," she whines in her still-childish voice. Sarah is her older sister who always does the right thing. Her mother brushes these comments aside saying that the magic that pulses through them cannot be dictated. "It isn't something to be taken lightly. It is an honour, passed down through the women in our lineage. We cannot determine who that will be." Her mother smooths her hair as she says this. An action she normally reserves for birthdays, or the anniversary of their grandfather's death. The young girl is standing with her feet apart, the hem of her dress frayed where she caught it on the fence. She holds firm to the kitchen floor. Her resolve sticky on the linoleum.

Her mother sighs as she pulls out a chair at the dining table that has seen better days. "You know your great-grandmother was the healer of the village. Granny too. This is the blessing and the cross of the women in our family." She signals for her daughter to come closer, wrapping her arms around her as she breathes in her curls. The young girl cannot remember when their bodies were this close. She feels the heat of her mother's hands as she allows this tenderness to pass between them. "I wish I knew more," her mother comforts, "Though I can say with certainty that you were born with the film. It covered you when you slid out of my womb. It is quite miraculous, you know. The women in our family carry this gift so far back they are pinpricks in time."

The young girl looks at her sister Sarah who is concentrating on the bowl in front of her at the kitchen counter. Sarah is chopping carrots, pretending not to eavesdrop. The girl stomps her foot. She thinks that all this is a whole lot of hogwash. If this gift were descended, then why was her mother so ordinary? Would power of this nature not have the means to hold on to a man? It certainly would not warrant working as a cashier in the dingy supermarket down the road. The aunts seem equally unsuitable. All of them average as garden tomatoes. They were women who sat about and gossiped. Drinking endless cups of tea and nibbling on almond biscuits so that their hips bulged out of their armchairs from lack of use.

She asks her mother why this information only reaches her now. "They can keep it. I just want to go out and play with the other children." Though her petulance shifts when she takes in the sheen-of-ash look on her mother's face.

"It didn't come to me you know. I wish it had. It skipped my generation. We have been without a healer since Aunt Agnes passed. It will be much worse if you fight this, Baby Girl." She is still holding her. Now she tightens her grip, squeezes her shoulders. "Open your mind to it."

Something about the tremor in her mother's voice, the surrender that seems to bear longing for a divinity that rejected her, makes the young girl go with the women when they come to fetch her at dawn. They are dressed in bright colours, their eyes lined with Kohl, their heads wrapped in turbans intricate as nests. As they walk along the trail that will take her to the sacred place of learning, they hum songs she has heard all her life. Their voices echo across the ears of houses in the village as they tread in single file, their bodies faint silhouettes against the orange sun climbing to where the air is thin and cold. When they reach the place where ash circles scar the mountainside, the women build a fire from wood they pull out of tapestry bags they carry on their shoulders.

Aunt Augustine, the oldest of the cronies, reminds the girl that she is one of the chosen. She murmurs about honouring the past, obeying gravity. "It is a weight child," she tells her as the younger women draw symbols on her body with wet chalk. "You now share the responsibility that goes with bringing souls into the world. You are a keeper of wellbeing, beyond that which we see. Our people will turn to you someday. You must be prepared."

Aunt Augustine says she will teach her about herbs. Chamomile for sleeping. Liquorice bark for hot flushes and viral infections. Milk thistle and fenugreek and raspberry Leaves. In time she will learn that doctors and healers are not the same. Aunt Augustine's eyes turn downwards when she tells the girl that she cannot teach her secrets beyond her limited knowledge. That will come from beyond she promises. A place where only a few are worthy of secrets that deserve the torch of being passed on.

Aunt Augustine brushes the girl's forehead tenderly as she prepares her for the ritual where she will meet her lineage. This is a journey she must take alone. The young girl shivers. She smiles to show she is brave, intrigued. Only the gooseflesh that prickles her skin indicates her terror. She wishes she was down below. Today is kite-flying day.

"Don't be wary child," Aunt Augustine soothes as she offers her the pungent herbs that will take her to the other side. The girl tries not to pull a face when she chews on the wheat-tasting stalks. Then with a quick swallow and a large gulp of water, she is told she can rest.

Her head grows light as the medicine becomes one with her body. In her mind, she is flying. Weightless as the kites she sees down below. Dots of bright diamonds sailing in the August sky. Children are chasing the flecked kites across the plains. She is with them, soaring through the air. Then with a sudden shift, her body falls to the ground. She jumps through blocks in the sand. Left foot, right foot, both feet out. Her thoughts become a collage of intertwined flashes. She sees her mother, her sister Sarah, her brothers chasing one another in wheat fields. Their laughter a melody vibrating off the trees. The sky tilts, she can hear the aunts talking through cotton wool somewhere far away. With a turn of the eye, she is twisting bamboo to make the strongest kite that will reach these mountain tops. She sways, lies on her back as the ground tilts.

As she teeters between the waking and the dead, the air grows thick. The girl gasps when she steps dreamlike into the smog, where hundreds of women bow to greet her. They stretch out in a line welcoming her with palms cupped in prayer. Her cheeks burn with their kisses though their lips have not touched her skin. Their faces are familiar. She has seen the edges of their features in the mirror, in the reflection of water, in the light of a window.

She lifts her hands waving towards the furthest end where foremothers with moonbeam smiles become silver specks on the horizon. A curious inversion settles over her. She begins to see this altered reality through their eyes. They lead her, show her secrets of birth and death, place language crystals in her mouth so that she grasps the name of plants and petals stored within her cells. They share knowledge, ancient as grain. She lifts. Rises. Flying towards destiny with the weightlessness of kites.

First Breath

The infant cannot swim in these waters any longer. The spaces do not fit around him, and nature compels him to leave her body be.

Her body has nourished him, helped him form from cell to tiny being. He may even have taken more from her than she can spare. He puts his elbow out, trying to stretch to its fully formed length, signalling to his mother that he knows he has become heavy, pressing fingers against the membrane that separates them. A layer thick as velvet.

These have been calm waters overall. In the warmth of this cocoon where he has grown plump from the finest in-dining. He has taken his fill of her ocean until his head bloomed and his eyelashes sprouted, spine curved to the finesse of the master sculptor.

Now the rains flow between her thighs. He shivers and drops his head as her muscles contract. Far away, he hears muffled wails as primitive as the first woman who squatted with this pain of parting. One final swallow of her sweet waters before he plunges towards the light.

Another contraction, then waves that lilt and sway. His head crowns against her womanhood as he slips out the canal. Mother and unborn son, connected by this rope that joins them like tugboat to ship.

The boy takes a gulp of air tasting the coldness in his lungs. A cry as he drinks in the wonder of the woman who has brought him here.

Brighton

Crazy Joe lives in the house next door to ours where his mother is the nanny. She calls him Brighton. That is probably his name though he introduced himself to us as Crazy Joe the day we moved in. The name stuck. He cannot find proper work, he says, so he lives in the outbuilding on the property of his mother's employer. Most days Joe hangs around as an unofficial car guard at the shopping centre nearby. When he sees me running my errands, he always offers to carry my bags, saying "Heitara neighbour lady, spare Joe a couple of Bucks asseblief."

I know he uses the money to buy cheap beer from the woman who brews it at the end of our block. His mother yells at him when he comes home drunk. Her voice echoing across the rooftops of our neighbourhood so that the houses shake with her woes. I often find him curled on our side of the lawn when she locks him out. Once or twice, I took a blanket out to him so that he could sit out his *babalas* without freezing to death. It was Joe who saved us when we had an attempted robbery at our house. What alerted us to the danger was Crazy Joe's slurred shouts, his drunken voice louder than the crash of breaking glass.

"Voetsek wena, you stay away from my neighbour lady's house," I ran out the front door to find him throwing bottles and small rocks at the fleeing car. They must have gotten the shock of their lives when the dumped blanket lying on my front garden materialized into human form. "Thank you Joe," I said to him. "You saved us big time. Do you want something to eat? Shall I call your mother to fetch you?"

"No asseblief," he replied, "I don't want her to see me this way. Just let me be." He stumbled and plopped back down on the kerb. A second later, he lifted his head as if he had just remembered something. Crazy Joe wagged a drunken finger at me then, saying, "And don't expect me to be your guard. I have a life you know, and you can-not afford my services."

White is so much Better

We raised our fists, shouted Amandla, tore down signs that reminded us of our place, ran from sour tear gas that burnt our skin and ignited our fury. We dodged rubber bullets, held on to the blackness within our brownness. Then went back to classrooms where we were subtly fed. A small morsel of thought that brown was a tier above black, aspiring to bleach itself to the ideal.

No *Bantu* education for us. We felt for our black brothers but the system had us believe, "You can have a Premiere House of Delegates Education. Not quite white, but *Ag shame*, coolies are maar clever." So, we fought the struggle as we sang Die Stem, mourned for Hani, for Timol, for Biko while we swallowed the power of Verwoerd. Unwrapped our saris as we tightened those corsets. Bowed our heads in shame at how inferior our English sounded when we spoke it with a guttural vernacular twang.

Then the ropes of the struggle loosened. We grabbed at the whiteness within our brownness. We replaced those years behind crisscrossed fences with high walls in suburbs we had once stared at through bus windows. We traded blackness for the bleached dream. For the perfection of blonde models smoking Stuyvesants, sailing in entitlement.

We made children. Sent them to the best Model C's or IEB's. "You'll have the best son, what the white boy has son. Talk like the white boy son, Don't say 'Oh-n-i-on', Enunciate, it's 'Un-ian'. Tighten your tie son. Don't drink masala tea, unless it's trendy Chai son." Even when Sally spoke extra slow to the new brown neighbours because "*Ag shame* they probably speak Indian in their home."

Even then, we dropped our fists, became the thought that was planted.

Leading and Following

My father is an academic. His keen mind and lateral thinking have earned him the title of philosopher once or twice - The modern Avicenna people in the medical fraternity often tell me. At home though, his accolades are merely papers framed in mahogany, hanging like badges on the wall of his study. In the confines of his privacy, my father resigns himself to my mother's instructions as if nothing aside from his work holds much value by way of his own opinions or decisions. Last year, he was nominated for a lifetime legacy award for outstanding contribution in his field. I worked on his portfolio for months, tracking down employees and work colleagues spanning half a century. The letters that came through humbled me. I marvelled at the fact that people focused on his personality as much as his accomplishments. Our family hardly ever saw the passionate, ideological, take-charge humanitarian side of him. In the confines of our space, he was happy to let our mother take the lead.

On the evening of the ceremony, my mother made me lay out his best suits on the hotel bed. She had pressed and packed all of them, placing as much care in his appearance as she always did for public events. A grey blazer coupled with a dotted burgundy tie or a navy jacket and powder blue shirt. The suits lined up like corpses waiting to be filled with flesh. My father knew all along that nominees were only allowed to wear black, but he shushed me when I reminded him of this minor detail. That evening, he went on stage to receive his award from the minister of health and the crowd honoured him with a standing ovation. My siblings and I hailed him from the table reserved for families of laureates. I noticed his face drop when he returned to his seat and took in the grimace my mother wore under her beaded headscarf. "The newspapers are here," she said, "and your tie is crooked. You should have straightened it." She offered no congratulations, no, "I am proud of you." Just a stab in the gut to deflate the balloon of acknowledgement that had him floating.

A couple of days later, as we sat in the office and scanned the array of articles that had been printed, I asked my Dad why he allowed mother to treat him so poorly. He seemed surprised at the comment, as if the matter was obvious enough. "It is how she shows her love," he said. "Be kind to your mother."

Slipping

When the young woman stepped off the tracks towards the train coming headlong, it was too late to say, "We can have that talk now." All those months, when she had reached out trying to close the gap and Hadia brushed her off, "Get a grip of yourself. We came here for your future. Foreigners like us cannot fail." All those months she worked eighteen hours a day to give her children the life she wished for herself. The way she held back on that new pair of slacks because their education mattered most. She was doing her best. Everyone says it is hardly her fault, "Tragic," they say, as they shake their heads in dismay, "Look how she has taken your pride."

"She slipped," Hadia tells the clan of curious family and friends who have come to pay their respects. "It was an accident. She was a good girl. Top of her class. You know she was going to be the first person in our family to go to University."

Now the house settles into silence. The mourners have departed like full-bellied mice. They will resume their conversations on the tracks of telephones between words travelling through invisible waves. Hadia walks from room to room, the house is still heavy when she spies her daughter sitting at her desk holding on to the A's that made her gleam with pride. She scrunches her eyes to erase the image. But her daughter is in the kitchen now, blooming at fifteen. Her auburn hair sparkling in the evening as she wipes the kitchen table. She makes sure her brothers are fed, so that their mother may get to work on time. Hadia tries to catch the memories as they loop before her, the languid way her daughter would slouch in the armchair scrolling through her Instagram feed. A yearning for the freedom her friends enjoyed as they pouted for selfies, their faces baked in carefree smiles.

Hadia hears her whisper. A faint sound resonating from a place only her daughter has reached,

Mom, can we talk,

Mom, I think I need some help.

Mom, I cannot catch up. The school says I have too much on my plate.

My Mother and The Whale

I believe the whale first appeared that day in the rose garden. It was one of those spring mornings when dotted buds were making promises to warmer air. I kept moving the white wrought iron chair, rolling my pants up to my knees to brown my calves. Winter skin trying to suck in sunlight that sprinkled though the pillowed sky. You told me to stop being so fidgety, said it distracted you. I laughed and kept on babbling about painting the nursery with unicorns or dragonflies. You were focused on breeding that hybrid. The one you promised to name after your first grandchild. I remember how the phone broke through our companionable chatter.

Click of the shutter. A picture captured in the mind. Moments that run on a loop so that we see them through the veils of living- breathing- doing. I remember your blue summer dress billowing as you fell between the shrubs, garden shears slipping through muddied gloves. I remember that your phone got tangled in the roses as it slipped from the freckled cradle between ear and shoulder. Click of the shutter.

Your eyes blinked in slow motion as you saw the mouth of the whale slip through the voice piece of the phone. I hear it every single time the click of the shutter plays the slide show of *My Mother and the Whale*.

Those were the opening credits I suppose. The smooth arc of a once normal life forever altered by the erratic patterns of unwelcome whales. Of course, that's what you chose to call it. You always had that way with imagery. The ability to turn pain into beauty. I must make a note to thank you for that when we meet again. It has been one of your finest gifts to me -The daring to pull words from the spaces between my mind and make them land on paper trails.

So it was that we ended up in the oncologist's office. That first day of tests and scans and biopsies in doctors' rooms where automatic air fresheners tried to disguise the acrid smell of fear. You made small talk with the nurses while your heels chatted with the floor. There was a smear of mud on the hem of your blue skirt. I remember thinking that perhaps if I wiped it clean it would take away that two-centimetre smudge in the breasts that had fed me.

Click of the shutter. A doctor's words landing on us like a sledgehammer. I remember that Dad could not compose himself. He kept asking if they could run more tests. I remember how I sat mute in that office where fates are read out. My mind a mess of 'before, after, what-ifs, hows, whys, this can't be', thinking how pitiful it was that lab technicians looked at cell samples of numbered ID's never knowing the person behind the tumour. I wanted to yell at the doctor sitting with a look somewhere between pity and empathy, one step removed, promising to give you his best care. Perhaps he had fingers crossed behind his back.

You were the only one who remained composed. You held my hand whilst turning your head towards Dad, told us both to wipe our tears and stay strong. This would be just a season in your life. Your lips quivered and your eyes registered a different meter, yet you chose to smile.

We always teased you about your belief in magic potions and holistic health. It almost seemed a cruel game of fate when you asked the doctor if you could get by without chemotherapy. "Could I consider alternate therapies?" Your voice sounded small, your shoulders deflating when he replied, "Your tumour is graded nine out of nine. That's a fantastic score if you plan on entering *Dancing with the Stars*. But not for a malignancy." He chuckled at his joke. A dry laugh that made his white beard move slightly out of place. I had this urge to lunge over the desk and dishevel his composure with my bare hands. All I did was sit in silence, staring at the wooden floorboards that shone beneath my pale knuckles.

Click. Click. Click. The shutter goes faster.

Months of waves. Doctor's visits for both of us. Once a month for me. Twice a month for you. Down Rivonia Drive, past the McDonalds. Both of us at Morningside Clinic. Dad always on the ready. He had that kit, remember? The one that he kept in the back seat of his car in case one of us threw up. One of us nurturing life. The other slaying death.

That's when you called it the whale. You turned one day, right in the middle of Johannesburg traffic, and said, "You know the whale has taken all the space in the ocean of my mind. It blocks the view of the sky, the trees, people. I can see nothing but the whale. Let's not say the 'C' word, okay. I need to make this whale swim far into the ocean." You burst into sobs then. It was the only time you broke down like that. Your body shaking until I pulled you into the cocoon of my arms.

As my belly grew larger, the chemotherapy made you seem so tiny. I remember nurses hovering. They prodded to find veins that were strong enough to suck in the drips, made you sit in those faux comfortable recliners in the oncology ward where brave smiles hide despair. I remember how your skin flushed crimson as the drip found its way to that two-centimetre smudge, killing every other cell it met along the way.

Click of the shutter. Slow-motion now. Your hair, once thick, set-in ringlet curls every Friday afternoon, now coming off in chunks. You dismissed it off for so long, hiding the traces of auburn silk on your jersey, the sofa, the bath. Then acceptance. How serene you looked when cousin Kath shaved it off. I told you we'd find you the sexiest goddamned wig. We did. It made you look like Katherine Hepburn, though you never wore it save for the day Izzy was born. The rest of the time you'd tie a printed scarf like a gypsy. Flower prints, rich with colour. They made you sparkle like one of your first prize roses when you knelt in the garden. I urged the earth to restore you, crossed my fingers when you tried in vain to hide your wasting body under layers of jerseys.

The whale bobbed and sank, claiming space in the ocean of your being.

Izzy. A granddaughter in the midst of all that unhappiness. I remember how you lay next to me when we returned home from the maternity ward. Dad and Bill watched from their place of safety at the foot of the bed. You smiled when Izzy's pink fingers closed over your hands. Your eyes told the story of a body willing itself to see her take her first steps. Your pupils had taken on this sheen of jade marbles after your eyelashes fell and they watered so much that day. At least that's what you said as you wiped your cheeks.

After months of treatment when it seemed you had nothing left to give, we were finally allowed to exhale. “Good news,” the Doctor said, “latest scan looks good. The tumour is shrinking, prognosis actually seems excellent.” We celebrated at the McDonalds Drive-Thru whilst Izzy lay asleep in her car seat. You bought an ice cream cone, taking slow licks so that the white liquid ran down your chin. The sun caressed your cheek so that your face gleamed under the printed headscarf. I remember thinking, “My mother is the most beautiful woman.”

Months of calm before the surgery to remove your breast. You hardly fussed. Even when the drain looked like your insides were bleeding out of your body. I remember how we tried to find a silicone cup to smooth the lines of the lace dress you wore for Izzy’s baptism. You teased me as you straightened your bra, laughed and asked if your cleavage was straight. You even put on some makeup, splashing a dash of mascara on your newly grown eyelashes. Dad said you wore your stubble of white curls like a queen. It was spring again and you were radiant in the knowledge that the whale was underwater. “I can finally see the ocean,” you said. “I shall call my hybrid rose *Isabel*.”

Click of the shutter. A picture of us bathed in light that bounced off the stained-glass windows of the church. My favourite part of the slide show of *My Mother and the Whale*.

He was always there, lurking within dark waves. I prayed he would find another sea to swim in, but the whale liked your ocean best Mom. I believe you knew when he spouted again. Long before the day you went for the PET Scan and told me to be brave, kissed Dad on his beard and whispered, “I promise you’ll get by my love.” Then we heard the words, “Metastasis. Second Round of Chemo,” followed by pacifying lies that swallowed us. I knew you didn’t want more medicine eating through you. I knew you would try, if only for us. Most nights, as Izzy suckled at my breast and I lay absorbing at the miracle of her, I bargained with the Gods to be merciful to you.

I am sitting in the garden, staring at the empty wrought iron chair. I want to hear you ask me to brew a pot of Earl Grey Tea. I taste the salt of tears that roll down and sting my tongue. I think I may have spilled enough to fill an ocean. Just not the one where the whale took you. “Izzy took her first steps today,” I say. Knowing the wind will carry my words to you on the rose petals that twirl in this garden you loved.

Solace

It is not yet time for the Dhuhr prayer. The circumambulation of a sea of worshippers ebbs and flows around the Kaabah. At times the dense collection of humans packed so tightly becomes a vortex, other times a smaller circle where people jostle one another to touch the walls of the house of God.

The worshippers are specks of black and white, dotted across the expanse of marble flooring. I peer at them through the bronzed windows of my hotel room. There is no denying the magnetic pull between desert and sky that feels at once enigmatic and humbling. I am on my period today so I cannot enter the Mosque. My family has gone on without me. I can almost imagine I see them join the human river down below, my husband holding the hand of our curious two-year-old, so she does not wander off. I welcome the quiet of this luxury room, decorated in carved mahogany that glistens against pale blue trim. After months of walking on hot coals since the trauma of the armed robbery, I am overcome with a sense of unravelling.

I taste the blood in my mouth each time that night loops on repeat in my head, feel the butt of the gun crashing into my jaw, the crunch of metal against bone. We said a million prayers, Omar and I, in those moments when time stopped, as they tied us up and went to pull the children from their beds. Panic. Fear so that my feet became ice as the most aggressive of the three pulled me away an hour later. That instant of seeing every nightmare come to life. One of them, older than the rest by the signs of grey hair peeking out the front of his mask, yanked my arm then motioned for me to carry Sami on my arm. His movement was so slight that the other two failed to notice. It took me aback, that lapse into sympathy from someone violating our sanctity. Perhaps he was a father I thought, as I put the toddler on my hip and dragged my feet through the cement of dread then followed them to the kitchen where they asked for car keys and passwords. How easy it is to hand over things we guard fiercely when the essence of survival is at stake.

The children have been in our room since then. They drag their duvets and pillows without fail come 8 pm. Our bedroom transforms into an obstacle course of Barbie and Spiderman linen sprawled across the carpet. Our house a web of sanctity and imprisonment. That was why Omar suggested performing the Umrah. A break from it all he said, so that we could find some solace and all that jazz. My husband lives with the serenity of the faithful. I, on the other hand, remain enveloped under an umbrella of jitter spokes. I obsess that it could have gone either way, whilst Omar reminds me to take comfort in the fact that they shopped at our home and left our bodies intact. "Don't take this on Babe. To them, we were simply another job. We're as anonymous to those three men as they were under their balaclavas. We're lucky," is what he says, "we've upped the security. There's no need to panic."

I tap my nails against the window, observe birds flying in circles around the domes of the mosque as if they possess unseen secrets in the sky. On the ground, people move as one as they whisper God's name. I believe I can almost hear them from way up here. Something about the anticlockwise motion of the Tawaaf hypnotises me. My eyes flit back and forth across the people below. They walk with purpose, striding towards the peace they yearn for, drinking from the sacred well of Zam-Zam. Soon they will form orderly lines, creating perfect circles as they face the Kaabah in prayer. My family is alive amongst the worshippers below, moving in harmony to the recitation of the Imam.

Part B: Portfolio

Submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts in Creative Writing

Of

Rhodes University

By

Nasira Bhikha

November 2021

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Introduction

This is a portfolio recorded over the past two years, tracking my reading and writing research. It contains a reflective essay on the editing and rewriting process, my book reviews, an essay on poetics and the combined reflective journals chronicled throughout the period of study. These journals have been a vital component of the learning curve, providing a platform for personal assessment and serving as a reminder of the learning trajectory that led to the collection of short stories in my creative dissertation. They are presented in chronological order with updated reflections where necessary.

Section 1: Combined Reflective Journal (RJ) Essay

Orientation Week: A Flutter of Nerves

Following months of the application process and the elation at being accepted through recognition of prior learning, I was quite anxious on the eve of Orientation week. I had immersed myself in the holiday project which helped put in perspective some of the reading processes of the program, though I still agonised over how I would juggle studies with work and life commitments, whom I would meet during O-Week and whether I would find my space and voice amongst accomplished peers and lecturers. This feeling dissipated within the first morning, replaced by a zest I had not felt in years. I was finally doing something I loved, with like-minded people.

The week was well planned, allowing us to ease into the reading and writing exercises in a manner gentle enough to break the sense of self-consciousness that novice writers often feel when asked to share their work. I remember that I was apprehensive about my first reflective journal, which I thought was a disaster, until I realised that almost everyone was in a similar position. Added to that, the fact that lecturers participated in the sessions as part for the course allayed some of my misgivings, replacing them with a sense of camaraderie and community.

Two things that were said to us during Orientation and have stayed with me for the past two years are: *"Think of yourself as a writer- someone who works at writing,"* and, *"Use reading to think critically about the writing of others for impact on your own work."*

RJ Two - Weeks 7-8: Fierce Beginnings

Our first seminar for the year, Fierce Writing, facilitated by Kerry Hammerton, was a powerful way to commence coursework. I appreciated the variety of poems, prose, flash fiction and poetry that Hammerton presented through written and visual platforms.

Dear White America by Danez Smith inspired me to write a reflective piece as a South African Indian. *Anne Boyer's. The Undying: A Meditation on Modern Illness*, also affected me in that it allowed for contemplation on how I would write about maladies that have impacted me. Hammerton eased us into routine by asking that we submit four poems or short prose entries for the assignment. I had no idea what the first feedback session would entail. It turned out to be tough yet reassuring. Hammerton commented favourably on the Boyer inspired prose-poetry piece I wrote about losing a child. She identified some of my strengths relating to content as well as writing emotively but also weaknesses in terms of form. These have remained part of my learning curve.

Reading:

Our introductory group reading provided further exposure to genre, awakening interest in books from the reading list that I would otherwise not have encountered. I was magnetized by *Ghayath Almadhoun's Massacre*, which uses metaphor to highlight the atrocities of war. Paul Wessels commented that the poem was a good example of trusting the intelligence of the reader. *The Fifth Story* by *Clarice Lispector* stood out for me. I particularly enjoyed Lispector's circular writing with superimposed narratives told through a cockroach infestation.

For personal reading, I chose *40 Likely to Die Before 40: An Introduction to Alt Lit*, edited by *Cameron Pierce and Michael J. Seidlinger*. This was my first encounter with the genre, and I was pleasantly surprised by the stories of contemporary writers who test convention. Writers such as Tao Lin and Megan Boyle motivated me to experiment with staccato. I was also intrigued by the strong themes of human connectedness in the anthology. In particular, *Dark* by Juliet Escoria that only alludes to the act of incest, using metaphors such as, "*The carpet had vacuum lines but there was a line of mould right at the edges.*"

Reflection- October 2021

It is interesting that some of the challenges that I identified early on, have been the Achilles I have had to nurse. Kerry Hammerton's seminar created awareness of subject matter I find compelling, my innate voice and the long seated habits that I needed to either nurture or break. Two writers from this Journal have impacted my writing— Julia Escoria, whose description of pain is so raw it leaves you feeling pummelled. And of course, one of the queens of the short story, Clarice Lispector, whom I found magnetic since that initial encounter.

RJ Three - Weeks 9-10: When Words are Visceral

Stacy Hardy invited us to redefine the relationship between physical nature and the nature of our texts. Her philosophy on the need to revolutionise writing by tearing down convention captivated me. *"Bodies are genius. How can we harness this genius to write characters, action and plot?"* Hardy challenged us to write in ways that liberate.

Her readings effectively demonstrated this ideology. I appreciated the voices of Egyptian and South American writers to whom I have had little exposure to date. Of the readings though, American Lidia Yuknavitch's *Second Language*, is the story that magnetised me. *"Somewhere in her skull or rib cage, the hint of old ideas—family, home—lingered, but the memories were not strong enough to negate their absence in this place."* Yuknavitch's writing is visceral, packed with deeper layers.

I wrote a story about incest based on the true account of an elderly lady in the community where I work. Hardy's feedback was positive overall, though she suggested I shorten and tighten the story.

Reading:

I look forward to the weekly poetry selection from Mangaliso Buzani. Other readings this fortnight included *Freshwater* by Akwaeke Emezi, Selah Satertom's *Pink Institution* and a chapbook called *Betty Superman* by Tiff Holland. Emezi is an artful storyteller whose metaphors, such as 'tamarind night' and the use of 'us' to denote mental illness is intriguing. *Pink Institution* and *Betty Superman* had more of a resonance with my writing. The former, for the way that Saterstrom's prose challenges the norm, telling the traumatic tale of four generations of Mississippi women through experimental non-traditional typography.

The latter, Tiff Holland's flash fiction, was sent to me by Paul W. There is no denying Holland's enthralling writing. She captures a moment with vividness. Her tight, unapologetic prose in *Betty Superman* and *Dragon Lady* are described as stellar examples of the short form. I am in awe of Holland's finely woven interactions of an eschewed mother-daughter relationship.

Reflection- October 2021

Since this seminar I have integrated writing the physical in stories such as 'Hail the Strong' and 'Order of His World' in line with Hardy's philosophy that, "In the end we are all culpable; implicated and damaged, conscripted and consigned. That is what we write about." Reflecting on this journal has also brought to light two important aspects of my writing trajectory:

-Tiff Holland has influenced the way I write about family, and her writing has instilled my love for the short story.

-Lidia Yuknavitch remains one of the writers I deeply admire.

RJ Four -Weeks 11-12: The Music of Words

Mxolisi Nyweza is a renowned poet, whose seminar, *The Musicality of Poetry*, reflected on nature and the lyricism of language. He encouraged us to write about frustrations by tapping into inherent knowledge. I wrote four poems for the assignment which Nyweza said had an innate rhythm, though he had reservations about a piece on a dubious Imam. It made me contemplate about the translation of writing with specific cultural references that may not be relatable to the larger demographic.

Reading:

Our long reading list arrived last week. I spent hours reviewing books I would otherwise not have encountered during the course of my life. My readings this fortnight were inspired by the reading list and comprised of poetry by Baudelaire and *Take My Word for It* by Nina Cassian. Her poems are emotive, sensual and often playful, with mesmerizing imagery such as, *"Trees in prayer positions, kneeling inside themselves."*

Reflection- October 2021

This was a period of research as I wanted to immerse myself in the poetry we were exposed to. I benefitted from Nyweza's honesty to everyone in our group. Looking back, I wonder if I erroneously presumed that we were required to write poetry for seminars facilitated by poets. Regardless, I gained insight on pieces that worked such as a feminism poem I wrote about abuse and some that did not, particularly those where references were misunderstood. The overall learning curve did invoke appreciation for the musicality of writing.

RJ Five - Weeks 13-14: Write, Rewrite

In his lecture, Nathan Trantraal elaborated on the Roshaman Effect, asking us to analyse how context affects the way we tell a story, and the way that four or five people could write that story in vastly different ways. His comparison of Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* and J.M Coetzee's *Foe* were stellar examples thereof. When I initially read the topic, I assumed Trantraal's seminar would be along the lines of Hemingway's, "*The only kind of writing is rewriting.*" I was pleasantly surprised to discover that most stories are in essence a recreation of age-old themes inspired by the writer's experience.

I rewrote Machado's *One Summer Night*. This is the second assignment where I submitted a poem instead of prose. Though feedback was good overall, it made me wonder about my final thesis submission.

Reading:

I shared *Promenade by Henrietta Rose-Innes* featured in *The Granta Book of the African Short Story* for this week's group reading. As a South African woman of similar age, I find Rose-Innes' references and language relatable. In fact, *The African Short Story* anthology resonated with me holistically. It is interesting how themes change dramatically across the African continent. These seem to be influenced by politics, culture and religion. Editor Helon Habila's chronological arrangement lends clout to historical events over the past century. Not surprising that Northern Africa featured several female writers whose stories are influenced by Islamic tradition. I find many of these themes echoed in my own writing.

Other readings included *Short*, edited by Alan Ziegler and a rather fascinating story entitled *The Whore Raft* by Kuzhali Manickavel which was my first encounter with Bizarro. I read *The Whore Raft* a few times as I had a keen desire to interpret Manickavel's writing where she portrays India's economic disparity in the face of a tumultuous political landscape. *Short* is an exciting anthology exploring the many forms of short prose. Included in the anthology are works by brilliant writers such as Virginia Woolf, Diane Williams, Kafka, Baudelaire, Gertrude Stein, Oscar Wilde, Lydia Davis and Margaret Atwood. Amongst the contemporary works, I appreciated Kimiko Hahn and Traci Brimhall. A minor downfall of the anthology is that it is weighted in favour of European and American authors, and I had hoped for more diversity.

Reflection- October 2021

Nathan Trantraal's seminar left a lasting impression on me. I appreciate that he engages with one's work, trying to finetune each piece to its essence. Trantraal created an awareness of plot and character that we find repeated in literature. This was useful in my own writing as it has made me think laterally about how I wish to write and present a narrative.

Of my readings this fortnight, Henrietta Rose-Innes is worth mentioning. Her short story artfully portrays a specific scene juxtaposed with psychological growth in the protagonist. It is a skill I have tried to emulate in my work.

RJ Six - Weeks 15-16: Challenging Convention

Paul Mason's extensive literary knowledge, combined with his outlook on the hero's journey benefitted me immensely. I enjoyed the analysis of literature accompanying his seminar engaging with existential and modernist excerpts, particularly Armah's representation of upending narrative in *The Beautiful Ones* where the author uses objects as structural devices to shift the reader's consciousness to a higher level. It made me consider the portrayal of characters in relationship to their environment. We had to transform four prompts into something visceral for our assignment described by Mason as 'Life upon Life'. It motivated me to challenge convention by writing about arranged marriage, infanticide and patriarchy. I welcomed the fact that Mason took the time to read our submissions prior to the group feedback session. His suggestions, even those as simple as 'odd verb', helped improved my story.

Reading:

I look forward to Thursday group readings as I always gain so much from these sessions. This week, it was the provocative Rikki Ducornet's prose via Andrew's reading of *Opium*. I resonated with Ducornet's style and look forward to reading her work for inspiration.

My own readings were fairly varied. Aside from Samuel Beckett's *One Evening* that I shared for our group, I have been exploring a Translation of the *Ancient Chinese Book of the Tao* and *Tablet & Pen: Literary Landscapes from the Modern Middle East-Edited by Reza Aslan*. The latter unearths the literary landscape of countries from Morocco and Egypt to Turkey, the Middle East and Pakistan. The thread of the anthology is not through borders and nationalities, but rather the common experience of Western imperialism. I appreciate that one hears the voice of writers across four languages and a cross-section of cultures with themes of repression, frustration and poverty. Turkish poet, Nazim Hikmet's writings from early in the 20th Century are enigmatic, especially the vivid descriptions in "*I love My Country*." Mahmoud Darwish's poems translated from Arabic moved me to tears and is probably where the conception of the Muezzin in my story for Paul Mason precipitated.

Reflection- October 2021

Paul M is one of the lecturers who inspired me to work harder and make every word in my writing matter. His use of prompts is an exercise I use whenever I seek a spark of creativity.

During this seminar, I knew why I had selected prose. Granted it takes a lot more out of me, but the fruits are worth the labour. 'Crossing the Divide', the gruesome story I wrote for my submission remains amongst my strongest.

RJ Seven - Weeks 17-18: The Art of Expression

Paul W sent me feedback with an accompanied reading of Lidia Yuknavitch's *Daguerreotype of a Girl* so that I could refine the story I wrote about postpartum psychosis for Paul Mason's seminar. Yuknavitch challenges the norm and her writing demonstrates the difference between descriptive and expressive prose exceptionally well. I believe this is essentially what I was trying to achieve but could not quite articulate in my first draft. Our group also met with Paul W to discuss a book review project. I was fortunate that *Tablet & Pen*, the anthology I researched, has been widely reviewed extensively.

Extract from my research: *Ultimately each type of review has a place and an audience, a style and an outcome. Great book reviews are not flat and expected. Instead, they become share-worthy in as much as the book they talk about. A review is a promise of sorts, it whispers to the reader a glimpse of a journey or revelation — using only a few well-chosen words.*

Reading:

Our group readings were facilitated by Marike Beyers, whose love for poetry provided a captivating preview for her seminar. She rekindled my admiration for Neruda's *Ode to the Tomato*, Lorca's *Song With a Particular Movement* and South African icons such as Robert Berold and Antjie Krog. Aside from the evocative Lidia Yuknavitch, I have been reading another short form anthology. This one, *The Penguin Book of the Prose Poem- Edited by Jeremy Noel-Tod* is comparative to Ziegler's *Short*, featuring many of the same writers such as Virginia Woolf and Oscar Wilde. However, I appreciated the inclusion of writers beyond Europe and the U.S in this collection.

Reflection- October 2021

As mentioned above, Paul Wessels sent me a story by Lidia Yuknavitch with the following advice:

-Only one metaphor per paragraph

-Descriptive prose and expressive prose need differentiation. Think about what you want to say and have the reader experience. Do not over explain.

-Point of view can change the tone and believability of a story.

These words have shaped a great deal of my work. The art of expressive prose is something I endeavour to refine as I work at being a writer. Another valuable takeback is that every detail of a story has to be examined in terms of the logical unfolding of narrative. In my story 'Crossing the Divide', changing the point of view to third person elevated the unfolding. As far as reading for the purpose of writing is concerned, this was a turning point for me. I am grateful to Paul Wessels for the introduction to writers with whom I feel a sense of kinship.

RJ Eight- Weeks 19-20: All Prose is Poetry

Our exposure to poetry these past few months has enriched my learning experience. As mentioned in previous RJ's, I am trying to gain as much reading exposure to poetry as to prose for the rhythm and art of craft it lends to a writer. I appreciate that Marike Beyers made me think of form as part of the poem and not just a vehicle of artistic gimmickry.

Her readings included essays by Brodsky and Kenneth Koch. These were invaluable in breaking down the art of poetry, poetry versus prose and the reiteration that prose is in fact poetry. I wrote three pieces fashioned on the works of Neruda and Nina Cassian. One of my poems, *Ode to the Jacaranda*, was subsequently published.

Reading:

Paul W sent links to Ubu and PennSound to carry us through Lockdown. Ubu has an interesting section on Ethnopoetics featuring oral narrations by Aztec and Shamaic poets. Many lean towards folktales with an interpretation of the region's culture. Navigating the Upenn website was akin to being in a candy store. I learnt a great deal from "*The Sound of Pound: A Listener's Guide*, by Richard Sieburth."

Reflection - October 2021

Beyers' feedback on my poems were most beneficial. Whilst she did not discourage me, she did pose a pertinent question and that was, "If prose pushes you, could it be the genre for you?" She also took the time to reconnect with us post rewrite and editing. In her communication Beyers commented on the edits that we had discussed as a group. This is welcomed as one does not always discern whether a rewrite is in keeping with a lecturers directive.

RJ Nine - Weeks 21-22: Poetics and The Art of Craft

Traditionally, the term poetics has been interpreted as an inquiry into the rules and principles that underlie a work of art and has often carried normative and prescriptive connotations. <https://lucian.uchicago.edu/blogs/mediatheory/keywords/poetics/>

I fully embraced the outstanding essays in the Poetics seminar. They inspired me to conduct my own research in order to decipher the philosophy behind the subject. Although Aristotle is cited amongst the pioneers who defined the theory of Poetics, I believe that his philosophies relating to structure, form and theory are only partially relative within the context of our degree and the times we live in. To my mind, Poetics here, is defined in terms of the process encompassing all creative spheres rather than exclusively within an academic construct.

Paul's approach of introducing us to acclaimed writers and poets' insights through their essays, is a constructive manner in which to glimpse how creative minds process their craft. Studying writers inspired by the same schools of thought helped put many of the essays in context for me.

Aside from lessons on form as explored in the works of Olson and Creeley, I am intrigued by concepts of change outlined in Chris Kraus, R.M. Berry and Kate Bernheimer's essays. Federico Garcia Lorca's *Duende* and Tim Seibles' *Beautiful Noise* that discuss the power of that indescribable 'it' were equally mesmerising as was Mxolisi Nyezwa's transformation of language through energies. I was encouraged by avant-garde writers such as Anna Kavan, Jackie Wang and Amina Cain. hooks' *Narratives of Struggle* that talks about writing of and through were captivating. It left me determined to find the wonder that Kathy Ackers reveals when she says "*play with language and content.*"

Reading:

José Saramago's *Cain* was a welcomed change from the stream of anthologies I have been reading. As Portugal's austere Nobel laureate, Saramago combines the artful with meditative prose, in this novel where a Biblical tale is turned on its head. His humour, non-conformist punctuation, capital letters and long sentences are riveting. Aside from *Cain*, I also read short prose by Maggie Nelson and favourites such as Clarice Lispector and Amy Césaire.

Reflection- August 2021

The Poetics seminar allowed me to embrace the spirit of writing. Integrity, I have come to understand, cannot be disguised under the veil of perfect verse. When a writer lets his or her soul lead the way, theory and form lend themselves.

RJ Ten - Weeks 27-28: Making Contact

Our studies have sailed along despite the restrictions of lockdown and Virtual contact week was no different. Kerry Hammerton organised an experience rich with reading and feedback. As an exercise of self-appraisal, we were required to compile portfolios for contact week. Several questions arose whilst reflecting upon my work-

1. *How do I write emotive prose without being melodramatic?*
2. *Why have I written so much poetry?*
3. *Is it actually poetry? or prose that I have tried to dress up as poetry?*

Many of these concerns were addressed during lecturer discussion or whilst listening to the feedback of others' writing. I appreciate that our facilitators are approachable, trying to understand our work whilst honouring our individuality. Of course, writing being of such a personal nature, it sometimes stings to hear about flaws in a piece, but objective feedback helps one realise what is essential to bring out the best in the writing.

Reading:

I used contact week to read books suggested by lecturers. These included *The Taiga Syndrome* by Cristina Rivera Garza, Diane Williams' short prose and Lidia Yuknavitch's first collection, *The Small Backs of Children*. All these writers resonate with me. Garza for the mystical way that she writes. Her words fold in on themselves, examining myth and truth through narrative that feels hallucinatory. This out of body experience, albeit in a different manner, is also how I felt reading *Diane Williams' Collected Stories*. Williams is magnificent. Her stories are short. They defy logic. There is a Gertrude Stein feel to them but that would be underplaying the fact that she has a voice so unique it is unforgettable.

On the note of unforgettable, Yuknavitch's *The Small Backs of Children* did not disappoint. One particular story about the loss of a baby, echoed my own experience. The way that Yuknavitch expresses a ritual of goodbye to her stillborn child gave me chills. Her writing is like taking a journey with a friend who shares your struggles and desires.

Reflection – October 2021

Contact week was a turning point in terms of understanding what I was required to achieve, my strengths, weaknesses and placement of voice in parallel with writers that inspire me. I found it useful to have multiple lecturers offer advice and constructive critique. It allowed me to grow in confidence whilst acknowledging my challenges of overwriting, using poetry as a fallback and excessive adjectives.

I believe that the exposure to Cristina Rivera-Gaza, Diane Williams and Lidia Yuknavitch during contact week was fortuitous. There is no denying their influence on my subsequent writing.

RJ Eleven - Weeks 30-31: Sexy Writing

I was intrigued by Chwayita Ngamlana's *Writing about Sex* seminar, particularly the fetishes she asked us to include in our prose; as these added an enthralling dynamic to the assignment. Ngamlana's approach on the ways in which a sex scene may be introduced into the narrative also work well. I wrote two stories for the assignment. *The Incubus Effect*, is aligned to my innate style, whilst *Order of His World* has a cooler tone that reflects the male protagonist. It seems that contact week had a significant effect in refining my voice.

In preparation for the seminar I read Ngamlana's novella, *If I Stay Right Here*. Her story is beautifully written, addressing the complexities of relationships with the impetus being exploration, trauma, violence, jealousy and heartache. Our group reading further explored these narrative thrusts. Paul Mason's insight helped us distinguish the nuances of a piece of writing in terms of how writers move through plot, setting and dialogue.

My own readings included *A Question of Power* by Bessie Head that Vangile mentioned during contact week. Head captures the mind of a mentally disturbed woman poignantly, swaying between the real and imagined so that one's axis shifts. Through her writing I learnt that topics such as racism, poverty, religion and sex can be tackled in a didactic manner.

Reflection - October 2021

When I read my work from this period, I notice a positive shift. There is an emergence of voice, a clarity that seems somewhat lacking in some of the earlier assignments. Perhaps I developed self-confidence at this stage, reading for the purpose of enhancing my voice, using the assignments for further growth. Both stories written for this seminar have been included in my thesis submission.

RJ Twelve - Weeks 32-33: Breathing Life into Writing Death

Carol Leff's *Writing about Death* seminar was very close to my heart. Her delivery and the accompanied readings were also exemplary. I revelled in the blend of African writers from Buzani to Zakes Mda whose stories on death ranged from heartfelt to humorous. As far as the assignment went, the unusual circumstances we are faced with this year made fictionalising the memory of a death challenging yet cathartic. Leff's feedback session was equally productive. She is an astute academic who made us aware of the finer nuances of our work such as not using fragmented sentences without purpose. I appreciate that she encouraged me to explore the whale metaphor in my story further. I was uncertain about my title for the story and felt relieved when Carol said that it worked, as titles are something I struggle with.

It was thus a welcomed coincidence when Paul M discussed titles during group reading. He made us consider a title's suitability, advising that simplicity is key. This has been useful in the way I enter a reading and my own writing.

Reading:

My own readings this fortnight were quite varied. The introduction to Brian Evenson in the short story, *White Square*, compelled me to discover his other work, and *The Altmann's Tongue* did not disappoint. Another prolific writer whose prose left me awestruck is Fernando Pessoa. *The Selected Prose of Fernando Pessoa* is quite profound. Pessoa's pace and narration together with his mystifying heteronyms add layers to the text. There is little wonder why he is hailed as one of the most prolific modern writers. Another fascinating, albeit completely different novel that I delved into this fortnight is *Ice* by Anna Kavan. Kavan's writing takes a frightening plunge into the icy darkness of humanity. Her prose glimmers with imagery. I love the blurring of reality that Kavan accentuates with her idiosyncrasies.

Reflection – October 2021

I found it intriguing that my submission for the seminar on death, 'My Mother and The Whale', appealed to everyone in our group. I used the motif of a camera shutter to frame memories in the story which is a first person narration of a young woman who loses her mother to cancer whilst pregnant with her first child. Andrew Stuart-Watson commented on the form, which he said enhanced the expressive nature of the prose. Others said that the duality of death and birth juxtaposed in the story made the emotions stronger.

RJ Thirteen – Weeks 34-35: Telling it Slant

Oblique prose or 'writing slant' as Jo-Ann Bekker described her seminar, made me mull over what I want to say, and the way in which I wish to write it. I believe that the metaphorical flourish I tend to suffer from was allowed some chance to pirouette this fortnight. I revelled in the variety of writing included in Bekker's readings. Amongst them, Lydia Davis, Jergovic's *Cactus*, a vignette by Vangile and Yuknavitch's short prose. Bekker posed introspective questions between readings, which challenged me to think laterally. Our feedback session was equally fruitful. Bekker's keen insight helped me to finetune my four submissions.

Reading:

My readings included the enchanting Angela Carter's *Collected Short Stories*. Her distinct voice traipses on the surreal whilst remaining timeless. Can Xue's, *The Embroidered Shoes* was a good accompaniment to Angela Carter. Her stories are dreamlike concoctions of the haunted and obscure. Carol Leff introduced us to Nigerian writer Sarah Manyika whom I enjoyed so much that I decided to look at other experimental writers from Africa. What a joy to read Lesley Nneka Arimah's *What It Means When a Man Falls from the Sky*. Her stories are often fragments capturing scenes from family life in Nigeria and expats in America.

In preparation for our next seminar, I researched the formidable Samuel Beckett, gaining insight into his life, his relationships and his influence on subsequent minimalist and post-modern writing as mentioned in *The Complete Short Prose, 1929-1989* and *The Cambridge Introduction to Samuel Beckett*. There is music and mystery in Beckett's prose. He writes as if trying to articulate the spaces between consciousness, often adding humour. I am in awe of his sentence structure, use of repetition and unashamed disregard for grammar and punctuation.

Reflection- October 2021

Jo-Ann Bekker's seminar allowed me to play with style and form. Though admittedly, my lessons to this point made me mindful of using the oblique with discretion. This seminar helped me produce some of my stronger pieces such as 'The Watchman' and 'Taming Mustangs', both dealing with complex mother-child relationships. Another story from this seminar has been the source of many debates and went through several title changes. Interestingly it speaks to a female readership quite strongly. I named it 'Love' for Bekker's seminar, then 'Paper Boy' but decided to omit it from the final manuscript. Perhaps it will find a space sometime in the future.

RJ Fourteen - Weeks 36-37: Stirring Still

Beckett's work, ranging from his plays, to longer fiction such as *Molloy* and shorter prose pieces towards the end of his lifetime, reflect not only his versatility but his changing inner landscape beyond cultural boundaries and convention towards spellbinding genius. In our previous seminar, I had an affinity for writing the oblique. I believe that many 'slant' writers were influenced by the modernists, perhaps by the non-conventional that Beckett employs. Thanks to Paul Mason I am an unabashed Beckettian convert. His passion inspired me conjure up the character of a sapped old man for my monologue. I am pleased that it worked.

Reflecting on my readings these past two weeks, I come to realise that I am drawn to mood as much as words. What does the unsaid reveal? How does a writer get to the heart of a reader without melodrama and overwriting?

My readings included *The Prose of Samuel Beckett* which, as mentioned above, speaks to the senses. I was particularly engrossed Beckett's hauntingly emotive final piece called *Stirring Still* which I read for our group.

In keeping with writing that speaks to my voice, I also decided to read more of Lydia Davis. I am in awe of her mastery of the short form. Some pieces are no longer than a paragraph, yet they are lucid, honest and surprising. Reading her work invokes the same feelings in me as Lidia Yuknavitch's writing.

Reflection - October 2021

Samuel Beckett's writing created awareness that exposure to all forms of writing is an instruction on ways to improve personal voice. This versatility needs to be explored in one's work. Despite that, I constantly turn to writers whose work has a resonance. Lydia Davis for example, whose mastery of the short form motivated several of the micro-fiction pieces I wrote for my creative thesis submission. I have her short story collection on my bedside and it has become a valued treasure.

RJ Fifteen - Weeks 38-39: A Distinct Voice

Masande Ntshanga's seminar on rewriting to distinguish one's voice is planned at a significant time in our coursework. I have been feeling somewhat off kilter and this assignment provided opportunity for reflection. Ntshanga's personal recollections combined with his outlook on writers that inspire one's creativity were captivating. His encouragement gave me the confidence to write four versions of a story on polygamy.

As part of the assignment, we were asked to include a personal reflection and to research writers that motivate us. I examined writing that resonates with me, including the works of *Lydia Davis, Angela Carter, Clarice Lispector, Joanna Walsh, Diane Williams, Tiff Holland and Lidia Yuknavitch*. Other writers worth mentioning are Susan Steinberg, Ursula LeGuin, Anna Kavan, Can Xue, Cristina Rivera Garza and Jenny Xie.

For the research aspect of the assignment, I read *Extracts and Selected Prose from:*

- *The Chronology of Water- Lidia Yuknavitch*
- *The Verge- Lidia Yuknavitch*
- *Nine Micros- Tiff Holland*
- *The Boys-Tiff Holland*
- *The Complete Stories of Clarice Lispector*
- *Collected Short Stories- Lydia Davis*
- *A Souvenir of Japan- Angela Carter*

I am not going to delve into specifics on the books mentioned above as they all provided consolidation in terms of writing I am drawn to. These are stories, particularly the short form, painted through nuanced imagery and metaphor. In the end, I drew on Yuknavitch and Holland for this assignment.

This is an extract from the Reflective piece I submitted to Masande:

Life abounds in circumstances that shape us. For me, stories told in a way that invoke universal emotion speak to my heart. I think it is because the thread between fiction and non-fiction is so fine, it often gets blurred. In one of Tiff Holland's essays, she states:

"Sometimes I begin writing with a strong feeling about something, but I stumble upon most of my writing, whatever its form. I wait until I cannot stand to NOT write something before I write it. That gives the piece urgency and authenticity."

RJ Sixteen - Weeks 40-41: The Thrust of Motif

"Motif is the clearest example of a literary device creating cohesion in writing. It can allow prose to reach crescendo and to wind down to resolution." Henali Kuit's explanation of effective use of motif was succinct, particularly in the examples she shared such as Henry James' *Portrait of a Lady* where the peacock description is used effectively.

Many of my stories have motif or repetition in them. It is something I do quite naturally and I really enjoyed working on parallel plots in my submission about a manipulative friendship where I used motif inspired by Henry James. Henali provided astute feedback on our writing, asking us to consider whether the device benefitted the narrative. As with Ntshanga's seminar, Kuit asked us to include reflections in our submissions. This heightened the synergy between the creative process and the research component of the assignment.

Reading:

I explored three very different writers over the past week – Joanna Walsh, Nana Kwame Adjei-Brenyah and Julio Cortazar with the intention of researching themes for my upcoming thesis. I included Adjei-Brenyah as he has been on my list since my first encounter with his intense stories during one of our group readings. *Friday Black* is described as 'Political Dystopian Fiction' that examines the Black experience in modern day America. Writing as a person of colour infiltrates all my work and I benefitted from Adjei-Brenyah's bold approach to racism. I also benefitted from Cortazar's fluid prose in *We Love Glenda So Much and Other Tales*. Cortazar has influenced so many writers. He has a brilliant way of framing a story, creating tension through curves in his narration.

Of the three books, Joanna Walsh's *Vertigo* dazzled me most. Her short stories stream together and read as a Novella. Walsh's writing is poetic with a memoir feel, providing fragment's into a woman or several women's lives speaking to emotions, relationships and understanding of the female position in the world. Her love for Clarice Lispector and Marguerite Duras comes through in her work.

Reflection- October 2021

Henali Kuit's seminar allowed me to play with form and tone. 'The Craft of Haute Couture' is the story I wrote for this assignment. It is included in my thesis with only minor edits, for which I am pleased.

With regards to my reading trajectory, this RJ confirmed the genres I find appealing. I remain enticed by the nonlinear thrust of Walsh's stories. They are reminiscent of Diane Williams, Lidia Yuknavitch and Lydia Davis, all of whom I aspire to; and whose writing has influenced my work.

RJ Seventeen- Weeks 42-43: Write me a Letter

This is a bittersweet journal that comes after a fitting final seminar on letter writing, where words are more in conversation with the essence of being than with the narrative. Stacy Hardy's wealth of knowledge is always uplifting. Her seminar, interspersed with excerpts, poems and prose in the form of letters was difficult at first as one had to stop to free-write but it turned out to be incredible in terms of unleashing creativity. I found that once I engaged with a reading, thoughts spilled onto the page.

My final submission, where we had to write to a favourite author and compose a creative letter, were inspired at some point in the free-writes. For the author aspect, I had set out to write a letter to Virginia Woolf, but I found myself writing to Lidia Yuknavitch instead. My creative piece featured a mother-child relationship *again*. This was not intentional and it concerned me as I do not want to be pigeonholed into a particular genre. On the other hand, there is some beauty in writing that comes naturally.

Reading:

My two readings this fortnight were equally compelling. The first is by Ibrahim Sonallah who is described as the 'Kafka' of Africa. His novella, *The Community* is cryptic but captivating, relaying the story of a desperate man's struggle against bureaucracy in the hopes of unveiling post-colonial Arab globalization and its subjugation of the Egyptian people. My second reading, Nathalie Sarraute's *Tropisms* offers snippets into ordinary character's lives through vignettes that are so beautifully written it feels like peeping through a keyhole and seeing words through a kaleidoscope.

Reflection- October 2021

During Hardy's free-writing exercises, I wrote three letters that found their way to my creative submission. One of them, 'My Darling Ma' is a personal recount and one that is close to my heart. Most readers find it endearing, which makes me realise that stories that carry an authenticity seem to have more of an impact.

RJ Eighteen - Weeks 45-47: Year-end Fragments

With coursework behind us, I am in equal parts excited and nervous about the journey ahead. This is compounded by the submission of our Thesis abstract. I must admit that although I have written abstracts for work-related academic papers, I fumbled in my first attempts. I am finally satisfied with the genre and content matter I have outlined. It is a reflection of who I am, and the short form bodes well for exploration of voice and theme.

Reading :

Jo-Ann Bekker recommended some authors aligned to my writing. Amongst them, Joy Williams and Marie Ndiaye. I read Williams' *99 Stories of God* this week and it did not disappoint. Like Lydia Davis, she is a master of the fragment. Her writing is vivid, leaving one with a sense of contemplation. *99 Stories of God* can be picked up and read at random. It reminded me of Diane Williams' work. This offers food for thought for my upcoming thesis in that stories may be connected by the writer's voice despite a range of themes and characters.

RJ Feb - March 2021: The Solitary Writer

Now that the lonely journey of writing without assignment directives has begun, a creative lethargy seems to have set in. My supervisor, Paul Wessels advised me to break out of this by writing every time I read something inspirational. To that end, he sent two anthologies that have been extremely useful. Both books broach the subject of motherhood on par with other 'worthy' literary subjects. This is a great milestone as it builds bridges between the perception of motherhood as a separate entity to literature, thereby addressing a pertinent aspect of feminism. Writing the maternal figure is something I connect with. For the longest time, this has been accompanied by a feeling of mediocrity. However, these anthologies helped view the subject in a positive light.

The first anthology, *Not for Mothers Only- Contemporary Poems on child getting and child rearing* edited by Rebecca Wolff is diverse whilst remaining tender. "*The thousand experiences, the thousand interruptions,*" as poet Alicia Ostriker writes in the foreword.

I was quite taken with Toi Derricote's writing in the anthology. Her poem, *Natural Birth* reads like a journal on the birthing experience. It inspired me to write a vignette from the perspective of the foetus that I would like to include it in a series of stories on "talking from beyond". I'm not sure how this will transpire, but the mood of the piece does lend itself to the mystical realm.

After completing these anthologies, I also wrote a flash fiction piece about a teenaged girl who commits suicide and her mother's subsequent denial thereof. I would like to expand upon this story at some stage, as the subject of cultural displacement and the pressure on young immigrants is linked to all diaspora.

I shall be meeting with Paul W thrice weekly to edit work from last year's seminars as well as to examine this year's progress. At present I am quite invested in the topic of the unseen, trying to connect the lives of ordinary people with spiritual beliefs as this is a huge part of Indian and African culture. I researched the maestro, Angela Carter's *Book of Fairy Tales and Strange Things Sometimes Still Happen*, as I was trying to decipher the cross-over of writing stories that have these philosophies. In her foreword, Carter addresses this connection in relation to the modern world, particularly family. This inspired me to write two stories with related themes- *Saving Grace* and *Rites of Passage*.

I also read Rikki Ducornet's *The Word-Desire*. There is definitely some influence in the stories that I wrote about relationships after encountering Ducornet. Her work has a transcendence worthy of noting. One has to read between the lines to make connections, which is a vital lesson for me in my quest not to overwrite.

RJ- April-May 2021: Until we Meet Again

Contact week at the end of April turned out to be exhilarating yet sobering. This would be our final group meeting with peers and lecturers, and I was eager to establish whether I had made progress. Whilst listening to the work that we all shared, I celebrated the long way we had all come from Orientation week in 2020 where we tip-toed around one another, then the first contact week in which I felt totally overwhelmed, caught between poetry and prose.

Paul W and I met regularly. We began by cementing what the thesis would entail and how I planned to work towards that end. Initially, I had set out on a grand plan to write only on motherhood and tried to work by theme viz childhood to death, then I veered and tried to write to suit the outlines of my abstract. What I soon learnt is that writing in this forced manner made me lose something along the way. I used too much of the passive voice and tried in a somewhat contrived manner, to follow the example of writers such as Lydia Davis and Diane Williams by not using names for my protagonists at the expense of my own uniqueness. The resultant work became a blur of 'he's' and 'she's'. Wessels asked me to rewrite in the active voice and give my protagonist's names where the stories dictated.

Suddenly pieces such as *Slipping* and *The Dancer* took on a life of their own. Wessels further suggested that I collate all stronger pieces from the seminars and that we use those as a starting point. Needless to say, and as noted throughout my reflections, many of those stories are now included in my thesis after tightening and editing.

I wrote roughly four to five pieces for each bi-weekly meet where Paul W and I read and edited during a session. This was an extremely useful approach, as I often noted errors during a reading. I would think to myself, "oh this does not work." And sure enough Paul would point it out.

I had about seventy percent of my stories by the time contact week arrived. They provided a strong enough platform from which to establish whether the progression of the stories were in keeping with the overall arch of the my thesis. I daresay, not all the pieces were successful during contact week. Some remain works in progress that I hope to expand upon, others such as a story on Xenophobia narrated from the point of view of an Indian woman who falls in love with an African national seemed a bit too contentious and though it is based on the truth, it did not work for my collection.

Contact Weeks are highlights of my studies, through them I have been introduced to new writers, an array of writing styles and I have learnt to establish what works. It is always interesting to note different reactions to a piece of writing. Some feedback resonates instantly whilst others can only be evaluated whilst editing. One of the pieces that falls into this category is a story called *Fridays with Amma*. Another story, *Legacy* was well received, though Stacy Hardy asked me to play with the form. Her recommendation changed the pace of this vignette, highlighting its simple vocabulary whilst strengthening the depth of its message. I learnt a great deal about myself and the path of my writing through the receipt of my work via lecturer and peer feedback.

Highlights of contact week:

- Stories that worked.
- Kerry's free-write prompts.
- Reading short stories, especially a blog on flash fiction.
- Considering my work objectively.
- Cherishing the fact that never again will I have so many experts comment on my work solely for the improvement thereof.
- The fact that writing is indeed a community.

Some 'tough-love' lessons I need to jot down:

- Do not overwrite.
- Do not write stories dense with adjectives and metaphors.
- Be mindful of tense.
- Stay away from the passive voice.
- Use discernment of time and place for characters.
- Not every story makes it to the finish line.
- Do not get lost in edits.
- Work on Titles.

Conclusion

The months post contact week have been a whirlwind. I set out to work on suggested edits, whilst reading as much as I could from the reading list, including authors such as Yuri Herrera, Ocean Vuong, bell hooks and Carmen Machado over and above the writers who have inspired my collection. The writing and live edit protocol that Paul W established since January resumed after April.

Contact week encouraged me to challenge myself with some of the longer stories that appear in my submission such as *Mrs. Seth* and *My Husband's Daughter*. Many of these favour a third person protagonist. This is because stories such as *In the Room where I am Queen* received positive feedback and I decided to develop a wider array of characters. It seems that as I wrote, my thesis developed a life of its own with stories ranging from motherhood to angels, death to sex. Ultimately all carrying a piece of me.

In the abstract for my creative dissertation, I set out to use fiction as the lens through which the untold and unresolved become a catalyst for healing. Whilst I remain hopeful that my short stories provide that vehicle even to a minute degree, my reflections reveal that the true elixir has been what I have received

Section 2: Poetics Essay

(W)rites of Passage

One of the questions I frequently get asked is why, at forty-nine, I felt compelled to study creative writing. It is a question I have asked myself too. For lack of a concrete answer, I believe that the only rationale is the compulsion to write. To feed that innate part of me that has been writing since I was a child, yearning to grab the unspoken.

Reading the words of brilliant poets and writers has left me awestruck. I consider myself a novice standing on the periphery of what constitutes great art with a long way to go. Despite that, I take strength in my perseverance and the will to reach for that elusive unspoken. In the words of Gertrude Stein, *"It will come if it is there and if you will let it come."*

The essays reveal different parts of a writing tree, all unique, yet all essential to the wholeness of that living entity. Be it through form or content, from life experience or a manifestation of the unseen, artists are concerned with the intrinsic nature that underpins the metaphysics of our makeup. I identify strongly with that. Dambudzo Marechera (1988) says, *"From early in life, I have viewed literature as a unique universe that has no internal divisions. I do not pigeon-hole it by race or language or nation. It is an ideal cosmos co-existing with this crude one."* This 'crude one', the one that shapes each of us, is where, as writers, we imagine an 'other'.

For me, it is putting into prose, poetry or narrative, the possibilities the world holds if it were bonded with empathy. A united humanity where we celebrate, mourn, seek justice, are heard for the very fact that we are human.

Do you belong to the Tribe?....Listen closely....The Tribe wishes to speak.

"As writers you belong to an ancient tribe" Paul Wessels (2020) said in a brief about the Poetics' Seminar. Being part of this community is an honour and responsibility that one cannot wear lightly. Though writing should make room for playfulness and risk, personal attainment of freedom that in itself creates the cathartic experience, it also comes with responsibility to translate effectively, honouring intrinsic and inherited knowledge of where we come from, where we are, and what will follow through the changes we set in motion.

Common to most religions is one phrase that I love, *"In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the word was God."* What enormous gravity the word possesses. It is as much a part of mankind as the breath that made the first man.

So to learn from masters of this ancient tribe is like the passing of wisdom through memory. The (w)rites of passage akin to ancient rituals of sages around campfires in remote-mountain passes.

So how do the greats come to writing – How do I translate that into my own discourse?

I have benefitted immensely from exposure to the essays, encountering new philosophies, cementing some old ones, and in moving instances feeling an inherent resonance that I may have been innately aware of, but could not articulate with distinction.

Though there are many themes that stood out, I have decided to focus on ideologies that I identified most with. These are:

- *Form, Structure and Theory*
- *Content, Knowledge and Imagination*
- *Race, Culture and Politics*
- *Spirit, The subconscious, Internal Rhythms – Energy beyond Science*
- *Writing the audience, Speaking the community*

Although I will elaborate on these particular themes, I would like to mention that essays such as R.M. Berry's (2009) "Thesis on Fiction's present" which states, "*For the twenty-first century to liberate a new episode in the history of fiction, writers and critics will need to locate points of contact between the formal conditions of reading and writing and the demands of a multicultural, globally organized, technologically complex, and economically constrained world.*" And, "*Words, sentences, paragraphs (and of course the punctuation) and their position on the page and in the book must be rethought and rewritten so that new ways of reading can be created,*" Federman (1993), are revelations that I find liberating for the future of literature.

Insights from a community of writers and how they have impacted me:

- ***On Form, Structure and Theory:***

The diversity of writer's writing about the theoretical aspects of their craft was of immense benefit. This is probably linked to the fact that I have no formal qualification in the academic analysis of literature with regards to concepts such as eras, defined structures and form. Thus, writers revealing their thoughts on everything from the classics to modernism, post-modernism, experimental, avant-garde, critical fiction, narrative, surfiction to projective verse and creationism has been enlightening.

I have come to understand the influence of being taught by convention. It is apparent that learning formulaically rather than intrinsically is simpler. Through clarification of the obvious limitation of these traditional 'meters', Charles Olson and Robert Creeley provide enlightenment on ideologies regarding measure and projective verse, reiterating that the need for lateral thinking is vital for the creation of knowledge beyond convention.

Further through the essays, I identified some of the habits that I have succumbed to over the years and which I need to dispel or, at the very least, be mindful of. One of these is the 'metaphorical flourish'. I do not intentionally use metaphors with zealousness. However, now that I am aware of using them cautiously, I have increased discernment for their usage and for refining my expressive prose.

In Antonio Machado's *"Notes on Poetry"* he comments on overusing metaphors: *"Metaphors are nothing in themselves. They have no value except as a means of indirect expression of that which is missing in the omnibus language."* Machado (1979)

Another valuable lesson that I gained from Machado's essay is the use of imagery as an *"arbitrary game of concepts, not of intuitions."* (1979). For me, this leads to a new perception on the sincerity of my personal orientation towards thesis or antithesis and the question of which side my work has taken thus far.

Though I will discuss politics, race and culture later in this essay, a construct that I gained from the readings is connected to race as a by-product of its role in the form or style of writing that I have formed somewhat unconsciously. This is the *"overly politicized writing"* that Njabulo Ndebele (1984) highlights in his exceptional essay, *"The rediscovery of the Ordinary."*

As a person of colour and the granddaughter of an ANC stalwart my early readings were heavily influenced by writers such as Serote, Nadine Gordimer, Christopher van Wyk, Mafika Gwala, Don Mattera, E'skia Mphahlele and Ahmed Essop, I realize, upon reading Ndebele's essay, that as powerful and influential as they were, some of these writers likely told their stories for intentional purposes (and rightfully so for their time). However, *"titillating readers with the spectacular"* (Ndebele-1984) through the creation of defined archetypes of heroes and villains, leaves very little by the reader's way of choice. This was perhaps necessary during Apartheid South Africa where art was one of the greatest political tools and I am thankful for the outlook it has given me towards oppression. It has certainly shaped my writer's voice.

What I understand from Ndebele's essay is that 'rediscovery of the ordinary' to break out of the spectacular mould of writing is essential in this century on a local as well as global sphere. His ideologies are echoed by bell hooks' (1991). She argues that writing the ordinary serves as a beacon of hope in dire circumstances where critical writing is not represented by writing for display.

To me, these philosophies are a means of checking myself. The implementation of such practices will aid in making my writing more suitable to a current reader. I am however, offered some consolation that despite my challenges, many theoretical

practices expressed in the essays are apparent in my work. They are present, though until this year of study, have been largely subconscious.

The essays further confirmed my ideologies that honesty, humour, the avant-garde, experimental, form and the non-conformity are with each writer, and they are waiting to fall onto the page through imagination and the willingness to challenge established identities.

Camille Roy offers the following wisdom, *"It's all about nested structures where narrative provides context for the rupturing of identity."* (2004)

Ultimately my realisation on the theme of structure and theory is that the story or poem has its own life. It cannot be beaten into form. Those are semantics that we analyse after the fact. It is about being present and taking risks. Or as one of my favourites, Tiff Holland so beautifully claims, *"sometimes subject just dictates form."* (2014). The art of writing is necessity, and at its essence, the creator who fills his cup through Content, Knowledge and Imagination.

Which brings me to my second theme. My interpretation of-

- ***Content, Knowledge and Imagination through the readings.***

Throughout the essays, there is an almost reverent acknowledgement that content is sparked through a thought, an observation, a conversation, a need for change everything that defines the nature of being through knowledge that feeds the imagination.

On this subject, Aimé Césaire details in *"Poetry and Knowledge"* (1946-82): *"It is not merely with his whole soul; it is with his entire being that the poet approaches the poem. What presides over the poem is not the most lucid intelligence, or the most acute sensibility, but an entire experience, all the dreams dreamed, all the images received and grasped, the whole weight of the body, the whole weight of the mind. All lived experiences. All the possibility."*

In terms of knowledge and imagination I have often asked myself what my content is telling. Sometimes, when I have a thought or strong opinions, or witness something emotionally evocative, I feel multi-personated until I transfer these voices to paper. It is difficult to define but it feels like a release that comes through me and not from me.

This allure is highlighted in many of the essays. From Camille Roy's (2004) thoughts on writing grinding itself into what is familiar yet unbearable, to bell hooks' (1991) powerful phrase that *"empathy is rooted in our capacity to imagine"*.

However almost as if it were written for me, is Tiff Holland's introduction to her Novella, *"Betty Superman"* (2014) and William Carlos Williams' (1979) remarkable essay.

Carlos Williams writes in *"Projective Verse + The Practice"* that, *"The actual calling of people, at all times and under all conditions, the coming to grips with intimate conditions of their lives, when they were being born, when they were dying, watching them die, watching them get well, has always absorbed me."* (1979) When I read this paragraph in Carlos Williams' essay, I circled it and wrote *"Oh my Goodness-This is me!"* Like him, I have never felt that medicine interfered with me, rather it grants me the honour of being witness to, and play a role in, people's lives. To see human beings at their most vulnerable, read the stories their eyes and body language tell, to gain empathy as to why stories need to be told.

Moulded by life experiences, human emotion and the characters in our heads that demand to be heard, content for me, is *"finding that one line in the mess of the story"* that Tiff Holland talks about when she says, *"I thought about other people as well as writing. I would meet new people and wonder about their lives not just as stories, but also as poems."* Holland (2014)

Our knowledge, content and imagination could ultimately help us remove the masks we wear. Those masks are the ones Mxolisi Nyweza instructs poets and writers to take off. To challenge prevailing norms by *"chopping language into tiny fragments and sections in order to expose the lies and sift the truth"* (Nyweza- 2015) thereby revealing the face of modern man and his relationship with himself and the world through the word.

Writing embodies empowerment. It is the unshackling of stereotypes, of race, creed, politics, gender and culture so that we may find redemption.

- ***Insight on Race, Culture and Politics –All things unequal***

The third theme that I shall elaborate upon sits at the heart of my essay. I am stirred by the readings dealing with critical fiction.

I am-What am I?

I am proudly African

Black and Brown

Rooted in African soil

With India in my chromosomes

though Malay from one Grandmother.

I am-What am I?

The product of colonialism

Moulded by Patriarchy

*Bent by culture
Shaped by Religion
That piece of it that celebrates peace.*

*I am-What am I?
Woman-daughter, mother, wife, sister
Beater of Cancer
Marginalised, multilingual, liberated
Privileged to know
That I am all of this.*

*Standing Tall,
Seeking words beyond
Who I am*

In 2015, I was co-editor on a novel entitled *"Life, Literature and Cricket"* by Yusuf Garda. The highlight of being involved with this publication, was that the other editor was the late Ahmed Essop. Spending time with Mr. Essop benefitted me immensely. Not only for the literary knowledge he imparted but also for his outlook on what defines the so-called marginalized critical fiction writer. It is the very same philosophy that I identified in bell hooks' (1991) and Anton Shammas' (1991) readings that of appreciation, awareness, consciousness, community and above all reconciliatory empowerment.

I could easily fall into that fatal space of amateur philosophy on the theme of race, culture and politics because I cannot escape the fact that I am because of what has shaped me. My writer's voice, the characters that surface and the images that I conjure are all influenced to some degree by my upbringing and the experiences that have forged not only me, but also my immediate community of people from all races and cultures. Cristina Rivera Garza beautifully articulates that *"writing is a practice connected to situated bodies in contexts shaped by uneven power relations. Conflict. Contestation. The power relations that include, of course gender, but also class, race and national origin."* Garza (2018)

Trying to make sense of the essays dealing with these issues has given me clarity on my own writing. The best analogy I can think of is that of manufacturing a painkiller. It is that whilst the separate components of my identity may individually be akin to an ingredient such as Paracetamol, they would be toxic in isolation. However, working in compound with other ingredients, they become an elixir for pain. In essence, to use my craft to simultaneously "enact and deconstruct" and thus write beyond oppression not from it.

The iconic bell hooks' (1991) writes in her landmark essay on the *"Narratives of Struggle"* that the dreaded surfaces of oppressive structures surface as forgotten scars that are permanently inscribed as a sign of terror and torture. I aspire to write as she elucidates through remembrance that ignites knowledge only *"to the degree that it would stimulate awareness and the will to change."* This is therapeutic to me as a writer as it would, *"shift the paradigms of readers to a place of empathy as a conscious gesture of solidarity."* Hooks (1991)

That said, I can appreciate Bettina Judd's (2015) point of view that writing, and reading the writing of a person of colour is recognized through their body. Her philosophy, though more in terms of identity and genre is also to be found in the arguments raised by the magnificent African writer Taiye Selasi (2019). Selasi's insight on black writers perceived as a collective and then being judged within that category by the collective, raises pertinent questions on the receipt of writing across cultures and countries.

Whilst reading her piece, I laughed out loud when she mentioned Chandra's essay and how she could replace *"African-ness"* with *"Indian-ness"* as that would fit the African writer's woes to the tee. Selasi (1991) I wondered where that left me as an African-Indian, sitting on the edge of the diaspora and having the added burden of being deemed a terrorist!"

I am extremely mindful of the fact that by my very nature, and the dilemmas cited by Selasi, my writing would be marginalised into that politely uncomfortable category that only appeals to a specific audience. And whilst the increasing population of Africa and India abound, I would be mortified if those are the only categories of readers that I would appeal to. I echo the sentiments of Selasi when she says, *"The diasporic novelist, as much as any other, must be granted that freedom to feel and say."* Selasi (2019)

Although Judd's and Selasi's observations are identifiable to persons of colour and cultures deemed 'foreign', the essay that I truly connected with was Tamiko Beyer's (2015) *"A slanty kind of Racial(ized) Poetics"*. Like me, Beyer is an 'in-between', cognisant that race is narrowed into black and white and we as people outside of that binary try to fit into the system as border dwellers. Her philosophy on writing slant, where an angled approach gets us closer to the heart of the real-life devastation of race, works for me because it *"aims to get to the language root of racism in the attempt to disrupt it."* Beyer (2015)

Upon reflection, I feel that my inherent belief systems would transpire regardless of how I present them. I aspire to the quiet politics and social awareness that Amina Cain (2015) says have a different register to them, one that will speak to its own tune without pointing out the diabolical.

Tim Seibles, in his compelling essay, *“Desperate and Beautiful Noise”* encapsulates a similar philosophy through the sentiment, *“If I am a black singer, my heart will likely have been forged by circumstances specific to my experience, but what I sing may reach people of many backgrounds because we share the entire spectrum of emotion. (Black grief and white grief overlap quite a bit, I think – as do gay and straight glee) This is why a straight Latina might feel a passionate connection to the music of Tracy Chapman and why a Black kid who grew up in a gang ridden part of Philadelphia might become an adult who loves Theodore Roethke’s poems.”* Seibles (2019)

I am certain that I will turn to the Poetics’ essays many times in my life’s journey-as a reader, a writer or simply to connect with what moves me. However, amongst them, Seibles’ *“Beautiful Noise”* has been etched in my psyche. Not only for his writing style, but for the many pearls of wisdom that I gained from his essay. His question, *“Why do any of us try so hard to bend the silence, to fashion a voice worthy of a listen?”* spoke directly to me. Further in his essay he mentions *‘that urge’*, that *‘Duende’* that Lorca (www.poetryintranslation.com) makes so vivid in his writings on the marrow of what makes art come alive.

Seibles’ final words are, *“Perhaps the critical thing we learn from artists we love- be they guitarists or poets (painters or dancers) – is to trust and value that itch inside our guts, that restlessness that means something we know has got to be said.”* Seibles (2019)

What then, is that itch inside our guts? Throughout the readings, and despite the varied topics of discussion, what played like a backtrack for me, was the sense that despite form, structure, content, race, culture and societal discourse the writer is moved by an un-namable force. One that allows words to come from a place that goes beyond the artist.

That brings me to the fourth theme of my essay:

- ***Spirit, The subconscious, Internal Rhythms – Energy beyond Science***

*“The condition of creation is a condition of entrancement. Till you begin-**obsession**; till you finish -**possession**. Something, someone lodges in you; your hand is the fulfiller not of you but of it. Who is this it? -That which through you wants to be.”Marina Tsvetaeva (2010)*

And first there was the word.

There are times when a thought haunts me. It could be a story I hear on the news or a reminder of my grandmother’s songs from my childhood, the sight of a bald person undergoing chemotherapy. It does not matter. I feel an urgency to find a pen

and unleash the spirit of that thought. Most times the words that stare at me when I am done scribbling have no bearing on the logical progression that they made in my head. It is those moments when I am astounded.

Though I have somewhat understood the concept of art coming to and through the individual as a rhetoric, the essays finally made me contextualize this 'need' to write.

There are so many names for this 'unnameable'

- Rimbaud calls it the 'Unknown'
- It is Yuknavitch's 'Wolf'
- Wang says it is when we feel alien and write through 'Energy'
- Tim Seibles describes it as the moment when "The mind enters itself and God the mind."
- It is Machado's 'Spirit and Energy'
- Garcia Lorca's 'Duende'
- Césaire's 'Unconscious' "Ancient knowledge that is all the ages of mankind."

Regardless of name, this non-tangible transcendence is inextricably linked to the arts in dimensions across space and time. It is that which allows us to chip away at the stone of our created limitations and move towards our true nature.

Aimé Césaire phrases this force eloquently when he says, *"Within us animal, vegetable, mineral. Mankind is not only mankind. It is universe."* Césaire (1946-82)

Césaire's essay *"Poetry and Knowledge"* awakened new comprehension of my own make-up. I agree with his sentiments that *"Physics classifies and explains, but the essence of things eludes it. Natural Sciences classify but the quid proprium of things eludes them."* Césaire (1946-82) Why? Because human beings are the collective memory of elán knowledge driven by forces that lead us to imagine.

My interpretation of the essays is that this 'spirit' makes its own rhythms on the page, equal to the beatings of our heart or our breath. It serves as the catalyst coming from that undefined place within. Its vehicle may be pain, or love and appreciation. It could be that force of connection to the divine, the seeking of justice, the celebration of life or the darkness within each of us that Federico Garcia Lorca says are the *"roots that cling to the mire that we all know, that we ignore but from which comes the very substance of art."*

Lorca (www.poetryintranslation.com)

Lorca calls this the mysterious dark force *"The Duende"*. As a measure my own writing, the Duende puts in perspective my struggles. It is the meeting of my psyche expressed through writing to find authenticity. It becomes as Tsvetaeva (2010)

describes, *“An act of yourself in complete freedom. Without conscience. Yourself as nature.”*

The realization that writing is not a scientific formula, but an inherent wisdom allows one to enter a field of clarity not seen through the eyes of the writer but through the common language that all of mankind possesses. Wherein, as Rich further explains, *“the poem depends on a delicate, vibrating range of difference, that an ‘I’ can become a ‘We’ without extinguishing others.”* Rich (www.poetryfoundation.org), which begs me to question, whom do we write for?

Leading to my final theme:

- ***Writing the audience, Speaking the community***

In our current global climate riddled with politics and driven by economic prowess, writing is often determined through mainstream convention. This convention herds creativity towards the barn of profiteering at the sacrifice of the very nature of art.

That sentiment is shared passionately by Lesego Rampolokeng in an interview with Robert Berold. Rampolokeng talks about the limitations of writing for the masses. He says, *“There is this standard that’s being placed on just how high the word should jump or not for it to be celebrated. I’ve always believed that if you say this is the level the masses are, and pitch the words at that level, what you’re actually doing is contributing to keeping the masses at that level.”* Rampolokeng & Muila- (Robert Berold, Gecko Poetry, 2003)

The drive to rise above the expectations of a supposed audience is further articulated by Brian Evenson (2002). His brave stance on remaining true to experimental narratives came at the expense of Institution and Religion, that he feels was the only path to liberation.

On writing for an audience, Amina Cain’s *“Slowness”* says *“I start from an open place and trust that the elements will find their way. I don’t think about accessibility or audience; some of my stories are accessible to some people, and some of them aren’t”* Cain (2015)

Why should this not be the case? Why can we not write in foreign tongues from our foreign selves to attract the forces that would move people beyond the ordinary? When we have a story to tell or a poem that begs to breathe its way into the world, we reach the non-linear of Dickinson and Stein. Lidia Yuknavitch (2015), describes this ‘real consumption’ with finesse, *“And if there is consuming going on, it’s not about money; it’s a reader wanting to take a book I wrote and maybe put it in their mouth or rest it on their chest or take it into the sea.”*

bell hooks (1991) believes that writing with authenticity is the only way to create change, so that when we write we cut across borders to include members of all communities and invoke appreciation beyond labels to reach what we all share our humanness.

The tribe has spoken.....Do you belong to the tribe?

Though writing is an individual journey, the craft is not isolated to the "I". The acuity from members of the 'Tribe' we have been exposed to through the Poetics Seminar, has benefitted me more than any academic rulebook. I think this is because one draws strength from those who have already walked the journey.

The themes discussed in my essay are all identifiable, present and relevant to my rite of passage. They have removed the blinkers and allow me to take in the world beyond the periphery thereby creating space for my connection to the word.

I have gained valuable insight relating to form, content, imagination, race, culture, spirit and community. Through forty-five essays, I have been forced to look within. In embracing my brown-skinned, Indian-cultured, colonized, patriarch-subjected, marginalized, female, illness-survivor, privileged, family-led self, a page unfolds and in it the elusive word. It tells me that I am blessed to be all of these things, because they have given me forty-nine years to embrace the most important tool of empowerment—true empathy.

bell hooks (1991) says that the ability to be empathetic is rooted in our capacity to imagine. Through empathy, authenticity, taking risks, not being afraid of the 'weird that is me', I strive to cultivate the rawness. Always, always having faith that I can speak and connect to the humanity present in all of us - Perhaps that is when my writing will truly come in search of me.

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Section 3: Book Reviews

3.1 Short Book Review One

The Chronology of Water- A memoir

Lidia Yuknavitch

Publisher : Canongate Books; Main edition, March 2019

My first encounter with the unabashed, brilliant work of Lidia Yuknavitch was like falling into a lake, then coming up for air and finding that words could be malleable, as fluid as the water Yuknavitch often uses as a theme. That first book, *The Small Backs of Children*, introduced me to the visceral world of Yuknavitch that people don't simply read, they fully absorb.

The Small Backs of Children set the bar high in terms of my expectations from *The Chronology of Water*, an account of Yuknavitch's memories told neither chronologically nor as a traditional autobiography but rather as a recollection of life events woven to reveal an astonishing tale of survival.

The Chronology of Water is as much about the journey of writing as it is about Yuknavitch's kaleidoscope of living. Her power with literary and metaphorical prose, some conversational, others stream of consciousness, is quite extraordinary. Yuknavitch uses words like a conjurer fuelled by rage and pain, love and transformation. The result reads like art on paper.

In the first sentence of her acknowledgements, she writes, "*If you have ever fucked up in your life, or if the great river of sadness that runs through all of us has touched you, then this book is for you.*" That is in essence the chord that *The Chronology of Water* touches in a reader. Though many would perceive it as a woman's tale, and of course, Yuknavitch does draw a larger female following, it is by and large a story of shattering through struggle, then coming up to find a purposeful life. In that, despite graphic language and what some may deem as a disconcerting illustration of sexual encounters, we learn that there is a place of finding wholeness.

Lidia Yuknavitch's work is like looking down at your body in a pool of water to find shapes distorted. Whether or not every event described really happened is not the point of this memoir; rather it offers the reader experiences that elevate the personal to the universal. Yuknavitch describes this best, "*All the events in my life swim in and out between each other. Without chronology. Like in dreams. So if I am thinking of memory...there is no linear sense. It's as arbitrary as the mass of chaotic images we call memory-but we can put it into lines to narrativize over fear.*"

From the outset, where Yuknavitch is witness to her sister's abuse, followed by her own abuse at the hands of their father while their alcoholic mother existed in a fog of denial, readers empathise with the young woman fuelled by rage to the point of self-destruction. Using narrative that sways between descriptive and matter-of-fact, she describes how this

trauma led to squandering a college swimming scholarship, getting lost in drugs, alcohol, and sex.

Writing became her salvation. Time and again, as she lurched between affairs, addiction and obsession, writing buoyed her above the waves of her own destruction. It was the birth of a stillborn child though, that ultimately led to using writing as a catharsis that she shared with others.

The notion of seeking salvation through art, could easily be used to romanticise Yuknavitch's story but what sets this memoir apart is the intense beauty with which she uses language as a salve. Once you honour her humanness, a protagonist who can also be highly unpleasant, you fall in love with Lidia Yuknavitch's unflinchingly honesty. You empathise with her destructive tendencies and celebrate her triumphs. Her recount in this memoir is emotive without being melodramatic. Through tears and laughter, frustration and anger you will feel. Perhaps, like me, you will also better understand an innate part of yourself.

Lidia Yuknavitch uses water in many of her books. In *The Chronology of Water*, she writes, "*We are all swimmers before the dawn of oxygen and earth. We all carry the memory of that breathable blue past.*" This link to and through water, from childhood to the loss of her child weaves throughout the book. At an early age, her father throws her into an icy lake to teach her to swim. This sets the course of her life as a swimmer and her connection to water. Water shapes her body, it becomes her escape.

Critics of Yuknavitch's work generally comment on her experimental prose and often grotesque scenes. Her fans on the other hand, are in awe of her writing which is interspersed with poetic lyricism, flowing into short bursts of word explosions. I was intrigued by her thought processes, even in the seemingly scattered fragments. The stream of consciousness obscurity with which she writes traumatic incidents resolving to structured paragraphs when she finds her partner and gives birth to her son. This ability to tell a seemingly uncomfortable narrative through language and imagery makes Yuknavitch one of today's sought after writers .

The journey to self is often paved with treachery. Reading *The Chronology of Water- A Memoir*, will make you understand why.

3.2 Short Book Review Two

Vertigo

Joanna Walsh

Publisher : Dorothy, a Publishing Project; October 2015

British writer and poet, Joanna Walsh has received a string of awards for her fiction and journalistic efforts. Her collection of prose in *Vertigo*, examines the ebb and flow of life's movements, often through mood as opposed to plot and narrative. In *Vertigo*, she draws the reader in unexpected directions that provide snippets of a woman or several women's relationships with self, family and environment. *Vertigo* is a novella of sorts, consisting of fourteen prose pieces, linked through the fluidity of the telling that reveals a unique and sensitive personality navigating the imperfections of ordinary life.

Walsh has the uncanny ability to write from a distance whilst revealing personal vulnerability. Her narrator/s are observant of their state of being. From childhood trauma to motherhood, parental relationships and sexuality, the focus of each story is on the inward psyche.

"Vertigo is the sense that if I fall, I will fall not toward the earth but into space. I sense no anchorage," the narrator says in the title story. We are not told who this woman is, but rather drawn into her consciousness through phrases such as, *"I will pitch forward, outward and upward."* Walsh's poetic execution, interspersed with vivid repetition, captures her characters' reflections in a meditative and consolatory manner

She creates distance by often reverting to the third person as she grapples with infidelity, family and self-awareness. Her sentences are layered with imagery that creates depth to her stories. What stands out, is the inner monologue of characters who mediate their space in the world.

In *Relativity*, a woman traveling by bus to visit her mother, compares herself to her teenage daughter seated beside her, and to other women on the bus: *"Among other middle-aged women I don't look too neat, and this pleases me.* The theme of motherhood carries across many stories in the collection. *Young Mothers* left me with a melancholy at the realisation of the pain that comes with motherhood. *Children's Ward* is another piece that evokes empathy. As a mother sits and waits for *Charlotte*, presumably her ill child, we sense her despair. Walsh's telling of these stories is not overtly sentimental. Rather, she uses precise language, free of unnecessary adjective to mould an idea in the reader's mind.

Other stories in *Vertigo*, explore the dynamics of external factors in terms of relationships and environment. In the story *Vagues*, there is a sense of introspection as the narrator lies on a beach somewhere in France. In *Online*, one shares the stream of consciousness of a woman grappling with her husband's infidelities.

And After, provides picturesque images of an unnamed town: "Let it be autumn. Let it be another town. Let the houses be low rise, undistinguished, a mix of old and new.... Let there be a coffee shop next to a head shop where the art students hang out." The title story, *Vertigo* has an oblique feel that draws attention to the dizzying effect it creates. This is no accident. Walsh's writing is well-known for being at once beautiful and cinematic, whilst throwing one off-kilter.

This is a book that needs to be savoured. Joanna Walsh offers a contemporary lens on universal subjects. Her writing has a reminiscence of her influencers- Clarice Lispector, Marguerite Duras and Diane Williams. She is drawn to writing about difficult things, or as she says about her writing in *Vertigo*, "*I do not write about dramatic events, I write about what Freud called "common unhappiness."*

3.3 Long Book Review One

Interpreter of Maladies

Jhumpa Lahiri

Publisher : Harper Collins, United Kingdom; May 2000

I was introduced to Jhumpa Lahiri during our first seminar. Kerry Hammerton suggested I read her work for the way she straddles cultures and writes about family. It has been one of the books I have turned to throughout my studies. *Interpreter of Maladies* comprises nine short stories and won the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction and the Hemingway Foundation/PEN Award in 2000.

American author, Jhumpa Lahiri is of Indian descent and her stories cross the divide between East and West. Her writing is succinct. She does not labour in her prose, but neither does she abstain from vivid detail. This collection has stories ranging across a myriad of topics, peppered with colorful details of Indian tradition, cuisine and celebrations.

What fascinated me about Lahiri's stories is that her characters display immersion of Indian-Americans not merely as immigrants, but as professionals and high-income earners who do not focus on culture as a means of definition but rather as a recognition of their roots. Lahiri uses heritage as a catalyst for the events of her stories. These unfold in slow motion like a sequence of images that uphold the confinement of the characters, leading to an outcome often blurred by the mundane quality of the troubles she writes about. Her knack for doing this is extraordinary.

I resonated strongly with *Interpreter of maladies*. Like Lahiri who considers herself American by virtue of being raised between London and Boston, I am South African above all else. However, as with all people whose cultures define a large aspect of their lives, I sometimes find myself straddling identity and cultural displacement. Lahiri manages to celebrate this dilemma with crafted detail, told through the eyes of someone ingrained in Western society.

Interpreter of Maladies features stories centred around love and loss, growth and guilt. Many of them cover topics unique to Indian culture without being subjective nor politically charged. Her characters navigate arranged marriages, homesickness, isolation, divorce, religion and even the Pakistan-Indian partition.

Lahiri has an uncanny ability to build on mood and plot through a calm, often slow pace. This restraint draws subtly on the psychology behind the characters she portrays, hinting at closure without always providing answers. This is part of the beauty of her writing. Her characters lead simple lives, and though they face special, often melancholic circumstances, there is an overall sense that life is special.

Even though Lahiri offers something delightful in each story, some stand out more than others. For me, *A Temporary Matter*, *A Blessed House* and the title story, *Interpreter of Maladies* were outstanding in their execution.

In *A Temporary Matter*, a couple live as strangers in their house until a series of scheduled electrical outages brings them together. Through food and intimate conversation they acknowledge the pain of losing a child and the sadness at realising that some wounds can never heal. I loved the monotony of *When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine*. It enhanced the underlying reference to the Indo-Pakistan conflict seen through the eyes of a young girl growing up in America.

As mentioned, the title story, *Interpreter of Maladies*, is memorable. The narrator works as an interpreter of Indian languages, spending his weekends as a tour guide for visitors to India. He becomes quite taken with an Indian-American woman who is his customer for a day. In a turn of events, the woman turns out to be the one desperate for someone to confide in, and pours out her secrets to the guide. *Mrs. Sen*, is another moving story about a young woman's loneliness having left her home in India to marry a university professor in the U.S. Yearning for company, she takes care of young Eliot in the afternoons. Mrs. Sen and Eliot develop an endearing bond as she tries to navigate an arranged marriage and new home far from Calcutta.

Lahiri's elegant prose softens her subject matter. Her descriptions have a richness unique to her writing style. In *Mrs Sen* she portrays a day at the beach with such finesse, one is almost transported to the scene: "*The beach was barren and dull to play on alone; the only neighbors who stayed on past Labor Day had no children, and Eliot no longer found it interesting to gather broken mussel shells in his bucket, or to stroke the seaweed, strewn like strips of emerald lasagna on the sand.*"

I found the metaphor of "emerald lasagna" most compelling. In fact, food is something that features throughout the book. In *A Temporary Matter*, Shobha uses cooking to reconnect with her husband and Mrs. Sen yearns to cook fish as she did before she married.

Interpreter of Maladies is a masterful example of short prose. Lahiri's writing is seductive, and the peek into lives of people melding cultures provides significant understanding of the lives of immigrants.

3.4 Long Book Review Two

Signs Preceding the End of the World

Yuri Herrera

Lisa Dillman (Translator)

Publisher: And Other Stories; March 2015- First published in Spanish-2009

Borders- an interesting concept that we use to define places and things. It is that instinctive human need for belonging. Yuri Herrera's acclaimed novella, *Signs Preceding the End of the World* is a story that faces these borders head on, it turns the neat black and white into grey, not only in the sense of the riveting tale of a young woman looking for her brother, but also in a figurative and mythological sense.

Signs Preceding the End of the World is a short, powerful book filled with depth. Lisa Dillman provides insight into the process of translating Herrera's story, detailing the surrealism and deeper meaning of Spanish words where inferences lend depth to the story. One of the words, that Dillman discusses is *jarchas*, from the Arabic *kharja*, meaning exit, in the original text. Dillman explains that she translates it as 'verse' in the novella as it adds to the interest and overall tone of the story.

Through the heroine's journey, Herrera addresses relevant geo-political issues in modern day Mexico. There is a duality to the heroine's journey, where one easily grasps the analogies to Aztec mythology even if, like me, you are not altogether familiar with these fables and feel compelled to research the subject upon completion of the novella.

The story opens with the occurrence of a sinkhole that literally throws you off your feet. The crater is located in an unnamed silver-mining town in Mexico, "*riddled with bullet holes and tunnels bored from five centuries of voracious silver lust*". Once you get drawn in, you teeter between storyline and an otherworldly quality that ebbs and flows to a quiet towards the end of the book.

The plot entails Makina's journey through unnamed geography. Places are simply referred to as "*Village*" or "*Little Town*" and "*The Big Chilango*" for Mexico City. Makina is sent by her mother, via a web of unsavoury characters with names such as Mr. Double U and Mr. Aitch, across the United States border to deliver an appeal to her brother to return home. She carries with her a suspicious package as a means of safe transfer from the drug lord Mr. Aitch. In her notes, Dillman compares Makina's journey to the nine layers of the underworld, with the first three stages in reference to the often perilous path many Mexican immigrants take to get to the United States.

Upon crossing the border, Makina discovers snow, a metaphor for the cycles of life common in Aztec mythology: *"...and when it dissolved a few seconds later she wondered how it was that some things in the world -- some countries, some people -- could seem eternal when everything was actually like that miniature ice palace: one-of-a-kind, precious, fragile."*

Though her journey is paved with obstacles, Makina remains unscathed. She traverses the hazardous Rio Grande *"filled with invisible water monsters"* and encounters a group set out to capture illegal immigrants, where she seems to repel bullets. Once she locates her brother's whereabouts and discovers the conditions that took him to serve as a paid army replacement for an American young man, Herrera delves further into the idea of mythical superheroine, *"She almost flies, as she felt her feet not touching the ground, as if she could float."*

Makina is a savvy young woman who realises early on that borders do not necessarily cross into better terrain. The concept of borders is created in a multi-fold manner. Makina has to cross the border quite literally, but the unseen borders of ethnic, racial, societal and economic disparity created through centuries of colonial imperialism speak volumes . Through Makina's eyes, we witness how Mexicans are subjugated. Herrera depicts irony in scenes where American restaurants sell *"All Mexican Foods"*, or situations where people of colour are targeted by policemen and women are sexualised.

Makina is an exceptional protagonist. She is a fearless, intelligent young woman who speaks three languages: native tongue, Spanish, and English. Herrera's portrayal of Makina as someone who holds knowledge beyond what she sees is a wonderful way of exploring complex ideologies. For example, when she observes Americans, she contemplates: *"We are to blame for this destruction, we who don't speak your tongue and don't know how to keep quiet either, who didn't come by boat, who dirty up your doorsteps with our dust, who break your barbed wire. We who came to take your jobs, who dream of wiping your shit, who long to work all hours. We who are happy to die for you, what else could we do?"* In a memorable scene she breaks the middle finger of a man who touches her inappropriately. This youth grows to respects her, and assists in locating her brother's whereabouts. Makina's struggles as a Mexican woman in America are well explored, providing startling reality to the plight of female immigrants.

Ultimately, through Makina's journey, we also encounter hope and to an extent redemption of a life altered through circumstance. I was taken with the ending. Makina's resignation to remain in the United States signified dually by an ending of life. She descends a staircase, which leads to another door, this time one with a sign above reading *"Verse."* She sees her whole life flash before her, and exclaims, *"I'm ready."* A splendid counterpart to the opening scene of the book where she says, *"I'm dead."*

Signs Preceding the End of the World is the first of Yuri Herrera's books that I have encountered but it will certainly not be the last. This story is intellectual nourishment, real yet surreal.

Section 4: Reflective Essay on Reader Report

Following months of writing, feedback and editing, the reader report is in many ways a summative assessment gauging whether the creative process has resulted in a cohesive final thesis. For me, it is like the quality assurance department of the academic journey where, through anonymity, one is able to establish how one's writing would be received by the public at large. This is a vital component of the outcomes of our program. After all, do we not write because we have stories to tell but choose to learn how to refine that craft because we want our words to reach an audience?

The idea of feedback was so agonizing at the outset of our studies that I was physically ill before the first group session with Kerry Hammerton. Since then, through seminars, contact weeks and multiple editing sessions with my supervisor, Paul Wessels, I have learnt that only when I let my vulnerabilities become my strengths am I allowed to receive in as much as my stories may give.

After the first year of prescribed coursework and constant engagement, the creative writing aspect of the latter half of studies demands the skills that all writers are privy to – self-discipline and finding inspiration to continue typing word after word. In fact, I have mentioned to my supervisor that I am dreading being on my own next year. The crutch of having someone to turn to is of immense benefit during this latter part of studying.

As opposed to some of my peers who opted to write a novella, my collection of short stories includes several pieces that were written for seminars. This was a blessing in that I had some material to begin with, but also a downfall because it set the tone of my collection to some degree. One of the ways that Paul W and I overcame this was by looking at my thesis abstract early in the year, then establishing what worked from the assignments. Many of these pieces such as *Crossing the Divide* (pg.61) and *Hail the Strong* (pg.52) had already been edited in our lecturer feedback sessions and post contact week, though Wessels asked me to refine them further paying special attention to superfluous metaphors, titles and endings.

Through live reading and editing, Paul W and I cut-down unnecessary text, rearranged plot where the narrative demanded and sharpened or edited several endings. This is because I often seem to write in a circular manner tying the end of a story back to the beginning. Whilst this works for certain pieces, in others it diminishes the '*trusting the reader*' ideology that Wessels has instilled in me through the duration of our supervisor-mentee passage.

One story in particular, *Taming Mustangs* (pg.23) where I brought the Mustang and necklace motif full circle, was shortened significantly to heighten the sense of loss that the piece invokes. *Looking Back* (pg.42) a short story initially entitled *Casualties of Shared Families* that I wrote for Masande Ntshanga's seminar also underwent a similar dissection. In the initial version, I ended with the brother's point of view, but Paul noted that turning the story back to the sister and leaving her watching her emaciated sibling silhouetted against the sun made much more of an impact.

It was thus a relief when the reader commented on this particular story saying, *“The search for identity and struggling to bridge the divide between the old and new, are most successfully portrayed in stories like My Darling Ma, Fridays with Amma, Hard Work, Casualties of Shared Families and Solace.”*

Which brings me to the collection as a whole, and the path of writing, refining and editing towards the final dissertation. I mentioned earlier that the reader’s report serves as a measure of readability. It goes without saying that the chosen reader would not fall into the category of average audience but someone qualified to critically analyse and provide commentary aimed at improving the manuscript. I agonised over the receipt of my short story collection and its translation within the context of my abstract. Had I met the outlined objectives? Would the stories seem cohesive? I was immensely relieved by the overall positive response I received on the 8th September 2021.

In the opening remarks of the report, the reader states: *“Tiff Holland in her introduction to Betty Superman had the following to say: Flash, like poetry, is an art of pure essence. That’s what I love about it: the spark, the quick uptick, the unblurred moment. And herein lies the strength of this collection of stories. The stories provide a snapshot of the characters’ lives with such clarity that within the moment of the story, the edges fray and nothing else matters more than the instant that is visible on the page.”*

This was most encouraging. Not only did the reader align my work with one of the writers who influenced my thesis, they also went so far as to comment on the positive impact that Tiff Holland had on my prose. This observation affirmed that the short form with all the ‘snapshots into character’s lives’ that I tried to discern realistically, the observation of mundanities and complexities of the world around me, and writing towards that end had potentially reached their destination.

I had also been concerned about character portrayal and the unfolding of narrative. The short form is so tight that the unsaid is often where the heart of the story lies with the writer having to convey that through fastidious expression, description and action. It was a consolation when the reader made mention of this, saying, *“In Legacy the unanswered questions from the daughter leaving and the suffocating dependency the mother showers onto the youngest daughter is exquisitely captured in the image of the slippers with the toe indents still visible. In Slipping the daughter’s desperation screams as loudly as the oncoming train that ends her life.”* These pieces, inspired by masters of the short-short form; Diane Williams and Lydia Davis, are less than five-hundred words long and were far more difficult to write than some of the longer stories in my thesis. *Slipping* (pg.74), in particular, was first written in Davis’ ‘nameless’ protagonist style, but I am no Lydia Davis, and my initial attempt failed to hit home. Wessels advised that I make the piece more engaging by enhancing the immigrant theme and developing the characters. It was thus rewarding when the reader made mention of this particular story.

In my collated reflective journals, I noted that writing in a contrived manner for the purpose of meeting specified themes left some of my earlier pieces somewhat flat. Paul W encouraged me to take an organic approach, which he said would lend itself to a more authentic final collection where stories would naturally align to my thesis abstract. It was reassuring that the reader cited my abstract as a benchmark against which to measure stories of similar themes, with comments such as, *“One piece that did a particularly good job of showing the everyday life of ordinary people, giving them a voice without uttering a single word was A Smaller Circle. And “The nurturing relationship between mother and child is best portrayed in pieces like Son, Fridays with Amma, My Mother and the Whale and Contracts on Creased Paper.”*

A Smaller Circle (pg.1), which turned out to be my title story is particularly noteworthy, as it is one of the pieces I battled with. Initially, the cleaners in this story were featured in *Solace (pg.78)*, a story also set in Makkah. Based on true events, the workers of the great mosque touched something in me on my visit to the Holy City and I really wanted to make them part of the protagonist’s growth in *Solace*. I wrote a few versions of the story and was ready to throw in the towel, when Nathan Trantraal mentioned writing them as two stories to highlight the themes of politics and reflection. That made all the difference.

Another piece, in fact an epistolary that I wrote for Stacy Hardy’s seminar, *Contracts on Creased Paper (pg.55)* was also noted by the reader, with the following suggestions: *“The only criticism on this piece is that where the despair turns to anger, on Day 6, the emotions are not as strong as in the rest of the piece. The anger of “I cannot bend and kneel five times a day any longer” is vivid and you feel it, but then “Please will you check on my request” seems out of place. The mention of “Route 777” earlier and “Route 666” later on feels forced and jarring. This does not add to the emotional despair of the rest of the piece.”*

Interestingly, this is one of the pieces I love and one that Paul W kept placing in the ‘maybe’ pile. When I saw the reader’s comments, I finally understood where the weaknesses of this piece lay. I tried, perhaps too hard, to bring humour into this very traumatic story of a drowning, which, in hindsight, “feels forced and jarring” as the reader comments. I have since edited the piece, and it reads much better.

Another story that has been refined since the reader’s input is *Hanging In the Wind (pg.9)*. I believe this is one of my stronger pieces and Wessels commented positively on the tone as well as the ending. Prior to the reader report, I had made a few changes to the unfolding of the narrative but the reader’s advice to add an olfactory component strengthens the encounter of two young girls and the corpse of a man who committed suicide.

Writing being such an undeliberated art, one of the suggestions that the reader gave for a piece called, *The Dancer (pg.38)* did not materialise as suggested. The reader recommended that I add more complexity to the mother in the story. Interestingly this was the angle I had used in my first draft. However, this is actually the daughter’s story and her mother’s influence comes through the child’s behaviour. When I received the reader’s report, I

drafted another version, once again bringing the mother in, but it still made more of an impact in the version that appears in the collection.

As illustrated above, Paul Wessels has been instrumental in bringing out the best in my stories. His acuity, decisiveness on whether a piece works or not, his reminders to “*lead not show*”, “*never to overwrite*” and to think about the believability of the narrative have been invaluable. One of stories that comes to mind with regards to his intuition is *My Husband’s Daughter* (pg.49). I confess that this was a story that both Wessels and I were in two minds about. We felt that the psychology behind the protagonist’s yearning for a daughter worked well, but I had not quite managed to build the husband’s character enough. I sat with this story late one evening rewriting to make the husband more inclusive in the narration. Through subtle changes, I altered the dynamic of the story, taking it from a reflective-type telling to a somewhat psychologically charged interaction between husband and wife. The reader did not mention this story in her feedback which is consolation enough.

One of the stories that she does mention, and for which I am immensely relieved is *Fridays With Amma* (pg.3). In her report, the reader says, “*In Fridays with Amma, the realisation at the end that the grandmother chose South Africa and chose to live in circumstances that the granddaughter just could not understand was so refreshingly unexpected. And it leaves the questions at the end: Are the stories themselves not more important than any truth could ever be? Are we not who we are because of the stories we tell and have to tell? Well done on this piece.*”

Fridays with Amma is a story that I wrote so many times that I once sent it to Paul W saying that I would prefer to leave it out of the thesis. It survived despite the rewrites, cosmetic changes in the form of character sketches and points of view. The initial story included the characters in *Hard Work* (pg.5), but they slowed down the narrative significantly. During contact week one of our lecturers, suggested I turn the piece, initially entitled *Rooted in Family* into two stories. This finally gave all those characters their space, resulting in the final versions that appear in my thesis.

Rooted in Family was a “horrendous title” to quote Paul W. Titles, it seems are the bane of my work. They have been more agonising than writing some of the stories. However, Paul Mason’s advice during reading, and Wessels’ reminders throughout the year have helped me to finetune many of the titles so that they are interesting without being too literal or in other instances overtly cryptic.

Another vital takeback from the reader report is to trust my instinct. Aside from suitable titles, one of the other challenges that presented was the order of the collection. How to curate one’s work so that it becomes a cohesive read? How would the reader experience the order of the stories? And how do the pieces connect to one another when there is so much diversity of content. After agonising over the name of my manuscript and settling on, “*A Smaller Circle*” upon advice from Paul W that this story was in fact a Leitmotif of the

collection as whole, I curated the documents well over twenty times. My desktop is ablaze with these drafts.

The reader suggested that I begin with something relatable and personal. This would not only set the pace for the collection, they said, but also give my writing a sense of ownership. In fact, the epistolary the reader recommended I begin with, *"My Darling Ma,"* was what I had placed as an introduction in my first draft, and then juggled around as I thought it would perhaps be too obvious to come straight in with, "this is me."

The reader however, had this to say:

"In My Darling Ma, the relationship between the grandmother and the two granddaughters, representative of the old and the new in a world that for them are so different from each other's, is so clearly written that the impact is on an emotional level. Through the showing of the struggles that they have just in the different languages that they are forced to speak, the loneliness of feeling like a stranger in the land of your birth, and wishing for just one more moment to listen to the grandmother telling her stories, this piece is incredibly successful. The complexities of a relationship where there will be misunderstanding are so beautifully illustrated that for me, this is really where the collection starts."

Whilst it would be impossible to comment on every story, the reader provided feedback on at least half, categorising them in terms of the key outcomes of my abstract. These themes made me reflect on *A Smaller Circle* from another angle. The separation of stories relating to motherhood, into *"The abusive mother-daughter relationship"* and *"The Nurturing Mother"* would, no doubt, address the maternal theme more cohesively. It sparked the idea to curate in this fashion. Paul W and I subsequently decided to settle on a happy medium of organic curation with subtle thematic interweaving. I believe this is where the collection lent itself. It also gave many of the hard-hitting stories the room to be digested.

Motherhood is a topic I explored quite extensively in my writing. It is a theme that I write naturally, whilst remaining a subject I am wary of. I once told Paul Wessels that I would hate to be branded the "unicorn and fluffy bunny writer". However, the encouragement from my reader who seemed to appreciate the complexities behind the characters, is a huge relief.

Despite the topics of family and motherhood, the psychology behind some of my stories, particularly the darker ones such as *Mrs. Seth* (pg.33) took their toll on me at times during the year. With a collection of this nature, where there are multiple characters fighting to make themselves known through a multitude of storylines and subtleties in tone and setting, it sometimes felt like climbing a mountain. I tried to navigate this by interspersing writing short descriptive prose in between longer stories. Some of these micro-fiction pieces were purely for my own sanity whilst others found a space in my thesis. Amongst them *Brighton* (pg.71), *Waiting at a Funeral* (pg.7) and *Pecking Order* (pg.13). Of the latter, the reader says, *"In Pecking Order and Waiting at a Funeral, human nature is put under the microscope and the accuracy in the descriptions really made these pieces shine."* This made me realise that many of the pieces that carry a strong sense of my individuality, are also pieces that the

reader connected with, reiterating the age-old adage to write what you know and remain as authentic as possible. In fact these are qualities I witness in Lidia Yuknavitch and Tiff Holland's prose where there is ownership of the writer as narrator.

I once read a quote by Larry L. King, in which he said, *"Write. Rewrite. When not writing or rewriting, read. I know of no shortcuts."* This effectively sums up the process of writing and editing through the course of this year. I am sure that many of my stories will demand refining in the future. For the moment, I am appreciative that the reader engaged with my work, establishing the connection with writers who inspired my thesis, commenting favourably on the content through my lens as a South African woman.

The lessons gained through editing under supervision and alone together with feedback not only from the reader but also through contact weeks will no doubt bode well for future writing. For now, I take respite in the reader's closing words, *"Again, congratulations on excellent writing."*

My Reading List

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